



COMMITTEE of the WHOLE

CITY COUNCIL

SUMMARY

July 18, 2022
5:30 pm
Hybrid Meeting

COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT:

D. Reed, C. Daubert, J. Cepeda-Freytiz, W. Butler, M. Goodman-Hinnershitz, M. Ventura – in person

OTHERS PRESENT:

L. Kelleher, S. Smith, M. Gombar, F. Lachat, F. Denbowski, E. Moran, J. Abodalo, J. Stoudt, S. Harrity, R. Bradley, K. Cochran – in person and J. Kelly, K. Zeiber, M. Oppenheimer, M. Lynch, BCTV - virtually

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz called the meeting to order at 5:21 pm.

I. Adopt a Block Program

Mr. Harrity announced that trash and recycling pick up will begin at 5 am the rest of this week due to heat concerns.

Ms. Smith screen shared a Power Point Presentation. Mr. Bradley stated that much of the City's litter is cigarette butts and plastic waste.

Ms. Rodriguez joined the meeting at this time.

Mr. Daubert expressed the belief that the sponsorship signage is critical as it will show who is responsible to remove litter and who the City should hold accountable.

Mr. Moran stated that this is the intention of the signage. He noted the need for residents to take pride in their neighborhoods.

Mr. Bradley stated that the goal of the program is for each resident to take ownership of cleaning up the front of their home. He stated that he engages residents who complain about

trash and litter on social media and works to get them registered as part of this program. He expressed the belief that the City is heading in the right direction and that this is a great place to start. He distributed flyers and registration forms to those in attendance.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that clean-ups are needed. She suggested highlighting the sponsors and posting short videos of clean-ups and before and after photos.

Mr. Harrity stated that two new employees have been hired by Property Maintenance to focus on trash and litter issues specifically.

Ms. Ventura expressed the belief that this is a great idea that will bring the community together to take ownership of their neighborhood. She questioned if there was a limit to the number of blocks that one person could sponsor. Mr. Bradley stated that there is no limit but that people should not take on more than they are able to handle.

Ms. Ventura questioned if the program would also remove snow in the winter for elderly or handicapped residents. Mr. Bradley stated that snow removal is not part of the program but that neighbors can help neighbors. He noted that litter getting caught in the snow is problematic.

Ms. Ventura agreed with the need to perform at least two clean-ups before signage is installed. She questioned how the clean-up information would be reported. Mr. Bradley stated that the sponsor would report the information to him. He noted that this program will help build relationships and that his initial focus is in high litter areas.

Ms. Ventura questioned what information would be reported. Mr. Harrity stated that the number of participants, the number of bags, etc. would be reported.

Mr. Bradley stated that this type of program was suggested in the Litter Action Plan. He stated that PA DEP will revisit Reading in 2027 to determine if there has been improvement. He expressed the belief that proper trash disposal requires behavioral changes.

Ms. Reed expressed the belief that this program is similar to the Adopt A Highway program. She noted the need for officials to speak about trash and litter in one voice. She described a situation where a City employee congratulated a resident on social media for sweeping their litter into the street. She stated that this will clog the sweepers and will also help litter get into catch basins and to the Schuylkill River.

Mr. Harrity agreed that sweepers are not designed to remove trash and litter.

Ms. Reed requested statistics on litter enforcement. She stated that there is always trash on 8th St by City Hall. She suggested using the camera system to find and fine those who litter.

Mr. Moran stated that Property Maintenance will provide statistics on litter enforcement.

Mr. Harrity again noted the two new employees in Property Maintenance who will focus on litter and trash enforcement and education and stated that this has never been an employee's sole focus before.

Ms. Reed requested the litter enforcement information within the next month. She also noted that many alleys consistently contain litter. She questioned if alleys were included in the program. Mr. Bradley stated that alleys within the block are included. He stated that he spends much time in alleys but that there has been nothing in place to address litter in the past.

Ms. Reed did not agree with Mr. Bradley and stated that programs have been in place in the past but that they were not sustained. She suggested adding screens to the catch basins to prevent litter from entering the sewer system and netting at the discharge locations to catch litter before it enters the River. Mr. Harrity stated that he will research these possibilities. Mr. Bradley stated that the Climate Corps and RHS football team have cleaned out 74 catch basins with the assistance of Sanitary Sewers.

Ms. Reed questioned if research would be done on her suggestions. Mr. Denbowski stated that the suggestions would be researched.

Mr. Daubert stated that he also supported the screening and netting. He noted the need for consistent clean-up so that the litter doesn't clog the screening and cause flooding and overflow issues.

Mr. Butler questioned how sponsors would be removed if they did not fulfill their duties. Mr. Bradley noted his hope that other residents would assist the sponsor. He stated that the sponsor would then report the data to him.

Mr. Butler questioned how often the data would be collected. Mr. Harrity stated that the sponsor will report the data after each clean-up.

Mr. Butler questioned how often the clean-ups would be performed. Mr. Harrity stated that it would be weekly. He stated that the sponsor will be relieved and the signage removed if duties are not done.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that each block has notorious families that are responsible for trash and litter issues. She questioned how the sponsor would address these families without it becoming confrontational. Mr. Bradley stated that there should be no negative interactions. He stated that the sponsor should report the address to staff who will intercede.

Mr. Moran thanked Mr. Harrity and Mr. Bradley for creating this program. He stated that the creation of Mr. Bradley's position grew from his four pillars. He expressed the belief that block captains work and that there are already 17 residents confirmed to participate. He noted his hope that each block would be sponsored but this is a great start. He noted his hope to begin a monthly recognition of the cleanest street in the City with a block party. He noted the need to find funding for recognition events. He stated that Property Maintenance Inspectors are identifying residents who have improved the facades of their properties. He stated that he will be presenting these residents with certificates of recognition and gift cards.

Mr. Denbowski stated that Property Maintenance has reinstated the "Good Neighbor Award".

Mr. Abodalo agreed and stated that owners who beautify their properties are being recognized. He stated that these owners also encourage others around them to do the same. He expressed the belief that property owners take better care of their properties and that rentals are challenging.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz noted the need to engage Barrio Alegria and South of Penn since they are already doing regular clean-up events and have a similar program. Mr. Harrity stated that they are engaged.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if there could be multiple sponsors in a block. Mr. Bradley stated that there can be and that there is ample room on the signage for multiple names.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz recommended that the sponsor perform four clean-ups rather than two before the signage is installed to keep them motivated. She stated that this program can be expanded in the future to include alleys, parks, etc. She noted that it is important for people to know that they can be fined for littering and she suggested posting signage with the fine amount and to begin enforcement. She stated that littering needs to have a consequence.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz noted the need for staff and officials to be trained about proper clean-up of trash and litter to be consistent. She stated that she is excited to get this program started.

Mr. Daubert left the meeting at this time.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz expressed the belief that residents don't understand the meaning of litter and that this needs to be addressed first. She suggested branding the issue on an emotional level. She noted the need to lead by example and to have MDJ agreement that fines will be levied for littering. She suggested taking a positive approach and noted her hope that someone would adopt the Pagoda.

Ms. Reed noted the need for punitive fines in order to help change behaviors. She expressed the belief that littering is not being enforced and that enforcement is critical to making changes.

Mr. Harrity noted the need for Police to agree to enforce littering.

Ms. Reed noted the condition of the sidewalk and trash receptacles around City Hall. She stated that the receptacles are not emptied and there is always litter.

Mr. Daubert returned to the meeting at this time.

Ms. Reed noted the need for the City to do a better job on its properties.

Mr. Bradley stated that he remains optimistic. He stated that litter reduction is about changing behaviors. He also noted cultural differences and that new residents don't know the rules until they are educated. He suggested that Councilors schedule town hall meetings to begin education about litter and to find additional block sponsors.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz thanked Mr. Harrity and Mr. Bradley for their work.

Mr. Harrity expressed the belief that Public Works is getting ahead of the trash and litter situation and he is looking forward to seeing improvements.

II. Fire Marshal

Mr. Searfoss stated that the Office of the Fire Marshal consists of himself and three inspectors. He stated that he also serves as the City's Emergency Management Coordinator. He stated that he orchestrated the City's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and ensured that City employees had the necessary PPE.

Ms. Ventura left the meeting at this time.

Mr. Searfoss stated that K-9 Gracie was obtained through an agreement with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. Gracie is trained to alert staff when a flammable liquid is present at a fire scene. She also is used at school events and community outreach events. He stated that Gracie also assists the PA State Police and ATFE as requested. Gracie was utilized 50 times in 2021. He stated that fire investigations are very time consuming and are done in collaboration with the Police Department.

Mr. Searfoss stated that free smoke alarms are distributed to home owners and are installed on a daily basis.

Mr. Searfoss stated that the Fire Department has started a new drone program and that the pilot is licensed by the FAA. He stated that this program is very beneficial. He stated that a new drone with thermal imaging will be added to the program. He stated that the drone program also benefits the City's Trades division.

Mr. Searfoss stated that the Fire Marshal also issues permits for fire protection systems and has a list of vetted contractors that it shares as requested to ensure that the systems are installed safely and in compliance with City regulations.

Mr. Moran left the meeting at this time.

Mr. Searfoss stated that the Fire Marshal also works to educate residents of all ages and conducts programs through the Reading School District, Reading Housing Authority and civic agencies.

Mr. Searfoss stated that the Fire Marshall also permits and inspects both outdoor fireworks displays and indoor pyrotechnics. He stated that there are approximately 40 fireworks shows annually at First Energy Stadium and approximately 12 shows with pyrotechnics annually.

Ms. Ventura and Mr. Moran returned to the meeting at this time.

Mr. Searfoss stated that the Fire Department also keeps a list of properties that are not safe to enter. He stated that fire fighters receive structural collapse training and that he also serves as a Fire Academy instructor. He stated that the Fire Marshal and his staff need to have extensive training and many certifications to ensure accurate investigations and to serve as an expert in court proceedings.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if Mr. Searfoss could provide his report in writing. She stated that it contained much information. She questioned the need for FEMA training. Mr. Searfoss noted the need for National Incident Management System (NIMS) training for some officials. He stated that this training ensures consistent disaster response. He stated that he will provide this information and the courses that are required.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz questioned if the courses need to be retaken to prevent expiration. Mr. Searfoss stated that once the course is taken there is no need to take it again. He stated that he provides refresher courses from time to time but there is no expiration date.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned Mr. Searfoss's involvement with the fire escrow. Mr. Searfoss stated that he is somewhat involved. He suggested streamlining the workflow for better tracking. He stated that fire escrow funds are received by the City if there is a loss to the insured. He stated that these funds can be used to abate violations if the owner does not respond. He suggested collecting the insurance information to share with other offices in the workflow. He questioned who would receive the remaining funds if the property is sold without repair and the new owner makes the repairs. He stated that he is willing to work on improving this workflow.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz stated that the Auditor recently reviewed this fund.

Ms. Rodriguez also questioned who is entitled to the remaining funds in the case of a sale before repairs are made.

Mr. Searfoss stated that there is no direction on this issue in the State Statute or the City Code. He suggested that the funds be returned to the insurance company.

Mr. Lachat stated that generally the funds belong to the insured. He noted the need to address the backlog and suggested that after a certain timeframe the funds not be returned. He stated that he would work with the Fire Marshal moving forward. He stated that the City can reimburse itself for costs associated with the damaged property before funds are returned.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that she is disturbed that there are no direct answers. She stated that many properties sit boarded up for extended periods of time and can destroy an entire block. She expressed the belief that the Blighted Property process is too slow. She stated that a fire destroyed property will reduce investment in the neighborhood and noted the need for quicker responses.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned when Council needed to complete NIMS training. Mr. Searfoss stated that the City is audited occasionally to ensure that its officials are trained. He stated that if officials are not trained, grant funding can be revoked.

Ms. Rodriguez requested to work with the Administration and have a legal review of the fire escrow issue to determine how to address the backlog.

Mr. Lachat stated that he will work with Mr. Gombar and coordinate with the Fire Marshal to ensure the City's expenses are paid. He noted the need to develop best practices.

Ms. Kelleher questioned the number of buildings that are fire damaged that have insurance. Mr. Searfoss stated that much of the damage has a low financial threshold that is not reported to insurance or that the majority of the properties have no insurance coverage.

Mr. Gombar stated that he will work with Mr. Lachat on this issue as many concerns were raised during the discussion of the Auditor's findings report. Ms. Rodriguez noted her willingness to work on this project as well.

III. Bernhart's Dam Update

Mr. Denbowski stated that the current condition of the park requires additional actions. He stated that the main dam remains in place but cannot remain indefinitely. He noted the need to permanently remove the dam or to rebuild it to current specs. He stated that the cost to replace the dam will be \$4 - \$7 million which is not budgeted and there are no grants available because dams are discouraged. The cost to remove the dam and install green infrastructure and plantings will cost \$500,000 - \$1 million. He noted the need for additional stewardship to help nature flourish within 3 - 5 years.

Mr. Denbowski stated that the condition cannot remain as it is. He stated that it will be helpful for the Administration to understand Council's position to move forward. He stated that the Administration recommends removal for both fiscal and environmental reasons. He stated that there will be additional local wildlife and fewer invasive species.

Mr. Denbowski stated that many soil samples have been taken and there is no risk to human health if the area is kept for recreational use. He stated that US EPA will address contamination issues in the future as needed.

Ms. Reed noted her appreciation of this update and noted the need to hold a community meeting with Muhlenberg Township and area residents. She suggested that this meeting be held before a final decision is made as there will be a large impact to neighbors. She stated that the last meeting was three years ago.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned the timeline. Mr. Denbowski noted the need for a decision to be made within two months as there will be budgetary impacts regardless of which option is chosen.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that she passed by this location daily when she was younger but didn't realize the level of pollution it contained. She noted her hope that conditions are improving since the smelter operations have ceased. She reminded all of the controversy at Angelica when the hurricane breached that dam. She stated that officials should expect similar reactions now and noted that the decision cannot be made solely on the wishes of the residents. She noted the need to understand the full impact of removal on Laureldale and Muhlenberg Township.

Ms. Smith stated that a position statement has been requested from the Environmental Advisory Council and that they conducted a tour of Bernhart's last week. She stated that Council will be provided with this position statement when it is submitted.

Ms. Reed stated that this is not the same situation as Angelica. She noted the need to remove the dam breast that remains at Angelica.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz suggested including the County in the meeting as well. Mr. Denbowski suggested inviting all the officials that were invited to the 2018 meeting. He suggested holding the meeting in early September.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned where the meeting should be held. Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that it was held in the Chabad on Hampden Blvd in the past. All agreed to use the same location. Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz offered to assist in making the meeting arrangements.

Mr. Moran reminded all that the Administration's recommendation is to remove the dam. He noted the need for Council to be mindful of the City's means and be fiscally responsible.

IV. Review Spreadsheet re Finance Report

Due to time constraints, this topic was deferred.

V. Public Works Report

Due to time constraints, this topic was deferred.

VI. Community and Economic Development Report

Mr. Abodalo stated that HUD monitors CDBG funding regularly to high standards. He stated that the City's CAPER report was audited and had stellar results. He stated that he will provide the report to Council. Mr. Denbowski stated that he provided this report to Council a month ago.

Mr. Abodalo screen shared a spreadsheet of CDBG projects. He credited Mr. Anspach for spending down most of the required funding. He stated that much of the funding will be used for park rehab projects. He noted that \$1.1 million needs to be spent before November 1 and with Mr. Anspach's projected spending that number is reduced to \$150,000. He stated that he is confident that the funding will be spent without panic.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned the spending plan. Mr. Abodalo stated that the projects moving forward will meet the November 1 spending deadline. He stated that monthly meetings are held for staff to stay up to date.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that in addition to CDBG funds there is also the capital budget and ARPA funding. She noted the need to prioritize projects and determine which funding source will be used. Mr. Abodalo agreed. He stated that he prefers using CDBG funding first when projects qualify.

Mr. Denbowski stated that some projects have been affected by supply chain issues. He stated that funding sources are switched as needed. He noted his hope that the supply chain will be back to normal before too much longer.

Mr. Abodalo stated that cost increases are also considered.

Mr. Daubert requested an update on the 5th & Penn properties. Mr. Abodalo stated that an agreement is currently in negotiation and stated that an update can only be provided in executive session.

Mr. Daubert noted his understanding of the negotiation process. He questioned the timeline to release the information. Mr. Abodalo stated that this information will be brought to Council shortly. He stated that work is beginning to investigate multiple uses in the properties.

Mr. Abodalo stated that the lead program has begun. He stated that two employees have been hired and an agreement with the Berks Community Health Center has been signed to refer patients to the program. He reminded all that Reading was awarded \$175,000 from the Dept of Health and \$3.3 million by HUD to remediate lead. He stated that several assessments have been done and the first project will get underway in August. He stated that the first project is a rental property and that the family is very grateful.

Mr. Abodalo stated that a Zoning amendment is in process to add an overlay district. He noted his hope that the overlay would create parking lots with churches and synagogues.

Mr. Daubert noted the need to ensure that procedures are in place so that properties are posted properly as required for zoning hearings. He stated that this should never happen again. Mr. Abodalo stated that he will take responsibility for the error. He stated that an employee failed to post the property and he agreed that the posting is required.

Mr. Daubert again noted the need for this to never happen again. Mr. Abodalo noted his understanding.

The meeting adjourned at 7:12 pm.

*Respectfully Submitted by
Linda A. Kelleher, CMC, City Clerk*