

Environmental Advisory Council
Tuesday, April 23, 2024
Virtually

EAC members present – S. Bach, S. Thompson, W. Vitale, A. Sellers

Others present – S. Smith, S. Bachman, B. Ayers-Fisher

CALL TO ORDER

Ms. Bach called the meeting to order at 12:03 pm. She noted that a quorum was present.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Motion was made by Mr. Vitale, seconded by Ms. Sellers, to approve the March 26, 2024 meeting summary as written. Motion carried unanimously.

UPCOMING EVENTS AND STAFF UPDATES

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that the Great American Cleanup and Earth Day were very successful. She stated that there were 76 exhibitors and approximately 3,000 attendees. She stated that the park was full all day.

Ms. Bach stated that she now has a much greater appreciation for Ms. Ayers-Fisher's work. She stated that the audio was much better this year. Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that with three stages, audio can be challenging. She stated that a successful way to manage that was found.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher provided the following upcoming events:

- Friday, April 26 at 10 am – Arbor Day tree planting in City Park
- Saturday, May 4 at 9 am – Angelica Creek cleanup from Berks Nature to Ken-Grill Pool
- Saturday, May 4 from 10 am – 2 pm – Camel Project Street Art project at Reading Muhlenberg Career & Technology Center
- Saturday, May 4 – Taco Fest Penn St
- Saturday, May 11 at 9 am – Install City Park pollinator garden at 11th St & Perkiomen Ave
- Saturday, May 18 – Dumpster Day

Mr. Vitale questioned if the solar presentation is taking place on April 24. Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that it is. She stated that it is being held virtually. She stated that Penn State Berks students will be presenting their findings on installing solar panels at the Public Works Building.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that the City will receive technical assistance from DEP to work toward food waste diversion. She stated that DEP will assist with logistics for drop off locations and curbside pickup. She stated that the program will also include businesses.

Mr. Bachman stated that his team has been cleaning catch basins. He asked members to inform him about any catch basins that need to be addressed. He stated that he is also addressing many sanitary issues at this time.

Ms. Bach stated that she is very proud of the work that the City team does.

OLD BUSINESS

- **Signage / Mapping**

Ms. Bach stated that the signage review process went well. She thanked all for their great comments.

Ms. Sellers stated that she is sorry that she missed the Green Infrastructure meeting. She stated that she has not reviewed the suggested changes and questioned if additional edits can be submitted.

Ms. Bach stated that no more edits are being submitted. She stated that most of the edits were linguistic changes.

Mr. Vitale expressed the belief that until the signs are produced, edits can be submitted. He suggested that if Ms. Sellers finds something very wrong to bring it to the Committee's attention.

Ms. Sellers stated that she is concerned about possible misinformation.

Ms. Bach questioned the production timeline. Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that the signage will go into production on May 1.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that the mapping project has been reassigned to the University of Maryland Environmental Finance Center. She stated that the Center will work with a graduate student studying stormwater. She stated that information is being gathered.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that an educational video about the City's stormwater system is currently being planned.

Mr. Bachman noted the difficulties that staff have accessing some areas. He stated that this work is time consuming.

Ms. Sellers questioned if a camera system could be used. Mr. Bachman stated that a camera is unable to get through debris.

Ms. Sellers questioned the use of a drone. Mr. Bachman stated that the drone would be unable to fly in those conditions. He stated that a contractor tried to use a robot and the robot has become lost in the system. He stated that some piping is 60 feet underground and small devices are difficult to control in these conditions.

- **Great American Cleanup & Earth Day**

Ms. Ayers-Fisher thanked Ms. Bach, Ms. Curran-Myers, and Mr. Thompson for their work. She stated that Luisa was also in attendance and has begun compiling comments. She stated that hundreds of comments have been received, some in Spanish.

Mr. Thompson stated that Luisa did a great job. He stated that he and Ms. Curran-Myers cleaned debris from around the basketball courts. He expressed the belief that it was a great day. He stated that there were good discussions and feedback.

Ms. Bach stated that there were fewer people in attendance after 5 pm and suggested adjusting shifts.

Mr. Thompson stated that the time passed quickly. He stated that he stayed longer to help cover a shift.

Ms. Bach stated that people liked the stickers and other giveaways.

Ms. Sellers suggested that seed balls be made at future events. Ms. Bach stated that many other vendors were making this.

Ms. Sellers stated that the seed balls can be planted. Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that two other vendors were making seed bombs. She stated that there were also birdfeeders, plant sales, and container gardens.

Ms. Bach stated that she enjoyed the simplicity of the EAC table. She stated that it was a great opportunity to educate and talk with community members. She expressed the belief that it was a very successful event.

- **Technical Assistance from the Water Center at UPenn and the University of Maryland Environmental Finance Center**

Ms. Ayers-Fisher suggested that this topic be moved into the project update section.

- **Annual Council Report**

Ms. Bach stated that she will follow up with Ms. Curran-Myers.

- **Berks County EAC Mixer**

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that she has spoken with West Reading and Robeson Township and they are interested in participating.

- **Berks Nature Public Meetings**

Ms. Bach stated that she will be attending a meeting in July. She recommended that other members attend a meeting as they are able. She stated that she expressed the EAC's concerns about the locations of these meetings to Ms. Shimp. She stated that Berks Nature is planning to hold meetings in Reading and will be meeting privately with representatives from the Reading Public Library and Hispanic Center. She stated that Berks Nature is open to suggestions of other groups to meet with and stated that they need 30 minutes for their presentation. She stated that a summer meeting is being scheduled at Mi Casa Su Casa.

Mr. Vitale suggested that Berks Nature meet with Barrio Alegria at the WCR Center.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher suggested meeting with Tec Centro.

Mr. Nunez connected to the meeting at this time.

Mr. Vitale questioned what Tec Centro is. Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that they are part of the South of Penn organization. She stated that they focus on workforce development for primarily Spanish speakers. She stated that they are starting CDL

training and offer medical training and culinary arts training. She stated that they are also working on a pre-apprentice construction trades program.

Ms. Bach questioned if she should suggest that Berks Nature meet in their spaces or be a speaker on their agenda. Mr. Vitale suggested that they do both. He stated that 20% of Berks residents live in Reading. Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that both locations can easily accommodate 50 people comfortably. She stated that both locations also have a limited number of off street parking spaces.

Mr. Vitale stated that Berks Nature will hear perspectives based on the people that they speak with. He stated that if you speak with the same people you get the same perspective. He suggested that Berks Nature also speak with NAACP. He stated that NAACP was glad to hear from the EAC and are responding positively.

Ms. Bach stated that she is happy to follow up with Ms. Shimp. She suggested that members email her additional comments if needed.

Mr. Vitale stated that he will register to attend a City meeting.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that Public Works will share the Reading meeting details on their social media pages.

- **EPA Exide Cleanup Update**

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that assessment planning is underway. She stated that EPA was at Earth Day providing free soil testing. She stated that EPA recognizes that there are lead issues throughout Berks County from multiple sources. She stated that the soil testing will help to establish a baseline.

Ms. Bach stated that she enjoys the attention from Washington, DC.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that this is a multi-year project.

- **Goggleworks Rain Barrel Workshop**

Ms. Bachman stated that he has no update.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher questioned if a date has been chosen. Mr. Bachman stated that it is planned for late summer or early fall.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that she is willing to assist and it is important to get the date on her calendar.

NEW BUSINESS

- **Beekeeping Zoning Amendment**

Ms. Smith explained that the Policy Committee meeting was postponed and this topic is not yet ready for discussion.

- **Outreach and Engagement Intern**

Mr. Vitale noted the need to formally approve the intern to move forward. He stated that Barrio Alegria will engage Luisa. He stated that she attended Earth Day and met the EAC at a Climate Action Plan presentation. He stated that a rough job description has been drafted. He explained that Luisa is almost exclusively Spanish speaking.

Mr. Vitale stated that Ms. Slusser has done great work. He stated that Luisa lives in the community. He stated that she will address general environmental issues and the Climate Action Plan. He explained that the total cost of services is \$22,500 and is for a one year term. He stated that \$5,000 remains in the EAC budget for intern costs in 2024. He stated that the EAC will provide this amount for the contract and the rest will be covered by Public Works. He stated that the EAC may need to pay another portion in 2025. Luisa will work 15 hours per week at \$15 per hour. He stated that the administrative costs will be paid by the City. He stated that the Communication Committee supports contracting with this intern.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that this will be a fellowship between Public Works and Barrio Alegria. She stated that Luisa cannot exceed 750 hours. She stated that the EAC will be covering 25% of the cost and Public Works will cover 75% of the costs. She explained that Luisa has a journalism background.

Mr. Vitale stated that Luisa's English is limited but the cost of an interpreter is not included in the proposed budget. He stated that Luisa will attend Communication Committee meetings with the interpreter. He stated that this will be an adjustment. He stated that she may also attend full EAC meetings as necessary. In addition, Ms. Curran-Myers suggested that she be part of the EAC's presentation to City Council.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that this will fill a critical gap in Public Works. She stated that in addition to reaching the Spanish speaking community she will also better relate with younger residents.

Mr. Vitale suggested that Berks Nature consider having an interpreter at their City meetings. He noted the need for this to be advertised.

Ms. Sellers questioned how the interpreter would operate at public meetings. Mr. Vitale expressed the belief that it would be simultaneous translation. He stated that Barrio Alegria has identified a person.

Ms. Sellers questioned if earphones would be used. Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that this is one way to do it but the City doesn't own this equipment. She expressed the belief that they would sit together and speak quietly.

Mr. Vitale agreed with Ms. Ayers-Fisher. He stated that it works remarkably well and the logistics depend on the audience.

Ms. Sellers questioned if the City owned earphones. Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that it does not but expressed the belief that they could be borrowed from Tec Centro.

Mr. Vitale stated that the majority of City Council and the Mayor are Spanish speakers.

Motion was made by Mr. Vitale, seconded by Ms. Sellers, to engage Barrio Alegria for an intern for one year at the terms noted above. Motion carried unanimously.

Mr. Vitale suggested that the EAC discuss the topics that should be addressed by the intern.

PROJECT UPDATES

- **Communication Committee**

Mr. Vitale stated that Ms. Slusser is producing great materials. He stated that she is currently working on the Sustainable Six for consistency. She will then create a flyer and have the information added to the website. He stated that her main focus has been on producing materials.

Mr. Vitale stated that the NAACP presentation has been rescheduled to May 20 due to a scheduling conflict.

Mr. Thompson stated that he gave a very brief presentation and stated that he will tailor his presentation to the feedback received.

Mr. Vitale stated that the focus of the presentation will be the Climate Action Plan. He stated that Ms. Slusser has refined the presentation and added the City branding. He stated that the feedback received from NAACP was about trees, brownfields, and lead abatement. He stated that the presentation can be tailored to what's on the community's mind.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that she has introduced the EPA team to NAACP.

Mr. Vitale stated that the lead abatement program began with the NAACP.

Mr. Thompson stated that Ms. Curran-Myers is an expert on brownfields and can address this issue briefly. He stated that he is concerned that this topic could become the sole item discussed.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that she will bring information about the EPA process to the meeting. She stated that she is also willing to schedule an NAACP presentation with the City's lead abatement team in the future.

Mr. Vitale stated that the tree discussion centered on street trees and how they ruin sidewalks. He stated that property owners don't get assistance from the City. He noted the need to address street trees overall.

Ms. Smith stated that the Policy Committee will continue their work on street trees after the Beekeeping Amendment is complete. She stated that they plan to review other municipality's tree policies before making recommendations to the Shade Tree Commission.

Mr. Thompson stated that a resident paid \$3,500 for a new sidewalk due to the damage from a tree.

Mr. Thompson noted the need to start planning an EAC table at Wacky Water Wednesday events. He stated that there is a great atmosphere and great turnout.

Mr. Vitale stated that it is hoped that Ms. Slusser will be retained by Public Works at the end of her internship. He stated that her work is very valuable and she will be a per project contractor.

- **Policy Committee**

Mr. Vitale stated that the community is pushing for Reading to move forward on a single use plastic ban. Ms. Smith stated that this item will also be addressed by the Policy Committee. She noted the need for the community to be patient as not all issues can be addressed simultaneously.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that she has spoken with this community group and noted that the EAC is researching the issue. She stated that she informed them of the hope to have a County wide ban for consistency. She stated that now that Earth Day is over, she will restart this work. She stated that Public Works is supportive of the issue.

Mr. Thompson stated that there was a lot of feedback about plastics from Earth Day.

- **Green Infrastructure Committee**

Ms. Bach stated that the next meeting is scheduled for June 3 at noon. She stated that the signage / mapping project remains the focus of meetings.

Ms. Sellers stated that she found one error in the signage comments. She stated that great work was done.

- **Rain Garden Installations**

Mr. Bachman stated that soil testing has begun at the garden in the 600 block of Warren St. He stated that a garden is also being considered on Summit Chase Dr. He stated that repairs have begun on Old Wyomissing Rd.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that Berks Nature and Public Works met with the USGS to install a groundwater monitoring well at Angelica Park. She stated that the only other USGS monitoring well is in Kutztown. She stated that this would assist with monitoring drought conditions and could be used as a teaching tool.

- **Urban Agriculture**

Ms. Smith stated that she was able to attend this month's meeting. She stated that the group heard an update on the County Agricultural Study. She stated that there is troubling data showing that there is no next generation of farmers ready to take over operations after retirements. She stated that a food hub was also discussed which would allow farmers to sell to the hub and small grocery stores buy from the hub to have fresh fruit and vegetable options.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that the City has become a member of BARN. She explained that BARN is a non-profit educational hub that works with local farmers. She stated that this will also assist with grant funding. She explained that Berks is considered an urban county and not all grant funding is available to Berks County. She noted the need to acquire additional grant funding for urban ag.

Mr. Thompson questioned why Berks is considered an urban county. Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that it is based on its density population.

Mr. Thompson expressed the belief that Reading is a hamlet compared to large cities.

- Zero Waste Plan

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that she is laying the foundation for this Plan. She noted the need to complete the Climate Action Plan and programming for the Greenhouse first. She stated that once these issues move forward to City Council she will begin this work.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that the new Assistant Projects Manager is moving forward on the greenhouse project and hopes that construction will begin this summer. She stated that the greenhouse work group and the Administration support this project. She stated that she is excited to see that the greenhouse will be active.

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, May 28 at noon via Zoom and will feature a presentation on the NREL project.

The meeting adjourned at 1:32 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by
Shelly Smith, CMC
Deputy City Clerk