

Environmental Advisory Council
Tuesday, September 24, 2024
Virtually

EAC members present – S. Thompson, D. Beane, W. Vitale, J. Cole, C. Curran-Myers, A. Sellers

Others present – S. Smith

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Thompson called the meeting to order at 12:10 pm. He noted that a quorum was present.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Motion was made by Mr. Beane, seconded by Ms. Curran-Myers, to approve the meeting summaries for June 25, 2024 and August 13, 2024 as written.

Motion carried unanimously.

UPCOMING EVENTS AND STAFF UPDATES

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that the next EAC Networking event at Berks Nature is tomorrow.

Mr. Bachman and Mr. Miller connected to the meeting at this time.

Mr. Beane stated that this event is the same topic as the last networking event. He stated that his goal is to have a County EAC networking dinner.

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that she will be attending tomorrow. She stated that the information at the first session was complicated and noted the need to have a better understanding. She stated that she provided public comment to City Council last evening concerning the rezoning of a parcel in the Hessian Camp neighborhood from preservation to residential.

Mr. Bradley connected to the meeting at this time.

Ms. Curran-Myers described the property's conditions and stated that the City's current zoning application does not require studies about environmental impacts. She suggested that the EAC develop a position statement to conserve resources in the future. She stated that developing this parcel would lead to erosion of the mountain and landslides. She noted the need to protect the natural environment.

Ms. Curran-Myers suggested that the zoning application should be updated regarding environmental impacts. She noted the need to avoid creeping sprawl. She stated that she will draft the position statement and share it with the group. She noted the need to be able to explain the value of preservation. She expressed the belief that development is not always the best use of a property. She stated that most Hessian Camp residents opposed the change and it was not approved by City Council.

Mr. Vitale stated that he supports Ms. Curran-Myers's position. He stated that the Reading and Berks County Planning Commissions recommended that City Council approve this change in zoning. He stated that this parcel became preservation after the other homes on this side of the road were already built. He stated that it is unclear when or why the property was rezoned. He expressed the belief that this change should not have been recommended to Council without further environmental analysis. He stated that several residents spoke in favor of the zoning change. He stated that the property owner testified at the hearing that no harm would be done since he is not taking any further action at this time. He stated that many community members attended the City Council meeting to comment on this issue.

Ms. Curran-Myers expressed the belief that citizen comments and the EAC's position was important and influenced City Council's decision. She stated that Council was told at the hearing that this parcel is surrounded by R-1 properties and that this would be the highest and best use of the parcel. She stated that neighbors described the property and their wish to preserve the surrounding forest. She stated that the EAC supports the neighbors' position.

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that she visited the site and it is easy to see the need to preserve the parcel. She stated that the slope is almost straight down and expressed the belief that most waivers of the steep slope regulations are granted. She suggested that the position statement be developed by the Policy Committee. She expressed the belief that this preserve area is a huge asset. She stated that similar future requests must be better analyzed before action is taken. She stated that it is difficult to analyze these changes without knowing the intended new use.

She stated that environmental analysis should occur as part of the City's current processes and that the EAC should be encouraged to provide information sooner in the process.

Mr. Beane suggested that this situation be used as an example at Berks Nature's event tomorrow. Ms. Curran-Myers agreed.

Mr. Vitale stated that he spoke with Ms. Ayers-Fisher about this situation and she also has ideas to address similar situations in the future. He stated that Ms. Ayers-Fisher believes that this is not the end of this situation. He agreed that the position statement should be drafted by the Policy Committee.

Ms. Curran-Myers and Mr. Beane stated that this topic will be added to the Policy Committee's agenda.

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that she will draft an outline.

Mr. Bachman stated that the clearing of the trees on this parcel has caused damage to the swale at a neighboring parcel on Trooper Rd and also on Steuben Rd. He stated that there are many problems with stormwater in the area now.

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that this was not mentioned at the hearing or at the City Council meeting.

Mr. Vitale stated that the tree clearing will cost the City taxpayers. Mr. Bachman stated that the infrastructure was old but had been functional. He stated that the swale will need to be rebuilt and concrete must now be added to secure the location. He stated that the concrete will increase the speed of the water flow. He stated that the property owner needed to remove additional debris for the City to make these repairs.

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that this proves that the landscape is fragile and small changes can trigger big consequences. She stated that this proves that the EAC is not crying wolf.

Mr. Bachman stated that the swales were also used by properties on Hill Rd.

Mr. Bradley stated that another Dumpster Day has been scheduled for Saturday, October 19. He stated that dumpsters will be located at Baer Park, Reading Iron

Playground, 2nd & Walnut Sts, Perry St & Hampden Blvd, the Centre Park Artifacts Bank and at W. Oley & McKnight Sts. He stated that he will provide the flyer.

Mr. Bradley stated that the next BCTV program will feature the Kidscape at Opportunity House and its community garden.

OLD BUSINESS

- **Signage / Mapping**

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that Ms. Ayers-Fisher is working on this project with the Green Infrastructure Committee. She stated that the signage is being finalized.

Ms. Sellers questioned who would get the necessary permits. Ms. Curran-Myers stated that she is unsure at this time.

Mr. Vitale expressed the belief that Ms. Ayers-Fisher wears too many hats. He stated that it is a big help to her when others are proactive.

- **Annual Report to City Council**

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that the report is nearly completed.

Mr. Bradley stated that he is keeping up with Reading Rising Park. Ms. Curran-Myers stated that Mr. Cole also checks on this park frequently. She suggested that a fall cleanup be scheduled.

Mr. Bradley disconnected from the meeting at this time.

- **Berks County EAC Mixer**

Mr. Beane stated that this has not yet been scheduled. He stated that it will be a dinner meeting.

- **Goggleworks Rain Barrel Workshop**

Mr. Bachman stated that he has no update. He stated that the crew has been focusing on catch basins and other repairs. He stated that several damaged lines have been located and repaired. He stated that he has been managing both the sanitary and storm water systems.

- **2025 Budget Request**

Ms. Smith stated that the EAC's requested amount has been submitted.

NEW BUSINESS

- **Beekeeping**

Mr. Beane noted the need to schedule a Policy Committee meeting to finalize this project. He stated that there will be a more detailed discussion at the next EAC meeting.

PROJECT UPDATES

- **Communication Committee**

Mr. Vitale stated that the Environmental Educator position has been filled and it is hoped that the position will be expanded to fulltime. He stated that the person has teaching experience.

Mr. Vitale stated that there are two new members of the Committee and another is interested. He stated that all Committee members are participating and progress is being made. He stated that the Barrio fellowship is moving forward to assist with outreach and engagement. He stated that many handouts have been created and have been translated to Spanish.

Mr. Vitale stated that the group will be participating in the Cultural Diversity Festival and a CAP workshop will be held at Franklyn's. He stated that the Committee will also be working with Rep. Cepeda-Freytiz's staff on an urban agriculture and environmental event in 2025. He stated that he spoke in favor of the GESA project at the City Council meeting last evening.

Mr. Miller stated that Council supported the concept of the project but that there were concerns about the considerable costs. He stated that the City Auditor voiced concerns about new debt and some Council members feel that the ARPA funding should be used to assist small businesses instead. He noted the need to invest in the City's future and that the project was approved by a 5 – 2 vote. He noted the need for the public to understand the costs.

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that the project will not quite pay for itself but that it is not only City funding. She stated that this is a great boost for modern infrastructure.

Mr. Miller agreed and stated that this is the right thing to do. He stated that this is a loud message to the public what direction the City is taking.

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that she is glad that the new direction is being emphasized. She expressed the belief that it is important to show the direction in visible investments and stated that the future is now.

Mr. Miller noted the need for public relations about the project. He expressed the belief that there will be backlash because of the costs. He noted the need for education and promotion. He noted the need to show that now is the turning point and why these changes are needed. He noted the need to look at the long term benefits and not only the costs.

Mr. Vitale agreed that this project sends a message. He expressed the belief that selling the project to the community for support is important. He expressed the belief that there is a good understanding and this is a bold step. He stated that there will be no tax increases to pay for the project. He suggested holding a press conference.

Ms. Curran-Myers expressed the belief that this project will help Reading to be a good place to live in the future.

Mr. Thompson stated that the project shows the purpose of the EAC.

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that she and Mr. Thompson tabled at the 6th Ward Block Party and it was a great event. She stated that most people are thanking the EAC for their work and for describing how they can make sustainable changes.

Mr. Thompson stated that members of the Communication Committee have been attending events. He encouraged others to also get engaged. He stated that Reading is full of good people and the events are fun. He stated that this is a chance to hear from residents firsthand.

Mr. Vitale applauded Ms. Ayers-Fisher for her time and effort. He expressed the belief that Ms. Ayers-Fisher understands the scale needed to address environmental issues and ways to reduce the costs. He expressed the belief that this is the right approach.

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that Schneider Electric has a national reputation as a leading sustainability company.

Mr. Miller stated that the Finance Director will be providing a cost review to City Council. He suggested that the EAC attend this meeting to assist with education

about the project. He stated that the session will help to educate both City Councilors and the public.

Mr. Vitale expressed the belief that implementation and education are important. He stated that seeing the City take these steps will also help residents make changes as individuals. He expressed the belief that this is a giant leap forward.

Mr. Miller stated that the block party events are important so that the City can bring resources into the neighborhoods because many people won't come to City Hall to get assistance. He stated that some new items were tried this year because grant funding was available. He stated that many great conversations occur at these events.

- **Brownfields Database**

Ms. Smith stated that all the notices have been added as a note in the City's Parcel Manager program so that they are available to all City departments. She stated that she needs the EAC's advice on how to make the information available to the public on the City's website.

Ms. Curran-Myers suggested that this topic also be discussed at an upcoming Policy Committee meeting. Mr. Beane agreed.

- **Rain Garden Installations**

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that Mr. Krall has determined that the EAC can now comment on future PennDOT projects. She stated that an EAC rep will be added to meetings to review environmental issues during the planning stages. She stated that this is a real breakthrough.

Ms. Sellers stated that this is great news.

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that she will follow up with Ms. Ayers-Fisher for more information.

- **MS4**

Mr. Bachman stated that many repairs are being made. He stated that the 5th & Buttonwood break has been repaired and the final repaving is upcoming.

Ms. Curran-Myers questioned if DEP has visited Reading. Mr. Bachman stated that their visit focused on the WWTP and the pump stations.

- **City-Owned Dams**

Ms. Smith stated that she shared information about the removal of Bushong Dam.

Ms. Curran-Myers stated that Mr. Lloyd from Berks Nature is concerned that there is no plan for stream restoration. She expressed the belief that funding is available and that the City can also find funding partners for the restoration.

- **NREL Presentation**

Mr. Vitale stated that the initial presentation focused on comfort during hot days and not on energy savings. He stated that the next phase will focus on comfort during cold days and will explore ways to retrofit current heating systems to run on electric, specifically radiant heat.

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, October 22 at noon via Zoom.

The meeting adjourned at 1:42 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by
Shelly Smith, CMC
Deputy City Clerk