

Youth Commission
Wednesday, January 7, 2026
Virtually
6:00 pm

Members Present — A. Ramirez, Z. Febres, M. Perez, M. Tavarez

Others Present – S. Smith, B. Ayers-Fisher, T. Veloz

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 6:09 pm by Ms. Tavarez. She stated that a quorum is not present.

Mr. Febres introduced himself to those present.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

TREASURER'S REPORT

Ms. Smith reported that City Council approved the Youth Commission's 2026 budget request of \$10,000.

SOCIAL MEDIA REPORT

Ms. Tavarez stated that a new Instagram account has been created. She stated that she will share a link in the group chat and requested all members like and follow the account. She stated that she is considering a give-a-way to encourage likes and follows.

RECRUITMENT VIDEO UPDATE

Ms. Tavarez stated that she reviewed the current video and that no new content is needed at this time.

EVENT PLANNING

- Joint Event with YMCA

Ms. Tavarez stated that the YMCA has been unresponsive but that she will follow up.

- Bear Creek Snow Tubing

Ms. Tavaréz stated that she will follow up with Ms. McLendon about this event.

Ms. Smith stated that the City Solicitor has opined that the Youth Commission can participate in the event but that a waiver must be signed by participants holding the City harmless in case of injury or accident. She stated that the waivers must be returned to her prior to the event and anyone who does not sign the waiver cannot participate.

Ms. Tavaréz requested that the form be emailed to her and that she will also pick up hard copies.

Ms. Tavaréz stated that this is exciting and she hopes that Ms. McLendon can now start sign-ups. She stated that she will send the details of the trip via the group chat.

OLD BUSINESS

- Adopt-a-Block

Ms. Tavaréz stated that she will update the schedule to include Mr. Febres.

NEW BUSINESS

- Marketability of Downtown Housing

Mr. Veloz and Ms. Ayers-Fisher introduced themselves to the group. Ms. Smith shared a PowerPoint presentation.

Mr. Veloz noted the City's hope to retain young people after they graduate from high school and college. He noted that Reading has a shortage of workforce housing and noted that this project will focus on adaptive reuse of downtown buildings in the 200 – 500 blocks of Penn St.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that the Youth Commission is in the project's target age and requested ideas on what amenities members would like to see in the finished units. She stated that this input will guide project application approvals. She requested that ideas be creative.

Mr. Febres questioned whether the units would be rented, purchased, or either. Mr. Veloz stated that the units would likely be rented but that some properties may also be owner occupied multi-units.

Mr. Febres noted the need for rent stabilization for young professionals. Mr. Veloz stated that this is a huge validation of staff discussions. He stated that eligible projects must have at least ½ of the units within the 60% - 120% of average median income for Berks County for workforce housing. He explained that these are not low income units which must be less than 60% of average median income. Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that the rental costs will be part of the project contract and that this level must be maintained for at least ten years. The rental costs must also be verified annually.

Mr. Veloz gave the example of \$80,000 being Berks County's average median income and stated that the salary range in the 60% - 120% would be \$48,000 - \$96,000.

Ms. Tavaréz questioned how young residents would be targeted. Mr. Veloz stated that the projects will not be age restricted. He stated that national trends show that younger people prefer living in urban cores and that Reading would be a natural market. He expressed the belief that a large portion of downtown residents would be young people.

Ms. Tavaréz stated that many young people still don't earn that much and that rent is difficult to pay. She questioned how lower income people could be assisted. Ms. Ayers-Fisher noted her understanding of the situation. She stated that this project will not set rents based on income level (as is used in public housing). She stated that this project will help developers with funding assistance to complete the projects. She stated that this is not college housing. She stated that the target would be those who are in their early to mid-twenties and are moving toward independent living.

Mr. Veloz noted the need for a better rental market in Reading. He noted how the return of passenger rail will affect downtown housing.

Ms. Smith stated that she looks at this as an opportunity to have more dedicated multi-units managed in a professional way and not depending on rental units in properties that were intended to be single family homes.

Mr. Veloz questioned amenities that members would like to see included. He used examples of rooftop gardens, rooftop restaurants, and bike racks.

Suggestions included:

- Practical spaces

- Lots of natural light
- Windows that open
- Central air conditioning
- Security
- Stable conditions
- Comfortable
- ADA accessible
- Gardens
- Social spaces
- Clean
- Attractive
- Use of color – not feel like living in a doctor's office
- Neighborhood watch
- Pet inclusive / pet clean-up stations
- Laundry area

Ms. Ayers-Fisher questioned what security would mean. Ms. Perez stated that she would like security cameras, sufficient lighting, and suggested blue light stations to call Police in emergency situations. Mr. Febres agreed. He stated that these features would also assist with the walkability of area.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher agreed with the need for accessible units. She stated that this is not a requirement of the project due to the high cost of elevators. She stated that most of the properties in the target area are two to four stories. She stated that this is not new construction.

Mr. Febres questioned if the target area would expand beyond downtown. Ms. Ayers-Fisher noted her hope that it would. She stated that this is a pilot program at this time. She stated that City tax funding is being used for the project and that if it is successful it can be implemented in other neighborhoods. She stated that because City funding is being used, the City gets to set the project parameters.

Ms. Perez stated that she is currently a West Chester University student but is living off campus. She stated that Reading has the potential to mimic this downtown.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that she will discuss the possibility of installing blue light stations with the Public Works and Police Departments.

Mr. Veloz stated that Reading's crime statistics are down. Ms. Ayers-Fisher agreed and stated that Reading is beginning to believe the negative narrative.

Mr. Veloz noted his agreement about Reading mimicking West Chester. He stated that West Chester has a great main street. He stated that streetscaping is also needed but that is beyond the scope of this project. He noted the need to determine how to address that as well.

Using the chat feature, Ms. Smith suggested reviewing the Greening Penn Street Plan for streetscaping guidance.

Mr. Febres noted the need for better BARTA signage. He stated that buses are difficult to navigate and people get lost. He suggested that better signage should be installed. Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that this is especially true for out of town visitors. She stated that she will follow up with BARTA.

Mr. Febres questioned if the units would be one bedroom. Mr. Veloz stated that the number of bedrooms will vary based on the developer's plan. He noted his hope that there would be a mix so that families can also be accommodated. He explained that the existing buildings will be updated and so the design will be based on current conditions.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that, in the past, the business owner also owned the entire property and lived in the upper floor space.

Items that are not needed include:

- Luxury units

Mr. Febres stated that downtown is currently marketing luxury units and most of them are empty.

Mr. Veloz stated that these are great suggestions. Ms. Ayers-Fisher agreed and stated that this discussion has validated staff conversations.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher requested that other suggestions or comments be provided to Ms. Smith to share with staff. Mr. Veloz stated that he may also come back for another presentation and project update.

Ms. Smith stated that she will share the PowerPoint presentation and request feedback.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher thanked the Youth Commission members for their service and helping to shape City policy.

OTHER BUSINESS

Ms. Ayers-Fisher invited members to participate in the seed starting workshop on January 19 at 10 am at the City Park greenhouse. She stated that the seedlings will be used in City gardens and City community gardens.

Ms. Ayers-Fisher stated that park workdays are being planned in the spring and new gardens will be installed at Baer Park.

Ms. Tavaréz thanked Mr. Veloz and Ms. Ayers-Fisher for attending the meeting and requesting feedback.

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Youth Commission will be held on Wednesday, February 4 at 6 pm via Zoom.

Meeting adjourned at 7:12 pm.

Respectfully submitted by
Shelly Smith, CMC
Deputy City Clerk