

Youth Commission
Wednesday, May 5, 2021
Virtually
6:00 pm

Members Present – G. Munoz Arias, K. Shapiro, M. Hutchinson, W. Butler, W. Butler, B. Hernandez, W. Victoriano

Others Present – S. Smith, L. Kelleher, J. Zabala, L. Sihelnik, J. Cepeda-Freytiz, C. Daubert, J. Long, J. Furdyna

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Zabala called the meeting to order at 6:08 pm.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

INTRODUCTIONS

New Youth Commission members introduced themselves:

- Wilma Victoriano stated that she joined to be a voice of the community. She stated that she does not have any specific issues she wishes to address at this time.
- Brandom Hernandez stated that he is representing Council District 4. He stated that he is a life-long resident of Reading and noted his hope to improve the City. He stated that he is excited about this opportunity and noted the need to reduce violence and help Reading get a better reputation.

Mr. Zabala congratulated the new members on their appointment and welcomed them to the Commission. He agreed with the need to improve Reading's reputation. He expressed the belief that Reading will become better than anyone's expectations.

Ms. Sihelnik explained the purpose of public comment. She stated that it is a great way for the Youth Commission to interact with the public and an opportunity for the public to bring feedback and ideas forward to the Youth Commission. She stated that this is a great way for other youth community members to learn how to share their voice.

Mr. Zabala wished a happy birthday to Wynton Butler.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Ms. Smith stated that the group will need to use Roberts Rules for this approval. She explained the need for a motion and second, any corrections or questions, and a vote of approval.

Ms. Sihelnik explained that Youth Commission meetings are official meetings and the business is recorded. She stated that the public has a right to know what the Youth Commission is discussing. She explained that the Commission must review and approve the previous meeting summary.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz stated that she is not noted as being in attendance. Ms. Smith stated that she is noted at the time she joined the meeting.

Motion was made by Mr. Butler, seconded by Mr. Butler, to approve the April 7, 2021 meeting summary as written. Motion carried unanimously.

CIVICS 101

Mr. Daubert thanked the Commission for the invitation. He stated that he has been teaching for 18 years and he is a bit nervous about making this presentation. He stated that he has prepared a power point presentation on government organization and functions and that he welcomes questions.

Ms. Divison joined the meeting during the presentation.

Mr. Zabala questioned if the Commission form of government functions similarly to the Borough of Wyomissing. Mr. Daubert stated that it is similar but that Wyomissing Borough Councilors are not full time and do not lead a department.

Mr. Zabala questioned the relationship of the City and the Parking Authority. Ms. Smith explained that all the City's authorities are governed by the PA Authorities Act. She explained that in addition to the Authorities Act, each Authority has its own governing State legislation. She stated that local regulations cannot conflict with State law. Ms. Sihelnik agreed.

Mr. Wynton Butler questioned some projects that the City uses CDBG funds for. Ms. Sihelnik stated that this is provided in the annual CDBG budget. Via the

chat feature, Ms. Smith listed several CDBG projects including ADA curb ramps, trail improvements, building demolitions, and fire equipment.

Mr. Wynton Butler questioned how Council district boundaries are determined. Ms. Smith explained that after the Census data is released every ten years, the City Council empanels a Redistricting Committee to analyze any changes in population and determines if district boundaries need to be adjusted in order to keep district population neutral. She stated that the Committee also analyzes natural boundaries in districts such as the railroad and the river.

Mr. Daubert explained the interaction of federal, state and local laws by using recreational marijuana use – marijuana is still illegal at the federal level but is legal in some states. He stated that it would be interesting to see how this interplays in the future.

Ms. Sihelnik agreed that this is an interesting situation. She stated that the reaction to the pandemic was also interesting as the federal government allowed states and municipalities to make their own rules. She stated that this allowed PA and Reading to make their own rules to reduce the spread of COVID-19. She stated that this shows there are always different approaches.

Mr. Wesley Butler questioned what happens to Reading if it is not prepared to exit Act 47 on schedule. Mr. Daubert explained that Reading would go into what is called receivership and that its assets would be sold off. He expressed the belief that the waste water treatment plant and water authorities would be sold to private firms and that Reading would no longer have control over costs. He expressed the belief that these important assets should remain public.

Mr. Wesley Butler questioned if the Parking Authority assets could also be sold. Mr. Daubert expressed the belief that they could be sold. He asked members to consider the situation if costs to residents were solely motivated by profit. He expressed the belief that these assets must also remain public.

Mr. Wynton Butler questioned ways to exit Act 47. He expressed the belief that resident income should increase to provide additional EIT tax revenue. Mr. Daubert noted the need for economic growth. He stated that the human capital is already here and needs to be capitalized on. He expressed the belief that the City cannot tax its way out of Act 47 and recommended that the City reduce the EIT tax rate to 1% as in other local suburban municipalities.

Ms. Sihelnik agreed with Mr. Daubert that economic growth needs to occur. She noted the need to increase recreational opportunities where people will also pay to park, eat, etc. She agreed that residents need to earn more but also that they should spend more of those earnings within the City. She noted the need for Reading businesses to reinvest in themselves and that Reading cannot tax itself out of Act 47. She noted the need to utilize tax incentive programs to encourage businesses to locate in Reading. She stated that Reading needs to grow its tax base and use incentives to re-urbanize the City.

Mr. Daubert stated that one of his favorite places is Portland OR. He stated that they have many celebratory food festival weeks. He stated that this could easily be done in Reading with some organization and publicity. He stated that they are very popular and could increase revenues. He expressed the belief that Reading already has much of what it needs. He suggested organizing "Taco Week".

Ms. Sihelnik stated that Reading also has a large amount of tax exempt entities that do not pay property taxes. She stated that some provide payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT) or services in lieu of taxes (SILOT) but many do not. She stated that this creates a large imbalance. She stated that many City residents do not work in Reading and both of these have a negative impact.

Ms. Ventura agreed with Mr. Daubert and Ms. Sihelnik. She noted the need for economic growth and more attractions. She also noted the need to increase home ownership.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz noted the need for more stores and shops. She stated that most of Reading's factories have closed and jobs were lost. She noted the need for Reading to rebrand itself and utilize the arts to increase revenue. She encouraged members to review the City's budget. She agreed with the need for more home ownership. She noted the need to assist existing businesses and develop outfitter businesses along the river trail. She suggested holding tours of the City's architecture and encouraging additional PILOTs and SILOTs. She suggested that tax exempt entities share space to reduce the number of exempt properties. She agreed that Reading needs to dispel its negative stereotypes. She expressed the belief that Reading is diverse and dynamic and is a great treasure to discover. She noted the need to instill a love of Reading and to change the residents' mindset to get out of poverty.

Mr. Wesley Butler questioned if there are tax incentives to open businesses. Mr. Daubert stated that he does not know of any. Ms. Sihelnik stated that this is complicated and depends on the type and size of the proposed business. She requested an example.

Mr. Wesley Butler questioned if a small business like a bodega could receive incentives. Ms. Sihelnik stated that it probably could not. She suggested that the CD Department Director attend a future meeting to address this.

Mr. Wesley Butler questioned incentives for large businesses. Ms. Sihelnik stated that there are state and federal incentives for large businesses such as Keystone Opportunity Zones that defer taxes for a set number of years.

Ms. Divison suggested that items be sold at the Pagoda to increase revenue. Ms. Sihelnik stated that this is a great idea. She explained that there is a Pagoda Foundation and suggested that Ms. Divison speak with them and submit her ideas at an upcoming Foundation meeting.

Mr. Hernandez stated that an income source that may not be considered is the number of college students that live and work in Reading. He stated that they need places to go and spend their money. He suggested that this be analyzed by the City.

Mr. Zabala stated that collaboration will be necessary. He suggested that businesses provide a discount to college students.

Ms. Sihelnik noted the need to survey students to determine what businesses they would like to go to spend time and money. She stated that these types of businesses can then be encouraged to open. She agreed that Alvernia students living and learning downtown can provide economic development.

Ms. Munoz-Arias noted the need to beautify the City and stated that many clean-up events are held. She also noted the need for flowers and plantings. She agreed that many youth go to the Pagoda. She noted the need to emphasize Reading's many creative artists and their art.

Ms. Sihelnik stated that City Council is currently considering Public Art legislation. She suggested that members read the draft legislation and provide their feedback to Council.

Mr. Zabala stated that Council is willing to hear the voice of youth. He expressed the belief that this is a great opportunity to work together.

Mr. Wynton Butler thanked Mr. Daubert for his presentation and stated that he enjoyed it. He stated that many businesses have left Reading for its suburbs and noted the need for incentives for businesses to locate on Penn St rather than Penn Ave.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz stated that the City is not always able to support businesses and she stated that there are no incentives for small businesses at this time. She stated that locating downtown is a great opportunity to locate in properties that are affordable. She stated that the taxes in Reading are also more affordable. She suggested that the City identify properties for businesses to locate in. She also noted the need for the property owners to become involved. She again noted the need to dispel the negative stereotypes so people are not afraid to come downtown. She stated that crime is down and the narrative needs to change.

Ms. Sihelnik suggested that members consider what they would need to do to open a business and compare rents and other costs of locating in Reading and locating in West Reading. She suggested that a member should determine if West Reading provides incentives. She stated that West Reading has a better reputation and branding. She noted her hope that Reading's reputation would improve.

Ms. Divison suggested that a "Reading's Got Talent" event be held.

Mr. Zabala stated that several local businesses hold open mic nights. He agreed with the appeal of a "Reading's Got Talent" event.

Mr. Daubert thanked the Commission for inviting him to make this presentation.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF OFFICERS

Mr. Zabala stated that a chair, vice chair and secretary are needed. He questioned if anyone had interest in holding one of these positions.

Mr. Daubert left the meeting at this time.

Ms. Sihelnik questioned if anyone had questions before volunteering.

Ms. Victoriano requested an overview of the position's responsibilities.

Mr. Zabala stated that the secretary will keep the official record.

Ms. Smith stated that she is glad to assist as necessary. She also explained the roles of the chair and vice chair. Ms. Sihelnik stated that the chair will also present the Commission's report to City Council.

Ms. Victoriano stated that she is interested in serving as vice chair.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if officers would receive training. Mr. Zabala stated that they would.

Mr. Wynton Butler stated that he is interested in serving as chair.

Mr. Hernandez stated that he is also interested in serving as vice chair.

Ms. Smith stated that this could also be a ceremonial secretary position where she does the work.

Ms. Sihelnik stated that the secretarial duties could also be alternated. She noted the importance of recording history.

Mr. Hernandez stated that he would consider secretary rather than vice chair.

Ms. Sihelnik stated that not all members are in attendance. She suggested that there be nominations at the next meeting so that all have the opportunity to be officers if they are interested.

Mr. Zabala suggested that those who are interested in serving contact him by May 26.

NEXT MEETING

The next regular meeting of the Youth Commission will be held virtually on Wednesday, June 2 at 6 pm.

Mr. Zabala asked the members to contact him if they are unable to attend.

Mr. Wynton Butler reminded all who are able to vote on May 18.

Motion was made by Mr. Wynton Butler, seconded by Ms. Munoz Arias, to adjourn the meeting. The meeting adjourned at 7:52 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by
Shelly Smith, CMC
Deputy City Clerk