

Rockville Environment Commission

Minutes of the Meeting of Thursday, April 4, 2019

Mayor and Council Chambers, City Hall,
111 Maryland Avenue, Rockville, Maryland

Meeting Attendance

Commissioner	Present	Absent	Reason, If Given
Chair John Becker	X		
Sy Garte		X	
Susan Koester	X		
Clark Reed	X		
Monica Saavoss	X		
Steve Sprague	X		
Pavitra Srinivasan	X		
Fedon Vayanis	X		

Council Liaison:

City Staff: Lise Soukup (Staff Liaison); Erica Shingara and Mark Charles (DPW Environmental Planning Division); David Levy (Department of Community Planning & Development Services)

Guests: Katherine Stauderman, Girl Scout

Meeting Commencement

The meeting convened at 7:02 p.m. by Chair Becker.

Approval of Agenda

The Environment Commission voted 8-0 to approve the agenda, with the modification that Item 7 went before Item 6.

Approval of Meeting Minutes

The Commission voted 6-0 to approve the March 7 meeting minutes. Commissioners Stauderman and Sprague abstained.

Community Forum

No discussion.

REC Use of Dropbox for File Sharing

Most Commissioners have managed to access this and are willing to test it for REC use. Commissioner Saavoss offered assistance to those who still need help.

Update on City Ordinance for Plastic Straw Ban

Mark Charles, Chief of DPW's Environmental Management Division, updated the REC on the City's proposed ordinance change to ban plastic straws from being automatically distributed, which was first discussed at the March REC meeting. Mr. Charles will introduce the ordinance revisions on May 6. The current language that goes into effect on July 1, 2019, is considered too restrictive by the Mayor and Council and staff. Staff still supports a version of the language from proposed Maryland House Bill 134, which makes a customer directly request a straw.

Mr. Charles asked the REC for any alternative suggestions. Commissioner Vayanis suggested including a plastic straw definition that included plastic stirrers. Commissioner Reed suggested language that an establishment may only give a straw on request; biodegradable or reusable straw is offered first, and if a plastic straw is still requested, the City charge a 5-cent tax. Commissioners Srinivasan and Saavoss were concerned that disabled customers who needed a plastic straw would be unnecessarily penalized and recommended using the Maryland State language as proposed by staff or similar language.

Ms. Soukup mentioned that, if the City created a plastic straw tax, it would be alone in the region and would have the costs of administering a tax collection and accounting system with the retailers, which might incur more expenses than the tax provides revenue, so it could be a net financial loss. Commissioner Saavoss moved and Commissioner Koester seconded the staff's recommended language. Commissioner Reed then asked to add a 5-cent straw tax. Commissioner Saavoss moved, and Commissioner Reed seconded, an amendment to also ask staff to investigate the feasibility of the 5-cent tax. The Commission approved this amended motion 8-0.

Staff Briefing on Draft Comprehensive Plan

David Levy, Assistant Director for Planning and Economic Development, CPDS, gave a brief overview of the Draft Comprehensive Plan released by the Planning Commission in March for public comment. He described the purpose of a Comprehensive Plan as a way for the community to plan for the future and to cover required planning elements that will support future zoning decisions under Maryland law. Although Environment is not a State-required planning element, it is incorporated into various other required elements, such as Water Resources, Transportation, Municipal Growth, and Recreation & Parks.

Mr. Levy reviewed the public outreach and education components that have occurred in the past two years. The Planning Commission must approve the plan under State law, then will send its version to the Mayor and Council for final approval. The Planning Commission is now in its own review period, and will hold three public hearings in May and June. The REC may submit written comments to the Planning Commission at any time during the public hearing period, and may also make verbal comments at any of the three public hearings. The Planning Commission will review all comments after the public hearing stage and make its decision about final changes prior to sending the plan to the Mayor and Council.

Commissioner Saavoss asked about how specific comments should be. Mr. Levy encouraged keeping comments general enough that they wouldn't go out of date in a planning document expected to last 15-20 years. The comments may be aspirational, but should still be achievable. Also, the comments should be clear on what the REC wants the Comprehensive Plan to say, but there is no need to wordsmith the text or detail future ordinances.

The REC discussed a format and process for collecting its comments. Commissioner Saavoss volunteered to be the organizer of the REC comments and will set up a Google Drive spreadsheet for common use. Chair Becker intends to cover the REC's major points in a 5-minute oral presentation at the May 22 public hearing, if possible, or at the June 4 public hearing.

The Commissioners will contribute their comments between the April and May REC meetings to the shared spreadsheet, and will discuss these with the various committees at the April committee meetings. The REC will review all submitted comments at the May 2 REC meeting, eliminate any duplicates and set its priorities. It was noted that the Watershed Committee does not have an active Commissioner participating with it.

Committee Reports and Requests to REC

Watersheds Committee (WC):

Commissioner Vayanis listed upcoming events, including the Spring Maryvale Stream Cleanup on April 13, and that the WC met with the City's Nature Center Director, Elissa Totin, to discuss WC requests for future events.

Climate Action Committee (CLAC):

The CLAC started review of the Draft Comprehensive Plan at its March meeting. Chair Becker asked about the CLAC request to address questions and recommendations to the Planning Commission, and suggested postponing this until after the Comprehensive Plan is completed. Commissioner Saavoss agreed.

Additionally, Commissioner Saavoss's questions from CLAC to the Traffic and Transportation (T&T) Commission were redirected to DPW Transportation staff, since the T&T Commission is not familiar with or involved in these topics. The Transportation staff responded with answers, and Commissioner Saavoss agreed this was sufficient. Many of the CLAC questions to both Commissions are answered in the Draft Comprehensive Plan.

Energy Committee (EC):

In March, Commissioner Reed distributed a Gantt chart for the EC's proposed Rockville Community Conservation Corps (RCCC), which is the proposed outreach program to engage 15-60 families in three Rockville neighborhoods in tracking their energy use and trying to implement improvements. Commissioner Reed also submitted RCCC draft announcements to Ms. Soukup on March 28 for approval by the REC. This outreach effort is scheduled to start in late April and is to be an Energy Committee effort only, with welcomed assistance from REC commissioners.

Ms. Soukup explained that the City requires the RCCC materials to be reviewed by the City's Public Information Office (PIO) and to be rebranded with City of Rockville logos, etc., if it is to be a City-sanctioned event. The PIO review would delay the RCCC start by at least 1-2 months.

The REC learned more about the City's increasing caution about committee events and outreach carried out without formal City staff oversight. Senior City staff in the City Manager's Office, City Attorney's Office and City Safety and Risk Management now are reviewing appropriate roles and actions for Commission committees. As part of this, they will discuss these questions with the Boards and Commissions Task Force.

Ms. Soukup suggested that the RCCC effort, along with Brewshed events or other activities that may be vetoed in the future by the City or subject to time-consuming oversight, might have a different path. The organizers may explore the opportunity to establish a non-profit group that is not connected to the City government. Although a non-profit would not be part of the Rockville Environment Commission and could not use REC funding, it might be a good alternative for activities that are not appropriate for City involvement or do not dovetail with Mayor and Council initiatives, City programs or City staff/resource availability. Another option is to talk with the Rockville Science Center or other existing non-profit to see if these events would fit under another umbrella group outside of the City Commissions.

Ms. Soukup also noted that the City's annual budget process includes the opportunity in October/November for non-profits to seek some funding from the City in the following fiscal year's budget. Commissioner Reed was interested in the non-profit option and asked for a meeting with City senior staff to discuss it further. Ms. Soukup will try to arrange this for May or June.

Chair Report

Chair Becker reminded the REC to follow the REC meeting decorum guidelines, and that these will remain on the monthly agenda for several months.

Hometown Holidays booth and parade applications for the REC have been submitted, and were signed by Chair Becker, although the insurance/liability waivers were struck out. As part of this, City staff has discovered that only appointed Commissioners are covered by the City's insurance and liability protection. Ms. Soukup explained that this means family members and non-Commission volunteers are not covered in REC activities or events, so they should not participate in these activities.

The REC agreed that May 6 is the preferred Mayor and Council date for the Environmental Excellence Awards. Chair Becker reminded the REC to attend the April 11 talk by Mark Charles on Rockville's Legacy of Environmental Protection at Glenview Mansion.

Environmental Management Division (EMD) Report

City staff expects to brief the REC on the draft Comprehensive Master Plan at the April meeting. Staff will send out the link to the Public Hearing draft document prior to this briefing.

Commissioners are urged to review the draft and come prepared to the April meeting with their questions and comments.

The City will introduce revisions to City Code Chapter 24, “Water, Sewers and Sewage Disposal”, to the Mayor and Council in April. The draft ordinance has been distributed to the REC. Only Commissioners Vayanis and Stauderman expressed interest in reviewing this ordinance. Commissioner Vayanis requested an opportunity to discuss his questions with staff before submitting comments. Ms. Soukup will let him know when this can be arranged. Since the Watershed Committee does not have a sitting Commissioner participating with it, the Watershed Committee needs to work with Commissioner Vayanis to express their opinions on this ordinance through the REC.

The Rockville Bicycle Advisory Committee invites the REC to join the Annual Rockville Bike Month Kick-Off Bike Ride on Sat, April 27 at 10 a.m. at City Hall.

The Rockville Solar Co-op is again offered between May 3 to July 31. Rockville will host an information session on May 7.

Ms. Soukup covered various administrative details for the new REC Commissioners.

Old/New Business

New Business: Commissioner Sprague announced the offer from the West End Citizens Association for the REC to present its current activities at the WECA meeting on May 9. Participants to be determined at the May REC meeting.

Adjourn

The Commission adjourned by acclamation at 9:40 p.m.

Next Commission Meeting

The next Commission meeting is scheduled on **Thursday, May 2 at 7:00 pm.**