

Alle-Kiski Intergovernmental Council Meeting Minutes
Meeting #11
July 21, 2022
New Kensington City Hall

Attendees (*D-Delegate, A-Alternate*)

AK IGC: Kristen Sarno (A-East Vandergrift), Barbara Sharp (D-East Vandergrift), Dennis Scarpiniti (A-New Kensington), Matt Grantz (D-West Leechburg), George Hawdon (D-Arnold) Adam Zweig (A-Arnold), Melissa Cortilesio (D-Upper Burrell), John Andrejczik (D-Lower Burrell)

Westmoreland County Planning: Corey Block, Victoria Baur

Public: Jody Sarno (Vandergrift), Marilee Kessler (Vandergrift)

Please be advised that the format of future meeting minutes will be changing to be more concise

Meeting started at 5:05 PM.

Victoria called the meeting to order, confirmed that everyone had a chance to review the meeting #10 minutes, and asked if there were any questions or concerns. A motion was made by John to approve the minutes and it was seconded by Melissa. The meeting #10 minutes were approved.

Victoria transitioned to follow-up on the admission of Vandergrift into the IGC. Marilee and Jody shared that Vandergrift's council wanted more time for their solicitor review the resolution and by-laws before joining. Marilee added that Vandergrift would be in a better place to join the IGC at the August meeting.

Victoria asked if the member IGC communities were okay with delaying this item another month, to allow for additional time for Vandergrift to join. The group confirmed that they were okay waiting. John said that members of Vandergrift's council had shown commitment to the IGC by attending many of the year 1 meetings. Jody thanked the IGC members and Planning Division for their support and patience.

Victoria noted that the formal vote to admit Vandergrift into the IGC would be tabled until the August meeting. She also noted that the distribution of the AK IGC Year 2 agreement would be tabled until after the August meeting.

Victoria transitioned the group to continue the discussion of the shared code enforcement officer. She reminded the group that this topic has come up several times over the last year and that the conversation at the last meeting left off with the question: what is the code enforcement need in your community? Victoria asked if anyone had any information to share out.

Marilee shared that Vandergrift's code enforcement officer (CEO) is paid for 12 hours a week of work, which is not enough for their community. She added that with all of the paperwork, time in the field, and appearances at hearings, their CEO's time is completely full. She said that they could benefit from some support. John shared that Lower Burrell recently hired a new CEO. He added that he thought their new CEO might be able to help communities in need in the future.

Jody asked if the group had determined the breakdown of the shared CEOs time. Kristen said that this still needed to be determined and would depend on whether a full or part-time CEO is hired. George asked if there were any county-level examples of shared CEOs that the group could look at. He noted that Arnold may be able to lend their CEOs out in the future, as properties continue to come into compliance.

Jody brought up that the rate of pay of the shared CEO would have to be considered. John suggested that the rate of pay would have to be set and agreed to by the member IGC communities. Marilee said that the group should look at options to add capacity, rather than tapping into current capacity. Victoria said that sharing current CEOs is one option, but that it sounded like communities were just getting by with what they had. She noted that adding capacity, rather than tapping into current capacity, might help communities more.

Victoria shared that she talked with Amanda Settlemaier, Executive Director, of the Turtle Creek Valley Council of Governments (TCVCOG) to get some advice on shared code enforcement approaches. She provided some background on the TCVCOG, noting that it was founded in 1971 with 11 participating communities and that it has grown to 20 communities. She added that this organization has nonprofit status and a paid staff of 10 people to operate programs like grant administration, code enforcement, and utility billing for participating communities.

Victoria said that Amanda pointed out that the mindset around code enforcement requires a shift from thinking about cost savings to investment, in order to bring properties into compliance and improve communities. Amanda noted that CEOs have to be technologically savvy, politically, savvy and must understand the various codes. She said that offering a competitive wage for CEOs is also essential to retaining them. She added that a good code enforcement program is cloud-based or online, rather than paper-based.

Melissa asked if the group was just looking at property maintenance codes or building codes. She suggested that if everyone follows the International Property Maintenance Code (IPMC), that it would be easier for a shared CEO to work across communities. She added that the problem in Upper Burrell Township isn't with property maintenance, but with getting people to comply with building permitting and building codes. Corey asked if any community doesn't follow the IPMC? Melissa said that Upper Burrell does not follow the IPMC.

Victoria also shared that the Westmoreland County Redevelopment Authority may be offering an online-based code enforcement software (Code Pro) directly to communities at an affordable cost in the very near future. She said that based off of conversations with Brian Lawrence, one of the first steps a community can take now to prepare for the "Code Pro" software is to adopt the newest version of the IPMC.

Victoria noted a number of benefits to utilizing this software through the RACW for code enforcement. She said that by working with the RACW, property-based information will be fed directly to the County to help put resources back into communities (to demolish or redevelop structures for example). She added that CEOs would be able to use a phone or tablet out in the field to select a property, enter a violation from a drop down menu, add notes and a picture, and submit the violation, which would automatically generate a violation letter to be mailed to the property owner. She said moving away from a paper-based code enforcement system would mean this data could be used in other ways, paving the way to digitize other processes.

Victoria noted that the RACW is currently piloting this software in Latrobe, with plans to expand to other areas in the near future. Corey added that because the RACW is incorporating the IPMC into the software, communities that adopt this will be in a better position to start using the software. She suggested that communities look into what codes they are using. Victoria echoed this and said that the IPMC offers a comprehensive set of standards that communities can easily adopt either completely or partially. She added that pursuing shared CEOs would be more feasible if participating communities are working from the same property maintenance codes and software.

Corey asked if communities are currently working from a paper-based or an online code enforcement system. George noted that Arnold is working from a paper-based system. Corey asked the group to start thinking about the amount of time an online code enforcement system would save them. She suggested that an online system would help expand the CEOs range. CEOs would be able to spend their time more efficiently out in the field issuing violations and doing follow-ups, rather than filling out paperwork.

George shared that Arnold has had several different CEOs and that they all have had their own different filing system. He said that the online system would help eliminate the challenges that come with this.

Dennis shared that the City of New Kensington recently started using an online code enforcement system. He said that one of the benefits is that the City can now see the history of violations for properties to help build a case against violators. He noted that with a paper-based system, some of that evidence or data can be lost and added that the City even uses this information with police data, to see additional relationships. He suggested that if communities decide to buy into the RACW's code enforcement software, maybe the IGC could write a grant to help acquire tablets for CEOs to use. Victoria and Corey agreed that this is a possibility.

Victoria asked if communities followed the IPMC or if they knew which property maintenance codes they had in place. Jody said Vandergrift's codes were online, but he wasn't sure if they were a part of the IPMC. Marilee said she thought Vandergrift followed the IPMC. Dennis suggested that if the state adopts or recommends certain codes, typically boroughs or cities would follow the same. George said that Arnold follows sections of the IPMC.

Victoria asked members to think about and look into their municipal budgets for not only code enforcement staff, but also software and equipment. She noted that communities interested in the RACW code enforcement software may be able to take advantage of a group or bulk rate for a subscription when this is available. She said that the RACW rates would likely be much more affordable compared to private companies offering code enforcement software.

Adam asked if the property ownership information available through the software would be updated regularly. Victoria shared that the RACW is building the software to connect with the County's parcel information, which would automatically update on a monthly-basis to reflect current ownership. Corey brought up that this aspect would end up saving communities additional time, as CEOs often manually look this information up as a part of their work. She added that rather than trying to make the County's parcel data conform to an outside consulting firm's code enforcement system, the RACW's system is being built from the county's data.

Melissa brought up that if there is a way to fast-track the timeline for when the magistrate holds a hearing for a violation, she wanted to pursue this. She said that the time between a violation and a hearing is too long and that minimal fines of \$25 for high grass aren't enough to make people comply. She added that the Township has to give a 10 day notice before elevating the issue, and that the magistrate gives an additional 30 and then 60 days sometimes before a hearing is held, where cases are often dismissed.

Dennis shared that New Kensington has increased their fines to \$1000 per day with a 10 day notice, and that this seems to motivate people to take care of the problem. George said that Arnold also increased their property maintenance violation fees.

Corey and Victoria shared that as a part of Latrobe's blight inventory plan process, the City reached out to the magistrate, to address similar issues with lag time between violations and hearings. City Leaders were told that they couldn't make changes to the process or even discuss Latrobe's concerns because it could influence the court's decision on property maintenance violation cases. Jody suggested that there should be a way to talk to a judge about issues that communities are having in concept, without risking influencing any decisions on a particular case. Corey asked if there was someone above the magistrate to talk to. Melissa said that she had tried to involve the court of common pleas but that this made things worse.

Melissa also brought up that if there was a way to put pressure on lending institutions to foreclose on properties sooner, rather than allowing issues to accumulate after months of sitting, she wanted to pursue this too. The group echoed these concerns and noted that lending institutions don't really want properties in their name and that this creates other challenges for communities.

Dennis suggested that the group come up with a creative way to address property maintenance issues like cutting grass for elderly or disabled property owners. He suggested creating a unit of volunteers that can go out and cut grass in certain situations. Melissa suggested a part time municipal employee could go out to specifically cut the grass for vacant properties. Jody noted that communities don't want to be in the business of cutting grass, but that this is sometimes the easiest or quickest way to resolve the nuisance.

Corey suggested that residents may not know about resources that could help them. She suggested putting together a resource list of volunteer groups, affordable lawn care businesses, or handy-man services. George shared that Arnold has considered this but ran into issues with liability, as the City cannot endorse certain groups or business over others. He said that the City plans to compile a list of violations and their corresponding fee schedule to be mailed out with the City's sewage/garbage bills. He said that the flyer will help notify residents about what to keep an eye on to prevent property maintenance issues.

Dennis brought up that the City's staff cannot just go onto private property to improve it, per the third class city code. He said that the City has to be careful to follow certain processes to abate the issue. He added that if the City can't get the property owner's consent, they can post a notice, then abate the nuisance, and then file a lien against the property for the costs incurred.

John shared that there may be groups of volunteers through local unions, where retired or idle workers are available to cut grass and remove snow for people in need (for free or low-cost). He said that he would look into this and share. Corey suggested that information like this could be posted on a municipality's website.

Jody asked how costs incurred to abate property maintenance issues are paid back to the municipality. Matt and Dennis said that a municipality has to file a lien on the property for the cost of the service. They said that the money isn't collected until the property is sold. Dennis shared that it can be expensive to put liens on properties and suggested talking to the County's Prothonotary about adjusting the filing fee for liens, as it costs around \$70. He added that perhaps a municipality could pay \$10 to file a lien on a property and then pay the other \$60, once the property is sold.

Corey asked how violations are typically issued. Jody shared that Vandergrift issues violations via certified mail. Corey shared that other communities have had success handing violations to property owners in person (if possible). She said that this gives the CEO an opportunity to talk about ways to bring the property into compliance. George shared that Arnold has had success with violation door tags and follow-up letters.

Victoria thanked the group for sharing their ideas and tools on how to bring properties into compliance. She asked if the group had any interest in having a speaker come from the TCVCOG, the RACW, or another organization to talk about shared code enforcement or cloud-based code enforcement systems. The group agreed that they had interest in a speaker. Victoria asked the group to determine if their community follows the IPMC or other property maintenance codes to share at the next meeting.

Victoria transitioned the group to the blight inventory project. She shared that the Planning Division still is working on the proposal/scope of work for this project and is planning to include all IGC communities. She noted that Lower Burrell's maps had not been received yet but that she would talk to John after the meeting to coordinate. John said that he could provide input on behalf of Lower Burrell.

Victoria transitioned the group to the Westmoreland Broadband initiative. Corey provided an overview of the Westmoreland Broadband project and noted that data collection field crews would be working in communities, checking out 3,600 locations that may be unserved/underserved, over the next several months. She asked for assistance in sharing the project website information with residents and encouraged all to take the internet survey. She said that two pilot projects to expand broadband will be identified early on as a part of this process. She added that the Planning Division would be sharing a communications toolkit to communities to help get the word out about the effort soon.

Victoria transitioned to discuss agenda items for the next meeting. She said that August 18th will be the first meeting of year 2. She said that the Planning Division wants to use this first organizational meeting as an opportunity to reflect on year 1 - what went well, what didn't, what needs to change. She said that the Planning Division wants the group's feedback to continue to improve the IGC's operation. She added that there may also be an opportunity to discuss if the by-laws are working for the IGC members, if virtual meetings should be incorporated, etc.

Victoria transitioned to provide an update on trail progress within the Alle-Kiski. She shared that the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission (SPC) allocated up to \$3.5 million for the Kiski Junction rail line corridor to be acquired by Armstrong Trails and Armstrong County for trail improvements. She added that this will help connect to other trails in the region and is a critical link in the Erie to Pittsburgh Trail.

Victoria asked if there were any other public comments. She asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. A motion was made by George and seconded by Dennis.

The meeting ended at 6:06 PM.