

Alle-Kiski Intergovernmental Council
Regular Meeting Minutes
Meeting #4 - November 16th, 2023
Virtual Via Google Meet

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

AK IGC: Tom Guzzo (D-New Kensington), Matt Grantz (D-West Leechburg), Dennis Scarpiniti (A-New Kensington), Kristen Sarno (A-East Vandergrift), Barbara Sharp (D-East Vandergrift), Jody Sarno (D-Vandergrift), Marilee Kessler (A-Vandergrift), John Andrejcik (D-Lower Burrell), George Hawdon (D-Arnold), Michael Kornis (D-Allegheny Township), Kayla Visnovsky (West Leechburg)

Westmoreland County Planning: Jillian Caswell, Victoria Baur

Guests: Michael Halpern (MuniReg) **Public:** None

Meeting started at 5:00 PM.

1. Review/approve minutes from Meeting 3

A motion was made by John and seconded by Jody to approve the Meeting 3 minutes. The Meeting 3 minutes were approved.

2. Guest speaker: Michael Halpern, MuniReg

a. Presentation

b. Q&A

Michael Halpern, President and founder of MuniReg, provided an overview of MuniReg and its programs. Based out of northeast Ohio, MuniReg assists communities with mitigating blight by administering vacant property registration programs. In Westmoreland County, MuniReg currently works with New Kensington and Lower Burrell.

Michael provided several example scenarios where vacant property registration ordinances (VPROs) help provide useful information to a community about the property owner, so that the property doesn't become a nuisance. He explained that it can be difficult to track down contact information from banking and financial institutions when they become property owners. He emphasized that MuniReg is well versed in working with banking and financial institutions. He stressed that obtaining contact information is much more likely to occur early in the process.

Michael said VPROs are not meant to be a revenue generator for the community or MuniReg, nor are they a "silver bullet" to fix blight. VPROs are a preventative tool that are helpful to have in place and many communities across the U.S., regardless of size, use them.

Michael explained that if a community works with MuniReg, a contract is executed and the community adopts a VPRO, which establishes a registration fee that MuniReg retains a portion of. MuniReg is able to provide model ordinances as examples for the community. Michael explained that Rental Property Registration Ordinances (RPROs) have similar benefits and can be adopted simultaneously. He added that he is experienced in navigating difficult conversations with council members and the public and can assist in making a smooth transition in establishing a VPRO.

Members followed up with questions. John and Dennis shared their experience working with MuniReg, noting that having a VPRO was beneficial and a “no-brainer” to put in place. Dennis said VPROs are a valuable time-saving tool for code enforcement.

Michael Praised the AK IGC members for working together and said this is the only way to find solutions to common challenges. He said he would share a copy of the presentation after the meeting and noted he is available to return in person if members would like a follow-up.

Members thanked Michael for attending the meeting and sharing information. Victoria thanked George for recommending Michael as a speaker. She said she would distribute Michael’s presentation as a follow-up. Victoria also noted that for the six communities participating in the regional blight project, the project will include looking at collected data and selecting applicable blight mitigation tools, like VPROs and RPROs, for communities to consider adopting.

3. AK IGC Year 3

a. Agreement status

Victoria noted that there are still pending items that are needed from Allegheny Township, Lower Burrell, and Vandergrift regarding the year 3 cooperation agreement.

Victoria said she checked with Allegheny Township and understood that items are on the way in the mail and that Lower Burrell recently attested the signature page of the agreement, but that Dues are still needed. John said he would follow-up with Greg Primm to make sure the Dues are taken care of. Jody said the Vandergrift’s approval was delayed, but that all items should be taken care of and sent along soon. He said to reach out to the Borough Secretary. Marilee said she thought the agreement had been signed and mailed already but she would follow-up with Steve.

Victoria stressed that these items are needed as soon as possible. She said all items are to be turned in by December 12th, in time for the last Commissioner’s meeting of the year.

4. AK IGC Blight Inventory and Plan

a. Report

Jill provided a brief update on the Alle-Kiski blight inventory project, noting that since the last time the group met, the Planning Division was able to complete data collection in Allegheny Township. She said fieldwork is more than halfway done with data collection being complete in East Vandergrift, Vandergrift, West Leechburg, and Allegheny Township.

Jill explained that the Planning Division will be taking a break from fieldwork data collection and will resume with New Kensington and Arnold in the spring. In the meantime, over the winter, the Planning Division team will be working to acquire and prepare any additional datasets from communities, such as code violations, police incidents, and building permit data.

Jill noted that building permit data has been received from East Vandergrift. She added that Allegheny Township indicated they have police incident and code violation data and that West

Leechburg indicated having code violation data, but that these additional datasets have not been received yet. Jill said that since New Kensington and Arnold were not present at the blight kick-off meeting, additional datasets had not been identified.

Victoria asked if New Kensington or Arnold had additional digitized datasets, such as police incidents or code violations to include. She said this information can usually be exported from crime reporting or code enforcement software if available. Victoria also asked if there are points of contact that the Planning Division should reach out to for this information.

George said he would provide contact information for the City of Arnold's police chief. He added that the City also has code violation data, but that this might not be useful for the project. Tom noted that data from New Kensington can be provided.

Regarding the Local Government Academy (LGA) resolution for the market component of the blight inventory project, Victoria said she received the City of Arnold's resolution. Marilee said she has Vandergrift's signed LGA resolution and asked if it needed to be mailed or scanned. Victoria asked if she would scan and email or fax the resolution as soon as possible.

5. Shared code enforcement

a. Subcommittee report

b. Follow-up on third party code enforcement providers

George shared that after having more conversations with Harshman Group LLC, the company indicated they are willing to work on retainer for the AK IGC communities, being paid quarterly. He said that Harshman is able to provide not only code enforcement services, but also rental inspections, building code official services, etc. George added that an arrangement like this would not have to be bid out by communities, as this falls under the "professional services" category. He said for any community that is lacking in any or all of these services, this arrangement could be very beneficial and cost effective.

Victoria reminded that the group wanted to wait until East Vandergrift shared their experience meeting directly with Strategic Solutions before following-up again with any of the third party code enforcement providers. She asked if Kristen could share a report.

Kristen shared that Strategic Solutions recently presented to East Vandergrift Borough Council. She said John Trant, President of Strategic Solutions, reviewed some of their existing code violation data and provided the Borough with a proposal. Kristen said East Vandergrift has decided to move forward with a temporary (6 month) contract where Strategic Solutions will provide code enforcement services, billing by the hour.

Kristen noted that Strategic Solutions plans to do a code enforcement "sweep" to kick things off. She added that in order to save money on travel time, when it comes to follow-ups, Strategic Solutions said the Borough can provide pictures to them for any other issues as they arise. As a part of their arrangement, Strategic Solutions plans to handle all notices, letters, court appearances, etc. and will provide regular reports to the Borough.

Victoria congratulated East Vandergrift on their new code enforcement arrangement and pointed out that it appeared that many communities gained a lot of beneficial information from the third party code enforcement presentations. She said it sounded like each community may have met their code enforcement needs at the moment.

Victoria asked what the group wanted to do regarding next steps, if any. Members indicated they are still open to pursuing some sort of shared code enforcement arrangement and that they are also open to working with any of the companies that presented. Tom said the group could revisit the topic after the new year.

6. Shared fire service subcommittee

a. Subcommittee report

George provided an update, noting that Arnold was unable to approve the volunteer fire service tax incentive program, due to a publication error. He said the City would be voting to approve this at their next meeting. He hopes that this program can be reciprocated by other communities.

Michael followed-up by asking which communities would be interested in adopting reciprocal volunteer fire service tax incentive programs. John said Lower Burrell might be able to discuss this in the future, but not now. Tom said New Kensington recently approached their fire departments to discuss this. Members agreed that they would be interested in continuing to pursue adoption of reciprocal programs.

7. Next AK IGC meeting date: Thursday, January 18th 2024 @ 5PM (*in-person*)

a. Discuss agenda items

Tom noted that there is no December meeting and said the group will reconvene in January. He suggested that if the weather is bad, the group could meet virtually. Jody asked if there was a process for making a last minute change to meet virtually. Victoria said that the annual advertisement of the AK IGC stipulates that meetings may be virtual with notice - notice being posted in the agenda online. Members determined two days notice would be sufficient to make a decision about a last minute virtual meeting due to inclement weather.

Victoria reminded members to continue to think of and forward agenda items along over the holiday break.

8. Public comment

None.

Other Discussion

George shared that he will be moving on from his position on Arnold's Council soon. He indicated that at the City's January meeting, Council will be discussing and assigning a new person to serve as the Delegate for the AK IGC. He said Adam Zweig is still going to be the Alternate. George thanked everyone and said serving as a Delegate on the AK IGC was one of the most enjoyable parts of being on Council at the City.

John shared that he will be moving on from his position as Mayor at the City of Lower Burrell. He said that Chris Fabry will be taking over as the Delegate and Ron Welker will likely be the

Alternate for the AK IGC. John also reminded that someone from the AK IGC will need to take over the Secretarial duties. He said he plans to continue being involved with and supportive of the IGC as a member of the public, as much as he is permitted. John encouraged members to keep the ball rolling.

Tom, Victoria, and members thanked George and John for their commitment to the AK IGC over the last several years. Victoria stressed the importance of having replacement Delegates/Alternates in place for Arnold and Lower Burrell to ensure all communities are actively participating in the IGC.

Tom wished everyone a happy holiday season.

9. Adjournment

A motion was made by Kristen and seconded by John to adjourn the meeting. The meeting ended at 6:14 PM.