

Alle-Kiski Intergovernmental Council Meeting Minutes

Meeting #5

January 20, 2022

New Kensington City Hall

Attendees (D-Delegate, A-Alternate)

AK IGC: George Hawdon (D-Arnold), Dennis Scarpiniti (A-New Kensington), Tom Guzzo (D-New Kensington), Ren Steele (D-Allegheny Township), John Andrejczik (Lower Burrell), Amy Rockwell (D-Lower Burrell), Kristen Sarno (A-East Vandergrift), Barbara Sharp (D-East Vandergrift), Melissa Cortilesio (D-Upper Burrell Township)

Westmoreland County Planning: Kristi Mitchell, Victoria Baur

Westmoreland County Redevelopment Authority: Brian Lawrence, Ashley Vidale

Public: Christopher Zelonka, Dante Cicconi, Corey Pistininzi

Meeting started at 5:01 PM.

Tom called the meeting to order. Tom confirmed that everyone had a chance to review the meeting #4 minutes and asked if there were any questions or concerns. Ren clarified that Allegheny Township would be willing to share equipment indicated in the shared services summary, but that an arrangement would need to be made to pay the township operator of said equipment. Ren emphasized that lending equipment would only be on a short-term basis. A motion was made by Amy to approve the minutes and it was seconded by Ren. The meeting #4 minutes were approved.

Victoria welcomed the group back after the new year and noted that Brian would be speaking virtually instead of in person. She added that Brian would be explaining the role of the Westmoreland County Redevelopment Authority (RA) and Land Bank (LB) in the county and leading a discussion around regional code enforcement, drawing from priorities indicated in the shared services/joint purchasing survey.

Tom noted that representatives from New Kensington City Council were in attendance including Dante Cicconi and Corey Pistininzi, to ask questions regarding the LB. Tom also noted that Lower Burrell, Vandergrift, East Vandergrift, and Allegheny Township are already members of the LB and have benefited from its tools.

Tom introduced Brian and thanked him for joining the group virtually. Brian thanked the group, shared his background working for the county, and provided an introduction to the RA and LB, its board members, and staff. The RA and LB are two agencies that function under one organization, operating with five staff. Brian noted that the organization recently went through a strategic planning process to identify specific objectives and one mission for the two agencies - to build healthy and whole communities and reposition our towns by eliminating blight and its influences in the communities of Westmoreland County.

Brian brought up the topic of blight and how its impact is significant in our communities. Blighted properties can cause a greater risk of tax delinquency, crime/vandalism, a diminished tax base, and can lead to diminished community perceptions and aesthetics.

Brian shared examples of successful projects from the RA and LB's efforts including acquiring property to create a recreational destination in Sutersville Borough, turning a vacant/delinquent building into a successful restaurant (Gato Taco) with apartments above in downtown Irwin Borough, and even installing ramps and chair lifts in the homes of disabled and elderly residents throughout several communities.

Demolition, rehabilitation, land banking, accessible housing, affordable housing, educational training, historic preservation, and brownfield cleanup are examples of services/programs that the RA and LB offer.

Brian announced that the RA and LB will be hosting the first-ever Annual Blight Remediation Summit on April 22, 2022 at the Event Center at the Westmoreland County Community College in Youngwood. This one-day event, themed the Blight Boot Camp 2022, will address the causes of and solutions to blight.

Brian explained that the "whack-a-mole" approach to dealing with blight across the county is ineffective. Brian further explained that data is the greatest tool to address blight and without intel from local officials on the location of blighted properties, the RA and LB aren't able to help.

Brian shared that the RA and LB created a simple, online, [Blight Reporter Form](#) specifically designed for code enforcement officers (CEOs) or local officials to report blighted or nuisance properties within their community. The RA and LB can use this information to help communities improve these properties. Brian will forward the link to Victoria to circulate to the AK IGC.

Brian went on to explain that the LB helps to create equitable development opportunities by connecting local developers with available properties through a process of acquisition. Brian shared an example from East Vandergrift Borough (which is a LB community). The vacant former East Vandergrift Elementary School is now being redeveloped into affordable senior housing with assistance from the RA, a local housing nonprofit, and a developer. This project is a direct result of the Planning District process in the Alle-Kiski, as this opportunity was identified early on.

Brian transitioned the discussion to shared services and acknowledged that the AK IGC communities have similar priorities around shared services with the RA and LB. Brian noted that the RA and LB boards want the organization to look for opportunities to support regional code enforcement solutions. Brian clarified that by regional code enforcement, he's specifically talking about property maintenance code, not building codes, UCC, or IBC, as blight often starts with property maintenance.

The group discussed the challenges around finding and keeping quality CEOs. The group acknowledged that enforcing property maintenance codes is a tough job with difficult working conditions and that the pay, benefits, and professional development associated with this line of work is often lacking. Brian also noted that the expectations placed on CEOs often vary, depending on the community, and that this can make the job even harder. Brian added that local biases and relationships within communities can also pose a challenge to

equal, consistent, enforcement of codes. CEOs may also not have access to professional development or training. George added that the volume of blight can be overwhelming for CEOs to respond to in certain communities.

Brian asked the group how they would rate the code enforcement program within each of their communities (one being the worst, five being the best). Ren suggested that Allegheny Township has a good code enforcement program, rating it a five. John suggested that the City of Lower Burrell's code enforcement program is fair, rating it a three and a half. Tom explained that the City of New Kensington has two full-time and one part-time CEOs. The City uses CDBG dollars to help pay for its CEOs. Tom said New Kensington struggles with bad landlords that have been around for generations and local biases and relationships.

Brian asked the group what a regional-scaled code enforcement program would look like. Based on the feedback provided to the County Planning Division, code enforcement was a priority indicated across all communities. Brian presented two different models for pursuing regional code enforcement.

In the first model - municipalities would band together under an intergovernmental cooperation agreement to procure services from a third party or an existing municipal CEO. In the second model - municipalities would individually enter into an intergovernmental cooperation agreement with the RA to procure services of their staff to provide code enforcement (similar to how municipalities enter into the LB). The RA does not currently have the staff to provide code enforcement services but is interested in pursuing this model to better address blight at the local level.

Brian noted that the RA can't solve problems they don't know about and that there is a disconnect between the local scale and the county scale. The strength of the second model is that it would provide the RA with a direct line of communication at the local level to better understand and address blight within communities. The RA is also committed to ensuring that CEO positions are well-trained and well-compensated, with reasonable hours, and good benefits to attract sustainable staff.

Tom asked if the RA is looking to replicate this model across all seven Planning Districts. He added that the AK IGC is likely happy to be the first to try a regional code enforcement program out, but suggested that managing this type of program and a large staff across seven Districts would be difficult.

Brian clarified that the RA is not looking to replace what's working. If a municipality is happy with their code enforcement program, they don't have to give that up. He added that there are already multiple CEOs working within the AKPD and across all communities in the county. He suggested that the RA might be able to create some efficiencies of scale to reduce costs and produce better outcomes. Brian also noted that this type of program would be short-term to start and wouldn't be free, but rather a procured process.

Brian asked the group what the next steps are for this process. He suggested that figuring out how a CEO typically works within a given community is important. Also identifying how

much a community currently spends and would be willing to spend on this issue and estimating the number of CEOs needed. Brian also noted that the program could account for legal fees generated from the magistrate, for example.

John asked if the difference in codes across communities would be an impediment to a regionalized code enforcement program. Brian suggested that there is a way to use a third party model like Code.sys Code Consulting, Inc., Code Enforcement Agency, etc. These are private companies that are doing code enforcement in multiple locations where different codes apply. He added that one option would be to use the International Property Maintenance Code (IPMC) as a base to provide consistency, for example, or assigning CEOs to work in communities that have similar codes.

Brian added that at the Blight Remediation Summit on April 22, 2022, the RA will have a representative from the Centre Region COG code enforcement office to speak about their program and services. Amy commented that the Centre Region COG has been successfully applying a regional approach to issues for many years and are a good example to look towards if the group wants to move down this path.

Tom transitioned the discussion back to the LB and asked if any of the municipalities participating in the LB could share their thoughts and experiences. John and Amy shared that any property Lower Burrell has entered into the LB has returned back on the tax rolls. Barbara noted that with help from the LB, the vacant former East Vandergrift Elementary School is going to be redeveloped into affordable senior housing.

Corey asked about the process and length of time to make difficult properties (with back taxes and federal liens) available again. Brian said that properties with federal liens can be challenging, but the LB has taken them on (for example, the Monsour Hospital property in Jeannette). Typically there is a requirement with federal liens where after a judicial sale, the federal government has to re-up the lien. He added that with these types of properties, it can take between three to five years before they are made available, but not all properties are like this. Brian asked Corey to email the details of the property(ies) for him to look into.

Tom asked if there were any other questions. Brian added that municipalities looking to join the LB pay a one-time-only \$5,000 fee and that there is not an annual fee. Brian said that for those communities that have joined the LB, their \$5,000 has come back to them ten-fold when you consider the amount of money generated once properties get back on the tax rolls. John echoed this sentiment and said that the LB fee has paid for itself over and over again, once properties are back on the tax rolls.

Brian brought up an example recently from the City of Arnold (not a member of the LB) where the City needed intervention from the LB but it was too late. Brian stressed that when it comes to the LB, it's important to have access to this tool before you need it.

Referring to the previous example in Arnold, George shared that this property was very dangerous, unsafe, and located in a nice neighborhood. He added that this was driving down property values. The City was able to resolve this issue, but had Arnold been a

member of the LB, the process would have been much quicker, easier, and more equitable. George asked if Brian would be able to talk with City Council again about joining the LB. Brian confirmed he would be in touch and added that if any other community has interest in joining the LB, he is happy to talk with their local officials as well.

Brian noted that the RA still has Countywide Demolition program money (funded by federal HUD CDBG) and stressed that communities that have not opted out of the program should consider applying (New Kensington and Arnold have opted out of the program).

Dennis asked about the DEMOFund program (funded by Act 152 - recording fees) application status. Brian noted that the RA has recommended a slate of 12 properties to the Commissioners which includes the 4th Street, New Kensington, property. Brian added that the RA's estimate of the number of structures that need to be demolished across the county is upwards of 1,000, yet the RA has only received 12 applications. Brian asked the group if they have a list of blighted properties in their communities, to please share this with the RA as soon as possible.

Brian thanked the group for their time and for accommodating the virtual presentation.

Tom asked the group if the last agenda item - to review the shared services/joint purchasing opportunities survey summary - could be carried over to the February meeting. The group agreed to carry over the agenda item.

Tom asked if there were any public comments. Barbara introduced East Vandergrift Council president, Christopher Zelonka. Christopher introduced himself and thanked the group for having him speak. He shared that he has been working with several other council members and municipalities to come up with a template letter and resolution for municipalities to encourage the Westmoreland County Commissioners to distribute some of the County's ARPA funds directly to communities. Municipalities such as Delmont, Hyde Park, Vandergrift, and West Leechburg have already adopted resolutions of support.

Christopher shared that he and other local officials have determined that municipalities could ask the Commissioners for 37% of the County's \$105 million allocation of ARPA funds to be dispersed to municipalities based on population size using a formula identified in the letter. The group thanked Christopher for attending the meeting.

Tom asked if there were any other comments. Ren brought up that all Alle-Kiski communities should join the Erie to Pittsburgh Trail Alliance to help support trail expansion in the region. Ren encouraged group members to reach out to Malcolm Sias with the Regional Trail Corporation. Ren also noted that the Tredway Trail will likely be expanded across the Freeport Bridge and beyond. He added that the group should encourage the development of the boat launch area in Braeburn. The group agreed that pursuing investments in trails and other recreation is an important priority for the region.

A motion to adjourn the meeting was made by George and seconded by John.
Meeting ended at 6:12 PM.