Alle-Kiski Intergovernmental Council Meeting Minutes
Meeting #7
March 17, 2022
New Kensington City Hall

Attendees *(D-Delegate, A-Alternate)*
AK IGC: George Hawdon (D-Arnold), Tom Guzzo (D-New Kensington), Mike Korns (A-Allegheny Township), John Andrejcik (D-Lower Burrell), Kristen Sarno (A-East Vandergrift), Barbara Sharp (D-East Vandergrift), Melissa Cortileso (D-Upper Burrell Township), Matt Grantz (D-West Leechburg)

Westmoreland County Planning: Corey Block, Victoria Baur
Public: Marilee Kessler (Vandergrift), Daisha Clayton (Vandergrift), Jody Sarno (Vandergrift)

Meeting started at 5:05 PM.

Tom called the meeting to order, confirmed that everyone had a chance to review the meeting #6 minutes, and asked if there were any questions or concerns. A motion was made by Melissa to approve the minutes and it was seconded by John. The meeting #6 minutes were approved.

Tom asked the group to confirm changes to the Delegates, Alternates, and Secretary positions. John confirmed that he would be the Delegate instead of Amy Rockwell for Lower Burrell and that Chris Fabry would remain the Alternate. Matt clarified that he would be the Delegate for West Leechburg instead of Marcia Cole and Marcia Cole would switch to be the Alternate instead of Tim Grantz. Mike later confirmed that he would be the Alternate for Allegheny Township instead of Kathy Starr. A motion to make John Andrejcik the Secretary of the AK IGC in place of Amy Rockwell was made by Melissa and seconded by George.

Tom transitioned to update the group on the letter to COSTARS regarding the AK IGC's complaints with Compass Minerals. Victoria confirmed that Amy drafted a letter on behalf of the AK IGC and that everyone was provided a copy.

Tom moved on to discuss the group's homework from the last meeting - to reflect on the shared services/joint purchasing recommendations and consider items to jointly purchase together - as this was indicated as a mid-term priority. Tom referred back to the idea of jointly purchasing software, such as GIS, as only some communities have this. Tom asked the group to share their ideas.

Tom asked the group to seriously consider items to jointly purchase and to bring ideas up at the next meeting. He noted that jointly purchasing item(s) would be an achievable goal for

the first year. He added that discussions regarding items to jointly purchase can even occur outside of the meeting via email, phone, etc.

Jody asked about the possibility of jointly purchasing software for code enforcement. Tom noted that this is an option for the group. He added that there is potential to work with the Redevelopment Authority of Westmoreland County (RACW) to develop a regional code enforcement program that would serve all interested Alle-Kiski communities in the future.

Tom asked the group about their interest in creating a list of developable lots and vacant properties to market, as this was indicted as a mid-term priority. George noted that Arnold is interested in this priority. George added that, based off of discussions with the RACW, the County may be distributing a portion of its ARPA funds to the RACW to work with communities to rehabilitate or demolish blighted structures.

Tom transitioned the group to discuss the blight mapping/developable properties project goals, expectations, and limitations - as these items were also indicated as mid-term priorities. Victoria suggested that the group pick one main priority to work on at a time to make the most out of everyone's limited and valuable time. She noted that if this is the combined priority that the group wants to focus on next, the group needs to discuss all that is involved with a blight inventory at this scale - the timeframe, scope of work, associated costs, etc. Victoria added that the blight inventories that the Planning Division conducted for Monessen, Greensburg, and Latrobe were provided at a cost to each municipality.

Tom noted that a blight mapping/developable properties project would provide a lot of value to the Alle-Kiski communities and suggested that the group discuss the potential project and examples.

Corey noted that although Vandergrift has not formally joined the group, they can always reach out to the County Planning Division for assistance and guidance directly. Marilee and Daisha noted that they have had discussions with the RACW regarding property conditions within a specific census tract in the borough, as this area may be eligible for additional ARPA funding for rehabilitation and demolition. Marilee added that their code enforcement officer is using the blight reporter feature of software developed by the RACW to gather property condition information within this specific area.

Victoria explained that the Planning Division is able to work directly with municipalities in a consultant-like capacity through the Division's Technical Resources and Municipal Services (TRAMS) program, providing mapping services, technical expertise, and professional planning to help communities accomplish their goals. Aside from the blight inventory projects, past projects that have come out of the TRAMS program include creating a

comprehensive plan and developing a zoning ordinance for Youngwood Borough, and digitizing the City of Greensburg's zoning map.

Victoria established that blight is a common problem that virtually all communities deal with and noted its significant negative effects. Victoria shared that a blight inventory has the ability to provide a complete look at a community's property conditions (a snapshot in time) to better make informed decisions, target resources efficiently, and strategically build strategies around, among other benefits. Corey added that once blight is inventoried, the next step is to create a blight management plan based on the data collected, full of strategies to tackle blight.

Victoria explained the general process of conducting a blight inventory. Beginning steps include making direct contact with a community; drafting a project scope/proposal; executing a cooperation agreement between the community and County; and meeting with a project team to determine the project goal, available data sets (such as crime incidents, tax delinquency, code violations, building permits, etc.); and gain consensus on the project methods. Next steps include fieldwork data collection to assess parcel-by-parcel property conditions; deskwork data collection to acquire data from other County and municipal offices; and preparing and joining the collected/acquired data together and displaying this information in an end product such as a digital map or website landing page.

Victoria explained the general methods used in a blight inventory project. Property conditions are determined based on a Good, Fair, and Poor grading scale. Property conditions are recorded via a mobile application in the field by Planning Division staff. Photos are taken of Poor graded properties to show the location and severity of blight.

Victoria described the blight inventory projects that the Planning Division conducted for Monessen, Greensburg, and Latrobe, and walked the group through each example of the online map-based inventories.

Corey noted that going through the process of a blight inventory can help shed light on where practices need to be improved or updated within a community. For example, during the Latrobe blight inventory project, the City realized its paper-based code enforcement system was disorganized and not easily accessible or usable in other ways. Learning this, the City immediately transitioned to using a digital-based code enforcement software which will allow them to better track property conditions over time and use this data elsewhere.

George asked if building permit data is clickable on the Latrobe inventory - to provide information about the permit. Corey and Victoria noted that because this dataset is self-

reported by municipalities to the County, each instance looks different and information is limited.

Melissa asked if the blight inventories have helped motivate residents to fix or address their code violations more quickly. Victoria and Corey noted that because the process of conducting blight inventories is still fairly new, they don't have enough evidence to show its impact on people's behavior to improve property conditions. However, they both noted that there is value in making the blight inventories public, so people can transparently see property grades within their community and are ideally motivated to make improvements. Victoria and Corey noted that depending on data availability, information included in the inventory can be as detailed or as vague as the group's desire.

Tom asked if the seven AK IGC communities, plus Vandergrift, could band together and apply for funding or contribute financially to the project, would this be possible and would the County Planning Division want to tackle it? Corey and Victoria noted that the County Planning Division staff and the AK IGC communities would need to continue the conversation to determine if a project of this scale is feasible.

Victoria noted that an application was previously submitted to PA DCED at the end of the Alle-Kiski Planning District process to apply for grant funds to conduct an Alle-Kiski Planning District-wide blight inventory, for all 11 communities. However, this project was not funded and the specific funding program was limited to 2020.

Mike asked what a blight inventory would look like for Allegheny Township. Corey noted that in the more sprawling communities, certain streets or corridors could simply be mapped based on need or desire, utilizing the County vehicle. Victoria also noted that one option would be to utilize a consultant such as Civic Mapper to help. Civic Mapper (in partnership with Roadbotics) is a Pittsburgh-based company that has the ability to record property condition information through cameras on vehicles - this information would still have to be reviewed/graded by Planning Division staff.

John suggested prioritizing the blight inventory based on need - mapping the communities that have more blight first. George suggested the blight inventory would be useful for all communities in the Alle-Kiski. He noted the value of identifying the Fair properties now, so that they can begin to target resources and efforts to keep them from turning Poor.

Matt asked how the grades of properties with two existing structures with different grades are determined. Corey noted that in previous inventories, grades were determined based on the primary structure. She added that based on the group's interest, if there is a notable concern with secondary structures being Poor, while the primary structures are in Fair or

Good condition, considerations can be built into the inventory process to bring attention to this issue.

Corey noted that data collected in a blight inventory really helps to inform the tools, programs, and strategies to address problems. She added that for example, CDBG funds can be used to develop a paint program to help remediate and improve Fair properties with peeling paint to prevent rotting wood.

Melissa asked if additional details can be added to the inventory such as the use of a property - whether it's residential, commercial, or agricultural - and if sewage and water availability could be noted. Victoria suggested that utility information may be available to add from entities like MAWC, etc, but that the use of the property would be harder to determine out in the field. Corey suggested that if there is zoning in a community, depending on the accessibility of the zoning map, this could also be added to the inventory. Corey added that through the TRAMS program, the Planning Division has worked with communities to digitize their zoning map - but this is a separate project from the blight inventory.

Tom thanked Victoria and Corey for showing the example blight inventories and for answering the group's questions. He suggested that if the AK IGC communities are interested in pursuing a joint blight inventory, the group should reflect on the information presented and bring questions and ideas to the next meeting.

Victoria echoed Tom's suggestion and asked the group to think about what a blight inventory looks like for their community - What considerations should be made? What data is available? Would your entire community be inventoried or just certain areas? Where and how can we start? She added that this is a very big project that the group is considering undertaking and that there is more to discuss and many more details to figure out. She noted that because of the Planning Division's current workload, and how much more needs to be laid out for this project, the AK IGC blight inventory is likely not something the group can start this year. However, the group can begin to lay the framework of the project out now.

Victoria suggested that the group review two of the PA Housing Alliance's resources: the *Five-Step, Fast-Track Blight Plan* and the *From Blight to Bright Toolkit*. She also recommended that if officials are aware of blight in their communities now, they should submit information to the RACW via their *Blight Report Form* to see if any assistance is available for demolition or rehabilitation.

Victoria reminded the group about the RACW's first annual Blight Remediation Summit on Friday, April 22 at the Westmoreland County Community College in Youngwood. The event

will have experts speaking about regional code enforcement and the tools needed to address blight. Municipal representatives are encouraged to attend.

Victoria also reminded the group that there are only four months remaining in Year 1 of the AK IGC. The Planning Division will be reviewing the current dues structure internally to determine changes to fees. The Year 2 cooperation agreement between the County and all interested participating Alle-Kiski municipalities will have to be executed for August 2022. Victoria noted that the group will need to initiate this process soon. She added that if Vandergrift wants to formally join the AK IGC, the group would have to vote to allow them to join. Then, Vandergrift would pay the dues for Year 2, adopt a resolution, and sign the Year 2 agreement, rather than attempting to formally join before the end of Year 1.

Tom asked if there was anything else to discuss. John shared that he recently made contact with the Regional Trail Corporation president and that Lower Burrell is getting assistance/guidance on submitting an application for grant funds through the PA DCED for a potential trail project.

Melissa noted that if Lower Burrell is applying for grant funds that other communities have also applied for, the AK IGC could provide a letter stating that they support the project and are not in competition.

Tom made a motion to adjourn the meeting which was seconded by Melissa.

The meeting ended at 6:15 PM.