

Staff: Holli Bushnell, Office Assistant
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Minutes

Parks, Arts & Culture Committee Meeting

Thursday, October 24, 2024, 12:00pm

MEETING CONDUCTED IN PERSON AT 645 PINE ST, FRONT CONFERENCE ROOM, AND VIA ZOOM

Attendance:

Committee Members: Chair Becca Brown-McKnight, Councilor Mark Barlow, Councilor Carter Neubieser (not present)

City Staff: Mary Danko – FFL, Doreen Kraft – Burlington City Arts, Cindi Wight - BPRW, Holli Bushnell – BPRW

Meeting called to order at 12:04 pm by Chair Becca Brown-McKnight

Approval of Agenda

Mark Barlow moved to approve the agenda with the following modifications – move item 4.1 to 4.3, Brown-McKnight seconded, and all were in favor.

Approval of Draft Minutes from 09/26/2024

Barlow moved to approve the minutes, Brown-McKnight seconded, all were in favor

Public Forum

Public forum was opened at 12:05pm. As no one present wished to speak public forum was closed at 12:05pm.

Fletcher Free Library Update –

Director Mary Danko reports that the positions approved by the city council have been posted and the search to fill them has begun. These include a patron service specialist (security) and a social worker (the current contract is coming soon and will go to Howard Center). The Library as a hot spot has started to diminish lately which is a good thing even though the reason for the reduction is unclear. They had a great meeting with Community Safety Advisor Ingrid Jonas recently which continues to be encouraging.

The library has two major programs coming up, the Green Mountain Book Festival on the weekend of 11/2 which will activate all of spaces in the library. Then on the weekend of 11/16 and 17 FFL will be hosting a non-fiction comics festival; the only one in the country. People are coming from all over to participate and visit.

Staff has been visiting NPAs to talk about library cart sign up month and received great feedback about the services being provided. The staff had some turn over which has folks onboarding and hiring new staff in the near future. Staff also updated the website recently, and are still working out last few tweaks.

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Barlow asked if the lack of hotspot activity continues into off hours or if there is still overnight activity such as camping in the entryway. Danko shared that there are less tents on the ground and staff has heard anecdotally that tenting has shifted to the garage across from City Hall Park. FFL still has some folks sleeping in the Carnegie entrance which is a fire exit, so they cannot sleep there. They are still seeing drug use around the library, having issued over 100 180 day trespasses in addition to numerous 60 day trespasses.

Barlow asked if BPD has been providing off-hours support. Danko shared that it's unclear but she will ask about it. She was able to report that an arrest made across the street a week ago that seemed significant, but she doesn't have more info on it. The goal is for BPD to patrol the library when they can, but they are short staffed. Danko promised to drill down more on that.

Barlow shared that he wants to support efforts to continue diminishment of activity. He asked if there's something councilors can do to get BPD to move people along in the course of their patrols as that would be ideal. Danko shared that continued requests for CSOs would be helpful.

Brown-McKnight asked how staff is measuring the decrease in activity. Is staff looking at metrics? Danko shared that most of the evidence is anecdotal. They do have non-trespass form in use but staff gets overwhelmed. Morning staff helps clear folks who stayed overnight out in the mornings and they've been reporting less activity in the last three weeks. Brown-McKnight asked if there is anything that could be put in place to help track activity or if there's something at the council level that could provide tracking for hot spots. Brown-McKnight noted that the Mayor's office really keen on data too. She also asked how trespasses work after they're in place.

Danko explained that every week or so trespasses and a spreadsheet are sent to BPD. They are kept on file at FFL and sometimes there is a photo of the trespassed individual from surveillance cameras as well. Security is tasked with remembering who the trespassed patrons are. They can remind them to leave or if the person is more volatile, BPD is called. BPD comes depending on level of severity (if there is immediate danger). Security looks at pictures and trespasses and familiarize themselves with who is trespassed. At one time CSLs were coming by in the mornings. They would be putting that data into Valcor. Ultimately, the tracking that Brown-McKnight is interested in might already be in place on the BPD side of things.

BCA Update –

Doreen Kraft shared that BCA's next project is the upcoming holiday market. The holiday lights in CHP when up yesterday. Kraft described City Hall Park as a "brightspot" (a positive place for activity which is also a hot spot for negative behavior). When the library has more issues, City Hall Park has less issues. CHP has been terrible in the last period. Kraft has spoken with Ingrid Jonas, the Mayor's office, and BPD chief Murad, as behavior in the park has been absolutely awful. Staff was out for meeting in park, witnessed horrific behavior – drug use, violence amongst people in attendance, things left in the park and not cleaned. Staff doesn't want Kraft to be involved with these issues because she gets so emotional about how the behavior has chased away so many individuals and sponsors. Prior to the

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meeting, Kraft had just met with a donor for fountain work on Tuesday and this donor witnessed everything happening, came back, expressed displeasure, and Doreen chose to walk her out of the park to commit that she would work on resolving CHP issues that were “abnormal”. The number of police officers available at any given time is too small. The street team came for this incident, but their limitations are too great. What they needed was PD but there were only 3 people on duty for the whole city and 7 incidents happening at one time. They couldn’t get support. Kraft feels that the status of the park has devolved to where we were 2 years ago. She has no answers but knows it needs to be dealt with.

Brown-McKnight was disheartened, sharing that she felt like she was seeing positive changes. She lives on the hill and comes down college to CHP and when FFL and CHP are in great shape they really shine. When they’re in trouble it really shows. She asked what we did in 2 years that improved things.

Kraft confirmed that it was police patrols that made the difference. Nothing else works except when PD is there, patrolling, walking through the park, questioning behaviors. The environment changes immediately after the sweeps through. It’s the only thing she’s seen work. It’s in combination with other things, but the patrols really made the difference. When we are all on the same page is when things work better. This combination of positive programed activity and a strong police presence is the only thing that works. When we don’t have the officers we don’t have half of what we need to make it work.

Barlow asked if behavior has spiraled down in the last week or so and Kraft confirmed that was the case. Barlow shared that he feels the entire center of downtown is a hot zone as opposed to a bunch of little hotspots. When we address activity in one place it moves to another spot within the hot zone. Barlow shared that he drives through the downtown garage, visits library, has gone to the defunct YMCA building, and talked to pastors from the downtown churches. When negative activity moves from one spot, it goes to another spot and enforcement is just chasing it around the city. Right now the garage across from City Hall Park and the park itself are the hottest spots. He walked by 2 groups using drugs openly on Main Street while heading to a meeting last night on the S side of CHP. Our tolerance is part of the reason it persists, but our hot spot strategy needs to be more global. We’re just displacing the hot spots in the hot zone.

Kraft shared that Church Street Marketplace Director Kara Alnaswari feels this way too. She’s not sure what Chief Murad feels. There is a downtown plan, it’s very specific, but it seems like we just don’t have the resources. Barlow feels there has been a policy decision to willingly not enforce certain things. Kraft hopes that rewriting the parks ordinances could be an opportunity to address some of these issues.

Brown-McKnight asked about last years’ contract with the state police to patrol Church Street during the shopping season. Kraft was unsure, but shared that it’s not in the budget for this year. Last year they used AARPA funds for that security. Barlow added that Council had \$50,000 set aside, and PD added additional shifts thurs-sat which officers could sign up for 8pm to midnight. They provided visual enforcement but had BPD lead on any physical enforcement. The only shifts that they could get covered were all earlier in the day, not late night when we needed them. It didn’t have as big an effect as we

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thought it would. One thing that was successful was when private security was hired for downtown security. Danko added that DPW director Chapin Spencer present at hot spot meetings. He has hired some sheriffs to work CSM garage. Their funding may have changed. This made positive impact on that garage.

Kraft added that all of these issues have been a public relations challenge – things may have changed for the better, but people, visitors, are still scared. Brown-McKnight asked if the mayor's office had considered working with PR company. Kraft shared that she hasn't heard of that but would love to see if that's something happening.

Kraft shared that the international film festival happening at present. It's supported through regional programs by the city and held at Main Street Landing. The Holiday Market will be taking place in CHP, hopefully will help bring more positive vibes for downtown. Lighting going up on side streets, and additional activities are coming for holidays.

Finally, Kraft shared that BCA has done a mini-reorganization in organizing. They will be going to Board of Finance on 11/4 and the City Council two weeks later. They worked with both AFSCME and HR, and everything has been approved. They are now putting memos together to move to next step. They haven't done the full one due to efficiency study and fee study, but needed to address a couple of issues – strengthening development department. The intention is to take lowest paid positions and help address inequity of financing. Best of all, this reorganization is budget neutral. They will also be looking at the efficiency study and the major concerns from it.

Brown-McKnight shared that she does not support merging BCA with BPRW. Everyone looking at the efficiency study with care. Kraft noted that some councilors have reached out to her, but she would love to have deeper conversation regarding the study. She has many creative ideas, but hasn't come forward yet.

BPRW Update –

Wight shared that the state ending of the motel program has added an estimated 75 – 100 tent appearances since program ended (not 75-100 new tents, but we observe, notice, and remove). Wight shared that we do have individual living at Roundhouse Park; a gentleman in his mid-sixties who came out of hotel program who is disabled and on oxygen. Many folks are trying to help him, so staff are not removing him (Roundhouse is technically not a park). They are being more flexible due to his unique situation. With the closure of the program BPRW saw a lot more people, a big increase in campers and locations, but the urban park rangers are on top of it. Lots of new sites at barge canal/urban reserve. Not everyone loves leaving folks in the urban reserve and at the flying A, but it's made a big difference for our rangers.

Wight reports that the Kieslich Park agreement is now with lawyers.

In terms of ordinances updates, they continue to work through the rules and regulations in appendix d. They are currently working on permits in parks with a small group (Deryk Roach, Wight, and Meghan

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O'Daniel). BCA has added some input. Next the changes will go to the Parks Commission and then PACC as well. These ordinances haven't been updated in 24+ years. Humans make laws and humans change laws – if you don't like something in there, we can change it. The goal is to make it easy for community to understand and staff to understand and enforce. Brown-McKnight asked Wight to share these changes and Wight agreed that she would.

Barlow shared that during mayor's update on unsheltered and homelessness from 10/7 it seems that city staff are working to create additional guidelines for response to camping in park spacing, including identifying areas in larger parks where camping and sleeping could be extended for longer times without notice. Wight confirmed that the hotel program opens again for winter on 12/1. That's the date that staff are using as a guideline. Everyone still gets notice that there's no camping in parks, but there is no specific time period on the notices. They can range from 30 minutes to 72 hours. They are looking at non-programmed spaces in parks where no one is using the space and giving longer notice times in those spaces as long as behavior is also acceptable.

Barlow shared that he is looking forward to meeting with the urban park rangers, but is concerned about making the camping policy more lax. Someone could conceivably camp for all of November. There are areas in some of the parks where people can inhabit that are out of the way but still problematic for neighborhoods abutting the parks and passive use of the spaces. He has concerns about making current notice periods more lax, but hopeful that it's not something that will become standard.

Wight shared that staff is getting ready to clear out the Flying A before 11/1, but most of those folks have already cleared out of that area. Barlow feels that folks need to go somewhere. If they're not in the flying A we'll find them elsewhere. Wight added that the hope is that they'll shift to the urban reserve. She added that the cold weather also helps shift people around/inside as well.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 12:55pm. The next meet will be held in November at 645 Pine St. This will be the final PACC meeting of the year.