

City of Alexandria, Virginia

Alexandria Beautification Commission

P.O. Box 178

Alexandria, Virginia 22313

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, July 12, 2018

7:30 PM

Durant Arts Center, 1605 Cameron Street

Attendees: Kathryn Chiasson, Joseph Crowell, Cathleen Curtin, Kevin Dunne, Mary Enschede, Archer Heinzen, Dana Holmstrand (Vice Chair), Carol Maxwell, Beth McElwain, Monica Murphy, Anna Smith Lacey, Denise Tennant (Chair), Erich Veitenheimer

Excused Absences: Christina Mazurkevich, Julie Moore, Mellenie Runion

City Staff: Oscar Mendoza, Jack Browand

The meeting was called to order at 7:31 PM.

1. Approval of June 14, 2018, Meeting Minutes – A motion to approve the minutes was made by Ms. Murphy and seconded by Ms. Heinzen. The Commission unanimously approved the minutes.

2. Commission Business

A. Landscape Guidelines Update – Ms. Beth Znidarsic of the Department of Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities was unable to attend this month’s meeting and present the current status of the update to the Landscape Guidelines. She will be scheduled to present at a future meeting.

B. FOIA Requirements

As the Department’s Public Service Information Officer, Mr. Jack Browand presented “Laws and Rules for Boards and Commissions,” a review of issues related to the Virginia Freedom of Information Act (“FOIA”). The presentation was developed in consultation with the City Attorney’s office and each year the chairs of the City’s commissions are invited to attend, though Ms. Tennant did not receive such an invitation this year.

Mr. Browand followed the printed presentation to review FOIA’s components, including laws related to citizen access to public records and meetings of public bodies. As a “public body,” the records of the Commission and its members, in their capacity as

members, are subject to public disclosure. Those records include everything from email to text messages; the same rules as those for city employees.

Under FOIA, Mr. Browand explained that any gathering, including via telephone, of three or more members of a Commission to discuss commission business is a public meeting. As such, the gathering is required to provide public notice three working days prior to the meeting, the information provided to the members must be made available to the public, the meeting must be open to the public, and minutes of the meeting must be recorded. Mr. Browand noted that the extensive electronic communications options now available can create opportunities for communication to constitute a public meeting and trigger the requirements of a public meeting. In order to avoid the problems of not properly holding a public meeting, Mr. Browand suggested that members not “reply all” to emails, not respond to or email more than one other member at a time, or wait until the next meeting of the board to share the information.

For a Commission meeting, FOIA requires the physical assembly of the members, with only limited exceptions for emergency situations. Mr. Browand emphasized that no vote of any kind can be taken for any public business that is not in accordance with the provisions of FOIA. Ms. Maxwell asked how the Commission was expected to get anything done if all decisions that affect any action by city staff must be voted on by the full commission. In response, Mr. Browand reminded members that we are members of a public body and as such must be accountable to the public. Therefore, all decisions must be made in the public sphere and observable. When Ms. Maxwell asked how other commissions get anything done, Mr. Browand noted that other commissions have more meetings and longer meetings. Ms. Chiasson asked what constitutes a “decision,” to which Mr. Browand replied that a decision is any recommendation that creates an action in response, particularly if that action is undertaken by city staff. He noted that even advising staff members includes making a policy recommendation, which as a public body, must be done in the public realm and by Commission vote.

Finally, Mr. Browand covered open meetings, which requires that all meetings of public bodies be open to the public. He noted that no meeting can be fully electronic, and advertised conference calls do not count. There has been recent work to accommodate a handicapped member, but the commission needed to enact its own rule in advance of allowing that member to phone in, and the existence of a quorum physically present was required. Ms. Holmstrand asked if other commissions had bylaws. Mr. Browand said, in general, no, but many have policies that are noticed and voted on by the commission. Ms. Tennant asked about using “doodlepolls” and the like for establishing the time of a meeting, and Mr. Browand said he would check and report back to the Commission.

C. Consideration of New Scoring Scheme for Awards

On behalf of the Awards Subcommittee, Ms. Smith Lacey followed up on the comments from members on various aspects of the scoring procedure for the annual awards. In

addition to the discussion at the meeting, Ms. Tennant suggested that Ms. Smith Lacey solicit comments from members via email, though doing so in accordance with FOIA.

In particular, Ms. Smith Lacey noted that for residential and commercial beautification, rubrics were created for scoring criteria, while for the other categories no such rubrics were created. She asked if members would be interested in such tools. Members indicated they are generally interested in such, and that even the rubrics for the residential and commercial properties could use revising. Ms. Heinzen discussed her disappointment at requiring the comparison of residences of vastly different value. Ms. Tennant asked that Ms. Heinzen compile ideas of how the Commission might include such distinctions in next year's scores. Ms. Curtin noted that she will propose using a subcommittee to reduce the number of properties the van tour needs to visit. Ms. Smith Lacey said that all suggestions are welcome.

D. Commission Workload

Ms. Tennant led a conversation on the Commission's workload in response to concerns raised in previous meetings. She suggested that subcommittees evaluate their goals determined earlier in the year in order to assess what practices are working and whether some items are not the business of the Commission. She will devote more time at a future commission meeting to discuss the subcommittees' ideas.

E. Commission and Subcommittee Updates

a. Commission – Nothing further.

b. Awards

The subcommittee is in the middle of finalizing the winners' notices, invitations, forms, and awards-related materials. Most of the materials are being drawn from last year. Subcommittee members will get together to discuss and ask Mr. Mendoza to give notice of the meeting. In planning the event, Ms. Murphy noted that the Commission could benefit from an online repository for materials that would make finding resources easier.

c. Vacant Lots

The Del Ray Citizens Association, with which the Vacant Lots Subcommittee has been working on the Simpson Triangle Park Project, was awarded \$22,500 from the Community Matching Fund. The subcommittee plans a coordination meeting within the next two weeks.

d. Education – None.

e. Tree Canopy – None.

f. Sustainable Landscaping

The King Street and Quaker Lane medians are finished, with the Patch, the Gazette, and the Zebra all featuring the completion. Next steps are to find sponsors for a Parknership. Ms. Murphy will reach out to the Red Hill Garden Club as a potential sponsor.

g. Outreach – None.

3. New Commission Business – Ms. Tennant is working to arrange a couple outings for the Commission, including a park clean-up. Dana Wedeles has also offered to give the Commission a tour of the Four Mile Run Restoration project. Commission members are requested to provide Ms. Chiasson with feedback on potential topics for by-laws: attendance, number of meetings and schedule, date of meetings, election of officers, term limits for officers, whether we want an annual retreat, defining officer and member roles, subcommittee obligations, length of meetings, electronic policy. Ms. Heinzen requested time at the September meeting on behalf of the Tree Canopy sub-committee to have a representative from the Tree Stewards speak about their upcoming training opportunity.

4. Staff Report – Mr. Mendoza provided a written staff report. He noted that the City is doing a restoration in the African American Heritage Park. The park was under another organization, but doesn't have CIP funding and so the city is stepping up and redoing the infrastructure. Ms. Smith Lacey asked about the garden at the Murray-Dick-Fawcett House, and Oscar reports that the city is working on increasing the standard at the house. Ms. Maxwell noted planting along Van Dorn Street and asked Mr. Mendoza what is happening. Mr. Mendoza relayed that the area is property of VDOT and not under control of the City, and that if citizens wish to provide feedback or complain about the area, they should contact the Landscape Architect of VDOT.

5. Agenda Items for September 13, 2018, Meeting – The meeting will focus on the functions of the commission, especially as related to work load. There will also be time reserved for discussion on the possible adoption of by-laws.

6. Public Comment/Discussion – None.

Meeting adjourned at 8:56 PM.