

Sustainability Commission Meeting, December 9th, 2024

Meeting Summary

SC Members in Attendance: Judy Nelson, Julie Grant, Maryjayne Stone, Andrew Scholl

Others in Attendance: Bill Wilen, Lorraine McCarty, Julie Morris

Judy Nelson called the meeting to order at 5:35pm and roll was taken.

Judy opened the Good of the Order/Open Comments section of the meeting. Julie M. advised she received an email last week from Mary Starbuck resigning from the commission as of 12/9/24. Julie G. asked whether Mary had given any reason for same. Julie M. noted Mary had not provided a reason, but Mary advised in her resignation email that she plans to still attend meetings as an interested and supportive resident instead.

Members discussed whether quorum was still attainable until the two vacancies are filled, and what the status of the appointment process is. Julie M. advised there is still quorum when all three remaining members are present. Julie M. recapped the situation of the change in Clerk of Council staff recently and that Patti Long, Assistant to the City Manager, is currently ascertaining the vacancies across all the boards and commissions that are coming up for December 2024. Patti is working to schedule interviews for the next Council meeting, December 18th, and then they will also hold interviews in January for any remaining positions as well.

Judy advised she talked with Patti who had advised of the clerk change and that staff were working on it, and Judy asked whether Julie M. knows of any applicants for the commission. Julie M. advised she does not, and that part of the process isn't part of her/staff's purview. Judy asked how they were going to comply with the two weeks' notice time frame outlined in the Council Standing rules. Julie M. advised she did not know how that was being addressed. She noted there was a generic notice of vacancies posted in the last issue of the Tree City Bulletin, and that every board member is listed with their terms' expiration date on the associated webpage. Julie M. noted she didn't have a direct answer, but noted Patti and other staff are working to sort it out.

Judy noted now is a good time to encourage anyone who might be interested in applying and Julie M. advised they can direct folks to the Boards and Commission page on the City's website where the process and application materials are outlined.

Judy recognized and thanked Andy for the two terms on the Commission that he served and for the work he did on the climate action planning process. Judy asked Andy whether he could share any thoughts about what he expected out of the Commission in relation to what it is.

Andy shared he specifically joined the Commission to help with the climate action plan which was the primary focus for him and which he enjoyed. He noted it was a learning process with a group of volunteers who didn't have expertise but were trying to put the plan together.

Andy noted back in his previous terms, the Commission was focused on what was going on the community, sharing members' own personal information, and what members felt like working on. He noted back then there were very little requests from Council. He felt it was focused on people's pet projects that weren't guided, despite there being good work and ideas with same. He felt now that while those things can still be incorporated, having the Climate Action Plan gives the members a driving goal. He noted that the Commission can now focus on implementing and helping educate about this plan, and he feels like the Commission is doing good work right now. He noted after he takes his required break, he may join the Commission again in the future to help continue the work.

Julie G. asked Bill Wilen what the status of the Community Solar bill (Senate Bill 247) was after the hearing held in Columbus, and whether Bill attended same as she saw Bill's name listed as having provided a response. Bill advised he did not attend the hearing in-person but noted he had submitted a comment in writing. Judy noted she had done so as well and both she and Bill noted they each got an email acknowledging receipt of their input.

Judy, Bill and Julie G. discussed their understanding of the status to be that the Committee meeting was held and a vote was needed to move it out of Committee. No members present knew the outcome of that vote but they noted it needed to be voted out of Committee by the end of the year otherwise the process would have to start all over. Judy advised she would check on the status of the vote and send the information out to Julie M. to distribute to the members.

Judy asked whether Lorraine had any information to share with the group about Kent Environmental Council (KEC) and Judy noted KEC has started a monthly speaker series. Lorraine advised KEC is holding a monthly discussion and speaker series at the Kent Free Library on the 3rd Thursdays of the month around topics of sustainability. The discussions will take place from 6:30pm-7:30pm with the speakers presenting from 7:30-8:30pm.

Lorraine noted January 2025 will be an exception as they have their KEC annual business meeting and then will feature an extra speaker, but the details of same are still being worked out – they were considering a topic related to water. Their regular quarterly meeting speakers will resume in February 2025. Judy suggested Dr. Sherri “Sam” Mason who researches microplastics and freshwater plastic pollution as a possible speaker. Judy noted she had seen her speak before as part of a KEC program and felt Sam’s research is relevant and could be a nice compliment to a water topic.

Lorraine clarified for Maryjayne that their first speaker in this new series (that started November 30th) was held on a Tuesday, but they are moving to the 3rd Thursdays now due to availability of the Library conference room.

Judy asked whether there were any other questions or comments for the Good of the Order. Hearing none, she moved the meeting into New Business. Judy reminded members to share with friends and family that Portage County Recycling offers a lot of services related to Christmas tree recycling and other items. Judy encouraged members to keep an eye on their website which has been updated recently.

Judy asked whether there was any other New Business and hearing none, moved the meeting to Old Business. Julie M. noted there were no new updates and provided the recap of the Water Treatment Plant Tour that is being organized to address commission member concerns about various aspects of water safety related to fracking and other contaminants. Julie M. reiterated this tour is dependent on coordination with Jim Bowling and John Ellison at the City, whose schedules are greatly impacted through the end of the year. Jim and John expect to be able to hold the tour sometime in January 2025.

Judy asked whether there were any further comments and hearing none, made a motion to adjourn and move to the working session. Maryjayne seconded, discussion was offered and hearing none, the vote was held. The motion passed unanimously, and the meeting adjourned at 5:55pm.

Julie M. began the working session. Judy suggested using some of the working session time to allow members to review the staff work update report as it had been provided that morning and ask any questions they had.

Lorraine noted the item in the report advising that Melanie Knowles left Kent State and has become the Director of Sustainability for Cuyahoga County. Julie M. noted she remains in contact with Melanie and will continue to work with Leah Graham who is the Sustainability Coordinator for the Office of Sustainability at Kent State. It was asked whether Kent State will be replacing Melanie’s position. Julie M. advised she didn’t know and wasn’t sure given the hiring freeze currently in place at Kent State.

Judy noted the item in the report referring to research Julie M. provided the members regarding ICLEI Cohort Cities sustainability commission equivalents as case studies to help with the Commission’s own bylaws review process. Julie M. advised she had looked at the various cities’ websites first for what was publicly available and found that several of the cities had a version of a commission or a Green Team. Julie M. advised she pulled website links and information into a single document, organized by City, that she emailed out to members, along with copies of their versions of bylaws that were available. Julie M. noted while there is a lot of information, members do not need to review it immediately and is meant to refer to and help supplement the review process.

Julie M. noted that after members have a chance to review the case study materials, if specific questions for a particular city are generated, Julie M. can reach out to those city representatives from the ICLEI Cohort to see about getting answers.

It was asked whether Brad McKay had provided information to Julie M. as noted in the EPA's Energy Star Portfolio Manager Project item update in the work report. Julie M. provided more context for same. Brad McKay, the City's Facilities Manager is getting ready to have some of repair work done to the Vehicle Maintenance Facility located at Plum Creek. This repair work should help increase the energy efficiency of the vehicle storage building and we should hopefully see the results of that as a reduction in energy use as tracked in the Portfolio Manager system. Brad providing Julie M. with the specifics of the building repair work that is done will allow correlation between the reduction in energy use with the specific repairs made which in turn will help when conveying improvement stats and providing education on energy efficiency work the City is doing. Julie M. provided a brief description of some of the work intended for the facility.

Julie M. noted that of the 16 facilities that were included in the World Kinect decarbonization report review, all have now been entered into the Portfolio Manager system except for the Water Treatment Plant, Water Reclamation Facility and an associated Booster property, as they are much more complex to set up and require a different set of data. Julie M. noted that the process of setting up buildings in the Portfolio Manager system is not intuitive, requires data from different sources that don't always align or match across those sources. Julie M. noted it will be very important to provide a robust education/training program, as well as remain a trouble shooting source within the City for our area building owners when we eventually develop the GHG Reduction Ordinance and request they use same. Julie M. noted there will be a learning curve not just for the software, but for the kinds of and sources for data required to set up their portfolios.

Julie M. noted another meeting working session could allow time for review of the City's building portfolio if members were interested in seeing same. Julie M. noted the baseline year used for the City's portfolio is 2023 and she will be entering 2024 data once received in January 2025. She also noted the next step is to explore more of the reporting features, as well as the goals and target setting features the Portfolio Manager tool provided. Julie M. noted the tool is free and has become an industry standard for reporting energy use, especially due to its capacity for entities to share their use reports with each other.

Judy asked whether Julie M. was aware of any entity or business in the community that has looked at, asked questions about or made any comments related to the GHG reduction ordinance or the Energy Star Portfolio Manager program. Julie M. advised she had not, but advised once she shares more about the City's Portfolio Manager use with the community and the City gets further along in developing the GHG reduction ordinance program, she expects to hear more and additionally, bring folks into targeted training sessions so that they then can also be ambassadors for the programs in the building owner community.

Bill asked what Julie M. was expecting to receive from World Kinect's solar assessment as noted on the staff work report. Julie M. advised there is a meeting scheduled for tomorrow to review the final assessment their team made for the solar array system intended for the downtown Fire Station. The report is expected to provide information on the placement and number of panels, costs analysis of the system including return on investment and potential options for how to fund same. Julie M. noted this report should help support discussing the project with Council, Staff, and help with future funding applications.

It was clarified that the World Kinect solar report is only focused on the Fire Station and does not include the Water Treatment Plant (WTP). Julie M. provided a brief recap of the decision not to pursue solar at the WTP as it was determined by City staff to not be a feasible location at this time. Julie M. reiterated the Community Development Department is exploring other possible public/private site options for a ground mount solar array and she will hopefully have more information about same to share soon.

Members speculated on possible locations for a ground mount solar array, making suggestions for lots they felt would be good to explore. Judy asked whether a list of possible brownfield or other sites could be obtained from Bridget Susel - not the site specifics just general locations. Judy advised these lots could be kept in mind should community solar ever be passed at the State level, allowing the City to be ready to move on any opportunity to

develop same as soon as/if it became possible. Members returned to discussion of the Community Solar Bill and noted that AEP, who has a lot of influence, was lobbying heavily against same.

Judy asked about the January 2025 newsletter and an article idea she had for same. Judy noted she had written an article for the Tree City Bulletin when she was on the Commission back in 2016 or 2017 covering local farmers', who sell at the Haymaker Farmer's Market, perspectives on impacts they are seeing and experiencing with climate change. Judy noted she'd like to do a follow-up article with the farmers to report on changes they've noticed almost 10 years later and report on any regenerative farming practices they may be doing. Judy asked whether the group thought that would be ok for her to do – members agreed it would.

Lorraine noted KEC president Todd Cartner had mentioned at their last KEC breakfast that General Mills is giving their farmers five years to use regenerative agriculture or General Mills would not be taking their products. Julie G. noted that in some ways, this request would cause the reworking of the entire agricultural system, and Judy noted Chipotle had made an impact on the system with their similar requirements as well. Andy noted it may be the companies only ask for the "x" number of items/practices related to regenerative farming to start and build from there. Members then discussed the differences between rating and labeling terms like "certified organic", "regenerative", or "natural". Members agreed that the certification levels and processes vary and these kinds of terms don't always reflect what happens in practice, or they can have very specific criteria they refer to.

Judy asked whether there were any other thoughts on the staff report before returning to the bylaws review work. Hearing none, the bylaws review work resumed. Julie M. noted all members, save Mary Starbuck, had provided their feedback on Ordinance 1995-103 Section 4a. As Mary Starbuck isn't present, the review work could begin with Section 4b which contains the single phrase: "The Commission shall not interfere with the authority of the City Health Department or any other department of the City".

Judy started by asking what authority the City Health Department has and what falls within their purview that could be cause for concern around issues of sustainability. Judy interpreted this section as meaning that even if other departments have areas that cross over into sustainability, the commission isn't able to direct what those departments do related to same.

Maryjayne asked why the Health Department was singled out, even though the rest of the statement says, "any other departments". Members speculated it was probably referring to something relevant when the Ordinance was created – they noted that the original appointment committee referenced in Section 3 included the Deputy Health Commissioner. It was noted that there's always classic environmental issues like noxious weeds, or allergies etc. that could cross over to the health department. It was felt the specific reference to the Health Department could be removed and only state "any City Department".

Andy noted that Section 4 part C provides more context, indicating the Commission is intended to be an advisory body. Members noted this meant that the Commission is only able to make suggestions and it does not have the same power or legal authority like the Planning Commission to make policy or legal decisions. Judy noted the language used in Section 4 part B is very negative ("shall not interfere") and could perhaps be changed to more positively reflect the advisory capacity. Members agreed this should be changed and Julie M. noted they can work on the exact language change suggestions later in the review process when they are evaluating the suggestions that have been made.

Julie G. asked what the Commission wants its relationship with the Health Department to be. Judy advised when she served on the Commission previously and helped organize the Green Energy Ohio tour, they had invited the Health Department to participate, and they did. Judy noted they brought helmets and other items to the event. Judy noted it was a working relationship, the Health Department didn't see the Commission as interfering during that experience, and there wasn't any negativity. Julie G. noted environment and health are intimately related and it would be good to find out what all the Health Department does to help think through whether they should be singled out in the 4b clause, or whether it could just refer to "all departments" generically.

Julie G. noted the referenced advisory capacity could be two-way – that the different City departments could come to the Commission for input on issues, but the Commission could also approach them to request collaboration or

express concern or interest in the work being done. Lorraine felt this distinction and advisory characteristics should be located at the top of Section 4 before the listing of duties and responsibilities – she noted it should be clear this in advisory board right at the start. Members agreed.

Members reiterated that the Section 4a Duties and Responsibilities list is outdated and Judy noted social justice wasn't on same. Members agreed and asked what the order of 4 A, B,&C should be. Members suggested the following: If B gets reworked, it could be moved up to A as it also covers the 1st part of C – the idea is to combine these items together. It was also noted they don't specify who the Commission is advising. It was clarified that the first sentence of C could be incorporated into A/B but the rest of C gets into other areas and should remain separate.

Members moved on to broadly discussing subpoints 1,2 and 3 of Section 4 C. It was noted that a lot of C has already been developed, beginning with the second sentence “the commission shall develop...”. Members felt there needed to be a statement that the Commission conducts reviews and examines its bylaws and goals since they will change over time and that the bylaws and goals should be treated as living documents. It was suggested this periodic review statement could be its own bullet point.

It was noted that the end of C with the “activities shall be non-regulatory” is just reiterating the Commission as being an advisory board. It was felt that Section A (list of duties/responsibilities) should be connected to the advisory-only capacity.

Members returned to the duties/responsibilities list in Section A and noted there may be other items needed. Additionally, they reiterated environmental justice was missing from the list. A discussion was had to clarify the different aspects of what is meant by environmental justice and equity within the field of sustainability. Julie G. noted a lot of resources have been put towards environmental justice initiatives by the US Department of Energy that are meant to benefit low-income communities.

It was noted that there are three pillars of sustainability – Environment, Economy, and Equity. Equity not only addresses traditional aspects of environmental justice, like the siting of pollution emitting factories in low-income neighborhoods and mitigating those harms etc., but it also includes making sure folks of all economic circumstances, especially in the lower income brackets, have input in and access to programs, services, and benefits generated by climate action. An example was provided related to Electric Vehicles - that these are often seen as a solution to help reduce GHGs (which they are) but are generally too expensive for low to middle income households to access.

Julie G. was concerned this was too broad of a lens and asked whether the Commission would want a focus on the more traditional concerns of environmental justice. Judy noted that the goals the Commission developed take the broader view and address issues of Environment, Economy and Social aspects of sustainability. Judy noted the Commission's name was changed from the Environmental Commission to the Sustainability Commission to align with those goals and reflect the broader lens.

Maryjayne noted it is important to focus on all of these issues so that GHGs are reduced, and noted that each member has an issue(s) that is important to them – LED lighting for Maryjayne, solar for Bill Wilen etc. – but in her case, when she thinks about new LED lighting, she feels it's important to make sure it is the kind (Red Zone and not Blue Zone lighting) that will do the least harm to animals, insects, birds and humans. Maryjayne felt it is important to educate about these issues. Maryjayne discussed the example of previous work and discussions she and past Commission members had with City representatives regarding the LED lighting but were told too much work had already been invested. Maryjayne felt it would have been better to provide the Commission's input on the issue before the work had been done.

It was asked whether the City would ever consider what the Commission had to say about an economic development proposal. Julie G. mentioned the Water Street project where there was concern about trees being cut down in order to build a retirement/nursing home center on the property. Judy noted this project was happening on private property and there will only be so much the City can say or do when it comes to private property and associated private property rights.

It was noted that within the purview of City programs and action, having the broader lenses of sustainability added to same can make those initiatives more resilient. It was noted a process is needed to identify issues related to project work, as, in Maryjayne's example, the knowledge of the issue was both personal and reactionary because Maryjayne has those lights shining into her house. Julie G. felt this was too random of a way to identify issues and felt it should be suggested the different City departments and City Council be required to come to the Commission when looking at certain issues that cross over into sustainability. Julie G. acknowledged this wouldn't be in a regulatory capacity, but suggested the City give the Commission a month or two months' notice when they are doing projects so that the Commission has a chance to provide advisory input that connects the three sustainability pillars to the work.

Members noted that this was unlikely to be possible. Julie M. noted that considering the breadth and enormous amount of work the City does daily across the departments, it's not reasonable to expect to know every project that is happening. Julie M. noted that the programs being developed out of the CAP do involve other departments, and from an internal perspective, staff are learning to communicate across departments about the work the CAP is asking the City to do. Julie M. didn't think it would be unreasonable to develop some other kind of relationship between the Commission, City departments and/or other boards, but how that works is something that would have to be developed with Staff later on in the by-laws review process.

Julie G. provided the hypothetical example of a new building project going before the Planning Commission and noted it would be important for the Sustainability Commission to give the Planning Commission input, advising them of what should be incorporated into the project according to the sustainability perspective. Julie G. acknowledged the Commission members can't force the Planning Commission to do anything, but she also noted that to provide this kind of input, there would have to be actual plans for the Sustainability Commission to review. Judy advised that members could attend every Council meeting to be aware of everything that is happening in the City, but noted this would take a lot of time, energy, and effort.

Julie G. suggested having a quarterly update from the different departments where, for example, at every 3rd or 4th Sustainability Commission meeting someone from the health department came in to provide an update and commission members could ask questions. Judy noted this adds to work departments already must do, which wouldn't be looked on favorably. Judy referred to her own previous commission work at the Farmers Markets asking people for their opinions on issues of sustainability and noted that people begin to wonder what the point of providing input is when they don't see any tangible result of providing those opinions.

Members discussed how these issues of providing advisement and communication with City entities are related to Section 4C item 2 "Coordination". It was noted this section is a good example of where the original intention is not what is currently practiced. It was also noted that if the work was to be done as outlined in this section, the Commission's sole job would be reviewing legislation and would require much more time and meetings than is currently utilized.

Members returned to the discussion of how the Commission can be useful to the City and Andy noted that this group can provide a holistic perspective on sustainable aspects of projects that may not necessarily otherwise be factored in. He acknowledged that the day-to-day work of the City must get done with a priority focus on how much it will cost and how soon it can be scheduled. That said, Andy felt the larger projects may have more room for community input and commission advisement. He felt the Commission's job is primarily to help educate City Staff, the public etc. around what Sustainability is before being able to apply it to work.

Andy noted Section 4C item 1 is about "Promotion" – not just educating Staff and coordinating with other City boards and commissions/departments etc., but promoting sustainable activities that are occurring in the City with the public. He noted that their job on the Commission is to provide that perspective and speak for sustainability issues – whether anyone listens is another issue.

Judy reiterated for members that the reason there is a CAP is because a group of volunteers who care met regularly over years to get to this place – she noted that most cities in Ohio do not have a climate action plan. She noted that the members' regular meeting and existence of the Sustainability Commission helps remind Council and the City

of these perspectives which is a kind of power and influence in its own right. Julie G. suggested that more influence was needed.

Lorraine described the CAP process as it went over the years and struggles that were overcome – from the City not having any budget for this work, and then after a couple of years, finding funds to connect to the ICLEI membership and software for the initial GHG inventory, which then led to the eventual development of the CAP with Keramida. She noted that while the process has been excruciatingly slow, this work has expanded over the years.

It was suggested members could develop an explanation about what sustainability is and provide a kind of checklist with examples of how to incorporate sustainability into work being done and/or planned. Judy noted for the City to consider using this, Council and the City Manager need to value this kind of input. Judy advised the City Manager needs to direct all his department heads to consider this checklist when making decisions, so that it is incorporated into work done by Staff. It was noted the more people see the work enacted, the more it becomes normalized and part of the work culture. Julie G. thought maybe this list or process should go to the boards and commissions first and work its way up – bottom up instead of top down.

Julie M. noted that change takes time, and institutional inertia is part of this – things have been done a certain way, zoning, codes, and laws at both the local and state levels have been in place for years and require detailed legal processes to update or change, all of which takes many different people and an enormous amount of time to do. Julie M. noted this is part of the difference between doing this work to support a City's climate action versus working with a business or non-profit that doesn't have the same obligations and can oftentimes move more quickly.

Members wondered if Council was aware of the various Commission documents or their current review work and asked how it would get communicated to them. Julie M. noted once members have completed their review of the documents and agreed on a resulting list of generated suggestions for the bylaws update, there will be a lot of back and forth with Staff and the Law department as needed to get agreement and approval of the suggestions. At the end of it, there will be an updated by-laws that can be provided to Council as an informational item. What that all looks like and whether any additional context is needed or will be given to them will be determined as the process is completed.

Lorraine requested copies of the Ordinances and other documents being reviewed and Julie M. noted she will email them to her.

It was noted the next meeting working session review will continue with Ordinance 1995-103 Section 4C items 1,2 & 3.

Members ended the working session at 7:15pm.

The next Sustainability Commission meeting will be held Monday, January 6th, 2025, starting at 5:30 p.m. at the Overholt building.