

Environment Committee Meeting, December 9, 2020 (via Zoom)

Present: Barton Rubenstein, Jack Frink, David Kathan, Donna Harmon, Stephen Surko, Ralph Wooden, Bugs Bartley, Marnie Shaul, and Veronique Marier

1. Minutes of the October 15 meeting was approved. Ralph moved their approval, and David seconded.
2. Leaf blower Discussion

Barton reviewed the December 2 leaf blower forum conducted by the Town. This is the second public forum on the proposed ban of gas-powered leaf blowers in the Town. Barton stated that each time the proposal is presented new questions have been asked, and the Environment Committee has been able to answer them. He stated that his Mother Earth Project has added more information on the hazards of gas-fired leafblowers on their website. Barton reported that the petition for the ban received wide support. He did get some pushback on the listserv or by email, but he feels that he has been able to provide information in response to concerns and believes that he has been able to get residents to understand the underlying health issue. At the forum, Barton summarized discussions he had with two minority-owned landscaping companies. Both companies stated that transitioning to battery-owned leafblowers was possible, and that health and safety concerns were major issues for them. In addition, two landscaping companies participated in the forum. John Schorb, owner of another landscaping company, presented at the forum and indicated that his company is transitioning to battery-operated leafblowers, and that the transition has not impacted his business. Kris Kirby stated that after an initial investment, his company is 100% electric. He also stated that he generally plugs batteries in at each house to ensure that he can change out batteries quickly and not affect his operations. Barton also addressed enforcement concerns raised at the forum and by the Town Council, and expressed his hope that the Environment Committee can engage with the Council on this issue.

EC members provided their thoughts. Veronique suggested that providing incentives to not use gas-fired leafblowers is needed, such as telling them they can work one less hour at their house. Ralph expressed frustration with one of the commenters on the forum, John Schorb, who suggested all the ways that can be done to weaken the ban, e.g., banning backpacks but not freestanding units. Steve Surko also expressed concern about John Schorb's suggestions, and is worried that allowing freestanding units would tilt the playing field towards these units and to larger landscaping companies who can afford these larger blowers. Steve also reported that these freestanding units can be much louder than backpacks, such as 100 dB. David addressed the enforcement comments at the forum, and stated his support for continuing the same practice that is already being done for construction noise. He did raise a question about who would receive the fine – the homeowner or the contractor. Marnie expressed her concern about the impact on minority firms, and supported a three-year transition period, like DC did. Barton suggested a compromise where warnings would be issued in the first year or giving an exception to minority firms. Marnie also asked if there will be an educational campaign to get the word out. Barton answered yes.

3. Solar Panels for Pool Building Roof (Matt Zaft, Pool Committee)

Matt joined the meeting and reported that the Pool Committee met recently and discussed the possibility of installing solar on the pool house roof. He and Barton reported that the roof has good southern exposure and represents a good location for solar. When the Pool Committee reported this to the Town, the Mayor suggested that it would be better to have the Environment Committee make the proposal. The Pool Committee would like the Environment Committee to take action and get three estimates for the installation. Several members of the Committee (Veronique, David and Bugs) expressed support for the idea and expressed their willingness to help with the project. They also brought forward several important installation issues that will need to be resolved, such as sizing the panels to be match pool electricity usage, financing options (buy upfront or sign an agreement for purchasing over time), potentially shifting the pool heater to an electric heater, and whether the pool solar could serve all the Town's electric needs (i.e., does the Town receive one or multiple bills for all of its buildings?). David recommends pulling the Pepco bills to find total annual usage. Jack asked if there are other structures in town that might be better locations for solar installation. Marnie says that other buildings are not as good. Barton expressed his opinion that the installation should have as its primary goal as carbon reduction, and it would be a great action to support the climate emergency resolution by the Town. A motion was made by Donna and seconded by Jack to go forward with a process to explore the opportunity of installing solar on the pool roof, such as obtaining the Town's electric bills, and work with the Pool Committee. Motion was approved.

4. Climate Emergency Resolution

Barton suggested that we delay discussion until the next meeting. David noted that the County's Climate Action Plan is coming out shortly, and recommended waiting until it comes out.

5. Stormwater Committee

Jack reported that the primary concerns of the Stormwater Committee is property damage, and less about environmental issues. He proposed to the Stormwater Committee that the Environment Committee jointly develop a proposal, and that the Environment Committee address environmental issues as part of this proposal.

6. Streetlighting

Brief discussion about choices for streetlights. Marnie reported that the Town has looked into this, and that only 5 or 6 will fit into our poles.

7. New Items

No new items were offered.

8. Public Comments

No public comments were offered.

9. Meeting was adjourned at 9:10 pm.