

Environment Committee Meeting, June 10, 2020 (via Zoom)

Present: Robin Barr, Jack Frink, Marnie Shaul, Donna Harman, Ralph Wooden, Patty Friedman

1. Minutes of the April 16 and 28 meetings were approved.
2. Status of Welcome Letter: The version of the letter presented at the June meeting was the version approved by the committees and not the version developed subsequently by Paige Whitley (a member of the Task Force). The Town Attorney had expressed concern about the content of the letter as it referred to items that were not clearly listed in the Town code. Discussion on Council centered around the importance of the code. No decision was taken on the letter. Paige Whitley's version which refers only to trees and to storm water which are in the Town code was not discussed at this meeting.
3. County Pesticide Ordinance – Status of Town opting into the County regulation. Marnie indicated that Council considered the question of opting in during its Work session at the June meeting and it appeared that there was majority support for opting in. Steve Surko then introduced the item at the end of the June meeting and that should allow its consideration at the July meeting. Robin mentioned that Steve had written an article for the Town Journal on the regulation and on the two hearings held by the Council to consider the matter. (As a reminder this regulation is also known as the Healthy Lawns Act by some of us and the Environment Committee recommended to Council that Somerset opt into the regulation at our meeting in February.)
4. Leaf blowers
We had previously discussed at the April meeting the list of “quiet” landscapers (battery or manual equipment only) that had been developed as a collaboration among Somerset, Chevy Chase Village and the Town of Chevy Chase. The list is posted on the Town of Chevy Chase site and we had decided to promote it through an article in the Journal, a blast on the listserv, and recommending to Council that we post a link to the list on our own Town site. Robin wrote an article on it for the June Town journal but is asking the committee whether it might be better to delay the blast on the listserv and the recommendation to Council to closer to the time when residents renew contracts with landscapers.

We had some discussion on the best time to take the remaining actions and November/December appeared to be most appropriate to match when residents start considering a contract for the following year. The committee agreed that completing the actions then would be more effective than doing so at this time.

Donna asked about the status of the Town buying a battery-operated leaf blower. Robin and Marnie explained that the Council decision was to buy a battery-powered replacement for the first gas-powered blower to break down. These blowers have a lifespan of about three years.

5. PEPCO's position on the transfer of street lighting to LED bulbs

Marnie reported that Jeffrey, the mayor and she have an upcoming meeting with PEPCO representatives on Monday, June 22 to learn what their strategy is going forward. Robin asked whether it would be useful to have any Environment committee members present. Marnie indicated that she and Jeffrey had considered that one more Council member might join them but that she and Jeffrey understand that PEPCO wishes the meeting to be a small meeting to brief the Town leadership on the LED light transition.

6. Status of the Storm Water Management and Protection of the Tree Canopy committee

Discussion at the June meeting of Council left considerable uncertainty as to the path forward for this proposed committee. In the original proposal from the mayor the committee was seen as having a budget in order to pay consultants with expertise on particular topics. Our mayor, on taking a suggestion from the Town attorney, has also recommended a particular individual, an urban planner who had participated in similar committees for the Town of Chevy Chase and for Chevy Chase View. Council members raised concern that the Council would be delegating responsibility for financial decisions to a committee when the responsibility is properly a Council one, and concern that an individual has been named with no input from either Council or the committee.

Discussion around the issue at our meeting centered on the likely expense of the project, and on whether it makes sense to bring the idea back modified and reshaped.

Marnie is taking a broader view at the moment. She is reviewing how other local communities conducted their inquiry into building codes and what motivated them. Robin brought up that he had discussed the Town of Chevy Chase's process with Stu Sessions who was very involved in the committee work that they conducted. Robin particularly asked Stu whether the new codes established by the Town had had their intended effect. He indicated that the effect was small.

Committee members indicated that it would be important to have individuals such as Stu Sessions present in Somerset either as a way to help build support for the committee or as an input into the committee as it begins its own review.

Committee members indicated that the committee's mandate should go beyond code changes to any change that would benefit the Town's consideration of building permit requests. These might include early signals to intending owners of the Town's current problems with storm water and our status as a Tree city. They might also include review of building plans by a storm water engineer or a storm-water qualified landscaper in the same way that the Town arborist now reviews the reforestation plan.