

Work Session of the Greenbelt City Council held Wednesday, June 17, 2020, to meet with the Greenbelt East Advisory Coalition (GEAC)

Mayor Byrd started the meeting at 8:00 p.m. It was held virtually by Zoom.

PRESENT WERE: Councilmembers Judith F. Davis, Emmett V. Jordan, Leta M. Mach, Silke I. Pope, Edward V.J. Putens, Rodney M. Roberts, and Mayor Colin A. Byrd

STAFF PRESENT WERE: Nicole Ard, City Manager; David E. Moran, Assistant City Manager; Terri Hruby, Planning Dept. Director; Joe McNeal, Recreation Dept. Director; Rick Bowers, Police Chief; and Bonita Anderson, City Clerk.

ALSO, PRESENT WERE: Rohanie Bacchus, Terry Benedict, Pat McCoy, Charlene McAdams, Marti Galvin, Jacqui Waters, Sean Ballantine, Walter Moody, Vijay Kowtha, and others.

COVID-19 Updates:

The COVID-19 pandemic led to significant discussion and actions by Council and local coalitions. Beijing recently reopened. The County Executive announced a Town Hall meeting to address local concerns. Testing availability and reopening plans in nearby areas were also highlighted. Mr. Putens predicted a potential rise in case numbers and urged everyone to pay attention over the coming days.

The Greenbelt East Advisory Coalition (GEAC) gave a brief presentation. Ms. Bacchus mentioned the coalition typically meets monthly, but gatherings had been disrupted due to the pandemic. She announced that Governor Hogan would allow places of worship and businesses to reopen at 25% capacity, along with outdoor activities at 50%, starting that Friday. Ms. Davis pointed out that the City followed the County's rules, but Mr. Jordan reminded them that the City could enforce stricter guidelines if needed.

GEAC presented a series of questions about the City's handling of the COVID-19 crisis. The first question focused on the current contingency strategies. Mayor Byrd stated that the pandemic primarily affected Greenbelt financially, causing project cancellations, venue closures, and staff reductions. Many employees were working remotely. Uncertainty about the fiscal year continued to affect spending. Ms. Ard highlighted the importance of reassessing the budget once more funds began flowing in. Council remained concerned about residents' livelihoods, especially in terms of businesses, housing, utilities, and food security. They also reaffirmed their commitment to supporting the community through the CARES Act funds and other resources.

Safety protocols for City facilities were also discussed as staff prepared for the gradual return of in-person work. Financial measures included the deferral of capital projects, pay raises, and merit increases and a freeze on hiring for non-essential positions. Online classes and activities were made available for free, but some state funds for the City had been cut, leading to a “bare-bones” budget.

Ms. Davis mentioned the Council's efforts to protect tenants from eviction and late fees during the pandemic, urging homeowners' associations (HOAs) to show similar leniency. Mr. Ballantine

echoed this by confirming that HOA fees would not be charged for the time being to alleviate burdens on residents.

Recreation during the pandemic was another key topic. Ms. Mach emphasized the importance of outdoor activities, sharing her personal experience of exercising in the park. Questions arose about the County Executive's modified reopening plan, which included updates on recreational facilities and pools. Mr. McNeal stated that the City's pool would prioritize residents and pass holders once it reopened. However, COVID-related precautions, including revised lifeguard training and stringent cleaning protocols, would be in place.

Schrom Hills Park construction was briefly addressed. The project was delayed due to poor soil, and heavy equipment remained on-site, blocking the entrance. Mr. Kowtha raised concerns about access, but safety measures required keeping the trail closed until further notice.

Police presence in schools was discussed at length. Mr. Roberts inquired about the potential removal of School Resource Officers (SROs). Ms. Davis shared that the City opposed removing SROs, believing their presence maintained safety in larger schools like Eleanor Roosevelt High. Discussions about police funding also surfaced, with questions about defunding or abolishing the department. Chief Bowers clarified that the police budget remained intact, although they were understaffed.

Ms. Bacchus raised concerns about police training, specifically regarding chokeholds and neck restraints. Chief Bowers responded that the use of such techniques was prohibited under the department's use of force policy. He also highlighted that the Greenbelt Police Department was CALEA accredited and adhered to strict standards. Chief Bowers noted the department's commitment to continuous improvement through scenario-based training.

Sanitation at the Greenway Shopping Center was discussed, as complaints of trash and groundwater leaks persisted. Ms. Hruby assured the group that inspections were ongoing. The Planning Department was monitoring the situation, taking enforcement action as needed.

The Baltimore-Washington SCMAGLEV project was another topic. GEAC raised concerns about the availability of the interactive map and the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Mayor Byrd responded that while the City could not provide an exact timeline for these materials, Council was monitoring the project and seeking legal counsel to review the EIS.

Crime reports and security measures in Greenbelt East were also discussed. Chief Bowers provided an update on the newly installed Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) system, which allowed better communication with other County agencies. Auto theft remained a significant issue, but overall crime was steady. The City was also working on installing security cameras in targeted areas.

Plans for bus shelters and bike-share stations along Hanover Parkway were also discussed, with updates on expected installations in the summer and fall. Additionally, tree replacement along Hanover Parkway was planned as part of a phased approach to address the aging Bradford pear trees.

Education was another important issue raised by GEAC. Overcrowding at Springhill Lake Elementary School remained a concern, with no immediate plans for expansion. Ms. Davis emphasized the need for a new school in Greenbelt, though funding remained a challenge. Ms. Mach expressed frustration over past decisions, stating that Eleanor Roosevelt High School had been overlooked for an addition that went to Duval instead.

Finally, GEAC inquired about the police department's relationship with the City Manager and how frequently the Chief met with her. Ms. Ard clarified that the Chief reports to the City Manager and met regularly with her. The discussion concluded with questions about how the City was addressing issues like racism and equity in light of current events. Both Ms. Ard and Chief Bowers highlighted the City's focus on health, finances, and equity, as well as the police department's ongoing efforts to review and improve policies through accreditation and training.

The meeting ended with thanks and a reminder of the importance of clear communication between the City, GEAC, and residents, particularly in distributing vital information during these uncertain times.

The meeting ended at 9:51 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Bonita Anderson
City Clerk