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Minutes

Parks, Arts & Culture Committee Meeting

Thursday, January 26, 2023, 5:00pm

MEETING CONDUCTED IN PERSON AT 645 PINE ST IN THE FRONT CONFERENCE ROOM AND VIA ZOOM

Attendance:

Committee Members: Chair Joan Shannon, Councilor Mark Barlow, Councilor Ali Dieng

City Staff: Cindi Wight – BPRW Director, Erin Moreau – BPRW, Alec Kaeding – BPRW, Colin Storrs – BCA, Zach Williamson - BCA, Holli Bushnell – BPRW Staff

Meeting called to order at 5:04pm by Chair Joan Shannon

Approval of Agenda

Councilor Barlow moved to approve the agenda, Shannon seconded, all were in favor.

Approval of Draft Minutes from 11/30/2022

Barlow moved to approve the minutes, Shannon seconded, all were in favor.

Public Forum

Public forum was opened at 5:05pm, as there was no one present who wished to speak public forum was also closed at 5:05pm

Enhanced Ranger Program

Shannon began by requesting that Erin Moreau and Cindi Wight detail the structure of the current Urban Park Ranger program. Moreau explained that the team currently consists of one lead ranger and one assistant ranger who are full time. They report to Alec Kaeding, who reports to Moreau who reports to Wight. There were seasonal employees who also participated in the program in the summer of 2022, but BPRW is considering eliminating the seasonal positions. Some of the tasks require more training and PPE or are higher risk/uncertain situations, so seasonal staff might not be the best fit for position.

Moreau provided information on the background for both the lead and assistant park rangers. She continued by explaining that the position was new for start of 2022, hiring took place in the spring and staff was in the field as of late May 2022. It took 8 months or so from start to finish to develop and create the position. Initially, BPRW anticipated the rangers providing tours, acting as a presence in parks, and assisting with educational programming. The department initially thought the biggest issues

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the rangers would face would be beach fires, off leash dogs, and fireworks. The intent was for these rangers to do that work and were trained as such (new training has been implemented in the off season this year).

What actually happened in 2022 was some enhanced programing and engagement with BHS Lake and City semester, but the primary focus of the ranger's work changed in June due to the spikes of both unhoused individuals and addiction. The rangers asked to be part of city team, and they felt they could be effective as a first line of contact. The 2 full time rangers were tasked with direct outreach to tent and encampment occupants and posting at these sites for removal. The sites they visited were already established areas of encampment by the time the rangers were able to make contact.

Clean up was also part of the ranger's responsibilities. The encampment and tent sites posed major health and safety risks. Moreau provided a slideshow of images from various cleanup operations around the city. The pictures show large quantities of methamphetamine which was found repeatedly at many sites over the summer along with other varieties of drugs, needles, trash, and other dangerous debris.

The procedure when approaching an encampment/tent included a site assessment, talking to residents, contacting and offering services to the residents, and contacting nearby neighbors (knocking on doors, talking to folks, breaking down barriers). The site would then be posted, a timeframe to depart given to the residents, and services continually offered throughout the removal process. Once the residents have departed cleanup begins. A city team that could include members of DPW, BPRW ground maintenance, CSOs and CSLs (dependent on size and scope of site) catalog the items present, place them in storage containers and post a note of the stored location of the items in case residents wish to reclaim them. This procedure did not exist at the beginning of 2022 and was developed over the season. Moreau provided data from 2022 season including that between July and December city staff removed 43 separate encampments, 35 of which required extensive clean up.

Barlow asked what sites required heavy equipment to assist in removals, and Wight confirmed that the wooded area by Perkins Pier and the Urban Reserve both required heavy equipment. Arborists had to cut all the brush at Perkins to remove the encampment. Moreau continued that if a site was unsafe to walk into (a footpath clear of needles could not be found) Staff was forced to bring in heavy equipment.

Moreau continued that 14 individuals were moved more than once from the parks, and several of these individuals were moved at least 3 different times. 42% of removals were people who had been removed at least twice before. These people have no place to go. Some are tidy, some are not. Many will leave their belongings when they are removed, collect new belongings in transit, then spread out their new belongings again at their new site, making another large mess. The work is extremely mentally challenging for everyone involved – both staff and unhoused folks. When the people being removed ask where to go, staff doesn't have an answer or anywhere to send them. It's really painful and challenging to keep kicking the same people out again and again.

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In the future, the goal is to get more info on the top encampment locations and work on adding more movement tracking to their data collection. Alec Kaeding added that every one of the removals began with multiple contacts between the rangers and the unhoused first. There was a lot of communication and assistance offered before folks were packed up and moved out. Moreau added that the rangers really excelled at engagement. They always kept in mind that these people were human beings going through a difficult time and that they were there to rendering assistance.

Moreau continued by explaining that staffing levels are currently unsustainable based on what the rangers were doing and what we want them to do. They are under resourced and under trained. BPRW met with the Mayor and the homeless crisis team late in the 2022 season at the Urban Reserve. They reviewed the site and were asked by the Mayor to generate a proposal on what can be done to improve things. BPRW is trying to meet the goals of the city, but has been hampered by a lack of staffing levels.

BPRW proposes that they expand the urban ranger program to up to 6 full time ranger positions in 2023. They know that there are budget limitations, but they want to put the end goal of the program enhancement out there. They are proud of the work the rangers did in 2022 and can see the impacts they could have if the program was expanded. There are other areas of city teams that are currently expanding and looking for ways to come together more to focus on unhoused crisis in public spaces as a whole, and while there are now 12 CSOs and 11 CSLs, incorporating them in process has been slow going. BPRW is advocating for the ranger program to be expanded so they can better serve in their position within the city team.

Barlow asked if the rangers trained as CSOs since they have the same or similar authority. Wight explained that they are not trained as CSOs, because their position is, ultimately, different. CSOs are being hired as future police officers. Urban park rangers are hired to be urban park rangers – both can enforce (ticketing), but urban park rangers approach things differently, more outreach over enforcement. Barlow again asked about the training the rangers receive. Wight explained that the rangers have been working with other ranger programs throughout the country to develop appropriate trainings. For example, they have now undertaken both baton and pepper spray trainings. BPRW has been debating if rangers should wear bulletproof or stab vests or if they should wear body cams. Rangers may train with CSOs, but will continue to do their own trainings as well.

Moreau agreed that on some level the rangers should have the same training or similar training to CSOs. At the moment BPRW is playing catch u. Trainings are happening and the department is working with the city attorneys to figure out what kind of training is needed for the kinds of things the rangers might need. Moreau explained that staff just met with our new safety manager who was present for the last encampment removal to help identify what will be needed in the future. They are taking this off season to look at training, and the safety manager is recommending programing. BPRW has also reached out to BPD to participate in CSO trainings. More importantly, they are hoping to get a CSO manager who can help facilitate/coordinate with Kaeding.

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Dieng stated that he agrees that training needs to be aligned. He wants to make sure that a distinction is made between rangers and CSOs/PD. He asked if there are limitations on where rangers can enforce (parks and beaches). He asked how the number of six new rangers was determined. Moreau explained that six is the ultimate goal at the moment (though she does reserve the right to re-evaluate), but BPRW realizes that budget constraints may require them to build the program over time. The bottom line is that the ranger program was grossly understaffed in 2022, housing will be getting worse as programs dry up, and that the overall situation might actually be worse this year, but BPRW are going in with eyes open. If the priority of the rangers shifts away from work with the unhoused and enforcement then six new rangers will not be necessary.

Moreau pointed out that rangers should not be going out into the field alone, especially for first touches, so at least 2 need to be present on any given day. Removals were delayed last year because we didn't have enough staff for coverage. If there was at least another pair of rangers BPRW could stagger their work, and that would make a huge difference. Moreau explained that this proposal is a future goal, and BPRW is happy to implement it incrementally and review and revise going forward if need be.

Dieng asked if the rangers have been using the city's encampment policy and Moreau confirmed that they were. Wight added that there is also a new process in place under the supervision of Sarah Russell that determines who gets moved. Lead ranger Neil Preston fills out a form, which is reviewed by Kaeding who passes it to Moreau, who passes it to Wight. The report is then reviewed by the City Attorney's office and the Mayor's office before removal is approved.

Dieng asked how has the scope of work of Moreau's work has changed in her position as the Waterfront Superintendent and Harbormaster. Moreau explained that things have changed and she's learning a lot. There are encampments and tenting at the waterfront, it's happening everywhere, and the Waterfront is really seen as last safety net of society for BTV. Moreau welcomes the challenge and is comfortable being in the position of being part of the work with the unhoused. Moreover, she feels her position should include this work as the Waterfront has amenities that are needed by everyone – lots of public restrooms for example. There are resources there and that's why we're seeing more people along the waterfront.

Shannon stated that she was hoping to get an idea of what the program is and what the boundaries of rangers work with enforcement and ticketing are. Wight explained that the rangers will be ticketing by April 1 2023 (they were never intended to ticket in 2022). Exactly what the rangers do still needs to be decided. If they need to deal with the unhoused then it will be difficult for them to focus on writing tickets for minor infractions. 100% of ranger's time could be spent on dealing with the unhoused and they still wouldn't finish the work.

Shannon commented that she still needs to see the actual plan for the work the rangers are going to be doing. She thought that the purpose of BPRW coming to PACC – to bounce ideas and see if plan will

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meet community expectations. At present, rangers have tried to deal with the unhoused and addiction crises by building relationships, and it's been successful. Shannon wonders if the rangers will continue to work in that direction, where to draw the line and seek enforcement, and how enforcement should happen. She noted that the work doesn't fall just on BPRW and that it needs to be coordinated with DPW and BPD. She stated that she knows the work is daunting and heartbreaking and that things will get worse as hotel programs end. At present Shannon doesn't feel like there's a plan, but knows there's more work being done. Shannon would like to see plan of everyone coming together to understand jurisdiction, what extra help is needed, and when it should be called. She asked that BPRW explain what the new 6 rangers will be doing, breakdown vision of what could be accomplished with 6 rangers.

Moreau appreciated Shannon's questions and noted that PACC may not have received the original memo that was sent to the Mayor's office as justification for enhanced program proposal.

Dieng added that he didn't know everything that the rangers have been dealing with all of this and really appreciates getting the full scope. He feels the rangers do not have adequate training yet, but is reassured to know it's in process. Dieng asked that all the key players (BPRW staff currently present and appropriate BPD/DPW staff) be present at the next PACC meeting.

Barlow stated that he appreciated the quantified information. He felt that, given the information provided, a surge of staff might be needed to deal with problem as it unfolds and state supports disappear. He wondered if the ranger positions could be funded by a grant for surge as funds are a concern (maybe the state could assist). Barlow also noted that the situation did improve as the season progressed in 2022, and that this feels like this is a work in progress. He would welcome a plan that coordinates with other departments and involves surging resources.

Moreau wondered if it would be worth exploring if there are ARPA funds for public safety. She made it clear that it would be a challenge to surge staff while respecting the existing budget. She noted that an incremental increase in staff would be easier to have a conversation about, but felt that there was still merit and need for 6 rangers in summer 2023.

Shannon asked that the presentation be emailed to the committee along with the original memo to the Mayor's office.

Infant Mortality/Stillbirth/Child Loss Memorial

Dieng stated that he was contacted by Chelsea Levis, the founder of Empty Arms Vermont, who submitted a request to Board of Finance for funding for a memorial/garden. Dieng would like to invite Levis to the March meeting as she was not able to attend the meeting tonight and will be out of town in February. The item was tabled until March.

BCA Update

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Colin Storrs began by introducing Zach Williamson who provided an update on Highlight.

Williamson stated that this year marked the 5th and best Highlight yet. After the first 2 years of growth, the event moved fully online in 2020. BCA held a smaller, hybrid event in 2021, and it was great to be back in person for 2022. BCA sold over 6000 tickets – the goal was 5000, so it was great to go over. There were limited issues with venue capacity this year, resulting in only a couple of problems. BCA was able to provide 10 hours of programming at 40 events. Highlight is a community celebration on NYE that's really reasonable and accessible. BCA was able to provide ticket giveaways to most folks who reach out. It was/is a safe, in-person arts and cultural celebration which the community both appreciates and comes out for. On the artist front, 220 Vermonter artists were paid \$96,000 for 10 hours of programming. BCA charted a 122% increase in impressions from print/social media. 6 million impressions of Highlight were collected across the full promotion time, and BCA received fantastic support from BPRW, DPW, and emergency services. They are already talking about next year, and things went great!

Storrs went on to provide a brief update about what BCA is currently working on. Their camp catalog will be going live February 6. They are transitioning scholarships to people who reach out to education department with scholarship requests which will provide an assigned scholarship spot in every class.

Also, BCA held a Dewey Park community meeting about public art installation on 12/5 at Integrated Arts Academy with REIB and BPRW. They provided a 2-scale model of the park which helped with resident's concerns. The artist was able to be present at the meeting to talk about the project. REIB has been handling communications around meeting, and it was very productive from Storrs' perspective. Finally on 2/10 2 new exhibitions will open at BCA. The first is an AI focused exhibition on the main floor, and on the second floor will be an exhibition of Sarah Smith's work.

Shanno asked if Storrs had anything that would require the attention of PACC. Storrs stated that he did not at present, however BCA is in the midst of a call to artist project for main street project (Great Streets). Once that process finishes that project will come before PACC. Also, Ryon Fink from the Odd Fellows has reached out to BCA in regards to a mural they would like to commission for their building. They may be coming to PACC/CC to request funds as BCA cannot fund them. BCA will assess the scope of the project and then approach council with additional fund request.

Mark – mural painted on Ethan Allen Shopping Center – did BCA/city have a role in that? Would that be a better construct for the Odd Fellows.

Colin – can connect with Sara and Doreen and see how connected BCA was to project. Has quantified a lot of procedures over last few years. Often ways that the city has helped organizations in the past that may not have been the best course of action but they worked out well. Will look into project and see if we can use that structure.

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Dieng asked that Fink attend the next meeting. He also asked about comments from the Dewey Park meeting that there was limited to no community engagement about the public art being installed there. Storrs stated that BCA is exploring how to do it better and agreed that there was a general feeling of a lack of good public engagement. Storrs noted that, while there was public engagement (news articles and a press release), it just wasn't enough. People felt out of the loop and that wasn't the intention. BCA will continue to strive to improve their public engagement.

Schedule Next Meeting and Adjournment

The next meeting will be held on February 23, 2023 at 5pm at 645 Pine St in the front conference room. Members of the homeless outreach team including Chief Murad will be invited to the next meeting as will Doreen Kraft of BCA.

The meeting adjourned at 6:36pm

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