

Minutes

Parks, Arts & Culture Committee Meeting

Wednesday, March 10, 2021, 5:30 pm

MEETING CONDUCTED VIA ZOOM

Attendance:

Committee Members: Chair Karen Paul, Councilor Ali Dieng (arrived at 5:58pm), Councilor Joan Shannon

Mary Danko – Fletcher Free Library, Doreen Kraft – BCA, Sara Katz – BCA, Sophie Sauve – BPRW, Cindi Wight – BPRW, Holli Bushnell – BPRW Staff

Meeting called to order at 5:41pm by Chair Paul

Approval of agenda

Councilor Shannon moved to approve the agenda. Councilor Paul seconded. All were in favor.

Approval of draft minutes from March 4, 2020

Shannon moved to approve the minutes. Paul seconded. All were in favor

Public Forum

Public forum opened at 5:42pm. No one present, but Paul mentioned that she had received several questions from the community, as well as a letter to the mayor. Because Dieng was not present at the time, the committee will review these issues/questions at the next meeting.

Agenda Items

1. **General Update and Grant News from Department of Parks and Recreation** – Sophie Sauve, BPRW comprehensive planner, provided the committee with an update on Oakledge for all Universal Access Project and the grant they have received (which is waiting for final approval from the city council).

The project itself is a collaborative effort between multiple groups including Oakledge for All (OFA) and the city. OFA was started by Julia Wayne after she became aware that 1 in 13 families in our state can't access their community playgrounds. OFA partnered with BPRW in 2012. At that time, the idea focused specifically on the playground, but has now evolved from to include

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beach access and accessible parking and changing spaces as well. Sauve explained that, while Oakledge has always been a beloved space in our community, individuals with different physical ability levels are unable to access the playground and beach and use the park. The space was not designed with everybody and every body involved. The new plan is designed for accessibility for all. Infrastructure accessibility, such as paths, restrooms, parking, and changing, is just as important as access to the play space itself. The new vision for Oakledge will provide all of these.

Phase 1 of the project was completed in 2018. Over the course of 2021, which happens to be the 50th anniversary of Oakledge, BPRW will begin work on phase 2. Key features in the plan involve benches for caregivers to rest, a caldera for both separate and together play, and additional trees and landscaping. The play structures have been built into the site in such a manner that everyone can enjoy the space.

Access along Blanchard beach has been a challenge to figure out, but, as fully accessible lake access is very limited in our area it has been prioritized as part of the plan. There is a lot of community support for this project.

The grant has been approved, and is waiting for city council approval. It's also on hold while the new presidential team transitions into place. BPRW is moving ahead with permitting and finalizing design elements, but until there is a grant agreement in place and signed work cannot start. One of the larger wrinkles to be ironed out is that Blanchard Beach is a separate parcel from the rest of Oakledge and there are deed restrictions requiring land access from the original owners (Mobil). The goal is to potentially move the property line to allow Blanchard to become part of the original parcel while maintaining access for the original deed holders.

Shannon was fully supportive of this project. She felt the progress is positive and has heard from community members that everyone is enjoying the new space. She's looking forward to moving the next steps along and thanked Sauve for the hard work and the update.

Councilor Dieng commented that the original plan has shifted and there have been changes to the concept, scope, and timeline. He asked Sauve and White when the next phases will start and when the project might be completed. Wight confirmed that work will begin as soon as possible, certainly in the next two years. They may not be able to get the grant in place for the 2021 construction season, but it will definitely be ready for 2022. The bike path, beach access, and restroom renovations are funded by grants that are matched. If grant comes in late, restroom renovation could be conducted in the autumn of 2021. Dieng asked what is available for accessible playgrounds now. Sauve responded that phase 1 at Oakledge is open and

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accessible. Ideally, all playgrounds would be accessible, however, accessible surfacing is extremely expensive and standard plastic molded structures aren't made for everyone. It's challenging, and requires the funds, but BPRW love to have accessible playgrounds in all parks. Once Oakledge is complete, BPRW would likely look in the North end for the next location. Paul asked how many universally accessible playgrounds are there in northern New England. Sauve confirmed that Oakledge is the first universally accessible playground in Vermont and that the next nearest one to us is outside Boston. Paul asked if any funding coming from Penny for Parks. Sauve confirmed that \$100,000 from FY2020 and \$100,000 from FY2021 is being used from Penny for Parks for this project. Also, the restroom renovation is using Penny for Parks funds. Wight stated that the general playground work will cost around \$200,000, \$60,000 is estimated for the restroom, and \$5,000 is allocated for additional work. They have a \$75,000 buffer from penny for parks.

In other BPRW news, Wight confirmed that programing and some events are queued up for summer. She also stated that BPRW had a great winter season, with more skateable days than the city has had in years.

Shannon asked about the RFP for concession at North Beach. Wight confirmed that, while it's still under review they will have more info soon.

Sauve provided an update on the bike path. BPRW will be working on 2 major pieces this summer. The first is the realignment between college and maple, and the second is at Oakledge. The exact scope of the work at Oakledge is still in flux as budgets finalize. There will be some detours. Currently the path is closed between college and king, as rail lines will be taking over where bike path is and the path moves to the west side of tracks. King to maple will be closing soon - Friday the contractor will be announced and will be bid out next week. BPRW is Coordinating with VTrans to bid everything together so it can be done by the same contractor, cause less disruption. Work is also being done at the college st plaza in front of echo. They are trying to improve vehicle/bike/pedestrian conflicts. King and maple street work will happen closer to the fall. Detours through Oakledge are up for debate depending on what is able to be accomplished. BPRW is communicating with area business owners and working on social media announcements for future disruptions.

Wight informed the committee that all events normally held at Waterfront Park have put in their applications. BPRW is waiting for the state government to decide on gathering limits and outdoor events.

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Paul asked if Wight could provide an update on FRAME, and Wight stated that FRAME is a CEDO project. Grace Ciffo is staying on to manage that project. Paul also asked when the amenities in City Hall Park will open. Wight confirmed that the water features will likely have to wait until May when there is no risk of freezing. Sara Katz commented that the tables and chairs on the BCA patio are used all the time. It's easy for staff to put them out quickly on a nice day.

2. **Update on upcoming Library events and spring planning**

Mary Danko stated that, moving forward, FFL will be implementing the strategies they learned last year during lockdown while waiting to see what the governor decides about indoor activities. They will continue to provide open air hours and outside activities, but are hoping to be able to provide indoor activities as well. Some COVID practices may remain in place, however. Book groups, for example, might meet over zoom or using some sort of hybrid in person/via zoom set up based on the interest of participants.

Danko reports that the staff at FFL has been reduced, but they have been incredibly creative. They've developed online activities, STEAM kits, and have activated the front window as display space. They are working with teachers for pandemic art displays. FFL is also about to launch a digital provide project with 10 laptops and 10 hotspots that people can check out (funding provided through Friends of FFL). The teen/tween librarian has created teen take and make kits that kids can use for projects. FFL is also using Beanstack, an app that tracks reading, and it may become part of the summer reading challenge.

As a staff, FFL continues to engage in anti-racism and social justice. The staff recently discussed the book Stamped as part of their ongoing anti-racism work. Before April meeting they'll watch a film that they can discuss on similar topics. Danko has put a lot of her own focus on taking care of her staff. FFL staffers have gone through a lot, and she's proud and supportive of them.

Finally, while the dream of a new and improved library is on hold, Danko reports that they are starting to reengage in conversations. Paul was encouraged that FFL is looking at the library dream again. Shannon also expressed appreciation for everything FFL is doing. She also thanked Danko for providing contact tracing notes from FFL staff participating in the work prior to the meeting.

Dieng wondered if it might be possible to expand the library/library access into the NNE. He asked if Danko could consider any possibilities for a physical space where people can come and interact. Danko stated that FFL will be getting a new computer system which will make it much easier to add branch libraries. Physical space and staffing are the more challenging, but she's

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working on it. Dieng asked if the library has been effected by the ongoing graffiti problems, and Danko confirmed that, while the library has been spared, Memorial Auditorium next door has been hit hard by graffiti.

Paul stated that councilors have been getting emails about the graffiti problem on a daily basis. She reached out to Bill Ward who confirmed that in the past two weeks he and a couple of staffers have cleaned or removed over 3 dozen large tags all over the city. Unfortunately, in spite of their hard work, the tags are being put back up almost as soon as they are removed.

3. Update on Highlight and BCA Activities

Doreen Kraft began by detailing the somewhat urgent condition of the Chief Greylock statue in Battery Park. She stated that this is a project in the city that is urgent in its need for resolution. BCA is working with all 4 Abenaki chiefs to figure out their next steps, and they may apply for a Vermont arts council grant for this work. BCA will also likely request additional funds from the City Council. The cost of the repair will likely be in the \$100,000 to \$150,000 range. \$15,000 was allocated from Penny for Parks for this project in 2019 based on community requests, and those funds are being held until work begins. BCA will do everything they can to resolve the issues this year. This will be a community process working in conjunction with the Abenaki Chiefs who choose to be a part of project.

Paul asked if there is a consensus on what course of action to take. Kraft returned that there is not currently a consensus, but BCA would like to present on this issue the next time they meet. She explained that there are some parts of the Abenaki nation that believe the statue sits on sacred ground and the location is what's important while other members feel that statue itself is more important than the location. If the restoration is very costly, some might see the chance to put a new piece there as a positive option. BCA has been looking at options for a new location for Chief Greylock, and the Ethan Allen Homestead is one of the options on the table. Most importantly, BCA wants to do this right, so they are taking their cues from the Abenaki. It's a great project, and part of a much larger endeavor. The goal is to go slow and do it right.

Sara Katz provided an update on Highlight Houseparty. The key factor to this year's event was that, no matter what level of talent you had you could hold an event during this evening. Everyone who wanted to had an opportunity to participate, and their presentation could be as basic or as fancy as they wanted. Each performer given a base level of support from BCA staff, and all performers shared in ticket sales. Everyone was to explore a little bit of everything and performers were from all over Vermont. They also included Vermonter performers living out of state. There was tremendous support from community for this event, and because of it BCA has realized that future events should include content for people who don't want to or are unable to

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leave the house. A combination of virtual and live performances will likely be costly, however, and BCA is just beginning to analyze the possibilities for the future. Because the only data they have on participation is based on logins, they're not able to estimate how many people participated, however they did raise a good amount of money for non-profits such as food banks. There were a few challenges because of all the new technology required to host a virtual event, but they're confident that Highlight will be new and improved next year. Especially if the city council decides to support it (BCA did not request funds from the city council this year due to pandemic).

Paul asked what the cost was this year versus previous years, and if Kraft had any idea what the potential hybrid costs might be. Kraft stated that the full budget hasn't been put together yet for operating in both universes. This cost year it was around \$100,000, and 2020 was \$230,000. They anticipate that there will be some cost savings due to the need for fewer live venues, but they'll be inventing the hybrid as they learn what numbers will be allowed in terms of groups/gatherings. All the gathering questions are still up in the air, but they remain very optimistic.

Paul asked if there was revenue from the event. Kraft confirmed that they likely broke even and possibly made a profit of around \$2000. Katz elaborated that BCA worked with over 100 artists, and that each had their own community that was interested in their performance. Ultimately, the diversity had an exponential effect on interest in the event.

Dieng asked how can councilors can get involved and if there is a timeline for the project. He feels that, although there isn't a number attached to it yet, whatever the cost it's worth it to preserve or add to the area from a cultural perspective. The statue has tremendous historical and cultural value and it should be a priority whatever they choose to do. Kraft agreed. Dieng asked if there was any update on the bowling alley at the pine street building. Kraft stated that Redstone and their partners are still trying to make budget work. The initial estimates were around \$1 million over budget.

BCA is looking into doing some of the necessary preparation work during netzero energy updates. Those numbers are being crunched now. The goal is to have the project ready enough to apply for significant grants when the federal government starts issuing grants again. All Vermont congressional delegates support this project. Moreover, Kraft has never seen a project more beloved than this one. The community value of this project makes people really happy. Dieng commented that, while he's not 100% sold on what the renters want to do, he likes the idea of giving the children of the city more access to more activities. It's something we don't have that will serve everyone for generations to come.

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Kraft returned that BCA understood early on in the project that they could raise about half the cost, and that's why there's a master tenant for the first 15 years. They will grow slowly into the other half of the building. Preservation of the footprint for community use is important – a building for the future and for the arts for generations to come. Katz added that the building is open, and they are offering remote programming for youth, elementary and teens. Tactile experiences happening in the space. Kraft continued that BCA has had a lot of success with zoom tours. They haven't stopped fundraising for the project through the pandemic, and have raised about a third of their initial goal. Consequently, the timeline is going to be longer.

Kraft concluded by providing a brief preview of what BCA would be presenting at the next meeting (4x8 projects, mural projects in the city, Juneteenth update). Dieng requested that Wight provide an update on the Sea Caves project at the next meeting. Paul added that there was a memo from city attorney on the Everyone Loves a Parade mural that should also be on the agenda.

4. Wrap up public forum

No public were present at this time.

Schedule next meeting – Committee will be queried via email

Adjournment

Shannon moved to adjourn, Dieng seconded, all in were favor. The meeting was adjourned at 7:17pm.