

Turtle Creek Valley COG

Director's Report

TCVCOG Board Meeting

September 25, 2014

Important Dates:

September 30th 7:00 pm
Woodland Hills Community Meeting on Land Banking

October 14th 10:00am
Police Chief Meeting

Oct. 22th 10:00 am
Managers Meeting
*Please note the date change

Land Banking

This has been a very busy summer with the release of our Land Bank Business Plan. We met with County Executive Rich Fitzgerald on July 14th to discuss the details of the plan. The Executive has pledged the County's support for the Land Bank. This project has also garnered a lot of press coverage. There have been numerous newspaper articles written about the plan, including the front page of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

- Monroeville moves Forward with Land Bank – The Times Express, September 2014
- Land Bank Would Help With Blighted Properties – Pittsburgh Post Gazette, July 2014
- 3 Councils of Governments Release Plan for Land Bank Deal – Trib Total Media, July 2014
- Mon Valley Called 'Ground Zero' for Blight – Trib Total Media, July 2014

We have been making our way to municipal council and school boards meetings to present on the details of the plan. To date we have presented at nine council meetings and one school board meeting. We have some more scheduled for October. If we have not done so already we would be happy to come out and speak to your governing body.

We are hoping that the municipalities that are interested in becoming a member of the land bank will pass their ordinances and sign their intergovernmental cooperation agreements by the end of the year. Monroeville is the first municipality that has passed an ordinance to become a member of the land bank. The first board of the land bank will have the task of passing the founding policies and procedures, which is why it is so important to come on board at the inception of the land bank.

On Tuesday September 30th Wilkins Township will be hosting the Woodland Hills Schools District communities to discuss how land banking will benefit their communities. We are hoping this is a good way to engage the school district in this conversation as they will be needed if any of their twelve municipalities wish to join the land bank. The meeting will take place Tuesday September 30th at 7:00 pm in the Wilkins Township Community Center.

We have also been meeting with representatives from the foundation community to secure initial funding for this endeavor. The conversations have been positive thus far. We are hopeful that the next stage of this project will be funded along with some initial seed money for the start-up phase of the land bank's operations.

Code Enforcement

Centre Region COG Visit

On July 31st Liz, Greg Bachy from Plum and I traveled to Centre Region COG in State College Borough to learn more about the structure and costs of their code enforcement program. The Centre Region COG has been conducting code enforcement, rental inspection, and fire inspection on behalf of all its member municipalities since the creation of the COG in the 1970s. The program is paid mainly through the fees collected at the time of inspection, therefore creating a program with little to no costs to the municipalities. They have also been really successful in fire inspections and have achieved top ratings in the ISO insurance ratings. The other functions of the COG were beyond impressive. The organization operates with a \$24 million budget and has been able to achieve impressive results, including consolidating the fire departments of five of the municipalities. They also own and operate public parks and pools, and conduct planning efforts for their municipalities. Their efforts show just how much can be achieved when members see the value in coming together.

COG Code Enforcement Program

Along with the trip to Centre Region the Code Enforcement working group met to talk about the Code Enforcement Pilot program. We have decided to move back the start date to March 1, 2015 due to the general work load for code enforcement departments. The group felt that in the beginning months of the winter there is usually not as much work to be done. We have discussed the code enforcement officer conducting fire inspections in Wilkins and Occupancy permits in Churchill. We will be looking for board approval to spend some of the Managers Special Projects fund on the purchase of a code enforcement vehicle.

Housing Alliance Released from Blight to Bright

On July 21st the Housing Alliance released a new code enforcement educational toolkit that can be used as a guide for implementing strategic code enforcement practices. The event was held at the Steel Valley COG and Rich Fitzgerald spoke about the Tri-COG Collaborative efforts on Land Banking and offered his support for the initiative. They were anticipating 50 people in attendance, but the crowd was over 150 people and the event was relocated to the gym. Maura Kennedy, the City of Pittsburgh's Bureau of Building Inspections Chief, talked about her experience in the License and Inspection Department in Philadelphia. She had a lot of great suggestions on how code enforcement can be strategic, and how enabling legislation, like the "Doors and Windows" ordinance in the City of Philadelphia really can make a big difference. Other speakers talked about the impact potential of blight mitigation in communities that were on the fringe of blight but not totally devastating by widespread vacancy. The manual is located on the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania's webpage for those who are interested in learning more.

PABCO Conference

On September 16th I attended the first annual PABCO conference held in the outskirts of Harrisburg. Senator Argall and Rep. Harhai opened the conference with remarks on the importance of aggressive code enforcement, and discussed several bills that are being considered. These bills discuss closing loop holes for mortgage companies (2120), making perpetual code violations 2nd and 1st degree misdemeanors (1242), and revoking driving privileges (1420). There are two bills that would create funding for demolition (1427, 1442), and one bill that would provide funding for multi-municipal code enforcement (2302). I will be

following these bills carefully. Another session that discussed the standardization of Inspection procedures for rental housing inspections was very informative. Two sessions on legal components to Code Enforcement were eye opening to say the least. This was a good opportunity to meet very experienced professionals in the field of code enforcement. The Vice President of State & Local Government Relations from the ICC, Dorothy Harris, discussed training opportunities as well.

Other News

Public Works

This summer we purchased a new backhoe on behalf of the public works department with assistance from an ACT 47 grant. The machine has a unique attachment that allows the department to grind stumps and remove unsightly overgrown vegetation. It is able to cut through a lot of weeds. The backhoe has been a welcome addition to the department this summer!

New Website

The COG recently invested in upgrading our website to a mobile-ready cloud based platform that allows for greater accessibility and more advanced capabilities. The website will be using WordPress platform so updates can be reached from outside the office. We would like this website to be not only a resource to find information about COG programs and announcements, but a place to learn more about our member municipalities. If you are interested in including any photographs or information please let us know!

Vactor

As of next year the COG will be offering both an 8-day and 15-day opt in program for the vactor. Please schedule for the month of October! We will be forced to shut down the program early this year if there is not enough work to keep Ray busy.

Allegheny Conference on Economic Development

On September 11th Liz attended the Allegheny Conference on Economic Development quarterly meeting. The goals that were set for the 2012-2014 were discussed including targeting "People on the move" which the Conference has defined as college educated young professionals, Puerto Ricans, and Veterans. The biggest hurdle they have faced with bringing development to the region is what they perceive as a lack of "Pad Ready" sites. These sites would mean the utilities, street, and traffic lights are already fitted to meet development needs. The Conference plans to release a new Agenda for 2015-2017 at their November meeting.

DCED

Members from the executive leadership team at DCED came to Allegheny County to see to what extent the projects they have funded have been met with success. The leaders came to the Steel Valley COG offices on Wednesday September 17th to learn more about the success of the Tri-COG Collaborative's Blight Fight. DCED helped to fund the Financial Impact of Blight, therefore a presentation was given to showcase the effort and discuss the findings. The Collaborative also spoke about the recently released land bank business plan. Michael Cortez, Senior Advisor to the Secretary and Acting Deputy Secretary from DCED lauded our Blight Fight efforts. He was very supportive of the COGs and was very impressed by how much the three COGs were able to achieve by coming together. We will be looking to DCED for additional support as we develop the land bank and support to assist our communities with planning and strategic visioning.

Manager's Meeting

August 20, 2014

In attendace: Rebecca Bradley, Wilkins; Moe Rayan, Penn Hills; Greg Bachy; Plum; Steve Morus; Forest Hills

The Tri-COG Blight Initiative will host Pat McGrail on Monday August 25th. Pat will talk about strategies for dealing with blight from a legal perspective.

We have been making our rounds to municipal council meetings and have been meeting with school board members about the land bank business plan. There is a meeting tentatively scheduled for September 30th from 7:00-8:30 pm at the Wilkins Community Center. The primary purpose of the meeting is to have all the communities that make up the Woodland Hills School District, along with members from the school board, there to discuss land banking. The structure of the meeting will be determined in the near future. Amanda asked if there were any other questions or concerns about the land bank business plan. Overall the feedback we have received from municipal council members has been positive.

Since the COG is working on establishing a code enforcement program, and since effective code enforcement is a critical tool for every community, we have been looking into becoming a member of one of the state-wide code enforcement agencies. Amanda is also looking into attending a conference in the fall.

Monroeville has recently faced an issue with state road utility maintenance and was wondering if other communities were having similar issues. A sewer line under the state road is collapsing and PennDOT advised Monroeville it is the municipality's responsibility to make the repairs. In the past PennDOT made the repairs to utilities under state roads. The other municipalities had similar experiences in which PennDOT completed the maintenance when needed. However they are also being told now that in the future they will need to be responsible for the utilities and PennDOT has asked some municipalities to sign an agreement. None of the municipalities have had an issue thus far that requires maintenance but it may not be that far into the future. They are aware that PennDOT is looking into upholding some old ordinances that have not been enforced in the past.

Amanda asked about health insurance renewal rates but the managers have not yet received theirs. The COG's renewal increased by just over 4% but have heard from other COGs rates increased up to 24%.

Rebecca wanted to get the managers' feedback on updating phone systems and see if anyone has moved to a system hosted on the internet as opposed to a land line. There seems to be some advantages and significant cost savings. Plum recently switched to VOIP in which the phone connects goes through the internet. The only issue is when the internet goes down the phones stop working, so they have land line backups for the police. Plum has experienced cost saving from making the switch.

The managers had a discussion about the increase price of rock salt. The bids through the COGs' joint purchase agreement did come in high but other group bids came in higher or not at all.

September 17, 2014

In attendace: Tim Little, Monroeville; Moe Rayan, Penn Hills; Greg Bachy; Plum; Connie Rosenbayger, East McKeesport; Patty Logo, North Versailles

Blight Busters will be held Monday September 22nd at 2:00 pm. Attorney George Pettrone will be discussing small estate administration with a focus on how it has been used as a method to acquire properties. He has been doing this in Wilkinsburg so it will be interesting to learn the process. This is also something that we plan to incorporate into our Land Bank acquisition strategies.

Amanda talked about the Land Bank Business Plan and progress being made with council meetings. To date we have attended nine council meetings to present on the details of the plan. Monroeville has been the first municipality to pass the ordinance. We are sticking to our timeline of getting the first members to join the land bank to pass their ordinance by the end of the year. The founding members will solidify the policies and procedures, which is why it is important to come on in the beginning. Land Banking is a new tool and so there will be a learning curve as we move forward.

Amanda went to the PABCO conference yesterday, and learned a lot about code enforcement legislation and requirements. There is a bill in the state legislature for a funding source for multi-municipal code enforcement programs. The managers talked about the new bill that would require municipalities that use third party inspectors for UCC to hire two agencies so that applicants for permits and inspections can have a choice. Connie said this would be a big issue for the smaller communities but would likely not affect the larger ones who typically have in-house employees with UCC certifications. There was also discussion about getting BCO certifications. If towns are interested we can arrange for paper and pen test for municipal employees who wish to obtain certifications. There is a minimum of 25 tests for a representative from the ICC to come out and provide the tests. The COG is still on track for a March 1st start for the pilot code enforcement program with Wilkins and Churchill.

There has been some information disseminated about small cell towers being placed in municipalities and one of the managers asked that a discussion about ordinances be placed on the agenda. Liz mentioned that the Allegheny Conference on Economic Development has heard concerns that the Eastern suburbs do not have the greatest cell phone reception and broadband connections, which may be limiting developing in this area. There will likely be more development in the areas of information technology so it would be beneficial for municipalities to have ordinances in place that would allow for some control over where cell towers can go and how they can look.

The COG is now offering both an 8-day and 15-day opt in program for the vector. We are hoping the managers will consider this new offer as they prepare their budgets. The next managers meeting will be October 22nd due to the Three Rivers Wet Weather Annual Conference conflicting with the committee's normally scheduled meeting time.

Police Chief Committee Meeting

September 23, 2014

In attendance: Dean Bazzone, North Braddock; Allen Park, Churchill; Chuck Williams, Forest Hills; Russ Stroschein, East McKeesport; Scott Farally, Pitcairn; Doug Cole, Monroeville; Robert Payne, Edgewood; Greg Geppert and Ellis Watson, Swissvale; Joe Asturi; District Attorney's Office, Timothy Logue, District Attorney's Office; Harold Land, District Attorney's Office

Joe Asturi, Timothy Logue and Harold Lane came to talk to the Police Chiefs about an upcoming program for electronic recording of custodial interrogations. The proposed policies were developed primarily by a working committee made up of practicing police officers. The CJAB – Criminal Justice Advisory Board - approved the policies along with the District Attorney's office. At this time representatives from the DA's office are meeting with police chiefs to garner feedback and see if any departments are interested in joining the program. The objective of the program is to have all police departments in the county on board and to ensure officers are conducting interrogation recordings with consistency.

The group suggested that those departments that do not have interrogations rooms wired for audio and video recording use less expensive means of recording such as the GoPro cameras. Four cameras fully equipped with additional batteries can cost up to \$2,800. It would be ideal to have fully wired rooms but cost can be prohibitive. Some police departments however already have these capabilities but do not actively conduct audio recording of interrogations. Officers are hesitant to use audio recordings because of the Pennsylvania wiretap legislation. It was recommended that the chiefs lobby PA legislators to grant an exception to the act that would allow of audio recording during custodial interrogations. As a former homicide detective, Chief Payne believes the standardization this policy provides is a huge step forward. Chief Cole agreed, but said storage solutions for video files will need to be investigated.

If the police chiefs have any concerns about the electronic recording of custodial interrogations or the recommended procedures please let Joe Asturi know.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 11:00am.

Respectfully submitted by Amanda Settelmaier