

WUDAC 2.14.2023 Meeting Notes

Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee (WUDAC)

Tuesday | May 9, 2023 | 7:00 pm-8:30 pm

Hybrid Meeting

Join in Person

2nd Floor Mid-County Board Room

2425 Reedie Drive, Wheaton MD 20902

Join via Zoom

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/83246233594>

Meeting ID: 832 4623 3594

+1 301 715 8592 US (Washington DC)

Agenda

I. Call to order 7:00 pm

Attendees:

Jim Epstein, Chair

Karen Cordry, Resident Representative (temporary minutes taker for tonight)

Ali Oliver-Kruger, InterAct Story Theatre, Wheaton-Kensington Chamber of Commerce

Dave Jarette – Crossroads Two Restaurant – Large Business Representative (new member)

Nina Koltnow – Resident Representative

Kit Wood – Green Plate Catering – Small Business Representative (new member)

Stuart Amos - Westfield Mall Manager

Rob Fox – MCCAB Liaison, Recording Secretary

Riana Cole – Resident Representative (new member)

Pedro Matamaros – Franks Burgers - Small Business Representative

Luisa Cardona, Director, Mid-County Regional Service Office

Crystal Ruiz, WUDAC Manager

II. Community Concerns 7:05 pm

Limited to 2 minutes per speaker

We began with Community Concerns while WUDAC members were arriving.

Mr. Jarrett noted vehicle break-ins at the high-rise parking garage that occurred after midnight. Ms. Ruiz noted the importance of reporting such incidents to the police so they would know when and where problems were occurring and could adjust their assignment scheduling accordingly. It was noted that the police wanted to take the information from the direct victim.

III. Review/Approve minutes. It was moved and seconded to approve the minutes for the April meeting and the motion was unanimously approved by voice vote.

IV. Reports/Updates 7:15 pm

a. *Council Member Fani-Gonzales' office* – Jose Ortiz, staff member, reported on the Council's current activity. They are working on the budget now; the finances are tight, but their office is pushing to get more resources for this side of the County. They will be having a second meeting

with the Governor sometime at the end of May. The proposed recordation tax increase just passed with 7 votes in favor. Currently, it is 1.1% and is imposed on new buildings and refinances. Under the increase, it will be a graduated increase (ranging from 1.2-1.3%) with the larger increases being imposed on the higher priced transactions. Most of the money being raised will be used to increase rental assistance and to fund the school budget, with a priority on increasing teacher's salaries.

b. W/K Chamber of Commerce – *Ali Oliver-Krueger*. They will be having a May 31 Lunch Mixer featuring a Montgomery Historical Society speaker on Top Ten Places Off the Beaten Path in Montgomery County, sponsored by Ledo's Pizza. On August, 16, 2023, the Chamber of Commerce Annual Awards Banquet, will be held in person at Hollywood East. WUDAC hands out two awards at that event. Nominations will be due by the June WUDAC meeting and we will vote in July. Here is information on the award <https://forms.office.com/g/OLsXdc9Sgd>. They are for:

Outstanding Business Leader of the Year

Recognizes a business that has made an outstanding contribution to the Wheaton Urban District as a leader in his/her field and in the community using the following criteria:

- Business innovation and success
- Business Environment Impact
- Community Impact
- Contributed to Urban District Revitalization

Best Property Improvement of the Year

Recognizes a business or property owner who has improved their storefront/property within the following criteria:

- façade
- Environmental impacts
- Lighting, Landscape
- Contribution to Urban District revitalization

c. MCCAB, *Rob Fox* – We did tabling about MCCAB and WUDAC at the recent Green Fest in downtown Wheaton. Council Members Glass and Jawando did a presentation to MCCAB and he will forward notes on their discussion. Their next topic is a presentation from the Park Department on their refurbishment activities for the parks.

d. Mid-County RSC, *Luisa Cardona* – She also noted our participation at the Green Fest, noting that, while it was somewhat lesser attended than last year, the tabling did seem to work well. She thanked those WUDAC members who attended and helped staff the table.

Hiring – she noted they are planning on hiring a Program Specialist, hopefully in the next month or two, to manage a number of the scheduling and operation of various public spaces, including the Marian Fryar Plaza, the Reading Room at the Library and so forth. The goal is to increase their usage and to be able to collect the rental fees when they are being used. She noted that non-profits can apply to waive the fees. They are prioritizing getting funding for arts and entertainment (“A&E”) uses in the space and working on getting them to be active. They have sent out a form to them asking for when they would like to use the space and have been getting some responses. Ideally, there would be something active every day. Right now, most people using the facilities come in under some sort of County funded/affiliated program but once they get the Program Specialist, they hope to be able to open this up more.

They also need to hire 2 part-time (about 25 hours per week) event monitors (primarily for evening and weekend hours) to direct events. They attended a County Job Fair and were able to start interviewing candidates. They will be trained on sound and lighting features there and will be enforcing the rules, such as not having food trucks on the Plaza itself, places where bounce houses can be used, and so forth. The Job Fair did work well – they interviewed 12 good people and expect will be making offers to that group.

They are also working with the County Executive to get the A&E Board reinstated both here and in Silver Spring and are reviewing its structure. They do want someone from the Board to be on the CAP, the fund to help reduce fees for users

Planning updates – on Thursday is the Wheaton planning board briefing. Pedestrian Master plan on 3/21 for another hearing. Changed the newsletter to biweekly to keep up with it more, but that might change once there's more staff again. There are two large business openings that they hope we can push out. Not everything that we wanted was in the budget proposal, but there are lots of competing needs and little funding. The capital improvement project budget will have a county executive forum on that for April.

Crisis Response Team – Ms. Cardona also noted that this was a unit set up by the Police Department to deal with mental crisis issues. We offered them space here so they would be convenient to the community and they are now located in the building.

Streeterly Proposal – at the moment, the budget does not have funding to do the actual improvements we were asking for. Instead, there was a proposal to allocated \$75,000 for planning for three such Streeteries (including here, Bethesda, and Silver Spring). They are planning on doing some temporary fixes, such as removing parking meters on the side of the street near where the tables are located. They are also measuring the street to determine if they can narrow it and make more space for tents and so forth. One question is whether the Streeterly should be open year-round (which goes to whether removing the parking meters is permanent or temporary). It was noted the tables on Elkin are currently too close together and some space is needed for bikes and pedestrians to get through.

Jim Epstein noted that the Planning Board had already done a substantial amount of studying of the proposal before the Plaza was suggested for such a project. Even if there is more nitty-gritty planning to do, we would like to sit down with whoever is working on this, get it figured out and start spending any allocated funds on getting things done, not just talking about them.

Mr. Ortiz was asked if he knew what priority this project had. He noted that there was a big push in the budget talks to try to reduce the amount spent on consulting services and so forth, and concerns about projects not getting done. He will talk to Council Member Fani-Gonzales to try to get her help on moving this forward. Jim Epstein emphasized, we want to stop studying and start implementing.

Ms. Cardona noted that she and Ms. Ruiz had been looking at strategies to try to move this forward. In other areas, where it had been done, it had tended to be implemented through private-public partnerships where the funding could be created without having to go through governmental structures. Both Bethesda and Rockville's facilities are private funded but we don't have the same level of private funding here. And, conversely, the public funds are quiet limited at the moment – they are short-staffed so they do not, for instance, have any weekend

cleaning staff regularly scheduled so all events have to be done on overtime. It was agreed this was a topic we should try to work on at the June retreat.

She also noted that the Taste of Wheaton Festival would be on June 4 and the Summer Concert series will be starting after that. Chuck Levin's will be doing alternate weekends (and hopefully pulling some big name bands) and the County will be responsible for the other time slots. We will be trying to fundraise on those events, such as by letting private partners tag the stage with their logos during events, etc.

Insurance for fencing along the medians around the Safeway and Reddie Drive will need to wait until FY 24 to encumber the funds (i.e., not for another 4-5 months).

e. Gateway Project – *Krista Brooks*. She reported that they had fixed the fences around the site and would be reinstalling them and doing some beautification efforts. She didn't know when the next Planning Board Meeting would be set for.

V. Presentation

County Office of Food System Resilience – *Heather Bruskin*. This is a very new office and she is the first director (since Feb. 13). They are hiring for two more positions. She lives in Kensington and for the last nine years was head of the County Food Council, which has a commitment to giving the community a voice in meeting these food availability issues. This initiative grew out of the response to the pandemic, when it was recognized that no office was dedicated to a holistic view of these issues. HHS had duties with respect to food security and the Department of Agriculture deal with production but no one tied all of the concerns together. The Food Security Task Force recommended this office and it has now been created.

The challenges are growing (with inflation and the like) while resources are shrinking. (For instance, the added SNAP benefits provided due to COVID were phased out at the end of February and in just the first month, that resulted in a reduction of \$6 million in benefits. This also meant that they did not get the benefit of being automatically enrolled in utility and rental assistance programs.) They are working on bringing all of the agencies together and determining what funding sources are available to tap. One of the things they need to do is to get a lot more data on the actual incidence of food insecurity, what current efforts exist to combat it, etc. We are working to set an accurate baseline so we can look at future effects of things like climate change and the current inequalities in the County.

One aspect they are looking at is expanding local food production, not just in the Ag Reserve but across the county. They set up a \$100,000 grants program (maximum award \$15,000) two weeks ago to help nonprofits connect residents with information about creating food gardens. There are currently 12 County gardens but they are largely full. They are looking at where additional spaces might set up, including in public areas with the actual gardeners taking what they need and any additional amounts going to local schools.

They are also looking at other infrastructure issues, including creating col storage facilities and providing access to community kitchens at all scales of use. They have implemented a Farm to Food Bank program where they work with the Manna Center to contract directly with farmers to buy food that then goes into the local food assistance distribution networks. They currently are working with 32 farms to help expand their production capacity.

Farmer's Market – there was then an extended discussion about whether it would be possible and/or economically feasible to help activate the Fryar Plaza by holding a farmer's market there. Mr. Epstein asked whether it was likely to be a revenue generator or a financial drag on the venue. Ms. Bruskin noted there were many considerations to take into account, including what was the basic goal; i.e., to generate funds, to attract people, to provide low-cost food, etc. The financial structure of the project can change markedly. There are about 20-24 such markets already in the County with Silver Spring having a very large facility but that one took years to build up to its current size and it has a full-time manager. So this is not a project that can be undertaken lightly.

She also noted that it was common for farmers at these markets to come from out-of-state and we are competing with other venues that may have less regulations and requirements than here. She further noted that it would likely be useful to find a partner to sponsor the market, perhaps an entity tied into health care or SNAP programs. An entity such as Holy Cross or Kaiser might like to take a "Food as medicine" approach to sponsorship, but in any event, we would want to appeal to many types of interest. It was noted that some farms may work directly with organizations like Kaiser and Adventist Hospital to provide had markets open to the public but they may give discounts to their own employees. It was also noted that the Crossroads market in Langley Park was well rooted there and not necessarily interested in expanding but might be willing to work with us on strategy, planning, etc. The bottom line is that deciding on such a project will be a major commitment and, as Ms. Wood noted, we still need to make the initial determinations as to what our basic goal for such a market before we plunge into the project.

VI. The meeting adjourned at 8:45 (?).