

Operations Minutes August 17, 2021

The Berks County Board of Commissioners met Tuesday, August 17, 2021 at 9:30 a.m. via Microsoft Teams Live pursuant to due notice to Board members and the public.

The following matters was discussed:

1. Discussion on the ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) –
The Federal Government discontinued the family program at the Berks County Residential Center earlier this year. ICE wants to transition the facility to a different population. David O’Neil ICE Deputy Field Office Director said the Federal Government is requesting a modification to the current contract for low-level adult female, mostly non-criminal single adult female population. The administration is looking for more of a residential setting and not a jail like setting. There is a need for low-level offenders to be housed at this time. Christine Sadler, County Solicitor, asked Mr. O’Neil to clarify what low-level offenders would qualify. Mr. O’Neil explained that most of the cases may be individuals seeking asylum at the border or airports. No one with criminal history will be approved and ICE is looking to make this transition as quickly as possible.

Diane Edwards, Executive Director of the Residential Center, explained that the center is still operating under family residential standards. We do not have the security measures as the jail would have. No locked doors, no cells and it is an open movement free program. There are educational programs the women can take advantage of during their stay.

Commissioner Leinbach asked where we are contractually. Christine responded that Paul Bradshaw, Assistant County Solicitor, and herself will be going over the terms of the agreement and can potentially be approved on Thursday at the Commissioners Meeting, subject to final review and approval of the terms and conditions by the Solicitor’s office. Diane informed that the IGSA is not being changed but is being modified. Christine indicated that there are two agreements, one for the continuation of funding formula by the Federal Government and one for the population.

Commissioner Barnhardt asked for clarification on what low-level offenders would be considered, their length of stay and any changes that will be noticeable. Mr. O’Neil indicated that the candidates will not have any criminal history or anyone who will be a threat. Mr. O’Neil could not say definitively how long they will stay, but most cases will have a quick turnover. Mr. O’Neil indicated that there may be a fence surrounding the premises.

Question in Q&A from Karen Shuey, Reading Eagle – While 78 is the starting population, how many women could potentially be housed at the Berks County Residential Center at one time? Diane Edwards responded the Center could house up to 98 residents but that is not an exact number.

Commissioner Rivera asked if there will be an impact to employees at facility? Diane responded no, but there are some vacancies still in place that she is looking to fill.

Commissioner Barnhardt will not attend the Thursday, August 19, 2021 Commissioners' Meeting due to being out of town, but wanted noted for the record he does not support the transition to a different population and does not believe the residential center should be turned into a detention facility and does not support moving forward with the plans as presented.

2. Kaercher Creek Park Discussion – Kevin Barnhardt, Cathy Wegener and Brendan Lederer Berks County was asked to revisit the possibility of a joint relationship with Fish & Boat Commission at Kaercher Creek park. A meeting was held between several County staff and Fish & Boat. Commissioner Barnhardt gave a brief history on Kaercher Creek and the issues with the battery casings in which EPA was contacted. The cost of the cleanup was the deciding factor in walking away from Kaercher Creek in 2015. Commissioner Barnhardt requested the Board consider responding to Fish & Boat via a letter declining the offer of a joint relationship with Kaercher Creek, citing the extensive cost that will be incurred to local taxpayers and the failure of an indemnification agreement.

Motion made by Commissioner Barnhardt; County of Berks declines the opportunity to further explore potential County reengagement at Kaercher Creek park with Fish & Boat. Seconded by Commissioner Rivera. Seeing no further discussion, the motion carried.

Christine noted for the record that she dismissed one comment from an individual that labeled themselves as Keith, no last name or municipality.

3. Discuss a Regional CEDS (Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy) in Cooperation with Southcentral PA partners – Pam Shupp Menet
Pam Shupp Menet was contacted by colleagues in South Central Pennsylvania to start working on a 5-year comprehensive strategy, a requirement of being able to apply for funds in Economic Development Administration. The region's most recent CEDS expired at end of 2019. As a region we determined we should come back together again to be positioned to be able to apply for any projects within our respective counties for Economic Development Administration. South Central decided to use some of their PREP (Partnership for Regional Economic Performance). Ms. Pam Shupp Menet recommended to proceed working with South Central to hire a consultant. Berks County's obligation may be up to \$12,000 to participate, and it is a 5-year plan. Ms. Shupp Menet also asked Commissioners to provide a letter to Economic Development Administration indicating the County's intent to move forward with discussions with South Central.
Commissioner Barnhardt read a comment from Ken Pick who indicated that he could provide funding of \$12,000 from CBBB program.

4. Discussion on Berks County support for a resolution establishing a Tri-County Passenger Rail Authority – Christian Leinbach, Pam Shupp Menet, David Hunter, Alan Piper and Jim Gerlach (Greater Reading Chamber Alliance)
Commissioner Leinbach reported Tri-County Rail Commission has been meeting and agreed to proceed with the next step of a capacity study, and the need to form a Tri-County Passenger Rail Authority. Senator Casey with Congresswoman Houlihan have applied for \$750,000 Federal funding to cover the cost of a capacity study. No request for action was made today, this was informational purposes. Dan Becker and the Redevelopment Authority has agreed to provide the funding to do all the legal work to set up the authority. Both Commissioner Barnhardt and Commissioner Rivera are in support of moving forward.

5. 2026 CCAP Annual Conference Location – Campaign for Berks County to host the Fall Conference - Christian Leinbach
The vote for the 2025 CCAP conference did not take place last year due to COVID. Being that CCAP conference was canceled in 2020, they decided to give the 2025 spot to last year's location. Commissioner Leinbach is asking the County to start advocating to bring the 2026 CCAP conference to Reading, Berks County.
Commissioner Rivera motioned to approve moving forward to advocate that Berks County host the 2026 CACP Annual conference. Said motion was seconded by Commissioner Barnhardt. Seeing no further discussion, the motion carried.

Commissioner Barnhardt brought up the following items from the Floor

1- The Board received a request from Michael Toledo, Centro Hispano, who indicated there was an emergency funding need for their food program. They are requesting a \$75,000 reimbursement funding for their At-Risk Youth Feeding Program. Commissioner Barnhardt met with Mayor Eddie Moran and Abe Amoros, City of Reading Managing Director, and provided a copy of the Mr. Toledo's request, but no commitment was made.

After discussion, Commissioner Leinbach motioned to grant the request for \$75,000 from the American Rescue Plan (ARP), to the extent it meets the guidelines of the ARP, and to encourage the City of Reading and Reading School District to jointly participate in the funding request. If the funds do not meet the requirements of the ARP, the County will pay for the \$75,000 from the general fund. Said motion was seconded by Commissioner Rivera. Seeing no further discussion, the motion carried.

2- Ken Pick reached out to Commissioner Barnhardt asking if the County can provide approximately 500-700 square feet of temporary floor space for the Coalition to End Homelessness Program for their Emergency Rental Assistance Program due to security issues at their current Facility. Motion for support in providing temporary space approximately 700 square feet in either the Courthouse or the Services Center for the length of the Emergency Rental Assistance Program pursuant to legal and the ability for Facilities to identify the space. A motion made by Commissioner Barnhardt to support temporary space of approximately 700 square feet in either the Courthouse or Services Center for the length of the Emergency Rental Assistance Program pursuant to legal review and ability of the Facilities Department to identify space. Said motion was seconded by Commissioner Rivera, seeing no further discussion, the motion carried.

There being no further business to come before the Board, a motion was made by Commissioner Barnhardt, to adjourn. Said motion was seconded by Commissioner Rivera, and the meeting adjourned at 11:08 a.m.

Comments - None

Respectfully Submitted,



Carmen Torres, Chief Clerk