

Berks County Operations Minutes November 29, 2022

The Berks County Board of Commissioners met on Tuesday, November 29, 2022, at 9:30 a.m. in the Commissioners' Boardroom, 13th floor of the Berks County Services Center, and via Microsoft Teams Live pursuant to due notice to Board members and the public.

Commissioner Chair Christian Y. Leinbach called the meeting to order, with Commissioners Kevin S. Barnhardt and Michael S. Rivera in attendance. Also present were David Peris, Assistant County Solicitor, Ronald R. Seaman, Chief Operations Officer, and Carmen Torres, Chief Clerk.

Approval of Minutes

The meeting minutes of November 1, 2022, were approved as presented.

GRCA 2023 Economic Development Strategy - Debra Millman, VP of Development & President, Greater Berks Development Fund & Aaron Gantz, Senior Director of Economic Development

Debra Millman, VP of Development & President, Greater Berks Development Fund, indicated that the GRCA 2023 plan had incorporated many of the action items preliminary identified in the IMAGINE Berks plan. She thanked the Board of Commissioners for their time and introduced Aaron Gantz, Senior Director of Economic Development.

Ms. Gantz indicated that the 2023 GRCA Economic Development strategy focuses on business and industry, growth, retention and attraction, and community and economic development. She detailed some of their programs, including Train Talent to Retain Talent, which will provide tools and resources to businesses. She introduced some upcoming goals, funding opportunities, and municipal engagement. Ms. Gantz is excited about the possibility of the return of the Passenger Rail to Berks County.

Update on Cleanup at the Former Exide Facility - David Hunter, Executive Director Berks County Planning Commission and Fred Osman, Osman Environmental Solutions, LLC

Mr. Fred Osman, Osman Environmental Solutions, gave an update on the cleanup of the Exide former Facility. Mr. Osman gave a brief history of Exide and when they entered the EPA. He indicated that EPA approved the site-specific assessment that Exide provided based on a soil level guidance by CDC, resulting in a cleanup level of 650 PPM for residential properties. Mr. Osman displayed a Powerpoint presentation to show what the levels should be among children. Mr. Osman concluded that he does not believe it is sufficiently protected based on EPA models and CDC guidelines of 650 PPM soil cleanup.

Commissioners agreed that this is something they inherited when they came into office, and the cleanup must continue. The money that was set aside by Exide for the cleanup is long gone, and they welcome the super fund site dollars available.

Commissioner Barnhardt inquired into whether the children with high lead levels over 20 years ago have been tracked through their adult years. Mr. Osman stated that he had not seen any indications that the children were tracked.

Commissioner Leinbach invited Ashley Showers, Assistant Director of Planning, to make any comments. Mr. Showers indicated that she could prepare a letter to the state and federal delegation and follow up with Mr. Osman to ensure they address his concerns.

Commissioner Leinbach indicated that there are two specific strategies, one is calling on the EPA relative to the recommendations Mr. Osman made, and the other is a concerted effort to work at the state and federal level on this issue.

Commissioner Barnhardt suggested a joint letter from the County, Borough of Laureldale, and Muhlenberg Township. The Commissioners agreed that including the Borough of Laureldale and Muhlenberg Township was a good idea.

Infrastructure Bank - Jeremy Zaborowski of the BCIDA

Mr. Zaborowski indicated that based on analysis, feedback from local municipalities and leaders to assess the need and interest, advice from outside consultants, and desire to add financial support to the IMAGINE Berks plan, staff recommends allocation of funds in 2024 for the creation of an infrastructure investment fund in Berks County. He is recommending the 1st version of the two versions presented to the Commissioners. Version 1 is to establish a revolving loan fund that utilizes low-interest loans to entice local municipalities to engage in infrastructure projects where repayment does not start until 5 years or when they land a project, whichever is sooner. The fund would reside with and be administered by Berks IDA, with an initial contribution of \$5M ARP dollars. The County may or may not choose to add additional dollars to the fund.

Commissioner Barnhardt motioned to move this program to the Commissioners' meeting for formal approval. Commissioner Rivera seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, the motion carried.

Broadband Feasibility Study Presentation - Justin Loose, CIO & Allyssia Gutierrez, Lit Communities

Justin Loose gave a background about the Broadband Feasibility Study, and the team they put together to get broadband connectivity to those who need it. He expressed the importance of the team.

Mr. Loose introduced Allyssia Gutierrez and Lindsey Miller from Lit Communities to highlight the key findings of their study. Ms. Gutierrez and Ms. Miller presented a slideshow pointing out some critical findings within their study and their recommendations for the next 18 months.

Mr. Loose introduced members of the Broadband Feasibility committee; John Weidenhammer from Weidenhammer Systems, David Myers from Berks Alliance, Scott Major from BCIU, Mike Najarian from Reading Public Libraries, who spoke about the need for broadband in different categories such as education, health and the need for affordable internet access and the digital literacy programs.

Mr. Loose also introduced some of the partners who work with the Broadband Feasibility committee; Dr. Jill Hackman from BCIU, Ashley Chambers from United Way, Pat Giles from Wyomissing Foundation, and Anna Weitz from Wyomissing Foundation, who asked the Board to consider supporting the recommendations of the committee and approve funding the projects to address the digital divide of all residents in Berks County.

Mr. Loose closed by highlighting the committee's request for allocation of 5.7 Million dollars to be allocated to the infrastructure broadband project, supporting actively pursuing grant and/or private funding to address broadband connectivity gaps, and allocating 600K to fund two pilot digital literacy programs.

Commissioner Leinbach thanked everyone for being present and collaborating to expand broadband. He noted that when the discussion of expanding broadband started a few years ago, it gained little traction, but COVID changed that. Commissioner Leinbach recognized that the internet today is essential to how we live. He fully supports the 6.3M dollar request for the project.

Commissioner Rivera thanked the task force for all they have done and the time they have put into this project. Commissioner Rivera indicated he supports the project but inquired whether the program and the digital navigators would be available in Spanish. Mr. Loose indicated that the program and digital navigators would be available in Spanish.

Commissioner Barnhardt inquired what other counties were doing with broadband and whether we were at the right point. Mr. Loose indicated that Berks was ahead of some Counties, but behind others; however, he believes Berks County will be very competitive if the requested allocated dollars are approved. Commissioner Barnhardt inquired whether Mr. Loose and his team have the staff and the bandwidth to complete this project. Mr. Loose recognized the amount of time that has gone into this project and stated that he would continue to work with the current team and evaluate the need for additional staff/time along the way. Commissioner Barnhardt supports the project.

Commissioner Rivera motioned to support the request and have it approved at an upcoming Commissioners Board meeting. Commissioner Barnhardt seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, the motion carried.

Discuss and Finalize 2023 Commissioner On-The-Road Meeting Schedule locations

Commissioner Barnhardt motioned to approve the On The Road meetings as follow:

For 2023, Sinking Spring Township will be on the 3rd Thursday in March instead of the fourth Thursday. Borough of Tipton in June, Union Township in September, and Tilden Township in December.

For 2024, Muhlenberg Township in March, Colebrookdale Township in June, and Ontelaunee Township in September.

Commissioner Rivera seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, the motion carried.

Public Comments

No comments.

There being no further business, Commissioner Leinbach adjourned the meeting at 12:20 p.m

Respectfully submitted,



Carmen Torres, Chief Clerk