

Community Advisory Committee Minutes
January 9, 2023

Committee Attendees: Bill Corey, Evan Smith, Cameron Moody, Sandra Schwarzbart, David Churchill, Ken Niles, Al Muller, Ethel Pacheco, Prem Garg, Stephanie Clipper, Bill Lewis, Sheila Footer, Joe Bucherer

Regrets: Cameron Moody, Cheryl Tyler

The meeting was held via Zoom and called to order at 6:00 pm.

Topics:

- Committee Roundtable:
 - Discussion of pedestrian traffic lights on Willard Avenue at Hills Plaza. It is noted that the lights only stop traffic on Willard Ave, leaving traffic on Hills Plaza and Wisconsin Place unstopped when it turns left or right into the Willard Ave crosswalks. The Committee suggests that consideration be given to a request for pedestrian traffic lights facing both Hills Plaza and Wisconsin Place that work in conjunction with the Willard Ave traffic lights so that all traffic is stopped at the intersection.
 - Incidentally, traffic lights that control traffic on Hills Plaza and Wisconsin Place will also protect the crosswalk across Hills Plaza. However, if that is an important function, then traffic light control buttons and walk/don't walk signals would need to be installed on both sides of Hills Plaza.
 - The lobby modernization at the Willoughby is completed.
 - Committee is looking forward to the receipt of the report and data from the Quality-of-Life Survey.
- Sprinkler Mandate:
 - The position of the Committee is that the Village Council should take a position in opposition to the mandate. Using material issued in December from the Elizabeth Board of Directors, the feeling is that the letter issued to elected representatives clearly outlines the issues associated with the mandate which will be of impact to every high rise in the Village.
 - The Committee suggests that the Village position be based on a summary of that letter (attached).
 - The Committee recommends that the Village sponsor, possibly through the Safety Committee, a Town Hall type of event to be attended by the elected representatives of the buildings (Board of Directors, rental / resident leaders, etc.). The thought is that these individuals should be well placed to discuss the issue with attendees. The public, if interested would be invited to attend via video stream to ensure seating capacity is not an issue.
 - After the meeting, word was received that Governor Moore had indicated that he would not allow the mandate to go forward. A statement is pending; however, we do know that there is proposed modified legislation being considered to among other things, review buildings based on their individual merits versus a broad mandate, provide for funding mechanisms to support any work, accommodation for fire mitigation beyond sprinklers, etc.
 - As a result, while a town hall may not be reasonable until more is known, the Committee in communication after its meeting suggests that the Village Council consider taking a position.

- Energy Baseline Initiative:
 - The Committee discussed the County and State initiative to mandate energy usage. It feels that in conjunction with the Sprinkler Mandate, these are two issues that negatively impact every residence and business in the Village.
 - The Committee will be reviewing documentation and having conversations with people familiar with this topic. Early indications are that the mandated thresholds for buildings in the Village are not possible, which will result in fines and added cost to residents.
 - The Committee before making a recommendation will do a review of the available documentation. We expect this to be complete in mid to late Spring.

The next Committee meeting will be held on February 6, 2024, at 6 pm in the Village Center. If there is a winter storm, the Committee will meet via Zoom.

Summary Position Suggested Regarding the Maryland Fire Sprinkler Mandate:

Regarding the Maryland State Fire Marshal's mandate to install sprinkler systems in all high-rise buildings regardless of age, we are asking for a reconsideration of the legislation based on several criteria:

Building construction and material-based flexibility:

Many buildings built in the mid- to late- 1970's, were built as Class A masonry structures. Masonry structures are classed as "Fire-resistant" or "Type I" construction, have the highest rating possible. The mandate is an all-or-none proposition without regard for the type of structure for a building. Consequently, the interminable danger clause of the Fire Marshall's mandate is not clearly present.

Appropriate planning time:

The original mandate set a compliance goal of 2031 for sprinklers to be installed. At the time of the mandate details regarding requirements were not present. Timing has been shifted to 2033, allowing ten years to raise funds.

Sprinkler cost is expected to be in the millions of dollars, not including the cost of consulting to ensure proper specifications, potential asbestos remediation, relocation of families, storage of personal effects, modifications to fire safety systems if needed, nor the cost of higher insurance premiums because of the ancillary damage to units caused by water.

The mandate was imposed without regard for factors beyond the sprinkler system itself, or funding mechanisms, nor consideration for the financial hardship to the thousands of individuals and homes impacted.

Time to effectively fund and understand potential aid:

It is prudent to have long term plans for replacement and repair. In the case of condominiums, which represent a large component of the structures in Village of Friendship Heights, these plans are mandated. The mandate ignores the fact that condominium and by extension co-op associations are already funding improvements to the tune of millions of dollars. Hence the burden of raising funds to accommodate an ill-defined mandate result in an extreme financial burden to owners, residents, and is a risk to the tax base.

Request for moderation and alternatives:

There are reasonable alternatives to invasive sprinkler installation, such as misting systems placed in kitchens, which are not considered in the mandate as outlined.

Process:

It is not clear that the mandate was properly noticed with an opportunity for public comment. The Attorney General's office has suggested that was a lack of legislative process which should have been in place.

Due to the above reasons, the Community Advisory Committee of the Village of Friendship Heights recommends that the Village Council express its opposition to the mandate.