



BALTIMORE COUNTY, MARYLAND
Department of Permits, Approvals and Inspections

MEETING MINUTES

MEETING DATE: Thursday, April 2, 2020

ATTENDEES: Listed below

RE: Code Enforcement Work Group Meeting held via WEBEX

I. Roll Call/Attendees:

Michael Mallinoff, Director, PAI, Chair
Councilman Izzy Patoka, Co-Chair
Lionel Van Dommelen, Code Enforcement
Adam Whitlock, Code Enforcement
Robyn Clark, Code Enforcement
Peggy White, Deputy Director, PAI
Kimmy Routson, Office of the County Executive
Kristin King, Office of the County Executive
Michelle Bernstein, Office of the County Executive
Mary Clay, Office of the County Executive
John Morris, Office of IT
Brian Morris, Legislative Aide for Councilman Quirk
Justin Silberman, Councilman Patoka's office
Valerie Schwab, District 1
Eric Rockel, District 3
Vivian Paysour, District 4
Greg Bauer, District 5
Cliff O'Connell, District 7
Eric Rockel, citizen
Alan Zuckerberg, Pikesville Community Organization
Mike Pierce, citizen
Devin Crum, Peake Newspaper
Michael McCullough, District 1, Halethorpe Community Improvement Association
Michael Whitfield, citizen

II. Councilman Patoka Opening Remarks

Thanked those in attendance for helping to improve the efforts of the County Government.

III. Director Mallinoff approved minutes from meeting on February 19, 2020 and reviewed the action items for the meeting. Mr. Mallinoff announced that the Administrative Law Judge hearings are closed and may resume on Monday, May 4, 2020.

IV. Adam Whitlock, Code Enforcement, presented a Power Point which highlighted the duties of the Baltimore County Department of Code Enforcement.

V. Action Items

1. Concerns from last meeting

Mr. Zuckerberg questioned how we are able to speak to communities when we are understaffed. Mr. Whitlock explained that most meetings are afterhours.

Mr. Zuckerberg asked how we handle sign violations. Mr. Whitlock said when an inspectors see sign violations, they handle them as a complaint, but don't typically issue a violation. When they verbally tell the owner to remove a sign, if removed immediately, they close the case. If a sign is not immediately removed, they issue a notice of correction. Verbal and written notices are both recorded in Acela (our data base).

2. Communications between citizens and department

Mr. Van Dommelen mentioned our bilingual rodent door hanger, which we have had for 2 years. These can be distributed to communities, if requested.

3. Overall staffing levels

Ten years ago Baltimore County Code Enforcement had 34 inspectors on the street. Today, there are only 18 inspectors on the street. Councilman Patoka expressed his concern about these numbers, as Baltimore County also had 100,000 fewer residents ten years ago so the ratio is much worse. Additionally, since then, many neighborhoods have changed. Councilman Patoka said "important items" are defined by your budget. When positions are removed, it sends the wrong message. Moving forward there is a commitment to improve the number of inspectors.

4. Off hour and weekend code enforcement

Mr. Whitlock said we are in the process of adopting off-hours inspections. Currently it is done on an on-call basis. There are inspectors who may prefer to work weeks due to personal needs.

Director Mallinoff said the COVID-19 crisis may help the support the need for this process if we adopt these recommendations now.

5. Technology

It was announced that the office of IT is in the process of updating Acela, the database software. It is currently in testing. Mr. Whitlock is hoping technology will help them communicate better with the public with the new on-line system and BALCOGO.

6. Improving Rental Inspections

Director Mallinoff feels we have been falling short in the area of rental inspections. By adding a multifamily inspection program, he is hoping the fees from this new program will allow us to hire additional inspectors. Currently multifamily dwellings are inspected using third party inspectors. Director Mallinoff believes our program will improve the level of the inspections.

7. Sign enforcement

Mr. Whitlock mentioned the new sign brochure, which is very informative, and one step towards better communication. Mr. O'Connell asked if anything can be done to limit the amount of signs plastered on the front of liquor stores. Ms. Clark said they can enforce signs on the outside of the store, but not signs posted inside of the windows. Director Mallinoff said it may be possible to regulate a percentage, such as 25%, open window for public safety purposes. Councilman Patoka said he would support that regulation and will bring it up with the Council. Mr. O'Connell mentioned a grant program for façade improvement and felt it could be called a violation where these improvements are occurring.

8. Vacant property registry

Mr. Whitlock stated that the City of Salisbury, MD, has a regulation stating if a property sits vacant for six months, the property can be taken by the jurisdiction. We would need all the properties to be registered. This would need to be done by regulation. It could include both commercial and residential properties. Sandtown in Baltimore City had a program where an owner was given six months to improve the property or it would go into a land trust. +

9. ALJ staffing

Director Mallinoff said the County Executive would like to add an additional judge. This could be for after hours or virtual hearings.

10. Private/Business property maintenance code enforcement

Director Mallinoff said there is limited budget for to improve or clean up properties. The cost to clean up a property can be upwards of \$30,000 and the cost to stabilize an unsafe structure can be \$65,000.

11. Improved trash and litter

Mr. Whitlock said Code Enforcement's role is to enforce the code on private properties. Code Enforcement does not have the funds to handle dumping on community property. Dumping on government land or in the rights-of-way is handled by the Department of Public Works.

Ms. Paysour asked if we can put up signs stating fines for littering. Mr. Whitlock said we can post "No Dumping" signs, if we are emailed a location. The fine is \$500. Councilman Patoka wants to double the fine amount to \$1,000. He will introduce legislation to do so. He will also speak with Stacy Rogers, the County Administrator, to discuss how a modern county picks up trash. This is a broad policy issue. Chief Hyatt (police) may be a good resource. Mr. Whitlock said in court, most judges do not prosecute those who litter.

Mr. Whitlock clarified the Code Enforcement sites property, Police site People. The police have to know who did it.

12. Pro—active inspections

Mr. Zuckerberg asked for our caseload numbers per inspector. Director Mallinoff said some data is available on the dashboard on our website. In view of our shortage of inspectors, Items 12 & 13 may not be realistic until we get more inspectors.

13. Pro-active education and communications

We are working with the County Executive's office to create more bilingual communication tools, such as the rodent and sign brochures.

14. Bonds for rental properties

Ms. Schwab state that the idea would be to require a bond from rental property owners that would be available should they not maintain their property.

15. Revolving fund from fines and liens

The revolving fund could be an answer to assist us with the cost of code enforcement measures such as property clean up, hauling trash, or structural stabilization. Currently the money collected from bonds, fees, and fines goes into the general fund. The department uses money in its budget to perform these measures. This revolving or special fund would a self-sustaining fund which would place the bond, fee, and fine money collected into the budget to be used solely for clean-up and property improvement measures.

VI. Wrap up

Mr. Zuckerberg asked for the Code Enforcement Web Address. This is CEIW@baltimorecountymd.gov. He suggested that we inform our appointees and employees of our codes, as he feels they are often not followed. (He reference Planning Board Member Perlow) He feels we should review other jurisdictions' codes in an effort to tighten ours.

Councilman Patoka announced the County Executive's Virtual Town Hall next week. It was suggested to give support for our Code Enforcement Budget and need to add more inspectors as well as the support for the revolving fund for site clean-up.

The following comments were provided post-meeting via email by Eric Rockel:

1. Verbal notices about code enforcement cases are only worth documenting if the violator corrects the issue in the presence of the inspector. If not it becomes a he said/she said issue that would be difficult to enforce.
2. Given the number of violations and the complexity of violations, it seems appropriate to try to fund more than 18 inspectors. I would suggest adding five more inspectors, if the budget allows.
3. New Reporting System: The current system only allows the public to see if a violation was found, without the benefit of an explanation as to the nature of the violation, or if the property is in compliance. This leaves the public largely in the dark about what the inspector did or did not see. At a minimum, if the property is in compliance, the report should state what specific issue was found in compliance. Additionally, there should be a specific entry for the date and time that the property was inspected.
4. Fines for dumping trash on public property should be increased to accurately account for the cost of the trash removal.
5. With regard to sign enforcement issues, if the owner has not received a permit, and one is required, the County should be given the latitude to require removal of the sign as soon as it comes to Code Enforcement's attention.

Next Meeting Topics:

Director Mallinoff will have more information on the county's 3-1-1 program that has not been publicly launched.

Caitlin Klimm-Kelner will present the new neighborhood package and Kristin King will discuss Montgomery County's welcome package.

Next meeting is April 9, 2020 at 12 noon in a WEBEX format.