

BANKERS HILL COMMUNITY GROUP MONTHLY MEETING MINUTES

Monday, June 17, 2019
Bankers Hill Clubhouse, 3030 Front St.

BHCG Director At Large John Percy called the meeting to order at 6 p.m. The following Steering Committee members were present: Percy, Chair Amie Hayes, Treasurer Jeanne Rawlings, interim Secretary John Lamb, Char Lou Benedict, Becky Veen, Ben Baltic and Peter Raymond. There were approximately 30 people in attendance.

Percy welcomed attendees and announced that the agenda would be rearranged to move up the presentation of Community Improvement Awards and a question-and-answer session with San Diego City Councilmember Chris Ward.

Presentation of 2018-19 Community Improvement Awards

Councilmember Ward and Toni Duran, representative for state Senate President Pro Tem Toni Atkins, assisted in honoring this year's awardees: Pine Tree Court and Bad Boy for landscaping improvements; Ben Baltic and Doug Scott for a public-art installation; San Diego Pride for community pride and generosity; 7 on Third and Tershia d'Elgin for Maple Canyon cleanup and protection efforts; Extraordinary Desserts for 30 years of community loyalty; and the Bankers Hill Parking District Subcommittee for addressing parking and pedestrian needs.

Featured Speaker: San Diego City Councilmember Chris Ward

Councilmember Ward expressed his appreciation for serving as the awards presenter for the third consecutive year and provided an update on a variety of community issues. He noted "a lot of community wins" in the recent budget deliberations at City Hall. Ward said it's his hope that more of the long-standing needs in the community will soon be addressed. He talked about Balboa Park – "our front door to Bankers Hill" – and new opportunities there since "closing the door" on the Plaza de Panama project that was pushed by Mayor Kevin Faulconer. Ward said that project, while floundering for seven years, prevented other improvements in the park to move forward. It also "hung up about \$10 million" the city had set aside for the project, which Ward said will now be used for needed improvements, including roof repairs and restroom upgrades. Many of the bathrooms in Balboa Park are in "decrepit" state and not up to expectations of park visitors. The initial focus, he said, will center on the restrooms near the Organ Pavilion, the South Palisades, and in the Casa del Prado Theatre, which he described as "straight out of the 1950s." In addition, restrooms near Morley Field will be improved. Roof restoration is planned for the old Federal Building, soon home to the new Comic-Con museum. He described it as a "huge investment" to ensure that the museum opens on schedule in mid-2021.

Ward said he worked hard to increase city funding for tree trimming, which he said has not been high on the mayor's priority list in the past. In fact, he said proposed reductions would have cut back trimming schedules from once every seven years to once every 42 years, which he called unacceptable.

For high-fire-risk urban canyons, Ward said he was able to secure \$1.8 million in funding for brush-abatement efforts. Additional code-enforcement officers and park rangers were also added to the budget, he said. He also praised community Maple Canyon advocates who have helped position the city to receive approximately \$8 million in state grants using some initial city seed money to help stabilize and rehabilitate that canyon.

Regarding Olive Street Park, Ward noted that the city's Park and Recreation Board approved plans to move forward in concept. He said he was hopeful there would be more community input

when detailed designs emerge. He estimated it could be four to six months before those designs become public. He suggested the plans would return to Uptown Planners and the park board for further input on the design concepts.

He said staff told him the new restrooms planned for the West Mesa of Balboa Park are moving forward. Groundbreaking for those should take place in late summer or early fall, Ward said. Additional funds had to be secured for those projects, he explained.

Hayes thanked Ward for efforts to quash the Plaza de Panama project, which had become a watered-down version of itself after higher-than-expected bids came in. He said proponents had proposed building the western bridge and parking garage and then see if any money remained for beautification. He said he told supporters that the project “just got away from us.”

Hayes also asked about a recent story about repurposing hotels as SROs to help with the housing and homeless crisis. Ward said he has pushed for such opportunities since he came to City Hall, but it's expensive. Ward was also asked about the status of several permanent supportive housing projects in the neighborhood as well as the downtown navigation center for the homeless. He said opening dates keep moving and should now be completed by September.

Ward said he was surprised about recent discussions surrounding a vacancy tax that would be imposed on landowners who keep their property unoccupied. He said he wasn't sure what state law allows cities to do, but noted that cities like Los Angeles are studying the proposal. Voters might have to weigh in first, he said. He did agree that finding out how many vacant units San Diego actually has will be useful.

Bruce Dammann said he understood that the West Mesa bathrooms were being redesigned. Ward said he would get back to him about new developments. Dammann added that he had hoped the community would be able to weigh in on the plans, since that has not happened to date. Ward said he would ask city staff to report back to the community at a future date. Hayes said the group would be happy to host them at the July meeting.

Roy McMakin from Friends of Maple Canyon thanked Ward for his work on the canyon and said he hoped the city would take a better approach to dealing with the canyon's erosion issues. McMakin also expressed frustration that Ward's office has relied more on developer interests than community input on housing-construction plans in Bankers Hill. Ward said everyone's perspective should be respected in this critical discussion. Ward added he's been fighting for more inclusionary housing but has found mixed results. He also hinted that new-housing construction would soon plateau.

Benedict asked Ward about a liquor store at Fifth and Elm that intends to move to Fourth and Grape due to the planned demolition of its current location. She asked how the community can limit the number of liquor stores. Ward said that both city and state play a role in that decision but that this would be a transfer of a liquor license as opposed to a new license. Ward said he would rather focus on reducing homelessness in the area but said citizens have a right to appeal approval of the license. He said he's also working on strengthening city laws pertaining to preserving SROs.

Raymond asked about efforts to improve mental-health services in the city. Ward said he's working with county counterparts, particularly Supervisor Nathan Fletcher, to get the county more involved, both in providing more funds and using land the county “has been sitting on.” The lack of those services, he noted, puts greater pressure on local law enforcement to dedicate more time to that. He said recuperative-care facilities are being discussed on Third Avenue near the former San Diego Hospice site that would be available to housing-challenged individuals for short-term recovery stays.

Ward was also asked about homeless-outreach pilot programs in North Park and City Heights that have been in operation since January. He noted some success early on but said he needed to check in for an update on those efforts.

The councilmember was then asked about scooters and an attendee's perspective that there is little enforcement of local laws. Ward said he's frustrated as well but said new rules are in the works. Ward said police have told him that they're waiting for grant money to pay for the overtime required for enforcement, which he said was confusing because fines can be as high as \$250. Enforcing the laws should provide enough funds to do the job, he said, not that it should be a money-making endeavor. Rules can also be added to require the proper technology to improve safety, Ward said.

Announcements

San Diego Pride community liaison Paul Johnson provided an update on the upcoming July festivities. He urged more people to sign up to volunteer for trash-cleanup duties, which help fund the BHCG. He said he was still awaiting information on the number of temporary trash cans that will be provided for the community.

Government Representatives

Toni Duran, representing state Senate Pro Tem Toni Atkins, outlined recent state-level budget discussions, including \$8.2 million proposed for restoring the Botanical Building in Balboa Park.

Brandon Torres, representative for county Supervisor Nathan Fletcher, updated the audience on efforts to improve mental-health services countywide. He also discussed county plans to improve fire-safety protocols and job opportunities for disabled individuals.

Maria Bojorquez-Gomez, staff assistant for Congresswoman Susan Davis, updated attendees on the work of the local representative, including her support of the Green New Deal.

Treasurer's Report

Rawlings reported that the BHCG's current balance is \$3,182.28. She emphasized the importance of the Pride cleanup efforts, which help fund the group, and the need for more volunteers to assist.

Non-agenda Public Comment

Peter Raymond from the Bankers Hill parking subcommittee gave an update on recent developments. Bids are in for protected bike lanes along Fourth and Fifth avenues. Plans will be rolled out at the next committee meeting in July. Locations for scooter corrals have already been identified in the community. Time-limit extensions up to four hours are being considered for some areas where parking spaces receive limited use. More parking spaces are under review in the core area of Bankers Hill.

Meeting adjourned at 8 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by John Lamb, interim Secretary.