

**CITY OF PITTSBURGH/ALLEGHENY COUNTY
TASK FORCE ON DISABILITIES**

April 18, 2011

MINUTES

Location: First Floor Conference Room
Civic Building, 200 Ross Street
Pittsburgh, PA

Members Present: Paul O'Hanlon, Chairperson, Janet Evans, James C. Noschese,
Katherine D. Seelman, John Tague

Members Absent: Aurelia Carter, Linda Dickerson, Sarah Goldstein, Milton
Henderson, Liz Healey, Richard McGann, Jeff Parker

Others Present: Judy Baricella, Lester Bennett, Adolphine Birescik, Ed Buran,
Stephanie Boczar, Dianne Gallagher, Larry Hockenberry, Kwin
Jordun, Robert Kohlmeyer, Charles Morrison, Richard Meritzer,
Lucy Spruill, Shirley Weiru Shi, Lorene Trent, Joe Wasserman

The meeting was called to order by Mr. O'Hanlon at 1:00 PM.

ACTION ITEMS

Review and approval of March Minutes

The motion moves unanimously.

Review and approval of financial report

Mr. Tague reported no changes on the financial report. He will correct the error pointed out in last task force meeting and send that out.

UPDATE

Meeting with the Mayor

Mr. O'Hanlon went through the issues they discussed with the Mayor and wanted to exchange comments or reflections about what happened with the audience.

The Task Force attempted to create an agenda with the Mayor, including things which the City really has functions to address. The overarching agenda was called: The disability agenda for accessibility, inclusion and life in the City of Pittsburgh.

The first broad category is neighborhood access and inclusion. First item of this category is sidewalk safety and access. There are two components to do to that. First was enforcement of snow and ice removal laws, and support for homeowners who need assistance to comply with that requirement.

The task force raised this item, because they didn't know there is a volunteer coordinator in mayor's office was setting up a program where they will get community groups to identify local volunteers. This was funded for two years by national grant.

Mr. Meritzer explained that his office and the mayor's office will match the volunteers to the residents so that volunteers and the residents could actually develop a relationship. The City is not taking responsibility for any of the liability. This is a volunteer effort between local community development cooperation, residents and neighborhood. His office is just facilitating. Buying spiffy T-shirts, vests or something will identify the volunteers. It will be rolled out in mid-fall because he is still working on CDC infrastructure.

The second part of the agenda is keeping sidewalks free of obstructions, such as commercial signs, sandwich boards, telephone pole switch boxes, etc.; and the practice in certain neighborhoods of parking cars on sidewalks. Mr. O'Hanlon commented sidewalk sandwich boards issue seems to be a recent proliferation commercial sign. It was something that the Mayor took under advisement. The Mayor was not aware that it was an issue.

Second category is Audible traffic signals. The Task force wants to continue to expand beyond the Cultural District and select intersections.

The third item in agenda is addressing the URA's practice of granting façade improvement loans and grants to businesses which have readily removable accessibility barriers like one-step barriers. The first part of this is stores and restaurants in many neighborhoods (Southside, Bloomfield and the Strip, etc.), are not welcoming to people with disabilities from the aspect of physical accessibility. How can the City promote and endorse a new attitude that liability means everyone. Then, another part of this item is how the City makes more routine the process of getting information about tax credits for small businesses that make accessibility improvements and hiring people with disabilities who are registered with OVR and similar organizations.

Ms. Spruill wondered if there is any action, follow-up taken on any of this such as if there are some things that the mayor's office agreed to do and the things task force agreed to do. To respond, Mr. Tague responded suggested using dashboard which list tasks up and track the progress will be very useful. Mr. O'Hanlon also said the whole part of the URA and façade improvement loans. The URA was to be here at the meeting today and is now promising to be at next month's meeting to discuss this. The Mayor said he would try to discuss the issue with the URA.

The fourth item was the growing practice downtown of privatizing public spaces. The City's Zoning ordinance requires a certain amount of the public space be created and protected for use by the public in the downtown area, particularly in areas around bus stops and so forth. In the last couple of years, there has been fencing in the public spaces, turning them into the outdoor café areas, doing things excluding the public from use of these spaces, and turning it into only being available to paying members of the public. And that's is an issue that affects a lot of people who live in the downtown area, lots of people who gather together and people with disabilities have used those spaces because they frequent the downtown area. A very interesting article in the Post Gazette in the agenda, the reporter wrote a follow-up story. A lot of people are intolerant about the people who gathered there. It's an important issue. Mr. O'Hanlon gave an example of CNG tower in liberty to explain that. The article talks about this kind of the growing practice of this. Related to that, some of the bus stop have been moved or eliminated because business nearby were complaining about it. There's a whole kind of issue, who owns public spaces, the public or private entities? Are they calling the shots?

Ms. Spruill said they're enlarging private businesses with rent-free space; that's not right. Mr. Meritzer clarified that it's technically not publicly owned space. When the downtown developer planned a new building, the business owner is required to keep a certain amount of open space within their property. It's not sidewalks or streets that are publicly owned. It's their property; the city makes them donate it for the right to build, keep open, so downtown buildings are not squashed up against each other. It's not as clear cut as they are taking public land. If it's their land required to be open, how open does it have to be? The City has not really ever established that. It's a combination the fact that there is vagueness and less diligence about that.

Mr. O'Hanlon agreed and gave an example of sidewalk café. Mr. Meritzer said sidewalks are public space. The plazas are more questionable about how public space they are. He will approach the issue to Susan Tymoczko and set up a meeting to think about it.

Mr. O'Hanlon said the issue is very important to disability community. For example, historically, the deaf community gathers around Market Square as a gathering point, and clearly people who live in downtown in the assisted high-rise and shelters are heavy users of the public space. Dr. Seelman said we are attempting to privatizing schools, Medicare, and Medicaid. It's a good idea to have the public push back in anyway the public can do so appropriately.

The next issue is the public safety issues. Task Force is concerned about the state of the City's emergency preparedness. They want to create a process that moves the City in the direction of Best Practices for emergency preparedness that includes appropriate training in emergency evacuation of people with disabilities by first responders.

Secondly, Task Force raised issue of struggling for stop signs, using one example of a new Goodwill Industries in the Strip District. They were struggling to get a stop sign, where individuals getting off the bus to go there. It happens to be a point whether no stop sign or streetlight and crossing a fairly busy street is problematic. The question is how they make the process more cognizant of special circumstances for certain populations.

Ms. Spruill told a story of her neighbor related to that. She said her neighbor is trying to get a stop sign and finally got it because they simply bombarded the Mayor's office with endless numerous telephone calls and it did work.

The next category is city operations issues. Number 7, how can we improve accessibility for deaf and hard of hearing residents at city events and the Convention Center? The Convention Center is not in Mayor's control, but he does have the bully pulpit.

Number 8, city residents who are deaf and hard of hearing report having access issues with the City's 311 service, how can you address this issue? To some extent, mayor didn't be aware of some issues but hopefully the meeting had educated him to some extent on that.

Number 9, what can the mayor do to improve City employment of persons with disabilities like the summer youth employment programs, targeting kids that need job experiences.

Number 10, beginning March 15, 2011, new standards under revised ADA titles II and III become effective, impacting, for example, indoor and outdoor spaces, new construction, scoping and technical requirements for children's facilities and elements, play areas, recreation facilities, and residential facilities. What process can we develop between the City, the disability community, and other stake holders to move the city forward? For example, do City pools have lifts for people who can't climb ladders?

The last three issues we recognize that they were outside the Mayor's control. They may use Mayor's "bully pulpit". Number 11 is the transit cutbacks. What could he do to preserve the Port Authority service? Could mayor communicate with Disability Community when issues of bus stops and bus shelters are being discussed?

Number 12, the deaf seniors in need of nursing home care must choose between traveling 3 hours to Columbus, Ohio and being served in facilities where they are cared for in communication isolation. What could city do to promote that?

Lastly, in this tight budget environment, there are concerns that mental health Drop-In Centers could be reduced or even eliminated in the City.

Ms. Baricella asked if the city's contract, an evacuation plan with Michael Baker Corporation finished.

Mr. Meritzer responded it was being reviewed. It has not been publicly distributed yet. In addition, the city staff will receive a special training on the latest best practices for emergency management for people with disabilities. It will happen this late summer or early fall. Mr. Meritzer and the other staff may go with people from other departments. He will pass out the report to the community when it's done.

Ms. Baricella mentioned that their office gave training for consumers to be aware of what they need in emergency situations. She wants to collect the opinions about where else these training could be happen. She had a summer intern help her to work on it. She also mentioned people who worked in places like Michael Baker Group need information from the disability community.

Ms. Evans gave an example of emergency case. In this case, everybody was asked to have their medications with them in an emergency for at least three or four days.

Ms. Baricella suggested City/County Task Force and her office work on this kind of project jointly.

Ms. Spruill asked Ms. Baricella if Michael Baker Corporation is still working on it. Another thing she said is about two trainings, one in Washington D C and the other in Clarion County, which was free, in emergency preparedness measures.

Mr. O'Hanlon worried about the issue of physical identifiable infrastructure, for example, evacuation chairs.

Dr. Seelman responded that a public hearing could come out of that effort.

Ms. Baricella said there are always floods and fires in neighborhoods and municipalities. That's a little bit different than evacuating downtown. It's a pretty broad issue.

DISCUSSION

Effects on the Recent Port Authority Cuts

Mr. O'Hanlon raised the issue of recent port authority cuts and wanted to get a collective sense of how it is going for people. This is the most recent service cut after a 15 percent cut earlier. He found that it is cumulative. 15 percent follows with another. The buses were full before the cut. It was routine to be on a bus where people were in the aisles. Since the most recent cut, it's routine to pass people at the stops. That makes it hard for people with disabilities to navigate from their seat to the door of the bus. He opened the discussion for task force meeting on this item.

Ms. Evans shared her difficult story on the bus 57.

Mr. Noschese pointed that businesses are not making decisions with the ADA and suggested getting businesses' attention.

Dr. Seelman asked Mr. Noschese and Mr. Wasserman for feedback with buses within the deaf community in the clubs.

Mr. Noschese said it's hard to figure out and get complains independently.

Mr. Wasserman said he didn't have big problem on buses issues. With regard to Mr. Noschese, legislature needs to be informed about ADA and the Port Authority needs to.

Ms. Evans raised another problem that bus will pass by the people with disabilities if the driver saw the number of them is larger than he expected.

Mr. Hockenberry pointed that some places may have no buses passed by, like Swissvale.

Mr. O'Hanlon is looking for the facts and situations of this issue for some lawyers to challenge it in the court. If someone hear or experienced some compelling situations, like balance issues, please tell him. He is involved in the process to see if there's ways of legal challenges.

Dr. Seelman suggested UCP and TRCIL could take this on. Organizations like Center for Hearing and Deaf Services can do it too.

DISCUSSION

City Controller's Audit of the ADA Compliance Program

Controller audited Mr. Meritzer as opposed to the department. He went through a six-month audit process. He sent everyone the link of webpage and digital copy of that. There are three things he should improve. One thing is about job complaints. He said he didn't realize that and has been further educated about that. Another thing is about visibility report to City Council. It's working now. The third thing is about city properties for accessibility report. He should complete all the space and not leaving it blank. He is getting some high school students and working on that.

Mr. Meritzer wants to get community's feedback because he wanted to the best job while sometimes controller couldn't evaluate all. So he was delighted to have more feedback from the community.

Dr. Seelman appreciated Mr. Meritzer's work and pointed out the inconsistency and wrong definition of disability on audit report.

Mr. Tague suggested involving Mike Lamb to talk about this. If they engage us as part of this process, it would have been more effective.

Dr. Seelman said if there is a model of city ADA audit. Mr. Meritzer said he would check it. Mr. Noschese asked if it is the first report. Mr. Meritzer answered audits are done only periodically. This is the first time since he has been the coordinator that he has been audited. And he did notice that they made errors and saying the City first had an ADA coordinator. The fact is that the City has had an ADA coordinator since 1993.

Mr. Tague said he would like to see a compliance audit. How is the City performing in regard to the ADA as far as the result? He said having Mr. Lamb talked about the audit and what Task Force would like to see. He said Mr. Meritzer was doing a good job.

Dr. Seelman suggested looking at the audits of City of Chicago if they have. Ms. Spruill said Chicago might not be a good benchmark. First of all, it's much bigger office. They define their function beyond what the law envisions. Dr. Seelman said Saint Louis. Mr. Meritzer said he would check with a couple sources what is a model of city audit and hopefully bring it to the next meeting.

Mr. Noschese said this report is the key for future decision markers for the budget.

Ms. Spruill suggested sending Mr. Lamb a brief note about the audit and the recognition of this effort, recognizing the critical nature of having an ADA coordinator of City government and calling attention to the good work Mr. Meritzer has done, including some of the time he was ADA coordinator and had another full-time job besides. It might be nice to call attention to the good things and the great first step.

STAFF REPORT

Mr. Meritzer went through the progress in April and plan of May. First of all, he selected two additional interns. Shirley is coming on full-time. He is getting an architectural intern working on continuation of the City building, and working with the visibility of tax credit committee. Another nursing student four days a week will work on medically-oriented issues, including the hospital compliance manual for the cognitively disabled, which has been requested. The architecture student was from CMU and the nursing student is from his ongoing lectures at Duquesne nursing school.

He is working on the Art PGH design/PGH comprehensive plan, which is crucial to the disability community of all the pieces of the comprehensive plan. He interviewed the consultants of the project and requested a list of requirements for consultants to include. There will be a number of public outreach projects on this. Along with the MOVEPGH, Mr. Meritzer asked for input from Task Force. Responding to the question about what PLANPGH is Mr. Meritzer will send the information of PLANPGH to the audience.

Mr. Meritzer is also in the process of re-evaluating the bi-shelter contract and has been working on that. He sent e-mail out about a kiosk in Squirrel Hill. That's the heart of the contract. He asked everyone to tell him if they have an issue with the placement of the bus shelter and/or kiosks.

Mr. Tague said Doug Shields, who is the contractor now, said they were willing to move bus shelters to prepare the site. They have the conversation about who will pay. If they want the advertising dollars, they should pay for the move.

There's going to be a conference on hearing education advocacy. Mr. Meritzer will attend in Greensburg.

And Mr. Meritzer will be on vacation from May 4th to 12th

Shirley is responsible for one step project and its legislation is on its way to City Council soon. It's co-amendments; there may be a required hearing. Mr. Meritzer will inform everyone about the hearings. Once that's approved, we can get out the packet. One of the things Mr. Meritzer will do is to meet the business associations around the city to explain the packet and how to help them. That should help the one step in front of their business. Mr. Meritzer is also adding to the list of county and city ADA coordinators. Mr. Meritzer will set up visitability meeting soon.

Ms. Spruill asked if Mr. Meritzer is aware of any other municipalities in Allegheny County that has an ADA coordinator.

Mr. Meritzer will check it soon and email the size limitation to Ms. Spruill.

VOX POP

Ms. Baricella said the issue of funding the human services development fund is critical to Task Force. She asked if anybody know any grass roots or lobby efforts.

Mr. O'Hanlon asked if the budget has been announced or come. And he said Task Force should do something about that. At least, they should send the Governor a letter and the Allegheny County delegation.

Ms. Spruill said a broader coalition, basic human needs, homelessness, hunger, that sort of thing, probably almost undoubtedly are partly funded by HSDF. It's expressing advocacy in broader terms than just that particular cut.

Mr. O'Hanlon said strategically people in the delegation who are a republican that are in control need to come to back for us.

Mr. Bennett said Mr. Turizai is a state representative, majority leader. He also said he had attended a meeting in Harrisburg, and they want the budget done by May. He suggested Task Force could apply for that but should be very quick.

Mr. Hockenberry raised the issue of baby audiology. Ms. Spruill responded that the only thing that was de-funded were payments to the hospital for the hearing screenings at birth. Any kind of therapy or treatment or education for a child who was discovered to be deaf would still be funded through the Department of Education and Department of Welfare. That's the way it's now. Those funds were not cut, except part of the education cuts will fall on special education. To the extent that it's special education, it is in jeopardy.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:00 PM

THE NEXT TASK FORCE MEETING

DATE: May 16th, 2011
TIME: 1:00 P.M.
LOCATION: Large Conference Room
200 Ross Street