

# **South Watch: The South Side Flats and Slopes Code Enforcement Project**

## **Meeting Minutes**

**August 11, 2021**

Mission: The South Side Flats and Slopes Code Enforcement Project works to improve the quality of life on the South Side by bringing people and institutions together to identify code violations, advocate for their remediation and monitor the outcomes. (This is also the mission of Oakwatch.)

### **I. Welcome/Introductions**

Barbara Rudiak welcomed everyone and reviewed the agenda.

#### **Present:**

Bob Charland, Community Relations Manager, District 3  
Denise Hartman, SS resident and SW committee member  
Gisele Betance, Office of the Community Affairs  
Barbara Rudiak, Member of the SSCC and SW committee  
Anna Marie Kijanka, SS resident and SW committee member  
Tim Lewis, Duquesne University  
Jacky Kaiser, SS resident and SSCC board member  
Adrian Smith, SS resident and SSCC board member  
Michelle Margittai, SS resident  
Kitty Vagley - SS resident  
Jeff Neubauer, SS resident  
Moiria Kaleida, Chief of Staff for Jessica Benham  
Jessica Benham, State Representative  
Jessica Chau, State Representative Jake Wheatley's office  
Allison Harnden, Nighttime Economy Manager  
Rachel Webber, Nighttime Economy Coordinator  
Robert Cavalier, SS Resident and Block Watch Lead  
Hamadi Mkomwa, SS resident  
Bailey Knapp, Hamadi's tutor

### **II. Presentation**

**There was no presentation this month.**

### **III. South Side Property Progress Report**

No one from Environmental Services or PLI were in attendance. Barbara indicated that she had wanted someone from Environmental Services to attend the meeting and explain what it takes for a property owner to receive a citation. I mentioned this to Jacqueline Balzer in ES and she put me in contact with Colleen Knecht, a communication clerk, who works on the 311s that ES receives. Wendy Urbanic, 311 manager, shared that over the last month there were 66 trash violations in the flats and 61 in the slopes. The South Watch committee doesn't submit 311s as soon as they become aware of a violation. Instead, the attempt to educate the person living at the residence and, if not corrected, will contact the

property owner. Only when the problem is not remedied, will the committee member put in a 311 service request. We are doing the legwork but are not seeing citations written. Colleen has been very helpful and she and Barbara will be working more closely together. Some successes are as follows:

- 1810 Harcum Way - There is a sale pending for \$50,000.
- 117-119 S. 12th Street - Judge Ricciardi fined the owner of the lot \$2,500 and it is being paid in \$100/month increments. Since the weeds continue to grow and the sidewalk in disrepair, Desiree Markovich suggested that Barbara asked Judge Ricciardi to set up a meeting with the owner so that the problems do not continue.
- 77 Pius Street - Although trash in front of the property has been an issue for a while, Barbara had not written a letter to the property owner who, she learned was also a South Sider and had a business on the South Side. Once contacted, the problem was resolved but the property will be monitored.
- 81 Pius Street - A resident who lives across the street contacted the property owner and the trash in front of the house has been removed. The house is up for sale and the photos show a large back yard. This property will be monitored to make sure that the trash and cans do not return to the sidewalk.

**IV. South Side Crime Report** - Commander Fisher was not in attendance.

**V. Pittsburgh Parking Authority** - Gwen Bolden was not in attendance.

**VI. Duquesne University** - Tim shared that freshmen move in on Tuesday, August 17th and spend the entire week in freshmen orientation. The school plans quite a few activities for them and they go late into the evening. Attendance is usually quite high every year. Upperclass students who live on campus move in on Friday, August 20th and Saturday, August 21st. Those who live off campus have moved in over the summer. Classes begin on Monday, August 23rd.

Tim mentioned that an email went out to all students from the administration alerting them to the new traffic pattern on the South Side. In addition to reminding the students about safety, the letter included a number of important safety tips for them.

Tim mentioned that the university would continue with their normal messaging for the St. Patrick's Day parade on September 18th.

Barbara and Tim met with Officer Fisher to talk with him and share how issues with students were handled when Commander Dixon was in charge. It was a productive meeting and, it appears, that the past processes will continue.

DU requires students to provide a local address when they sign in to the university's portal at the beginning of each school year. This allows him to determine if students are living at a property that has created problems. That process takes a bit of time. During the pandemic, the university had a policy in place that stopped all off campus events and that included parties. That is no longer in place but Tim asked residents to contact him if there are problems and they suspect the tenants may be from DU.

Once the Guide to Living on the South Side is completed, it will be sent to all DU students who live on the South Side.

Tim indicated that, in the past, there were two shuttles for students who lived on the South Side. One would run basically to take students to and from classes Monday through Friday. The second shuttle would run on Friday and Saturday evenings. The day shuttle will continue to run but the evening shuttle will not run this semester.

Duquesne is requiring masks for everyone - those vaccinated or not - reported that it had been a busy week on campus. Vaccines are required and, like other institutions, there are exemptions for different things.

**VII. Mayor's Office** Eric Williams from the Mayor's office shared announcements.

**VIII. City Council Office** Bob Charland shared that it has been a busy time for the councilman's office even though city council is in recess. The office has been providing a lot of support around building permits.

Michelle Margittai shared concerns of parents around safety on the South Side and wanted the councilman and mayor's office to know. In addition, Pittsburgh Public Schools is rolling back the start date for school to September 8th because of bus issues.

#### **IX. State Offices**

Jessica Chau, Legislative Assistant to State Representative Jake Wheatley State Representative had to leave the meeting but did provide information that will be shared with residents through the SSCC newsletter. She did share two important pieces of information.

- The office is receiving many calls related to unemployment. Some are having trouble with their keystone log in. The office is still taking rent rebates. The deadline has been extended to December 31st. If anyone knows of anyone who is having problems with either, they should contact Representative Wheatley's office.
- On August 21st, they will be hosting their 8th annual health and wellness event. Sign ups for the 5K and volunteers are continuing.

Jessica Benham, State Representative, shared two events that were coming up.

- There is a shredding event at the Brentwood Civic Center on August 28th from 9 - 11.
- There is going to be a Hilltop Health Check - health center and health fair - on September 25th from 10 AM to 2 PM at Brashear's new location on Brownsville Road.

She also provided information about the extension of the eviction moratorium. Both her office and State Rep Wheatley's office can provide guidance on this and unemployment issues.

**X. Public Safety** - Allison Harnden and Rachel Webber - Nighttime Economy Since Commander Fisher was not in attendance, Barbara asked Allison if she could speak to some of the concerns related to East Carson Street. Allison identified herself as the liaison for the city between the beverage and entertainment businesses and the communities in which they serve for those at the meeting who did not know her. The goal is to help them succeed as businesses and as business districts and also to work on preventing impacts that sometimes come along with nighttime economy. What she and others are seeing on Carson Street - is something that they've never seen it like this before. Allison said that it seems to be a convergence of so many different factors that have never come together before.

A lot of people are gathering on the streets. Some of this happened in different neighborhoods during COVID. People felt sort of empowered to remember that businesses had closed early or they were completely shut down. They got used to gathering in the streets and some of this is happening on East Carson Street in a big way later at night. Those that are gathering are not necessarily customers going into businesses. They are doing all sorts of things than can range from seemingly innocuous, i.e. just playing music in their cars. It is very loud. Others are coming back to the bars and restaurants on the street. These establishments may be understaffed and having difficulty getting people to come in and work.

There is also an issue with Uber that functions under the supply and demand model. They don't have enough drivers so they try to incentivize drivers through surge pricing. People may want to use it but it is too expensive so more people are driving to Carson Street. Now you have a lot of cars that are driving around looking for parking. They are playin music. They are sometimes drinking and partying in their cars, smoking pot on the sidewalk, drinking in public and urinating in public. Then it escalates into worse behavior like fights and even gunshots which is extremely concerning.

There are a couple of businesses that have done some 18 and up events. These establishments have met with the police and liquor control enforcement who have asked them not to this, particularly as this time. Typically in nightlife districts, you hav a lot of people under 21 hanging around outside bars just to either see or be seen or to pick up girls when they are coming out. Now, when you have an 18 and up club and you are not 18, you have even younger ages coming out. This is just a perfect storm or an imperfect storm.

There are also some really interesting studies about physiological changes in brain chemistry after coming out of isolation, particularly in brains that are not fully developed. It relates to cortisol and aggressive behavior.

Public Safety is trying a few different things and one is attempting to address the concerns around more crowds on the street with not enough room on the sidewalks between 10th and 17th. People are getting pushed into the street because there just isn't enough room on the sidewalk. There is a concern that if there are shots fired, and there have been, that a stampede will happen. Also, with the extra cars, it's difficult for police to have sight lines. In addition, it is very difficult for public safety vehicles to get through. A few years ago, the city implemented a public safety pull over lane that was cleared at 10 PM. It has been moved to 8 PM, and in the last two weeks, public safety implemented a one way direction on Carson Street between 10th and 18th going from the lower streets to the higher streets. Incoming traffic coming to 18th Street is split to the side streets. It is rather confusing and a lot of residents have been really concerned that it was pushing behavior back further into the neighborhoods. It has, in essence, as of last week, made it a lot more calmer on East Carson Street. The consequence, however, is that businesses, many of whom have not recovered at all from the economic challenge of COVID, are really struggling. Someone reported, that they had 10 percent of their business that they usually have this past weekend.

Public safety had a meeting that was already scheduled with the bars and restaurants that was meant to address the students return. It is done every year in August. In addition, this year, there was to be a discussion about the St. Patrick's Day parade. A lot of that was pushed off the agenda because the discussion was around how businesses were going to stay in business. There is a concern because these businesses employ of lot of residents who live in your neighborhood - some are students while others are long term employees. The other concern for Allison, who has worked in a lot of cities doing

consulting work with entertainment districts, is that when you get rid of the earlier evening crowd, you start just having late night crowds on Fridays and Saturdays and maybe Thursdays and now Sundays. There needs to be a return back to this balance. There is a plan that may be going into effect this weekend and, if it does, it may create some unintended consequences.

Allison asked that residents contact 311 when there are problems that they want the city to know about. That reporting creates hotspots and identifies where the city should send resources.

Michele Margittai shared some history regarding liquor licenses. She stated that when the liquor license law at the state level changed so that liquor licenses could transfer between counties, many on South Side were concerned because the neighborhood went from 70 to approximately 130. She was serving on the South Side Community Council at the time and board members interviewed liquor license attorneys, researched the law and ways to limit the number of licenses because the legislation affected the balance of the neighborhood, specifically daytime shops that would be pushed out because rents would be higher than they could afford. Also, early entertainment that might appeal to a different crowd that wasn't nightlife would be scared away by too many bars.

She stated that there is a need to be looking at this from a macro level because the LCB has benefited from our neighborhood over the last 20 years. None of that money has come back in terms of additional license enforcement, additional police going into the police department and into grants supporting other businesses. We can continue to look at the micro but also need to look at the macro.

Jessica Benham shared that she agreed and is working on a piece of legislation that would give municipalities the ability to limit liquor license concentration. Barbara asked how the community can help move the legislation forward. Jessica said that she needed to find a Republican to co-sponsor the bill. Barbara asked that Jessica keep the community informed of her progress and, if need be, South Side residents would be willing to visit state legislators in order to persuade them to support the bill.

Allison mentioned that sometimes it isn't necessarily about the number of licenses but, instead, the number of seats. You may have a wine bar with 10 seats and a Mario's or Foxtails with occupancy in the hundreds. A question might be - how much occupancy can one neighborhood handle. She gave an example of the area between 10th and 17th with the narrow streets - should we be allowing occupancy permits for places that have public assembly with many bodies in it. She suggested that advocacy can be done at the local level especially with a new administration coming in.

She mentioned that during the pandemic there were a lot of illegal speakeasies popping up in social halls or retail space. Tickets were sold to enter the space and entertainment was provided by promoters/DJs.

Allison also acknowledged that South Side is at a disadvantage by not having a community development company as other neighborhoods do. Rachel Webber, the nighttime economy coordinator, shared that prior to working at the city she was the main street manager with Lawrenceville Corporation. She stated that as a community LC and Lawrenceville United had a rigorous community process when it came to businesses wanting liquor licenses in LV. She agreed with Allison about occupancy and also suggested that South Side work with other community organizations to make changes at the local level. She also stated that she can provide SSCC with guidance/assistance and knowledge around business managers.

The next South Watch meeting will be on September 8th at noon via zoom.

