



Richland County
 Coronavirus Ad Hoc Committee
 April 28, 2021 – 5:00 PM
 Zoom Meeting
 2020 Hampton Street, Columbia, SC 29204

Yvonne McBride	Paul Livingston	Joe Walker	Gretchen Barron	Chakisse Newton
District 3	District 4	District 6	District 10	District 10

Committee Members Present: Gretchen Barron, Chair; Yvonne McBride, Paul Livingston, Joe Walker, and Chakisse Newton

Others Present: Bill Malinowski, Allison Terracio, Cheryl English, Jesica Mackey, Andrea Mathis, Michelle Onley, Kyle Holsclaw, Tamar Black, Ashiya Myers, Clayton Voignier, John Thompson, Lori Thomas, Randy Pruitt, Stacey Hamm, Ronaldo Myers, Mike King, Bill Davis, James Hayes, Geo Price, Dante Roberts, Dwight Hanna, Leonardo Brown, Michael Byrd and Michael Maloney

1. **Call to Order** – Ms. Barron called the meeting to order at approximately 5:00 PM.
2. **Approval of Minutes: February 25, 2021** – Ms. McBride moved, seconded by Mr. Livingston, to approve the minutes as distributed.

In Favor: McBride, Livingston, Barron and Newton

Not Present: J. Walker

The motion in favor was unanimous.

3. **Adoption of Agenda** – Mr. Brown requested Item 7 “Federal Vaccination Site Update” be moved to the beginning of the agenda to accommodate Dr. Traxler’s schedule.

Ms. Newton inquired if it would be appropriate to discuss public participation and involvement under Item 5 “Resuming In-Person Council and Committee Meetings”.

Ms. Barron responded in the affirmative.

Mr. Livingston moved, seconded by Ms. McBride, to adopt the agenda as amended.

In Favor: McBride, Livingston, J. Walker, Barron, and Newton

The vote in favor was unanimous.

4. **Federal Vaccination Site Update** – Dr. Traxler noted she wanted to address several different topics. One of them being the federally supported State-run vaccine site at the Columbia Place Mall. They started on April 14th, and they have distributed approximately 5,000 vaccines. It open 7 AM – 7 PM seven days a week. Appointments are not required. There is no insurance or ID requirement, and it is free of charge. There is a drive-thru option or you may walk into the old Sears. It is an easy process, which usually takes 30 minutes. This location has been supported by FEMA, as well as State and local partners, including Richland County. Dr. Traxler thanked Mr. Brown and the Councilmembers that attended the kick-off event.

Currently they are administering the Pfizer vaccine. The vaccine requires two doses, three weeks apart. In approximately 7 – 8 weeks, the site will begin using the Janssen vaccine, which is distributed by Johnson & Johnson. Recently the CDC and the FDA put a pause on the use of the Janssen vaccine due to blood clots. There were reports 6-7 people with blood clots, with low platelet counts. After some investigation and made sure hospitals and providers knew how to treat it. You do not treat it with the normal blood thinning medicine Heparin. The CDC found 15 cases out of 7 million vaccines that experience blood clots. Of the 15 cases, 13-14 were found in women between the ages of 18-49. Therefore, this past Friday, the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, came together and determined they were going to lift the pause and recommended using the vaccine. They requested the FDA to include some warnings to ensure women know there is a slight risk of blood clots and there are other options (i.e. Pfizer or Moderna).

When the CDC issued a temporary pause to the use of the Janssen vaccine, DHEC gave their vaccine providers specific instructions on how to store the vaccine, so as to not waste the vaccine. After the CDC made their new recommendation, DHEC sent communication out to them so they could resume using the stored vaccine.

Mr. Malinowski inquired how they know the name placed on the vaccine card was correct, if no ID is required.

Dr. Traxler responded they are trusting people are self-identifying themselves correctly.

Ms. Newton inquired when the vaccine will switch from Pfizer to Janssen.

Dr. Traxler responded she will have to get back with the specific date. She noted they plan to do 6 weeks of the Pfizer vaccine and 2 weeks of the Janssen vaccine.

Ms. Barron thanked Dr. Traxler for her work and noted they are telling people “Don’t wait to vaccinate.”

4. **Emergency Rental Assistance Program** – Mr. Brown noted, as of yesterday, they have approved 75 applications. The breakdown is as follows: \$217,073.41 – Landlord Rental Arrears; \$165,981.20 – Future Landlord Rent; \$28,146.92 – Utility Arrears; \$10,865.00 – Tenant Rental Arrears; and \$19,509.00 – Future Tenant Rent for a total of \$441,575.53. He thanked everyone for supporting this effort, going through the approval, eligibility and quality assurance process to ensure these funds are approved and are meeting all the Federal regulations associated with the program.

Ms. Barron inquired about the pending applications due to the need for supplemental documents.

Mr. Brown responded, as applicants apply, they address the needs immediately.

Mr. King noted the eligibility specialists are working diligently to get the applications approved and are compliant with both Federal and Treasury requisites. They work one-on-one with the applicants. The largest issue they have is getting all the data. The applicant is allowed 21 days to provide the needed

data. The landlords have 10 business days to turn in their data. Currently, we are one of the few in the State that are issuing checks or approving payments. Recently the State of South Carolina announced their ERA Program. We are trying to build a coalition with the 7 counties who have received direct allocations to build a working email talk group to share ideas, recommendations, and lessons learned. This allows us to share data. He noted they have referred received questions to the website. Compared to other municipalities our website FAQs, policies and procedures are upfront.

Mr. Brown stated they actively take information, so in order to project they would have to have the information pooled to capture the data. He noted they take the information lie and process it rather than taking a pool of applications, and then begin to see what they need to do. This makes it a little more challenging to pull projected data.

Ms. Newton noted she understood them not processing in batches, and we are taking applications live. She inquired, when you look at all the people who have applied, the amount of rent and utilities funding requested, can you tell us what the total requests are.

Mr. Brown responded they could have Tetra Tech to do that based off the request alone, but not backed up with the actual data. He noted it may not mirror what the applicant is eligible to receive.

Ms. Newton stated she would like to see the information. A lot of times when there is a limit to what you can request, people request the max. At least that can show us an additional data point for what is being requested. She is hoping that we can expend as much funds as possible. She inquired as to what we are doing to see if any of these funds are available or Richland County Utility customers.

Mr. King responded they are working with Assistant County Administrator Thomas and the Utilities Department to track, through the billing department, the monies they are receiving from the ERA Program. He noted he believes they are putting information out on the utility bills, and they also have the information in their service department. When customers call, they have the information for the program. He noted Dominion and the City of Columbia are also helping promote the program through their billing and customer service departments.

Ms. Newton inquired if there were any additional outreach channels, communication vehicles, or partnerships to expand knowledge of this program. She noted people who are in crisis may not be going to usual places to get information.

Mr. King responded his team has been working with the Public Information Office and the Government and Community Services Department to aggressively get the word out. He noted this is the reason he has been contacting our county partners because they may have some ideas, recommendations and suggestions we have not thought of. He stated they are going to take advantage of getting the word out at any opportunity they can. They are going to add onto the media release for the State's ERA Program. The City of Columbia announced a Housing Relief Fund, so he initiated a meeting with the City and the Cooperative Ministry to ensure they are not duplicating their efforts, and they are not putting our residents in a hazardous situation where they are duplicating benefits.

Mr. King noted the City has not kicked off their program, but we were able to provide them assistance on operating this type of program. The City's maximum relief is \$3,100 for either a mortgage, rental or utilities, but not a combination. Individuals might be approved by the City and still have a gap in funding that can be referred to the County's ERA Program. The Cooperative Ministry and their partners are assisting through their faith and corporate partnerships. There will also be a media blitz with the limited or non-English proficient citizens through the Spanish media channel. The Government and Community Services Department developed an email listing for 175 churches or faith-based institutions throughout the County. The emails are seeking partnerships and help in providing

information that can be provided to their congregations, as well as their faith partners, to get the information out. They recently started working with Richland Two schools and training their social workers about the program and how to enter the information. A lot of time these social workers have contact with families that are in need in their school district.

Ms. Mackey inquired if staff was tracking where the applicants heard about this program. She noted this would help staff to know which advertising works best.

Mr. King responded they are not tracking it at this time, but he would run it by the programmers to see if that could be a part of the process.

Mr. Brown responded, at the time of the program's implementation, they were only putting questions on documents that were absolutely required so applicant did not feel overwhelmed.

Ms. McBride noted she was glad to see all of the efforts being done to make this program successful. She noted she wanted to see a more concerted effort, in terms of working with the faith-based communities and entities, to include the underserved areas, as well as the Magistrate office. Sometimes the churches are overworked, and given Coronavirus, there is limited staff. The faith-based area is where people go to look for assistance. Sometimes those faith-based entities need assistance in order to help the people. She noted she would like staff to further investigate how they can assist the faith-based entities.

Ms. Barron suggested staff might want to hold an information session hosted at these faith-based organizations. The faith-based entities and the church are the center of the community, and a resource people will go to in time of need.

Mr. King noted they have reached out to the Magistrate's office for this program because of the eviction issues people are facing.

5. **Resuming In Person Council and Committee Meetings** – Ms. Barron noted she discussed a few options with Mr. Brown. Depending on how the discussion goes tonight, we may be ready to take something to Council. She noted the County is opening up, the children are going back to school, and County staff is coming back. It is time to evaluate if it is time to return to Chambers or in-person meetings. She suggested a tentative date to resume in-person Council and Committee meetings on July 1st. She noted many people are interested in doing in-person meetings, but Chambers may not be conducive for Council to sit at the dais comfortably. It does limit the number of staff members present, as well as the number of citizens that can come in. While Council has been taking citizens' input the entire time during the pandemic. It just had to be done in writing. She proposed resuming in-person meetings, but perhaps choosing alternative locations by looking at facilities the County owns or our millage agencies. For example R2I2, which is in Richland School District II. She noted she spoke with Dr. Davis, and they are willing to host us. In addition, she has spoken with the Richland I School Board Chair, Midlands Tech, Allen University, Richland County Recreation Commission, and Historic Columbia. This would give us the opportunity to be able to go into the community and not host them in the same district, but move around.

Mr. Brown noted he is interested in sending a unified message both to the employees, as well as the community members, who are looking at how we may be operating as an organization. As we plan on more broadly opening up access in July, he thinks it makes sense to send a consistent message. If we are saying the public can come in and move about, Administration and Council can come together. He noted he has no objections and would only need to know of any alterations Council may want provided in order to meet in person.

Ms. Terracio voiced her support for moving the Council meetings around the County to give the public

access to us in a different way. She noted we can take something that is an unusual circumstance and make it into something positive.

Ms. English noted she is in agreement with Ms. Terracio. She requested the Township Auditorium be added to the list of facilities to utilize.

Ms. Barron noted she overlooked the Township, which is on the list. With all the organizations she has reached out to, she did not give specific dates, but inquired if they were interested in hosting Council.

Mr. Livingston agreed to consider having meetings at different facilities, but there is a lot that goes into that. He inquired about how we tie that into resuming meetings in Council Chambers. This may be an item Council needs to take up at some point, but he is not sure it is directly related to resuming in-person meetings. He inquired if we are talking about having meetings in July at different locations. He believes that would be problematic to arrange and manage.

Ms. Barron responded they were thinking about resuming in-person meetings in July by working alongside Ms. Keefer, and other staff, to ensure a smooth transition. She hoped they would not move forward without having a concrete plan in place.

Ms. Mackey stated she was supportive of having in-person meetings in a safe way that works for Council and staff. She voiced her concern about having meetings in different locations. She noted consistency is usually best for the public, so they know they can go to one spot for every meeting. She also inquired about the costs. She does not think we should be paying to meet at any location. She would like to see more of a plan of what it would look like, and which locations would work best. She inquired if there will be protocols or standards in place if cases begin rising again.

Mr. Brown responded the protocols are something that can provide to Council to ensure they agree. His recommendation would be to follow local and federal agency guidelines. He noted COVID-19 has taught us that we need to be flexible on multiple points because sometimes the numbers are not in our favor.

Ms. Newton supports in-person meetings with standards and protocols that staff is going to propose. She wanted to ensure Councilmembers are able to maintain whatever level of appropriate social distancing and the protocol for how they set capacity, how they are going to communicate capacity, mask requirements, etc. She agreed with Mr. Brown's request for flexibility for standards and guidelines to ensure safety. She noted she is hearing a huge outcry and desire for citizens to participate in a more meaningful way, to have their voices heard and be able to make eye contact with Council.

Ms. McBride stated she concurs with much of what has been said, particularly with Ms. Mackey's concerns regarding the logistics of moving from one place to another, the consistency, and the cost. She noted she is a data-driven person, and when they have tried to outsource the meetings, they got less participation than when they held meetings in Chambers. She is supportive of having 1-2 meetings offsite, but they should make it possible for the citizens to come to Hampton Street to meet.

Ms. Newton inquired, via text message, as to what we can do better to allow the citizens to participate in meetings, and feel engaged, while we wait to come back to in-person meetings.

Ms. Barron inquired what else could they do. Currently, the constituents can submit comments, which are read into the record. She noted some of her constituents have submitted written comments, but would have preferred to be able to call in.

Ms. Mackey stated we need to evaluate the technology we currently have and if we are fully utilizing it. For example, we livestream on YouTube, but do they have someone answering questions as people live

chat during the meeting. She also suggested looking for new technology to help the citizens engage.

6. **COVID-19 Memorial** – Ms. Barron noted spoke with Mr. Brown, and we want to get some feedback about a COVID-19 memorial to acknowledge the loss of life during the last 16 months. She suggested a wreath laying at 2020 Hampton Street, with a short ceremony. Citizens can then visit the site for a week or two.

Ms. English stated we need to understand so many people did not just die, but died alone. This would be an opportunity to say their loved ones mattered. She believes this is an excellent idea.

Ms. Barron noted her oldest brother died of COVID-19, and it was an experience you do not want anyone to experience. We want people to know their loved ones mattered to us in Richland County.

Ms. Livingston moved, seconded by Ms. McBride, to request Administration to put together a proposal for a memorial for the COVID-19 victims and bring it forward to Council.

If Favor: McBride, Livingston, J. Walker and Barron

Present But Not Voting: Newton

The motion in favor was unanimous.

8. **Relief Funds** – Mr. Brown stated Council should have already received a document that communicated the breakdown of the American Rescue Plan. We are still waiting on the actual detailed guidance from the Treasury and the associated funding. Richland County has not received either, but this is consistent across the board. Some of the potential uses are in the document. He is looking forward to additional feedback from Council on some opportunities they would like staff to consider. Two of the things he mentioned to the committee chair was using the funds to address the technology needs. He thinks that will help us better engage with the citizens. Also, to address supplements to our First Responders who were on the frontline during the pandemic. He noted Operational Services staff were put in the position of being First Responders. They were dispatched anytime there was a request to disinfect, sanitize and clean areas where there were cases of COVID-19 exposure.

Ms. Barron encouraged Committee members to read the document, make recommendations to Mr. Brown, and be prepared to discuss this further at the next meeting.

9. **Review of the Face Mask Ordinance** – Ms. Barron stated the current mask ordinance is set to expire on June 5th. She noted Mr. Livingston, Mr. Brown, and herself met with members of the City of Columbia, Mayor Benjamin, City Manager Teresa Wilson, and other staff members to discuss how to move forward with the mask ordinance as the CDC is changing the guidelines of wearing masks and face coverings. She wanted to give the community an opportunity to discuss their thoughts on how to move forward before the June 5th deadline. At the meeting, they discussed suspending the mask ordinance and to allow the citizens to interpret the CDC guidelines. They also discussed amending the existing ordinance to reflect language that would embody the CDC guidelines. She noted moving forward the City of Columbia and Richland County could work in tandem with their language and verbiage to have a unified message.

Mr. Livingston noted another option was to allow the ordinance to expire.

Ms. Terracio inquired if the ordinance was re-approved would it be for less days.

Ms. Baron noted, if the committee wanted to explore fewer days, it could be put on the table for discussion.

Mr. Livingston noted the question was to determine if Council wanted to take action prior to June 5th.

Ms. Terracio inquired if committee members were questioning if it needs to be renewed.

Ms. Barron responded, part of the thinking is not that it will not be renewed, as much as it is what is for the good of the body. Does the body think they need to make modifications to the ordinance, and if that is the case, they can do that prior to June 5th?

Ms. Mackey inquired if the City's ordinance could be provided to the committee to compare the differences between the ordinances. That way when, and if the time comes, she would be prepared to make changes.

Ms. McBride noted COVID is very fluid, so we do not know which way it is going. It looks like it is going in the right direction, but her personal opinion is we should prepare to look at something after June 5th. She does not see us amending the ordinance in such a short period of time.

Mr. Livingston noted he had a brief conversation with the Mayor. The Mayor indicated they were thinking about the ordinance and whether they were going to do anything with it since it was expiring soon. The hope is that the City and County can be on the same page. This was brought to committee to have a brief conversation, and not necessarily take any immediate action.

Mr. J. Walker stated, for clarification, the CDC recently released new guidelines indicating that if outside, and appropriately distanced, masks were not warranted. He inquired why we would not incorporate updated guidance provided on the federal level. He inquired if that was the direction the City was heading, and why we would not immediately allow the liberties associated with the CDC guidelines, as it compares to our current ordinance.

Mr. Livingston noted that was part of the discussion.

Mr. J. Walker reiterated why they would not immediately incorporate the leniencies associated with removing restrictions on our constituents.

Ms. Barron responded some of the conversation they had today addressed those concerns, and what the CDC provided yesterday, and merging that language into a revised ordinance or how we should move forward.

Ms. McBride noted the CDC guidelines discuss those that have been fully vaccinated, family members, and numerous contingency items in terms of when to go without a mask. It was not a blanket free mask guideline.

Ms. Terracio noted she would support an amendment to the current ordinance to support new CDC guidelines.

Ms. Barron noted she plans to hold another meeting in the next week to allow them to make more concrete decisions.

Mr. Livingston directed staff to incorporate the CDC requirements into the current ordinance for consideration. At this point, the current ordinance is in conflict with the new CDC guidelines.

Ms. Barron stated she was in agreement.

Ms. McBride requested staff to identify areas where there are conflicts.

Mr. Brown responded in the affirmative. He noted they would date the document to indicate when the most up-to-date changes take place.

10. **Adjournment** – The meeting adjourned at approximately 6:30PM.