



CITY OF MOUNT VERNON

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Tree Advisory Board (TAB)
MEETING MINUTES
June 16, 2022, 4pm

A **REGULAR MEETING** of the Tree Advisory Board) was held on Thursday, June 16, 2022, 4:18 pm via zoom. The meeting was livestreamed on facebook.

Attendance

Voting members: Eveline Feldmann, Chair • Marlene H. Wertheim, Vice Chair • Henry May • Marlon Molina.

Absent: Vincent DeVito. **Non-Voting Members:** Elias Gootzeit • Tanesia Walters.

AGENDA

1 – Approval of Minutes Minutes of June 2, 2022. They are being tabled for the next meeting.

2 – Tree Removal Permit – tree ordinance amendment

The changes were submitted to the legal adviser. The Corporation Counsel will prepare the document for approval by the commissioners before being submitted to the Mayor and finally, to the City Council for adoption.

3 – Reports

3.1 Chair:

- City Councilwoman Browne and City Clerk Walters were thanked for help with resuming the posting of our Board documents.

- June 3rd, a letter went to Commissioner Bush in regard to trees that were planned, purchased and committed for South 4th Avenue for the Kingsbridge area, but were reallocated without Lincoln circle traffic dividers. His response was that he'll discuss with the team to put together a feasible plan moving forward. We haven't heard anything yet and hope to again to support and add our value to what is the beginning of city forest planning, with the right tree at the right place.

- June 15th, the Chr. and Vice Chr. had a meeting with Commissioner James Rausse of the Dept. of Planning and Community Development and his team. The Chair reports "He was generous with his time and our discussion was broad and productive, a good beginning to a promising on-going dialogue. Beforehand, we had provided him with a summary of the TAB history, accomplishments, and current objectives (attached). He acknowledged our hard work and commended us on what we have achieved in a short period of time." As a new commissioner Mr. Rausse is re-imagining his department and to clarify the interconnected relationships between government depts. and boards - including the advisory- with the purpose of understanding the value of the roles everyone plays in the larger construct of our city. Katherine Mella, new Associate. Commissioner, who is assigned to the Comprehensive Plan to interact with CP specialized outside consultant firm, and new cover land-use board matters was in attendance at this meeting as well. The TAB will closely work with Mr. Molina's in anticipation of the preparation work for the series of meetings with community around CP in regard to messaging, public education and A GREEN ASSESSMENT of all those parts of the city. As Comm Rausse expressed it, "The core of the CP is MV's identity," who are we and who do we want to be – and trees and green landscape definitely have their place here, he said. Steve Lawrence, the Grant Writer, described his position as one that is responsive to the priorities aligned with city needs, as specified by the depts. and the Mayor. At the moment it's sewers. However, he is aware of the grant opportunities through NYS and elsewhere to help the city and TAB fulfill its tree planting objectives and, when it's time to submit proposals, he, too, will be turning to the TAB for content and expertise. All in attendance agree, the desire to work together was clearly displayed and that there was a convergence of minds and aspirations concerning the holistic planning of our city.

3.2 The Tree Surgeon/DPW updates: No report at this time due to his absence.

3.3 Planning Dept. Representative updates: Deputy Commissioner Molina agreed with the Chair's positive assessment of the meeting with Commissioner Rausse. A focus was the collaboration between our two groups in an involved community process that seeks to prepare for the Comprehensive Plan. Understanding the public's perception of the city is vital. Of additional relevance to the TAB are considerations related to sustainability and greenspace. He added there will be benefit to looking outside Mt. Vernon, to learn from cities that are further along this path, as well as from established and experienced related organizations.

-He concluded that as of now there are no planning applications related to trees on land-use agenda.

4 – Tree Plantings

4.1. South 4th Ave. planting of 2nd set of 6 cherry trees. There was a lengthy valuable exchange among the TAB concerning the status of the 6 trees remaining that were intended for South 4th. The Chair had been informed by the Parks Director that they were instead, being assigned to the roundabout at Lincoln & Gramatan. Unclear at this point is whether or not this was carried out. At issue for the TAB members is the lack of communication between the Board and DPW when this decision was made. Upon considering the trafficked area and soil, another choice of tree might have been preferable. Also, is there any thought to replace the trees in question? We're all aware that the participation of the TAB in a tree planning program for our city is something new and that the lack of prior notice can be attributed to the DPW Commissioner's demanding schedule. The City Clerk also clarified that DPW as a City agency is within its right to make changes such as this one.

It was agreed that we would wait to receive an official response from DPW before coming to any conclusions. At the same time, the TAB and DPW need to grow in our communication skills and identify how the TAB can add value and support the City in a collaborative working relationship that seeks to establish a well-thought-out vision for our tree planting program, and strengthening the idea of City Forestry Planning.

4.2. Tree List: We have several lists to draw from for potential planting. When we purchase trees we want to have them designated for specific sites. We also have to keep in mind DPW's limitations on staffing and availability.

5 – Community/Education

5.1 – Stuyvesant Plaza Park Restoration. The community group requested a meeting with the Dir. of Sustainability and DPW Commissioner to draw attention to their local environmental concerns. They have worked hard to invigorate neighborhood engagement. They will be gathering tonight at the Presbyterian Church at Columbus and Lincoln Avenues to discuss their intended future initiative with the above leaders, whose positive response is appreciated by their membership and the TAB. Of course, the TAB will be an available resource if called upon. Mr. Molina invited other communities to follow suit in seeking City interventions.

5.2 – Messaging. The TAB sees as its responsibility the education of the public about the TO, TAB and tree benefits. We need to start talking about the right message to convey re trees and green spaces. This information will feed into the Comprehensive Plan conversation. Engagement has to begin from the ground up utilizing educational materials – media and printed – that will be accessible to everyone in the community.

The Chair suggested that she and Mr. Molina form a subcommittee to meet regularly to discuss the materials and contents for the public meetings.

-The Chair cautioned that, before we can pushout the TO, the amendment changes have to be in place. The plan is to achieve this before we take off for summer vacation. We have to remember that the City Council meets once a month during the summer - July 13 and August 10 and that a letter of referral with the completed draft documents will have to be submitted before either of those dates, if we want them passed soon. Even though we will be away in August, we can continue to work behind the scenes and Corporation Counsel.

6 – Announcements

-Next regular TAB meeting is scheduled for Thursday, July 7, 2022, at 4 p.m.

Summer schedule/Vacation – Motion moved by Marlene, Henry seconded to take the entire month of August off. The current plan is to, as of September, meet once a month.

-The Neighbor's That Care tree dedication by Graham School is set for Tuesday, August 2, 2022. DPW will be installing the 4 pear trees on the public site.

Meeting adjourned at 5:30p.m., moved by Eveline, seconded, by Marlon. The recording of this meeting is accessible with this link: <https://www.facebook.com/mountvernonny/videos/738421937278897/>



Eveline Feldmann, Chair

07/07/22

Date of Approval

HISTORY, ACHIEVEMENTS AND OBJECTIVES **OF THE MOUNT VERNON TREE ADVISORY BOARD (TAB)**

In the face of development, we learned that we cannot take for granted that trees and green spaces will be preserved. The ravaging of the ax really hit home for me in 2014 with a clear cutting of 25 healthy cedar trees on a private property next door to mine – a beautiful canopy that extended over our yard and shielded noise and heat – to make way for an auxiliary outdoor parking facility with maximizing variances.

Mount Vernon's Tree-City designation had expired almost a decade ago. The community wasn't engaged. There was an outdated Tree Ordinance that addressed only public, not private, land. There was little in the way of prohibitions and/or regulations that would protect the trees or see them as ASSETS, let alone as a critically important urban ecosystem that we often only make space for in a minimal setback of a structure, a yard, or a sidewalk green strip. And as everybody here knows, Covid and a challenging climate are further demonstrating that a lack of trees in areas of great density and few green spaces leaves a community more vulnerable to disease and increasingly extreme heat. Trees are part of Nature's sustainability plan.

I spoke out at a community meeting, seeking a constituency that would work together to ensure that this would never happen to another homeowner. Thirteen citizens signed on to fight the rapid decline of trees in the city by revising the out-of-date Tree Ordinance (TO). For six years, this small group of advocates, known as Mount Vernon CitizenTree, with determination and persistence, attended public meetings, collaborated with the Planning Board and Dept. of Public Works, cultivated valuable allies on the City Council and outreached to supportive environmental groups to produce a well-researched and crafted draft document ready for submission to the City Council.

Passage of the Mount Vernon Tree Ordinance / Initiating the City's Green Renaissance

In Dec. 2020, The City Council unanimously passed the revised TO. The intention was not to have a policing instrument but one that unifies people around learning to appreciate and to be stewards of our valuable green landscape and to regulate the roles of today's City and property owners in maintaining and preserving MV's trees.

The new law called for a Tree Escrow Fund to collect appropriations and provide funding for tree plantings and replacements. Also mandated, was the formation of a Tree Advisory Board (TAB) with clear duties to assist and advise the City in the provisions of the ordinance and the City's tree management program, as well as to contribute to the policy, planning, replanting, and public education.

A year ago, the first TAB members were appointed and sworn in; 3 citizens, a representative from Planning and the Tree Surgeon. The 5 immediately took on a wide scope of work. Our bi-monthly live-streamed meetings have an impressive community following.

With the adoption of the TO, after a long hiatus, MV regained its Tree City USA designation and celebrated its inaugural educational community tree planting on Arbor Day 2021 at Hartley Park.

TAB Achievements in 2022

This year we maintained our Tree City USA status and won a Growth Award/Arbor Day Foundation for building the community framework of the TAB.

The new TAB and DPW, in collaboration, organized a 2nd Arbor Day event. This time it was in a neighborhood near the Bronx border, that faced an elementary school and, instead of one tree, we added a line of 6 beautiful flowering cherry trees, with the commitment to extend the line, with 6 more. To engage and empower the youth as future stewards of our landscape, they were invited to speak. Young and adult present shoveled soil around the bases of the trees, knowing all were unified in being part of the life-giving process. Good to know that in the Arbor Day state-wide calendar art competition, 3 of the 12 winners were from Westchester County, two of the three, from our community.

Arbor Day marks the beginning of tree plantings that will take place throughout the year ahead, giving priority to areas most in need. Residents at the event who wanted trees in the public space in front of their homes were asked to sign up. This list, along with those from the Tree Surgeon, will navigate our first community tree planting program.

As Tree City USA ambassadors, we are seeking to sustain positive collaborations with DPW, other dept. heads and new members of the City Council and the Mayor's Office.

Neighborhood associations are being inspired to initiate their own local green campaigns as part of our efforts to get out into the community to engage and help young and adult residents gain a better understanding of the benefits of trees and the need to plant and care for them.

MV was celebrated at a NYS/DEC Urban Forestry state-wide event where our city was lauded as an example of an evolving story of advocacy on behalf of a City's invaluable tree assets and its efforts to overcome existing environment inequities.

Current Objectives

- Implementation of TO procedures, tree removal permit process, building out the tree issue reporting mechanism, amending the document as needed
- Clarifying operation and Tree Escrow Account procedures
- TAB integrated into City land-use board processes
- Preparation of educational information about the TO, the TAB and the Fund
- Encouraging certification to upgrade skill level of the Tree Surgeon in role of Forester
- In an advisory capacity, contributing to a collaborative pathway to Green Infrastructure Health and a City Forestry Program

Our TO is not an end but a start. The law by itself doesn't make for success. It must be fueled by public and private citizens brought together by the desire to save our green spaces and trees for the common good.



Eveline Feldmann, Chair
Mount Vernon Tree Advisory Board