

WORK SESSION OF THE GREENBELT CITY COUNCIL held Monday, October 17, 2011, for the purpose of holding a stakeholder meeting with representatives of the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center.

Mayor Davis called the meeting to order at 8:02 p.m. It was held in the Council Room of the Municipal Building.

PRESENT WERE: Councilmembers Konrad E. Herling, Emmett V. Jordan, Leta M. Mach, Silke I. Pope, Edward V.J. Putens, Rodney M. Roberts, and Mayor Judith F. Davis.

STAFF PRESENT WERE: Michael P. McLaughlin, City Manager; and Cindy Murray, City Clerk.

ALSO PRESENT WERE: Dr. Joseph Spence, Beltsville Area Director; David Prevar, Beltsville Area Safety and Health Manager; Dan Thessen, Beltsville Area Physical Security Officer; Bill Orleans, candidate for City Council; Dr. Laura Kressler, Chair, Public Safety Advisory Committee; Thomas X. White, Greenbelt News Review; and Cindy Henneberg, Greenbelt Patch.

Dr. Spence gave an overview of the status of the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC), noting that their financial situation had improved considerably since they last met with the City Council. At the same time, BARC is in the grip of external factors beyond its control—in particular, the budget. He said there has been “no real federal budget” in three years. Regarding publicity on the pending closure of ten of the Department of Agriculture’s 106 locations, he said BARC is not scheduled to be one of them and may even grow as staff are redistributed. He said they have more than 500 structures on the campus and will be reducing the number they occupy to 30, substantially reducing many costs.

Mayor Davis asked if the dramatic drop in facility usage would raise new federal interest in selling off parts of BARC land. Dr. Spence said there are both federal and state restrictions on the use of the land for agricultural purposes, which provides some protection. He said he also felt safe on that score as long they were in Congressman Hoyer’s district but could not speculate beyond that. In response to a question from Ms. Mach, he said they have begun leasing some of the facilities to other entities with overlapping research interests.

In response to queries from Mr. Putens, Mayor Davis, and Mr. Jordan, Dr. Spence mentioned various cooperative programs, including those with University of Maryland, College Park, other University System of Maryland institutions, and Eleanor Roosevelt High School.

Mr. Jordan asked about the future of the visitors center. Dr. Spence said this had always been an Agricultural Research Service visitor center for the entire agency, although it is located at BARC. Because of cost, the agency is closing the visitor center, but the building, which was built under the WPA, will be leased by a sister agency of BARC, the National Resources Conservation Service, for training purposes. BARC tours will now be arranged through the new Carter Building.

In response to a question from Mr. Roberts, Dr. Spence said there seemed to be a hiatus on the university’s proposal to build a road through the South Farm, possibly at the suggestion of Congressman Hoyer. He also said he would look at Mr. Roberts’ suggestion of whether greater advantage could be taken of the proximity of the Patuxent Research and Wildlife Refuge to strengthen BARC’s physical presence, again stressing that BARC’s legislative protection is on the basis of the required agricultural use of the land.

After stressing the importance of BARC to Greenbelt and the City's willingness to be called upon to provide any possible support to BARC, Mayor Davis opened the topic of the closing of the Research Road gate to pedestrian and bicycle traffic. She said the issue was not the gate itself, of which Greenbelters were strongly supportive, since it limits motor traffic not only on BARC property but in the adjacent residential neighborhoods. She said it was also understood that the gate was in need of repair or replacement. The issue, she said, was the elimination of the side gate that had allowed entry for pedestrian and bicycle traffic for so many years.

Dr. Spence said the closing of the aperture that allowed people to enter was not the result of a change in policy or a newly perceived need to restrict access. In answer to the Mayor's questions, he said there had been no spike in vandalism or trespassing involved; rather, inspection of the property preceding a tour of the facility for high-level officials last June had revealed that the gate was an eyesore in need of replacement. He noted that it was still possible to get in under the gate. He added that he thought BARC and the City could come to some agreement on a solution.

Mayor Davis observed that closing this entrance would not restrict access because so many roads are open elsewhere; even this road is open at the other end. Dr. Spence replied that although BARC is not and cannot be a truly secure facility, there are a number of perimeter gates that are completely and permanently closed in residential areas. He said the goal with such a large, open property is to assist security by making it clear that there are areas where people are out of place at certain times so that a guard can know instantly that there are people present where they do not belong. He said they want people who do not belong there to look out of place.

Mayor Davis said the City believed that the compromise that prevailed for many years, whereby the gate excluded motor traffic but allowed pedestrians and bicycles to pass through, could actually increase security, since people who frequent the areas would recognize problems and call.

Mr. Thessen said the property is "pretty much wide open." They cannot close it because it is split by state and county roads over which BARC has no control. Noting how unusual this situation is for a federal facility, he said all they can do is try to minimize their vulnerabilities.

Noting earlier comments that people could still go under the gate, Mr. Herling said he had heard that getting under the gate was in fact quite a feat.

Mr. Roberts said he had read in recent email that if people enter now, they are subject to arrest. He said, "These people are your friends," adding that the well-established policy of allowing pedestrians and bikes through had not caused any problems. He said there are also BARC employees who live in Greenbelt who use Research Road to get to and from work.

Mayor Davis asked if anyone had brought to the meeting the petition that had been circulating for presentation to BARC. Since no one had, she opened the floor to public comment.

Ben Skolnik, 56-J Ridge Road, suggested that BARC use its sign in a positive fashion to encourage residents to improve security by giving a phone number on the sign and information for how to report suspicious activities. Bob Zugby, 94 Ridge Road, seconded the idea of encouraging a type of neighborhood watch rather than treating hikers and bikers as trespassers, and he questioned whether in fact the gate provided security at all. "You're discouraging the wrong people," he said. He also confirmed that trying to climb under the gate or put a bicycle under the gate was not easy. Tom Simon, 121 Lasner Lane, described himself as a "user since 1976," both walking and biking. He said he and his wife had reported problems to BARC security. He said until recently they always felt welcome there, and he hoped for an agreement.

Mark Christal, 53-D Ridge Road, a member of the Beaver Dam Watershed Watch Group, enumerated a substantial list of activities undertaken by this group on BARC property over the years to benefit Beaver Dam Creek: for example, educational tours, water testing, tree planting and removing trash and dumped items from the property. He said he considered this group to be a BARC stakeholder. He, too, commented on the difficulty of getting under the gate but expressed appreciation for the prohibition of motor traffic.

Peter Blank, 1-B Plateau, said he moved to Greenbelt in part because of the proximity to BARC. He bikes frequently on the property but finds it very difficult to get a bike under the fence.

After determining that about 25 people had come to the meeting out of concern for the gate issue, Mayor Davis posed the question to Dr. Spence: "What can we do to open the gate?" He replied that it had not been their intent to outrage anyone and that he thought a solution could be reached. He emphasized that they have had a good working relationship with nearby neighbors and that many of their employees live in Greenbelt. He said BARC's needs were to continue to limit motor traffic, to have a gate designed for the purpose rather than a makeshift opening in the fence, and—except for specific, planned activities—to lock it at sundown since without lighting risk is too high. He said they are, however, willing to open it through the weekend during daylight hours. Some of the speakers had suggested more welcoming language in the signage, but Dr. Spence emphasized that what they do with the sign must maintain language appropriate to a federal research center and that it would not be in BARC's best interests to make the property sound too much like a recreational facility.

Mayor Davis asked Mr. McLaughlin to be the contact person for further discussion with BARC and to receive information about plans for the gate and signage. She asked that BARC move as quickly as possible on correcting the situation.

Velma Kahn, 2-L Research Road, asked that BARC take those who are less young and less agile into account when designing the entrance gate, allowing if possible even for wheel chairs and strollers, as well as for bicycles.

Several people inquired about the status of the arrest threat while this matter is being worked out and a new gate and signage developed. Mr. Thessen said their guards and the Park Police would be alerted the next day.

Mr. Putens asked about the status of cleaning up the hazardous waste sites on the property. Mr. Prevar said they had started with 160 sites and as of last year were down to about 60. For most of those they are requesting no further action from the Environmental Protection Agency, but there are five or six undergoing long-term investigation and feasibility analysis.

Mr. Jordan asked about designating Beaver Dam Road for bike and pedestrian use and expressed concern the danger on some of the roads for bikers. Mr. Thessen said the roads involved were county roads and not in BARC's control.

The remaining items on the agenda were discussed briefly:

Update on MDOT/CSX Rail Intermodal Facility Proposal: Dr. Spence said BARC is on record as opposing this use of the property off Edmonston at Sunnyside. He said it is one of the three sites the state is still considering, but he has no idea why they would want it. Mr. Prevar said MDOT was not fully informed about some aspects of the site when it was selected and that he would think this site

was the most environmentally impacted of all those under consideration. Mayor Davis said the City was on the same page.

Feasibility Study on Widening the Baltimore-Washington Parkway: Mayor Davis asked if they were opposed to possible taking of BARC land if the parkway is widened. Mr. Prevar said they were not yet informed about what BARC land would be wanted but that they would oppose any plan to destroy forest canopy. He said Patuxent would also be impacted.

ICC Mitigation Sites on BARC Land: Mr. Prevar addressed aspects of various site considerations and offered to give a complete presentation on it to the City Council at another time. Mr. Roberts said he thought the ICC mitigation proposals were band-aid approaches rather than actions to address the causes of the problem, which lay in the industrial patches throughout the area. After noting that he is an employee of BARC who bicycles to work, Cary Coppock, 9-D Research Road, said that the Citizens to Conserve and Restore Indian Creek (CCRIC) had heard presentations by the ICC people but had not taken a position on any of the proposed plans.

Baltimore-Washington Partners for Forest Stewardship: Mayor Davis said BARC and the City of Greenbelt are members and that there will be a meeting of the group during the workday on October 27. Mr. Prevar said he had been told this organization is the largest such group in the nation.

Deer Hunting: Mr. Thessen said this is a public program and that the State Department of Natural Resources could be contacted for information. He noted that an area near Research Road is a public hunting area. There was discussion of the need for signage to warn people to stay on the road, which would protect them as well as furthering BARC's interest in keeping people in a limited area.

Mr. Jordan mentioned the traffic problems and dangerous turns from the Baltimore-Washington to Powder Mill Road. BARC representatives agreed but said once again that this area was not under their control but was a National Park Service responsibility.

Ms. Mach mentioned that one of the areas under consideration as a construction staging area for the expansion of the federal courthouse on Cherrywood Lane is on BARC property at Cherrywood and Edmonston. Mr. Prevar said BARC had restricted what had originally been requested and that the GSA did not even have accurate boundary maps. Mr. McLaughlin said he would send them a copy of the City's letter of comment and also give Mr. Prevar contact information for City planning staff.

Mayor Davis thanked the BARC representatives for coming. After a short break, Council discussed several informational items.

The meeting ended at 10:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Cindy Murray
City Clerk