

Minutes: Housing / Community Development Subcommittee

June 4, 2018

C. Vernon Gray Conference Room

George Howard Building – Ellicott City, MD

The meeting began at 3:05 p.m.

In attendance: Anne Brinker, Paul Casey, Kiim Flowers, Cindy Parr, Becca Niburg, and Coleen West. Also attending, Jeff Meyers, Council staff.

Hector Garcia, CEO and executive director of the Foreign-born Information and Referral Network (FIRN) addressed the subcommittee on issues related to immigrants in Howard County. Currently, things are unstable and confusing because of the national environment and contradictory messages from political leaders. This creates uncertainty and anxiety among immigrants and their US-born children. FIRN is a nonprofit organization in the County that helps immigrants, refugees, asylees, and other foreign-born individuals to access community resources. FIRN provides counseling, classes, interpreting and translation services, tutoring, referrals, and a variety of workshops. FIRN is an accredited provider of immigration counseling services at its office, 5999 Harpers Farm Rd, Suite E-200 Columbia, MD 21044. FIRN is unique among Maryland counties. Over the years, individuals in the foreign-born community have come to trust FIRN but FIRN must operate cautiously to ensure that this reputation of trust is maintained. In recent times, other agencies have begun to refer all foreign-born individuals to FIRN no matter what the issue and FIRN does not have the capacity to meet this level of demand. FIRN estimates that it sees more than 25,000 families each year, of which 2,500 are referred to other agencies and 4,500 require immigration services – 350 require specialized legal assistance. About 70,000 foreign-born in the County may be in or near crisis. FIRN requires more space, more staff, and more money. Mr. Garcia noted that Baltimore City budgets money to pay private attorneys to represent immigrants. Additionally, immigrants would be helped if the County educated real estate agents and rental agents and ensured that immigrants are not bamboozled. Immigrants need access to more and better housing, transit options, and health care. The County's Workforce Development efforts should include immigrants, particularly with helping those with foreign professional certifications to get similar certifications here.

John Byrd and Mike Milani, Howard County Recreation and Parks briefed the subcommittee about the activities and impact of the the Department. Their PowerPoint is posted on the Task Force web page¹. Subcommittee members were impressed with the Department's child care activities and asked a variety of questions about facilities, fields, 50 meter pools, and the Department's relationships with the School System. Mr. Byrd indicated that the Department's Land Preservation Parks and Recreation Plan is available on-line². Mr. Byrd estimated that around half of the Department's employees live in the

¹ <https://cc.howardcountymd.gov/Portals/0/Rec%20and%20Parks%20Impact%20on%20Econ%20Growth.pdf>

² <https://www.howardcountymd.gov/lpprp>

County. There is not much land available for Park acquisition, which means that once the current large Park projects (Troy and Robinson) are done, the Department is likely to concentrate on indoor facilities to meet the needs of a changing demographic. The Department coordinates with the Office of Transportation to incorporate bus stops and pathways in each of its projects.

The subcommittee reviewed areas for which it might make recommendations and agenda topics for the next several meetings:

- June 26 – another discussion with Kelly Cimino and Peter Engel
- July 16 – discussion of recommendations and policies
- July 23 – continuation of July 16 discussion

The meeting ended at 5:17 p.m.

