

New Castle City Sea Level Rise Task Force Meeting

Minutes

April 18, 2023 – 6:00 p.m.

1 Municipal Boulevard, New Castle, DE

Members Present: Alice Riehl, Chair
Gail Seitz
Tish Gallagher
Fred Gallagher
Michael Marinelli
Sandra Taylor
Timothy Moore

Absent: Richard Pennell

Also Present: Chris Rogers, City Planner

Ms. Riehl called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. Roll call followed and a quorum to conduct business was declared.

Minutes

The Minutes of the February 28, 2023, meeting were not available and Ms. Riehl stated they would be reviewed at the May 16, 2023 meeting.

Presentation by City Planner Chris Rogers of Results of Elevation Study

Ms. Seitz stated that Mr. Rogers has been working with engineers from AECOM to pull together information on the elevation studies that were performed.

Mr. Rogers stated that he is a Planner and is not a Professional Engineer (PE) or a Certified Flood Plain Manager (CFM); however, he has been working with a PE and a CFM on the AECOM team to articulate where they are in the process and understanding the studies that were made available to them. He noted that the Vulnerability Assessment & Adaptation Plan done in 2018 and the Assessment of Dike Alternatives and Floodproofing Measures from 2019, both concluded that more specific information was needed in order to make a more informed judgment on flood measures for the City, i.e., doing a cost benefit analysis of raising the dikes vs floodproofing structures.

He explained the two studies currently being made: McBride & Ziegler surveyed the finished first floor of 615 of the 625 structures identified in the Vulnerability Assessment as being impacted by a 100 year storm plus 2 feet, plus structures impacted by daily tides. This provided the first floor elevation of those structures and the lowest adjacent grade (the ground level next to the house) of those structures. Those structures are designated Priority 1 (influenced by daily tidal waters or in the 100 year flood plain) or Priority 2 (in the flood plain as of 2050). In response to a question from Mr. Marinelli, Mr. Rogers stated that he is unsure if the McBride & Ziegler study will be available to the public.

Mr. Rogers noted that flood insurance is based on the first floor elevation and explained that when building a new structure in the floodplain in New Castle, you must demonstrate that the first floor elevation is 1-1/2 feet above the floodplain elevation, which is 10 feet (100 year storm elevation). In addition, after construction is completed the first floor must be surveyed and certified that it is 18" above the floodplain elevation. He added that there are different floodplain levels in different parts of the City. In response to a question from Ms. Riehl, Mr. Rogers stated that he is not certain if homeowners can use the study to get a reduction in the cost of flood insurance. He added that a homeowner can try to demonstrate to FEMA that they are not in the floodplain.

TetraTech is performing a study on the same structures that looks at raising dikes vs the ability of individuals to flood proof their homes by dry or wet floodproofing. Mr. Rogers explained both floodproofing methods. This study estimated the number of homes that could be flood proofed and the cost of that mitigation. Mr. Rogers stated that study will be complete once it is determined whether a structure can be flood proofed or not, and the square foot replacement cost. Mr. Rogers stated that he hopes to have the data from TetraTech to be entered into a Hazus Model in a few months.

In response to a question from Mr. Gallagher, Mr. Rogers stated that dikes would be a capital investment and flood proofing would be an individual investment; and he will have a better response to his question when the two studies have been reviewed. In response to a question from Ms. Riehl, Mr. Rogers stated he did not know what the basis of the replacement value was. Ms. Gallagher noted that the study does not take into consideration the historic significance of some of the structures, and asked how that would factor into a final determination. In response to a question from Ms. Seitz Ms. Riehl stated she was unsure if the data from these two studies would be considered by the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) in determining whether the City qualifies for the PIFR.

Discussion of PIFR Status

Ms. Riehl reported that the results of the Preliminary Investigation of Eligibility Report (PIFR) should be available next week. Ms. Riehl explained the four alternatives of potential mitigation:

1. Do nothing;
2. Do what you can manage, i.e., raise and extend the dikes;
3. Tear down everything in the flood zone;
4. Do everything, plus do pumps to eliminate internal flooding.

Ms. Riehl explained what would be done if the dikes are raised to 13 feet and extended. Mr. Bergstrom informed Ms. Riehl that anyone who is raising and extending the dikes will consider water coming from the other side in the plan. In response to a question from Ms. Gallagher, Mr. Rogers explained the Delaware City pumping system. He opined that New Castle has a much larger issue with the marshes that drain through the dikes.

Ms. Riehl reiterated that the Task force should know soon if the City is eligible for the NRCS grant.

Planning Discussion for May 10th Community Meeting

Ms. Riehl reported that promotional items could probably be printed in the City office. Ms. Gallagher distributed a sample of a yard sign and a door hanger for review and asked that members write their comments on the samples and return them to her. Ms. Taylor stated she will reach out to her FEMA contacts to see if someone can attend who can speak to flood insurance. During discussion it was agreed that:

- Yard signs will be placed at the entrances to neighborhoods and in the City.
- Door hangers will be distributed.
- Other than Danielle Swallow, who is the main presenter, representatives from other organizations who can respond to specific questions and share information will be stationed at tables throughout the room.
- Mr. Bergstrom will provide maps.
- DNREC will show specific addresses on the computer.

In response to a question from Ms. Riehl, Captain Moore stated that:

- Emergency preparedness/evacuation in the City is a joint function of State, County and City agencies.
- An affected County will be under the State emergency procedures in a state of emergency.
- Warning notifications are done through the State, and the City can do it through MSC using a reverse 911 system.
- There is signage identifying evacuation routes.

Ms. Gallagher noted that Ms. Swallow advised that the State will be coming out with new information on evacuation routes. Captain Moore noted that if there is an evacuation, evacuees from the City would go to William Penn High School, and stated that he will get more information from Dave Carpenter.

Ms. Riehl noted that the event begins at 6:30 p.m. and the first half-hour will be informal. At 7:00 Ms. Swallow will speak for approximately 40-45 minutes.

Ms. Riehl stated that she is having issues finding audio/visual equipment. She will reach out to the Library and other local groups to see if they have equipment they can loan, but if it is necessary she will rent equipment.

Mr. Rogers noted that DNREC is the liaison between the local jurisdictions and FEMA, and the State Floodplain Manager at DNREC may be able to speak at the event. Ms. Seitz noted that Dave Warga had spoken at the University of Delaware and included flood insurance in his presentation. Ms. Riehl will find out who DNREC's new State Floodplain Manager is. Mr. Rogers will coordinate with Mr. Bergstrom about how the new first floor elevation can be disseminated and how he anticipates using maps to tell people whether they are in the flood plain or not.

Ms. Riehl noted a number of questions that she hoped could be answered at the meeting, and also hoped to ensure the residents that the City is working on a solution. Ms. Riehl referenced an

article on sinking coasts which indicates that “we live in an area that is as sinking as Charleston, South Carolina”. She added that the area from the Chesapeake and up through Delaware is one of the worst areas, and the ground is actually falling each year; and that, in conjunction with the rising sea, creates a potential for disaster.

Ms. Riehl noted that the Senior Center will be open at 5:30 p.m. for set-up. Ms. Gallagher recommended that the round tables remain for attendees and that long tables that are also available at the Senior Center be used for Ms. Swallow, the organizations sharing information and for refreshments.

Miscellaneous

Website –Kristen Thornton at DNREC reached out to Ms. Riehl regarding having students at the University of Delaware assist with the website. Ms. Riehl will keep the Task Force updated.

Coastal Resources – Ms. Riehl and Mr. Bergstrom will participate in a stakeholder engagement phone meeting with DNREC to discuss how coastal resources are being utilized in Delaware, i.e., fishing, boating, etc., and to ensure that those resources are preserved. Ms. Riehl will update the Task Force at the next meeting.

Community Meeting Feedback – Ms. Gallagher suggested that evaluation forms be available at the Community Meeting for participants to complete in order to get their feedback on how effective the presentation and information sharing was.

In response to a question from Captain Moore, Ms. Riehl stated that Mr. Bergstrom will be at the meeting.

Task Force Extension – In response to a question from Mr. Marinelli, Ms. Riehl confirmed that the Task Force has been extended until October 2023. Regarding the Task Force report to Council, Ms. Riehl opined that it would be presented at the conclusion of the Task Force term. Ms. Souder noted that the original Resolution said the report was due at the conclusion of the Task Force.

Door Hangers – Ms. Riehl noted that volunteers will be needed to distribute door hangers. Door hangers will be distributed to homes in vulnerable neighborhoods such as Buttonwood and Van Dyke Village, and to the homes that were identified in the McBride & Ziegler and TetraTech studies. Mr. Rogers will provide the addresses of homes identified in the two studies. The members agreed that 750 door hangers would be sufficient.

Signage – Signs will be placed at the entrances to vulnerable neighborhoods. The members agreed that 20 signs would be sufficient.

Communications – Ms. Riehl submitted an article to The Weekly advertising the meeting and will put ads in The Weekly for the next two editions.

Public Comment

Phil Gross – 1301 13th Street

Mr. Gross noted that one of the evacuation signs is facing into the flood area into the marsh. He noted that Washington Park, Deemer's Landing, 7th Street and 9th Street feed into Rt. 141 and Washington Street and the natural progression will be heading into a log-jam. Ms. Riehl noted that the almost all egresses of the City are underwater.

Mr. Gross recommended that the Task Force recommend that something be done to halt new construction. Ms. Riehl noted that stopping construction was not in the purview of the Task Force.

Mr. Gross stated that natural grasses should, and must, be used to keep the shoreline protected.

Tom Whitehead

In response to a question from Mr. Whitehead, Mr. Rogers estimated that 200 homes have a first floor elevation of 9 feet and below. Mr. Whitehead opined that any new construction be required to have the floor elevation of between 14-14.5 feet. He stated that you shouldn't think mitigation; you should think about what the cost would be to raise homes in the flood plain and to split the cost between the homeowner and the City. He stated that the floor level of the house is the main thing and that the Task Force should not focus solely on raising the dikes, but should also consider raising the floor elevation of the existing homes. Mr. Whitehead also stated that pumps do work. Mr. Whitehead opined that the Task Force should have an engineer.

Next Meeting Agenda

Ms. Riehl recommended waiting to set the Agenda for the next meeting until the results of the PIFR have been received.

Ms. Gallagher stated that one Agenda item should be to review the evaluation forms from the Community Meeting. Ms. Gallagher volunteered to assist in organizing the evaluation forms.

Ms. Seitz added that follow-up communication should also be part of the Agenda.

Mr. Marinelli volunteered to work on the addresses for door hangers.

Ms. Taylor reached out to Pastor Lee at the church in Buttonwood regarding distributing door hangers, and is waiting for his response.

There being no further business to discuss, the meeting adjourned at 8:31 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathleen R. Weirich
City Stenographer