

East Whatcom Community Council Clean Air Committee

Meeting summary

January 10, 2018

CAC Charge: The charge of the East Whatcom Community Council Clean Air Committee is to work jointly with the Northwest Clean Air Agency to develop a comprehensive, community-based, long-range plan designed to improve the air quality in the East Whatcom County Region.

Chair: Phil Cloward, East Whatcom Community Council

Members: Jerry DeBruin & David Moe, WCFPD #14; John Wolpers, Whatcom County Health Department; Mark Schofield OppCo; Veronica Dearden, Kendall Watch Community Action Group; Viktor Vetkov, Slavic Church; Mark Sniffen, Whatcom County; Julie O'Shaughnessy, NWCAA

Present: Phil Cloward, Jerry DeBruin, Mark Schofield, John Wolpers, Julie O'Shaughnessy

Agenda items:

1. Introductions

Committee members introduced themselves to community member, Richard Whitson, who attended on his behalf and residents of Peaceful Valley.

2. Approval of December 13, 2017 meeting summary

Motion:

- Mark Schofield moved to approve meeting notes.
- Jerry DeBruin seconded the motion.

3. Open public comment

Richard Whitson – Attended as a local resident, Chairman of the Board of the Peaceful Valley Homeowner Association, and as commissioner of the water district. Shared with the committee homeowners' comments and concerns expressed to him regarding the recent air quality burn ban.

Comments and concerns include the following:

- Why is someone taking pictures of my house when I start a fire?
- Why can people on Limestone (outside the UGA) burn all they want?
- There seems to be an inequity in how the ban is implemented and how enforcement occurs.
- What about the bonfire the fire district had? Even though for all the right reasons and not during the ban, it seems unfair.
- Why can my neighbor burn during a burn ban when I can't?
- Why does my neighbor get an exemption just because he can't afford to use another type of heat? He's still polluting the air. They shouldn't have preferential treatment that allows them to burn when we're both sharing the same air shed.
- What is being done about vegetation burning?
- People relate burn ban information to outdoor burning, not to wood stoves.
- Wood burning is my only source of heat. What does NWCAA expect me to do?
- I need to burn and I don't need an exemption. I don't care what you think, I need to stay warm.

Julie – Provided an overview of the different types of burn bans and wood heating exemptions as a framework for the conversation. She also shared lessons learned on how NWCAA may improve the process in the future.

During an air quality advisory, residents are asked to voluntarily use another source of heat, if available, to prevent air quality from getting worse. During a Stage 1 burn ban, burning is only allowed if it's your only source of heat or if your device is certified or is a pellet stove. During a Stage II burn ban (air quality has exceeded the PM2.5 24-hour health-based particulate standard), all burning is banned unless you have a wood-heating exemption.

During a burn ban, if a person does not have a valid wood-heating exemption, NWCAA would not advocate to not burn at the expense of keeping themselves and their families warm and safe. However, as in all situations, the objective is to burn hot and cleanly.

There are 4 different types of exemptions that allow a resident to legally burn during a Stage I & Stage II burn ban. They are: 1) low income, 2) no other adequate source of heat, 3) breakdown of alternative heat source, and 4) one-time, 10 day. Again, an exemption to heat with wood does not exempt a person from the 20% opacity standard.

Residents who submitted an exemption application received a response that their application was received, was currently under review, and that they would be contacted if there were any questions. Upon receipt, the application was considered valid and in effect. The message also reminded them to burn cleanly, check to make sure there is not more than a wisp of smoke coming from their stack, to burn a small hot fire, and don't let fires smolder overnight. To date, a total of approximately 35 exemptions applications have been received.

During the December burn ban event, inspectors started chimney observations when air quality reached unhealthful levels (Stage II – burning allowed only with an exemption). Opacity readings were taken and photos were used for informational purposes only. Inspector's wood smoke observations were divided into two categories; smoke which was 35% opacity or less, and; smoke which was 40% opacity or more.

A letter was sent to the 43 residents observed to have "less" smoke. The letter referenced that burning was observed at their residence during a Stage 2 burn ban, that burning during a Stage II burn ban is only allowed with an exemption, and that more information on exemptions and burning cleanly could be found on our website.

A chimney smoke warning was issued to 32 residents observed to have "more" smoke. The warning referenced that burning was observed at their residence during a Stage 2 burn ban and required them to take corrective actions (don't burn during a burn ban, burn the right way, review exemption information, apply for exemption if appropriate).

NWCAA made a deliberate decision not to issue violations or fines in response to this first burn ban. Instead, a continued outreach and educational approach was viewed to be more appropriate and productive.

NWCAA has internally reviewed the process of calling a burn ban and is identifying ways to improve the process in the future. These include placing sandwich boards at all Columbia Valley entrances, in front the fire department and the resource center to help reach people not on social media; refine the exemption application and approval process where necessary; and, review and refine messaging content where appropriate. In addition, NWCAA will consider other changes and revisions that support improvements to community communication and transparent expectations.

Jerry – The main issue is that everyone needs to learn to burn cleanly whether the stove is old or new. Burning cleanly can help prevent air quality issues.

Phil – Questions the monitor's results and the calling of a burn ban because air pollution levels look low during the day and the reader board at the fire department indicates high levels. Exemptions should be based on the fact that I'm going to burn wood and it's my

responsibility to burn cleanly and if I'm not burning cleanly then fine me. There is a feeling that the valley is targeted unfairly because there is no smoke.

Mark Schofield – Asked in what way residents feel targeted.

Phil – Because there is no evidence of pollution in the air.

Richard – Neighbors feel there is an inequity because some residents can burn legally via a low-income exemption, but others that can afford to pay the propane bill are held to a higher standard and can't use their stove.

Jerry – Asked what the neighbors who have this perspective would like to have happen; that their neighbor is cold or that everyone is allowed to burn?

Richard – The general rationale is probably to let everyone burn. The UGA boundaries determine whether or not someone can legally burn outdoor fires and being close to that boundary compounds the inequity issue on wood stoves. It's also still unclear exactly what a Stage II ban means in regard to using or not using a stove, and staying warm or freezing.

John – It seems it's an educational issue if residents have still have questions regarding UGA boundaries and what is allowed.

Phil – We've made some really good progress and we did not have air quality issue, then the burn ban was called. People are calling because, in their opinion, air quality levels they are experiencing don't warrant the calling of a burn ban.

Julie – Air quality trends that get worse at night when people are home and building fires, then typically improves during the day is fairly typical. The challenge is that even though the cycle goes up and down, the baseline continues to increase as particulate continues to build up.

Phil - Firmly believes, as do other residents, that the monitor is in the wrong place and that the monitor does not fairly represent the air quality of the entire UGA and that the monitor should be moved to a different location that is more representative of the entire valley. Perhaps the clubhouse could be the new location. Phil strongly requests that this be taken under consideration by NWCAA and that NWCAA staff needs to evaluate the location of the current monitor.

Jerry – Asked if NWCAA has the ability to do mobile monitoring.

Julie – NWCAA does not have mobile monitors. However, our monitoring staff person has purchased two small, less sophisticated monitors which will be co-located with our current monitor to see if they can replicate measurements. Is confident that our air monitoring person has located the monitor in the best available location to reflect air quality in the valley and that it is functioning properly and has been properly quality controlled and quality checked.

Jerry – Perhaps the mobile monitors can be used to take readings in different areas of the valley once their reliability is determined to see if there is a lot of variation in air quality.

Julie – Is also interested in how these monitors may be used in the future to determine air quality and acknowledges that more information may be helpful.

John - Said it may be helpful if residents suggest potential sites for consideration so that it's a more inclusive siting process. Communication and trust seem to still be an issue. We need to make sure people understand why one person can burn and another can't.

Julie – The implementation of a burn ban can be a bumpy road because it is new and may feel punitive. However, there is hope that because we've been systematic and transparent, residents will understand why an air quality burn ban is being called and will eventually support them.

Richard - Appreciates having information and talking points to share with the community he represents.

4. Announcements – none

5. Wood shed status update

Phil – Wood sheds will be delivered on Saturday, January 20 and is looking for a trailer. Made arrangements with the Men's Club to help with deliveries. In total, it appears that 18 sheds are left.

6. Biomass committee update

Phil – The committee is meeting with the Port of Bellingham on January 16 to give a presentation on the pellet mill project. The Port is supportive of the project and interested in how many jobs this project may create.

The wood bank will start distributing wood before next heating season. Looking for people to work at the wood bank.

Mark Schofield – Inquired about the status of the proposed boiler project.

Phil – The proposed project is still under review.

7. Summary of 2017/recent air quality

Julie – Provided a spreadsheet summary of PM 2.5 24-hour averages ug/m3 in the Columbia Valley since November 2009. There have been 5 days with particulate levels that were unhealthy, and 8 days with particulate levels that were unhealthy for sensitive groups this winter-heating season.

8. Burn ban communications update

Seth will provide update next meeting upon his return.