

East Whatcom Community Council Clean Air Committee
Meeting summary
April 11, 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, John Wolpers, Mark Schofield, Aly Robinson (OppCo), Mark Sniffen, Seth Preston, Julie O'Shaughnessy

Agenda items:

1. Introductions – No introductions necessary – only committee members present.

2. Approval of February 14, 2018 meeting summary

Motion:

- Mark Sniffen moved to approve meeting notes.
- Phil Cloward seconded the motion as moved.

3. Open public comment – None – only committee members present.

4. Announcements – No announcements.

5. Wood shed status update

Phil – Still have 10 sheds at Mount Baker High School to deliver. Have been challenged coordinating the school's schedule and Phil's availability. Will work to complete deliveries when schedules and delivery volunteers are available.

6. Biomass committee update

Phil – Continuing to make progress with Whatcom County and the Port of Bellingham on activating the light industrial area on Limestone Road. The first focus is the development of a pellet mill facility.

7. Highlights of the "National Residential Wood Smoke Conference" and recent meetings

Conference:

Julie – The national conference was attended by a wide variety of individuals, including First Nations, federal, state and local agencies and private wood-heating vendors. A few "take-aways" were: 1) Many areas throughout our country are experiencing similar challenges in their efforts to improve air quality and reduce wintertime smoke from solid fuel burning: 2) There is not one easy solution. Working towards a solution takes significant resources, time, money and energy to create a lasting cultural shift. 3) It's critical to connect and build relationships with community members. This means listening to concerns, input and feedback. 4) Dry fuel and proper wood storage is very important. The wood shed program is a very effective and practical component of wood smoke reduction strategy. 5)

Educational information and tools (EPA Burn Wise materials, moisture meters, wood stove thermometers and fire starters) provide meaningful assistance with proper burning techniques.

Oakridge, Oregon, a small town with a significant PM2.5 air quality issue, used a unique approach to improve air quality by changing out 200 stoves in 2009 and installing a ductless heat pump and weatherization for each of these households. An additional 69 “priority” households have been identified for the next round of change-outs. These homes will also receive the same combination of a new solid-fuel heating devices, a ductless heat pump and weatherization. The local electric company funded the ductless heat pumps and reduces/writes-off residential electricity costs for qualifying households on days when an air quality burn ban is in place. Outreach is done in a focused and systematic manner so that residents who will benefit from cleaner burning resources the most receive priority.

Fairbanks regulations requires residents to have adequate dry wood storage if applying for a wood-heating exemption.

Mark Sniffen – Was surprised that health was not a significant motivator to burn cleanly (Missoula, Montana). Fairbanks changed out over 2,000 wood-heating devices. Did they change-out to heat pumps?

Julie – The Missoula, Montana, replacement program found that cultural and financial considerations were more important than health. In Fairbanks, change-outs were mostly wood-to-wood. The units in Alaska are typically much large than we see here and are essentially furnaces.

Recent meetings:

Prior to the conference, Julie met with OppCo colleagues to investigate the possibility of PSE’s participation in funding ductless heat pumps as part of what NWCAA views a top-tier system (a new solid-fuel burning device, a ductless heat pump and weatherization). OppCo staff will contact PSE to see if they’re able and willing to fund ductless heat pumps. NWCAA’s primary objective for future change-outs will be top-tier systems.

Julie is working with OppCo staff to determine the number of change-out commitments to include in the next Ecology grant cycle which will end June 2019. All new wood stoves installed by vendors participating in this program must meet federal 2020 PM2.5 emission limits. Emphasis will be on the installation of “top-tier” packets that includes new wood stove or pellet stove along with a heat pump and weatherization.

8. Outreach/community event ideas – community disposal (dumpsters, vouchers & outreach regarding mandatory pickup)

Julie – Still open and searching for new ways to connect with community members to improve air quality. Want to make sure that residents have the tools necessary, whether it’s a new wood/pellet stove in conjunction with a heat pump, moisture meter, stove thermometer, etc. The challenge is still how to reach people we’ve not yet connected with and to connect in a more meaningful way with residents we have.

Julie has evaluated existing information gathered through community and outreach events and has developed a “focused outreach” list. The intent is to deepen the connection and check back in with people who have participated in any aspect of the change-out program and outreach events. Ninety-eight residents were identified to have high smoke emissions. From this list, 25 residents were contacted by our agency on two or more occasions because of their emissions or had a wood-heating exemption (other than a 10-day, 1-time exemption). For high emission burners, the question is how we can help them. For exemption households that will be allowed to burn during a ban, again the question is how we can help them burn cleanly. The intent of the focused outreach is to make our efforts more effective and focus on priority households.

At the last meeting the possibility of holding a large-scale community cleanup event by providing dumpsters for debris and clean green material was discussed. After considering discussion points, hearing back from several community members, talking to several cities and disposal companies, the project is put on indefinite hold. This type of event is very labor intensive and requires a lot of planning and organization. If an event of this type is held in the future it will need to be spearheaded by community members with NWCAA acting in a secondary support role. A major cleanup event is unlikely because it is so resource intensive and because there is concern that it would not result in a long-term change.

Julie also met with the Whatcom County Health Department about a potential "voucher" program which would pay for material disposal on a one-time-basis. At this point, there is no program in place and the health department is continuing to investigate ways to possibly implement such a program.

John – Spoke with the WCHD Solid Waste Supervisor regarding the possibility of contacting local residents about mandatory garbage pickup requirements. WCHD is responsible for enforcement and has also taken over the Public Works portion of solid waste. Realistically, with staffing resources available to address current responsibilities, specifically efforts in Point Roberts, it would be very difficult and very time consuming to add this to the list. It's not that it can't be done, it's a matter of putting it on the list and prioritizing.

John also discussed the voucher program with the solid waste supervisor and it is something that could possibly be done in the future, county-wide where necessary. The program's purpose will be to establish rapport with residents and provide them with a one-time voucher to dispose of accumulated debris. Any future debris will then be properly disposed of on a regular basis by the resident.

John reinforced the concern that a large cleanup event is unlikely because it's very resource intensive and doesn't result in a long-term change.

Julie – There is a perception that emissions from illegal outdoor fires is a contributor to poor winter-time air quality. How to address illegal residential burning has been brought up internally by NWCAA.

Dave Moe, WCFD14, provided Julie with a summary of the number of illegal outside fires responded to annually between 2015 and 2018. On average, the fire department responds to 80+ outside fires. Most of these are first-time burners. There are less than five habitual burners. Illegal fires consist mostly of yard cleanup fires (sticks, leaves, and brush) versus garbage fires. Other illegal fires include the burning of construction and demolition debris.

9. Burn ban communications update

Seth – Rethinking and refocusing on ways to reach the community. It's been very difficult getting new releases published in the Bellingham Herald. There was continued contact during the fire season, but very little to none during burning season. KGMI radio has been responsive in communicating news releases. The challenge is to connect with the appropriate media for Columbia Valley topics since there is no one station or paper that specific to this community. That is why Facebook has been the most productive.

The focus going forward the next few months is to look at new tools. The sandwich board signs are now ready and available to use. NWCAA will have an internal meeting to evaluate this winter-heating season's approach and make changes where necessary through lessons learned to have a more effective "season" next year.

Julie – NWCAA implemented several new wood-heating/burn ban components this year and we are evaluating ways to improve the process. This includes monitoring, putting the signs out, how to communicate, what to communicate, staff mobilization, staff follow-up, etc. We

will also review the wood-heating exemption process and appropriate messaging at key times. For example, in the spring post season wood now for next year. The objective is to create a calendar year of standard messaging because every year is a winter-heating season year.

Jerry – Said that talking about next year’s wood supply now is a good idea because generally speaking people burned a lot more wood this year by an average of 1-2 cords because of the long, cold winter.

Phil – Used wood that typically would not be needed until next year, but had enough seasoned wood to burn. Many neighbors also had adequate supply of seasoned wood available. Thinks there has been progress in improving air quality in the valley. The bad thing about the exemptions is that within a day it was general information throughout the community that all you had to do was call NWCAA for one.

Mark Schofield – Commented that not many people applied for an exemption (approximately 30).

Phil – Community members have noticed and mentioned to Phil that the same people are the ones with heavy chimney smoke.

Julie – Responded that if addresses are provided, then something can be done; outreach at a minimum. Through information gathered by NWCAA inspectors, heavy and repeat “smokers” have been identified as part of the focused outreach effort.

Jerry – Agrees that there are some households that have consistent high levels of smoke and that the easiest way to eliminate human error is to say no burning on days when air quality is bad. Although it may be unfair and punish people who burn cleanly, it would be the ultimate way to avoid heavy emissions during burn ban days.

10. Air quality and complaint update

Julie – There were 18 days this heating season that exceeded the PM_{2.5} 35ug/m³, 24-hour standard. Weather patterns resulted in an increased number of cold and still days especially in December and as late as March. We have not experienced this number of poor air quality days since 2013. Although it feels discouraging to Julie, she also acknowledges a positive shifts in community air quality awareness and burning habits.

Two different summaries of PM 2.5 air quality data were provided; one for the wood-heating season and the second summary based on calendar years.

Phil – Commented that in regard to wood-heating exemptions on “red days,” it’s really the responsibility of people burning to burn cleanly. Burn bans and regulations get in the way. The focus should be on burning cleanly. If a person can burn cleanly, don’t worry about it. But if you don’t and you smoke, you pay. No exceptions, no warnings. On days that exceed the PM standard, if people are smoking, they get a ticket. We make these rules then come up with all these exceptions. Wood-heating exemptions are an enabler.

Julie – Responded that NWCAA is responsible for enforcing the state rule which requires that a burn ban be called during periods of impaired air quality and that wood-heating exemptions are also part of the regulations, but that the exemption does not allow a person to emit heavy smoke. Realistically speaking, what Phil described is essentially what will happened. Because of staffing limitations, the violations that are going to be issued will be during a stage II burn ban for stoves that have heavy smoke.

Mark Sniffen – Shared that in an effort to increase efficiency with limited staff, a virtual inspection program has been implemented and has been very effective. Perhaps using this

approach with complaints and heavily smoking chimneys is a possibility. Social media may be an effective tool also.

Seth – Social media has been one of the most effective ways to connect with the community. NWCAA utilizes Facebook consistently and connects with the EWRRC and KendallWatch and asks them to “share” information.