

MINUTES FOR FALL WCGN BUSINESS MEETING
October 27, 2021, 7:00 PM, on Zoom

Marjorie Russell called the meeting to order about 7:10, after Bob Lane, with the assistance of Roberta Moore, initiated the Zoom session and had the visuals ready for screen-sharing. Marjorie mentioned some housekeeping details related to having our first virtual general meeting.

She welcomed newcomers, and encouraged everyone to make sure to be signed up for the monthly newsletter, to visit WCGN's web site, and – if interested – to get onto NextDoor West Central Germantown.

Before starting the evening's business, she conveyed the sad news of the recent death of long-time neighborhood activist and friend Sue Finch.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS

Bob explained how to use an online poll to vote on the following slate of officers, as recommended by the nominating committee Luke Russell and Russell Fulton:

President – Marjorie Russell

VP 1 – Luke Smith

VP 2 – Suzanne Ponsen

Secretary – Russell Fulton

Treasurer – Johan de Jong

- Please note that committee chairs are also board members:
Bob Lane, Massoud Mohadjeri, Roberta Moore

The slate was voted in – 18 out of 20 in favor, 2 abstentions.

ADOPTION OF MINUTES, JANUARY 2020 MEETING

Standing in for Russell Fulton, Marjorie obtained approval for the January 2020 minutes, which are on web site. She recalled that at that Potluck, we celebrated the new stop light at Tulpehocken and Wayne by enjoying Jenny Anne Horst-Martz's cupcakes decorated with traffic lights.

TREASURY

Treasurer Johan de Jong reported that FY 2020-21 (a year of pandemic) was very quiet, both in terms of expenses and income, so it was financially neutral.

The current FY is more complicated, owing to a decision to challenge the Mosaic development plan for the property adjacent to the train station by hiring legal and other professional services to represent us before the ZBA. Fortunately, we have a sum set aside in our bank account for just such a circumstance, but we have now spent a couple thousand dollars on this already, and expect more of these fees as we move forward, especially if we go the next step(s) following appeals.

Accordingly, Connie, Luke R, and Marjorie have conducted a targeted fundraising campaign with a goal of \$10,000, which is going very well.

Recently we held a good yard sale generating about \$1,300, a substantial contribution to our annual operating expenses, but we also need to have more regular donations we can count on. E.g. monthly withdrawals, even if only \$5.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Roberta Moore reported on the first event hosted by WCGN since the beginning of COVID – a Yard Sale held in the Aulenbach parking lot on October 2, from 7:30 – 1:00. WCGN worked in a successful partnership with Christ Church and St Michael's and another religious group called Circle of Hope. WCGN earned about \$1400 from the event, and would like to repeat this arrangement in the future. She thanked the many who helped, especially Gloria Greer.

Meanwhile, she needs new volunteers to be on her committee!

HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMITTEE

This is a new committee being formed by Russell Fulton in the face of current and anticipated development that is unsympathetic to the character of our neighborhood.

One goal of this committee will be to learn more about the history of our neighborhood, especially the areas not yet researched – e.g. Price-Knox – and especially during the 19th century.

The other goal will be to identify and preserve historic properties vulnerable to demolition. There are two ways to approach this goal, through zoning designation and through having properties placed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

Recently the rezoning task force identified a couple of especially vulnerable properties. Thanks to the generosity of some individuals, those properties have now been researched and nominated to be on the Register. The Committee will identify more such properties, and it will pursue the idea of having WCGN pay for some of these nominations. In these efforts the History and Heritage Committee will be coordinating with Oscar Beisert of the Keeping Society of Philadelphia, as well as Councilwoman Bass and PCPC.

GARDEN COMMITTEE

Marjorie announced the fall work day: Saturday November 13, 10-1.

REZONING TASK FORCE

Marjorie read this summary of the process of WCGN's Rezoning Task Force:

As a part of its overall plan to guide development in Phila – which they called Philadelphia2035 – Ian Hegarty of the City Planning Commission came to us in January of 2020 with a proposed remapping of our part of the city. The intention was to give us about a month to respond with feedback, after which they would revise their proposal and present it to the larger community “Germantown North”. COVID was our friend, in that it gave us much needed time to think about this proposal.

Connie Winters spearheaded researching every property in WCGN, and thinking about possible ramifications of the proposed changes. She was aided in this by several others including Suzanne Ponsen, Massoud Mohadjeri, Mike Ramos, and Johan de Jong. Johan agreed to chair this task force and he did a wonderful job. Over the summer of 2021 the group examined their research and decided on which rezoning assignments to challenge. Suzanne made up spreadsheets of these and Johan composed a letter to the city detailing the reasons for our challenges.

Once WCGN submitted this letter – on September 9 - along with Suzanne’s exhibits, PCPC held a small virtual meeting of a “community partner advisory group”: one or two representatives from each of several civic organizations in the Germantown North area. In that meeting Ian summarized WCGN’s feedback and sought additional comments. After that, PCPC adjusted their proposal, giving us about 80% of what we had asked for. Then on October 7 Ian held an all-community meeting – for all the residents in the North Germantown district. During this meeting, many of the task force requests were seconded by members of the community.

The next phase of the process involves having our councilperson Cindy Bass present the proposal draft to City Council. Therefore, our requests for changes need to be approved by her as well as by the PCPC. As we were about to begin this negotiating phase, Johan asked to be relieved of the task of chairing the committee and Suzanne Ponsen has agreed to take it on.

WCGN intends to seek the other 20% (with some stated priorities). Since the public meeting, Suzanne and others had a conference call with Cindy Bass which went very well. The councilwoman expressed her desire to support us and promised that she would not introduce any new map to Council until we were satisfied.

After some email exchanges, Ian and the PCPC have made further adjustments, the details of which we are still waiting to see.

To show the extent of the work of this Task Force, Massoud exhibited a chart that indicates exactly which properties WCGN and the city still do not see eye to eye on.

Suzanne pointed out that the area the city is calling North Germantown comprises much more than what is encompassed by WCGN’s boundaries, and also that there are a couple of portions within our boundaries about which we were not given information, e.g. the south side of Rittenhouse Street.

Suzanne also explained the rationale behind not wanting up-zoning in many cases, even when current use would seem to warrant it. She gave as examples many buildings that were originally single-family homes and have since been broken up into a few apartments, while continuing to support the historic appearance of the neighborhood. If they are zoned multi-family, developers will have a free ride to demolish them and build large apartment buildings. If they are not, developers will have to appeal to the city for variances, in which case neighbors can have a say in what happens.

Connie said she thought it was still important to push for the last 20%.

Suzanne explained that WCGN is only one portion of what the city is calling North Germantown, and our comments did not apply to the rest. She added that our main theme has been to point out that we are not against multi-family housing, but that our neighborhood already has a lot of it, through variances, that has not destroyed its historic look.

Connie suggested our process could be used as a template for other neighborhoods in the city.

Adam Kiliszek kindly offered to help us whenever we need zoning information that is difficult to find, since as a real estate agent he has access to more sources.

Suzanne brought up our plan to develop an infrastructure of block contacts. Also that WCGN has joined Philadelphia Crosstown Coalition, an organization that connects RCOs in the city.

ZONING AND LAND USE

Marjorie mentioned two disappointments during COVID, where ZBA rubber-stamped the developer, ignoring neighbor protests about irregularities: 52 W Washington Lane and 15 W Rittenhouse. These are in contrast to WCGN's successfully fighting a land use case on 101-5 Cheltenham Ave by hiring a lawyer to represent us.

In June Luke Smith stepped down as Zoning chair, after serving in that role beautifully for 10 years, and the Board has appointed Bob Lane and Massoud Mohadjeri as co-chairs and RCO representatives to the city.

Bob spoke about their plans moving forward as being "pro-active".

They intend to establish a list of people whereby someone is committed to connecting to each block in the neighborhood.

They intend to monitor public information sources like YIMBY, local newspapers, newsletters, etc.

And Bob added that everyone in WCGN is welcome at zoning committee meetings, which take place on the first Wednesday of every month. He then listed the 11 named members on the core committee – the ones with voting rights on matters such as RCO protocols. Besides himself and Massoud, they are: Johan de Jong, Russell Fulton, Eve Gentieu, Phil Kane, Walter King, Suzanne Ponsen, Mike Ramos, Steve Smith, and Connie Winters.

Luke Smith reported on the proposed development of the triangular wooded area across from the Tulpehocken Train Station by the firm Mosaic Partners. He gave a brief history of the process, and explained some of the details involved in our challenges, including the fact that SEPTA had not yet granted Mosaic an easement to use Station Drive and seemed as though they might be supportive in our push for a reduction in the project's size and scale. He also provided an update on the current status, which is that the ZBA has not ruled on whether to give them the variance they need. [Unfortunately, as of this writing, the ZBA has granted Mosaic the variance they requested, with a proviso regarding safety on Station Drive.]

OLD BUSINESS

Women's Y: Marjorie mentioned that Yvonne Haskins is trying to initiate a grassroots push to get the city to remove KBK as the developer designated to rehab the Women's Y and reopen bidding, since nothing has happened in 6 years.

With the announcement of the next scheduled business meeting, January 26, the meeting was adjourned at about 8:40.