

**Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission  
Regional Policy Advisory Committee Meeting  
Meeting Minutes  
SPC Offices – Terminal Building & Cisco WebEx Meeting  
February 26, 2024  
2 p.m.**

Members present were: Arthur Cappella, Douglas Chew, Mark Critz, Pat Fabian, Sheila Gombita, Mark Gordon, Robin Gorman, Robert Griffin, Sherene Hess, Dusty Elias Kirk, Ann Ogoreuc, Leslie Osche, Mark Rafail, Mavis Rainey, Jason Rigone, Anthony Shea, Byron Stauffer, Jason Theakston and Vince Vicites

Others: Sara Harvey, Fayette County Planning; Ernest Raiakone, Allegheny County; Barb Warwick, Pittsburgh City Council; John Timney, Washington County Authority; Brandon Leach, PennDOT; Beth Cron, Michael Baker International; and Meg Rodgers, Michael Baker International;

Staff: Rich Fitzgerald, Kirk Brethauer, Leann Chaney, Faith Collins, Ronda Craig, Dominic D'Andrea, Linda Duffy, Chuck Imbrogno, Lillie Gabreski, Jenn Lasser, Caitlin O'Conner, Jeremy Papay, DJ Ryan, Ailisa Sobien, Josh Spano, and Sara Walfoort

1. Welcome/Introductions

Chairman Pat Fabian called the meeting to order and asked everyone to introduce themselves.

2. Action on minutes from the December 11, 2023 meeting

Mark Rafail moved to approve the minutes of the December 11, 2023 meeting and Byron Stauffer seconded. The motion carried.

3. Update on the Save the Allegheny River Initiative (STAR) – DJ Ryan, Director of Strategic Initiatives and Policy

**Preserving the Allegheny River's water levels.**

- Regional organizations partner to save Allegheny River from potential lock and dam hours reduction.
  - Big trouble with moving freight or recreational watercraft up and down the river
- Updates the group on efforts to preserve levels of service on the Allegheny River, including a letter from Congressman Reschenthaler and a resolution to endorse Senator Casey's Waterways Act.
  - Congressman Reschenthaler reached out to Army Corps of Engineers and informed them of his desire to see our levels of service preserved
  - Army Corps of Engineers' response tries to reassure Congressman Reschenthaler that they are going to consider recreational users and they're going to consider the impact to the economy.
  - Senator Casey's proposed Waterways Act is a bill to establish a task force on waterways to create diversification on the Monongahela, Allegheny and Ohio River Corridor.
- Discusses the Interagency Working Group on coal and powerplant communities' taskforce to improve waterway freight use and connect projects to funding opportunities, with support from local partners.

**Waterway legislation with bipartisan support.**

- Discusses the importance of resolutions for the Allegheny River, highlighting the impact of freight, recreation, and flooding on local communities.
- Emphasizes the need for the SPC to pass a resolution supporting legislation to address these issues, citing the potential for \$5 million to \$10 million in funding over 10 years.

- Expresses appreciation for bipartisan support of waterways issues, citing full delegation signatures on letter to General Spellman.
  - Mr. Ryan stated that he is a lot more comfortable going for resolution knowing that this has bipartisan or support on both sides of the aisle, if that makes sense. I know it's an election year, I was going to throw it out there. Senator Casey's running for office. Right. But at the same time, we've been talking about these waterways since I've been in office. But at the same time, I think it looks like it's everything I'm hearing and the debate is pretty bipartisan ship in the support.
  - DJ Ryan – There are a lot of differing opinions in Washington. But the one thing that has been really refreshing is when it comes to these waterways issues. Everything we've been doing has had full bipartisan support. The letter that was sent to General Spellman and I think, every member of the southwestern Pennsylvania federal delegation signed on to it. In this effort we've been talking with every member of Congress's office about this, and everybody's been on board. So this is one that doesn't seem to have a partisan lien to it.
- Questions whether resolutions have ever endorsed specific legislation, with little recall of such an instance.
- Committee members discuss and vote on a resolution to support a water resources development act.
  - Commissioner Osche recommends letting the minutes reflect the discussion on the resolution.
  - Regional Policy Committee recommends to the Commission to support Casey's resolution

Mark Rafail moved to recommend Resolution 2-24 to the Executive Committee and full Commission to endorse Senator Casey's resolution for a proposed Waterways Act. Robin Gorman seconded. The motion carried.

4. Updates on recent grant awards and forthcoming grant opportunities – DJ Ryan, Director of Strategic Initiatives and Policy

**Transportation grants and projects in Pittsburgh.**

- The Allegheny County Regional Navigation Program has received over \$500,000 in grant funding for a Vision Zero Pilot Program and is working on applications for additional grants.
  - Hope to use as template for other counties
  - Spike Funding
  - Safe Streets for all
- The program has also received \$142.9 million in discretionary grant funding for active traffic management systems, arterial management, and bridge repairs on the parkway east and east busway.
  - Bathtub
- Secretary Pete Buttigieg visits Pittsburgh to announce grant, sparking excitement among staff.
- Bridge Investment Program
  - Karns Crossing in Butler County
  - Electric Charging
  - Stormwater opportunities

5. Briefing About the Regional Digital Navigator Program Model (Broadband) – Beth Crow, Public Engagement Manager, and Meghan Rodgers, Senior Public Engagement Specialist (Michael Baker International)

**Digital equity and navigation in Pennsylvania.**

- Beth Crow and Megan Rogers of Michael Baker International discuss their work with the Southern Pennsylvania Communications (SPC) on a digital navigator project to close the digital divide in the region.

Beth Crow:

- In 2022, Michael Baker was hired by SPC to create a connectivity roadmap for the region, involving diverse regional partners to address access to devices and online opportunities for education, job placement, and rural health.
- Rural communities prioritize healthcare and connectivity, with limited access to digital resources.
- Discusses a program with SPC to bridge the digital divide in the region, involving member counties and partners.
  - SPC helps people/businesses apply for grants
  - Jennifer Blatz expert on digital navigation and Bob Gradek, University of Pittsburgh
- Efforts are underway to collect data on digital navigation programs and assets in the state, including a conversation with the United Way of Pennsylvania.

Megan Rodgers:

**Digital equity tool development in southwestern Pennsylvania.**

- Developed asset mapping tool in ArcGIS to serve as central resource for information on entities in southwestern Pennsylvania.
- Partners can filter digital navigator programs by county, population, and demographics in southwestern Pennsylvania. SPC aims to develop a tool for partners to compare curriculum and resources.

**Digital equity partnerships and surveys.**

- Discusses a survey and marketing tools for digital equity, with a list of 36 partner organizations.
- Suggests adding more organizations to the list, and Jen Blatz provides input on who to send the survey to.
  - Requests for more partners from Committee Members
  - SPC's Library Network
  - Mavis Rainey suggested CDCs
- Mentions digital literacy programs and digital navigator programs happening in various locations, including libraries and senior centers, and encourages help in reaching more people in the SPC footprint.
- Discusses computer reach's work in digital navigation and their involvement in a session at the Greater Pittsburgh nonprofit partnership conference, with a heated discussion about an elected official not being made aware of the work.

6. Message from the Executive Director – Rich Fitzgerald

- Next Meeting Date **Monday—April 22, 2024**

**SPC initiatives and events for county commissioners.**

- The Southern Pennsylvania Commission (SPC) will host an orientation for new commissioners and others to introduce the organization's initiatives and priorities.
- The SPC will also attend meetings and events in various counties to support economic development, transportation, and other initiatives.
- Requests from organizations and companies for workers at Job Fairs

7. Adjourn

Art Capella moved to adjourn the meeting and Byron Stauffer seconded. The meeting adjourned at 2:45 p.m.