JUNEAU COMMISSION ON AGING

City & Borough of Juneau

Minutes of Regular Meeting

September 8, 2016

CALL TO ORDER

The Commission met at the Senior Center. Chair VandeCastle called the meeting to order at 1:15 p.m. Other members present were: Eileen Hosey, Mary Lou Spartz, Ric Iannolino, and Christine Blackgoat. Also attending was Marie Darlin.

DECLARATION OF QUORUM; APPROVAL OF MINUTES; AGENDA APPROVAL; NEW MEMBER INTRODUCTION

It was declared that a quorum of members was present. Minutes of the Commission's June and July meetings were approved. The meeting agenda was approved. Newly appointed member Christine Blackgoat introduced herself. She is a recently retired nurse. She has a special interest in housing options for seniors. She recently attended a conference on cohousing in Salt Lake City. Cohousing is a type of housing development that got started in California in the 1960s, with clusters of privately-owned individual units sharing common facilities, green space, etc. Christine has toured some cohousing developments in Salt Lake City and southern California. Some provide for caregivers to live in the development for free while they help residents who are recovering from surgery or otherwise in need of home care. They also offer guest housing for visiting family members. Christine said that Alaska's first cohousing project is being built in Anchorage.

PRESENTATION BY CBJ FINANCE DIRECTOR BOB BARTHOLOMEW

CBJ Finance Director Bob Bartholomew presented the Commission with an interim report on the results of the changes in the Borough's senior sales tax exemption program which went into effect on January 1, 2016. The changes narrowed the types of purchases eligible for a sales tax exemption. Bob reported that there have been a few bumps with the grocery stores. Three of them have automated the calculation of the tax: Costco and the two IGA stores. To date, Fred Meyer and Safeway have not; customers there have to pay twice (for taxed and untaxed items). Stores are using the SNAP ("food stamps" program) definition of items eligible for the exemption.

Low-income seniors (those with incomes of $37,000 or less for a one-person household, $50,000 or less for a two-person household, etc.) may apply for an annual $325 rebate. The first rebate application cycle is complete. July 1st was the deadline. However, because a number of seniors were unaware of the deadline, Bob has told the sales tax office to continue taking applications. The application is available online. A copy of the applicant's federal tax return must be submitted with the application.

Mary Lou asked when the rebate is to be issued. Bob said he estimates that the rebate checks will be disbursed on September 19th this year. They must be issued by September 30th. So far, 267 individuals have applied for the rebates; 208 have been approved. There is an appeal process, but currently it requires a $500 fee and goes to the Assembly. Bob is proposing an ordinance change

in which there would be no fee for an appeal, and it would go first to the City Treasurer, with the next level of appeal to the Sales Tax Board of Appeals. For now, appeals have been placed on hold for four to six weeks until the process can be changed.

Of those who have applied for a rebate this year and been denied, most were over-income. Some had missing information and others' applications were received late. About half of these people have been notified of the denial. The remainder will be informed by early next week.

Bob forecasts that, with the deadline extension, there will be about 600 rebates issued this year. Next year they will promote the rebate availability in the Senior Voice, local newspaper, etc. For this year, late applications will probably be approved at the Treasurer level.

Bob estimated that the change in the senior sales tax exemption will bring in an additional $1.2 million per year to the City. Also an increase in the number of cruise passengers (forecast at two percent but actually up five percent this year) will make a difference.

From July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016, the City took in $500,000 more than was budgeted – but the State budget took $4 million away! Tonight the Assembly is meeting to propose ways to fill the gap. They had not proposed any program cuts for FY 17, but probably will do so for FY 18. They will be prioritizing programs. There may be a role for this group (the Juneau Commission on Aging) in this process.

Christine noted that North Dakota's economy crashed after oil companies pulled out, causing dramatic changes in government services. Bob replied that it is still early in the cycle here, and we're not seeing a downturn yet, although some jobs have been moved to Anchorage, so there are fewer jobs here. The Governor has noted that the state needs a fiscal plan. Municipalities need to know ahead of time what they are facing. "We need a plan."

Bob said it's likely that the State's senior property tax exemption will come back up for discussion in the legislature. Some want to make it optional for local communities. Bob thinks that if such a change were to occur, Juneau would not move to change the property tax exemption for seniors.

PRESENTATION BY CBJ HOUSING DIRECTOR SCOTT CIAMBOR

The Commission also welcomed the CBJ Housing Director, Scott Ciambor, for a report on current housing issues in the Borough.

Scott said he moved here ten years ago from Maryland. He has a teaching background. He became aware that six of ten kids at Yakoosge had no housing. He himself lived in a basement for four years. He became involved in the Homeless Coalition, finding that many of the homeless needed medical help in addition to a place to stay. He did street outreach looking for the chronic homeless, which led to the Housing First project now underway. He helped with getting a consistent annual count of the local homeless population and helped start Project Homeless Connect. Scott estimates there are about 530 homeless people in Juneau.

The seriously mentally ill and those involved in substance abuse were not coming to outreach events like Project Homeless Connect, so they did outreach surveys on the street. There are about 55 people in this group, most in the 40 to 55 age range. Many homeless mentally ill people never make it to their senior years.

Scott for the Alaska Mental Health Board for four years, dealing with state level housing and homeless issues. He returned to Juneau in April for this job in the City Manager's office.

Last Monday he and Beth McKinnon from the Community Development Department presented a housing action plan to the Committee of the Whole. It provides a foundation of information on Juneau housing needs, and outlines nine areas of action.

The CBJ has an affordable housing fund, which started with $800,000 (now $490,000). This funding can be used for capital or operating expenses by developers. Also, with accessory apartments now allowed by local code, homeowners can get $6,000 to help build accessory apartments on their property. Twelve such grants have been applied for, and people are adding these apartments. A mobile home down payment assistance fund is also being set up.

True North Federal Credit Union now has started doing mobile home financing.

The goal is to grow the affordable housing fund so that the Borough can do more intervention. The original money came from a loan paid back to the City, which was sitting in a fund and nobody was aware of it. The affordable housing fund hasn't yet been looked at really comprehensively. That is the next step.

Christine suggested that it would be a good idea to publicize such funds and foundations for seniors to leave their property to.

Scott noted that the Juneau Community Foundation has made a substantial contribution to the community. It now oversees the CBJ's social services block grants. These go to help with homelessness, substance abuse, hospice care, etc.

The Borough has an Affordable Housing Commission now, as well as the position Scott now fills, which is to create a housing focus, pulling all housing-related activities and information together. A housing plan has not yet been adopted, so there currently is no scorecard to measure progress.

With regard to assisted living, Scott notes that we are limited to the beds available at the Juneau Pioneer Home. As beds become available, they are offered to the next person on the wait list who can be cared for there. Unfortunately, money to develop new assisted living facilities just isn't there, either from the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority or the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation. There is an AHFC senior housing fund, but it is funded at a minimal level. The governor is being pushed to develop a strategic housing plan, including infrastructure level investment, but – the timing is bad right now.

With such limited sources of funding, building anything new is going to be difficult.

With no supported housing available locally (where seniors could live independently but with supportive services provided), people with these less intensive needs may be taking up assisted living spaces. Assisted living is available mostly in Anchorage at this time.

Eileen asked if the Army Corps of Engineers ever does projects such as shoring up the Mendenhall River area near Vintage Park, where an assisted living project has been proposed. The power of water with silt is much more forceful. Scott said that SCSSI, the group proposing the project, has not made a specific request regarding river risk abatement.

The Assembly's options are to provide straight cash, sell CBJ land to a non-profit or assisted living group for less than fair market value, or provide a tax abatement (not a current option for housing projects, only for economic development, though taxes can be deferred for five years for subdivisions of six or more units).

With buffers along a riverbank, the question arises how far do you extend it. Ric noted that a river goes faster when a seawall is built.

Scott noted that if seniors were readily able to move out of their homes, to assisted living or other appropriate senior housing, that housing stock would then become available for others in the community.

There is more of a dialogue happening now with developers regarding ADA accessibility, senior-friendly design, etc.

The housing plan proposes an inclusionary zoning option in which 25% of a development is set aside for low-income or special needs individuals, or a targeted audience or the developer must contribute a fee to the Affordable Housing Fund. Such an arrangement is not currently in our statutes, though.

Federal money for affordable housing projects has dwindled. Federal money is going into supported housing rather than homeless shelters. Senior housing money is even more competitive – Alaska competes with Oregon, Washington, etc. and those areas are more attractive to developers. Instead, the efforts have been going toward home- and community-based services for seniors.

Eileen and Mary Lou noted, however, that home- and community-based services, personal care assistance, and Medicaid are now subject to much tighter criteria – it's more and more difficult for seniors to quality for these services. "Time for task" standards are shrinking.

Christine commented that a lot of fraud was going on in those programs, which resulted in the tighter standards.

Eileen said it is shocking that seniors are living without any access to services in Juneau. Christine agreed that many of them are just "making do."

Eileen noted that there is a Gatekeeper program, via CCS, in which community members such as bankers, grocers, etc. who become aware of a frail senior can make a confidential referral.

Ric added that implementing the Smart 9-1-1 program in Juneau could help in responding to confused or incapacitated seniors on the streets. However, the police chief have said this is not a current priority.

In response to a question about the site of the former Gastineau Apartments downtown, in which many low-income seniors lived, Scott replied that there is a lien on the property and a lawsuit is proceeding. The City doesn't own the property. Right now, nothing is happening.

There is a developer wanting to build thirty to forty furnished studio or micro-apartments on the parking lot next to the Baranof Hotel. These would be fair market value apartments. The hang-up is the requirement that parking be provided. One possibility is initiating a "fee in lieu" program in which a developer could pay a fee instead of putting in parking.

NEW BUSINESS – ELECTION OF OFFICERS.

The Commission elected new officers for the coming year. MaryAnn said she has chaired the JCOA for four years, and wishes to step down from that position.

After a brief discussion, members unanimously voted to approve Christine Blackgoat as chair, Mary Lou Spartz as vice chair, and Eileen Hosey as secretary.

NEW BUSINESS – OTHER.

Ric announced that he will be out of town in January and February, MaryAnn will be out of town during October, November, and December, but may be available to call in for meetings. Eileen will be gone during February.

Mary Lou volunteered to approach UAS to see if we could get help from a student volunteer in doing meeting publicity, including an online presence.

Suggestions for meeting guests for the remainder of the year included the new mayor and the director of the Juneau Pioneer Home.

Mary Lou noted that the Juneau Community Foundation has purchased the Behrends house on 5th Street. We might want to look into using it for meetings, and even inquire whether it could be used as a senior center.