

Parkwood Resident's Association Meeting via Zoom, June 2, 2020

Jeff Griffith, PRA Vice President, called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m. Thirty persons participated by signing into the Zoom meeting.

Jeff introduced the guest speaker, Adam Ortiz, Director of Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection. Jeff encouraged participants to ask questions at the end of Mr. Ortiz' presentation.

Mr. Ortiz said that his presentation would focus on three topics: 1. Climate change 2. Watershed protection, and 3. Waste reduction and recycling.

1. Climate Change

Reducing climate change is the top priority of Montgomery County. The county declared a climate emergency and set a goal: 100% emission reduction by 2035 and 80% reduction by 2027 which according to Mr. Ortiz is probably one of the most ambitious emissions goals in the country.

Early on the MC Department of Environmental Protection needed to determine the scope and sources of emissions. The Climate Action and Resilience Panel was formed to provide answers. Mr. Ortiz displayed a circle graph, "Montgomery County's Greenhouse Gas Emission Profile". One side of the circle is labeled Buildings; the other side, Transportation. These are the two emission sources that MC is tackling.

Buildings. MC has taken steps to make construction more energy efficient. The county is working on a new building code for energy efficient construction. Incentives for builders such as a "Green Bank" that offers low cost financing for energy efficient construction is one tool. MC drafted a bill called Community Choice Energy which would direct Pepco or another energy provider to purchase 100% green energy. This bill did not pass, although it came close. County leaders continue to search for ways to advance green construction.

Transportation. MC has purchased 14 electric transit buses. Four of these have been deployed in a trial period. MC is also expanding electric charging stations for the county's fleet. Another goal, getting vehicles off the road, has gotten an unplanned boost by the pandemic as more people are now working from home. This appears to be making a substantial difference for the environment although the data isn't in yet.

Mr. Ortiz said that they are continually assessing what actions they can take that will make the most difference toward reaching the county's highest priority: getting to 0 emissions by 2035 and reaching an 80% emission reduction by 2027.

2. Watershed Protection

Storm water runoff has been the most quickly increasing source of pollution in rivers and streams. Rainwater hits hard surfaces like roofs, sidewalks and streets and washes pollutants into our streams and creeks. Mr. Ortiz displayed a county map indicating watersheds (Rock Creek and Anacostia) and each of the county's creeks and streams. He explained that the mapping exercise helps planners be more strategic. He pointed to the Parkwood/Kensington area, part of the Rock Creek Watershed which is highly distressed and has been a focus of attention for a long time. The Anacostia Watershed is even

more distressed. The map shows distressed areas, existing watershed conditions and the stress level of waterways. The map also shows areas with new development that may need to be targeted in the future.

MC is working to protect our watersheds, creeks and streams by constructing storm water filtration systems and also through rain gardens, cisterns, and bioswales. There are thousands of projects throughout the county. The question is: Which areas are priorities for restoration; where can we make the biggest difference and capture the most pollution?

Mr. Ortiz said that as they move into the next phase, they have put together a demographic index of areas with high minority and low-income populations as shown on the "Equity Map" that he displayed. The county is going to have to build more projects. This map can help planners make sure that communities where historically there has been underinvestment are getting their fair share of restoration. We're going to have to build another thousand or more projects to get to a restoration level where our streams are swimmable and fishable. We want to be sure that we're doing it in ways that are thoughtful and sustainable and that in the long run make a difference that is not only environmentally but socially sound.

3. Waste Reduction and Recycling

Mr. Ortiz said that although Asian countries are no longer accepting our recycled materials, Montgomery County is still recycling. Everything that goes through our recycling stream that is recyclable gets recycled.

Montgomery County has a 60% recycling rate which is the highest in the state, but Mr. Ortiz believes we can do a lot more. The goal is 0 waste. MC is recycling aluminum, recyclable plastics, glass and paper. As it leaves our recycling station, it goes to recycling projects in the region.

Paper is a success story. Because China stopped taking recycled materials, the price of paper pulp has fallen. That has created an opportunity for US investors. In the last few years, 16 new pulp mills are being built or retrofitted in the US. About half were virgin timber pulp paper manufacturers. Investors realized that instead of buying virgin timber they could use the pulp that is available within our borders

Composting

Montgomery County is investing in organic composting in a big way. One successful enterprise is Leaf Grow, a soil amendment product. Residents put their leaves, tree branches, yard trim, etc. on the curb. Trucks take it to the Dickerson compost facility where it's turned into compost, bagged, and sold in the Mid-Atlantic region as Leaf Grow.

However, 20% of food still goes into the trash stream. It turns out that organic material, mostly food, when mixed with leaves, yard trim, etc. becomes a high quality soil amendment with a higher nitrogen content, and therefore a better fertilizer, than most commercial products. According to Mr. Ortiz, MC has made big strides in collecting food scraps. He showed a slide of "Montgomery County's own compost pick-up truck." MC has contracts with 27 businesses and institutions, including Holy Cross Hospital, Montgomery College, some restaurants, schools and supermarkets to give us their food scraps. These are taken to a facility in Princes Georges County where they make an enhanced and more valuable compost product called Leaf Grow Gold.

MC would like to build its own enhanced compost facility and is looking for a suitable site in the county.

Focus on Plastics

Plastics have become a huge problem. About 15 years ago fossil fuel companies, realizing the future impact of green forms of energy, invested heavily in plastics which are now ubiquitous.

Mr. Ortiz showed a video of a pre-sort line at the MC Shady Grove recycling facility. The video shows a conveyer belt of materials coming off a recycle truck before the belt moves the materials to the next step where mechanical instruments such as magnets are used. The video shows one of 8 workers facing the conveyer belt and pulling out non-recyclable items, i.e., things that were placed in blue bins that did not belong there because they cannot be recycled. About half of the materials from the truck are pulled off the line here. The majority of things the workers remove from this belt are plastic bags along with some other plastic items.

Mr. Ortiz said that an audit showed that 35 – 40% of items coming into the recycling center are plastics that are not recyclable. There are reasons for this: One is the huge number of plastic products on the market. Even items like baby food that used to be in glass jars is now in plastic pouches. Another is that consumers find it hard to know just what can be recycled. Some plastics are not recyclable even though they have a triangle icon on the bottom. The triangle icon can mean a lot of different things. For example, it can indicate that the product contains some recycled materials

Red or blue picnic cups have a number 6 in a triangle on the bottom but they are not recyclable. Number 6 products are made of polystyrene which is a form of Styrofoam. MC is taking on the industry. Through the Department of Environmental Protection, the County Executive has filed legislation to ban #6 plastics—probably a first for any jurisdiction. This action will be on hold until the pandemic is over but, according to Mr. Ortiz, “when we come out of this, we’re going to make a big splash against # 6 plastics.” He said that the county would also lead a parallel effort at the federal level to stop manufacturers from using the triangle icon on items that are not recyclable.

Mr. Ortiz gave some final advice: “If you have to choose between a six-pack of plastic, glass, or aluminum, buy aluminum.” The county makes a profit on recycled aluminum.

Before ending his formal presentation, Mr. Ortiz invited participants to follow the MC Department of Environmental Protection on Facebook where a lot of good information is available.

Questions from Zoom Participants

The final portion of the meeting was devoted to questions from participants. Mr. Ortiz’s answers are summarized here.

All homeowners are charged the same storm water charge, regardless of runoff from their property.

Plastics and other materials that cannot be recycled are incinerated at the Dickerson facility.

Only clean plastic bags placed in grocery store bins can be recycled. Others go to the incinerator. “Stock your trunk with reusable bags.”

Plastic items with a # 7 symbol don’t have value.

A “pulp mill” used to burn sludge but it became a toxic mess in upper MC.

The county is thinking of solar panels for the site in Laytonsville; it would not be a compost facility site.

MC is not in competition with Compost Crew which collects food scraps from homes. The county is trying to get business from the institutional sector like hospitals.

Bottle caps are too small to be recycled. Small items like these can go in your trash. Items with mixed materials, such as pens also go in the trash.

The MC EPA has considered Fairfax County’s “purple bin” initiative to recycle glass but has decided against it.

Clear glass has some limited value but not colored glass. There are employees at the recycling center who use spatulas to strike brown and green glass into a bin when it comes across the conveyer belt.

In response to a question about whether mosquito control companies violate MC pesticide laws, Mr. Ortiz said that he had not heard that was the case.

There were several questions about communication of recycling guidelines. Many questioners said they want more detailed information about what the county can and cannot recycle. Suggestions included bin stickers, packets of information, etc. Mr. Ortiz said that although there’s some debate about whether to be specific or general in issuing guidelines, he believes people are smart enough to handle detailed information. He said there would be more material forthcoming, and he promised to work with community leaders to provide information.

He also said: “Let’s hold manufacturers accountable. And buyers can make better purchases.”

Respectfully submitted,

Judith Dighe

Secretary