

SMILE General Meeting minutes

February 3, 2021

Via ZOOM, online

Main Website

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Procedural

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OFFICERS PRESENT: Simon Fulford, President; Bob Burkholder, Vice President;
Eric Norberg, Secretary

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Juliana James; Jim Friscia; Neal Spinler; Elaine
O’Keefe; Rhea Smith; Elizabeth Milner

SMILE MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE: R. Corless; Joshua Meyers, Maryanne Nelson;
Heather Katcher; Ezra Cohen; John Cronise; Mark Sailor and Jerrad

GUEST: Chris Davis, Deputy Chief of Police, City of Portland

President Simon Fulford called the meeting to order at 7:35 p.m. He began by reviewing, for those attending, the protocols for SMILE’s ZOOM meetings. Although several SMILE members had not signed in, Simon was able to determine that at least 20 SMILE members were present, so he declared a quorum and we finally were able to review and approve the minutes of the October, November, December, and January General Meetings. The October through December minutes had been informally reviewed previously, and any needed corrections already made – so although they were included in the motion to approve, a detailed review of only the January 6 minutes took place at this meeting. After the review of the January minutes, and after making sure that no further corrections were to be offered to the previous three sets of minutes, President Fulford asked for a motion to approve. Neal Spinler moved that all four sets of minutes be approved as now presented, and Elaine O’Keefe seconded the motion, which then carried – with unanimity, confirmed Simon.

First to speak was R. Corless, Chair of the SMILE Crime Prevention Committee, who introduced as her guest Portland Deputy Police Chief Chris Davis – whose last previous appearance at a SMILE meeting was in 2019. Davis thanked SMILE for the invitation to appear, and said he would begin with two high-level updates, both of them pressing issues.

The first dealt with the rise of gun violence in the city – although, he added, the Sellwood-Westmoreland neighborhood is pretty unique in having almost entirely escaped this sharp rise so far. There had been over 100 “shots fired” incidents in the city and 10 gun-violence deaths ***just in January of 2021*** (in even “bad years” in Portland in the past, there were no more than about 30 gun deaths in the entire year). He and Chief Chuck Lovell submitted a plan to the Mayor before Christmas, to address this problem, at the Mayor’s request.

The second issue is the persistent civil unrest in the city; it has receded during the winter, but probably will be resurgent when spring arrives, he said.

Adding to the difficulty in addressing both issues is Portland’s extremely low staffing level of sworn officers – 917 positions, as of today, compared with 1,040 in 1998 when Portland had a significantly fewer residents (a population equivalent to the City of Salem has been added

to Portland since then, yet there are substantially fewer sworn officers now). 109 officers have departed the Portland Police Bureau since July 1 of last year – and 36 of those were not retirements – simply officers leaving Portland to serve somewhere else, which, he said, is “unprecedented”. 825 of the 917 currently-authorized positions are filled as of today, and the PPB does not have the budget to fill any more of the authorized positions until at least the start of the next fiscal year on July 1. This is a big problem when fulfilling calls for service, said Davis. Officers assigned to dedicated teams, such as the Traffic Division, K-9 service, etc., have been reassigned to routine patrol duties. But, he added, nonetheless it has been necessary to add resources to investigate violent crimes – to meet gun violence investigation requirements. After those observations, he invited questions.

President Fulford asked if last year’s rise in violence and gun violence had not been a national phenomenon, due to COVID-19, and the recession accompanying the pandemic. Davis agreed that the rise in violence may be COVID-related – and a rise in high-speed traffic violations spiked in parallel with it, here and elsewhere. But, he said, the gun violence rose higher, faster, in three cities – when each one reduced funding for the police, and “gun violence reduction” teams were disbanded in each. The three cities were Portland, Seattle, and Minneapolis – and these crimes did not spike as much in other major cities, so that may be a factor in it too. Fulford asked if there are any other sources that could be tapped for additional funding for our police. Davis said no – the city lost much of its own general funding sources with the arrival of the pandemic, and so no more money is available for the police. Finally, Fulford asked if we are really having a lot more low-level crime here now, or is it just our perception? Davis replied, “It’s a shift – there are fewer residential burglaries, because more people are home all the time; but, here, you’re getting hammered on business burglaries, car crimes, and car theft.”

Juliana James thanked the Portland Police for an incident she was personally aware of when officers protected a park full of kids playing soccer from violent demonstrators, and she asked how we can help with “all the unrest”. Deputy Chief Davis thanked her for the question, and responded by saying that the Portland Police Department is “way ahead of most cities” in dealing with its own social justice issues, “but we still need to do a lot of work”. However, he shared, a “fairly small group of people” have hijacked social justice protests to physically attack police and others, and to commit crimes, some of them serious. “We have to clearly distinguish between these two situations.”

R. Corless asked Davis if the Milwaukie Police cooperate with Portland Police near their mutual border, as she has heard. Davis responded, “Yes, Milwaukie is a big help. And without the Multnomah County Sheriff’s Department and the Oregon State Police, we in Portland would be in a difficult spot”, because “other neighboring cities don’t want to send their officers here” due to safety concerns. R. Corless asked how we, in the neighborhoods, can better cooperate with the police? Davis responded, “Two ways – be heard at City Council; and get to know your local cops.” He said the dialogue in City Council chambers tends to be dominated by small but very organized groups whose agenda seems to vary considerably from what local citizens care about – so, he said, “be heard”. One of the ways police know they have much support from residents of the city is the large number of supportive personal messages, and even food, received at the police precincts – and our local police really appreciate even casual indications of support amidst what has been a rather discouraging atmosphere lately emanating from some in City Hall. R. Corless concluded her

questions by asking if we still have an N.R.T. (Neighborhood Response Team) Officer; Davis said yes we do, but they have patrol duties now, too. “Shaun Sahli is still on that team at Central Precinct,” he confirmed. (Officer Sahli’s number is 503/823-0097.) President Fulford thanked Davis for his frankness and openness, and for having given us his time.

Next on the agenda was an appearance by the revived “Friends of Oaks Bottom” group – originally an independent organization, and later a committee of SMILE, before it became inactive. Young Ezra Cohen, with help from others of like mind, has restarted the organization, and he spoke for the group. He reminded us that he and Joshua Meyers had visited SMILE last February at one of our last in-person meetings before the COVID-19 pandemic shifted us to having all our meetings virtually, online, on ZOOM. The first event of the revived group was the cleanout of a surprisingly large amount of trash from Oaks Bottom by 15 volunteers early last fall, with help from SMILE’s S.N.A.C committee. The group currently has a core group of five, and are planning another similar event in March. It is also planning to do “community engagement” with visitors to Oaks Bottom; and the revived Friends of Oaks Bottom now would like to become a subcommittee of S.N.A.C.

Next to speak for the Friends of Oaks Bottom was another core member, Marianne Nelson, who moved here with her husband in 2006 upon her retirement, and specifically moved to Sellwood because of the nearby presence of the Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge. She thanked SMILE for having lobbied the city for years to have Oaks Bottom be designated the city’s first natural wildlife refuge – it was finally named as such in 1988 and, she said, that probably would never have happened had it not been for SMILE’s long effort on its behalf.

Elizabeth Milner, a SMILE Board Member, is also the Chair of S.N.A.C., and confirmed that the committee favors the new Friends of Oaks Bottom becoming a S.N.A.C. subcommittee.

Last on the agenda was a report by Jim Friscia from SMILE’s newly-established Events Committee. He said at the start of his remarks that he wanted to thank Ezra and Marianne, and he hopes the Events Committee can work with the Friends of Oaks Bottom on its events. He commented, apropos of Oaks Bottom, that as a frequenter of the wildlife refuge a pet peeve of his is the number of people who walk with off-leash dogs there, in violation of the rules, and to the detriment of the natural wildlife refuge.

Friscia went on to explain that the new Events Committee was established to consolidate the various events that SMILE is involved in. The committee is expecting our Neighborhood Cleanup to return on the third Saturday in May after taking 2020, the pandemic year, off – still at the south end of Westmoreland Park. A date has also been reserved for Sundae in the Park in August, but it is not clear that it will be possible to present it then. Other SMILE events are up in the air this year, due to COVID-19.

As the meeting approached its end, Juliana James said she wanted to publicly congratulate Sellwood Community House for its outstanding work. There followed a brief discussion of whether SMILE could help with the replacement of a destroyed bench, previously placed at the end of a street in Sellwood by nearby residents; but since it was an unofficial bench placed on city property, Simon said its replacement should probably similarly be unofficial. He then adjourned the meeting at 8:56 p.m.