

SMILE Board Meeting Minutes
July 19, 2023
at SMILE Station in Sellwood

Main Website Procedural
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OFFICERS PRESENT: Elizabeth Milner, Vice President; Eric Norberg, Secretary; Pat Hainley, Treasurer

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Jim Friscia, Grant Huling, Elaine O’Keefe, Bob Burkholder; MacKenzie Torres; Tracy Fisher

GUESTS: Sharon VanSickle-Robbins, Melody Valdini, and Dwayne Judd of the City of Portland District Commission, and an additional guest from the Commission who did not identify herself to the Secretary. There were an additional couple dozen attendees from the neighborhood.

SMILE Vice President Elizabeth Milner called the July Board Meeting of SMILE to order, in the absence of the President, at 7:43 p.m., and began by asking for a review of the June 21 Board Meeting minutes – after which MacKenzie Torres made a motion that the minutes be approved as amended. Elaine O’Keefe seconded the motion; and the motion carried unanimously.

Milner then reminded us all that Portland voters had passed a ballot measure in November for a new and more representative form of city government, and currently a city District Commission has developed three potential “district maps” dividing the city into four districts of roughly equal population to form the basis of the new 12-member City Council – with three elected representatives from each of the four districts, using the new method of “ranked-choice voting”. In two of the three maps, Sellwood and Westmoreland are part of the west-side and downtown district; in one of those the Eastmoreland and Reed neighborhoods are, too. Only in the “Maple” map is all of Southeast Portland south of Powell all in the same district. The Commission will vote in August to choose one of the three maps, after citizen input is gathered in July. If the Commission cannot agree on which map to adopt by the end of August, the current City Council will choose the map for these initial City Council voting districts. The Commission has held eight public forums in the four proposed districts, and one “virtual” forum. They also have made appearances at neighborhood association meetings, and tonight is ours. The districts will not be reconfigured again until 2030, with remapping at that time informed by the census information from Portland. The Commission says its mandate is, “We cannot divide communities of common interest”.

Elaine O’Keefe commented, in response to that mandate, “The areas of common interest for Sellwood and Westmoreland are all in Southeast. We don’t much identify with locations across the river.” The meeting was also offered on ZOOM; and Jim Friscia, who was monitoring comments on ZOOM, said several attendees agreed with Elaine.

A woman identifying herself as Dannelle D. Stevens stood and said that she is a Democratic party leader here, and prefers the Alder map, which puts Sellwood,

Westmoreland, Eastmoreland, and the Reed neighborhood into the west-side district. That's because she sees a voting advantage for her party if the city is configured that way. (Just why this would be was obscure, because although she passed out a voting chart while commenting [which is incorporated into these minutes by reference], the City Council voting districts have nothing to do with the state and national political voting district boundaries in Oregon, which are not set by the city, and would not be changed by the city's adoption of a City Council district voting map.)

Jim Friscia said that a ZOOM attendee wanted to speak directly to the commissioners present, and he invited her to do so. She said she thinks transportation is one of the most impactful matters for the future, and asked for more detail on that. The Cedar map, which would put Sellwood and Westmoreland into the new west-side city district, but not Eastmoreland or Reed, is based on major transit corridors, such as McLoughlin Boulevard, as district boundaries. The commissioners present said that the three maps are each designed using different criteria, and none of the maps is better or worse than the others because of the differences in criteria; they are just three ways of making the district boundaries. The remote attendee asked if TriMet had offered any comment on the maps. There was no direct answer to that question.

A member of the SMILE Board recounted having heard that the city might require Southeast Uplift to stop representing Southeast neighborhoods that are put into the west-side voting district, which would disadvantage our neighborhood if any map but Maple were adopted, and would also weaken Southeast Uplift. Commissioner Melody Valdini said that was an interesting question, and she would look into it.

Jim Friscia reported that a ZOOM attendee asked, in the chat, how Sellwood-Moreland could be effectively represented in a district that is mostly on the west side of the Willamette River. The commissioners present asked for a specific definition of the terms used in the question, and gave no direct answer.

Attendee Chuck Martin said he would oppose any map that splits neighborhoods and/or business districts, and he said the Cedar map seemed a monstrosity to him.

Vice President Milner pointed out the importance of considering Southeast Uplift's boundaries of represented neighborhoods in Southeast Portland as being, itself, "a community that should not be divided".

A man present commented Ms. Stevens' political argument had convinced him that the Alder map was best.

Eric Norberg remarked to the commissioners present that THE BEE, of which he is currently the editor, is hard evidence of "Southeast cohesiveness", and invited them to pick up an issue (on the piano in SMILE Station) and see for themselves. "Every story in it is about Inner Southeast Portland neighborhoods, and there is no coverage beyond the west end of the Sellwood Bridge." The paper has 45,000 readers monthly all across Inner Southeast, but few if any anywhere else. It has been published here since 1906.

A woman present asked the commissioners, "Why are you moving around pieces of Southeast Portland, and not Northwest?" The answer was, "Because we decided not to."

Another woman present asked if the final map chosen would only be one of these three presented, or if a fourth map might be considered. The answer: “It is premature to say.”

The previous evening at a public meeting in Eastmoreland, there reportedly had been a point made repeatedly by a commissioner about the need to avoid “asset packing” in defining the four districts – not a publicly-identified criterion for defining the districts – and MacKenzie Torres, having heard about that, and noticing that it had not been mentioned tonight, asked, “What’s this about ‘asset packing’?” The commissioner in question, Melody Valdini, responded that it is not a hard and fast criterion; the commission wants to distribute “power” to the four districts equally. An “asset” is something that conveys “power”, she said. Someone in the room commented that putting Sellwood-Moreland, Eastmoreland, and Reed into the west-side/downtown district seemed to be “asset packing” the west-side district. There was no response from the commissioners.

Jim Friscia said one ZOOM attendee could not find “asset packing” in the criteria assigned to the commission to use in the district maps. A second asked if Central Eastside had expressed any opinion about the Maple map. No direct answer to that.

With the hour approaching the 9 p.m. adjournment time, Vice President Elizabeth Milner thanked those from the District Commission who had come to present to us tonight, and reminded the attendees in the room that the public comment period ends this Saturday, and that everyone should make themselves heard on the matter, no matter which map they prefer.

After the commissioners had departed, Elizabeth asked the Board, “Do we want to take a position?” Elaine O’Keefe said that apparently the city wants to redraw borders of District Coalitions, such as Southeast Uplift, along the city voting map lines – adding, “If we stand to lose Southeast Uplift representation, that would make Maple the only choice for us.” General discussion followed. “The Cedar map is the worst of the three,” remarked Elaine, and there was some voiced agreement with that thought. She added, “Anything that’s going to interfere with the neighborhood is a non-starter, and that includes the neighborhood coalitions.” President Dugan, who was unable to attend in person tonight, but had joined the ZOOM option for at least the latter part of the meeting, concurred with that last thought. Elizabeth Milner made a motion that the Board write a letter formally affirming SMILE’s view that the city must preserve existing neighborhood and district coalition boundaries regardless of whichever district map is chosen by the commission (or City Council). Jim Friscia seconded the motion, which carried unanimously.

Pat Hainley then reported that vandals had broken a window by the door of the Oaks Pioneer Church and damaged the electrical service of the church, and also damaged the lock. We are looking at setting up surveillance cameras there, since this is not the first time the church has been vandalized recently, causing major expenses to SMILE in repairs. The window, lock, and electrical service are being repaired.

David Dugan reported via ZOOM that the city has reached out to the Board about a new meeting concerning the operation (and possibly ownership) of the Oaks Pioneer Church. More coming soon.

With that, Vice President Milner adjourned the Board Meeting at 9:26 p.m.