

AGENDA & MINUTES

GRAND RIVER GREENWAY Advisory Committee

January 11, 2023

3:00 PM

29 Pearl Street NW (Downtown Grand Rapids Inc Offices)

1. Call to Order & Welcome

Andy Guy called the meeting to order at 3:00 PM

Present: Kate Berens, Matt Chapman, Rob Hunter, Ryan Kilpatrick, Salvador Lopez, Sam Moore, Wendy Ogilvie, Stephanie Ogren, Jim Meeks, Tim Kelly, Mark Rambo, Julius Suchy

Absent: Kara Wood

Others Present: Andy Guy, Josh Spencer, David Sernick, Mark Miller, Marion Bonneaux

2. Approve December 7, 2022 Meeting Minutes

Guy stated the December meeting notes were included in the agenda packet. He asked if Members had any corrections or questions. Members offered no comments and agreed the notes adequately captured the December 7, 2022 discussion.

3. Preliminary Proposed Investment Scenario & Criteria Alignment (3:05)

Josh Spencer presented the Backbone Trail & Greenspace Scenario which proposes focusing investment on a series of projects that together establish a mainline trail generally following the Grand River corridor across Kent County. The concept links major regional park assets such as Millennium Park, Riverside Park, Grand Rogue Park (Plainfield Twp), Chief Hazy Cloud (Ada Twp) and Riverfront Park (Lowell).

The concept also links major cultural, community and economic assets such as GVSU campuses, Downtown Grand Rapids, museums, Whitecaps ballpark, site of proposed outdoor amphitheater (201 market), etc.

The Backbone scenario importantly also establishes a main trunk line across the County in a way that would enable numerous adjacent neighborhoods and communities to more easily connect into the regional recreational and nonmotorized trail system.

Spencer stated the projects presented today are shared with the Committee for reflection and conversation. This is not a final recommendation.

Ogilvie inquired about the status of finalizing the ARPA grant agreement with the State of Michigan.

Guy stated the process continues with DNR, the next call is scheduled for January, the hope is to finalize the process in Q1 2023. Key outstanding questions remain around timing of the state granting/reporting requirements and the possibility of using funds for planning, land acquisition and other potential needs.

Kelly inquired about the implementation timing of the various projects that make up the Backbone scenario and whether they can all be completed within the ARPA deadlines.

Guy stated every individual project is a unique case, with some further along in the development process than others. He stated some projects should be ready to go in 2023 while others, particularly in more complicated urban sites, require additional planning, design and collaboration. The proposed Fulton-Wealthy trail segment is a good example.

Guy also stated that, based on conversations with individual project leads, and barring unexpected difficulties, that project partners believe all Backbone projects proposed for funding can be completed within the ARPA allocation deadlines.

Moore stated moving efficiently to allocate the ARPA Greenway funds is important to complete the projects within the deadlines, as granting decisions will give project sponsors and other potential funders confidence to push projects forward.

Berens stated she appreciates the pragmatic approach proposed by the Backbone scenario, the notion that these are projects we reasonably think can be completed, and that they make good connections across the community and region.

She also stated certain projects adjacent to the in-river Grand Rapids Whitewater project – trail segments from Leonard to Ann and Fulton to Wealthy for example that may require in-water trail segments – have unique permitting needs and timelines that require heightened collaboration and coordination among partners as projects progress towards implementation phase.

Meeks observed the Backbone scenario proposes a significant percentage of overall investment for one project – the Grand Rapids to Lowell trail segments. He observed the project does not appear to be as directly related to Grand River corridor revitalization as other projects. He also observed that, under the preliminary scenario presented, Greenway ARPA funds would be a minority investment toward the overall budget for most projects but a majority investment needed for the GR-Lowell trail.

Spencer stated one reason is that project proposes to build a significant amount of new trail mileage (23) and illustrated where the trails run on map.

He also stated that project is a key segment that ultimately helps connect Greenway segments together in a way that expands access to the broader regional recreational/parks/trail system for low-income neighborhoods/households (Qualified Census Tracts, which is a key consideration for investing the ARPA funds.

Spencer also stated that this is one preliminary funding scenario. The Greenway Committee has the authority and flexibility to suggest different allocation priorities and options.

Kelly noted that the “Assumption of Other Funds” for the GR-Lowell Trail includes \$10,000,000 and asked if that’s committed or where it might come from.

Moore stated the Kent County Park Foundation is working to organize a fundraising campaign.

Spencer added there’s efforts underway to explore the potential for additional appropriation from the state, perhaps transportation funding, and philanthropy has expressed interest.

Kelly encouraged the Committee to consider some threshold or percentage of Greenway ARPA participation to support leveraging additional funds.

Suchy noted that in some instances not all the related match for related projects is included in the worksheet. He cited Ada’s recent \$5,000,000 investment in a trail segment along Pettis that is part of the larger GR-Lowell trail building.

Spencer noted establishing 100 miles of contiguous trail is important threshold for attracting major bicycling events that support tourism, and the 23 miles from GR-Lowell would be key addition toward that goal.

Meeks noted Bentonville, AR is a popular biking destination but the challenge is visitors often need a car to get from destination in the area to another. He inquired what types of / where does the Backbone scenario help connect key biking facilities.

Spencer replied facilities in Cannonsburg and coming County investment to build a mountain biking facility in Johnson Park. He also mentioned facilities in Luten Park, Merrell Trail in Rockford and eventually the Dragon Trail further north could be offshoot connections to the Backbone in the future.

Moore stated the big vision is to establish Grand Rapids/Kent County as the hub in the regional/statewide recreational system connecting Holland, Grand Haven, Lake Michigan, Muskegon, Cadillac, etc and the GR-Lowell segment is the key east-west connection toward that vision.

Guy stated one key organizing principle of the ARPA funding is expanding access to parks, trails and outdoor recreation for historically underserved households and neighborhoods. He noted the proposed trail segments across the southeast side of Downtown (Fulton/Market site, 201 Market) would facilitate greater access to the Grand River and other regional amenities for adjacent neighborhoods such as Black Hills, Roosevelt Park and Grandville Ave. He also noted that if trails on the southeast side of Downtown could connect to the GR-Lowell Trail that would facilitate access to thousands of acres of riverfront parks across the County.

Kelly stated the projects worksheet contains a great deal of good information. But also a number of assumptions about certain project cost, timing, other unknowns, etc. He asked if the Committee needs to make specific funding commitments in the immediate moment, or might the Committee embrace the “Backbone” concept, consider funding recommendations for projects that are ready to go, and allow time for more clarity to emerge around the costs and needs for other projects not as far along in their development process.

Spencer stated the Committee does not need to make funding decision today.

He stated the budgets included in the worksheet are the best estimates the project leads currently have. He encouraged the Committee to think of themselves as a Foundation. He stated one approach the committee might take is to commit to a certain allocation, and if a project budget rises as design/development progresses, the responsibility to fill the gap is on the project lead.

Chapman inquired if/when the Committee might see more details about what more specifically a particular funding commitment might cover on a project-by-project basis.

Spencer stated clearly defining the specific project details/deliverables that Greenway allocations might support is a coming step in the process. These details would be worked out through the development of a project agreement with project leads.

Guy stated, in accordance with ARPA rules, staff and the Committee eventually will have very detailed documentation of how ARPA funds will be put to use for specific projects. He said those details will be worked out likely through the development of a grant agreement with project leads/subrecipients.

Sernick agreed and noted numerous communities are working through similar questions and process right now. He said prospective partners often start working through an agreement in more detail, scope “the project” to align with funding goals and criteria (in this case the Backbone) and develop a better understanding of cost, needs, etc.

He said its not unusual for that process to compel some reconsideration and/or reprioritization of funding allocations and that is one of this Committee’s roles.

Moore stated the initial Backbone Scenario projects as presented seem entirely consistent with the intent of State funding. He encouraged working diligently to determine funding recommendations so the project lead organizations better know what to expect and can plan their efforts accordingly.

Ogren agreed and stated that, while various project leads all are exploring various additional funding sources, signaling what amount of ARPA allocation might be available – or not – for individual projects would help inform those conversations.

Lopez asked if staff had, or could prepare, information or visualization that helps the committee understand how the various projects in the Backbone Scenario positively impact underrepresented communities. He also inquired why projects such as Plaster Creek trail we’re included as a Future Priority versus a more term opportunity.

Spencer stated the Backbone Scenario is comprised of projects that can be completed by 2026. He stated projects such as Plaster Creek trail and a possible Silver Creek connection, also Coldbrook and future opportunity sites such as the Kent County Road Commission site or the USPS site, have not yet started design and in several instances do not yet have project champions. That is why they are categorized as Future Priorities, he said. He also stated the overarching long-term goal to implement every project on the list. He encouraged the committee to think of the ARPA Greenway funds as an initial tranche of funding that starts to accelerate the implementation work for projects that are ready to go.

Berens observed that property control is one distinguishing factor of the projects that are more ready to go than others.

Guy agreed and stated that years of planning, community engagement and fundraising have also brought those projects to a point of action unlike other Future Priorities that have not yet received the same interest and attention. He also stated staff has inquired with DNR about the extent to which ARPA funds can be used to advance planning and organizing effort around projects such as Plaster/Silver Creek.

Lopez stated its important to acknowledge that some projects are more ready to go than others because of the historic lack of investment in community planning and development in particular areas.

Meeks asked what's the plan for the approx. \$5M in potentially remaining funds under the preliminary Backbone scenario.

Guy stated that there will be administrative costs associated with receiving, deploying and reporting the ARPA funds. He stated there's various assumptions and uncertainties influencing the overall proposed allocation strategy. So the idea is to preserve some flexibility to adapt and adjust as more is known. He also stated staff continues to explore eligible expenses with the DNR, and there's hope some of those funds might be dedicated to support planning/engagement around key Future Priorities.

Guy asked Rambo how the proposed Backbone Scenario would align with the County's planned investment in the Greenway.

Rambo stated the Scenarios aligns very well. The County's primary focus is establishing a main trail that provides point-to-point access to parks and other recreational assets along the river corridor. Another goal is to first establish the main line trail that other communities and neighborhoods across the County can connect to. The proposed Backbone Scenario projects would support that effort.

Hunter stated support for the Backbone Scenario strategy. He also inquired why Canal Park, which already has existing trail, is included as a priority project.

Spencer said the City identified this section as a priority. He also stated that the improvements would enhance the existing trail, make it wider, and strengthen the connection to the overall system. He said it's similar to enhancing an existing trail section at the GR Public Museum site.

Ogilvie observed that Canal Park also is located in the "Upper Reach" where future in-channel improvements are planned to occur. She asked if the Committee would want to recommend ARPA investments that could be undone by future in-channel work.

Chapman and Spencer responded that any investment in Canal Park requires careful coordination with the in-channel work. Some upland elements of the Canal project could be done, but some elements do potentially interface with the river. Chapman stated Grand Rapids Whitewater, City Engineering and others would need to work thru and coordinate around those issues.

Chapman stated the potential underpasses planned for the Leonard-to-Ann Trail present similar issues.

Guy stated, from Downtown Grand Rapids Inc's perspective, one general organizing principle for the recommended project investments is not to do anything that further complicates organizing efforts for the in-channel improvements.

Hunter also inquired why various City-owned sites in the project catalogued require "acquisition."

Berens stated that's a legal and technical matter for the City of Grand Rapids to consider.

Chapman asked if staff had a solid understanding of the resources required to help plan/initiate projects on the Future Priorities list that in the past have received less attention.

Spencer stated generally no. That's a project-by-project consideration. He stated many of the Future Priorities are ideas in a plan, with no process or budget, and often times no feasibility or preliminary design work started. He said the City has begun to explore the work required and a potential budget estimate to initiate the Plaster Creek Trail project, which for a variety of reasons is technically challenging. But many of these Future Priorities seemingly need a champion or project lead.

Lopez asked how might we use this opportunity to get a better understanding of what's required (budget) to help initiate key Future Priorities.

Moore stated this is why funding for planning is so important.

Sernick stated we must gain clarity from the State if ARPA funds can be used for planning.

Guy stated staff meets with the DNR next week and hopes to gain clarity on this "planning" matter.

Spencer reiterated that the ARPA funding represents an initial tranche of funding towards a more holistic bigger picture Greenway initiative. That's why the Committee's charge to develop a longer-term Priority Plan for Action is so important. That plan will help raise additional resources, especially as we demonstrate momentum building with the initial projects.

Lopez stated that the notion of using the ARPA spend to help kick start planning and organizing efforts around projects in communities that historically/systemically haven't received as much attention is seriously worthy of consideration.

Berens stated that Plaster/Silver Trail is an important connection to the Greenway, just like the trail connection to Lowell and the statewide trail system. She supported identifying funds to support additional/accelerated planning that also would help unlock additional funding for development/construction in the future.

Guy observed the meeting is reaching its scheduled end time.

He quickly reviewed the 3-step decision making process for the ARPA funding.

1. The Greenway committee advances a recommendation to the Grand River Network Board of Directors
2. The Grand River Network Board of Directors advances a recommendation to the Board of Advisors for Downtown Grand Rapids Inc, which is the recipient of the ARPA funding.
3. The DGRI Board of Advisors considers the recommendations and approves final funding recommendations.

Guy stated he sincerely appreciates all the dialogue and critical thinking. Staff will reflect on the insight and guidance. He stated the Committee can expect the next iteration of the near-term investment strategy to look a bit different. He also suggested the possibility of a phased investment recommendation.

Moore encouraged the decision-making process to keep moving forward as swiftly as possible.

4. Committee Member Discussion

None.

5. Adjournment

Guy adjourned the meeting at 4:30 PM.