



CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

OFFICE OF THE MANAGING DIRECTOR

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RESPONSE TO OPEN LETTER FROM PHILLY THRIVE FROM AUGUST 25, 2019

Dear Philly Thrive and Affiliated Organizations:

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with the Refinery Advisory Group, as well as for your continued engagement in this process.

The purpose of the Refinery Advisory Group is to gather information about the consequences of the refinery closure from the perspectives of business, academic and environmental experts, organized labor, and community members in order to better inform City officials. The Advisory Group was established to bring together people with diverse experiences, knowledge, and perspectives on the refinery to provide information about:

- How the closure of the PES facility will affect Philadelphia's economy, environment, and public health and safety;
- The range of possible future uses for the site, with an emphasis on options that are both economically feasible and positive for the city.

As co-chair of the Advisory Group, I appreciate that Philly Thrive sent an open letter to the group expressing its feedback on the meeting structure of the August 20th Community Committee. This document is intended to summarize some of the issues raised and provide brief responses where relevant in order to address or add clarity to some of the concerns that were raised:

Feedback Received - Benefits of Meeting Structure:

1. The small group format was in part a response to suggestions by residents at the first public meeting, which means the Advisory Group is being responsive to residents' suggestions.
2. Different stakeholders were able to dialogue with each other, which has rarely happened. There were instances of listening and learning across experiences.
3. The facilitation questions attempted to prompt discussion on varied possibilities at the site.

Feedback Received - Shortcomings of Meeting Structure:

The Advisory Group appreciates hearing feedback about what worked well, as well as what could be improved as we move forward. A summary of the specific shortcomings raised by Philly Thrive, and my responses to those issues, is below.

Issues 1 and 2: The small group discussion format with separate storytelling room encouraged escalating conflict between stakeholders who decided to attend the Community Committee meeting. The dispersed format created opportunities for many unfacilitated or unmonitored exchanges between participants, a feeling of chaos & lack of order that invited conflict, and the acoustics and layout of the room made it very hard to hear people talk in the small groups, which led to yelling in order to hear each other, which escalated tension in conversations. The Advisory Group was not equipped to lay down clear ground rules, moderate conflicts, or de-escalate. Relying on police/security to play this role is not adequate or preferred.

Response: The intent of the meeting format was to provide multiple avenues for people to express their thoughts in a more interactive way. This format was created in direct response to the specific suggestion raised by community members for the Advisory Group to have a more interactive process. Unfortunately, in many cases a more interactive process inherently leads to a less orderly one – particularly when the meeting is as well attended as this one was. While many tables featured productive and topical conversations, some did not – despite the best efforts of the staff who were facilitating the conversations. This is in large part a reflection of how varied and strong opinions are about the refinery. I also acknowledge that it was a shortcoming to have other audience members in the room while people were using the video story board and adjustments will be made in the future. It is important to note that both City staff and Advisory Group members were present in both rooms at all times and actively worked to de-escalate conflict throughout the process. While Philadelphia Police Civil Affairs and school security were present, like at all Advisory Group meetings, their presence was to ensure that an orderly environment was maintained rather than to moderate any discussions.

Issue 3: The small groups and specific facilitation questions did not succeed in the goal of providing a platform for the Advisory Group to hear residents' experiences and stories about the impacts of living near the refinery, and what it would mean for their lives to have the refinery closed or reopened.

Response: The questions that the facilitators used to guide the small group discussions specifically asked participants to respond to the specific questions of “what are the issues” and “what are the opportunities/what would make it better for you” for a variety of scenarios. In addition, participants were provided opportunities to share their views in alternate formats, including a video story board and written comments, which provided for more wide-ranging feedback to be received. The Advisory Group received a great deal of feedback from the public through these formats, which will be posted on the website. We will also schedule another

community meeting in the coming weeks to provide residents with another opportunity to share their perspectives.

Issue 4: It was unclear who the members of the Community Committee were in the room. It was not clear if any Committee members were facilitating small groups, and it did not appear that way.

Response: Many members of the Advisory Group, including a majority of the Community Committee members, were in attendance and circulating throughout the room of small group discussions. Their role, like the role of the Advisory Group overall, was to listen to what others were saying, rather than to guide or directly participate in the discussions. I acknowledge that we could have done a better job with identifying who they were and more directly engaging them in the meeting.

Issue 5: We were told by the Managing Director that the format was planned by members of the Community Committee, but Committee member Irene Russell has said she was emailed the plan and was not part of the decision-making.

Response: The format of the meeting was proposed by the staff of the City's Department of Planning and Development, whose director is the lead City staff contact for the Community Committee. Email is the primary mode of contact between members of the Advisory Committee and City staff and all Committee members are strongly encouraged to email us with their input. A draft of the proposed meeting agenda and format was emailed to all Community Committee members on August 13th, one full week in advance of the scheduled meeting, to get their input and feedback. Unfortunately, Ms. Russell was not able to attend the meeting on August 20th due to a late scheduling conflict that arose after the public meeting was scheduled. The Advisory Committee strongly values Ms. Russell's perspectives and is grateful that she dedicated her time and energy to helping us better understand this important issue.

Issue 6: There was an inadequate number of residents from neighborhoods nearby the refinery present at this Community Committee meeting.

Response: The meeting on August 20th, like all Advisory Group meetings, was open to the public. City staff publicized the meeting in the news media, through its social media channels, on the City's website, by contacting the registered community organizations in neighborhoods near the refinery in both South and Southwest Philadelphia, and through the contacts of the Advisory Group members. The attendance at the meeting was very strong and the room was filled to capacity. Since this was a public meeting, the City could not turn anyone away based on which neighborhood they lived in. However, we readily acknowledge that we need to hear from the people who live nearest the refinery and at least one more community-focused meeting will be scheduled in the weeks ahead.

Issue 7: The meeting was over in roughly an hour, ending roughly an hour early. For residents taking time out of their schedules to attend and be heard on this topic, there should be an engaging program planned for the full meeting time.

Response: The meeting did not have an official “end” time other than the scheduled ending of 7:30pm. Many of the small group discussions reached the end of their conversations in roughly an hour, but each conversation moved at its own pace. Attendees were permitted to use the video story board for the full duration of the scheduled meeting time and many did so at the conclusion of their small discussions.

Issue 8: Facilitation questions had bias towards continued refinery operations, as most residents have little to no information on feasible possibilities for the site other than a refinery, which slants the opinions that are able to be given.

Response: As Philly Thrive acknowledges on the first page of its letter, the facilitation questions were intended to elicit feedback from attendees on numerous possible scenarios – they were not intended to create a bias toward continued refinery operations (or not). However, we must acknowledge that continued refinery operations in some form is one of many possibilities for the site. The specific questions asked by facilitators were as follows:

1. Future Uses
 - a. Refinery Scenario -Many former refineries become refineries again. If this is the case:
 - i. *Ask:* what are the issues?
 - ii. *Ask:* what are the opportunities/what would make it better for you?
 - b. Other Industrial Use Scenario– If other industrial uses were to locate or be integrated into the site:
 - i. *Ask:* what are the issues?
 - ii. *Ask:* what are the opportunities/what would make it better for you?
 - c. Vacant/No Use Scenario– If the site ends up vacant for a number of years:
 - i. *Ask:* what are the issues?
 - ii. *Ask:* what are the opportunities/what would make it better for you?
 - d. Other Use Scenario– Are there uses that could be incorporated on the site?
 - i. *Ask:* what are the opportunities/possibilities?
2. Next Steps
 - a. *Ask:* what else would you like us to know?
 - b. *Ask:* how best to reach people and their communities for updates?

Issue 9: Back to back meetings on August 20th and August 21st should have been rescheduled for accessibility. Very few working people and families can attend meetings on consecutive days.

Response: While members of the public are encouraged to attend any Advisory Group meeting they wish, each meeting of the Advisory Group is tailored to hear presentations from a

specific constituency so we can hear from all perspectives in a reasonably orderly manner. The time and locations for the meetings were specifically intended to promote accessibility – they are being held in a school that is located in a neighborhood near the refinery that can be reached by either car or transit, the meetings are held during evening hours, and the venue is ADA accessible. Feedback from the meetings will also be made publicly available online at phila.gov/refinery.

Concerns Regarding Intimidation and Disrespect

Refinery Advisory Group meetings are intended to provide an opportunity for different stakeholders to express their views in a safe and respectful atmosphere. We understand that there are many different passionate points of view on this subject, which is why the Advisory Group structured its meeting calendar in a way that was intended to allow different perspectives to be heard without the same constituencies dominating every meeting or resulting in arguments among those who have different views.

No incidents of threatening or harassing behavior will be tolerated. Philadelphia Police Civil Affairs personnel have been present at all meetings to ensure that a safe atmosphere is maintained. If any audience members experience an uncomfortable situation they are encouraged to immediately bring that issue to the attention of the City staff or the members of Civil Affairs who are present so it can be promptly addressed.

Recommendations

On behalf of the Advisory Group, I thank Philly Thrive for the list of recommendations it offered for how to improve the process. These recommendations will be carefully considered as the work of the Advisory Group moves forward. I will share your letter, and this response, with the Advisory Group members and we will also post both documents at phila.gov/refinery along with the other feedback gathered through the meeting.

Please note that it is the intent to make the feedback gathered during these meetings publicly available on the phila.gov/refinery website, and the Advisory Group expects to announce at least one more additional community meeting in the weeks ahead.

Sincerely,



Brian Abernathy
Managing Director

August 27, 2019