



Alexandria Beautification Commission (ABC) Retreat

Saturday, February 3, 2024

9:00 am - 2:00 pm

Meeting location: Transportation & Environmental Services (T&ES) Offices, 2900a Business Center Drive, Alexandria, VA.
REC PO Training Room 2900A

ABC MISSION: The Alexandria Beautification Commission was established by the City to advise City Council and citizens on all matters related to City beautification.

Present in person: Leah Bancheri, Steven Cohen, Elizabeth Gelfer (Vice Chair), Felicia Hackett, Kenneth Krupa, Alexander Mcelya, Monica Murphy, Maralyn O'Brien, Sara E. Rhoades, Daniya Tamendarova (Secretary), Eleanor Trice (Chair), Kelly Yates; Judy Lu (facilitator)

Excused absence: Laura Norfolk, Eleanor Quigley, Yanique Revers

Unexcused absence: Emily Swaim

Meeting called to order at 9:10 am

GOALS

- **Inspire beautification** through an awards program.
- **Promote environmental sustainability** through collaboration and engagement with City Council, City staff, and private organizations.
- **Educate** local community on beautification and sustainability best practices.

Also can review related resources:

- [Objectives from 2022 retreat](#)
- Draft [2024 planning calendar](#) with key dates
- Potential ABC [partners & collaborators](#)

Consider bringing your laptop and water bottle to the meeting. Looking forward to seeing you soon!

FEBRUARY 3 MEETING MINUES

1) **Welcome & introductions** (9 am – 9:30 am)

Commission members introduced themselves and welcomed our newest member, **Kelly Yates**.

2) Brief **review** of mission, goals, 2022 objectives & 2024 planning calendar (9:30 – 10:15 am)

Steve: For the goal bullet on Sustainability: Think about overlap between ABC and the Environmental Commission – how far into environmental area can/should we stray? For example, could we consider weaving in themes of biodiversity into our goals? There is a Stewardship Campaign for Biodiversity to protect and promote City’s biodiversity—can we draw on it and be part of it?

Judy: In 2019, the City issued new Landscaping Guidelines, which included best practices on biodiversity (a minimum 50% of planting in new developments should be native)

Monica: Sustainability can be a large umbrella covering many initiatives, including stormwater stewardship and biodiversity. We could be more descriptive about what “sustainability” means in our work. Maybe what we should add to the goal is the “why sustainability matters” – e.g., to “promote sustainability to enhance the benefits of ...”

Sara: We should be very clear about what WE mean under sustainability. The Sustainability Committee defines it very narrowly to buildings, etc. It’d be helpful to have a clear definition in our space for the Education Subcommittee’s work as well.

Maralyn: The Sustainability Subcommittee will take on that bullet and fleshing it out more in terms of providing our definition of sustainability, potentially incorporating the themes and definitions of biodiversity.

Eleanor T: Are there City offices that focus on biodiversity?

Judy: Oscar’s office of Forestry and Natural Resources; nongovernmental organizations like Tree Stewards and Master Gardeners; to a lesser degree the City’s Stormwater Division.

City calendar

Eleanor T: The City Hall is being renovated; this could be an opportunity to contribute to the next steps on plantings.

On the idea of planting 275 trees (for the City of Alexandria’s 275th Anniversary) – TES is already planning to plant 275 trees, working with the new Urban Forestry Manager (new arborist). Eleanor reached out to Tree Stewards on partnering, who were willing to work with us and the arborist. The new arborist suggested that ABC do a giveaway of 275 trees – e.g., possibly focus on an area where there are not many trees already?

The way a giveaway works—we’d gather native tree saplings and then choose an event of where to distribute them (e.g., native plant sale) and the arborist office could provide information; Tree Stewards could be available with guidance.

Ken: Sustainability Subcommittee did some research on where there are tree deficits – primarily in the West End. About 70% of people living in that area live in apartments, so giving away trees may not really engage or benefit them.

Eleanor: The arborist’s long-term plan is to build relationships with apartment complexes.

Steve/Daniya: To Ken's comment, instead of or in addition to trees, offer grow bags and earth and then provide vegetable plants and native flowers that are easy to take care of (black-eyed Susan) – something people can grow and enjoy on their balconies.

Ken: Sustainability Subcommittee discussed planting the 275 trees in one of the parks like Ben Brenman Park (e.g., create a critical mass “orchard” planting) – so it's an impactful, visible contribution. Choose trees that are particularly interesting like redbud or service berry.

People could adopt a tree (with a plaque, donating \$27.50) and then watch it grow to encourage citizen participation.

Alex: Can we take on a particular planting the City is going to do already and focus on promoting that?

Eleanor T: Time-wise, the tree giveaway would need to happen in spring or fall.

Steve: Is there a private-sector sponsorship opportunity? Nonprofits? Target a small area in an underserved part of the city where even 10-15 trees would stand out.

Ken: If the Sustainability Subcommittee's vision were to be realized 1) Somebody needs to keep track of names/dedications...- the Awards Committee or a partner nonprofit?; 2) Promotion of the initiative – e.g., through the Education Subcommittee

Steve: There is nothing to say that we can't create new subcommittees, and the 275th anniversary could be the focus of a new subcommittee.

Eleanor T: We could also consider refocusing the Awards Committee toward another initiative.

Daniya: We should focus on existing community events at specific areas we want to affect (e.g., in West End) and be part of that event to promote tree or plant giveaway. **DT to do: Look up what the Anacostia Museum did with the plant promotion and what organization sponsored that, lessons learned, potential VA partners, etc.**

Steve (to Judy): Are there existing sponsorship success stories by other Commissions? Best practices?

Judy: Will look up. There were examples where Commissions partnered with other civic organizations or local business associations—e.g., Tree Stewards are very active.

Eleanor T: Budget timeline is another important consideration – City budget is submitted in late February/March.

Ken: Can we use our existing research/information from the beautification committee awards and produce something people can use – e.g., a self-guided map to historic trees of Alexandria (Steve wrote up some articles)? On the City website, there are several self-guided tours through Alexandria. As a Commission, we could add 6-12 more (historic trees of Old Town, historic trees of West End, beautification awards sites, interesting architecture, murals).

Steve: Interesting idea. These could be distributed through schools and recreation centers.

BREAK (10:15 – 10:30 am)

3) Individual & subcommittee group work to develop 2024 strategies related to 4 themes below (a - d) that further the goals above (10:30 – 11:45 am)

- Review guardrails for ABC initiatives - including advocacy & fundraising (Judy Lo)
- Each individual write down their top 3 strategies (related to any ABC goal above) on post-it notes & share on a wall. (30 minutes)
- Each subcommittee takes related post-it notes & discusses their key SMART ideas, then report back to the full group. (45 minutes)

Focus on SMART objectives: Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant & time-bound

- a. Take advantage of ABC engagement opportunities tied to **City's 275 birthday**.

Sample ideas:

- Revitalization of Fort Ward's first arborist memorial & celebration/photo op event with new arborist/City council/ABC in May 2024.
- Plant additional 275 trees – reach 40% tree canopy goal

- Cultivate **meaningful partnerships**.
 - Identify the specific actions to take with specific City commissions/groups/departments/commissions that are tied to ABC goals. For example: Invite a City Council member ([Sarah Bagley?](#)) as liaison & champion to further ABC goals.
- Build **diversity**.
 - Sponsor a clean-up day/week in a diverse neighborhood in Alexandria West along with key partners? Build more diverse ABC/award awareness & member recruitment – other strategies?
- Structure **internal ABC operations** for sustainability.

Examples include:

 - Sponsorships/fundraising for specific ABC initiatives.
 - Document processes & key decisions. Save to ABC's Google drive.
 - Provide a brief orientation for new ABC members.
 - Update a central calendar.
 - Distribute awards & education sub-committee's work - e.g. awards promotion/communications plan for education sub-committee & City staff (Katie Bishop)
- Discussion with full group, then each subcommittee develop a 2024 action plan with target dates, including partnerships, to help meet your goals. (12:30 – 2:00 pm)

Awards Subcommittee (Alex)

- 1) Establish a Communications Plan, working with the Education Subcommittee
 - a. Internal: Joint meetings, or have liaisons between Education and Awards Subcommittees
 - b. External: Expanded outreach with businesses, City, community associations, city residences, architects, press (Zebra), and local business associations
 - c. Seasonal: Awards as catalyst

- 2) Update requirements for Awards: explicitly include balconies/decks/porches; public art (partner with the Office of Arts); better define what WE mean by “sustainability”; consider short-term informal “awards” – like “walk-by Best [seasonal decoration, etc.]”
- 3) Document processes and key decisions for Awards and the Awards Subcommittee
- 4) Awards event location – determine location rotation in advance
- 5) Partnership opportunities: Awards location

Monica: For the Awards work, are you considering partnerships? Did you think of partnering with Arts Commission – e.g., to engage them as judges for awards?

Ken: Potential commercial partnerships as well?

Eleanor T: Like nurseries providing plants? **Felicia:** Go to different areas of Alexandria and into their nurseries and other businesses in our space to promote awards, etc. (**Eleanor:** Green Street did this for us last year)

Ken: Ken is a liaison to the West End business association and, if we host the Awards event in West End, they’ll help us promote.

Steve: Like the idea of “spot award”. It’ll require a lot of commitment and clear timeline/expectations, but worth it if we keep it simple

Eleanor: We can leverage City staff to help us take photos of the Awards properties (**Sara** agreed that we can use more professional help).

Monica: Spot-award-type initiative would help identify and promote public spaces and engage communities with our Awards outreach.

Education Subcommittee (Sara)

- 1) Create content, in coordination with Awards and Sustainability subcommittees, to support the City of Alexandria’s 275th Anniversary

- a. Initiate and post twice per month about Awards on social media and submit 1 article per month with the Zebra or other print organization from March through September 2024.
- 2) Create a “Voices of Alexandria” video series by creating and posting a minimum of 1 video per month on compelling topics through December 2024, such as:
 - a. Events and notable celebrations in the City
 - b. Awards ceremony (All): ceremony itself; officials and guests at the ceremony; garden tours and interviews with award winners
 - c. Commission priorities (native plantings, invasive plants, green roofs, stormwater conservation, etc.) (Sara, Leah)
 - d. Historic buildings and Alexandria history (highlight black history, Leah)
 - e. Architecture (Leah)
 - f. Public art/murals (Daniya)
 - g. Photographers who specialize in Alexandria (“Lenses of Alexandria,” Steve)
 - h. Library events (Sara, Daniya)
 - i. Gardens/nurseries – interviewing employees about planting in the summer and fall (All)
- 3) Establish monthly communication and outreach with Awards Subcommittee to obtain timely bi-monthly social media content and monthly Zebra articles to inform the public about the nomination, voting, and award ceremony from April through October.
- 4) Establish internal communication channels with the Commission Subcommittee and key City departments by setting a clear schedule for attending monthly meetings with monthly touchpoints; the ultimate goal will be to create a monthly calendar to use for social and print media to inform the public about Commission priorities.
 - a. Establish a monthly email to ABC Chair, Awards, and Sustainability team leaders to ensure we receive timely content for social media and Zebra articles.
 - b. Identify a champion in each subcommittee responsible for getting relevant content to the education subcommittee.
 - c. Establish Education Subcommittee champion to coordinate with specific City officials.
 - d. Determine if Sustainability Subcommittee will be continuing outreach to council members.
 - e. Discuss with Eleanor T. the process for outreach to Council members.
- 5) Expand our coverage/promotion of Alexandria beautification through partnership with at least 4 organizations over the course of 2024—e.g.:

- a. Alexandria Library (Sustainability Librarian is Megan Zimmerman)
- b. TE&S
- c. Tree Stewards (Eleanor Trice)
- d. City Council Liaison for website updates (**Eleanor T** to make initial contact)

Other organizations to consider reviewing social media and contacting for information:

- Virginia Native Plants Society
- Horticultural Society at River Farm
- Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia
- Botanical Society of Washington
- Maryland Native Plants Society

Monica: Can we make sure we link to Zebra ABC content on social media? [Subcommittee response: Yes]

Monica (Ken concurs): Uncomfortable with posting directly on flooding and development (i.e., taking a political stance as a Commission), but we could find an angle – looking at it from the perspective of what makes Alexandria beautiful – e.g., what can you do to avoid flooding, etc.

Ken: We have plenty of positive things to post/interview about: e.g., 2 green roofs in public spaces in Alexandria – Alexandria City Council, Houston Rec Center. Monica could be interviewed about the green roofs in her apartment building.

Monica: Each Subcommittee should have a liaison with the Education Subcommittee and each Subcommittee could provide ideas for **4 posts a month**.

Eleanor T: Subcommittee communications could vary – e.g., Awards Subcommittee has so much going on, it may be useful to have an Education Subcommittee member actually attend Awards Subcommittee meeting; a Sustainability Subcommittee liaison could send info to the Education Subcommittee.

Ken: Kirk McPike may be able to lead a group of people to the bicentennial tree by the Beatley Library – something to document in summertime.

Eleanor T: Tree Stewards have a relationship with *Alexandria Times* and could put us in touch.

Steve: There may be an understanding of exclusivity of our content published in Zebra.

Eleanor T: On interviewing City Council, if we asked Sarah Bagley to be our liaison on the Council, she could be our more consistent voice. Also, Kelly Bishop has our stats on website usage. What is our “ask” for a City Council liaison? Each Subcommittee should think about their “asks” – and what is in it for the City Council member?

Sustainability Subcommittee (Maralyn):

1) Alexandria Gateways – Monica focuses on encouraging native plantings under the City Gateways; Ken focuses on artwork and giveaways.

2) Plantings/Giveaways - Partner with the Arborist on tree giveaway event(s).

3) Organizational outreach - Attend events of gardening and other relevant groups to promote our activities. Additional activities – building maps (Emily and Ken), eradicate Bradford pears (Eleanor Q), matching award grant from DEA that could triple City budget (Maralyn – City needs to apply, and Maralyn will work with the City to get that grant through).

Sara: The City has a program on tree donation with dedications – we could plug this for the 275th Anniversary

Alex: Is there a need to establish a liaison for the INNOVA Hospital redevelopment? Monica: It’s too early in the process.

Eleanor T: Based on Judy Lo’s feedback, revitalizing the Arborist memorial is a long-term project. This year, we could review the site and provide recommendations for what needs to be done – next year, allocate resources – in year 3 – implementation.

The arborist memorial revitalization may be one of the asks for City Council liaison.

Proposal: Each subcommittee to do a recap of what their 3 plans are and send to Eleanor T/Daniya.

Ken: The speaker from Visit Alexandria was compelling. We committed to provide some ideas of what they might pursue for the 275th Anniversary. The Arborist memorial is one idea, but there are more ideas we could propose to the City. Some ideas from Ken (something we can't do as ABC, but a larger organization may):

- 1) Sponsor a mural in the Beatley Library – there are 3 blank walls in the entrance – e.g., a historic mural for the 275th Anniversary – West End business commission may donate funds or resources

Sara: Alexandria Arts Commission may be another group who could spearhead this

Steve: An opportunity to engage student artists

- 2) Sponsor a landmark iconic sign for Alexandria?

Sara: The Alexandria Arts Commission may be a good group to spearhead it (like they sponsored the stormcover)

- 3) “Black Is Beautiful” campaign – about black squirrels – coordinated by Council person Chapman and former mayor Bill Euille – a way to engage both the African American and African communities

Felicia: a potentially offensive idea linking the slogan to squirrels

Monica: We don't need to link it to the squirrel and could just focus on the message of “Black Is Beautiful.” Consider a black walnut tree, black-eyed Susans, black tulips

Overall agreement: revise this proposal to omit the focus on black squirrels

- 4) VA has the most US presidents among states – what if we had busts of US presidents (\$1800 each) and scatter them either near individual restaurants or public parks in West End – even a pokémon-type thing – a way to bring more tourist activities to West End. If we create walking tour maps (Ken will drive it within the Sustainability Subcommittee) and provide them to the City and Visit Alexandria – an additional way for us to be cross-promoted by sites with larger footprints.

Next steps (Eleanor): Each Subcommittee Chair to post their group's plans on Google drive. Eleanor will send everyone a reminder.