

HOUSING COMMISSION OFFICIAL MEETING MINUTES

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2020, 4:00 PM
VIDEO CONFERENCE

Members Present: Robert Abraham, Member
Pedro Alanis, Member
Jeff Arndt, Member
Dr. Paul Furukawa, Member
Jessica O. Guerrero, Chair
Taneka 'Nikki' Johnson, Member
Richard Milk for David Nisivoccia, Member
Susan Richardson, Member
Sarah Sanchez, Member

Members Absent: None

Staff Present: Lori Houston, *City Manager's Office*;
Verónica R. Soto, *Neighborhood & Housing Services Department*;
Kevin Barthold, *City Auditor's Office*
Veronica Garcia, *Center City Development and Operations*;
Ian Benavidez, *Neighborhood & Housing Services Department*;
Edward Gonzales, *Neighborhood & Housing Services Department*;
Sara Wamsley, *Neighborhood & Housing Services Department*;
Edith Merla, *Neighborhood & Housing Services Department*;
Irma Duran, *Neighborhood & Housing Services Department*;
Allison Shea, *Neighborhood & Housing Services Department*;
Edith Merla, *Neighborhood & Housing Services Department*;
Munirih Jester, *Neighborhood & Housing Services Department*;
Kristin Flores, *Neighborhood & Housing Services Department*;
Sharon Chan, *Neighborhood & Housing Services Department*

- **Call to Order** - The meeting was called to order by Chair Jessica O. Guerrero at 4:00 PM.
- **Roll Call** – Irma Duran called the roll. At the time when roll call was conducted, eight (8) members were present representing a quorum.
- **Public Comments** – Duran announced there were no residents signed up to speak for public comment.

Staff note: The Housing Commission deadline for written comment is 4 pm the day before the meeting. Signing up to speak during public comment can be done until 12 noon the day of the meeting. Speakers who call past the deadline are given the opportunity to submit a written comment to be included in the minutes but not read during the meeting, and to sign up in advance for the following meeting.

1. Item #1: Approval of Minutes for September 14, 2020 Special Meeting and September 23, 2020 Regular Housing Commission Meeting.

Commissioner Richardson requested that on Page 8 of the September 23, 2020 minutes an edit be made to reflect “WFA” should be “WSA” (Workforce Solutions Alamo).

Commissioner Johnson requested that on Page 1 of the September 23, 2020 minutes an edit be made to reflect “Tameka Nicole Johnson” should be “Taneka Nikki Johnson”.

Commissioner Arndt motioned to approve the September 14th, 2020 Special Meeting Minutes and the amended September 23rd, 2020 Meeting Minutes. Commissioner Alanis seconded. Motion carried unanimously.

Staff note: These edits are now reflected in the meeting minutes for the September 23, 2020 meeting.

2. Item #2: Discussion and Possible Action on the Emergency Housing Assistance Program (EHAP) Evaluation Survey Questions and Strategy.

Guerrero requested Sara Wamsley, Interim Affordable Housing Administrator, to present.

Wamsley stated that an EHAP evaluation survey was drafted with the help of the Commissioners and Outreach Workgroup. Survey would be presented to applicants, nonprofit partners, and property managers who participated the program to identify EHAP improvements regarding access, usage, and outcomes. A briefing at the Culture and Neighborhood Services Committee (CNSC) will take place on Monday (November 2nd) pending on Commissioner approval. Survey will be launched the week of November 2nd and close November 30th. Data analysis and findings will be included on the December 2nd Commission meeting and formal recommendations proposed on the January 20th, 2021 meeting.

Commissioner Arndt suggested to closed survey on the first full week of December due to the Thanksgiving holiday and send out reminders on November 30th.

Commissioner Johnson asked how the survey would be launch and distributed the week of November 2nd. Wamsley stated that a soft launch would be carried out the week of November 2nd. Distribution would be through Council offices, partners that have helped with the administration of EHAP, and direct email distributions to applicants and property managers. Johnson asked for confirmation that the survey would be distributed to applicants that were denied. Wamsley confirmed the survey would be.

Chair Guerrero stated that there were discussions in the Outreach Workgroup to have another phase of qualitative data input for people that have participated in some way with EHAP to share comments, concerns, and suggestions. She recommended that the Risk Mitigation Stakeholder Group assist with that phase. Johnson and Ian Benavidez, Assistant Director, both agreed that Group would be helping in formalizing the next phase. Verónica Soto, Director, stated that the addition of the Group to formalize the qualitative data phase could be included with the CNSC briefing for feedback and suggestions.

Arndt noted that from the start of the EHAP evaluation discussion, qualitative and quantitative factors were both requested.

Commissioner Sanchez joined the meeting.

Johnson requested additional spacing on the survey for input of any difficulties encountered while applying for EHAP. Benavidez stated staff would review the survey and ensure there would be an open-ended space to comment for if an applicant had issues applying that were not placed as a choice, such as not having internet access. Soto stated that from July 1st, the Intake & Recovery Center has offered in person application processing. Before July 1st, NHSD partnered with many grassroots organizations to assist with in person intake of applicants.

Arndt commented that a mail distribution for the survey was brought as an option. Wamsley stated that mailings and survey copies available at the Recovery Centers and NHSD are all options for distribution.

Commissioner Furukawa credited NHSD for promoting the survey as a large majority of applicants haven't asked for their feedback to be included. He asked, regarding the Risk Mitigation Fund (RMF), would the survey information gathered be useful for additional RMF programs in the future.

Wamsley stated that initial strategizing for survey data to be used in the RMF hasn't been developed; however, previous data gatherings have helped other program developments (ex. Legal kiosks from eviction data). Once the survey data has been collected, there is an opportunity to brainstorm before January 20th. Furukawa offered to assist. Benavidez welcomed Furukawa's assistance and guidance. Soto stated that NHSD's programs are greatly data driven to ensure sound decisions are made.

Wamsley summarized that Commissioner will be voting to approve the EHAP survey with the following amendments:

- Ensure open-ended spaces on survey for additional EHAP commentary
- Survey deadline extension with a check-in on the December 2nd meeting

Commissioner Arndt motioned to approve the amended survey and strategy. Commissioner Abraham seconded. Motion carried unanimously.

3. Item #3: Briefing by the San Antonio Water System (SAWS) on the Impact of Utilities on Housing Affordability.

Guerrero requested Gavino Ramos, Vice President of Communications and External Affairs, to present. Ramos stated Mary Bailey, Vice President of Customer Experience & Strategic Initiatives, would present first.

Bailey stated that SAWS serves 1.8 million properties, 1.5 million in San Antonio, the majority of which are single family residences. SAWS currently services about 482,000 connections, not including multi-family complexes as each apartment unit isn't individually metered. The 1.7-1.8% connection growth is predominantly outside of San Antonio average. Each customer averages 6,300 gallons monthly, including outdoor and indoor usage. Using the winter average, 5,100 gallons monthly best represents indoor usage. SAWS averages 5-year increments to determine the average residential monthly bill. The current average, \$75.10, is on the lower side of the national average. The comparison and average will be updated this upcoming year. Bailey stated that the affordability discount program (Uplift) is offered and families can receive discounts up to \$28.35 depending on

poverty level.

Ramos continued that SAWS is looking to grow their assistance programs and have increased the Uplift budget 120%. With insistence from the SAWS CEO, enrollment outreach efforts have also increased 60% in the last 5 years. Because of the outreach, SAWS assistance enrollments have grown in the past four years. One recent program change was Project Agua. Agua started as a once-per-year use program for customers but has increase to a twice-per-year. Ramos stated Agua works together with families to eventually catch up on their SAWS billing and be made whole. There are also numerous customer “touch points” that SAWS has created for customers that have different assistance needs. Taking a holistic approach in understanding that customers requesting assistance with their water bill will most likely need assistance in other aspects, Ramos stated in/or around 2019, two positions were added as contacts solely to reach out to the community and find customers in need. Due to the pandemic, the team members had not been able to go into neighborhoods, but now are being reintroduced in Council offices and events.

Alanis commented that with the Strategic Housing Implementation Plan (SHIP) and the definition of affordability, having a better understanding of what SAWS provides offers better context of San Antonio’s affordability question. Regarding the housing development guide, Alanis asked for more information on the impact waiver fee program for affordable housing projects. Ramos stated that impact fee waivers are done through the City Council not through SAWS. Lori Houston, Assistant City Manager, stated the Center City Development & Operations Department (CCDO) oversees the impact fee waiver program. SAWS budgets the funding then the City adopts a policy allocating the funding that was budgeted to the development.

Alanis asked about SAWS response to the COVID crisis. Bailey responded that in early March, SAWS understood that water and good hygiene was important to limit the spread of the disease, which is why they had ceased disconnections and late fees for customers. To date, SAWS hasn’t resumed late fees or disconnections even when seeing a significant deterioration of fee collection and 600% increase of accounts that would be eligible for disconnection. SAWS is currently working with its Board to understand the current situation and get back to a more normalized state. Previously, 3 to 6 months’ time frames were offered for payment arrangements; now, customers are being offered up to 18 months. Additional resources are also being examined for Project Agua. Ramos stated that since March 2020, over 1,700 families were added to Project Agua’s enrollment compared to 2,800 families in 2018-2019. SAWS understand there is a need and will continue to reach out.

Commissioner Milk stated that SAHA understands that utility costs are an elevated issue for their residents. So much so that SAHA has included utility costs as one of the marquee outcomes on SAHA’s 5-year strategic planning. Milk thanked SAWS for their timely presentation and now has a greater understanding of programs that SAHA’s residents can enroll in. Ramos thanked SAHA for being an integral part of the growth of SAWS’ assistance programs and networks as well.

Commissioner Richardson inquired how customers are made aware of the programs. Ramos stated that with every bill, SAWS includes a newsletter. Working together with Councilman Trevino’s office, a dedicate newsletter regarding assistance programs was distributed. Information is also distributed through VIA bus shelters, buses, newspaper ads,

and direct mailers (most effective). Ramos stated that while partnering with the Alamo Area Council of Governments' (AACOG) insulation programs, their qualifiers were so in sync that both program applicants could crossover and received additional help.

Furukawa praised SAWS holistic thinking to include additional partnerships and resources apart from SAWS' assistance for their customer's water bill. Ramos praised a particular Uplift team member, Mary Jane Villalobos, for listening to a senior's concern regarding their pet. Ms. Villalobos discovered there are also animal food banks and organized a pet food drive at SAWS, which generated the highest-level participation at SAWS.

Johnson asked if the SAWS customer service representatives (CSRs) are all trained in all the different programs offered. Ramos commended SAWS' CSRs and the affordability team in understanding the importance of the customer's needs and ensuring the family gets the assistance they deserve. Johnson asked if the assistance information was easily found on SAWS' website. Ramos stated that under the direction of Greg Wukash, the Uplift site was created (uplift.saws.org) and is also accessible through saws.org. Johnson asked if the assistance information also been given to 211. Ramos confirmed that it had been.

Commissioner Sanchez inquired on how Project Agua is funded. Ramos stated that Agua is mainly funded through SAWS, but, like CPS, customers can donate on their SAWS statement. Donations to Agua can be selected from the United Way campaign. Proceeds of SAWS Fiesta medal purchases are also donated to the Agua. Most recently, a pop-up window on saws.org asks neighbors to help other neighbors through a donation to Project Agua, which has generated over \$15,000 since March 2020.

Arndt agreed with Furukawa's praise and added that many organizations in the community that help rarely are applauded for their efforts. Arndt asked of the total revenue that SAWS receives, what percentage is budgeted to their assistance programs. Bailey stated that SAWS received \$800 million in revenue and has budgeted \$8 million in 2021 for their affordability discount programs and \$400,000 to Project Agua alongside the donations. Bailey stated that SAWS does attempt to keep the billing affordable as possible; though water is a right for all citizens, but there is a cost in providing it that needs to be paid. One of SAWS goals is to find efficiencies in its processes to ensure the cost is affordable.

Commissioner Abraham brought up a competition point for SAWS to beat Phoenix's rank of lowest cost water provider. Bailey stated that Phoenix's rank is hard to compete against as it has less outdoor water usage.

Guerrero inquired about training time for intake, what the ratio of employees to calls was, and the timeline of the application process. Ramos stated that SAWS had been working for over a year to create an online application that could give the applicant an immediate reply of what programs they had qualified for. Depending on when the applicant had applied, a discount could be provided as early as the next billing cycle. Uplift representative training typically takes 15-20 days for trainees to familiarize themselves with what programs are offered and understand what programs fit the customer's needs. Out of the seventeen staffers, seven individuals are dedicated to inputting applications and assisting customers with affordability programs while ten help with any overflow. Guerrero asked if there was an evaluation survey for the program. Ramos stated that there was an informal survey done to hear back from customers of what worked and what didn't.

Guerrero inquired if SAWS had considered connecting with City and County in their approach for housing assistance and the SAWS Board's thoughts of water usage to be included as housing cost. Ramos mentioned that San Antonio's rates are one of the lower priced rates in the nation. Though many would like the rate to be even lower, SAWS must consider infrastructure maintenance costs to ensure safe quality water for the community. Guerrero thanked Ramos and Bailey and extended an invitation to both and the SAWS Board from the Housing Commission in discussions of defining affordable housing.

Guerrero asked about SAWS timeline for the rate structure adjustments and addressing prior customer fees/disconnections. Bailey stated that a rate structure study is currently being conducted and the Rate Advisory Committee (RAC) is a group of customers appointed by City Council and other organizations. Due to the pandemic, both the study and Committee were paused and there is no current timeline to resume activities as the timeframe would be based on when viable data collection could resume. 2020 was to be used as the base/testing year to determine the rate, but the pandemic has thrown things into disarray. A re-evaluation of how the basing rate should be determined is currently being discussed. Regarding disconnections, Bailey mentioned conversations are being included with next week's 2021 budget presentation. With the customers eligible for disconnection rising from 5,000 to 30,000, a large concern is if there will be a decrease as time goes on. Historically, SAWS has balanced helping the most vulnerable while ensuring people not take advantage of a situation. Bailey stated that it would be very hard to determine at this point that they would not re-institute disconnections but there are ongoing conversations.

Guerrero asked for clarification of late fees. Bailey stated monthly usage fees are still being billed but that late fees are not charged. Late fees would only be charged after the moratorium was lifted and on the amount after being resuming. Disconnections would only be considered if the customer continued to not pay their balance and would not enter payment arrangements. Extra strides will be taken to ensure that disconnections could be prevented.

Alanis stated that as almost half of San Antonio's community are renters, what data is available to assess cost for water usage among renters versus single family houses. Bailey stated that the presented data only pertained to single family homes, there is no distinction of the home being rented or owned. For multi-family complexes, total water usage is accounted for but units per complex isn't. For a more accurate unit count, it would be best to ask directly or through the San Antonio Apartment Association (SAAA). Bailey also mentioned that one of the RAC members is from the SAAA; and though more complex, one of the charges of the RAC is to determine affordability for multi-family complexes as well as single family.

Johnson inquired when date is set to resume disconnections and late fees, would SAWS contact customers to alert customers of the date set, give time to apply for the discount programs and/or payment arrangements, and train CSRs for in the incoming questions and customer volume. Bailey confirmed that all items would be included in their plan as anything less than 90 days' notice couldn't offer an opportunity to customers to rectify their situation. She stated if more time is needed because of customer call volume, more time will be allotted. SAWS also has a self-service system where people can log into their user portal and self-enroll in a payment plan. Expansion of eligibility requirements are also being discussed.

Guerrero inquired if there were penalties charge for water waste and if it could be a potential funding source for the programs. Ramos stated that it would be under the conservation department to issue citations, but there is not as many offenders as people believe. Bailey confirmed that SAWS uses off duty officers to cite offenders. However, citations are adjudicated by the Municipal Court and fines assessed go to the City.

Guerrero asked for clarification of the rate study and timeline. Bailey stated that the rate study was paused due to the pandemic. As there are 21 members on the RAC, a conversation was held to see if the meetings should be virtual. But a determination was made that with the complex data, 21 members in a virtual setting couldn't be as effective as in-person. Bailey stated as time moves forward, the underlying base of the study has been called into question and a complete review of the study is in discussions.

Guerrero asked for clarification on the impact fees. Bailey states that SAWS charges an impact fee when a new house/unit is connected to the water system. The impact fee recoups costs for the infrastructure connections to the new unit. Impact waivers can be granted by the City for projects. For example, in the 2020 SAWS budget, \$100 million was budgeted in impact fee collection with an additional \$3 million pre-determined to be waived by the City. Veronica Garcia, Assistant Director, stated that the waivers are granted to qualifying affordable housing projects, expansion of small businesses, and rehabilitation of historic buildings.

4. Item #4: Director's Report.

Chair Guerrero requested Verónica Soto to present.

Soto stated that responses for last meeting's questions were included in the follow-up packet distributed to the commissioners.

Soto introduced Kevin Barthold, City Auditor, to present the results of the Audit of the NHSD Risk Mitigation Fund and COVID-19 EHAP.

Barthold stated that the City Auditor independently reports to the City Council through the Audit and Accountability Committee. An audit was conducted in July/August 2020 of EHAP as it was a new program with significant growth and large funding. The objective of the audit was to ensure funding was distributed in accordance with federal policy and municipal direction. The scope of the audit was a timeframe of when an application was first received to when approval was sent to Finance for payment until July 31, 2020. Barthold summarized that the results of the audit had no findings and that NHSD's approvals and rejections were in accordance with City and Federal guidelines. Declined applications were recorded and categorized correctly with applicants notified of results. The top reason why a person was declined was because they were outside the City limits. Mendix, the application and tracking system, was also found to be reporting accurately. In turn, the real time EHAP dashboard was also able to reflect accurate data. On the finance side, items were tracked and categorized correctly as well. Overall, the EHAP process and audit results were good.

Arndt congratulated the NHSD staff for clean audit results and praised their mindfulness during the trying circumstances.

Richardson remarked of instances in other cities still being challenged with their assistance

disbursements efforts. She asked for more information on Mendix. Barthold stated Medix was implemented towards the end of April as a tracking system and workflow database for the EHAP process. Richardson asked to confirm if Mendix would continue to be used. Soto stated that Mendix is a framework. With Mendix, Edward Gonzales, Assistant Director, was able to create an online application and workflow tracking. As the system is secure and can assist staff with managing data and documents, Soto recommends that it continue to be used. Richardson asked if the City owns the data and what else it would be used for. Soto stated that though the data is City owned, as much of the data deals with federal disaster funding (CARES Act funds), and as such, identifying information of the recipient cannot be included.

Johnson inquired of the additional reasons why applicants were denied and how was the information obtained. Barthold stated that some other reasons listed of why applicants were denied was due to non-responsiveness or applicant no longer needing assistance. Johnson inquired how contact with the applicant was verified. Barthold stated Mendix had a Notes section where representatives placed down their actions of what was being done on the case. Johnson asked if there were accounts of denial due to the applicant not working. Barthold stated that denial due to applicant not working was not shown but would also be counterproductive to program.

Guerrero asked for clarification on Page 1 regarding how the City addressed root causes of displacement. Barthold stated the background information was taken from RMF program narrative and wasn't included with the audit findings. Guerrero asked for clarification on Page 5 of the random sampling of 43 applications and their listing of reasons of denial. Barthold stated that on Page 11, Section F, a listing of reasons of denial were presented. Guerrero asked for clarification on Page 9 regarding "management determining award amounts" and if there was a list of criteria to denote fairness/unbiases. Barthold stated that Page 9 referred specifically to duplicate applications and the applicant being awarded twice (overpayment). He stated that the list of criteria for EHAP's federal and City funding was straightforward and consisted of the applicant providing information of how they were impacted by COVID and AMI qualification.

Guerrero asked if the City Auditor's Office was due to receive equity training and if equity is an included criterion in the auditing process. Barthold stated that many but not all staff have gone through the equity training. Many audits do include a data and equity perspective, such as City-wide audits like budgeting. He stated an example from District 5 regarding the street repair budgeting was equally distributed, the funds didn't help their situation as it wasn't being equitably distributed.

Guerrero asked if there was a determination to not include racial or ethnic demographics in the audit. Barthold stated that demographics weren't specifically asked for in the original Council audit request. There was not a conscious decision to not include demographics. Soto presented the racial and ethnic demographics that are included with the dashboard features.

Soto presented an update regarding the Texas Eviction Diversion Program (TEDP), which is a state pilot program that San Antonio is helping to pilot. The state extended a program contract to DHS for \$600,000 and targets people facing eviction. Funds can assist with six months of rent and applicant must be referred by the Justice of the Peace (JP) Courts. As so, the program is not widely advertised as it will contain a small subset of eligible applicants.

Participating landlords must waive fees. Contract should be ratified in Council on October 29th. These funds will expand the Courts Team by two staff. Pilot will take place from October to December 2020 and the eligibility calculations are different. The two new staff will be trained on these calculations so that the processing will run smoothly.

Wamsley stated with the new pilot, training focus has shifted to prepare for TEDP. Currently, all 4 JP Courts are holding hearings, but the scheduling is irregular. As declaration sheets are needed by the judge for the CDC moratorium, staff is ensuring that people have declarations prepared. From July 15th to present, there have been 295 hearing resets and 262 eviction dismissals. With the moratorium, reset numbers are now higher due to cases being reset until January. Benavidez also highlighted Sara Wamsley and Crystal Grafft that their efforts with the Courts Team was able to be shared nationally and helped with the development of TEDP.

Johnson praised the Courts Team for their work and resolve. She inquired when the \$600,000 needed to be used by. Soto stated December 31, 2020. Johnson followed up that if the pilot is successful and new funding is granted, would the applicant pool expand. Soto stated that under its guidelines, TEDP could only be used for people facing eviction in court but hopes that there may be separate additional funding that would be designated for rental assistance. Benavidez stated that if the guidelines remain the same, the applicant must be directly referred by the Court.

Furukawa, firstly, praised the staff for a clean EHAP audit, remarking that it is a remarkable feat to accomplish with an urgent task at hand. Secondly, he thanked Soto and staff for their support and quickness to the mission-oriented organizations and SHIP forums. Wamsley assisted in briefing the Interfaith San Antonio Alliance on the EHAP and Eviction Courts programs. Furukawa was able to use the materials for a later presentation to social workers that were able to make use of the information. Lastly, Furukawa stated that Alfred Montoya and Trinity University will be starting a class in January with interest in San Antonio housing studies. He asked if the staff would be interested to take these students as interns or incorporating them somehow. Wamsley thanked Furukawa and his support and stated that NHSD currently is working with interns from Trinity and UTSA and would be interested in interns for next semester.

Guerrero recommended ongoing communications between City and County for continued education and benefit gained for a more complete partnership. Soto stated that the Eviction Courts Team has partnered with the County for the JP Court hearings. She is constantly discussing challenges, what has been effective, and referrals with the County. Guerrero specified her recommendation to formalizing the communication between organizations and City in addressing the housing crisis.

Soto stated that the upcoming Housing Commission meeting was moved to December 2nd as the previously timeslot would be right before the Thanksgiving holiday. The EHAP Evaluation Survey will be presented to the Culture and Neighborhood Services Committee on November 2nd. As the Mayor had reinstated the Planning and Land Development Committee, presentations for SHIP and the ForEveryoneHome Initiative are tentatively scheduled to be heard November 9th.

Richardson inquired if a definition of affordability has been reached and being presented. Benavidez stated a definition has not been reached. The affordability definition would first

be presented for Commission approval before moving toward Council approval.

Closing-

There being no further discussion, the meeting was adjourned without contest at 7:00 PM.

DRAFT