

IRVINGTON

Committee recommends clarity for review of land-use proposals

BY JULIAN MICHAEL CALDWELL

After a six-month consultation with the Pace University Land Use Law Center, the Irvington Land Use Approval Streamlining Committee has revealed its 13-step plan to simplify and improve the approval process for projects such as construction and renovation to home residences and commercial properties.

The 13 steps include updating the village zoning code, hiring a facilitator to manage the land-use process, and having target timelines of completion ranging from six months to 18 months. During a work session on Wednesday, Oct. 15, the village board of trustees decided to present the recommended steps to the public at their meeting on Monday, Oct. 20, and allow for public comment on six recommendations the board wants to pursue immediately.

The 43-member committee, which had its first meeting on April 8, consists of members of the planning board, architectural review board (ARB), zoning board of appeals (ZBA), village staff, and village homeowners and residents. The committee's co-chairs are Randy Huff, who is a member of the ZBA, and David Zwiebel, a real estate developer and architectural designer who will be one of two unopposed

Democratic village trustee candidates on the ballot on Nov. 4.

In March, the Village spent \$20,000 to hire Pace's Land Use Law Center, which has advised more than a dozen municipalities in Dutchess and Westchester counties in similar situations over the past 15 years. One of the main issues the committee wants to address is helping residents keep up with zoning code changes that affect alterations to their homes.

"Code changes have occurred over the last 25 years that are significant for every village, and every time the State comes out with a new regulation, or the village decides they want solar energy or some other wonderful thing, they just write a paragraph and drop it into the code," Zwiebel told the Dispatch. "And when you add it all up, it's difficult to understand what you need to do if you're making an addition. Adding an air conditioner — that's one piece of a code; sprinkler systems is another piece of the code; and on and on and on."

The six actions the committee is recommending the Village begin implementing immediately are a review and update of the village zoning code; amending village code to limit the types of developments that require site development plan review; an annual

evaluation of the land-use review and permitting process; collection of historical data to determine and clearly communicate estimated costs associated with the different types of applications; a revamp of the board member on-boarding process to include land use board roles; and the creation of reports and meetings to better educate applicants on the pre-application process.

The committee chose to focus on those six steps immediately because of consensus among the committee members and Pace as priorities, and because they come at no cost to begin the process.

Residents will have the opportunity to voice their opinions on those recommendations during the village board meeting on Monday, Oct. 20. Depending on public response, the board could vote to approve the recommendations at that meeting.

Reviewing and updating the code is expected to take roughly 18 months, and will require the Village to pay for a consultant. The Village plans to determine the consultant cost and scope before applying for funding from the state Department of State or Department of Environmental Conservation.

"Rightly so, the planning board, zoning board, architectural review board, and

building department all answer many complaints with the line, 'We didn't write the rules, we just enforce them,'" Zwiebel said. "But what's overlooked in that is that there have been so many changes, and the rules have gotten more explicit, and that most folks don't realize this stuff happens."

For several years, some residents have taken issue with the fact that the Village has three separate decision-making boards related to building and renovation, which tends to prolong the approval process. Like Irvington, Hastings and Ardsley also have a planning board, ARB, and ZBA, while Dobbs Ferry has only a planning board and ZBA.

The committee's recommendations don't include dissolving any of the boards, but include the clarification of ARB standards and a recommendation that the ARB provide only an advisory opinion to the planning board for all projects subject to planning board review.

The committee is also recommending that the Village require the designation of one ARB board member as a liaison to the planning board to participate in planning board meetings, and appoint an architect who doesn't work within Irvington to serve on

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Ardasley Heart

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in their development, but we noticed that the emphasis wasn't necessarily on all the different experiences that we have here in Ardsley," he said. "It was more of, 'You're here at Ardsley, we're together,' but with this organization we feel like there's a more articulate and nuanced way of talking about how we're all different in some ways, but ultimately, we can be together and express ourselves and be able to say, 'This is who I am or who I want to be.'"

According to Balaram, another pillar of Ardsley Heart is the belief that advocating for change requires all members of the community to step up.

"We can't put it all on the school to help improve that sense of belonging, because some of it is also our responsibility to extend our hand to our neighbors and to have conversations."

The first of these conversations took place on Oct. 15, in the Ardsley High School library. The evening centered around immigration, with the attendees watching and discussing the 2013 film "I Learn America."

The choice of topic and film stemmed from the novel "The Distance Between Us" by Reyna Grande, which all members of the high school community, including parents, were encouraged to read over the summer through the Books or Other Media (BOOM) Club. The themes from this novel reminded Wai of this film, which follows five immigrant students at International High School in Brooklyn, where she used to teach.

"Their individual immigrant stories are worth learning about and appreciating, and seeing where their journeys converge with Reyna Grande's and where it might diverge," she said. "Knowing that helps us pluralize this idea of the immigrant story, because there's no 'the immigrant story,' there's 'immigrant stories,' plural."

Such exchanges offer people the opportunity "to grow with one another in a way that is more substantive," Dorsainville said.

"It differs from just spending time watching your kid play sports or shuttling them around from place to place. Something like this [is] to have a conversation and to talk about really important ideas and how we're all crashing into these ideas, especially right now. Things are stressful and contentious."

Balaram agreed.

"[It's] a diverse group of people — students, parents, teachers," she noted. "When else are you sitting next to a teacher in the high school... to talk about something like your immigrant story? That's a rare opportunity to have a conversation about something that you wouldn't necessarily have at CVS."

Upcoming are two events discussing "The Distance Between Us": the first one will take place over Zoom on Nov. 12, and the second will take place at the AHS library on Dec. 10. Other initiatives will include a Right to Be campaign, inspired by an organization that teaches students how to be an upstander.

Ardasley Heart also meets one-on-one with families, and has regular meetings with school district officials, according to Balaram.

"[The district is] very aware that this is something that we all need to work together to improve. We all want children and families to feel connected, to feel affirmed in this school environment, to feel like they belong, and to feel safe."

Ardasley Heart also hopes to highlight positivity within the community. A form is featured on their website for people to nominate "Champions of Belonging," or members of the community who align with the organization's values.

"We will highlight them on our social media, like, 'This is a really wonderful teacher, this is a really wonderful kid on the bus that helped me feel like I belong,'" Balaram said. "Those are the stories that are so important for encouraging more of that behavior. Our work is not just pointing out the gaps. It's also saying these are the spaces [where] the school district is doing a great job, where young people are doing a great job."

Dorsainville emphasized Ardsley Heart's vision for the district.

"There's opportunity here for you to be your best self, to learn to be who you are," he said. "That means that it's up to the parents of the community to learn how to talk about differences, how to talk to each other in a respectful manner, and to grow and learn... Even though our experiences might be different, there's a commonality to it. There's a way to go forward together."

The leadership encouraged the community to nominate Champions of Belonging and share ideas at their website ardsleyheart.org.

Land use streamlining

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the ARB. Though village code states there should be an architect on the ARB, Irvington does not have one, as it's been a conflict of interest in the past for village residents who work in Irvington.

Other recommendations include hiring a consultant to refresh the Village website to clearly list updated frequently asked questions, forms, and fees; the creation of a flow chart with example cost ranges, average costs, and time constraints for different kinds of projects; and hiring a facilitator in the building department to be in charge of public sessions every few months that inform residents about the permitting process and common obstacles for people remodeling their home. Zwiebel believes that with the Village's focus on restructuring municipal facilities, and new related grant opportunities from the State, now is the right time to pursue the recommendations.

"There's a demand for this improvement in the building process, but there are also these necessary infrastructure things that we need in town, and there's money out there to do it that isn't taxpayer money," Zwiebel said. "Is it going to happen all within six months? No way. But I'm looking at two years from now. Before we can have shovels in the ground to do anything with facilities, we need to get all of these rules straightened out."

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Program Update

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Opt out letters will be mailed out in October. The opt-out periods are Ardsley 10/20-11/24, Dobbs Ferry 10/20-11/25, Hastings 10/20-11/23 and Irvington is 10/20 to 11/27.

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- Customers will pay a premium for renewable supply services. This additional cost helps support New York State's clean energy goals and a more sustainable energy future.



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