

Valparaiso Environmental Advisory Board

Meeting Summary | February 3, 2025

1. Roll Call

- All Environmental Advisory Board members were present.

2. Open Door Law Overview

- City Attorney Patrick Lyp provided an overview of the public records act and the Open Door Law policy.
- He emphasized that any meeting or discussion of official business and action items by the board must be publicly announced and open to the public.
- Each board member needs a city-issued email for official correspondence.

3. Term Establishments

- The board selected **Maureen Turman** as the **Chair** and **Greg Quartucci** as the **Vice Chair**.
- **Sara McKelvey** was appointed as **Secretary**.
- Term limits for board members were established:
 - **Ellen Kapitan** (City Council President and sponsor of the board) – Term ends **December 31, 2027**.
 - **Maureen Turman & Greg Quartucci** – Terms end **December 31, 2026**.
 - **Sara McKelvey & Malorie Medellin** – Terms end **December 31, 2025**, with the opportunity for reappointment.
 - **Student representatives** will serve **one academic term**:
 - **Naia Nikitaris** (Sophomore at Valparaiso High School).
 - **Austin Sabec** (Senior at Valparaiso High School).

4. Current Sustainability Efforts

- Several existing sustainability-focused nonprofits were identified in Valparaiso, including:
 - **NWI Plastic Reduction Alliance** (upcoming meeting on **February 26 at 5:30 PM**).
 - **Wild Ones**, which promotes the use of native plants.
- The board expressed interest in engaging with these groups to learn more about their efforts and explore partnership opportunities.
- **No Mow May** was successfully promoted and accomplished in Valparaiso last year.
- Discussion of **stormwater runoff regulations** included mention of **contractor fines** for violations.
- The board reviewed **composting and recycling efforts** within the city.
- Local student-led environmental groups include:
 - **Earth Awareness Club** at Valparaiso High School.
 - **Sustainability Cohort** at Valparaiso University.

- **Upcoming Environmental Debate:**
 - A debate between Valparaiso and Chesterton High Schools will take place on **March 17** at the **Porter County Administrative Building at 5:30pm.**
- **Air Emissions:**
 - **Malorie Medellin** noted that NIRPC conducted a study identifying the air emissions inventory for local municipalities, including Valparaiso, and that she could find and share that information if helpful to the Board.
 - It was noted that **Northwest Indiana's air quality in Lake and Porter County was recently classified as "serious nonattainment" for the 2015 ozone standards by EPA.**
- **Potential Partnerships:**
 - The board expressed interest in working with the **Indiana Dunes Education Center.**
- **Solar Energy Growth in Valparaiso:**
 - The city has installed **772 solar panels** across **five municipal facilities** as of **2023.**
 - Solar panels have been installed at:
 - **Three treatment plants.**
 - **City Services building on Joliet Road.**
 - **City Hall on Lincolnway.**
- **City Department Sustainability Efforts:**
 - A "Request for Information" email will be sent to various **Valparaiso City departments** (Public Works, Parks and Recreation, City Engineer) to gather more details about current sustainability initiatives. The board expressed intention to invite various department heads to future meetings.
- **Recycling Issues in Schools:**
 - The student representatives reported that **recycling efforts at Valparaiso High School are lacking.**
 - There is little oversight in ensuring that recyclable materials are properly sorted.
 - Access to recycling bins is limited.
- **Regional Recycling Challenges:**
 - Nearby cities **Gary, Hobart, and Portage** have **canceled their curbside recycling programs**, raising concerns about regional waste management.
- **Green Space Conservation and City Growth:**
 - Successful projects were noted in the **Beauty Creek** and **Vale Park Road** areas.
 - Concerns were raised about the **future land use behind the post office on Vale Park Road.**
- **Summary of Current Efforts:**
 - There are many unanswered questions regarding sustainability in Valparaiso.
 - A **discovery phase** will be necessary to gather data and determine actionable goals.
 - **Collaboration with local organizations** will be key in defining sustainability objectives.

5. Goals for 2025

- Goals were not yet finalized due to the need for more information gathering.
- Several **potential goals/efforts** were discussed:
 - **Community and Business Education:**
 - Increase public awareness on sustainability issues.
 - Provide educational resources for local businesses and contractors.
 - **Partnerships with Schools:**
 - Encourage **educational farm/garden programs**.
 - Improve **recycling education** in schools.
 - **Land Use and Zoning Policies:**
 - Propose requirements for **environmental impact reviews** before development projects can proceed.
 - Ensure new projects meet specific environmental criteria, similar to existing stormwater and wetlands regulations.
 - **Incentive Programs:**
 - Encourage local businesses to **incorporate native and low-water plants** into their landscaping.
 - **Sustainability Awards** for developers and businesses meeting environmental standards.
 - **Shirley Heinze Land Trust** is a nonprofit that rewards people for native planting with their **"Bringing Nature Home" award**.
 - **Kathy Sipple**, a big advocate in Valpo, is working on a native plant 'bank' of people that are registered with the [National Wildlife Federation](#) and their **certified wildlife backyards**.
 - **Enforcement and Accountability:**
 - Fines for developers/contractors **not adhering to environmental regulations** (after education and training).
 - **Community Engagement Events:**
 - Organize **No Mow May** and an **Earth Day celebration (April 12, 2025)**.
 - Model No Mow May off of the [Steven's Point, WI community](#).
 - Develop a **workshop with high school and university students** to generate new sustainability ideas.
 - **Evaluation of Parks Department Policies:**
 - Assess current **pesticide use, mowing frequency**, and other land care practices.
 - **Creation of a "No Plant" List:**
 - Restrict invasive species, such as **Bradford Pear trees**, from being planted by residents and developers.
 - **Rewriting the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO)** to incorporate stronger environmental protections.
 - **Revamped recycling and composting programs:**
 - There is a lot of interest being generated for **food waste composting**. Right now, the Recycling and Waste Reduction District has [two small pilot programs](#).
 - **Goal-** encourage City departments to **plant natives or have 'no mow' areas**

- **Goal-** funding, help research and recommend (and implement if applicable) **grant monies for sustainability initiatives** throughout city departments
- **Goal-** develop a **Climate Action Plan** based on relevant studies to the area. Determine **data sets** to track progress.

6. Public Comment

- **Green Destination Initiative:**
 - A community member suggested **positioning Valparaiso as a "Green Destination"** and a **climate-resilient city**, similar to **Madison, WI, and Columbus, OH**.
 - This initiative could enhance Valparaiso's reputation as a **sustainable and desirable place to live**.
- **Community Engagement Opportunity:**
 - The board was invited to **Northview Elementary Family Nature Night** on **February 11 from 6:00 – 7:30 PM** to connect with other sustainability-focused organizations.
- **Interest Group Collaboration:**
 - A community member, **Walt**, volunteered to compile contact information for various local nonprofits and interest groups in order to invite them to future meetings for collaboration.
 - [Wild Ones is out of Gibson Woods in Griffith](#). There is an interest in **establishing a chapter** in Valparaiso.
- **Water Quality Concerns:**
 - Concerns were raised about **Valparaiso's downstream pollution risks** and its impact on neighboring communities.
- **Sustainable Urban Planning:**
 - A suggestion was made for the **City Engineer** to explore incorporating **Complete Streets concepts** into future infrastructure projects.
 - **Complete Streets** could improve **nature preservation, pedestrian-friendly spaces, and overall sustainability** in urban planning.
- **Communication**
 - There was a request for a **newsletter** to be added to the board's website that can be sent out to an email **contact list for all interested community members**.
 - The newsletter can include events.

Action Items | February 3, 2025

1. Outreach and Partnerships

- **Compile a list of local environmental nonprofits and interest groups:**
 - These organizations will be invited to future board meetings.

- **Establish communication with the following groups** to learn about their current sustainability efforts and educational resources:
 - **NWI Plastic Reduction Alliance** (meeting on **February 26 at 5:30 PM**).
 - **Wild Ones** (focuses on native plants).
 - Look into establishing a chapter in Valparaiso.
 - **Indiana Dunes Education Center** (potential collaboration on sustainability education).
- **Engage with local schools and universities:**
 - Connect with **Valparaiso High School's Earth Awareness Club** and **Valparaiso University's Sustainability Cohort**.
- **Invite city officials and department heads** to share sustainability initiatives:
 - Send email requests to **Public Works, Parks and Recreation, and City Engineer's office** for information on **current sustainability policies and efforts**.
 - Identify what actions are already in place and where improvements can be made.

2. Data Collection and Research

- **Obtain air emissions inventory:**
 - **Malorie Medellin** will share the NIRPC air emissions inventory report so Valparaiso can better understand the sources of the air emissions in the community.
- **Determine current zoning and environmental regulations:**
 - Obtain existing policies on **land use, stormwater runoff, and wetland protection**.
 - Determine whether development projects undergo environmental reviews.
- **Analyze existing fine and incentive programs:**
 - Identify if contractors and developers face fines for environmental violations.
 - Evaluate opportunities for **incentive programs** that encourage sustainable building and landscaping.
- **Track and compile a list of upcoming environmental events and meetings:**
 - Gather details on community meetings, educational events, and sustainability initiatives.
 - Events already identified:
 - **Northview Elementary Family Nature Night (February 11, 6:00 – 7:30 PM)**.
 - **Environmental debate between Valparaiso and Chesterton High Schools (March 17, Porter County Administrative Building)**.

3. Policy and Initiative Development

- **Explore the feasibility of adding a city-mandated environmental review for new development projects.**
- **Draft a "No Plant" List:**
 - Research **invasive species** (e.g., Bradford Pear) that should be restricted in city landscaping policies.

- **Assess parks department policies:**
 - Review **pesticide use, mowing schedules, and land conservation efforts.**
 - Identify areas for improvement to promote biodiversity and sustainability.
- **Review existing recycling programs:**
 - Investigate Valparaiso's city-wide recycling operations.
 - Explore potential for a **cardboard-specific recycling initiative.**
- **Create a Sustainability Award:**
 - Develop criteria to recognize businesses and developers meeting sustainability standards.

4. Community Awareness and Engagement

- **Promote and support sustainability-focused community events:**
 - Encourage participation in **No Mow May and Earth Day (April 12).**
 - Explore additional opportunities for community workshops and public education.
- **Plan a workshop with high school and university students:**
 - Gather student-led ideas for sustainability improvements in the community.
 - Develop actionable plans based on student input.
- **Encourage local businesses to adopt sustainable practices:**
 - Identify businesses willing to incorporate **low-water and native plant landscaping.**
 - Provide educational resources on sustainable landscaping benefits.