

**ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION  
REPORT TO COUNCIL**

**SUBJECT:** Petition on Science and Technology issues

**BACKGROUND:** George Boyce, writing on behalf of GreenSTEMS and Club125 (Greenbelt Makerspace) submitted a petition to the Greenbelt City Council to create a Science and Technology Advisory Committee and a future Science and Technology program. There were 7 specific requests. Council referred the petition to ACE and asked for comments on 4 of the 7 requests.

**FINDINGS and RECOMMENDATIONS:**

*Request: Direct ACE to accept grant proposals from non-profit groups representing home school students.*

*Recommendation: ACE does not recommend that this request be enacted.*

ACE was originally created to support the public schools and formal private schools within Greenbelt. ACE's charter, last updated in 2007, establishes the ACE core schools to be "(1) any public school that Greenbelt children are assigned to as their home school; or (2) school(s) within the corporate limit of Greenbelt." The charter further states that, "To help encourage excellence in education, ACE will offer specific activities for [this] set of core schools." Since the beginning of the grants-to-schools program in 2009, ACE has interpreted its charter to limit the program to the 7 core schools. ACE believes that opening the grants program to non-school groups or to schools that are not core schools would require a change to the ACE charter.

ACE does not request this change to its charter. Limiting the grants program to the 7 core schools makes the program manageable by the ACE committee. ACE requires all proposals to be signed by the Principal of the school, even when the proposal is from the PTA. The endorsement of the Principal provides an assurance that the program is desired by the school, is in keeping with its educational mission and that the school will make available any facilities needed. The Principal is also responsible for carrying out the program even if the teacher who wrote the original proposal leaves the school before the program is

completed. The Principal ensures that ACE receives a final report when the program is completed. ACE maintains a relationship with each of its core schools through annual meetings with the Principals and PTA Presidents, and through its other core school activities. If the grants program included organizations with which ACE does not have this kind of relationship, ACE is concerned that the program would be much more difficult to manage.

If the grants program were opened up to non-profit groups representing home school students, it would be hard for the ACE committee to know whether a group should be included. While ACE might specify that the home school students must be Greenbelt residents, it would be difficult for the committee to confirm the students' residency or to evaluate the impact of the proposed programs on the Greenbelt residents relative to non-residents that might also be included. Including home schooled Greenbelt residents would beg the question of whether public magnet schools or private schools which are physically located outside of Greenbelt, but which have Greenbelt residents enrolled should also be eligible. A previous study identified as many as 100 schools that Greenbelt residents attend. It is easy to imagine such a greatly expanded grants program becoming unmanageable by a volunteer committee. In addition, ACE is concerned that the actual benefit of the program to Greenbelt residents could end up being diluted.

For the reasons described above, ACE recommends against expanding the grants program beyond the core schools as defined in its charter.

*Request. Fully fund the grant requests of non-profit contribution groups that support community activities and events related to science and technology.*

*Recommendation: ACE believes that the City's current processes for evaluating requests by Contribution groups are being followed and does not recommend any changes.*

Proposals for contribution group status are reviewed by the Arts Advisory Board (AAB) or the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board (PRAB), prior to action by the City Council. Contribution and recognition groups that include a science or technology component include: Astronomical Society of Greenbelt, Central MD Amateur Radio Club, GATe, CCRIC, Beaverdam Creek Watershed Watch Group, CHEARS, Greenbelt Computer Club, GCAN, and there may be others.

GreenSTEMs submitted a proposal to become a contribution group, which was reviewed by PRAB at their meeting on March 19, 2014, and by Council at the work session on May 7, 2014. GreenSTEMS requested \$5000 contribution from the City for FY15. In PRAB's report #14-2, PRAB recommended 8-0 to accept the budget without reservations, saying, "PRAB is satisfied that the activities that GreenStems provides are an enhancement to the community, but wondered if the city can fund a private non-profit organization?" The City Council has put applications for new Contribution Groups on hold, in order for City staff to recommend a process for the approval of new groups. The proposal by GreenSTEMS was not funded.

It appears that City processes for evaluation of the proposals were followed. ACE does not recommend any changes to the Contribution group evaluation process.

*Request. Fund the Recreation Department to make plans for a future Science and Technology Program.*

*Recommendation: ACE does not recommend that this request be enacted.*

The Recreation Department runs programs in Arts and Athletics/Physical Fitness. The staff and facilities of the Department are hired and configured for these programs. Members of the Rec Department staff are not trained in running science and technology programs, and to set up such programs could require new staff and new infrastructure, including purchasing equipment to run the programs. Without a significant increase in funding for the Recreation Department, addition of a new program would be expected to come at the expense of the current programs.

The schools teach science to the enrolled children; it is a common core subject, and the curriculum requires science at almost every grade level. Unlike arts and athletics, which are often after-school activities (if included at all), science is taught as part of the regular school day. A technology class is added for all students at the high school level, and additional advanced technology classes are required for the Sci-Tech program students at ERHS.

Outside of the regular curriculum, there are robotics clubs at ERHS, MES and GES. ACE sponsors a science club at MES, and has funded 7 science or technology ACE grants this year. Adults and children with an interest in science have opportunities that include public activities at NASA – Goddard, the Owens Science Center and other local facilities, The Astronomical Society of Greenbelt, the Smithsonian museums, classes at the University of Maryland or the community colleges, and self-study through books. In addition there are technology learning opportunities offered by GATe.

The Greenbelt Makerspace offers classes and activities in science and technology. If the Recreation Department were to also offer classes, they would compete with this local non-profit organization. It is not clear to ACE that this competition would benefit the Makerspace, the Recreation Department or Greenbelt residents.

ACE agrees that access to Science and Technology programs for Greenbelt citizens is important, but finds there already exist a variety of Sci-Tech programs and opportunities in and around Greenbelt. ACE also recognizes the value of the current Recreation Department programs in Arts and Athletics/Physical Fitness and believes that funding for a Sci-Tech program would come at the expense of the existing programs. Therefore, ACE does not recommend that the Recreation Department be funded to explore the implementation of a Science and Technology program.

Request: Create an Advisory Committee on Science and Technology

*Recommendation:* ACE does not recommend that this request be enacted.

ACE recognizes that there are some areas in which the City could use advice on science and technology issues. For example, the city buildings do not have wireless internet for the use of the City employees. Wireless internet in the Community Center and the Municipal building would increase the productivity of the employees. Wireless could also be used in some of the classes that the Recreation Department offers, such as the recent "Cell-phone Photography" class. As another example, the City's web presence is large and complex; an independent citizen's group could provide advice on usability of the website. There also may be some scientific issues, such as proper maintenance of the Greenbelt Lake, which could benefit from the advice of a science and technology committee.

However, ACE recognizes that creating a new advisory committee would involve substantial resources and a long-term commitment for the City and its residents. In the last 25 years there have been only two new advisory committees created: ACE and the Forest Preserve Advisory Committee. The advisory committees take a significant amount of time for the volunteer members and the City liaisons. Although ACE typically enjoys full membership of 9, some of the other advisory committees are often short of members. Setting up a new advisory committee is a long-term commitment and is not an action that should be taken lightly.

Advisory committees give advice to the City and organize programs. Most advisory committees work directly with a City Department (i.e. PRAB works with the Recreation Department, GreenACES works with Public Works), or other City organizations (i.e. ACE works with the schools.) It is not clear to ACE what organization a Science and Technology Advisory Committee would work with. It is also not clear what type of programs the committee would create. An advisory committee would need a charter, and ACE cannot envision what the charter would entail.

At this time, ACE is not convinced that the City's need for advice on science and technology issues is commensurate with the effort required in setting up a new Advisory Committee. ACE believes that advice that the City might need could be provided by the existing advisory group structure, or (if necessary) by a task force set up to answer a particular question. If frequent questions on science and technology were to arise in the future, then the City could re-examine the question.

Approved by ACE on 3/24/15 with a vote of 7-0 with 2 members absent.