

**Planning Commission
MINUTES – Regular Meeting**

**April 30, 2014
City of Hagerstown, Maryland**

Douglas S. Wright, Jr., chair, called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m., on Wednesday, April 30, 2014, in the Conference Room, Fourth Floor, City Hall. Also present were commission members M. Brubaker, C. Coleman, J. Stone, R. Thomas, and J. Wheeler. The following staff members were present: K. Maher, Planning Director; S. Bockmiller, Development Planner/Zoning Administrator; A. Rohrbaugh, Planner; and D. Calhoun, Secretary.

REGULAR MEETING

Roll Call.

All commission members were present with the exception of D. Miller.

Approval of Minutes.

There were no minutes ready for approval.

100 West Washington Street – Washington County Board of County Commissioners, Final Plat, Case No. S-2014-01.

Staff Report: Mr. Rohrbaugh gave the staff report. The building currently encompasses several parcel lines separating the buildings at 100 and 128 West Washington Street. Washington County purchased 128 West Washington Street several years ago. The intent of the final plat is to combine both buildings on a single lot of record to further facilitate the use of “128” as a part of the County government office complex. The properties are zoned CC-MU (City Center-Mixed Use); therefore, no minimum setbacks or lot sizes apply. Since no development is proposed, stormwater management, Historic District Commission review, and forest conservation do not apply.

The plat was routed for comment and all review agencies have given their approvals. Staff recommended approval of the final plat.

Commission/Applicant Discussion: Mr. Wright pointed out that the plat does not indicate what lot lines are being vacated. He requested that a note be added to the plat to that effect.

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- MOTION:** (Stone/Thomas) I make a motion that the subdivision plat be approved with the condition that a note be added that all interior lot lines are to be vacated.
- DISCUSSION:** None.
- ACTION:** APPROVED (Unanimous)

Workshop: Collegiate Acres Replat.

Lot 1 is a single-family lot that fronts on Terps Boulevard, adjacent to the small open space lot on Terps Boulevard. At the time the development was initially being laid out, the developer proposed this lot as a building lot. There were concerns about the depths—staff said if a building could be placed on the lot without variances, it could be a building lot. It was recorded as a lot in 2012. There is a note on the plat that the building restriction lines are the lines that need to be used.

The developer, Beazer Homes, pointed out that the required rear yard setback in the RMED zoning district has recently been reduced from 35 feet to 30 feet. Since the City amended its regulations, the developer wants to re-record the plat to reflect the new rear setback measurement.

Staff requested Planning Commission feedback on Beazer’s proposal so they can move forward with the replat if the commission concurs. Any house built on this lot will front on Terps Boulevard which is a through street. The entrance to the property will be right-in, right-out only and the City Engineer’s office will require a configuration for the driveway to prevent vehicles from backing out onto Terps Boulevard.

Mr. Stone noted that since this is a subdivision in progress, with some of the homes built, existing residents might have issues if some of the plats have well defined setbacks.

Mr. Wright felt that the setback lines should be shown on the plat since potential home buyers need to be able to see where the setback lines are. Mr. Stone added that setback lines help homeowners visually address the density of a development. Jeb Bittner, representing Beazer Homes, stated that covenants do not usually address setbacks, they usually refer to governmental regulations. There was discussion by the commission about omitting setback lines from plats. Problems should be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

This matter was brought to the commission for feedback so Beazer can move forward with the replat. The final plat will come back for approval in the future. The commission expressed no particular concern with this proposal.

Review of Draft Capital Improvements Program for FY 2015.

Ms. Maher presented the draft FY 2015 Capital Improvements Program for the commission’s review and comment. A summary is included in the meeting file. Commission members had the following observations and comments:

- If spending money on the steam engine at City Park, it needs to be open more frequently.
- Mr. Coleman said it was his understanding that North Locust Street was going to be resurfaced as part of the Safe Streets Initiative. Ms. Maher will research the funding source for this project.
- The City should seriously consider draining the sludge out of City Park Lake especially if a premier project under the Urban Partners study is for a walkway to City Park from the Arts & Entertainment District.
- Water pressure is an issue in the East End near the former Sheraton site.
- Pedestrian safety on the Dual Highway is a concern.
- Recommendation for creation of a pocket park in the East Antietam Street area.
- Recommendation for tree pit fencing along East Antietam and South Mulberry Streets.
- Regarding Project #639, Ms. Wheeler asked if “Green Streets” means the same thing as “Complete Streets.” Ms. Maher indicated that she get more information on this project.

MOTION: (Thomas/Wheeler) I move that we recommend to the Mayor and City Council that the FY 2015 Capital Improvements Program appears to be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan with the following comments and/or suggestions: dredging of sludge in City Park Lake; water pressure in the East End behind the former Sheraton; tree pit enhancements on East Antietam and South Mulberry Streets; pocket park along South Locust Street; resurfacing plan for South Locust Street; recommendation to State Highway Administration about constructing a fence in the Dual Highway median to discourage pedestrian crossings.

DISCUSSION: None.

ACTION: APPROVED (Brubaker - ABSTAIN)

Review of Urban Partners’ Draft Market and Physical Analysis Reports.

Staff requested the commission’s feedback on the draft Market and Physical Analysis reports prepared by Urban Partners. The recommended catalytic projects which were presented on April 9 grew from the results of urban Partners’ draft Physical Analysis and draft Market Analysis, as well as from public input received in the interviews, focus groups meetings, and at the public meeting held at the Washington County Free Library. Much of the housing analysis in

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the draft Market Analysis came from the results of an online housing survey conducted by the City at Urban Partners’ request. (A copy of the report and staff memo is in the meeting file.)

Commission comments on the Physical Analysis:

Page 4:

- Mr. Wright noted there are numerous vacant building and lots on the north side of the first block of West Washington Street.

Page 5:

- Mr. Stone indicated that the map shows most of the University as a park, whereas the building goes back to the alley. The park is not L-shaped, at least not as pronounced as shown on the map.

Page 7:

- Mr. Wright suggested different colors between Connecting Gateways (blue or orange) and tight streetscapes.

Page 9:

- Mr. Wright would like to discuss the information in the second half of the first paragraph. He would not be in favor of 12-story structures throughout Hagerstown. He questioned what the building code requirements are that would regulate that situation and whether something could be done to not force tall building. Ms. Maher stated that staff could question Urban Partners further to find out what building code issue is driving that.
- University Park is still not reflected correctly on the map on this page.

Page 10:

- “RV parking” is not a necessary use for the Downtown area.

Commission comments on the Market Analysis:

Page 3:

- Mr. Stone stated that when Urban Partners was here he got the impression that they were missing the boat for placing most of the emphasis on housing and offices. Cultural locations are very attractive. Mr. Stone did not believe that housing can be the driver like in Frederick, and retail. He disagreed with the comment that office space is adequate downtown. Most of the existing office space is in deteriorated condition. A major office project will not do the job. What this analysis does not address adequately is the Downtown office market is terrible. Office space is available space, but it is not the type of space that businesses want to occupy, which is mostly related to the Downtown as a

whole. There is a reason why professional firms are moving out. The driver of jobs is small- to medium-size businesses (office type). Right now there is not much to offer. There is so much bad stuff that people do not want to come downtown. People say it is too trashy, no parking. The reality is that even the good space that is available is not attractive to businesses. Ms. Maher indicated that it is not a simple fix. Quality of life issues, absence of amenities need to be addressed.

Mr. Wright noted that the former Susquehanna Bank Building is becoming derelict. It is difficult to fill the spaces because the ambience of the area is lacking and people are going elsewhere.

Ms. Maher asked the commission on what it believed the City should focus to address its concerns. Commission members identified a market issue wherein the Downtown area has a large market disadvantage partly because of socio-economic factors, perceived parking problems. Catalyst projects will not address this problem, nor will they carry the City over the problem. A recommendation was made to set up a process of recruiting businesses from outside the area that are used to more challenging conditions.

Mr. Wright stated that the perception problem needs to be addressed. More time needs to be spent moving forward and not going backwards. Examples of success stories have happened slowly, piece by piece. Ms. Wheeler stated that the commission has the opportunity here to address things more directly with the perceptions of Downtown, such as should ambulatory healthcare facility be allowed from a zoning perspective. What are some things through zoning to hit these problems more directly?

Mr. Coleman asked if an office or business owner survey was conducted in conjunction with the housing survey. Mr. Maher stated that contact was made through stakeholders. Support was given for bolstering programs such as First Thirds grants, parking decks. The City is trying to assess how the proposed office buildings would affect parking supply. Mr. Coleman and Mr. Stone both observed that people seem to prefer parking decks over surface parking lots.

Mr. Thomas wanted to encourage Downtown homeownership, including residents being able to work close to home. Downtown residents will need entertainment, but also need parking close to where they live. Mr. Bockmiller observed that he rarely needs to go above the third floor to find space in the University Deck on North Potomac Street. Mr. Brubaker stated that a professional parking study was conducted in 2012. The study recommended against building decks under speculation since parking decks are very expensive.

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Page 4:

- Arts & Entertainment District is correctly shown on page 4. Staff noted that the District was expanded a few years ago to incorporate more residential properties for artist housing.

Page 7:

- If houses are selling for \$80,000 they are affordable for people making \$9 an hour. Commission members were concerned that banks are hampering people's ability to get loans in order to purchase homes. Ms. Maher indicated that part of the path toward more homeownership is to determine ways to acquire foreclosed housing units before the slumlords do.

Mr. Stone noted there is a strong interest on the part of younger people in buying homes and living Downtown. However, the properties that might be attractive to younger people are being purchased by persons who do not intend to live Downtown. Mr. Brubaker observed that many of these homes need a lot of renovation work and many people do not want to get involved with renovation projects. Ms. Wheeler said the proposed connection between Downtown and City Park with the new housing units, if townhouses or row houses were built, might make the area attractive to the people who do not want to get involved with renovations.

Ms. Maher informed the commission that the City recently beefed up its Downtown Residency Initiative to include down payment assistance with a piggyback that could help with renovations. Jim Hartling of Urban Partners is looking at the incentives to see how they can be tweaked. Mr. Wright would like to see all resources brought into a small area (for example, from Cramer's Alley to Locust on the north side of East Franklin Street) and let the program grow slowly. The targeted areas should be made smaller. Mr. Stone agreed and recommended aiming for something that is more doable in the short term.

- If there is a number associated with the number of owner-occupied units in the study area, it should be in the report.
- Mr. Coleman asked about the accuracy of the survey responses.

Page 15:

- In the middle of the page, Mr. Wright pointed out that the "sentence does not coincide with the number." Also, the intended message of the sentence is unclear.

Page 17:

- There was a question about the ratio of rental units to Section 8 vouchers. The report just calls out the number of vouchers per census tract.

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- 43% of downtown rental units are subsidized. Several members of the commission felt the problem is with the number of Section 8 units and a possible solution is to forbid the Housing Authority from building any more units. Mr. Stone stated that if the idea is to try to strengthen the demographics, then subsidized housing cannot be located Downtown. This demographic must be spread out over the entire county. Ms. Maher said the City would need to meet with the agencies that control how the vouchers are distributed.

This discussion will resume at the next meeting.

Election of Officers.

MOTION: (Thomas/Wheeler) I move that we keep the existing officers.
DISCUSSION: None.
ACTION: APPROVED (Unanimous)

Adjourn: It was moved and seconded that the meeting adjourn at 9:14 p.m.

8/13/2014

Approved



Debra C. Calhoun - Secretary