

**CiCITY OF BIG RAPIDS  
PLANNING COMMISSION MINUTES  
January 18, 2017**

Chairperson Schmidt called the January 18, 2017, regular meeting of the Planning Commission to order at 6:32 p.m.

**PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

**PRESENT** Sue Bean, Renato Cerdena, Jennifer Cochran, Paul Jackson, John Schmidt, Tim Vogel, Bill Yontz

**ALSO PRESENT** Mark Sweppenheiser, Neighborhood Services Director  
Cindy Plautz, Neighborhood Services Coordinator

There was 1 person in the audience.

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

**Motion was made by Tim Vogel, seconded by Paul Jackson, to approve the minutes of the November 16, 2016, meeting of the Planning Commission as presented.  
Motion passed unanimously with all in favor.**

**PUBLIC COMMENT NOT RELATED TO ITEMS ON THE AGENDA**

Lynn Anderson, 319 S Michigan, expressed a concern about the new construction at 316 Locust that replaced the previous fire damaged residence. She is disappointed in the appearance of the structure and believes the aesthetics of newly constructed buildings should be more regulated.

Schmidt agreed saying there should be ordinances that govern aesthetics. Jackson agreed saying perhaps there is a need to establish standards in the ordinance. Schmidt asked if the City is aware of the concept of *zoning by architecture*. Sweppenheiser was not familiar with the concept and added that single family homes do not go through site plan review.

**PUBLIC HEARINGS**

None

**GENERAL BUSINESS**

**Review of Master Plan On-Going Actions**

Sweppenheiser reviewed the Master Plan Long-Term/On-going Actions 2016 update with the Commission. He highlighted his responses to the On-going Actions (see attached Master Plan Long-Term/On-going Actions 2016) as outlined and the Commission had opportunity to comment on each item.

### Housing

In reference to #2, Cerdena remarked that there is a need for quality housing. Per the census, 50% of families in Focus Area #1 and the area bounded by Bailey, Woodward, 15 Mile and State are below poverty level. He wondered how to set policies so developers can address a broad range of housing.

In reference to #4, Cerdena wondered if the City has a data base that shows where violations occur. He is developing a geographic map to show violations. Sweppenheiser said that the See Click Fix program can do that, but code enforcement is not included on the See Click Fix map.

Bean added that the cost of building new homes is very expensive due to the need to be compliant with current housing codes. To be affordable houses may have to be smaller.

Schmidt wondered how to designate areas specifically for low income and higher income families. Sweppenheiser said the trend toward a healthy community is now one of mixed use. Cerdena cited examples of cities that have healthy mixed use environments such as Traverse City. Bean added that this is what the Housing Commission is trying to do in the northeast area of town.

Schmidt suggested that the City could offer incentives such as tax abatements. He also suggested that zones could be developed by architectural features, such as single family, multi-family, etc. He added that mixed use may not work.

Cochran believes that the City needs to be made attractive to entice people to locate here. Jackson added that we need visionaries, designers, and open zoning to facilitate development such as that going on in north Grand Rapids. Rockford Construction has poured millions into redevelopment on Bridge Street in Grand Rapids.

Yontz asked if a study could be done to see what the community would like to see. He would like to see fun things to do added to the City's amenities so that people would be attracted to Big Rapids. Sweppenheiser added that a survey was recently done for the update to the Park and Recreation plan to gain the communities insight as to what recreational amenities they would like to see in Big Rapids.

Sweppenheiser remarked that only 5 houses have been built in Big Rapids in the last decade.

Schmidt asked what the plan is and asked if the Planning Commission should look into this. Sweppenheiser said that the design standards must be followed. Schmidt asked about the process and what the Planning Commission can do to set the stage for a community vision. He

suggested that the community could become a “green” community and the concept could be pushed to attract people to Big Rapids.

Cochran asked about relying on staff to get all the work done and wondered if it is adequate. She suggested that we need a clear sense of the final picture instead of just pieces.

Cerdena stated that the Planning Commission hasn't been a part of any planning. He wondered what the City has in the way of incentives to entice private investments – perhaps tax incentives? Sweppenheiser stated that all of the last developments have been done without tax incentives. Why offer tax incentives if they can do the development without? There is a consequence for incentives: everyone pays due to loss of tax base.

Jackson and Schmidt agree that quality of life such as a great recreation program or an exceptional education system will attract people to Big Rapids.

### Transportation

Schmidt would like to see the Planning Commission involved in planning the layout of the streets and commercial corridors.

Sweppenheiser stated that he is not in full agreement that the Planning Commission should be involved in meeting with MDOT on transportation matters. MDOT has its regulations that must be followed - staff normally takes care of these matters.

### Downtown

Sweppenheiser stated that the downtown is taken care of very well. To redevelop a parcel takes a huge investment – it would not be a function of the Planning Commission. The City has a lot going on. Heather Bowman will sit on the Downtown Business Association. Aaron Kuhn will sit on the Downtown Development Association.

### Cooperation and Coordination

There is plenty of cooperation and coordination that goes on between staff and other organizations and boards. Development in the City has been slow the last few years. The township has more acreage than the City so new student housing development has been happening there rather than within City limits.

Sweppenheiser stated that the City has to be pro-active on keeping up to date and maintaining its assets. The City will be applying for a Michigan Economic Development Corporation Infrastructure Capacity Enhancement grant to replace the derelict water main on Ives and South Streets.

Schmidt asked why there isn't a water and sewer commission that reaches across City/Township lines to which Vogel said, in the past, the personalities did not work well together.

Sweppenheiser added that if we don't own the property, we can't extend the lines. Cost is a concern. Cerdena wondered if there were other agreements with neighboring communities for things such as pollution control. The City has a well head protection program and is looking at addressing the Ives storm water drain problem with the County and FSU.

### Public Facilities and Services

This year, as mandated by the state, the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) will cover a 6-year period. Staff is currently involved in its creation. As funding the needed CIP projects is difficult, the City needs to carefully select which are the most important. Funding sources in the form of grants are sought to help the City complete some of the projects.

The Commission talked about things that would help keep people in Big Rapids. Schmidt said we need to see growth around the University and offer more entertainment. Along with a lack of things to do in town, Yontz believes that the streets are the problem. If people have trouble getting here they can't take advantage of what is offered. Cochran was concerned about the students not staying in town for the weekend. She believes the City needs to offer more for them to do to keep them here. Jackson said there are no job opportunities here for students so they go home on the weekends to make some money. Yontz thought it might be a good idea to have a FSU student at the Planning Commission meetings. The student would be responsible for reporting information back to the student body.

### Economic Development

The City is fortunate to have a fair amount of industrial businesses. Recently, owners of a wood related business looked at locating in Big Rapids. They would bring up to 730 jobs, but they also looked at other cities in other areas of the country and Big Rapids was not selected. Sweppenheiser believes it might have been a challenge to find 730 skilled workers in this area. Investments have been slower paced than the City would like to see. However, almost everything sighted in the 2006 Blue Print Plan for the City was accomplished.

### CIP Committee

Three people are needed to serve on the committee which will meet on Wednesday, February 1<sup>st</sup>, and Friday February 3<sup>rd</sup>. The first day is a drive-around to look at the projects. The second day is to meet with department heads and go over the need for the projects they have identified for inclusion in the CIP. Bill Yontz, Renato Cerdena and Tim Vogel will serve on the Committee.

### Home Occupation

Sweppenheiser stated that the Commission has discussed this topic before and he has consulted with the City Attorney who recommends that #5 of Section 11.1:10 of the Zoning Ordinance be altered to strike the part of the condition that states "no client or customers may visit on a regular basis to conduct business with the home occupation".

Home occupations have not been a problem in the City.

Vogel stated that he has looked at other City's ordinances and some are more restrictive and others are less restrictive.

Sweppenheiser asked the Commission to think about this for the next Planning Commission meeting.

**There being no further business, motion was made by Jennifer Cochran, seconded by Paul Jackson to adjourn the meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 8:20 p.m. with all in favor.**

Respectfully submitted,

Cynthia J. Plautz  
Planning Commission Secretary