

**ADA TOWNSHIP PLANNING COMMISSION  
MINUTES OF THE SEPTEMBER 9, 2008 WORK SESSION MEETING**

A work session meeting of the Ada Township Planning Commission was held on Tuesday, September 9, 2008, at the Ada Township Offices, 7330 Thornapple River Dr., Ada, Michigan.

**I. CALL TO ORDER**

Meeting was called to order by Korth at 3:00 p.m.

**II. ROLL CALL**

Present: Chairperson Korth, Commissioners Burton, Butterfield, Gutierrez, Hoeks, Lowry and Sytsma.  
Also present: Planning Director Ferro.

**III. APPROVAL OF AGENDA**

Motion by Sytsma, second by Gutierrez, to approve the agenda. Motion passed unanimously.

**IV. DISCUSSION OF DRAFT HELIPORT REGULATIONS.**

Korth asked Ferro to review the information he has prepared for review. Ferro noted that changes in the draft ordinance from the prior draft were highlighted in the draft distributed to Commission members. He reviewed the revised standards which have been drafted, to address comments by Commission members at the August 21 meeting. He noted that language has been added in several areas that provides the Commission with discretion to consider the proximity and nature of surrounding land uses in establishing hours of operation limits and limits on frequency of usage of a heliport. He has also added required spacing requirements between heliports.

Ferro reviewed other handout materials, including the standards in the current zoning rules for approval of any special use permit, and recent correspondence which has been received, from Ron Isbeque, Abbey Mill Dr. on August 25, September 4 letter from Brady Kennedy and Kathryn Smith Kennedy, Hall St., Angela Butterfield's correspondence from prior to the August 21 meeting, and a letter from Robert and Petra Stead, dated September 8.

Korth noted that the Zoning Board of Appeals would be meeting at 4:30 p.m. in this room, and that he would need to attend that meeting.

Korth stated that if we are not able to come up with an ordinance that we agree on unanimously or near unanimously, we haven't done our work. He noted that the applicant's representative had submitted written correspondence taking exception to a statement by Mr. Lowry at the August 21 meeting. Tom asked Mr. Nelson if he wished to address the Commission regarding what he feels needs to be clarified.

Kevin Nelson, from Nelson Aerodynamix, stated his client is Dick DeVos. He provides consulting services to Mr. DeVos regarding helicopter matters. He stated he respectfully disagrees with a comment made at the last meeting by Mr. Lowry that when there is a problem with a helicopter, they fall straight down. Mr. Nelson stated this is patently false. He stated that in pilot instruction, he routinely practices landings with engine or tail rotor failures hundreds of times per year, and they are fully controllable with respect to altitude, direction and speed. Mr. Nelson explained that when a helicopter engine fails, the rotor is automatically disengaged from the rotor system, and the rotor is able to "auto-rotate," permitting the helicopter to be in a controlled descent to a landing spot. Nelson noted that the statistics bear out the long haul with regard to helicopter flight being safe.

Bob Lowry stated that he wished to apologize that his comments were misunderstood. He stated he wished to clarify a few points. He stated that in his comments at last month's meeting, he did not state that he was an expert regarding helicopters. He did state that he had a lot of experience with them in the past. Lowry stated that his biggest concern was and remains the safety of people in the surrounding area.

He stated his comments last month were based on information he saw on a web site containing details of four helicopter crashes, in which they did drop straight down. He realizes it is a remote possibility, but it still exists in his mind.

Korth pointed out that Mr. Nelson is not here as the applicant for approval of a heliport; he is here as the applicant requesting a zoning ordinance text amendment.

Hoeks asked Mr. Nelson if a jet turbine fuel fire can be suppressed with water. Nelson stated that jet fuel is similar to the diesel fuel that runs school buses. He noted that generally firefighting for fuel fires is a foaming system. He pointed out that the flash point of jet fuel is much higher than gasoline, and is more like diesel fuel in terms of volatility.

Gutierrez asked Nelson about statistics regarding the causes of helicopter crashes. Nelson stated that in the majority of accident cases, human factors are involved, either in the aircraft or on the ground.

He noted that there is a higher accident rate for small, privately-owned, piston-driven helicopters.

Butterfield recited some of the accident statistics contained in the data that she had found.

Sytsma stated that in her view, we are here to figure out how we resolve the differing views among Commission members regarding under what circumstances heliports should be allowed.

Korth stated that the main issue seems to be to define what is a reasonable space to have in order to safely operate a helicopter without interfering with the people around you. The current draft has separate sets of standards for industrial areas versus the rest of the Township. He noted that in last-month's discussion, he believed there was a consensus that we should not have a separate set of rules for the industrial zone, and that we should have a single set of rules and standards that apply township-wide.

There was general agreement indicated with this approach, and agreement that there should be a single set of relatively broad standards, giving the Planning Commission discretion to look at site-specific application circumstances, and impose appropriate conditions on a site-specific basis.

He stated that one important issue is minimum property size and distance of landing area from property boundaries.

The Commission discussed the relationship between minimum setbacks of landing area from property boundaries and resulting required lot area.

Korth stated that he believed the separation distance from property line standards were more important and should be focused upon, since they control lot area required and the number of parcels that would qualify to be considered for this use. Korth noted that increasing the minimum separation requirement from 300 to 400 feet results in a drastic increase in the size of property needed, with very few sites qualifying.

Sytsma noted that a rectangular shaped property would still have to meet separation distance requirements.

Korth stated that whatever separation standard is used, perhaps there should be some latitude to modify these dimensions by a maximum percentage, given site-specific circumstances.

Hoeks noted that the separation distance standard does not speak to proximity of churches, schools or other public facilities.

Ferro stated that the most recent draft does allow proximity of these uses to be considered with regard to limits on hours of use, type of aircraft and frequency of operations..

Hoeks proposed language that would require the facility to be accessory to and ordinarily located on the same lot as the residence of the facility owner, and a minimum separation distance of 2,640 feet (1/2 mile from a church, school or public structure. He stated that he wished to have these proposals discussed. Hoeks stated that he also believed the points made in the two letters just received should be discussed. He wishes to be able to thoroughly review these materials before taking action, and have the materials at least 24 hours in advance.

Korth stated that if the entire Commission is not ready to take action, then we will hold another meeting, and take the time to do that.

With regard to schools and churches, Korth stated that there is a lot of time when schools and churches are unoccupied, and that restrictions on time of use could prohibit operation during times these facilities are occupied. He also pointed out that the construction of a church or school nearby might make a nearby residential site ineligible to be considered for a heliport, that would otherwise be acceptable.

Hoeks stated that in such a case, he believes that the private right should be overridden by the greater public good.

Korth referred to the language Ferro had drafted as possibly giving the Commission discretion to alter the restrictions on operation after the approval.

Ferro noted that adding the word "ordinarily" to the requirement for location on the same lot as the owner's residence would be less stringent than the language in the current draft, by opening up the possibility of sites being proposed in which the owner does not even live nearby or in the Township.

Hoeks stated he would only be convinced of school acceptance if there was written evidence of parent support submitted.

Ferro was requested to look into drafting language for separation distance of approach and departure paths from places of assembly, that might go beyond the minimum FAA standards.

Nelson noted that he and Mr. DeVos have been operating out of the church parking lot or adjacent to the Christian School for 3 years. He also stated that the applicant has no objection to the Commission taking more time to work through the issues in developing an ordinance, even if it takes into the next year.

## **VII. ADJOURNMENT**

Korth noted that the meeting needed to be adjourned due to the scheduled Zoning Board of Appeals meeting at 4:30 p.m. He encouraged members of the public in attendance to submit written comment to the Commission.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

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Deborah Ensing Millhuff, CMC  
Ada Township Clerk

rs:jf