

**ADA TOWNSHIP PLANNING COMMISSION
MINUTES OF THE SEPTEMBER 17, 2009 MEETING**

A meeting of the Ada Township Planning Commission was held on Thursday, September 17, 2009, at 7:30 p.m. at the Ada Township Offices, 7330 Thornapple River Dr., Ada, Michigan.

I. CALL TO ORDER

Meeting was called to order by Chairperson Korth at 7:30 p.m.

Korth noted that this is the last meeting for Commissioner Hoeks, who has served as a member of the Planning Commission for 9 years and has been a wonderful contribution to the community.

II. ROLL CALL

Hoeks called the roll. Present: Chairperson Korth, Commissioners Butterfield (joined the meeting at 7:33), Easter, Hoeks, Lowry and Trustee Rhoades. Also present: Planning Director Ferro. Absent: Commissioner Gutierrez.

III. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Motion by Easter, second by Hoeks, to approve the agenda as presented. Motion passed unanimously.

IV. APPROVAL OF MINUTES OF THE AUGUST 20, 2009 MEETING

Motion by Hoeks, second by Easter, to approve the August 20, 2009 meeting minutes with the following correction: on page 2, 8th paragraph, the second line should read "crossing the Grand River" instead of "crossing the water". Motion passed unanimously.

V. PUBLIC HEARINGS

None.

VI. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

None.

VII. NEW BUSINESS

1. Proposed Revision to Villas of Ada Final PUD Plan, for Conversion of Above-Garage Storage Space in "Canterbury-Abbey" Building to a Bedroom and Bath, Covenant Two, LLC.

The applicant was not present at the meeting. Ferro stated he was contacted by the developer inquiring about a possible change to the floor plan layout of an unspecified number of the condo buildings in the Villas of Ada. The change would involve a slight change in the roof configuration and roof height of these units. They want to convert storage space in the roof area above the garage to a finished bedroom/guest room. The roof pitch will be a little steeper to create more ceiling space inside the bedroom. The developer at this point is just inquiring about this in order to see if it is possible to offer this as an option in some units. Ferro noted that this change would not affect the roof over the end portions of the buildings. The building footprint and locations would also not change at all.

Hoeks suggested they consider a gambrel roof which would lessen the overall height. Butterfield asked if this is something they have done in their other developments. Ferro said no.

Ferro stated the Commission will need to decide whether the changes proposed are significant enough to

go back to the preliminary plan stage, or whether it can be approved as a revised PUD plan, which would not require a hearing. Ferro concluded that no specific request or plan has been submitted at this point and thus no action is required.

2. Proposed Zoning Ordinance Amendments – Revisions to Agricultural District, Creation of New Rural Preservation-1 and Rural Preservation-2 Zoning Districts, and Re-Zoning of Land to the New Districts.

Ferro stated that there have not been any changes to the drafts of the 3 proposed zoning districts from last month's meeting. He submitted related amendments throughout the zoning ordinance where zoning districts are specifically listed with that revised language highlighted. Ferro next handed out a map and summary of the proposed changes. Ferro then summarized the changes which affect only the portions of the Township currently zoned agricultural. The entire agricultural district currently has 1 lot per 3 acres. Two of the new districts propose reductions in maximum residential density to either 1 unit per 5 acres or 1 lot per 10 acres. The Rural Preservation 1 area in the far northwestern portion of the Township would be changed in name only, with the density limit remaining the same as it is currently.

Ferro stated that the impetus for the proposed zoning changes is policy direction contained in the 2007 Township Master Plan. The Future Land Use Map contained in the Plan calls for these proposed density limits. The rationale for the changes expressed in the Plan is the limited infrastructure serving the area east and north of the Grand River, including lack of public water and sewer, and limited road infrastructure – particularly the existence of only two road crossings of the Grand River.

Ferro pointed out the proposed inclusion of a maximum lot size standard in the new Agricultural district, and stated it is intended to discourage fragmentation of large parcels into multiple small parcels, and to encourage retaining large blocks of land intact that have viability for agricultural use.

Easter said she thinks there is nothing progressive, nothing green and nothing to be gained by this but to inhibit growth and to keep people out of this community. She stated she believes we need to obtain additional measures of public sentiment regarding this.

Korth stated Ada is part of the Metropolitan Grand Rapids area that has a tremendous amount of urban decay. He stated he does not understand Easter's remarks. There is current infrastructure to be utilized where it makes much more sense to encourage development. Easter believes it is personal choice, but she does not believe they should make it more difficult for people to live here. Korth said with increasing frequency and increasing percentages, in citizen surveys the community has asked the Commission to try to maintain and preserve the character and quality of the community and that is where this comes

Ferro stated that the Commission's main focus at this point should be whether the Commission is ready to proceed with a public hearing on the proposed zoning amendments. Ferro said he could provide more background literature on various approaches to growth management to Commission members. He stated there are two sides to the issue being expressed here, and some additional resource materials might be helpful.

Hoeks stated that this is Ada Township's attempt to keep urban sprawl from progressing. He also noted that he does not believe that if a community is not growing, it is dying. He does not believe this is true other than for business. There is a different kind of growth other than numbers that is very significant. He believes that justification for the proposed changes lies in efforts to control sprawl.

Easter stated that if this is what the community wants and thinks is important, this is what we should do, but she is not convinced.

Ferro stated that the role of Commission members is not just to react to the pulse of the people, but to

make decisions that make good planning sense, which is not always aligned with public sentiment. He stated that public sentiment needs to be tempered with members' judgments as to what is best for the Township.

Hoeks concurred with Ferro's comments, and stated that this point is made strongly in the Citizen Planner basic training program. He stated that Planning Commission's role is not necessarily to be representative of the will of the people, but to consider good planning principles.

Butterfield asked how much consideration should be given to the broader metropolitan area in making these decisions. Ferro stated that it is important to consider Ada's place in the metropolitan context, and that there is material in the Master Plan that speaks to this. He noted that intergovernmental consultation with neighboring communities is encouraged in the planning statute.

Korth believes it would be a good idea to go forth with the public hearing because the public's input would be beneficial.

Ferro stated that another significant step that should be considered is putting a temporary moratorium on new development proposals in this affected area. He stated that if changes in zoning are being contemplated, we would not want to see development proposals brought forth that are contrary to the Master Plan while the Commission is deliberating these changes.

Easter stated she did not believe that was necessary, since this direction was already established in the Master Plan. She stated that in this sense, the ship has already left the dock.

Lowry stated that it is important for each Commission member to express their individual opinion. He stated that in his view the northern part of the Township is reliant on septic systems on clay soils, which can be a problem.

Ferro stated that one additional point in support of a moratorium on processing development approvals is that, in a time of a severe housing downturn, the impact of a moratorium is greatly lessened. A moratorium simply prevents development proposals from being brought forward and vested that are contrary to the Master Plan and that have no chance of being implemented in the short term.

Easter questioned whether there is a chance that our considering these zoning changes could result in changing the direction in the Master Plan. If the answer is no, than she agrees we should move forward with implementation. Butterfield said the Master Plan is not black and white, and she is open to possible reconsideration of that direction.

Rhoades stated the public hearing date has already been set for October, and in the meantime, Jim can provide us with more information. He sees no reason not to have a temporary moratorium in place.

It was moved by Lowry, seconded by Rhoades, to recommend to the Township Board placing a moratorium (through the end of January, 2010) on new development proposals pending consideration of the proposed zoning ordinance amendments.

Motion approved unanimously.

The consensus of the Commission was to move ahead with the public hearing on October 15.

VIII. REPORTS FROM COMMISSION MEMBERS/STAFF

1. Correspondence from Grand Rapids Township regarding Master Planning.

Correspondence was received from Grand Rapids Township informing Ada Township that they are starting the process of updating their master plan. Ferro said this is a notice required by State law.

2. Correspondence from Grand Valley Metro Council Regarding 2035 Long Range Transportation Plan Update.

Correspondence was received from Grand Valley Metro Council informing Ada Township that the Council is beginning to update its metro-wide transportation plan and they are holding some sub-regional meetings around the metro area. The meeting for the east side is being held at Ada Township next Thursday. Ferro said it would be a good idea for some representatives of the Commission to be there and Ferro stated that he would be attending.

3. Discussion of Capital Improvements Plan.

Commission member Easter proposed to the Commission that it may be beneficial for the Township, in completing the Capital Improvements Plan, to undertake a more concerted effort to measure public views regarding priorities for expenditure of Township funds on various types of capital improvement projects, especially considering the fact that available funding for capital projects is likely to fall short of the amount needed to fund all of the projects that are being considered.

Easter stated that she believes that, given the complexity of the information involved in making these decisions, the use of focus groups facilitated by a professional would be a good approach to getting the needed public input. She pointed out that focus groups involve engaging in a face-to-face dialogue with citizens, in which two-way communication can take place, so that residents can be informed as part of the process.

Easter stated that she believes that this type of information is needed in order for the Township to have backup for the decisions that are made.

Commission members discussed the proposed Bailey Drive trail, and whether the Township will use general fund revenues to pay for a portion of this project. The status of cost estimates for this trail was discussed, and it was pointed out that the estimated cost may change as the design is completed.

Korth suggested we direct our discussion to the possible use of focus groups to engage the public in the capital improvements planning process. Ferro stated we should also consider the relative pros and cons of focus groups versus a written survey. Butterfield stated she wished to have an understanding as to what the objectives of focus groups would be and how participants would be selected.

Jeff Gartner, Gartner & Associates, was present to provide information to the Commission regarding use of focus groups. Gartner stated he is a believer in the community having a say, but noted that public input is not a public referendum. Gartner stated he employs a variety of methodologies in conducting community research for other public institutions. Gartner stated that from what he has heard, the larger issue for the Township is how to meet voters' expectations for completion of the trail system. He stated that it would be beneficial to give people an opportunity to talk about the issues. Gartner described similar projects he has worked on in other communities.

Gartner stated that we use focus groups to identify issues and the larger context of the issues. A survey is also sometimes used as a follow-up to focus groups, and these are most efficiently done online. Gartner stated that using online surveys makes it possible to conduct more frequent, but shorter surveys that people are more likely to respond to and complete.

There was then discussion regarding utilizing focus groups versus surveys and what is the best way to gather information. Gartner described procedures that can be used to recruit focus group participants.

Butterfield asked how the information from the focus groups would be used by the Township Board. Gartner stated that the Board has certain decisions that need to be made, and that the Board would use the information from the focus groups in making those decisions.

Ferro stated one main task for us at this point is to properly frame what the research question is – he doesn't believe this has been done yet. Korth stated that he sees the issue to be addressed as whether the Township should dip into general fund reserves to complete trails or other capital improvements. The issue in his view is, given a finite amount of available resources, what are people's relative priorities for spending public dollars on capital projects generally – trails are not the number one topic of discussion. Korth stated there is a need for the Board to finish the trail system and the question becomes what is the required amount of budget surplus taking into account the trail deficit. Gartner suggested that in conducting the focus groups, it would be interesting to see how soon the topic of trails comes up on its own. Rhoades pointed out that there are other capital improvement decisions that the Board has faced that input is need on, such as paving of the hill on 3 Mile Rd. at Pettis Ave.

Gartner stated that, assuming we have 60-80 people participating, one of the benefits is that the information people obtain by participating in the focus groups spreads to others through word of mouth.

The Commission discussed several issues that are likely to come up in public discussion, including the amount of general fund reserves held by the Township and whether some of those reserve funds should be spent, and how and whether to complete the planned trail system.

Easter added that having the community input can only help to make a better decision – inquiring of the citizens what their top priorities are for the Township.

Ferro asked Gartner in what timeframe he felt the focus group effort could be completed, assuming prompt decisions by the Township in whether to proceed. Gartner stated that focus groups could be held in a week or so after Thanksgiving. Ferro stated that one thing we need to be aware of is that the focus group effort could hold up the CIP process somewhat, and that our goal was to have the CIP completed before we start the budget process in mid-to-late December. Easter stated that based on the funding projections, there may not be much in the way of capital improvements anyway.

The Commission discussed what the next step should be. The consensus of the Commission was that Gartner should submit a proposal that can be considered by the Township.

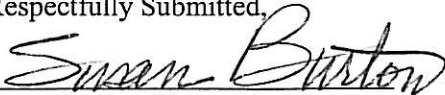
IX. PUBLIC COMMENT ON ITEMS NOT ON THE AGENDA

Susan Burton, 7690 Three Mile Road, as former member of the Commission and as current Township Clerk, thanked Commissioner Hoeks for his service to the community over the years and for personally mentoring her. She wished him the best, as did the other Commissioners.

X. ADJOURNMENT

Motion by Hoeks, second by Easter, to adjourn the meeting at 9:20 p.m. Motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully Submitted,


Susan Burton, Township Clerk