

Aiken City Council Minutes

WORK SESSION – COMMITTEE MEETING
Municipal Building and Administration and Finance Building

July 7, 2014

Present: Councilmembers Dewar, Diggs, Ebner, Merry, and Price.

Others Present: Roger LeDuc, Stuart Bedenbaugh, Sara Ridout, Avery Spears-Mahoney, and Maayan Schechter and Michael Ulmer from the Aiken Standard.

The meeting was called to order at 6 P. M. Councilman Ebner moved, seconded by Councilman Merry that the meeting come to order.

Mr. LeDuc stated there were two issues to discuss at this meeting, including the new building at 135 Laurens Street SW and the Municipal Building at 214 Park Avenue SW.

135 Laurens Street SW
Administration and Finance Building

Mr. LeDuc stated for the building at 135 Laurens Street SW some of the things that he had heard include security at the building, especially access to the second floor. He said we need to look at what we can do to keep the building secure, especially for people in Finance, but allow people to get to other people in the building.

Another matter mentioned is signage at 135 Laurens Street SW. He pointed out presently there is a banner on the building. There needs to be signage on the front of the building and something on the wall of the building to identify the building. It was pointed out that signage needs to meet city regulations.

There was also a comment regarding the name of the building at 135 Laurens Street SW, and if Administration and Finance Building was appropriate for the building. It was pointed out that the building at 214 Park Avenue SW is known as the Municipal Building and City Hall.

It was also pointed out that there are some issues with the paving of the parking lot at 135 Laurens Street SW and some drainage grates that need to be raised. There was a comment regarding the glass at the counter between staff and the citizens who are paying bills or requesting information. It was stated that a person has to talk loudly for the staff to hear what the citizen is saying so therefore other citizens in the lobby hear what the citizen is trying to tell the staff about their personal financial matters.

It was stated the lobby at 135 Laurens Street SW needs some changes to reflect Aiken life. There was also a comment that the Mayor's Office should be at 135 Laurens Street SW.

214 Park Avenue SW
Municipal Building

Mr. LeDuc stated in January there was a presentation regarding the 214 Park Avenue SW building. He showed Council some drawings of proposed uses for the Park Avenue building which had been prepared by Michael Jordan, Architect. He said he understood there had not been any discussions for the use of the building by Council since that time, nor had there been input from the citizens. He pointed out the second floor of the Park Avenue building is being used, but the first floor is not being utilized except for rental of the Conference Center, which is typically on Fridays and Saturdays. The second floor is being used by the Planning Department, Building Inspections, and IT.

Mr. LeDuc stated the first floor has room for probably 15 to 20 people. It could continue to be used as office space, which would probably be the least cost for renovation changes. The office space could be used by Aiken Downtown Development Association (ADDA). It could also be used by the PACT officers, the Solicitor, and Neighborhood Services. If those offices were moved from the Newberry Street building, then that building could be available for lease or sale. He commented that there had been an inquiry for use of the Newberry Street building recently, and a proposal is to be presented for lease of the building.

Mr. LeDuc stated that in 2006 or 2007 Council discussed expansion of the Municipal Building, and whether to build at a new location or expand the current building. The decision was made to purchase the property at the corner of The Alley and Newberry Street to expand the current building to keep the offices together and downtown. Then a decision was made in 2012 to split the offices and purchase the building at 135 Laurens Street SW.

Councilman Merry then discussed his idea regarding the Municipal Building use. His idea was to move the offices from the Newberry Street building and ADDA office into the front section of 214 Park Avenue SW. He said that would free up the Newberry Street building for lease or sale. He pointed out the city paid \$930,851 for the property, but probably would not recover that cost. He said the main reason to sell or lease the property is what it can add in terms of quality of life and further downtown enhancements to the goods and services available in the downtown, particularly The Alley, which is some of the most valuable real estate. He pointed out that if The Alley is our urban core and center of our urban space, that 25% of the space is occupied by municipal operations, not by the private sector doing business. That takes the property off the tax rolls, and it also means that it is not drawing people downtown to spend money. He said if that property were used by the private sector it could raise as much as \$10,000 in taxes, but it would also benefit The Alley and its draw for downtown and might also enhance the entire downtown environment and other merchants.

Councilman Merry stated his second idea was to take the Conference Center space in the Municipal Building and condominiumize it, making it a separate tax parcel which could be leased or sold outright. Between the Conference Center and the patio, it is an ideal environment for a café, retail space, coffee shop, etc. He said he would be more in favor of selling that portion of the building. He said his idea is for the building use to contribute to the quality of life in The Alley. It would add value in terms of what goods and services are available and further plays on The Alley concept that Cam Scott presented to Council a few weeks ago. It would be a further draw to the downtown. It would pull more people at more hours of the day downtown to do business.

Councilman Merry stated there are variations on how that could happen. The purchaser of the Newberry Street property could be required to put in certain elements in the building, such as a Conference Center, if it is felt that is needed. A Conference Center could be on the second floor of the building. The most valuable and beneficial element of a building is the ground floor—the walk-in/walk-out, the window shoppers, etc. He pointed out the Bowery and Up Your Alley fed each other. Having both there made the whole alley more vibrant, and now The Alley is struggling. He felt when Mellow Mushroom comes and with the Up Your Alley Chop House open, we will see The Alley being revived. He felt the more we have drawing people, the better it is for everybody. He felt it was not really about how much money we get for the sale, but more about how to enhance the downtown experience and what benefit it provides for the entire city. It does not really cost the city anything, but actually puts things on the tax roll and takes away our maintenance cost for these things. He felt the gain in taxes would make up for the loss for rental of the Conference Center.

It was pointed out that a proposal is being made to the city for the Newberry Street building which shows that the property and area has value. There was discussion about the previous owner of the property having first right of refusal to purchase the property.

Mr. LeDuc pointed out that Council needs to decide what they want to do with the Park Avenue building before anything can be done with the Newberry Street property.

Councilwoman Price pointed out that something that was mentioned a couple of years ago was that there was a need for a Conference Center downtown based on the number of comments that was being expressed by businesses. She wondered if that need was still there.

Mr. LeDuc reviewed the history for the Conference Center. He pointed out that in the 1980's when Roland Windham and Mayor Weeks were here, there was nothing downtown or in Aiken where a person could have a conference. They looked at how we could draw people to the downtown area. The idea was to build a conference area to bring people to the downtown area. In the 1980's the downtown was dying. The Conference Center was built to draw people and provide an area for a gathering of about 100 to 150 people. The need has changed some since Newberry Hall is downtown and can hold 200 to 300 people.

Mr. LeDuc stated Council could make the issue of the Conference Center a separate issue, and address the matter of the empty office space and a use for that portion of the building. He pointed out one thing to consider is that a larger transformer would have to go where the present transformer is if there is some other use of the Newberry Street property and the Conference Center.

Council then continued to discuss the items, including whether to sell or lease the Newberry Street property, use of the office space at 214 Park Avenue SW, whether to move the employees from the Newberry Street building to Park Avenue, and use of the Conference Center and whether to expand it some and provide some breakout rooms. There was discussion of other buildings that the city owns, such as the Woodard House, and the building on Kershaw Street and the leasing of the office space for ADDA. Councilmembers expressed an interest in increasing the tax base and services in the downtown area.

Mr. LeDuc pointed out that if the front of the Park Avenue building is to be used for office space, some renovations would have to be made to the building, especially in the area vacated by Finance, but the renovations should be minimal.

There was a question as to why PACT has a separate office from Public Safety. It was pointed out the purpose was visibility. In about 2007 or 2008 the downtown merchants were asking for more of a presence in the downtown area, so a PACT office was put on Newberry Street, which has made a great presence in the downtown area.

It was pointed out that if ADDA was in the old City Manager's Office area, they would have a nice reception area and a conference area,

Councilman Merry pointed out that David Sacks had expressed concern about competition with expansion of the Conference Center. It was stated that unless we do something really big, we would be using taxpayer dollars to subsidize the competition for Newberry Hall. It was pointed out that the URS Theater could be used for a large crowd.

Mr. LeDuc again pointed out that what to do with the Conference Center could be a sub-phase, but the concern at this time is about whether we should move employees from the Newberry Street building.

Councilman Dewar stated before getting rid of the Conference Center he would like to know about existing customers who use the Conference Center and how they would be impacted. He felt there may be a lot of existing people who use the Conference Center on a regular basis, and if it were to disappear, it would have a community impact. He said he had talked to someone who used to go to parties in the Conference Center in the 1930's. He said that is a long standing community function. Sara Ridout briefly reviewed some of the uses of the present Conference Center. It was pointed out that

some sponsors of events like to bring their own food or have a caterer other than Newberry Hall.

Council again continued discussion on the use of the vacant office space at Park Avenue. Ms. Avery Spears-Mahoney was asked her opinion on ADDA use of some of the Park Avenue office space. Ms. Spears-Mahoney stated she had mixed feelings on the use of the Park Avenue office space. She pointed out having their office very visible is very important. She stated at times the office has a lot of foot traffic. She pointed out that, as far as the offices in the Newberry Street building, there are no walls between offices for privacy. She said the layout of the office space in the Park Avenue building could be better configured. She also felt that having activity on the conference center side of The Alley is important. She felt it would be nice if the Conference Center space could be changed from a Conference Center to something active in that portion of the building other than office space in order to contribute to activity in The Alley.

Councilman Merry pointed out The Mill may have a small conference area in that building. He said the city still has Rye Patch for functions. He said he felt the Conference Center area and the Newberry Street property are valuable pieces of real estate for what benefit they can bring to The Alley, aside from what tax revenue they might generate, or the sale or lease of the properties might generate. It is all about how they can help buoy the activity in downtown Aiken, especially in The Alley. The more attractive occupancies we have downtown, the more people will come downtown to enjoy them and transact business.

Councilwoman Diggs pointed out the attractiveness of the patio area when renting the Conference Center. She wondered if it would be possible to expand the building onto the patio area. She felt the patio is one of the most attractive portions when renting the Conference Center.

Discussion continued on the Conference Center. Mr. LeDuc pointed out some changes that had been made since the 1980's. He noted that many of the churches such as St. John's Methodist, St. Thaddeus, and First Presbyterian all have areas where events can be held.

Councilman Merry stated a possibility would be to sell the Newberry Street property and require the developer to make the second floor into a conference center to city specifications using the \$1.4 million of Capital Projects Sales Tax. He said the point is not whether or not there is a need for a conference center downtown, but the point is that the first floor is what is so valuable to retail and restaurant space. A conference center could go on the second floor, and it could connect to the present Municipal Building. With the connection the stairs and elevator space could be together. He felt the conference center could be 9,000 sq. ft., or 4,000 sq. ft. and have breakout rooms. He said that could be a mandatory component of the sale of the Newberry Street property. He felt there is some great value in having a downtown conference center. He felt the idea of having a larger conference center to attract state-wide conferences is valid, but that would not be possible in a place that seats 200. It could only be done in a place that would seat 500. If it is on the second floor, there would be the most valuable use of the first floor area as retail, commercial and restaurant. A third floor could be offices, apartments, or condominiums. He said the ground floor is the most crucial as far as the value that it brings to The Alley and to all of downtown. The question was raised about parking for big events. Councilman Merry stated if we predicate anything we do on parking, then we don't need to do anything.

Councilwoman Price asked if we could ask for public opinion on use of the Municipal Building. Mr. LeDuc responded we would probably get a lot of opinions.

Mr. LeDuc asked if Council could agree to have staff determine what it would take to move the PACT Office, the Solicitor, and Neighborhood Services to the Municipal Building as well as talk to ADDA about occupying the front part of the Municipal Building on Park Avenue. The general consensus of Council was agreement. Mr. LeDuc stated, if Council agrees, this matter will be on the agenda for Monday, July 14. Further

discussion could be had on the Conference Center area and get some public input on what to do. He said the first step is to get the front part of the Municipal Building occupied. He said there will be some cost to reconfigure the office space for the employees. Also, there will be some additional cost for some changes to the 135 Laurens Street building, including signage, parking lot paving issues, changing locks to the second floor, reworking the lobby, etc. He said at this time he did not feel that we need to have anyone come in and tell us what we need to do at the Park Avenue and the Laurens Street buildings. He said staff will come back to Council with some recommendations. There was a question as to whether the engine could be removed from the lobby.

Mr. LeDuc stated on the agenda for July 14 there will be a proposal from the Committee recommending the moving of the PACT Office, Solicitor, Neighborhood Services and possibly ADDA to the front part of the 214 Park Avenue SW building. He said staff will come to Council with recommendations on items for the 135 Laurens Street SW building based on the discussions at this meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business Councilman Ebner moved, seconded by Councilman Dewar, that the meeting adjourn. The meeting adjourned at 7:05 P.M.


Sara B. Ridout
City Clerk