

Aiken City Council Minutes

WORK SESSION – COMMITTEE MEETING

Municipal Building and Administration and Finance Building

August 6, 2014

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

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

The meeting was called to order at 4 P. M. Councilman Dewar moved, seconded by Councilwoman Diggs that the meeting come to order.

Mr. LeDuc stated a staff committee had met to discuss the use of the Municipal Building and changes to the Administration and Finance Building. He said it was felt staff needed some direction from Council regarding the Conference Center and the location of the Mayor's Office in order to make a recommendation to Council. He said Mr. Bedenbaugh had chaired the committee and would present the discussions from the committee. He said staff hoped to get some direction from Council as to the next steps to take.

Municipal Building
214 Park Avenue SW

Mr. Bedenbaugh stated the staff committee had had several meetings and there had been informal discussions with staff and others about the Municipal Building and the Administration and Finance Building. He said the sense had been that the staff that is currently in the PACT Office on Newberry Street, which includes Community Services of Public Safety, the City Solicitor's Office, and Emory Langston, Special Projects Coordinator would move to the Municipal Building as well as consolidate the IT staff, which is currently located in three different locations in the Municipal Building. He showed Council a drawing of the current first floor of the Municipal Building, which has been vacant since December, 2012. He reviewed some proposed modifications that would need to be done to make the move for staff mentioned. It is proposed that the PACT office be moved into the front part of the old Finance Department. He said the counter area would need to be removed to open the area up to accommodate PACT officers. There would need to be an office for some privacy for the officers to be able to talk to others privately. He pointed out offices along the hallway which could be used by Emory Langston and for Cynthia Mitchell. The five IT personnel could occupy the other offices along the hallway. He pointed out the old copy room could be used for storage for PACT equipment.

Mr. Bedenbaugh stated there is already sufficient electrical access in the offices, but we may need to run some network cable, which can be done in-house. He pointed out the IT servers would stay on the second floor where they are currently located.

Mr. Bedenbaugh stated it is proposed that, if Council wishes the Mayor's Office to be in a more prominent location, that it be in the old City Manager's Office in the corner office. The City Solicitor/Staff Attorney and the Paralegal could be in this area. He pointed out there are two vaults in the building, and they could be used for records that need to be kept secured.

Mr. Bedenbaugh stated, regarding the Conference Center, the committee did not want to make a recommendation as they felt they needed more direction from Council before a recommendation could be made. He pointed out the information in the memo sent to Council regarding revenue and use of the Conference Center. He pointed out usage of the Conference Center had declined because there had been limits put on dates the Conference Center would be available for rent.

Councilman Ebner asked about the resistance to having the Mayor's Office being located in the Administration and Finance Building. He thought it was Council's understanding that the Mayor's Office was going to be in the A&F building, but that did not happen. He felt the Mayor's Office should be where the rest of the hub of the city is located.

Mr. LeDuc pointed out the Municipal Building is where all the city meetings are held.

Mayor Cavanaugh stated there was no problem for him with the Mayor's Office being in the Municipal Building and not in the A&F building.

Councilman Ebner stated he had supported the move of staff to the A&F building, but it has turned into a nightmare. He said in the beginning the A&F building was supposed to be the new City Hall and all the key city staff people, including the Mayor, were supposed to be in the Laurens Street building. He said it was discovered in October or November, 2012 that the Mayor's Office would not be in the Laurens Street building. He pointed out the recommendation from the staff is that the Mayor's Office would still be in the Municipal Building on Park Avenue.

Mr. LeDuc stated if the Mayor's office were to move to the Laurens Street building, then some of the offices in the building, such as the Business License/Risk Manager or Revenue Administrator, would have to be moved to a different location. It was felt that it would be easier for the Mayor's Office to be in the Park Avenue building, but if Council wants the office in the Laurens Street building, we would need to move people around.

Councilwoman Diggs stated she also thought the Mayor's office was going to be in the Laurens Street building and agreed that the Mayor's Office should be in the Laurens Street building.

Councilman Merry stated he would like for the Mayor to have an office worthy of the title and position. He said he did not care which building the office would be in, but that it should be a nice office.

Mayor Cavanaugh stated he really did not care which building the Mayor's Office is in. He said he is not in the office very much during the day. He said he has an office at home. He is out in the public a lot. He said the office had never been a problem.

Councilman Ebner said the matter is a vision for the city. He said one reason he supported the purchase of the Laurens Street building is that it was to be a more open type feeling. He said he thought the Mayor's Office should be in the headquarters building.

Councilman Merry pointed out that when visitors from corporations come to town looking at Aiken, and are introduced to the leaders of the city, the Mayor's office should be an office befitting the Mayor's position. He said he did not care which building the office would be in.

Mayor Cavanaugh stated with the Mayor's Office in the Park Avenue building, there is the big Conference Room adjacent to the Council Chambers, which can be used.

Mr. Wade Brodie stated if the Mayor's Office were moved, what would it cost to move the office. He also asked how the move would affect the public and employees who are already using the offices.

Mr. LeDuc stated if the Mayor's Office were in the Laurens Street building, it would probably be the office currently occupied by the Business License/Risk Manager. It was pointed out the office has a lot of windows and is very open, but does not have a lot of privacy. If the Mayor had a large group, they would have to go upstairs to the Conference Room on the second floor. He pointed out that with the Park Avenue location, there is a conference room in the area.

Mr. LeDuc suggested that the Laurens Street building could be modified. He pointed out there is a big open space in front of the building. That could be sold off and used for retail space or apartments. He said the main entrance to the building then would be off Hayne Avenue and not Laurens Street. He pointed out that the front corner of the property is a prime area. He said having the building as a government building is a good thing, but also a bad thing because the property is primary for retail. If it were retail, the city could receive tax dollars from the property. He said he agreed that the Mayor's Office should be in a more prominent location. He said the old City Manager's Office is a prominent location. He said the decision is up to Council. He said the sooner staff knows where the offices will be, we will be able to retrofit the space so we can move the employees from the PACT Office and Council can decide what to do with the Newberry Street property.

Councilman Merry suggested that the small conference room in the Planning Office and the office that was used by the City Solicitor could be combined and made into a very nice office for the Mayor.

Mr. LeDuc stated staff just thought having the Mayor's Office on the first floor would be a nice location and more prominent.

Councilman Dewar stated it did not make any difference to him as far as the location of the Mayor's Office. He pointed out that most of the time the Mayor's Office will be empty, as the Mayor is not in the office very much. He said the Park Avenue location for the Mayor's Office is fine with him.

Councilman Merry pointed out that the Mayor is probably in the office when he has meetings with people. If the office were in the Laurens Street building, there would be no privacy, even with curtains, as the office is very open and right off the main lobby.

Mayor Cavanaugh stated having the Mayor's Office in the Park Avenue building is fine with him. He suggested that a lot of time is being spent on talking about the Mayor's Office, but he thought there were other things Council needed to talk about.

Councilman Ebner stated the concern is the outside world's perception of how we are. He said the world has changed.

Councilman Merry stated a nice office for the Mayor would be nice, but he did not care which building or upstairs or downstairs. He did feel, however, that it should be up to date.

Mr. LeDuc pointed out the old City Manager's Office would be larger and in a nicer location than the Mayor's upstairs office.

Councilman Ebner pointed out there was money in the Capital Projects Sales Tax II and III to expand the Public Safety building so the Solicitor could be in that building. He asked about that possibility. He said he was looking at the long range plan. He said there is money coming from CPST III but that money is years away.

Mr. LeDuc stated the decision was made to use the money in CPST II to make a major expansion at the area where the Burn Building is. The Firing Range and classrooms are there. The money that was going to the Public Safety Station was used at the Burn Building location instead. He said there is money in CPST III to be used for a fire station.

Mr. LeDuc asked if Council was in agreement with moving forward with taking out the counter area in the old Finance Department and starting to relocate people in the old Finance area. He felt it would be a few thousand dollars to do the renovations needed for the proposed offices.

Councilman Merry asked how many office spaces we really need by moving the employees from the PACT office and do we really need to use all the office spaces down the hall.

Mr. Bedenbaugh stated there are five people in IT, and they would need an extra room for their equipment.

Mr. LeDuc stated we don't need the offices for IT as they could be where they are now, but it was thought they could all be moved so they could be together. He said if the Mayor's Office is to be moved, he thought the old Mayor's office could be used by the Capital Projects Sales Tax Manager.

Councilman Merry stated he knows there is a load bearing wall that separates the Conference Center from the offices so that wall could not be removed for a reasonable amount of money. However, he was still wondering if the space where the offices are along the eastern wall, might not be better served as part of whatever the Conference Center area is used for. He suggested not just taking the space because it is there, but reserving it so it might be used for whatever the long term use of the back half of the building might be.

Mr. LeDuc stated we would not have to move IT at this point in time, and it could be held open until we see what is going to happen with the back half of the building. If it is decided the back half of the building is going to be something different, then we would make a decision at that time about IT. He said the primary thing is to get the employees out of the PACT office so we can go ahead and do something with the Newberry Street property.

There was a question about Aiken Downtown Development Association and if they would like to move into the Municipal Building.

Ms. Avery Spears-Mahoney stated the ADDA board met yesterday. Basically the board voted unanimously not to move into the Municipal Building at this time based on a number of things, with the primary concern being visibility. Another concern was not knowing what will happen to the back half of the building and where they might be located in the building. They were also concerned about the two people in the office being separated in the building. They were willing to look at the location later if there is another opportunity and it is known what will happen to the back half of the building.

Councilman Dewar asked how much square footage ADDA has in their present location. It was stated the square footage is about 800 to 900 square feet. Presently ADDA pays \$1,181 monthly for rent.

Mr. LeDuc stated we could look at moving ADDA once it is determined what will happen to the Conference Center.

Councilman Merry stated he had found that a significant portion of what ADDA does daily involves walk-up, walk-in, pass-by traffic. He said he never realized they have so much traffic to the office.

Mr. Wade Brodie stated visibility is essential for the ADDA office. Ms. Spears-Mahoney stated they have a retail portion at the office so visibility and the store front atmosphere is essential.

Mr. LeDuc asked if Council would talk about the Conference Center and what they would like to do about it.

Councilman Dewar stated he felt we need to get back in business and go back the way we were before 2012. He said it is a good facility and a lot of people in the community use it.

Councilwoman Diggs stated she agreed with Councilman Dewar.

Mr. Lou Papouchado stated he was present representing the Aiken Community Playhouse. He said he is also a board member of the Aiken Tennis Club and works at URS. He said he works on Newberry Street all the time and is very interested in what happens to the Municipal Building. He said specifically the Aiken Community Playhouse is struggling for space. They need additional space for rehearsals and for special programs for children, and to teach classes, etc. He asked if the city might consider some special package deals for non-profits that would help the City of Aiken by utilizing the facility. He said if the facility is not being used we are wasting money, and we are not serving the community. He said there is an opportunity to get both—to serve the community and make some money. He suggested that there might be a special fee structure that might be different from a for-profit group or individual that wants to rent the Conference Center. He felt there may be other organizations that might also be looking for this kind of opportunity. He said they had looked at purchasing another building, but it was too expensive. He said they need something that would be more cost effective. He asked if Council might consider renting the Conference Center to non-profits at a reduced rate. That would be helping the community, the facility would be utilized and the city would make some money. He asked that the city consider a reduced rate for non-profits. He said they do not have the money or the programs to book the Conference Center all the time. He said perhaps some other organizations might also want to use the Conference Center, and they could come as a group to rent the Conference Center for a certain period of time. He said he would have to do some research to see what kind of time they might want to use the Conference Center.

Councilwoman Diggs stated she felt a discount rate might be a good idea as she had had several people from non-profits talk about renting the Conference Center, but they could not afford it. She said she thought Aiken Electric gives non-profits a discount on use of their building. She said she did want to keep the Conference Center for rentals as it has been used in the past, for things such as weddings and other events. She said she liked the ambience of the Conference Center in The Alley. She said she would hate to not be able to use the Conference Center. She noted there had been a change in revenue.

Mr. LeDuc pointed out there had been a change in revenue for the Conference Center. He noted that several years ago the Rotary Club used the Conference Center every Monday, and we did give them a special rate as they were using the facility every week for several years. He said a special rate had been charged in the past, and it could be done after working out the details. Mr. LeDuc pointed out that at the Playhouse when there is a play, the building is occupied for four to six weeks, seven days a week. He asked if that would be the case for use of the Conference Center. Mr. Papouchado stated he did not think so, but he needed to work on a schedule. Mr. LeDuc pointed out the prime rentals are on Friday and Saturday nights.

Councilwoman Price pointed out that she works in the building with the Playhouse and she sees the utilization of the building. She said during the day the building is usually not being used. In the evening the building is tied up for weeks with stage props for an upcoming play, and the building cannot be used. She felt this was limiting the use of the building for weeks.

Mr. Papouchado stated the building is tied up during the week so they cannot get rehearsal time as there is a setup on the stage and other events going on. There are events in the Black Box where they normally run rehearsals. He said they have run out of space.

Mr. Brodie asked if the use of additional space could be limited to Monday through Thursday. Mr. Papouchado stated he needed to look at the schedule to see what the needs would be. He said they need room for classes, as they are teaching more classes. He said the Youth Wing is a growing organization, and they are teaching 100 kids in Aiken theater arts. He said they want to expand the programs, and the only way to do that is to have additional space. They have been looking for additional space for classes and, occasionally, rehearsals. He thought the primary reason is for classes for youth. He said the proximity of the Conference Center to the Playhouse is attractive for use.

Mr. LeDuc stated the purpose of the meeting today was to determine if we want to continue to use the facility as a Conference Room for the City and what do we want to do with it. He said it seems to be the consensus of Council that the City continue using the Conference Center as we have in the past. He said staff could see if there is the opportunity for the Playhouse and others to use the Conference Center on a regular basis and come back to Council with some detail on that.

Councilman Dewar stated he would like to see if we can develop a non-profit rate. He said whatever rate we have needs to cover our cost—the set up, etc. even for non-profits.

Mr. LeDuc stated if we are continuing the use of the Conference Center, perhaps by the end of the year we might move IT in the other offices.

Councilman Dewar pointed out that PACT has a lot of bicycles and equipment. He wondered if there was a place for that equipment. Mr. LeDuc stated a lot of it could go in the old mail/copy room.

Councilman Dewar stated when people come into this building will they go into an office and see a senior working off their tax bill. Mr. LeDuc stated there is a senior there most of the time, but not all the time. If no senior is there and no officer, the door will be locked.

Mr. Bedenbaugh stated one idea was that perhaps the door to the office may be more of a glass door so people can see into the office and be more inviting.

Administration and Finance Building
135 Laurens Street SW

Councilman Ebner asked about the engine in the Laurens Street building being moved to the Park Avenue building.

Mr. LeDuc stated he would like for Aiken Tech to get the engine since they work with MTU unless Council wants to keep the engine somewhere. He said staff would work on that. He said it seems to be the wish of Council that the engine be moved from the lobby. He said he had asked several people if they would like to have the engine. When the engine is moved, we will concentrate on where the receptionist should be. He said he had noticed over the last few weeks that at the end of the month and the first of the month there is a plethora of people in the office paying their bills, late payments, etc. He said it is being suggested that a committee be formed to study credit card payments, which will take care of a lot of people coming into the office. He said the firm that staff has been looking at will make calls to people reminding them they have not paid their bill and that they will have a 10% late fee. The person can then pay the bill on line or pay it by phone at the time the firm calls with the reminder. Right before the city cuts water off, the customer will get a call saying the water will be cut off and they will have to pay a fee to get the water cut back on.

Councilman Dewar pointed out that people don't want to spend \$.47 for a stamp. He wondered why they would pay \$2.26 for use of a credit card.

Mr. LeDuc pointed out they will have a 10% penalty for payment after the 20th of the month and if the water gets turned off, they have a much higher fee. He said it is amazing how many people come in on the 20th to pay their water bill. He said if they could pay it on line rather than driving to the office and standing in line, he felt some people would be willing to do that.

Councilman Merry pointed out that the modern generation will pay it on line rather than sending an envelope.

Councilman Dewar stated he did not think the modern generation was the ones in line at the office. He said he was certainly willing to give it a try, but wondered how it will work.

Councilman Ebner stated he sees people using the ATM and paying a fee of \$10 to \$15.

Mr. LeDuc stated staff will see about moving the engine. He said Council had talked about security. He said staff is looking at that. We will look at signage so people can go upstairs. Another issue is that we don't want people to go downstairs, as there are no offices down there. Another matter is that when people do go upstairs, how do we make it so they don't go into the vault and other areas. He said basically a person will be able to go to the City Manager's Office, but the other area upstairs will be secure. He said we will probably add doors in the hallway. Council continued to talk about security and that citizens should have the ability to be able to go up to see the City Manager.

Councilman Merry asked about the glass partition between the cashiers and the customers. Mr. LeDuc stated Council had asked that something be done about that, so they would be working on that.

Councilman Ebner stated we should make the lobby customer-friendly. He said he felt the lobby at the Administration and Finance Building should depict the history of Aiken and should have an Aiken atmosphere.

Mr. LeDuc pointed out that both city buildings now have city wi fi. He said staff will work on signage for the Laurens Street building and name for the building.

Mr. LeDuc asked that Council think about the suggestion he made regarding the courtyard in front of the Laurens Street building. He asked if Council wants to continue having the courtyard or do something with the front area. He said the front property would be very marketable if we want to do something.

Mayor Cavanaugh stated he felt the front of the Laurens Street building was great the way it is. He felt the courtyard makes a wonderful entrance, and there are a couple of benches for people to sit on.

Councilman Ebner stated he would struggle with making that change.

Councilman Merry stated from a Planning standpoint to have a city building there in lieu of having a building for which the downtown central core business district is about is not good planning. He said when you study planning principles, most will say not to have the area like what is in front of the Laurens Street building. He said you use up parking spaces, etc. and you are taking away from something that can add to the downtown environment.

Mayor Cavanaugh questioned this. He said people are downtown shopping, going to eat, and they can stop at the city building and pay their bill. He felt to have the area in front of the building was inviting for people to come in. He felt it brings government closer to the people.

Councilman Ebner stated when all the other store fronts downtown are full, then the city will sell the property in front of the Laurens Street building. He said no one needs it now, so there is no reason to sell it. He pointed out there are plenty of store fronts available now.

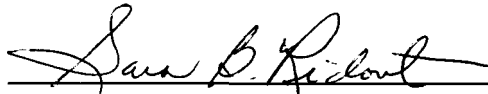
Councilman Merry stated he was not saying to sell the area today or not, but he was agreeing with Mr. LeDuc that we should keep an open mind to his suggestion.

Councilman Ebner pointed out that the banner the city has on the Laurens Street building is illegal and should be changed.

Councilman Merry asked if there was a need to talk about the Newberry Street property. Mr. LeDuc stated he felt most of Council feels the city needs to get rid of the Newberry Street property (Brinkley property), as the city does not need it. He said it is a matter of how to get rid of it. He said now that we have found a way that we don't have to use some of the property for another transformer, there is a bigger space. The current transformer will stay. It was thought there might have to be a second transformer for the undergrounding, but a solution has been found.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business Councilman Ebner moved, seconded by Councilman Merry, that the meeting adjourn. The meeting adjourned at 5:00 P.M.


Sara B. Ridout
City Clerk