

Aiken City Council MinutesJuly 12, 2004WORK SESSION

Present: Mayor Pro Tem Sprawls, Councilmembers Clyburn, Cuning, Price, Smith, and Vaughters.

Absent: Mayor Cavanaugh

Others Present: Roger LeDuc, Bill Huggins, Gary Smith, Larry Morris, Phil Berley, Pete Frommer, Richard Pearce, Sara Ridout, Steve Hale, Philip Lord of the Aiken Standard, Josh Gelinas of the Augusta Chronicle, and about 14 citizens.

Mayor Pro Tem Sprawls called the meeting to order at 6:19 P.M. He stated Council had two items that they would like to discuss in the work session.

TOURISMRecreation Department

Mr. LeDuc stated that last year the Chamber of Commerce decided not to continue providing tourism as part of their organization. Since that time, the City has been working on three separate tracks as part of a strategic plan to provide tourism service for our community. The first track was to develop a resource directory which lists a description of all the services available to someone wanting to come to Aiken. This includes transportation, entertainment, lodging, restaurants, outdoor activities, and other aspects unique to Aiken. The second area was bringing the arts community together to determine whether or not they wanted to become an official organization. They are currently looking at three possibilities: becoming a non-profit 501(c)3, a city committee or some hybrid of the two. This group would be in charge of a central calendar for the entire community to possibly develop events that could be coordinated by this organization. This could consist of new events or grouping events together to provide a festival over a weekend or longer. The last track that we have been working on involves recommendations on the initial direction for our Tourism Division. Liz Stewart, who is present, has held several meetings with focus groups. The groups included restaurants, the lodging industry, arts community and citizens at large. Three trends surfaced from these focus group meetings: (1) a desire for family based travel destination tourism, (2) weekday tourism and events, and (3) to restrict large buses from horse district areas. Based on these results we recommend three primary areas of concentration: (1) destination packages developed around theatrical performances, antique shopping, and a combination of shopping and golfing for couples, (2) Newberry Street events, such as the car show scheduled for this fall, and (3) to develop tournaments on a year round basis. This could include indoor sports during the winter months. At tonight's meeting we would like to get Council's thoughts on moving forward. The City will continue to support and promote the existing events that are occurring within our community, and with Council's approval the new tourism coordinator will begin to focus on the aforementioned recommendations.

Ms. Liz Stewart, consultant, stated there was a very diverse group that met to discuss tourism. She stated the three categories of information solicited on which the recommendations are based were: 1. What is so special about Aiken and what are some of the things that contribute to making the quality of life good. 2. What role tourism should play in economic development within the community, and 3. What barriers they saw to trying to maintain the balance between enough growth and industry in terms of the tourism industry and yet maintain the quality of life and the venues that we appreciate. She said there was a lot of consistent feedback from all the groups, which was very good. She pointed out that the Tourism Director needed to be a marketer and market Aiken as a destination community where people would come for a two or three day stay, including small groups, since Aiken has limited space for hosting thousands of people at one time.

She pointed out there could be packages for dinner and then a show at the theater, and other smaller special events.

Councilwoman Vaughters stated she would like to see tennis tournaments added to the packages or events. She pointed out they bring a lot of people to town. She also stated the city needed to be careful in planning the Newberry Street festivals so they don't interfere with the businesses on Newberry Street.

Councilman Cuning also stated he felt business conferences should be added to the events. He pointed out the key to tourism is the person. He said the person has to be totally dedicated to tourism and marketing the area. He said the city is currently working on trying to bring events to the theater on weekdays.

Mr. LeDuc stated with the report from Ms. Stewart, the city would start concentrating and moving forward. He said the city would advertise for the Tourism Director. He said the city now has an idea of the skills needed for marketing the area. He said the city would advertise for someone on city staff. If we do not find the right person, then a consultant will be used. Council asked for a copy of the job description and what the salary might be.

ROUNDABOUT

East Gate Drive Mall/Publix Drive Road

Mr. LeDuc stated that for the last several months, we have been investigating the possibility of a roundabout on East Gate Drive at the Mall/Publix. We have recently completed the design and have now received the cost to build the roundabout. We received five bids for this work, and, due to the higher cost for petroleum, along with the necessary traffic control needed at this intersection, the prices came in slightly higher than we had anticipated, with the low bid at approximately \$200,000. Our review of this bid and the other four showed them as responsible and competitive. Although we feel that a roundabout is an excellent solution to the problems we are facing at this intersection, due to the cost of this work we have also investigated the installation of traffic signals as another alternative. We have estimated the cost of this work, assuming decorative poles and all underground wiring similar to what we enjoy in the downtown area. The traffic signal would include a lead left hand turn movement and arrow into the mall as you travel west bound on East Gate Drive, with all legs of the intersection being fully actuated through a computerized traffic controller. The estimated cost for decorative poles and underground wiring is \$100,000.

Our engineering consultant, Roger Dyar, has reviewed three alternatives to correct the present traffic control plan at that intersection. These included a four-way stop intersection, traffic signals, and a roundabout. The four-way stop intersection would be exceeded in the next few years and presents several potential safety problems due to the size of the intersection. The traffic signal would work, but potentially could have problems with traffic backing up to Whiskey Road and with the timing of these signals with those at Whiskey Road. The roundabout is his preferred methodology to correct this problem and should be able to accommodate the expected traffic volumes well into the future. However, if the traffic continues to increase at 3% or higher over the next 10 years, there could be a capacity problem at this intersection. We have reviewed several publications from both the Federal Highway Administration, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, and a safety environmental group (S.A.V.E.) and they all state that roundabouts are much safer than other types of traffic controls at intersections similar to the one at East Gate Drive. The report from the Federal Highway Administration shows that a single lane roundabout in an urban area has a capacity of approximately 20,000 cars per day. East Gate Drive's current volume is about 7,000 cars per day. It also states that roundabouts are generally safer than other forms of at grade intersections for low and medium traffic capacity conditions. The lower speeds through the roundabout should provide several safety benefits. The SAVE report states that roundabouts reduce crashes by 95%, since the vehicular movements through the intersection are slower and have fewer conflict points within the intersection. The proposed roundabout will also have

exclusive right-hand turn lanes which will help avoid several conflicting movements in the intersection. The Insurance Institute report also states that roundabouts are less expensive and can save up to \$5,000 per year in electrical and other maintenance costs. Since traffic should not stop in most cases at the roundabout as you normally have with a traffic signal, there are also additional fuel savings for the motorists that travel through these intersections. Lastly, in an upcoming report to City Council, the Old Aiken Master Plan is recommending that Council consider roundabouts at many of the current signalized locations in the downtown area.

Mr. LeDuc stated one item which had not been designed was what would be in the middle of the roundabout. He said this would give the opportunity for some nice aesthetics in the area, either greenery, statues, fountains, flowers, etc.

Although budget constraints are always important, our first and foremost concern is safety. Based on the reports that we have studied, it is the recommendation of both the Highway Administration and the Insurance Institute that roundabouts are safer. Although Council told us last year to move forward with this project, and funding is available to build the roundabout, we wanted Council to receive this information before moving forward with construction. He pointed out one of the reasons the cost is so high for the roundabout is because a lot of the curb and gutter and asphalt have to be torn out, and the parking lot at Publix has to be reworked. He stated the Woodside Homeowners Association had voted in favor of a roundabout instead of a traffic signal on East Gate Drive. After Council's review, we will proceed with this project using funding left over from last year's budget. He pointed out if Council approves proceeding work will begin in about 30 days and it will take about two months to complete the work.

Mr. Phil Rosbach, 624 Boardman, stated he operates the UPS Store in the center next to Publix. He said he was all for the roundabout and had observed what it would do over the last couple of years when Public Safety had the cones directing the traffic like a roundabout. He said when the roundabout is in effect because of the flow of traffic, there is more traffic funneled in front of Publix and his store. He said he was concerned about the increase of traffic in the Publix center and the space behind Publix, which was designed to be a loading and unloading space. He said it is being used more and more like a thoroughfare, with people driving 40 mph through the area. He said he would recommend speed bumps behind Publix and possibly another entrance into the movie theater. He pointed out when the movie is over everyone is going to one area. He said he was not sure if these items had been considered.

Mr. LeDuc stated once the roundabout is constructed, some adjustments may have to be made internally with the shopping center traffic.

Council then briefly discussed the proposal and the issues discussed by Mr. Rosbach. Mr. LeDuc stated the city would be looking at these problems. Council asked that something low maintenance be put in the center of the roundabout. Council had no problem with the city proceeding with the roundabout.

BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

Accommodations Tax Committee

Penland, Peggy

Mr. LeDuc stated Mayor Cavanaugh needed to make an appointment to the Accommodations Tax Committee and the appointment needed to be someone who works with hotels or the lodging industry. His recommendation is Peggy Penland.

Mr. LeDuc stated that in September several appointments will need to be made to the General Aviation Commission.