

Aiken City Council Minutes

February 23, 2004

WORK SESSION

Present: Mayor Cavanaugh, Councilmembers Clyburn, Cunning, Price, Smith, Sprawls and Vaughters.

Others Present: Roger LeDuc, Gary Smith, Larry Morris, Richard Pearce, Sara Ridout, Susan French, Pete Gilchrist of the Augusta Chronicle and about 15 citizens.

Mayor Cavanaugh called the meeting to order at 6:15 P.M. He stated Council had two items that they would like to discuss in the work session.

AIKEN DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION

Design Guidelines

ADDA

Old Aiken Master Plan

Mr. LeDuc stated that last year City Council asked staff to develop design guidelines, especially for the downtown area. Recently the Old Aiken Master Plan Committee also recommended that there be some type of guidelines for the downtown area. Sam Erb is the Chairman of the sub-committee for the ADDA looking at potential design guidelines; however he is unable to be present tonight because of illness. Present tonight are Janet Morris and Randy Wilson, Director of Architectural Services from Community Builders, who would like to discuss some possible standards that will ensure a level of quality for new and renovation construction. Mr. Wilson has a power point presentation for Council concerning possible guidelines, and hopefully he can get a sense of Council's position on the issue. The committee does not want to move forward in a direction that is not in keeping with the wishes of Council and would like to ensure that their final product is both useful and acceptable to property owners in the downtown area.

Once they have received some direction from Council, they will move forward with developing a final product which can then be given to our Planning Commission and Council for approval sometime in the future.

Ms. Janet Morris, Director of ADDA, thanked Council for the opportunity to inform Council of what ADDA is looking at doing for downtown Aiken. She said Mr. Randy Wilson, Architect on staff for Community Builders, is present to make the presentation to Council about what design guidelines are, what they hope to accomplish and how to go about developing the guidelines for Aiken.

Mr. Randy Wilson, of Community Builders, stated Aiken had done an admirable job so far in developing its downtown and needed guidelines to protect, not direct, its downtown. He said design guidelines become a great way to protect public investments in the area. He said he suggests design guidelines because they protect the inherent character of the community, preserve property values and in most cases increase property values. He said in most cases those properties with some special design review and protection appreciated at a higher value and rate than those that are unprotected. He said he feels design guidelines foster community pride. He said they would safeguard the things that make Aiken special. He pointed out the medians in Aiken make Aiken unique and special. He said his comments were basically about the process and the benefits of design guidelines. He said in the process they value the public's involvement. He said if the citizens are involved in the process, they understand the design guidelines are good for the community and are far less likely to feel that the local government is telling them what they can and cannot do with their property. He said it is their desire to do it in sort of a workshop manner, making photos of the blocks, assembling all the buildings, and having the public come in and look to see what is common with the buildings. He said they wanted the public to help us understand what is the dominant architectural characteristic of downtown Aiken. He said once the public helps them establish that, that

is what goes into the actual guidelines. He said they want the case study to be Aiken and only Aiken. He said Aiken had enough raw data in the downtown to safeguard Aiken's future new and renovation construction. He said also Council would be involved in the process. He said they would get Council's feedback as they go through the process. He distributed a process document which had been assembled by the sub-committee which stipulates the process to implement guidelines for Aiken. He pointed out also that the process is codified, but the design guidelines are not codified but become an amendment to the ordinance. The ordinance stipulates the makeup of the review commission, length of terms, and the process for getting a certificate of approval. He said the design guidelines are not a part of the ordinance, but are an amendment. He said every design issue could never be codified, and this allows flexibility to change them and adapt them for Aiken's needs.

Mr. Wilson stated some things he considers as benefits of design guidelines are that they provide a document that gives a clear and objective basis for a review commission to evaluate property that comes for a building permit and ensure objectivity. The guidelines help in creating a standard operating procedure. He said he does not recommend having an ordinance which tries to stipulate design using verbiage. He suggested using illustrations and especially photographs. He said the approach would be not to tell people what they can't do, but give them options of what they can do. Give the people maximum flexibility. He said there has to be a delicate balance. He said the city needs to safeguard its physical design, but you don't want to erect any barriers to development. He said he suggests an overlay district. He suggested that it would probably take 8 to 10 months to complete the process.

Mr. LeDuc stated the staff had asked ADDA to get their membership together to determine what will be appropriate for the downtown area. He said if Council approves of what Randy and Sam, Chairman of the Sub-committee, are doing, the committee will keep moving forward in that direction. He said, however, if Council feels they need to go in a different direction they need to know that. He said they hope to get buy-in by 80% to 90% of the downtown owners.

Council discussed the information presented and the general consensus of Council was that the sub-committee was going in the right direction.

SIGN

South Park
Colony Parkway
Fairfield Inn
Holiday Inn

Mr. LeDuc stated the Colony at South Park apartment complex would like to discuss with City Council the current sign at the intersection of Whiskey Road and Colony Parkway. In 1989 Aiken Associates built a development off of Colony Parkway consisting of several parcels of land and an apartment complex known as The Colony at South Park. The original intent was for all properties to maintain the parkway and the sign at the intersection with Whiskey Road. In 1994, Aiken Associates deeded the right of way and land to the City of Aiken, with a quit claim deed from each of these entities stating they no longer wanted to control the parkway. Mid-America Apartment Communities, who owns The Colony at South Park, has maintained the parkway since 1998. In 1998 they enhanced the land by installing an irrigation system, trees, pine straw and flowers at the entranceway. Additionally they have repainted the sign on several occasions to keep it attractive for the entire South Park development. They are now requesting the City of Aiken to either give them an easement to continue to maintain the sign or to deed the parkway to them so they can continue to maintain the sign and the land properly.

This request came forward based on the Shahs (owner of the Holiday Inn Express and the Fairfield Inn Suites) wanting the sign removed and rebuilt to list the Fairfield Inn Suites. The Colony Apartments and Aiken Associates are opposed to the proposed change to the South Park sign, which will go before the BZA on Tuesday, February 24, 2004. The Colony would prefer to own the land in order to be able to maintain it to its high standards and is willing to compromise on the sign with a new sign, listing the Colony

Apartments, Fairfield Inn, and Verizon Wireless. They would like to discuss their concerns with City Council and ask that Council consider either deeding the property to The Colony or giving them an easement to be able to maintain the sign in the future. Again, they are willing to have Fairfield Inn listed on the sign and to work out a regime fee with them to maintain it in the future.

Mr. LeDuc pointed out that Mr. Shah had looked at the picture of the proposed sign and has no problem with it and is willing to help with the payment and maintenance of the sign so this may help the Board of Zoning Appeals in making their decision on the request. Mr. LeDuc pointed out The Colony Apartment complex has a standard that they would like for the sign and parkway to maintain, and they would like the city to deed the parkway to them. Mr. LeDuc stated there were two issues before Council, one being the request before BZA regarding the sign. He said Mr. Shah's request before BZA would not be necessary if the proposed sign is approved. He said Council can then decide whether they want to deed the parcel or a portion of the parkway to The Colony for the sign and for maintenance.

Ms. Sandra Korbelik, of the Planning Department, stated the application before the BZA deals with three variances and two other issues. One issue is that since the sign is allowed in the right of way as an entrance sign to a subdivision, all the properties in the subdivision need to be identified and make inquiries as to whether they might want identification on the sign also. Also, the owner of the sign, which is Aiken Associates, has submitted a letter stating that he does not want the sign to be modified. She said this needs to be worked out. Aiken Associates presently owns the sign, and it has not been deeded to Mid-American, representative of Colony Apartments. In response to a question about businesses changing in the area, Ms. Korbelik stated wording would have to be included to allow the sign to be repainted as businesses change.

Ms. Patty Boylston, of Colony Apartments, stated she received a letter today from Vic Mills, of Aiken Associates, stating they would deed the property to the Colony Apartments, but they want to be sure the sign is worked out with all the owners in South Park. She pointed out the proposed sign would be made so the panels could be interchangeable as businesses change. Ms. Boylston stated their request is that the sign be deeded to The Colony Apartments, ask for the easement from the City and also have the parkway surveyed and deeded to the Colony Apartments for maintenance. If at some point the Colony Apartments is sold, the parkway would revert to the City of Aiken's ownership.

Mr. LeDuc stated presently it seems that all the parties are willing to agree to the proposed sign submitted to Council for review. He said Council then needs to decide if they would give The Colony Apartments an easement for the sign or give them the entire parkway for maintenance. He said Colony Apartment is already maintaining the parkway, even though it is owned by the City. He said if the Colony Apartments owned the parkway, it would give more assurance to be able to maintain the parkway. Ms. Boylston stated The Colony Apartments spends about \$4,000 to \$5,000 to maintain the parkway each year.

Council discussed the matter, and the general consensus was to place the request for deeding the property to The Colony Apartments on the agenda for action by Council at the next meeting for first reading of an ordinance.