

Aiken City Council Minutes

WORK SESSION

February 27, 2017

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

Others Present: John Klimm, Stuart Bedenbaugh, Gary Smith, Ryan Bland, Tim O'Briant, John McMichael, Keith Powell, Sara Ridout, Christina Cleveland of the Aiken Standard, and about 8 citizens.

CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Osbon called the meeting to order at 5:05 P.M. and stated Council had two items to discuss at the work session, including a review of three elements of the proposed Comprehensive Plan and an update on the proposals for the Downtown Development Project, and one item to discuss in Executive Session—a proposed lease arrangement for city owned property.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Review

Mr. Klimm stated there had been an initial presentation of the Comprehensive Plan recommended by the Planning Commission on January 23, 2017, and at that time a number of policy issues, clarifications, and additional information was requested by Council. It was felt that the best approach would be to review each of the elements over a period of time. Mr. Bland, Planning Director, will review three elements of the plan and answer any questions.

Mr. Bland pointed out there are nine required elements, and he was proposing to review three at each work session. He noted that the three for review at this meeting are Natural Resources, Cultural Resources, and Community Facilities.

Natural Resources Element

Mr. Bland presented a map showing the city's study area including the public service boundary for water and sewer.

Mr. Bland reviewed the overall mission statement for the plan. All the policy statements have been gathered into six guiding principles. The guiding principles are found in the Appendix, and they are also found throughout the plan. Each chapter will end with a number of policy statements that apply to that chapter.

Mr. Bland first reviewed the Natural Resources Element. Included in the element are water quality, soils, watersheds, flood hazard, hydrology, land cover, and ecological diversity. It was pointed out that natural resources include the parks, but also include landscape structures as well as ecosystem services which impact not just the aesthetics of the community but its function and quality of life. The Natural Resources element addresses some of the key environmental characteristics, including water sources and their quality, soils and farmlands, watersheds and flood hazard areas, topography and its impact on issues such as erosion and hydrology, and the city's land cover or vegetation and species diversity. It was noted that Aiken's character is significantly tied to the character of its landscape such as Hopelands Gardens, the Downtown parkways, and Hitchcock Woods. It was pointed out that soils are important because we need to know if the land is suitable for development and what portion is prime farmland. It was pointed out that there is only 8.2% classified as prime farmland throughout the entire County.

Mr. Bland pointed out it is very important to know our flood hazard areas. He noted that generally the City of Aiken is well drained with a few problematic locations around the downtown area. About one-third of the city drains into the Sand River and runs through

Hitchcock Woods which is outside the city limits. Preserving Hitchcock Woods was the number one concern at the public meetings.

Councilman Dewar pointed out that last week Aiken County had a public meeting on the Whiskey Road Corridor and they had some storm water maps. He wondered if that was information that should be in the Comprehensive Plan as there are significant stormwater problems in the City of Aiken.

Mr. Bland pointed out the map in the Comprehensive Plan is a general flood map which shows the whole picture and where there might be some concerns with flooding. If there are specific areas of concern, it may be appropriate to do an additional study for the specific area. The Comprehensive Plan contains the big picture.

Councilman Dewar pointed out that Mr. Bland was talking about stormwater runoff in Hitchcock Woods and the relationship between the chemicals which the golf courses which surround Hitchcock Woods use to maintain the courses and the effect that has on water quality and the health of nearby eco-systems. He wondered if we should be talking to the golf courses about the chemicals that they use. Mr. Bland stated that is something that could be asked. He pointed out that compared to other open space uses the water usage and runoff for golf courses is fairly high due to the amount of water used to maintain the golf courses.

Mr. Bland stated regarding land cover, urban development accounts for 1,586 acres or nearly 12% of the land cover within the city limits. Urban residential accounts for 2,648 acres or nearly 20% of the land cover within the city limits. He said that shows there is a lot of green cover in the city. He noted that an interesting aspect is that Aiken has 85 rare species, with 63 being plants, 21 vertebrates and one invertebrate. The question may be what that has to do with land use planning. If there are things that land use patterns do to concentrate some of these rare species, it might be something we could think about addressing. He pointed out the biggest concern is that we are one of the top three counties in South Carolina in invasive species with 239 different invasive species in Aiken County.

Mr. Bland then reviewed the Natural Resources Element Strategies. He pointed out Growth. The City of Aiken will grow in an orderly and efficient manner that enhances equity and strengthens the local economy while preserving Aiken's unique character.

There was a question as to what that statement meant. Mr. Bland stated it basically means that it kind of goes back to the concept of smart growth and that you try to grow places where you know you can service, and you don't try to grow places that might grow in a manner that would produce negative impacts, but you try to grow in places to yield positive facts for the community. He pointed out growth also depends on where the infrastructure is. There is more capacity in some areas than others to target development.

There was also comment about Balance. The City of Aiken will become a community that is balanced in all respects, including demographically, economically, and in its approach to growth and the environment. Councilman Dewar pointed out that the city is not growing demographically. Mr. Bland stated that statement allows us to ask that question and why growth is not happening and why we are not balancing economically and whether there is something in our policies that is intentionally or unintentionally creating a problem. The question is what are we doing, what can we do, and have we made decisions moving forward, planned use or otherwise, that promotes a well-rounded balanced community.

Mr. Bland pointed out that a strategy was to prepare a plan for the ongoing utilization and maintenance of the city's parkways with a focus on balancing the competing needs and desires of each neighborhood and commercial corridor for the future use and aesthetic of the parkways in their area. He pointed out that this comes from the public input that a lot of people who live near them are concerned about the parkways, either the preservation of them, changing the use, whether they are utilized correctly or underutilized, whether or not they are in an historic district or whether they have been changed over time.

Cultural Resources Element

Mr. Bland then reviewed the Cultural Resources Element Five. He pointed out that cultural resources is what he feels is the other half of what people think about Aiken. A statement in the introduction of the Cultural Resources Element is "Aiken is an eclectic and elegant Southern city with deep equestrian roots, attracting residents and visitors nationwide." The introduction also discusses how the cultural amenities of Aiken contribute to the city's identity. He pointed out Aiken has a high number of cultural amenities and is a good place to live. The amenities include visual and performance arts, museums, celebrations and events, activities, historical areas and sites, parks, etc. For a city of 30,000 Aiken has a lot to offer.

Councilman Dewar pointed out that in the introduction it sort of ended the history of Aiken in the 1950's when the Savannah River Plant came to Aiken. He pointed out there have been many dynamics since then. Aiken is an attractive community for seniors but that is not mentioned, and Woodside and Houndslake in the 1970's are not mentioned as well as the golf courses. He pointed out those had been a significant impact on the development of Aiken.

Mr. Bland pointed out that three historical events had generally shaped the physical and cultural development of Aiken over 50 years ago. Those were the construction of the Charleston and Hamburg SC railroad line in the 1830's, the reputation as a winter resort based on equestrian sports in the 1880's, and the establishment of the Savannah River Site for the development of nuclear materials in the 1950's.

Councilman Dewar stated he felt changes since then are critical to where Aiken is headed now because we are talking about a major change within the City of Aiken, such as the Renaissance. He said he was not sure we had decided where the future of the city is. He said there is a segment that loves the Renaissance and a segment that does not. He said we are focused on the millennials, but not everyone is focused on the millennials. He said we need more housing downtown, but we can't forget the seniors. He noted that the seniors are involved in so many activities of the city. He pointed out that the Renaissance is a significant issue because we are talking about the future of the city. He pointed out that he does not know if there is a consensus in the community as to the future of the city. He pointed out that the seniors who came to Aiken in the past seemed to have had more money and moved to Woodside and Houndslake. However, the seniors coming now seem to be interested in a different type and size of housing and from a different economic level. He felt some of that should have been incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan.

Mr. Bland responded that he felt it is incorporated, but targeted in other ways. He noted there are a lot of big overarching statements that try to capture a lot of things as opposed to creating such a long list of policies. He said they tried to group things under one statement for more flexibility.

Councilman Homoki pointed out that his generation always looked for a house, but it seems that the trend now is more to invest your money in things other than a house. They are looking for apartments. In the past those in apartments were viewed as transient and were not that involved in the community, but he feels that is changing and that the boomers will be involved in the community.

Councilwoman Diggs pointed out that some people are looking for something cheaper, and we have to consider that also. Not everyone can afford to live in an upscale apartment in an upscale area.

Councilman Ebner stated he felt the comments were well taken. He pointed out that on page 20-28 of the Comprehensive Plan that the numbers are definitely skewed to those over 64. He pointed out that from the things we have heard from the Site contractors, people are going to be retiring. He felt possibly another chapter should be added to the Comp Plan regarding the trends shown on page 20-28. A fourteen year history is shown in one place.

Mr. Bland pointed out that the Cultural Resources element includes historic sites and districts. He pointed out that historic development patterns and architecture are something that people identified as wanting to preserve. He said included was National and Local Register of Historic Places which are concentrated in the old Aiken area. He pointed out the small section on the Equine history. He said there is a specific Horse District. He said people had been very vocal about maintaining and preserving the Horse District. The Comp Plan does not propose to change anything in the Horse District as that is one of the things that makes Aiken special.

Mr. Bland pointed out the section listing the Arts and Cultural Facilities. He also noted three unique areas which include the Downtown, Horse District, and Hitchcock Woods.

Mr. Bland then reviewed the Cultural Resources Element Strategies, including growth, connectivity, transformation, consistency, balance and investment.

In the discussion it was pointed out that it is important for the viability of the downtown area and all areas, from a city perspective, that we enforce whatever we demand of the downtown and other areas. It was noted that tenants have complained that the landlords will not maintain the property as it should be.

There was discussion on the point under Balance regarding prepare a plan for the ongoing utilization and maintenance of the city's parkways with a focus on balancing the competing needs and desires of each neighborhood and commercial corridor for the future use and aesthetics of the parkways in their area.

Mr. Bland stated there had been some talk about the parkways along Park Avenue, and how we maintain those and program those. There have been certain facilities put in those parkways, such as stormwater management, etc., but that is not everywhere necessarily. Through the Strategic Plan a lot of other people started asking about their parkways. The strategy is to think holistically about the whole parkway concept. A question is what is the desire for the parkways. Are the parkways just historically green space, or are they lively programmable. With that we have to think about the parkways as infrastructure and that they have to be maintained. The parkways may be serving a function such as for stormwater. All of that has to be taken into account knowing there is an interest and a renewed interest lately, specifically in the parkways as far as how we use them, what they look like, long term how we preserve them, or use them in a different fashion. In some areas people may want a dog park, a playground structure, etc. There are things that can be done depending on the right of way.

Mr. Klimm pointed out that Mr. Bland and the Planning Commission are open to comments. The whole document has to come before Council for approval. We want to make any comments and any changes and improvements before it comes to Council for approval.

DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION

Renaissance

Proposals

Downtown Development Project

Mr. Klimm stated the next item for the work session is to discuss the proposals that were received for the Downtown Development Project. He pointed out that the city had options on two properties downtown. He pointed out that four bids had been received from the Request for Proposals that had been sent out in December. He said staff is moving ahead with the plan that was outlined in the Request for Proposals. He pointed out that a City Selection Committee had been created made up of city staff that was charged with holding interviews and evaluating the content of the four proposals. The committee consisted of John Klimm, City Manager, John McMichael, Business Vitality Manager, Tim O'Briant, Communications Manager, Stuart Bedenbaugh, Assistant City Manager, and Ryan Bland, Planning Director.

Mr. Klimm stated the first review by the Selection Committee was to ascertain whether or not the proposals met the minimum criteria required in the Request for Proposals. Over the last several weeks the Committee has been meeting with all the Development

Teams and holding communications with them to further clarify their proposals. He said the Selection Committee is ready at this time to make a recommendation to Council on the ranking of the four Development Proposals.

Mr. Klimm pointed out that under the plan of procurement that has been utilized, the RFP requires that the development proposals be ranked for the purposes of beginning negotiations with the Development Teams. He said he would be asking Council at the regular meeting to consider the Selection Committee's recommendation that ranks the Development Proposals 1 through 4. He said the Committee would give Council justification for that. He pointed out that does not select the preferred developer as the developer. It just establishes a rank and order for negotiations to begin. Under the process that State of South Carolina procurement expert and attorney, Keith Powell developed we would thereafter meet with the first team and begin a process of negotiations with the hope of bringing forward the best possible proposal for Council's consideration. At this point Council has not considered this and made any decisions on the proposals. He said staff wants to put before Council the best possible proposal. To do that staff needs to begin the negotiating process. Mr. Klimm stated if Council approves staff's selection ranking, it does not mean that staff will come to an agreement with the highest priority and highest ranked preferred team. He noted that staff may run into issues in the negotiations and have to go to the next highest ranked development team.

Mr. Klimm stated he would not only ask that Council approve a ranking of the development teams so staff can begin negotiations, but he will recommend to Council that a Citizens Advisory Team be created consisting of citizens that have expressed interest in the process that brings to the table a variety of level of expertise that can help him and his staff negotiate the best agreement possible for the city. He said he was asking Council to allow him to appoint the committee as the committee would be advising him in his role as City Manager in negotiating. Ultimately, if Council so chooses they could utilize the Citizens Advisory Team or choose their own when Council gets to the position of decision making on behalf of Council.

Mr. Klimm stated the goal of the Citizens Advisory Team. "It shall be the responsibility of the Citizens Advisory Team to provide advice and assistance to the City Manager and staff in the negotiations process associated with the Downtown Development Project. The purpose of the Citizens Advisory Team (CAT) is to advise and provide counsel to the City Manager assisting in negotiating the most advantageous package for the City Council to consider. The CAT is advisory in nature. Specific attention should initially focus on the issues of architectural design and potential retail uses for the property." He said the two areas had repeatedly been identified as areas of concern by the citizens. He said they should assist and work with the preferred development team in articulating what the so called "Aiken Look" is and what our hopes and desires are for an architectural design for any redevelopment. Secondly, we continually hear about the concern about potential retail use. People articulate what they don't want as opposed to what they might want. He said he was seeking citizens' counsel on those areas primarily. He felt if we can come to some consensus on architectural design and in the area of limitations on uses that might seem inconsistent with the uniqueness and charm of the downtown area that we will have gone a long way to resolve many of the concerns that we have heard over the past few months about our downtown revitalization.

Mr. Klimm stated he was recommending the following to serve on the Citizens Advisory Team: Kristyne Shelton, Philip Winsor, Larry Comegys, Wilbur Lane, Jane Page Thompson, Larry Ogletree, Jason Rabun, Tim Simmons, Jenne Stoker, Bob Alexander, Sam Erb, Barbara Stafford, Gene Hart, and Julie Whitesell. He said the team could be available for other issues. He felt they could play a very helpful role to him in the first instance by trying to flush out further the two major points of contention—design and use. They could also be used in the possibility of holding a series of public forums themselves so members of the general public could offer testimony before the Citizens Advisory Team makes recommendations to us as we go forward to negotiate with the development team.

Mr. Klimm stated he wanted to ask Council to begin a series of public meetings, which we have promised that we would do. The first one, or more than one, needs to be a major

public meeting on the issue of a parking garage. He noted there have been conversations and discussions for several decades about the issue of parking in the downtown area. This was mentioned last year when we held a series of workshops. The issue raised the most by the people who came to the workshops dealt with the issue of parking. He hoped that the process that we will go through will, once and for all, put that issue to rest as to whether or not we need to adopt new policies and/or new structures and facilities to address the parking need in our city. We are prepared to make a presentation to City Council made up of experts in the field that have been studying this issue for over six months. We also want to give an opportunity for our citizens and residents to weigh in as well. We have heard from time to time some criticism that we didn't hold public meetings and hearings. However, we did hold public meetings, and we have every intention to continue to hold public meetings so any citizen who wants to have a say on this issue will be allowed to speak. He said he hoped that around March 13 or 20, when all Council can be present, we can have a meeting regarding the parking issue in the downtown. After that we want to have another hearing on City Hall and whether or not we stay as we are, or whether we will look at options. He pointed out that can happen simultaneously with discussion by the Citizens Advisory Team and with negotiations by him with the developer. All of this could happen simultaneously.

Mr. Klimm said there has been a lot of discussion, and we are now ready to have this community discussion once and for all. There was speculation that we would not be able to find interested and responsible developers, but we received four very competent and qualified developers to submit a proposal. Staff talked to at least a half dozen other developers of significant reputation and experience who were not able to submit in this round because of their present work load or conflict they may have. He said the good news is there is interest in the City of Aiken. Mr. Klimm stated the Selection Committee went through the process of evaluating the four proposals. The guideline they used as their reference was the RFP which clearly says that the evaluation factors to be evaluated are as follows:

1. The developer team's expertise.
2. The developer team's experience and track record on similar projects.
3. The references of past clients.
4. The developer's ability to financially perform their proposal
5. The developer's plan to accommodate local businesses that are presently located in this area that would be impacted by this project.

The Selection Committee spent many hours reviewing our recommendations and using the objective criteria that was included. He pointed out that the proposals have been on the city website, and we have received unsolicited input from citizens. He pointed out that all four of the development teams met the minimum criteria. He said it is their belief that any one of the four development teams have the capacity and wherewithal to perform the job. He said it was clear to the Committee that one team appeared to be above the others in specific areas that we were interested in. The Committee has unanimously come to the conclusion and recommend the ranking of the development teams as follows:

1. Carbon Properties, LLC
2. Southeastern Development Associates
3. WW-TW Enterprises, LLC
4. RAL Development Services, LLC

Mr. Klimm then reviewed in detail the proposal that the Selection Committee believes is the most advantageous proposal of the four and that is the proposal submitted by Carbon Properties, LLC.

Mr. Klimm pointed out that all the development teams are still in the running. Council's approval would allow staff to initiate the negotiation process by sitting down with Carbon Properties to begin negotiations.

Councilman Ebner pointed out that our communication in the past in newspapers, etc. has not been where we would like it to be. He pointed out that it is very important to have the right facts in the paper. Most of the residents will read the newspaper, and the right facts are very important to communicate to the citizens. Councilman Ebner stated he has

two other concerns as we get into the public meetings on the parking garage and City Hall. He said we need to be sure to have the financing of these items on hand.

Councilman Ebner pointed out there are a number of encumbrances on the options and on the properties. He said one of the first things we need to do is be sure the encumbrances are well known by all the parties. We don't want something to come up several months down the road and someone say they didn't know something. We need to be sure to get all the encumbrances to the developer.

Mr. Klimm stated through the entire process we have kept open communication with tenants. He said staff has had regular meetings with all of the tenants, and they are up to date in terms of what is going on. Prior to the RFP proposals being submitted and thereafter, we have had many, many meetings with all four of the development teams. He said the development teams are aware of the leases that exist. He said he had articulated not only the concerns that the tenants have, but also expressed the concerns that Council has in making sure that we do all that we can do for existing tenants. He said all four of the Development Teams are very well aware of what the situation is and our desires.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

Lease of Land

Mayor Osbon announced that City Council needs to go into Executive Session pursuant to Section 30-4-700(a)(2) of the State Code to discuss negotiations incident to a proposed contractual arrangement and proposed sale or purchase of property. Specifically, City Council will discuss a proposed lease arrangement for property owned by the City of Aiken.

Councilwoman Diggs moved, seconded by Councilman Dewar, that Council go into executive session to discuss a proposed lease arrangement for property owned by the City of Aiken. The motion was unanimously approved.

Council went into executive session at 6:37 p.m.

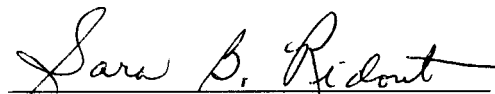
After discussion Council returned to the Council Chambers at 6:55 p.m.

Councilwoman Diggs moved, seconded by Councilman Merry that Council come out of executive session. The motion was unanimously approved.

Mayor Osbon reported that Council discussed a proposed lease arrangement for city owned property, but no action was taken by Council at this time.

ADJOURNMENT

The work session adjourned at 6:56 P.M.



Sara B. Ridout
City Clerk