

Aiken City Council Minutes

## CITY COUNCIL AND PLANNING COMMISSION JOINT MEETING

September 21, 2020

Council Present: Mayor Osbon, Councilmembers Brohl, Diggs, Girardeau, Gregory, Price and Woltz.

Planning Commission Members Present: Bob Brookshire, Clayton Clarkson, Jack Hunter, Ryan Reynolds, and Steve Simmons

Others Present: Stuart Bedenbaugh, Ryan Bland, Gary Smith, City Attorney, Kim Abney, Sara Ridout, Tim O'Briant, Gary Meadows, Daniel Williams, and Colin Demarest of the Aiken Standard.

Mayor Osbon called the meeting to order at 5:10 P.M. and welcomed those in attendance. He asked that those present introduce themselves.

ACTION AGENDAPlanning Commission  
2020 -21

Mr. Stuart Bedenbaugh, City Manager, noted that Council likes to have a joint Council-Planning Commission meeting every year if possible to discuss past action items and develop an action agenda for the upcoming year. Then the action agenda would be taken to Council for approval. This action agenda recommendation will be considered by City Council at the October 12, 2020, meeting. He said at this meeting we need to develop some action items whether they are a continuation of items on the current list or any new items for the action agenda.

Mr. Bedenbaugh stated Mr. Bland, Planning Director, would review the items that were on the last action agenda that Council approved in October, 2018.

Mr. Bland reviewed the previous action agenda items. He noted the first item was to 1. Update Planning Commission about the Whiskey Road Congestion Relief Project and formulate a recommendation to City Council regarding update to the Comprehensive Plan to incorporate impacted areas that may reasonably be assumed to be annexed into the city under current annexation policies and land impacted by the Powderhouse Connector.

Mr. Bland stated the plans had been refined and over the last couple of years had been refined significantly. Updates have been provided to the Planning Commission. He said some program components may warrant amendments to the Comprehensive Plan as part of the required 5-year update.

2. Formulate a recommendation to City Council regarding a Highway Overlay district focused on aesthetics of non-residential uses with a particular focus on the Richland Avenue W corridor between Valley and Vaocluse Roads. He said this item was discussed with the Planning Commission over the course of several work sessions. The Planning Commission has discussed potential options for a Highway or Gateway Overlay district in the Richland Avenue W area. However, with increasing uncertainty on the development of the former Aiken County Hospital/Administrative Office site, further direction from City Council may be appropriate. He said the Commission reviewed a list of the number of public improvements wanted by the public. They discussed and focused on what could be done on the regulatory side as far as a proportional way that properties could update their landscaping over time. During that time a couple of grants were pursued for the area, but the grants were not received. He said possibly grants could be pursued in the future to try to incentivize folks to improve their signage and landscaping in the corridor.

3. Recommend updates to the Traffic Management Ordinance to align with SCDOT standards.

Mr. Bland stated the Planning Commission did send the recommendation to City Council regarding changes to the Traffic Management Ordinance and the recommendation was approved by City Council.

4. Perform a legal review of the sign ordinance as a result of the Reed vs City of Gilbert (AZ) U.S. Supreme Court Decision and recommend any necessary changes to City Council. Mr. Bland stated after consultation with the City Attorney, it was felt that it may be beneficial to wait for additional case law to come through. He said there were some places in the sign code where he could recommend some changes, but overall there has not been a lot of sign legal action come through since then. We have not gotten into a lot of issues with the sign ordinance.

5. In consultation with the Equine Committee, review the Horse District zoning classification to ensure the purpose of that district is being promoted. The Equine Committee was restructured as a Council committee and has started working through an agenda. It would probably be good to get a recommendation from the Equine Committee.

6. Evaluate land use policies upon completion of water and sewer system modeling. Mr. Bland stated there have been some sewer expansion project plans with one on the north side and another on the east side on the East Pine Log Corridor. The plans have been firmed up in the recent months through the engineering side. We have been updating the Commission through the CIP program about those plans. This may be something that we could address as part of the Comprehensive Plan update that we are required to do every five years.

7. Review parking studies and assess the need and locational suitability for structured parking. Mr. Bland stated they had been waiting on some further direction from City Council on the best location. It seems now that the best location has been identified as the surface parking lot to the south of the future Municipal Building located at 107 Chesterfield Street S.

Mr. Bedenbaugh stated progress was made on some of the items, and some are multi-year works in progress.

Mr. Bedenbaugh noted in the agenda there was a listing of possible action agenda items for the coming year. He noted there were several items from the prior list that may warrant additional consideration. Also, from the staff level some questions have come up from applicants or just in the day to day operations in the Planning Department and other departments.

Mr. Bedenbaugh asked if there were any comments or questions about the prior action agenda and then going forward we would like to write down any potential items for potential inclusion in an action agenda. They do not necessarily need to be rated in terms of importance.

Mr. Brookshire stated he felt Whiskey Road is an issue and there had been discussion regarding the Whiskey Road Congestion Relief Project. He said he understood a proposal had been submitted to SCDOT for funding. Mr. Bedenbaugh responded there was a request for \$37 million for the Powderhouse Connector, but it was not funded. However, the Infrastructure Bank will be accepting applications again for projects before the end of the calendar year. The City will submit the project again for funding. He said the city had been working on some of the components without Infrastructure Bank money. There have been items on the agenda recently where Council approved the purchase of some right of way in the area. We are also considering the purchase of some land for a detention pond in the area.

Mr. Brookshire stated at almost every Planning Commission meeting there is a request for approval of a concept plan for something to be built on Whiskey Road. He was concerned about the traffic impact of these small developments as a whole on Whiskey

Road. He pointed out that every time a small development is approved, that is more traffic on Whiskey Road.

Mr. Bedenbaugh noted that he felt we are making progress. Since the calendar year began, we have acquired some acreage for a road that will be for traffic relief off of Whiskey Road. When fully built out, which will take some years, it will reduce the traffic on Whiskey Road by 25%. The road is being designed in such a way that it will have limited access, unlike Whiskey Road where there is a curb cut at every parcel. He noted that a traffic signal improvement is to be made at Stratford and Whiskey at Powderhouse Road with a signal similar to the one at Whiskey and Silver Bluff and Price Avenue. He said he felt that the Whiskey Road Congestion Relief and Safety Project could be an action item for the Planning Commission as we move forward with trying to acquire property for the building of connector roads.

Councilwoman Gregory pointed out that the ARTS Committee is supposed to reprioritize their projects and the Whiskey Road Congestion Relief project is a project on their listing. It was also pointed out that in considering Whiskey Road there are the drainage ditches along the road that need to be addressed and the safety of pedestrians and vehicles along that road.

Discussion continued on the need for correcting drainage on Whiskey Road as well as traffic and safety for vehicles and pedestrians.

Mr. Bedenbaugh pointed out that from the discussion it seems that some verbiage addressing the Whiskey Road Congestion Relief should be an action agenda item for the Planning Commission for consideration. He pointed out that we are working with the County as well on Whiskey Road. He pointed out that the County has significant dollars of CPST IV money designated for stormwater relief in the Whiskey Road Corridor area.

Councilwoman Price stated as we look at continued growth along Whiskey Road, we need to consider how we can redirect some of the growth. She asked how can we encourage and entice people who live in the County to annex to the City. What can the city provide to encourage annexation. She asked if there were anything in the Comprehensive Plan about annexation of areas. She noted that particularly we should pursue annexing the donut holes into the city.

Mr. Bland stated there is a policy statement in the Comprehensive Plan about annexations. The Planning Department has been reaching out to properties that are adjacent to the city limits, particularly the ones along water and sewer lines so when the property is sold it will need to be annexed. He said the Planning Department had been reaching out to those by providing them calculations and showing them, in a lot of cases, that the in-city rates are more beneficial to them. He pointed out that a lot of the single annexations recently have not been required but have been from residents outside the city who see the benefits of being inside the city. He said the Planning Department will continue to encourage annexations by providing calculations to residents to encourage annexation. He said they have not gone out and dealt with entire neighborhoods to annex. He stated for the last three years the department has used part-time help to prepare annexation agreements and calculations to encourage annexations.

Mr. Bedenbaugh pointed out that our water and sewer policy regarding providing city utilities has helped annex areas to the city. He noted that about four years ago Council adopted a policy that requires anyone requesting water/sewer service sign an annexation agreement to annex the property when it becomes contiguous to the city. He said we have probably annexed about 30 properties with that policy. He said another issue is that we cannot always provide sanitary sewer service to properties to be annexed and that is a service to entice annexation.

Councilwoman Price asked if we could pursue annexing areas to the city. She noted that there are areas in her neighborhood that are not inside the city limits. She asked if it would be cost prohibitive to annex some areas to the city. The group continued to discuss encouraging annexation of properties to the city. Some of the items discussed as action items were to try to get rid of the donut holes surrounded by the city, especially on

Vauchuse Road since it is so close to downtown and other areas; make a listing of the donut holes to pursue annexation; provide cost/benefit analysis for citizens to annex; provide incentives to annex; look at policies and ordinances and make amendments if necessary; and consider the sewer tap fee. It was noted that in some instances for the donut holes, the sewer line is front of their property, but it would cost them so much for the sewer fee to tap into the line that they do not want to annex and pay the sewer fee. It was pointed out that there should be a plan and areas should be targeted for annexation that would benefit the city and have someone monitoring the plan.

Mr. Bland noted that as part of the process staff has come up with a good modeling comparing in-city and out-of-city costs that is provided to people with custom estimates on their property if it were inside the city. He noted that partly because of staff resources they have strategically targeted the price range or the value range and the assessor's data that we know where it would likely be beneficial for them to annex. He said we have come a long way in the last couple of years as part of our annexation policy to really be able to provide information to people regarding annexation comparisons.

Regarding the donut holes and the number of properties involved, it was stated staff could update the listing. Strategies could be developed for Council's consideration to entice or incentivize the donut holes to annex to the city.

There was discussion about a previous annexation incentive program in the 1990's where incentives were paid for people to annex and to sign annexation agreements to annex when the property was contiguous to the city. It was pointed out the City has to sell its services.

Mr. Bedenbaugh stated it seemed that pursuing annexations, donut holes and other annexations, would be an item for the action agenda.

Mr. Bedenbaugh stated another item discussed was Overlay District regulations with a particular focus on the Richland Avenue W corridor. He pointed out that gateway entrances were an item of particular interest as we have multiple gateway entrances into the city, including the Richland Avenue area west, Columbia Highway (US1) north, and Richland Avenue East. In the 1990's the city made an effort to enhance the gateways with a federal grant, and the Richland Avenue W gateway was selected. The gateway improvements on Richland Avenue were made from Hitchcock Parkway to Gregg Highway near the Walmart. He pointed out that discussions about the Old Hospital (former Aiken County Office Complex) on Richland Avenue near the downtown has become more and more focused as it is on the western gateway to the city. He asked if that would be an item that Council would like to continue on the action agenda. He said a question that staff would need is direction as to where to start with improvements—start at the old hospital and work west or start at the Walmart and work east towards the city.

The group then discussed that Richland Avenue W is a major gateway to our city, and it was felt that we should try to beautify the area coming into the city as much as possible. It was also pointed out that with the Steeplechase locating on the east end of Richland Avenue some beautification needs to be done on that gateway also. It was also pointed out that the gateway on U.S. 1 north needs to be enhanced for development along that corridor and development of Generations Park. The gateways need a plan for road maintenance and beautification. There was discussion about the old hospital and how that area needs improvement.

Mr. Hunter expressed the feeling on the Richland Avenue W Corridor improvements that until something is done with the old hospital building that other improvements on the Richland Avenue Corridor will not help the area. He said there is concern in the community about nothing having been done with the old hospital. He felt the Richland Avenue Corridor depends on what happens to the old hospital property. That would make so much difference in that whole corridor. He said until we can get that hospital out of there, he would be reluctant to pass any kind of thing to change that corridor.

There was a question as to whether the City had a plan for the parkways on Richland Avenue to mimic the Park Avenue parkways with the walkways, benches, etc. It was felt improvements to the parkways would cause a draw of people.

Mr. Bedenbaugh stated there is a plan. Whenever the old hospital sells, at some point the radio antenna is going to be taken down. The County would do a funding mechanism called a multi-county park to pay for that. They have invited us to participate, and we have had some discussion with Council, but nothing formal has been done since the County is not ready to implement this multi-county park. The plan that we would want to recommend to Council is that money would be used for a gateway improvement. That is why he brought up that we start at the Richland Avenue Walmart for the gateway improvement and then work our way east. Or do we start at the old hospital and work our way downtown to Laurens Street with a parkway improvement similar to what we did on Park Avenue. We have the drawings for the parkways. We have a mechanism for the corridor improvements; it just won't be available until the multi-county park is done. We could start the improvements at Gregg Highway by the Walmart. We could possibly do some improvements with what's already there from the bypass up to Walmart. He said staff would need Council's direction as to whether to start at Walmart and come towards town. Or start at the old hospital and go east toward town.

It was noted that possibly we could start the improvements where there would be the most visibility and people could see the progress, and where we already have plans for the area. It was pointed out the old hospital is downtown, not the Walmart Center. There was a feeling that the parkway improvements should start downtown. Starting downtown would create walkability and connectivity. Starting at the Walmart would be more of a visual, nice to see improvement, not a useable improvement. It was noted that in the residential area an attractive improvement could be the lighting poles and there are sidewalks all the way from Gregg Avenue all the way down to the old hospital.

Mr. Bedenbaugh pointed out one of the things that goes a long way in terms of beautification is being able to underground the power lines. However, the lines along Richland from Kalmia Plaza to downtown are transmission power lines which cannot be undergrounded. The right-of-way in the area is very narrow. The roadway covers most of the right-of-way which complicates the matter. It is not impossible, but will take creativity. He felt the Planning Commission could look at this matter holistically and make some recommendation to Council on how best to address this. We will have some money from a multi-county park to do some sort of aesthetic improvements. It is just a question of where to target the money as he felt we will not have enough money to do the entirety of this corridor, but it will have to be done in phases so it is a question of how to prioritize the phases.

Councilwoman Brohl pointed out that along the corridor, there is nothing from Walmart coming into town until you get to Kalmia Plaza and the old hospital. It was pointed out that we would love to have something happen to the old hospital, but that is not entirely in the city's hands. However, on the property from Walmart to town, there is nothing there. Having some sort of landscaping in that area would be noticed as currently there is nothing there. It would be a continuation of what we have at the bypass up to Walmart. She felt that area would be an impacting thing from nothing there to something.

Mr. Hunter noted there are people on County Council who are not terribly concerned about the old hospital. It is a County Council. This is a City of Aiken issue—the old hospital. He felt the old hospital is a big deal to the City of Aiken.

Mr. Bedenbaugh stated from the staff's perspective, we would like the items on the page of staff's assessment to be considered. He asked if there were any items unrelated to the staff's assessment page that should be added to the action agenda. He noted that the listing will be presented to City Council at the October 12, 2020, meeting. City Council could potentially add items to the action agenda at that meeting.

Mayor Osbon suggested that if anyone has any other items they feel should be on the action agenda, to please give the City Manager or the Planning Director a call.

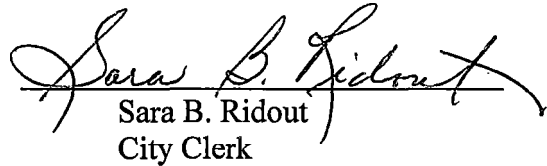
Councilwoman Brohl noted that on the staff's assessment, there are three additional items listed which require amending existing ordinances. She noted the items should be addressed. She wondered if the Planning Department and Planning Commission have the time because changing ordinances takes time and thought. She wondered if we have the staff to be able to address these three items in the next few months and get something accomplished.

Mr. Bland stated the item regarding bed and breakfast regulations is coming up soon. He said he felt it was of value to try to streamline the landscape ordinance because it can be confusing to a lay person. He felt review of those ordinances could be done in a year to a year and a half timeframe.

Councilwoman Diggs noted that we need to make sure that we address the situation regarding the trunk show and product parties as staff was put in an uncomfortable position on this matter.

Mayor Osbon thanked everyone for their time, input and serving the city.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 6:20 p.m.

  
Sara B. Ridout  
City Clerk