

Aiken City Council Minutes

February 9, 2004

WORK SESSION

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

Others Present: Roger LeDuc, Gary Smith, Bill Huggins, Larry Morris, Richard Pearce, Leasa Segura, Sara Ridout, Philip Lord of the Aiken Standard, and about 35 citizens.

Mayor Cavanaugh called the meeting to order at 6:25 P.M. He stated Council had two items that they would like to discuss in the work session.

SCHOFIELD NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

McGhee, Bill

Mr. LeDuc stated that Bill McGhee, President of the Schofield Neighborhood Association, would like to speak to Council about the various strategies that they have undertaken over the past couple of years. Several individuals have been working with them and have begun the revitalization of their particular neighborhood. Through a grant, they have developed a strategy for the possible economic revitalization of the Schofield area. Mr. McGhee would also like to talk to Council about some of their successes and their needs for the future.

Mr. McGhee, 217 Fairfield Street NE, stated he was present on behalf of the Schofield Community Association. Mr. McGhee stated there were several McGhees present, and all the McGhees present are homeowners in the Schofield Community Association neighborhood. Mr. McGhee briefly reviewed the activities of the Association over the past year. He said he would like to point out some things he felt the City could help with in the efforts to revitalize and redevelop this special historic and valuable neighborhood in the City of Aiken. He presented a power point presentation. He pointed out two organizations, including the Northside Heritage Preservation Foundation and the Schofield Community Association. He pointed out the Schofield Community Association has officers and membership fees on an annual basis. He said last year they had 42 paid members. He said the Schofield Community Association is organized by and with the guidelines of the neighborhood associations for the City of Aiken. He said they have annual dues, and they are a non-profit association. He said in order to pursue some grants and contributions, the Association petitioned the IRS and finally obtained the 501(c)3 designation.

Mr. McGhee described the Schofield community in the 50's. He said it was a neighborhood with characteristics of owner-occupied homes, racially mixed neighborhoods, mixed incomes, and thriving businesses. He pointed out the area now called downtown used to be called up town. He said downtown was around Fairfield and Union Streets. He pointed out the schools in the area included Schofield, Aiken Graded School and the religious institutions there presently. He said there were many craftsmen, shops, medical practitioners, and a safe and healthy environment. He said presently there are many aging homeowners in the area and many vacant lots. A majority of the units in the area are now rental units. There is a low income housing project, a lot of absentee landowners, and very few employment opportunities in the area. Most of the shopping is now on the southside. He said the property values are decreasing in the area, and there is a problem with crime. He said the group felt that at this time the neighborhood is still worth preserving because of the historic background and the streets and parkways. He said the Schofield area has very easy access to downtown, and there are major thoroughfares in the area. There is a variety of architectural features in the residences; infrastructure is available in the area, and there is mixed use zoning in the area. He pointed out the County had recently invested approximately \$12 million in renovation of the Schofield Middle School. He pointed out the City has the Smith-Hazel center in the area, and there are many active churches in the area.

Mr. McGhee stated last year the organization applied for a competitive grant and got a capacity building grant from Concurrent Technologies Corporation in Columbia, a Department of Labor grant. He said one of the features of the grant was to train craftsmen in some of the construction trades. The Department of Labor liked the idea of an apprenticeship program and funded this. The grant was completed successfully, but there have been a lot of cutbacks, so the sustainability of the program is in doubt now. He said the organization got the IRS 501(c)3 designation as a non-profit organization. They participated in many neighborhood initiatives around the city, cleanups, workshops, and spent many hours in the update of the Old Aiken Master Plan. The organization also organized block captains and developed a user manual for the block captains and received a matching grant from the city for a land uses study, a copy of which has been given to Council. Basically the study is of land use possibilities and building on what is presently in the Schofield area. He said the organization feels it is a well done study, and they would like to go over it in detail with Council to see what they can proceed with based on the study. The organization also commissioned McDonald Law to look at the 200 block of Kershaw, which faces Schofield School. It was felt this was the place to start and move out from there with renovations and do some major face lifting. He pointed out the organization had taken a picture of each of the houses and talked to several of the residents. He said about half of the homes are rental properties and half owner-occupied. The study shows how the block could look with some face lifting. The organization also partnered with United Methodist Church in their efforts to get more space for parking. The church is interest in expanding to a family life center. They want to use the space where the current parsonage is located for parking, and they had petitioned the city to have it demolished, to which the city had agreed. The organization spoke with them and felt the building was worth preserving, since houses in the area are 75 to 100 years old. They have agreed to partner with the organization if they can find a suitable lot to which to move the parsonage building in the neighborhood. In another project the organization partnered with the All Saints Anglican Church in their Saints Alive Program to develop the the block from Park Avenue to Hampton on Fairfield Street. The church contributed \$11,000, and the organization did exterior repair and upgrade on four residents on Fairfield Street with a small amount of paid labor, lot of volunteer labor and a lot of help from the owners.

Mr. McGhee stated the organization had looked at 600 parcels in the neighborhood. He said it was disturbing. He said 37% of the buildings are rental property, 25% is owner-occupied property and 18% is commercial property, 4% deserted houses, and 4% vacant lots. He said recently the organization made a map showing all the houses that are vacant. He said the organization is concerned that if something isn't done to arrest the deterioration of the homes that the homes will be in danger of demolition. He then showed some properties that are vacant and not being kept up to code. He said if something isn't done, he was concerned that they may be demolished.

Mr. McGhee then discussed with Council the organization's needs. He said they need a good partnership with the City of Aiken to revitalize and redevelop the area. He said they need \$60,000 in the form of a grant or a loan program for the Kershaw Street façade upgrading. He said they would like to enter into a program with the City so they would have a revolving loan fund for approximately \$500,000 at low interest rates, so they could involve owners into restoring their property, acquiring property, restoring it and selling it and also involve training craftsmen in the construction trades and the construction business. He said they would like support from the City on the rezoning of the appropriate areas in the neighborhood to single family residential; Union Street could be a government or office area. He felt there could be more street lights in the area, and more retail shops on Richland Avenue. He said they would like to keep the residential area single-family versus high density multi-family units. He said they would like the City to work with the organization and with the Department of Education to expand the drug free zones around public schools in Aiken. They would also like to see an increase in Public Safety in the neighborhood. He said they were trying to save a neighborhood that they felt was worth preserving.

Council pointed out the study was very comprehensive and entailed a lot of work.

Ms. Colleen Reed, 207 Brandon Road, stated many of the residents in the Schofield area are older citizens and often the citizens do not have the resources to fix up their homes. Through the volunteer efforts of the Schofield Community Association they have been able to do a lot in the community, but their financial resources are very limited. She said they need the financial support of the City of Aiken. She said many of the houses need repairs now, not in two years. She said the problems need to be addressed before there is further erosion within the community. She said with dilapidated housing and crime the neighborhood will erode further. She said the Schofield Association is trying to stop the erosion. She said they are asking for the City's support in their efforts.

Mayor Cavanaugh stated a lot of information had been presented and Council needed to look at the study in depth.

Mr. McGhee stated the organization appreciated what the City had been doing in the Toole Hill area, and that the northside had benefited greatly over the last couple of years with the efforts of focusing on improving the neighborhood. He said, however, time is running out in the Schofield Community for some of the buildings, and they did not want to see the buildings demolished and the city have to do a massive overhaul.

Councilwoman Clyburn stated she understood that time is of the essence. She commended the group for the efforts they had put into identifying the properties. She suggested Mr. McGhee needed to meet with staff to see what the next step is, and the information already gathered should be valuable in working in this area. She pointed out Mr. McGhee could be a big help to the city in this matter.

Councilmembers continued to discuss the proposal with Mr. McGhee and the needs in the area. They asked that Mr. McGhee meet with the staff to see what can be done.

SOUTH CAROLINA HISTORICAL MARKER

Hitt, Ola Historical Marker

Mr. LeDuc stated Miss Ola Hitt has been working with several organizations to create a historical marker of the original survey of Aiken. Owen Clary and Allen Riddick have been working with her on this marker, and Mr. Clary is present to discuss this marker and ask Council's permission to place it in the downtown area. They would like the marker erected either in the southern median of Newberry at Richland or the western median of Park at Laurens.

Mr. Owen Clary stated the organizations propose the erection of an historical marker somewhere along Newberry Street to commemorate the original survey of the laying out of the original 27 blocks of the City of Aiken in 1834. This was laid out by the two surveyors who helped lay out the South Carolina railroad. He said copies of the wording that has been approved by the South Carolina Department of Archives and History has been given to Council for information. He said the group is asking permission to erect the marker. The cost of the marker will be borne by the three organizations. Two sites are suggested, one being the corner of Newberry and Richland near the time capsule or at the corner of Newberry and Park. He said Newberry was one of the four original streets when they laid out the original 27 blocks of Aiken.

Council briefly discussed the request and asked that the request be sent to the Planning Commission for their study and suggestion of a site for the marker.