

**PLANNING COMMISSION
STRATEGIC PLANNING RETREAT
MINUTES
AUGUST 14, 2008
5:30 P.M.**

The Planning Commission of the Town of Rocky Mount, Virginia met at The Franklin Center, located at 50 Claiborne Avenue, Rocky Mount, Virginia on Thursday, August 14, 2008, at 5:30 p.m. with Madame Chair Janet Stockton presiding.

The following members were present: Madame Chair Janet Stockton, Vice Chair John Speidel; Planning Commission Members Derwin Hall, Ina Clements, and Jerry W. Greer, Sr. Staff members present included: Assistant Town Manager & Community Development Director Matthew C. Hankins, Town Attorney John Boitnott, Planning and Zoning Administrator (PZA) Paul D. Stockwell, Code Inspector & GIS Technician Nathan J. Wright, and Deputy Clerk Stacey B. Sink.

Following a dinner meal, the meeting was called to order by Madame Chair Stockton at 6:20 p.m.

The purpose of this meeting was to consider and discuss issues pertaining the Town, including: staff/Commission relations; items of strategic importance to the management of Rocky Mount's growth and development; land use planning; Commission direction for staff on updating, amending and improving the Town's subdivision and development ordinances; and likely projects for staff. A specific, itemized agenda was not prepared for the meeting.

The Assistant Town Manager facilitated the meeting and opened the floor to discussion by asking each Planning Commission member to identify what he/she brings to the table in regards to education, experience, and motivation as a representative of the Planning Commission. Discussion ensued:

- Planning Commission Member Greer stated that sometimes he thinks government employees forget who they work for. Without the people who pay taxes, there are no jobs. The biggest reason he is in government is that citizens often get half-way service. Government should provide better service.
- Vice Chair Speidel stated that he agrees with Planning Commission Member Greer (who is also an elected member of Town Council), but also identified that there is a difference between serving on Planning Commission and Town Council: Town Council members are elected and Planning Commission members are appointed. Planning Commission is less political.
- Planning Commission should be the eyes and ears of Town Council.
- Planning Commission Member Hall stated that Planning Commission should make objective and informed recommendations to Town Council.

- Planning Commission Member Clements stated that she feels her role as a Planning Commission member is to listen to citizens and be patient.
- Vice Chair Speidel expressed a concern that he often feels as though Planning Commission spends a lot of time in making a recommendation to Town Council, but he is not sure that any of the information gets through to Council.
- The PZA agreed with Vice Chair Speidel, stating that he could use help with this issue from Planning Commission. Often, he gets a vote/recommendation from Planning Commission, but he is not sure he understands why the vote was made. If Planning Commission members could offer reasoning as to why they vote in a particular manner, then he could more effectively communicate this information to Town Council.
- The Town Attorney added that Planning Commission recommendations are important because having two public hearings on the same request (once before Planning Commission and again before Town Council) offers the opportunity to analyze the information twice. This can make a difference in voting based on objectivity instead of emotion.

Next, the Assistant Town Manager asked the Commission to identify the Commission's role and staff's role as it relates to the Planning Commission. Discussion ensued:

- Planning Commission's first role is to be the first of two public hearings.
- Staff should work with Planning Commission to resolve material questions prior to the public hearings.
- Planning Commission should set appropriate conditions.
- The Assistant Town Manager added that in his dual role (which also includes the Community Development directorship) he plans to open the lines of communication with Town citizens by holding small community-based meetings throughout the Town in the coming months. His hope is that these meetings will give citizens the opportunity to voice concerns, as well as ideas for making the Town better. These ideas and concerns will then be topics of discussion for Planning Commission.

The Assistant Town Manager questioned if Planning Commission is satisfied with the work done by staff in preparation for hearings and meetings. Discussion ensued:

- Madame Chair Stockton stated that she does not always understand why the Planning Commission is working on a particular issue. Is there an existing problem that needs to be corrected? Is there an issue that needs to be corrected before it becomes a problem? She would like more information on issues that are brought before Planning Commission for discussion.
- The Assistant Town Manager added that he is specifically asking this question based on the comments of Planning Commission Member Hall, who in a previous meeting stated that he looks at staff as "consultants" on issues, and that he feels Planning Commission is appointed by, and works for, Town

- Council. This has left an impression with staff that the Planning Commission is not happy with ideas staff presents for deliberation.
- Planning Commission Member Hall addressed his previous comments, stating that he thinks the Planning Commission should work on issues that are identified by Town Council. Again, he feels that the Planning Commission works for Council. There has been a lot of staff turnover in recent months, staff and staff ideas come and go, but Town Council and Planning Commission is constant.
 - The Town Attorney pointed out that often the ideas presented by staff are the result of ideas and requests presented by Town Council. The ideas presented by staff are not attempts by staff to “take over” the Town.
 - Vice Chair Speidel pointed out that some times the Planning Commission gets the packet information on Friday, for a Tuesday meeting. This creates an adversarial role because the Planning Commission does not have time to ask questions and may be unsure of why an issue is being presented.
 - The Assistant Town Manager questioned if changing the format of a meeting to a two-part meeting would be more conducive to improving the communication process. The first part of the meeting would be to take care of the information at hand, and the second part of the meeting would be to introduce what is coming up.
 - Vice Chair Speidel added that another concern he has is that he doesn't hear back about the decisions of Council unless he reads it in the newspaper.
 - The Town Attorney suggested that an executive summary could be prepared and delivered to the Planning Commission regarding the action items of Town Council.
 - Planning Commission Member Clements added that there are things happening in the outside world that have a bearing on Town Council decisions and she would like to know about the Town Council agenda, as well as the results of their votes.

The Assistant Town Manager asked the Planning Commission to consider where the Town of Rocky Mount will be, and what it will look like, in five years. Discussion ensued:

- Some positive issues facing the Town over the next five years include: the Uptown Revitalization, the Cox Property, a need for biotechnology and a need for more industry.
- Some negative issues facing the Town include economic uncertainty and a lack of natural gas service.
- Projected growth during the next five years will be along Route 40 East and North Main Street.
- Questions were raised as to whether the Town needs an Industrial Development Authority (IDA), how the Town will make progress over the next five years, and what the goals of the Planning Commission should be over the next year.

The Assistant Town Manager opened the floor to discussion regarding his proposal to change the meeting structure for the Planning Commission meetings. (*The proposed change in meeting structure was previously mentioned at the June 2008 meeting, and discussion was tabled until the retreat.*) Discussion ensued:

- The proposed change would allow the Assistant Town Manager to replace the PZA at the dais. The PZA would continue to provide important information to the Commission at the meetings, as he has broad technical knowledge; however, the Assistant Town Manager has broader management experience and would help to move the meetings along and keep them more efficient.
- Planning Commission Member Hall stated that he thinks the PZA is often in a conflicted role. He also noted that an applicant should have a specified time to speak and there should be limited time for presentation and methods. Sometimes the public needs help to understand the process and get to the point.

There being no further discussion, Madame Chair Stockton entertained a motion.

- Motion was made by Planning Commission Member Clements to change the format of the meetings on a trial basis through the December meeting, to allow the PZA to become more of a liaison to the applicant and to allow the Assistant Town Manager to be at the dais, with motion on the floor being seconded by Planning Commission Member Hall. Discussion ensued. Again, the Assistant Town Manager confirmed that the PZA will be more available to the applicant. The Assistant Town Manager will introduce the discussion, and give a synopsis, the PZA will give the technical information, and the Assistant Town Manager will help to move the meeting along. There being no further discussion, let the record show that the motion on the floor passed unanimously by those present.

Regarding the goals and objectives of the Planning Commission, the Assistant Town Manager advised the Commission that these can be determined in a work session and also by e-mail. He asked the Commission to feel free to bring any specific ideas to his attention. It was the consensus of Planning Commission that two areas of interest currently exist, namely the Franklin Heights Subdivision issues, and the subdivision ordinance.

It was also the consensus of Planning Commission that members would like to receive reminder calls of the upcoming meeting on the Monday before the meeting, and that packets should be mailed ten days in advance of the meeting. Planning Commission Member Greer stated that he would also like to receive a reminder call the afternoon of the meeting. Staff so noted.

The Assistant Town Manager advised the Commission that the issue of Central Business District Parking had also been tabled at a previous meeting for the continuation of discussion at the retreat. However, due to the late hour, he suggested

that this discussion be continued at a work session or during another regularly scheduled meeting. Discussion ensued:

- The Town Attorney recapped the previous discussions on the matter by stating that Planning Commission's biggest concern has always been the idea of giving one person the ability to make parking decisions using objective criteria. He confirmed that this decision could also be turned over to the Planning Commission to decide the number of spaces required for a new business in the Central Business District.
- Currently, according to code, the number of parking spaces within 500 feet of the building can be considered when meeting the parking requirement.
- A public hearing is another option; however, a public hearing could hinder or deter businesses from locating in the Central Business District.
- Planning Commission could consider increasing the parking radius from 500 feet to 750 or 1000 feet. The Assistant Town Manager advised he would have staff take a look at this option.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to discuss, motion was made by Planning Commission Member Greer to adjourn, at 8:32 p.m., seconded by Madame Chair Stockton, and carried unanimously.

Janet Stockton, Chair

ATTEST:

Stacey B. Sink, Deputy Clerk

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