

City of Washington
Economic Development Commission
REMOTE MEETING VIA ZOOM
Thursday, January 21, 2021 – **Minutes**

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Kristy Howell at 4:32 p.m.

Present: Liz Heider, Kristy Howell, Randy McGuire, Brad Mahony

Also Present: City Administrator Ray Forsythe, Planning and Development Director Jon Oliphant, Alderman Lili Stevens

AGENDA

1. Approval of Meeting Minutes:
Randy McGuire motioned to approve minutes from the June 30, 2020 meeting. Liz Heider seconded the motion. The minutes as stated were unanimously approved.

2. Business Items:

A. 2020 SUMMARY AND REVIEW -

The last four years have seen very consistent building permit totals. There were 17 new residential permits issued in 2020 and 15 commercial/industrial permits. New residential growth has had little variation with anywhere from 17 to 19 permits issued annually since 2017. Non-residential expansions/renovations/new construction has also had consistent activity, with 13 to 17 permits issued per year since 2016. These totals are in line with a general reduction in new construction across the region for several years. Among the more prominent projects within the city limits are those for Beck Oil and Sunrise Roofing.

Comments:

Brad Mahony shared that four out of five people that he speaks with want to build on land. They either want to be on the outskirts or want an acre. He also shares, to Jon's agreement, that there is not a whole lot of lots available. Building costs are up now, too.

Is it a concern that there are not a lot of residential lots? Jon Oliphant answered that there hasn't been a lot of new subdivisions platted for a few years now, and eventually, there will be a need to determine a new residential area. We don't have that need at the moment.

B. 2021 PLANNEED PROJECTS -

The City was awarded a Statewide Planning and Research grant from IDOT to pay for 80% of the Comprehensive and Collaborative Land Use, Economic Development, and Transportation Plan. The City's last comprehensive plan was completed in 2001, though the future land use and thoroughfare plan maps were updated in 2009. There has been substantial growth during that time and with a few significant capital improvement projects on the horizon, this is a great time to undertake such a plan. It is anticipated to be completed in early 2022. Focus will be given to three particular sub-areas: Nofsinger Road/US 24, Business Route 24, and Freedom Parkway/Lakeshore Drive. Additionally, the City's Square TIF District is currently set to expire at the end of 2021. It was extended for 12 years in 2009 following the support of the impacted taxing districts and the approval of State legislation. The same process is required for a second extension and staff has been reaching out to each of the taxing bodies to see if they would be supportive of having this tool in place through 2033.

Comments:

Would burying power lines be part of grant funds from IDOT? Jon explained that this was discussed a bit internally. It is not likely that that will happen, and generally it is a cost passed on to municipalities.

Ray did chime in and state that if the pavement was to be widened and a pole would need moved, then we would want to push Ameren to bury them.

There are a few major project areas, the first being Nofsinger/24. The City purchased property in 2013. It is a significant project and focus of Comprehensive Plan. The Comp Plan includes some folks with an economic development background that will do some forecasting and provide good advice. Ray is looking forward to obtaining a document that the City can use to recruit, one that includes pictures, concepts and drawings.

TIF district looking to expire at end of year. It is a good tool but some have lost tax funds due to the district. Looking at reducing area of TIF district. Brad Mahony stated that he thinks it's been a great tool and would love to see it continue.

Kristy Howell wanted clarity as to the amount currently in the TIF fund. Right now, Jon stated, there is around \$1 million. If we discontinue the TIF district, funds would be distributed back to taxing bodies proportionately. Funds, though, can be utilized if we have a City project in the works, though the funds can be used up quickly. The City does have a Streetscape project around the square that is being looked into. Kristy shared that there are bricks along the sidewalk deteriorating and could be a potential trip hazard. She is happy to hear that improvements are being discussed. Revamped lighting would also be great.

C. GRANT RELIEF FUNDS FOR WASHINGTON BUSINESSES –

A variety of funding programs have been made available at the federal and state levels over the past year to address the impact on businesses from COVID-19. The Payroll Protection Program offers loans to help businesses keep their workforce employed during this time. The Downstate Small Business Stabilization program provides 60 days of working capital for small businesses that are considered non-essential by the Governor's Executive Order. The Business Interruption Grant program has had two rounds of funding aimed towards helping business expenses such as payroll, rent, utilities, and other operations. The Hospitality Emergency Grant Program was aimed at offsetting working capital expenses at bars, restaurants, caterers, and hotels. Finally, the City received an Economic Support grant from the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity to establish a local grant program that provided funds for eligible bakeries, bars, caterers, and restaurants for reimbursement for occupancy and/or utilities. These programs have all been established very quickly and it is feasible that there may be new programs rolled out in 2021 to address continuing impacts from COVID.

Comments:

Many in the group wondered if businesses are utilizing available funding? Are they taking of available grants? Jon replied that some businesses have been more aggressive than others. Those that have a better handle on bookkeeping have been in a much better position to obtain grants. Others struggle to come up with proper documentation in a timely fashion. Some grants require a lot of documentation and the ability to track eligible expenses.

The biggest challenge is that the state rolls out programs but isn't properly staffed to answer questions and distribute funds in a timely fashion. People that were awarded grants months ago are just getting money now. It can cause frustration.

Kristy stated that easiest one (quickest turnaround) was the BIG grant. The application was very easy to fill out and they communicated very well. She saw practically a one-month turnaround.

Liz agreed that it was hard because certain criteria they didn't hit. Overall, very fortunate she has a good team to help utilize all their resources and fill out documents. She agreed, though, that some funds took a very long time to receive.

D. CITY MARKETING PLAN -

The City has partnered with Business Building Marketing since mid-November to help digitally promote the business community. The initial focus is on advertising through Facebook and Google. The rollout prior to the holidays helped drive traffic during a vital shopping period while the first quarter of any new is typically a much slower time for many businesses. This will establish a standard, consistent marketing foundation that will then allow for expansion of the digital footprint. This is intended to be compatible with the Chamber's marketing, which is more focused on print and broadcast media. Further advertising may include the creation and dissemination of multiple videos on a variety of topics.

Comments:

The City has received very positive feedback from Business Builders regarding number of clicks and views. Online marketing is a very efficient way to spread word about our community and spark

Randy asked if we get any data back on what people think about Washington or is it just pushing out information? Randy says that he hears many people saying great things about Washington. While our online advertising may not give us such direct feedback, fun surveys are an option. Brad believes that the best indicator is population growth. He sees that people are moving to Washington and those that are here are staying.

E. FUTURE MEETING DATE – Next meeting to be held on Thursday, March 25 at 4:30PM.

3. Other Business:

A. Stock and Field property –

Kristy Howell brought up that Stock and Field, in the Cherry Tree Shopping Center, is now empty. She wondered if there anything we can do to fill that place? Unfortunately, Ray explained that Stock and Field owns the property and they are in bankruptcy. Members agreed that it can be very challenging to find occupants for such a large square footage. We need to be open to possibly subdividing the spot, renovating, and encouraging a variety of different organizations, i.e. medical complexes, to consider the space. Jon encourages people to talk and get the word out!

4. Member Comments:

Ray wanted to discuss City financials very briefly. Washington has fared very well through this pandemic. Since Washington is primarily a bedroom community, people have been shopping locally. Our sales tax is actually up from pre-Covid and that is attributable to people working from home. We have also received funding through CARES Act. Washington will end the fiscal year with a positive balance versus a deficit. Larger communities in the surrounding area are dipping into their rainy-day funds.

Lastly, the state passed legislation years ago that went into effect January 2021. We will now receive sales tax from online orders purchased from big box stores and online retailers (Amazon, Walmart, etc.) Overall, people want to live here and shop here!

5. Adjournment - Meeting

Motion approved by Brad, seconded by Randy. Meeting adjourned at 5:40 PM.