

Wednesday, December 11, 2024

St. Louis

A regular meeting of the St. Louis Planning Commission was called to order by Manager Giles at 5:30 P.M. Due to the absence of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman, a motion by Messer, supported by Palmer to appoint City Manager Giles to chair the meeting. All ayes. Motion Carried.

Present: Giles, S. Kelly, Messer, Echtenaw, Palmer, Whitford

Excused: Doepker, D. Kelley, Horvat

Also Present: Josh Leppien - Intern

Manager Giles led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Motion by Messer, supported by Whitford, to approve the minutes from the October 9, 2024, meeting. All ayes. Motion Carried. Mayor Echtenaw commented that Recording Secretary Dori Foster did an excellent job in preparing those minutes.

New Business:

a. Church of God – 520 Olive Street Discussion

Manager Giles mentioned that there had been a number of inquiries over the past few months from interested parties concerning the re-use of the vacant church at 520 Olive. These inquiries led him and Josh Leppien to review the current Zoning Ordinance with regards to allowable re-uses for vacant religious facilities. The current ordinance provides in Article 17, "Special Land Use Requirements", some direction on the re-use of school facilities but is silent with regards to re-use of religious facilities. Discussion amongst Commission members indicated that the City has had more religious facilities relocated, leaving their facilities vacant. There was a consensus as to a need to consider the re-use potential for these facilities within various zoning districts.

Josh Leppien had drafted suggested language, adapted from the current Article 17.3, at Manager Giles distributed it to the members. Commission members discussed potential business use impacts on the existing properties and the use of the special land use section of the ordinance. Commissioner Messer asked for examples of the types of businesses which could be allowed as there was a concern that some may not be compatible. Messer also asked if the Administration could look into other communities' ordinances to see how they have addressed re-use of vacant religious facilities.

Manager Giles agreed to have staff look at the ordinances for surrounding communities and bring this information back to the Planning Commission for review and discussion. The goal of this effort is to amend our current zoning ordinance to provide guidelines for the re-use of religious facilities within the City of St. Louis, thereby creating a positive impact on the existing neighborhoods where they are located.

Additional discussion:

Manager Giles mentioned that the City will be looking to review and update the current Zoning Ordinance in the future, utilizing the consultant working on the overall County Master Plan. This will occur once the County Master Plan has been completed.

There was no other business to report.

There were no public comments.

Motion by Echtenaw, supported by S. Kelly to adjourn at 6:05 P.M. All ayes. Motion carried.

Keith W. Risdon
Acting Recording Secretary

Wednesday October 9, 2024
St. Louis, MI

A regular meeting of the St. Louis Planning Commission was called to order by Chairman Dan Doepker at 5:30 P.M.

Present: Doepker, Giles, D. Kelley, S. Kelly, Messer, Echtinaw, Palmer, Whitford

Absent: Horvat

Also Present: Jake Gregory-Hope House, Chief Richard Ramereiz-SLPD, Gratiot County Prosecuting Attorney-Laura Bever.

Others in Attendance:

Jim Kelly, Lyle McCoon, Nathan Workman, Kelly Braman, Stephanie & Frank Davis, Paul & Sandy Capen, Dan Mandy, Bill Leonard, Buffy Block, Tim Block, Louise St. John, T.J. Serrine, Amber Derosia, Sydney & Brenden Zuke, Carolyn Studley, Sarah Bouman, Cass Thelen, Lori Teal, Rebecah Most, Rachel Smith and Farris Azzam.

The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Chairman Doepker.

Motion was made by D. Kelley, supported by S. Kelly to approve the minutes from June 12, 2024. All ayes. Motion carried.

Kurt Giles advised the Planning Commission that it was time to review the Special Use Permit extension renewal for the Gratiot County Hope House. This is to be done every 3 years.

Chairman Doepker opened the public hearing at 5:34 P.M.

Jake Gregory from Hope House advised the Planning Commission that this was their third renewal, and they are very grateful for the support from the community, members, and area agencies that support their mission. Hope House has had good success over the past few years, from helping families to single individuals, of all ages. There are many local agencies that Hope House has assistance with, a few to mention are 8 Cap, Gratiot Integrated Health, My Michigan Health, and the Gratiot County Prosecutor's office. Jake stated they also do fundraisers, and other organizations donate as well.

Ralph Echtinaw asked where the funding comes from for the Hope House. Jake advised that funding comes from 8-Cap, MDHHS, Michigan State Housing Authority and HUD.

Amber Derosia asked what the Hope House would do if the permit was denied? Jake advised that they do not have an alternate place to go at this time.

Buffy Block (whose backyard is adjacent to the Hope House property) advised that they hear lots of cussing and fighting from the Hope House. They feel that Jake Gregory is ignoring them when they attempt to talk to him. Buffy stated they had gone to his house, but no one had answered the door. Chief Ramereiz asked why they do not call or go to the Hope House when they have an issue and not Jake's personal residence. Buffy advised that she had called once but received no feedback. Buffy has twelve kids under her control during the day. She stated they cannot go to the park anymore; drugs are being hidden there and are being found on the ground. Chief Ramereiz asked Buffy what kind of drugs had been found at the park and what they did with them once found. Buffy

stated it appeared to be marijuana and that she had put it in the trash. Chief Ramereiz asked why not call 911 and have the police take care of it? Buffy stated she was there with her daycare kids, and this was just the easiest way to dispose of it, thinking that no one would take it out of the trash. Buffy advised this is not safe for them or anyone to be around.

Tim Block who works at MDOC and whose property abuts the shelter property asked how many houses have been broken into since Hope House has been here? Chief Ramereiz read off the description of calls to the Hope House and surrounding areas and stated he was not aware of any home invasions of that nature. Tim asked Jake if there was drug use inside of the Hope House. Jake stated there was not. Tim asked why they do not administer drug tests. Jake advised that they are not permitted to per the State. Tim asked if the pavilion at the park must be reserved to be able to use it, Chief Ramereiz advised that it does not need to be reserved all the time to be used. People do call and reserve it for parties/functions. Tim asked how often the police patrol the area by the park. Chief Ramereiz stated he has one officer on duty at a time and they are instructed to patrol 2-3 times in the a.m. and p.m. Tim asked about the drugs being found at the park and what can be done about that. Tim asked, "don't we have a drug dog that can go patrol there. Prosecuting Attorney Laura Bever advised that Gratiot County Sheriff's Office has one dog and Tribal Police do as well. Tim asked why they couldn't be used to do sweeps of the park and the Hope House grounds. Prosecuting Bever stated that she had sent an email to the Gratiot County officer with the K-9 and asked that he have the dog check the area frequently. Tim asked Jake if any of the Hope House staff had found drugs on the residents. Jake asked one of the employees named Rachael and she stated none of which she was aware. Rachael advised that presence is prevention, and it has been working well.

Paul Capen, a 15-year resident of Westgate subdivision, stated they have loved watching the park. All the kids playing and families enjoying their time there. Since the Hope House has been there, they have witnessed cars being parked overnight, same vehicle being parked there for 5 days, people sleeping on the picnic tables and in the bushes, loud language, profanity, sexual acts being performed in plain site and behind trees (have proof on phone), families arguing with young children. Paul advised there are no children coming to the park anymore, people are not comfortable going there. Paul stated there has been at least six times that random people have been in their yard. Paul advised one day a lady asked if she could put up a tent in his yard. Paul advised that they had to install security cameras at their house because of this. Paul advised that they do not like to call to bother the police and most of the time whatever is going on has stopped once the police get there.

Chief Ramereiz asked the residents to please call anytime you see anything going on at the park. The non-emergency number is 989-875-7505. Even if once the officer arrives the issue is not happening, we still need to know what is going on.

Amber Derosia advised that they stopped using the park 2 years ago, they go to Alma now. Amber asked why the Hope House does not have a smaller time frame for the permit. She stated that she is tired of living next to it and it needs to go.

Sarah Bouman from Community Mental Health advised that they provide help for addiction. A lot of the residents of the shelter have trauma from before they came here. We must provide basic needs first by housing them. We are not allowed to turn them away. Sarah stated we have a much better chance of helping/healing them once they have housing.

Buffy Block asked, Are they violent? Who is looking out for my kids? Is anyone going to assure me no one will snap? An employee from Community Mental Health stated that anyone can snap at any minute, it is not unique to homeless populations.

Paul Capen asked, does the shelter take people from jail? Jake Gregory stated that they have on one occasion. Jake also stated that the county does not give the shelter money if they take someone from the jail. Jake also advised that they check for sex offenders upon registration and if they are on the list then they are denied from staying at Hope House.

Lyle McCoon director from OHS- Office of Human Services advised that money raised helps people in need, whether it be rent, staying at a hotel or a campground. We are all working together to keep people in their homes and with their families. Homelessness is a big problem. He added "Please renew the permit".

Louise St. John advised that she visits the shelter weekly, she truly loves spending time there and getting to know the residents. She also advises everyone to visit the shelter, hear their stories, and learn how they are trying to better themselves. Louise stated that she lives by Alma College and has noisy college kids in her backyard and understands the disruption.

Ferris Azzam inquired, are there any out-of-state residents at the shelter? Jake stated, no everyone that enters is from or staying in Gratiot County in some capacity. A lot of people start out seeking assistance from 8-Cap and then go to Hope House.

Former Mayor Jim Kelly addressed the Planning Commission and stated that he has spent 23 years on their side of the table. I helped get Hope House here. We all had the same issues in the seventies when I was a police officer. I fully support the Hope House. Jake Gregory addressed the Planning Commission again stating that unless we know of problems going on, we cannot take care of them. When we do know of a situation it is managed right away. We have had to remove people as well. Homeless people have the same rights as we all do but must follow the rules as well. We must know about it before we can help fix it. I have been to graduation parties at the park where there is loud music and parents are there smoking as well. I have heard loud music from my neighbors as well. I must follow the rules with MDHS, I don't always agree with them. Please report issues to us as soon as possible, call or stop by the office and added" We are trying to help improve their lives. We will address what we are aware of".

Chairman Doepker closed the public hearing at 6:57 P.M.

Kurt Giles advised that the Planning Commission can act to approve, deny or conditionally approve the 3-year extension with annual review in house or with the planning commission.

D. Messer asked how many are at the shelter now? And how many employees and volunteers? Jake stated there are fourteen residents currently, 10 employees and volunteers usually number 6-7 people.

Messer also asked Chief Ramereiz if the shelter puts a strain on daily operations. Chief Ramereiz stated all agencies are dealing with shortages, if we are unable to take the call, Alma Police Department or the Gratiot County Sherriff's Department would be called in. Buffy Block stated that when the police had been called, they had arrived asap.

Jake Gregory advised that Hope House has their operations manual online, and it is very informative and can answer a lot of questions. Jake also stated that there was a noise complaint made but it was his dog barking, nothing to do with the shelter.

Sue Whitford asked if there was something brought up at the very first meeting about four different counties or rotating services. Jake stated that they had planned to rotate between different churches but there were not enough resources to be able to do this, Jake also states that this rotational arrangement was never presented to the St. Louis Planning Commission.

Tim Block asked if there are people with mental health issues living there and are the staff physically able to restrain them until the police arrive. "Do they have training?" Jake advised that they do have protocol to follow and that they have a RAD Instructor, and the staff have been trained in how to respond. Chief Ramereiz stated that when they have been called to an issue the staff has handled it well and has the room cleared up by the time they arrive.

Chairman Dan Doepker stated "Don't be afraid to call". Commission member Kevin Palmer stated I do not call either and I should. Giles asked if there were any more questions or comments and there were none.

Motion made by D. Kelley, supported by R. Echtenaw to approve the three (3) year Special Use Permit for the Hope House with annual review by City staff members.

Roll Call:

Ayes: Doepker, Giles, D. Kelley, S. Kelly, Messer, Echtenaw, Palmer, Whitford

Nays: None

Motion Carried.

Giles advised there was no other business.

Chairman Doepker asked if there were any other public comments. There were none.

Motion made by Messer, supported by S. Kelly to adjourn the meeting at 7:15 P.M. All ayes. Motion carried.

Dori Foster
Recording Secretary

Wednesday June 12, 2024
St. Louis, MI

A regular meeting of the St. Louis Planning Commission was called to order by acting Chair Donna Kelley at 5:30 P.M.

Present: Giles, D. Kelley, S. Kelly, Echtenaw, Whitford, Horvat

Absent: Doepker-excused, Palmer-excused, Messer-excused

Also present: Jake Gregory-Hope House, Nathan Workman-Hope House, Carolyn Studley-Hope House, Chief Richard Ramereiz-St. Louis Police Dept., MyMichigan Medical Center-Lori Johnson, Catie Macha, Jennifer Nigro, Katlyn Wiles and a few others that didn't sign in.

The Pledge of Allegiance was led by acting Chair D. Kelley.

Motion was made by Horvat, supported by Giles to approve the minutes from April 10, 2024. All ayes. Motion Carried.

Giles advised Planning Commission members of the plan to discuss the Gratiot County Hope House mid-year review and hear from Jake Gregory from the Hope House. Giles stated that the City has not had any difficulties with issues being addressed by Hope House representatives whenever the need arose. As well as any other concerns brought up during the meeting, Jake intended to address three topics of concern. These include the perception that Hope House residents were being sent from other locations or being attracted to St. Louis because of the existence of the Hope House, the suggestion that individuals associated with the Hope House were sometimes occupying vacant buildings in the St. Louis area and that there was an inordinate number of law enforcement and/or first responder calls to the Hope House.

Jake stated the first issue was that other areas/communities were bringing people to our shelter. Jake stated this is not true, that if you are in Gratiot County for whatever reason you are here, you have access to the shelter. Statistics provided by Hope House representatives identify 89% of the individuals served in the past 27 months were deemed from Gratiot County. Another 8.7% of those residents had been in the Central Michigan Planning Body area, but outside of Gratiot County. The Central Michigan Planning Body includes the Counties of Montcalm, Isabella, Ionia and Gratiot. Jake stated that there are employees from MyMichigan Health and other agencies present to answer any questions about how the Hope House has helped the people that they house and how the agencies' activities intersect with Hope House. The Hope House coordinates with MyMichigan Alma, Gratiot Integrated Health Network and EightCAP. An individual could be released from the hospital and have nowhere to go and the Hope House will help if they are able.

Jake advised that the second issue was the suggestion that Hope House representatives were advising residents to stay in abandoned houses or buildings. Jake stated this is not true at all, we would never recommend staying in any abandoned building. Once an individual leaves the Hope House they cannot control what they do, these people are adults and what they choose to do is their business. However, if an individual is asked to leave the Hope House, they will try to assist them once they leave as well. An example could be staying at a hotel for a few nights or getting them a ride somewhere, so they are not just kicked out.

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Present: Giles, D. Kelley, S. Kelly, Echtenaw, Whitford, Horvat
Absent: Doepker-excused, Palmer-excused, Messer-excused
Also present: Jake Gregory-Hope House, Nathan Workman-Hope House, Carolyn Studley-Hope House, Chief Richard Ramereiz-St. Louis Police Dept., MyMichigan Medical Center-Lori Johnson, Catie Macha, Jennifer Nigro, Katlyn Wiles and a few others that didn't sign in.

The Pledge of Allegiance was led by acting Chair D. Kelley.

Motion was made by Horvat, supported by Giles to approve the minutes from April 10, 2024. All ayes. Motion Carried.

Giles advised Planning Commission members of the plan to discuss the Gratiot County Hope House mid-year review and hear from Jake Gregory from the Hope House. Giles stated that the City has not had any difficulties with issues being addressed by Hope House representatives whenever the need arose. As well as any other concerns brought up during the meeting, Jake intended to address three topics of concern. These include the perception that Hope House residents were being sent from other locations or being attracted to St. Louis because of the existence of the Hope House, the suggestion that individuals associated with the Hope House were sometimes occupying vacant buildings in the St. Louis area and that there was an inordinate number of law enforcement and/or first responder calls to the Hope House.

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Jake advised that the third issue was excessive medical calls to the shelter. Jake stated there have been 19 medical calls in 27 months while 234 individuals have been served by Hope House. Jake advised that Chief Ramereiz had the clerk put together a chart of the calls for service at the Hope House and similar calls outside of the Hope House. Jake stated that the calls to the shelter are not disproportionate and usually resolved very quickly.

Chief Ramereiz stated that if there are rumors heard, he investigates for verifiable information. If it is something important, then he has always been able to talk to Jake or Nathan right away. Chief advised that he has never had any issues with the staff. They are easy to deal with. The shelter has strict policies to follow as well. The Chief advised the planning commission that there were (3) three possible cases of people being brought in from other areas. Two of the people do not know or remember who brought them in or where they came from. The other was reportedly from Kent County PD but no one from the department could corroborate.

Kurt stated that Diandra Messer of the Planning Commission was unable to attend but sent an email to him with the following questions about Hope House:

1. Does the police force feel that there is a strain on their services due to the addition of the shelter? Chief Ramereiz stated no there is no strain on the day-to-day policing.
2. Have neighbors or community members voiced valid concerns that have or have not been addressed? Kurt stated that no complaints have been received from Westgate area residents that attended the October 2021 Planning Commission meeting since the time of that meeting. A report of individuals that were perceived to be homeless in Orchard Hills subdivision was received in February of 2024, however, no connection to Hope House was able to be verified.
3. Does Hope House feel that they have the adequate staffing to meet their needs in a safe and constructive manner? Jake stated yes, we have adequate staffing, However, there are challenges to maintaining staffing levels with limited funding. There is not enough funding to be open 24/7 as they would prefer.

Kurt asked if there were any other questions at this time. None were asked.

There was no other business to report.

Motion made by S. Kelly, supported by Whitford to adjourn the meeting at 6:23 P.M. All ayes. Motion carried.

Dori Foster
Recording Secretary

Wednesday April 10, 2024
St. Louis, MI

A regular meeting of the St. Louis Planning Commission was called to order by Chairman Doecker at 5:30 P.M.

Present: Doecker, Giles, D. Kelley, S. Kelly, Messer, Echtenaw, Whitford, Horvat

Absent: Palmer-excused

Also Present- Kasey Zehner GGD Inc., Ferris Azzam-council member

The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Chairman Doecker.

Motion was made by Messer, supported by Whitford to approve the minutes from November 8, 2023. All ayes. Motion carried.

Kurt Giles advised the Planning Commission that a site plan for Worthy Electric was submitted to add a new building and parking area behind the business. Kurt stated they would be adding crushed concrete instead of a hard surface. This is an existing use that is allowed in the industrial park. Kurt stated that staff had no concerns and recommends the site plan for approval.

Motion was made by D. Kelley, supported by Horvat to approve the Worthy Electric site plan. All ayes. Motion carried.

Kurt advised that Kasey Zehner from Greater Gratiot Development, Inc was here to talk about updating the Master Plan.

Kasey advised the Planning Commission that there have been three input sessions and one survey which created five areas of priority. The first being Housing. Kasey mentioned thinking big, what are St. Louis's wishes and goals for the future. Is there a shortage of housing as in other communities, does St. Louis need more variety in housing options?

It was mentioned areas around St. Louis needed annexation due to some houses being in city limits then the next one being out of city limits. This normally will not happen unless utilities are needed. Could renovating and restoring single family housing be helpful? More apartments on second floors above businesses? There could be grants available for some of these ideas but would need further investigation.

Childcare and Early Education are also an important topic. Childcare costs are extremely high, parents are choosing to stay home more to raise their kids. Wages are not high enough to attract workers and centers, etc. Should zoning regulations be reviewed to help this issue? It is a topic of discussion all over the county.

Community Business and Workforce Development. What can we do to bring more people downtown? Would people come if there were more hands-on opportunities to gain experience? What are things people would like to see more of?

Industry Activities and Infrastructure is a harder area to focus on due to the limited availability of industrial lots in St. Louis. The industrial park is pretty much full. There are a few areas that are available, but most businesses want 20+ acres, which St. Louis does not have to offer.

The last area of discussion is Tourism/Agrotourism, Environmental Protection and Messaging. What areas are good for the community of St. Louis, what will bring tourism? Having more festivals, being included on the quilt trail, maybe more car shows. The Velsicol Site is an area that could house

many different ideas. Maybe an energy park with solar panels to benefit the community. Maybe a basketball court, pickleball court, walking trail, all good ideas for the city. Kasey advised the Planning Commission that these were the principal areas of discussion and asked if they had any other questions at this time. None were asked.

There was no other business to report at this time.

There were no public comments at this time.

Motion made by D. Kelley, supported by Messer to adjourn the meeting at 7:10 P.M. All ayes. Motion carried.

Dori Foster
Recording Secretary