

MINUTES OF A JOINT WORK SESSION OF VINTON TOWN COUNCIL AND VINTON PLANNING COMMISSION HELD AT 6:30 P.M. ON TUESDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2011, AT THE VINTON WAR MEMORIAL, 814 WASHINGTON AVENUE, VINTON, VIRGINIA.

COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT: Bradley E. Grose, Mayor
Robert R. Altice
Carolyn D. Fidler
Matthew S. Hare
William W. Nance

PLANNING COMMISSION MEMBERS PRESENT: David R. Jones, Chairman
William E. Booth
Paul R. Mason
Dawn M. Michelsen
Robert A. Patterson

STAFF PRESENT: Christopher S. Lawrence, Town Manager
Susan N. Johnson, Town Clerk
Anita McMillan, Planning & Zoning Director
Julie Tucei, Planning & Zoning Coordinator
Karla Turman, Associate Planner/Code Enforcement Officer
Mike Kennedy, Public Works Director
Joey Hiner, Assistant Public Works Director
Mary Beth Layman, Special Programs Director
Lauren Hodges, Facility Manager

The Mayor called the work session to order at 6:50 p.m. The Town Clerk called the roll with Council Member Altice, Council Member Fidler, Council Member Hare, Council Member Nance and Mayor Grose present. Anita McMillan called the roll with Planning Commission Members Jones, Booth, Mason, Michelsen and Patterson present.

The Mayor expressed thanks to all in attendance and turned the meeting over to the Town Manager.

The Town Manager said that the real focus of this meeting is what is downtown Vinton to us as a community as well as for the region. Staff will be presenting an update on the Town's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) application, an update on current downtown projects, a review of our current zoning ordinance, economic development strategies, expansion of our façade grant program and public utilities and amenities.

Anita McMillan began the presentation with a review of the Town's CDBG Grant application that was submitted in March 2011 for \$700,000 for the downtown area. The Grant request was not funded and staff requested a scoring of how our project was ranked. According to the State, there were 30 localities that submitted an application and out of 10 that were funded, only one was a downtown project. Another application can be submitted by March 8, 2012, but before it can be done, we need some direction and some commitment.

The application has a total of 1,000 points that you can get and the Town's received 595 points on this year's application. The weaknesses identified in the proposal were:

- Project needs and outcomes – 88 points of a possible 145
 - Plans for two white elephants (former Vinton Motors and Dunman properties)
 - Economic decline

- Costs and commitment – 62 points out of a possible 145
 - Lack of local and private funds
 - Regional ties
- Readiness and capacity- 50 points out of a possible 150
 - Need strong vision for future
 - Downtown spark plug
- Impact on economic development – 72 points out of a possible 130
 - Document need
 - Lack of focused project
 - Beneficiary involvement
- National objective relationship – 110 points out of a possible 200
 - Redevelopment plan and private investment not defined
 - Two white elephants
 - Economic blight needs to be 100%
 - Project activities impact on beneficiary needs and local moderate income

Mr. Hare asked if we knew what kind of impact the library project would have on the scoring since it has gone forward and the Town has committed funding to it. Ms. McMillan indicated the application requires the Town to show that something will be done in 18 months.

Ms. McMillan then provided five elements that need to be addressed for the downtown project to be funded by CDBG:

- Two white elephants
- A spark plug-private investors needed for downtown
- Commitment from property and business owners
- A branding/niche
- Tie with regional economy

In 1995 when the zoning ordinance was updated, the former Vinton Motors property was left as General Business because it was an active car lot at that time. The other properties in the downtown are zoned Central Business. The Planning Commission and Council need to decide if they want to amend the zoning ordinance in relation to this property to set design standards to guide the development of downtown.

Mr. Hare asked if Mr. Vinyard had to agree to anything we would want to do and the response was “no” if the use fits with the current zoning. Karla Turman mentioned that an overlay could be created that would set design standards and it would override the district standards. Ms. McMillan indicated that if the zoning ordinance was amended to require a Special Use Permit, then a property owner can apply to the Planning Commission for a Special Use Permit and the Planning Commission and Council can require certain standards for particular uses when granting the Permit.

The Town Manager commented that there would be two strategies from a zoning standpoint. One is to create an overlay district to set design standards for the whole downtown area regardless of the zoning districts or to apply design standards for certain uses in a district, such as a gas station, but those same standards would affect all gas stations, whether downtown or not. Any amendments to the current zoning ordinance could take three or four months.

Mr. Nance asked how long Vinton Motors has been vacant and the response was at least three years. He then commented that if it has been closed for four years, why would we want to put more limitations on it? Mr. Nance indicated he would rather see it developed even as a

gas station then see it set empty for another decade. Ms. Fidler made comments that even though the property may have no historic value, the history of its presence in the Town for over 60 years is important to the current owner.

Ms. McMillan reiterated that we need to develop a clear direction for downtown before we submit the next CDBG application. We also need to get the property owners to come to the table and to get assistance from the County for incentives.

The Town Manager indicated that the question is about our vision. The vision is the Downtown Development Plan that was created, but we are lacking in commitments and support from property and business owners. The driving force for the redevelopment of any downtown is the need for a champion or champions in the private sector who will find a niche and invest in that niche.

Mr. Hare asked about getting the Chamber more involved and the response is that they do not have any money. Mike Kennedy said we need a citizen who will commit to putting up a certain amount of money to renovate their building in addition to being an advocate for the entire downtown. Further discussion was had about potential downtown property owners who could have a committed interest in developing the Town. Ms. Fidler mentioned that she knew of at least 15 people who may have a personal interest in downtown.

Mr. Kennedy mentioned that maybe some dialogue with Mr. Vinyard of the former Vinton Motors property would be helpful and the Mayor mentioned that he is in the process of doing just that.

The Mayor asked if it would help with the grant to specify a certain project such as street lights, trees, etc., rather than being so vague. The Town Manager said it would be helpful if the Town could indicate they were proceeding with some preliminary plans for a specific project. There may also be other grant opportunities, but this particular grant is not the end, it is the means to the end. There are other areas that we can work on such as new entrance signs while focusing on this grant application and the possible collaboration with the County to provide some incentives for businesses.

The Town Manager then gave brief comments on the economic development recovery/restructuring strategy in Consuella Caudill's absence. He commented on a new video on RVTV highlighting two new businesses and assistance available to businesses and coordinating small business/existing business support with the Small Business Development Center.

The issue of downtown parking was discussed at length and the Town Manager commented that we had recently sent out a courtesy letter to all the downtown businesses reminding them of areas for their employees to park. The issue of not enough parking in downtown is a perception.

The Town Manager continued with economic development and the issue of having a niche for the downtown as well as for the community. We need to pin down who do we want to be and in other words, we need to name it, claim it and be it.

Comments were made about what other downtown areas have such as government offices, colleges and free Wi-Fi as well as the need to fill some unfulfilled need in the region. The Town Manager indicated that this grant helped to identify important areas that will help to make a successful downtown and whether they invest in us or not, it sets up a good model for us to continue to pursue.

Mr. Hare asked if return on investment is really that important, why are we looking downtown since our tax base is not downtown. The Town Manager said that is absolutely right. Others commented that the money is in the corridors, not in downtown.

The Town Manager continued commenting on the façade grant which has been successful downtown. The County has a corridor façade grant program which focuses on bigger buildings. Is there more interest in continuing to promote downtown but trying to reach out to more of the commercial districts? Comments were made that the outlying corridors have fewer empty buildings than the downtown area. Ms. McMillan indicated that business owners in the corridor often ask why we focus on downtown and not on the corridor businesses.

Mary Beth Layman asked about the regional goals which brought up the question of what is the Town of Vinton's connection with the region from an economic standpoint. Outdoor recreation is the one goal that seems to be getting real traction.

Ms. Fidler made comments about Explore Park and the fact that some things that hopefully are going to be happening in the future could have an impact on us.

Mr. Kennedy commented briefly on drinking water, wastewater, stormwater and fire protection service. In the downtown area in very broad terms, including residential areas, a study was done in 2006 and primarily for fire protection services \$2.5 million in upgrades were identified. If the focus is on South Pollard and Maple Streets (the core of downtown) and fringe on Lee and Walnut Avenues, from a domestic water and wastewater standpoint, the Town is in good shape. He commented on various properties that if they were developed may need fire protection upgrade, but we are generally in good shape barring some type of industrial development. Most deficiencies relate to fire protection, not domestic water.

The Mayor summed up comments about corridors being our economic future and he agrees with that. He personally thinks that the library is going to generate some activity downtown and that we need to be careful about our future ordinances and codes being a hindrance to downtown redevelopment, but that they do provide some protection. We need to provide some incentives and focus more on economic development, more marketing. If we want to get serious about developing downtown or our corridors and invest money we need a list of businesses that we need to be targeting and we need to start knocking on doors.

The Mayor further commented that the façade grant program is great, but he felt that expanding it to the corridors may encourage new small businesses, which is positive, but we need some heavy hitters.

Ms. McMillan commented that we need to look at zoning and incentives as a whole. The Mayor then responded that we need to partner with Roanoke County and he feels that Roanoke County is currently willing to help and is concerned about the quality of businesses we put downtown considering the investment that are going to make for the new library.

Mr. Nance commented that staff has put in their time for this grant, but we need outsiders to get on board. We should continue to work toward getting the grant, but we need to talk to our friends and neighbors and see if we can get more buy-in. He thinks that providing some incentives are of very high interest. A suggestion was to consider selling the Health Building and designating that money for economic development in the corridors either for the façade grant or funding incentives. Mr. Kennedy mentioned that we also have \$90,000 potentially coming from Appalachian Power Company.

Mr. Nance further commented that the greenways have become a draw for people for this community and having a portion paved would be nice. However, he indicated that saying to

businesses, you come here and here is a pot of money is a higher priority for him. Ms. McMillan mentioned that the State has said that the Roanoke Valley is identified by the greenways.

Dawn Michelsen mentioned a club of 500 people called Meet Up that is part of a Roanoke Outdoor and Social Group who have an interest in organizing events in the Roanoke Valley. She has started a Dining Group and is looking at Vinton as a place to bring these people--35 have already signed up. Her concern is our tax base and the lack of businesses that bring money into our Town and feels we need to focus on the bigger picture, not just downtown.

Ms. Fidler mentioned the greenway and what its connection is going to be through or with Explore Park and that the greenway system is taking shape and the Town is a part of that system.

David Jones said when the comprehensive plan was reviewed, the Planning Commission brought people in and had good groups in beginning. We need to figure out who the stakeholders are downtown and they need to be included. There are some young people in the Chamber that do have an interest in the Town and we need to expand out and get some of them involved.

Ms. Michelsen mentioned the Blockbuster building that is empty and that it would be a great location for a new business. A lot of people that go to Lake Drive Shopping Center, there is plenty of parking and the vacant building should be marketed.

The Town Manager commented that Ms. Caudill has a list of vacant properties but the challenge is large for one person. We need to list ten businesses we would want to see in the Town and we need to have a team and start working. Mr. Kennedy commented that the plaza where Blockbuster is managed by an international property management company and they are out marketing their properties, but we do not often know what they are doing.

Ms. Michelsen commented that if we want Vinton downtown to be something for the future, we need to keep Vinton alive now, need to broaden our focus and try to get our tax base healthy.

Ms. McMillan agreed with Mr. Jones about another meeting, but we need a focus before we can identify a group of business owners to bring together.

On motion by Mr. Nance, seconded by Ms. Fidler, with a vote of 5-0, Council adjourned the Work Session at 9:32 p.m.

APPROVED:


Bradley E. Grose, Mayor

ATTEST:


Susan N. Johnson, Town Clerk