

SPECIAL BOARD MEETING of August 28, 1996, with Mayor John Cleaveland and Commissioners H. N. James, Mike McCall, Donnie Calloway, Ron Sanders, and Zeke Sossomon present.

Also present were Planning Board members Jolene Niblack, Frieda Bennett, Ron Waller, and Woodrow Wilson; and Richard Betz, Lamar Nix, Shannon Baldwin, Jim Sparks, Derek Taylor, John DeVille, Dr. Gerson Perry, Peggy Foss, Barbara Neagley, Oscar Crane, Clarence Crane, Robert Crane, and John Lupoli.

I. Mayor Cleaveland called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m., and stated that the purpose of this joint meeting with the Planning Board, scheduled at the August 7 Regular Board Meeting, was to discuss the recommendations of the Planning Board Project presented at the May 15 meeting.

The Mayor informed the Planning Board that the Board of Commissioners, as part of the budget process, had agreed to increase the ad valorem tax rate this year and create a special Capital Project Fund for street improvements with the resulting revenues of approximately \$100,000 annually. He also hoped that the Room Occupancy Tax would be passed by the State Legislature next year, which would result in another \$100,000 per year in revenues. The Board had already identified improvements on Spring Street as a priority, and had completed a construction survey in preparation for that work. Main Street between Fourth and Third Streets had also been identified as a priority, including the need for storm and sanitary sewers, uniform lighting, removal of overhead powerlines, and enhancements to foot traffic. The widening of Maple Street had also been discussed, and Comm. James reminded the Board that it had agreed to look into the possibility of widening Main Street west of Third Street and creating additional parking.

The Mayor said that the Board had "nibbled at" the parking and traffic flow problems in Highlands for years, but had never fully attacked them. He said he appreciated the hard work that had gone into this Planning Board Project.

Planning Board Chair Jolene Niblack pointed out that the Planning Project had recommended improvements in several stages. Ron Waller added that priority had been given to those improvements, identified as Stage I, which would be the most feasible, such as signage and brick crosswalks; he understood that No-U-Turn and Parking signs had already been ordered by Town Planner Shannon Baldwin. Stage II and III recommendations, such as timed parking, should only be considered if these initial strategies did not work.

The Board discussed the recommendation that delivery zones be established for UPS trucks on Third Street and on Main Street. Comm. James did not feel that UPS trucks created much of a problem. After considerable discussion, it was agreed that Town Engineer Lamar Nix should review the possibility of designating a delivery parking space on Third Street; depending on its effectiveness, the designation of additional delivery spaces might be considered on Main Street.

Comm. Sanders asked about the problem of employees of businesses on Main Street parking there when they could use the parking lot behind the Town Hall. The Mayor pointed out that this had always been a problem, and would be difficult for the Town to regulate. Derek Taylor felt that timed parking was the only way the problem could be addressed short of voluntary methods. Jolene Niblack agreed that this was a problem that businesses should enforce themselves. Ron Waller stressed the important of education and voluntary compliance from everyone, including both delivery trucks and businesses.

Comm. Calloway asked if the Town had the authority to assess downtown businesses for some of the improvements identified in the Project, such as provision of additional off-street parking.

Shannon Baldwin reported that he had spoken with D. O. T. Traffic

Engineer Ruben Moore, who would be reviewing the possibility of a turn lane on Main Street at Fourth Street. He also said that the Planning Board had met with D. O. T. Engineer David MacDonald concerning the possibility of an in-town by-pass. Ron Waller reviewed two by-pass proposals which the D. O. T. had agreed to study as indicated on a map presented with the project. One proposal was a by-pass using First Street, a bridge across the Town's Recreation Park property, and Foreman Road. The other proposal used a new road off US-64 in the vicinity of TLC Realty and the Crane Stables property, Oak Street, and Maple Street, and would involve right-of-way acquisition. He said that the Planning Board did not want to implement either of these plans, nor would the Town be required to do so if the D. O. T. study was conducted, but that 10 to 15 years in the future congestion on Main Street might require it.

Barbara Neagley, a resident of Oak Street, was concerned that the quiet village community would be disrupted by a by-pass through this neighborhood. She pointed out that Oak Street was already used as a by-pass, but at a speed of 20 miles per hour. Peggy Foss shared this concern, and wondered how the road could be widened.

Shannon Baldwin said that the D. O. T. had measured the highest traffic counts on NC-106 from Dillard and US-64 from Cashiers; routing traffic through Town from those roads was therefore a priority. Comm. James and the Mayor wondered if perhaps another alternative route could be found through or around Town using existing Town streets, such as South Street and Fifth Street. Comm. Calloway agreed that he would rather not see residential areas disrupted.

Jolene Niblack then reviewed some of the concerns of the Aesthetics/Beautification portion of the Project, including the recommendations to clean up clutter on utility poles, new traffic light poles, a street lighting plan, brick crosswalks, a plan to replace sidewalks with brick (a policy already in effect, it was pointed out), sidewalk grates around trees on Main Street, and feeding power from Oak Street and Church Street so that Main Street power lines could be removed. She felt that funds were available for many of these projects.

Ron Waller said that he felt this section of the Project was one of the most exciting things that had happened, and was the result of a lot of thought. He believed that several established businesses would be receptive to helping finance some of the improvements in order to enhance the appearance of Highlands.

Comm. Calloway asked about a recommendation in the Project report that the Appearance Commission be given the authority to regulate rather than merely guide; he wondered whose design standards would be used. Town Administrator Richard Betz pointed out that the State enabling legislation for Appearance Commissions limited them to an advisory role only; specific standards could be incorporated into the Zoning Ordinance, but could not be enforced through an Appearance Commission. The Mayor felt that everyone agreed there was objectionable construction in Town, but he wondered how this objective could be accomplished without being so oppressive. Comm. McCall was opposed to everything looking alike. Comm. Sossomon felt that the Town did have the authority to say to a builder, in effect, "You can build it, but you have to make it look nice." Comm. Calloway was concerned that if the Town over-regulated the downtown area, it would send business out of Town. The Board discussed these issues at some length.

Ron Waller then discussed with the Board a pending application for an addition to Furniture South which had come before the Appearance Commission. He wondered if the Commission had the authority to give a negative recommendation based on the size of the building, and he noted that this served as an example of the limitations of the current appearance regulations.

Derek Taylor said that he thought the Chamber of Commerce could spearhead a drive to fund some of the ideas presented in the Project

through, for example, an "adopt a light" or "buy a brick" strategy.

Jolene Niblack then reviewed the street lighting recommendations; Comm. James had some reservations about the lighting proposed.

Jolene Niblack also reviewed the recommendations on streetscapes. She asked the Board to be thinking about the re-zoning of Spring Street to a B-1 designation in order to permit construction without setbacks from the street line. Comm. James felt that new buildings should be set back from the street line perhaps five feet in order to provide for landscaping.

Jolene Niblack then asked about the upcoming Land Use Plan Update process; the Land Use Planning Committee was scheduled to begin meeting with Community Development Planner Geoffrey Willett next month. The Mayor reviewed some of the guidelines set by the Board some time ago for this Committee. He felt that the emphasis of the study should be on the commercial areas of Town.

It was generally agreed that the issues raised and the recommendations made in this Planning Board Project would be incorporated into the Land Use Plan update.

II. Meeting was adjourned by consensus at 9:00 p.m.

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Richard Betz, Town Clerk