

REGULAR MEETING OF THE WEST BRANCH PLANNING COMMISSION HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER OF CITY HALL, 121 NORTH FOURTH STREET, TUESDAY, JANUARY 12, 2016.

Chairman Tim Schaiberger called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Present: Members: Bob David, Kara Fachting, Heather Grace, June Longstreet, Shirley McClenahan, Tim Schaiberger, and Dan Weiler.

Absent: Jan Hasty and Mike Jackson

Others officers in attendance: John Dantzer, City Clerk/Treasurer.

All stood for the Pledge of Allegiance.

MOTION BY WEILER, SECOND BY DAVID, TO APPROVE THE MINUTES FROM THE REGULAR MEETING HELD DECEMBER 8, 2015

Motion carried

A sign permit variance was submitted by A&R Power Equipment to allow a larger wall sign than allowed under the current zoning code. Bob Thomas, owner of A&R Power Equipment, noted that it was an existing sign that he brought from his old location. It was noted that at one time, he also had a smaller sign located in the front yard that would have been allowed.

MOTION BY DAVID, SECOND BY MCCLENAHEN TO DENY THE SIGN VARIANCE SUBMITTED BY A&R POWER SPORTS.

Motion carried

Bob Thomas noted that he has had several issues with the County Building Inspector and believed he was keeping businesses from opening up downtown. Manager Grace noted that he was a County employee but if Mr. Thomas would submit something to her, she would pass that information onto the County to have them look into it.

Proposed changes to allow brew pubs/small distilleries in the Central Business District by special permit only were discussed. Discussion on the positive impact it has had on several other cities were shared. It was noted that the draw of the pubs/distilleries would also help the other businesses downtown.

MOTION BY SCHAIBERGER, SECOND BY FACHTING TO RECOMMEND TO CITY COUNCIL TO CHANGE THE ZONING IN THE DOWNTOWN DISTRICT TO ALLOW BREWPUB/DISTILLERY TYPE BUSINESS BY SPECIAL PERMIT ONLY.

Motion carried

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Proposed changes to allow first floor dwellings in the Central Business District were discussed. Letters were shared from Heather Johnson on behalf of the Chamber of Commerce and from Joe Clark. Member Longstreet noted that it should be handled by variance only so they would have more control over the issue. Manager Grace noted that the variance would have to be heard by the Zoning Board of Appeals. Plans were shared from Jane Swartz to convert part of her downtown business to back entrance apartments. There were questions raised on square footage requirements that may need to be met, the number of egress openings, the amount of extra parking spots that it could require, and what the square footage of apartments to retail space ratio should be. Mrs. Swartz did note that she has had some discussions with the building inspector to address some of those requirement concerns already. Pete Fabbri spoke on his not being in favor of the first floor dwellings. He noted that he has talked with a representative from the Michigan Municipal League and they could not find a single City that allowed first floor dwellings in their downtown districts and that general best practices are to maintain as much commercial road frontage as possible. He also noted that he has talked with several surrounding communities and only one has allowed a first floor dwelling and that was by a variance only. Manager Grace noted that she also did find a City in the Ann Arbor area that did allow it as a variance in a very specialized circumstance as well. Mr. Fabbri noted that he is concerned that this would set a precedent and several other business owners could potentially do this down the road and then the makeup of the downtown would be altered forever. He also recommended that the City needs to maybe take a step back and decide what they want their vision of the West Branch City to look like and then address this issue after that is done. Member Longstreet noted that part of the issue of not being able to control what is coming into the Downtown Business District is because that in several cases they do not know what is coming to town until it is opening. Manager Grace noted that some communities in order to combat this will require a business to apply for a business license for the sole purpose to control and monitor what type of business is coming into the downtown district. Council member Showalter noted that as the chair of the Downtown Development Authority he has concerns that allowing this may alter the ratio of retail businesses over residence to maintain State laws to keep the DDA. Joe Clark noted that while this one building may not alter the entire landscape of the City; it is the future changes that may be brought on from this decision that needs to be the main concern. He recommended coming up with a committee to address this issue and that he doesn't believe this decision should be made right away without putting a lot of study into this issue. Manager Grace noted that she has noticed much more participation in the City's issues and that maybe now is the time to go over the Master plan. Member David made note that another concern should be if the City is in need of additional housing. Manager Grace noted that in her opinion there are too many questions still and that it wouldn't be in the best interest to pass anything now and needs to be studied more. Member Fachting noted that her concern is that by making a decision now or having a variance approved will affect the City long term and that it is in the best interest to decide what they want the City to look like and define that in the zoning rather than the variance because once one is allowed it would be very hard to stop additional ones in the future.

MOTION BY DAVID, SECOND BY FACHTING, TO POSTPONE ANY DECISIONS TO GATHER MORE INFORMATION.

Motion carried

Dan Zettel updated the Planning Commission on the potential recreation center and noted that the parking requirements were still a concern and seemed to be high for the usage of the building. Manager Grace noted that other Cities were less stringent and most recommended three parking spot per 1,000 square feet of building. She also noted that she would not recommend side street parking, especially during the winter, due to safety concerns.

MOTION BY SCHAIBERGER, SECOND BY LONGSTREET, TO RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL TO CHANGE THE PARKING REQUIREMENTS FOR A RECREATIONAL FACILITY IN THE INDUSTRIAL PARK TO 3 SPOTS FOR EVERY 1,000 SQUARE FEET OF BUILDING AND TO CHANGE THE PARKING SPOT SIZE REQUIREMENTS TO 9'X18' FOR 90° ANGLE PARKING, 9'X21' FOR 60° ANGLE PARKING, AND 8'X24' FOR PARALLEL PARKING AS WELL AS 1 HANDICAP PARKING SPOT FOR EVERY 25 PARKING SPOTS.

Motion carried

Jane Swartz voiced her concern that regardless of how her request for first floor residential buildings goes, she hopes the Planning Commission and the City do get a masterplan committee together which would include some business owners and draw upon their knowledge to come up with a plan of what they want the downtown area of the City to look like in the future.

Pete Fabbri agreed with Mrs. Swartz and noted how now more than ever all of the different groups in the City seemed to be working together and now is a great time to continue to work together to determine what we want the future downtown area to look like and he would be more than happy to be on any committee.

Meeting was adjourned at 8:00 p.m.