



CITY COUNCIL

Standards of Living Committee

Monday, March 2, 2015
Meeting Report

Committee Members Attending: D. Sterner, C. Daubert (Co-Chair), S. Marmarou

Others Attending: S. Katzenmoyer, C. Peiffer, B. Kelly, E. Lloyd

The meeting was called to order at 5:05 pm.

I. Donation Box Regulations

Mr. Peiffer stated that ATMs and donation box placement enforcement will begin in March. He distributed the letter template which will be sent to all businesses currently in violation of the regulations. He stated that zoning enforcement officers will visit the establishments before the letter is sent.

Mr. Marmarou noted his hope that items placed in the donation boxes are getting to people in need. He expressed the belief that the business owner should monitor the box. He questioned if all boxes must be removed. Mr. Peiffer stated that all boxes do not need to be removed, but that all boxes must meet the regulations.

Mr. Marmarou noted that most people feel good when helping other people. Mr. Peiffer stated that some boxes are used by for-profit businesses. He stated that these businesses sort and sell the items left in the box.

Mr. Sterner questioned if the letter was a way to reaffirm the rules and begin enforcement. Mr. Peiffer stated that it was. He stated that the regulations are currently in effect and there are no changes at this time.

Mr. Sterner questioned if there was a limit on the number of boxes. Mr. Peiffer stated that there is no limit.

Mr. Sterner questioned if a limit should be set. Mr. Peiffer expressed the belief that a limit is not necessary. He stated that the regulations will ensure that the boxes are in appropriate locations.

Mr. Sterner questioned who is responsible for the boxes. Mr. Peiffer stated that a contract between the box operator and the business operator or property owner and open communication between them is necessary. He stated that the City does not get a copy of the contract but they may request it as necessary.

II. Update on Zoning Backlog

Mr. Peiffer stated that 964 applications have been cleared within the last six months. He stated that 618 applications remain.

Mr. Marmarou questioned the most common reason for the lack of appeals. Mr. Peiffer stated that most denials are due to the number of units and that there is a lack of appeal due to the cost.

Ms. Katzenmoyer requested an explanation of how the applications have been cleared. Mr. Peiffer stated that the number of units has been investigated and the database updated to reflect the number according to zoning and housing files.

Ms. Katzenmoyer questioned the need for hearings. Mr. Peiffer stated that hearings will not be needed to the scale originally anticipated.

Mr. Marmarou expressed the belief that many properties were converted to multiple units and sold without the use of a realtor. He stated that new owners may not be aware of the discrepancy. Mr. Peiffer and Ms. Katzenmoyer explained the Certificate of Transfer process. Mr. Peiffer stated that this process has made significant progress toward finding these properties.

Mr. Marmarou questioned if the Certificate of Transfer is provided in Spanish. Mr. Peiffer stated that it is not but that it can be translated as needed.

Mr. Marmarou expressed the belief that many who can speak Spanish cannot read or write it. Mr. Peiffer and Ms. Katzenmoyer explained the Certificate of Transfer process. They noted the need for a translator through the settlement process.

Mr. Sterner gave a brief history of the backlog and Council's decision for the way the backlog is cleared. He stated that Council overview is preferred because in the past the Administrative Hearing Officer was approving applications without Council's knowledge. He stated that the new Council process has not been used to date.

Mr. Peiffer explained that the Council process made assumptions that many applications would require a hearing and that there would be many appeals. He stated that in his opinion the Council process is not necessary and that there will be less than 24 hearings needed.

Mr. Sterner questioned if the Zoning Hearing Board would hear any appeals in this process and if the Zoning solicitor was involved. Mr. Peiffer stated that they are not involved. He explained that the Zoning Administrator completes the initial review. He stated that according to the Council process the next step would be a hearing before a Hearing Master. He stated that he is not using this process as it is unnecessary and will save funds. He suggested that appeals be before the full body of Council.

Mr. Sterner stated that this process will not alleviate Council's concerns. Ms. Katzenmoyer explained how Council would have opposed/denied many of the properties approved by the Administrative Hearing Officer and that they did not want this process to continue. She stated that Council then adopted the process to be used to address the applications including the use of the Hearing Master, hearings before a smaller group of Council, and Council adoption of the decision before permits are issued.

Mr. Peiffer explained that he begins his review of applications with the City's database and housing files. He stated that the database is updated as needed throughout the process. He stated that he also reviews the unit history. He approves the applications when he is able.

Mr. Sterner stated that many conditional use decisions of Council order the deconversion of properties. He questioned how many deconversions were ordered to date. Mr. Peiffer stated that this issue is problematic. He stated that in the past owners

deconverted properties on paper only. He stated that in this case, inspections must occur.

Ms. Katzenmoyer questioned the process used if the number of units on the application does not match the City's files. Mr. Peiffer stated that a letter is sent to the applicant explaining the options. He stated that if there is no action taken by the applicant they will be fined during their next property maintenance inspection.

Mr. Sterner stated that this project has been languishing. He stated that this is an important Council issue and suggested that it be discussed at the next Committee of the Whole meeting. He noted the need for the project to be complete within six months.

Mr. Peiffer left the meeting at this time.

Mr. Spencer arrived at this time.

III. STAR Assessment

Mr. Lloyd gave a brief overview of the STAR program. He stated that Mr. Kelly and the CDC have been instrumental in this process and that over 100 external partners assisted with gathering information.

Mr. Daubert expressed the belief that the STAR designation will assist with grant funding. Mr. Lloyd agreed and stated that it can also improve the City's bond rating.

Mr. Kelly stated that the STAR assessment is a collection of data to show the City's level of sustainability. He distributed a chart showing the goals and objectives. He stated that there are a total of 544 data points and action items. He stated that the action items are steps to take moving forward. The City's assessment was submitted on February 27 and Mr. Kelly expressed the belief that the City will attain a three star rating.

Mr. Kelly stated that the exercise will also identify gaps where the City needs to address issues.

Mr. Sterner questioned how this related to grant funding. Mr. Kelly stated that the rating will move Reading up the list in the competitive grant process. He stated that the data collected and the gaps identified will also be baseline data for the Comprehensive Plan.

Mr. Kelly explained that he and an intern are currently working on the gap analysis. He stated that some grants require STAR to be considered for the grant award. He stated that PennDOT, HUD, and EPA look for STAR on grant applications. He stated that Reading is the first city in PA to submit to STAR. He stated that there is a 60 – 90 day vetting process. He stated that the Comp Plan Steering Committee has reviewed STAR and will use it to structure the Comp Plan.

Mr. Daubert stated that he is excited by this program. He stated that deficiency analysis is very helpful. He stated that Reading is creating and thinking outside the box.

Mr. Johnson arrived at this time.

Mr. Sterner questioned the timing of the next update. Mr. Lloyd suggested it be after the vetting process is complete. Mr. Kelly stated that he will also provide an overview of the analysis at that time. He stated that Reading will receive national attention through this process and will build partnerships with other STAR communities.

Mr. Lloyd stated that there will be a public event after certification.

Mr. Kelly, Mr. Spencer, and Mr. Lloyd left at this time.

IV. Trades Codes & New Language re PVC vs Copper Piping

Mr. Lachat arrived at this time.

Mr. Lachat distributed the draft amendment to the Plumbing Code. He stated that the limitation on pex will be removed from the regulations and replaced with a paragraph requiring the installation to be under the City's guidelines. He stated that the guidelines will be an attachment to the ordinance.

Mr. Lachat explained that this must be done safely as grounding of electricity can become problematic. He stated that the guidelines will be issued again when a permit is pulled. He stated that the work must be inspected by the City.

Mr. Sterner questioned if pex can be installed now. Mr. Lachat stated that it can be if the inspectors allow it.

Mr. Lachat stated that the amendment has been reviewed and approved by the Plumbing and Electrical Boards.

Mr. Sterner questioned when the amendment would be on Council's agenda. Mr. Lachat expressed the belief that it would be introduced at Monday's meeting. He stated that licensed plumbers will install the pex safely and that inspections of work will continue.

Mr. Sterner questioned if a presentation at the Committee of the Whole meeting was necessary. Mr. Lachat stated that he would prefer to attend on the evening that the amendment is ready for final passage. He stated that he will provide background information and an agenda memo to Council with the amendment.

Mr. Marmarou stated that this is an important issue and agreed with the need for discussion at the Committee of the Whole meeting.

Mr. Lachat left the meeting at this time.

V. Wyomissing Park Street Lighting

Mr. Johnson stated that the light poles should be delivered this week. He stated that the circuit one conduit and concrete pads are complete. He stated that the panel will be located (with permission) on the Villa St. Elizabeth property. He stated that continued weather conditions may delay completion.

Mr. Daubert requested an estimated completion date. Mr. Johnson stated that circuit one should be complete by mid April.

Mr. Sterner questioned if the wires were underground. Mr. Johnson stated that they are. He commended the contractor for using directional borings rather than doing a lot of digging.

Mr. Johnson stated that the rest of the project is 40% – 50% complete. He stated that good progress is being made but that it is too early to give a completion date.

Mr. Sterner requested the name of the contractor. Mr. Johnson stated that it was Pagoda Electric but that the borings were done by a subcontractor.

Mr. Sterner questioned how many lights were affected. Mr. Johnson stated that it is approximately 40.

Mr. Daubert stated that the area is very dark. Mr. Johnson agreed and stated that many residents light their driveway and porch lights to assist.

VI. Utility Cuts/Potholes

Mr. Marmarou questioned if metal plates were allowed. Mr. Johnson stated that they are. He stated that if the utility must enter the same area multiple times the plates are necessary.

Mr. Marmarou stated that there are many potholes. Mr. Johnson agreed and stated that they are addressed as quickly as possible.

VII. Kenhorst Blvd

Mr. Daubert stated that this street needs to be repaved. Mr. Johnson noted his hope that it be addressed this year. He suggested that only the travel lanes be completed to stretch the funding. He also suggested making the street repairs around the construction schedule at Mary's Shelter so that the work is not damaged by heavy trucks.

Mr. Johnson noted his hope that an engineering assessment of streets be conducted. He stated that this will help with documentation of road conditions and help to prioritize funding.

VIII. Snow Plowing

Mr. Daubert commended Public Works for keeping the City streets plowed and safe during weather events. He noted the striking difference between City streets and those of other municipalities.

Mr. Johnson thanked Mr. Daubert. He stated that he often travels different routes through the City during weather events to see the condition first hand.

The meeting adjourned at 6:28 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Shelly Katzenmoyer
Deputy City Clerk