

**MINUTES
CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS
PLANNING COMMISSION PUBLIC REGULAR MEETING
FARMINGTON HILLS CITY HALL – COMMUNITY ROOM
31555 11 MILE ROAD, FARMINGTON HILLS MI
May 21, 2015**

Chair Topper called the Planning Commission meeting to order at 7:32 p.m. on May 21, 2015.

Commissioners Present: Blizman, McRae, Orr, Rae-O'Donnell, Stimson, Topper

Commissioners Absent: Fleischhacker, Mantey, Schwartz

Others Present: Staff Planner Stec, City Attorney Schultz, Planning Consultant Stirling

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Item 5, Approval of minutes, was removed from tonight's agenda.

MOTION by McRae, support by Blizman, to approve the agenda as amended.

Motion carried unanimously (Fleischhacker, Mantey, Schwartz absent).

REGULAR MEETING:

Staff Planner Stec explained that tonight's discussion was the result of the Planning Commission's charge to staff and consultants to bring comments and analysis to the Commission regarding the Twelve Mile and Farmington Road area, and the Grand River CIA Gap Area.

A. DISCUSSION: TWELVE MILE AND FARMINGTON REDEVELOPMENT AREA

Regarding the Twelve Mile and Farmington Redevelopment Area, Staff Planner Stec referenced the recent approval of a PUD for the old Alexander Hamilton site and comments regarding this area in the Master Plan. The Commission had before them a May 15, 2015 memo from ClearZoning. After discussion, staff would look to the Planning Commission for further direction regarding study of the area.

Commissioner McRae asked about the possibility of a future parking deck across Farmington Road. Also he wondered what the status was for the PUD for this area.

Staff Planner Stec responded that the parking deck would be before the Commission in June. The parking deck was being requested because the use on that site was growing more intense. The increase in intensity could impact the area being discussed this evening.

Staff Planner Stec also said that the PUD for the Alexander Hamilton property was moving forward appropriately, with final details of the agreement still being worked out by the City and the developer. The connection to Farmington Road was written into the agreement as a future possibility; i.e., if the connection was possible, it had to be constructed. As far as he knew, no bond had yet been posted for demolition.

Commissioner Orr pointed out a discrepancy on one of the maps being shown this evening – the library and post office was actually much further east than shown.

Utilizing overhead slides and referring to the May 15, 2015 ClearZoning letter, Planning Consultant Stirling gave the background for this discussion item. She described the geographic area as outlined in the Master Plan of 2009. The Redevelopment Area included the area east of Farmington Road to the western boundary of the Farmington Hills Public Library.

Planning Consultant Stirling noted that the 2006 Sustainability Plan called for hotels in this area, along with greater height.

Some questions to consider were:

- Did the Planning Commission want to stay within the area defined in the 2009 Master Plan?
- If the Planning Commission wanted to expand the study area, what was the extent of the study area?
- How could the City best capitalize on the community/public assets in the area (post office, library, schools (middle and WSU), and places of worship)?
- What were the assets and issues for the area?
- What types of land uses were envisioned in the study area?
- What would the Commission like to see implemented related access management standards at the intersections?
- Was this area a candidate for a new overlay zoning district?

Planning Consultant Stirling pointed out that the number of uses and community assets in this area and very close by actually formed the nucleus of what was typically found in a small town: school, library, shopping, drug store, grocery store, university/college, churches, general office buildings, theater, post office, YMCA, banks, medical offices, research and development uses, restaurants, etc.

Planning Consultant Stirling also pointed out public spaces incorporated into this area including outdoor seating for office uses, new pedestrian friendly amenities with the new PUD, existing sidewalks, green space behind the library, etc.

Planning Consultant Stirling reviewed the infrastructure in the area, including the number of overhead utilities, wireless antennae, and the difficult intersection – especially for pedestrians – at Twelve and Farmington Roads. There were more traffic access points on the north side of the Twelve Mile Road than the south side. She pointed out the opportunity to create pedestrian movement at Twelve Mile Road and Hamilton Boulevard and also to create more of a street frontage along Twelve Mile Road.

Discussion included:

- The traffic congestion on Twelve Mile Road within this area, especially during rush hours.
- The Prince of Peace Church owned the land to the east and south of the church, giving them frontage both on Twelve Mile Road and Market Street.
- The public schools owned the baseball diamond east of the YMCA.
- The hotels in the PUD agreement were “fixing in place” what would be in the area for some time to come. What could the Commission as planners add to this area? Ideas included:
 - Enhanced pedestrian use, including for students who crossed Twelve Mile to use the library.
 - What would happen with the church or school properties years from now, should

those uses disappear? Senior housing might be an appropriate use; this was noted in the Master Plan.

- This area was “in the middle” of a lot of activity.
- With four banks in the area, perhaps one or more of the bank properties might eventually become available for a different use.
- Destination restaurants might be part of an overlay district, especially in the area from Farmington Road to the Post Office.
- Redesign the area for ease of pedestrian access to Oakland Community College.
- Trail marking signs, including walking maps and distance notices for walkers.
- Lighting at intersections helped pedestrians to use those intersections.
- Should height limits be increased in the Quakertown area? This would necessitate a parking deck. The Quakertown office buildings had great occupancy right now and parking was at a premium.

Discussion was had regarding where the Commission should spend its time, especially with the new development represented by the hotels in the new PUD. Could more options be allowed within new PUD plans, making an overlay zoning unnecessary? The Commission could then spend its time working on issues within the area as already noted above.

Chair Topper acknowledged public that was present this evening and invited anyone interested to speak.

Natalie Tomlinson, 28221 Ridgebrook Farmington Hills, said that she was a walker and an avid runner. She often ran 12 Mile Road, and she had a couple of near misses with traffic. She said she often ran/walked with a stroller and a dog, and the sidewalks could be improved. She noted the awkward pedestrian traffic from the middle school to the library. The kids had to cross across Kendallwood and then cross again across Twelve Mile Road. She asked about constructing a bridge walkway across Twelve Mile Road.

Chair Topper thanked Ms. Tomlinson for her comments.

Discussion continued, including:

- Commissioner Stimson often crossed Twelve Mile Road from Quakertown. He would walk down to Hamilton Boulevard to cross rather than use the intersection at Twelve and Farmington.
- Commissioner Blizman talked about using traffic lights to encourage pedestrian traffic.
- Twelve Mile Road was a county road – the most the City could do was request a signaling study.
- Commissioner Orr wondered if the area was going to be studied, why not expand it all the way to Orchard Lake Road, and north to at least the YMCA?
- Commissioner McRae spoke to the difficulty of encouraging private owners of existing buildings to make major changes. The City could encourage change and a general sprucing up, but not much else.
- Using the Zoning District and Master Plan to drive change would mean including improvements in the Capital Improvement Plan.
- The width of walkways, landscaping along walkways, etc., promoted a sense of place, connectivity and pedestrian use. These could be accomplished through site plan reviews.
- Could the gate between Level One and the building to east be opened up, thus increasing connectivity? Staff should check to see whether the gate was in compliance with site plan and

- fire department regulations.
- Access/service drives might be considered along Twelve Mile Road, although access drives had both advantages and disadvantages.

Commissioner Rae-O'Donnell summarized the conversation thus far. Connectivity, walkability, and site plans were important for this area. Perhaps the Planning Commission should focus on other areas where it could have more impact, but have these issues in mind whenever anything came before the Commission from this area. Improvements could be made one step at a time.

After further discussion, Chair Topper further summarized the discussion as centering around improved pedestrian amenities and connectivity, including improving internal traffic circulation between Farmington Road and the Post Office. A total re-visioning or the establishment of an overlay district was not appropriate at this time. Discussion should continue, and at some point it would be appropriate to involve the business community and property owners.

B. DISCUSSION: GRAND RIVER CIA GAP AREA

Staff Planner Stec explained that while the City was trying to implement recommendations of the Corridor Improvement Authority, the gap area was not specifically included in the Grand River Corridor Overlay 1 district or in the Grand River North Focus Area in the Grand River Corridor Vision Plan. Gap areas were areas not included, but about which it was hoped there would be spin off from nearby developments.

Planning Consultant Stirling gave further background to this discussion item, suggesting the following questions:

- What did the Commission envision for this area?
- Were there other areas within the Grand River Corridor Plan and Master Plan that should receive immediate focus?

Planning Consultant Stirling explained that the gap area was a relatively shallow area.

Discussion included:

- At future meetings a more detailed map would be helpful.
- The hope was that individual property owners might improve facades, etc., as other development occurred around them. The Corridor Improvement Authority might have funds to help these small businesses re-invest in their businesses.
- Smaller gap areas did not lend themselves to being part of a large focus area.
- The Commission should work to familiarize themselves with this area. It would be helpful to know the individual businesses and where the curb cuts were. Entrances should be encouraged on side streets where possible.
- The shallowness of the properties made redevelopment difficult.
- Sometimes it was difficult for a property owner to meet ordinance standards. Perhaps some relaxation of the ordinance might be appropriate, for instance, allowing parking along a side street sidewalk in exchange for a greater greenbelt along Grand River Avenue.
- The area was not one that encouraged walking – the businesses were ones people drove to.
- Was there a way to increase the size of the businesses along the gap area, especially in terms of increasing their depth? Would there be spin-off from the redevelopment of the Beaumont/Botsford hospital? More doctors offices, for instance?

- There were many auto-related businesses in the area.
- The river should be utilized as an important amenity.
- The gap area could be branded as an entrepreneurial area.
- What was the taxable value of these properties?

Commissioner Orr urged the Commission to “deal with what we have.” For instance, envisioning a larger development area when there were residences abutting the businesses seemed an unlikely scenario.

Commissioner Stimson said that the Master Plan could show future rezoning; this would make it easier in the long run for redevelopment to occur.

Chair Topper cautioned against promoting any encroachment into the residential areas.

General discussion followed regarding parking issues, residential use close to commercial use, etc. Further ideas included:

- Interest in the County’s scoping project for this part of Grand River.
- Location of private and public utilities.
- A list of tools could be developed to work with properties as they existed.
- Perhaps the area could include live/work spaces, adding residential as a permitted use.
- Alleyways seemed a loss of useable space.

Planning Consultant Stirling suggested taking a look at some of the properties in detail, including looking at dimensions, building heights, curb cuts, and providing greater parking. Development opportunities included treating the area as a Special Land Use.

In summary, the following ideas warranted further research:

- The feasibility of allowing residential as a permitted use in the gap area between Botsford and the Target shopping plaza.
- Economic incentives that might be available through the CIA to encourage re-investment into existing buildings.
- The taxable value of the lands between the Botsford and Target center CIA focus areas.
- Possible improvements that would allow for more parking with minimal impact on adjacent residential uses.
- Encourage entrances into commercial properties from the side streets in order to reduce curb cuts along Grand River.
- Identify where all public and private utilities were located.

PUBLIC COMMENT: None.

COMMISSIONER’S COMMENTS:

June Planning Commission meetings were tentatively set for June 11 and June 25.

Commissioner Orr said the Engineering Department was following up on the problematic tar being used on city roads.

Commissioner Blizman noted that his subdivision association was asking for increased zoning enforcement for some difficult issues.

ADJOURNMENT:

Hearing no further comment, Chair Topper adjourned the meeting at 9:23 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Steven Schwartz
Planning Commission Secretary

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