



**OAK RIDGE TOWN COUNCIL
SPECIAL CALLED MEETING/WORKSHOP
JANUARY 21, 2021- 2:00 P.M.
OAK RIDGE TOWN HALL**

(Held simultaneously in person and electronically via Zoom)

This meeting was conducted remotely under N. C. Gen. Stat. § 166A-19.24 by use of simultaneous communication by appearing in person or using the Zoom online platform and in which Town Council members participated by simultaneous communication. Council members were given the choice to meet in person or by remote link due to continuing COVID-19 pandemic concerns. Town Council members who joined by Zoom participated in the entire meeting, unless otherwise noted.

MINUTES

Members Present

Ann Schneider, Mayor
Jim Kinneman, Mayor Pro Tem (via Zoom)
George McClellan
Doug Nodine
Martha Pittman (via Zoom)

Staff Present

Bill Bruce, Town Manager
Sandra Smith, Town Clerk (via Zoom)
Sean Taylor, Planning Director (via Zoom)

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Ann Schneider called the meeting to order at 2:01 p.m.

2. APPROVE AGENDA

Councilman George McClellan made a motion to approve the meeting agenda. Councilman Doug Nodine seconded the motion, and it was passed unanimously via a roll-call vote (5-0).

3. DISCUSSION/ADOPTION OF UPDATE TO TOWN OF OAK RIDGE STRATEGIC PLAN

Mayor Schneider thanked everyone for participating in Council's first hybrid meeting. She asked participants for their patience with the technology as Council members and staff held this working session to update the Strategic Plan. Schneider reminded Council members that discussions need to be at a high level and that the Strategic Plan will be used to guide the Capital Improvement Plan and the budget.

Mayor Schneider turned the meeting over to Town Manager Bill Bruce.

Bruce asked Council members to refer to the current Strategic Plan's policies. He suggested when an item needed further discussion that he would note it and discussion would ensue at the Mayor's direction.

Section I - Town Park and Whitaker Property Master Planning

Bruce said that most initiatives were complete under this section. He said that a Parks & Recreation Master Plan to guide future development at the Town Park and the Whitaker property had been developed and adopted. Bruce stated that a subcommittee had been formed to evaluate possible uses for the Redmon house and that their report had been incorporated into the Master Plan. He said that the next step would be for Council to advise staff on next steps for the Redmon house.

Mayor Pro Tem Kinneman said that he would like to have a longer discussion regarding the Redmon house.

Section II - Trails and Sidewalks

Bruce stated that the update on the Pedestrian Plan had been put on hold due to COVID-19 meeting restrictions. He said that he would like to reconvene these meetings in the next several months. Bruce confirmed that the trail corridors will become part of the Pedestrian Plan that was adopted by Council.

A discussion ensued about possible ways to incorporate aspects of the Conservation Easement Plan into the Pedestrian Plan and how to move forward on trails and sidewalks.

Councilwoman Pittman said that she would like to have a longer discussion regarding trails and sidewalks.

Section III - Town Core Safety, Aesthetics and "Village Feel"

Bruce stated that the growth and development implementation was covered in the two areas of the Strategic Plan and asked Council members to refer to sections III and IV. Bruce stated that the Conservation Easement Committee had been established and that their report was in Council's hands. He said that Council would need to make a decision on how to move forward with the Committee's work.

Bruce told Council members that a sub-task was satisfied when a text amendment had been established regarding a permitted use table to ensure permitted uses are consistent with the strategic vision in the Town Core.

Councilman Nodine asked what was meant by "village feel," and Bruce replied that Town Planner Sean Taylor, he and a consultant will work with focus groups on what their vision is for a "village feel." Bruce stated that Council had budgeted money for this fiscal year to hire a firm to help create a vision and documentation to help create a "village feel."

A lengthy discussion ensued regarding what the consultant's focus should be on regarding this project.

Bruce referred Council to Goal 2.3 regarding collaborating with NCDOT on NC 68 safety. He stated that there had been a speed reduction on NC 68 and that work was being done with NCDOT on intersection improvements. Bruce said that there are several action items included in the Strategic Plan to ensure that the Streetscape Plan was incorporated into the NC 68 plans.

Councilwoman Pittman asked whether the Town would have any say-so or if decisions are controlled by NCDOT regarding Streetscape Plan, and Bruce replied that all final decisions are made by the NCDOT.

A conversation ensued covering topics such as putting utility lines underground, upgrading crosswalks, adding lighting, planters and benches, and the cost associated with these items.

Section IV - Infrastructure and Future Growth

Bruce said that additional guidance was needed from Council on the topic of voluntary annexation. Mayor Schneider asked how voluntary annexation applies to what Summerfield is currently discussing, and Bruce replied that those areas would be eligible for voluntary annexation into Oak Ridge if they are contiguous to the Oak Ridge town limits. A conversation ensued regarding voluntary annexation that resulted in a request that Bruce speak with Summerfield Town Manager Scott Whitaker regarding Summerfield's recent ETJ annexation investigation.

Bruce referred Council to Goal 3.1.1 of the Strategic Plan regarding groundwater exploration. He stated that after further analysis, Council had decided not to participate in a regional water system.

Bruce said that Goal 3.1.2 of the Strategic Plan said to investigate wastewater treatment options in the Town Core. He said that nothing had been done regarding this initiative yet, and he wanted to see if Council wanted it to continue as a priority.

Mayor Schneider said that she would like to discuss the investigation of wastewater treatment options at the same time as "village feel" was discussed further.

Bruce referred Council to Goals 2.3.3 and 3.2.2 of the Strategic Plan regarding improving the Thoroughfare/Collector Street Plan to ensure feasible road connections for future development. He said the sub-task of asking a Planning & Zoning subcommittee to review the Collector Street Plan was set to take place in February 2022.

Section V - Preservation of Historic Resources and Open Space

Bruce said that last area to review of the Strategic Plan was the Preservation of Historic Resources and Open Space. He said that work was continuing on building relationships with preservation groups.

Schneider said that she would like to tweak the goal to make it broader and to include easements for historic structures, and Councilwoman Pittman agreed.

Section VI - Communication and Customer Service

Bruce referred Council to Goal 3.3.2, under section VI of the Strategic Plan, regarding Communication and Customer Service. He said that the development of a new website was ongoing.

Bruce stated that the overview of the Strategic Plan was complete. He said that the following topics required future discussion:

- Redmon house

- “Village feel” and wastewater needs for town core
- Trails and sidewalks
- Conservation easement implementation
- Voluntary annexation
- Including other preservation groups and historic site owners in Goal 4.1.3

Redmon House

Mayor Pro Tem Kinneman said that his main concerns with the Redmon house expansions plans was whether the project is planned well and if we just expect residents to use the house. He said that he thought the plan needed to make sure the house would be utilized. He asked how parking would be handled if the house becomes a meeting or activity space. Kinneman said that parking could cause traffic issues. He stated that he understood the house’s historic value, but said if it is renovated and no one uses it then it becomes a statement piece that would not produce any value.

Schneider said that she had discussed this topic individually with Kinneman and that she went back to review the Master Plan Survey where nearly 100 percent of the respondents wanted the Redmon house to be used and not be demolished. She said that she believed the Town was on task with the preservation of the structure and that the next step was the planning phase.

Councilwoman Pittman asked if the consultant would address just the structure or if the focus would also be on parking and accessibility. Town Planner Sean Taylor replied that the consultant would only be focusing on the structure itself. He said that if Council would like to go further, that it would cost more money. Taylor said that Phase II of the project could focus on parking and landscaping.

Pittman stated that she was supportive of the Redmon house renovations and asked if the stub sidewalk was intended to connect to the Redmon house; Bruce replied yes.

Schneider said that a considerable amount of work had already been done by the subcommittee. She said that the subcommittee talked about possible landscaping and parking. Schneider said that exploring other locations for parking for the Redmon house would be important to consider. She stated that the first step would be to preserve the structure and then to add the landscaping to the plan.

Councilman McClellan said that he would also like to see a shelter near the house because we have shelters in other areas of the park. He said that Oak Ridge citizens made the decision to preserve the Redmon house.

A lengthy conversation ensued covering topics such as handicap access to the Redmon house, additional bathrooms, potential parking issues, landscaping and the costs associated with the project.

Mayor Schneider said that \$20,000 was already in the current budget to receive the Redmon house vision in a basic way and according to the recommendations from the subcommittee and residents. She said that in February, Council will need to decide if \$200,000 would be left in the Capital Improvement Plan for Redmon house renovations.

Mayor Schneider made a motion for a three-minute recess. Councilman George McClellan seconded, and it was passed unanimously via a roll-call vote (5-0).

Mayor Schneider made a motion to return from recess. Councilman George McClellan seconded, and it was passed unanimously via a roll-call vote (5-0).

“Village Feel” and Wastewater Needs for Town Core

Bruce told Council members that the next topics of discussion would be around the “village feel” and wastewater needs for the Town Core. He stated that staff was currently working on a contract that would come before Council for approval soon, which would help define the “village feel” meaning. He said that once that definition was determined, it would be included in a document shared with property owners and developers. He asked Council if this was an initiative that staff should pursue. He stated that if so, staff would work with a consultant to facilitate focus groups to create a document that would become an adopted plan and would be referred to when new developments are proposed. Bruce said that the recommendations could be incorporated into the Town’s Development Ordinances.

Councilman Nodine asked where the “village feel” overlay would go and whether it would apply to the whole town. Bruce replied that it would probably just apply to the commercial Town Core.

Bruce said that during the initial discussion with a possible consultant, staff had said that the Town wanted to focus on larger, undeveloped parcels on Linville Road, Fogleman Road, NC 68 and other large gateway parcels. He said that the “village feel” definition would also be translatable to any property in the Town Core.

Nodine asked if a consultant had been identified, and Bruce replied that Hill Studio was the firm that staff was currently working with to produce a proposal on both the “village feel” and the Redmon house projects.

Schneider said that she felt that these projects were a priority, and she asked if Council needed to move forward with including the wastewater issue into this project. Bruce replied that would be an important consideration.

Bruce said that consultants from Hill Studio would be working under the assumption that the Town does not have wastewater treatment in the Town Core, which would impact potential future uses and densities. Bruce said that Council had discussed wastewater two years ago and agreed on investigating a centralized wastewater treatment facility that would be Town owned and operated. He said that a future wastewater treatment facility could accommodate greater density of use in the Town Core.

Mayor Pro Tem Kinneman asked if drain fields could be put in the natural areas of the Whitaker property without upsetting the conservation easement that is currently planned for a part of that property. Bruce replied that the Whitaker property was on a higher elevation than the rest of the town core, so that might not be possible.

Schneider asked what the next step should be as it relates to wastewater. She asked if a feasibility study should be done, and Bruce replied that a soil scientist would need to be hired.

A lengthy conversation ensued regarding the possibility of investigating wastewater which covered topics such as potential costs and timeframes of when work would be completed.

Councilman McClellan said that \$15,000 was planned to spend on the investigation of wastewater in February of 2022.

Mayor Schneider asked if Council should consider moving that date up so that it would dovetail with the "village feel" project.

Councilman McClellan asked if the \$15,000 should be included in the 2021-2022 fiscal year budget, and Bruce replied that putting that money into the budget effectively is saying that this is our vision for the Town Core and that we support a higher density Town Core. He said that if Council decided to support a higher density Town Core that he suggested doing the feasibility analysis to find out how to accomplish that.

Councilwoman Pittman asked Bruce if he was suggesting that Council take the \$20,000 for the "village feel" project and the amount for the Redmon house and roll the wastewater treatment facility into the same proposal. Bruce responded that it would be a good time to consider whether it is a priority that Council would like staff to work on.

Bruce said that Council could consider pushing back the "village feel" consulting work to further flesh out the discussion of the wastewater treatment or bring the wastewater treatment discussion into this fiscal year and work on it in conjunction with the "village feel" consulting work.

Mayor Pro Tem Kinneman said that he felt it was important to note that the wastewater treatment facility would be for commercial use only and not for residential use.

Taylor said that Council should consider the cost feasibility of putting in a wastewater treatment facility. He stated that it would be very expensive and that the closest tie-in would be in Greensboro and crossing two creeks.

Kinneman said that he did not see a need for a wastewater treatment facility that was that big and suggested that perhaps it would just require putting in additional drain fields at the Whitaker property. He said that there would not be a need to support large operations or chain stores, but instead little shops and cafes.

Schneider asked if the current scope of work with Hill Studio could be slightly expanded. She said that she would like to see what the additional benefits, in terms of "village feel," the Town would achieve if it adds wastewater treatment.

Taylor replied that Hill Studio could include the wastewater treatment option, but that it would cost additional money.

Schneider said that she liked to idea of adding the investigation of a wastewater treatment facility to the contract. In doing so, Council would have all of the information so that it could make an informed decision on whether to move forward with wastewater.

Taylor reminded Council that that Hill Studio will facilitate community meetings to help formulate ideas for the project. Through this exercise, Taylor said, Council will receive information on what our citizens would like.

Bruce suggested that Council leave the investigation of the wastewater treatment facility in the Strategic Plan for 2022 and move forward with the "village feel" project that looks at both options.

Council members agreed by consensus to the suggestions outlined regarding the "village feel" and wastewater needs.

Conservation Easement Implementation

Bruce said that the Strategic Plan says that Council should investigate the topic of conservation easements. He said that Council had recently been given a report by the conservation easement committee and he suggested that Council decide if this is a Strategic Plan discussion or a regular Council meeting discussion.

Councilman McClellan said that he felt the topic of conservation easements should come before Council at a regular meeting.

Mayor Schneider suggested that Goal 4.1.3 in the Strategic Plan be reworded to add that the Town would work with organizations dedicated to preserving open space and historic structure easements.

Councilwoman Pittman agreed with Schneider and said she would like to broaden the concept of the goal. She said if Council agrees to adopt the plan, future action steps are already outlined for the next five years.

Schneider suggested that Council could decide at a regular meeting to add next steps to the implementation plan for the Strategic Plan.

Council members agreed by consensus to the suggestions outlined regarding the conservation easement implementation.

Voluntary Annexation

Bruce asked Council if the investigation of voluntary annexation options outside the ETJ was a priority for Council, and Councilman McClellan replied that he felt a conversation was necessary in order to know how to respond to the Town of Summerfield's recent ETJ proposal.

A lengthy conversation ensued regarding the options for future voluntary annexations and how municipal water may impact annexations for municipalities.

Bruce suggested moving the proposed July 2021 start date forward to now in order to evaluate the feasibility of acceptance of voluntary annexation requests south of County Line Road and Reedy Fork.

Mayor Schneider suggested that Town Attorney Michael Thomas, Town Planner Taylor, and Bruce work with Summerfield leaders to develop an analysis of the area that Summerfield is considering making its ETJ. She said that she would speak with Summerfield Mayor BJ Barnes regarding this topic.

Council members agreed by consensus to the suggestions outlined regarding voluntary annexation.

Trails and Sidewalks

Lastly, Bruce said that Councilwoman Pittman wanted to affirm Council's commitment to trails and sidewalks.

Pittman said that she wanted to ensure that all Council members had the same understanding as it related to easements. She stated that the Strategic Plan required public easement dedication along adopted, public trail corridors, but that this requirement did not apply to existing developments or landowners. Pittman said that there is a big difference between a public access easement and a preservation or conservation easement. She said that public access easements deal with access corridors for trails and walkways and conservation easements deal with larger tracts of land. She said that she felt like Council had done extremely well on some sections of the Strategic Plan, but had stalled a bit on other items. Pittman stated that she wanted to make sure that things were moving along when it came to trails and sidewalks and that everyone understood that the process of getting access easements is not the same scope as with the work of the Conservation Easement Committee.

Mayor Schneider said that some conservation easements have provisions for trail easements.

Pittman said that some places have neither and that the trail corridors are relatively narrow pieces of land.

In closing, Schneider said that the Strategic Plan is a five-year plan and it has not been stuck on a shelf. She said that staff had done an incredible job with executing the plan under the leadership of Town Manager Bruce.

4. ADJOURNMENT

Councilman McClellan made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 4:07 p.m. Councilman Nodine seconded the motion, and it was passed unanimously via a roll-call vote (5-0).