

CITY COUNCIL
BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE MINUTES
August 4, 2011

The City Council Business and Community Affairs Committee of the City of Norman, Cleveland County, State of Oklahoma, met at 5:35 p.m. in the Conference Room on the 4th day of August, 2011, and notice and agenda of the meeting were posted in the Municipal Building at 201 West Gray and the Norman Public Library at 225 North Webster 48 hours prior to the beginning of the meeting.

PRESENT: Councilmembers Lockett, Quinn, Spaulding, and Chairman Ezzell

ABSENT: None

OTHERS PRESENT: Mr. Jeff Bryant, City Attorney
Ms. Susan Connors, Director of Planning and Community Development
Ms. Carol Dillingham, Ward Four Councilmember
Mr. Tom Kovach, Ward Two Councilmember
Mr. Steve Lewis, City Manager
Mr. Shawn O'Leary, Director of Public Works
Ms. Cindy Rosenthal, Mayor
Ms. Karla Chapman, Administrative Technician III
Mr. Phil Clark, Pioneer Library Business Outreach Coordinator
Ms. Joy Hampton, The Norman Transcript
Mr. John Woods, Norman Chamber of Commerce President

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND PRIORITIZATION OF THE FOLLOWING ITEMS:

1. Resolution adopting a policy for participation in the drafting of new ordinances by representatives of groups that will be directly affected.
2. Creation of a public trust authority as a tool to facilitate economic development.
3. Opportunities to partner in economic development.
4. Creative ways the City can assist and participate in the mission of economic development.
5. Review of building permit issuance, fees, and inspections.
6. Review of modernization of the Sign Ordinance.
7. Miscellaneous Discussion.

Policy for Participation in Drafting New Ordinances.

Chairman Ezzell said the topics tonight are representations of ideas that have been discussed at various times by Council, City Staff, and interest groups. He said discussion regarding a resolution adopting a policy for participation in drafting new ordinances by representatives of groups directly affected was originally suggested by Mr. Harold Heiple, Heiple Law Offices, Inc. He said this has been discussed by the Community Planning and Transportation Committee (CPTC), chaired by Councilmember Dillingham, and asked her to update this Committee on those discussions.

Councilmember Dillingham said the CPTC discussed the concept of trying to identify what a significant piece of policy might be that unreasonably benefits or burdens an individual or group. She said the CPTC wanted to make sure all individuals and/or groups were represented equally. She said discussion had included planning; zoning; large personnel issues; traffic; parking, etc., which are the types of issues that affect all neighborhoods and citizens. She said the CPTC would be discussing the resolution more thoroughly at their meeting in September and welcomed public input.

Councilmembers Kovach and Quinn said they liked the underlying idea; however, were not sure how such a resolution could be crafted.

Items submitted for record

1. Letter dated July 12, 2011, from H.L. Heiple, Heiple Law Offices, Inc., to Norman City Councilmembers and City Manager

Public Trust Authority/Economic Development.

Chairman Ezzell said the creation of a public trust authority as a tool to facilitate economic development and opportunities to partner in economic development are really sub-items of creative ways the City can assist and participate in the mission of economic development. He said in meetings with the Chamber of Commerce and the Norman Economic Development Coalition (NEDC) there has been a lot of discussion on these very issues. He said one item discussed was the ability to monetize quality jobs benefits. He said the Quality Jobs Program is a program of the State that pays a rebate to businesses based on payroll and it is paid out over a period of time. He said future discussion will include how to finance those quality jobs benefits. He said many economic development efforts coming forward today are partnerships between counties, cities, universities, schools, vo-techs, etc.

Chairman Ezzell asked Staff to consider opportunities where the City could assist the public by waiving permit fees and what types of projects would qualify. He asked Staff to include a cost benefit analysis and Staff's opinion of when it would be appropriate to make concessions to benefit a project. Mr. Woods the City of Moore is willing to give incentives to businesses and asked if Norman would be willing to do the same. He said he understands it would be difficult in the beginning but felt it would be worth the effort.

Building Permits Issuance and Fees.

Chairman Ezzell said 90% of complaints received by the City of Norman are regarding building permit inspections and the fee process; however, these complaints are rarely quantified factually as to what specifically happened, when it happened, who was involved, etc. He said the Chamber of Commerce has been gathering data and building a database with specific complaints and he would like to invite the Chamber to a future meeting to review this information and get their feedback. He said it is hard to have constructive dialogue and address issues without specific, precise facts of events. He said one complaint has been the inspection process does not work efficiently in that an inspection is made where a problem identified and corrected, which then requires another inspection and additional inspection fees. He suggested the inspection process consist of inspectors leaving a punch list of items to be corrected with one re-inspection rather than the continual stop and start inspection process.

Sign Ordinance.

Chairman Ezzell said he feels the City has an outdated sign ordinance that can be improved and enhanced. He said he would like to have more detailed discussion at a future meeting with Staff input that includes the history of the ordinance.

Councilmember Lockett asked when the ordinance had been amended last and said she had been involved in one of the revision processes where there was a lot of contention regarding the size and height of signs that should be allowed. She said advertising through signage is an important part of business and should be taken into consideration during the process. Councilmember Ezzell felt the Committee could move any discourse forward and find a balance. Councilmember Spaulding suggested including community signs in addition to business signs and said there is a maintenance aspect that needs to be addressed as well.

Councilmember Ezzell said he would like to review the sign ordinance at the next Business and Community Affairs Committee meeting.

Councilmember Kovach said he would rather review the building permitting process first. Councilmember Lockett agreed and said she has heard of several national businesses that built new buildings in Norman and believe the City of Norman's building process is the most difficult to work with. She felt the City needs to work on the attitude of employees that are the first point of contact for builders. Chairman Ezzell agreed and said the Chamber of Commerce and NEDC have stated the City needs a concerted campaign effort to educate businesses that the City is "open for business." Mr. John Woods, President of Norman Chamber of Commerce, said The Moore Monthly newspaper published an article quoting a broker that "due to the difficulty of the permitting process, businesses regret deciding to do business with Norman." Mayor Rosenthal said part of the problem is perception and, in meetings she has attended, other cities complain that they hear the same thing from builders in their communities.

She said perception can be reality and she would like to see a matrix of Norman compared to other cities including Norman's turn around time for permits. Councilmember Lockett said she would like to see of copy of the paperwork inspectors leave with the businesses when corrections are needed. She said inspectors need to be consistent because she personally knows of cases where corrections were made and a different inspector checked the work but would not approve the corrections required by the first inspector causing delays and confusion.

Chairman Ezzell said the idea of a matrix is important and requested a proposal from Staff as to their idea of a good checklist of matrix that includes permit costs, permit issuance time, number of inspections, etc. Mr. Woods said he would like to include the number boards or commissions an applicant has to go through before final approval and how that varies in other communities. Mayor Rosenthal asked Mr. Steve Lewis, City Manager, about the other items permitting issues that could be reviewed and Mr. Lewis said the matrix would consist of ten to twelve standard items used across the country. He said these include the amount of time it takes to get a permit, when permit is issued from time of application, how long before inspections are made once requested, training issues for inspector in terms of consistency, etc. Councilmember Lockett said time is an issue since time is money for businesses and Mr. Lewis agreed and said that is especially true for seasonal businesses.

Councilmember Dillingham said she would like to identify permit issues that can be fast tracked. Councilmember Quinn said an example of fast tracking is Embassy Suites. He said the City worked closely with them to make sure everything was completed as quickly as possible and the same effort needs to be put forth for everyone. Councilmember Griffith felt it was important to stress the City is looking for efficiency, not that the inspections be any less effective.

Councilmember Spaulding asked if discussion would include the possibility of an ombudsman position and Councilmember Ezzell said that could be discussed later on and felt part of the process of gaining efficiency is repetition and standardization and the City needs to put together a team that understands the process with a congenial team leader. Councilmember Dillingham felt that once Staff had a better idea of how to make the permitting process smoother and more efficient, ombudsmen would be part of future discussion. Mr. Lewis said the City continues to talk with other communities regarding their efforts in economic development and is looking at whether an ombudsman position would be geared for internal processes or retail recruitment.

Chairman Ezzell asked Mr. Jeff Bryant, City Attorney, if a public trust authority had been discussed in detail as far as setting one up and paperwork required and Mr. Bryant said the City has a couple of public trusts, but not a separate public trust authority specifically for economic development. He said the City has discussed a trust in conjunction with acquiring industrial property and acquiring a mechanism for that and Mr. Lewis said the City has discussed a water trust so the basic research has been done and could be integrated into a presentation. Chairman Ezzell said the would like Staff to look into the idea of a public trust for quality jobs and the legal ramifications. He said the basis would be to set up a public trust with a common financier that has the authority to issue debt. Councilmember Dillingham agreed asked how that would work within the City's Charter, ordinances, and State law. Mr. Bryant said it could possibly be done through the Norman Tax Increment Finance Authority (NTIFA), but there is risk if the business being financed is not able to pay the debt back.

Chairman Ezzell said at the September meeting, he would like Staff to be prepared to discuss the matrix with information from comparable cities including examples of generic residential and commercial projects. Councilmember Dillingham said she would like to see a comparison of costs and procedures for small businesses opening in the Campus Corner area compared to downtown Norman.

Chairman Ezzell said he would also like the Legal Department's opinion on the concept of a Public Trust Fund Authority.

Mayor Rosenthal liked the idea of monetizing the Quality Jobs Act as an innovative way to get ahead of the game. She said she would like to see a presentation on the PETCO Project and what was on the table, which was not the value of the deal at the end of the day. Councilmember Kovach said one thing that often gets overlooked in economic development is quality of life issues in the community, which should be part of discussions.

Councilmember Quinn said he would be out of town the first week of September and asked that discussion on building permits be postponed until October. Mayor Rosenthal said the first meeting in September would fall around the Labor Day holiday and suggested rescheduling the meeting one week later. Chairman Ezzell said he would meet with Brenda Hall, City Clerk, regarding the meeting calendar schedule for September. Mr. Lewis said Staff could be prepared by September 15th.

MISCELLANEOUS DISCUSSION.

Chairman Ezzell said there are groups in the community advocating for various things such as a new Animal Shelter, Aquatic Center, soccer fields, etc. He said he would like to see the creation of a citizens committee that would tie these issues together, prioritize them, and submit recommendations to Council. He said it will be important to include representatives from the University of Oklahoma (OU), Cleveland County, Norman Public Schools, United Way, local businesses, etc. Councilmember Dillingham said there are many citizen groups that have spent a great deal of time discussing these issues that need to be included as well. Mayor Rosenthal said it is also important to include and recognize constituent groups that have spent a lot of time building the groundwork for various issues.

Chairman Ezzell felt the Animal Shelter should be advanced forward although it is not a lifestyle project, but more of a governmental service. He said he was not sure the project is an immediate need project. Mayor Rosenthal felt there is need in every area, for example parks maintenance is the number one need highlighted in the Parks Master Plan. She felt that tying all the projects together as suggested makes a lot of sense and brings a lot of enthusiasm to a committee. Councilmember Dillingham said the voters would have to decide if a project was important enough to pass General Obligation Bond's and felt that in today's economic climate that may not be so easy. Chairman Ezzell said public perception on park maintenance is that the City has pretty steep park fees, but park maintenance is woefully inadequate especially regarding maintenance of facilities.

Chairman Ezzell said there is always a lot of effort in gathering data on the need for various projects, but there is never execution of the project as far as financing and although prioritization is part of the process, a citizens group could be charged with making recommendations that includes financing options.

Chairman Ezzell said he would like suggestions from NEDC, the Chamber of Commerce, and advocacy groups regarding an initial push the City could make to get its own message out to the public. Mr. Woods said the Chamber and NEDC are creating a website, normannow.com, to tie in local entities to help individuals find information about Norman such as places to shop, places to visit, where to find jobs, buying a home, etc., and the City could be added as a link to the website as well.

The meeting adjourned at 6:35 a.m.

ATTEST:

City Clerk

Mayor