

Economic Development Committee of the Fitchburg City Council

Tuesday, July 15, 2020

Meeting Minutes

Members Present:

Councilor Andrew Van Hazinga, *Chair*
Councilor Marcus DiNatale
Councilor Marisa Fleming
Councilor Bernard Schultz
Councilor Samantha Squailia

Others Present:

Councilor Paul Beauchemin (*Ward 2*)
Tom Skwierawski, *Executive Director of Planning & Community Development*
Anne Cervantes, *City Treasurer & Parking Clerk*
Sharon Bernard, *Library Director*
Mary Jo Bohart, *Economic Development Director*
Jay Bry, *Fitchburg State Univeristy (VP of Admin. & Finance)*
Tom Bagley, *Community Development Dept. intern*

Chairman Van Hazinga called the meeting to order at 5:37p.m.

He began by reading Petition 160-20 (from Councilor Paul Beauchemin) into the record, which was: *To Petition the City to not demolish the building at 617 Water Street, but rather, take the funds allocated for this and use them to demolish 40, 40 ½ (already in progress) and 44 Nashua Street in order to improve the neighborhood with single family lots.*

Chairman Van Hazinga asked for Councilor Beauchemin to explain what he aimed to achieve by the Petition, and the Councilor stated that the Nashua Street properties in his Petition have been in disrepair for some time and are blighting to the immediate neighborhood. Chairman Van Hazinga then briefly mentioned the status of each of the Nashua Street properties in question. 40 and 40 ½ Nashua St are owned by the City and the process of demolishing 40 ½ has already begun. 44 Nashua St is privately owned by a bank after a foreclosure and the owner applied for a demolition permit on April 6th of this year. He then mentioned that the 617 Water Street property was acquired by the city several years ago through a tax lien judgment. He noted that this now-vacant property has negatively affected the Water Street corridor which is an important gateway route into downtown Fitchburg.

Mr. Skwierawski explained that the city's annual building demolition bid has already been awarded to a demolition contractor, and the 617 Water Street building is among the bundle of properties included in that overall bid package. He added that the city had been conducting various environmental site investigations at 617 Water Street through the environmental engineering firm Tighe & Bond and its licensed site professional Todd Kirton. Also, there has been removal of interior personal property and abandoned debris, all leading up to this planned demolition project that is scheduled to begin within coming days.

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Ms. Bohart provided further background on the 617 Water Street property, explaining that she coordinated with the prior property owner (Bert Ludwick) leading up to his vacating the property when it was formally taken by tax lien more than three years ago. She explained that since that time, the city has taken on the challenge of keeping the vacant building secure from break-ins, squatters, and other public safety concerns. Ms. Bohart stated that the owner of the abutting *City Storage/UHaul* business would periodically contact her to alert the city when vagrants and squatters had once again gained access to the building. She stated that direct proximity of two multifamily residential buildings on Lancaster Street, immediate up the hill from 617 Water Street, created serious concern that fire could occur due to squatters at the vacant industrial, which added to the urgency for demolition of the blighted vacant building. She concluded by stating that Fitchburg Fire Dept. has had to respond to multiple drug overdoses within the vacant 617 Water Street building, when squatters gained access, so the building in its current state presents an ongoing public safety risk.

Councilor Schultz made a motion for the Petition to be given leave to withdraw. Councilor DiNatale seconded that motion. Chairman Van Hazinga asked for any discussion on that motion.

Councilor Squailia spoke on the motion, acknowledging the attention Councilor Beauchemin is giving toward the problem of dilapidated properties in Fitchburg. She then asked Mr. Skwierawski whether the city plans to use a Request For Proposal (RFP) approach when disposing of the 617 Water Street property, and whether there is presently a buyer interested in the property?

Mr. Skwierawski confirmed that the city does intend to utilize the RFP approach to disposition of the 617 Water Street property. He added that once the building demolition is complete, the property will be much more appealing to interested buyers who could repurpose the site commercially.

Vote:

A motion was made by Councilor Schultz for Petition #160-20 to be given leave to withdraw so that the building demolition at 617 Water Street proceeds as planned. The motion was seconded by Councilor DiNatale, and the motion passed unanimously (5:0) by roll call vote.

Chairman Van Hazinga then asked Mr. Swierawski, Ms. Cervantes and Mr. Bagley to briefly present summary findings from a *Downtown Parking Study* jointly commissioned by Fitchburg State University and the City of Fitchburg in 2019 through a sharing of the cost of the study. Mr. Skwierawski explained that this parking study could be thought of as a 10 year plan in that many of the recommendations would occur gradually over time. He explained that the study: 1) Analyzed supply/demand of parking in the downtown; 2) Developed a cost estimate feasibility for the FSU/City shared parking to occur next to the Theater Block; 3) Conducted a policy analysis of existing city parking policies. Mr. Skwierawski then showed informational slides regarding this parking study.

Councilor DiNatale asked Mr. Bry if the university is firmly committed to developing the shared parking facility next to the Theater Block and across from City Hall.

Mr. Bry indicated stated that FSU is committed to that project and its abutting parking which would be shared with the city.

Mr. Skwierawski stated that he would be presenting the Downtown Parking Study to the full City Council in September. Meanwhile, though, due to the economic development relevance of parking within downtown districts, he wanted to provide this brief summary to the committee for general information.

Chairman Van Hazinga then asked for a motion to adjourn. Councilor Schultz so moved, and Councilor Squalia seconded that motion which passed unanimously (5:0). The Economic Development Committee of the City Council adjourned at approximately 6:55 pm.