

Minutes - May 17, 2004 - Committee-of-the-Whole

Minutes of the Committee-of-the-Whole Meeting of the City Council of the CITY OF DARIEN MAY 17, 2004

1. CALL TO ORDER

The Committee-of-the-Whole Meeting of the City Council of the City of Darien was called to order at 6:00 P.M. by Mayor Carmen D. Soldato. In attendance were: Aldermen Biehl, Cotten, Hagen, Marchese, Poteraske, Weaver, and Tikalsky. Also in attendance were: Mayor Soldato, Clerk Coleman, Treasurer Monaghan, Administrator Vana, Community Development Director Dreyer, Public Works Asst. Director Mengarelli, Public Works Asst. Director Rodgers, and Business District Development and Redevelopment Commissioners Coren, Cozzolino, Dahl, and Jiskra.

2. BUSINESS DISTRICT DEVELOPMENT AND REDEVELOPMENT

Mayor Soldato provided background and articulated reasons for the recommendation contained within the Business District Development memo dated May 17, 2004. He noted that comments/direction would come from Council and Commission members; he stated that residents would also have an opportunity to offer input later in the meeting. Mayor Soldato commented that the development would not include the total twelve acres but would focus on the properties that fronted the east side of Cass Avenue between Plainfield Road & 75th Street, basically from the Shell station southerly to the BP station with the strip center between the two. He said that if the City owned or controlled the property that the City could drive the timing and nature of the project.

Alderman Hagen stated that this proposed project was more 'doable' than the entire triangle; he noted that the project was entirely different than previously proposed and suggested another RFP.

Alderman Marchese noted that the project was downsized and that the Gammonley plan would need to be revised, which had been a blend of residential and commercial. He questioned the impact for development of the remaining land and if the Gammonley Group had a vision for this 'new' proposal. Administrator Vana responded that what was critical about the development was partnership between the developer and the City; he said that there were no preconceived/detailed plans at this time and that Council would need to provide direction. Mayor Soldato stated that the new plan would divert from that originally planned; that the new plan would meet the Comprehensive Plan goal.

Alderman Biehl questioned the redevelopment along Cass Avenue, specifically the parking levels and condominiums; he noted that the proposed changes now included residential, business, and parking. He asked if the existing would be demolished. Administrator Vana responded to the inquiry. He said that Gammonley was interested in the project even though the scope was reduced; he said that details needed to be worked out and that the existing buildings would be demolished. Alderman Biehl inquired about relocation of the existing businesses. Mayor Soldato responded that there would be juggling to achieve the redevelopment; he said there was one owner with many tenants and that the tenants could be relocated within the City. Mayor Soldato stated that communication was important between the City, owners and business tenants.

Alderman Biehl asked Attorney Murphey if the City had to do another RFP; Attorney Murphey responded that this was not a legal issue but discretionary. Mayor Soldato stated that the current budget allowed the City to investigate the whole twelve acres as a TIF District in order to seek assistance; the procedure contemplates not spending that money by enticing a developer's interest; litigation or lawyering costs. He said that Council needed to provide Administrator Vana with the authority to ascertain information about development, which could be done through another short-term RFP but was not necessary.

Alderman Poterasko stated that the City had met with resistance from some building owners. He asked why the City would take on the role of gathering money for development of the three parcels and not the developer. Mayor Soldato commented that the City was asked if they owned or had control of the land and the City response was 'no'. He said that Administrator Vana, a banker and he discussed a bridge loan for a short term basis until it could be turned over to a developer. He stated that the City would control it and would find a partner who would purchase it from the City; he noted that the City would only pay interest for the period when it owned the land and would then turn it over to the developer. Alderman Poterasko said that he would like to see progress and not have the project dragged out.

Alderman Cotten commented that the previously proposed development was off the table, that parking would be an issue, and that open space would be limited.

Alderman Tikalsky stated that they had been talking about the three parcels along Cass Avenue and the City taking ownership. He suggested that the City aggressively consider purchasing the eleven acres instead of piecemealing the project even if it took time to develop the entire area and even if the City became landlord to some of the tenants. He disagreed with placement of residential on Cass Avenue. Mayor Soldato stated that if the City was the owner, it could own the property for a very long period of time and not know what the future market would dictate. Alderman Tikalsky asked what the market value of the properties was and what the interest payment would be.

Alderman Hagen stated that the City owns a small lot that fronts onto Plainfield, he suggested that if the project became a reality that it might want to swap with the apartment complex. It was noted that \$95,000 had been budgeted for studies not for purchasing. Administrator Vana referred to the aerial map and stated that the City owned the parcel indicated as 005; he indicated that the City could probably purchase green space from the apartment complex, which would have no impact on the apartments. Chairman Coren commented that residents wanted a downtown area within Darien and that the concept was limited and 'dressed up' an existing rundown center. He suggested expanding the downtown area to include the Brookhaven and Jewel centers instead of being narrowly focused. Mayor Soldato stated that the owner of Brookhaven was improving the center and had new tenants.

Commission Member Jiskra was concerned that the downtown area may look like another strip mall; she liked the proposed mixed use.

Commission Member Dahl questioned the status of the apartment complex; Mayor Soldato stated that the owners have been non-responsive.

John Keporos, owner of the Heritage strip center, stated that he met with Administrator Vana and was advised that the City wanted a development in a horseshoe shape from corner to corner, that TIF money was available, and that the City would assist; he agreed to work with the City. Mr. Keporos tried to purchase the Shell property but was told that the City had the first option; he was recently contacted by the new owner of the Shell property because he wanted to purchase the strip center. Mr. Keporos contacted Shell to find out how the new owner purchased the land; he was informed that the City had the first option to purchase but had no money. He asked that the City take into consideration that some of the tenants had been there approximately 25 years. He inquired if blueprints had been submitted; Administrator Vana responded that the gentleman had a concept plan and made a proposal to Council in regard to developing the corner and possibly developing to the south. Mr. Keporos stated that he would offer to purchase the Shell property from the new owner but would not sell the strip center to him.

Mayor Soldato thanked Mr. Keporos for commenting; he stated that the City could not offer to buy land or offer an option on land until after Council publicly voted to enter into an agreement. Mayor Soldato commented that everything must be done according to law; he said that it was slow and cumbersome and that no one had the authority to stand alone. He stated that the City was interested in the Shell property from a development standpoint but it was impossible for the City to purchase the land since it never appeared on an Agenda for formal consideration by the Council.

Dr. Atassi, a dentist in the Heritage strip center, said she was establishing her practice and that it was not easy to move because malls have restrictions. She requested better communication and a time frame.

Gloria Anderson inquired if a TIF would be utilized by the City as a development tool; Mayor Soldato responded "we would hope not; we would hope that we would not have to". She stated that someone from the Gammonley Group informed her that the City was in the process of hiring a TIF consultant. Mayor Soldato stated that the City looked into a TIF consultant to find out what the cost would be for budgeting purposes but dollars were not budgeted; he noted that presentations were made to do TIF work but the City was not moving forward in that direction. Administrator Vana stated that there were State Statutes that must be followed for Public Hearings and that the City would meet all of those requirements.

Joe Snyder, owner of Snyder Insurance, wanted to refinance his business and was informed that the value of his property had depreciated; the property was appraised at less than half of its value three years ago. He stated that he would only sell his property for redevelopment if the price was right.

Mayor Soldato recommended that Council give Administrator Vana authority to * meet with the three business owners on Cass Avenue in order to reach an understanding, * contact owners of the other corners to see if there was a desire to work with the City, and * prepare an RFP, for sixty days, in regard to the limited project.

Mayor Soldato stated that the City Council and Business District Development and Redevelopment Commissioners would meet at 6:00 P.M. on June 7th for further discussion about the Triangle area.

3. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to come before the Committee-of-the-Whole, the meeting adjourned at 7:05 P.M.

Carmen D. Soldato, Mayor

Joanne F. Coleman, City Clerk

JFC:jr All supporting documentation and report originals of these minutes are on file in the Office of the City Clerk under File Number 05-17-04 Committee-of-the-Whole. Minutes of 05-17-04 Committee-of-the-Whole ??