

MINUTES

Lowell Planning and Zoning Board

Regular Meeting

Tuesday, March 7, 2023, 6:00 P.M.

I. CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Scott Wilson, called the meeting to order at 6:01 p.m. Planning Board members present: Heather Seay, Troy Roberts Sr., and David Jennings. Norris Lamb was absent. Staff members present: Joe Gates, Planning Director, and Cheryl Ramsey, City Clerk. Members of the public were also in attendance.

II. DETERMINATION OF QUORUM –it was determined a quorum was reached.

III. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE - led by Scott Wilson

IV. CHANGES TO AND APPROVAL OF AGENDA – No changes were proposed to the agenda. Board Member Jennings made a motion to approve the agenda, seconded by Board Member Roberts. The vote was unanimously in favor.

V. APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM THE FEBRUARY 7, 2023, MEETING.

A motion was made by Board Member Seay to approve the previous minutes, seconded by Board Member Jennings. The vote was unanimously in favor.

VI. OLD BUSINESS – None

VII. NEW BUSINESS

A. Lowell Development Ordinance – Sign Ordinance Discussion. Master Sign Plan. Wall and Freestanding Signs. Menu Boards, etc. – presented by Joseph Gates. No submittals for this month but Mr. Gates wanted to get their ideas about some ordinances and if any improvements should be made. He first discussed the Signs ordinance. Right now, all areas, regarding of zoning district, you're allowed to have a wall sign that can only be 32 sq feet and the only way to do anything bigger than that is if you fall into the category for the Master Sign which is greater than three acres and fall within a specific zoning classification. He believes everyone that has signed up for a master sign permit has been approved by the Board and City Council. The old UDO (Unified Development Ordinance) [now LDO (Lowell Development Ordinance)] had it split up into residential, office, industrial, commercial, and percentages based on the underlining zoning. This takes a more holistic approach where everyone is treated the same and then makes minor exceptions for the downtown area. This would in turn require the applicant

to come before the Planning Board, then hold a public hearing, then council votes, which adds extra steps. He asked the Board their thoughts. Board Member Roberts asked if there were any complaints from business owners or them wanting bigger signs? Mr. Gates said he hasn't had a ton of requests and only one company calling to ask questions since he has been employed with the city and another that wanted to get a bigger sign but didn't want to go through the long process. He then looked at the ordinances of Gastonia and compared them to the City of Lowell's.

Board Member Jennings asked what was approved for the Newell business sign. Mr. Gates said it was based off Gastonia's ordinance and was already approved by Gastonia when it was realized that this building is primarily in Lowell. The sign is under 100 sq. ft. It may not have been what the developers intended but it was inadvertently designed under Gastonia's ordinance not Lowell's. Board Member Jennings said what they have is still small when viewing from the I-85 highway. Mr. Gates said at some point there should be a cap for the sign sizes because 10% of this building (over a million sq. ft) would be a very large sign. He stated we could look at changing percentages based on square footage of the wall areas.

Mr. Gates stated he wanted to bring the topic to the board since people/businesses tend to ask the same questions and it may mean the ordinance should be reviewed for possible improvements. Chairman Wilson stated that may be difficult considering we have different types of business, with some on Franklin and some in the downtown area. Board Member Roberts thought about the owners downtown and asked what would happen if they too wanted bigger signs? How would that look? Would it attract more business? If we adopted a different ordinance where signs would be a percentage of the building, can we come up to a maximum sign limit to be approved by Joe [Gates] and capped at 6%? Mr. Gates said they would have to be approved administratively by him. He then went over some options to consider. The idea is to try to streamline the process so businesses would not need to bring things up in the Planning Board meetings but could be answered administratively. Additionally, you don't want to change an entire process for just one request. He will get more preliminary information for the board to review options and possibly revise the ordinance in the future.

Mr. Gates then stated that he has had a lot of questions from restaurants about the City of Lowell menu board signs requirements, specifically for drive-through's. Currently Lowell's is only 6 square feet. Most of what he is seeing is 32 sq. ft total or about 8X4 for each panel. He said a lot of the businesses are going to the digital menu boards where they can rotate throughout the day; however, the way the ordinance reads, they can't do a lot. He asked the board if they were ok with him looking more into this ordinance and exploring more suitable options to bring

back to them at a later date. All agreed for him to look further into the menu boards and see what other counties are doing.

- B. Lowell Development Ordinance – Parking Regulation. Mr. Gates went over the City of Lowell’s current LDO regarding parking where we take all the uses allowed and set minimums and maximums. This was provided by the consultant who helped with our LDO. He has been doing some research and noted that there is a push to get rid of parking minimums. He then showed a portion of a video by StrongTowns.org for parking ideas. After the video, Board Member Jennings asked if the City of Lowell had minimums and Mr. Gates stated that we did and that there are over 200 spots in the downtown area. He thinks it would be worth it to review the current ordinance and determine if changes should be implemented, particularly in not requiring minimums and maximizing the number of maximum spots. Board Member Roberts stated that with the upcoming 1-85 improvements, it would be beneficial to review the ordinance.

Board Member Jennings asked how many spots would civic facility/police department need? Mr. Gates said the current LDO says no less than 1 per 350 sq. ft and no less per 250 sq. ft. Board Member Seay asked if we got rid of the minimums and someone decides to build condos downtown then decide to not put any parking spots at all, would the city say no you need parking spaces or per the new LDO, they won’t have to put in any if they don’t want to? Mr. Gates said they [developers] may not see a need to have all their parking on site and gave an example of a lot in Gastonia where they were able to come up with on-street parking as a better option to relieve parking issues.

Chairman Wilson said if you eliminate the minimums, it will leave room for people to build things and not provide for what’s really needed for the building. Mr. Gates said if they are the business owner, you probably know the amount of traffic you are going to have and generate. It puts the responsibility of the developer to build parking or not. Chairman Wilson said if the LDO is changed to no minimum parking, you can’t stop them from building. Mr. Gates said that is correct. He said it was done this way in Gastonia and they never had any issues with developers not having any parking. For example, developers would build small offices and decide they would be appointments only. Instead of having them build 30 spots for example per current ordinance, they would only build four. Chairman Wilson said he’s all for that but thinks Board Member Seay is correct in saying there should be something in the ordinance that requires them to do something regarding parking for tenants/customers. Discussion was had regarding businesses not building parking areas and allowing their customers to potentially use other businesses’ parking. Mr. Gates said if it’s public parking then they can park there. He said ultimately you want there to be more businesses downtown and that may bring in more opportunities for a parking deck to be built later. Further discussion was had regarding businesses having a certain amount of parking. He asked the board if they wanted to give it some thought and discuss it

later. Board Member Seay stated she would do some research herself regarding it. Mr. Gates will send everyone a link for the video.

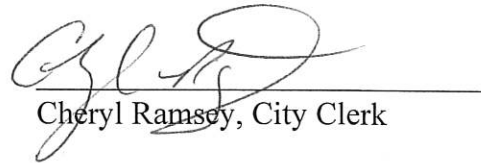
VIII. ADJOURN

Motion was made to adjourn by Board Member Seay, seconded by Board Member Roberts. The vote was unanimously in favor. Adjourned at 7:10 p.m. The Stormwater meeting was held immediately after the Planning Board meeting.

AFFIRM:



Chair, Scott Wilson



Cheryl Ramsey, City Clerk