

## Community Development Department

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### MINUTES PLAN COMMISSION APRIL 5, 2023 CITY COUNCIL CHAMBERS

**Members Present:** Patricia La Rue, Chris Holtkamp, Dan Toland, Diane Odeen, Rebecca Prendergast, Mike Woolsey and Lisa Moody  
**Members Absent:** none  
**Staff Present:** Emily Shively, Sterling Hackney, Sam Burns  
**Others Present:** Mark Roffers, MD Roffers Consulting (virtual); David Curtin, Lamar Advertising; Phil Larsen, business owner

#### CALL TO ORDER

Meeting convened at 6:30 p.m.

#### APPROVAL OF MINUTES

M/Odeen, S/Woolsey to approve minutes. Motion carried 6/0.

#### PUBLIC COMMENTS

Dave Curtin with Lamar Advertising commented on the electronic sign ordinance up for discussion this evening. He stated he is available for questions. He would like to see options to modernize electronic signs which would benefit his billboard sign business. Phil Larsen, Century 21 Real Estate business owner, commented that he has done a lot of research on electronic reader board signs. It is a challenge to buy what the current code allows. They now have far more capabilities. He understands the need to limit electronic signage but would like to see more abilities and options allowed per code for electronic reader boards. He discussed applying for a special sign permit and wants to see that process be more fair and clear. Larsen also discussed the setback for pylon signage needing to be setback as far as it is tall. He would like to see the focus on building a structural solid sign instead. Also discussed are the proposed regulations referring to the size of the print. He would like to see the print size requirement be at the discretion of the building owner as they will want the print to be seen. Larsen also stated he would like the ability to advertise for community events and benefits on electronic reader boards.

#### ORDINANCES AND RESOLUTIONS

##### **Proposal for annexation and rezoning for property located at 99 Highway 35 and 101 Highway 35 (New Life Worship Center).**

Sam Burns gave a presentation on the annexation and rezoning. Keith Fletcher, Minister of New Life Church, has submitted an annexation request for 99 and 101 Highway 35. The property plans include building a church and to convert the existing structure to church offices and construct a youth center in the future. Burns showed the site location that is approximately 4.07 acres. The property is contiguous to City boundary. The Future Land Use is Community Commercial, and the Extraterritorial Zoning is Commercial. Proposed zoning classification is B3 Highway Commercial. The use of the property as a church is permitted in the B3 Highway Commercial

district. Staff recommends forwarding the enclosed council ordinance regarding annexation and zoning to City Council with a favorable recommendation.

M/Odeen, S/Woolsey made a motion to approve the annexation and rezoning. Motion carried 6/0.

There was discussion clarifying access location to the property.

## **REPORTS**

### **Electronic Sign Ordinance Discussion**

Emily Shively introduced Mark Roffers of MD Roffers Consulting who attended the meeting virtually. She gave a brief overview of what he will present regarding electronic signage. Shively stated the Planning Department has been approached with some electronic sign proposals that are currently not allowed by City ordinance. Examples are making static billboards electronic, allowing churches in residential locations to have lit or electronic signs, and businesses that currently have electronic signs be able to use more of the sign's capabilities. This led to the discussion of the sign code and the opportunity to discuss keeping the ordinance the same, or modify things minorly or make major changes to the sign ordinance. Roffer was hired to assist. Shively stated health, safety and welfare are important when making decisions about signage. She noted the City can regulate size, location, and number of signs but cannot regulate content of signs.

Mark Roffers introduced himself virtually and said his background includes 30 years in Planning and he has worked with many communities regarding sign regulations. He showed examples of current electronic signs allowed by code with the one color, either red or amber lettering. Roffers stated the purpose of sign regulations is public safety due to hazards from poorly constructed signs or sign clutter that can cause confusion or distraction to drivers. Other purposes are to ensure compatibility of location, size and placement of signs. A final reason is to preserve the natural beauty and integrity of the City. Sign ordinances differ by zoning district. Signs also need to provide reasonable identification and opportunity to the business to allow them to grow. It also benefits the public to be able to get around successfully and find business locations. Roffer discussed maintaining compliance with federal law and a Supreme Court decision regarding sign content and the First Amendment, for example if you must read the sign to regulate it, that is not an appropriate regulation.

Roffers shared three approach options regarding electronic signs. They are as follows; maintain the current approach, modernize and limit, or modernize and expand. He reviewed aspects of each approach which includes regulations such as color, illumination, and location of electronic signs. Roffers stated that technology has improved dramatically for these signs so modernizing language may be appropriate. Roffers explained that discussions this evening will help determine what a draft ordinance amendment should look like and will be shared at a later meeting for further discussion and detail. There was discussion regarding signage in different zoning locations, and sign standards being based on zoning location including overnight lighting, color of lighting, brightness levels, length of time for changing messages and the amount of time to transition messages.

Odeen stated this discussion has been helpful and would like to see more updates to the ordinance to use more of the technology available in electronic signs but still keep the character of River Falls.

Roffers asked if anyone in the audience had further comments. Phil Larson commented on the downtown overlay district being more restricted for signage however he has noticed that business find a way to get around having more signage. An example is installing large tv's in their windows facing the street displaying ads.

David Curtin commented that color limitation on billboard electronic signs would limit the ability to display pictures. He prefers keeping time intervals to 6-7 seconds to have the ability to display numerous messages. His sign locations are on the highway so not allowing off site advertising would make his signs not usable.

Planner Burns shared that the ordinance won't be one size fits all. The zoning districts currently have different sign regulations and that can remain the case.

Roffers asked for the opinion of each commissioner on what approach they prefer to see for electronic signage. Holtkamp preferred the current approach with more restrictions applied. Moody, Woolsey, Odeen, Toland, Prendergast, and La Rue preferred the modernize and expand approach. Moody and Woolsey commented they would like to see restrictions based on zoning locations. Odeen commented that she could support a mixture of both the modernize and limit and modernize and expand options and is not a fan of billboard signage. Prendergast commented that electronic signage has a sustainability feature; new sign materials are not being used to construct new messages. La Rue stated she would like to see the downtown area protected and outside the downtown have more options for signage. Prendergast inquired about public comment regarding Turnkey's large electronic sign in Sterling Ponds. The sign was put up without approval and they applied for a special sign permit and was granted after the fact.

Roffers summarized that most prefer the modernize and expand approach. He stated it is easier to open the door a bit to expanding options for electronic signage and then more if desired later than opening the door wide and trying to restrict later. Standards for signs was discussed such as quality, size and quantity of signs. It was restated that standards can be designed for particular zoning locations.

Shively thanked everyone for the discussion. She summarized by stating that the consensus is that context and character matter. The capabilities of technology can be considered as well. There is a broad range of options to approach this and the discussion will be taken into consideration. She concluded that Shively and Roffers will come up with ordinance language to meet the goals discussed.

### **2022 Housing Study Presentation**

Planner Sam Burns provided a presentation. He stated the 2022 study is an update to the 2018 Housing Study. In 2018 the City contracted with Maxfield Research and Consulting to complete a Housing Study. The most crucial data collected was the Housing Needs Analysis which looks at current demographics, current housing stock, and projects the needs for future housing. The City contracted again in 2022 with Maxfield Research and Consulting to update the Housing Needs Analysis section only. Burns shared statistics from the 2018 and 2022 studies. He stated it is projected that more housing is needed in 2022 than in 2018 due to not enough units being built between 2018 and 2022 even though we saw a record permitting for new units and River Falls being a desired community to live in. The numbers take into consideration the new housing permits for 2022 and 2023 so far and the units that are currently in the development pipeline. Burns stated a lot has been done, there is still more to go. Senior housing is a major need and discussed the different kinds of senior living units needed. Burns summarized the outcomes from the updated study. He explained the vacancy rate and said the housing supply remains critically

low. He explained the housing market is an ecosystem and different housing types compliment and affect each other. The 2022 study gave a better understanding of the needs and allows the City to promote different housing types and assist in the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan. This data is crucial to ensure our community has adequate housing. It is noted there has been progress in housing, specifically in market rate rentals however there remains a need for new units. The issue is not unique to River Falls, as housing shortage is faced everywhere. The study can be viewed on the City of River Falls website.

Odeen commented on working with developers in encouraging them to building in River Falls. Burns stated the market has the ultimate effect but the City can be intentional on development design standards, and provide flexibility while maintaining quality to draw interest. Developers and builders look at these studies. Holtkamp asked about the timeline on zoning code review and Shively stated new policy guidance and goals in the Comprehensive Plan have been approved and staff will begin prioritizing zoning changes to start implementing. La Rue gave a history of all new housing development since 2017 and the number of units it has added to the City. She stated there has been a lot of work completed and a deliberate plan for what is needed.

### **Planning Update**

Shively reviewed projects recently approved in March which include Oak Hill's first phase, The Current, Thompson Heights site work has begun, and Saturday Properties will move forward soon. The Comprehensive Plan has been approved. The next meeting will be May 2.

### **ADJOURNMENT**

Commissioner Holtkamp made a motion to adjourn at 7:54 p.m. S/Odeen; motion carried 6/0.

Respectfully submitted,

Angie Bond, Community Development Assistant