

M I N U T E S
CITY COUNCIL ANNUAL RETREAT
January 7, 2010
Ruby Rupner Auditorium, J.C. Hormel Nature Center
5:30 pm

PRESENT: Mayor Stiehm, Council Member-at-Large Anderson, Council Members Austin, McAlister, King, Clennon, Pacholl and Martin.

ABSENT: None.

STAFF PRESENT: Jon Erichson, Craig Hoium, Craig Byram, John Garry.

ALSO PRESENT: Austin Post Bulletin and Austin Daily Herald.

Mayor Stiehm opened the meeting at 6:00 pm.

Main Street Project

Craig Byram, president of the Main Street Project, gave a report to Council. The program was organized in 2005 and actual work was underway by 2006. So far there have been 27 renovation projects. There is also a rent reimbursement program. Sometimes it is difficult to renovate while renting so there is a small stipend available to help defray rental for the first year. There is a small project program for renters that includes a matching \$2500 grant. This is a forgivable loan for up to two years. One example of this is the canvass painting at Rydjour Bike. One of the committees of the Main Street Project is working on promotion and an awareness of downtown. Sarah Douty, the Main Street Project director, is collecting data on available space so there is a one-stop shop for this information. Included in the database is who the landlord is, and what the square footage is. The goal for 2010 is to give a privately owned focus to public spaces by creating a streetscape atmosphere. A more inviting atmosphere is the goal, and this would involve streets, sidewalks and open areas to include bike racks, benches, etc. The program currently has over thirty volunteers and one part-time staff. Challenges for the future include the new open space created by the fire of January 2009. Already some people have stepped forward and may be interested in this area. The group will be looking to see what is the next step. The Main Street Project has received another Hormel Foundation grant; that grant is not taxed.

Council Member-at-Large suggested some container gardening for the fire area. This could be a citizen project.

Council Member-at-Large Anderson also suggested a brown highway sign for the interstate, such as Owatonna has for its Village of Yesteryear. Mr. Byram made note of the suggestion.

Mayor Stiehm suggested a mural project similar to what Wadena has. The murals are mostly historical and together create a puzzle. Perhaps the Main Street Project could promote this.

Council Member-at-Large Anderson questioned if there might be matching grants available from other places. Mr. Byram thought there might possibly exist some outside funds, particularly if they are for historical purposes. He noted that the Black Bart's building had that done; it added interest for selling.

Mayor Stiehm asked if there were any plans for the First Bank building/Bradley renovation going east. He noted those buildings have sat empty for ages. Mr. Byram said Bradley is not actively leasing as he didn't want to bother tenants during the renovation. He noted that the Main Street Project is still interested in going east. It is one of their priorities.

DCA

Executive Director John Garry noted that in 2009, there was a good prospect for a company locating to Austin, but the company decided not to locate here, or anywhere, for financial reasons. He spoke on the Town Meeting Initiative which involved discussion about entrepreneurial ideas to involve the community. Two ideas which came out of those meetings were a plant for the soybean market to market to Japan. Also, a doctor at Austin Medical Clinic is doing work in biological research. There may be four projects that come out of this. The Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation is doing a lot of promoting to get communities to work together, and the DCA has been involved in that. The DCA is looking to expand their membership through businesses. The DCA is also marketing the Cook Farm Industrial Park. Mr. Garry gave a presentation on the new DCA website. He noted that Google has an application where you can get indepth information on who is using your website, which DCA has used. This is useful for targeting our market.

Community Development

Community Development Director Craig Hoium discussed projects worked on over the last year. APC is expanding on a "fast track" and they have new accounts. There are two separate building additions planned. CRC has a first right of refusal for some property in the Cook Farm Industrial Park for their expansion. The company employs a number of people and an addition would be a huge asset if they do proceed, he noted. The 4th St reconstruction may be incorporated with that expansion perhaps. He noted that that is the direction that the community is going - north. Projected projects for 2010 include the Ellis school expansion, the Watts property hotel project, McDonald's redevelopment, some potential restaurants, an investor looking at an adult care and locating national restaurant, JoAnn Fabrics. A local trucker is looking at the NE Industrial Park. Mr. Hoium gave an update on the justice center property acquisition. Anytime Fitness is appealing their payout. As for the Building Department, Mr. Hoium noted that we are doing quite well considering the economic condition. There were 1500 building permits issued with a valuation of over \$48,000,000. Ten single-family homes were built. Taxable retail sales are showing a positive increase. One of the goals of the department is to provide good service to citizens. Council Member King questioned if the department kept track of the clean-up properties. The department physically cleaned up around 50 properties. Council Member King asked if there was any correlation between the clean-up properties and the proposed crime-free housing. Mr. Hoium noted there was some correlation. He said there are a lot of repeat

offenders. Some of the offenders are absent property owners, but most are local landlords who own ten or twelve properties.

Public Works

Public Works Director Jon Erichson said that at some point, he would like to talk about an overall comprehensive plan, similar to Albert Lea's "Blue Plan". This would include sidewalks, etc. Council Member King agreed that our plan is not comprehensive – such as the sidewalks in Bustad. He agreed that we need a more comprehensive plan. Council Member-at-Large Anderson said she would like to see more bike lanes, make it easier for bicyclists. Council Member Clennon asked how often the City resurfaces the parking lots. Mr. Erichson said there is no policy; they are just reviewed. The arena parking lot is a \$70-80K project. This is the worst lot. It was taken out of the 2009 projects due to the budget. Environmentally, the leaf program is very popular. As for recycling, he asked if we want to as a community look at something different. As for energy, we should set standards just with ourselves. This would include buildings and streetlights. Sometimes we need to set the example, Erichson said.

Council Member-at-Large Anderson suggested retrofitting with LED lights as was suggested at a LMC meeting. Mr. Erichson said they had planned on retrofitting, but this was one of the budget cuts. Council Member King said Lakeville has large containers for recycling, but they don't sort. He would love to see the program expand without too much effort. Mr. Erichson noted that it is a county program, but sometimes there needs to be citizens to make the push. Discussion followed on the convenience/inconvenience for some to recycle. Mr. Erichson thought this is an idea that could be brought up at a City-County Committee meeting. Regarding the manifold plan for flood mitigation, Mr. Erichson would like to see support from the Council and the City for a watershed-based approach and carry it out to the county level. Also we need to ask ourselves how important snowplowing is and if we should be doing more street patching work as salt and asphalt costs are going way up. He added that sometimes the City needs to take the lead and not give up in certain areas. We should be looking at customer expectations. As a city, we should ask how we could serve citizens better.

GOALS

Council reviewed the 2009 Council goals and discussed them. They are:

- LGA reductions... Find creative solutions
- Flood mitigation implementation
- Research and consider promoting a regional council of governments for SE MN
- Take a leadership role and involve citizens in reducing the community's carbon footprint and encourage development of alternative energy sources
- Prepare a succession plan for key personnel
- Economic development
 - a) Main Street Project – emphasis on blighted property
 - b) Continue to work on attracting industry to the

Cook Farm Industrial Park

- c) Seek bioscience and alternative energy development
- d) Continue emphasis on centralizing economic development efforts
- e) Comprehensive Plan revision areas of emphasis: Reduce maintenance of park flood lands, improve 10th Drive SE area

Mayor Stiehm said the North Main flood mitigation project (including the retaining wall) *has* to get done this year and said we will have to do it on our own if we do not get the grant. Council Member King said we need to decide what it will look like. Council Member Martin expressed concern that the water may flow to his residential area as a result of the flood wall. Council Member-at-Large Anderson and City Administrator Jim Hurm reassured him that the city engineer said it won't, and the modeling says it won't. Mayor Stiehm added that the last flood was the second highest on record but the damage was the second lowest. So we are heading in the right direction.

Council discussed its ideas for reducing the carbon footprint. Council Members King and Anderson said they would like to see bike lanes, adding that this is a low cost solution. Recycling was discussed. The Mayor would like to see more recycling in parks. A large part is setting an example, he noted. Council Member King would like to encourage more participation in recycling. Council Member-at-Large Anderson said she would like to encourage businesses to set up their own bike racks, and possibly the Main St Project could help with this effort. Council Member Martin said he received much information from the National League of Cities on all kinds of energy and recycling information. He will share that with Council.

Council said they would like to hold an open public meeting to receive citizen input on these ideas and others for energy reduction. The meeting should be televised, and perhaps people could call in.

Council Member McAlister said the City has been dealing with LGA reductions so why are we even thinking of spending money on trails. The LGA reduction is his greatest concern.

Mayor Stiehm said the Leaders Group meets monthly and we are putting together a group to redefine government (with collaborative efforts). They are researching how we can lessen the cost of government.

Mayor Stiehm noted that Rochester Mayor Brede said 15 out of their 19 units voluntarily gave up contracted and agreed-on wage increases. They have agreed to furloughs. Could we pattern after Rochester on this?

Council would like to see a zero percent increase in wages for 2011. Council Member-at-Large Anderson said she would like hands-on as much as possible and frequent updates.

More discussion followed on the Leaders Group committee called the "Solutions Summit" to consolidate costs. They will be asking the state legislature to remove all kinds of mandates. Mayor Stiehm said now we are competing with each other. But could we combining school administrators? Police forces?

Council Member Clennon said the State went to the MnSCU system. Now each one is doing their own thing, and they're falling apart.

Council Member Clennon said she would like a survey done on the lists of all services. What are citizens willing to pay for? She would like to take the Solutions Summit ideas to the Coalition's Legislative Action Day on February 17. She would also like to have a survey put on the website.

Council discussed a regional council of governments. The Southeastern Minnesota League of Cities is the best avenue, noted Mr. Hurm. The next meeting is scheduled for January 27 in Rochester.

Some discussion followed on economic development, including the thought of centralizing it with a visitor's center, Chamber of Commerce and the DCA. Council Member King noted that the fire site is on the front burner, and we need to keep the public informed. It was noted that there is a public perception that the property is city-owned. Public relations work is needed here, noted Council Member-at-Large Anderson. Council Member Martin said we should ask Attorney Craig Byram to update the City and citizens quarterly on this, and also include in public, televised forum with other ideas. As for economic development, he noted that everything is slowed down.

Mayor Stiehm said that for the succession plan, we could have a streamlined procedure.

Mike Rose, reporter from the Austin Daily Herald, encouraged council members to write letters to the editor. People do read those.

Council Member Martin read a prepared statement to Council. He said we are a diverse group, and conflict is inevitable but it need not be destructive. He admitted that he is sometimes harsh. He said there are many issues facing the citizens of Austin and they should be addressed if each member is allowed to discuss. We need to do the same here as in the work sessions. We should define our common ground. Change is very difficult, and Council struggles with that.

Mayor Stiehm accepted Council Member Martin's comments. We just move forward after we don't hear from the rest of council. But it is important not to disrupt the system. You are on council to work with the system, but it seems to me you don't like the system we're working with, he told Council Member Martin. You don't have a lot of faith in us. He understands that he chooses to represent certain citizens, but he (sometimes) has a different viewpoint. Mayor Stiehm said he hopes to see in the papers that we are working together. This does not mean that I want to ignore you, he told Council Member Martin. Sometimes you are 80 degrees off what we are talking about. And sometimes you have some very good ideas.

Council Member said he doesn't mean to "get 80 degrees off." There is a caste of citizens that call and deserve that representation, he said. We let go of an opportunity to make our system better. I think we got used to business as usual.

Council Member-at-Large Anderson said Council Member Martin had some very good comments. She recalled the very first meeting with Former Council Member Hecimovich who said we will have our differences, and then we will vote. But we must walk out of the room and respect each other. I think it's worked that way. She believes the code of conduct board will work. If there are issues to discuss, Council should talk to the mayor or Jim Hurm. If the board says it is not an issue, we will move on from there.

City Administrator Jim Hurm said he appreciated the discussion. He suggested a mandatory open discussion at the end of each work session. That may solve conflict.

Mayor Stiehm said that could be a time when if anyone wants something on the next agenda, it could be requested at that time.

Council Member Pacholl said we as council still have to work with it to make it work. We may not always get what we want personally.

Council Member King said he appreciated Council Member Martin's comments. It appears that when we make our statements, we are too negative. He noted that we have an excellent city staff, but we put upon them that we second guess them. As a council, we need to be more supportive of ourselves and city staff. We hope we are more positive, more supportive.

Mayor Stiehm said we should never question motives or desires. We have to realize that we are all committed, and it is all about working together and compromising. If you are not, people won't listen anymore and you will negate your importance to the group.

Council Member McAlister said he appreciated Council Member Martin's words tonight. He was not happy about last night and this helps bring balance back. He admitted he doesn't express himself much. He said he wants to listen to other people's opinions as there is a chance he could be wrong. He said he has pride for this city in which he has been connected for over 30 years. He has served on the School Board for thirteen and the City Council for five years. "I try to do the right thing. Don't tell me I'm full of it, but tell me why."

Drawing on her experience on the Planning Commission, Council Member-at-Large Anderson said she is open to testimony of citizens, staff, etc.; it is important to have an open mind. She would like to have a better understanding of the 'nay' votes. Sometimes it's a matter of understanding, she said.

Council Member Clennon brought up the committee assignments that were given last night. There were 25 assignments, and three people have 18. Council Member-at-Large Anderson noted that her job prevented her from being on some boards. Some are given due to seniority and availability. Mayor Stiehm said the committees have been working well. At this point, he said he would not kick people off committees. If there is anything open in the future, you are welcome to ask for it.

Council Member Clennon noted that some council members are allowed to have differences and no one notices. With others, there is a barrage of discussion to convince them to go their way. Mayor Stiehm said a lot of times it is the manner in which something is presented.

Council Member Martin said he appreciated everyone's honesty. He realizes he is "rough around the edges." When he is honest, he noted, sometimes it comes out wrong. It is something I have to work on on a daily basis, he said. My learning curve is greater than others. But honesty is the key. I have learned a lot from every one of you. He told Council Member McAlister that he felt he needed to break that wall last night, but it took on a life of its own.

Mayor Stiehm nominated Council Members King, Austin, Anderson and Clennon to serve on the ethics conduct committee. The committee should meet when they want and should pick their own chair. Others may attend. We will treat this committee like the Fire Committee.

Moved by Council Member Austin, seconded by Council Member King, adjourning the meeting.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeanne Howatt