

**CITY COUNCIL JOINT WORK SESSION
CITY OF RAMSEY
ANOKA COUNTY
STATE OF MINNESOTA**

The Ramsey City Council conducted a Special City Council Work Session on Tuesday, September 23, 2021, at the Ramsey Municipal Center, 7550 Sunwood Drive NW, Ramsey, Minnesota.

Members Present: Mayor Mark Kuzma
Councilmember Ryan Heineman
Councilmember Chelsea Howell
Councilmember Debra Musgrove
Councilmember Chris Riley
Councilmember Dan Specht
Councilmember Matt Woestehoff

Planning Commission

Members Present: Chairperson Randy Bauer
Commissioner Bruce Anderson
Commissioner Cheri Gengler
Commissioner Eric Peters
Commissioner Gary VanScoy
Commissioner Brian Walker

EDA Members

Present: Member Scott Cords
Member William MacLennan

Also Present: City Administrator Kurtis Ulrich
City Engineer Bruce Westby
Senior Planner Chloe McGuire Brigl
Economic Development Manager Sean Sullivan

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Kuzma called the Special City Council Work Session to order at 5:30 p.m.

2. TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

2.01: Discuss COR and Highway 10 Planning/Vision

Planning Commissioner Chair Bauer stated that the Planning Commission requested this joint meeting to ensure that everyone is on the same page as opportunity arises. He stated that there are frequent requests that come forward with changes to the zoning. He stated that clarity is needed to ensure whether everyone wants to continue to follow the plan, or whether changes should be made to the zoning. He stated that the discussion should also include Highway 10, as retailers

have continued to say that visibility from Highway 10 is important. He stated that there have continued to be variance requests for sign height and therefore he would like clarity on that as well and whether that ordinance should be amended to allow taller signs. He stated that the important element is that all bodies are on the same page to ensure the review of applications is consistent throughout the development review process. He referenced the development north of the roundabout at Sunwood and Armstrong, noting that the area is zoned for mixed use (residential and retail) and noted that there was a recent proposal that requested all residential, but the decision was made to stay with mixed use. He stated that additional requests for development will come in and therefore it is important that the vision is clarified to ensure whether the zoning is flexible or whether the plan should be adhered to. He wanted to ensure that all parties are moving in the same direction.

Mayor Kuzma asked for clarity on the sign variances.

Planning Commission Chair Bauer stated that the Commission has reviewed variances for both height and size as retailers and businesses would like to ensure their sign is visible from Highway 10. He stated that if the City is okay with the larger/taller signs, the ordinance should simply be changed rather than requiring an applicant to go through the time and expense of the variance process.

EDA Chair Cords asked if the sign ordinance is blanket across Ramsey or differs depending upon the zoning district. He asked if the variances have come from businesses that are more hidden inside The COR and desire more visibility.

Planning Commission Chair Bauer replied that the sign ordinance has different regulations for each zoning district. He confirmed that the variance requests are coming from businesses within The COR.

Councilmember Musgrove asked for more information on the current process for the variance and whether there would be a suggestion to streamline the process.

Planning Commission Chair Bauer stated that currently the applicant must go through the variance process with the Planning Commission, which requires a public hearing.

Senior Planner McGuire Brigl clarified that the request is actually granted through a Conditional Use Permit (CUP).

Planning Commission Chair Bauer clarified that the applicant would then be required to go through both the Planning Commission and City Council in order to obtain the CUP. He stated that if the ordinance were changed, and the applicant met the updated requirements, the applicant would not be required to go through that additional process and expense.

Councilmember Specht commented that he would be in favor of loosening the requirements within The COR in order to make it easier for businesses.

EDA Chair Cords asked if the sign variance requests are somewhat consistent in manner or whether they are drastically different from one request to another. He explained that his thought was whether there is a formula that could be applied to the ordinance.

Planning Commission Chair Bauer stated that the Commission has attempted to remain consistent in terms of allowed size and height.

Economic Development Manager Sullivan asked if there would be discussion on billboards.

Planning Commissioner Anderson referenced the upcoming Highway 10 project and stated that the City will continue to receive requests for taller signs because the visibility will be impacted by that project. He cautioned the City to think about where signs are placed, the height, and size.

Economic Development Manager Sullivan stated that staff is currently working towards putting together a billboard and sign ordinance along with a lease agreement with iDigital for the billboard. He stated that from a staff perspective he will speak in favor of a larger sign, as that is what businesses continue to ask for, recognizing that the Planning Commission would favor a smaller sign. He stated that when working on the lease agreement, there has been a question of whether political advertising would be allowed. He explained that political advertising is not allowed on City property, but in this instance a private company would be leasing the property. He noted that there would not be adult content advertising allowed.

EDA Member MacLennan stated that the challenge to attracting businesses to The COR is the lack of visibility, which is why a larger sign is needed. He stated that the purpose of the billboard is to advertise for businesses and therefore he would support a larger sign only for the purpose of business advertising and would not support political advertising.

Councilmember Musgrove stated that part of the messaging can include community events, which may have political involvement and therefore there could be a gray area.

Economic Development Manager Sullivan stated that this private company will sell ads to pay the lease and earn revenue. He asked whether this would be considered City land, which would then not allow political advertising, or whether this would be considered private as it is land that is being leased and therefore political ads could be purchased.

Councilmember Specht stated that he would prefer to leave it open for the company to decide. He suggested that legal counsel be consulted to determine whether or not that would be considered City property.

Planning Commissioner VanScoy stated that the ordinance is clear that if the City owns the land that type of advertising is not allowed.

Economic Development Manager Sullivan stated that legal counsel was consulted and there is a difference if the land is being leased.

Planning Commissioner Walker stated that when this came before the Commission he was opposed because the ordinance is being changed for the benefit of the City which he has a problem with. He stated that if this moves forward and the company leases the land, he does not see why political ads would not be allowed as those would generate revenue.

Councilmember Heineman asked if that would take away from the opportunity for businesses to advertise.

EDA Chair Cords replied that there are stipulations in the lease that would state the percentage of advertising that must be for businesses.

Planning Commissioner Walker suggested only allowing political ads for 30 days prior to an election rather than three months prior.

EDA Chair Cords asked if the City is leasing property to any businesses and whether those businesses are placing political signs on that property.

Economic Development Manager Sullivan confirmed that the City leases multiple properties along Highway 10 and those leases include language that does not allow political advertising on the property.

Planning Commissioner Walker stated that if the opportunity is open to other landowners, he would be supportive but at this time feels that the change in ordinance was done in a way to allow the City to generate revenue.

Mayor Kuzma stated that the intent of the billboard is to allow opportunity for businesses to advertise on Highway 10.

Economic Development Manager Sullivan stated that there will always be time allocated to Ramsey businesses and City events, per the lease. He confirmed that Ramsey businesses would also have a reduced rate for advertising.

Councilmember Heineman stated that related to signage he is more inclined to look at intent. He noted that the intent of the ordinance language is to prevent political advertising on City property and the intent of the billboard is to create advertising opportunity for businesses. He therefore did not see why political advertising would be allowed.

EDA Member MacLennan stated that when it comes down to it, the company pushed back requesting an allowance for political ads. He stated that perhaps that is an opportunity to generate additional income.

Economic Development Manager Sullivan stated that the comment was made that political ads are a good revenue source that can be counted on every two years.

Councilmember Musgrove stated that while she agrees with the intent stated by Councilmember Heineman, she would also be open to having the company provide additional information on political ads.

Councilmember Woestehoff stated that when he was on the Planning Commission it felt that there historically have been decisions where the vision for The COR have been sidestepped. He stated that it would be great to have it solidified that the desire is for a Main Street concept down Sunwood, but variations continue to be allowed. He asked if the vision is for a Main Street and small-town feel, or whether the desire is for something else. He stated that he would favor holding out to create the desired vision rather than continuing to accommodate variations.

Councilmember Heineman stated that it appears that Champlin does not allow political, tobacco, vaping or other adult ads on their billboard.

Planning Commissioner VanScoy commented that there is a plan for monuments along Highway 10 to advertise for the businesses within The COR. He stated that those monuments would serve a good purpose.

City Administrator Ulrich stated that the broader topic is development within The COR. He referenced the parcel at the corner of Ramsey Boulevard and Sunwood Drive which has had some retail development and has additional interest from PACT Charter School for a High School location. He stated that although that type of tax-exempt development within The COR does not generate income, it does create a destination use. He stated that the original vision for that area was office type use. He asked whether the Council would be open to different use on that parcel, whether that be PACT or retail. He stated that options will come forward as that corner will continue to have good visibility. He recognized that the retail market has changed and there has to be some flexibility to the vision in order to accommodate market forces. He stated that The COR has been in existence for 20 years and this is a time where adjustment may be needed to adjust to the market.

Jason Tossey, PACT Charter School Board of Directors member, stated that the school has a vision to double, which would include multiple sites. He stated that the school can financially support the vision to expand. He stated that PACT uses Northgate Church for its plays and other programs. He explained that PACT is a public charter school and they would like the opportunity for students to continue from kindergarten to 12th grade. He stated that utilizing the space across Sunwood would allow them to create a campus feeling. He stated that they would like to work with the City to possibly double the size of the school within The COR.

Josh Nyquist, Executive Director of Building Operations, PACT, stated that they are a public school and they continue to grow with a waiting list. He stated that they want to be the high school for Ramsey. He stated that they have looked at a number of sites but would prefer to have a site close to the existing school.

Kao Vang, Development Manager, PACT stated that they are early in the process. He stated that using the existing enrollment and waiting list, they have generated a model to predict future space needs. He stated that they have reviewed opportunities within Ramsey and did not find many

options that would fit their needs. He stated that even though a portion of the site has been sold, they would still have sufficient space to fit the school building and regulation sized football field. He stated that if there is support from the City, they would continue to work on plans and bring them forward.

Mr. Tossey stated that when he explained it to the Board of Directors, he used the concept of Friday night lights, noting that this would create a destination in the community which would support ancillary businesses. He stated that Ramsey and PACT have worked in partnership since 2004 and they would like to continue that.

Councilmember Musgrove recognized that this is early in the process but noted that she likes the idea. She asked when this would be anticipated to begin construction if this is supported.

Mr. Tossey stated that they would hope to be open by August of 2023, recognizing that is an ambitious timeline.

Councilmember Riley asked if PACT would be stuck on a location within The COR. He stated that he supports the expansion but is hesitant on the location within The COR.

Mr. Nyquist replied that they feel vested in The COR as they have been in their location since 2004. He stated that they do have other options they are looking at but would prefer this location.

Councilmember Riley stated that he likes the idea but would be open to looking at other locations.

Councilmember Heineman stated that it would make sense to have the PACT buildings near each other for parent drop off. He stated that bringing a school into that area would help to improve the local economy. He stated that the field would be a great attraction as well and would increase business activity. He stated that what may be lost in tax revenue, would be gained through additional customers for businesses. He stated that it would also be a draw for additional residents to come to Ramsey and would be part of the identity for Ramsey to have its own high school. He believed this is a great idea.

EDA Chair Cords asked what other sites have been considered.

Mr. Nyquist stated that he would rather not share those locations.

Mr. Vang stated that they have reviewed 29 sites within a four-mile radius, which was then reduced to 11 and then to four. He stated that the City zoning is very restrictive and educational uses are not permitted uses on any site other than the site within The COR. He stated that if the location is moved too far from the original campus there would be additional challenges.

Mr. Nyquist stated that there are some teachers that teach in both elementary and secondary and noted that there would be benefit to keeping the buildings close.

Councilmember Specht commented that he believes this would add a lot to the community. He recognized the statement that staff could go between buildings and asked if students would go between schools too.

Mr. Nyquist replied that there would be older students going between the buildings to help with younger students.

Councilmember Howell stated that she is very supportive of the plan. She stated that kids could get jobs within The COR that they could walk to or could walk to the apartments if they live there. She also liked the idea of football games bringing in additional patrons to other businesses.

Councilmember Heineman stated that he used to live in Blaine and that sports center has a huge draw for local businesses. He stated that PACT sports do bring in additional customers for businesses.

EDA Member MacLennan stated that his children attend Spectrum and one of the main reasons was because they have an expanded campus. He stated that expansion within the same area is very convenient for parent drop off. He stated that having a larger charter school would be a great draw for Ramsey. He acknowledged that it would change the vision for that area, but did not believe it would take away from the area.

Councilmember Woestehoff asked the number of acres that would be necessary.

Mr. Vang replied that they would need 15 to 18 acres.

Councilmember Woestehoff stated that across from his home is a large site owned by Connexus that he did not believe is used.

Economic Development Manager Sullivan stated that Anderson Dahlen is purchasing 13 of those 15 acres for its expansion and therefore that site will be off the market.

EDA Chair Cords asked if there is sufficient road and traffic control capacity to handle a high school and sporting event traffic.

Mr. Nyquist stated that for sporting events they would be able to utilize the parking for the elementary and secondary schools. He believed that would provide sufficient parking for special events and sporting events. He noted that the proximity to Highway 10 would also be convenient for moving traffic in and out of the site.

Councilmember Riley stated that he is supportive of the idea but would prefer a different location. He noted that this parcel is within a TIF district and would not generate any TIF. He stated that this parcel would also contribute to the regional stormwater basin that was designed for high density use while this would be a low-density use.

Mr. Nyquist stated that 80 percent of the students are from Anoka County while about 50-60 percent are from Ramsey.

Mr. Tossey stated that they have considered adding to the PACT name to clarify the location in Ramsey within the name.

Planning Commissioner Gengler stated that when she first reviewed the request, she was not sure this was the best use for the space. She asked if there have been conversations about shared facilities; whether the campus would be closed or whether there would be opportunity for community and athletic groups to share the facility.

Mr. Nyquist confirmed that they are open to sharing the amenities with community groups, such as the auditorium and athletic areas. He noted that they have been in discussion with ARAA to get input on the types of spaces that group would be interested in for their needs.

Planning Commissioner VanScoy stated that there was discussion of a split campus and people moving between the sites. He asked how pedestrian safety would be addressed.

Mr. Nyquist stated that in a typical day students would remain within their building. He stated that for after school activities there would be a crossing guard to assist with crossing.

Councilmember Specht stated that he believes there would be community and/or business use interest in using the auditorium.

City Administrator Ulrich stated that the project would rely on the purchase of private property along with the City owned property. He noted that if the Council agrees with the concept, they could continue to work out the details through a staff review process. He stated that the cost and benefits to the City would be determined through that process and shared with the Council.

Economic Development Manager Sullivan asked if the group would like to discuss the other proposal. He stated that he has an active development proposal that would like to place the property under purchase agreement. He stated that if the desire is to move forward with PACT, he would like to provide that direction to the other proposer.

Councilmember Riley asked for details on the other proposal, whether it is a concept or whether there are businesses attached.

Economic Development Manager Sullivan stated that Java Companies submitted the proposal. He stated that Java has spoken with a number of businesses that are interested including a coffee business and carwash. He stated that a restaurant and general retailer are also shown in the concept. He noted that a four-story hotel was also shown in the concept, although he was not fully supportive of that option in that location.

City Administrator Ulrich stated that this would not have to be an either/or situation. He noted that perhaps staff could work with both groups on locating within The COR. He stated that perhaps with flexibility they could accomplish both retail and a high school campus within The COR.

Councilmember Specht asked if the carwash and coffee business are tied in firm or whether it is just a concept.

Economic Development Manager Sullivan stated that in his discussions with Java, there appear to be agreements with those two businesses, should it be approved. He stated that Java believes that the traffic that would be generated from those two uses would bring in interest from other components. He stated that Java is willing to enter into the purchase agreement process and he wants to be fair to that process and alert Java if this site will be reserved for PACT.

Senior Planner McGuire Brigl commented that Java has stated that this would be the desired retail corner for Ramey and the only one that would have this type of interest.

Councilmember Heineman stated that based on this concept he would not favor a hotel with that amount of parking and would not be a huge fan of the car wash. He stated that while retail would be great, there is vacant retail on the other side of The COR already. He stated that he does want retail but believes that this would be a great location for PACT and the PACT project would bring in additional business interest. He stated that as presented he would not favor the Java proposal over the high school.

Councilmember Musgrove stated that the original COR plan included multiple parking garages that may not be needed and perhaps some of that space could be freed up for additional retail use. She stated that she also prefers the school in that location.

Economic Development Manager Sullivan stated that he also was not a supporter of the hotel in that location and provided that feedback to Java. He stated that he asked about an Aldi at that location as it would provide additional opportunity without directly competing with Coborn's. He stated that Java took that feedback and is having discussions with Aldi. He stated that retailers and developers are stating that the hard corners are where they want to be. He stated that while retail can be created more in the heart of The COR, the corners are where they want to be.

EDA Member MacLennan commented that with the overpass, that corner will be a premier location whether it is PACT or retail. He agreed that staff should have flexibility to see what they could work out with both parties.

Planning Commissioner Gengler stated that this is a prime retail location that would benefit all residents of Ramsey. She asked if there is any data that schools would bring in additional customers for the existing businesses.

Councilmember Woestehoff stated that Anoka High School is a great example where it probably only generates customers for the gas stations adjacent. He noted that Ramsey would have a better opportunity with more businesses in that area, but would also want to see more data to support that this use would bring in more business interest and/or customers.

Councilmember Heineman did not believe this could be compared to Anoka High School as that school has existed for decades and there is not much retail development opportunity in that area.

Councilmember Specht stated that perhaps staff could work with both parties to find a solution that would allow both. He noted that the City has been promised that businesses want to come, but that often falls through. He stated that PACT would be guaranteed to move forward to fruition and therefore he would support the school in that location.

Councilmember Musgrove stated that residents have brought forward concern with development proposals within the rural area of Ramsey and asked if that would be discussed. She suggested that there be more discussion and public input on the rezoning of properties within the rural areas. She asked if there is willingness to change the zoning and move that type of development closer to The COR.

City Administrator Ulrich stated that perhaps that be discussed at a future worksession as that would be a policy decision.

Planning Commission Chair Bauer stated that part of the 2040 Comprehensive Plan included development in certain areas. He noted that developers have provided input that there is a desire for smaller lots in order to lower the price point on homes. He stated that there is a shortage of affordable homes for first time buyers.

Councilmember Musgrove commented that residents are providing feedback that should also be considered in addition to the comments from developers.

Councilmember Woestehoff stated that there is good case law about down zoning or up zoning. He stated that if there is a developer already in the process, there would be legal ramifications in changing the zoning.

Councilmember Howell stated that she would also like to have that conversation as she would be interested in what the residents want in addition to what the developers want.

3. ADJOURNMENT

The Special Work Session of the City Council was adjourned at 7:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,


Kurtis G. Ulrich
City Administrator

ATTEST:


Katie M. Schmidt

Deputy City Clerk

Drafted by Amanda Staple
TimeSaver Off Site Secretarial, Inc.