

New Castle City Planning Commission Meeting
Minutes
1 Municipal Boulevard, New Castle, DE
April 22, 2024 – 7:00 p.m.

Members Present: Margo Reign, Chair
Brie Rivera
Cynthia Batty
Kristin Zumar
Tamara Stoner

Absent: Keaira Faña-Ruiz
Very Worthy
Timothy Gibbs
David Majewski

Also Present: Christopher J. Rogers, City Planner
Andrew Hayes, Sr. Engineer & Landscape Architect, Foresite Group
Chruni Patihanda, General Manager, NCC Land Use
Karen Horton, AICP, Delaware State Housing Authority

Ms. Reign called the Planning Commission meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. Roll call followed and a quorum to conduct business was declared.

Minutes

A motion to approve the minutes of the April 22, 2024, regular meeting as amended was made by Ms. Rivera, seconded by Ms. Stoner and unanimously carried.

Public Comment

There were no comments from the public.

Review and Discussion of Planning Commission By-Laws

The Commissioners reviewed the first draft of the Rules and Procedures for the Planning Commission that was reviewed by the City Solicitor. Ms. Reign noted changes to the draft and Commissioner suggestions were discussed, including.

1. Day of meeting – Add that the Chair can change not only the time of the meeting but the day of the meeting.
2. Submittal of applications – Applications requiring Planning Commission review should be submitted 30 days prior to the scheduled Planning Commission meeting.
3. The length of meetings – A two (2) hour limit is proposed unless a majority of Commissioners agree to extend the meeting time. Mr. Rogers noted that it will be difficult to limit expert testimony for rezoning, Comprehensive Plan amendments, special exceptions, etc. Ms. Reign will discuss this with the City Solicitor.
4. Scheduling meetings – The Planning Commission usually tries to review applications at the next scheduled meeting if they submit on time; also, the Code requires that subdivisions are reviewed within a specific time frame.

5. Attendance – Ms. Batty suggested adding “or four (4) meetings within six (6) months” to Article 1.C. During discussion it was noted that the authority to remove a Commissioner lies with City Council.
6. Public Comment – Written public comments will be accepted up until 3:00 p.m. on the day of the meeting.
7. Agenda – “HAC Update” should be added as an Agenda Item.
8. New Ideas – Ms. Reign stated that the Chair needs to be notified of any new ideas or suggestions of substance, and those topics need to be added as Agenda Items. During discussion Ms. Zumar stated that discussions should be about items that are within the purview of the Planning Commission, and not topics that are within the purview of another Commission or City Council. Mr. Rogers advised against conducting a lengthy discussion on any topic that is not listed as an Agenda Item.

Subdivision Plan – Michael Dorph and Leah Justis – 907 Gray Street

The applicant was not in attendance. Mr. Rogers stated that on December 20, 2023, the Board of Adjustment approved necessary variances described in General Note 16 on the subdivision plan; and items in his letter of May 16, 2024 have been addressed by the applicant with the exception of Item 4 (signature blocks) and Item 5 (“parcels” should be labeled as “lots”).

There being no questions or discussion from Commission members, Ms. Reign called for a motion.

A motion was made by Ms. Zumar to approve the subdivision plan contingent on minor changes, signature block and “parcels” to “lots”, per Mr. Roger’s letter of May 16, 2024, to Antonina Tantillo. The motion was seconded by Ms. Batty and unanimously carried.

Site Plan – Route 273 Trailhead Improvements, Jack Markell Trail

Mr. Andrew Hayes, Sr. Engineer & Landscape Architect, Foresite Group, consultant for New Castle County on this project, made a presentation of proposed improvements to the Jack Markell Trail trailhead. Improvements include:

- A total of 61 parking spaces, including ADA parking spaces.
- A circular “plaza” turnaround for vehicles coming and going as well as emergency access.
- A DART bus stop.
- The existing sidewalk along the frontage will be removed and replaced with a 10’ wide sidewalk farther from the roadway.
- Art installations along the trail and in the plaza. Chruni Patihanda, General Manager, NCC Land Use, explained the art component.
- A bike station with an air pump and tools and a bike rack.
- Kiosk with information about the Trail.
- Bollards to restrict vehicular traffic on the trail. Mr. Hayes noted that Good Will Fire Company approved the location and spacing of the bollards for ATV access.
- Drainage structures at both ends of the parking lot. The entrance will be modified to better direct water to a drainage structure.

- Trees along the frontage will be removed and Cherry trees, low shrubs, Yucca, and native grasses will be planted. None of the plantings will create a safety issue in terms of blocking the sightline into the parking lot. Shade trees will be planted on the outside of the parking lot.

Mr. Hayes responded to questions from Commission members:

- The plan does not include bathroom and drinking water facilities.
- The current crosswalk will remain. Ms. Zumar asked if signage for the crosswalk could be enlarged and/or made more noticeable. Mr. Hayes stated that he would pass that request on to DelDOT.
- The bike tools and pump will be maintained by the County. The Colonial School District will continue to cut the grass and plow snow. The County will be responsible for maintaining the new improvements.
- The entrance will be large enough to provide adequate ingress and egress.

Mr. Hayes stated that suggestions from Commission members would be added to the plan, including:

- Provide signage near working facilities with a phone number to report items that are not working or are damaged.
- Once the Plan is approved, an article will be submitted to The Weekly to inform the public about the improvements.
- Install EV charging stations in the parking lot if possible. Ms. Patihanda will discuss this with the City Administrator.

The project will be completed by June 2025.

Ms. Batty restated suggestions made:

- EV charging stations.
- Improve the crosswalk signage.
- Insure maintenance of the facilities by adding a phone number on signage to report broken items.

Mr. Rogers explained that there are no regulations requiring action by the Planning Commission; however, the City Solicitor stated the Planning Commission should take formal action on the site plan. Mr. Rogers recommended that any motion include receiving confirmation from Good Will Fire Company that they approved the Plan and from Police Chief McCabe prior to the Plan being approved by City Council.

A motion was made by Ms. Batty to approve the Site Plan SR273 Trailhead for the Jack Markell Trail as presented with the condition that Good Will Fire Company and the Chief of Police officially sign off on the Plan prior to approval by City Council and with the following suggestions:

- Add an EV charging station if possible;

- Improve crosswalk signage so users easily understand they need to push the button to get across safely; and
- That maintenance of the facilities will be managed by the County and the School District and at all places where there is a point of failure a phone number will be provided for users to report a problem.

The motion was seconded by Ms. Zumar and unanimously carried.

Housing Authority Presentation

Mr. Rogers introduced Karen Horton, AICP, Delaware State Housing Authority (DSHA), who gave a presentation on affordable housing in Delaware and housing in the City of New Castle. Ms. Horton introduced Vanessa Cullen, DSHA Emergency Management Coordinator.

Ms. Horton reviewed affordable housing, an overview of the Housing Needs Assessment, and a Land Use Analysis.

- The 2023 Housing Use Assessment was based on demographic data, housing production, housing costs, stakeholder interviews and a resident survey. The response to the resident surveys was so substantial that it was statistically considered significant.
- For housing to be considered affordable, the housing costs cannot make up more than 30% of the gross household income. Homeowners are “cost burdened” if the gross household income is more than 30%.
- Ms. Horton explained Area Median Income (AMI) as it relates to housing costs, noting that only 20% of homes for sale in Delaware were affordable to homebuyers making less than 120% of the AMI.
- In Delaware half of all renters and about 21% of homeowners are cost burdened; and 8% of all Delawareans are either homeless or on the cusp of being homeless.
- More affordable rentals and more “missing middle” and cottage type houses are needed.
- Ms. Horton reviewed the demographics of New Castle City, noting that 62% of residents are homeowners; which Ms. Horton opined is a good percentage in comparison to other municipalities. Ms. Zumar noted that proposed apartments in New Castle are not “affordable” housing.
- Statewide 25% of all households are comprised of one person.
- Ms. Horton reviewed an analysis of the by-right uses of housing types in all three counties and how many units could be produced if there were more flexible housing regulations.
- Since 2015, 298 small projects and 64 large projects have been completed in the New Castle Downtown Development District.
- Ms. Horton reviewed development “incentive stacking” using State and/or Federal rebates and tax credits.

Ms. Horton will forward a copy of the report and the data dashboard to Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Rogers noted that between River Edge, The Battery and 610 W. 7th Street there are 1,000 apartment units in the pipeline in New Castle. He added that in the R-1 Zone a one-family detached home lot size is 7,500 square feet.

HAC Report

- On Thursday, May 23rd, Kara Briggs will give a presentation on the Preservation Delaware Historic Preservation Tax Credit Program at the New Castle Historical Society.
- HAC is working on a series of things to help new homeowners and businesses when they come into the city.
- Ms. Batty encouraged members to read the Municipal City Code.
- HAC is working on a Procedure for HAC meetings that she will share with the Planning Commission.
- HAC wants to clone what's being done to publish applications and dispositions that the Planning Commission is doing with the University of Delaware to have a better website and make it easier to work with the HAC.

There being no further business to discuss, Ms. Reign called for a motion to adjourn.

A motion to adjourn was made by Ms. Rivera, seconded by Ms. Zumar and unanimously carried, and the meeting adjourned at 9:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathleen R. Weirich
City Stenographer