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DEKALB COUNTY REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION MINUTES

(August 27, 2020)

The DeKalb County Regional Planning Commission (RPC) held a virtual meeting on August 27, 2020 at 6:30 p.m., via Zoom. In attendance were Commission Members: Cheryl Aldis, Dan Olson, Russell Kula, Frank Altmaier, Dan Chambers (alternate), Martha May, Becky Morphey, Brian Gregory, Linda Swenson, and Steve Faivre. Also, in attendance were: Pete Stefan, DeKalb County Finance Director; Dan Templin, from the DeKalb County Community Foundation (DCCF), Mim Evans, from the Northern Illinois University Center for Governmental Studies (NIU-CGS), and, County Staff members: Derek Hiland, Jolene Willis, and Marcellus Anderson.

1. Roll Call – Mr. Gentile, Ms. Jergens, Mr. Redden, and Ms. Wilson were not in attendance. Ms. May was in attendance and could hear the meeting, but due to a technical difficulty, was unable to be heard.

2. Approval of Agenda

Ms. Morphey moved to approve the agenda, seconded by Mr. Faivre. A roll call vote was held, and the motion carried unanimously.

3. Approval of Minutes

Mr. Gregory moved to approve the minutes of the June 25, 2020 meeting, seconded by Ms. Morphey. A roll call vote was held, and the motion carried with eight (8) voting yes, zero (0) voting no, and one (1) abstention (Mr. Chambers).

4. Public Comments

None.

5. CEDS – Community Champions Committee Report

Mr. Hiland introduced Dan Templin and Mim Evans, members of CEDS Team 5 – Community Champions Committee, who gave a presentation on the progress of the CEDS group on countywide collaboration efforts over the past two years.

Mr. Templin informed the Commission that he was the executive director of DCCF, and that he and Ms. Evans were the cochairs of CEDS Team 5. He described the history of the CEDS group and elaborated on the vision that they developed: DeKalb County Thriving Strategic Plan”. He talked about items/ideas put forth by their committee, such as the “Community Champions” concept, which encourage communities to share their experiences with one another. He talked about the DeKalb County Economic Development

Grants program operated by DCCF. He finished by highlighting all of the efforts put forth by Ms. Jolene Willis in support of their efforts.

Ms. Evans informed the Commission that she is with the NIU-CGS, and talked about how the CGS worked with the communities. She elaborated further on the Community Champions Group, explained the importance and origin of the group's name and purpose. She highlighted that the group was uniquely structured around three elements; networking, learning, and sharing, and explained each element in detail. She talked about topics the group has discussed at its meetings and about the things that have been shared at the meetings. She finished by discussing some new groups that could be formed to address specific issues or around some common interests.

Ms. Aldis informed the Commission that she had attended some of the CEDS Group 5 meetings and noted that she found the meetings beneficial.

Mr. Hiland talked about the funding program provided by DCCF and planning grants that they availed to the communities. He also noted that often ideas are developed but are never followed up on due to an inability to find financial backing to support the efforts and ideas. Mr. Templin noted that most of the communities have started the planning process with DCCF, with many having already completed it. He also noted that some have even started projects.

Mr. Templin informed the Commission that DCCF's program was wrapping up, possibly by the end of the year, and that DCCF was in the process of determining what role they will play next.

6. Property Maintenance Codes and Enforcement

Mr. Hiland informed the Commission that one of the topics requested by Commission members was property maintenance codes. He noted that the Commission had discussed this issue in the past, but that it was good to revisit some issues like this again. He explained that the memo included in the Commission packet contained information gleaned from previous discussions and that it also contained the policy on property maintenance for the unincorporated portions of the County. He finished by asking the Commission members to share their experiences in dealing with property maintenance codes and enforcement.

Ms. Aldis noted that resolving property maintenance issues can take a long time, relating that it took Cortland twelve years to resolve the issues with one property and six years with another property. She did note however that one of the properties in question was now a public parking lot. Ms. Aldis informed the Commission that Cortland currently uses the 2006 IRC, and had been planning on updating to the 2015 IRC, but that due to the Covid-19 shutdowns, the process got derailed. She also related that it had been a struggle not having in-house code enforcers.

Mr. Gregory reported that Sycamore had experienced similar issues to the one already described. He noted that communities have to start, pointing out that it will be a journey, but it has to start somewhere.

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He related the City's experiences acquiring a particular property and noted that it seemed like every time they had to tackle issues like these, it seemed to take four to five years to resolve. He noted the importance of setting real expectations and to expect these to be multi-year efforts. Mr. Gregory also noted that the fines should always be a last resort, with compliance being the true goal.

Mr. Olson agreed with Mr. Gregory's statements, noting the need to get started addressing these issues, and highlighting the importance of catching things early on, if possible. Mr. Olson related DeKalb's difficulties in acquiring Campus Cinemas and getting it demolished. He also related their experiences dealing with difficult land owners.

Mr. Hiland noted the importance of having a property maintenance code in place. He reminded them that the County did not have a maintenance code in place, but the communities can have one.

Mr. Altmaier noted that at one point there had been talk about changing the State Laws regarding maintenance codes, in particular, addressing the differences between what home-rule communities and non-home-rule communities can do. He inquired whether there was any interest at the state level to strengthen the enforcement capabilities. Mr. Hiland responded that he did not know the answer, but could look into it. Mr. Hiland did report that the County Board had discussed the issue and that had been determined that it would likely take a countywide coalition to get anything to change.

Mr. Gregory noted that he believed that the City of Genoa may have administrative adjudication, even though they are not home rule. Mr. Altmaier noted that Genoa did, and that Kingston and Kirkland also use the same administrative hearing officer and location as Genoa. Ms. Aldis noted that administrative adjudication did not address all of the issues in question, and that she was aware of legislation being "on the table" with the State, but with no idea when the matter might be picked up again. She also noted some of the shortcomings of being not home-rule. Mr. Altmaier noted that rental licensing ordinances would also be nice.

Ms. Swenson mentioned that a former mayor of Waterman had enough foresight to realize that if the old pizza company factory in the heart of the village ever closed, the Village would be left with a big eyesore similar to what happened with Campus Cinemas in DeKalb. So, he went after them and was able to get the company to sell it to the Village for a dollar. The Village then tore it down and cleaned up the site. She noted that people complain that there is nothing there, but pointed out how much worse the site would have been with an abandoned factory there. Ms. Swenson noted that Waterman has a lot of maintenance issues. She noted that many people seem to think fines are the answer, but she disagrees with that approach.

Mr. Hiland agreed with Mr. Gregory that compliance is the key. He noted that it is not a money maker, and is probably a money loser in terms of a community's budget, but that the return on the quality of life in the community is invaluable. Mr. Gregory added that ultimately it really is a small investment to get neighborhoods to grow and get new construction, pointing out that property maintenance is a good way to maintain levels, and that all communities should prioritize it.

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Ms. Willis informed the Commission about a grant available for returning derelict properties to good use from the Illinois Housing Authority's Revitalization Program. She noted that it was a new program, and that they will be having a webinar on September 1st, and that applications will be due on the 28th. She then relayed the program information to the Commission. She noted that the program was funded out of the State of Illinois' Build America Bond Fund. She noted that the Commission could look into the program.

Mr. Chambers related Kirkland's experience taking down a building and their issues with now having the empty lot. He noted that had received help from Resource Bank. Mr. Chambers noted that in a smaller community like theirs, a vacant property was not easy to fill, and that preservation was more important to them.

7. Covid-19 updates

a. Community Impacts

Mr. Olson related that at the last Council meeting, it was noted that they had 500 late water bills, which was about double that of a normal year. He noted that the City had not done any water shut-offs since March, and that the City's planned to reach out to these people regarding setting set up some kind of payment plan, and to inform them about agencies and resources that are out there that might help them.

Ms. Aldis reported that Cortland had also offered that. She noted that Cortland only had about 1,500 accounts and only billed quarterly, so they did not have quite the problem DeKalb did. She noted that their water operator had pointed out to her that none of the communities with municipal plants were under the Governor's executive order; only those communities using a private operated system run by a contractor that could not be cut off. She noted that Cortland forgave late fees in the March quarter, and that they delayed late fees in the summer. She noted that they have not turned anyone off. Ms. Aldis noted that, unfortunately, no one had come forward to set up a payment plan. She noted that the offers were out there, but that people weren't taking advantage of it.

Mr. Gregory reminded the Commission about the CURES Program put out by DCEO, which had reimbursement dollars for municipalities, and that by October 1st communities are supposed to have an ordinance passed, and certification forms submitted, stating that the community would be participating in the program related to Covid-19 expenditures. He also talked about how the finance numbers were in, and noted that feared trends did not materialize.

Ms. Morphey related Somonauk's experiences with their water bills, noting that they had been lucky so far, with no delinquent bills.

b. DCEO Programs

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Ms. Willis elaborated on the CURES Program, and asked whether all of the Commission members got emails from DCEO regarding their programs. She noted that if they did not, she could forward the emails to them.

8. Census 2020 Update

Mr. Hiland displayed the current census totals for the County and its communities, and noted that the numbers were looking better than the 2010 Census at a comparative timeframe. He noted that counters were out, and reiterated the importance of getting everyone counted.

9. Comprehensive Plan Status for each Community

Mr. Hiland related that the genesis of the item came from the survey given to the Commission members months prior. He talked about past conversations held by the Commission on the topic, noted that it is good to regularly update Comp Plans. He asked the Commission members to inform staff of the date when their community's Comp Plan was last updated and whether their community had copies available, digital or physical.

Mr. Hiland also noted that an updated member roster for the Commission would be sent out to the members to verify the information on it. He also asked that the members also identify how they represent your community: are you an elected official; an appointed one; and just a member of the community.

10. Municipal Development Permits / Projects / Challenges / Champions

Ms. Aldis (Cortland) reported that their permit numbers were up, and noted that they believed it was because everyone was home because of the Covid-19 crisis. She noted that homes were being built and that they had just issued two new permits. She reported that their projects were on hold, with the Fall Parade getting cancelled. She noted that a challenge they had was an old abandoned school building they need to get rid of.

Mr. Kula (Hinckley) that things had been quiet in Hinckley all summer.

Ms. Swenson (Waterman) reported that she had recently listed the biggest commercial building in downtown Waterman, which also contained a house as part of the building. She noted that she had eight showings on commercial buildings so far. She reported that they had one new house going up, and that lots of houses have sold, with many new people moving in.

Mr. Olson (DeKalb) reported that the Facebook and Candy company developments have been very strong. He reported that Gurler Road was closed, and that a roundabout was being constructed at the intersection of Gurler and Peace Roads. He noted that Homes2Suites hotel was scheduled to open in mid-September, and that Aurora Tower and Isaac Suites projects were under construction. He reported that the Raising Cane's Chicken Fingers restaurant should be open by November. Mr. Olson reported that the City had

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received three RFP's for the old city hall site, noting that two involved tearing down the building and putting in residential uses and one involved adding residential uses to the building. He reported that the Council was leaning towards the project proposed by John Pappas, for the building with 76 upscale rentals and executive suites. Mr. Olson reported that at the last Council meeting, the item getting the most discussion was backyard chickens. He noted that the issue is going to be put to the voters to decide.

Mr. Olson asked if any of the other communities allow for backyard chickens. Mr. Chambers responded that Kirkland did, and had regulations on it. Ms. Morphey noted that Somonauk also allows backyard chickens but that they had a stringent ordinance and regulations, and noted that no one had applied to do so.

Mr. Chambers (Kirkland) reported that housing was moving hot, and that home prices were going up.

Ms. Morphey (Somonauk) reported that the school solar project was finished, and that the second one should be done in November. She noted that they would be starting their sports program as soon as the bat training season was over. She noted that they had received their DCCF planning grant. She also noted that they were still working on their water system, had one house permit, and a lot of pool permits.

Mr. Faivre (DeKalb County) reported that the County had recently received applications for twenty-three solar re-applications, so that they could participate in the second round of the State Community Solar Program. He also noted that Syngenta Seeds had applied for a special use to establish a facility on Route 38, west of Malta. Mr. Gregory noted that this was a great example of communities working together to extend the enterprise zone to help Syngenta to come to DeKalb County.

Mr. Gregory (Sycamore) reported that the Covid-19 crisis had slowed residential starts for them, but that they had quite a few in the recent month. He noted that interest had been shown in some older buildings. Mr. Gregory also reported that the State would be redoing Route 23, from Sycamore to Genoa, and where Route 23 and Route 64 overlap.

Mr. Altmaier (Kingston) reported that they had been reviewing building permit fees to ensure that they were in line with their consultant fees, but that it wound up morphing into a review of the whole building permit process, which has led to other considerations changing. Mr. Altmaier cautioned other communities to look at updating their permitting processes and codes to be prepared for when progress happens. He noted that a nursery/landscaper located on Route 72 was moving out. He noted that a dairy trucking business was looking at the site, but that the use was not allowed on the site. He noted that the Village was considering possibly amending the zoning ordinance to allow for the use.

Ms. Willis gave an update on the GIS Infrastructure program, noting that agreements had been signed with Genoa, Sandwich, Kirkland, Shabbona, Somonauk, and Kingston. She encouraged the other communities to join while it was still free to do so. Ms. Aldis inquired about the fee after the first year, and Ms. Willis responded that she did not have the numbers with her, but that the pricing structure was all in the MOU.

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11. Next Meeting Date

Mr. Hiland informed the Commission that the next meeting date would be October 22, 2020.

12. Adjournment

Mr. Altmaier moved to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Ms. Aldis, and the motion carried unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Cheryl Aldis
Chair, DeKalb County Regional Planning Commission

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