

PROCEEDINGS OF THE CITY COMMISSION
CITY OF EAST GRAND RAPIDS

Regular Meeting Held November 17, 2014

Mayor Seibold called the meeting to order at 6:01 p.m. in the Performing Arts Center at the East Grand Rapids High School and led the audience in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Present: Commissioners Dills, Duncan, Graham, Johnson, Miller, Skaggs and Mayor Seibold

Absent: None

Also Present: City Manager Donovan; City Attorney Huff; Public Safety Director Herald; Finance Director Mushong; Parks & Recreation Director Bunn; Zoning Administrator Faasse; City Clerk Brower; Planning Consultant LeBlanc

2014-136. Commissioners Dills and Miller thanked everyone in attendance for coming to the meeting.

Commissioners Johnson and Duncan remarked on the number of letters and emails they have received recently regarding the historic preservation issue and thanked all those who had written in.

Mayor Seibold also thanked everyone for attending in spite of the snowy weather and the conflict with the schools foundation dinner.

2014-137. Duncan-Graham. Motion to approve the consent agenda as follows:

A. To approve the minutes of the regular meeting held November 3, 2014.

B. To approve payroll disbursements of \$209,768.86; county and school disbursements of \$35,930.81, and total remaining disbursements of \$197,509.13.

Yeas: Dills, Duncan, Graham, Johnson, Miller, Skaggs and Seibold – 7

Nays: -0-

2014-138. Mayor Seibold gave an overview of the historic preservation issue to date, outlined the agenda for the remainder of the meeting, and reviewed the steps that would be taken if the City Commission voted to go forward with a formal study.

2014-139. Fil Iorio and Ellen Schendel presented the committee's recommendation to proceed with establishing a formal study of a historic preservation district. Mr. Iorio noted the proven positive economic impact on homes within historic districts, the non-economic impacts of historic preservation and community pride. He stated the administration of a historic district is usually routine and non-controversial. Further, a historic district is the only mechanism that can limit home demolitions. Mr. Iorio spoke in favor of conducting a formal study of the possibility of setting up a historic district and felt the study could be done by volunteers with a minimum of cost to the city.

Ms. Schendel reviewed the recommendation from the pre-study committee to appoint a non-binding, fact-finding Historic District Study Committee to examine the feasibility and desirability of a historic district composed of the blocks of Briarwood, Cambridge, and Plymouth that are bounded by Lake and Wealthy. She stressed the City Commission could decide later to not move forward with creating the historic preservation district, but felt the study would be useful to gather more information on the city's historic assets and create more dialogue in the community. She stated the pre-study committee recommended a survey of residents within any proposed district and that 2/3 of residents should be in favor of a historic district before any further action was taken. She also recommended the historic district ordinance be very broad to give maximum flexibility for renovations and the final historic district commission should be transparent and accountable to the residents.

- 2014-140. Brian Miller presented the dissenting opinion that the city not proceed with a formal study or the establishment of a historic preservation district. Mr. Miller stated a formal study would be more than just a research project, but would propose boundaries and an ordinance to be adopted, steps that lead to a historic district. He felt the study and ongoing administration of a historic district would incur costs for the city and add additional government regulations. He further noted that flexibility would rest on the members of the historic commission and not with the elected officials or residents. Income tax credits have also been eliminated, removing the incentives for residents that used to be in place. Mr. Miller noted district boundaries cannot be determined prior to the study or arbitrarily determined before all the historic homes were studied in the city, thus opening the possibility of a much larger district than originally proposed impacting many more residents.

Mr. Miller reported that in speaking with many people about this issue, many were more concerned about the size and scale of the new homes being built after older homes were torn down than with the loss of specific homes. These types of concerns could be better addressed with better zoning restrictions, possibly including form-based code or other alternative methods of controlling what is rebuilt after a home is demolished.

- 2014-141. Mayor Seibold opened a public hearing on this issue. The following people expressed their opinions:

Supported historic district and/or study

Joanie Dowling, 437 Briarwood
Chris Byron, 959 Ogden
Pamela MacDougal, 500 Cambridge
Shirley Francis, 457 Briarwood
Amanda Reintjes, MI Hist. Preservation Network
Doug Dowling, 437 Briarwood
Tom Walker, 425 Cambridge
Judy Freeman, 425 Cambridge
Jennifer Gehl, 503 Cambridge
Elizabeth Iorio, 431 Cambridge
Betsy Galbreith, 329 Rosewood
Eric Gollanek, 2306 Burchard
Jan Smith, 915 Orchard
Bruce Smith, 915 Orchard
Tom Wilson, 959 Ogden
Elizabeth Goede, 417 Cambridge
John Goede, 417 Cambridge
Karen Zivi, 608 Laurel
Steve Ratliff, 435 Cambridge
Joe Becherer, 443 Cambridge
Amorak Huey, 429 Briarwood

Opposed to study and/or historic district

Don Lawless, 2539 Albert
Mike Sekulich, 736 Cambridge
Rhonda Miller, 455 Plymouth
Mark Peters, 750 Plymouth
Mark Murray, 649 Cambridge
Alexis Boyden, 547 Cambridge
John Inhulsen, 615 Cambridge
John Constanelos, 1727 Franklin
John Green, 563 Belvedere
Joe Crawford, 1649 Seminole
Elizabeth Murray, 649 Cambridge
Collin Hansen, 2144 Tenway
Erin Fredrickson, 400 Cambridge
Charlotte McLravy, 451 Cambridge
Paul McMahan, 1100 Cambridge
Scott Gorsline, 950 San Jose
Dan Bogo, 1620 Pontiac
Todd Fredrickson, 400 Cambridge
Micki Benz, 817 Gladstone
Shelli Whallon, 2663 Hampshire
Rob DeVilbiss, 935 Cambridge
Andrew Norden, 620 Cambridge
Kathie VonGruben, 649 Cambridge
Michael Bell, 426 Cambridge
Rick Merpi, 617 Plymouth
Michael Naltner, 1661 Fisk
Rob Sears, 958 Pinecrest
John Nowak, 2831 Woodcliff Circle
Cam Najar, _____
Bill Lewis, 1063 San Lucia
Roger Cares, 263 Briarwood
Jeff Olson, 1112 Eastwood
Gail Nowak, 2831 Woodcliff Circle
Kathy Zago, 954 Cambridge

Mayor Seibold closed the public hearing. She reported that more than 500 letters/emails had been received regarding this issue over the last several months with a majority of those writing in opposed to a study and/or the creation of a historic preservation district.

- A. Skaggs-Duncan. Motion to approve a historic preservation district study and a historic district study committee as set forth in Public Act 169.

Commissioner Skaggs stated he had learned a lot during this process and felt the committee did an excellent job researching the issue and addressing many of the concerns and myths associated with historic preservation districts. He agreed with the majority report that listed the benefits as enhanced identity, increased property values, and reduced demolitions and loss of historic homes. He disagreed with the argument that a formal study would automatically lead to the establishment of a historic district. He stated the city would have greater flexibility in the creation of a historic preservation ordinance since the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) was no longer required to approve the regulations now that the tax credits were eliminated. Mr. Skaggs addressed many of the fears people had about historic districts, stating the city could write its own regulations, had adequate fund balance to fund a study without affecting other services, and could choose the boundaries at the end of the study. He concluded that although this was a divisive issue, the community had faced difficult decisions before and pulled together for the good of the community.

Commissioner Graham did not feel that additional regulations or a historic preservation district were needed. He noted there were many lovely historic homes that were well maintained, but felt that people viewed homes differently and should be allowed to renovate and update them to fit their needs. He felt East Grand Rapids has so much to offer people, including diverse neighborhoods with many different styles and price ranges of housing and lifestyles.

Commissioner Duncan stated that while she understood why many people were opposed to the study and a historic preservation district, she supported going forward with the formal study. She felt gathering information would be beneficial to making the right decision down the road.

Commissioner Johnson was concerned about the added cost and difficulty of conforming to historic standards for those who want to live in the area but not be able to take on the added responsibility of a historic home. She felt a study was not the best way to proceed and that there were better ways to document and preserve the history of the area. She stated there was not enough community support for her to vote in favor of a study.

Commissioner Miller reported there have been 13 home demolitions in East Grand Rapids this year as of September 30th and that this was not a dramatic increase over past years. He did not feel this warranted significant changes or a historic preservation district. He stated the city's zoning requirements and variance process produced results that were good for the community as a whole. He stated the character of a neighborhood was not exclusive of age or architecture and that diverse styles and sizes were welcome throughout East Grand Rapids. He did not feel a historic preservation district was needed.

Commissioner Dills appreciated all the research that had been done and all the resident input received on this matter. He stated the correspondence received showed approximately 100 people in favor of a historic district study and 400 people opposed to a study. His concerns included the number of people opposed, increasing government regulations, no way for residents to opt out of being included, and the immediate and future costs associated with a historic preservation district. He felt everyone should trust their neighbors to maintain and update their homes appropriately.

Mayor Seibold commended the remarkable passion shown for the East Grand Rapids community by people on both sides of this issue. She felt that rebuilding tired homes could bring new life and diversity of housing to neighborhoods and new homes and remodeling were necessary to keep neighborhoods viable and the city vibrant. She did not feel that requiring preservation was the correct approach, especially since there were fantastic homes built in many different decades and all were important to the character of East Grand Rapids. She urged those who had already collected historical information on individual homes to submit the research to the history room.

Mayor Seibold stated all neighborhoods in East were special for one reason or another with many containing historical properties, and she did not feel it was appropriate to single out only three blocks for special designation. She worried about the loss of property rights for those who did not wish to participate in the historic designation and noted there were other ways to accomplish some of the same goals.

Yeas: Duncan and Skaggs– 2

Nays: Dills, Graham, Johnson, Miller and Seibold – 5

Mayor Seibold thanked everyone for coming to the meeting and for sharing their views. She noted that East Grand Rapids is a fantastic community and asked everyone to treat their neighbors with kindness and respect no matter what side of this issue they were on.

The meeting adjourned at 9:03 p.m., subject to the call of the Mayor until December 1, 2014.

Karen K. Brower, City Clerk