
PLANNING & ZONING COMMISSION
September 19, 2005
Minutes

Members Present: Jack Harkins
 Eddie Boykin
 Ovelia Campos
 Jeff Luther
 Tim McClarty

Members Absent: Neomia Banks
 Floyd Miller

Staff Present: Jon James, Director of Planning and Development Services
 Jeff Armstrong, Development Services Manager
 Dan Santee, First Assistant City Attorney
 Gloria Brownell, Planner I
 Justin Fortney, Planner I

Others Present: Bob Hammond
 James McClure
 Kirk Brown
 Tim Ritto
 David McMeekan
 Lydia Long
 Ima Amber
 Neldon Watson
 Don Faulkner
 Bill Brabbin
 Tim Cook

Item One: Call to Order

Mr. Harkins called the meeting to order at 1:33 p.m. and declared a quorum present.

Item Two: Plats

Ms. Gloria Brownell, Planner I, stated that the plat identified as item “a” was incomplete and would not be considered at this meeting. Information was provided regarding the plat to be considered at this meeting (Item b.). Ms. Brownell stated that staff recommends approval of these plats as all meet the requirements of the Subdivision Regulations.

Mr. Harkins opened the public hearing and asked if anyone wished to speak regarding any of the four plats presented. There was no response and Mr. Harkins closed the public hearing.

Mr. McClarty moved to approve plat b., as submitted. Mr. Boykin seconded the motion and the motion carried by a vote of five (5) in favor (Boykin, Harkins, Luther, McClarty and Campos) to none (0) opposed.

Item Three: Discussion Items

- a. Presentation of the results of the Community Appearance Focus Group and discussion and direction to staff on community appearance issues.

Mr. Jon James, Director of Planning and Development Services, presented information regarding the process and results of the Community Appearance Focus Group. He explained that when the Comprehensive Plan was approved in 2004, it provided general and specific strategies to implement the goals it designated. Staff reviewed ordinances from Abilene's peer cities and assembled members for the Community Appearance Focus Group for feedback from the community. The staff presented a variety of regulations from other cities to the Focus Group, which produced consensus on some issues and disagreement on others. Mr. James stated that he was bringing many of the more controversial topics to the Commissioners for guidance. Mr. James asked the Commissioners to review the staff recommendations listed in the survey he provided to them and decide if they felt staff was moving in the right direction. Mr. James provided a summary of the presentation and results of the group meetings.

Mr. James presented the Comprehensive Plan goals for signage. He stated that the idea was to provide business identification to customers in the vicinity, not a half or full mile away. He added that the intention was not to hide businesses, but that the proposed regulations should set reasonable limits and should vary by zoning district.

Mr. Boykin asked if there was a current limit for wall signage and Mr. James stated that there was no limit except in certain zoning districts, including Planned Development Districts and Corridor Overlay Districts.

Mr. Boykin suggested that Mr. James should be requesting the City Council for guidance instead of the Planning and Zoning Commission. Mr. James stated that the Council had requested a joint meeting with the Planning and Zoning Commission and that staff was already planning to ask for guidance from them, the members of the Focus Group, and any other interested parties throughout the community. Mr. Boykin stated that the Commissioners could spend hours working on a draft for nothing. Mr. James stated that staff had intentionally avoided bringing a draft forward before they received clear direction from both the Planning and Zoning Commission and the City Council.

Mr. Luther stated that they should request the Council members to reaffirm their commitment to the Comprehensive Plan. He was concerned that the Commission had not been included when the staff chose members for the Focus Group and wondered how and why each had been chosen. He said that the Wal-mart and Cracker Barrel cases were lost because they had not provided enough information to show that those businesses would have been successful without a big sign. He added that the staff would have to work harder to prove why their recommendation is appropriate. He suggested that the Planning Magazine provided to each Commissioner should also be available to Council members.

Mr. Harkins noted that he had seen a Cracker Barrel sign along Interstate 10 outside of San Antonio that he estimated to be between 30-40 feet tall. He added that the businesses had been built regardless of the height of the sign.

Mr. Luther questioned the choice of cities and asked why we do not include other cities throughout the country. Mr. James stated that Council members usually frowned upon comparing Abilene to other cities outside of Texas. Mr. Luther stated that the top 25 cities in the country would not include any of Abilene's ten peer cities. Mr. Santee stated that the ten peer cities were chosen and approved by Council a few years before.

Mr. Boykin stated that the Council had voted unanimously for Cracker Barrel's request and asked how strongly the recommendation from the Planning and Zoning Commission had been presented. Mr. James stated that he had included the Commissioner's comments directly from the minutes and that staff regularly includes the reasoning behind their recommendations when presenting the case to Council. He said that the comments would probably not have made a difference with the Cracker Barrel case, but that he could present the Commissioners' recommendations for other cases more forcefully in the future.

Mr. Luther stated that he was not happy with the Commissioners' relationships with staff or the City Council. Ms. Campos said that she thought today's meeting was premature and that she agreed with the joint meeting with Council. Mr. Luther stated that he was unhappy with the amount of work that had already been done for the community appearance regulations. Mr. Harkins said that the Comprehensive Plan had called for this type of process and that staff had to begin somewhere. Mr. Boykin asked if the Focus Group represented a good cross-section of the community and Mr. Harkins replied that he was not sure, but he did not have a problem with starting with citizens.

Mr. McClarty stated that he was concerned about spending two years on the Comprehensive Plan because the members of the City Council had changed and he was not sure if the goals of the new members were in line with the Plan. He added that he would prefer that staff receive direction from the City Council before the Commissioners sent any more time on community appearance. Mr. Boykin stated that the Comprehensive Plan had been adopted in 2004 and the elected officials should not choose to take it or leave it. Mr. McClarty stated that the joint meeting should include a review of the Comprehensive Plan. Mr. James asked if it should also include the community appearance presentation and Mr. McClarty stated that they should judge by the atmosphere of the meeting. He said that the commissioners would follow Council's lead.

The Commissioners agreed that Mr. James should finish the presentation and that they would withhold any major discussion until the joint meeting. Mr. James continued with the presentation, which included information regarding pole signs, monument signs, portable signs, off-site signs, and landscaping. Mr. Harkins cautioned staff about requiring landscaping around the foundation of structures because of the type soil in Abilene. Mr. James stated that staff intended to provide enough flexibility in the ordinance to accommodate his concerns.

Mr. Luther stated that he disagreed with relaxed standards for infill or redevelopment, but agreed that there should be some sort of incentive. Mr. Harkins agreed and suggested the use of some form of tax incentives.

Mr. James presented information on urban design and a list of summary questions for the Commissioners, including a list of three options describing the general perspective of development in Abilene. Mr. McClarty stated that he thought the Commissioners were in line with the strictest option and the Council would agree with the least restrictive option.

Mr. Luther suggested that staff should research the relocation criteria used by companies to confirm that a community with a good appearance will also attract business.

Mr. Harkins stated that the Comprehensive Plan represented the middle option from the list because there were so many compromises made before it was adopted. Mr. McClarty agreed that there had been compromises, but said that the Plan still set a high standard for Abilene. Mr. Harkins agreed, but added that it was still not as high as the standard staff had initially intended.

b. Status of Land Development Code project.

Mr. James reviewed the report from the last meeting and stated that a consulting company had been chosen for the project. He had presented the project to the City Council and they had tabled the issue to allow more time for discussion. Mr. James explained that there had been some disagreement among the Council members regarding the cost of the project. One Council member expressed concerns about spending the money to produce a document that would not accomplish the goals of the Comprehensive Plan. Another Council member asked if staff was capable of completing the project without assistance from a consultant. Mr. James had explained that the project would take much longer than the proposed 19 months if staff were asked to be responsible for the entire project. Mr. James stated that the City Council was scheduled to make a final decision on Thursday, September 22 and that grant money for the project would be lost if no decision was made at that time.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 4:19 p.m.

Approved: _____, Chairman