

**MINUTES OF THE PORTAGE CITY COUNCIL
COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE MEETING
APRIL 27, 2021**

Mayor Patricia Randall called the Committee of the Whole Meeting to order at 4:00 p.m. The meeting was held virtually as permitted by PA 228. Mayor Patricia M. Randall, Mayor Pro Tem Jim Pearson, and Councilmembers Chris Burns, Lori Knapp, Vic Ledbetter, Claudette Reid, and Terry Urban were present. Councilmembers participated virtually from Portage, Michigan, except Councilmember Ledbetter who was attending from Kalamazoo. Also in attendance were City Manager Joe La Margo, Development Services Director Kelly Peterson, and City Clerk Erica Eklov.

Mayor Randall summarized the meeting purpose and format. She thanked the City Councilmembers Mayor Pro Tem Pearson and Councilmember Knapp for their efforts on the Lake Center District Area Steering Committee. City Manager La Margo noted the public comment period and upcoming public meetings, as well as the attendance of Director Peterson at tonight's meeting. Councilmember Knapp noted the meeting was an informal briefing with only preliminary consideration for future action. She provided background on the Lake Center District efforts and the hiring of Doug Farr as a consultant to Study the area. Councilmember Knapp then provided the specifics on prior city efforts to date. She also noted the membership on the Steering Committee and thanked the members for their efforts. Ms. Knapp outlined the purpose of the strategic plan and stated the Steering Committee unanimously supports the proposed plan.

Development Services Director Peterson described the background on the Study, the current status of the Lake Center District. She explained the phases of discussion with the hope to make the area more accessible for everyone. Doug Farr began by commending the City of Portage for performing such a Study, especially amidst the pandemic. Mr. Farr then presented the Study, explaining that the document was for the Lake Center Corridor, as well as the District, with the overall vision and theme being "vibrant, beautiful and safe." He provided the background on prior public collaboration efforts that had progressed the Study to its current point. Mr. Farr then explained the Complete Streets concept as part of the next steps for the Lake Center District, as well as the use of placemaking, which would mirror the existing City of Portage zoning and guidelines. Mr. Farr highlighted the five key segments from the Study and explained the pedestrian condition measurements for each segment. He explained the Study included three different scenarios for the subject area utilizing a complete streets concept and the three-point vision, and provided the pros and cons of each scenario. He stressed that the City Administration needs to take a critical look at the Lake Center District with the understanding that this is a generational project incorporating a cohesive and coordinated effort among all entities involved to make this happen effectively.

After opening the meeting to City Council questions, Mayor Randall asked for clarification regarding placemaking and whether it entails a place to live and work versus a vacation destination focus. She inquired about the return on investment with the vacation destination focus. Mr. Farr responded that it depends on who the placemaking is serving, stating that it should focus on residents first with the Lake Center Corridor daily business and amenity offerings but include enhancements with a "postcard view" sense of place that people can feel. Councilmember Reid noted that the residential market analysis recommendation of 45 percent for rental units was different than the current Lake

Center District landscape, as well as the city as a whole and wanted to know if this area was good for that type of development focus. Director Peterson responded that the 2020 residential market analysis showed the current demand supported this recommendation. Councilmember Burns noted the pedestrian island recommendation in the Study but highlighted the current vehicle issues with the existing pedestrian islands. Doug Farr relayed that Mr. Burns' concerns had come up during the planning process but stressed that the problem is not with the pedestrian islands but the drivers. Mr. Farr elaborated that drivers do better when they are surrounded with supporting imagery and visual cues, which would be incorporated in any next steps for the area, opening the roadway and reversing the current trend. Councilmember Burns then noted the potential for a façade improvement program and asked how such a program would work. Director Peterson stated that the city is evaluating neighboring jurisdictions to find existing best practices, which would utilize federal COVID-19 to support businesses with façade improvement programs and upgrades. Mr. Farr stressed that any improvements should go beyond façade upgrades and stated the Lake Center District would be best served by moving away from an auto-dominated design, instead of focusing on attracting pedestrian connections. Director Peterson noted that such an improvement program would be administered by a Corridor Improvement Authority, as noted in the Study.

Councilmember Urban asked Director Peterson to describe how a Corridor Improvement Authority works. Director Peterson stated that such an Authority is a statewide tool funded by tax increment financing similar to a downtown development authority. Councilmember Urban next highlighted a recommendation on page 80 of the Study and asked for clarification on the rationale of connecting Stanley Avenue. Director Peterson stated that it should connect with South Shore Drive and not Lakeview Avenue but is intended to increase neighborhood connectivity. Councilmember Ledbetter asked how such a property would be acquired. City Manager La Margo stated it would be done by a fair purchase and not eminent domain. Doug Farr noted the plan would continue the offset of Stanley, south of the existing building, but stress that the recommendation was not a high priority in the Study. He said it was a good idea to offer routes parallel to Portage Road to slow down traffic. Councilmember Urban responded that he doesn't favor this particular cut-through and expressed concern with the potential negative effect on private residences. Councilmember Urban then highlighted the pedestrian walkway along the channel and stated he doesn't see recommendations to link the residents on the south side without the need to cross the Portage Road. Mr. Farr reviewed the underpass proposal and clarified that a walkway on both sides was recommended.

Mayor Pro Tem Pearson stated that, as a Steering Committee member, he had witnessed a decline of the Lake Center District and relayed the prior city efforts to at improving the area. He stressed that this area between the two lakes needs to improve for future generations and noted form-based zoning would be the best approach. Fellow Steering Committee member Terry Patterson echoed Councilmember Knapp's original remarks on development and looks forward to future implementation. Mr. Patterson offered North Walloon Lake in Isthmus, Michigan as an example for the Lake Center District to follow. Mayor Randall then opened the public comment period.

John Paver (9651 Portage Road) asked how the funding for roadside improvements would work. City Manager La Margo responded that various program funding mechanisms would be utilized.

Adam Edlefson (912 Forest Drive) spoke regarding the West Lake Riparian survey and the unfavorable response in connecting the two lakes. He asked why the connection was a recommendation in the draft Study. Mr. Farr responded with the three-point theme from the Study noting that such an interconnection would enhance this theme. Mayor Pro Tem Pearson addressed the water quality concerns and prior lake group efforts to improve it. He noted the April 27 Regular City Council Meeting agenda included a dissolution recommendation for the Austin Lake Governmental Lake Board and the potential move of the lake board to an association for control of water quality.

Ed Clifford (1006 Forest Drive) echoed Mr. Edlefson's comments.

Mark Yassay (1401 Lakeview Avenue) stated he was the president of the West Lake Improvement Association and was sharing the West Lake Riparian survey results and concerns that conflicted with recommendations in the Lake Center District Study. He also relayed the survey results about the West Lake Drive-In and the desire to make it a park or leaving the location unchanged.

Tom Rohlwing (1108 Forest Drive) questioned whether a risk assessment had been performed in connecting the two lakes. He also questioned cost implications, noting the Study's recommendations would only benefit a small portion of the Portage population. Doug Farr responded that a risk assessment was not part of the Study's scope at this time. City manager Largo echoed Mr. Farr's comments.

Patrick Duggan (1810 Forest Drive) stated he was also part of the West Lake Association and noted the canal is a drain and not designed to be navigable. He has already witnessed issues with jet skis in the area trying to pass through and does not support connecting the lakes.

Mayor Randall closed the meeting by reviewing the discussion and noted this review was an initial step in a very long process and stated no decisions would be made during the meeting. She then thanked Doug Farr and his associates for their efforts on the Study. Mayor Randall adjourned the meeting at 6:06 PM.

Erica L. Eklov, City Clerk