City of Oxford Housing Advisory Commission  
Minutes of the May 18, 2020 Virtual Meeting  
Held via Zoom App and Broadcast to YouTube in accordance with HB 197

HAC members in attendance: Sherry Lind, Glenn Ellerbe, Jason Bracken, Shana Rosenberg, Steve Schnabl, and Scott Straker.

HAC members excused: Nicola Rodrigues

Staff members in attendance: Zachary Moore and Sam Perry

Meeting was called to order at 1:32 pm.

Steve moved to approve the agenda, Shana seconded. Sherry made a motion to approve the meeting agenda along with an added item “Old Business.” All voted in favor, none opposed.

Shana moved to approve the April 20, 2020 meeting minutes. Jason seconded. Sherry stated that her votes had been left out of the March and April meeting minutes. Steve asked whether this was appropriate, or a miss concerning the Chair’s votes. Zach responded it was an accident, and not an intention to leave off the Chair’s vote. Steve made a motion to include amending the minutes to that effect, seconded by Jason. All voted in favor, none opposed.

The next item on the agenda was a presentation on affordable housing incentives by Shana. The goal of the presentation was to address Goal #1 on HAC’s list for 2020, in exploring the drafting of incentives or requirements to make housing more affordable. Shana gave a robust report on various incentives, including: (1) increased density; (2) expedited processing; (3) fee waivers; (4) required parking reductions; (5) tax abatements; and (6) sale/lease of City-owned property. She acknowledged her belief that some groups in town may not be happy if voluntary provisions were pursued, as opposed to mandatory ones. Another key point is to conduct a feasibility study to determine whether provisions put in place are economical and actually make sense for builders/developers to pursue.

Following the conclusion of Shana’s report, Sherry called on Glenn for any additional ideas he would like to share. Glenn commented his desire to ensure there is an option for an applicant to pay in-lieu fees into a fund, where the City would have discretion on where to direct monies generated. The fund would be a dedicated line item under the City budget. He felt that because the current fund doesn’t provide much agility in terms of its uses, it should be either re-structured or removed in favor of a new fund that would be properly set up.

Scott asked a question about what properties the City owns, and how NIMBYISM could be addressed. Sam responded that the SR 732 property was large enough to consider those impacts through careful design, but most of the other City-owned properties were too small to really support a substantially sized development. Scott mentioned property owned by the City off Bonham Road. Sam replied that much of that property is in the floodplain, and thereby not as developable. Scott suggested units could be elevated above the flood level. Sherry suggested the Architecture Department at Miami, which had previously presented their concept for a green neighborhood near Marshall Elementary, could examine the Bonham Road site for a future project.
Steve revisited Glenn’s points about restructuring the housing fund, expressing his concern for the general lack of revenue-generating development proposals. Glenn responded with a couple examples around town, where density issues could or have come into play with multi-unit developments. Shana asked Glenn to clarify whether he was in favor of a density bonus being able to be bought – Glenn said yes, that was correct. He explained that he was in favor of the in-lieu cost being higher than the actual cost of providing the affordable units. Sherry asked Sam what the maximum number of stories was in the Uptown area; Sam responded there was a 48-foot height limit above grade. Sam mentioned he has talked to multiple department heads about raising building height limits across the entire City, though there are many other factors to consider including public safety, water pressure, and others. Sherry asked whether there would be any difference in the level of impact by increasing heights on the Western Knolls site vs. the Uptown area, and Sam replied that he wasn’t sure.

Steve thanked Shana for her presentation. Shana asked staff to present their thoughts on whether to move forward on the housing incentive goal, or not move forward due to COVID. Sam said staff could go through the goals and visit these with other departments as needed. Zach said he appreciated the inclusion of a Midwestern example with Bloomington, noting that had been an issue before in terms of finding an example more comparable to Oxford’s situation. Sam said he had looked at fee waivers off and on through the year, expressing that might be a simple way to help a developer – it is kind of a “coupon mentality.” Though the City income was still a concern, and Sherry agreed. Shana stressed the need for an answer on whether to proceed on this goal in 2020, or delay until 2021. Sam agreed, and said it may warrant individual follow-up before next month’s meeting.

Glenn asked whether there were property management companies located in town that serve as a source of income tax revenue from FTEs; Sam responded yes. Glenn followed up with a question on whether new units coming online in town would generate extra payroll tax. Sam said he wasn’t sure. Sherry mentioned she had noticed an increase in the number of available positions for property managers in Oxford.

The next item on the agenda was devoted to an update on the Housing Fund. Sam said after he and Zach reflected on the comments from the previous meeting, and their conclusion was that the best thing to do was to assist with immediate relief by donating to the Family Resource Center (FRC) to assist clients with housing costs and utilities. Following this, the fund could be restarted in a way that was in-sync with the present goals of the Commission. Steve commented that he was very much in favor of that direction, provided the FRC’s financials were acceptable to the Chair. Sherry said her concern was that the funds go into their budget as a line item specifically devoted to housing needs. Steve responded that every non-profit is required to abide by a specified restriction, and unethical to do otherwise. He agreed with Sherry, asking for a report on the actual expenditures of the fund until it went down to zero. Shana asked whether it would be difficult to reestablish the fund if the current one was extinguished. Sam responded that the fund was not properly set up to begin with, and that the Finance Director would be happy to see a properly set up fund with a dedicated revenue source.

Due to Nicola’s absence, Sherry read an email from her into the record concerning the homeless in Oxford:

“Not a lot has changed since the last time I talked about the homeless. We are still continuing to help clients in order to prevent evictions which may happen once the courts open up for business.”
We recently did a rough count of the homeless that came our way (in person, phone calls) during the last calendar year. The number was between 70-80. They include those living in tents, couch surfing as well as those living in the various hotels. Some of them are local and others travel from different places because they have friends or family here they can temporarily stay with. We have been able to house some but we haven’t heard from others given the transient nature of the homeless population. Last week a homeless unmarried couple came by asking for help with housing. We are working with them to find something. Neither of them have jobs and they are not keen to separate and go to a shelter. The shelters also have certain criteria for entry that all homeless do not meet unfortunately.”

Scott gave a report on Fall 2020 rentals. He provided some current data from College Property Management (subsidiary of Coldwell Banker): 422 rented units; 188 homes; 65 multi-family buildings, within there are 234 units. Out of 422, there are 43 student vacancies. These students just moved out, but there’s not a way to tell whether these units are currently available or how long they’ve been vacant. There are also 26 family homes that are not rented, which can be rented either to families or students. The families do not renew until July 31st, with the question on whether to renew posed to tenants in June. Scott felt the best time to report on conditions would be in October, because you need to get past the time when everyone (students and families) would be settled into their units. Sherry said that she thought Miami had made the statement they would definitely have in-person instruction in the Fall. Scott said he was surprised by how many vacancies there were currently, as they are usually all booked up for the next semester by now. Shana said Miami is doing a huge push to encourage students to live on-campus. Steve wondered about his prior proposal for the University to step in with the residential properties they own, as far as offering up some of those for subsidized living. Sam said he had brought it up, but hadn’t gotten any traction. He felt their business model would need to change in Physical Facilities in order to accommodate such a proposal. The University is looking to develop some of their properties, to reduce maintenance expenditures since they do not generate any revenue.

The next item was an update on HAC Code Changes. Sam explained this was initially delayed since legislative items did not come forward for a while due to COVID. Secondly, it got lost in the shuffle and had not been reviewed by the City Manager or Mayor ahead of being put on the Council agenda. Instead they are proposing to conduct a work session between Council and HAC, possibly on June 9th. There was general discussion about the timeline for approval of the amendments in terms of affecting the Commission membership, in consideration of two terms (Sherry’s and Steve’s) coming open at the end of June. The soonest the amendments could come forward following the work session would be the first meeting in July, then following a favorable vote at the second meeting/reading in July, there is 30-day referendum period. If the amendments did pass, it is likely there would be a partial term filled until the normal time to appoint individuals to Commissions. Scott expressed that he would not be available in June for the work session.

Zach updated the group that the Western Knolls summary publication was nearing completion, pending internal review.

Sam shared with the group that the City is under contract with Bowen National Research to do a housing study, and exchanging emails with the consultant daily.
The last agenda item was to address Old Business from the prior meeting minutes. Sherry asked what role or duties she should be assuming at present regarding the Housing Study. Sam said nothing had been produced yet, so once something was received from the consultant then staff would begin more involvement with Sherry.

Next, Sherry asked whether Steve recalled a prior conversation about him reaching out to the County on behalf of the Commission regarding CDBG funds. He mentioned through conversation with Desmond Maaytah that there will be more CDBG funding coming into the County. However, he had not been successful in getting in touch with Commissioner Carpenter to discuss the tiny homes project. He said he will try to get in touch with her.

Steve said he would send an interesting segment from the AARP Rural Livability Guide to the group via email.

Steve made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Shana. All in favor, none opposed.