

**MINUTES OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE WORK SESSION  
OF APRIL 28, 2015**

Mayor Strazdas called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. The following Councilmembers were present: Nasim Ansari, Richard Ford, Patricia M. Randall, Claudette Reid and Terry Urban, and Mayor Peter Strazdas. Mayor Pro Tem Jim Pearson was present via teleconference. Also present were City Manager Larry Shaffer, Deputy City Manager Rob Boulis, Community Development Director Vicki Georgeau, Finance Director Bill Furry and City Clerk James Hudson. City Attorney Randy Brown arrived at 6:05 p.m.

Mayor Strazdas reviewed the progress of the Committees of the Whole and the need to plan the pace of the remaining COW topics. Discussion followed. City Manager Shaffer introduced Finance Director Bill Furry and the topic of roads, and deferred to Community Development Director Vicki Georgeau and asked her to talk about housing and the status of our neighborhoods.

Ms. Georgeau reviewed her communication to the City Manager dated April 17, 2015 regarding the three part Neighborhood Revitalization summary. She discussed part one conducted in 2010-11, neighborhood enhancement activities, neighborhood strategy recommendations, community quality code amendments, part two in 2011-2012, home-based businesses, work/live accommodations, mixed-use developments, and part three in 2012-13, crime preventions, neighborhood stabilizations activities/programs, rental housing and concerns about house foreclosure monitoring. She explained the two attached maps, the three charts and two Tables. Discussion followed regarding foreclosures, new house construction.

Ms. Georgeau summarized that things are looking up; however, the Administration is still looking to do more to keep things going, and mentioned her request to fill the position that was cut in 2008 to do more proactive monitoring instead of only responding to complaints. This would also help balance the work load in the Department in order to do more housing improvement, and process grant opportunities with MSHDA. She reviewed some of the neighborhood strategies and enhancements in the Capital Improvement Program (CIP) in the areas of street lighting, sidewalks, local road improvements and crime enforcement. Discussion followed.

In light of the need to protect the aging housing stock in Portage, Ms. Georgeau reviewed the strategy of the targeting different low income neighborhood areas based on the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) guideline of at least 51% low income, but in Portage, the percentage is 43%, so the Portage formula is different from the City of Kalamazoo, for example, and discussion followed.

Councilmember Reid referenced the proposal to fill the position of Code Enforcement Inspector and noted that where there is high level of blight, there should also be a strong interest in preserving the housing stock in that area to let the homeowner know that there is a real concern for that neighborhood. She mentioned that the City can help by replacing the sidewalks, improving the streetscape, planting trees, etc., especially the small neighborhoods where our children are going to be able to afford a house. She cited the example from the April 14, 2015 Regular City Council Meeting where Gary Wager and Mary Torres, 5936 Concord Street, expressed a concern for pedestrians owing to semi-trucks and through traffic traversing Concord Street in violation of posted signs,

“No Thru Traffic” and “No Trucks” and a lack of enforcement of the speeding on Milham Avenue, and his comment that, “Maybe because we have small houses we don’t get much attention from the City.” She stressed that if the City is going to do more code enforcement, there needs to be more improvement from the City in the area, also.

In an attempt to educate and resolve conflicts, Ms. Georgeau discussed the practice of providing blight notices prior to the Spring Clean-up effort to allow the homeowner a convenient opportunity to take advantage of the Spring Clean-up service. Where there are housing maintenance concerns, such as broken windows or a roof that is failing, the Department always includes information about the City CDGB Program should they be eligible to take advantage of it. She indicated her work with the Police Department to form neighborhood watch groups, including apartment complexes and mobile home parks. Discussion followed.

Mr. Shaffer indicated that next year, prior to the discussion about the Capital Improvement Program (CIP), staff will solicit input from the neighborhoods to determine what the people would like to see in terms of enhancements as a proactive measure that should help us shape our CIP and explained. He indicated that it should be possible to measure the impact of the investment by tracking the property values and checking the success of the effort toward stabilization. Next, he indicated that the new zone enforcement officer is not intended to be a position where we will “beat our citizens into submission with a flurry of tickets” since the principle job is education and the objective is enforcement through friendly tickets. Councilmember Ansari interjected that he concurred with this approach and gave an example on point. Mr. Shaffer explained communication is the key, how it contributes to their well-being, not only their quality of life, but also the protection of their assets.

Councilmember Randall recognized that not all people have the same standards and asked how does one approach a neighbor who has been parking the camper or a boat in violation of the ordinance for seven years, for example, and now that there is a new code enforcement officer, feels singled out. Mr. Shaffer indicated that this is a good point, and that is why it is important to hear from the balance of the neighborhood because many of the issues come from citizen complaints and explained. He said it is about mentoring and about education, so it is important that the people feel they have some control of and input into the matter, and that there is some value to them and to everyone else in the neighborhood. He admitted that there will be some people who are not happy with the process, but from the philosophical perspective, we have to take the mentoring approach, the education approach and we have to try to bring people along, rather than bullying them. Discussion followed.

Mr. Shaffer indicated that the Public Safety Director Richard White has taken the initiative to meet with the managers of the apartment complexes to determine the needs of the apartment complexes and to share the approaches to take to meet those needs. Discussion followed.

Mr. Shaffer introduced the topic of streets by discussing local roads. He revealed that there are 147 miles of local roads, and about fifty miles of them have a 3, 2, 1 or 0 PASER rating, or about a third of Portage local roads are in the reconstruction stage at a cost of \$149,000 a mile, or \$7.4 – 7.5 million. He analyzed the chart attached to the communication from Chris Barnes to Deputy City Manager Brian Bowling dated November 27, 2015. He indicated that there are 221 miles of major roads which will cost

\$2.4 million. He indicated that he will be offering some alternatives during the budget session that will allow for the construction of more roads. Discussion followed with regards to holding the proposed Stabilization Fund as cash or as a hard asset such as roads. Mr. Shaffer expressed his optimism with how the community is progressing financially. He mentioned the November audit and that he may very well come in and give Council a list of roads that need attention that would be pulled from the CIP in sequence and invest upwards to \$1.2 million during Spring 2016 while still retaining a 24% Fund Balance and explained. Discussion followed regarding the Fund Balance.

Councilmember Reid asked what can be done to stretch out the road “bubble” because everything was built at the same time, so everything has to be rebuilt at the same time. Discussion followed.

Councilmember Ansari spoke to the quality of the roads and asked if there is accountability, or whether there is a warranty against breakdown from the contractor who builds the roads, and mentioned I-94 and Centre Avenue. Mr. Shaffer indicated that warranties are not out of the question. Councilmember Urban referred to the discussion last week and indicated that Portage puts warranties in its contracts while MDOT does not, unless the vote on May 5, 2015 passes. He said MDOT is not required to put warranties in its contracts, and they could do it now, but they choose not to. Mayor Strazdas indicated it would be prudent and discussion followed.

Councilmember Ford concurred that preparing for future generations is a good point, that the streets of Portage are excellent, and complimented the planning of past Administrations for their efforts. He also explained that taking care of local roads is important, and that he was in favor of investing in infrastructure. Councilmember Ansari concurred and indicated that roads provide the first impression of a community and Councilmember Reid pointed out that a person does not notice if the roads are good, but that a person does notice if the roads are bad. Discussion followed.

**STATEMENTS OF CITIZENS:** Tom Haroldson, 6941 Rothbury Street, indicated that he participates in his Neighborhood Watch Program that has been in existence for about three years now. Discussion followed.

**ADJOURN:** Mayor Strazdas adjourned the meeting at 7:02 p.m.

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James R. Hudson, City Clerk