

**OSHTEMO CHARTER TOWNSHIP
PLANNING COMMISSION**

MINUTES OF A VIRTUAL MEETING HELD MAY 28, 2020

Agenda

New Business

- a. Discussion: Electronic Message Centers**
 - b. Discussion: DRAFT Planning Department Annual Report 2019**
 - c. Discussion: Proposed 2020 Van Buren County Master Plan**
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A virtual meeting of the Oshtemo Charter Township Planning Commission was held Thursday, May 28, 2020, commencing at approximately 6:03 p.m.

ALL MEMBERS

WERE PRESENT: Bruce VanderWeele, Chair
Ron Commissaris
Dusty Farmer
Micki Maxwell, Vice Chair
Mary Smith
Anna Versalle
Chetan Vyas

Also present were Iris Lubbert, Planning Director, James Porter, Township Attorney, Josh Owens, Assistant to the Supervisor, and Martha Coash, Meeting Transcriptionist.

In addition, Scott Foster, Consumers Credit Union, and Jack Vos, Universal Signs, Inc. were in attendance.

Call to Order and Pledge of Allegiance

Chairperson VanderWeele called the meeting to order at approximately 6:03 p.m.

Approval of Agenda

Hearing no suggestions for change, Chairperson VanderWeele let the agenda stand as presented.

Public Comment on Non-Agenda Items

There were no members of the public present; the Chair moved to the next item.

Approval of the Minutes of the Meeting of May 14, 2020

The Chair asked if there were additions, deletions or corrections to the Minutes of the Meeting of May 14, 2020. Hearing none, he asked for a motion.

Ms. Versalle made a motion to approve the Minutes of the Meeting of May 14, 2020 as presented. Ms. Maxwell seconded the motion. The motion was approved unanimously by roll call vote.

Chairperson VanderWeele moved to the next agenda item.

NEW BUSINESS

a. Discussion: Electronic Message Centers

Ms. Lubbert said in mid-March of this year Jack Vos, with Universal Signs Inc., approached the Township to explore getting a variance for a sign deviation on behalf of his client, Consumer Credit Union. The request was specifically to allow for the installation of a larger electronic message center than permitted by the Zoning Ordinance. However, after the application was further reviewed, it was found that the argument being presented for a variance was not with how this site in particular is at a disadvantage but rather that the current signage ordinance is outdated. Specifically, the applicant argued that the code's restriction of an electronic message board's square footage (35% of the total sign area) is too small. It was determined that any discussion about potential deficiencies of the current ordinance was not appropriate for the Zoning Board of Appeals but rather was a topic for the Planning Commission to consider. After discussion, the applicant agreed to meet with the Planning Commission to discuss a request to update the signage ordinance.

She introduced Mr. Vos who said electronic message centers have changed over the last 10- 15 years when they began with line and word orientation. Code allowed 25%, which later increased to 35% of a sign to be dedicated to the message center portion. That percentage limits the message center so that the proper aspect ratio cannot be achieved. They wish to show static images and characters in the proper aspect ratio. His comments covered the following points:

- Message centers greater than 35% fill in the allowable sign area and help eliminate dead space around the display.
- The ordinance limits the overall sign size and the 35% percentage limits the message center size. When combined, these size limitations together reduce the size of a proper aspect ratio message center to be too small to be effective.

- Due to these limitations the message and graphic on the message center will be smaller with less space around the copy which makes the message harder to see and the words harder to read.
- A message center in the proper aspect ratio greater than 35% of the sign area will allow the images to be larger and the words on the message center to have more spacing and blank space which will make the sign easier to read.
- A message center that has larger images and is easier to read is less distracting and assures safe egress to the branch which is safer for all motorists.
- An aspect ratio of 2:1 and size greater than 35% would allow us to utilize the full width of the sign and allow us to have enough height to be closer to the preferred content range. An aspect ratio outside of that range may cause portions of content to be lost or distorted when displayed. A sign aspect ratio of 2:1 is consistent with advertising standards, allows business to make use of existing content sources that they already have created for billboards or social media, and is the best choice for large, legible copy and use of pictures.

He provided examples of signs in the area that have different percentages of the overall sign dedicated to the message center area and indicated there are multiple CCU signs in the Kalamazoo area that have the correct aspect ratios which makes them more effective. The sign at 9th Street and Drake Road has 64% of the allowable sign area dedicated to the message center. The same sign with the correct aspect ratio, but reduced to 35% shrinks images so much they are harder to read. They believe dedicating 65% of the overall sign area to the message center gives enough flexibility to achieve a correct image on the screen.

Ms. Maxwell noted at their last meeting they agreed they were not interested in adjusting the sign ordinance at this time.

Ms. Smith added a year ago the Commission agreed they did not want large, flashy signs in the Township.

Ms. Farmer said the Commission changed the ordinance after a sign expert advised them on aspect ratios. Sign messages are allowed to change every six seconds. Drivers should be able to see one or two messages as they pass by. She felt the term "message center" was a little misleading and was not interested in larger signs.

Mr. Commissaris was concerned with safety, suggesting the consideration of further distractions at 9th and West Main and Drake and West Main, two of the areas in this part of the state with the most accidents, requires caution.

Ms. Maxwell mentioned the Consumers Credit Union variance granted at the Zoning Board Authority meeting earlier in the week.

Ms. Lubbert explained the variance was to increase the overall size of their pylon sign by 20 square feet, because of a unique easement that forced the placement of the

sign further back from the road, in order to help them compete with other more visible neighboring signs.

Mr. Vyas asked what would be gained by a bigger message center.

Mr. Vos explained the increase is in the proportion of the size of the message center in relation to the overall sign, which would not increase in size. Without that increase the sign will cause strain for a driver to read the message, and would be less safe for traffic. The message center portion of the sign would increase, not the overall size of the whole sign.

Ms. Farmer said signs placed at the side of the road that encourage reading them when driving are a huge distraction and should not be encouraged at all. The Township considered a message sign to be placed in front of the Township Hall and decided against it because of the resulting distraction that would occur.

Ms. Maxwell felt signs should be identifiers, not message centers.

Mr. Vos said message centers have proven to be the most effective way to advertise to those passing by. A lot of message centers have been in place for years, they are just evolving to be safer. A reasonable size makes them easier to read and be seen. They are proven to be both effective and safe. The message center is just an LED board that shows messages or pictures and is static as it has always been. The message would change as many times as allowed in code.

Mr. Foster, Consumers Credit Union, said they have three offices in Oshtemo Township and nine around the Kalamazoo area, that include a very large sign in Texas Township on I94. The message center on the sign in Mattawan Village is close to 50% of the sign. The messages usually include 3-5 words on a six second rotation. If you are stopped at a light you would likely see 3-4 messages; if driving by you would see one. Similar signs are installed in Grand Rapids, Holland, South Haven and Coldwater. Oshtemo Township has the lowest % of area sites. The sign will not be bigger but will allow companies a ratio that makes sense. If a company has a long name/logo, the changeable space is less than for a name/logo that is shorter. The message center is an opportunity to grow business. They are just asking for the flexibility a higher percentage of the message center to overall sign area would provide. He hoped the Commission will continue discussion to increase the percentage somewhat to be in line with other communities across Michigan.

Mr. Vyas said if the square footage of the sign is kept the same but the aspect ratio is stuck at 35%, the ability to put up better signage and a logo is reduced. The sign is stuck at 35% unless the aspect ratio can be changed to get the most out of the digital space. Otherwise much of the sign is wasted with the space bordering the message center with metal material.

Ms. Farmer said the sign discussion is not personal to CCU. She is a member of CCU and appreciates their presence in Oshtemo Township. The overarching issue with signage is general. Signs have been an ongoing saga for a decade.

Ms. Smith said the problem is that they hear from so many companies who want name recognition, on three sides of their building, on the street, message centers. She felt the purpose of signs is to find the storefront, rather than providing a message center on signs.

Ms. Maxwell and Mr. Commissaris both agreed with her comment.

Mr. Vyas felt considering the aspect ratio is not a bad idea.

Ms. Maxwell said what is being asked for is a change in the percentage of a sign that is dedicated as a message center, not just addressing the aspect ratio.

Ms. Smith said she was not in favor of a bigger sign.

Mr. Vos said they are not asking for a bigger sign. He noted every business is unique. A long name takes up more static space. A short or condensed name or logo provides a larger percentage of message center space. Without an increase in percentage they are handcuffed. If their request is not approved, they will go with a larger sign as seen at West Main and Drake. It will still be at the maximum allowance, but does not look as good as other signs.

Chairperson VanderWeele said it was clearly the consensus of the Commission to stay the course for now. There may be further discussion in the future.

Ms. Farmer needed to leave the meeting at this time.

Chairperson VanderWeele moved to the next agenda item.

b. Discussion: DRAFT Planning Department Annual Report 2019

Ms. Lubbert told Commissioners every year the Oshtemo Planning Department produces a report that satisfies the requirements of Section 308 of the Michigan Zoning Enabling Act (Public Act 110 of 2006, as amended), which states that a Planning Commission must prepare an annual report documenting the administration of their municipality's Zoning Ordinance and outline possible future amendments to the Ordinance. The draft report fulfills the obligation for 2019 and provides updates on the activities and projects planned for 2020.

She noted the Planning Department expanded the scope of the report to further document the activities of the Zoning Board of Appeals and the administrative activities of the Planning Department staff. By doing so, the document provides a more complete picture of Planning and Zoning activities within the Township. This report is intended to

not only document past and ongoing activities but also help the Township Board develop its own work plans and budgets for the coming year.

The Planning Commission had no questions, thanked Ms. Lubbert for her work and complimented her on the report. They felt she had covered everything and the report was ready to finalize and forward to the Township Board.

The Chair moved to the next agenda item.

c. Discussion: Proposed 2020 Van Buren County Master Plan

Ms. Lubbert explained the Michigan State Planning Enabling Act requires Jurisdictions to send proposed Master Plans and Master Plan amendments to neighboring jurisdictions, and if a Township, to the County. Van Buren County is in the process of adopting a 2020 Master Plan and a draft plan was provided to the Township. The plan builds upon the 2017 Van Buren County Master Plan and was developed through an open public process led by community stakeholders committed to making a difference in the County.

She said the Planning Commission requested in the past to review updates of this nature in a Planning Commission meeting. Due to the size of the document, she provided a link to access the proposed 2020 Van Buren County Master Plan. She said any questions, and/or concerns the Commission has about the Plan will be shared with Ted Thar, Van Buren County Land Management.

Ms. Maxwell asked if there is any way to know what is new or changed in the document.

Ms. Lubbert said the report outlines Van Buren County's plan and vision for their community for the next five years. She as unsure on other specific differences between this plan and the Community's previous plan.

There were no further comments.

Chairperson VanderWeele suggested that after everyone has had a chance to read the plan they may have further discussion down the road.

PUBLIC COMMENT

No members of the public were present. The Chair moved to the next item.

OTHER UPDATES AND BUSINESS

Ms. Lubbert noted Governor Whitmer extended her prohibition on public

meetings until June 30. She will update the group as more information is forthcoming. The next meeting will continue to be held virtually via Zoom. In the meantime discussion will continue on how future meetings, post pandemic restrictions, will be conducted.

ADJOURNMENT

With there being no further business to consider, Chairperson VanderWeele adjourned the meeting at approximately 6:50 p.m.

Minutes prepared:
May 29, 2020

Minutes approved:
June 11, 2020