

WEST ST. PAUL PLANNING COMMISSION WORK SESSION

The West St. Paul Planning Commission work session was called to order by Chair Samantha Green, on Tuesday, November 17, 2020 at 5:00pm in the Municipal Center Council Chambers, 1616 Humboldt Avenue, West St. Paul, Minnesota 55118.

ROLL CALL: Samantha Green, Morgan Kavanaugh, Lisa Stevens, Maria Franzmeier

Also Present: Melissa Sonnek, City Planner; John Justen, Council Liaison

MINIMUM PARKING REQUIREMENTS DISCUSSION

Sonnek asked commission members if there were any initial thoughts for discussion after reading the background information she gave them. Franzmeier said it would be nice to align themselves with what the City wants to accomplish. Sonnek said that she is looking for a recommendation to carry to Council. It could be to ask for a study to be done by an outside company, or to continue to review site plans on a case-by-case basis. Alternatively, the Commission could decide tonight based on the information provided and tonight's work session to lower the parking minimums. Green asked if a parking study was feasible, affordability-wise. Sonnek does not know how much it would cost. The study could focus only on certain areas of the City like Robert Street. This may reduce the costs. Stevens said that the reason why the Commission is reviewing the parking minimums is to give guidance to developers. It may not make sense to look at site plans on a case-by-case basis. The [parking minimum] has been an ongoing problem. Stevens said that it would not hurt to get a cost for the study. Kavanaugh said that a lot of other cities have not updated their parking minimums. They are in the same situation as the City of West St. Paul. Sonnek confirmed this saying, "we're all in the same ship together." Franzmeier asked about the excel comparison sheet. Kavanaugh said that developers have been presenting plans and requesting that they provide less parking that code requires. Mixed use parking numbers are "out of whack" with businesses have really needed. Green said that if the Commission looks at recent variances, the vast majority of them were given to residential multi-family complexes. There are not a lot of these properties left in West St. Paul. Green suggested starting there. Justen said of the three cities that they are looking at tonight, only Inver Grove Heights said that they are not [making any changes in parking minimums]. The other two cities felt that their parking requirements were too high. Of the businesses that responded, two of the restaurants felt that their parking was too high. Food Smith received a huge reduction in parking; they are happy. Regarding the multi-family/efficiencies and one-bedrooms, five out of six respondents said that the parking requirements are too high. Kavanaugh remembers in 2015 when 252 Marie was built, the neighbors complained that there was going to be too much traffic and not enough parking. It has been built and there are no issues with traffic and no apparent issues with parking. It

seems to be a pattern of when once something is built and functioning, everyone realizes that the world is not ending. Sonnek said that one thing worth noting that 252 Marie has the mixed use component; with retail in the state that it is in, only 1-2 suites are occupied. There is lesser demand for parking for 252 Marie. Green would like the City to do a parking study. With the other cities' ordinances being out of date, a study makes more sense. Kavanaugh asked if the general consensus is that the numbers are too high. Green said that the City needs more flexibility but does not have a standard of what has worked with other cities. Kavanaugh said if you look at an aerial Google map view of West St. Paul, the City has a lot of empty land taken up by empty parking lots. West St. Paul only has five square miles; it is an absurd use of land. [Lowering the parking minimum,] ties into environmental issues. It is one of the easiest things to do to change things for the better. It has an impact on global warming and the impact of cars. Sonnek related that part of the problem was that the standards were pulled from the International Association of Traffic Engineers. Up until now, there had always been a consistent demand for parking. The City is now moving away from the automobile oriented developments. The standards have become obsolete. Justen commented that the current parking standards are inhibiting the construction of outlot businesses. The fully developed lots have an ocean of parking. They are not actually fully-developed. The City does not have a lot of empty spaces to put new businesses. It would be hard to market the parking space if it were against code. Green mentioned that there was going to be a Tim Hortons in the Hobby Lobby parking lot but it could not be built because of issues with the current parking requirements. Franzmeier talked about the need for a shared parking ordinance. Sonnek said that this ordinance does exist in the code, especially if there are non-competing uses. Franzmeier wondered why if the parking is over-provisioned. Sonnek said that it is a good point. Kavanaugh said that the Tim Horton's fell through because of other reasons. The Planning Commission was hoping for outdoor seating and patio space and some green space. [The developers] said this could not be accomplished with the parking requirements as well. It is a perfect example of putting projects in different areas and the developers still being told they need all this parking. Green said that we are definitely in a place where we need to be more creative to find more spaces for businesses. We are in agreement that our parking standards are too high. The question is where do we go from here? Stevens suggested starting at specific uses like the "big box stores" and looking at the requirement of stalls per square footage. If the commission reduces the requirement, it would open the business to sublease. Justen opined that changing the big box requirement would not fix the problem that the City has now. Kavanaugh said that Menards is an example of a big box needing changes in the parking lot requirements. Sonnek said that Menards has had several variances based on the changes in that lot. The most recent one was for the security gate. It reduced the lot about 12 stalls. Justen said that the big goal is to move forward. If the City does reduce parking requirements, it has to be made clear to all the establishments, (existing and out lot businesses,) that this is being done. Stevens said that it makes sense to reduce what the City requires for retail. It opens up the big box stores to sublease or sell or resale their space. Justen asked the about the number of subcategories retail has. Sonnek replied that they are all based on square footage.

Stevens suggested starting with stores and getting “rid of the sea of unused parking and impermeable surfaces.” The other objective would be a general reduction for retail and for food and beverage. The City needs to right size parking requirements going forward for other types of retail, and then housing.

Sonnek reviewed the parking minimum code per property square footage with the Commission. For any building smaller than 10,000 square feet, it is one stall per every 200 square feet. For buildings between 10,000 and 100,000 square feet, there is a baseline of 50 stalls and then one stall per every 200 square feet. Sonnek said that the code was probably generated from traffic engineer reports. Stevens suggested to first reutilize the “sea of empty parking,” and to shore up the shared parking ordinance. Stevens talked about tripling the space per stall to 600 square feet instead of 200 square feet. Kavanaugh said that the [parking requirement] would also depend on the actual [type of] retail and service establishment that was being proposed and their needs. The catchall of square footage would not necessarily fit what was needed. Sonnek said that if the City were to specify retail or service square footage, it might help. For example, if Menards were 50,000 square feet and 40,000 square feet was for retail service and the other 10,000 feet were used for a storage warehouse, under the present ordinance, the City would need to match the parking ratio to the total 50,000 square feet. If the ordinance were changed, it could exclude office space, storage etc. It would be fine-tuned to the customer base. Justen suggested matching the parking requirements to the least number of spaces that the building would need. He has 2,600 square feet of retail space that required 13 parking stalls under the current ordinance. Justen never needs this many stalls. He sells expensive guitar things. He never has that many customers at one time. However, if the kind of store changed they could still build more. His leaning is to require a minimum. Most business will calculate what they need. Franzmeier said that Justen has a good point. The only caveat is if a developer builds a building and they do not know who would be using the space. Kavanaugh said that Justen is making a case for not having parking minimums. There are some cities that have done this. Sonnek would hesitate to have a blanket no-minimum. She has seen places that base no-minimums based on area like the green line heavy public transit. She would be more comfortable with that. During the site plan review, the no-minimum parking would be difficult. The applicant would like to have their plans fully drawn before they come to the Commission. Stevens wondered if they could just slash the requirements in half. Franzmeier said it might still be over provisioned. She suggested a stall for every 800 square feet. Part of their requirement would be an ADA stall. The ADA stall is state building code. For every 25 parking stalls you would need at least one ADA parking stall. Justen remarked that a developer would build to attract many types of businesses; they would not limit the number of parking stalls and restrict certain businesses from buying/renting their space. It would be Kavanaugh’s preference. The market would figure it out. Kavanaugh said it might make staff nervous. Green said the Commission is taking a wild guess. She would be okay with no required parking as long as it did not jeopardize the neighborhood. Her main concern is parking spilling into main residential areas. She thinks the City needs a parking study. The only city that Sonnek know that has no

minimums is Minneapolis. Minneapolis has parking maximums. It is not a completely market-based approach. Kavanaugh said with parking maximums, the city does not get the giant sea of parking. Sonnek said Minneapolis wanted the business to fit to their code. Kavanaugh added that they are dense and urban. It echoes to our Comp Plan. West St. Paul is an urban center. The City is being told by the Met Council what it should be and the City is trying to align to that.

Stevens would like a study to see what would the red flags be if there were no minimums. Green asked if the Commission would be comfortable continuing to grant variances before the study is done. Kavanaugh said there are things the Commission can fix now. For the mixed use/multi-family buildings the code is 2 stalls per unit; the market does not support this. It could be changed to 1 ½ stalls per unit. If a developer provided a study to the Commission, they could prove they need the variance. Sonnek said if the applicant has done their homework and they are willing to pay for a parking study; it is a pretty solid case. Justen asked where the funding money would come from for a study. Sonnek said some funding would be generated from the increased amount of development in the City. Green asked if Jim Hartshorn had any opinions. Sonnek said he did want a recommendation from city staff. However, it is hard to compose a recommendation for an issue that is so wide open. Sonnek wanted to have the recommendation come organically from the Commission. The City could explore how much the study costs. Franzmeier asked about retroactive legalities if the Commission were to cut the parking requirements in half. Sonnek said it would not apply to existing buildings but to plans moving forward. Ordinances are changed all the time.

A motion was made by Kavanaugh and seconded by Franzmeier to approve the following changes in code:

- **One and one-half parking stalls per unit for multi-family buildings;**
- **A fifty percent slash to the existing parking minimum;**
- **The ability to have parking minimums reduced if a developer has done a study; and**
- **Recommendation that a parking study be done that would focus on the Robert Street/non-residential zone and commercial area.**

Vote- 4 ayes, motion carried.

Justen recommended informing local businesses with significant parking of the change. The change may spark ideas in the seas of parking lots. Sonnek said there are only a handful of big boxes to inform. A press release could go out to everyone.

BUILDING MATERIALS DISCUSSION

Sonnek said there hasn't been a lot of discussion on this topic yet. There is not a lot of variation with other communities on this topic either. Franzmeier asked if this was in regards to the green building surfaces or it mostly just aesthetic. Sonnek said it was about exterior construction materials. Franzmeier said some materials could be more green friendly than

others. Green said that the Environmental Committee is working on better building practices and greener practices across the board whether it be lighting or materials. She is interested in what their recommendation is. She is hesitant to changing things and making things more costly. She does not want to price the City out of future development. Franzmeier remarked that recent applications have been a little lackluster in some of the building material propositions. In community meetings she has attended, there has been some comments on character and charisma in our architecture. These qualities do not exist especially in the Robert Street corridor. The Life Center wanted a bright lime green strip on their facade; it would date the building. Franzmeier would like to eliminate color of such boldness from City ordinance. Relating to accent colors, Sonnek has seen other cities limit color to a certain portion of the building to no more than 10 percent or 5 percent. Franzmeier would love to see more natural brick in general. She talked about the storage unit buildings with flat CMU. It would be nice for the neighbors that live next to the storage unit to see something better. Sonnek said that one option for the CMU's would be to reduce the size of the panels to make them more to human scale. Franzmeier said no to this option. It is not the look she is going for.

Green asked if there were any updates from the Environmental Committee. Sonnek said she has not received any updates. Kavanaugh commented that one building that gets a lot of criticism is the Burger Time building on Robert Street and Bernard Street. It has the orange and red Hardie Board panels. It is an example of a building that could have used more brick and natural stone. The building probably looked good when it was initially built with its bold colors. Over 15 years, it fades. The City could ask for more natural colors and stone requirements. It would not be too onerous. Parking is expensive and the City is now getting rid of these requirements. Green suggested changing the minimum percentage of the primary materials. It is at 60 percent. What would developers say – Kavanaugh asked if it would prevent any developer from coming to the City. Sonnek said that the 60/40 percentage is pretty common straight across the board. A deviation would create a very different change for this area. Mendota Heights has the 60/40 percentage for their business and industrial zoning. Kavanaugh said that they are probably getting nicer buildings because the market supports it, not because their standards are different. Sonnek confirmed this summary statement. Franzmeier referenced the apartment complex being built near the Hy-Vee. The commission was underwhelmed by the plan. Sonnek recalled that the applicant said that lap siding was based on the demographics of the community. Kavanaugh said that the rents that were being charged in this area would not support an all brick building. Franzmeier said that the applicant, "likes to say that." She does not know if it is necessarily true. Green said that it is and cited rental rates for the area. Kavanaugh said that the City can make progress on the standards. However, the City cannot have better standards that "let's say Wayzata in one day." There will be some growing into it. There are steps we can make now that are not cost prohibitive. Franzmeier mentioned the DARTS signage. It looks like it was slapped on the building. Sonnek said that signage is a separate part of the code. Signage is typically reviewed under a different section. For the DARTS building the signage is on retaining wall. There is no language for this

type of sign. Franzmeier said that it does look cheap and an afterthought. Green asked for recommendations. She would prefer to wait from the Environmental Committee for their recommendations.

A motion was made by Kavanaugh and seconded by Franzmeier to continue discussion until they hear from the Environmental Committee's recommendations.

Vote- 4 ayes. The motion carried

The meeting was adjourned at 6:14pm.

All Ayes.

**Respectfully submitted,
Sharon G. Hatfield**