

Housing Advisory Commission

Monthly Meeting: Via Zoom <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/92216643920>

Wednesday, August 26, 2020, 8:30 AM

Attending: Katrina Bonfili, Amy Chandler, Christal Crouso, Lisa Darden, Chris Fletcher, Bill Kawecki, Gail Lipscomb, Alexis McMillen, Ken Tennant, Arthur Trusler, Brian Walker, and John Whitmore

Call to order

Housing needs assessment discussion: Group

Chris Fletcher, the City's development director, is leaving his position after nearly 15 years with the City. He discussed the housing needs assessment prepared by Bowen National Research, located here:

<http://www.morgantownwv.gov/DocumentCenter/View/3416/2020-Housing-Needs-Assessment-Report>. Chris said that Bowen's presentation to Morgantown City Council was well received. Chris has resigned his position to take another job, and his last day is next week. He stated the report tells us what we already knew in terms of Morgantown's housing market, in that we are overbuilt in terms of student housing but sorely lacking in single family offerings. The report validates our efforts and helps connect the dots in our housing market. Affordability across the market is a huge issue. Bowen cited the Fairmont-Morgantown Housing Authority (FMHA) as the City's best housing partner and recommended the city hire a housing director. However, the City has experienced a revenue decline since March and has a hiring freeze. While the hiring and spending freeze will continue indefinitely, hiring a housing director will be a priority when possible. Chris said that student housing is too much a focus for the Housing Advisory Commission (HAC), and the HAC needs to be realigned, using the assessment document as a guideline. HAC members should choose and prioritize goals and accomplishable objectives. Chris said we can do more, and one way to accomplish more would be setting up subcommittees for the purpose of direction. The HAC has been given a \$40K resource that we should use better.

Bill Kawecki said that, looking at the HAC composition, perhaps we should identify who is missing. Chris added that a developer or contractor would be helpful to highlight resources needed for development. Hurdles for development include flood plain issues, the Morgantown Utility Board (MUB), local terrain, and cost of and lack of available land. The development of affordable housing is very difficult in the area. A contractor or developer would help HAC members understand the hurdles. Two or three price-point sectors are completely

underserved. The HAC should set up a committee to dive deep into the report and can begin with some of the recommendations that are easier to accomplish. There needs to be more interaction with City Council and the HAC. Lisa Darden stated that she agrees with Chris in that we are too focused on student housing.

Lisa stated that dealing with MUB is an expensive task; if MUB could reduce costs, more development may be possible. Christal Crouso said there are lots of expectations for FMHA, and more than 50 percent of FMHA vouchers are in Mon County. Members of HAC should understand that development of affordable housing is difficult. Arthur Trusler asked if we should bring in a builder rather than a developer, as developable land is hard if not impossible to find, particularly within city limits. Chris agreed that a builder might be a better choice. Chris suggested more of a subcommittee approach, and they could report back to the group during monthly meetings. Working subcommittees would have a better focus and would be more effective. Alexis said low-income tax credits may encourage development. In the study, more than 55 percent of survey respondents said they would move to Morgantown if they could afford it. Katrina Bonfili could give reports on sales, while Arthur could head a rental subcommittee. Bowen could work with developers. We could look into other communities with land-grant institutions to see how they have handled development. The current oversaturation in the student housing market should be turned into single-family. HAC needs to get the housing assessment out for public consumption and discussion. The waitlist for housing vouchers is extreme, and there is a critical need for 1,000 low-income units at a price point of no more than 30 percent of income, rather than the current 50 percent, which is unsustainable for many families.

Amy Chandler said we need to find ways to make low-income housing more profitable to encourage development. She said that mixed income developments have been highly successful in other parts of the country. These neighborhoods are diverse and feature a mix of ages, families, and couples, and Amy wondered if the city can use zoning regulations to mandate. Chris stated that Morgantown is a dichotomy, with West Virginia residents mixed with people from other states. We should be careful about adding more rules, as they typically add to building costs. If the City adds more, it will push developers and builders out of the area and into another. Unfortunately, Morgantown does not have enough free area to create a new mixed development and, as such, will have to be more incremental, such as taking a house that was a rental and refurbishing to make it a single-family dwelling.

Neighborhood associations are vocal and resistant to change. In Wiles Hill, for example, some housing stock needs to be torn down or refurbished. This is a time-consuming and difficult conversation in neighborhoods. Non-detached housing makes neighborhood associations nervous because they are afraid these will turn into student housing. Two acres are needed to start a new development under current zoning regulations. Bill cited the Sabraton school demo example and asked about the vision for this area by the property owner. John Whitmore said

the school sat on a six-acre parcel, and he reached out to the owner with no response. Some developers do not want to pay for land for redevelopment, but this generally doesn't work in Morgantown, as property prices are high. Other West Virginia cities offer negative value property, such as Fairmont or Princeton. Alexis said some projects are going on in Davis by nonprofit developers. Christal stated that FMHA has been considered a nonprofit housing developer, and zero property costs are the best way to make development work for lower cost housing.

John said Woodburn School would have been an excellent opportunity, but the neighborhood was in extreme opposition and will not happen now. It's a hard town to do different things and provide something that is different. Christal said FMHA tried to do a pod in the Darst Street area, but neighbors were against this. Bill said a housing director would help greatly; in order to get boards and commissions to work effectively, you have to identify goals to achieve. In order to get things to move forward, it helps to have someone like a director. He would like to see a restructuring of the HAC to accomplish this goal. Chris said the HAC needs what other boards and commissions have, which is someone from city administration to be assigned as staff support to help the commission establish goals and accomplish objectives set forth. Bill agreed and asked Chris to make that recommendation to the city before he leaves next week. Chris said he would do so.

WVU Move-In: Brian Walker

Brian discussed move-in for WVU residence halls and University Apartments. Residence hall move-in took place from August 15 to August 22, to allow for physical distancing and reduce foot traffic. In addition, Welcome Week was recast as Refresh, with in-person programming for incoming students on a much smaller scale; virtual programming was also part of Refresh. University Apartments scheduled move-in from August 1 to August 14, and the property managers said it went smoothly.

Rude Signage: Group

Brian said that, unfortunately, we did see some instances of rude signage, which we see every year. Much of the signage was in Sunnyside and on Willey Street. Brian contacted landlords and property managers of units displaying signage, and most had their tenants remove the signs as soon as possible. Arthur said that, with a couple of his units, tenants were belligerent and cited first amendment rights. Gail said the first amendment is often misunderstood and refers to the right to speak out against the government. Property managers and landlords can just pull the signs down. A swell of entitlement and bad behavior has led some people to think they can do anything without recourse. John said that, earlier in the year, City Council enacted a rule about temporary signage, as there is no permitting in the City right now due to COVID. Arthur said tenants have been more angry and belligerent this year, and Gail says that attitudes are seemingly different right now and agrees with Arthur.

New Business

None.

Next meeting: September 23, 2020

Adjournment