

**MINUTES OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE WORK SESSION  
OF MARCH 10, 2015**

Mayor Strazdas called the meeting to order at 6:03 p.m. The following Councilmembers were present: Councilmembers Nasim Ansari, Richard Ford, Patricia M. Randall and Claudette Reid, and Mayor Peter Strazdas. Councilmember Terry Urban arrived at 6:07 p.m. Mayor Pro Tem Jim Pearson was absent with notice. Also present were City Attorney Randy Brown, City Manager Larry Shaffer, Deputy City Manager Rob Boulis, Community Development Director Vicki Georgeau and City Clerk James Hudson.

Mayor Strazdas reviewed the past COW Meetings and confirmed that the topic, "Study of the City Retail Profile to guide City Council efforts," had been deferred to the COW Meeting tonight from the last meeting. He announced that the March 24, 2015 COW Meeting would be a discussion of promoting community engagement through the use of social media which is an extension of the discussion tonight. He mentioned the plan to discuss a portion of the Comprehensive Plan, the "Miracle THree miles" of Portage, Portage Commerce Square and the risk of an overbuilt commercial community.

Councilmember Reid asked that the impact of the switch to retail on-line be addressed.

Mayor Strazdas introduced Community Development Director Vicki Georgeau, who began a discussion of the City Retail Profile as a guide for City Council efforts and referenced the Crossroads Mall, South Westnedge Avenue, Milham Avenue, Centre Avenue and the mixed uses on Shaver Road. She pointed out that there has not been plans for large areas, but core nodes to serve neighborhoods, and emphasized that in 2002 and 2008, a key strategy of the plan was not to build to compete with what we have. She said that the amount of land area in the City designated for commercial use has remained relatively stable during the ten year period between 2002 and 2012 with land area used for commercial purposes averaging approximately 910 acres, or 4.1% of the total during this time period. She discussed the commercial revitalization area, large malls that are failing because of the recession and vacancies such as Kmart and the old Sam's Club properties that are filling up and are strong for now. She said that the trend now is going from the big boxes to mixed use and small or midsized boxes and this was made possible in 2011 with the Zoning Code Amendments regarding redevelopment. Discussion followed.

In answer to Councilmember Ansari, Ms. Georgeau indicated that there has been internal planning around large parcels in the industrial corridors to ensure the parcels are ready for development. She mentioned particular interest has been given recently to the Brownfield sites, and gave the example that Accu-Mold wants to move to Industrial Drive. She stressed this is important for employment, tax base and higher paying jobs.

City Manager Larry Shaffer indicated that the revisions to the Industrial Tax Abatement Incentive Policy is on the Regular City Council Meeting Agenda for Council Consideration at 7:30 p.m. He listed some of the many assets the City of Portage has to offer and indicated that the process and incentives of the Policy are commensurate with the Industrial growth needs of the City. Discussion followed.

In answer to Councilmember Randall, Ms. Georgeau indicated that there is no control over the types of stores or concerns that may rent space in the various business zoned properties in the City. City Attorney Randy Brown indicated that when the property is owned by the City, more control is possible. Discussion followed.

Councilmember Reid expressed a concern that the quality of some stores was going down, and she asked whether the City was assessing the quality of the current commercial retail establishments and/or tracking what kinds of stores are in close proximity to one another in order to get a proper mix. Discussion followed regarding the frustration that the Chamber of Commerce no longer has a support system for small businesses and the need to work with them to formulate one.

Councilmember Urban reminded Council that the West Main and the Maple Hill Malls disappeared and that the City needs to be prepared in order to minimize any impact from events such as this here in Portage.

Councilmember Ford expressed his opinion that the anchor stores would possibly be closing owing to an outlet mall that is planned to be built 45 minutes away.

Councilmember Ansari emphasized the need to work with the Chamber of Commerce and Southwest Michigan First. Mayor Strazdas summed up the need to find out how the City can work with the owners of the Crossroads Mall to help them to be successful.

Mayor Strazdas introduced the discussion of the City Visioning Process letting everyone know that there were 150 participants in Portage 2025 in 2007 with four forums that were two hours in length, and a renewal event in 2008. He reviewed some of the many goals presented by the first event that were opportunities for citizen engagement, including: the City Center Area Plan, the 2011 Community Survey, the 2013 Business Sign Forum, the Lake Center District Informational Planning Meeting of April 2013, and the 2014 update of the Comprehensive Plan. He offered the suggestion to host a one-evening visioning project similar to the Portage 2025 Renewal Event of 2008 as an effective means of increasing citizen engagement. He also advocated the use of a professional facilitator plus a keynote speaker along with community wide announcements and any other promotions to get the word out. He said topics should include Comprehensive Plan topics, and a discussion of “branding” was mentioned.

Since it has been seven years since Portage 2025 and there has been contraction and survival in the commercial realm, and Mayor Strazdas indicated that there is a need to get citizens of Portage engaged for a brighter future, and that he believes Portage citizens are ready for another visions process. He recommended a keynote speaker and to connect the things that happened since 2008 to the 2025 Visioning Process to see what has been done. Discussion followed regarding brainstorming and transformation.

When asked by Mayor Strazdas, Environmental Board Member Martha Dahlinger, 2612 Chopin Avenue, agreed that this strategy would be very useful and Councilmember Reid concurred saying it is important for citizen participation to know what has been done in the past. She proposed a series of programs on Public Media Network and that they also be posted on the city website. Discussion followed.

Councilmember Reid mentioned that that the Council of Governments (COG) has been discussing the citizen engagement topic and COG is really focusing on notification and informing as it is important to let the public know at what stage they are entering into a process and to know where the work performed has had an impact.

Discussion followed and City Manager Shaffer stressed that a good Capital Improvement Program starts with the neighborhoods to let them know what the City is doing and that measurement is key. He noted that the option of Big Data research with the BS&A Software is used to inform citizens whether or not we accomplished the goals of a plan.

Councilmember Reid indicated that the development of Center Avenue took nine months of visiting and planning and suggested the use of Portage Alert to target a particular area and to utilize social engagement tools to get citizens involved.

Mayor Strazdas interjected that that is the topic of the next COW where Technology Director Devin Mackinder will present the technology tools and techniques applicable for this purpose.

**STATEMENTS OF CITIZENS:** Martha Dahlinger, 2612 Chopin Avenue, indicated that the last Census revealed that things are changing dramatically. She noted that a lot of stores no longer exist; that sustainability and brainstorming are important considerations for growth; and, that preparation should include contacting neighborhoods to get citizens together so they can establish a comfort level ahead of time for their discussions.

**ADJOURN:** Mayor Strazdas adjourned the meeting at 7:08 p.m.

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James R. Hudson, City Clerk