

The Altavista Planning Commission held a regularly scheduled meeting on November 1st, 2021, at 5:00 p.m. in Council Chambers at Town Hall, located at 510 7th Street, Altavista, Virginia.

Members present: John Jordan, Chairman
 Marie Mitchell, Vice Chair
 Marvin Clements
 Jennifer Morton

Member Absent: Reggie Bennett, Vice Mayor

Staff present: Sharon D. Williams, AICP, Community Development Director
 John Eller, Town Attorney
 George Sandridge, Main Street Coordinator

CALL TO ORDER:

Chairman John Jordan called the Planning Commission Meeting to order at 5:00 p.m.

DETERMINATION OF QUORUM:

With four of five Planning Commission members being present, Chairman Jordan confirmed a quorum.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA:

Chairman Jordan asked if there were any amendments to be made to the agenda, to which there were none. Upon a motion by Vice Chair Marie Mitchell, and seconded by Commissioner Marvin Clements, the Planning Commission voted 4-0 to approve the agenda as presented.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE & INVOCATION:

Chairman Jordan delivered the Invocation and afterwards, the Planning Commission recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

Commissioner Jennifer Morton asked that a correction be made to the October 4, 2021 meeting minutes. Whereas the minutes referenced Altavista's library as Staunton River Memorial, Commissioner Morton said the minutes should read Staunton River Memorial Library. Upon a motion made by Vice Chair Mitchell, and seconded by Commissioner Morton, the Planning Commission voted 4-0 to approve the minutes from their October 4th, 2021, Planning Commission meeting as amended.

PUBLIC EXPRESSION:

Chairman Jordan opened the floor for public comment.
There being no speakers to come forward, the public comment period was closed.

PUBLIC HEARINGS:

There were no public hearings scheduled for this date.

OLD BUSINESS:

a. 2040 Comprehensive Plan SOAR Analysis

Chairman John Jordan welcomed Ms. Ada Hunsberger, Regional Planner, Central Virginia Planning District Commission (CVPDC), back to the Planning Commission Meeting.

Ms. Hunsberger stated she would continue the SOAR Analysis for the Comprehensive Plan update and reminded the Commission of its meaning: S=strengths, O=opportunities, A=aspirations, and R=results. She gave the Planning Commission a brief overview of the first two categories discussed at the last meeting, Community Resources and Resiliency/Hazard Mitigation. Ms. Hunsberger said this meeting would focus on Housing and Transportation; and conclude with Amenities and Town Services at a later date.

Chairman Jordan asked if the list of items they discussed would be the same list of items portrayed in the completed Comprehensive Plan.

Community Development Director Sharon Williams answered not necessarily. She said the Comprehensive Plan process included facts gathered by all town's boards and commissions, however, the State Code specifically identified the Planning Commission as an advisory board to Town Council, therefore they would rely heavily on the Commission's input. Ms. Williams stated Staff started with the Planning Commission to have some direction when speaking with other town boards and the community. She said the Comprehensive Plan would ultimately be approved by the Planning Commission and Town Council.

Chairman Jordan asked if the Commission would discuss economic development and land use during the Comprehensive Plan update.

Ms. Williams answered that would be discussed later in the process. She said, unlike the current plan, the Hazard Mitigation Plan, Land Use Plan, Parks & Recreation Master Plan, the Downtown District Plan, and the Camoin Study would be integrated into the updated Comprehensive Plan. She stated, as previously directed by the Commission, she would also conduct a zoning analysis for 3rd, 4th, and 5th Streets in Altavista.

Housing Affordability and Availability

Ms. Hunsberger referenced Housing and said quality housing played a critical role in a citizen's economic, social, and physical well-being. She started the discussion with housing quality and safety, which included ways to reduce/eliminate blight, and ways to ensure that tenants and homeowners were living in safe living conditions. Ms. Hunsberger asked the Commission's input on the town's strengths, opportunities, and aspirations pertaining to housing.

Vice Chair Mitchell stated she believed Altavista had more affordable housing than nearby Lynchburg, which she considered a strength. She also shared an aspiration of Altavista having more available housing.

Commissioner Morton agreed with Vice Chair Mitchell that the town needed rental properties.

Commissioner Clements said Altavista had a limited amount of space to expand its available housing.

Ms. Hunsberger said that was considered a challenge but was important to consider for the process.

Ms. Williams said that there were lots available in town that could be utilized for housing growth. She said there was a list of vacant lots of five acres or more in the current Comprehensive Plan, however the town did not have adequate ordinances in place to assist with development.

Commissioner Morton said the Comprehensive Plan update would be a good opportunity for the town to update its zoning and/or subdivision ordinances.

Ms. Williams agreed and said it would be beneficial when reading a plat or a construction document when a developer was interested in building in Altavista.

Vice Chair Mitchell said that a developer out of Roanoke, VA recently contacted her office with potential interest in developing a vacant piece of land in Altavista but declined to do so due to the town's low housing prices and uncertainties of what needed to be done to the property. She said that she had never worked with a developer and was unsure of what that process involved.

Ms. Williams said there were multiple things to consider during the development process, such as water/sewer connections, infrastructure, traffic studies, etc., which were costly. She shared an aspiration to consider for the housing category: to recommend the town develop an incentive package of what it could offer a potential developer in order to help promote housing growth.

Chairman Jordan referenced the block of houses located on Novelty Street and asked if current town ordinances allowed staff to address the blight issue.

Ms. Williams informed the Commission the houses on Novelty Street were owned by the same person, who was neither willing to fix or sell the properties. She said reminded the Commission that the Town of Altavista did not have a property maintenance code, which hindered its ability to address the issue as fully needed.

Vice Chair Mitchell stated that Novelty Street was not the only area of town that had derelict houses and there were derelict housing issues throughout the town. She asked if it would be helpful for the town to have a Code Enforcement Officer to address these issues.

Ms. Williams informed the Commission that it was a state code requirement for the town to have someone designated as their Code Official, trained and certified, in order to adopt a property maintenance code; and it was up to the town if they adopted the entire code, or only sections of it. Chairman Jordan asked the Town Attorney, John Eller, how the town could address the blight issue without a Code Official and a property maintenance code.

Mr. Eller stated the Town Code had two provisions for blight issues. He referenced a town program previously used by homeowners to help with the cost of tearing down their derelict houses by loaning them the money to do so, but he did not believe the program had been utilized in a while.

Ms. Williams said the town still allocated \$5,000 in the budget every year for the program.

Ms. Hunsberger informed the Commission that the CVPDC (Central Virginia Planning District Commission) had similar programs to help address blight issues, but they were geared towards the renovation of blighted properties, and not demolition. She said sometimes there were challenges with getting homeowners to take advantage of government programs, so the CVPDC worked with federal Community Development Block Grants to offer the renovation service.

Ms. Williams shared that the town's application to the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) for their Acquire, Renovate, Sell (ARS) program had been approved. She said, under the program, the town could purchase and renovate homes, or construct new dwellings. She stated the homes would be marketed to first-time home buyers. Ms. Williams said the DHCD would loan the town the funds to build a home and when the home was sold, the town would repay the initial loan and use any profit to reinvest into the program. She stated there was also a possibility that other grants could be combined with the program.

Ms. Hunsberger said that she believed she had enough input from the Commission to put together an outline of their aspirations for housing.

Ms. Williams referenced the Altavista/Campbell County Habitat for Humanity and the Claire Parker Foundation and stated she believed their clear vision and the will to assist with the housing need in Altavista was a strength for the town, to which the Commission agreed.

Ms. Hunsberger stated, something for the town to consider would be how to leverage that strength and how much of a partnership the town was comfortable with pursuing.

Ms. Williams said she believed there might be opportunities to build bridges with those organizations.

With no further questions or comments from the Planning Commission pertaining to housing, Ms. Hunsberger moved the SOAR analysis discussion forward with the next category.

Transportation

Ms. Hunsberger stated transportation, as a pedestrian, bicyclist, motorist, or transit rider, directly impacts quality of life, community resources, access to employment, and can contribute to a town's economic development. She referenced the Altavista Community Transit System (ACTS) and asked the Commission for their thoughts and if there were ways the service could be improved.

Ms. Sharon Williams shared a strength of the transit system and informed the Commission that ACTS offered deviated pickups, as long as the request was within one mile of the scheduled route.

Chairman Jordan asked what the cost was to ride the ACTS bus.

Ms. Williams said the cost of each ride was \$0.50 (fifty cent) per passenger, however, during the summer months the service was free to all passengers, due to an anonymous donor.

Chairman Jordan also asked what the annual cost for the town was to offer the service.

Ms. Williams informed the Commission that the town received grant funding annually from the Department of Rail and Public Transit (DRPT) that helps offset ACTS's expense.

Ms. Hunsberger asked if there were opportunities or aspirations to consider under transportation.

Ms. Williams shared what she believed to be an opportunity, which was to offer the transit service on Sundays, as it is currently not offered on that day.

Vice Chair Mitchell said an aspiration to consider would be to offer the ACTS service to Rustburg one day per week for citizens needing to visit county offices or the Social Services Department, which were not available in the Town of Altavista.

Ms. Hunsberger asked if the town had ever investigated the possibility of connecting the ACTS service to Lynchburg's GLT bus service.

Ms. Williams stated that she and Altavista's Main Street Coordinator, George Sandridge, checked on how far out of Lynchburg the GLT traveled and found that the service was currently only offered within city limits, which stopped on Wards Road at the stop light in front of Logan's Restaurant. Ms. Williams referenced the town's second/back-up bus and offered, utilizing the second bus for additional services, as an opportunity to consider.

Chairman Jordan asked how many drivers the town employed for the ACTS program.

Ms. Williams informed the Commission there were six (6) drivers, but two (2) of them only drove on the weekends. Ms. Williams also shared another aspiration to consider, which was for the town to investigate other grant opportunities that would help cover the cost if they decided to expand the ACTS service.

Commissioner Clements suggested the town consider asking neighboring localities, such as Campbell County and the Town of Hurt, to share the cost of having a local transit service.

Commissioner Morton said she believed cost sharing for ACTS with the Town of Hurt was a missed opportunity because the service already transports citizens to and from their medical center.

Town Attorney John Eller reminded the Planning Commission that Staunton River Plastics Company would soon be operating a new facility in the Town of Hurt, which may cause an increase for public transportation needs to that area.

Ms. Hunsberger referenced the Virginia Breeze bus service and asked if the Commission had any comments or suggestions pertaining to that service.

Chairman Jordan asked what areas the Virginia Breeze serviced.

Ms. Hunsberger stated it went from Danville to Washington D.C., with several stops along the route, including one at the Altavista WalMart. She informed the Commission the Comprehensive Plan citizen survey showed a high percentage of citizens were not familiar with the service.

Commissioner Morton said the Comprehensive Plan update was a good opportunity for the town to inform its citizens of the Virginia Breeze bus service.

Ms. Williams informed the Commission, when Virginia Breeze added Altavista to its regular route, the town issued a press release and posted information about the service on the town's website.

With no further comments from the Planning Commission regarding the ACTS and Virginia Breeze bus services, Ms. Hunsberger moved forward in the analysis with Active Transportation. She asked the Commission to consider how the town could encourage active transportation opportunities, such as biking and walking.

Commissioner Clements suggested the town consider implementing a bike lane on Main Street from Rt. 43/Bedford Avenue to the US Route 29 exit at the north end of town.

Ms. Williams informed the Commission that the CVPDC prepared a bike plan for the Town of Altavista a couple of years ago, however, some of the initial restrictions had eased since that time. She stated it had been her experience in other localities that bike lanes were utilized for both recreation and commuting to work.

Ms. Hunsberger stated there were also other ways to encourage active transportation, such as adding additional benches to sidewalks, and making needed sidewalk improvements.

Commissioner Clements referenced English Park and suggested the town investigate the possibility of extending the sidewalk from Main Street going down Pittsylvania Avenue to the park's entrance, or find an alternate solution for a safe pedestrian route to the park, such as an underground tunnel or adding elevators to the existing pedestrian bridge that crosses the railroad below Broad Street. Chairman Jordan said the town would have to get permission from the railroad company to plan an underground tunnel, which was not always an easy task.

Commissioner Morton asked if there was an ACTS bus stop at English Park.

Ms. Williams answered saying, if a deviated route was requested, the ACTS bus would transport riders to the splash pad during summer months. She said the ACTS offered wheelchair accessibility

Commissioner Morton said she believed the town should consider authorizing ACTS to add English Park to its regular daily route.

Ms. Williams informed the Commission that staff previously offered a plan to the Recreation Committee and Town Council for extending the sidewalks on Pittsylvania Avenue to the English Park entrance making the access from Main Street more user friendly, however, the plan was not what Town Council wanted at that time, but access may be revisited in the future.

Ms. Hunsberger asked if there were any specific areas in town where there were safety concerns for transportation for bikers, pedestrians, or motorists.

There was a consensus of Commissioners that both the Altavista Combined School and Elementary School were areas of traffic safety concern, especially during the afternoon release of students.

Vice Chair Mitchell said there were student walkers that either did not know how to use a crosswalk correctly or they were not obeying the safety guidelines for the crosswalks near the high school.

Commissioner Morton suggested the town contact the school's administration and request that the students be informed of the correct safety crossing methods and also for the crossing guards to be trained to implement the methods.

Ms. Hunsberger stated she added coordinating with school officials for education of cross walks to the town's aspirations for this matter.

Chairman Jordan referenced the intersection of Lynch Mill Road and Clarion Road and stated the current Comprehensive Plan mentioned improvements to that area, which to date had not been done, but he believed should still be considered due to the heavy traffic flow from WalMart patrons, access to Abbott's rear entrance, and Route 29 exits/entrances that all utilize that intersection.

Ms. Williams referenced one of the town's strengths being the walkability of the town's downtown district with its crosswalks and nice sidewalks, and also the decorative light poles and decorative flags in the downtown district. She asked if the town should consider implementing those items in other locations of town, such as Bedford Avenue.

Commissioner Morton agreed it would be nice to do so for Bedford Avenue since that was a highly traveled main entrance into town from US Route 29.

Ms. Williams said that the town's sidewalks went all the way up Bedford Avenue until one reached the Route 29 exit and offered an aspiration for the town was to consider extending its sidewalks from Food Lion to the hotels and Route 29 exits on the north end of town.

All Commission members agreed that was a good aspiration to consider.

Ms. Williams offered another opportunity to consider which was adding signage to sidewalks for walkers/pedestrians informing them of locations to local amenities.

Commissioner Morton said it would be great to have a sign on Bedford Avenue informing people of the location to the Green Hill Connector Trail off of Westwood Drive.

Ms. Williams informed the Commission that Town Staff was currently working with a local sign company on a sign package for the town's entire trail system, including directional street signs.

Vice Chair Mitchell asked if it was possible for the town to add sidewalks on Lynch Road from Main Street, up to the Route 29 exit.

Ms. Williams stated that Lynch Road was not maintained by the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) like Main Street and Bedford Avenue were, therefore, it would be the town's responsibility to fund the project. She said the town was dedicated to finding available grants to help fund such large projects, so the cost did not fall entirely on the town and its citizens.

Chairman Jordan reminded the Commission there was also the aspect of acquiring multiple right-of-ways to add sidewalks to Lynch Road, which could be costly to the town.

With no further comments, questions, or suggestions from the Planning Commission regarding the Transportation category, Ms. Hunsberger stopped the discussion that evening and said she would return for the December meeting to conclude the SOAR Analysis with the last two categories.

b. Comprehensive Plan Schedule

Ms. Williams informed the Commission that the Planning District Commission recently lost its Executive Director to retirement and its Senior Planner, therefore requiring Ms. Hunsberger to take on an additional workload to help cover that loss. She stated, with the recent departure of Altavista's Town Manager, Assistant Town Manager, and Public Works Director, she had been tasked with the responsibility of overseeing the Recreation Committee, therefore, while they would not be stopping the Comprehensive Plan update, staff would be slowing down the process.

New Business:

There was no new business to discuss on this date.

Adjournment:

With no further business to discuss, Chairman Jordan adjourned the meeting at 6:23 p.m.

John Jordan
Planning Commission Chair

Sharon D. Williams, AICP
Planning Commission Secretary