LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS/Cleveland Heights City Council meeting highlights

NOVEMBER 18, 2019

- Public comment—Severance redevelopment, the recent election, public school funding, and street repairs
- City manager’s report
- Recreation programs, regulations, and rates
- Tax and budget ordinances
- Severance Town Center Redevelopment Plan
- Forest Hill Park inclusive playground
- Mayor’s report
- Council members’ announcements

Council members present were Mayor Carol Roe, Vice Mayor Melissa Yasinow, Mary Dunbar, Kahlil Seren, Jason Stein, and Michael N. Ungar. Craig Cobb was absent. The meeting lasted from 7:36-9:04 pm.

Public comment

*Severance redevelopment* — Fourteen citizens spoke about a wide variety of concerns including the near future study of redevelopment at Severance, the recent election, public school funding, and streets in need of repair. This comprised about 45 minutes of the meeting.

A recent presentation by consulting firm AE7 Pittsburgh of a redevelopment planning process to engage the Severance property’s current owner attracted much attention. Council members-elect Melody Joy Hart and Davida Russell spoke together to suggest delay of this item until they are seated in January, noting it is the single most important project at this time and a legacy of the council. They asked about viewing the other proposals submitted. Resident Susan Miller gave high praise to the AE7 proposal, stating city staff did a “brilliant job” and her “heart swelled,” especially concerning the community engagement process being proposed.

Architect Paul Volpe is unsatisfied with the answers from AE7 and strongly opposed engaging the firm. FutureHeights, which is a Community Development Corporation (CDC) and is keenly interested, had done a study of Severance six months ago, prior to the RFP. He pointed out that the FutureHeights proposal was less expensive and included a great deal of pro bono work. He thinks the city is not yet prepared to do the study or to hire a consultant.

City planner Bob Brown supports the city’s initiative with this problematic private property, but says it is impossible to endorse the AE7 proposal without seeing some of the other 16 proposals. He added that FutureHeights should be part of the team.

FutureHeights Executive Director Deanna Bremer-Fisher, referring to Severance as “an extremely important property in the center of the city,” echoed Mr. Brown’s ideas. She pointed out that FutureHeights was unable to participate in vetting the proposals because it was part of a team that submitted a proposal. She wondered what the expectations of FutureHeights would be now.
Jonathan Golli, representing AE7, stated his firm always assumed that they would work with community groups.

The recent election – The November general election was on the minds of three residents:

- Kathy Flora thanked council, candidates, and everyone who worked on all sides of the election; she expressed pride in Cleveland Heights.
- Michael Bennett, representing Citizens for an Elected Mayor, said Cleveland Heights made history on Nov. 5. He asked that all residents apply their energy to the next challenge, thanked and congratulated all candidates, and concluded he was heartened by City Manager Tanisha Briley’s election night email.
- Garry Kanter stated that elected officials “think they have the privileges of private citizens,” but they do not, in his opinion. He said that taking the oath of office and their care of the city’s business leaves them unable to donate to a political action committee because that act removes their impartiality. He addressed Law Director William Hanna, questioning whether certain members of council had been “honest, faithful, and impartial.” Mr. Hanna did not respond.

Public school funding—Robin Koslen spoke about school vouchers and what they are doing to the public school system. She noted that, although not directly related to city government, the impact is severe because the schools “cannot stay in business” the way things are going. This is because the state mandates, but does not fund, vouchers, and district money follows the voucher students, leaving a less than adequate amount for public school students. Members Roe, Ungar, and Dunbar thanked her for raising the issue and said this will come up in joint meetings with the school board. They were impressed with the magnitude of the problem, asking what they can do to help explain the problem to those who can make change. Mr. Stein thanked Ms. Koslen specifically for not framing the problem as public vs. private students.

Street repairs—Willard Young complained about being unable to get city repairs for longstanding chuckholes in his street; he was connected to Collette Clinkscales, director of public works, who was in attendance at the meeting. Residents of Middlehurst Road, Marsha Kraus and Bill Bruml, voiced concerns for the preservation of their brick street, which has become quite a washboard, probably due to rusting pipes underneath. They prefer the brick, but state this must be diagnosed and remedied, even if asphalt is chosen.

City manager’s report

Ms. Briley’s detailed update may be found on pages 2—10 of the council packet at:

Following are highlights of her report:

- Leaf collection has resumed after a delay for snow clearing.
- The refuse and recycling task force is completing its recommendations.
- Information about marketing, communications, and promotions are included. New tag lines are “Join Us” and “All are welcomed here.”
- Jan. 22 has been set for the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Ceremony at the Community Center.
• Meetings regarding Taylor Road will be Thursdays Dec. 5 and 12 at 7 p.m. at City Hall.
• Nine of the 13 condos being built at the College Club are sold.
• Updates on Top of the Hill details are included.
• Zhug Restaurant will open at Cedar-Fairmount on November 22. Other new business openings were detailed.
• Parks and Recreation announcements included plans for STEM classes and summer camp for youth.
• Fire department updates included the chief’s participation in a conference about mental and emotional health for first responders.
• Phase one of the sanitary sewer evaluation survey is complete and phase two has started.
• Mostly capital projects are complete or have small details to be finished before winter.

Recreation programs, regulations, and rates

These annual ordinances received first readings. Specific details can be found on the city website.

Tax and budget ordinances

The appropriation ordinance for expenses and expenditures for Jan. 1—Dec. 31, 2020, received a first reading, as did an ordinance to amend appropriations and expenditures to correct the budget for the 2019 fiscal year.

Severance Town Center redevelopment plan

This resolution to hire AE7 Pittsburgh, LLC, to undertake a redevelopment planning project received a third reading, but no vote, this evening, after considerable discussion at council’s committee of the whole meeting.

Five members weighed in on this item.

• Mr. Ungar was impressed by the AE7 presentation, but is concerned about pausing the project to seat new council members before proceeding. He emphasized the importance of community buy-in, FutureHeights’ involvement, and getting this project right.
• Ms. Yasinow agreed with waiting for the new council members, but has some reservations about FutureHeights because they filed a competing application.
• Ms. Dunbar expressed reliance on staff and the city manager to vet this choice, saying it is outside the scope of council members.
• Mr. Stein disagreed with Ms. Dunbar. He wants to wait until new members are seated and would like to review three to five of the proposals.
• Mayor Roe stated that Severance was one of the highest priorities for 2018-19 and that staff followed through on council’s direction. She is ambivalent about waiting, as she sees Severance as a catalyst for development at Center-Mayfield and Noble. She concluded that she disagrees with waiting, with no disrespect to the new members, because this council was elected to do this work.
**Forest Hill Park inclusive playground**

Council unanimously passed authorization to apply for a county grant to construct an inclusive playground at Forest Hill Park.

**Mayor’s report**

Mayor Roe congratulated both sides of the Issue 26 campaign and the newly elected council members. She stated that all are excited to move forward and council will begin to discuss transitions at next week’s committee of the whole meeting. She added that many in the community do need time to heal after a hard fought campaign. She praised Heights Tree People for new tree planting around the community center on Sunday.

**Council members’ announcements**

Ms. Dunbar thanked voters for her reelection and said she looks forward to moving ahead.

Mr. Seren thanked voters for their participation, applauded the decision on Issue 26, and expressed gratitude for his reelection.

Mr. Ungar commented that the recent election was historically important and congratulated leaders on both sides of Issue 26, stating there were phenomenal people on both sides. He added that it is not the form of government but who is governing that matters. He welcomed council members-elect Hart and Russell and praised outgoing members Cobb and Roe for their service to Cleveland Heights.

**The next regular council meeting** will be Monday, Dec. 2, 2019, at 7:30 p.m.

*LWV observer: Blanche Valancy*