

MINUTES
PLANNING COMMISSION WORK SESSION
Tuesday, April 26, 2016
5:00 – 7:00 p.m.

PLANNING COMMISSION WORK SESSION

Location: NDS Conference Room, Charlottesville City Hall, 2nd Floor

Planning Commission Members Present: Vice-Chairman Kurt Keesecker and Commissioners Taneaia Dowell, Genevieve Keller, Jody Lahendro, and Corey Clayborne;

City Councilors Present: Kathy Galvin, Mike Signer, Bob Fenwick, and Kristin Szakos;

STWCA Advisory Group Members

Call to Order: by Vice-Chairman Keesecker

Call to Order: by Mayor Mike Signer

Missy Creasy proposed a Joint Session of the Planning Commission and City Council to discuss the Strategic Investment Plan for Thursday, May 26th. Based on feedback from the attendees, Ms. Creasy said the session would be tentatively confirmed for the 26th. A discussion of code changes for the West Main Street and Water Street districts is scheduled for Tuesday (May 24th) of the same week; it will be followed by the first Small Area Plan walking tour.

Background: the Streets that Work Plan

In February 2014, City Council adopted a resolution to consider the context surrounding the streets as part of any future design process. Since then, the City of Charlottesville has been involved in the Streets That Work planning process which has included both a variety of community engagement efforts as well as drafting the Streets That Work Plan. City staff has worked with Toole Design Group (TDG), the Streets That Work Code Audit Advisory Committee (STWCA), the Development Review Team and incorporated feedback from the public to inform the process and draft the plan.

Heather Newmyer and Amanda Poncy introduced the Streets that Work Plan discussion. Heather Newmyer said that the purpose of the discussion would be to touch on key unresolved issues and items that are new to the plan.

First Question for discussion: What is an appropriate standard that supports healthy tree growth and balances the public's priority for large street trees, minimizes sidewalk maintenance/repair as well as utility conflicts (overhead and underground)?

The first discussion item concerned recommended soil volumes and planting widths for street trees. Tim Hughes, former Urban Forester with the City, served on the Streets That Work Project Team until his retirement in February 2016 and provided staff with street tree planting and soil area standards to be incorporated into the Streets That Work Plan. These are the same standards that are currently distributed to developers during site plan review as recommendations for landscape plans. They are based on national

research to support the growth of large shade trees. The recommendations are for 8' minimum planting strips and 900 ft³ per tree for large trees; 6' strips and 450 ft³ of soil for medium trees; and 4' strips and 250 ft³ of soil for small trees. The question is whether these recommendations should simply be included in the Streets that Work Guidelines, or whether they can be codified as requirements for private development via the code audit.

The Tree Commission, after review of the City's current recommended standards, provided alternative standards that were less restrictive. The Tree Commission was concerned that Mr. Hughes' recommendations, coupled with limited right-of-way space throughout Charlottesville, would limit the planting of large street trees. In response to these concerns, staff reduced the soil volume minimums in the Streets that Work Plan from 900 ft³ to 700 ft³ for large trees, while specifying 900 ft³ as preferred. Staff also reduced the large street tree minimum planting strip width from 8' to 6', listing 8' as preferred. Additionally, staff appended a note stating that smaller planting widths may be permitted if soil volumes are met. The revisions are meant to allow for more trees along Charlottesville streets, while remaining consistent with national standards for the soil and planting space required for healthy trees.

Paul Josey of the Tree Commission explained that though the commission supported the soil volumes recommended in the Plan from the standpoint of ensuring tree health, they had concerns that they might be cost-prohibitive. The Plan is meant to inform the Code, and though 8' strips for large trees would be ideal, there are very few streets in the City that actually offer an 8' right-of-way. Most cities set a 4' minimum; Toole Design Group (Charlottesville's consultant for Streets that Work) did a similar project in Boston, and set a 1.5' minimum width for street trees. The West Main Streetscape Plan currently envisions a 9' sidewalk. Applying the proposed 6' planting strip standard, West Main Street would be able to support only small, ornamental trees like redwoods or dogwoods. We couldn't plant what we have today. Mr. Josey said that the problem of street tree roots lifting or cracking the sidewalk surface is better mitigated by providing trees adequate volumes of uncompacted soil beneath the street than by regulating wide planting strips. For these reasons, the Tree Commission favors a 5' minimum planting strip width for large trees, at the most.

Heather Newmyer clarified that the current minimum given in the draft plan is 6' for large trees, a width that can be reduced further given large soil volumes. She telephoned a staff member at the City of Alexandria, which has a minimum of 300 ft³ of soil for all trees, to ask what the rationale behind setting the standard was. The staff member said that although Alexandria agrees with the national recommendations for higher volumes, in an urban setting, it is necessary to be pragmatic. Alexandria also requires a 6' planting strip; Richmond's minimum is 5'. Mrs. Newmyer asked the meeting attendees, Planning Commission, and Council for their input.

Carl Schwarz said that Charlottesville's zoning code requires large street trees for certain developments. He asked whether these requirements, combined with a new clause saying smaller planting widths can be achieved as long as soil volumes standards are met, would in effect force developers to turn to suspended sidewalk slabs or other methods to achieve soil volumes, and whether that would be a desirable outcome. Can the problem be solved just by requiring developers to use more expensive planting methods?

Heather Newmyer said it could, but it is important to consider that in some cases, the street improvement is conducted by the City instead of by a private developer. At what point must the City determine that there is not enough room or money to plant a large tree and accept a medium or small tree?

Bob Fenwick asked what constitutes a large or medium tree. Heather Newmyer responded that the ones on West Main Street are classified as medium-size.

Kristin Szakos suggested setting a required minimum soil volume, but only a *preferred* minimum for planting width. Mr. Josey supported the idea.

Missy Creasy gave some general context for the discussion, explaining that multiple drafts of the Streets that Work Plan have been reviewed by City staff, the Streets that Work/Code Audit (STWCA) Advisory Committee, the public and other groups. The final draft is the one now before the joint work committee. The questions presented for discussion regard the main items that are still pending. Ms. Creasy acknowledged that while there would likely be additional topic areas that the Commission and Council would like to discuss, it was important to tackle two topics in addition to street trees in order to resolve specific questions and make timely progress.

Kathy Galvin asked how the street trees discussion relates to the street typology outlined in the Plan. Ms. Newmyer explained that each street typology has a chart of street design parameters. For example, the parameters for “Mixed Use B” streets are found on page 41. The parameters include street tree planting strip widths and soil volumes. Mrs. Galvin asked whether street tree parameters actually varied by street type. Ms. Newmyer answered that what varies is the width of the curbside buffer. Ms. Galvin said that, since buffer width was the dynamic element, it made sense to give “preferred” planting widths and maintain soil volumes as a requirement.

Heather Newmyer asked for confirmation that the Plan’s soil volume standards should be 700 ft³ for large, 450 ft³ for medium, and 250 ft³ for small trees, and that preferred planting widths should be 6, 6, and 4 feet for each tree size, respectively.

Carl Schwarz asked how achievable a 700 ft³ soil volume would be on West Main Street, for example.

Paul Josey said that it would be tight, but if large trees are planted 40’ on center, 700 ft³ of soil per tree would be feasible.

Brennen Duncan said that, for reference. A trench 4’ wide and 4’ deep provides 640 ft³, if trees are planted 40’ apart on center. On West Main Street, there are utility conflicts, but this is not true for every street.

Paul Josey pointed out that the utilities on West Main Street may be relocated.

Mike Signer cautioned that utilities relocation has not been shown to be fiscally feasible on West Main Street. Ms. Galvin responded that it was too soon to rule out the possibility, however, since the City is waiting on a cost estimate. Mr. Signer said that unless \$8-9 million materializes, it is likely that the City will have to move forward with the West Main Streetscape project without undergrounding utilities.

Kristin Szakos said that, nevertheless, Council had agreed to keep undergrounding in the plan for West Main Street.

Kathy Galvin asked Ms. Newmyer to clarify what the 640 and 300 ft³ minimums meant. Heather Newmyer said that the 300 ft³ was an example of a flat minimum soil volume for all trees in the City of Alexandria.

Paul Josey said that Virginia has excellent clay soils that retain moisture and nutrients, and that it could support healthy trees with lower soil volumes. He recommended a minimum soil volume of 300 ft³ like Alexandria's or 400 ft³ like Tyson's.

Rachel Lloyd said that the question of utilities is important. Utilities both above and below ground are the major impediment for many street design aspects, including emergency services, street trees, and etc. Utilities were not in the scope of the Streets that Work Plan, yet the plan will remain un-implementable until the City addresses utilities.

Amanda Poncy suggested that another issue to consider was the effects of minimum soil volumes and planting widths on sidewalk maintenance and wheelchair accessibility. Minimums that are too small will result in sidewalk heaving, resulting in ADA challenges and added maintenance costs.

It was noted that there is always a trade-off between big, beautiful trees and flat, even sidewalks; it is a matter of choosing which is the higher priority. Mr. Josey said that measures like thicker sidewalk slabs and root barriers that direct roots downward, can allow the City to achieve both.

Lisa Green asked whether the species of the tree influences the amount of sidewalk buckling. Charlottesville has planted many elms and zelcova, but on Garrett Street, there are white oaks. These appear to have shallow root systems more prone to sidewalk heaving. Paul Josey said this was indeed the case, and suggested that the City provide a recommended species list. Heather Newmyer agreed, suggesting this as a project for a future urban forester or for the Tree Commission.

Rachel Lloyd expressed a strong preference for tall street trees whose limbs are above pedestrians. Mr. Josey said that tall trees also reduce the shadows cast by leaves blocking street lights.

Kathy Galvin said that the consensus seemed to be to establish a smaller minimum (400 ft³) of soil for a large tree, specify preferred tree species, and then allow planting strip width to vary based on the street typology.

Genevieve Keller asked Paul Josey whether, given the quality of local soil, he would be comfortable with a minimum soil volume below the national standard of 400 ft³. Mr. Josey said that soil quality varies even within the city, and he feels the national standard is a safe average.

Heather Newmyer said that these standards are just recommendations at this point, but if they are integrated into the Code or the Standards and Design Manual, they can be accompanied by a note that they are subject to the urban forester's recommendations based on site conditions. Once the Streets that Work Guidelines are adopted, the discussion on how to codify it will begin. Some aspects will be codified in the zoning ordinance and others are more appropriate for inclusion in the Standards and Design Manual.

A member of the public raised a concern about nighttime street lighting. He said that the Guidelines should address the differences between pedestrian and vehicle lighting, as well as illumination of buildings and landmarks. Brennan Duncan said that a separate study, the Pedestrian Lighting Study, is proceeding separately.

Second Question for discussion: Are there concerns about including shared streets as a City supported street typology? Are there other considerations that should be included in this typology?

Heather Newmyer introduced the next question, concerning shared streets. She said that the City's engineering staff had several concerns regarding this topic (addressed on page 65 of the Streets that Work Guidelines). The idea is to take nontraditional but beloved local streets like Altamont Street and provide flexibility for other low-traffic neighborhood streets to mimic them in the future. However, these streets are not eligible for VDOT maintenance, so the City would be fully responsible for them. Where would these streets be appropriate, given levels of traffic and topography? For instance, a shared street on a very steep slope could be dangerous. A third issue is ensuring access for fire trucks.

Brennen Duncan added that there would need to be a standard for providing staging areas wide enough for emergency vehicles, especially for longer shared streets.

Dan Rosensweig said that to make shared streets work, designers have to take the plunge and make them feel so unsafe to drive quickly that motorists are forced to slow down. This idea has worked for the Sunrise development. He also said that Altamont Street, which is 15' wide curb to curb, has not seen a traffic fatality since it was built. Yet the Streets that Work Guidelines currently recommend yield streets with parking on both sides to be 20-24' wide. This means the language "shared streets" is misleading. Altamont Street works; we should imitate it more faithfully.

Amanda Poncy said that yield streets are a separate concept from shared streets. The guidelines should make that distinction clearly.

Lisa Green said that the narrowness of Altamont Street is what signals to drivers to slow down and watch for pedestrians. The street diet has to hurt a little bit to be effective. This was demonstrated in Saturday's Streets that Work Demonstration Project. Education and enforcement are as important as better design.

Dan Rosensweig emphasized that 20-24' is still too wide to function as a traffic-calming street. The public really wants to push the envelope. Mr. Duncan responded that 20' *is* pushing the envelope for many streets. For instance, Market Street has travel lanes that are 14 or 15' wide now. Taking even more width out of that right-of-way would severely inhibit traffic in peak hours, given delivery truck traffic and on-street parking. Shared streets are not always appropriate; we need to be very specific about when they are.

Rachel Lloyd asked why shared streets are not appropriate for steep slopes. Amanda Poncy explained that shared streets require slow speeds, but steep grades make it difficult for heavy vehicles to maintain those speeds.

(***At this time, 6:00pm, City Council lost its quorum***)

Genevieve Keller suggested that the criteria for locating shared streets should include parking capacity and land use. Ms. Poncy replied that shared streets are appropriate in many different land use contexts, including commercial areas. The Downtown Mall vehicle crossings are a model.

Kathy Galvin directed attention to the table of street typologies (page 66 of the Guidelines). She said the table failed to distinguish between framework, local, and shared/yield streets. Ms. Poncy responded that

the street typologies apply only to framework streets. The problem is that the vast majority of streets in the City are local, not framework, and there is extreme variation among them in width and other streetscape conditions. Ms. Galvin said that if the local streets are not categorized, even though the menu of tools can be applied to them, there is no way to codify this and will happen on an as-needed basis.

Heather Newmyer said, however, that standards for shared streets do need to be codified so that they can be enforced. Mr. Rosensweig said that for all other types of local streets, the minimum lane widths and curb heights required to guarantee safety should be available to designers and developers. Ms. Galvin agreed. Amanda Poncy said that the problem with codifying standards for local streets is that they would force well-liked streets such as Altamont to change drastically.

Kristin Szakos asked if there was a way local streets could become framework streets.

Kurt Keesecker said the question was whether there might ever be a situation in which we want to change our vision for local streets. Ms. Szakos said streets' context can change; Water Street is changing thanks to the construction of Market Plaza, and if it had formerly been classified as a local street, we would have been stuck with treating it as such. Mr. Keesecker said that a better question might be how to build room for creativity into the Standards and Design Manual, instead of how to codify each street type—for instance, by allowing developers or designers to measure any street that is safe, and replicate it.

Kathy Galvin said that the goal should be to create a process to redesign streets so that they better serve us. Missy Creasy agreed, saying the Guidelines are a tool for exacting higher standards for our streets. Room for creativity alone won't motivate a departure from the status quo. Ms. Galvin said that the Guidelines fail to insist upon alley systems and better intersection spacing, which are nevertheless key to improving the structure of our street *network*.

Alex Ikefuna said that a few weeks ago the City Engineer told the City Council that some of the streets that the City has accepted that meet VDOT guidelines are now eligible for maintenance funding from VDOT. As we move forward with implementation of the Streets that Work process, we need to keep in mind that all unconventional streets will require local taxpayer money.

Kathy Galvin proposed that the Guidelines simply state that local streets are not permitted to be built or redesigned to be wider than Neighborhood B streets.

Dan Rosensweig asked that, given the aspirational nature of the Streets that Work document, the discouraging language under the heading 'shared streets' be removed. Ms. Poncy said that perhaps a balance could be achieved that expresses an aspiration yet makes clear that certain conditions are needed for a shared street to thrive.

Kathy Galvin raised the issue of access management (reducing curb cut size and frequency) and the need to relegate parking to the rear of buildings, which she strongly felt should be an aspect of the Streets that Work Guidelines and then the Code—for by-right development and smaller additions, not just for Special Use Permits.

Third Topic for discussion: Prioritization

Amanda Poncy introduced the prioritization process included in the Guidelines. The Streets That Work plan included a standard set of criteria to compare all of the location specific transportation issues raised during town hall meetings and neighborhood/public meetings. The process identified priority corridors and intersections where improvements based on the Streets That Work Guidelines would have a significant positive impact on the comfort and safety of all street users. The initial criteria used by Toole Design Group to identify priority locations for redesign were: crash locations, public input on problem spots, bicycle and pedestrian improvements recommended in the Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan, pedestrian demand analysis, and transit stops. Criteria added by the City included accessibility, employment density, and inclusion in CIP or repaving schedules.

Kristin Szakos said that prioritization should take into account actual incidences of speeding, not just crashes or tickets. Amanda Poncy said that the City does not currently have those data, but can build speed into the equation for future calculation.

Kurt Keesecker said that it is important to focus on clusters of priority rather than tacking projects over the next fifty years in a whack-a-mole fashion. Clusters allow for more holistic planning and design. Fortunately, the priorities generated by this process are located in clusters. Some of them are in our Small Areas already targeted for investment.

Jody Lahendro asked whether all the data and input used to prioritize had been collected and was no longer subject to change. Amanda Poncy said that the Guidelines are a living document. The prioritization equation is a rational formula and it can be recalculated in the future given updated data.

Genevieve Keller asked what the final elements of community engagement were. She worried that people would be upset their neighborhood street was not a priority project. Kathy Galvin agreed, asking that there be a station for Streets that Work at the neighborhood Townhalls to inform people of the result of the prioritization process. Amanda Poncy said that the public feedback had been extensive and very positive.

Corey Clayborne asked whether thought had been given to how to track the success of streets as the Guidelines are implemented. How will we tell the story? Being able to point to measurable improvements will help with community engagement. Mr. Keesecker built on this comment, saying that the Comprehensive Plan talks about placemaking. Intersections are strategic places, and the City may get more bang for its buck by making changes at these places rather than along corridors. Ms. Keller agreed, saying that Charlottesville has seen decades of investment in corridors at the expense of intersections. Good intersections are destinations can spur better corridor infill. However, to be destinations, intersections need to be marked by strong, traditional visual foci instead of parking lots and flat land uses.

Lisa Green asked how this discussion would influence the weighting mechanism, since intersections are not one of the criteria in the prioritization formula. Amanda Poncy replied that there is a priority list for corridors and a separate one for intersections.

Kurt Keesecker said that priority intersections and corridors form clusters and will need to be tackled in conjunction. Ms. Green objected, saying that if intersections are prioritized, corridors may be filled in organically. But a member of the public pointed out that corridors remain an important priority for transit routes.

In conclusion, Kathy Galvin asked how the Guidelines would link up with the Code Audit. Missy Creasy said that the Guidelines needed to be finalized before moving to the code. Rachel Lloyd said that the original vision had been to conduct the planning and the Code Audit approximately at the same time. The Guidelines would not be finalized until staff had taken a few steps into the Code Audit, so that interrelations could be discovered and mutually inform the auditing and planning processes. Ms. Lloyd requested that staff provide a presentation on the green infrastructure activities occurring in the City. Kathy Galvin agreed, saying that the way built form influences the street has not been thoroughly considered in the Streets that Work Guidelines.

Missy Creasy said that the City has limited resources and staff, and that our goals must be pursued step by step. Staff went through the Plan with the intent that it would give us the data to perform a code audit. Kristel Riddervold and other green infrastructure experts have been part of the process all along, and the planning has been conducted with the ultimate goal of a Code Audit firmly in mind.

Kathy Galvin proposed that streets with exceptional potential to be “green streets,” which now carry and could filter lots of water, be prioritized as well. The Strategic Investment Area Plan already does this.

Adjournment: 7:00