

City of Stevens Point Meeting Minutes

Special City Plan Commission

Tuesday, October 13, 2009

PRESENT: Chm. Halverson; Tony Patton; Jami Gebert; Anna Haines; Shari Laskowski; Daryl (Bo) DeDeker (Ald. Jerry Moore excused)

ALSO PRESENT: Comm. Dev. Dir. John Gardner; Po. Co. Senior Planner, Jeff Schuler; Ald. Mary Stroik; Bill & Bonnie Maher; Bernice Sevenich; Bob Woehr; Cathy Dugan; Reid Rocheleau; Mary Ann Laszewski; Gary Dietrich, Assoc. Bank; Val Glytas, Assoc. Bank; Greg Polacheck, Assoc. Bank; Jeanne Dodge; Guy Janssen; Mike Morrissey; Bonnie Brown; Sarah Robinson; Rick Opperman; Jim Clark; Mary McComb; Dave Medin; Po. Co. Gazette, Gene Kemmeter

1. Discussion Only on Portage County Courthouse Proposal at Strongs Ave./Arlington Pl.

John Gardner's Slides

John Gardner's Memo | Jeff Schuler's Memo

Option B Model | Option E Model | Option F Model | Option F1 Plan, First Floor | Option F1 Plan, Second Floor

Chm. Mayor Halverson opened the meeting and noted there will be an open house on Thursday, October 22, from 6:00-7:30 p.m. regarding the proposed Portage County Courthouse Concept.

John Gardner stated this item will come before the Plan Commission at its regular meeting on Monday, November 2. Action will be taken at that time and forwarded on to the Common Council November 16th meeting.

The proposed two story building would be constructed west of the annex and would connect to the annex on the second floor. The building would be used for courtrooms and court related offices. An underground, secured passageway would be constructed under Arlington Place and be used to transport the inmates from the jail to the courtrooms.

The city-owned parking lot at Arlington/Water Streets would be sold/deeded to the County. Sale or deeding of the land will require Plan Commission and Council approval. Construction of the tunnel and connecting building would require rezoning approval by the Plan Commission and Council and the tunnel in the right of way would also require review and approval by Public Works and Council. The building design would require approval by the Historic Preservation/Design Review Commission. The proposal is conceptual and the action by the Commission is to be conceptual as well.

He noted staff feels the courthouse should be located downtown. The County has asked the City allow for the potential of closing Arlington Pl. Closing could result in a more efficient site design, more parking, and perhaps better building security. Any decision to close Arlington should take into account building entrance and parking location as well as traffic impact to the area. Parking for both existing demand as well as future growth is an issue that should be addressed in the future. Staff recommends addressing urban design issues including pedestrian scale of the site and high quality building design at a future design phase of the project.

Jeff Schuler stated the Building Review Committee for Public Safety Needs (BRC) began in February of 2009 to study the building and safety needs for the jail, courts, and related functions. The current court-related spaces 1) do not allow for proper separation between lawyers, witnesses, and the general public, 2) lack proper jury deliberation areas and conference rooms for client/lawyer discussions, and 3) two of the three courtrooms are undersized by State standards. They contracted with Venture Architects of Milwaukee to design a new building combined with re-use of existing office space. The BRC held several public meetings for discussion on conceptual options. At their October 1 meeting, they selected Option F, the east/west building with a tunnel under Arlington Pl. The City and the County need to provide their approvals of the concept prior to the option going before the Portage County voters in an April 2010 referendum.

Chm. Halverson read comments from Associated Bank stating they had not been contacted by the County and wanted to sell their property as one parcel.

Bill Maher, 1100 Brawley St., expressed opposition to the proposal and felt expansion of the downtown jail would be the next step. An I-39 location would provide plenty of parking and would have capacity for growth.

Bonnie Maher, 1100 Brawley St., objected to closing Arlington Pl. and expressed concern with increased noise, parking, and safety and potential impact to historic structures. It is three miles from the Sheriff's Dept. to the highway and the Deputies are speeding through neighborhoods when they get a call. This is just a stepping stone to expand the jail downtown and the committee needs to look at safety and a location out of town.

Dave Medin, 2101 West River Dr., stated he is against vacating Arlington Pl. He supports the courthouse remaining downtown and felt the tunnel would work.

Reid Rocheleau, 408 Cedar St., felt the courthouse should stay downtown. Arlington Pl. is more valuable as a building site than a street. Both Church St. and Strongs Ave. could become two-way streets and traffic could be circulated better than it is now.

Cathy Dugan, 615 Sommers St., agreed with Dir. Gardner. She agrees with the downtown site and feels closing Arlington Pl. would make for difficult circulation. She supports keeping businesses downtown and developing a shared parking structure.

Brian Formella, representing the Anderson, O'Brien, Bertz, Skrenes & Golla Law Firm, stated they are supportive of the downtown location and feel it is a great opportunity for urban renewal.

Mary McComb, 2100 Elk St., stated she owns a business downtown. She feels it is cheaper to build on current infrastructure. Building outside the downtown would take away green space. We need the public sector downtown and it makes sense economically.

Bob Woehr, 727 Second St., stated he is in favor of keeping the courthouse downtown. He recommends closing Arlington Pl., opening up Court St. from Strongs Ave. to Water St., and moving Portage House somewhere else. Parking has to be addressed first to accommodate parking for existing employees while addressing parking for construction machinery and workers.

Guy Janssen, downtown business owner, feels this is a great plan and we should keep the courthouse in the downtown to maintain the hub. He suggested thinking green when designing this structure and feels it is awesome that the county and city are re-using an existing building. He disagrees with closing Arlington Pl. because it takes away from the circulation. We need to look at a parking structure.

Bernice Sevenich, 1324 Fourth Ave., agreed with keeping the courthouse downtown. Parking has always been an issue and a parking structure would be wonderful. The new building should compliment what we have already.

Sarah Robinson, Director of the Downtown Business Assoc., stated the ADB endorses the courthouse staying downtown.

Rick Opperman, downtown business owner, stated he loves the downtown and feels the courthouse should be in the downtown.

Chm. Halverson stated it makes sense to have the courthouse downtown and it is paramount to preserve and protect the institutions in the downtown. Whether a jail should be in the downtown is yet to be determined. Portage County has been working with Marathon County on a regional jail which presents an opportunity that the county should explore. If it makes sense from the Sheriff's Dept. point of view, he would support a jail outside of downtown. The presence of a courthouse is something very different than the presence of jail. A better traffic analysis needs to be done to evaluate closing or extending any streets. Parking is central to what we should be analyzing with this site plan. With regard to urban design, he very much likes more dense design and reduced setbacks, especially in the center city.

Jami Gebert asked if we did a traffic flow study, would that address how much parking would be needed.

John Gardner responded that is a different study, but parking would be one of the important issues when the final design comes to you.

Jeff Schuler stated when the County takes its action, it would include the expectation of meeting demand for parking.

Bo DeDeker felt the courthouse needs to be in the downtown, but he is concerned with what will happen with the jail. He questioned whether there is a plan to address future jail expansion.

Anna Haines felt the courthouse should be downtown for economic reasons. We are still going to have the jail problem and it does need to be thought about and resolved. From an urban design prospective, she has real issues with closing Arlington Pl. It is a bad idea to disrupt the grid. It should remain open. After looking at the aerial photo of the parking in this area, she was shocked that there are 11 parking lots in this area. That is a lot of land taken up by parking lots which is a wasteful use of downtown land from a fiscal and economic prospective. A parking structure is a necessity. When we look at a circulation study, we can't just think about cars, we need to include bikes and people walking. The proposed building placement allows for solar panels and day lighting.

Jami Gebert questioned if all neighbors were notified. John Gardner responded yes, 130 notices were sent out.

Jami Gebert asked are we just not worrying about the jail right now? She expressed concern about whether this proposal will work out with the jail. Jeff Schuler responded the decision of the BRC Committee is that the court needs come first. The assumption is that we are going to operate with the existing jail in its existing configuration into the future. The county is not in a position at this point to finalize any future jail plans because of the discussion of the regional jail, programming, etc. The final parameters aren't really all in place. The jail will be the way it is and will need to be dealt with in the future.

John Gardner noted the Courthouse concept will come back to the November 2, Plan Commission meeting. If you have any questions, direct them to Jeff Schuler or himself as soon as possible so they have time to prepare for mailing on Oct. 26.

Meeting adjourned at 8:10 p.m.

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