

ESCANABA PLANNING COMMISSION
"EXCERPTS"
JUNE 12, 2008

NEW BUSINESS

1. North Shore Waterfront Redevelopment Planning Process Discussion

City Manager Jim O'Toole said the Escanaba waterfront was identified throughout the community in the City's Master Plan process as an underutilized resource, which could be converted into a dynamic mixed-use redevelopment area. The Master Plan outlines the logical segmentation of the waterfront to include a series of uses such as waterfront related retail, commercial, lodging, residential and industrial uses. Mr. O'Toole said a discussion would take place at tonight's meeting regarding the planning process that would be used to formulate a citizen-based strategic plan that will garner public input and encourage an exchange of ideas. Jim O'Toole had prepared some talking points in an effort to address issues in the community (see attached). In an effort to have a fair and equitable representation on this important planning process which involves the various City boards and commissions, Mr. O'Toole created a North Shore Redevelopment Leadership Committee. This committee is comprised of two City Council Members (Gilbert Cheves and Patricia Baribeau); two Planning Commissioners (Steve Buckbee and Bridgette Jaakola); two Downtown Development Board of Trustee Members (Scott Kwarchiany and Peggy Schumann); and City Administration (Jim O'Toole, Bill Farrell and Roger Good). Mr. O'Toole said this group would serve as the eyes and ears in the planning process and as a sounding board to the prospective board and commission, the Planning Commission and the City Council. This group is charged with ensuring that all aspects of community interests are represented at the commission and committee level. As this group evolves, additional members will be added from other boards and commissions, such as the Brownfield Authority, Electric Advisory Committee, Traffic Safety Committee and others.

Mr. O'Toole asked if there were any questions from the Planning Commission.

Vice Chairperson Todd Milkiewicz stated that public input and input from the property owners would be key to this process.

Commissioner Jon Liss asked if there was any response from the recipients of the letters that were sent out. Mr. O'Toole said the letters had gone out just recently, and those meetings would be scheduled in the next week or two.

Jim O'Toole stated that in the discussions over the past few weeks, the deeds for the property have been pulled, and the City Attorney has reviewed them. There is a requirement in the Charter, under Chapter 16, Section 7, that states the City shall not sell or dispose of property belonging to the City, such as parks, unless submitted to the electors and approved by them by a vote of 3/5's of the electors voting thereon. Mr. O'Toole said at the end of this process, if it is decided that as a community we would like to do Proposal A, that is what would be presented to the electorate. Mr. O'Toole said it would go directly to the people. The formal planning process actually will begin once a vendor was selected, very much like the City did with the Master Plan, per Mr. O'Toole.

Vice Chairperson Todd Milkiewicz asked where the North Shore Redevelopment Plan begins. Jim O'Toole said as identified in the Escanaba Master Plan, it starts at the Historical Museum and goes north along the shore to the Escanaba River. Mr. O'Toole pointed out the area in slides that were prepared in PowerPoint.

Jim O'Toole introduced Paul Neumeier of Escanaba and Mark Blomquist of Iron Mountain.

Paul Neumeier outlined their proposed development along the shoreline of Escanaba's marina, Ludington Park and the municipal dock area, and said the proposal was presented to the City Council last month. Mr. Neumeier said they would not be taking property from Ludington Park but rather it was their intention to make Ludington Park the center point of the county. Mr. Neumeier encouraged the Planning Commission to move forward with the Master Plan, and was glad the City was having this public discussion, and is something the City has needed for a long time. Mr. Neumeier said Escanaba was losing jobs, losing population and some schools were closing. It was time to start thinking about the future, and our grandchildren and other youth in the community. This proposal would be done in increments, and would attract a lot of satellite industries to be built here. Paul Neumeier said it was never his intention to go behind the scenes regarding this issue. Mr. Neumeier said he was aware of the vote needed. Without the support of the public, this project will not happen, per Mr. Neumeier.

Mark Blomquist, Iron Mountain, talked about the elements of the proposed development. Mr. Blomquist said the proposal would not go forward without a lot of input from the public. Mr. Blomquist said their initial thoughts include medium to high rise residential development, including a convention center, resort hotel and realizing deep water access there, receiving cruise ships and other boats docking at this location. In addition, small tourist and visitor oriented shops are envisioned there. This would all be private money; it would not require public monies. As income starts to generate from each of the facilities, then public improvements could be made in the park. Mr. Blomquist talked about additional restroom facilities, private cabanas on the beach, small structures that would add some shelter, etc. The Yacht Club, with this new development, may be able to put up a new facility. With the added income coming in, there may be additional support for the Historical Museum. Mark Blomquist talked about developing a cable car system down Ludington Street to bring more people down that route as well as attracting more people to Ludington Park. Mr. Blomquist said residential property values would increase with this new development. A signature piece for the Escanaba waterfront could be a sculptural bridge going over the mouth of the harbor. Mr. Blomquist stated these are just ideas, and nothing was carved in stone. Mr. Blomquist said if this project gets going, the City's north shore plans would follow.

Commissioner Bridgett Jaakola asked if Mr. Neumeier and Mr. Blomquist were willing to subject their plan to the North Shore Redevelopment Planning Process as outlined by the City. Mr. Blomquist said he wasn't aware of that process. Mr. Blomquist said the most controversial part of this plan was the use of public property, and said, again, that if this plan moves forward, the north shore plans would follow. There may be revenue for the City to purchase large tracts of land, which may not be available right now.

Commissioner Steve Buckbee asked if Mr. Neumeier and Mr. Blomquist had done any studies regarding the saturation of condominiums on the market. Mark Blomquist said they have not brought anyone onto the team to do any feasibility analysis in that area.

Mr. Blomquist said they were hoping to get enough support for this privately funded venture, a Request for Proposal (RFP) would be sent out to the developers in the Great Lakes' basin, and then would hire someone to join the team.

Commissioner Dennis Renken asked Mr. Blomquist if he was aware of the Hannahville Indian Community's possible development north of the Escanaba River. Mr. Blomquist said he was not aware of any development. He felt that Escanaba was one location where improvements at the park would revitalize Ludington Street more so than any other location.

Commissioner Bridgette Jaakola asked if this project was modeled after any other development in a lakefront municipality in the area. Mark Blomquist said this vision was flexible, and if they get support would solicit proposals from the experts in the field. Mr. Blomquist said they chose high rise development to minimize the footprint in Ludington Park. Paul Neumeier said the proposal was laid out not to impede anyone's current view of the lake. Commissioner Jaakola said in looking at the City's Master Plan and how the physical development of the entire north shore was outlined, would they consider moving project further up the north shore so as not to impact Ludington Park. Mr. Neumeier said a lot of people would like to be by the beach. The beach would be crucial to the project.

Vice Chairperson Todd Milkiewicz opened up the Public Comment portion of the discussion.

Peter Strom, 315 South 6th Street, Escanaba. Mr. Strom stated he was at the meeting on behalf of the Delta County Historical Society, which does not endorse the plan. Although there is a new museum in the vision, it is lost in the high rise condominiums, shopping center, boardwalks, etc. Mr. Strom said the Delta County Historical Society was not requested to provide input into this plan. Any future development by the Historical Museum or the lighthouse would be intended to be independent from or channeled through the process that City Manager Jim O'Toole described for development in the future. Peter Strom talked about all the new development in Escanaba such as Menard's, Biggby's Coffee, U.P. State Bank, Goodwill Industries, Dagenais Enterprises, all good, solid development. Mr. Strom complimented Roger Good, Director, DDA, and Judy Schroeder, DDA, and the DDA, and felt the City had very positive forces working here. The vision for this plan, although well intended, has some problems. One of the problems is that the proposal is not consistent with the Master Plan and the sensitive environmental properties in Ludington Park. The idea of moving the water plant after just going through state of the art renovations and replacing it with condominiums is just not prudent, per Mr. Strom.

Charles Lindquist, 317 South 6th Street, Escanaba. Mr. Lindquist said he was present for the meeting to speak in opposition to what he perceives to be the Blomquist-Neumeier Plan to privatize much of Ludington Park. Mr. Lindquist said he wanted to emphasize one thing, and that is the assertion by Mr. Neumeier and Mr. Blomquist that Ludington Park is under-utilized. Part of what makes a park a park is the sense of space it provides. Ludington Park gives every resident a spacious front yard and backyard, and must keep some land in reserve for future needs. Mr. Lindquist says Mr. Neumeier justifies taking over much of the park by saying that Escanaba has been going downhill ever since Harnischfeger left in the early 1980's, and that the City will grow again much like Traverse City has. When it comes to jobs, the unemployment rate for Grand

Traverse County last year was 6.5 percent, Charlevoix County 8.6 percent, and Emmet County at 9.0 percent. The unemployment rate for Delta County was 7.6 percent. This does not seem like such a big difference. Mr. Lindquist also said Mr. Neumeier has said that nothing very substantial has been done economically in Escanaba to help the local economy. Mr. Lindquist mentioned EMP with its hundreds of jobs or our health-care industry with its 1,500 jobs, anchored by St. Francis Hospital. The Island Resort Casino with its hundreds of jobs was also mentioned. The work done by K-12 schools and by Bay de Noc College, the Chamber of Commerce, EDA, etc., was also noted by Mr. Lindquist. Charles Lindquist said in reality, all of the above have done a remarkable job in helping all of us in Delta County to have a balanced, diverse economy which is the envy and the model for many others throughout the U.P. and northern Lower Peninsula. All of this was being done without giving up things like Ludington Park, which is a big part of what makes it so attractive to live and work here.

Roy Webber, 206 N. 19th Street, Escanaba. Mr. Webber is opposed to the project as a feasibility study was not done regarding the underground parking, and that the project would change the nature of Escanaba and used the example of New York City with the East Side and then there is Harlem. Mr. Webber mentioned that he had a PowerPoint presentation if anyone was interested in viewing.

Gary Olsen, 509 South 9th Street, Escanaba. Mr. Olsen doesn't see private enterprise taking over the park, and doesn't feel that is the case. The process that Mr. O'Toole outlined should go forward. This kind of project should be looked at, listened to and should go through the process. Mr. Olsen said what is special about Ludington Park is that it is on the water. Mr. Olsen said although the Neumeier-Blomquist plan requires some privatization, the City should maximize use of the harbor and the waterfront for the public, and may require some privatization. By going through the process, perhaps something good could come out of it, per Mr. Olsen.

Dennis Ness, business owner, Escanaba. Mr. Ness said this project is a bold idea, and gives Mr. Neumeier and Mr. Blomquist credit for the project. Mr. Ness has faith in the project, and feels it would be a good fit for the community. Mr. Ness said he may not agree with all aspects of the plan, but feels it may be time to consider a change for Ludington Park. There will be no growth without some change, and the City does need more economic growth, per Mr. Ness. Mr. Ness said the North Shore idea eventually will come to fruition. Mr. Ness also said Ludington Park is a huge community asset, but it is pretty much stagnant, and hasn't changed. Mr. Ness said Ludington Park and Aronson Island were artificially created years ago, and, at that time, people were asking why this was being done. As a result, the City has a beautiful park. Mr. Ness said the Neumeier-Blomquist plan should be looked at.

Paul Strom, 525 South 11th Street, Escanaba. Mr. Strom said in looking at Ludington Park, one can see the vision created by our forefathers to set aside and preserve it for recreation. Mr. Strom was speaking on behalf of the Bay de Noc Great Lakes Sport Fishermen's Association, a group of 500 members in Delta County. They have been involved with the rehabilitation of the walleye fishery in both Little Bay de Noc and Big Bay de Noc and have been working with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to try and make Little Bay de Noc a world class fishery. Mr. Strom said the first thing they noticed on the Neumeier-Blomquist plan was that there was no public boat launch. Mr. Strom had concerns about public access to the resource of the lake. The plan doesn't address public access. Does it allow sailboats and other boats in the yacht

harbor. Paul Strom said he commends Mr. Neumeier and Mr. Blomquist's intentions, but they need to work through the proper channels. The Bay de Noc Great Lakes Sport Fishermen's Association passed a resolution opposing the privatization of Ludington Park, per Mr. Strom.

Paul Neumeier said they did not intend to do anything with the boat launch; it would be left where it is. They did intend to possibly have a modern, heated, year-round usable restroom facility there. They would be doing the calculations so the beacon would be high enough to allow any sailboat to get underneath it.

John Economopoulos, 36 year resident, Escanaba. Mr. Economopoulos said he does not have a vested interest regarding one side or another, but would like to see Escanaba move forward. Mr. Economopoulos said this is something that has been generously opened up for debate by Paul Neumeier and Mark Blomquist, and let's allow this bold vision to be debated. Mr. Economopoulos likes the idea of the cable car down Ludington Street, which he feels would shorten the downtown. This is a flexible plan, and definitely should be looked at, per Mr. Economopoulos.

Rose Cox, business owner, Escanaba. Ms. Cox favors moving this proposal forward as there is no new money coming into Escanaba, and people are steadily leaving this area. Ms. Cox feels this project would help the downtown.

Dan Branson, 1616 12th Avenue South, Escanaba. Mr. Branson said he applauds Mr. Neumeier and Mr. Blomquist for their vision. Mr. Branson said the Escanaba community really needs to revisit this issue to see what can be done. The long-term investment would be fabulous for the City of Escanaba, and with it being private investment, would not be a burden to the City of Escanaba.

Lois Thompson, business owner, Escanaba. She stated that most older people have to travel to Florida to live in condominiums, and knows that people would like to live right here in Escanaba. She felt the overall plan was good, and was interested in hearing more about the project. She believes in entrepreneurship, and that we are on the right track.

Karen Wiggins, South 18th Street, Escanaba. Ms. Wiggins said most people think that the City of Escanaba needs some revitalization, and applauds Mr. Neumeier for presenting the proposal that stimulates a debate regarding changes that could be made. Ms. Wiggins said that those people who are against it based on the current plan and the specifics that have been talked about need to realize this is a fluid plan, a suggestion, an idea. Ms. Wiggins said everyone should open up their minds and come up with suggestions and other creative ideas that could be incorporated. Ms. Wiggins definitely feels this project should go forward for more discussion.

Vice Chairperson Todd Milkiewicz stated he was honored to see the number of people who showed up for this meeting to listen and provide comments. Vice Chairperson Milkiewicz said we need to get people involved.

David Williams, President, U.P. State Bank, Escanaba. Mr. Williams said he knows Mr. Neumeier, and thinks very highly of Mr. Neumeier. Mr. Neumeier is here in the spirit of the betterment of our community, and we should talk about this. Mr. Williams likes the idea of a debate. This project was worthy of working through the process.

Steve Messimer, 218 1st Avenue South, Escanaba. Mr. Messimer said he has lived in Escanaba since 1980, and was a former member of the DDA. He also was involved in the Tax Increment Finance Plan that was originally going to work on the North Shore. The plan did not involve anything north of the municipal dock. The DDA probably still has that plan. A lot of the issues such as ways to promote business in the downtown, developing the North Shore and even the idea of a cable car were mentioned in the plan. Mr. Messimer says he lives by the park, and is there every day. The park is the soul of Escanaba. This issue is not about the park, but rather our future and our past. Mr. Messimer asked if the City could accomplish the goals we need economically in this town by developing north and west of the municipal dock, and leave the public space for all of us.

City Manager Jim O'Toole suggested continuing on with the planning process as he had outlined, and encouraged Mr. Neumeier and Mr. Blomquist and the citizens to participate in that process.