

**STREETS, BUILDINGS & GROUNDS COMMITTEE MINUTES**  
**OF MARCH 11, 2019**

Municipal Council of the City of Vermilion  
Municipal Complex, 685 Decatur Street, Vermilion, Ohio 44089

**In Attendance:**            *Vermilion City Council: Steve Herron, President of Council; Monica Stark, Council at Large; John Gabriel, Ward One; Frank Loucka, Ward Two; Steve Holovacs, Ward Three; Barb Brady, Ward Four. Absent: Brian Holmes, Ward Five*

**Administration:** *Jim Forthofer, Mayor; Tony Valerius, Service Director; Amy Hendricks, Finance Director; Police Chief, Chris Hartung; Chris Howard, City Engineer; Chris Stempowski, Fire Chief*

**Call to Order:**            Frank Loucka, Chairman, RESOLVED THAT this Streets, Buildings, & Grounds Committee comprised of the committee of the whole does now come to order.

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**TOPIC ONE:                    Fulper Lot Development**

Mayor Forthofer presented Council with a power point on the development of the Fulper Lot. He explained the Fulper Lot was acquired by the City in 2016 at a very low cost to the city and there was no specific intention for this lot at that time. The Fulper Lot has gone through the necessary inspections and it cleared the EPA in late 2017. All the soil was inspected and it's a clear site. He conveyed he had an appraisal done in April of 2018 of the Fulper Lot and received a \$133,000 estimate of the market value.

He said driving some of the questions about where they go next is a document that has been in place for some time. A lot of the council members were present when the Downtown Revitalization Plan was originally done, which had a lot of participation and community involvement. The master plan for the downtown was designed partially by the Edge Group and different zones of town were identified for their best use. One of the identifications to empty lots as they might occur on Liberty Avenue, is that filling vacant properties with additional commercial, residential, and civic uses, would add to the vitality and relevance as its center of the community. In fact, not only was this written but they also prepared an actual map of the downtown and its probable uses.

Mayor Forthofer showed council a sketch of the Fulper Lot and it was proposed as a mixed-use redevelopment of retail space, office space, and a multi-family residence. In fact, this plan was done before the old ambulance garage was turned into Friendship Park. This plan is gradually coming into realization for what it's supposed to be. Interesting enough, in the plan is what he sees is the solution to the question of parking. From Liberty Avenue to Grand Street it is identified with a walk-through to the parking area behind the businesses. He said Dana Corogin had suggested an alleyway to him and it was in the original plan as an identifiable feature that would facilitate bringing additional parking to Liberty Avenue. He said alley's in most small communities are often off-street cultural venues. This adds to the feature of Liberty Avenue too because this is an avenue to 54 additional parking spaces, which could also be the basis for real growth in downtown development. It could be an asset to Third Thursday's, the Festivals, and people would not only walk from the parking lot to Liberty Avenue, but it would be part

of a cultural event and it could be art shows. There has been discussion in the past about them tying up the streets with chalk drawings, so they could move the chalk drawings to the alley. A lot of things can be moved to the alley and taken off the street. He said this takes them back to the Grand Division Parking Lot (now known as the Municipal Lot), which was purchased by the city during the last administration. He said the city took inventory of all the parking spaces in downtown Vermilion and there are 346 marked parking spaces. In talking with the Metropolitan Planning Organization of Erie County, they said for a town the size of Vermilion, this is more than enough parking spaces, plus they can easily add another 30 to 40 parking spaces for all the unmarked parking spaces in Harbour Town in front of homes. The greatest concentration of all parking spaces in all downtown Vermilion is right at the Municipal lot which abuts up against the Fulper Lot.

He suggested with Council's consensus, that they re-survey the Fulper Lot and the adjoining lot to designate an area that is permanently the City of Vermilion's or an easement owned by the City, so whatever else is built on that lot, the City owns the through-way to the parking lot in back. He took a guess of 10' wide and 380 feet from Liberty to the back-parking lot, with a nice arched entrance to the alleyway. The City should lay claim to this and own the through-way. He believed the remaining two lots should be joined (195' x 88'). This area would be for future development and this development area could be realized as commercial, residential, and retail, with a preserved common area that could be specified. He said the performance venue at Friendship Park has been used by Third Thursday's, Ice-a-Fair, and many downtown festivals. Likewise, this lot should contain some portion of a performance venue; even if it's just a plaza out toward the road. He said there is an approximate half acre that is available for development in a vibrant downtown that is currently at 100% capacity. The gentlemen from the Pavilion Food Truck are closing a deal to rent-to-own the Simple Pleasures building. This will make about 100% capacity of all buildings downtown and there really is no room for more. They could probably fill any space on the Fulper Lot. He doesn't think the development or sale of this area will be any problem. It's next to the highest concentration of parking spaces in the whole city; it's already designated for its purpose by the Master Plan. They would preserve the parking access to Liberty Avenue through the survey and designated parking space. He said they need design help. He could talk until he's blue in the face about the great ideas and he can borrow images from the internet, but the city needs to draw their own plan and to do this it costs money. The next step is an investment and a survey to create an easement for the alleyway and an investment in joining the two remaining lots. They need an investment in a design proposal to eventually bring a defined design to council for approval to use this design to acquire grants and to use the design to solicit building partners. Also, they need to invest in restriping the municipal parking lot. There is no sense in restriping it until they know what's going to happen with the easement joining into the parking lot.

He asked for a consensus from council to spend money because he doesn't want to spend \$5,000 - \$10,000 to develop this lot until he knows this is the consensus of where the city is going to go. He doesn't want to spend the money on this if it's going to be turned into a parking lot, so they need to decide which direction they need to go.

Marilou Suszko, Executive Director of Main Street Vermilion conveyed the following remarks:

I'm here as ED for MSV with the support of my board of directors regarding turning the Fulper Lot into a Parking lot. We believe that the future of this prime piece of real estate deserves more consideration. Our mission is to add to the revitalization of downtown. That happens by adding value to the city through tax revenues, value to the buildings, value to the businesses and the customers, value to the community.

New business, better businesses, more residents, new and better activities, better appearance, better management and entertainment all add value.

Parking lots do not entice visitors or residents to visit downtown. Multiple places to eat, variety and quality of products, customer service, things to do, a positive experience, and a welcoming atmosphere does.

In every Main Street Community in Ohio, parking comes up as an issue. When we discuss it in our quarterly meetings, we all come to the same conclusion that what is often being described as a lack of parking is more an issue of convenience, meaning: customers can't park in front or adjacent to a business.

We've probably all been to Crocker Park, Legacy Village and other crafted mixed use "communities" that blend residential and commercial in an attractive setting.

That's what we genuinely have here.

So where do you park when you shop at these places? Unless you get that coveted spot in front of your destination, you expect to park in the parking garage or elsewhere. And then you walk to your destination. Along the way you pass other stores, look in their windows, and might be inspired to stop in as well. At the end of the day, this is a good thing for all...broadens the experience for the visitor and creates sales for multiple businesses.

The need for turning a prime piece of real estate in the heart of downtown into a parking lot is in question.

Has the city considered a parking study to demonstrate the need? It will confirm whether or not need and not move blacktop equipment forward on speculation.

Putting up a parking lot assures less income tax and property tax revenue to the schools.

Aesthetically a parking lot symbolizes "an end." It's where you start and stop your visit. Putting a lot here could impact businesses that attempt to exist west of Grand. It is currently difficult for businesses beyond the Fulper Lot to encourage traffic to their stores. The development of this parking lot would sustain the sprawl that discourages walking trips and impedes better land uses (other than parking) ...such as establishing restaurants and business development, maybe even a residential component.

Let me share some myths and realities about parking from a presentation from the Laberge Group from NY (an engineering architectural, planning and surveying consultant) entitled DOWNTOWN PARKING MYTHS, REALITIES + SOLUTIONS.

Myth: People do not like to walk

Reality: Most motorists do not mind parking a block or two away from their destination. All downtown Vermilion is accessible from a block or two...and walkable downtowns are in demand, even trendy. The term “walkable” is a strong marketing feature for Vermilion.

Myth: If we build it, they will come

Reality: A successful downtown or business area has a strong sense of place and interesting attractive destinations. People come to experience an environment that is active, diverse and unique. They do not come downtown to park.

Myth: Parking must be in front.

Reality: Traditional downtowns have a grid pattern that allows for rear lot parking behind businesses. We do...let's look at whether that has the proper design features.

Myth: It's hard to find parking in downtown

Reality: Instead of thinking about how many spaces there are in downtown, think about how they relate to the neighborhood. Can people find them easily, are they easily accessible, in a safe place, how direct is the path to get to them, is it a pleasant place to be?

Myth: A parking problem is a bad thing.

Reality: If your town doesn't have a parking problem, then you have a bigger problem.

Main Street does not advocate for less parking, but we do ask council to not plan for our downtown as if it were a parking lot for a big box store.

Before moving forward, we would ask council to consider commissioning a professional parking survey to see if we should add parking. It might show that time and money be better spent on signage, reconfiguring and restriping what is already in place, lighting and access to parking including developing alleyways for better access where possible. Perhaps it will show that a better marketing, communications and branding of a parking program is required instead.

Laura Gongos explained she heard discussions last summer about turning the Fulper Lot into a Parking Lot. Her first thought is why would the City want to create a dead zone of empty parking spaces in the middle of what should be a bustling retail district and neighborhood. She said if you go around the world the idea of adding more parking places in Vermilion goes against a world-wide trend to do just the opposite, and that is to eliminate parking spaces. If you look in this country alone, depending on which survey or expert you listen to; there is an estimated five hundred million to two billion parking spaces in this country, which gives you approximately 2 – 2.3 parking spaces for every man, woman, and child. Nationwide there is a movement and if you go online and google Smart Growth Development you will see there is a balance smart growth movement design to balance parking with smart growth goals and it has captured the attention of many professionals, elected officials, and community leaders across the country, and about 40 states have signed on to it and Smart Growth Development is serving communities and helping to build local economies, and it's even helping to improve the public health of communities. One of the goals of Smart Growth is to create

walkable neighborhoods. It's not just Smart Growth that is looking at this - there are many other groups looking at it. For instance, the National Realtors Association have proven that walkable neighborhoods have higher home values. They've done surveys where 30% of the people surveyed want to live in a walkable neighborhood. This number jumps to 38% if you survey baby boomers, and it jumps to 50% if you survey millennials, so walkable neighborhoods are very important. Interestingly, if you google 'walk scores' there is a website that has been developed to look at what the walkability of your neighborhood is. For instance, she happened to put in the Mayor's address into 'walk scores' which scores range from zero to 64 and it's based on walkability to dining, shopping, groceries, parks, running errands, and cultural entertainment. The 'walk score' for 5511 Liberty Avenue is 64 and it's considered a somewhat walkable neighborhood. She said groups are starting to spend the money to help determine how walkable their neighborhood is. L. Gongos expressed additional information which can be heard at [www.vermilion.net](http://www.vermilion.net) (meeting videos). In closing, she said there are many avenues to explore for the reuse of the Fulper Lot that could enhance the quality of Vermilion, enhance the neighborhood, and ultimately approve the walkability of the neighborhood much more than what a Parking Lot could.

Peter Corogin said he has lived in Vermilion since 1980 and noted the nice presentation given by the Mayor. He liked how the mayor referred to the study done by the Edge Group years ago about the community and what they should be looking at. He said the other two residents are tough acts to follow and he agreed with most of the things they said. He said the mayor and him talked about this site and he believes everyone is looking at it and deciding what to do. He said the big complaint is that they need more parking, but he's not sure this is the right use for this site long-term. If you look at the city from an aerial view; this is a prime corner for the downtown - it's the second prime corner and what's built there should be something that is going to last for a long time and serve the needs of the community. He isn't sure what that is right now and it's hard to figure out quickly. For example, he said F. Loucka is working with him on the Harbor View Park where the museum was, and they are struggling. They're getting ideas and gathering information from people and taking surveys of the community and trying to get the right concept of what will be on this unique site. He thinks they have the same scenario here with the Fulper Lot. It's a great corner and something must be done that's right there, and he would question a black top parking lot that doesn't get it for a city they're trying to create - the walking, the charm, the small merchants, dining, and all the things that create a walkable downtown like they enjoy. He urged Council to create some consensus for the mayor and possibly allocate funding for him to work on a plan because it's going to take time; it's not going to happen overnight, and they need patience because this is a key corner of the city's downtown.

Sandy Coe of the Vermilion Chamber of Commerce said she is in total agreement to what everybody has said. She thinks a Parking Lot doesn't bring much of an asset to Vermilion. She said something needs to go there that brings foot traffic. People come to Vermilion for the experience and a Parking Lot is not an experience, so if the city brings something in with tax base to the community and not a black top parking lot, then she thinks this is what the city needs to look for and council should give the mayor the okay to go forward with an investment for a design.

Mayor Forthofer said he needs an agreement from Council to go ahead with whatever modest investments he needs to do to articulate the idea of what's best for this spot. What's kept him from going any further is the fact that he hasn't chosen to spend any money because he wanted to make sure they were all onboard. He would like a consensus from council on something that will bring tax dollars back to the city and he will in turn invest that money. He will bring an articulated idea for this lot and then they can continue to talk about it.

M. Stark asked the mayor if he wants to get an idea of what he could tell an investor to do with the property; is the city looking to sell this property and then tell them what they can build there. Mayor Forthofer said this is correct and first it would go to council. He said an architectural group and meeting of minds could inform council of what could go there, and it would bring revenue back to the city. To get grants they must show them what they want to do, and they need to invest in something. They need to be able to illustrate something. M. Stark said if the city approves money to do a design and they sell the property with the intention that they are going to do what the city likes, and they do something totally different, then what happens. Mayor Forthofer said the best way to secure the city's intention is to make sure the law director makes sure the city gets what they want. M. Stark said it wouldn't be the city's property anymore to tell them what to do. Mayor Forthofer said it takes planning and reassurance, but first they must come up with the idea.

S. Herron said council could authorize the creation of an alleyway easement on the eastern side of the Fulper Lot and they can authorize the administration to proceed with joining the lots. He said this would let everyone in the market know the city is serious about coming up with an idea on this lot, then they can look at the design issue.

S. Holovacs agreed with the alleyway and joining the two lots. He didn't have a problem with them looking for a design company but doesn't want to give the mayor an open checkbook. He would like to see what they are going to spend on a design plan.

B. Brady thought the corridor was a great idea and it would be nice to see parking on Grand Street to multiply that space if they have enough right of way to do this. However, she hesitates in doing a plan for the corner because if they do a plan they have one architect's idea. She would rather see them design the footprint of the lot and put it out to multiple people for different ideas; basically, go out to bid for people to build on it. Why should the city spend money to design it? Let the investors design it and come to the city. She is afraid if the city locks into one architect then you're also limiting what you're telling people is the best suggestion for the lot.

J. Gabriel agreed the city should start by getting the easement and the lots adjoined. He said council was hit by a lot of different ideas and there is a lot to digest. There's no sense in making a snap decision after 30 minutes when they have talked about this for seven years. He said the parking lot idea was the original intent because the city didn't own the Grand Division Parking Lot at the time, but as soon as that parking lot became available then obviously this opened the Fulper Lot up to different avenues. He said the lot has sat there for seven years growing weeds and at some point, it could look presentable enough to park on versus just letting grass grow. He is open to anything

that improves this space; it's not like he's locked in to anything, but he does like B. Brady's idea. He said council needs to think about this before deciding.

M. Stark said she agrees they shouldn't make any snap decisions tonight. She said the Fulper dirt lot is full almost every day with parking, so there must be a need if people are parking there. Also, she is glad to hear that somebody is buying Simple Pleasures, but she can still think of three empty buildings in downtown. If all the buildings were always filled then she would say they need this, but there are times they have vacant buildings. She agrees they need to investigate this further before making any decision.

Sandy Coe mentioned that a lot of people aren't aware that the municipal lot offers free parking now, so they need to make this approachable, so people park there. She thought signage would be helpful. F. Loucka said they should have signage indicating 'free parking'. Mayor Forthofer said they have talked about this as some people still think this is a toll parking lot and it's discouraging people. He said the city is going to investigate striping the parking lot, putting up signage, and re-landscaping the entrances.

M. Stark said when she first ran for council during the time Friendship Park was being built, many people approached her about the need for parking as they didn't understand why the city was building another park.

Don Nieding of 715 Foxwood Drive said the city should hire a surveyor to locate pins to see what they got, but he thought the city needed parking.

**S. Herron MOVED**; B. Brady seconded to authorize the administration to proceed with the necessary steps to obtain an easement for the alleyway and to join the two lots. Roll Call Vote 6 YEAS. **MOTION CARRIED.**

**TOPIC TWO: Vermilion Safe Routes to School**

City Engineer Howard provided an update to council on the Safe Routes to School project. He explained in 2013, ODOT hired a consultant to prepare the improvement plans. This was to install sidewalks on Sanford Street, State Street, Pineview, Larchmont, West River Road, Sweetbriar, Langfitt, and Mapleview. Some streets just have partial areas to fill in the gaps where sidewalks are missing. The original design required a temporary right of way from 24 property owners, of which 13 were on Sanford Street. The city previously hired K.E. McCartney to perform the right of way acquisition services and appraisal review services per ODOT requirements. In 2014, the city had Sanford Street reconstructed and this construction resulted in the need to revise the plans for the Safe Routes to School Project. ODOT's new design consultant has prepared updated improvement plans for Sanford Street and has determined that 39 properties will require a temporary right of way. The services being provided by K.E. McCartney and O.R. Colan were stopped once it was determined the project scope was changing. The city had requested revised proposals from both companies for their required additional services, which he would like to put on the agenda for next week. The contract modification for K.E. McCartney's right of way acquisition services will be

\$109,984 and O.R. Colan's appraisal review services will be \$24,050; these are worse-case scenario's and it probably will be less, but he would rather be conservative. The project is scheduled to begin construction July of 2020. There is ODOT money for the right of way acquisition, but part of that money has been used from previous services. They don't have a final number, but he has a meeting with ODOT on March 21 and they will ask for more money, but there is no guarantee there is any more money encumbered in this project. They are paying 100% of the construction up to \$584,000, so they're paying the majority of the fees for this project. The right of way acquisition services is a large increase that is required.

B. Brady asked why things changed so much on Sanford Street. C. Howard said the curb got lowered which changed the grading from the back of the curb to the right of way. S. Holovacs said there is a drastic grade drop on the north end of Sanford. M. Stark asked if the new pricing will fix the people's problem along the roadway. C. Howard said this is just for the right of way acquisition; to buy a temporary easement and the appraisal services. This is different from the construction plans. He said the sidewalk will be within the right of way and it will be a straight shot.

Chairman Frank Loucka adjourned the meeting after no further discussion came before the committee.

Next meeting: April 8, 2019 @ 7:00 p.m.

Gwen Fisher, Certified Municipal Clerk

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