



Minutes of the Roanoke Rapids City Council

A Work Session of the City Council of the City of Roanoke Rapids was held on **Tuesday, August 2, 2022 at 4:00 p.m.** in the Council Chambers at the Lloyd Andrews City Meeting Hall.

Present: Emery G. Doughtie, Mayor
Carl Ferebee, Mayor Pro Tem*
Sandra W. Bryant)
Wayne Smith)
Rex Stainback)

Council Members

Kelly Traynham, City Manager
Geoffrey Davis, City Attorney
Traci Storey, City Clerk
Carmen Johnson, Finance Director
Bobby Martin, Police Chief
Christina Caudle, Human Resources Director*
John Simeon, Parks & Recreation Director
Davis Wise, Planning & Development Director
Jason Patrick, Fire Chief
Larry Chalker, Public Works Director
Tony Hall, Main Street Development Director

Absent: Suetta S. Scarbrough, Council Member

*Denotes joining the meeting via Zoom.

Mayor Doughtie called the meeting to order.

Historic District Housing Condition Survey

Planning & Development Director Wise reintroduced the Planning & Development Community Team. There has been some staffing realignments and a new onboarding since the last time he came before City Council. He announced the promotion of Kristyn Anderson as the Principal Planner. On June 17th Kristyn celebrated nine years of service in the Planning & Development Department. Anthony Price was hired on June 13th, and his role is the GIS Specialist and Community Development Planner. Anthony had been working for the City as a GIS specialist through the Council of Government on the stormwater mapping project. Both individuals will be a huge asset for the Planning & Development Department moving forward.

Planning & Development Director Wise gave a Powerpoint presentation (On file in Clerk's Office) and reported the following:

By all accounts, vacant properties are a curse. Vacant properties are an expense that local governments simply cannot afford – and that expense grows every year a property remains vacant or abandoned. Such properties produce no or *little property tax income*, but they *do* require plenty of time, attention, and money.

CRIME

Vacant properties often become a breeding ground for crime, tying up an inordinate amount of police resources. The City of Richmond, VA conducted an analysis of citywide crime data. Of all the economic and demographic variables tested, vacant/abandoned properties had the highest correlation to the incidence of crime.

The City of Richmond focused on their vacant and abandoned properties through their Neighborhoods in Bloom [NIB]. This program resulted in a dramatic drop in crime rates. Seven of Richmond's neighborhoods were identified to restore physical livability, and improve neighborhood stability, tracking everything from code enforcement to increasing home ownership rates. In the first three years of the initiative the targeted neighborhoods experienced a 19% reduction in crime compared to a 6 % reduction citywide.

The City of Richmond invested the majority of their Community Development Block Grant and HOME investment Partnerships Program funding. Capital improvement funds and other resources were allocated to these neighborhoods until they achieved the critical mass of public investment needed to simulate self-sustaining private market-activity.

He called upon Police Chief Martin to speak about vacant properties in Roanoke Rapids.

Chief Martin stated they have recently received calls to some of the vacant homes in the city where individuals are taking part in drug activity; they tend to squat in these homes. Drugs and weapons are being stored in these vacant homes. They receive calls periodically in regards to vacant homes from the 1000 block to the 100 block where they get tips about drug activity in the yards, on the property and out of the houses that have been broken into. They try to contact the property owners to get them to secure the homes and keep this from happening. They also get calls about the vacant properties along Roanoke Avenue. For example, juveniles on top of the buildings throwing bricks down on the sidewalk. The Police Department does put in a lot of man hours into these calls. If they go

to an open vacant property, they do not clear it by themselves. It takes multiple officers for safety issues especially when locating drugs, narcotics and people in these homes.

Planning & Development Director Wise continued with his presentation.

Arson & Accidental Fire

The US Fire Administration reported that over 12,000 fires are in vacant structures in the US, resulting in \$73 million in property damage annually. Fires are likely in vacant properties because of poor maintenance, faulty wiring, and debris. During the winter, homeless people burn candles for light and heat. But more importantly, vacant buildings are a primary target of arsonist. More than 70 % of fires in vacant or abandoned buildings are arson or suspected arson. Such fires strain the resources of fire departments because vacant buildings often contain more open shafts, pits, and holes that can be an invisible threat to firefighters; the cost of fighting those fires is more than financial. The National Fire Protection Association estimates that 6,000 firefighters are injured every year in vacant or building fires.

Public Nuisances & Health

Vacant and abandoned properties require a disproportionate amount of public maintenance. In addition to securing buildings against criminal activity, local governments must clean and care for them to prevent a buildup of trash, illegal dumping, and rodent infestations. Demolishing crumbling vacant buildings does not eliminate the costs associated with abandonment. The resulting vacant lot still requires maintenance. Managing vacant properties ties up time of municipal employees and the resources of municipal taxpayers. Additionally, these properties depress the value of other properties and generate little or no tax revenue themselves.

Decreased Property Values & Tax Revenues

Vacant properties reduce city tax revenues in three ways: they are often tax delinquent; their low value means they generate little in taxes; and they depress property values across an entire neighborhood. According to Frank Alexander, Interim Dean and Professor at Emory University of Law School and an expert in housing issues, “Failure of cities to collect even two or four percent of property taxes because of delinquencies and abandonment translates into \$3 to \$6 billion in lost revenues to local governments and school districts annually. Property tax remains the single largest source of tax revenue under local control, so this loss of income is substantial.”

Lost Tax Revenue

Taxes are often lost on vacant properties because of tax delinquency. Abandoned properties often become vacant because the cost of paying taxes on the property may well exceed the value of the property. Tax forfeiture is a common fate for vacant and abandoned properties – ownership is transferred to municipalities, which tries to recover the lost taxes through the sale of the property. These sales can become problematic for several reasons: gaining title is a long and difficult process that consumes resources. Once the title is obtained, cities often auction delinquent properties for the amount of the tax lien, but reclamation of all the lost taxes is not guaranteed. Where cities have tried to recover delinquent taxes on parcels where homes have been demolished, not only are they not able to recover the taxes, but typically the demolition itself was costly. While tax sales can provide a source of income for municipalities, they do not ensure that the abandoned property will be put into productive use. Sometimes these properties are purchased by speculators without any intent to restore them, and the process fails to assemble marketable parcels of land.

Lower Property Values

In addition, to vacant properties generating little in taxes – perhaps more importantly, they rob the surrounding homes and business of their value. A study conducted in Philadelphia found that houses within 150 feet of a vacant or abandoned property experienced a net loss of \$7,627 in value. Properties within 150 to 300 feet experienced a loss of \$6,819, and those within 300 to 450 feet experienced a loss of \$3,542. Furthermore, the researchers found that houses on blocks with abandonment sold for \$6,715 less than houses on blocks with no abandonment. These lower property values represent a hit in the pocketbook for both homeowners and the city. A city that develops a focused effort to bring vacant properties back can restore value – and taxes, - for the city.

Costs to Homeowners

Living in a neighborhood with vacant and abandoned properties exacts many costs on homeowners. As mentioned previously, decreased property values, can devastate a family's financial security. When neighborhood populations decline and property become vacant, a smaller number of residents bear a greater proportion of the city's tax burden. This fact is particularly relevant to lower-income neighborhoods and among residents without the resources or the desire to leave their neighborhood. Additionally, there are other less measured costs of owning a home in an area with vacant properties – costs that are both fiscal and psychological.

Higher Insurance Premiums

The proximity of vacant and abandoned properties makes obtaining homeowners insurance, mortgages, and loans for home improvement more difficult. Insurance companies are informed about what is going on in neighborhoods. This can mean increased premiums or even policy cancellations for those owners living near vacant or abandoned properties. There are number of variables involved in the setting of premiums and many insurance companies hold the underwriting manuals to be proprietary. The presence of a “high hazard” property, which also includes condemned properties within forty feet of a solid masonry building, and 100 feet of a non-masonry building would lead to a cancellation or non-renewal.

Poorer Quality of Life

With abandoned buildings comes social fragmentation. Individuals who live in communities with an increasing number of vacant buildings begin to feel isolated, weakening the community. Vacant buildings in neighborhoods symbolizes that no one cares, increasing the likelihood that property value will continue to decline, and that further abandonment will set in. Vacant properties are out in the open for all to see and the aesthetic impact of abandoned properties, while not easily quantified in dollars, is another cost.

Planning & Development Director Wise referred to photos in his PowerPoint presentation.

We’ve isolated three residences to highlight the types of issues seen in many of the red properties. 611 Washington Street suffered damage in a fire several years ago, and the owner at the time insisted he was planning to rehabilitate the home, even obtaining a building permit. The dwelling was never improved and stands out on its block for its condition. Several residents have complained about the dwelling, which has recently been sold. We’re reaching out to the new owner to try and determine their intentions. 96 Madison Street was brought to our attention as a fire call as well, though the structure was not damaged by fire. The owner has since disappeared, and formal process began on the structure just before COVID. The required ad in the paper did not run, so the hearing was rescheduled, and then the pandemic restrictions happened. We are now restarting the formal process. 653 Washington Street is currently being analyzed for possible controlled burn demolition. Co-owner Janice Barnes told me she doesn’t believe the property can be rehabilitated.

Three commercial properties on Roanoke Avenue give us a decent overview of red properties in this area. 204 Roanoke Avenue, the People's Theater, is vacant and unused, and has been under a demolition order since 2012. 216 Roanoke Avenue is, in many ways, an extension of 204 – the damage in the theater has spread like a contagion among buildings in the general area. Loose brick work is apparent on the façade. 258 Roanoke Avenue was recently damaged by fire. The statutory 135-day waiting period ended July 4th.

Planning & Development Director Wise called upon Code Enforcement Officer Roger Bell for updates on some of the aforementioned properties.

Mr. Bell reported the People's Theater (204 Roanoke Avenue) owner, Eric Bowman passed away in December. His heirs were trying to sell the property, but there is a large unpaid tax burden they are trying to work their way through first. Staff will continue to communicate with them.

He said 258 Roanoke Avenue is owned by Mrs. Fitts. She had a structural engineer look at it and plans to demolish the entire structure, not just part of the structure. 216 Roanoke Avenue is an extension of 204 Roanoke Avenue, same owner and same problems in regards to the owner passing away.

Mr. Bell also reported 611 Washington Street changed ownership. The new owner has told him he would like it to be his retirement home and planned to renovate the property. However, last month he fell and has been faced with hospital bills he was not anticipating. Now he is not sure if he can move forward with those plans. Mr. Bell will contact him this month for an update. 96 Madison Street has been boarded up and staff will be moving forward with a hearing on that property shortly.

Councilman Smith asked if they had looked at the cost to tear these buildings down. Mr. Bell replied it cost between \$10,000 for a regular dwelling up to who knows for a large commercial building. He estimates it would cost six figures to demolish the People's Theatre. City Manager Traynham agreed and stated the asbestos disposal would be a significant cost. She estimated it would be close to \$1M to demolish and remove it.

Mr. Bell added 611 Washington Street is a two-story structure so the cost would be \$15,000-20,000 to demolish. These are just conservative estimates.

Mayor Doughtie asked if the City could put pressure on the owners of the People's Theater to do something about the building. City Manager Traynham stated City Council has taken all the action they could lawfully. They have completed the unsafe building process so unless something new comes up that was not covered under that. The judge has issued

the order and the City has the authority to take action on it if the City Council chose to fund the actions on it. Even if they used City funds to demolish the property, it does not make it the City's property. They would have to go through the lien foreclosure process. It would be unlikely the City would recoup any of the funds.

Mr. Bell added they could continue to communicate with the owners of the People's Theater.

Councilman Smith asked if there were any grant monies to help the property owners to restore some of these buildings.

Planning & Development Director Wise replied the three properties owned by this gentleman are in pre-foreclosure with Halifax County so there is \$28,000-\$29,000 owed over the three properties on Roanoke Avenue. There is Preservation money that could be used – tax credits. He spoke with National Trust for Historic Preservation when he was at the Main Street conference in Richmond. They have a list of investors that are looking for tax credit projects. These properties would qualify. He added it would be a lot of money to rehab any of the properties in the 200 block of Roanoke Avenue because of the condition. He has also talked with Rural USDA on some ideas such as a farmer's market. After his tour with Councilman Stainback where he saw the little museum at Roanoke Rapids High School, he had the idea of a Roanoke Avenue Museum where people could share their stories. He also said there are private foundations, but the City was not a CLG (Certified Local Government). The City would need to reactivate the Historic Preservation Committee and apply at the end of the year; it takes a year to get funding once they are a CLG. He discussed his ideas for the community including the People's Theater with Liz Parham with the Department of Commerce using the Main Street Transformational grant funds. Ms. Parham liked the idea of an application that was not on the three blocks where monies have been utilized before. It has to be transformational.

Councilman Smith asked if City staff was working with homeowners about getting grants. Planning & Development Director Wise replied they could apply for tax credits. The City could hold workshops, but the owners have to apply; the City cannot do it for them.

Departmental Updates

Planning & Development

Planning & Development Director Wise reported the following:

- One of the department's main projects is getting OpenGov started which City Council approved this year. Kristyn Anderson is the lead on that project. Starting August 5th they will have meetings every week. Anthony Price is their GIS Specialist so he is coordinating that with OpenGov. They are hoping to go live in January.

- They will conduct Planning Board trainings starting this month and continue for the next 4 months.
- He and Lian Elliott completed a NC State Building Code Administrative course which was required for her to be a permit technician in that role.
- He and Kristyn Anderson received a scholarship through the Local Government Credit Union to participate in a course for one weekend in each month of September, October and November to become Certified Zoning Officials. Scholarship totaled \$2,400.
- Roger Bell will be taking a class and test for a Level 1 Mechanical Inspector since they are short a building inspector. Trying to make a transition in-house.

Public Works

Public Works Director Chalker reported the following:

- Roanoke Rapids Theatre Update:
 - They moved back into the Roanoke Rapids Theatre about 2 weeks ago.
 - Had exterior locks changed to have control of who was in the building.
 - Performing normal routine maintenance/cleaning to get it back in the shape they would like to see it in.
 - Replacing batteries.
 - Serviced the HVAC units
 - Landscaping/grass cutting
 - Checked all production systems
 - Reprogrammed all the WIFI thermostats.
- Working on Marshall Street sink hole: It is a 25” pipe system. It appears the entire pipe system will need to come up. Challenge is finding the replacement pipe. The department’s Street Superintendent found 2 sections today. They will have to wait for it to be made. They will try to stabilize it until they can get the materials in hand.
- City Hall elevator: Intensive work begins next week on Wednesday. Contractors will be on site making a lot of noise and creating dust. They will be doing a lot of electrical work to prepare for the revamp of the elevator.
- Staffing levels are down, especially in the Refuse Department. This department handles the knuckleboom trucks that pick up the junk and limbs. They normally have 5 drivers and they have been down to 2 drivers for about two months now. They continue to reach out and recruit CDL drivers.

- They have been working in extreme heat. They are pushing hydration and when the heat index gets to a certain point they have to find some way to get out of the heat. It could be in a training environment or the shade.

City Manager Traynham introduced newly hired Main Street Development Director Tony Hall.

Main Street

Main Street Director Hall reported the following:

- This was his second week with the City.
- He is scheduled to attend the Annual NC Main Street Convention starting tomorrow through Friday.
- Working with Kimberly Graybeal, the Chairman of the Twilight Festival which is scheduled for September 23, 2022 in Centennial Park.
- Working with President and Vice-President of the Main Street Board of Directors. They have agreed on a meeting date of August 25th.
- Moving forward with the State Directed Grant money that was already allocated into four different areas. The grant was in the amount of \$250,000. The four areas are for street improvements in the uptown district with a budget of \$125,000; the 1026 Urban Greenspace final phase improvements with a budget of \$25,000; Selfie Station Outdoor Public Art Program and Public Outreach with a budget of \$25,000; Development Local Incentive Program for uptown historic building and rehabilitations with a budget of \$75,000.

Finance

Finance Director Johnson reported the following:

- Department has been busy due to it being the end of the fiscal year and closing out FY 2021-2022.
- Completed the following: LGC-203 report; Powell Bill Expense Report; COPS Hiring Grant.
- Working on the GASB 87 and trying to get that in place.
- Preparing for the auditor who is scheduled to be on site the week of September 12, 2022.

Police

Police Chief Martin reported the following:

- The last few months officers and admin staff have been working hard on recruitment.
- They have 3 individuals who will be going through BLET with the potential of 2 more.
- They have 2 officers who are already certified with 7+ years of experience.

- Working with Julie Thompson with the RRGSD in regards to training with the department's young police force. They will conduct some small scale active shooter response drills at some of the schools. This will be with the police department only at this time. They will work with other City departments and outside agencies later on.
- Community Programs – Captain Gorton Williams is doing a phenomenal job with these programs. They are planning a Back to School event at Chaloner Recreation Center soon.
- Focusing on some of the more violent crimes they have been experiencing within the City such as the recent robberies. They are investing a lot of time and effort to apprehend the person(s) responsible for these crimes.
- FLOCK Cameras – They will have all the cameras in place soon. In the short time some of the cameras have been installed, they've had 10-15 successes with stolen tags and vehicles.

Parks & Recreation

Parks & Recreation Director Simeon reported the following:

- Chaloner Recreation
 - Splash pad will close October 3rd. Attendance has been outstanding this summer. We receive compliments everyday on the splash pad.
 - Swing sets are to be shipped August 26 with installation to begin shortly after.
- TJ Davis Recreation Center
 - The outdoor pool will close August 13th.
 - Held several youth athletic camps this summer which have been well attended.
- Library
 - The library has received over \$30,000 in grants for several different projects this past year.
 - One particular grant for \$20,000 was awarded to only 77 libraries nationwide.
- Canal trail
 - Over the past year, we have replaced 3 bridges and covered the trail with screening to create a smooth surface that will last for years.
 - Tourism funding has been used to complete these projects.
 - All of this is being done in preparation for the Half Marathon on October 1st.
- Kirkwood
 - A.R. Chesson Construction will begin the restrooms renovation project on August 29th and completed by September 30th.
 - The fire alarm project will begin near the end of this month and should take 1-2 weeks to complete.

Fire

Fire Chief Patrick reported the following:

- Department has been busy this summer participating in special events: Lighthouse Ministries at Rochelle Park, Gaston Fire & Rescue Camp, Police Department Fun Day at TJ Davis, Sheriff's Camp at Halifax County 4-H Center and carried the Fire Safety House to Enfield for them to use at the Halifax County Firefighter's Association Fire Camp.
- Staff has been working hard at the station in between calls. They replaced sheetrock in the truck bay, painted the ceiling and upgraded lighting to LED.
- Annual Safety Fair is scheduled Friday, August 26th in conjunction with Friday Concert in the Park at Centennial Park. They plan to utilize the Lloyd Andrews Building and Chamber will have food trucks on site.
- Received Vidant/ECU Health Grant in the amount of \$10,000 to purchase new AEDs.
- Will conduct 4 days of training in the next month with the RRGSD.
- Experiencing staffing issues. They do have 3 individuals who started the Fire Academy yesterday. They will finish in December.

Miscellaneous

City Manager Traynham reported the City is scheduled to receive the second tranche of American Rescue Plan Act funds by the end of this month.

She said they will discussing more closely the strategic planning efforts and starting some of the preliminary stages involving City Council. The representative with the NCLM has developed a survey for City Council to answer. They should receive the survey soon to review and respond in order to help get some discussions going on the direction they would like to see the City in the future.

She reported on August 15, 2022, the State of Emergency Law that was granted by the Governor during COVID that impacts remote meetings will expire. Board members will not be able to meet remotely and it count towards a quorum. They will continue to stream meetings. For Quasi-Judicial meetings, comments would have to be in person.

Chief Martin announced a local businessman, Mr. Patel, donated flooring and his manpower to help upgrade the floors at the Police Department and the first floor hallways and conference room. They estimate the donation of flooring to be at least \$50,000. Mr. Patel's manpower along with Public Works were able to get the flooring installed in a weeks' time.

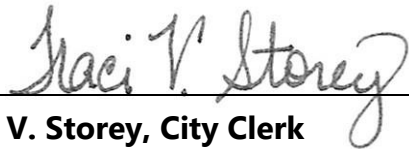
Chief Martin also approached Lowe's Home Improvement about a program they have called Give Back to the Community. They will be coming in to work with the department on

cabinets for their servers and work spaces for the officers at no cost to the City.

He estimates the total of the materials and services donated would be \$120,000-\$135,000. He plans to submit more information to City Manager Traynham to recognize the donors at a future meeting.

Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 6:20 p.m.



Traci V. Storey, City Clerk

Approved by Council Action on: August 16, 2022