

CITY OF PALOS HEIGHTS



Business/ Economic Development Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes August 16, 2021

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Grossart called the meeting of the Business/Economic Development Advisory Committee to order at 12:08 PM at the Recreation Center in Palos Heights. Present were: Bob Grossart, Alderman Jeff Key, Ken Busse, Judi Weber, Michael Coogan, Lori Mazeika, Veronica Studnicka, Carri Sirigas, and Recording Secretary Tayler Swiedals.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Chairman Grossart made a motion to approve the minutes of the July 19, 2021 meeting. On a unanimous voice vote, the motion carried.

Fusion59

Chairman Grossart informed the committee that four businesses from Palos Heights have completed the program, including: Royalberry, Harvest Room, Noral Jewelers, and Prime Choice Meats. Each business qualified for the \$600 grant from the Beautification committee, and one of the four businesses have joined the chamber after completing the program. For the fall semester, Manhattan Firehouse Grill and the Palos Heights Public Library have signed on to the program. Lake Katherine has agreed to be a part of the Fusion59 organizational class. The students who take part in the program write a report for the businesses at the end of the class.

Holidays in the Heights

The Holidays in the Heights committee will be meeting on Wednesday. They have set a deadline of September 30th as a date to decide whether the event will be able to run. The two biggest factors in making the event run have been raising the funds from sponsors and possible COVID restrictions in place at the time of the event. The committee currently has one sponsor and 15 vendors committed to the event.

Welcome Back

The Welcome Back event at Trinity Christian is being held on August 25th. The committee recruited 15 businesses to offer discounts to incoming freshman for their first year in Palos Heights. The hope is to secure a few more businesses willing to take part in the program. Local restaurants will be donating food to the event as they have in previous years.

Staffing

Chairman Grossart discussed the lack of progress being made with the Holidays in the Heights, Kris Kringle, and the Welcome Back events without having summer interns. Ken Busse acknowledged that Covid-19 caused disruptions with on-campus attendance at Trinity, the source of interns.

Business District

Ken Busse reported that the city has hired a consulting firm tasked to create a Business District along Harlem Avenue. The potential Business District will include Tiffany Square on the north, Great American Bagel on the south, and businesses in between. Both physical improvements and marketing items may be funded by the Business District. The hope is that by November there will be a report ready to be presented at a public hearing, and possibly be in a position to adopt a business district by the end of the year. Mr. Busse explained that this will require consensus building among business owners in Palos Heights. Mr. Busse has spoken with many business owners and the chamber about the benefits of having a business district.

The Business District is funded by an added sales tax ranging from a quarter penny to a full penny. The added tax will depend on the project budget, and the time frame of completing projects. Other lawful funds may be used by the City to supplement funding. An initial budget estimate suggests an added three quarter penny may be required. On the other hand, a full penny tax may allow improvements to be implemented more quickly. Mr. Busse explained that comparatively, the tax rate extended by Palos Heights is lower than adjacent communities, many of which extend an added Home Rule sales tax.

Mr. Busse further explained that the benefit of a Business District tax, versus a Home Rule tax, is that the Business District tax must be spent on items that benefit properties within the Business District, such as parking, vehicular and pedestrian circulation, façade and building improvements, and other lawful purposes. The Business District tax cannot be used for general city purposes. The funds may also be used to hire professional planning and design firms to improve pedestrian and vehicular circulation along Harlem and behind buildings.

Michael Coogan stated that as a resident, property owner and business owner, he supports the establishment and use of a potential Business District. He believes it is a necessary incentive program to encourage public and private investment in bigger ticket items. These improvements must be undertaken to improve and maintain the competitiveness of the Harlem Avenue corridor in the larger regional area.

Alderman Key voiced his support for the Business District, and the funding mechanism it can provide to improve the competitiveness and market share of businesses along Harlem Avenue. Ken Busse was asked to give an example of an area where municipal assistance has been successful. He cited the Lake Katherine Redevelopment Project, which utilized Incremental Property Tax revenue (aka, TIF revenue) to create the Lake Katherine Nature Preserve, and a mixed use of professional office buildings and residential townhomes. He also mentioned the 127th & Harlem Redevelopment Increment Financing, which utilizes a combination of TIF revenue, Business District revenue, and City sharing of a portion of its own 1% local sales tax. The combination of incentives caused the construction of an all-new 60,000 s.f. Jewel-Osco store, replacing an obsolete 30,000 s.f. Jewel-Osco store. It also stimulated the construction of a new Wendy's restaurant, and Andy's Frozen Custard.

Parking

Mr. Busse presented the committee with a packet comparing the downtown areas of La Grange and Palos Heights. Mr. Busse chose La Grange as a downtown comparison, because many people cite downtown La Grange when discussing downtown parking in downtown Palos Heights, as well as pedestrian circulation (aka, walkability). Mr. Busse indicated that some people believe Palos Heights customers must simply get used to the idea of walking greater distances for parking, like in other downtowns, such as LaGrange. And, by simply walking more Palos Heights businesses will do better.

Mr. Busse handed out a packet of illustrations to assist with the comparisons of the two downtowns. Mr. Busse noted that both downtown Palos Heights and downtown La Grange each have a major 100-foot wide right-of-way (ROW) that cuts through their downtowns. And, while Harlem Avenue serves as a major Illinois State Route (IL Rte 45), La Grange Road serves as both a major Illinois State Route (IL Rte 43), and a major U.S. Route (US Rte 12). The packet of illustrations compares the average daily traffic (ADT) for both downtown areas, as well as specific design aspects, and parcel configurations.

Mr. Busse stated that there are physical characteristics that distinguish Palos Heights from most other downtown commercial districts, including downtown La Grange. Many physical characteristics found in most other downtowns help to enhance the vibrancy of those downtown commercial districts. Moreover, many of the physical characteristics that enhance other downtowns can be addressed in downtown Palos Heights by design improvements to sidewalks, surface parking, vehicular and pedestrian circulation, as well as Harlem Avenue. Such improvements can improve the appeal, attraction and walkability of downtown Palos Heights in order to enhance local businesses, and expand its trade area.

Mr. Busse cites the most pressing issues of the Olde Palos Downtown area are the amount and location of customer and employee parking, well-lighted and uniform sidewalk design/width and connections. Additionally, an alternate Harlem Avenue roadway design that enhances vehicular circulation, increases parking, and improves pedestrian crosswalks can enhance downtown Palos Heights as a destination place.

Although La Grange Road serves as major arterial routes for both Illinois and the U.S., it has less average daily traffic volume traveling than Harlem Avenue. The reason ADT volumes are less is that the design of La Grange Road incorporates multiple design features that reduce the number of pass-through vehicles, and enhance the safety and walkability of downtown La Grange. These features include a middle turn lane that is limited in length near the signalized intersection, the provision of knuckled sidewalks that create safer pedestrian crosswalks that are 40 feet in length, and provide opportunities for on-street parallel parking. The combination of these features allow La Grange to reduce vehicular speeds along La Grange Road to 20 mph, vs. 35 mph along Harlem Avenue. Together, these features allow La Grange Road to serve and enhance the commercial district of downtown La Grange, rather than serve as a mere expeditious route to pass through La Grange, much the way Harlem Avenue serves pass-through motorists.

When examining Harlem Avenue, there are multiple roadway design features that impact the nature of Downtown Palos Heights. These features include an 18-foot wide middle turn lane that stretches beyond the entire length of downtown Palos Heights, four 14-foot drive lanes, numerous full-access ingress/egress curb cuts along Harlem, and large turning radii near

crosswalks. Together, these design features preclude the provision of knuckled sidewalks to enhance pedestrian safety, and create precarious pedestrian crosswalks that are approximately 80 feet or more in length. Additionally, while the posted speed limit is 35 mph, the design of a 74- to 80-foot wide roadway surface has a tendency to increase vehicular speeds beyond 35 mph. Increased vehicular speeds diminishes the visible promotion of local storefronts, and amplifies the commercial separation between the east and west sides of Harlem Avenue. Additionally, the large turning radii at 122nd, 123rd and 124th Streets, and lack of knuckled sidewalks, increases the time pedestrian are in crosswalks and their safety risks. Together, these design characteristics cause the need for a large and expensive police presence during special events in order to ensure pedestrian safety in crosswalks.

Another difference in the design of the two downtowns is the platting of parcels and the configuration of street layouts. These major differences include:

1. Buildings contained on parcels in downtown La Grange extend to the boundary of each parcel. With the exception of one or two rear parking spaces along the back alley, on-site parking is not a financial burden to La Grange businesses and property owners.
2. Sidewalks immediately adjacent to each business are contained in the public right-of-way, are wide and designed to a uniform standard, and are installed and maintained on a regular bases by the Village of La Grange. The provision, maintenance and financial burden of sidewalks is not the responsibility of multiple individual property owners, which lead to varying sidewalk widths and connections, as well as irregular conditions and maintenance.
3. Angled and parallel parking immediately adjacent to each business is contained in the public right-of-way and is installed and maintained on a regular bases by the Village of La Grange. The provision, maintenance and financial burden of angled and parallel parking sidewalks is not the responsibility of multiple individual property owners, which leads to varying amounts, conditions and maintenance.
4. The circulation drives immediately adjacent to each business are contained in the public right-of-way (aka, La Grange Road and other side streets), and are installed and maintained on a regular bases by the Village of La Grange. The provision, maintenance and financial burden of circulation drives immediately adjacent to each business are not the responsibility of multiple individual property owners, which leads to varying degrees of maintenance and conditions.

Mr. Busse concluded that these are some potential design considerations for usage of funds generated by an added Business District tax for the benefit of properties and businesses contained within a Business District. Mr. Busse further explained that the added expense of installing and maintaining sidewalks, angled parking, circulation drives and on-site parking creates an added financial burden on Palos Heights businesses and property owners. Additionally, the repair and maintenance of this critical infrastructure improvements in downtown Palos Heights is carried out on an ad hoc basis.

Certainly, not all of La Grange Road improvements are borne on the state and federal government. No doubt the Village of La Grange bears a financial responsibility for repairs and maintenance of such infrastructure improvements. However, the Village of La Grange is able to coordinate repairs and maintenance on a regular basis. Moreover, the scale at which the Village is able to do these repairs and maintenance allow for better pricing for repairs and maintenance. Or, some repairs and maintenance can be conducted in house by the Village of La Grange.

Mr. Busse added that expanding sidewalks within downtown Palos Heights could provide an opportunity for businesses to create spaces for outdoor dining. A lack of uniform lighting and crumbling asphalt along the back side of businesses create dark areas and safety hazards for customers who would like to walk within those areas. Mike Coogan commented that there should be an emphasis placed on providing public parking options on both sides of Harlem. The hope is the business district will aid in these improvements, and enhance local businesses and expand the trade area of downtown Palos Heights.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 1:11 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Tayler Swiedals
Recording Secretary