

ADJOURNED MEETING CITY COUNCIL  
October 22, 2015

The City Council of the City of Albemarle met in an adjourned session on Thursday, October 22, 2015, at 7:00 p.m. in the Raymond I. Allen room at City Hall. Mayor G.R Michael presided and the following Councilmembers were present, to wit: Bill Aldridge, Troy E. Alexander, Benton Dry, Martha Sue Hall, Martha E. Hughes, Dexter Townsend and Chris Whitley. Absent, none

Also attending: Planning and Community Development Director Keith Wolf, Senior Planner Nasser Rahimzedah, Planning Specialist Carolyn Martin, City Manager Michael Ferris, Assistant City Manager Christina Alphin, City Clerk E. Paulette Bowers, Economic Development Director Mark Donham and the interested public.

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The City Council held a public comment workshop concerning the consideration of a Commercial Maintenance Code for the City of Albemarle.

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Mayor Michael brought the meeting to order.

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Mayor Michael stated that around 18 months ago we had multiple requests of downtown businesses to look at the downtown building issues and the City had the ADDC to do the research. The ADDC Board researched, created and passed a Commercial Maintenance Code. This code then was passed on to the City Planning Board for approval and is what you are viewing now. We decided to first have a public comment session to receive as many comments from the public as possible. He asked the audience to ask a question as it comes up this evening and not wait until the end of the presentation.

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Planning and Community Development Director Keith Wolf stated the purpose of the Commercial Maintenance Code and he handed out several sheets and first reviewed an executive summary sheet of the code. He stated that a full version of the proposed Commercial Maintenance Code can be found on the City website.

Mr. Wolf covered the summary sheet which included the purpose, duty to comply, areas of responsibility, city authority to condemn, the conditions that have to be met, and the appeals process.

Mr. Wolf reviewed the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) sheet with answers regarding commercial maintenance codes.

Dr. Chris Bramlett stated from the audience that his concern is the City having the manpower to enforce the commercial code while we already have problems enforcing the minimum housing code. If the owner does not comply and the City has to make the improvements and charge the cost back to the owners as a lien against their property, where is the money initially coming from for the City to make the repairs? What if the City decides to tear down the structure, this could also be a big issue?

Mayor Michael stated that we are contracted with Centralina Council of Governments on the minimum housing code issues for residential and would hire a different firm to handle the commercial maintenance code issues.

Mr. Joe Speights stated that the budget may need to be high for commercial buildings downtown so as to cover issues concerning asbestos, lead based paint, etc. which are very costly.

Councilmember Hall stated that she and Councilmember Hughes had an opportunity to speak with members of a town in Kentucky at an annual conference they attended and how that town handled a private/public partnership with those volunteers going in and upgrading the old buildings in their downtown.

Councilmember Hughes stated that what we have now is definitely not working.

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Mr. Joe Speights stated that getting the owners and the town people to come together to find a solution may be difficult. Taking care of their own commercial property can be a struggle. Is there possibly any State/Federal grants to help owners and Cities with these types of repair issues?

Mayor Michael stated that there is reuse money out there but it is tied to creating jobs and there are several grants such as a façade grant, tax credits, and sign grants that can be applied for.

Dr. Chris Bramlett asked is there anyway to tie these costs in and determine if after these type of repairs are made, determining if you ever get a return on investment? How can we determine this?

Mr. Ritchie Hearne stated that this is a problem all over the country, causing businesses to not decide on starting a business downtown.

Mr. Keith Wolf stated that new businesses want to be located near a big box store now to take advantage of the traffic such as Wal-Mart.

Councilmember Dry stated that we need more people to open businesses like Tyra Storm with Off the Square who has a neat thriving unique niche for the downtown.

Mr. Jim Lowder commented on the costs of such items as repairing floors costing greater than \$50,000, roofing system costs even greater problems and greater cost overall, costing greater than \$300-400,000 to renovate some commercial structures. We need a program in place to put the life back into the downtown or goals may not be achieved.

Mr. Bradley Emerson stated that we need to work on the aesthetics but it still may need to be taken down if the building structure is not sound. If repairs can be made with grant money or otherwise is fine but the rent would probably be raised and those buildings may sit there empty due to the higher rental costs. He also stated that he would love to renovate the Wiscasset Industrial building but it would cost up towards \$10 million.

Dr. Chris Bramlett stated that a student/faculty group from UNC-Greensboro analyzed the costs of renovating the downtown Belk building costing around \$10 million. He asked if the City is willing to put up \$2 million to renovate the downtown? We would have to do a feasibility study and we will need to definitely have a public /private partnership working together.

Mayor Michael stated that he agrees with Dr. Bramlett. We are going out for bids soon concerning the hiring of a financier advisor, to tell us exactly how much we can safely borrow for things such as these renovations downtown.

Mr. Wolf finished covering the Frequently Asked Questions sheet.

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Upon questioning, Mayor Michael stated that we can only do this if we consider items during budget time and approve funds to cover this. There will be a formal public hearing before any consideration of adoption. Tonight is just a type of informal hearing/public input session.

If you did not say everything you needed to tonight or if you think of any incentives for the downtown later and would like to speak one on one with me, Council or the City Manager concerning this issue just call or email one of us. We are definitely open to suggestions.

Dr. Bramlett stated that doing nothing is not an option. He stated that Concord is way ahead in this Piedmont area but Salisbury still has a lot of vacant buildings downtown. The City of Concord is definitely ahead of the business owners in Concord. There is now competition for rentals on buildings downtown Concord. He asked that everyone think in a big way of public/private partnerships for our downtown. This is the best possibility we have ever had that he can remember in getting these types of things done downtown. Initiatives will have to come from City Council first. He thanked the City for having this public input session this evening.

Councilmember Hughes thanked the public for their attendance and sharing their thoughts this evening.

Mayor Michael stated to feel free to come and talk to anyone or call or email the City Manager or Council.

Councilmember Hughes asked what our next step is. Mayor Michael stated that Council will discuss further and decide whether to move forward with this or not. Then if yes, there will be a formal public hearing before any adoption. This will have to be determined so as to allocate monies while in budget work sessions in spring 2016 as we prepare for the 2016-17 budget year.

Councilmember Hall stated that Richlands and Pilot Mountain are listed as already having a commercial maintenance code and she will be checking and asking questions to those cities and report back to Council.

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Upon questioning, Assistant City Manager Christina Alphin reviewed events for October 24 8-12 noon, October 26 at Market Station 7-9 pm and October 26 at City Hall Raymond I. Allen room 8-5 pm concerning the streetscape project.

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Upon a motion by Councilmember Aldridge, seconded by Councilmember Hall, and unanimously carried, the City Council adjourned to a closed session pursuant to NCGS 143-318.11(a)(4) - To discuss matters concerning contract negotiations.

Upon a motion by Councilmember Aldridge seconded by Councilmember Hall, and unanimously carried, the City Council reconvened to open session. Mayor Michael announced that a closed session was held pursuant to NCGS 143-318.11(a) (4) - To discuss matters concerning contract negotiations. and there was nothing to disclose at this time.

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Upon a motion by Councilmember Hughes, seconded by Councilmember Alexander and unanimously carried, the meeting was adjourned until Monday, November 2 for a regular session in the Council Chambers at City Hall at 7 pm.