

**BIRMINGHAM CITY COMMISSION /  
PLANNING BOARD JOINT WORKSHOP SESSION  
OCTOBER 17, 2019  
COMMUNITY HOUSE, 380 S. BATES  
7:30 P.M.**

**I. CALL TO ORDER AND PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

Mayor Patty Bordman called the meeting to order at 7:30 PM.

**II. ROLL CALL**

Commission

ROLL CALL:

Present: Mayor Bordman  
Mayor Pro Tem Boutros  
Commissioner DeWeese  
Commissioner Harris  
Commissioner Hoff  
Commissioner Nickita

Absent: Commissioner Sherman

Planning Board

ROLL CALL:

Present: Chairman Scott Clein  
Robin Boyle  
Stuart Jeffares  
Bert Koseck  
Daniel Share  
Janelle Whipple-Boyce  
J. Bryan Williams  
Jason Emerine, alternate

Absent: Nasseem Ramin, alternate  
Sophia Trimble, student representative  
John Utley, student representative

Administration: City Attorney Tim Carrier, City Manager Valentine, Acting City Clerk Arft,  
Planning Director Ecker, Building Official Johnson

**III. ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION**

A. Citywide Master Plan Draft:

Mayor Bordman introduced the evening's proceedings, emphasizing that this would be an initial look at the first draft of the master plan (first draft). She explained a survey would be coming out for Birmingham residents to participate in a few weeks from the current meeting. Mayor Bordman also emphasized that there would be an entire second draft written and reviewed by people in the City before a final draft is written and released. It was important to note the

preliminary nature of the draft so residents understood their comments would be heard and considered by the master planning team as part of the process for the second draft's composition.

Matt Lambert of DPZ presented an overview and highlights from the first draft, which may be accessed in its entirety at [www.theBirminghamPlan.com/documents](http://www.theBirminghamPlan.com/documents).

Mr. Boyle described two homes to the west of the Wallace Frost home at Wimbledon and Adams. Both homes had been built after a lot split was granted a few years prior, and went on the market within the week prior to the evening's meeting. Mr. Boyle reported their listing prices as \$1.4 million and \$1.9 million. Mr. Boyle opined that if this area had been zoned as a neighborhood seam as described in the first draft, the lot could possibly have supported a six unit residential building. This would have added economic diversity to the residential housing stock of the Poppleton neighborhood, which Mr. Boyle stated is becoming increasingly financially inaccessible. Mr. Boyle continued that the neighborhood fabric should be a significant consideration for this planning process, and he applauded the work done on it so far. Mr. Boyle offered more general comments on the first draft, saying the graphics were good, the writing accessible, and that the first draft needed to be significantly edited to create a shorter piece. Mr. Boyle also said that the City must determine its planning priorities. He suggested that every topic in the first draft comes across as equally important, and that it would benefit the to have more clarity regarding the priorities of the master plan.

Mayor Bordman concurred with Mr. Boyle that the master plan would benefit from a clearer sense of what issues are a priority.

Mr. Lambert explained the implementation section will give a sense of the master plan's priorities. He said there also may be a way to address that goal in the writing.

Mr. Williams said the neighborhood associations should be implemented now, before the master plan and its sub-parts are implemented. He noted that in his 12 years on the Planning Board, people usually only attend meetings if they are strongly in for or strongly against a proposal. If the neighborhood associations are implemented now, the City stands to gain a broader variety of feedback on the master planning process. He said if the neighborhood associations are not implemented before the rest of the master plan, the City risks having insufficient buy-in, as a result of insufficient engagement, from residents. Without broad-based resident engagement, Mr. Williams shared concern that the same people who are strongly in favor or strongly against will determine the final implementation of the process.

In reply to Commissioner Hoff, Mr. Lambert explained that the goal in redistributing the neighborhood boundaries and neighborhood associations was to make the neighborhoods of geographically similar size. He said that in this way the City can better determine whether each neighborhood has similar access to public resources, such as parks. Mr. Lambert noted that in the 1980 Master Plan neighborhoods were described by the bounding roads, and that many of the neighborhoods DPZ proposes now are similar to the neighborhoods described in that plan.

In reply to Commissioner Nickita, Mr. Lambert said Birmingham could choose to invite each neighborhood to decide whether they would like to have a home pattern or not, and could also introduce some zoning regulations that would allow for a bit more granularity. He said he

admired how Birmingham had allowed its residential architecture evolve according to its residents' visions, but that increased granularity in zoning regulations could help raise the minimum zoning standards a home must meet. Mr. Lambert said the team could offer some suggestions regarding possible zoning regulations that would achieve that purpose.

In reply to Commissioner Harris, Mr. Lambert said that the majority of neighborhood associations presidents the master planning team spoke to were adamant that the role of neighborhood associations was to be informative, not political. Mr. Lambert said that was understandable, but that it left the master planning team contemplating how to make it work when decisions will need to be made either within a neighborhood, or through a neighborhood being in dialogue with the City. In order to deal with this the master planning team considered that the neighborhood associations retain their current function, with an additional panel of neighbors occasionally called to order to make decisions on a neighborhood-relevant issue. Mr. Lambert conceded that may not work as seamlessly as intended.

Mr. Jeffares spoke as the president of his neighborhood association, saying he felt he would be able to solicit feedback for the City from members of his neighborhood on various issues, but would not be able to politically represent the neighborhood as a whole. He said he also thought the master planning team did a pretty good job in its proposed redistribution of the neighborhood boundaries.

Ms. Whipple-Boyce stated that neighborhood association presidents cannot always be relied on to infallibly convey information to neighborhood association members. She also noted that sometimes groups of people consider themselves de facto decision makers for a neighborhood, even though they do not serve as such in any official capacity. For these reasons Ms. Whipple-Boyce said these new plans would need City promotion and engagement.

In reply to a question from Ms. Whipple-Boyce asking whether the residential density of different neighborhoods was considered when proposing new neighborhood boundaries, Mr. Lambert said they were not because neighborhoods historically have encompassed a range of residential densities. He said the master planning team has considered the density of neighborhoods in terms of the commercial centers they could support and the recreational facilities they might need.

In reply to Commissioner DeWeese, Mr. Lambert acknowledged that encouraging and maintaining engagement within the neighborhood associations is very difficult. Mr. Lambert attributed this to the fraying of the social fabric, happening both across the United States and within Birmingham, where people say they do not know their neighbors anymore. To this point, the master planning team proposes a three-pronged approach to helping people get to know each other again: commercial areas within each neighborhood, civic spaces within each neighborhood, and recreational areas within each neighborhood. Walkable neighborhoods with a variety of destinations will allow people to feel more embedded in their neighborhood communities, and when they feel more a part of the neighborhood they will be more invested in neighborhood participation and outcomes. Mr. Lambert allowed that this would not be a quick process, but that it should be an effective one. He said the informative aspects of the neighborhood associations could be implemented more immediately, while the process of increasing opportunity for interactions within the neighborhood will be more gradual.

Mayor Bordman concurred with Commissioner DeWeese's and Mr. Lambert's observations regarding the difficulty of promoting neighborhood engagement, and emphasized the national nature of these difficulties.

Mr. Share commended the master planning team for their inclusion of community engagement as part of the master planning process. He said he had two concerns moving forward: citizen engagement during the balance of the master planning process, and the possibility of forming subcommittees of Commission and Planning Board members to do more thorough considerations of different aspects of the first draft. Mr. Share said some of those discussions could be as small as deciding on which corner of an intersection a civic destination should be located in a neighborhood. He said those subcommittee meetings would be open to the public, and would create spaces more amenable to discussion than the current meeting format. Mr. Share suggested that Sections A, B, and C could be subdivided into the topics to be discussed.

Mayor Bordman agreed that subcommittee discussions could be of use, especially since the current meeting could only hope to provide an overview of the first draft.

In reply to Mayor Pro Tem Boutros and Mr. Share, Mr. Lambert explained that it is not DPZ's intention that the master plan should have every detail firm. He said the intention is more to provide guidelines along which the City can evolve, determining how to best move towards the master plan's goals as it goes along.

Commissioner Nickita stressed that the master plan will be comprised of broad-based considerations from which the City can create ordinance and policy as it determines the most appropriate ways to specifically implement the master plan's ideas over the next 20 years.

Mr. Koseck agreed with Commissioner Nickita. He added it would do the City well to remember that circumstances both within and without the City may change some of the implementation processes for this or any master plan, which is why it is useful to remember its recommendations can be addressed in five year increments and that the master plan overall should be thought of as a broad guide.

Chairman Clein respectfully recommended the Planning Board commence review of all land planning aspects within the first draft, addressing one issue per Planning Board meeting. Chairman Clein said that this could both allow a space for public feedback and comment, and could allow the Planning Board to provide considered feedback and guidance to the Commission on the various land planning topics.

Mayor Bordman said that if the Commission agreed that the Planning Board should pursue that course, then the City should alert the public to dates and upcoming topics on all social media channels.

Chairman Clein explained the intention for the October 23, 2019 Planning Board meeting was a debrief from the joint session.

Ms. Whipple-Boyce addressed the issue of implementation, noting it will be tempting for the City to resolve some of the least-demanding issues first. Ms. Whipple-Boyce said that instead of taking that tack, it would be wisest for the City to address some of the more foundational issues

that have been complicating City life for some time, citing unimproved streets as an example. She said doing so will lay the foundation from which other City problems may be addressed, and that the less demanding issues will become even easier to resolve as a result.

Mr. Lambert concurred with Ms. Whipple-Boyce.

#### **IV. PUBLIC COMMENT**

Mayor Bordman invited public comment.

Kate Beebe explained that she has been a resident of Birmingham for 44 years and retired from a career in doing master planning for various cities. She said that the first draft of the master plan is much too long and recommended the City set a limit on its length. Ms. Beebe said she was tasked with doing a master plan for Detroit, MI that was limited to 40 pages. She said that a lot of the content of the first draft are working papers, not master plan content. Ms. Beebe advised that it is not appropriate for the master plan to attempt to delineate neighborhood boundaries. Citing her experience living on Glenhurst, an unimproved street, she said that matters of infrastructure will be significant over the next 20 years in Birmingham and that the first draft suffered from a lack of attention to neighborhood infrastructure. Ms. Beebe said the draft should be shortened to three overall topics in order to make it most accessible to Birmingham residents. Ms. Beebe opined that implementation is not a necessary topic for the master plan. She said that infrastructure will be the topic that galvanizes resident participation in the master planning process.

Mayor Bordman thanked Ms. Beebe for her comments.

Mr. Lambert noted that DPZ strongly wanted to include unimproved streets and overall infrastructure as part of the first draft, but that the City advised them that the Ad Hoc Unimproved Street Study Committee is working on the issue.

Norman Fill said that while he is not a critic of urban planning efforts, he believes the aim of this master plan should be land use and infrastructure, not urban planning. He said he concurred completely with Ms. Beebe's points, noting that Seaholm High School students currently must drink bottled water because the school's pipes contain lead. Mr. Fill stated that Birmingham residents are in want of land use and infrastructure planning. He continued that neighborhoods already have their natural boundaries that have evolved with people living in the City, and that walking distance cannot be considered the ultimate delimiter of a neighborhood. Mr. Fill continued that there are a number of instances in which the first draft clearly includes idealized goals for the City, but that the City and its place in Michigan have an organic structure that will be difficult to shift. One example Mr. Fill provided was the first draft's recommendation that Birmingham pursue better integration with the Troy train station; he said that while he appreciated the idea, one can reach very few destinations within Michigan by train, so the usefulness of the idea is very limited. Mr. Fill offered his last comment, asking that the origins of the assumptions in the first draft be made clear within the next draft. He said that in reading the first draft he was not sure where parts of the preamble came from, and he would like to see what feedback or information from Birmingham residents created those suppositions.

Mr. Fill thanked the meeting for hearing his comments.

In reply to Brad Host, Mr. Lambert explained that the figure of a projected 2,000 more homes in Birmingham comes from a Michigan Housing Authority study, which was cited in the first draft. Mr. Lambert said there was an additional desire for homes within Birmingham to reduce housing costs and because the demand from people who want to live in the City is significant.

In reply to Larry Bertollini, Mr. Lambert explained that with accessory dwellings the City would likely need to come up with further setback ordinances for those situations.

Mr. Bertollini said he was not in favor of the concept, but that he would discuss it further at the appropriate Planning Board meeting. He continued that it is indeed difficult to get people involved in neighborhood associations, and that smaller ones comprised of two or three streets seem to have better luck for attendance. He stated it might be unwise to expand and thus disrupt some of the smaller neighborhood associations that are already functioning well. Mr. Bertollini recommended the City treat the proposed neighborhoods more as demographic districts through which the City can monitor whether public and civic resources are distributed fairly. Mr. Bertollini concluded by saying he would like to attention paid to vehicle speeds on Woodward, and that trying to define the character of neighborhoods through architectural styles may prove futile in the long run.

David Bloom agreed with the previous comments that the next draft much be significantly shorter than this one. He commended the master planning team for their integration of residents' feedback into the first draft. Mr. Bloom stated that his recollection of the 1980 Master Plan was that it was much simpler than this first draft. He also shared concern about trying to establish close relationships between the City government and the neighborhood associations. Having City employees at association meetings runs the risk of creating a chilling effect on discussions that will occur in the association meetings, Mr. Bloom suggested, and makes it less likely that the neighborhood associations could effectively organize should they choose to. Mr. Bloom concluded by sharing concern that the neighborhood seams could have the unintended effect of making neighborhoods feel further apart from each other rather than closer together, and that the City should carefully consider that possibility.

## **V. ADJOURN**

Seeing no further comment, Mayor Bordman adjourned the meeting at 8:35 p.m.

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*Las personas que requieren alojamiento, tales como servicios de interpretación, la participación efectiva en esta reunión deben ponerse en contacto con la Oficina del Secretario Municipal al (248) 530-1880 por lo menos el día antes de la reunión pública. (Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964).*