

**MINUTES FOR THE SPECIAL SESSION OF COUNCIL**  
**Monday, April 21, 2014 at 2:30 p.m.**  
**Mayor's Office**

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Council President Stephen Stuart called the meeting to order at 2:30 p.m.

**ROLL CALL**

Council-at-Large & President:	Stephen L. Stuart	Present
Ward 1:	Duane R. Fishpaw	Present
Ward 2:	Robert M. Valentine	Present
Ward 3:	Ruth Detrow	Present
Ward 4:	Sandra Tunnell	Present

The beginning of the meeting consisted of Council Members, Mayor Stewart, and the City Engineer.

The first topic up for discussion involved vacant commercial and residential property and inspections.

Inspections for vacant commercial and residential property within surrounding communities was considered for the City, which ultimately would require the vacant buildings to be registered by the property owner.

A number of benefits were cited during the discussion of the new policy, which included decreasing potential crime, lowering the chances of arson risks, and providing the City with much needed revenue.

It was stated that the funds collected from the registrations could be used to further the City's efforts to eliminate the number of dilapidated properties.

Applications for waivers, in regards to the regulation of the vacancies, was also discussed in the meeting.

More specifically, the proposed Ordinance would allow the City to issue a waiver if a registrant met certain requirements, and the waiver would last one year with the opportunity to extend the waiver one additional year.

It was stated that the purpose of keeping the waivers one year is an effort to encourage and promote accountability from the property owner.

During the meeting, registration of vacant properties that are also put up for sale was discussed.

One issue the City specified that needs to be addressed is when owners place their vacant property on the market and let it sit unchanged for years, because they feel the need to wait for a better deal.

One idea that was proposed to address this issue is to include a requirement within the Ordinance, which would require the owner to provide the City with a composite of two to three appraisals that would help the owner establish an appropriate market price.

One question that was posed during the meeting was how the City would enforce collecting the registration fees.

It was stated that the City needs to do more about the vacant commercial and residential properties, and currently the City does not have anyone employed who could police the issue, but shaping the Ordinance so that violators are sent to jail was considered.

Another concern about the newly proposed regulation involved the 45 day time limit for the owner to sell their vacant property.

It was stated that 45 days to sell a property seemed a bit too short with the suffering real estate market; however, changing the legislation to allow residents a little more time was readily accepted by Council members and the Mayor.

It was encouraged that Council strive to make progress on the vacant property issue each time they meet.

It was also encouraged for members of Council to share the proposal to any interested parties that may be impacted.

A more difficult issue that came up during the vacancy discussion involved the property owners, who leave for other states over long periods of time.

After considering the definition of a vacancy; however, the group determined that the properties are technically not vacant.

It was also decided that it would be best for the City to first focus on vacancies and then focus on improving maintenance issues down the road.

Members of City Council hope to have the issue up for consideration by June of 2014.

A second issue that was brought up during the meeting involved the hiring of a part-time building and zoning inspector.

Currently the City doesn't have a certified residential building department and the City still needs an electrical safety inspector.

According to the State, if the building department is established, the building department would not be required to enforce anything, but a city health department would be required to do that by law.

The downside of a city health department helping with the work is that the health department would be the ones collecting the collected fees.

Adding a residential building department could potential provide the City of Ashland with a new source of revenue.

One key concern that was brought forward during the meeting was the City's ability to afford hiring a new staff member, which would be a requirement by the State to certify the residential building department.

One person came up with the idea that hiring the electrical safety inspector on a case-by-case basis would afford the new position and another shared that using the funds collected to pay the inspector could be another way to pay the inspector.

It was concluded that further discussion of the affordability of the new inspector would be needed.

It was also noted that the safety inspector position is a position that prefers to be included under the City's liability insurance, which did not seem to be a conflict as the position would need to be an established City employee.

The designation of collected fees within the City was also considered during the meeting; however, it was determined that additional information would need to be presented to make a final decision.

An overall factor that was shared during the meeting, which could ultimately determine whether the new department would be successful, includes educating the public that filing for permits would protect residents and the community from hack jobs.

Furthermore, the benefits of obtaining permits would not only insure current and potential homeowners that their home is repaired properly, it would also improve the rest of their community by maintaining/increasing property values and preventing potentially fatal accidents from failed repairs.

A third topic that was discussed involved property owned by the City located at 1440 Sandusky Street.

It was stated that the ceiling was damaged during a repair and during the repair of the ceiling, workers discovered major structural and electrical issues.

The homemade repairs that were discovered in the City-owned rental property was determined to be dangerous and ultimately unhabitable for any resident.

The City submitted a letter to the occupants shortly after the discovery, which informed them of the problem and encouraged them to find a new residence as soon as possible.

During the discussion, it was also mentioned that the property has an array of other serious issues, including a failing septic system and roof, making the entire property unsalvageable.

Other topics that were briefly addressed during the meeting included a few complaints members of Council recently received.

The first complaint involved the disrepair of a retaining wall that was installed along with a sidewalk on one side of a neighborhood road.

It was stated that this issue is still being researched and the City will be in touch with the individual as soon as it can.

A second complaint submitted to Council involved a vacant home located on Chestnut Street.

It was mentioned that there was no address number on the home and that the property is either in need of major repairs or even total demolition.

It was stated that the City has been unable to locate the owner of the property and intends to notify the owner that the home is in disrepair.

The Mayor and City Council thanked City Engineer, Shane Kremser, for his time and welcomed the City Fire Chief to the meeting.

The first topic brought forward with the Fire Chief involved the potential hiring of a part-time fire inspector.

The revenue gained in the past and the potential revenue gain in the future was considered.

Currently, the City has over a 1,000 businesses that could be inspected on an annual basis; however, without a staff member exclusively designated to perform inspections, the Fire Department can only provide 150 inspections each year.

Some of the reasoning behind such a low number of inspections included the fact that the City simply cannot always afford to have one of their firefighters occupied on anything other than being on call to respond to emergencies.

It was noted that when a firefighter is scheduled to perform an inspection, the Fire Department expects the employee to provide such service and is not considered usable in the case of an emergency.

It was stated that the inspector position is not a new position, and that before the economy took a turn for the worst, there was an individual who was employed full-time.

Unlike surrounding communities, the City of Ashland does not have an inspector nor does it have an established fee structure for the inspections.

The City has proposed a fee for inspections to begin at 50 dollars; however, numerous individuals expressed their concerns for cost of the inspections.

A question was posed as to whether a special certification was required for the position and if the hiring of a part-time employee would help the Department.

During the discussion it was determined that a special certification is required for the job and that the addition of a part-time employee would help complete more inspections within the City.

Once again, the concern for the City's ability to afford additional staff was brought forward during the discussion.

It was stated that whether an additional fire inspector was added or not, the City would still be able to continue utilizing their firefighters to conduct the inspections, but preferred having them available for emergencies responses.

Another issue that came up involved the City's acceptance of the new charges for the fire inspections.

A few reasons that would hopefully help the citizens come to an understanding with the new fees is education and that the fees help provide a service that is beneficial to businesses and the rest of the community.

Another topic that was discussed with the City Fire Chief involved the City's dispatch services, and the possibility of transferring to a regional dispatch center in Wooster.

It was noted that 17,000 dollars in charges were billed to the City from the Sherriff's Department and the City simply cannot pay such a price for the kind of services it receives.

Despite the recent updates to the 911 system, converting to the regional dispatch service will improve the City's service significantly.

Additionally, the current dispatch service has also added to confusion and inefficiencies in regards to various non-emergency response calls.

The Council and Mayor thanked Chief Anderson for attending the meeting, and welcomed Mark Burgess of Human Resources.

The first topic up for discussion with Mr. Burgess was the Council Chamber Remodeling Project.

The City received a 17,500 grant from the Ashland County Community Foundation to help fund the project, and the City expects to have to cover the remaining cost estimated to be 32,000 dollars.

The City intends to only need to purchase materials for the project and do all of the renovation work with its own employees. It was noted; however, that drywall installation would be contracted out since it would be cheaper for the City.

Reasons provided in support of the project included the fact that the room is also used for meetings for other departments within the city, and because the renovation would provide the City the opportunity to make the Council Chamber look more professional and improve the technology used during meetings.

The proposed renovation would include new walls, ceilings, seating, sound system, and projector.

Throughout the planning of the renovation project, the Historical Society expressed its desire to preserve various items within the Council Chamber and place it on display.

It would prove beneficial to the City as well as the community if the former courtroom materials could be preserved for future generations to observe.

The same concern brought forward in other topics was revisited for this project, which was the City's ability to afford spending 32,000 dollars to complete the project.

It was mentioned that 7,500 dollars of the grant the City received required a report of how the funds were expensed, while the remaining 10,000 dollars did not require a report.

It was also stated that, unfortunately, the City must choose to use the grant funds this year to prevent losing the opportunity.

In conclusion, there was a major concern expressed in the City's ability to afford to spend 32,000 dollars from its Capital Improvements Fund, and it was decided that Council take more time to consider the project.

The Mayor and members of City Council thanked Mr. Burgess for joining them and proceeded to discuss the final issues remaining on the agenda.

The first topic up for discussion involved new sources of revenue.

Although the City has been able pay its bills, it is becoming increasingly difficult to deal with the increase in costs.

One observation that was made in regards to the inflationary change is how the revenue the City received in 2007 is scarily similar to the revenue the City received in 2012, and costs for just about everything have gone up.

During the meeting, the discussion of increasing the rate for income tax collection and whether or not the issue should be placed on the ballot was brought forward.

The financial state of the City relative to the economy gave numerous individuals the idea that the tax has simply become inevitable.

As good administrators of the law and if nothing else can be done to help bring in additional revenue, increasing the collection of income tax by half a percent may be the answer.

An increase of half of percent would enable the City to bring in an additional 2.25 million dollars, which would help alleviate financial hardships for years to come.

A point was also made that the right thing to do is to allow the people to make the decision as to whether or not they would like to pay more income tax.

The final topic that was offered up for discussion involved any concerns or recommendations Council would like to make to the Charter Review Committee.

The topic of the City-County Board of Health was brought forward, which seems to be a popular item throughout the majority of the Committee meetings.

The specific details of how to resolve the issue was not discussed; however, any change in the Charter that would give the City flexibility for finances and preserve the City's representation was noted.

**ADJOURNMENT FROM SPECIAL SESSION: 5:10 p.m.**

**Moved** by Mrs. Tunnell and seconded by Mr. Valentine to adjourn.

Ayes: Mr. Fishpaw, Mr. Valentine, Mrs. Detrow, Mrs. Tunnell, Dr. Stuart,

Respectfully Submitted by  
Lindsey M. Queen, Clerk of Council