

CITY OF JOHNSTOWN PLANNING COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
Wednesday, May 5, 2025

CALL TO ORDER, PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE, ROLL CALL:

The meeting was called to order at 5:02 p.m. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

The following members of Planning Commission were present for roll call:

Chairman Carthew and Commissioners Ian Shirt, Jim White, Don Buday, Mike Grandinetti, and Laura Huchel

In addition, Codes Enforcement Manager Dave Williams; Economic Development Director John Rutledge; Executive Director, Vision 2025, Robert Forcey; Art Martynuska; Principal/Director, Rothschild Doyno Collaborative, Kate Tunney; Barry Polster; and Nick Rebeck were also in attendance.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

Chairman Carthew brought to the Commission's attention that an electronic package including the April 2, 2025 meeting Minutes was distributed to the Commissioners. No further discussion or concerns were brought forth. Chairman Carthew called for a motion.

Mr. Grandinetti motioned to approve the Minutes of the April 2, 2025 Planning Commission meeting. The motion was seconded by Mr. Shirt. A roll call vote was taken:

Planning Commission:

Laura Huchel- YES

Ian Shirt- YES

Michael Grandinetti- YES

Donald Buday – YES

James White – YES

James Carthew – Chairman – YES

The motion passed unanimously.

NEW BUSINESS:

VISION 2025

Mr. Robert Forcey explained that the document provided was a publicly shared FAQ about a new home development initiative in Johnstown. He had spoken with most of the Commission members and noted recent press coverage. The initiative aimed to utilize Pennsylvania's Neighborhood Partnership Program, funded by nine local businesses, to build affordable homes

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on the City of Johnstown's 600 vacant lots. Partnering with Hosanna Industries, the plan was to construct homes priced between \$100,000 and \$110,000, aligning with the average local income in Johnstown being at \$38,800. The first home, to be donated by JWF to a veteran, would begin construction in mid-July, 2025, pending necessary approvals. Future homes would be built following a Fibonacci-like growth model, totaling 21 homes over six years. These homes would be sold at cost and targeted at a wide demographic, not limited to low- to middle-income buyers. The City was also reintroducing a First Time Home Buyers program, which could be combined with this initiative. The homes would be single-story ranch-style units, and the first was planned for Somerset Street, on lots 108 through 103. Mr. Forcey confirmed that the goal was to provide affordable, practical housing, particularly for aging residents. He also expressed gratitude for being allowed to speak first due to a personal obligation.

Chair Carthew confirmed the need for building plan approvals and inquired about UCC and the land surveyor, Mr. Cortez, who was reportedly completing surveys.

Mr. Forcey responded that they had met with Dave to review the project and would be seeking necessary variances, especially regarding setback limitations that could restrict feasible home sizes.

Chair Carthew acknowledged that possible action on the project could occur by the Commission's next meeting, which Mr. Forcey confirmed aligned with the timeline. He admitted that some aspects were new to him and emphasized his commitment to transparency and timely communication. While this was his first housing project, he had already coordinated utilities for July and was treating the initial home as a model for future builds. He also shared that 51 applicants were already interested, though financial constraints could limit some, and they would explore ways to assist them.

Mr. Grandinetti asked for clarification regarding residency requirements, confirming that the homes must be owner-occupied for five years and would include a deed restriction. He also inquired about property type and applicant selection criteria.

Mr. Forcey confirmed that the homes would include an equity share agreement, a model previously used by Hosanna Industries in other states. He described Hosanna's rapid-build approach, likening it to a barn raising, and noted strong volunteer interest, particularly for the veteran's home. He stated the homes would be single-family units. Applicants must submit an interest form, which are processed in chronological order. Once selected, applicants choose their preferred neighborhood, and Mr. Forcey's team coordinates with the land bank to locate feasible lots, while taking flood zones into consideration.

Mr. White asked about square footage.

Mr. Forcey stated the three-bedroom homes would be approximately 900 square feet, with a two-bedroom option being about 700 square feet. He emphasized the homes were modest, with open floor plans and built on slabs or crawl spaces. While affordable, the homes would be permanent, landscaped structures, not comparable to mobile or manufactured homes. He explained the focus

was on cost-efficiency, not large or multi-story designs, citing examples of more expensive builds in other cities.

Mr. Grandinetti then asked about utility coordination for lots with previously abandoned service.

Mr. Forcey responded that he had already discussed this with Michael Kerr of Resource Development and Management, Inc., and was assured that utility liens on abandoned properties would not apply to new developments, as all homes would be connected to new service lines. Although new utility installation would cost approximately \$5,000, all builds would be new accounts, effectively resetting the utility burden. He added that homeowners could choose upgrades like solar panels, but those would be at their own expense.

The Commission noted that the project's base pricing would include essential infrastructure, but optional customizations would be at additional cost. Mr. Forcey described the homes as semi-customizable, allowing buyers to select aesthetic elements, such as roofing, siding, and appliance colors, while maintaining standardization to control costs.

Mr. Forcey thanked the Commission for their time and welcomed any additional questions or comments. Mr. Forcey noted that anyone interested in contacting him may reach out to Mr. Martynuska, Mr. Rutledge, Mr. Williams, or Mr. White.

OLD BUSINESS:

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Ms. Tunney introduced herself and her colleague, Mr. Rebeck, from Rothschild Doyno Collaborative, stating they had been working with the City since the fall on the Comprehensive Plan. She explained their role as lead consultant and described their collaboration with two partners: Fourth Economy, focusing on economic development, and Clinton+Ries, providing landscape architecture expertise. She outlined the plan's three-phase process—existing conditions analysis, deeper issue exploration, and formal reporting—emphasizing that the plan would be actionable and rooted in community needs. Their engagement efforts began with the Unity in the Park event, where they collected input through interactive exercises and surveys. Over 100 responses were received, mostly from downtown, Prospect, Kernville, and the southern part of the City. Tunney noted they had tracked feedback distribution to ensure equitable neighborhood representation and had also gathered input from non-resident stakeholders.

Ms. Huchel asked whether non-resident neighbors were included in the total responses, which Ms. Tunney confirmed, noting the data was separated accordingly. Tunney acknowledged the need for higher participation and shared that a more widely distributed digital survey was in development and had been submitted to the City for review. She emphasized the importance of broad and representative feedback for the plan's success and approval.

Mr. Grandinetti requested to view a slide related to key takeaways, which Ms. Tunney clarified came from another consultant's work on the CDBG process. She explained that the slide was not

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included in their presentation but was used for alignment and comparative analysis with their own data collection.

Mr. Martynuska noted the team had been introduced to the group conducting the Coopersdale veteran grant study, and stakeholder discussions had begun.

Ms. Tunney confirmed those conversations had started , and her team had received relevant survey data and meeting notes from Urban Design Ventures. They intended to reuse and expand upon that survey to broaden their community outreach. She reported conducting over ten stakeholder interviews with groups including nonprofits, the Housing Authority, and Vision Together, and had scheduled meetings with the Redevelopment Authority and the Choice Neighborhoods Planning Grant team to coordinate efforts and maximize citywide impact.

Chair Carthew asked about the project timeline, to which Ms. Tunney responded that they might need a slight extension to ensure comprehensive community engagement. Chair Carthew supported extending the timeline to capture more data, and Tunney agreed it would strengthen the plan.

Mr. Grandinetti expressed interest in the CDBG findings, specifically related to housing, recreation, neighborhoods, and crime. Ms. Tunney reiterated that those findings were from a separate consultant, but her team would look to build upon and integrate that data. Chair Carthew acknowledged that all data would be useful, and Tunney confirmed it was valuable for their planning process.

Mr. Grandinetti inquired about the origin of the CDBG data, to which Mr. Rutledge explained it came from Urban Design Ventures' online survey. Mr. Williams added that their team shared that data due to initial concerns over insufficient responses, and efforts were ongoing to coordinate with the original consultants.

Mr. Grandinetti asked which groups were involved in conducting surveys, confirming with Mr. Rutledge that the Johnstown Housing Authority and the Choice Neighborhoods initiative were also engaged in the process. The Commission agreed that aligning and integrating feedback from multiple sources would be essential and supported extending timelines and outreach efforts to ensure a thorough and representative Comprehensive Plan.

Ms. Tunney stated the Choice Neighborhoods team also intended to conduct a survey and emphasized the importance of coordinating efforts to prevent survey fatigue and confusion among residents. She suggested forming a working group to share information, align timing, and avoid duplication, offering to share email lists and data already gathered. When asked about public meetings, she said a session would likely follow the survey phase and more focused stakeholder discussions. She outlined recurring themes from stakeholder conversations, including jobs and business, mindset and public perception, housing and population flight, accessibility, transportation, nature and recreation, city operations, and sustainability. She welcomed feedback on additional issues and confirmed meetings with City departments to understand operational concerns.

Ms. Huchel added that communication among agencies and public relations were lacking and should be addressed, and she emphasized environmental sustainability and stormwater management under the nature and recreation theme. Mr. Grandinetti inquired about distinguishing owner-occupied and rental properties, and Ms. Tunney confirmed they had created a detailed map using county data, including identification of out-of-state landlords.

Chair Carthew suggested coordinating with Vision Together and branding efforts, to which Ms. Tunney responded that her team had already met with Vision Together and Visit Johnstown and saw potential for aligning the comprehensive plan branding with existing City initiatives. Ms. Huchel highlighted the City's strong arts community as a unique asset, and Mr. White inquired about business recruitment, which Ms. Tunney said was being addressed through data analysis and identification of potential growth sectors, with stakeholder focus groups to follow.

Mr. Grandinetti noted the absence of Conemaugh Hospital among the stakeholders, and Ms. Tunney confirmed they were on the outreach list, with interviews pending. The Commission generally agreed on the importance of engaging healthcare stakeholders and expanding business sector input.

The Commission collectively concluded that a second survey should be a priority and asked to be informed when it is available for distribution. Chair Carthew and Mr. Rutledge discussed the use of a digital survey, with Mr. Rutledge advocating for in-person outreach through schools, community meetings, and events. He proposed using flyers, door hangers, and business cards to engage residents, including youth. Mr. Martynuska supported physical outreach efforts such as neighborhood walks and local events like farmers markets and Trash to Treasures weekends.

Ms. Huchel questioned the timeline for the new survey, and Mr. Rutledge clarified it was still being finalized, with a flexible window depending on response rates. The group emphasized the need for robust participation to ensure representative data. Ms. Tunney stated the survey would have youth-specific questions, and the team would track and report response rates to guide outreach. She confirmed progress would continue based on consistent themes already identified, but said they would not proceed too far without sufficient community input. Mr. Williams acknowledged the timeline might shift slightly, but said the goal remained to complete the plan by the end of the year. Chair Carthew reiterated that the data gathered would be critical in guiding the plan's direction.

NEW BUSINESS (Cont.)

MOM'S HOUSE – SITE PLAN EVALUATION

The Commission referred to the Site Plan Evaluation for Mom's House, noting that although the project had a complicated history with the Planning Commission, it had been resolved by City Council and Ordinance. He asked Mr. Williams to clarify the current status of the development. Mr. Williams stated the proposed Site Plan had been shared and included basic setbacks, but no building permit or engineered drawings had been submitted. Mr. Rutledge confirmed the intentions behind the submitted materials.

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Ms. Huchel inquired whether the plan included utilities, to which Mr. Williams responded that it was just a schematic with some sidewalk placements and no finishes. Mr. Shirt asked about the number of stories, and Mr. Williams indicated it was likely two but could not confirm without engineered plans. Chair Carthew asked whether the setbacks complied with zoning regulations, and Mr. Williams confirmed a brief review. Ms. Huchel pointed out the zoning had been forcibly changed from commercial to residential, meaning it now only had to meet residential standards.

The Commission agreed that the building was a separate structure, not just an addition, and it appeared to meet the required setbacks: 15ft in the front, 20ft in the rear, and 4ft along the sides. Although it resembled a community center, it was classified as residential. The review was for discussion only, not an action item. Chair Carthew stated the applicant might come before the Commission at its next meeting.

Regarding the physical site, Ms. Huchel noted that excavation had already begun, and Mr. Williams confirmed site development was underway but no building construction had occurred. Mr. Shirt and Mr. Buday explained that the slab had been removed, and the ground leveled. Due to the slope, the building would appear two stories from Franklin Street and a half-story from the rear. Mr. White asked if demolition was occurring, and Ms. Huchel and Mr. Williams clarified that demolition was completed and the current activity was limited to grading. Chair Carthew confirmed that only earth-moving was permitted at this stage without a building permit.

Mr. Grandinetti expressed concern that the Planning Commission was reviewing the Site Plan for Mom's House without sufficient documentation typically required for such reviews. He emphasized that applicants should be submitting a detailed list of elements—such as signage, parking, aesthetics, and buffering—per zoning ordinance requirements, and these documents should accompany the Site Plan to give a clear understanding of the project's compliance. He stressed the importance of this process regardless of zoning status.

Mr. Williams responded that the zoning had already been completed, and the site was now residential. Parking was shown on the Site Plan, but engineered plans had not yet been submitted. Chair Carthew suggested developing a checklist for future applicants to ensure all requirements, particularly zoning-related ones, are met. Ms. Huchel noted that because the site had been reclassified as residential, there were no parking requirements, a decision she strongly disagreed with but acknowledged was already finalized.

Although this structure was a community center, the Commission agreed that it was classified as residential and therefore not held to commercial standards, including those for parking.

Mr. White criticized the decision to rezone, arguing that it placed an inappropriate project in a residential zone and complicated oversight. Ms. Huchel explained that the rezoning had been forced through by City Council, despite Planning Commission's objections.

The Commission discussed the history of the site, agreeing that a commercial building had originally existed, and City Council's approval of the new residential designation had overridden

previous recommendations. Mr. Grandinetti reiterated his point that applicants should follow the Site Plan submission process outlined in the zoning ordinance, regardless of zoning category. Mr. Buday and others supported the idea of requiring more comprehensive submissions, including parking and architectural plans.

Chair Carthew asked Mr. Williams to consider implementing a checklist for future development applications. Mr. Williams agreed and said the topic could be added as an action item for the next meeting, including inviting a representative from the development team. The Commission expressed continued dissatisfaction with the rezoning and past council actions but recognized that the current review must move forward based on the new classification. Mr. Polster reminded the group that the Planning Commission had twice previously recommended against the project, but Council had approved it despite those recommendations.

REPORTS:

DCED DIRECTOR

Mr. Rutledge reported on successfully gaining access to the City's GIS software after several weeks of administrative effort. He was working with Hildebrand to learn and develop the system, to customize it and make it useful to the City and public. An initial meeting was held to review the limited existing maps in the system.

The first phase of implementation would involve collaborating with Mr. Williams to align the GIS system with city codes and begin developing user-facing tools for public interaction through the City website. He noted the system could eventually allow residents to submit complaints or reports directly through an interactive map.

Ms. Huchel asked whether the City's GIS system would build on county data. Mr. Martynuska confirmed that while some data could be shared between systems, the data from the firm retained by Vision to evaluate downtown properties was not compatible. However, both parties had agreed to share whatever data was usable. Chair Carthew encouraged integrating existing datasets such as vacant property calculations, suggesting that beginning with code enforcement data would be the most practical.

Mr. Grandinetti recommended that, alongside the focus on codes, the existing zoning map also be reviewed and modernized, suggesting an interactive zoning layer should be developed within the GIS. He noted that the current map was difficult to navigate and outdated. Chair Carthew and Mr. Williams agreed that zoning overlays could be integrated as a layer in the GIS system. Mr. Rutledge explained that the system could support public submissions through the map interface, potentially creating a one-stop portal for residents to access or report city issues.

Ms. Huchel inquired as to GIS training opportunities for City staff. Mr. Martynuska noted past regional conferences, and Mr. Rutledge agreed to research upcoming training sessions. Mr. Grandinetti reiterated the utility of interactive zoning overlays and praised Hildebrand's prior

work in this area for other municipalities. Mr. Martynuska confirmed that Cambria County had agreed to share all their data layers with the City.

PUBLIC COMMENT - NON-AGENDA ITEMS

Ms. Huchel inquired as to the current status of plans for a new public safety building, noting that a rough cost assessment had been completed for saving the existing structure.

Mr. Martynuska responded that discussions were ongoing with CamTran regarding potential collaboration as part of their Main Street transit project. CamTran was considering two design options, and the City proposed a joint project under Plan 4, which would demolish existing structures to allow for a new transit center with a parking deck and potentially a multi-story public safety building. This building would include parking and prisoner transport above the floodplain. The City currently had \$5 million available, but full rehabilitation of the current building was estimated at \$11 million, while new construction could cost \$20–\$21 million. Bonding was being explored as a funding strategy. He noted early-stage talks and emphasized alignment with CamTran's design timelines.

Chair Carthew emphasized the importance of keeping the public safety building integrated with the Main Street Revitalization project timeline.

Mr. Martynuska explained, while piecemeal improvements had been made to the existing building to ensure safety, a full renovation required significant funding. He detailed the Dellwood Street Bridge's condition, noting it was rated one point above closure. If closed, it would drastically impact emergency response times. The City had requested funding from multiple federal offices, received an estimate from EADS for over \$1 million in repairs, and faced added complexity working with Norfolk Southern to schedule track closures.

Ms. Huchel shared concerns raised at a CamTran meeting where their plans appeared contingent on the City surrendering real estate interests. She questioned the logic of keeping the transit center location away from the Greyhound and train stations and urged caution in dealing with CamTran, advocating for protecting City assets with long-term revenue potential.

Mr. Martynuska acknowledged CamTran's legal power of eminent domain over the proposed property, which concerned him given current long-term tenants. He noted one tenant, an escape room business, was growing and possibly expanding within the building.

Ms. Huchel highlighted that productive use of the property could complicate eminent domain claims and suggested reviewing upcoming CamTran board appointments since the City has appointment authority.

Mr. Grandinetti stressed the importance of incorporating city-owned infrastructure and public safety concerns into long-term planning, which Chair Carthew and Mr. Martynuska supported.

Mr. Martynuska added that the owner of the Commerce Center had recently proposed a build-out for a new public safety building using existing hardened infrastructure. They offered a purchase or lease-to-own option.

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Ms. Huchel raised concerns about the Jupiter Building at UPJ, noting lack of response from the university and poor exterior conditions, though she heard a delegation was visiting to discuss its future.

Mr. Martynuska noted a lack of PA SITES funding for the area and clarified that recent planning agenda changes were procedural since no votes were taken.

Regarding the Side Lot Program, Mr. Rutledge confirmed that it was under legal review, with updates expected soon. Ms. Huchel shared that residents were interested in the program. Mr. Martynuska explained that precise legal language was being finalized to avoid title complications, referencing past issues in the county with invalid deeds and bounced checks.

Mr. Martynuska also announced that the City remained in contention for a \$1 million LSA grant for the public safety building.

On the Public Art Committee, Chair Carthew and others discussed reviving its activities, with plans to involve key stakeholders. Mr. Martynuska proposed using potential savings from the Central Park project to fund a new artwork installation behind the pavilion.

Ms. Huchel advocated for City Council to engage in strategic planning to set clear priorities and streamline communications with the City Manager. While she did not propose a resolution, she suggested incorporating the idea into the comprehensive plan. She also noted that at a recent council meeting, her updates were met with indifference, and offered to raise any concerns at the next meeting.

Chair Carthew requested an update on the comprehensive plan and asked whether council had been informed about the CamTran-public safety building discussion.

Mr. Martynuska confirmed he had shared the information via text and added that the City had received a \$50,000 ARC grant to digitize records. Staff had begun preliminary planning, and additional funding was anticipated. The City would also receive clerical support from DCED to help manage growing demands, including public records requests.

Chair Carthew and Ms. Huchel acknowledged the burden of document review, joking about the overwhelming scale of one request that involved 17 file drawers of documents, which was ultimately declined after the City offered supervised access.

RECESS/ADJOURNMENT: The meeting was adjourned at 6:25 P.M.