

CITY OF JOHNSTOWN PLANNING COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
Wednesday, April 2, 2025

CALL TO ORDER, PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE, ROLL CALL:

The meeting was called to order at 5:01 p.m. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

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

Chairman Carthew and Commissioners Huchel, Shirt, Grandinetti, Buday, and White.

In addition, Codes Enforcement Manager Dave Williams and Economic Development Director John Rutledge were present. Barry Polster was also in attendance.

PUBLIC COMMENT (AGENDA ITEMS):

No comment was offered by members of the public.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

Chairman Carthew brought to the Commission's attention that the March 5, 2025 Minutes included minutes from the public open session that had also taken place that day. Ms. Huchel suggested they add to the motion that the Commission understood that it also included the minutes of the public hearing. Chairman Carthew called to amend the motion to incorporate that.

Chairman Carthew motioned to approve the Minutes of the March 5, 2025 Planning Commission meeting. The motion was seconded by Ms. Huchel. 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.

ACTION ITEMS:

None.

OLD BUSINESS:

URBAN MURAL PROGRAM

Chairman Carthew stated there were not many updates on the Urban Mural Program since the last meeting the City had with local artists back in January or February of 2025. They planned to gather additional information, foster community engagement, and review those goals in March 2025, but this did not come to fruition. He asked Barry Polster if he knew of any updates regarding the program.

Mr. Polster believed City Manager Art Martynuska had met with people regarding the treatment water tank within the past week. Mr. Polster did not know the results of the meeting, but believed some good information likely came out of it. The tank is meant to be used as a pilot project for a mural or other type of public art that could talk to the history of the city.

Ms. Huchel asked if anybody had discussed the "End Racism Now" message painted onto Main Street in these discussions. Chairman Carthew did not think this came up as a topic. Ms. Huchel relayed that it has been repainted once or twice, but it keeps getting worn away for various reasons. She discussed with the mural's organizers about doing a mural on an actual wall that would present the same message of fighting against hate.

Mr. Polster asked Ms. Huchel if any specific walls had been suggested for this mural. Ms. Huchel brought up that City Council Member Ricky Britt mentioned possibly doing something to commemorate the interracial couple who were murdered on the bridge near Washington Street. She acknowledged that PennDOT controls the main wall there, but it would be a poignant place for a message about being anti-racist.

Chairman Carthew suggested Ms. Huchel discuss the idea further with Mr. Britt. He made a note to bring this idea up in the next Urban Mural Project meeting in the event that Ms. Huchel could not attend.

GIS SOFTWARE

Mr. Grandinetti asked if inspectors were using GIS codes. Dave Williams responded that the fire department has implemented them when they perform property maintenance. The department takes pictures, fills a form out, sends them to Mr. Williams, and then the Codes Enforcement Office either sends out a violation or sends it to the Laurel Municipal Inspection Agency.

Mr. Grandinetti inquired as to who was putting this information into GIS. Mr. Williams responded that the county performs that task and that his agency merely uses the GIS codes as a reference tool. Mr. Grandinetti told Mr. Williams and Mr. Rutledge that their goal is to move away from filling out paper forms and instead transfer the information into the GIS system.

Mr. Grandinetti confirmed that they have a license to use the GIS software, allowing the Codes Enforcement Office to upload the data themselves. Ms. Huchel suggested hiring a summer

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intern from the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown (UPJ) or Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) to input the department's physical forms in the GIS system.

Mr. Grandinetti will submit a proposal if desired. Ms. Huchel recommended that the Commission take a serious look at GIS.

Mr. Buday asked if the office was understaffed and needed additional help transferring the information into GIS. Chairman Carthew will contact Dr. Ola Johansson, Associate Professor of Geography at UPJ, to see if any of his students would be interested in an internship performing these tasks.

Ms. Huchel expressed the need for a consultant or an intern to assist with Mr. Polster's suggestion that the Commission provide an annual report to City Council about their work. This would include some GIS planning and a strategic plan for the City of Johnstown. Chairman Carthew asked what the difference is between a strategic plan and a comprehensive plan.

Ms. Huchel explained that a strategic plan focuses on current issues to work on while a comprehensive plan focuses on long-term issues. A strategic plan might include what City Council and the City Manager will do, whereas the comprehensive plan might include what the fire department would contribute as well.

Chairman Carthew asked Mr. Rutledge what his plan was regarding implementing GIS into codes. Mr. Rutledge responded that he has that as an action item to work on and discuss further with City Manager Martynuska.

Ms. Huchel stated a third factor, which the Commission should focus on including in their report to the Council, would be following up with the county about who is buying properties at the tax sale. She asserted that the Commission should use their veto powers more often due to the fact that the county is more focused on selling these properties, rather than looking at code violations.

Mr. White asked if there were any other reasons to deny the purchase of property besides code violations. Ms. Huchel responded that outstanding liens also prevent the purchase of a property. He queried whether background checks were employed when someone bids on properties in a county which they are not from. Ms. Huchel said they are not.

The Commission discussed flagged bidders opening up other LLCs to bid on properties. They spoke about having better communication with the county office regarding issues such as verifying that properties set for demolition are not currently owned. Commissioners agreed to take active steps toward resolving this issue.

Chairman Carthew said this was an important topic to include in the Commission's annual report. Mr. Grandinetti questioned why the report was only annual. Ms. Huchel replied, as the Council's de facto representative on the Planning Commission, she could make a monthly report on what the planning commission does and present it at Council meetings. She stated even, if these reports are not looked at, their issues and concerns will at least be documented on paper.

Ms. Huchel communicated that the Commissioners should tell her each month what they want her to include in her report.

Mr. Grandinetti motioned that Ms. Huchel would identify items on the Planning Commission agenda for the Commission to vote on to present to City Council monthly. The motion was seconded by Mr. White. 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.

PUBLIC SAFETY BUILDING PROFESSIONAL ASSESSMENT

Chairman Carthew provided an update on the completion of the Commission's professional assessment regarding the Public Safety Building. He added that the City is still deciding whether to renovate it or seek a site for a new building. He spoke on behalf of the Planning Commission that their existing building is a viable structure for the purpose of public safety for the City of Johnstown. There are funding requirements to have both of these items worked on, but Chairman Carthew felt that their existing funds would be better utilized by focusing on establishing a renovation program.

Mr. Grandinetti queried as to whether any decision had been made regarding which option would move forward. Chairman Carthew stated the issue is still under review. Some items were taken care of in the building in terms of air quality and ventilation in the basement, but there is no renovation program in place.

Mr. Grandinetti suggested that the Commission could use money provided by the Department of Community & Economic Development (DCED) towards accessibility improvements and their bill of duty since accessibility is an eligible expense in a public bill. He continued that the City should take a look at the building's elevator and its accessibility issues, and provide for an exterior elevator or upgrade since that was an area of major concern.

Chairman Carthew estimated that a renovation for the elevator would cost about \$700,000. Mr. Grandinetti believed it could be an eligible expense through the DCED.

Mr. Polster announced that the lobbying firm retained by the regional partnership, DT Consulting, was asked to search for money at the state level to complement the money already allocated for either the public safety building or a new building. The firm recommended the Commission make a final decision swiftly.

Mr. Polster noted that this discussion has gone on for three years. He stated the Commission was allocated money by the City, along with receiving monetary assistance from the American Rescue Plan (ARPA) and the Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP). Additional funds are still required, making it important for the Commission to decide and let the firm know which direction the City wants them to go.

Mr. Polster stated a complete feasibility analysis had not been done. This would analyze other factors associated with the building besides the cost of building or renovation, such as demolition cost and potential tenants. He relayed that the Commission needs to create a detailed plan and identify specific items requiring renovation in order to be granted funds.

The Commission discussed a date by which it should make a final decision. Ms. Huchel announced that their ARPA money will expire in August 2025 and must be used before then. She estimated the funds to be between \$1,000,000 and \$2,500,000.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Mr. Rutledge announced working on creating the steering committee, and anyone interested can join.

Mr. Rutledge added that the committee is looking into having public meetings and engagements. He recently spoke to members about it, and he will follow up on any ideas

MAIN STREET / CENTRAL PARK REVITALIZATION PROJECTS

Chairman Carthew communicated that there are two projects in the works. Due to the time limit to spend the ARPA money, the Central Park revitalization project will take precedent over the Main Street revitalization project.

Ms. Huchel viewed new plans for Central Park drawn up by an arborist named Ron McIntosh, who wanted to update the plantings and create some sites. She then relayed that City Manager Martynuska said he would soon send out requests for proposals (RFPs). Mr. Grandinetti said it would likely take at least two months to hear back regarding a contract.

Chairman Carthew expressed that CJL Engineering has been working with the City in regard to plans for Central Park. Part of their work involves deciding on potential design features, such as landscaping, along with going through feedback. He stated CJL is helping create the RFPs. Ms. Huchel added that CJL is collaborating with someone from the Pennsylvania Department of State (PennDOT) whom the City brought in as a coordinator.

Chairman Carthew told Ms. Huchel that the main points which she should bring to the City Council meeting the following Wednesday on behalf of the Planning Commission are GIS, the Public Safety building, and the Central Park revitalization project.

Mr. Polster relayed that there is a new schedule being organized for the spending of the RAISE money from the United States Department of State (USDOT) amongst the four entities involved in sharing the money. The Commission was previously told that Central Park would be renovated in summer 2025 but this is now up in the air. The revised schedule for the raise money is set to be announced at a meeting in May 2025.

VACANT PROPERTY

Mr. Williams said he gave the Commissioners the vacant property ordinance. Mr. Grandinetti asked Mr. Williams where the Commission is with regard to vacant properties. Mr. Grandinetti wanted to know statistics, such as the number of vacant properties, how many citations had been issued, and what the \$300 in the escrow account was for.

Mr. Williams estimated that between 300 and 400 properties were registered over the past two to three years. Mr. Grandinetti told Mr. Williams to email the full list of properties to the Commission.

Mr. Grandinetti stated they should have an income of over \$100,000 due to each property selling for \$300. He questioned Mr. Williams as to the criteria for deeming a property vacant. Mr. Williams and Ms. Huchel said code violations or a property with no utilities can deem a property as vacant. Both agreed that a vacant lot that is being maintained would not be considered a vacant property.

Mr. Grandinetti clarified that a vacant property will be registered in a non-refundable registration fee if it is sold.

Mr. Grandinetti declared that code enforcers should be viewed as a department just as important as police, fire, and public works departments.

Mr. White asked Mr. Williams from where his department receives its funds. Mr. Williams replied that it comes from the General Fund and the Capital Projects Fund. Mr. White asked Mr. Williams if he receives any money from the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG). Mr. Williams replied that he does not. Ms. Huchel mentioned that CDBG only funds the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) as of 2025.

Mr. White suggested hiring another code enforcer to help with Mr. Williams's workload. Ms. Huchel replied that they downsized their code enforcers department, because they hired Laurel Municipal Inspection Agency to enforce their codes. Mr. White questioned the role of Laurel on code enforcement. Mr. Williams answered that Laurel is responsible for the code violations, which are sent to them by the City. They are meant to go after vacant property owners with criminal charges.

Mr. Williams continued by saying the fire department has become more pivotal in helping the code enforcers as well. The fire department goes street by street identifying code violations, taking photos of them, and providing Mr. Williams with the images and the addresses. The code

enforcers then determine what gets sent to Laurel and what properties may receive a violation letter. Ms. Huchel added on that Laurel is responsible for every violation it receives. Laurel pledged to hire more individuals if their team could not keep up with the volume of violations being sent. Mr. Williams stated there is an \$85 fee for each violation they send to Laurel.

PUBLIC COMMENT - NON-AGENDA ITEMS

Ms. Huchel inquired as to where the Commission stood on the Sidewalk Purchase Program. She stated City Manager Martynuska provided her with the sidewalk ordinance and told her that he was waiting on other confirmation with the county. She expressed an interest in buying the sidewalk, but was not going to risk a \$20,000 lien.

Ms. Huchel relayed an update from City Manager Martynuska. He stated the purchaser will still have to work with Cambria County on the reduced lien forgiveness portion of the program. The program will be publicized once directions and instructions are drafted.

Mr. Grandinetti questioned the forgiveness policy. Ms. Huchel replied, if you own the adjoining property, you can get it forgiven for \$500.

Mr. Grandinetti asked if a \$5,000 demolition lien could be waived by submitting \$500. Mr. Rutledge affirmed. Mr. Williams added that the individual must also pay the lien satisfaction fee, which is around \$60. Ms. Huchel clarified for Mr. Grandinetti that the \$500 would not clear any other outstanding liens.

RECESS/ADJOURNMENT: The meeting was adjourned at 6:06 P.M.