

CITY OF MARINE ON ST. CROIX
PLANNING COMMISSION
MINUTES

Tuesday, August 31, 2021 - 7:30pm
Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Present: Commissioners Kristina Smitten, Tim Casey, Jennifer Henry, Anna Hagstrom, Ed Sanderson

Absent: Chair Gerry Mrosła

Citizens present: Cecily Harris, Robbi Strandemo, Sebastian Corby, Tammy Newcomb, Kevin Nyenhuis, Robert Barros, Gayle Knutson, Wendy Ward, Laurel Smith

Acting Chair Smitten called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m.

Commissioner Henry moved and Casey seconded to adopt the agenda. Approved unanimously.

Pre-application Variance Inquiry: 360 Robert St.

Robbi Strandemo and Sebastian Corby were in attendance for a pre-application meeting to discuss the possibility of a variance at 360 Robert St. Homeowner Robert Barros also attended the meeting remotely.

Strandemo and Corby already live in Marine, and explained that their family has outgrown their current house but they want to stay in the city. They'd like to build at 360 Robert and have signed a purchase agreement with the owner contingent upon being able to build on the lot.

To deduce what variances would be needed they've done background research, namely a survey, wetland delineation report, and septic evaluation. The wetland delineation report concluded there are no wetlands present on the property that would require setbacks. A site evaluation for septic by Brian Humpal of Midwest Sewer Services shows the site would likely hold compliant septic. The applicants have also submitted a concept for a site plan showing a house footprint (about 1,500 square feet and a 728 square-foot garage) that would meet the city's yard and road setback requirements.

Commissioner Smitten asked whether they were working with an architect. Corby said they aren't to that point yet. They've clearly identified the building envelope, but they would want to purchase the land before working with an architect.

Smitten reviewed the variance process. The only variance the applicants believe they need is to build on a non-conforming lot. The lot is .55 acres (22,499 square feet) and the city's code requires lots to be .6 acres (30,000 square feet) in the Single Family Urban District. Corby sought confirmation that they needed a variance, since a house was previously on the property, and Commissioner Smitten confirmed that they would need one.

Smitten noted that Brian Humpal had recommend obtaining a soil review from Washington County to ensure they would approve the soils for the installation of a system on these properties, and indicated that that should be done as part of the variance research.

Smitten also explained that the city council denied a request in 2019 to split one lot into two because the minimum lot size would be slightly too small. However, that would have been creating a nonconforming lot. This lot is already nonconforming, which is a requirement of meeting the definition of “practical difficulty.” Nor would building on the property increase the nonconformity. Smitten added that the request seems to fit with the goals of the comprehensive plan for keeping housing financially accessible in Marine.

Hagstrom agreed that there seem to be a number of nonconforming lots in Marine, and land use is limited. In the spirit of community growth, lot size is something the city should look at. It might be more important to show that the property can meet setbacks and septic requirements. Casey also commented on density and lot requirements. Smitten said that’s something the council would have to give direction or support on.

Addressing the applicants, Smitten confirmed that even if there is some desire to modify existing regulations, the commission must follow the zoning code. They also have to think about precedent, so that the rules can be applied fairly to everyone seeking a variance.

Tammy Newcomb, a Robert Street resident, added that the home she purchased had to have a mound septic installed because of proximity to the water. Hagstrom said the specific type of system would be decided by the property owners (conforming to county regulations).

Sanderson asked whether they had a comparison as to the square footage of the house that was there before. They don’t have information about that house, but they’d like to build a home approximately 2,000 square feet.

Hagstrom asked about timelines on applicants’ end. Corby answered that they were supposed to close October 1. Originally, they thought they would get an immediate decision from the commission. It has taken all summer to get the surveys and tests done.

Smitten went over timing for the variance review and asked for two members to be assigned to the request. Commissioners Casey and Henry volunteered. City staff will connect the applicants with Casey and Henry.

Sanderson said to strengthen the application, it would be helpful to know the lot sizes of adjacent lots to show whether this lot size is consistent with nearby lots. And how exactly is the lot being measured?

Smitten reviewed the questions the applicants would be encouraged to answer related to practical difficulties.

New and Old Business

- Reminder of September 21 workshop to review the Zoning Ordinance

Councilmember Ward requested the workshop so the council and planning commission could review the memo items, a list of items the commission thought needed work.

Commissioner Smitten added that the proposed redline ordinance is ready for adoption. It's much more up to date than the 2008 code. It will still need refining after that, and the memo is meant to offer direction for subsequent updates. Still, at the workshop the commission could give a high-level overview of the items on the to-do list. Hagstrom agreed that it was important to pass this update to the code. Ward said it would be a good idea to enter the workshop with that agenda. City staff will send the redline and the memo to the council and commission.

- Wireless ordinances

Sanderson asked for an update on the ordinance and request for proposal process. Smitten said the council had approved working with Carly Kehoe on the RFP. Miss Kehoe has been out of the office, and Councilman Pardun is working with her on a revised schedule. Commissioners are finished with the work in their official capacity, but has offered continue to work with the council in a technical and review capacity.

- Upcoming vacancies

Councilmember Ward asked about upcoming vacancies and suggested writing a description out. She invited commissioners to add. Smitten suggested starting with the language in the code, because the role of the commission is already defined. Sanderson added that the commission consists of residents with complementary skills: architecture, legal, land use, history of the community. That mix isn't necessarily defined in the description, but it makes the commission more effective.

Approval of minutes

July 27 Meeting

Hagstrom moved and Henry seconded approval of the minutes of the July 27 meeting. Approved unanimously. Minutes approved as drafted.

Commissioner Henry requested an item for the September meeting agenda: discussion of liaisons between the commission and subcommittees. She thinks it will be more effective if a council member acts as liaison to council-appointed committees, rather than a commissioner.

Henry submitted a letter to council on the issue. The assistant clerk will distribute it to the commissioners and add it to the agenda for the next meeting.

Adjournment

Smitten moved and Sanderson seconded to adjourn at 8:20 pm. Motion passed unanimously.

Minutes taken by Suzanne Dammann, Assistant City Clerk.