

**ROSS TOWNSHIP
PLANNING COMMISSION
MINUTES
February 28, 2022**

CALL TO ORDER/PLEDGE

Chairperson Lauderdale called the regular meeting of the Ross Township Planning Commission to order at 6:00 p.m. at the Ross Township Hall.

ROLL CALL

Present: Chairperson Lauderdale
 Michael Bekes
 Mark Markillie
 Steve Maslen
 Michael Moore
 Pam Sager
 Sherri Snyder

Absent: None

Also Present: Bert Gale, AGS – Township Zoning Administrator
 Rebecca Harvey – Township Planning Consultant
 Rob Thall – Township Attorney

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

It was noted that consideration of the Notice of Intent to Plan received from Barry County should be added under New Business. The agenda was approved as amended.

APPROVAL OF PRIOR MEETING MINUTES

The Commission then proceeded with consideration of the **January 24, 2022** regular Planning Commission meeting minutes. Snyder moved to approve the minutes as presented. Moore seconded the motion. The motion carried 6-0, Bekes abstaining.

NEW BUSINESS

1. Sketch Plan Review – Sanctuary at St Ann

The next matter to come before the Planning Commission was consideration of a request by Joe Gesmundo, representing Sanctuary at St. Ann, for Sketch Plan Review of a spiritual nature park and trail to include a 'Stations of the Cross'. The subject property consists of approximately 72 acres located generally at 8000 N. 39th Street and within the R-1 and R-3 Districts.

Harvey reported that she had met with the applicant in review of the general proposal and had concluded that the project, proposed to be located on land owned by St. Ann Catholic Church and in close proximity to the church, was an extension of the church and a special land use in both the R-1 and R-3 Districts. She noted that the Sketch Plan Review process was employed by the applicant to allow for a general discussion of the project elements with the Planning Commission.

Gale stated that he was in agreement with Harvey's findings on the proposal. He referenced Section 21.3 – Sketch Plan Review as the guide for the Planning Commission's discussion.

Joe Gesmundo, a resident of the Township since 1965, stated that he has envisioned this project with the church for the last 8 years. He explained that the land area for the project is not available on the parcel currently occupied by the church, however 72 acres north of the church recently became available and has since been purchased by the church for the proposed spiritual nature park. He provided the following project details:

- The park will include a ½ mile 'Stations of the Cross' trail . . ½ mile being the distance Christ walked to the cross.
- The trail will include 14 stations depicting the last days of Christ's life using 1 ¼ life-size bronze sculptures.
- The sculptures will reflect designs inspired by art and the Bible.
- There will be approximately 200 ft separation between stations.
- The rolling and wooded nature of the property offers the ideal conditions to design a route that will provide a private and spiritual experience.
- The Fine Arts Department at WMU is providing set design assistance for each station, as well as for the situation of each station approach.
- The park will also feature a manned welcome center and parking area near the trailhead.
- The trail surface is envisioned to be a crushed limestone material.
- Improvements will likely include fencing and stone benches; no site lighting will be proposed in that the park will only be open during daytime hours.

Gesmundo provided background information on his 'sculpture search', referencing the Cloisters on the Platte in Omaha as a resource, and explaining his goal to make this the 'best in the world'. He distributed a Master Plan Layout of the proposed 'Stations of the Cross' trail and a photo of the scene for Station #1.

Lauderdale inquired as to the project timeline. Gesmundo advised that the sculpture production will take approximately 2 years to complete. He estimated a project completion of 2 ½ to 3 years.

Markille stated he was impressed by the project and finds the sculpture production process very interesting. He noted the objective in the Master Plan to ‘connect activity centers’ in the Township and encouraged that the proposed park participate in those connections.

Bekes questioned the estimated volume of visitors to the park. Gesmundo noted that the Omaha facility receives an average of 40 visitors/day, Monday through Thursday, but that he did not have an estimate for the weekends.

Bekes and Sager both noted the project site is near the Gull Lake bay area where parking is at a premium. They questioned the adequacy of the proposed parking area and expressed concern that overflow parking not occur within the bay area. Gesmundo noted that they have discussed limiting the occupancy of the park through tickets . . . similar to a golf course.

Moore questioned the plans for the project site’s 40th Street frontage. Gesmundo advised that no plans for project access from 40th Street are planned. Moore stated that there are fragile natural resources on the site and that he likes the idea of a low impact use of the property.

Snyder encouraged the applicant to meet with the neighbors to introduce the project and answer questions. She explained that such an effort typically improves the review process. Gesmundo noted agreement.

Lauderdale opined that he had an opportunity to view a model of the sculpture and that he would describe as them as ‘exquisite’.

The Planning Commission noted their support of the project and thanked Gesmundo for the presentation.

2. 2021-2022 PC Annual Report

Planning Commission members agreed that Lauderdale will draft the report for review at the March meeting.

3. 2022-2023 PC Meeting Schedule

Lauderdale noted that Attorney Thall will prepare the resolution for the Planning Commission’s 2022-2023 meeting schedule for adoption in March.

4. 2022-2023 PC Budget

Lauderdale explained that he had prepared the budget sheet per the Planning Commission's direction in January to 'duplicate last year's budget', but has learned that revisions to that budget request are in order.

Bekes referenced the last page of the budget material and noted that the Planning Commission budget should be revised to match the new categories reflected.

Bekes further advised that Township Board seeks to have a standard rate applied to all board stipends, which will result in an adjustment to the Planning Commission's current stipend. He noted that the stipend will be increased from \$60 to \$100 per meeting to be consistent with the rate just established for the newly formed Fire/Building Board of Appeals.

The adequacy of the escrow fee approach was questioned. It was noted that this should be factored/reflected in the budget.

Bekes stated that he will proceed working with the Township Board on the budget with the comments provided in mind.

5. Barry County Master Plan – Notice of Intent to Plan

Harvey explained that the Barry County Planning Commission has initiated an update of the County Master Plan. She provided a status report on the progress made to date.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

1. Master Plan Update

Lauderdale noted that the public hearing on the proposed Master Plan was held by the Planning Commission on January 24, 2022. He requested Commission discussion of the public comments received on the draft Plan.

Snyder stated that a comment had been received requesting that the Plan not encourage commercial use in the bay area. She noted that the Plan does not serve to 'encourage' or 'attract' commercial use in that area, but does support the existing commercial use and facilitates low-impact mixed use with good site design.

Lauderdale added that the C-2 District is also available and allows commercial use to occur outside of the bay area.

In response to written correspondence received raising the issue of CAFOs, it was determined that the topic represented Zoning Ordinance and RTFA issues and did not require modification to the Plan.

In discussion of next steps, the following was noted:

- Harvey will make the minor corrections to the draft Plan identified in the review process and remove the track changes from the document.
- The corrected draft Plan will then be presented to the Township Board for adoption.
- Harvey will provide the corrected draft Plan to the Township Office and Bekes for distribution to the Board.

REPORT FROM TOWNSHIP BOARD

Bekes reported that the Township Board's last meeting was held in the Fire Barn due to attendance. Agenda items included the following:

- New sewer/water connection fee structure . . and sewer hook-ups in general
- Cooper Township to join GLSWA
- The Township is seeking a grant to study the use of chip seal (tire) on roads
- Budget schedule
- Hazardous Waste Recycling Program
- Discussion regarding solar panels in the Township

Attorney Thall noted that the Township Board desires the Planning Commission to consider removing front yard solar panels as a special land use and consider them as variance requests instead. The Planning Commission agreed to place the item on the Work Plan.

REPORT FROM ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS

Chairperson Lauderdale reported that the ZBA did not meet in February.

PUBLIC COMMENT

No public comment was offered.

MEMBERS, CONSULTANTS, ADVISORS

Moore inquired as to whether the required landscaping for the recently approved solar panels had occurred. Gale responded that none has been established yet.

Snyder suggested that consistency is needed in the public comment process. Specifically, that members of the public who speak should provide their name and address so there is context to their comments and to allow for complete minutes. . and that the 3-minutes time limit is explained and enforced. Moore, Planning Commission Secretary, volunteered to keep track of the time each person speaks to ensure compliance.

Bekes advised that he will be absent at the March meeting.

ADJOURN

There being no further business to come before the Commission, the meeting was adjourned at 7:45 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,
Rebecca Harvey, AICP, PCP
Township Planning Consultant