

**Highland Township Planning Commission  
Record of the 1412th Meeting  
Joint Meeting with Highland Downtown Development Authority  
Highland Township Auditorium  
April 18, 2024**

***Roll Call:***

**PLANNING COMMISSION**

Grant Charlick, Chairman  
Kevin Curtis  
Chris Heyn  
Mike O’Leary (absent)  
Roscoe Smith (Chairman HDDA)  
Scott Temple  
Russ Tierney  
Guy York

**HDDA**

Matt Barnes (absent)  
Cassie Blascyk  
Taylor DeHaan (absent)  
Dale Feigley (absent)  
Jennifer Frederick (absent)  
Christina Hamill  
Rick Hamill, Township Supervisor  
Andy West  
Michael Zeolla  
Michael Zurek

***Also Present:***

Elizabeth J. Corwin, Planning Director  
Melissa Dashevich, HDDA Director

Visitors: 3

Chairman Grant Charlick called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m.

**Agenda Item #1: Call to the Public: Opportunity for anyone to bring forward issues of interest or concern for Planning Commission consideration. Each participant limited to 3 minutes.**

No comments were offered.

***Work Session:***

**Agenda Item #2:** Discussion of Highland Station Business District guiding documents: Master Plan, Design Guidelines and Zoning Ordinance.

Mr. Charlick explained that the Planning Commission was interested in fostering a cooperative relationship with the Highland Downtown Development Authority. He had attended their meeting of April 17, 2024 to discuss the Highland Station Master Plan, Development Guidelines and our Zoning Ordinance. The HDDA focusses on the downtown area whereas the Planning Commission deals more broadly with the entire township, but the HDDA interests go beyond the land use to architecture and sponsors events such as parades and tangible projects such as plantings to improve and promote their district. He admires the time and energy they put into making Highland a unique and lively community.

Mr. Charlick explained further that the Planning Commission has not had a reason to work closely with the guiding documents recently, but new interest in the properties along M-59 at Milford Road will make it necessary for all members to take the time to review them. Fortunately, the HDDA will be a helpful resource to evaluate the character and architectural elements of design.

He directed the members to the Framework Plan in the Highland Station Master Plan, and the members discussed the different styles of development and the types of use that are now permitted. The zoning regulations for Highland Station Commercial designation do not include many uses that are highway oriented; and would not allow for the gas station currently under discussion. The uses that are allowed are generally office and retail, but also include uses that might not be that desirable in that location, such as foster homes, child care or amusement establishments. It is worth noting that the gas station would be an allowed use only a few parcels away, and the controls about character and architecture would not apply.

Mr. Hamill described the properties on the southwest corner of M-59 and Milford Road. He noted that the Township had once considered the abandoned lumber yard building for a fire hall. When that project was dismissed, he worked closely with the Hoy family to determine possible uses for the property. Lack of sanitary sewer has held the property back. There had been discussions of fast food, breweries and the like, but the septic requirements were daunting.

Isaac Hannah started aggregating the property on the block in 2018, and worked with an internationally known architect prior to COVID in an effort to reuse the trusses on the lumberyard building. He proposed a concept similar to Alex's Market at White Lake and Andersonville Road. This led the Supervisor to explore whether there might be some interest on the part of the school district to work with the property owner to allow a land lease to place a septic system on the adjacent former middle school site.

Mr. Hamill explained that a regional gas station chain has expressed interest in the site. Their business model includes made to order food options. They have a very distinct appearance, and there will need to be some negotiation to bring it better in line with the design guidelines and character of the community. It appears that the project is moving forward, with the school district gaining public water service at the developer's expense in exchange for the land lease for the septic system.

Mr. Charlick thought a private agreement between the school and the developer was acceptable. He noted he had been concerned that the Township would participate in a project that did not directly benefit the community as a whole. This agreement with the school district offers the advantage of encumbering the school property so that it would not be sold off for a private commercial development.

Ms. Corwin reviewed the ordinance amendments that would be necessary to accommodate the use. Gas Station would be added to the use list as a special land use approval. Without amending the document at all, the gas station use could not be considered. The township is not enabled under state law to approve use variances.

She noted also that a supplemental provision could limit the use to those parcels that front the highway. The supplemental provision should also address a few details of the canopy placement and design, since this is the element of a gas station that is most prominent and likely to cause concern.

The Highland Station Business District regulations are thorough and provide architectural control not available to other districts, thanks to the efforts expended by the HDDA in developing the guidance documents. The signage regulations are oriented for pedestrian scale traffic though, and it would be appropriate to allow the businesses facing M-59 the same signage limits imposed on C-2, General Commercial zoned properties. This would include digital message boards, which Mr. Hamill hoped could be a cooperative venture with the township to allow for community messages.

She noted that in other districts, the drive-through window component is treated as a separate special use. She noted that MDOT representatives have stated that they do not allow driveways within 400 feet of a drive-through window. She was not confident that either of the sites fronting M-59 could properly accommodate a drive-through window. She noted that there are other impacts to neighbors from the lighting and menu boards. Mr. Hamill and Mr. Charlick each thought there may be design opportunities to orient the buildings to alter the traffic flow and impacts to neighboring residences.

Mr. Temple asked about the train station structure on the Township owned parcel in the corner of this block. Mr. Hamill explained that the Township Board has declared the property surplus, so that it could be aggregated with the rest of the block. The relocation or rebuilding of the structure at a location of the Township's choice is being considered in exchange for the parcel. Mr. Smith explained that the corner is actually two lots, split diagonally. The Township owned property is small, housing the train structure itself, but not much of the lawn. The Michigan Department of Transportation reserved the clear vision triangle for itself.

Mr. Temple expressed reservations about the gas station use, but asked if the HDDA would like to offer reactions. He would not undertake the effort of changing the ordinance if they do not support the use. He asked if there was a different path to allow for a gas station within the existing zoning regulations.

Ms. Corwin explained that the only other option would be to allow rezoning to C-2, General Commercial. But allowing rezoning to C-2 would be to give up the architectural and character controls that are entwined in the ordinance and design guidelines. This zoning designation is the key to requiring pitched roofs or other concessions that vary from the standard corporate model.

Ms. Dasevich explained that while a gas station is not necessarily what the HDDA had envisioned for this block, it was preferable to the blighted conditions that exist today. They hope to effectively influence the design so that it becomes an attractive entry into the Highland Station District.

Ms. Blacsyk spoke to the importance of the Design Guidelines. Her role is as chair of the design committee of the HDDA. She noted that economic development is a key objective of the HDDA, and they achieve it by promoting quality developments consistent with these guidelines. She explained that the HDDA has conducted numerous studies and surveys and a common theme emerges that the community wants something done with this corner. A gas station may be the best use to justify the development costs associated with a very expensive property. The HDDA is concerned with setting the stage for successful businesses. This is a business that if developed properly, could be an attractive asset to the district.

Mr. West noted that the infrastructure costs to redevelop this parcel are a barrier to entry for local businesses. He thought it would take a corporate player to bring the resources forward to complete a project. He had considered redeveloping the corner himself in the past, but his uses would not justify the expense of infrastructure. He also noted that he is very interested in learning what input MDOT can offer.

Mr. Charlick noted that the property on the west side of Milford Road had interesting options for entrances, since it has frontage on four streets. The other property on the east side of Milford Road has fewer options.

Ms. Blacsyk spoke about the multi-layered levels of review that properties in the Highland Station undergo. She would not be in favor of gas stations at other locations in the Highland Station, but along M-59, it makes sense, and could be an attractive gateway. She explained that the future goal is that many of the residential properties in the district could be converted to retail or office services like little shops or boutiques. She noted there are many examples of towns that have created a sense of place by preserving the architectural integrity.

Mr. Heyn noted that M-59 is a major thoroughfare, but that Milford Road was probably seventy percent locally owned and operated “mom and pop” businesses. He regretted that it might be necessary to invite “Corporate America” in, but recognized that the property has been available for redevelopment for decades, and nothing has happened yet.

Mr. Temple noted that now the entire block is aggregated, he wondered if the site could not better accommodate other uses that are already within the zoning regulations. Ms. Corwin explained that the combined parcels only amount to about 1.75 acres, with a depth of approximately 260 feet. In other districts, the setbacks would take up much of the usable space. Given this acreage, the site is about the same size as the BP gas station at M-59 and Hickory Ridge or the Mobil Station at Enterprise Drive or one of the small retail strip centers.

Ms. Hamill noted that she also sees the site as a gateway to the Highland Station District and agreed that it was overdue for redevelopment.

Mr. Zeolla spoke as one of the most direct neighbors to the redevelopment. He was concerned with the light trespass that has been a perpetual issue from this site, but thought that this could be addressed in the redesign. He also believes that he and his family would frequent the business here. He noted there could be other more objectionable uses than a gas station/made to order food outlet. He thought a restaurant element would be well received.

Ms. Blacsyk explained that the partnership with the school places other limits on the future development. The school is only willing to work with uses that are appropriate for the proximity to young children. They will not work with businesses that rely primarily on alcohol or tobacco sales as an example.

Mr. York thought it would be nice if we could get more details on a proposed development, but recognizes that this would not happen prior to the zoning ordinance revisions. He thought the best solution may be a “wrap around” retail/restaurant building oriented towards John Street or Ruggles Street that also has some pumps oriented to Milford Road. The gas sales could be secondary to the mixed use of food market and restaurant.

Mr. York also noted that the Planning Commission had discussed the school property and its future land use designation. He appreciates the options that would be afforded to the community if the site was designated as part of Highland Station and could be mixed use.

Mr. Hamill encouraged the Planning Commission and HDDA members to continue to work together to promote the Highland Station and lean on the guidance documents. He was encouraged by the open dialogue between the two groups.

Mr. Tierney wanted to ensure that whatever is developed, it retains that unique small town character and is not just another big box corporate modern facility where we are left with a building not easily repurposed if the business leaves.

Mr. Charlick restated a comment Mr. O’Leary had made as the Planning Commission deliberated over the gas station proposal at Wardlow Road. New development encourages other property owners to make new investments in their own businesses. A little competition is good for the whole community. He asked Ms. Corwin what was needed to make the necessary changes to the ordinance.

Ms. Corwin reiterated that only minimum changes were necessary; but thought it would be prudent to form a subcommittee with both Planning Commission members and HDDA members to refine the draft prior to public hearing. Schedule constraints were discussed. It was determined that a subcommittee

would meet Tuesday, April 30, 2024 at 7:00 pm in to review a draft ordinance in preparation of a public hearing in May.

Mr. York moved to set a public hearing for zoning ordinance amendments to provide for gas stations for highway-oriented parcels in the Highland Station Business District for May 16, 2024. Mr. Charlick supported the motion.

Motion carried by voice vote.

**Agenda Item #3:**

**Committee Updates**

- Zoning Board of Appeals:
- Township Board:
- Highland Downtown Development Authority:
- Planning Director's Update

No reports were offered.

**Agenda Item #4:** Minutes: April 4, 2024.

Mr. York moved to approve the minutes of April 4, 2024 as presented. Mr. Temple supported the motion, which was unanimously approved by voice vote.

Mr. Curtis moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:15 p.m. Mr. York supported the motion, which was unanimously approved by voice vote.

***Adjournment:***

Respectfully submitted,

A. Roscoe Smith, Secretary  
ARS/ejc