

February 8, 2018 Neighborhood Meeting

Martinsville City Council held a community informational meeting on February 8, 2018 at Albert Harris School Auditorium, 710 Smith Road at 7:00pm with Mayor Gene Teague presiding. Those present were Mayor Gene Teague, Council Member Kathy Lawson, Vice Mayor Chad Martin, Council Member Sharon Hodge and Council Member Jennifer Bowles. Staff present included City Manager Leon Towarnicki, Assistant City Manager Wayne Knox, Clerk of Council Karen Roberts, Registrar Cindy Barbour, City Attorney Eric Monday and Officer Coretha Gravely. Mickey Powell of the Martinsville Bulletin was also present.

The purpose of the meeting was for residents to hear information from Piedmont Community Services regarding their interest in the possible use of the former City Housing Office located at 605 Fourth Street and how it would affect that location as a voting precinct.

City Manager Towarnicki introduced Council members, the Registrar Cindy Barbour and Electoral Board members, City Attorney Monday, Assistant City Manager Wayne Knox and Greg Preston of Piedmont Community Services. Knox shared details about the upcoming Citizens Academy that will begin March 1 and every Thursday through the month.

City Manager Towarnicki explained that the building in question was previously a school, and was also used by MARC workshop, the police training academy and the housing department over the years. Piedmont Community Services has requested use of the building and the plans to use the building seem to be a good fit. Towarnicki introduced Greg Preston, Executive Director of Piedmont Community Service. Preston stated that he appreciates the positive relationship they have with Council and with the community. Preston summarized Piedmont Community Services role and responsibility in the community, providing mental health, disability service, youth and prevention, housing, substance use, psychiatric, case management and other services. Additional staff is needed for the Martinsville area and they are pleased with the building and the opportunity to work from that location. School based services are experiencing significant growth so he hopes to establish those additional offices at the forming housing office. He would like to provide a summer program for youth in the near future. It is vital for PCS to have a strong, positive relationship with the community they serve and do not want to infringe on anyone's right to vote. If the City and PCS can agree to the use of the Fourth Street building, it would be used to house PCS offices as well as a voting precinct. Plans for the storage of the voting equipment still need to be considered.

Council Member Bowles shared her excitement for the Piedmont Community Services for considering Martinsville to expand and stated that resident opinions and concerns are very important.

Ray Carr of the Electoral Board asked for a timeframe for PCS to move into the building. Preston said they still need to sit down with Council and create the formal proposal that will go back to the PCS Board of Directors, as well as an inspection to see what improvements to the building would be needed. Carr explained that primaries would be in June and there would be steps the Electoral board would need to make before that time.

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Jean Hairston, 408 Third Street attended to receive clarity on the purpose of the building and what would happen to the voting area. Her concern was that the PCS use of the building could hamper voting and would not be convenient for voters. Mayor Teague explained that it would be a lease or purchase, those details still need to be worked out. Hairston wanted to clarify that the building would be used for office space only and not for client relations. Preston explained that the park would need maintenance and a decision on how to use that space would be decided at a later time.

Council Member Hodge asked about the tax roll and if there is a financial difference on whether the building would be leased or sold. Towarnicki explained that has yet to be decided but regardless, PCS would take over the maintenance and utilities on the building which would be a reduced cost for the City.

Billie Coles, Beaver Street asked if the summer program would be for the PCS children clients only or open to the public. Preston said initially it would be for the children they serve. PCS serves approximately 50 students and those participating in the summer program would be considerably less.

Mayor Teague asked for a show of hands for those in support, those opposed and those that would like to receive additional information before deciding. He asked that anyone who opposed to please share their opinions

Peter Harris, 1010 D Street asked about the adjacent land and asked how many were aware that Dr. Baldwin donated the park for a recreation center for the West End. His concern is if the land is purchased, that could create a conflict since the park was a donation. Harris said he recalls that the same matter came up years ago and he was assured by City Council that the park would be maintained and now the park is an embarrassment to the community. Harris asked how the park would play into the future of the area. His primary objective is to maintain the location as the voting precinct. Ms. Campbell 1501 Roundabout Road asked that whatever decision was made that it be under contract so that it can't be changed. Alexis Lee, Sellers Street is in favor of PCS using the location and suggests that the park land be made a memorial garden to recognize the history of the location and doesn't feel because of safety reasons that it can be developed into a playground. Walter Wesley, 405 Third Street expressed concern about the summer students and how they will be transported to the location. He was concerned about potential loitering in the area. Preston explained that there is a primary summer site already and the Fourth St would be a backup option. The students are bussed to the area and ages range from elementary to high school age. Jimmy Williams, 600 Third Street agrees with Mr. Harris concerns. The park is a piece of Martinsville history and should be preserved as that. He expressed frustration that it's taken this long to clean up the park. He feels that PCS is a worthwhile organization but expressed concerns about possible increased foot traffic and what kind of problems could that bring to the neighborhood. He wondered why Joseph Martin School wasn't being considered.

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Ms. Harris, 1010 D Street said she is happy that the agreement will be in writing and she has concerns about the clients with mental health and substance abuse would be walking to this facility through the neighborhood. Preston explained that the site would be considered as an alternative summer sight and they are not planning to see clients at this location on a daily basis. If PCS can't have a win-win with the community they will withdraw the proposal.

Ray Carr clarified that ideally a voting precinct needs 18ft wide x 30ft long to accommodate the voting booths and tables for registration. The state mandates that a precinct have a minimum 500 voters, this precinct fluctuates from 485-600, with 506 registered voters for the presidential election. City Attorney Monday explained the Code of Virginia regarding voting precincts and the decision to consolidate precincts would be at the discretion of the local government and highly unlikely that the state would mandate that. Council member Bowles asked if consideration has been given to other precincts being joined.

Ida Draper, 602 Fifth Street is employed by PCS and stated that PCS is well organized and managed. The community has nothing to lose and a lot to gain.

Council Member Hodge clarified that the school based programs and those student clients are seen in the schools, not in the office. Mayor Teague explained that the other school building is still being used by the VMNH for storage and is not available for a new business. Council Member Lawson said having PCS working there daily would bring life to the building and allow it to serve a purpose in the community.

Registrar City Barbour explained that this agency participates in registering voters and they are very active in attending training to assist with that professionally and correctly. PCS is a strong advocate of helping people to vote.

Mr. Preston asked that if there is any opposition to please contact him so that he can take that information back to the board. Towarnicki said if attendees have questions, the contact information is on the letters that were mailed to residents in that area. They will work with Preston and PCS to iron out details and the public will have the opportunity to come in front of council to express concerns. Meetings are televised and open to the public. Any decisions made will be in writing for the public to review. Vice Mayor Martin explained that this meeting was a collective bargaining time to allow residents to share their thoughts and wishes.

The meeting adjourned at 8:15 pm.

Karen Roberts
Clerk of Council

Gene Teague
Mayor