

City of Natchez
Planning Commission Regular Meeting
Thursday, January 21, 2021, 2021 5:15 p.m.
Natchez Convention Center
211 Main Street
Natchez, MS 39120

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting of Thursday, January 21, 2021 was called to order by Chairperson Cheryl Rinehart.

ROLL CALL

Commissioners Present:

Stratton Bull, Vice-Chairperson
Charles Harris
Emma Rose Jackson
Mildred Chatman
Butch Johnson
Jonathan Smith
Deborah Martin
Marcia McCullough

Commissioners Absent:

Cheryl Rinehart, Chairperson

Staff:

Riccardo Giani, City Planner

MINUTES

Motion: I move to defer the minutes for the November and December 2020 Planning Commission meeting.

MOTION BY: Commissioner Deborah Martin

SECOND BY: Commissioner Marcia McCullough

In favor: All

Opposed: None

CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT: None

PUBLIC HEARING APPLICATIONS:

1. Application #PC 21-01. City of Natchez. Review and recommendation for the establishment of Urban Renewal Districts within designated areas to Mayor and Board of Alderman.

Mr. Giani gave staff findings.

Background: One of the many recommendations from the Downtown Revitalization Plan (2018) was to amend the existing tax abatement ordinance, and other administrative processes, to make Natchez more economically attractive to existing and future residents. Additionally, the creation of a comprehensive incentive package was one of the “low hanging fruit” recommendations that could be achieved in the short-term.

In review of the existing tax abatement ordinance and enabling Mississippi State Code, it was realized that the creation of renewal districts can complement with tax abatements. The core principle behind tax abatements is that the City provides a pathway for property owners (new or existing) to abate future taxes, resulting from a property improvement or major repair. The property owner will not be exempt from all City taxes, just those taxes that would be added due to a significant improvement to the property. Sections 27-31-32 and Section 17-21-5 of the Mississippi State Code give municipalities the power to establish tax abatement and renewal areas.

Planning staff is looking to not only expand the existing tax abatement district, but create Urban Renewal districts under the Urban Renewal Law (MS Code 43-35-11) to provide those areas with greater incentives. The main difference between a tax abatement within a historic district, and a renewal district is the length of abatement allowed. In a locally designated historic districts (purple), tax abatements max out at 7 years. In Urban Renewal areas (green), tax abatements are available for as long as 10 years. On the map, these areas will overlap but are color coded.

Urban Renewal areas have had negative connotations in the past, due to lack of consideration for historic neighborhoods and cultural community centers predominately in low-income areas. The destruction or disruption of historically or culturally significant buildings is not a goal of the Urban Renewal Plan. The Urban Renewal Plan and Districts designated aim to have a two-part effect; the first to provide tax abatements and other tools to new and existing property owners to help improve properties; and the second is to empower the City to target derelict, abandoned, and dilapidated buildings that have suffered from years of neglect.

Planning staff has included a map of the proposed Urban Renewal District, as well as a draft copy of the Urban Renewal Plan.

Staff Findings: Using existing City adopted maps, staff created a hybrid map detailing the location of potential tax abatement areas and renewal districts, and where they will overlap. The Woodlawn National Register District, and three other local review Historic Districts (On-Top-of-the-Hill, Upriver Residential, and Holy Family), are included in these areas. As stated, these are existing maps and boundary

lines that have been combined to form a hybrid map. From the perspective of planning staff, this was a way to remain impartial regarding the inclusion or exclusion of specific streets or areas. Additionally, there was an economic element to the decision. The larger a prospective tax abatement or renewal district becomes, the more diluted the effects of the district. In other words, the City should target these incentives in areas where there is a high concentration of dilapidated buildings and properties, but also with a high level of historical and/or cultural significance. For example, the Woodlawn National Register District meets this criteria which is why it is included within one of the proposed districts.

The map breaks down the following areas:

- Upriver Residential Tax Abatement District (Purple)
- On-Top-of-the-Hill Tax Abatement District (Purple)
- Holy Family Tax Abatement District (Purple)
- Woodlawn Renewal District (Green)
- Central Business Renewal District (Red/Purple/Green)
- Corridor Renewal District (Green)

The proposed Urban Renewal Plan will designate all “green” and “red” areas as part of the Urban Renewal District. The “purple” areas will be a part of the expanded tax abatement district. The Central Business District, or B-3 zoning district, will be one of the three proposed Urban Renewal Districts. The other two Urban Renewal District designated by the proposed Plan would be the Woodlawn Renewal District and the Corridor Renewal District.

The Woodlawn National Register district has a high-density of historically significant homes, and features many of the prominent architectural styles from Reconstruction to Post-WWII America. Along with the buildings, there is an immense amount of significance on Woodlawn, including the childhood home of author Richard Wright and a former headquarters of the NAACP. Unfortunately this historic area desperately needs tools to help revitalize this cultural center that has been so important through Natchez’s history. Woodlawn has a high concentration of dilapidated buildings that provide an unsafe, and unsuitable environment for reinvestment and revitalization. Revitalization through careful cultural interpretation of surviving resources would be paramount when bring Urban Renewal Activities to the Woodlawn District.

A proposed area shown on the map encompasses the entryways and exits of the city and has been termed the “Corridor Renewal District.” Unfortunately this area has seen steady disinvestment for decades, leading to the loss of business, historic homes, and blighted properties. State, Main, John Quitman, St. Catherine and E. Franklin Streets are the major thoroughfares of our City making them highly visible for residents, potential investors, and visitors. The goal of the Corridor Renewal District is to offer economic development incentives to established property owners and help the City control the issue of blight.

Lastly, the Central Business District (B-3) the core of the Natchez Historic District and Downtown has about a 40% building vacancy rate (Downtown Revitalization Plan, Economic Study). This is mostly in due to the expense of maintaining a historic property and steady population decline. In addition there are several historically and architecturally significant properties in the CBD that are either abandoned or being demolished by neglect. Like in the other proposed Urban Renewal Districts, the Urban Renewal Plan can address negative physical conditions and properties that are a strain to adjacent property values.

The Planning Commission, if acceptable, will recommend the approval of this resolution to the Mayor and Board to adopt an Urban Renewal Plan, establishing the areas as part of Urban Renewal Districts. The areas in the expanded tax abatement district and urban renewal districts, will provide residents and future investments with economic tools to continue to invest in Natchez. Tax abatement projects and Urban Renewal activities within the Local Review Historic District will first have to be reviewed by the Natchez Preservation Commission to be in accordance with the Urban Renewal Plan.

Mr. Giani shared a PowerPoint presentation on the history of Urban Renewal and what is proposed for Natchez.

Mr. Giani stated that the main goal for Natchez's Urban Renewal plan is to give residents the economic tools to improve their properties and give the City the power to incentivize these changes. Urban renewal of the past included the demolition of culturally important neighborhoods, which is not the goal for this Plan. He continued by stating that the preservation of historical and culturally significant places will be paramount and a high-priority of this Plan.

APPLICANT COMMENT: None

PUBLIC COMMENT: None

STUDY SESSION: Commissioner Harris asked if Minor Street (Minorville) was a historic district. Mr. Giani stated that Minorville is not a historic district. Mr. Giani stated that he has heard that there might be an effort to establish Minorville as a National Register District, like Woodlawn, however that work has not been done to designate it yet.

Commissioner Jackson stated that she thought Minorville has been established, and read the following:

“The Woodlawn Historic District is the largest of three, locally significant, historic African-American neighborhoods in Natchez. The city's oldest African-American neighborhood extends along St. Catherine Street and its cross streets. Due to urban renewal activity in the 1970s and 80s, the St. Catherin Street neighborhood no longer constitutes a single historic district. Today, two significant clusters of historic resources survive along St. Catherin Street and each is located in the shadow of two of the street's monumental landmarks – (1) Holy Family Catholic Church and (2) Brumfield School. The Holy Family Catholic Church

Historic District was listed in the National Register in 1995. A nomination is planned for the Brumfield School Historic District. The third historic neighborhood is Minorville, which is separated from the Woodlawn Historic District by Martin Luther King Jr. Road [formerly Pine Street]. Minorville developed in the late nineteenth century on the subdivided property of Concord, the suburban estate of the Minor family. A survey and National Register nomination is also planned for Minorville.”

(https://www.livingplaces.com/MS/Adams_County/Natchez_City/Woodlawn_Historic_District.html)

She continued by stating that the areas around Minor Street and Concord Avenue, including the historic slave quarters at “Concord Quarters” These resources are of immense historic significance, so she asked how could they be excluded from the historical district.

Mr. Giani requested a copy of the documents that Commissioner Jackson for his benefit, as he stated that he may not know all the actions and history of the planners before his time. From what Mr. Giani has heard, is that there has been talk around the National Register designation however no action has taken place.

Commissioner Chatman commented and suggested the inclusion of the areas around Watkins Street Cemetery in the residential urban renewal district as the victims of the infamous Rhythm Night Club fire are buried there. She continued by stating that the inclusion and designation of these areas as National Register Districts is very timely in her opinion, and Natchez must step up. Places like the NAACP headquarters in Woodlawn, must be included in the revitalization effort.

Commissioner Johnson stated that this conversation is a bit off track regarding the purpose of this application. This application refers to already established districts, whether they are local Historic Districts or National Register Districts and not about the designation of new historic-related areas. In his view, this is stage 1 of a city-wide revitalization effort that is starting in core, dense area and then can be expanded outward. After positive and desired results are felt within the Urban Renewal areas, then the areas can be expanded.

Commissioner Jackson disagreed and stated the aforementioned districts should be included because why would you leave out the mentioned historic areas, this would be an incomplete document in her opinion.

Commissioner Chatman expressed her concern about leaving out these areas as being exclusive, rather than inclusive.

Commissioner Harris stated that planning staff needs to be provided with the documents that Commission Jackson read, so more information can be known.

Acting Chairperson, Vice-Chair Stratton Bull asked planning staff if there was any public comment or any comments received. Mr. Giani stated that no letters were sent out as of yet, however the State Law lays out the rules for publication of notices regarding the designation

of Urban Renewal Districts. This would be done after/if the Planning Commission recommends approval to Mayor and Board of Alderman.

Commissioner Harris restated that the documents showing that Minorville is a National Register district should be given to planning staff for further clarification. Commissioner Jackson stated that she would make those available to Mr. Giani.

For clarification, Mr. Giani stated that there is a difference between a National Register District and a local Historic District. The local Historic District is overseen by the Natchez Preservation Commission and the Preservation Ordinance. National Register District such as Woodlawn, are not under the jurisdiction of the Preservation Ordinance or NPC. The establishment of Urban Renewal Residential Districts has nothing to do with the establishment of new historic districts or National Register Districts, as that is another process entirely. However, Mr. Giani would like to see the documents mentioned in Commissioner Jackson's report.

Lastly, Mr. Giani expressed his desire to be impartial with the proposed areas, that's why he used existing boundary lines (Historic Districts and National Register District) to create the areas and not just placing districts as he sees fit. He further explained that in his experience in creating "districts," whether it be the Go-Cup district or whatever, there was always a political aspect of why this street was or was not included. Mr. Giani wanted to avoid any appearance of political type districting, by using criteria based reasoning and not just organically creating new districts.

Commissioner Martin asked Mr. Giani, in his opinion, what the best course of action to move forward is. Mr. Giani stated in his professional opinion by viewing other urban renewal districts in the state, to limit the area as much as possible as to not dilute the economic effects or weaken the justification for that urban renewal designation. It is harder to justify, legally, a larger district because why wouldn't the City just designate the entire city an urban renewal area. This would be an unwanted an extreme for many reasons, but also would be impossible to legally justify. He sees these small, concentrated urban renewal districts as "part 1" of a multi-decade effort to bring economic incentives to areas with a high concentration of blight, but also high cultural significance.

Motion: I recommend the approval of a resolution to establish the Urban Renewal Districts, as stated in the Urban Renewal Plan, to the Mayor and Board of Alderman.

MOTION BY: Commissioner Martin

SECOND BY: Commissioner Johnson

In favor: Cheryl Rinehart.

Opposed: Charles Harris, Emma Rose Jackson, Mildred Chatman, Jonathan Smith, and Marcia McCullough

Motion fails, 3 In favor and 5 Opposed.

Motion: I move to defer the establishment of the Urban Renewal Districts until more information can be received.

MOTION BY: Commissioner Martin

SECOND BY: Commissioner Harris

In favor: ALL

Opposed: NONE

UNFINISHED BUSINESS: None

ADJOURNMENT:

Motion: I move to adjourn the Planning Commission meeting of January 21, 2021.

MOTION BY: Commissioner Martin

SECOND BY: Commissioner McCullough

In favor: ALL

Opposed: NONE

MEETING ADJOURNED

APPROVED: _____

Date: _____

ATTEST: _____

Date: _____