

TUPELO PLANNING COMMITTEE

October 5, 2020

CALL TO ORDER

Chair Leslie Mart called the meeting to order by Zoom. Gus Hildenbrand, Scott Davis, Patti Thompson, and Jimmy Swann were present, with Pam Hadley and Lindsay Leake also attending by Zoom. Mr. Hildebrand provided the invocation and Mrs. Thompson led the Pledge of Allegiance. Staff present were Pat Falkner and Marilyn Vail of the Development Services Department.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the September 14 meeting were approved on a motion by Mrs. Thompson, seconded by Mr. Hildenbrand.

Mr. Falkner reported that the City Council would be reviewing those minutes at their October 6 meeting, including the appeal of the Committee's action.

NEW BUSINESS

FLEX 20-04: Application by Louis Burrill for approval to build a 155 foot telecommunications tower in a Low Density Residential zoning district, at 203 South Feemster Lake Road.

Brian Youngken of Metro Site, the company handling site acquisition for the proposed tower, spoke for the application by Zoom. He explained that his company had been asked to locate a site for a new tower within a limited distance from an existing tower off Eason Boulevard. The location was based on the need to maintain service coverage in that area of East Tupelo.

Ms. Mart asked for an explanation of the site plan submitted with the application. Mr. Youngken explained that the location of the tower on the property was based on the highest point of elevation. The tower would be in the wooded area behind the existing house on the property. The higher location would offer expanded coverage compared to the tower located 700 feet to the east.

Ms. Mart asked for the staff recommendation. Mr. Falkner explained that the criteria for approval of a flexible use included a finding that the proposed use would be in harmony with the area and not injurious to the value of surrounding properties. The area around the proposed site is predominantly single family housing, one story structures, on relatively large lots. A cell tower would be out of character with that development pattern and would be expected to diminish value of the homes around it.

Mr. Hildenbrand and Mr Swann asked about the visibility of the proposed tower relative to the trees on the site. Mr. Youngken said that the upper part of the tower would be visible above the tree line, but that it could be built in a design resembling a pine tree.

Ms. Mart asked about landscaping of the site. Mr. Youngken explained that the landscape design was not submitted but that the company typically includes trees planted on 6 foot centers and a fence.

Mr. Hildenbrand asked how far the tower would be from Feemster Lake Road. Mr. Youngken answered that it would be 280 feet from the street right of way line. He also noted that the tower would be 125 feet from the north line of the property and 74 feet from the south line, and that it was designed, in the event of structural failure, to fall within the footprint of the tower rather than off the property.

Ms. Mart asked about the time line for the project. Mr. Youngken replied that it was projected for the third quarter of 2021. Ms. Mart asked how much of the tower could be camouflaged as a tree. Mr Youngken answered 30 to 35%.

Mrs. Thompson asked about the choice of location, if that was based on service complaints. Mr. Youngken answered that the carriers wanted a new tower because of the cost of continuing to use the existing tower. Mrs. Thompson followed up with a question whether the existing pole would be removed if the carrier went away. Mr. Youngken said that would depend on the owner of that tower.

The meeting was opened to the public.

Mike Pettigrew of 281 McNeece Street spoke, saying that he owns a number of properties in the McNeece Street and Feemster Lake Road area. He said that the existing tower was visible from Feemster Lake Road and that a second tower would devalue the neighborhood. Mr. Pettigrew also said that the location of a second tower appeared to be based on financial considerations rather than coverage needs, and suggested that the site acquisition company should find a location that is not in a residential zoning district.

Ms. Mart asked the applicant about that. Mr. Youngken answered that the company had contacted all property owners in the other zoning districts within the location search radius and none had responded. He also noted that the company was avoiding a wetland area.

Mrs. Thompson asked if any of the residents had service issues. Those present indicated that they did not. She asked if they had any objection to the tower if it were camouflaged. Mrs. Gillie Doty of 257 South Feemster Lake said that she can see the existing tower from her house and the proposed tower would be even more visible.

Ms. Mart asked if the Committee could require the removal of the existing tower if the new tower was approved. Mr. Falkner answered that the existing tower was owned by a different company which would not be bound by the Committee's action.

Ms. Mart asked what would be the effects of a denial on current service. Mr. Youngken said that the carrier might relocate and the coverage in the area could be affected. Ms.

Mart asked if the staff had a recommendation. Mr. Falkner replied that based on the finding that the structure would not be in harmony with the area around it, the staff had recommended disapproval.

Mr. Davis said that he did not see why the Committee should approve placement of a new tower in a residential area for the financial benefit of the carrier service. He moved to deny the application. Mr. Hildenbrand seconded the motion which passed with all voting in favor. Mr. Falkner explained the appeal process to Mr. Youngken who verbally indicated that the applicant wanted to appeal the decision.

Mr. Falkner reported to the committee that he was beginning to explore some of the questions that would have to be addressed in a new comprehensive plan for the city, as a result of the economic impacts of the Covid pandemic. To begin this process, Shane Homan, Chief Operation Officer of CDF, had been invited to give the foundation's perspective on those economic impacts. His remarks are summarized as follows:

Mr. Homan identified three significant patterns. First, both employment and education have been moved toward a hybrid model, with more work and more schooling conducted from homes. This changing structure has been challenging for employers and for school systems as well as for citizens trying to accommodate work and school or child care into their home settings. The hybrid model will no doubt continue to evolve, but is expected to impact both residential and commercial development in ways that the comprehensive plan will need to recognize.

Second, the national impact of the pandemic is driving a trend of migration away from larger metropolitan areas toward smaller cities, including those designated as micropolitan like Tupelo. People whose jobs allow them to work primarily from home are able to choose less expensive or more appealing places to live, rather than being tied to the area where the job site is located. This is an opportunity for Tupelo to compete more strongly for skilled workers and entrepreneurs.

The third area where the pandemic is disrupting earlier patterns is the acceleration of the shift of retail activity away from in person settings toward e-commerce. On line businesses were already cutting deeply into retail market shares, and the pandemic is simply strengthening the trend. We can expect a reduced need for higher quality office and retail space, as well as a redesign of restaurants. Changing supply chains may stimulate a need for local manufacturing or distribution space, but this would not necessarily offset the likelihood of reduced local sales tax revenue.

Mr. Homan also offered several observations about different priorities for things the city might do to adapt to these changes. There is definitely a need for an enhanced effort to get high-capacity internet service in all parts of the city. This is critical infrastructure for business, government, and especially for residences. It will be a key to the possibility of growing the residential core of the city with implications both for supporting local businesses and strengthening the school system. Closely related is a need for community centers that can provide space for school age children to do class work while adults work

at their jobs and younger children are cared for. Also, with many college students having to take classes from home, recreational and other activity programming aimed at this group could engage them in ways that benefit both those young people and the local economy. Outdoor infrastructure such as trails, pedestrian connectivity and bike paths would be effective for this group while also contributing to economic vitality of business areas that could be accessed this way. Finally, the city should be looking for ways to support the retailers still in place, especially in the mall area, as well as for potential conversions of vacant 'big box' retail buildings.

In reference to a question about the work of CDF in the pandemic, Mr. Homan explained their staff's close involvement in support of local businesses as they accessed stimulus funding. With this support, Lee County employment levels have come back close to pre-pandemic levels. Many local firms are having trouble filling job vacancies; some of this may have been a result of the high level of unemployment compensation provided early in the summer, but it also reflects health concerns and child care issues. Mr. Homan also expressed concern about the effects of the disrupted school years, noting that this is likely to affect students already at a disadvantage in education.

Mr. Falkner noted that several applications had been received for the November meeting. Ms. Mart set the work session for October 25 and the meeting for November 2.

The meeting was adjourned on a motion by Mrs. Thompson, seconded by Mr. Swann.