

Minutes: Russell Township Zoning Commission
Russell Fire-Rescue Station
April 13, 2016

Present: Richard Snyder, Chairman
Bruce Murphy
Donna Weiss Carson
Ben Kotowski
Tom Warren
Diana Steffen, Secretary

Also in attendance:

Board of Zoning Appeals: Sarah Moore, Vice-Chairman, Dushan Boucek, and Steve Gokorsch, Chairman, who was out of town but attended via speaker phone.

Board of Trustees: Jim Mueller.

Legal Counsel: Kate Jacob of the Geauga County Prosecutor's Office.

The Chairman called the meeting to order at 7:36 p.m. The Secretary announced that this was a special meeting and a sunshine notice was sent to the Chagrin Valley Times, Geauga Maple Leaf and News Herald on 04/11/16. It was also posted at the Administration Building.

Mr. Snyder welcomed the invited guests who were in attendance from the Board of Zoning Appeals, Board of Trustees and the Prosecutor's Office.

Mr. Snyder explained the purpose of the special meeting was to clarify the role of the zoning secretary/administrative assistant going forward due to the pending retirement of Diana Steffen on April 30th from her positions of Zoning Secretary and Zoning Inspector, and with no one in line to replace her. The Zoning Commission was made aware that the Trustees were not planning to replace the Zoning Secretary position from a Geauga Maple Leaf article dated 03/24/16. In it the Fiscal Officer was quoted as saying, "...the township is looking at changing the zoning inspector position to part-time, with a couple of township administrators possibly taking on some of the secretarial duties, a move that would likely save money." Mr. Snyder said that the Zoning Commission is of the opinion that a full-time zoning secretary/administrative assistant is needed, and they would like to have input from the BZA on this.

Mr. Murphy said that in his proposal for the zoning office he had recommended having a public meeting of the township boards to discuss the matter. There had been some resistance to doing so, and a suggestion for individuals to meet separately. He felt that any discussion of public business by public bodies should be done at a public meeting in order not to be in violation of the Ohio Open Meetings laws.

Mr. Murphy thanked Mrs. Steffen for her years of service and said that she had enabled the ZC to accomplish things it could not have done without her assistance. Institutional knowledge and memory in the zoning office will be lost since no one else has been working in it since the departure of the previous zoning inspector. He said the question now is how best to meet the needs of the zoning office and the two zoning boards. Administrative support is vital to maintain the integrity of the Township's zoning. He mentioned the current and previous job descriptions for the zoning secretary that he had distributed to everyone prior to this meeting. These call for a full-time secretary, and they have worked well for the Township for at least the last 18 years. He has now compiled a modified version of the previous undated job description, which is one of the handouts tonight. With assistance from Mrs. Steffen he added to it to reflect the position as they see it going forward.

Mr. Warren commented that according to the Ohio Revised Code the Board of Trustees has the authority to hire a zoning inspector and other assistants in the Zoning Office, and each of the zoning boards has authority to hire its own secretary with funds appropriated by the Trustees.

Trustee Jim Mueller said the boards are all on one team and everyone agrees as to the objective of what to do now the Township is losing the Zoning Inspector who moved into that position from Zoning Secretary (and Assistant Zoning Inspector). The Trustees have advertised for a part-time zoning inspector and are in the process of reviewing applications. With regard to the zoning secretary position, he said he understood there are times when it should not overlap between the boards, and a separate person should be used for each and for the zoning office work. Ms. Jacob advised that the ORC allows for one person, and Mrs. Steffen said it has been one position for a long time prior to her being hired in 1992, and the current and previous job descriptions are for one person. Mr. Mueller agreed that it would be best to have one person only.

As far as requirements for a zoning secretary position, it was agreed that an in depth understanding of the community and ability to research and write well were essential. Mr. Mueller suggested that from the description of some of the skills required, they might need someone with some legal secretary experience, who would still have a steep learning curve. He understood that there were issues with lack of knowledge for writing of minutes when Jen Dorka was assigned to do them for the Zoning Commission, and the lack of knowledge will be a problem for a while for whoever takes on the work. Mrs. Steffen said that Ms. Dorka worked well with her when she was training her for the zoning secretary's work, but after three months Ms. Dorka was needed full time in the Fiscal Office temporarily while Brittany Milite was on maternity leave. However, after Ms. Milite returned Ms. Dorka was apparently not available and no provisions were made to replace her. Since January 2015 Mrs. Steffen has received no assistance and has not been able to train anyone to gain knowledge of zoning or Zoning Office procedures.

Mr. Warren said that a full-time secretary to serve in all three positions would be best, and others in attendance agreed because the person would be mentored by the Zoning Inspector, and the positions have a very large amount of overlap. The knowledge gained would be used in all the positions.

Over the speaker phone Mr. Gokorsch said that the job description needs to be rewritten; the current one appears to have been written for a different position. As far as the BZA's work, the work load changes with some months having no work and others where there are several complicated cases. He emphasized that of the BZA variance decisions that are overturned in court 85% are due to procedural issues. It is vital that notices, filings etc. are all done correctly if BZA rulings are to be defensible and stand in court. He said he would be willing to share services using multiple people but if it compromises the BZA's work then the situation would have to be corrected immediately.

Mr. Mueller said he understood that it will be best to have one full-time person as zoning secretary handling all of the work, and he will discuss this with the other Trustees. If they agree then he suggested forming a committee of two people from each board, one Trustee and the Fiscal Officer to advertise the position and interview candidates. He said the Zoning Inspector will work 20 hours a week and would be the secretary's supervisor. Mr. Murphy emphasized that the secretary must be able to use initiative and be able to do work immediately as needed. Mr. Warren asked about the process needed to move forward quickly since it will take a while to bring someone up to speed. Mr. Mueller will talk to the two other trustees and tell them about the discussion and the decision made at this meeting that it is proposed that a full-time secretary is needed to fill all three positions. Mr. Gokorsch commented that he would appreciate interviewing candidates who would work for the BZA, and would like to focus on quality rather than looking to fill the position quickly.

It was agreed by all in attendance that there should be a committee to hire a full-time secretary for all three positions, consisting of one person from the Board of Trustees, two from the Board of Zoning Appeals, and two from the Zoning Commission, who would vote to choose the person, but including the new Zoning Inspector and the Fiscal Officer in advisory roles.

A discussion took place regarding the job description. It was agreed that a college graduate, paralegal degree, or equivalent experience was needed. Ms. Weiss Carson strongly stated that an ability and desire to learn all aspects of the job is as vital as the level of education. Ms. Moore recommended that the Trustees advertise the position as soon as possible, and leave it to the boards to rewrite the details in

