

TOWN OF SNOW HILL, MARYLAND

Life on the River

PUBLIC HEARING

JANUARY 26, 2016

On Tuesday, January 26, 2016 the Mayor and Town Council convened in a Public Hearing at 6:00pm at the Train Station on Belt Street, Snow Hill, Maryland.

PUBLIC OFFICIALS PRESENT

Mayor John Dorman; Councilwoman Alison Cook; Councilman Michael Pruitt; and Councilwoman Jenny Hall.

STAFF IN ATTENDANCE

Kelly Pruitt, Town Manager; Trish Goodsell, Asst. to the Town Manager; Michael Day, Economic Development Coordinator

Mayor Dorman opened the Public Hearing at 6:06pm and announced that the topic for discussion was Ordinance No. 2016-01 "Vacant Building Regulations". He introduced town staff that was present, as well as the elected officials.

The following people spoke:

1. Doug Glascox

Mr. Glascox stated that he is the owner of the Cedars B&B. He pointed out concerns in the draft Ordinance as stated below:

- a) Section 3 – houses that are for sale take a long time to sell; would be a hardship to pay fees after an inspection has deemed property to be ok
- b) Section 7-A-2 – states occupants but if vacant there are no occupants
- c) Section 7-A-B-4 – "occupants" again
- d) Section 7-B-1 – "occupants" again
- e) Section 7-B-2,3 – lots of times real estate is "as is" condition, which is proper to do; properties sell under market value
- f) Section 8 – lists the fees as \$300 and \$500 to cover registration and inspection but in Section 9 an inspection fee is added – redundant
- g) Section 11 – should have a clause for accountability; punish those only if they fail

He agrees with enforcement to hold people accountable but this seems to be exorbitant. He added that the Town, as well as County and State who have properties should be held to the same standard. He feels the 6-month rule to get things done is unrealistic, as some properties have been under restoration for years. He mentioned that a shop downtown took 11 months just for inspections/permits, which is a heavy burden.

2. Ann Coates

Mrs. Coates stated that she has spoken with Kelly and others about this Ordinance and feels the Town needs to be more proactive. She feels the Town has done a good job with Façade and Community Legacy grants; however, this Ordinance is punitive. She feels that Snow Hill needs a market but it is not here. She stated that she has done research and this type of Ordinance was only enacted during the economic recession and feels it is invasive and poorly written.

She has a building on the market “as is” and cannot afford to do more to the property.

Mayor Dorman asked what her solution would be. Mrs. Coates said she cannot fix the building unless she “wins the lottery”, adding that the “deep pockets” have gone away. She stated that the hoops you have to go through, like The Smiths did with the Planning Department, make life difficult and it was easier when Kay Stroud was here. She mentioned waivers that the Town used to give to downtown merchants.

3. Sophika Smith

Mrs. Smith said this town is beautiful and she is concerned about the vacant properties, but feels we need to build on what we have and make it better instead of punishing people. She feels that going from nothing to micromanagement is unrealistic. She suggested a creative document that entices potential buyers or a contest for business ideas. She added that she feels this Ordinance will have the opposite effect of what we want and will make people run.

4. Todd Crosby

Mr. Crosby said he agreed with the statements made by Mrs. Coates and Mrs. Smith. He stated that he has been here for 20 years and there is now a different communication with Town Hall. He added that he never feels appreciated or that they are doing something good. He stated that he feels personally singled out over the past 9 years and has heard from Town staff and customers they are not wanted here. He added that even though Tom (Gorman) is gone, he is not the only problem. He was asked to do illegal things and feels that we need a Code Facilitator rather than a Code Enforcement Officer.

Mr. Crosby stated that the Town has a reputation for being difficult and this Ordinance adds one more thing. He does not agree with the Knox Box or posting contact information on the building. He stated that they do not want their properties to be vacant. He commented that the problem here is more than the document.

5. Gary Weber

Mr. Weber stated that he understands the reason behind the Ordinance but he generally agrees with the comments made by others. He stated that he only heard of this hearing through an email he received from the Chamber and is concerned that it is being adopted on the 9th. He added that it never was presented to the Planning Commission for review. Mayor Dorman responded that it does not have to go before the Commission.

Mr. Weber recommended putting the Ordinance before the Planning Commission and “flesh it out”. He added that there is a divide here but he feels the Mayor and Council’s hearts are in the right place.

6. Fannie Birckhead

Ms. Birckhead stated that she was present on behalf of her daughters, who could not attend due to the short notice of the meeting. She stated that she agrees with what everyone has said before her. She commented that 6 months to rehab the properties is unrealistic and it seems that the Ordinance is all about making money. She added that her daughters are in rent court 3-4 times a year and cannot get rent and this Ordinance will cost them more money.

Ms. Birckhead agrees that the problem is bigger than the document. She feels the town should be held to the same standards for their properties. She stated that she wants to see growth but don't hinder and everyone needs to work together.

7. Nancy Thompson

Mrs. Thompson stated that banks will not lend money to fix old building nor will they approve residential loans to those with commercial blends. She stated that she feels the town is trying but may be misdirected at times. She added that the only funds to fix buildings are out of their own pockets or through grants.

Mrs. Thompson spoke of when she was looking to move here and how helpful Kay and Kelly were. She feels that there needs to be a really good solution.

8. Tony Labesky

Mr. Labesky stated that he looks at this like football: you have a chance to go to the Super Bowl but not if you only submit a document that has never been reviewed by the players, who are important to welcoming people to the town. He added that this Ordinance is a good start but should not be the end. He feels that the government should work with the investors in the community.

9. Van Tran

Mr. Tran has been invested in Snow Hill for 15 years. He feels that we need a solution and that Michael Day is the right person to find one. He suggested posting vacant properties on the town website so outsiders can see what opportunities are here. He also feels the town should have an expert on staff for loans, etc. for business owners.

Mr. Tran added that he would like to stay here forever but he also has met with the Mayor and Council President in Salisbury for opportunities.

10. Dick Thompson

Mr. Thompson thanked the Mayor and Council for their efforts but is not sure of what the original objective was, as he had not read the Ordinance. He feels that grant funding is critical and applauds the Town for the new funds. He suggested taking the "carrot" approach rather than the "stick" approach, as well as giving incentives to reinvest and get grants.

11. Michael Day

Mr. Day stated that he agreed with a lot that was said. He added that his objective when Kelly was "noodling" around with the idea was to get it going and to push it. He stated that it might not be the best thing and might need more work. He stated that he photographed all the vacant

properties in town and has been meeting with Economic Development, who may be able to assist with advertising.

Mr. Day stated that he has met with every developer downtown and the buzz is here but the condition of properties is the problem. He added that he disagreed with Mrs. Coates and that there is a market here with a lot of interest, which is why he pushed Kelly because he wants a match lit, not a bonfire. He feels there is a potential for apartments downtown.

Mr. Day said that we need to review what the stumbling blocks are with the Fire Marshall and Code Enforcement/Planning. He added that he was surprised that everyone was not notified and we need to do a better job internally.

Mr. Day discussed the financial programs for business owners.

12. Jan King

Mrs. King stated that she is concerned about residential properties that have trees growing in them or that are in poor condition, like Church Street. She would like an Ordinance that addresses them.

13. Rick Smith

Mr. Smith stated that the Town needs to work with people to get things done. He stated they put a lot of money into their shop and wanted to have an apartment upstairs. They were told they could not have a back doorway due to ADA compliance; however, it would require a step that leads to stairs so ADA cannot be an issue. Mayor Dorman interjected and advised that he can have the doorway.

Mr. Smith continued saying he was required to provide 2 sets of engineering drawings because the first were not stamped. He was advised by the Fire Marshall that a double ceiling was required. Later, the FM advised that he could not have can lights, even though they were on the drawings provided.

14. Sherry Glascox

Mrs. Glascox stated there seems to be enough stories to warrant a pamphlet of information that is provided before you start on what is required along with the Code requirements. She said this would prevent wasted money.

15. Doug Glascox

Mr. Glascox stated he sees a lot of frustration with the Codes. He added that he is guilty of not coming to meetings until he is irritated and that it is the responsibility of the business owners to attend meetings and be informed.

16. Mimi Suznavick

Mrs. Suznavick commented that the Ordinance draft was poorly written and embarrassing, stating that the verbiage should match and be legally correct.

17. Clint Bickford

Mr. Bickford spoke in favor of the Ordinance and added that he doubted the residential properties affected anyone present. He stated that property values won't increase until changes are made. He commented that it is fine to dangle the carrot but you need teeth to make change. He suggested that fees be waived for people making investments.

Mr. Bickford thanked everyone for the document and their intention.

18. Suzanne Timmons

Mrs. Timmons thanked the Mayor and Council for bringing attention to this matter. She stated that while she does not own property in town she has been the "Queen of Hanging in There" for 13 years as a business owner. She stated that she supports a change downtown, as she has watched people come and go for years.

Mrs. Timmons encouraged people to be open-minded; adding that she wished the owners would either lower their price and sell their property or fix it. She added that this is a catalyst for change.

Comments from the Mayor and Council:

Councilman Pruitt

Councilman Pruitt stated that considering this was a public hearing he was just listening and we will need to start over.

Councilwoman Hall

Councilwoman Hall stated that 11 people spoke tonight and she has never seen them at a meeting since she took office 3 years ago. She added that they want to do the right thing and the Ordinance was intended to be proactive and this is the first attempt.

Councilwoman Cook

Councilwoman Cook stated that she feels the same as Councilwoman Hall, adding that she is at their disposal for calls, etc. because their concerns mean something. She added that Michael Day is trying to move mountains and with a declining population (1900) we need to be more forward-moving and they will keep working on it.

Mayor Dorman

Mayor Dorman stated that when Kelly drafted the document it was intended to light a fuse and get comments. He agree that it needs a lot of correction but that they have input now. He added that the Ordinance will NOT be passed at the Town Meeting, as they will continue to work on it.

Mayor Dorman closed the Public Hearing at 7:45pm.

Respectfully submitted: Trish Goodsell, Asst. to Town Manager