

Cullowhee Planning Council Minutes

February 5, 2024

6:00 p.m.

WCU Ramsey Center, Hospitality Room
Cullowhee, NC

Members	Present	Absent	Members	Present	Absent	Members	Present	Absent
David Claxton	X		Karen Kandl	X		<i>Vacant</i>		
Mike Byers	X		Rebecca Manring	X		<i>Vacant</i>		
Chris Stuckey	X		Damon Sink		X			

Staff Present

Michael Poston, Planning Director
Anna Harkins, Planner I
Allison Kelley, Administrative Assistant III

Call to Order

Chairman David Claxton called the meeting to order at 6:01 p.m. and a quorum was present.

Approval of Agenda

Chris Stuckey made a motion to approve the agenda as written, and it passed unanimously.

Approval of Minutes

Rebecca Manring made a motion to approve the minutes from December 4, 2023, and it passed unanimously.

Public Comment- Sign-up sheet- 3 minutes per speaker

There were no public comments.

New Business

a) Vice Chair Nominations

Mr. Poston stated the Council does not have a vice chair as member Carol Burton has rotated off of the board. He asked the Council to consider making a nomination for vice chair for the absence of the chairman to run the meeting.

Karen Kandl made a recommendation to nominate Rebecca Manring as vice chair. David Claxton seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously.

b) Project Updates

Mr. Poston provided an update on the Jackson County Recreation Center Indoor Pool. He stated for those that were on the Council at the time, they had to approve the architectural design of the pool, and the County did have to make a few modifications before to ensure that it met all the design criteria because it is part of the district. Mr. Poston presented pictures of the East elevation, the existing building and the new piece. In addition, he showed the curb and gutter for the parking area and drive aisles. On the West elevation, he showed the current construction status and stated they are moving quickly on the exterior, and they are starting to move into the interior. The project will kind of slow as you get into drywall, and they are getting into that process now which they are using sheetrock, along with bringing in subcontractors for utilities and things of that nature. Mr. Poston stated they anticipate the indoor pool to be open of summer of this year; however, we are working on

the exact timeline as some of that will be determined by factors outside of their control for example weather would be a factor.

Mr. Poston presented pictures of the South elevation, that majority is translucent and made up of glass and that would be some of the last part of the exterior to be put in there. They are still bringing in some heavier pieces of equipment to finish the work, and both pools have been dugout. Once the site construction gets towards completion, the County Public Works Department would start the plantings based on the planting schedule that is required for the parking lot, buffering and drive out buffering, etc. Mr. Poston stated the site itself does not really need to be buffered because it abuts institutional uses mostly, and they would mostly be looking at parking islands and landscaping around the building.

Mr. Claxton inquired from staff more about the project timeline. Mr. Poston stated the Recreation Department has said summer, but that could be fluctuated between early, mid or late summer depending on the weather moving forward. Once they get inside, it would be less weather dependent, but there is still going to be some site construction that needs to be done, and the parking areas are still being used as a lay down area, and they would need to remove that material out of that area to finish the parking lot. Mr. Claxton stated the Recreation Center is used for voting and inquired if it would still be used for that purpose. Mr. Poston stated yes, from what he has understood they are planning to use the Recreation Center for the voting precinct, and he did see some of the election people were out there a few weeks ago measuring.

Mr. Poston stated next update is the Monteith Gap Road construction project, and presented the preferred alternative design on this project when it was first floated back in 2016/2017. He stated this did not go through our normal Transportation Improvement Program that the state does, it was a special project that was funded from a couple different pots of money. The bridge replacement is through bridge replacement funds, and the rest of the design was funded through at a time by a high impact small budget type of program. The project developed quicker than most transportation projects, and would take about 7 years to get the project built and constructed unlike other projects that take about 15 years. The project includes improving and realigning Monteith Gap Road, a new bridge upstream that will not be as prone to flooding as the current bridge has debris that gets caught up underneath from Cullowhee Creek as the bridge is not very high. In addition, he stated there is a floodplain that is within the area because of the confluence of where Cullowhee Creek comes into the Tuckasegee River, high rain events, and the potential for that 100-year floodplain to really impact that area. Mr. Poston stated the bridge is not the main cause of flooding in the Cullowhee Community Garden as there is water coming in at the bend and if you have a high rate of water coming the hydrology on that will still be tricky. However, having a higher bridge, the bridge will not get washed out or get impacted quite as easily as it does today. There have been recent incidences where that bridge has been hard to be accessible and they have had some folks that they have had to try to get out of that area before it got too bad. That bridge realignment will raise the level of the bridge, which will help for transportation and sustainability in that area for the transportation network.

The proposed right-of-way would open up an opportunity because the County owns a good amount of property in that area, which may allow for some public access to Tuckasegee River and Cullowhee Creek in that area. In addition, he stated the County and the Jackson County Recreation Department is interested in looking into this opportunity. The DOT has already purchased where the Smoky Mountain Pregnancy Center used to be, and some of the area near the Cullowhee Community Garden near South Painter Road, construction on the bridge is scheduled to be to begin and commence at the end of the month, and after that is completed they would begin the road construction. Mr. Poston stated they have previously moved some utility lines, and when they were there to take pictures of the current status of the area there were the subcontractor doing the directional bore for the new sewer line going in underneath Cullowhee Creek. He showed a picture of South Painter Road where they have installed new telephone poles that are part of the realignment, they are outside of where the new roadways are coming in, and it is a wet area and the new road alignment will be built up to account for that and the drainage is being designed with that in mind.

In addition, he stated Monteith Gap Road that connects to Ledbetter Road would be realigned as it has that free flowing right hand turn currently where you do not have to even tap the brake to get

onto the road, it will change into a 90 degree turn which is a more classic intersection design to slow down traffic when making a right hand turn. The other important thing to note is the County has already agreed to match the funding for DOT to put sidewalks that are scheduled to be on both sides of the road, and bike lanes that will solve the issues on Ledbetter Road, which is a first step in providing safer access to our multi-family and student housing projects in that area.

Mr. Poston stated the hatched areas on the plans indicate the asphalt and the bridge that are to be removed, and we have the ability to ask DOT to keep some of that asphalt, but he has asked for about 3 years and was told to stop asking because they were not going to do it to keep that bridge for pedestrian usage so they would not have to do anything but maybe put that Greenway down. The Army Corps would not let us keep it because that changes the hydrology in the area, which is gone. In addition, he stated they could go back in with a new pedestrian walkway, but the provision that we are going to make is because this road will not be here, you can get back up to grade and use a sidewalk in the interim. We have it finalized, but we probably could ask, as we did this in Dillsboro at the Monteith Farmstead and Community Park and the DOT did that bridge replacement they had to put in that road. The County worked with DOT, Town of Dillsboro, and the contractor and we left half of the roadway width, which is about 10 feet of asphalt and the bridge abutments to allow for us to connect those two parks. Mr. Poston stated theoretically, we could look at something similar, and he believes that bridge, though, we will not be able to keep in any shape or form, they would have to figure out a workaround if that is what we want to do.

In addition, he stated there is a missing segment of sidewalk between where the Cullowhee bridge replacement, the one that happened on Old Cullowhee Road, there is a gap basically from the old Moss General Store property up and around to the Baptist Student Union. In addition, he stated he believed Western had provided some funds to help see that project through to his understanding from DOT is that they have rolled that sidewalk project into this project to get it done. Mr. Poston stated as we sit today believed that that missing link will also be addressed in this project, and we will actually have a solid off road facility for students to use at least until they get to Ledbetter Road. In addition, he stated they have scored Ledbetter Road in the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) process twice, and the highest score we received was a 7 that is out of 100. That is absent to some other legislative program that is not going to be replaced or improved through the normal DOT TIP process, it just will not score well enough.

Mr. Poston stated when we talked about the Greenway going through that that Section a part of that was designed to be an on road sidewalk segment, and it does not seem likely that we have enough real estate between the rock face and the river to meet that. Therefore, we will have to be creative, and they are still trying to workshop around what can be done as it is an engineering problem, which means there is a solution and it is just a matter of how much those solutions cost and whether or not we have the ability, or desire to meet those costs.

Mr. Claxton inquired about the timeline for the new bridge. Mr. Poston stated the completion date is scheduled for December of 2025. Ms. Manring stated she assumed that with the roundabout, they were connecting all three roads to the roundabout. She inquired what was the thought process behind doing it this way, instead of connecting all three roads.

Mr. Poston stated he believed it would be difficult because you have an offset, and this grade coming downhill, and you would have to grade back farther because you do not want a roundabout on the grade, so they came back down to where it is flat. He stated making the best out of the situation is extending Ledbetter Road to this 90 degree angle to slow down traffic coming down the right off of Monteith Gap Road and South Painter Road.

In addition, he stated he believed the roundabout was to better manage traffic; it will have the ability to slow folks down. He believes that it would produce a safer environment, for automobiles and for other users of the road. When he travels that road he does see that there is always somebody walking down that grass on the medians, there is no shoulder, and this project will address more than just automobile safety, it would address all of the different users. In addition, this would be a safer option for bike users as he is sure there might be some students that have bikes. He stated he believed the project better suits the type of area that has grown into than what a traditional roadway design would be. The project also gives a better shot at providing sidewalks, bike lanes, and getting to a bridge that can accommodate additional facilities including sidewalks and bike lanes going

across the bridge, and that bridge will be wider than the current bridges by a noticeable amount, and this project is fast moving in terms of DOT work. As the project moves forward, folks off of Ledbetter Road and Monteith Gap Road will notice some transportation related delays, and we can ask DOT regarding timing or when they expect lane closures, etc.

Mr. Claxton stated he was curious because right now along the existing road on the riverside at the bridge over the creek, there is a sewer line and he asked if that would remain or go away. Mr. Poston stated DOT is more particular now about what you add onto bridges because of the weight of the bridge changes the life expectancy of that because it was never really designed for all those things to have. In addition, he does not know if it is a sewer line or water line, and does not know if the water line is being bored, but we do know the sewer line is being bored as he was out taking pictures of the current status, he talked to the subcontractor that said the sewer line was going to be bored underneath Cullowhee Creek. In addition, he stated if that was a sewer line and yes, it would go away because that is going to be a directional bore underneath the creek. Mr. Claxton stated recently after they had some serious rains, there was a whole bunch of debris that got caught against that pipe, sewer or water line on the riverside of the road. Somebody went and cleaned it out, and he guessed it was those guys that are doing the work. Mr. Poston stated it could have been or DOT. Mr. Claxton stated he believes that as long as that pipe is there, it is still going to get dammed up every time there is a heavy rain. Mr. Poston stated the height of the bridge is going to be increased. Mr. Claxton stated this is approximately three feet below the height of the bridge. Mr. Poston stated that is part of the reason why DOT does not allow them to collocate utility piping under bridges as much. Therefore, that is why they are doing the directional or going underneath the creek as opposed to going over top to the bridge, like you would see done in the past that DOT does not allow that as practice anymore. Mr. Poston stated he believes that the pregnancy center was the only structure that was actually removed, and the rest of this is property acquisitions. In addition, the folks at the pregnancy center were informed when they bought the place that it was going to be most likely torn down, and they decided to buy it anyway and outfitted. DOT bought that property from them and they have relocated to Sylva. Mr. Poston stated he did not believe that everyone was wholeheartedly pleased about it, there was a few folks that were not as excited about the project in general, But DOT went ahead and was able to secure the right-of-way.

Mr. Claxton inquired if there would be a next project similar to either of these in Cullowhee in the near future. Mr. Poston stated he believed the next set of projects that we would see around the Cullowhee area will be if and when the County's is able to secure enough land to start the proposed River Park. In addition, he stated he does not know when that would be, and suspects that based on what we currently have acquired in the County's possession it will be on the river across the bridge off of Wayehutta Road, and he does not know if it would ever go across the bridge off of Casey Road which is where the existing Lena Davis Landing is. He stated the County is closer than we have ever been the County owns now the property from DOT, and purchased the Prentice property, so it is the old Speedy's building and to date, the building owner has not been interested in selling that.

Mr. Claxton stated he guessed a Board like ours has no authority to recommend doing anything about neglected properties are abandoned properties. Mr. Poston stated there are some tools available, the County can condemn the building, but that just means that nobody should be in the building. In addition, he stated there is a lengthy court process to have the building removed, if it is that big of an issue. The county does not currently have a minimum of building code that some communities use, and there is a few rural counties that have those, and they are predominantly found in cities. He stated there are 26 counties, and they are evenly split, 13 and 13 between what we call urbanized counties and rural counties. He is not aware of anybody out west that has a minimum building code, maybe Hendersonville and Buncombe.

Mr. Claxton inquired if they have heard any interest from commissioners or planning councils. Mr. Poston stated we have heard some interest from folks, but that is a pretty big decision to make, but the human resources, staffing and financial resources that would need to implemented into such a program. However, that does not mean it could not be done, and it does not mean it should not be done. He stated that it means it is going to be one of those conversations that you cannot just say, we are going to adopt the minimum housing code or minimum building code, and all of a sudden, the County is going to jump in with two feet and enforce it. That is because the building staff does not

have any growth ability and cannot take on more tasks with the staff they have, and our department cannot either as it has four employees. Therefore, something is going to have to grow to accommodate some of those things. He believes those are all conversations that can be had, but he does not know that it is a quick conversation. Mr. Poston stated there is some nostalgia because of what used to be the original Speedy's, there was record store there at one time, and there have been a lot of different iterations however he does not know if that building is salvageable. He does not know if there is anything you could do from a structural perspective to rehab that building other than just taking it down and rebuilding, because it is a small piece, because when the bridge project came in and bought some of that property, so it is about a quarter of an acre. Therefore, when you think about commercial uses, you think about parking and all the other building footprint, you start to think, what can you really do with that piece. The property is not unusable; it is not an acre of flat land that is a rectangle that you can imagine 45 different things you could do with this property, as that would take a much more robust imagination.

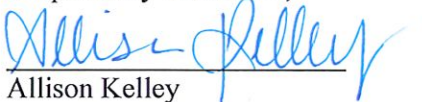
Ms. Kandl inquired if they had an updates on property where Sazon Mexican Cuisine restaurant was. Mr. Poston state he believes they are working to look at what the options are to rebuild as that property is tough, not only for planning, but for a lot of other rules and regulations at the state level, that building would have been what we call a legal nonconformity. When they tore it down to the ground, they lost a lot of that non-conforming status, and a lot of it has to do with how close it is to the Tuckasegee River and trout buffers and things of that nature. In addition, he stated they would be surprised at how much of their parking was probably also in the DOT right-of-way, and DOT will not let you park in the right-of-way for clear road zones, though they do not mind if it was just a utility easement, because those are not as big of an issue. He stated there is some power lines there and believes those are Westerns, and they would likely try to figure out a solution. They would not get the same style of development that was there previously, and most likely imagine it would be a one-story building because parking constraints for whatever use they intend to go there, but they are working on it and it is not an easy site.

Ms. Manring inquired if there is a way to get flashing lights and signs at the Rodgers Brothers, as she has noticed they stay pretty busy and at nighttime when you are driving through there you cannot see people crossing the road very well. Mr. Poston stated they are and a lot of that has to do with funding he thinks if DOT really thought about it they would have made that a requirement of their permitting process but they are working on that as they realize that is an issue. They are going to try to workshop that issue, and he believes that some of that is going to come down to how they are going to pay for it. He believes most likely at this point is going to be DOT that is going to have to figure out how to do that because they lost their leverage on making the establishment do that. Rodgers Brothers did everything they were told that they need to do based on the driveway permit that they were issue to his understanding.

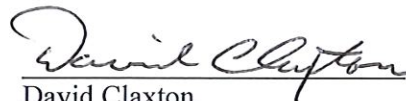
Adjournment

With no further business, Chris Stuckey made a motion to adjourn. Rebecca Manring seconded the motion and it carried unanimously, and the meeting adjourned at 6:43 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,



Allison Kelley
Administrative Assistant- Planning



David Claxton
Planning Council Chair

