

Albemarle County Planning Commission
FINAL Minutes December 14, 2021

The Albemarle County Planning Commission held a public hearing on Tuesday, December 14, 2021 at 6:00 p.m.

Members attending were Julian Bivins, Chair; Corey Clayborne; Rick Randolph; Daniel Bailey; Tim Keller; and Karen Firehock.

Members absent: Jennie More and Luis Carrazana.

Other officials present were Kevin McDermott, Planning Manager; Andy Reitelbach, Senior Planner of the Planning Division; Scott Clark, Community Development Planning Division; David Benish; Sandy Shackelford, Director of Planning of the TJPDC; Charles Rapp, Director of Planning; Andy Herrick, County Attorney's Office; and Carolyn Shaffer, Clerk to the Planning Commission.

Call to Order and Establish Quorum

Mr. Bivins called the meeting to order. He said the meeting was being held pursuant to and in compliance with Ordinance No. 20-A(16), "An Ordinance to Ensure the Continuity of Government During the COVID-19 Disaster." He said opportunities for the public to access and participate in the electronic meeting will be posted at www.albemarle.org/community/county-calendar when available. He asked Ms. Shaffer to call the meeting to order and establish a quorum.

Ms. Shaffer called the roll and established a quorum.

Consent Agenda

Mr. Bivins noted that there were no items on the consent agenda. He asked if there were members of the public who wished to speak on matters that were not on the agenda.

Mr. Neil Williamson said he served as president of the Free Enterprise Forum (FEF), a privately funded, public-policy organization focused on local government in Central Virginia. He explained that the FEF annually presented a fractured caroler story to spread holiday cheer and joy. He said it started with "An Albemarle Planning Christmas," followed by "Rudolph, the Form-Based Code," "Rio, the Small Plan, Walking in a Form-Based Code Wonderland," and the previous year's "Coronavirus Carol." He continued that every year presented its own challenges, and this year's challenges included the Community Development Department's application backlog. He said that he drafted a poem entitled, "All I want for Christmas is a Building Permit," but he decided against it. He announced that for 2021, the FEF presented the poem entitled, "Middle Density is Coming to Town," a parody of the song, "Santa Clause is Comin' to Town." He said he apologized to the original writers, Haven Gillespie and J. Fred Coots. He recited the parody poem.

Mr. Bivins asked Mr. Williamson to forward a copy of the poem to the clerk so that the Commission would have a physical copy. He asked if there were any other public comments for matters not on the agenda.

Ms. Shaffer said there were no more public comments.

Presentation

Rivanna River Corridor Plan

Mr. Benish introduced Sandy Shackelford, the Director of Planning and Transportation with the TJPDC, and Shirese Franklin, a planner who had also spearheaded this project as a joint City-County project.

Ms. Shackelford introduced herself to the Board as Sandy Shackelford, and said for a large majority of her career, she had worked in local government. She said that as Mr. Benish said, this project was a joint effort between Albemarle County and the City of Charlottesville. She said that originally, when this initiative was conceived, it was imagined as a three-phase process. She said the first phase was completed in 2018, which was an assessment of the existing conditions, and resulted largely in a series of maps that showed the existing conditions, flood plains, property ownership, land use, and other things for the joint area of the corridor.

Ms. Shackelford stated they were currently in phase two, which was the “visioning phase.” She said the goal of this phase was to identify what the priorities were as far as the future use and development of the river corridor. She said they would discuss phase three, but the original idea was that when going from phase two into phase three, they would begin development of a master plan for the urban corridor. She said there was some question at this point about whether they would move forward with phase three, and that had impacted some ways that they had approached this visioning phase for phase two.

Ms. Shackelford stated that the phase two study area was a 4.3-mile length of the corridor. She said it started at Penn Park as the northern termini and went down to the southern ending point near I-64. She said it involved properties on both sides of the river of Albemarle and Charlottesville. She said for reference, the existing conditions assessment involved looking at a thirteen-mile span of the corridor, so this was a much more concentrated and focused phase, and the small area boundary was developed by a technical committee composed of TJPDC, Albemarle County, and City of Charlottesville staff.

Ms. Shackelford said she would briefly review their public engagement process with this plan. She said they had a steering committee, which a few of the Planning Commission members were a part of, as well as two Board members and a member of the public from Albemarle and from Charlottesville. She said it was begun in July 2019, with an initial phase of public engagement in the fall of 2019. She said they went to the River Flow Festival and did some high-level engagement with people attending the event to get a gauge of the priorities for the urban corridor. She said they then came back and worked with the technical committee to develop an overall outreach process and develop their initial draft of the vision statement and guiding principles. She stated that in early 2020, when the global pandemic began, the process was paused while they focused on governmental strategies during the uncertain beginning of the pandemic, and they had to strategize what public engagement would look like with so much concern about interpersonal interactions.

Ms. Shackelford said there was a lot of discussion amongst the technical committee at that time about all of the activity that was occurring on the river, because that was a place people were attracted to during the pandemic. She said they worked hard to build their website and ensure that information was up to date, that surveys were available, and posted signs along the corridor itself to make sure people would be aware they were doing a visioning process for this study. She

said the posters had QR codes that could be scanned and let to the website where there was information and surveys about the public engagement opportunities available. She said through a combination of outreach efforts, they received about 70 responses through the website, so it ended up being a reasonably helpful way to make sure the public was aware and had opportunities to engage.

Ms. Shackelford said they also held two public webinars on October 24th and October 29th. She stated that in addition to posting the information along the river corridor, they also did a physical mailing to property owners within a 500-foot buffer of the project area to give everyone who was impacted in this area or interested the chance to make sure they had been contacted and notified. She said they also developed a stakeholder list with the technical committee and identified different organizations that may have contacts that would be interested in engaging in the process, including members of the Chamber of Commerce, the natural history committee, as she believed it was called, and other stakeholder groups that they knew would have at least some level of interest in this study, to make sure that there was at least an opportunity to engage and they were made aware of this project.

Ms. Shackelford said while they were doing this project, the NPO was also conducting a feasibility study on a bike and pedestrian crossing between Woolen Mills and Pantops. She said this really was a separate project that was outside of what they were doing for this corridor plan, but because it was related, and because so many of the same people cared about these happening at the same time, they made sure they were collaborating on scheduling the public information sessions and making sure they were cross-notifying people that had expressed interest in one or the other so that they had opportunities to engage on both of those.

Ms. Shackelford said from there, they refined their vision statement and guiding principles, and then separated the guiding principles into six different categories of types of uses, and for each of those categories of principles, they scheduled a stakeholder meeting with different folks that had some sort of technical or professional expertise in these subject areas, including people that had worked with Historic Cultural Resources, public safety personnel, Economic Development staff, Transportation Planning staff, and others. She said for each of those guiding principles, there was a separate meeting in which they got to vet the draft of recommendations before they completed the draft of the plan.

Ms. Shackelford said on August 10th, they met with the Planning Commission to conduct an informational meeting similar to the one they were doing here. She said the plan that was updated on the website right now that they all received as part of their packet incorporated comments from that Planning Commission meeting. She said she also presented this information to the Rivanna River Basin Commission in September, so some of those comments were also incorporated at this point.

Ms. Shackelford said that in addition to public engagement, they went through a benchmarking process to look at some successful planning efforts that were identified in other areas and pull out ideas and suggestions from those that could be incorporated into their own planning efforts. She said this benchmarking effort was envisioned to be looking at one other corridor in depth and understanding the plan, but as the technical committee was having discussions about what a good peer corridor was to consider, they realized there was no single one that was doing what they wanted to do with the Rivanna River. She said there was a lot of focus on economic development or flood mitigation or recreation, and what they really wanted for the Rivanna River was something that would balance a lot of different types of uses. She said they ended up deciding

to look more broadly at several different plans and look for common themes and other things that stood out to them and made sense to be incorporated into the Rivanna Plan.

Ms. Shackelford said that among those, they started out with Richmond and Greenville, because those were highly regarded as being successful river planning efforts, and then looked at Lynchburg and Fredericksburg. She stated there were some common things that were identified, such as a strong emphasis on how they developed their trail networks and access to the trail systems, incorporated local history, and fostering connections to the water. She said there were some other considerations that may not have shown up as universally, but were still important facts to consider, such as the accessibility of different amenities along the river corridor, the importance of wayfinding and navigation so people feel comfortable using the corridor, and different levels of environmental considerations, and while it was not addressed here, there was some discussion about how the zoning ordinances and regulations could support the development or the desired use of the river corridor.

Ms. Shackelford said they developed a draft vision statement and then vetted it through the public webinar and through the steering committee, so what was before the Planning Commission was the final version of the vision statement that was developed as part of this planning process. She read the vision statement.

Ms. Shackelford said she then developed their six guiding principles. She said when they began the planning effort and started putting together a draft of the guiding principles, there was this desire to say that the plan they were looking at was not a recreation plan, it was not a conservation plan, and it was not an economic development plan. She said it was intended to look at all the different ways they wanted the river to be used, and to balance those accordingly. She continued that however, when they developed the guiding principles with the public and with the steering committee, they found that environmental protection and stewardship was seen as a priority for improving the river and making it an attraction to the community, and that as long as it was being protected environmentally, the rest of the guiding principles would be of equal importance.

Ms. Shackelford said that it could be seen in the language that it was stated that environmental protection and stewardship would be paramount to all activities and land uses in the river corridor. She said that could be seen in some of the other guiding principles, such as recreational activities, where they made sure to emphasize that this could only be done with environmental sensitivity. She said that was also one of the concerns of the public, especially around how the recreational activities and development guiding principles could have some negative impacts on the environment.

Ms. Shackelford said briefly she would go through the high-level recommendations a general overview for each of the guiding principles. She said in the report, there was a table that showed that a lot of these recommendations were actually subtasks. She said the environmental protection recommendation was focused around first having the right information to know where sensitive biological areas were, and then could work to restrict access and have signage or appropriate barriers, to avoid impacts to wildlife movement. She said what they would find in the document was that it covered a very broad range of topics, and what they needed for a lot of these areas was a much more detailed analysis to be able to inform where some of these things should be occurring. She said something they would see out there was that there was a need for future planning to achieve some of these goals.

Ms. Shackelford said they also wanted to emphasize opportunities to work with other groups, such as the Rivanna Conservation Alliance, who were supporting some of the efforts. She said they did stream bank stabilization and worked with invasive species, and things like that. She said they were trying to build momentum where there had already been successes moving forward. She said they also got several comments that she found interesting and potentially helpful in reducing some of the labor, such as creating natural grasslands that did not require mowing, and other good ideas from the public regarding natural protection.

Ms. Shackelford said that related to recreational activities, they thought of this as a regional asset, as was stated in the vision statement. She said they wanted to improve trail connectivity, which may require looking at how they could enhance connections to nearby neighborhoods and potentially enhance that based on creating an access for neighborhoods that might be underserved and pay attention to issues of equity. She stated that more broadly than that, it meant looking at how people could access the river corridor, and how they could create as many different options for access as possible. She continued that that included looking at things like transit service to access the trails, so that was something else they tried to focus on, especially considering there were some concerns around restricted parking. She said that parking should definitely be considered, but that they needed to be much broader in how they could enhance actual access to the corridor area.

Ms. Shackelford said there were other items that came up, such as the accumulation of loose trash. She said there were several strategies that could be utilized for that, and there were different types of recreational activities through the corridor that may not be widely thought about, such as wildlife watching. She said the multi-purpose trails and bridges was also interesting. She said it partly related to the recreational access to the trail, but also to how the trail throughout the corridor fit into the larger transportation network. She said to make sure that whenever they thought about expanding access to the trail and thinking about other ways that these facilities could be useful or beneficial to people traveling through the area.

Ms. Shackelford said an example would be promoting trails and bridges for commuter traffic, and not only for recreational use, and thinking about how they could solve multiple goals with careful planning. She said she had mentioned before that they were pursuing a bicycle/pedestrian connection over the Rivanna River between Woolen Mills and Pantops, and the other sites that had potential for additional crossings were between Penn Park and Darden Towe Park and at Free Bridge. She said they were hoping to pursue at least one of those crossings. Ms. Shackelford said the last thing related to multipurpose and bridges was the importance of wayfinding systems to help direct users through the trail system, which could really make it a more attractive and hospitable way for people to travel to the area and feel comfort in being able to explore an unknown area with information about navigation.

Ms. Shackelford said the public safety, health, and welfare section was interesting because when they began the discussion, initially there was a push to make sure the corridor users felt comfortable and safe within the corridor, but as conversations progressed with the Public Safety Director, it turned less into providing a sense of comfort and safety, and more about providing a sense of empowerment. She said the people felt like they had the information they needed to respond to emergencies or circumstances that may arise. She said that an example was as they were thinking through the implications of the homeless encampments that were near the corridor, it became less about people camping there, and more about how they could provide greater service to meet the needs of the people who were part of that community, and how could they make people on the trail feel competent and know what to do if they come across this, and how

they could provide support or get more information if they need to solve a problem. She said she thought it was helpful for this section to spend time with the public safety personnel and think through these scenarios. She added that a lot of it was about providing information, such as access to the right phone numbers and knowing what to do in the case of common emergencies and have the information they needed to be able to communicate their location to emergency response personnel if needed.

Ms. Shackelford said that development and redevelopment was the other topic that had a lot of concern from the public, which was focused around not wanting to take away the natural feel of the corridor, and did not want it to be overdeveloped, and wanted to make sure this was done with a really high sensitivity to the environmental concerns. She emphasized that for this section, they were not proposing any land use that was different than what was adopted in the comprehensive plans and would not be revisiting that. She said they were trying to inform in this section is that where development should occur, and development that could already occur, what were some ways that they could already do this that were more cohesive to the environment. She said they looked at things like promoting the development of service-oriented businesses that provide or enhance enjoyment of the river, such as a patio that overlooked the river, or a recreational service like bike rentals. She said this was about how to create a connection between the types of economic development that went in the river and make it an opportunity to enhance enjoyment of the river itself. She said they were also looking at opportunities about visually developing the corridor could integrate with the characteristics of the very natural corridor area and working with existing businesses on how they could enhance visual impacts on people traveling through the corridor. She said there were some places that were more industrial that may not be as visually appealing, so they could work with those property owners to do voluntary landscaping programs or encourage industrial art, or something that added some visual interest to the property and make it more appealing to people traveling through the corridor.

Ms. Shackelford said that the next principle was historic places and cultural features. She said this was something that could benefit from some up-front planning, to make sure they had a really robust inventory of where all of these historic and cultural resources exist. She said there were some sensitive areas that would require restricted public access to ensure they were preserved, and there were other places that could be better promoted and further enhance the public's appreciation and awareness of some of those resources that existed through the corridor. She said a lot of these recommendations were also focused around collaborating with other groups or cultural centers to do programming and develop a greater sense of awareness of the rich history of the corridor.

Ms. Shackelford said that the high-level recommendations in the plan were shown in colored rows and the white rows were the subtasks associated with those higher-level recommendations. She said some had subtasks and some did not. She said they were not certain that they would move toward a master planning process, so they wanted to ensure there were clear implementable recommendations as a part of this plan, so they picked out a few recommendations that were either already high priority or had some momentum behind them that would be helpful to pursue, or else they were pretty low cost and could develop big benefits without needing many additional resources. She said they identified those as short-term solutions in the time frame, and they were also the ones identified as being able to implement some of the opportunities outlined in the plan and were the ones to focus on.

Ms. Shackelford said that because they were not sure where they were as far as the master plan, there were some intermediary steps they identified that could be helpful either to inform a master

planning process if that was moved forward, or also identified as additional things that could be done now that would be beneficial regardless of a master plan. She said that the planning priorities were very broad in scope, and there were some places where some additional focus could be really beneficial to meet some of those goals. She said those included comprehensive inventories of biological and ecological areas. She said some of this was part of the biodiversity action plan that Albemarle developed, but what was really needed to inform planning processes was actually more of a fine-tuned ecological survey of some of these areas, so that would be something that could be pursued on its own that would provide a lot of benefit regardless of whether there was a master plan to follow it.

Ms. Shackelford said that similarly, creating a comprehensive inventory of historic and cultural resources was a step in this planning. She said Mr. Keller had been advocating for a viewshed analysis, and that could not be part of the scope at this time, but they thought that could be helpful in informing the development and redevelopment decisions that needed to be made about how developments could impact the corridor, and to ensure they were identifying and protecting those important viewsheds that enhanced users' enjoyment of the corridor. She said conducting an architectural analysis or design charrette to identify preferred design standards for development within the corridor would be a really good step to help determine what those guidelines should be.

Ms. Shackelford said as far as implementation, there were a few grant opportunities that made sense to support the initiatives that were identified in this plan, so they were already looking at transportation system improvements, things like VDOT's system for SmartScale and revenue sharing. She said environmental conservation and mitigation was already happening and provided additional support to continue to work with organizations like the Rivanna Conservation Alliance, who looked for opportunities in the corridor to conduct their studies. She said there was also a pretty new funding source that focused on flood prevention and flood mitigation that could provide research funding for projects within the corridor. She continued that there were also some for historic preservation, so once they identified those historic and cultural resources, there could be good opportunity to restore and enhance those historic features. She said finally, they identified a couple of priority projects that were pretty low-cost, high impact projects that they thought would provide momentum towards implementation of this plan. She said some of those included flood-proofing any sorts of facilities or equipment within the corridor as flooding became more likely, and focusing on how to upkeep things like stairs, railings, etcetera.

Ms. Shackelford said that looking at zoning ordinances related to events and what was allowed for events was a good opportunity to see if they were creating barriers with some of the recommendations or not. She said that a lot of this was also information sharing, so they wondered how to empower users and inform users when they went to trails or the corridor they knew where they were going and were able to navigate the area. She said those were the types of things they identified as the project priorities for immediate next steps.

Ms. Shackelford said that if there was a master planning process, it would look at on the ground improvements for things like preservation, capital investment, opportunities for private investment or partnerships to initiate some of these recommendations, and river restoration. She said this would involve a funding commitment from Charlottesville and Albemarle and developing a scope of work and hiring a consultant with a goal to have very specific priorities and implementation schedules for some of these projects. She said there was a question as to whether this was a priority at this time, but hopefully any work that was done to fulfill this plan would start working

towards the overall goals to implement the vision for the corridor and could feed into the development of a master plan if there was interest in moving that forward.

Mr. Benish said this was a presentation of this document. He said the anticipated approach to this was that they would get their comments and feedback, and they would debrief on their comments. He said they would then complete the document with any suggestions they might have and forward that to the Board of Supervisors who would review and hopefully endorse the plan, and then forward it to the comprehensive plan update process for it to be incorporated and adopted into their comprehensive plan through that larger process.

Ms. Shackelford said there was contact information available for her and Ms. Franklin, but otherwise they would just like to hear feedback and questions.

Mr. Bivins asked if Ms. Franklin would like to add anything.

Ms. Franklin said that Ms. Shackelford said it all.

Ms. Firehock said she knew how difficult it was to do public engagement during the pandemic. She commented that there a lot of the recommendations talked about encouraging native species and increased trail access, but they were not very specific. She said when she looked at objectives, she liked to see if they were measurable, such as where the native species would be encouraged. She said a good objective was one that they could tell if they did it or not. She said that was a small comment on how she would like some of it to be more specific. She said what was hurting the Rivanna River was the tremendous amount of untreated stormwater management that was pouring through the stormwater pipes. She said she was very proud of Albemarle and Charlottesville for having a water protection ordinance, and she took a role in authoring some of the City's ordinance when she was a Planning Commissioner in the City some years ago. She said Charlottesville especially was mostly developed before clean water act standards for stormwater treatment, so most of the runoff from impervious surfaces in the City was going untreated into the Rivanna.

Ms. Firehock said their stormwater pipes went right under their beautiful, wooded buffers, and discharged all the metals, grease, grit, animal waste, chemicals from tailpipe exhaust, and other waste from the streets into the river. She said as Albemarle had continued to develop, they saw more and more stormwater problems, even though they required volume control on development sites. She said ultimately, to get the river cleaner, there would have to be a lot of work done in the watershed, so as they were writing this plan, it should be emphasized that what someone does in their backyard in Charlottesville up in Ivy Creek away from the river's banks still affects the river. She said there needed to be a much larger focus on adding permeable surfaces into their developments and actually redesigning the urban landscape to add stormwater management that was not there previously. She said it took a long time, but they had to start, and without the attention to the incredible volume of untreated runoff going into the river, they would not have a beautiful river that citizens could confidently explore.

Ms. Shackelford said they adjusted the stormwater management, but it perhaps was not as strong as what Ms. Firehock was talking about, so they could certainly go back and look at that.

Mr. Keller said he had seen that process as a representative, and before that had been on that committee and watched the first phase, which was the larger area to the north. He said it had come a long way, and there was a realization that there were people not talked about in history

that were important along the river, such as people who had been enslaved who lived in that area. He said there was a wealth of knowledge beginning to surface that could tell a much richer and diverse story than only the natural systems part, and he thought that would be another phase because of the interest that the history community had shown in this. He said also, from an urban design standpoint, the views in and the views out were important. He said it was not to create buffers, because there were river tours such as the famous ones in Chicago, that were focused on what was seen in a developed environment.

Mr. Keller said the interesting thing about the Rivanna River and the focus on the more urban portion was that it complemented the other two parts. He said there were three sets of uses and focus that could happen all the way up the number of tributaries that came into the Rivanna, and the potential blueways and greenways of that portion, through this portion, and pieces that the Pantops master plan also encouraged, which would continue this down to the County line with Fluvanna, where a tremendous amount of work had been done along the river. He said it was certainly an important part and there was a lot to be borrowed from for the comprehensive plan, if there was a subset on the Rivanna River, and he thought there should be in the upcoming comprehensive plan. He said there was enough continuity through the planning district commission to give this a good product for this point in time.

Mr. Bivins said to be intentional about how they used the word “urbanized waterway.” He said that when he read that, it pushed some buttons for him, because they did not have an urbanized river and they were not set up to have one unless someone with an unimaginable amount of money bought riverfront properties and began it there. He said to be intentional about that phrase, because he thought it would evoke a number of images for people who may either struggle with it or want to accept it. He said he thought they were seeing people who were appreciative of what they were presenting, but he would suggest when they presented this to the Supervisors, that they give more visuals. He said they ingested a lot of text, and they should be able to give them something to visually engage with as they were speaking.

Mr. Randolph said he wanted to remind Mr. Bivins he was not one of the Supervisors.

Mr. Bivins said he was on the Board in the past.

Mr. Randolph said that was correct. He said his one suggestion to Ms. Shackelford would be to pick two major things for each of the areas to share with the Supervisors, because they will have read the whole extensive, comprehensive, and outstanding, but two highlights would probably be enough. He said for her to be aware that when she did that, they would say she did not cover the other parts, and she would say that in the interest of time, she wanted to be sensitive and have it presented within 15 minutes with questions, which they would then appreciate.

Mr. Benish said he would debrief on their comments, as they did with the City’s comments, and would take those into consideration and move them forward to the City Council and Board of Supervisors.

Adjournment

The Planning Commission adjourned its meeting at 9:21 p.m.



Charles Rapp, Director of Planning

(Recorded by Carolyn S. Shaffer, Clerk to Planning Commission & Planning Boards; transcribed by Golden Transcription Services)

Approved by Planning Commission
Date: 01/11/2022
Initials: CSS