

WRIGHT COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION

Meeting of: November 16, 2017

MINUTES – (Informational)

The Wright County Planning Commission met November 16, 2017 in the County Commissioners Board Room at the Wright County Government Center, Buffalo, Minnesota. Chairman, Dan Mol, called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m. with the following Board members present: Mol, Dave Pederson, Jan Thompson, Charlie Borrell, Ken Felger, and Dan Bravinder. Absent was Dave Thompson. Sean Riley, Planning & Zoning Administrator, represented the Planning & Zoning Office; Greg Kryzer, Assistant County Attorney was legal counsel present.

1. **JANE GOODALL ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES ACADEMY, Jackie Longhenry** New Item

Petitions the Wright County Planning Commission for an amendment (Ordinance Amendment No. 17-3) to modify Section 155.048 to allow Schools with 150 students or less as a Conditional Use in the AG General Agriculture district.

Present: Jackie Longhenry; George Walker, Ed Schrup

- A. Riley explained the AG zoning district does not allow for schools. This petition is a proposed zoning amendment to allow it as a Conditional Use. The process is similar to a recent solar use that was not previously allowed. The office notified the school districts like a similar request and noted they likely have not had time to formally meet. He would suggest they discuss the petition and continue for additional comment and their legal team to write up Findings for the recommendation they make to the County Board.
- B. Borrell questioned how the Howard Lake School was built? Riley stated that was an annexation where they provided services. Borrell if the Commission suggests approval he felt they should also consider other zoning amendments that need to be studied. Riley stated this petition would not go to a workshop. Kryzer – explained that the other amendments to be considered would be separate. Riley added the difference is this came to them as a petition.
- C. Longhenry – explained the current Environmental Academy (Charter School) serving about 100 students, includes special needs children that is in their third year and operate under a Conditional Use Permit from Corinna Township at the Camp Courage property. They would like to partner with True Friends for the permanent school. The location with the lake, woods and natural area makes a perfect setting for their school. True Friends provides services to special needs which is important to them.
- D. Riley explained there is history on this school; originally they were planning to have it on DNR property and that fell through and made a temporary home at the Camp Courage property. Would like to make that permanent. If the zoning change is allowed it would also allow for it in other places in the County. Longhenry explained the Camp buildings are utilized. Summer cabins are their classrooms and what was their arts and craft building for their offices. Another suggestion was to add schools under 150 students and add existing group facilities. That would prevent them from popping up around the County.
- E. Felger how is this coming up. Longhenry – they have a permit to operate for a couple years, but want to find a permanent home. Their mission would not fit in a commercial area. They would stay on Camp Courage property with this amendment. Riley – responded to Felger, schools are not allowed in the townships. Felger – but are operating under a CUP when it is not allowed. Riley – it was thought to be a temporary situation and if the DNR property would have worked out, the County would not have been involved and everyone would have moved on.

- F. Walker – he is a parent of one of the students and also representing the Camp Courage -Charter schools cannot easily buy property. They could not start a pack group to raise money but it takes up to eight years to purchase property. Want a good place to lease. Schrup explained this school compliments some of the student's needs. His own daughter has benefitted and parents are looking for options so children have success. The classroom is 300 acres. He estimates 40% of the students have special needs. He explained the activities, including therapy riding and students are outside much of the time.
- G. Borrell – land would come off the tax rolls? Longhenry – noted they would lease buildings. Kryzer – stated that would be something the Assessor's office would address. Longhenry to become a public school it is a long process to do that.
- H. Bravinder – as a parent who home schooled, they could only write-off materials and expenses, but is the only tax benefit. It is difficult to get a tax-exempt status. Riley – this is an unusual model, the traditional school requires facilities and would need public services. Bravinder – to meet fire codes they need city services, etc. The 2007 Planning Commission minutes were included, asked if that was a different type of zoning amendment. Riley – similar, the school was different grades (high-school). Longhenry – they now include 6-12 grades and looking at things differently. They were a public school. Riley the "environmental school" is their emphasis. Someone could ask for any type of school with this amendment, not just environmental. They are using existing buildings with a limit to occupancy.
- I. Mol opened the hearing for the public.
- J. Mark Redemske - Superintendent of Maple Lake schools for 15 years– he was here in 2007 along with representatives present tonight, Jeff Power, from Cokato/Dassel; and Tim Prom, from the Annandale School district, when the school was looking at property on County Road 39. Every Superintendent from the County was present at the County Board hearing, representing school districts in 2007. George Ladd, former Superintendent of Howard Lake-Waverly-Winsted was told when they were getting ready to build a new high-school, they had to be hooked up to city sewer and water. He had read through their mission and he appreciates this applicant trying to fill a niche. Questioned why 150 students, looked at the options these districts might want the same opportunity. Reviewed their coops they lease to fill needs, but need to consider the precedence that could be set and others will want the same opportunity to get away. A reference made by Sgt. Leander about emergency services, was a surprise to him that his name was included in an August document. All public schools should be held to the same standards.
- K. Borrell asked about Village Ranch. Redemske – not sure that is very small. Borrell – there could be benefits and not everyone fits into a traditional school or learning method. He asked why as an educator, he would object. Redemske suggested they go on line and look at their test schools, they are not excelling. Schrup - stated they need to consider the clientele. Borrell –not all kids are good at what are considered the traditional subjects.
- L. John Dearing – Corinna Township Supervisor – the Town Board has worked with the school and feel this is a good use for the existing facilities. Why not utilize the buildings that are there. With a limit of 150 children these will not pop up all over. This fits perfectly and could be limited on where they can go.
- M. Mol – asked under a conditional use permit could it not continue? Riley the Township has to follow the County Ordinance and in order to make it permanent, it has to be an amendment. Not a reason to approve it, but it is what has to happen. Mol currently they are operating as non-conforming. Riley further explained the original plan to be on land owned by the DNR. Mol some of his concern are this could happen in many

places around the County. This would put more restrictions on agricultural practices. He gave an example in California where there are law suits about spraying fields near schools. He is also a parent of a special needs child and understands, but the taxpayers are paying for these services already in existing schools. He understands what the applicant is trying to do. The Camp is a beautiful piece of property. They have to consider opening this up to the rest of the County.

- N. Pederson – noted based on what the Commission is presented, they can decide whether they approve it or not.
- O. J. Thompson – her daughter-in-law works with the extreme cases of “special needs” and appreciates they have the para-professionals and school administrators as backup. The police departments are available and provides a safe environment. She is concerned that the Commission or anyone at the Government Center has the expertise to deal with these students. She was concerned they would open up a “can of worms”. The legislative process provides this. If this is a safe environment for the students and teachers, she may consider it. She is not comfortable opening this up to the County, although understands it is a struggle for the parents and students. The applicant has said a good percentage of the students have special needs.
- P. Bravinder – did not know if it was their job to critique the school or what the public school superintendents present have to offer in their schools; but whether they can operate at the Camp Courage location. He has personal experience with children who developed at different ages and would not have done well in a public school setting. He is near the Village Ranch in Stockholm Township who are licensed for 15 students. He is very familiar with those School Board members and deal with some of the most difficult students and handle it well. He felt each request has to be dealt with on an individual basis. He read what Pederson had to say back in 2007 and can see he has a “heart” for those students. Maybe they could focus on the size of schools. Mol –asked how they can make the rules the same for the 150 student schools vs. the 2,000 student schools.
- Q. Riley – would suggest this Board only address whether they can have a school, the number of students, the building and parking facilities, athletic fields and trails. Regulations on the schools education standards is up to the State of Minnesota. Suggested they leave the qualifications of the teachers and conditions of the school up to the State. Borrell would agree have they have to pass this Ordinance first. Riley the discussion has gotten off what this Board can regulate.
- R. Schrup - Camp Courage has the capacity of 300 with services and comply with the water, etc. They are asking for a school half the size these facilities can accommodate. One of the worries is if they build the school and it is not successful, what would happen to the facilities built. That is not the case here. He would suggest they could state the 150 students in an existing facility. The environment is part of the educational program. This location can accommodate these things. The fire department of Maple Lake can respond quicker than most cities. This is a facility that has up to 300 people at one time in the summer.
- S. Longhenry – addressed the safety. Sgt. Leander is in charge of the school resource officers, he may have forgotten their conversation, but was asked for his permission to include his statement. He had indicated that there was nothing out of the ordinary at this school from others.
- T. Kryzer – asked for direction on the Ordinance amendment. Members can contact him later. Riley appreciated the attendance, although light, would recommend a continuation to allow for further input. Borrell asked if the Township would review a formal Ordinance after changes were made. Riley – time was given for Town Boards to provide input. The final draft is not usually sent out to them. It is the school districts that did not have adequate time.

- U. Felger – this could be a complicated issue and is a workshop in order. Kryzer – did not think it is needed. If there is indication that the Commission would like to support this, they can try to narrow it down. If the consensus is they are not going to support it they should communicate that. Felger – noted with the solar ordinance they invited all the parties to the table. He wondered if that would be helpful. Kryzer – if they want to narrow it down they could hand it out to the school districts and consider it again in a public setting. Mol – would agree they should let all the school districts look at this. J. Thompson – she does not feel she has answers to her questions. Kryzer – to help with their consideration he could draft the Ordinance as 17.3 as proposed by the applicant.
- V. Borrell moved to draft an amendment ordinance to review at the December 14, 2017 meeting. Felger seconded the motion.

VOTE: CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY

DISCUSSION: Jeff Bowers – Superintendent for Dassel/Cokato – Charter schools are part of what they do, as a long-term educator, as part of the public schools systems, feels they do a wonderful job at his district. Did not know they would get a lot of districts responding. The broader concern is what they have to do to meet requirements then what they will have to do in rural Wright County. That is not why they are present, not here to say it not something that is good. The Commission does a great job.

Longhenry asked what additional information they could provide. Borrell – when we get to the Conditional Use Permit process that is where the details would be needed.