

PUBLIC FORUM
C-2 DOWNTOWN COMMERCIAL DISTRICT
APRIL 14, 2014

Mayor Cerino called the Public Forum to order at 7:10 p.m. In attendance were Councilmembers Liz Gross, Linda Kuiper and Samuel T. Shoge, W. S. Ingersoll, Town Manager, Jennifer Mulligan, Town Clerk and guests.

Mayor Cerino stated that the purpose of this meeting was to begin a dialogue between Town government and the business community. He said that he would like to try to follow the agenda for tonight's session.

Introductions were made of all in attendance. A sign-in sheet was also passed around.

Mayor Cerino stated that the Town supported local business. He said that he was not immune to the fact that people want to complain about how things have been done in the past, but said that it would be refreshing to keep the conversation light and focused on the future.

Mayor Cerino stated that parking was an issue in the downtown area and has always been a topic on which nobody can agree. He said that Ms. Kuiper performed a survey of the downtown businesses about the meters.

Ms. Kuiper stated that she visited 29 businesses to ask questions on the survey. She reviewed the survey. Most business owners did not want the meters and suggested that they be covered or go to a 2-hour limit. Other suggestions from the survey were read into the record.

Mayor Cerino stated that there was a parking lot being created on Cannon Street on the south end of the Town yard. He said that these spaces would be for merchant parking only. After business hours, the parking lot would be open to the public. When asked where it was, Mr. Ingersoll stated that the entrance to the lot was just past 312 Cannon Street.

Mayor Cerino stated that the theory of the meters was that it kept traffic moving and people were not parking their car for days on end in one spot. He said that he would be in favor of bagging the meters, but wanted suggestions on how to keep traffic flowing.

Ms. Marjorie Adams stated that she thought 2-hour parking was not long enough and it should go to 3-hour parking with someone marking tires.

Ms. Carla Massoni stated that areas designated with 15-minute parking in front of places like Stam's, the Natural Food store, and the coffee shops would be helpful. In other areas, parking should be longer to allow people to stroll and enjoy the town.

Ms. Elaine Bowman stated that she thought a tag should be placed over the meters, welcoming the public and directing them into the stores to get a parking pass or voucher. She added that some businesses, like Flow Salon, are not finished with their services in a 2-hour time frame.

Ms. Nancy McGuire stated that it was not certain that there was a parking problem because the merchants were parking in front of the stores. She said that if the merchants used a designated parking lot such as the one that was being created, there could be a change in traffic patterns.

Mr. Bill Arrowood stated that if meters were pulled the merchants would continue to park in front of the stores. He said that he lives on the 300 block of High Street and the Town pulled the meter in front of his house about 15-years ago and immediately the merchants started parking there. He said that enforcement was an issue all through Town, noting that he had a fire hydrant by his house and cars were parked in front of it all the time.

Mr. Larry Hauck stated that Queen Street residents would park on High Street if the meters were removed because it was such a congested street. He said that the lines of the street were not defined for parking spaces or crossing and on Saturday mornings people were double and triple-parking in front of Evergrain. Mr. Hauck added that trees are obstructing signs and visitors did not know it was a one-way street and that there was no left turn, so people went down the street the wrong way.

Ms. Gross stated that she had discussed with Mr. Ingersoll painting the parking spots and the yellow curbs. Ms. Trish Gruber stated that the blue loading and unloading sign needed painting in front of the Natural Food Store.

Mr. Jay Yerkes stated that there was a grid system in place and a perceived parking problem in Town. He said that creating a parking area was a good idea but a lot of people did not want to walk anywhere. He said that he thought a trolley system in Town would be good for business.

Mr. Peter Newlin stated that one of the best parking lots was the one at the courthouse because it created an environment that was welcoming and easy to negotiate. He said that the Town had to do long range planning to develop parking lots in town.

Mr. Paul Hanley stated that if the merchants were to ask employees to use the new parking lot off of Cannon Street he would like to make sure that lighting and other forms of safety were in place. He said that he did not necessarily want to see painted lines in the streets because the cars varied in size. He suggested bagging the meters and fixing the little issues that come up as a result, noting that some form of action is better than doing nothing. He said that the control was in the hand of the merchants as they were either part of the solution or part of the problem.

Mr. Dudley Bostic stated that he thought the proposed parking lot off of Cannon Street would be helpful in alleviating some of the parking problem and might empty the lot on Cannon Street by his shop and free up some parking on High Street. He recommended that if the Town tries to create parking on the front part of the lot on Cannon Street if the owner was willing to participate.

Mr. Ingersoll stated that the 200 block of High Street was due for repaving and that was why the paint was looking old. He said that should happen in the next 18 months. The paving of the 300 - 800 blocks of High Street were done with ARRA funding, but the 100 and 200 blocks were not eligible for Federal funding.

Mayor Cerino stated that a trial run of bagged meters for 3 to 6 months with some form of getting traffic to move sounded like a good first start.

Mayor Cerino stated that he would like to move on to the issue of signage. He said that every business owner wants as much signage as their storefront can get, but if that happened all over town it would not look very nice. He asked Mr. Ingersoll to give a brief summary of C-2 sign ordinance requirements.

Mr. Ingersoll stated that the sign ordinances were last changed in 1984 by the Historic District Commission, the Planning Commission, and the Town Council. He said that at that time, the main signs allowed downtown were flat signs. Projecting signs were not legal. The laws were changed to allow projecting signs and in areas with more than 25' front setbacks for their buildings a free-standing sign was allowed. Flat signs sizes were based on the front footage of the storefront. The changed ordinance also allowed for instances where there were multiple businesses in a single building. Mr. Ingersoll stated that it was time to have the Historic Commission and Planning Commission consider updating the sign ordinances and hearing the problems with the present sign ordinance.

Mayor Cerino stated that there has been talk of internally lit signs and the main reason that they were not permitted, unless grandfathered, was that the historic nature of the town was an economic driver for the downtown and people wanted to see an historic town.

Ms. Massoni stated that the business people need to have their voices heard regarding needs for their businesses. She said that in many instances, businesses are not permitted to do certain things because it did not conform to the Historic District Commission's rules. She added that Chestertown should have a "branding" that relates to signs. She said that once people arrived to town they did not know where anything was located. Banners and directional signs would be helpful. The town should be inclusive of all businesses and brand Chestertown as a whole. Mr. Bostic stated that a corner sign indicating which businesses were on the block would be helpful.

Mr. Yerkes stated that although Chestertown is an historic town, technology should be embraced.

Mr. Bob Ortiz stated that that the businesses were trying to attract people to town who have never been here and don't know where things are located. He said that there were 112 storefronts in the Historic District and said that there should be a sense of what was available in town to visitors when they arrive.

Mr. Arrowood stated that the entire town should have a unified plan for a look so when visitors arrived, they knew they were in Chestertown. He said that signs should be uniform in size and color throughout the entire town, not just the downtown.

Ms. Kuiper stated that several business owners have problems with their signs in town and said that there should be some flexibility allowed. She said that she thought the plastic sign outside of the Garfield Center looked terrible.

Mr. Newlin stated that the Planning Commission and the Historic District Commission should get together to discuss these issues and how to address them. He said that there were many centuries covered in Chestertown and the buildings should reflect their specific time period. He said that the two entities not working together, in his opinion, caused dysfunction.

Ms. Massoni suggested having an outside consulting firm to discuss with the Town Commissions and staff on how to address solutions to some of the problems in the different areas of town.

Ms. McGuire stated that there was a distinction between Commissions for a reason. She said that the Historic District had preservation-minded guidelines in place and the Planning Commission had a comprehensive plan they followed. She said that the businesses had to voice what they needed but the Commissions had to be respected for their roles.

Mr. Yerkes stated that he thought the town really had to decide what was in bad taste and said that not all technology was in bad taste. He proposed regulating technology rather than banning it altogether.

Mr. Ingersoll stated that it seemed to be time for the Planning Commission and the Historic District Commission to have the input from the businesses on what was needed and wanted. He said that if the Town was aware of all the problems changes could be made within the text of the zoning ordinance and the Historic District guidelines.

Mr. Hanley stated that some of the regulations were quirky. He said that he had a conversation the other day and the owner said she was not allowed a projecting sign on High Street. (Mr. Ingersoll noted that was misinformation since projecting signs were allowed throughout the C-2 district). Ms. McGuire stated that the Design Guidelines were available on line and could be read by any shop owner. Mr. Ortiz stated that the owner of the property should know the guidelines for their building.

Ms. Gruber stated that a brochure or something should be available on the website about how to start a business. Mayor Cerino stated that could be added to the new website.

Mayor Cerino stated that to summarize the businesses wanted better directional signage, a unified look to the signage, flexibility to the ordinances, and to look into using a consulting firm.

Mayor Cerino stated that other towns were marketing and promoting themselves, beginning with the local government, more than Chestertown does. He said that there was not enough social media marketing to promote town events. He said that a Request for Proposals for redesign of the town website was about to be released.

Mr. Shoge stated that one of the main points to the new website development was to integrate social media into Chestertown.com. He said that Facebook, Twitter, or any social media platform should be able to transition seamlessly to the website. He said that he wanted to engage potential visitors and maintain a competitive edge.

Ms. Barbara Hegland stated that she was looking to visit a town in Oregon and the site had everything linked together making it simple to navigate.

Mayor Cerino stated that collaborating with the College, the Downtown Chestertown Association, and all other agencies to keep everything in one place was crucial to the site.

Ms. Kristin Owen stated that Kent County Tourism and Economic Development used all types of advertising. She said that she thought Chestertown should invest those types of dollars to market Chestertown as a destination.

Ms. Massoni stated that there was a group of business owners who pull together for advertisements and get front of the magazine coverage. She said that the Town could put out

some money so that all the businesses benefitted. Ms. Gruber stated that there could potentially be grant money if a municipality wanted to use advertisements.

Mr. Arrowood stated that the town also had to advertise in other ways beside social media, with something other than a sign at People's Bank.

Mayor Cerino stated that this was the only commercial center in Town where the government can make a difference in putting on events, because they owned the parks. He asked for examples of events that give the businesses a boost economically. He said that there was a big lull in events from the day after Christmas until April.

Ms. Bowman stated that Downrigging was the best event in Chestertown and was beautifully done. She said that Tea Party did not help the businesses but it was important for the non-profits and used to be more regulated with nicer vendors. She said that the draw of people was not the caliber that would shop at their markets. She thought the vendors should be juried. Ms. Adams agreed, stating that Downrigging "upped" the quality of event and better vendors would draw a different crowd. Ms. Massoni stated that any event should draw a vast amount of people because it was unique and the vendors at the Tea Party were selling items you could buy anywhere.

Mr. Arrowood stated that the only source of income for the Tea Party was from the vendors who were paying a fee to be at the festival. He said that Downrigging was mostly through donations and fundraising and had an organization producing the event. He suggested that the Town help to fund the Tea Party, which would allow the Tea Party to have more discretion with their vendors.

Mr. Ortiz stated that as a business owner he felt excluded entirely from the Tea Party, as Cross Street is literally barricaded before the street ended and where his shop was located. He said that he is usually open on holidays, but he closes for Tea Party. Mr. Ortiz stated that Downrigging was successful because Sultana found a way to involve the entire town in the festivities.

Mayor Cerino stated that the winter festival was being modeled after Downrigging. He said that there were many different entities in town participating to make a weekend event. He said that there should be other activities to fill that winter void. He said that the organizations that put on Mardi Gras events were planning to work together this year.

Ms. Laura Drons stated that she thought a First Wednesday would be a good draw for stores. Ms. Massoni stated that there was something in the works along that idea. Ms. Massoni stated that the success of First Fridays was largely because each business did their own thing and said that the events had to be made broader.

Mayor Cerino stated that the town was designated a Maryland Main Street, but it needed an executive director to serve as a coordinator for the C-2 district. He asked if the merchants wanted to revive the Main Street position.

Mr. Arrowood stated that this person should be the one to find businesses and be the first face of Chestertown and would also be responsible for coordinating events and press releases. He said that Centreville had a part-time person that was paid by the municipality, as were most of the managers that he spoke with about the position.

Ms. McGuire stated that a Main Street program was not needed in Chestertown. She said that in the beginning they were told that funding would be available through Main Street that individuals could not get, but anyone can apply for those funds. She said that Main Street began in 2006 and never got off the ground, adding that every penny that was spent had to be raised by the town.

Mr. Newlin stated that if there was not a viable marketplace, the downtown would not be viable. He said that Main Street was economic development and historic preservation working together. He said that it involves long-range planning, business partnership and vision.

Ms. Massoni stated that a Main Street would only work if everybody was on board and worked together. She said that legwork had to be done to see if the will was in the community for a Main Street.

Ms. Kate Bursick stated that the Arts League was looking into Chestertown becoming an Arts and Entertainment District.

Ms. Owen stated that she did not want money to go to a salary and the Town not giving the financial resources to make the events happen. She said that financial support was needed just to maintain what goes on in town currently.

Mr. Hanley stated that there was no store in Chestertown that sold Washington College regalia. He said that it was an idea and did not know if the College was resistant due to the fact that people may not purchase the products at the College. Mr. Hauck stated that the college logo was protected under the NCAA license and there was a process to register to be able to sell those items.

Mayor Cerino stated that he had this conversation with President Reiss and said he should rent a space downtown and sell Washington College items. He said that President Reiss did have some reservations about it. Ms. Adams stated that this issue was just brought up at the last board meeting of the college and said that she thought part of the problem was that Barnes and Noble owned the College bookstore.

Ms. Colen said that she opened a store because she felt sorry for the town as so many of the businesses have closed over the years. She said that she did not care for the pop-up store last year because they were only there during graduation time, when there are the most visitors. Ms. Adams stated that some pop-ups become permanent businesses.

Ms. Amy Hague stated that she just opened up because the previous flower shops had all closed.

Ms. Massoni stated that there should be things downtown that people are going out of town for currently. She said that there should be a team of people to help those wanting to start a business in town.

Ms. Adams stated that when people come to town they should not see empty storefronts. She suggested displays in the empty storefronts to make them look like they are not barren.

Ms. Owing stated that she was working with a group of Washington College students on an app called "Passport to Chestertown" which would be available to the college students and local

businesses could let the students know about special events and sales in their shop. Mayor Cerino stated that coupons could also be downloaded from the app.

Mr. Rick Elliott said that he tried coupons to the Washington College student and they did not come. He said that the college has to say what they will come downtown to do and patronize.

Mr. Tom Martin stated that the College has created a community where the students don't have to go anywhere, adding that the College wanted those dollars to stay on campus.

Ms. Bursick stated that the pre-orientation programs are using the town to about 2 weeks before classes start. She said that the kids are led by another student downtown and something should be here for them once they arrived. Mayor Cerino stated that he told President Reiss that the town needed their help and that you could not even tell that Chestertown is a College town.

A member of the audience stated that he thought there needed to be clothing available for the college population.

Mr. Shoge stated that piggy backing off of the events at the College was a good idea, using open houses and the Birthday Ball as examples. He said that the NCAA licensing could be by-passed by catering to the Greek life on campus.

Ms. Adams stated that if there was a Washington College month, where the stores were supplied with items from Washington College for just that period of time, it may show the college that the town wants them to be a part of the business life.

Ms. Adams suggested that when a person shops at one store, they give a coupon for another store, so that people will go to different businesses in town.

Mr. Arrowood stated that it would be a real help if the college students could use their meal money in the restaurants.

Mr. Arrowood stated that another winter event could be built around the Birthday Ball and Mardi Gras (February).

Ms. Owing said that the next DCA meeting would take place next Thursday at 5:00 p.m. at the Chesapeake Bank and Trust.

Mayor Cerino adjourned the meeting at 9:30 p.m.

Submitted by: 
Jennifer Mulligan
Town Clerk

Approved by:
Chris Cerino
Mayor

C-2 Downtown Business Forum
Monday, April 14, 2014

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~~Terry Miller Empty #~~

C-2 Downtown Business Forum
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Mike Sipala	Paul's Sport Store	
Vic Pfeiffer	Resident + GCA Board	pfeiffish@aol.com
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Peter Nardus	Chesapeake Architects	Peter@chesarch.com
JAY YERKES	YERKES CONSTRUCTION	jayyerkesconstruction.com

SIGN-IN SHEET
C-2 Downtown Commercial District Public Forum
April 14, 2014

	Name	Business	E-Mail
1.	Peter Heck	Kent County News	pheck@thekentcountymews.com
2.	TOM MARTIN	Booker	booker@verizon.net
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4.	UNKNOWN W. OWEN	CBOT	women@chesapeake.com
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