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Likely Coming soon: Tech Taskforce, Comp Plan, and More Talking Crosswalks ^[1]

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By:

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Image: The audible crosswalk at Grand River Avenue and Division Street

East Lansing's City Council met last night for a "discussion-only" meeting at the Hannah Community Center that lasted almost three hours. Mayor Mark Meadows was in attendance along with Councilmembers Erik Altmann, Shanna Draheim, and Susan Woods. Mayor Pro Tem Ruth Beier was absent.

Taskforce on Technology and Innovation may be formed: City Manager George Lahanas and City Informational Technology (IT) manager Tom Crane talked with Council about the possible formation of a taskforce ^[2] or commission dedicated to looking at uses of technology by the City. Crane told Council he has been looking at what other cities do and gathering ideas of

how the government of East Lansing can better communicate with (especially in terms of hearing from) its citizens.

Councilmember Erik Altmann said he thought it would be useful to have "a bunch of geeks who are jazzed about technology who are way ahead of where I am, sitting around figuring out how to do cool new things with tech that help the City." He suggested having such a group with an open "charge" (not tied to specific agenda items) would be best. He said it would have been useful to have such a group when the City was considering banning drones, since then the Council might have heard from people who knew how drones work, what they are good for, etc., before banning most uses of drones [3] in the City.

Mayor Mark Meadows said the group should "examine each aspect of City government" to see if what is happening now "is the best we can do." Councilmember Shanna Draheim said she would like the group to emphasize innovation. Councilmember Susan Woods said she wants to see a Comic-Con in East Lansing.

The plan now is for Lahanas and Crane to come up with suggestions for how to proceed.

Addition of audible walk-signals downtown is desired and would be costly: Scott House and Steve Roach from the City's Department of Public Works (DPW) told Council that, in the words of House's pre-meeting memo [4], "the City has received a request to upgrade pedestrian crossings with Audible Pedestrian Signals (APS) along the Michigan Department of Transportation's (MDOT) Grand River Avenue at the Abbot and MAC intersections." (See map [5].) These are signals that allow vision-impaired individuals to hear, from a voice recording activated by the traffic signal, when it is safe to cross an intersection.

House told Council that the City would have to pay somewhere between one-third and one-half of the costs and that costs for modernizing a traffic signal can range from \$150,000 to \$250,000. He expected the City would have to pay about \$66,000 per intersection. According to his memo, "Typical maintenance charges can range from \$3,000 to \$10,000 a month." House suggested the cost of the upgrades could create an extreme strain on the budget for road-related maintenance and repair. He also warned that MDOT can unexpectedly bill the City for "its share" of repairs and construction conducted by MDOT, as happened with the sound wall along Route 127 [6].

Councilmember Susan Woods asked how many visually impaired people there are in the City. Roach said his understanding was that among students, faculty, and staff at MSU, there were 40-45 individuals who would benefit from audible-signal crosswalks. In response to a question from Councilmember Erik Altmann, House said MSU might pick up some of the costs but that there was no way to roll this cost into federal or state funding of the Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) plans. [Note: In a follow-up email communication with me, Director House clarified the goal is to see the audible signaling implemented when the BRT construction occurs along Grand River Avenue. It's unclear at this time whether the City of East Lansing will be responsible for part of the cost for the audible signaling.]

Comprehensive Plan to be presented to local groups for feedback: East Lansing Director of Planning Tim Dempsey reminded Council that the Comprehensive Plan revision was started in 2013, and noted that the last time the Plan was revised, it had taken about five years (2002-

2006), so he suggested this revision was not taking exceptionally long. Planning administrator Darcy Schmitt reminded Council the State requires the Comp Plan be reviewed every five years. According to the City's website [7] on the Comp Plan, the Plan is meant "to project land use planning 20 years into the future."

Schmitt gave an update [8] of the process (see her presentation [9]), which has included a lot of work by the Planning Commission and input from five "steering committees" [10]: Human Dignity, Community Education & Civic Participation; Economic Sustainability; Housing; Transportation, Infrastructure & Environmental Sustainability; and Urban Form.

Schmitt also showed a timeline [11] for finishing the process. The next part of the plan calls for bringing the revised Comp Plan maps to Hannah-based meetings with multiple neighborhoods, to people at festivals and the like, to get feedback from the public from May through October. She said that the plan will have to be circulated to surrounding communities for a 63-day comment period. She said staff was hoping for adoption of the plan in October.

Mayor Mark Meadows noted that historically the City Council has not adopted the Comp Plan in a formal fashion; the Planning Commission is the body charged with formally approving the plan. Meadows asked City Attorney Tom Yeadon if that could cause problems. Yeadon said that if Council passed development ordinances that contradicted the Plan, there could be legal challenges. He added, "Other than that, I don't know."

Councilmember Erik Altmann asked Schmitt how input from steering committees was managed. Schmitt said that input was drawn into the maps. Altmann asked what happened when there were disagreements, and Schmitt said, if there were disagreements with what went onto the maps, "no one said anything".

State may take away virtually all local gun control: The Michigan House Local Government Committee held a hearing recently on House Bill (HB) 4795 which seeks to stop municipalities from having virtually any say over the control of firearms. City Council let City Manager George Lahanas know he should instruct the City's lobbying firm to work against this bill. We have a separate report [12] on this issue.

Bus Rapid Transit plans moving forward: City Planning staff member Lori Mullins and CATA's Assistant Executive Director Debbie Alexander presented an update on the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) plans. The goal is to create dedicated bus lanes with hybrid buses running from the State Capitol in downtown Lansing to the Meridian Mall and back. The only place where there would not be dedicated lanes is in a small section of East Lansing. The plan is currently estimated to cost \$133,000,000 and would be funded mostly through federal dollars, if obtained. The presentation focused on the impact to East Lansing. We have two separate reports on this issue, one on the general plan as it impacts East Lansing [13] and one on the issue of bicycles [14].

Public comment: At the meeting's public-comments portion, Chris Root of Sunset Lane praised Council for including in the latest draft of its Strategic Priorities [15] document attention to the six pillars of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing [16]. Root said that one of the recommendations in that document is involving the community in development of police policies and procedures, especially as they relate to racial justice. Root also asked that plans aimed at local economic growth pay attention to what is possible in reality and get community input. On

that point, during a break, Mayor Meadows noted to Root that the Strategic Priorities draft speaks to the need to engage residents through community meetings and surveys in establishing a community consensus on community growth.

Two individuals also spoke during Public Comment against HB-4795 (the weapons bill), and their comments are included in our separate report on that matter. I also asked Council to be sure to address questions about bike lanes and reduction of the East Lansing green median downtown in the discussion of the BRT, since these are questions I've been getting from ELi readers; answers to those questions appear in our separate report on the BRT.

City tries to get its share of Ingham County's Trails and Parks Millage: East Lansing's Director of Parks and Recreation, Tim McCaffrey, told Council that City staff are working to get a chunk of the annual take from the Ingham County Trails and Parks ^[17] Millage. He told Council the millage generates about \$3.4 million, of which about \$433,000 is coming from East Lansing. East Lansing has to apply for funds, and Mayor Mark Meadows questioned the cumbersome process set forth by the County for getting access to funds for park and trail improvements and repairs.

Councilmember reports: Councilmember Shanna Draheim announced that on March 22-23, there would be a focus on finance at the state-level at the Michigan Municipal League conference.

Mayor Mark Meadows said he would like Council to look into the possibility of setting aside money to send some Councilmembers to national conferences and meetings on issues that could impact East Lansing, particularly where there are opportunities to shunt federal dollars towards East Lansing.

Councilmember Susan Woods reminded people of the East Lansing Film Festival schedule, including the March 16 showing of *She's Beautiful When She's Angry* ^[18] and the March 20 showing of *Making a Killing: Guns, Greed, and the NRA* ^[19].

Reminder: You can speak or write to City Council ^[20] on any issue, not only those on the published agendas.

Note: This article was updated on March 11 to include a link to Darcy Schmitt's presentation on the Comprehensive Plan. It was updated on March 12 to include the bracketed follow-up communication with Scott House on the question of who will pay for the audible signaling upgrades along Grand River Avenue.

Related Categories:

Council Capsule [21]

City Council [22]

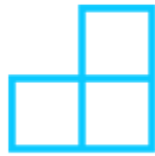
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- [2] http://eastlansing.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=585&meta_id=35804
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- [10] <https://www.cityofeastlansing.com/665/Steering-Committees>
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- [12] <http://eastlansinginfo.org/content/state-bill-aims-stop-local-gun-control>
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- [15] <http://eastlansinginfo.org/content/council-sets-priorities-neighborhoods-finances-environment>
- [16] http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/taskforce/taskforce_finalreport.pdf
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- [18] <http://www.shesbeautifulwhenshesangry.com/>
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