



Mayor and City Council of Cumberland

Mayor Raymond M. Morriss
Councilman Richard J. "Rock" Cioni
Councilman Eugene T. Frazier
Councilman James L. Furstenberg
Councilwoman Laurie P. Marchini

City Administrator Jeffrey F. Silka
City Solicitor Michael S. Cohen
City Clerk Allison K. Layton

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COUNCIL RETREAT OPEN WORK SESSION

Fairfield Inn
21 Wineow Street
Cumberland, MD 21502

Thursday, October 19, 2023, 9:00 a.m.

PRESENT: Mayor Raymond M. Morriss; Council Members: Richard Cioni, Eugene Frazier, Jimmy Furstenberg, Laurie Marchini.

ALSO PRESENT: Jeffrey F. Silka, City Administrator; Allison K. Layton, City Clerk; Ashley James, Executive Assistant

Media: Teresa McMinn, Cumberland Times-News

I. INTRODUCTION TO GOAL-SETTING PROCESS

Mr. Silka opened the M&CC Retreat with advice to keep personnel and sensitive items out of the conversation if the Press is here. He went over the retreat agenda categories, saying this is a session for the M&CC to brainstorm and discuss, while he will try to keep things on track. He added that he wants to know where we've been, where we're going, and how we're getting there.

Mr. Silka explained they need to define the mission of the City – how it is doing now – and set some goals and objectives to create a road map. He advised that it would be up to Staff to take the goals and get the City to meet them, while being unbiased and staying away from conjecture and hearsay.

II. REVIEW OF SWOT ANALYSIS

Mr. Silka passed around copies of the master SWOT analysis derived from the M&CC and Staff SWOT analyses. He said they will come up with goals, then create a presentation and have input from departments to implement; then visit it quarterly on the agenda to make sure they stay on track.

Mr. Silka went over each part of the analysis:

Strengths

- Location with regional history
- Strong, qualified, committed Mgmt.
- M&CC engaged with Staff, community groups, and governmental leaders
- Access to educational institutions

Weaknesses

- Aging infrastructure and maintenance costs
- Declining housing stock and lack of housing options
- Prevalence of blight
- Young people not staying in the City
- Low tax base/high tax rate/double taxation
- Need for expanded recreational activities

Opportunities

- Baltimore Street Rehab. Project
- Constitution Park imp.
- Leveraging remote work shift begun during pandemic
- Capitalize on the Potomac River/future Riverpark
- Define role of City and CEDC
- New residential development – Memorial, Allegany High – and impact on tax base
- Continue to expand Code Enforcement activities and sweeps

Threats

- Expansion of current low-income population
- Homelessness and drug addiction and its impact
- Current state of the economy and impacts on federal, state, and county budgets and funding

Mayor Morriss stated that he was good with all 4 strengths and asked for any others. Council Member Furstenberg noted that the highway goes right through the City, and discussed Cumberland's regional history. Mr. Silka said that's important as it draws people in. Council Member Marchini noted that the City's unique architecture is a strength, and said because the City has been so impoverished, it has been untouched. Mr. Silka agreed, saying this is strategic preservation. There was also discussion on Cumberland's active arts and entertainment community. Council made note of the culture at City Hall being the best it's been in a long while.

Mr. Silka moved on to weaknesses. There was discussion about there not being a north/south highway, like I-81, and Mayor Morriss mentioned Corridor H. He said it's a current topic of the Greater Cumberland Group. Council Member Cioni talked about the perception people have of the City, and getting people to take more interest in their City and their own property, and

mentioned double-taxation. There was discussion about getting people involved. Mayor Morriss said he has had this conversation with MML, about the City not winning blight cases in court. He suggested developing a strategy to have a conversation about partnership with the County and City entities to find the best tact for going forward to get the County to partner with the City.

There was discussion about Frostburg feeling slighted if Cumberland gets grant money from the County. Mr. Silka stated that no one wants to touch anything that says tax differential. Mayor Morriss stated that the City is in a better position than a lot of areas in the state, and said the right tact is a strong, positive negotiation with the County regarding expenses. It was noted that this doesn't have to be public, with Mr. Silka agreeing that it should be kept quiet.

There was talk about HUD counties, with Council Member Furstenberg saying Cumberland is the capital of housing vouchers, although Mr. Silka stated that the City doesn't do a housing program. He advised to be careful of that approach, because you can't discriminate against housing.

Another weakness brought up was workforce training. It was discussed that Cumberland has decent jobs, but no training. Mr. Silka stated that lots of trained people are leaving the area and going downstate. He added that Cumberland also has a lack of opportunity.

There was discussion about how hard it is to encourage kids to go to the Career Center to learn a trade. Mr. Silka stated that standardized tests have no bearing on real life skills, and suggested bringing people to the table to find out what skills are lacking. Mayor Morriss suggested getting school guidance counselors to help direct kids. He also said the City should have some kind of influence in this issue.

Mr. Silka moved on to Opportunities, reading through the list.

Council Member Furstenberg noted that the City's projects need to be completed so people stop being negative and complaining about things not getting done.

Council Member Frazier stated that the City needs to acquire the CSX property, as it's the biggest flat area in the City. It was noted that the area may have to have soil removed and be concreted over.

Council Member Cioni suggested digging deeper into the role of the City and the CEDC – are they doing what we want them to do? He stated that economic development is key to everything discussed. There was discussion about the relationship and how to make it better going forward, and to revisit and redefine the role of economic development. Mr. Silka stated that having 3 separate Facebook pages – DDC, City, CEDC - is not cohesive, and said if a city operates on that many different platforms, that's a problem. There was discussion about all entities leading to the same thing and linking to each other – make a website that is inclusive. Mr. Silka suggested “Cumberland Connected.”

There was also discussion about the City's logo, and if it still needs to show a canal boat and mule. It was noted that that specific logo doesn't relate to anything the City does now. Mr. Silka stated that they'd have to hire a consultant to walk them through that proposed change.

There was more discussion about the CSX property and development right off of I-68 being a good thing. Mayor Morriss stated it would be nice if that area was the hub of the City's retail center.

There was discussion about a plan in the past to develop from Maryland Avenue to Ft. Cumberland Homes. Mayor Morriss explained that is the grand vision, the plan is years and years in the making, with Rolling Mill being the first step – once that's developed the rest of the vision can be brought to fruition. He stated that moving forward with the Baltimore Street Revitalization was the right way to handle it, saying that as it's completed over the next 2 years, it will raise citizen morale, and the influx of private money into the downtown will continue outward. Buying up Decatur Street and Henderson Avenue was discussed. Mayor Morriss mentioned the development and work that has been done on Decatur Street so far, saying you can see it happening.

Mr. Silka discussed the tour downtown recently with folks from Johnstown, PA, and said the prices of large buildings are very much different between Johnstown and Cumberland. He explained how the Baltimore Street project was handled at the beginning, with efforts from Melinda Kelleher, and that the communication, engagement, and stakeholders made it successful. He added that he wants to bring the Manager's conference here to Cumberland, and also stated that he could see this as a presentation down the road at MML.

There was discussion about some negative comments regarding the Portland Loo public restroom. Mayor Morriss explained that the downtown business owners wanted to have a public restroom so that non-patrons of their establishments would have a place to use, instead of having people constantly asking if they can come in just to use the restroom.

Mr. Silka review the Threats. Council Member Furstenberg discussed social media and the constant negative commenting about Cumberland from several people and their followers.

Mayor Morriss suggested doing more positive things on YouTube to get them out there, which he said would lead people to that instead of negativity. Mr. Silka advised that they have had discussions about doing vignettes to self-promote, and about creating a YouTube channel for the City. Mayor Morriss suggested inviting Allegany County in, and discussed his viewership during Covid of his weekly updates.

There was discussion about recruitment to build staff. Mr. Silka explained that the City has critical retirements in the 5-year plan. He talked about hiring people based on where they will go next; how they climb the ladder.

There was discussion about training for potential supervisors, and about professional development being important. Mr. Silka stated that he has stressed to the Directors to get involved with MML, which he explained is populated by small cities calling the shots. Mayor Morriss stated that Staff feels that hiring and retention is a challenge, but said he feels the City is turning a corner – there's a lot going on in the City.

Council Member Furstenberg advised on old houses and blight being a threat, and said they need to get cleaned up faster. He stated that other cities are now doing what Cumberland is doing, and said we need to stay ahead of them. Mayor Morriss noted that the City has got the ball rolling with blight removal, and said that even though it's a threat, he looks at it as an opportunity to continue doing what we've been doing. There was discussion about being 100% sure the City is

in fact doing all that the law allows, and could it do more if there is more Staff and resources. It was noted that Cumberland has a big problem with its 512 structures that are not rehab-able. Mr. Silka noted that it comes down to money, and said the cost to demo one house is \$25K.

Mayor Morriss stated that Community Development has made great strides in the last 3-4 years, and grants are allowing developers/contractors to put more money into homes – making them nicer, not just basic renovations. He agreed with Council Member Cioni, saying if there's room for improvement, it needs to be done, and if people aren't doing what they need to do, they need to be held accountable, with violations and citations. He talked about issues with some property managers who know what needs to be done, and about not lowering expectations, but increasing other people's ideas of what the standards are. It was noted that some out-of-town landlords haven't seen their property in 20 years.

There was discussion about hiring too many contractors/outside workers. Mr. Silka stated that it's impossible to do everything needed in the City without hiring outside help, saying the thought was to hire more people vs. outside contractors. He explained that they could never hire enough Staff to do all the work the City does.

There was discussion about Community Development saying they had lack of qualified Staff to implement opportunities. They talked about Hagerstown P&R having 10-12 Staff vs. just Ryan Mackey for the City, and said it would be great to increase the Staff size, but there is a physical limitation. It was noted that if the City can increase tax base, there will be more resources to do so.

There was also discussion about court wait times regarding blighted properties. Council Member Cioni advised that he met with Judge Bean who couldn't understand why there is concern about this, because he stated that on Monday mornings he devotes all his time to just this topic. Mr. Silka explained that it's the court providing continuances – by the time it gets to court, the person has had ample time to resolve the situation.

Mayor Morriss gave examples of Code Enforcement taking pictures of a property every month, so that they would have a year's worth of photos to take to court. He stated that essentially all the judge did was issue a \$100 fine.

Moving on, Council Member Furstenberg discussed the threat of plant closures, and the many people that lost their jobs due to facility closures (most recently Westvaco and Hunter Douglas). There was discussion about census numbers and population decline, with the Mayor saying that the County's population is declining faster than the City's.

Mr. Silka talked about lack of adequate housing stock being a threat, and stated that Cumberland doesn't have the kind of housing to attract young professionals. Council Member Marchini noted that this needs to be discussed when talking about the kind of housing coming into the area.

III. IDENTIFICATION OF STRATEGIC CENTERS

Mr. Silka explained that “centers” means categories to start making goals under, and said there should be 4-5, encapsulating what they talked about in the SWOT analysis. The team discussed what categories to be the “centers.” The categories decided on were:

Fiscal well-being; Communication; Neighborhood revitalization; Governmental & community partner relations; Staff enhancement; and Strategic City initiatives.

Mr. Silka led discussions on formulating goals later under the Strategic Centers. Ideas included keeping up City property; communication regarding snow-plowing; increasing tax base; meeting with neighborhoods and residents, building up housing stock, blight control, more staffing. There was discussion on the value of having just one neighborhood association, since individual associations didn't take off very well. Mayor Morriss stated it's up to the citizens, saying if they don't have a core group to get things going, M&CC can't make things happen for them. Mr. Silka stated without organic participation, associations won't get off the ground. Council Member Furstenberg said he believes there is energy in the neighborhoods, and said he thinks M&CC can bring their own energy to help revitalize.

Mr. Silka discussed residential development, saying it doesn't necessarily result in an increase in tax base because services cost money. He said commercial development uses less services – no street plowing. He said the City is going to be a bedroom community because there is no developable land and the City has small shops – we have to get residents in.

Council Member Frazier talked about having Council visit neighborhoods once or twice a year to meet with residents - go out as a group to show that M&CC care.

Council Member Cioni spoke about his concern with the 10% drop in population, and said he doesn't see how Cumberland can continue as a broad community without working closely with the County and share resources. He said the 10% drop should get peoples' attention that the City needs a somewhat different approach, and discussed lost revenue. He imagined how good it would be if the County and others would be there to brainstorm with M&CC, and share information.

IV. DEVELOPMENT OF NEW MISSION STATEMENT

Mr. Silka discussed creating a mission statement, but said it was not necessary. Mayor Morriss read a random mission statement, saying that generally it would be a statement saying that we want to be nice people. He talked about mission statements when he worked at CSX. Mr. Silka advised they can work on it at a future time.

V. DEVELOPMENT OF STRATEGIC GOALS

Mr. Silka stated that the next step would be to formulate the goals under the strategic centers.

Beginning with Fiscal Well Being, Mayor Morriss spoke about the fund balances and to know where the City is and what it has, but to make projections 5-10 years out for what Staff believes funds will look like, and a base plan for infrastructure needs. He discussed a situation in 2008 when fund balance was low and the City didn't have the money that was needed.

There was discussion about what the asks and risks are, and what will be left in the fund balance. Mr. Silka stated that a responsible debt load is where we want to be. He discussed priorities for fixed capital assets, and said there's restrictions on the bond regarding what you can borrow for.

He also discussed performance-based budgeting, and said they are constantly evaluating where our money is. He noted that right now City benefits are being evaluated again due to service and price issues, and discussed concerns with the consortium.

Fiscal well-being – Fund balance projections; responsible borrowing; prioritization of projects; revenue sources/enhancements; addressing infrastructure

On to Communication: Mayor Morriss stated that M&CC needs to control the narrative of what goes out – stay consistent and positive. There was discussion about live-streaming the meetings. There was discussion about website consolidation, and rebranding it. They also talked about engagement of the public and volunteer opportunities. Doing more streaming of the public meetings, or recording them was mentioned. Mr. Silka noted that when the elevator is down for service for 6 weeks, they will need to have a way to allow for public comment, but after that just have the recorded videos on YouTube.

General Communication – Website consolidation and branding; Citizen messaging; City-positive PR; engagement of the public; unified voice

On to Neighborhood Revitalization: Mayor Morriss discussed property improvement programs, and to see if there's a way to increase funding for those. There was discussion about continuation of programs, while evaluating them to see if they are still necessary – is the money put on the street being used – are we getting the desired results? Council Member Frazier was concerned if the Code Sweeps could be a deterrent to living in the City, with folks thinking Code Enforcement is constantly on their case. Mayor Morriss didn't think it was a problem, and mentioned that 12 inches of grass should not be hard to maintain.

Neighborhood revitalization – Continuation and evaluation of programs; continuation/strengthening of Code Enforcement; Parks & Rec – continue improvements; increase housing stock and removal of blight; historic preservation

Next, they moved on to Staffing: Council Member Cioni discussed what Staff members would want in the way of training. Council Member Marchini talked about leadership development being a part of training. She also discussed having back-up – someone else in line. Council Member Frazier talked about organizational structure, and cross-training was also discussed.

Staff enhancement – Expand and encourage Staff development; succession plan; organization structure optimized; building on organization culture; cross-training

Next, Governmental & Community Partner Relations: Mayor Morriss listed the City's partners: DDC, CEDC, LBC, Janes Place, YMCA, AHEC West, HRDC, CDBG, Hotel/Motel partners, URM, Health Department, and DSS.

There was discussion about the Western Maryland Delegation, to talk to them to find out what common issues can be addressed, and whether to have joint meetings or individual conversations.

Governmental & community partner relations – Enhance relationship with County and State reps; enhance relationship with community partners; State associations, MML, MACO, Tri-County Council; Colleges/CCTE/ACPS for workforce development

And finally, Strategic Initiatives: There was discussion about Cumberland’s outdoor amenities. Mayor Morriss discussed connectivity between the downtown mall, Centre and Mechanic Streets, and talked about the City’s other “Main Street,” Virginia Avenue. He asked about the next steps for revitalizing that part of town, and said that street is the key to that area going forward. There was also discussion about way-finding signage for people coming off the GAP Trail. Council Member Marchini talked about Baltimore Street funding and public money coming in, and mentioned that there has been a lot of private development money going into it as well. It was noted that the Baltimore Street project was an impetus for people to purchase buildings downtown.

Strategic City initiatives – Riverpark and Amphitheatre at Canal Place; connectivity of City amenities; continue to work on Parks & Rec resources; ED review and assessment; leverage private investments for use of public funds.

Mr. Silka stated that these are the goals. He explained that he will handle it from this point forward, and thanked everyone for their hard work. He said they will create documents from everything discussed today, bring it to a work session, and create a roadmap. He said then the roadmap will go to the departments and they’ll come up with a plan as to how to address the goals. He said that what they have control over, they will give quarterly updates. It was mentioned that Staff incorporate time frames – short-term, mid-term, and long-term. Mr. Silka advised that this is a living document, and will constantly be changing. He explained that as we move into the budgeting season, there will be a priority list of what M&CC wants to see and what helps to guide budgeting decisions.

There was discussion about how to define success and failure. Mr. Silka explained that will be another discussion in a workshop – tell us what you want – we will give you the opportunity to take that goal.

There was positive discussion about the retreat, and M&CC said that it was great to be able to work together as a team.

IV. ADJOURNMENT

With no further business at hand, the meeting adjourned at 1:55 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Allison K. Layton
City Clerk

Minutes approved on: November 7, 2023