

Walterboro City Council
Work Session
Proposed Plans for Walterboro Wildlife Sanctuary Discovery Center
July 12, 2016
5:00 P.M.

Present were:

Mayor Bill Young, Council Members Jimmy Syfrett, Paul Siegel, Tom Lohr, Bobby Bonds, James Broderick and Judy Bridge. City Manager Jeff Molinari and City Attorney George Cone were also present. City Clerk Betty Hudson was absent.

There were approximately 5 persons present in the audience.

Mayor Young called the meeting to order and entered into the Work Session. City Manager Molinari stated that a few months ago, Council heard a presentation from Mr. Rob Montgomery, who is the architect who worked with the FROGS Committee and put together the conceptual plans on what the FROGS Committee had been talking about for the past several months. The FROGS Committee has been discussing rehabilitating and renovating the building that the City purchased three years ago to make it into a Discovery Center for the Walterboro Wildlife Sanctuary.

City Manager Molinari stated that he wanted to get some direction from City Council on what the next step will be. He then briefed Council on the conceptual plans for the Discovery Center and then went through the financial side of the equation, giving the following highlights:

The conceptual renderings that Mr. Rob Montgomery came up with showed:

- 1) As you go in the front part of the building, there is room and opportunity for some static exhibits, which could feature any wildlife that we have in the Sanctuary. We also have some space there that could potentially be utilized as a classroom.

City Manager Molinari stated that he had an interesting meeting yesterday afternoon with Mayor Young, Parks Director Adam Davis, and Mr. Tony Mills, who is a naturalist, who works out of Spring Island. He is well known and renowned. In fact, he has a television show on every Friday night. He gave us some interesting insights into the live animal component of the Discovery Center. Some of the feedback we have heard from an attendance and interest standpoint, is that it would definitely behoove us to have a balance between static displays and live animal displays. In talking about the live animals, I don't think we would be dealing with 6 or 7 foot alligators, but certainly there are opportunities with fish, different reptiles, turtles, and even smaller alligators.

- 2) One of the things that Mr. Rob Montgomery came up with as you go down into the area where the bays were in the old dealership is that he was looking at having a stage. There would also be a walk around the ramp where we could potentially put some live animal displays.
- 3) One of the conversations we had with Mr. Mills was that he thought that smaller alligators - baby alligators are definitely doable from a management standpoint. They only grow about 6 inches a year. We could have them for a few years and then simply just cycle them out. From his experience on Spring Island, he did emphasize that having the live animal exhibits would be a strong draw.
- 4) We also have some areas toward the back of the building that could be designated as an exhibit hall. There are certainly opportunities and a strong demand in Walterboro for meeting space. That is certainly something that we could incorporate into the design of the building.
- 5) Mayor Young stated that there is space in the center to have live animals. He thought that we would not want to have snakes down near the meeting rooms, because if somebody had a wedding reception down there, they might not want to have snakes near where they are having a wedding reception. So, we would want to put some of

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those things in the back. If they were in glass enclosures, it wouldn't be much interplay there.

Council Member Bridge then asked if staff would need to increase for having live animals there at all times, as opposed to just having shows.

City Manager Molinari responded that this was something that we talked about yesterday. He stated that Mr. Mills talked about a couple of different scenarios and from his perspective he thought that we could handle each animal or reptile on a different feeding schedule and different regiment. It was his opinion that we could have someone on a part-time basis between 20 or 30 hours per week. Certainly, from an operational standpoint, there is still a question in terms of what kind of staff would we need to dedicate to this facility, and what would be the hours. Mayor Young then said, I don't know what the hours of operation would be. The hours of operation might not be enough, unless we have a special group in there, but it seems like we are going to have to dedicate somebody for that facility.

Council Member Siegel felt that this facility would draw thousands and thousands of people a year off the interstate for a show like this.

- 6) City Manager Molinari stated that Mr. Mills also emphasized that he wanted to try and tie everything together from the history of the property to the wildlife there, and make the Discovery Center a focal point of downtown. Mr. Molinari felt that the Center is strategically located. It's a great piece of property and we have some inherent advantages with the topography. One of the concepts that City Council had already talked about was putting an amphitheater in near the rear of the property, which could be used for movies, performances, and even an opportunity for certain animal displays. It would be a focal point of our downtown especially with the improvements that are going to be made to the streetscape in the next phase.
- 7) Mr. Molinari stated that another feature that Rob had incorporated into the design and one that he really liked was drawing a direct link from the Discovery Center to the Wildlife Sanctuary. That would take some creativity on our part and some work in securing easements, but I think it would definitely behoove us and it would be absolutely critical to be able to tie the Sanctuary directly into this facility.

Mayor Young questioned Attorney Cone if there were still a railroad right-of-way across Harry Cone's property? Attorney Cone responded that this was still owned by the railroad. They were paying for a strip through the City, and I think they have sold some segments of it to private individuals. The City could probably buy it, but I don't know what it would cost. Attorney Cone suggested that he could enquire about the price. Mayor Young responded that he didn't know if we were at that point yet or not.

Mayor Young then said, we are still going to have a disconnect. I guess we could come out to Washington Street if we could come down the railroad property and then come out by Margie Bright's old office to Washington Street. Then, we could go down Washington Street to the Sanctuary. I mean, there are several other pieces of property that would have to be crossed.

Mr. Molinari said that in his experience with CSX, this will probably take anywhere from 12 to 18 months, and at least one trip to Jacksonville to complete. CSX is such a huge bureaucracy and the key is finding the person within that very large organization who can help.

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Council Member Bridge felt that (CSX) is not really trying to hold on to the property, because they have sold off segments of it. So, it wouldn't have any value to it.

Mayor Young said, the last time the City talked to them years ago about all of that section through the City, they wanted market value for the property, but what they called market value was very high. The City backed away from negotiations at that point.

City Manager Molinari then said he wanted to talk about the financial side of this project. He said, what I really want to do, since it's been a few months since Rob presented the concept to City Council, is to get some direction from you, in terms of where you wanted to move forward.

Mr. Molinari pointed out that the next logical step in the process would be to send out a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) to architects. That is something that's required in our procurement code. It would not be a difficult process. We would simply put the ad in the South Carolina SCBO (South Carolina Business Opportunity). Ultimately, we would proceed forward with the project, and City Council will need to select an architect you are comfortable with.

Council Member Syfrett asked, how specific were the grant stipulations for this project? I never saw exactly what we had to do to meet the qualifications or stipulations on that grant. Does this cover that?

City Manager Molinari responded that this more than covers it. My understanding of it is that there were some grant restrictions placed on the property that it could not be sold for certain uses and it had to be used as a Discovery Center for the Sanctuary. The funds were earmarked. I believe that Congressman Clyburn secured the funds for the City. Mayor Young added, yes, but it took him three years to make that money come through, because at the beginning that money was to go toward that \$4,000,000.00 project we had on the back side of the Sanctuary and we decided not to do that. We were able to apply for this. That really has been in the works and it goes way back. Council Member Bridge asked, how much money was that. Mayor Young responded that it was \$300,000.00.

City Manager Molinari reminded that Mr. Montgomery projected the cost for the center to be in the \$1.5 million range. What I have asked the Finance Director to do was to lay out a potential funding scenario to finance the cost of the project. We've got some capacity in both our Local A-Tax Fund, as well as our Local Hospitality Tax Fund. As you are aware, both of these revenue sources have been trending upward. We contacted BB&T a few months ago, and we were quoted a rate of 2.67%. So, just in general, on a 15-year loan, and I am not saying that Council needs to spend \$1.5 million, but just to give us something to work off, that would amount to an annual debt service of \$121,468. As you can see on the bottom of my memo that we have excess capacity in both funds of \$140,330. I am not suggesting that you spend all of that, but the good news is you have some resources there that you can utilize for this project. Because this project is directly tied to tourism, which puts the Local A-Tax and Local Hospitality Tax dollars into play.

Another thing I want to mention to you, just to keep in the back of your minds, is that we already have some debt service for both the Local A-Tax and Local Hospitality Tax. The City assisted with giving some financial assistance for the construction of the Veterans Victory House, as well as the Tax Increment Finance District which was created back in 2005 or 2006. As you can see on the schedule that Amy has provided to you, the TIF debt and the Veterans Victory House debt go away in the 2021 fiscal year. So, that could potentially give us the opportunity if we so desired, to pay this off early. So, you've got some things working for you. With that, I just wanted to get some direction from you. I think that the concept that we have right now is good, where ultimately, the architect that we select is going to provide some guidance and some expertise and will take our specific recommendations and incorporate them.

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Council Member Bridge asked if the City had received another report from a bank about the interest rate? City Manager Molinari replied, we have not, but we can certainly do that. I know that Andy Smith at BB&T would be happy to provide that. That wouldn't be a problem. I would imagine that our interest rate there would be right in the same range, but we could certainly inquire again.

Council Member Syfrett asked what would be the long term debt for the City on this, as far as additional insurance, water bill, light bill, and full time employees? City Manager Molinari responded, and that's the key, typically with projects like this, the brick and mortar are one thing, but it's the ongoing operational cost that we would have to account for. We can certainly put something together, ranging from utilities to maintaining the grounds, and everything that would be involved. Mr. Syfrett commented that the shock factor is going to be there, whether it is up front or not.

Council Member Bridge said the upside of this is the rental part of the facility, because if we get a lot of people to use the facility, there will be an income.

Mr. Molinari responded that this is certainly something that we could take advantage of. We just have to see how things play out. What I would envision at least initially, would be putting the operation of the facility under one of our existing departments. But it's going to be a team effort, and there is already a lot of overlap. Adam has been involved and Michelle has been involved on the tourism side. It touches on a lot of different areas, but certainly the long term operational cost is a good question, and then trying to put a rental structure together that would offset that as much as possible.

Council Member Siegel then asked, do we charge admission down the line as a source of income for the exhibits? City Manager Molinari said, that's a good question. You are going to have a facility that's going to be very attractive to schools in the district, not just Colleton County, but I think they would come from other areas as well. Those are things we are going to need to consider.

Council Member Siegel then asked the City Manager, have we ever had anybody to analyze this project from the standpoint of what we can anticipate in terms of exposure from out of town tourists? Do people come up the interstate? We'd have to have billboards, etc.

Mayor Young said, as we were trying to develop some of the other properties downtown several years ago, we talked to people interested in opening hotels and things like that. One of the things they said was that we needed another anchor for downtown, another reason for people to come here, along with the antique stores and the things they already come here for. They thought that something like this (a Discovery Center) might help to encourage development on some of the other properties that have not been developed.

Mayor Young further stated that there is a lot of unknown to this project. Until we get into it, we won't really know what we are going to do - whether we are going to charge and how much it's going to cost us. All of those things. We need to go in with the attitude that the center is going to be somewhat like the museum, which is there for people to go in and enjoy. Then, if it's such that we can charge a nominal fee for the school groups, tourists or whoever comes in, then it will be even better.

City Manager Molinari stated that the people we have reached out to for input have been incredibly supportive. They provided a lot of good information. What I would suggest to you is that we go ahead and push this project forward. It will certainly behoove us to select an architect who has experience with this type of facility and be able to lend some expertise.

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Mayor Young stated that last year he went to several interpretive centers, and a lot of them just had sections in there that were not walled off completely, but they would have a backdrop and they would have a video screen and a kiosk type thing. You go in and you turn that on and it tells you all about that particular section. Also, we might be able to get some help from ETV or Rudy Mancke or some of those folks who have produced this kind of thing and Dr. Kilpartrick. We might want to hire somebody to professionally produce the kinds of things that we put on there. The man we talked to yesterday felt that we could do a lot of this stuff fairly inexpensively. A lot of the exhibits and the ones he was suggesting, I don't think it would be as inexpensive as he thinks, but he does it for a living, so he probably knows.

Council Member Siegel asked, does he have an interpretive center at Spring Island. Mayor Young replied, yes he has one at Spring Island and Jeff says he has a t.v. show that's on PBS. He was very willing to help us, which we would be in competition with them to some extent. He has a lot of connections and he also told us that Rob and his son had built a 250-gallon aquarium in their house. So, the architect himself has some experience.

Mayor Young then asked the City Manager, what do you need from City Council? What kind of direction do you need from us at this point? City Manager Molinari responded that he needs an approval to proceed with the RFQ process to solicit proposals from architects. That's all I need. Council Member Bonds then asked, what does that cost us? City Manager Molinari responded nothing. He added that the SCBO doesn't charge anything. All it would be is, I will put the RFQ together and put it out there.

Council Member Bridge added, I want us to really give a lot more consideration to parking, because our property there is too much consumed with the building, even though there is some parking. It's just cosmetic parking, and it won't accommodate a crowd. I know we have the City Parking Lot too, but we are talking a lot about busing kids in by the hundreds. I don't know if you have driven on that road, but it's hard to pass cars there. So, if you have a bus, I don't know if it's even possible to tour this by bus on that road. I don't know what we can do about that, but if we are going to be using the back of the property for bus traffic, we really need to look at that. I don't know if there are any other lots available for parking? I know we talked about putting the buses on Washington Street. That's a big concern of mine, traveling on that road.

Mr. Molinari answered, we definitely are going to have to talk to the County if we have any issues with it, in terms of having to share the access, but yes, you brought up a good point. If one of the areas of people we are going to be focusing on is school groups, then we certainly are going to have to allow for parking those vehicles.

Further discussion was held on properties that could be used for parking for the building. Mr. Bonds said he could not image accommodating more than 2 or 3 buses of kids at one time. Mayor Young said, I think those are things we are going to have to work out. Council Member Bridge agreed that parking needs to be thought about in this process.

Council Member Broderick raised a question about a cut road that goes down to the entrance to the Great Swamp Sanctuary. There is a cut road that goes off to the side. That would be a place where you could park the buses. Mayor Young added, well, we have several options, we could have them park in the County lot, if the County works with us on that. We could let them out at our place and then bring the buses down to the City Parking Lot, and they could walk back through downtown to the buses and buy stuff on the way back or the bus could come back and pick them up.

Mayor Young said, yes, all that has to be figured out and you are right, we have to do it in the beginning plan.

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On a question raised by Council Member Syfrett, City Manager Molinari responded that he would probably give the architects 30 days to respond to the RFQ.

Mayor Young asked the City Manager, are you going to specify experience in this kind of facility would be a plus or past experience? Mr. Molinari responded, yes, I am not going to reinvent the wheel here, but I am going to call on some of my fellow City Managers and Administrators to get samples of RFQ's they have used for architectural services.

Council Member Siegel then asked, on the RFQ's does the architect give a concept or just the cost to hire him? City Manager Molinari responded, it is more of a statement of their qualifications. I would think that a project like this would generate very good interest. What I would envision is to have staff evaluate all of the proposals, and get them down to between 3 and 5 candidates. Then, bring them in for an interview with City Council, because ultimately City Council is going to have to choose somebody that they are comfortable working with. That process will probably take a couple of months.

Mayor Young then asked the City Manager, will you invite this man, also? City Manager responded without a doubt. Mayor Young said, he seems to be easy to work with. However, we might find somebody out there who has a lot of experience in this, that we don't know about.

Council Member Bridge then asked, how accessible is Tony Mills to having input. City Manager Molinari pointed out that Mr. Mills is really good. He said, the first time I met him last year, we did a walk through of the building and I know that he attended one of our FROGS meetings. He is the type of person that when I contacted him to meet this week, I sent him an e-mail and a minute later, he was calling me. So, I mean he is very dedicated and passionate about this. His expertise is more on the live exhibits' side, but I think that is a plus, and I think he'd be more than happy to open up his doors at Spring Island for us.

Council Member Bridge asked if Mr. Mills' facility was run by the state? The City Manager and others felt that the facility was private. Mayor Young added that Mr. Mills' place was very small, but it is very nice. He did mention some of the exhibits that he thought would not be appropriate for us to use here. There are other exhibit places that we might want to send a committee to look at, get some pictures and get some ideas to use. We can always drop back and look at the plans for the original Discovery Center, too, and see if any of that can be applied.

Council Member Siegel asked, do those original plans have concepts for actual exhibits? Mayor Young said, they were down to nuts and bolts on that.

City Manager Molinari said I have the set of plans in my office, it is very detailed. Mayor Young added, we had on those plans an otter pond and an alligator's bath that heated up so that the alligators would be made active. As you walked down in it, the water rose and dropped as you went through different phases of the swamp. We also had an animatronic man that was going to stand out in the pond, and he was going to greet you and tell you a little of the history of the Swamp.

Mayor Young then said, now Jeff will go forward if that's what Council wants, with RFQ's. He will write the description of the project, send that out and we'll see where we go from there. Council agreed by consensus.

No further input was received and the meeting was adjourned.

Submitted by,

Betty J. Hudson
City Clerk

APPROVED: September 6, 2016