

VILLAGE OF HOMEWOOD



MEETING MINUTES

DATE OF MEETING:

March 7, 2024

APPEARANCE COMMISSION

6:00 pm

Village Hall Board Room
2020 Chestnut Street
Homewood, IL 60430

CALL TO ORDER:

Chair Hrymak called the meeting to order at 6:00pm.

ROLL CALL:

Members Banks, Preston, Quirke, Kidd, Kluck, and Chair Hrymak were present. Member Scheffke was absent.

Chair Hrymak thanked former member Elizabeth Smith for her service on the Commission following her recent resignation from the Commission.

In attendance from Village staff was Director of Economic and Community Development Angela Mesaros, and Assistant Director of Economic and Community Development Noah Schumerth. There was one member of the public in the audience, and no members of the public were in attendance on the Zoom virtual meeting.

APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES:

Chair Hrymak noted that a request for information about graphics depicting electronic signage at 183rd and Governors Highway was incorrectly attributed to him, and should instead be attributed to Member Quirke.

Motion for approval made by Member Quirke; seconded by Member Kluck.

AYES: 5 (Preston, Quirke, Kidd, Kluck, Chair Hrymak)

NAYS: 0

ABSTENTIONS: 1 (Banks)

ABSENT: 1 (Scheffke)

PUBLIC COMMENTS:

None.

REGULAR BUSINESS:

Chair Hrymak introduced hearing for Regular Business agenda items. Chair Hrymak concurred and introduced Case 23-07: Appearance Plan Update.

CASE 23-07 – Appearance Plan Update Presentation

Assistant Director Schumerth introduced the case and noted that the presentation for the Commission was designed to provide an update on concurrent projects for the Sign Code Update and Appearance Plan Update, two projects being completed in-house. Schumerth noted that the presentation is designed to share results from public engagement and provide opportunities for discussion about how feedback from Homewood community members should inform the final versions of the new Appearance Plan and Sign Code projects.

Schumerth presented an agenda for the meeting which included reviewing the progress made on both concurrent planning projects, reviewing key takeaways from the public engagement events hosted for the project since 2022, and reviewing priorities and design needs for the new Appearance Plan.

Schumerth reviewed the four primary public engagement tools used for the new planning projects, including two in-person workshop events at annual community events (Fall Fest 2022 and Holiday Lights 2023), an in-person charrette workshop in Spring 2023, and an Appearance Plan survey. Member Quirke asked what a charrette is. Schumerth explained that charrettes are hands-on design workshops with activities, maps and other features which allow for hands-on workshopping of potential ideas for a plan by participants.

Schumerth displayed results of the Fall Fest 2022 workshop. Schumerth discussed the preferred buildings and architectural elements for buildings which emerged from the workshop, which largely focused on the Appearance Plan project.

Schumerth discussed the survey results from the Spring 2023 charrette workshop for the Appearance Plan Update and Sign Code Update projects. Schumerth noted key findings from the workshop, including stated desire to see more painted signs and murals, greater landscaping around monument signs, decorative exterior lights, a more unified lighting scheme across the Village, unique types of signs, bold colors, and more. Schumerth also expressed that residents wished to avoid mansard roofs, pole/pylon signs, LED signs, and signage not used in moderation. Schumerth noted the concerns residents had around signage in the workshop signals the need to take caution in writing the design standards of the new sign code.

Schumerth displayed new methods of organizing the new Appearance Plan which were devised during the Appearance Plan workshop, including a tiered list of material types to ensure high-quality and publicly preferred materials are used on new buildings without exacting onerous costs on developers.

Schumerth summarized the findings from the Holiday Lights 2023 event, which asked residents about preferred building types they wish to see constructed in Homewood and why they preferred such buildings. Schumerth shared that residents had a strong affinity for the use of brick, private and semi-public open spaces visible from streets, outdoor public spaces attached to businesses, and large windows on downtown buildings and multi-family buildings. On commercial buildings, residents expressed that unique rooflines and facades, clear entrances, and better pedestrian lighting and wayfinding are priorities for new projects. On industrial buildings, residents expressed a desire to see outdoor open/gathering spaces, clear entrances, awnings and other simple architectural features which make the building more humane in design.

Schumerth shared other key takeaways from the Holiday Lights event, including the need to shift Appearance Review focus to site design and building relationships over individual architectural elements. Schumerth also noted that in order to respond well to resident concerns, landscaping guidance and adaptive reuse guidance need to be present in any new guidelines created by the Village.

Chair Hrymak noted that maintenance also needs to be a higher priority in the new planning documents.

Member Quirke asked if anything specific standards for maintenance were identified by residents, such as private business owners being required to have the same standards for maintenance as those followed for Village properties. Schumerth said that he would refer back to specific responses from residents and follow up with Member Quirke.

Member Quirke mentioned “adopt-a-planter” programs and stated that such programs may still exist.

Chair Hrymak said that involving local businesses in the statements and materials put out by the Beautification Committee was important for ensuring good maintenance of local buildings and landscaping.

Member Preston discussed using the homeowner’s association concept in Homewood to perform landscape maintenance, where businesses pool dues together to maintain the landscaping surrounding the businesses on public and private property. Schumerth noted that this is a common device used in many communities through Special Service Areas (SSAs) or Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), and these can be considered for Homewood in the future.

Member Quirke asked for clarification about what a Special Service Area (SSA) is. Schumerth said that it is a taxing district permitted by the State of Illinois which allows businesses within a defined area to levy a small tax for specific stated improvements, which can include landscaping maintenance and construction, public infrastructure investments, repairs, and other projects. Schumerth noted that funds may only be used in the defined area around the businesses or property owners agreeing to participate in the tax. Hrymak noted that it is a tax and may take a long time to reach approval. Schumerth noted that 51% of property owners in the defined area need to agree to the tax, and there are appeal processes which other property owners may take.

Schumerth returned to Member Quirke’s question and noted that specific maintenance standards were expressed for the maintenance of landscaping at the front of lot, landscaping in parking lots and around signs, and of storefronts in the Southgate area. Schumerth stated he is happy to send the individual comments to any member of the Commission.

Schumerth discussed the Appearance Plan Survey released in late 2023 and early 2024, and noted that there were over 190 responses to the survey. Schumerth discussed the results of the survey. For the first question of the survey discussing how residents would improve one building in the Village, Schumerth noted that the Hartford Building, Homewood Brewing Company (under construction) and the former Brunswick Lanes buildings were most commonly selected to change. Staff Liaison Mesaros noted that the results of this question should be read with caution, as the Hartford Building and Homewood Brewing Company are incomplete buildings that are not full and active yet, and that opinions on design should be collected once the buildings are finished.

Schumerth noted that the Hartford Building feedback focused on the building's material and design, the Homewood Brewing Company feedback focused on the scale of the building, and the Brunswick Lanes feedback focused on the maintenance and upkeep of vacant properties. Schumerth said that the feedback had a far higher level of precision than expected, with many answers providing a lot of detail. Hrymak praised the level of care put into the survey.

Schumerth stated that in the second survey question on priorities for the new Appearance Plan, creating standards for improving landscaping quality and increasing open space availability was the top priority expressed by residents. Schumerth said that this was closely followed by the use of historic materials on all buildings. Schumerth said that this gave staff a great picture into how to spend time in developing new standards for the Appearance Plan.

Schumerth stated that a full word study of the responses provided for the survey gave a clear set of values to anchor the new Appearance Plan and Sign Code documents in. The top values expressed by Schumerth's study included "quality materials, compatibility and continuity, creating inviting open areas and landscaping, and prioritizing maintenance."

Quirke asked if there were any comments or concerns brought up about accessibility and ADA compliance. Schumerth noted that there were comments about accessibility brought up, including one expressing a desire to see ADA entrances to buildings be "as beautiful and interesting as the primary entrance of the building." Schumerth said that new designs should avoid "tacking" ADA entrances and infrastructure in hard-to-see areas of building.

Schumerth opened up a broader discussion with the Commission. Schumerth noted that the goal of the evening was to invite discussion as a Commission about the direction of the specific recommendations for the Sign Code and Appearance Plan. Schumerth noted that the question of the evening was to answer "what main ideas are coming through the plan?" and use those answers to start to come up with ideas that we can stitch directly into a written set of plans for the Village.

Chair Hrymak noted that the discussion should be informal and Commissioners could speak at any time.

Member Preston noted that finding a "happy medium" between these preferred materials and modern materials is important.

Chair Hrymak noted that people clearly want more brick and stone, and want us to avoid stucco and other modern materials which have become common around the Village. He noted that residents do not like the limited dark brick that looks too modern on the Hartford Building, and also dislike vinyl siding. Hrymak said that he did not remember approving the design that was built at the Hartford Building with limited brick on the structure.

Chair Hrymak also noted that businesses in Homewood operate in a low budget environment with taxes and other burdens. Member Preston asked if the Village could go after funding for improved materials and better building construction. Preston noted that a grant writer could be a useful resource for producing better architecture. Staff Liaison Mesaros asked if there are local grants available for use by the Village for the types of projects being discussed. Member Preston stated that there are economic development resources available through the Southland Development Authority and other local development groups.

Member Preston stated that Homewood needs a small business group to help raise awareness for these funds. Chair Hrymak noted that Homewood has the Homewood Business Association fulfilling that role. Preston noted that as a member of the Southland Development Authority, they are often not present at workshops or grant events. Preston expressed a desire to see Homewood community members “huddle together” to figure out how to secure funds for use in Homewood.

Member Quirke noted that TIF districts allow for unique opportunities to encourage better design. Quirke noted that the Village likes to encourage the distribution of money for new projects, and that it could be used to support and incentivize good projects, though they are long-term funds. Member Preston further discussed the need for Homewood to also be involved in the work of articulating a vision of design for Homewood and surrounding areas through involvement in the distribution of funds from the Southland Development Authority. Staff Liaison Mesaros noted that staff were not aware of the funds and programs being mentioned by Preston, and asked for more information separate from the meeting.

Member Quirke said that when developers were designing and presenting the Hartford Building, they wished to lure people from downtown Chicago. Quirke noted that the design, including materials and the garage doors in the front of the building, were designed to mimic the downtown designs that many young people in the downtown are drawn to. Member Preston said that the building was very reflective of designs employed on the north side neighborhoods of Chicago, which has benefits in attracting new people with disposable income but could affect community character.

Chair Hrymak said that he recalled building requirements being generated to dictate the levels of materials required for each new building. Staff Liaison Mesaros noted that portions of the tiered materials graphic shown by Schumerth earlier in the evening was integrated into the zoning ordinance and can be found in the code’s development requirements. Mesaros said that the requirements in the Appearance Plan can be more strict as a set of guidelines, which are negotiable to individual projects.

Chair Hrymak expressed appreciation for tiered guidelines and more specific thresholds written into guidelines to allow developers to have clarity in what is expected of them. Schumerth thanked Hrymak for the feedback.

Member Kluck also expressed a desire to see clear “windows” and standards to be written into the Appearance Plan to ensure that developers and architects do not waste their time and know from the start of the project what is expected in terms of project design and the subsequent cost of the project. Chair Hrymak also noted that these standards ensure that the Village does not set bad design precedent. Schumerth provided examples of how more specific standards can be written into a set of design guidelines.

Schumerth said that there were tradeoffs in terms of higher costs and restrictions on design ideas.

Member Kidd asked if it is possible to write standards and guidelines in such a way that it provides clear numbers and standards for developers to understand. Schumerth said that it is, and the main goal is to write in numbers or thresholds that are too specific nor too broad, which is difficult. Chair Hrymak and Staff Liaison Mesaros stated that past efforts to accomplish this had not worked in Homewood.

Member Kidd asked how other cities achieve successful design standards language, pointing to Naperville and Orland Park not having buildings which stand out from one another in a way that is

noticeable to a visitor. Member Preston said that there are incentives for staying within preferred design thresholds for materials, building massing, and other characteristics, offering a way for quality increases in building design to “pay for themselves.”

Member Banks said that in her previous community, there was a high level of “back and forth” between design review boards and developers, requiring color and material boards, multiple rounds of “back and forth” in design, and ongoing dialogue about the design of buildings. Banks noted that there was always a prioritization of using materials or building details that are drawn from immediately adjacent buildings. Banks said it was important to review buildings next to its neighbors to make decisions. Banks said that the La Grange design review board had an approach which would be willing to say “no” to new designs, and was proactive in offering design solutions and recommendations to developers or to other voting bodies considering plans for new buildings. Banks expressed a desire to see the Appearance Commission embrace its role as a design review board with some authority over building design.

Member Quirke expressed concerns that La Grange’s processes were not transferable to Homewood because La Grange is a home rule community. Staff Liaison Mesaros noted that she was a former employee of the Village of La Grange, and said that La Grange is not home rule and has the same municipal status as Homewood.

Schumerth thanked Member Banks for the new ideas and for bringing expertise from La Grange. Schumerth expressed a need for a proactive design review board in order to achieve successful design, and said that there is a need for successful tools to use to enact good recommendations for building designs.

As Schumerth presented the remainder of the questions written for the Appearance Commission, Member Quirke said that there was a need to improve enforcement of design quality and maintenance in the Village. Quirke said that enforcement was also needed to avoid “ad hoc” repairs and other actions which degrade the appearance of buildings. Chair Hrymak said that he was encouraged by the Village President openly stating at the previous Appearance Commission meeting that greater maintenance enforcement was needed in the Village.

Staff Liaison Mesaros noted the importance of granular details in the appearance of a community, and that she attended a conference in Naperville where she took photos because she was impressed by the attention to detail and clear maintenance of the community.

A member of the public walked into the Village Board Room to attend the meeting.

Chair Hrymak noted that there are “tried and true” building materials which the Village needs to embrace, and that they are what are often remembered from communities where people are visiting, as Staff Liaison Mesaros noted when she visited Naperville.

Schumerth introduced a separate conversation on areas of concern that need to be addressed through the Sign Code Update. Chair Hrymak said the focus needs to be on reducing and eliminating the use of LED and neon signs in the community. Member Banks said that such types of signs were prohibited in La Grange. Chair Hrymak said that gas stations in particular need to be watched for the use of signs.

Schumerth noted that in his previous community of Gilbert, Arizona, the community had an extensive set of design requirements in its sign code, and enforcement teams were given explicit training about common sign code violations to watch out for.

Member Quirke expressed concerns about the number of signage that businesses are being given, and said that there is a need to focus on how much signage is provided to individual storefronts and building tenants. Quirke said that the current standards do not give much detail about how much signage should be given to multi-façade buildings, or where signs can be placed on buildings with multiple frontages. Quirke said greater clarity on both amount and placement of signage are needed. Banks shared that multiple tenant buildings were treated differently than single-tenant buildings of the same size. Schumerth said that there are some requirements for multi-tenant and multiple frontage buildings, but that it is an area where more regulations and guidelines may be needed. Schumerth stated that these areas would be revisited in the rewriting of the Sign Code. Staff Liaison Mesaros said that the current requirement limiting enforcement and final sign allowances to building owners is difficult to manage.

Schumerth shared the next decisions to be made for the Appearance Plan document, including the creation of design “districts,” the final outline and structure of the plan, the design of the plan document, and the clear values which will be used to communicate the central purpose of the plan to the public.

Schumerth closed the presentation and thanked the Commission for the discussion. Chair Hrymak asked if any other people were involved in the public engagement work done for these projects; Mesaros and Schumerth said that it was only the two planners on staff.

Member Quirke requested that a “cheat sheet” be created with a short summary of the information collected through the public engagement process for these projects. Quirke mentioned it will make it easier to have discussions with other boards and with members of the Homewood community about the changes being proposed to the Appearance Plan and the Sign Code.

Chair Hrymak asked if the member of the audience who joined late in the meeting had any concerns or questions about the Appearance Plan and Sign Code projects. That member of the audience asked a question about feedback given on the Downtown Transit-Oriented Development Master Plan. Chair Hrymak said Village staff has received lots of feedback on the plan document.

OLD BUSINESS:

Chair Hrymak said that Stoney Point Grill looked ready to open. Staff Liaison Mesaros said that the business was prepared to open in the next several weeks. Hrymak praised the design of the signage and the interior and Mesaros said the interior build-out was largely complete.

Chair Hrymak also noted that the sign for Homewood Brewing Company was installed on the building’s canopy. Staff Liaison Mesaros noted the quality of the interior work and that the business was also very close to opening. Member Quirke asked about the former pizza restaurant next door and noted the Homewood Brewing Company sign on the side of the building. Quirke asked what the building will be used for, and whether it will be part of the brewery. Staff Liaison Mesaros said that plans are not finalized for that building but that it is owned by the owners of the brewery.

Chair Hrymak asked about the work going on within the Ridgewood Tap building, and commented on the new windows installed in the building. Hrymak asked about the new color band on the mid-section of the building and asked if the business had applied for its sign permits or had been prepared to be seen by the Appearance Commission. Staff Liaison Mesaros said that the sign will mostly replace the existing signage and that an Appearance Review was not required.

Member Kidd asked about a building on Harwood that is proposed to be a donut shop. Staff Liaison Mesaros said that interior work has continued on the building and that they still have plans to open. Chair Hrymak expressed relief that the business will open irregardless of public controversy about the incentives and construction on the building.

NEW BUSINESS:

Schumerth shared that a new memo had been attached to the agenda packet summarizing old and new project information for the Appearance Commission.

ADJOURN:

A motion was made for adjourning the meeting by Member Preston; second by Member Kidd.

AYES: 6 (Members Banks, Preston, Quirke, Kidd, Kluck, and Chair Hrymak)

NAYS: 0

ABSTENTIONS: 0

ABSENT: 0

The meeting was adjourned at 7:05pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Noah Schumerth