



Planning & Zoning Board Meeting

February 27, 2025 at 6:00 PM
Howey-in the-Hills Town Hall
101 N. Palm Ave.,
Howey-in-the-Hills, FL 34737

MINUTES

Board Chair Tina St. Clair called the meeting to Order at 6:00 PM.
Board Chair Tina St. Clair led the attendees in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag

ROLL CALL

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Board Member Joshua Husemann | Board Member Alan Hayes | Board Member Shawn Johnson | Board Member Paul Johns | Vice Chair Frances Wagler | Chair Tina St. Clair

MEMBERS ABSENT:

Board Member Richard Mulvany

STAFF PRESENT:

April Fisher, Town Planner | Sean O'Keefe, Town Manager | John Brock, Deputy Town Manager / Town Clerk

CONSENT AGENDA

Routine items are placed on the Consent Agenda to expedite the meeting. If a Planning & Zoning Board Member wishes to discuss any item, the procedure is as follows: (1) Pull the item(s) from the Consent Agenda; (2) Vote on the remaining item(s); and (3) Discuss each pulled item and vote.

1. Consideration and Approval of the January 23, 2025, Planning and Zoning Board Meeting minutes.

Motion made by Board Member Hayes to approve the Consent Agenda; seconded by Board Member Johnson. Motion approved unanimously by roll call vote.

Voting

Yea: Board Member Husemann, Board Member Hayes, Board Member Johnson, Vice Chair Wagler, Board Member Johns, Chair St. Clair
Nay: None

PUBLIC HEARING

2. Consideration and Recommendation: **Ordinance 2024-012 - Watermark Rezoning**

Board Chair Tina St. Clair read Ordinance 2024-012 out loud by title only:

AN ORDINANCE OF THE TOWN OF HOWEY IN THE HILLS, FLORIDA, PERTAINING TO LAND USE; PROVIDING FINDINGS OF THE TOWN COUNCIL; AMENDING ORDINANCE 2022-16 AND THE TOWN'S OFFICIAL ZONING MAP TO INCLUDE WITHIN THE PLANNED UNIT DEVELOPMENT (PUD) KNOWN AS WATERMARK PUD CERTAIN ADDITIONAL LANDS LOCATED TO THE SOUTH OF THE WATERMARK PUD, AS MORE PARTICULARLY DESCRIBED IN ATTACHMENT A TO THIS ORDINANCE; PROVIDING THAT THE CONDITIONS, REQUIREMENTS, RESTRICTIONS, AND OTHER TERMS IN ORDINANCE 2022-16 GOVERN THE USE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ADDITIONAL LANDS; PROVIDING FOR SEVERABILITY, CONFLICTS, CODIFICATION, RATIFICATION, AND AN EFFECTIVE DATE.

Town Planner, April Fisher, presented Ordinance 2024-012, which proposed expanding the existing Watermark Planned Unit Development (PUD) by incorporating an additional 33 acres located directly south of the current development. This expansion would allow for the construction of 65 additional dwelling units, all of which would be required to meet the minimum lot size of a quarter-acre, as mandated by the updated Future Land Use and Zoning Code. Mrs. Fisher explained that, despite the addition of new lots, the overall density of the development would remain below the maximum permitted under the Town's Comprehensive Plan. The current zoning allowed for up to three dwelling units per acre, whereas the proposed expansion would result in a density of only 2.19 dwelling units per acre.

Additionally, the applicant requested a modification to the existing development agreement, specifically seeking to remove the 3,500-square-foot maximum dwelling size restriction for the quarter-acre lots. Mrs. Fisher clarified that this change would apply only to the new larger lots, while all other aspects of the PUD, including setbacks and design standards, would remain unchanged. Given that the proposal aligned with both the spirit of the original PUD and the Town's Land Development Code and Future Land Use designation, Town staff recommended approval of the ordinance.

Following Mrs. Fisher's presentation, applicant representative, Carolyn Haslam, from the Akerman law firm, addressed the board to provide further details. She explained that her client had purchased the additional 33 acres and intended to seamlessly integrate the new lots into the existing development rather than confining them to the southern portion. The expansion would preserve the originally approved mix of 70-foot and 80-foot lots, while also incorporating the quarter-acre lots in a way that harmonized with the overall community layout.

Ms. Haslam emphasized that, while the applicant was seeking to remove the 3,500-square-foot dwelling size restriction for the new quarter-acre lots, the removal of this cap would not result in an overbuilt, disproportionate appearance. She explained that, even if a home were built to the maximum allowable size within the setback limits, it would still only cover approximately 46% of the lot, well below the 50% lot coverage threshold. Additionally, Ms. Haslam noted that the project was being developed in three phases and would continue to exceed the required open space standards. She also confirmed that the developer had agreed to increase the width of the pedestrian pathway to 12 feet and that all units would be connected to Town water and sewer services.

Board Chair Tina St. Clair opened Public Comment for this item only.

Mark Linn, 24030 Sunset Dr., Howey-in-the-Hills (unincorporated Lake County) – County Resident Mark Linn inquired about the proposed entry and exit points for the development and whether any access would be provided along State Road 19. In response, Board Member Husemann reviewed the development plans and confirmed that both entrances would be located on Revels Road, with no direct access from SR 19.

Further discussion addressed potential roadway improvements, with Board Member Hayes noting that the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) had proposed a roundabout at the intersection of SR 19 and Revels Road. Board Member Husemann cited an engineering report from Griffey Engineering, which indicated that the project would need to dedicate additional right-of-way at the southeast corner of SR 19 and Revels Road to accommodate the future roundabout. However, it was clarified that the final decision on the roundabout would rest with FDOT, as SR 19 is under state jurisdiction.

Linda Lindsey, 24115 Sunset Dr., Howey-in-the-Hills (unincorporated Lake County) – County Resident Linda Lindsey expressed concerns regarding rumors that her property was being considered for annexation into the Town of Howey-in-the-Hills. Board Chair St. Clair clarified that there were no plans for annexation of her property as part of the current development.

Ms. Lindsey also inquired about whether Sunset Drive would serve as an access point to the proposed subdivision. Town Manager, Sean O’Keefe, explained that Sunset Drive would not provide direct access to the development. The area where Sunset Drive meets the project site was designated as green space, and there were no entry points planned from that road.

Ms. Lindsey also raised concerns about her and her sister’s five-acre properties being boxed in by the development. Mr. O’Keefe provided additional clarification on nearby parcels, explaining that the retired Town landfill, which had been annexed into the Town of Howey-in-the-Hills, was located adjacent to the project. A road stub had been included in the development plan to allow potential future access to the landfill site, which had been considered for a possible observation park or other public use.

Following this discussion, Ms. Lindsey stated that she was satisfied with the response regarding Sunset Drive but remained concerned about future changes in the surrounding area. The discussion concluded with Board Chair St. Clair thanking her for her input.

Board Chair Tina St. Clair closed Public Comment.

Board Member Hayes inquired about the request to remove the 3,500-square-foot maximum home size requirement for certain lots within the Watermark Development expansion. He asked whether this measurement referred to total under-roof space or air-conditioned space and whether it included garages and porches.

A Watermark Development Representative clarified that the minimum garage size would be 400 square feet and that some home models within the development would exceed the 3,500-square-foot limit. Of the 12 home models planned, at least two would exceed this limit, with one at 3,800 square feet and another slightly over 4,000 square feet. However, even with these larger homes, the development would remain compliant with the Town’s lot permeability requirements.

Board Member Hayes then sought confirmation that the additional quarter-acre lots were not being clustered solely within Phase 3 but were instead distributed throughout the development. The Watermark Development Representative affirmed that, in response to prior concerns, the developer integrated the new lots throughout the community to create a more balanced layout rather than concentrating them in a single area.

Board Vice-Chair Wagler noted that this approach aligned with the Town’s Land Development Code requirements, emphasizing that the developer was following the Town’s expectations.

A gentleman from the audience spoke out asking to be heard, and Board Chair St. Clair re-opened Public Comment for this item only.

Rafael Gonzalez, 23608 State Road 19, Howey-in-the-Hills (unincorporated Lake County) - County Resident, Rafael Gonzalez, raised concerns about the impact of the proposed development on local wetlands and water sources. He inquired about the green and blue areas on the development plans,

which were identified as open space and stormwater retention areas. Mr. Gonzalez expressed concerns about potential pollution of nearby water bodies due to runoff from the roads and homes in the development, questioning how water treatment would be managed. A representative from the Watermark Development team assured him that stormwater would be properly treated before entering the surrounding environment.

Mr. Gonzalez also voiced frustration over zoning changes, stating that, when he purchased his property, he was informed the area would remain designated for five-acre lots. He felt that residents were not being adequately represented and that zoning regulations were being altered in favor of new developments. Town Manager, Sean O'Keefe, clarified that the zoning distinctions differ between unincorporated Lake County and the Town of Howey-in-the-Hills. While Lake County may have five-acre lot requirements in certain zones, the land within Howey's municipal limits is subject to Town zoning regulations.

Mr. Gonzalez further expressed frustration that public meetings had been canceled or rescheduled, suggesting that decisions had already been made without sufficient public input. Town Clerk, John Brock, explained that meeting postponements were due to necessary modifications to the development plans and legal notification requirements. Applicant Representative, Carolyn Haslam, added that the developer had adjusted plans based on input from a home builder who requested larger home models exceeding 4,000 square feet, which required amendments before presenting the updated proposal.

Mr. Gonzalez questioned whether the 33-acre parcel under consideration for rezoning had already been approved for development. Board Chair St. Clair clarified that the land itself had been annexed and designated for development years ago, with zoning updates aligning with Howey-in-the-Hills' comprehensive plan. Ms. Haslam emphasized that the developer was exceeding the current zoning requirements, ensuring that quarter-acre lots and updated land use plans met or surpassed town standards.

Board Chair Tina St. Clair closed Public Comment again.

Motion made by Board Member Johns to recommend approval of Ordinance 2024-012; seconded by Board Member Hayes. Motion approved unanimously by roll call vote.

Voting

Yea: Board Member Husemann, Board Member Hayes, Board Member Johnson, Vice Chair Wagler, Board Member Johns, Chair St. Clair

Nay: None

OLD BUSINESS

None

NEW BUSINESS

3. Consideration and Approval: **Hillside Groves - Meritage - Elevation Approvals**

Town Planner, April Fisher, provided an overview of the architectural elevation approval for Hillside Groves. She noted that the application was previously reviewed by the Planning and Zoning Board last year, at which time the applicant was asked to provide more detailed information on how the proposed elevations comply with Chapter 4 of the Town's Land Development Code. This chapter contains specific architectural design requirements for residential and commercial developments. The applicant had since addressed all concerns and submitted detailed house elevations and material/color packages for residents to choose from. Mrs. Fisher confirmed that the revised submission met all Land Development Code requirements and recommended approval by the Planning and Zoning Board.

Following the presentation, public comments were opened and closed with no participation from attendees. The board then discussed the requirement for homes with side or rear elevations facing a roadway to meet primary façade standards, ensuring enhanced architectural detailing on all visible sides of the home. Board Member Husemann emphasized that homes on corner lots or those with multiple street-facing sides must comply with the requirement to have four primary façade elements. Town Manager, Sean O'Keefe, confirmed that this requirement would be included in the meeting minutes and communicated to the applicant. Town Planner, April Fisher, clarified that compliance would also be verified during the building permit review process for each lot.

Motion made by Board Member Husemann to approval the proposed six house models from Meritage Homes for the Hillside Groves development at Howey-in-the-Hills, with the condition that any homes with multiple street-facing sides meet the four primary façade elements requirement on each street-facing side; seconded by Board Member Johnson. Motion approved unanimously by roll call vote.

Voting

Yea: Board Member Husemann, Board Member Hayes, Board Member Johnson, Board Member Johns, Vice Chair Wagler, Chair St. Clair

Nay: None

4. Discussion: **Land Development Code - Setbacks Update**

Town Planner, April Fisher, provided a report in response to previous discussions regarding pool setback requirements in the Land Development Code (LDC). Currently, the LDC requires a 10-foot rear setback for pools, screen enclosures, and pool decks. At the request of the Planning & Zoning Board, Mrs. Fisher researched how other jurisdictions in Lake County regulate pool setbacks. Her findings indicated that, while many municipalities require a 10-foot setback, some, such as Minneola, allow a 5-foot setback for smaller lots. Other municipalities, including Lake County, vary setback requirements based on zoning districts and lot sizes.

Mrs. Fisher noted that many of Howey-in-the-Hills' Planned Unit Developments (PUDs) do not specify alternative pool setbacks, meaning they must adhere to the Town's standard 10-foot requirement. This has led to challenges for homeowners with smaller lots, as the 10-foot setback can significantly limit backyard space. Homeowners and pool contractors have expressed difficulty understanding why a house may have a 5-foot side setback while the pool must maintain a 10-foot rear setback. Mrs. Fisher suggested that, if the Town wished to allow for reduced setbacks, this would require an amendment to the LDC or updates to specific PUD agreements.

During the discussion, Town Manager, Sean O'Keefe, inquired whether Lake County allows smaller setbacks on small lots. Mrs. Fisher confirmed that some districts, particularly those with higher density, allow for 5-foot setbacks. Board Member Husemann raised concerns that the 10-foot setback limits homeowners' ability to fully utilize their property, particularly in PUDs such as Talichet and Venezia, where lots are generally smaller. He noted that many neighboring municipalities allow 5-foot setbacks and expressed concerns that restrictive policies could deter future residents or increase variance requests. Conversely, Board Member Hayes argued that the 10-foot setback preserves green space and aesthetics for Howey-in-the-Hills. He also mentioned that tight spaces between homes make it difficult for contractors to install pools but acknowledged that pools can still be constructed within existing setbacks, even if homeowners must adjust their original designs.

Board Vice-Chair Wagler emphasized the importance of consistency in variance approvals, noting that some past variances may not have been granted based on true hardship criteria. She also raised concerns about the potential for unintended consequences if setbacks were reduced town-wide, such as increased requests for tree removal.

As a next step, Board Chair St. Clair requested a review of past variance requests, particularly in Talichet and Venezia, to determine how many variances have been approved or denied, what lot sizes were associated with those variances, and whether there is a pattern indicating that smaller lots struggle with the 10-foot setback requirement. Town Clerk, John Brock, confirmed that staff would compile variance data as far back as possible, focusing on lot sizes and variance decisions rather than broader permit data.

The board agreed to review the compiled variance data at the next meeting before deciding whether to pursue amendments to the Land Development Code or PUD agreements. No immediate action was taken, and the discussion will continue once additional data is available.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Any person wishing to address the Planning and Zoning Board and who is not on the agenda is asked to speak their name and address. Three (3) minutes is allocated per speaker.

None

BOARD COMMENTS

The Planning & Zoning Board discussed the topic of board member term limits and continuity, which was recently raised at a recent Town Council meeting. Board Vice-Chair Wagler brought attention to the issue.

Board Member Hayes explained that the concern revolves around ensuring consistent staggering of term expirations, preventing situations where a significant portion of the board leaves at once. Town Manager, Sean O'Keefe, added that the Town Attorney had suggested establishing fixed terms rather than the current system, where a new appointee begins a fresh three-year term upon appointment, even if they replace someone mid-term. However, no formal recommendation has been made yet.

Town Clerk, John Brock, clarified that some terms are set to expire in April, with the next group in October and another in December. He will reach out to those whose terms are ending to confirm interest in reappointment. Board Chair St. Clair inquired whether the Town Attorney was recommending aligning terms with the fiscal year, but Mr. Brock stated that the attorney had not yet proposed a specific approach.

Board Member Husemann suggested a staggered system similar to the Town Council, where a portion of terms expires each year to avoid complete turnover. He proposed a structure where two terms expire in 2025, two in 2026, and three in 2027, ensuring continuity on the board.

Further discussion highlighted concerns that, without a structured staggering system, there may not be a quorum in the future, particularly at the end of the year when multiple terms expire. Mr. O'Keefe noted that, when term tracking was first formalized three years ago, several members renewed at the same time, which inadvertently created the current clustering of expiration dates.

Mr. Brock added that the original formation of the board did not include a staggered system, which contributed to the current challenge. While the board has the capacity for seven members, it has often functioned with only five active members, necessitating recruitment efforts to ensure full participation.

The discussion concluded without formal action, but members agreed to revisit the topic once the Town Attorney provides further guidance on a structured system for term staggering.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to discuss, a motion was made by Board Member Husemann to adjourn the meeting; Board Member Johnson seconded the motion. Motion was approved unanimously by voice vote.

The Meeting adjourned at 7:54 p.m. | Attendees: 24


Tina St. Clair Chairperson

ATTEST:



John Brock, Town Clerk

