

MINUTES  
City of Alpena Planning Commission  
Regular Meeting (Council Chambers and Virtual)  
December 14, 2021  
Alpena, Michigan

CALL TO ORDER:

The regular meeting of the Planning Commission was called to order at 7:00 p.m. by Paul Sabourin, Planning Commission Chairman.

ROLL CALL: PLANNING COMMISSION

PRESENT: Wojda, Vanwagoner, Gilmore, Sabourin, Kostelic, Bauer (virtual),  
Boboltz (arrived at 7:04pm)

ABSENT: Peterson

STAFF: Montiel Birmingham (Planning, Development and Zoning Director), Donald Gilmet (Contractual Staff appeared virtually), Kathleen Sauve (Recording Secretary).

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:

Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA:

Agenda was approved.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

Meeting November 9, 2021, minutes were approved as printed.

PUBLIC HEARING AND COMMISSION ACTION:

**Public Hearing #1 - Case # 21-SU-03. 703 W. Chisholm St.;** Mary Catherine Hannah, on behalf of the County of Alpena, is requesting a Special Use permit for a new monopole telecommunications tower to be located at the 911 center at 703 W. Chisholm St. to improve communications for public safety personnel. The property is in the OS-1 district. The proposed tower is 190 feet in height and requires approval for Special Land Use and has supplemental development regulations.

All submittal requirements have been met.

Montiel Birmingham, Director of Planning, Development and Zoning, presented the staff report and recommendations to the Commission. See Appendix A & B.

Mark Hall, 911 Director and Emergency Manager for Alpena County, provides the Commission with a presentation explaining the importance of the telecommunications tower. He explains the history of the current tower, and that it is gauged off of the 800 MHz system. He says that law enforcement migrated to this system first, followed by EMS and then central dispatch and the fire service just finished migrating to this system a year ago. He goes on to explain the topography and elevations above sea level and where Alpena stands in correlation to other counties surrounding us. He states that Manning Hill in Green Township is the highest elevation in our area at 791 feet above sea level, while downtown City of Alpena is the lowest elevation at 591 feet, which may not seem like much of a difference, but it has a significant effect on the way the radios work inside buildings such as City Hall, the Courthouse, MMMC – Alpena, Meijer, Walmart, District Court, Public Safety Building, and the former Alpena Mall. He informs the Commission that currently it is impossible for police to call out for help while within the District Court house. Matt Wojda asked Hall if the impact is within the City or the city and the surrounding townships? Hall responded by saying that initially, they were trying to fix the downtown district, all the places where someone could have a radio inside a building and be able to reach out for help if needed. It will have positive effects and improve other communities as well. Hall explains how they know that this solution will work. He explains that in early 2021, MPSCS deployed a 73-foot mobile communications tower, the same height as the existing tower, allowing them to emulate radio performance. They then did radio checks while moving from building to building, using an 800 MHz radio on the existing tower, and a 700 MHz radio to the mobile communications tower. It provided a direct correlation. The results showed significant improvement in the areas of concern. Wojda questions why the tower needs to be 190 feet tall, as opposed to 73 feet, such as the mobile tower they tested the system with. Hall states that at 73 feet, we are not getting the connectability into some of those locations in the current system and will be well above the bowl that the City sits within. Hall then shows the Commission what the tower will look like. Hall summarizes that this project is needed to improve the safety of our citizens, employees, and all levels of first responders. Other communities around the country are undertaking similar projects using ARPA funds. Taking into consideration the Ambulance & First Responders millage and 911 surcharge, Hall trusts that he has demonstrated the logistical and financial viability of a new central tower.

Bill Forbush, Fire Chief for the City of Alpena, and the EMS Chief for Alpena County addresses the board. He states that he has been involved with Michigan Public Safety Communications System since it started 30 years ago. He shows a topographic map of the City of Alpena and the surrounding counties. He explains that there are towers on Manning Hill because of its topographical location and coverage of the entire area. It is where one of the existing MPSCS

sites is located. He informs the Commission that there is a tower located on East Grand Lake Rd., and it is the primary site that they talk from with their radios in Northern Alpena County. There is also a tower of Scott Rd. Forbush shows a map of the current indoor radio coverage in our area, followed by a map of what the coverage area would look like with a new tower located at Central Dispatch. He explains that not only would the coverage area completely envelop the City of Alpena, but it would also cover all of the urbanized and much of the rural area of Alpena Township, Maple Ridge, Wilson, and down into Sanborn. Forbush explains that the new tower would be as tall as the Ninth Ave. water tower. He goes on further to explain that it will have no impact on cellular, tv or broadband. It could be used later because there is a lot of room on that tower lower down, while all the public safety stuff is on top. So, lower down, if that was going to be a hub to a broadband network down the line, that would be an investment that we could get double benefit from. At this point in time, it would be operating only on the Public Safety only frequencies between 700 and 900 MHz, no cellular phone, internet, broadband, tv, nothing near any of those things. There is no radio frequency exposure at the ground level, and that is why it is 190 feet tall. He goes on to state that the most critical thing the government has a responsibility for is to assure safety of the public; and the most critical thing that public safety needs is communications. He then shows pictures of what the base will look like. He explains that below ground there is a massive base of concrete, it is all properly engineered, and these do not fall over. Forbush says there will be no access to it from the public. It would benefit the MPSCS because anyone on the state radio system in Alpena would benefit from it, including the State Police, FBI, Border Patrol, MDOT, every state agency and all local public safety at this point. It would benefit the County of Alpena, who provides our emergency communications system, and it would benefit the City of Alpena the most because our buildings would be communicable from inside. Probably the most important building being the hospital because 10 feet inside the door they cannot talk on radios, which poses a huge problem if an emergency happens there or we need to run a fire operation, we cannot communicate with the current system; however, there will still be communication difficulty in the basement of the hospital. Forbush is asking for help from the Commission to allow someone else to pay the money to make this happen.

Joel Jett, City of Alpena Police Chief, addresses the board. He states that radios are their (police) lifelines, also for first responders and the community that they serve. He says that the most important piece of equipment that they carry is their radios so that they can summon help for themselves, or the people that they were sent to aide. He says that the radios make a certain noise that they call a "bonk", which means nobody hears you and when you are fighting with somebody, literally sometimes, for your life, or if you have somebody bleeding on the floor and you are trying to get the ambulance here right away, and that radio is not getting out, that is about the worst feeling you are ever going to experience. But, he says, that is the world that we live in and this project is a godsend for us. He says this is something that he has been begging for and praying for since they went to the 800 MHz system, and he hopes the Commission is in support of this program.

#### FAVOR:

Donald Gilmet, Contractual City Building Official and County Commissioner, 220 E. Crapo St., explains to the Commission that he has already seen this presentation about 6 weeks ago, and so he has had time to look up any issues with this particular type of an antenna. He says he looked across the country for failures because obviously that is something we're looking at with it being taller than the setbacks that are required, and there have been no failures with the exception of monopoles that were made out of wood and rotted at the ground level or were hit by something and knocked over. There have not been any failures with the newer metal constructed monopoles.

#### OPPOSITION:

Angie Skiba, 635 River St., tells the board that she is not actually for it or against it, but she does have questions she would like answered. First, she asks where exactly it will be located. Wojda tells her it will be between the District Court and the 911 building. Secondly, she asks if the current tower will be replaced, and that it will not be located on top of a building, and just be much taller. Sabourin replied yes. Thirdly, she asks if or when it was to fall would it go into the road or into the FIA parking lot. Sabourin responds yes. Next, she asks about if the money to fund this project comes from the 911 surcharge. Tom Hall responded that the down payment will be coming from the ARPA funds, and then the Ambulance and First Responder millage brings in \$150,000 to 911, \$75,000 of which to fund the release payment on this because it is a very expensive project. Then the remaining \$14,000 will come out of the budget, which is revenue that come in from the 911 surcharge. Skiba asks if every person who owns a phone and pays a surcharge, will be paying for that. Hall states that they are already paying for that; that money comes in from the state, and it is then divvied up by the 911 Administrative Commission and that is how 911 is funded in general. Skiba asked what the gross cost was. Hall responds 1.27 million dollars. Skiba asks if it will interfere with cell phone usage, cable or internet, have blinking lights or outside alarms. Hall replies no. Skiba asks if it will affect her property value. Hall replies that he does not have any reason to believe that it will affect it because there is a tower there now and everywhere you go in every count, there are usually towers and it is what you have to do to make communications work. Vanwagoner states that if you were to have a property sale in that neighborhood for X number of dollars, and in the future if economic conditions remained the same, and another house in the same area sold for less money than the other one did, that would be an indication, but one sale does not make a mark; so you have to be careful there because those types of situation are very difficult and very hard to prove. Wojda states that it could be a good possibility that there could be an indirect benefit in the sense that there is an improvement in public safety throughout the community. Skiba asks for the questions in Joyce Oliver's letter to be answered. Forbush states that there is no 5G array and no way for it to interfere with her phone. He states that there is no ionizing radiation, but the only thing that there is is radio frequency energy transmitted off the tip of the tower but there is no exposure at the ground level.

Public Hearing closes at 7:46 p.m. for deliberation.

Wojda states that he spends a lot of time in the District Court building, and he has seen the communication issues firsthand and there have been times where it would have been more efficient to toss a paper airplane out the door than try a radio from the district court to the 911 center and we can't have that in this community. He states that 99.9% of the time, our courts are safe, but if there is an issue that comes up, medical or safety wise, we need to be able to address that and if these folks are going to tell us that it gives us better coverage and puts them in a better position to do their job effectively, he feels he is not in a position to disagree.

Randy Boboltz questions, not due to being in opposition, but out of sheer curiosity, how a tower 75 feet tall can not do the same thing as a tower 190 feet tall. Forbush explains that in order for communications to work on this system, transmission must come from the radio and travel to the nearest MPSCS site, and currently the radios travel through the airwaves to East Grand Lake Road. At the moment it hits that receiver, it is transmitted back out. It cannot go anywhere until it gets to that repeater. Currently, if the radios cannot make it to any of the three current towers, the radios are "bonking". He states that if there were the new tower in the city, the radios would travel there every time. Wojda asks if there were the same tower in the new location, would it still work, but be less effective. Forbush says yes, two-thirds of the population of Alpena County lives in the area that would be covered by this new tower.

Sabourin asks if the purpose of the new tower is for it to communicate to the other towers, or for you [public safety] to communicate with this tower. Forbush says it allows them to communicate with this tower, and then that in turn communicates with the other towers.

Sabourin asks if there was a tower that could be shorter, but just as effective. Mary Catherine Hanna, Alpena County Administrator, says that was a consideration the commissioners looked at, options of different tower heights. She says the cost analysis of the 70 foot tower versus the 90 foot tower and then the 190 foot tower, and then the impact, it just made so much sense to go all the way to 190 feet because of the level of impact, and also we are looking at the county level and not just the city, and wanting to be sure that they are impacting as many people as possible. She says the basic answer is yes, you could do a shorter tower and it would have the impact they are looking for, but in a much smaller and much more concentrated area, whereas, doing the taller tower impacts more people at a cost differential that did not make a lot of difference to spend a couple more thousand dollars when you are already spending so much.

Forbush explains that the towers communicate with each other by microwave, and so once you get to the closest tower, if the person we are trying to talk to is not local, it goes by microwave from tower to tower to tower, until it gets to wherever it needs to go. He says if they need to call the Emergency Operations Center in Lansing, we can do that in a millisecond, but you have to get to one first, and this is the hole that we cannot get to.

Sabourin asks if there will be other dishes or antennas installed on this tower. Forbush explains that is not part of this plan. He says this tower is capable of putting a lot more on it than what we are putting on it. He goes on further to explain that years down the road, if we wanted to

have a broadband system in the community, you could because there is room for it, so it is planning for the future. Sabourin asks if there were going to be more added to the tower in the future, would it require another review. Gilmet says that it would not be required to come back to the Planning Commission. Those are decisions that would be made by staff and obtain a building permit if required.

VanWagoner asks if there will be any guide wires on this antenna. Forbush responds no. VanWagoner comments that this seems like a no brainer to support our citizens, our police, first responders, medical personnel that are out and about, and if they cannot communicate, this is tantamount to their job, and so, why wouldn't we support this.

Bauer addresses the board stating she would like to echo what others have said, emergency communication is critical, as she was a former basic EMT. She goes on to thank those who have participated in the meeting, and their clear and concise answers to all the questions.

Motion made by Wojda to approve the proposed site plan and Special Land Use Permit and to construct the 190-foot monopole to assist in public safety communications.

Motion seconded by VanWagoner.

Motion approved 6-0.

**Public Hearing #2 – Proposed Zoning Ordinance Amendments** – Birmingham presents the board to explain the modifications to the rezoning standards as well as add Conditional Rezoning standards. See Appendix C.

FAVOR:

None

OPPOSITION:

None.

Motion made by Boboltz to approve the proposed Zoning Ordinance amendments as presented.

Motion seconded by Kostelic.

Motion approved 6-0.

NEW BUSINESS:

Birmingham presents the board with the 2022 Planning Commission meeting schedule. See Appendix D. She states that all holidays have been reviewed and is also proposing to change

the meeting time. In the current by-laws she has highlighted in yellow (see Appendix E) the areas of the by-laws that she would recommend striking. So, we would remove the specific time, and make a determination of what time we would like. Her request would be that it is no later than 6:00 pm. Sabourin states his concerns for an earlier time such as family time, dinner, work, etc. Boboltz states that he is surprised that there was ever a specific time hardwired into the by-laws. Kostelic agrees that an earlier meeting time is better for her as she works until 5:00 pm and would still be in the working mindset. Bauer agrees with Kostelic. Vanwagoner expresses concern that the public may have a difficult time making it to a 6:00 pm meeting. He states that whatever everyone chooses to do, he will support to the best of his ability. He also expresses concern of coming directly from work to the meeting as he is a hands-on contractor and is often full of sawdust and whatnot. Sabourin proposes they do not hardwire a time into the by-laws, but rather let the Planning Commission decide what time they will meet each month.

Birmingham then suggests that the Planning Commission look over Appendix F, which contains more changes to the by-laws for future discussion. Also, because the City of Alpena is a Certified Redevelopment community, she would like to add in training as an additional bullet point. She also suggests that they think about the language under section 3.8 of the by-laws, to get better clarification of the language.

Motion made by Wojda to amend the by-laws to remove the specific time requirement from section 3.1 and to identify City Hall and only City Hall as the location for the Planning Commission meetings.

Motion seconded by Boboltz.

Motion approved 6-0.

Motion made by Wojda to approve the 2022 Planning Commission schedule.

Motion seconded by Gilmore.

Motion approved 6-0.

All are in favor of meeting at 6:30 pm in January.

#### REPORTS:

Birmingham presents the board with information on the recertification process for Redevelopment Ready Communities and the Training Assessment for fiscal year 2021. She states she would like to add training to the Planning Commission by-laws to keep it top of mind,

as it is required for Redevelopment Ready communities. She asks that any board members who have done any training in year 2021, to please forward that information along to her so she can report it back to the MEDC as part of our recap for the calendar year.

Birmingham also informs the Planning Commission that the City Council has done the first reading of the Adult Use Marihuana Licensing Ordinance. As part of that, we need to review our Zoning Ordinance to make sure that we have an Adult Use amendment for marihuana establishments. If Council approves the second reading at the next meeting, there may be an option put the date effective to be when our can coincide so that we do not have a licensing ordinance without a zoning ordinance to go along with it.

CALL TO PUBLIC:

No public comment.

MEMBER'S COMMENTS: Boboltz inquires about how to get a specific name of a person who spoke up at the previous joint meeting with City Council. He is informed that City Council minutes are posted on the City website, but are not as detailed as Planning Commission minutes. Bauer suggests he watch the recorded video.

Birmingham informs the board of Christy Werda's resignation effective today, and next January meeting, Ashley Peterson will be welcomed to the board.

Bauer expresses her support of Birmingham's proposal of adding education and training to the Planning Commission by-laws, as there is a lot of training out there for free. She suggests that Birmingham bring forward the participation plan and marketing plan because she is not really clear what that is for our community.

ADJOURNMENT: There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:21p.m., by Sabourin, Planning Commission Chairman.

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Steve Gilmore, Secretary