

Rocky Mount TELEGRAM

City stands by Event Center parking plan

BY LINDELL JOHN KAY
Staff Writer
Sunday, September 2, 2018

Controversy continues to churn around an old church left standing in the middle of the new Rocky Mount Event Center parking lot, but its removal would result in very few additional parking spaces, according to the city's chief engineer.

Brad Kerr presented his Parking and Traffic Control Plan to the City Council at a public meeting early last week and sat down with the Telegram on Wednesday to go over the details.



The parking lot on the southeast side of the Rocky Mount Event Center is lined with construction equipment and materials on Aug. 22 in downtown Rocky Mount.

"It's a good plan that offers what is needed and provides flexibility going forward," Kerr said.

The Event Center has 328 onsite parking spaces, 206 in one lot and 122 spaces in an adjacent lot. An article in the Aug. 28 edition of the Telegram mentioned only one of those lots, giving an incorrect count as to how many parking spaces are actually at the Event Center.

A church, which sits on Ivy Street in a corner of the lot with 206 spaces, belongs to the family of Councilman Andre Knight. The property was purchased for \$10 during the time period the council was determining where to build the Event Center.

Beside the timing of the purchase, two major complaints have been leveled by the public concerning the church: It's taking up possible parking spaces and its dilapidated condition.

Kerr said if the church were removed now or not there when paving began, it wouldn't mean a lot of parking spaces, which require an area of 9 feet by 18 feet.

"I would need 46 feet to get one bay of parking and 65 feet for two bays," Kerr said, explaining less than 20 spaces would fit in the church's footprint.

As far as the church's appearance, its steeple has been removed and a crew is performing work to replace its roof with a building permit filed by Knight.

On Monday, Knight asked the Telegram to speak with him again before publishing another article about the church. Knight didn't answer the phone Wednesday, return voicemail messages left Thursday or respond to texts and emails Friday.

Kerr pointed out that the only road to be converted to one-way flow during major events will be North East Main Street from Thomas to Goldleaf streets.

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The plan has three shuttle routes serving eight lots with a total of 1,456 spaces.

According to a study of the Red Hat Amphitheater in downtown Raleigh, a tournament will require 300 places; a banquet will require 330 spaces; and a concert will require 1,820, based on a 2.2 vehicle occupancy.

The city also has 1,300 single spaces spread around downtown.

Kerr deferred questions about a lot near the old post office slated for parking but is rumored to be the future site of low-income housing.

"It's a parking lot as it stands right now and for the foreseeable future," Kerr said.

<http://www.rockymounttelegram.com/News/2018/09/02/City-stands-by-parking-plan.html>

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Meeting on housing plan set

BY LINDELL JOHN KAY

Staff Writer

Sunday, March 24, 2019

Rocky Mount city officials are inviting the community to a public information session on the planned downtown multi-family workforce housing development on Tarboro Street.

The session is set for 5 to 7 p.m. April 2 in the Biotech Auditorium at Edgecombe Community College.

The session is scheduled to include an open house from 5 to 6 p.m., a presentation from Development Finance Initiative project manager Sarah Odio at 6 p.m. and a question-and-answer session facilitated by the DFI of UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Government.

The Rocky Mount City Council has committed to convey property between 218-242 Tarboro Street via sale or lease to a yet-to-be-determined private development partner, according to a press release from the city.

During the Feb. 25 City Council meeting, Councilwoman Chris Miller asked whether the developer would be private so that the currently city-owned land would become taxable property. Councilman Reuben Blackwell said the developer could be private or it could be a nonprofit developer.

Sure to be at the top of that list is Rocky Mount-Edgecombe Community Development Corp.

Joyce Dickens, president of the Community Development Corp., has been involved with the process since the beginning, according to emails obtained by the Telegram via a public records request.

"I had a call from Joyce Dickens yesterday indicating that you all are planning to build 40 units of housing on the Tarboro site. Please provide us with a project update. Any information you can provide will be greatly appreciated," Landis Faulcon, the city's director of Community and Business Development, said to Odio in a July 14 email. Odio refers to the Tarboro Street location as "the CDC site" in an email to City Manager Rochelle Small-Toney on the same day — that's eight months before the project went public and any bids could be made.



This illustration from city plans shows the original purpose for the Tarboro Street properties was parking spaces for downtown use.

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Odio acknowledged this week that her reference to “CDC” meant the Rocky Mount-Edgecombe Community Development Corp. Odio also confirmed Dickens' early involvement.

“We spoke to Joyce Dickens several times early on in the process about potentially selecting a CDC site for this project, but we determined that the level of funding available from the state at the time would not be sufficient to support a development there,” Odio said. “RMECDC is welcome to reply to the Solicitation for Development Partner Qualifications, which we are currently drafting. Based on what we hear at the Community Information Session on the 2nd, the Solicitation could go out in mid-April. The city and the state will both have a say in the developer that is selected. We are looking for developers that are eligible for (Low-Income Housing Tax Credit) awards and have experience with federal funding sources such as (Community Development Block Grants).”

A Google search shows Dickens meets those requirements.

The Tarboro Street site was planned to be 80 units, but was scaled back due to available funding and the fact that ECC wanted parking on the spot, not housing, and therefore pulled its property out of the deal, as evidenced in an early August email from Councilman Tom Rogers to City Manager Rochelle Small-Toney.

Rogers referenced an update from Small-Toney stating the Tarboro Street site as the “preferred site.” He asked whether DFI would consider working with the city to find other sites not already considered.

"City has been very encouraging and supportive of ECC's presence and expansion in downtown Rocky Mount over the years," Rogers stated. "In fact, the city actually encouraged ECC's presence in downtown to generate increased activity. The city and ECC collaborated during the acquisition of the Tarboro Street properties. Part of the informal agreement was that the city-owned property would be available for ECC's use, if not ownership in the future. It is my understanding that there is no support for this project by ECC because it locks them in and limits their vision for their presence in downtown.

“Interestingly, the Tiger grant application shows the Tarboro Street properties being used for parking implying its use for ECC, downtown investors and the Event Center.”

As part of its Hurricane Matthew recovery effort, North Carolina’s Office of Recovery and Resiliency has committed to providing gap financing for the development of the rental units. This development will serve the city’s workforce with priority given to households displaced by Hurricane Matthew, according to the press release issued by Jessie Nunery, the city's media relations specialist.

The April 2 information session is free. All interested residents are encouraged to attend.

<http://www.rockymounttelegram.com/News/2019/03/24/Meeting-set-on-new-plan-for-housing.html?fbclid=IwAR1mNq9RI1IbLx9IcotBagW5DURuEm4nxxzfQNTnYGSOantLDITrqs2ONG4>

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Housing site faces environmental concerns

BY LINDELL JOHN KAY

Staff Writer

Wednesday, April 3, 2019

The Tarboro Street site chosen for workforce housing is a state environmental brownfield site not safe for well water as revealed Tuesday at a public meeting on the matter.

Local business owner Lige Daughtridge, candidate for the City Council Ward 5 seat, asked the officials conducting the meeting about how safe the location was given that it used to be the site of a dry cleaners and had been investigated by state environmental officials.

The site has been reviewed and determined to be OK, but wells wouldn't be allowed, said Sarah Odio, project manager for the Development Finance Initiative at UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Government, which facilitated the session.

Wells would not be part of the development of the site, but environmentalists often question the safety of such a former industrial site in connection to housing.

Daughtridge asked why a competing site, Crossing at 64, wasn't chosen.

Odio said that site isn't within two miles of a grocery store and pharmacy and had didn't have adequate infrastructure.

Crossing at 64 has infrastructure, said Rocky Mount Edgecombe Community Development Corp. President Joyce Dickens. She wanted the housing to be placed at Crossing on 64, but city officials and DFI chose the Tarboro Street site. Dickens has a good chance of developing the Tarboro Street site due to her experience with tax credits and federal funding.

Daughtridge said a grocery store could be built on the roughly 85 acres at Crossing on 64. He also questioned the transparency of holding a community meeting after the City Council has already voted for in favor of the project.

Beside the environmental revelation, two other reasons not to build on the Tarboro Street site were given.

First, Edgecombe Community College agreed to buy adjoining property because the city said the site would remain parking, said Gloria Wiggins-Hicks, a member of the ECC Board of Trustees.

City Councilman Andre Knight said the site might have been meant to be parking at one time but plans changed.

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The site was planned to be 80 units, but was scaled back because ECC wanted parking on the spot, not housing, according to city emails obtained by the Telegram via public records requests.

Second, private investors who have sunk millions of dollars into downtown expected the location to be parking for planned restaurants.

Jesse Gerstl, who owns nearby buildings, said downtown growth would be stifled without adequate parking.

"I support housing downtown," Gerstl said. "But Rocky Mount has a parking problem and you're taking away parking."

Local blogger Stephanie Houghton said she would rather see existing structures be remodeled. She also said the project should be paused while investigations of malfeasance at City Hall are complete.

"We have no confidence in city government right now," Houghton said.

Resident Kim Koo said Houghton doesn't speak for everyone. Koo said she has confidence in the city.

Several members of the community spoke up in support of the project, saying affordable housing is needed in Rocky Mount.

The City Council has committed to convey property between 218-242 Tarboro Street via sale or lease to a development partner.

The project entails 60 units, a mix of studio and 1- and 2- bedrooms, for households earning 60 percent of area medium income.

North Carolina's Office of Recovery and Resiliency has committed to providing gap financing for the development of the rental units. The development will serve the city's workforce with priority given to households displaced by Hurricane Matthew, according to information provided by the city.

The public meeting was held in McBryde Auditorium on the Rocky Mount campus of ECC, with the Tarboro Street site visible out the room's window.

http://www.rockymounttelegram.com/News/2019/04/03/Housing-site-faces-environmental-concerns.html?fbclid=IwAR2XwCh_Mecs4CQGsO9Xf_7GXPrMd92clhClpPY-oekYINr07_cCtq6zsZQ

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Council OKs Douglas block buyout

BY LINDELL JOHN KAY

Staff Writer

Tuesday, April 9, 2019

In order to gain complete control of the Douglas Block, the Rocky Mount City Council agreed to pay nearly half a million dollars to the Rocky Mount Edgecombe Community Development Corp.

City Attorney Jep Rose announced the settlement during Monday's City Council meeting. The agreement reached in 2017 stretches to 2020 with annual payments totaling more than \$400,000.

Rose said the city and the CDC in 2009 entered into a complex structure to receive tax credits in order to redevelop the Douglas Block. When it came time to undue the structure, the city and the CDC disagreed on who should own the Douglas Block even though the CDC was in possession of related documents.

The city and the CDC reached a settlement with aid of an arbiter. Under the agreement:

- The city received ownership free and clear.
- The city paid CDC a \$25,000 management fee.
- CDC turned over all relative documents.
- The city deeded a lot to the CDC with time conditions on development.
- The city paid CDC annual payments totaling \$424,000.
- The city created the Douglas Block Advisory Board.
- The city will continue to use grants to fund the CDC Housing Counseling Center and Business Development Center.
- The city will continue to fund the CDC commercial development manager position.
- The city and CDC agreed to continue cooperation on other projects.
- The city and CDC agreed to hold each other harmless among other considerations.

Local business owner Lige Daughtridge, candidate for the Ward 5 seat on the City Council, told the council during public comment that he asked for information on payments made by the city to CDC last year at budget time.

Daughtridge said his questions went unanswered, but the amounts equal the ongoing settlement numbers.

"How can you call this transparent and good governance?" Daughtridge asked.

Rose said at the beginning of his statement that the city was making the settlement public due to concerns over the relationship between the city and the CDC in connection to a proposed housing project on Tarboro Street.

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Daughtridge also addressed the Tarboro Street situation, questioning why the City Council was moving forward with affordable housing when city staff had created a draft agreement with Edgecombe Community College for parking at the site.

Councilman Reuben Blackwell said the council never voted to approve such an agreement.

Daughtridge held up a copy of the draft agreement while Blackwell was speaking.

After the meeting, Blackwell said the council never voted on the agreement.

The council did reach consensus not to consider the agreement, according to meeting minutes.

That would have been at a meeting in October. City staff was in talks with ECC to improve parking at the site across from the college's downtown campus while simultaneously working out a deal with an organization from the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Government to build housing units on the same spot, according to emails obtained by the Telegram via public records request.

Blackwell said he wasn't aware of what staff was planning and that several possibilities were considered for the Tarboro Street property — anything that would improve downtown.

Blackwell's email address was copied on mid-August emails detailing city staff communications with ECC regarding parking at the Tarboro Street site for Event Center activities, according to an email from City Manager Rochelle Small-Toney to all City Council members, including Blackwell.

"We are hopeful that ECC will approve our request to use the area for parking and that we can proceed with the needed improvements," Small-Toney said.

Housing seems to have been the long-term plan for the site, according to emails between Small-Toney and Tom Betts, an unofficial advisor.

In a late August email, Betts asked how long the site would remain parking versus housing.

"I have no idea, Tom. It all depends on Council's final decision and availability of funding," Small-Toney said. "Probably a year or two."

State funding was secured earlier this year and the city moved forward with housing plans.

<http://www.rockymounttelegram.com/News/2019/04/09/City-agrees-to-Douglas-block-deal.html>

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Emails show intent about parking lots

BY LINDELL JOHN KAY

Staff Writer

Friday, April 19, 2019

Despite public denials, Rocky Mount Councilman Reuben Blackwell was aware of plans to break an agreement with Edgecombe Community College on downtown parking in favor of a housing project, according to emails obtained by the Telegram.

In answer to reader interest, the Telegram is posting 100 pages of emails and attachments with the online version of this report. The emails are part of a public request for the past six months worth of emails to, from or copied to City Manager Rochelle Small-Toney.

ECC agreed to buy property on Tarboro Street next to city property because the city said the site would remain parking, Gloria Wiggins-Hicks, a member of the ECC Board of Trustees, said at a recent workshop on the planned Tarboro Street housing project.

At a City Council meeting earlier this month, local business owner Lige Daughtridge, candidate for the Ward 5 seat on the City Council, asked why the council was moving forward with housing when city staff had created a draft agreement with ECC for parking there.



Reuben Blackwell

Blackwell said the council never voted to approve such an agreement.

While Blackwell was speaking, Daughtridge held up a copy of the draft agreement.

Blackwell said housing was always the goal for Tarboro Street, he wasn't aware of what staff was planning and that several possibilities were considered for the Tarboro Street property — anything that would improve downtown.

Blackwell's statement can be viewed beginning at the 35:27 minute mark of a YouTube video recorded and posted online by local political blogger Curmilus Dancy.

“First of all, there was never a written agreement with Edgecombe Community College that this council voted on,” Blackwell said during the meeting. “I don't remember one. I don't remember voting on one. There might have been conversations with members of staff and with community college

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leaders but there was no agreement that everybody voted on. It was never discussed openly. So for some of us sitting on the council I'm just saying, we never had conversations. I never heard that conversation."

However, according to an Oct. 4 email, when Blackwell received the agenda for the October council meeting he asked a question and received a detailed answer from Small-Toney about the plan to transition from parking to housing when the funding was available.

Blackwell's question: "The document that defines our parking relationship with ECC says that we are using both parcels for event parking and that we are paying all costs for all lot improvements. Are we now saying that we are not choosing to use our parcels for housing on Atlantic and Tarboro or are their other parcels not defined or included in this agreement?"

Small-Toney's answer in part: "No, we will continue to look to use the site for housing and terminate the agreement at the appropriate time. Parking is during the interim until we know for certain that the state has appropriated the funds for the project."

Blackwell's response: "EXCELLENT!"

This email chain is the first emails included in the online PDF.

Blackwell didn't return an email with detailed questions about the matter.

As far as why the council didn't vote on the agreement, Small-Toney tabled the item because the agreement didn't include a way for the city to back out when the time was right.

"I tabled the agreement because it was not sufficient enough in accomplishing what was needed to insure that the agreement could be terminated by either party with sufficient notification," Small-Toney told City Engineer Brad Kerr in an October email conversation about how the improvements to the college's parking lot were made without an agreement in place.

Small-Toney's questions and Kerr's response is the second email chain in the online PDF.

A deeper dive on city manager emails reveal a sink hole at a city park, mold at a community center, lavish Miami Beach meals paid with a city credit card, no utility meter for OIC at the Event Center and more.

Titled "City Emails Release," the PDF includes emails relative to last Sunday's article about secret money and relief that auditors didn't look in certain files. Other emails include:

- City Accounting Manager Nicki Gurganus, who previously questioned an extended Miami hotel stay for Small-Toney and Landis Faulcon, the city's community and business development director, points out that Faulcon was in line to receive reimbursements for meals paid for with the city credit card.

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"The meal charges are included in the amount that we paid on the City's credit card. The per diems for those meals are included in the reimbursement for Landis. Without adjustment, we would have paid for the same meals twice," Gurganus said in a Sept. 20 email.

Meals included \$194.24 for dinner at PrimeFish Miami and \$99 for dinner at Joe's Stone Crab.

- Former City Manager Charles Penny, a \$125-an-hour consultant at the time, sent a Sept. 5 memo to Richard Worsinger, the city's utilities director, telling him not to install a gas and electric meter for the OIC at the Event Center. Penny said the meters could be installed in 2023 when the financing structure is dissolved. In the meanwhile, software is separating the OIC's bills from the Event Center's bills.

- In a mid-July email, a disgruntled trucker threatens to urinate in Mayor David Combs' food because of the city's new truck parking law.

"Screw you for banning truck parking," the trucker states. "How about we take a pee on the food we deliver to you. Good luck with that new law. We do pee on food when people treat us wrong."

The email has explicit language.

- Assistant City Manager Natasha Hampton-Clayton sent emails to Small-Toney in August and September about a buried steel tank causing a sink hole at Martin Luther King Jr. Park and thick white mold covering the floor joists of the Battleboro Community Center.

Elton Daniels, the city's director of parks and recreation, provided an update on the two situations Thursday.

"The sink hole addressed in the e-mail was fixed by a private contractor," Daniels said. "Since that time, staff discovered a much smaller sink hole that will be repaired next week by Engineering and the Parks and Recreation staff. The sink holes were the result of a tank that was crushed and buried in the early 80s after the decommission of the former Wastewater Treatment Plant located at the site."

The Battleboro Community Center had mold, Daniels said.

"Last summer, the building was tested for mold and the results were positive," Daniels said. "The building was shut down and remains closed. Staff is currently assessing costs for mold remediation, as well as future use of the facility."

Hundreds of emails covering July, August, September and October have been received by the Telegram over the past few weeks.

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The large majority of the emails are about routine city governance. In the interest of full disclosure, anyone who wants the complete email files can email lkay@rmtelegram.com with "city emails" in the subject line and the Telegram will reply with the zip files attached.

City Attorney Jep Rose reviewed the emails, removing any email that contained personnel or personal information.

City Hall is in the midst of two investigations. A law firm is conducting an independent review into alleged malfeasance at City Hall. At the same time, the Office of the State Auditor is subpoenaing and interviewing past and present city employees concerning the same issues.

<http://www.rockymounttelegram.com/News/2019/04/19/Emails-show-intent-about-parking-lots.html?fbclid=IwAR1OSHWFgstgMzr4qVJKrOgYhLIV0QhV92kV2nBKlYkk5GC5GJhwIT3IsHE>

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Councilman backs housing over parking

BY LINDELL JOHN KAY

Staff Writer

Saturday, April 20, 2019

Rocky Mount Councilman Reuben Blackwell said he supports housing development on Tarboro Street and if he misspoke about knowledge of parking plans at the site, he's only human.

Blackwell said in a meeting last week that he was unaware of plans to break a proposed agreement with Edgecombe Community College on downtown parking versus a housing project; but the real issue is the need for such housing.

"I stand by my position, my vote and my constituents on that location as the best site for this affordable, workforce housing development to help build the momentum of a beautiful, vibrant, diverse and economically beneficial downtown Rocky Mount that everyone can enjoy," said Blackwell, who answered Telegram questions on the matter from Thursday on Friday morning after presstime for a report in today's edition.

ECC agreed to buy property on Tarboro Street next to city property because the city said the site would remain a parking lot, Gloria Wiggins-Hicks, a member of the ECC Board of Trustees, said at a recent workshop on the planned Tarboro Street housing project.

Blackwell said Friday that an October email to him from City Manager Rochelle Small-Toney was about present day while at the April 8 meeting he was referring to discussions with a past city administration.

"I asked you to bring any document to my attention that the council has voted on with the college," Blackwell said. "Those are the discussions and vote that I do not remember. If they took place, then I'm more than willing to admit that my memory was not exact. I'm human and I do make mistakes as much as everyone else does."

Blackwell said he meant the original agreement from several months ago, not the proposed agreement from October when City Council candidate Lige Daughtridg held up a document during the April 8 meeting.



Reuben Blackwell

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"I said if I'm wrong about a discussion or vote at that time, then I did not remember," Blackwell said. "You can check my accuracy of recall on Curmilus' video. I have not done that because I do not think that my recall is the issue or the crux of what is important. I also told you when you approached me after the council meeting, that maybe my memory was faulty, but my stance is still the same."

Blackwell seems to be mixing up talks from several months ago with the Oct. 4 email in which he explicitly discussed Small-Toney's plan to use the Tarboro Street site as parking until the funding came through for housing at which time the city would terminate its agreement with ECC. The agreement was never voted on by council because Small-Toney tabled it at the eleventh hour since there was no clear exit clause for the city, according to city emails obtained by the Telegram via public records requests.

Blackwell said it's important to recognize several factors regarding the City Council's vote about parking at the Tarboro Street location and the relationship with ECC:

■ "The city of Rocky Mount and Edgecombe Community College have always, at least since my service on the council, enjoyed a mutually beneficial and supportive relationship. The city has always looked for ways to support the college's development and success in downtown Rocky Mount. It was the city of Rocky Mount who enthusiastically embraced (former ECC President Deborah) Lamm's vision of a vibrant health education center in the heart of our city. It was the city of Rocky Mount who encouraged the college to consider tax credit financing to move the stalled project forward because we also recognized the need for health care infrastructure for the present and future growth and development of eastern North Carolina. And it was the city of Rocky Mount that assisted our friends and partners with Edgecombe County and the college with technical assistance and support all the way from concept to construction of the beautiful Lamm facility that our students and region are enjoying right now. In fact, I personally served on the commission that the county appointed to build that very successful center."

■ "As an elected representative of the Rocky Mount City Council, my primary responsibility, loyalty and duty of care belongs to the people who reside in my ward and the overall health of my city. I will support, advocate and vote for the best interests of the people and community that I serve to the best of my ability and that aligns with the vision that my constituents have and currently articulate."

■ "The discussions that you are referencing took place at a time where the needs of our downtown and surrounding communities were different, as was the approach. Considering practices of equitable development, the city's approach changed as our city's needs evolved. All of our discussion today seems to center around an agreement that was created without the benefit of considering present day context of multiple uses. We did not have the Event Center, we were not enjoying robust development downtown, the real estate market throughout the country was in a slump and we were wrestling in Rocky Mount with the lack of engagement about downtown from owners of properties in and around that area. If we had a project then that was bringing millions of dollars of investment to that location and benefited the people that could be students and employees of the college, then I would have definitely and enthusiastically supported that project then as I do now."

■ "Your allegations of 'bait and switch' imply some nefarious context of ill will and misrepresentation of intent. That is your term, not my motivation. Not then and not now. You were present at the City

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Council Retreat in February when DFI presented their options, that this project would be an affordable, workforce housing development. You heard the statistics presented about need and even attested that this development would have been interesting to you if you had that option when you first moved to Rocky Mount. This development addresses the immediate crisis that hard working and retired citizens have in choosing great, affordable options for living and participating in Downtown. We must all be intentional in deeds as well as words in making space for citizens and visitors in an inclusive economy."

■ "I am still unclear about the protestations from anyone about why, at that location, affordable workforce housing would be a bad idea. Why wouldn't anyone want to attract working families and individuals or retired citizens or veterans or struggling families who want to better themselves and live in a vibrant downtown community right across the street from an anchor institution that was designed and funded to benefit them? I'm certain that the city would be more than happy and motivated to help the college address their concern about lack of parking at other close and proximate locations."

<http://www.rockymounttelegram.com/News/2019/04/20/Councilman-cites-need-for-housing.html?fbclid=IwAR2ntnfkPtLKdsqyg4cGijzElqL10ZC8LNLd4dCoJ1718oWnXzmVT7ekvw>

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City scraps parking for housing

BY LINDELL JOHN KAY

Staff Writer

Monday, April 22, 2019

Last summer in preparation for the opening of the Rocky Mount Event Center, the city made improvements to parking lots owned by Edgecombe Community College as voted on by the City Council.

The city and college were to share adjoining parking lots on Tarboro Street, but the city has since approved a state-funded housing project at the site with Councilman Reuben Blackwell saying he doesn't remember talks or votes concerning the agreement with the college.

ECC only agreed to buy land on Tarboro Street next to city property because the city said the sites would be used to share parking, Gloria Wiggins-Hicks, a member of the ECC Board of Trustees, said at a recent workshop on the planned Tarboro Street housing project.

In that workshop, Councilman Andre Knight's answer was nothing is set in stone.

A few weeks later, during an April 8 City Council meeting, Blackwell said he was unaware of any recent conversations or votes on the matter. However, emails obtained by the Telegram via a public records request show Blackwell asked about housing and parking in an Oct. 4 email after receiving the agenda package for an upcoming meeting.

When City Manager Rochelle Small-Toney explained her plan to go along with the parking agreement until funding for housing was secure then terminate the proposed agreement with the college, Blackwell's three-word response was: "EXCELLENT! THANK YOU!"

The agreement was tabled by Small-Toney because it lacked a clause that would have allowed the city to back out of the deal. But just a few months earlier, the City Council approved a plan that included repairing the college's property on Tarboro Street so it could be used for Event Center parking.

Blackwell both engaged in discussion and voted on the plan.

During the Aug. 27 discussion, Blackwell voiced concern for communicating to people residing in the neighborhoods that may be affected by parking. When it came time to vote on the plan, Blackwell seconded the motion and joined in unanimous approval that staff be authorized to move forward as outlined with the Event Center Parking and Traffic Control Plan as outlined in the presentation, according to the Aug. 27 meeting minutes.

City Engineer Brad Kerr in an Oct. 9 email response to Small-Toney pointed out that the city improved parking lots on Tarboror Street owned by the college as approved by the City Council.

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"As noted to council during the presentation, the city had pricing for the improvements and in order to make the Oct. 25 opening would need to start work as soon as possible," Kerr said. "It was also noted that the city was prepared to move forward as soon as it had authorization from ECC to make the improvements on their parcels. An initial draft agreement was prepared by Jep (Rose, the city's attorney) in June with the concept that it may be used as a model for future revenue sharing agreements with private property owners interested in RMEC parking."

Kerr said based on the decision, there would be no charge for off-site Event Center parking and a draft of the agreement deleting a revenue sharing clause was sent to ECC for review on Aug. 30 along with driveway permit applications and a map of proposed improvements.

College officials provided a revised draft based on the guidance they received from their board and a final version was negotiated between ECC and the city based on the understanding that this agreement was addressing only current parking needs for the Event Center and the college with future amendments made as conditions evolved, Kerr said.

"I stand by my position, my vote and my constituents on that location as the best site for this affordable, workforce housing development to help build the momentum of a beautiful, vibrant, diverse and economically beneficial downtown Rocky Mount that everyone can enjoy," Blackwell said late last week in answer to Telegram questions on the matter.

<http://www.rockymounttelegram.com/News/2019/04/22/City-scraps-parking-lots-for-housing.html?fbclid=IwAR11KZIZ4L-HC6vYiOWGhE3Ntz3BVINGxQUhDGZe5blQ2rIVmkm-FhpfeX4>

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Residents jeer council at meeting

BY LINDELL JOHN KAY

Staff Writer

Tuesday, April 23, 2019

Monday afternoon's meeting of the Rocky Mount City Council boiled over with jeers from the audience and council members biting back over development downtown and at Crossing at 64.

Local business owner Lige Daughtridge, a candidate for Ward 5, asked the council why millions of dollars have been spent on Crossing at 64 but nothing has been developed there since a Bojangles went up in 2012.

Daughtridge asked the city-imposed tax credit requirement be lifted from the Tarboro Street housing project so that the project could be moved somewhere else, including Crossing at 64.

Daughtridge pointed out that according to a report published by the Telegram, the city is propping up the Rocky Mount Edgcombe Community Development Corp., which is developing Crossing at 64.

Councilman Andre Knight said Crossing at 64 is in his ward. "How dare you come down here ..."

Knight's comment was interrupted by several shouts from the crowd and a growl.

Knight growled back and said it was his time to talk.

Mayor David Combs tried to calm the situation. He said the council asks the public not to be rude but turns around and acts that way.

Knight pointed out that Combs made a statement earlier when a resident asked why the Grown and Sexy event was cancelled.

Knight said the council has been trying to develop Crossing at 64 for years but has been blackballed. "Sheetz," someone called from the audience. The popular convenience store chain passed on Crossing at 64 a few years ago and now has three stores in Nash County and none in Edgcome County.

Councilman Reuben Blackwell said above loud booing that he wouldn't be intimidated and he's not afraid.

Blackwell said it's everyone's right to have an opinion, but his right isn't taken away by someone else's rights.

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Blackwell said development has occurred on one side of the city but not on the other. If people want to suddenly use their influence to help development now, he welcomes it.

"If this is what it took, God bless the Tarboro Street project," Blackwell said, adding the CDC wouldn't be needed if developers would have stepped up years ago.

Blackwell said when it comes to housing, Rocky Mount is a model for other cities.

Blackwell said he wants to lift up every part of the city. He received a round of applause, mostly from developers Troy Davis and Charles Roberson.

Earlier, Troy Davis questioned the purchase of a county club in Nashville by a company owned by Nash County board Chairman Robbie Davis.

Resident A.B. Whitley asked the council about the independent review, and Combs said the council would have a preliminary report at the next meeting then the report would be made public after a review by the city attorney.

Resident Anna Lamb asked in honor of Earth Day that the council take a stand against the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, which will pump natural gas beneath Nash County if it's ever built. Due to legal entanglements, the proposed pipeline is millions of dollars over budget and months behind schedule.

Resident Kim Koo said affordable housing is long overdue in Rocky Mount and she supports the Tarboro Street housing project. She added she would like it to be cleared by an environmental study.

Mayoral candidate Bronson Williams said the council and city staff should be more transparent; the controversy of the cancelled Grown and Sexy event was due to a lack of cultural sensitivity; and WHIG-TV should be opening its studio to whoever wants to use it based on the city's cable franchise agreement.

Charles Chambliss said in reference to the Grown and Sexy event that people should educate themselves about a subject before taking offense to it.

"If you don't know what something means don't make a comment about it until you do," Chambliss said, adding that at least the Telegram columnist who wrote about the matter first Googled the phrase Grown and Sexy.

Combs said he asked about the event at a meeting because he didn't know what it meant.

"I didn't book the event; I didn't cancel the event," Combs said.

http://www.rockymounttelegram.com/News/2019/04/23/Residents-jeer-council-at-meeting.html?fbclid=IwAR1GsWxfrPqKalBNvoDzjVMI9kyVDgLQqcIKDxEEc1ZMEI67_JBKVAe8enU

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ECC chides city over parking

BY LINDELL JOHN KAY

Staff Writer

Thursday, April 25, 2019

The Rocky Mount City Council voted unanimously to enter a parking agreement in February with Edgecombe Community College two weeks before voting to build affordable housing at the same spot on Tarboro Street.

The ECC Board of Trustees feels the maneuver is a betrayal, according to an April 18 letter to the City Council, City Manager Rochelle Small-Toney, state Housing Finance Agency board members and Sarah Odio, project manager for the Development Finance Initiative at UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Government, which is overseeing the project as hurricane relief.

The council on Feb. 11 approved the Parking Area Development and Shared Use Agreement. Two weeks later, on Feb. 25, the council voted to convey the same shared use parking space for affordable housing development.

"Unfortunately, no one at the college or on the board, including the college's new president Dr. (Greg) McLeod, was involved or engaged in any discussions concerning this development plan. Considering the scale of this plan, its proximity to the college, the imminent elimination of the shared use parking agreement between the city and the college and the negative impact this development will have on our future growth it seems reasonable and appropriate that the college would have been invited to be a fully engaged partner throughout this study," Trustee Chairman Jerry Price and the entire board states in the April 18 letter.

Eliminating the shared use parking space in order to construct affordable housing immediately across the street from the campus will not only negatively impact available and much needed parking but will also stifle the college's future growth, the ECC trustees state in their letter.

"Without viable options and solutions, this plan would significantly hinder our ability to adequately meet the evolving educational and workforce training needs of the residents of this community," the letter states.

In a March public forum held after the council voted on the housing project, state officials said the Tarboro Street location was best because the city owned the property and it was within a mile of a grocery store. In actuality, the one-mile restriction is to obtain new market tax credits not required by DFI.

The City Council has "unclean hands," according to a local lawyer familiar with the matter.

"It doesn't look like the council was acting in good faith to me," the attorney said, but added that as long as the city meets the 90-day termination clause, the college doesn't have much of a choice. Of

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course, any notice now would come after the council already voted to use the land for something else.

The council was set to vote on the agreement in October, but Small-Toney removed the item from the agenda because the agreement didn't provide an easy way out for the city.

"I tabled the agreement because it was not sufficient enough in accomplishing what was needed to insure that the agreement could be terminated by either party with sufficient notification," Small-Toney said in an email at the time.

City staff moved forward with improvements to the parking lots with an estimated cost of \$68,000, according to meeting minutes and city emails.

In an early October email, Councilman Reuben Blackwell asked Small-Toney about the plan for both parking and housing at the same site. Small-Toney explained the city would move forward with parking then terminate the agreement when the funds for housing were approved.

Blackwell denied an agreement existed at the April 8 council meeting.

"First of all, there was never a written agreement with Edgecombe Community College that this council voted on," Blackwell said during the meeting. "I don't remember one. I don't remember voting on one."

Blackwell seconded the motion by Councilwoman Lois Watkins to approve the Feb. 11 legally-binding parking agreement.

Then on Feb. 25, the same night the council approved the minutes to the Feb. 11 meeting that included the parking plan, the council approved the housing resolution, which was added to the agenda during the meeting. The council was provided a copy of the agreement moments before voting on it.

The motion to approve the housing project was made by Blackwell and seconded by Councilman Andre Knight.

Blackwell said Wednesday that his comments about no agreement and discussion were all centered around previous city staff negotiations with ECC.

"This agreement is recent and yes, we just voted on it," Blackwell said. "However, the opportunity to create a dynamic village of activity based on people who live, work, learn and play downtown is too great to pass up or ignore."

Blackwell said the bottom line is that he supports affordable workforce housing at the Tarboro Street site and throughout Downtown Rocky Mount.

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"We're large enough and diverse enough to create a place for everyone in every sector of our thriving and vibrant city," Blackwell said.

Councilman Richard Joyner noted the project is expected to be a reflection of the beautiful Beal Street Square Apartments, and will not be a slum, according to meeting minutes.

The Telegram called restaurants in the Beal Street area last week. The restaurants contacted would not deliver to Beal Street Square Apartments after dark

In 2015 the city and college acquired multiple lots adjacent to Tarboro Street.

"After great discussion, analysis and deliberation among city and college leadership, the acquisition of the lots was mutually agreed upon to specifically and expressly make overflow parking spaces available for the college's students and guests, downtown visitors, as well as the future patrons of the new event center to be constructed a block away. The decision made concerning which particular lots would be purchased by the city and which ones would be purchased by the college were made together and deliberately based on the economic opportunities available at the time. Furthermore, the city agreed to demolish and remove the building formerly used as a car dealership and later as a car wash located on one of the lots acquired by the college as well as the building formerly used as a laundromat and dry cleaners located on one of the lots acquired by the city, which left a large open space for immediate use for parking," according to the ECC letter.

The belief was that the parking would support the overflow parking needs for the college and Event Center.

The trustee letter states that if the shared use parking spaces were no longer needed for Event Center overflow parking, it's premature for the city to assume the location is somehow less valuable to the rest of the city, area businesses and the college.

"Know that ECC employees, students and visitors regularly use these lots to park as on-campus parking is limited, particularly during the day," the letter states. "With 2,900 students attending classes at the Rocky Mount campus, 122 faculty and staff, many library, barbering and cosmetology patrons and the numerous people who attend the various community meetings and events hosted there, finding an available space among the 194 parking spots on campus can be rather challenging depending on the time of day and year."

<http://www.rockymounttelegram.com/News/2019/04/25/ECC-chides-city-officials-over-parking.html?fbclid=IwAR1nwmIBkh8oyCsDUmNLbaZzZ89oaA9ghtrDDe8drIzQCQOVtqGtxPuFv6-w>