

President Chris McCann called the Special meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Roll Call:

Council Members Present: President McCann, and Trustees: Gale, Cook, Cavendish, Harper and Conley.

Absent: Trustee Ager attended via Zoom

Staff Present: Clerk- Joni Scott and Village Manager- Jim Dyer

Additions/Corrections to Agenda:

President McCann accepted the agenda as presented.

Public Hearing Regarding Seventh Street Property:

A. Introduction by Village Manager/Zoning Administrator

The Village Manager, Jim Dyer, presented a detailed chronology of the ownership and development of the village-owned property on 7th Street. The property was acquired by the village in 1941 due to tax delinquency, with a deed restriction for recreational use and retained interests by the state. Despite being used by the village for various purposes, the state did not reclaim it. In 2018, the village council sought to release the state's interest, leading to confirmation from the state. Since then, extensive due diligence has been conducted, including environmental studies and community engagement. The Planning Commission has evaluated various options for the property's future use, considering alignment with village plans and community feedback. The public hearing marks a crucial step in the decision-making process, providing an opportunity for further community input. Village stakeholders are encouraged to participate actively in shaping the property's future.

B. Citizen Presentations:

1. Joanne Geha Swanson

Joanne Geha Swanson expressed opposition to the development of the property on 7th Street, citing concerns about wetlands, lack of consultation with regulatory experts, and the need for a transparent decision-making process. She emphasized the importance of considering climate science, environmental impact, and wildlife preservation in decision-making. Swanson also highlighted concerns about potential impacts on neighboring properties, the need for affordable housing elsewhere, and the risks associated with environmental contamination. She questioned the validity of property appraisals and called for a reconsideration of the development plans in light of environmental concerns.

2. Kristi Fischer

Village Manager Jim Dyer read Kristi Fischer's letter into the record; Kristi Fischer expressed urgent concern regarding the fate of the Seventh Street property in Northport. She urged the village council to consider utilizing the property for affordable housing projects to address the critical housing shortage in the community. Fischer suggested dividing the property into two lots for housing projects while preserving the other two heavily wooded lots. She emphasized the importance of prioritizing the long-term well-being of the community over short-term profit. Fischer highlighted the availability of state and federal grant money for housing projects and the potential positive impact on the community. She urged the council to take concrete steps to address the housing need and set an example for other communities. Fischer concluded by expressing hope that the council would carefully consider the importance of housing and the unique opportunity presented by the Seventh Street property.

C. Public Comments:

Ruth Butler Arts- praised the Planning Commission's diligent efforts over the past two and a half years but expressed concern about the lack of documentation regarding the project's initial approval, which affected her trust in the process. She stressed the importance of adhering to the public use requirement outlined in the property deed and questioned the suitability of the property for large-scale housing developments. Instead, she suggested exploring other properties for housing and proposed repurposing the Seventh Street property as a natural habitat for educational purposes, envisioning it as a place for students to learn about native plants and wildlife.

Mike Stoffel, a long-time resident, expressed his support for selling the Seventh Street property for development to address the need for housing in the area. He suggested using the proceeds to fund the village's sewer system and emphasized the importance of not leaving the property unused or turning it into a dumping ground. Stoffel cited past issues with encroachment onto neighboring properties by the village as a reason for his stance. He concluded by stating his desire to see the property developed rather than left undeveloped.

Marybeth Salt Murray strongly opposes any development in the wooded area behind her property, citing its importance to the local ecosystem and her family's long-standing connection to the land. She advocates for preserving the area and suggests reforesting it instead of allowing any construction. Marybeth expresses concern about the environmental impact of development and fears losing control over the land's use if it's sold to a developer. She emphasizes the need to protect the natural beauty of the area and urges the council to consider alternative conservation measures.

Bob Newell, speaking as a resident rather than in his capacity as a planning commissioner or tree commission member, recommends selecting the option for 100% passive green space for the Seventh Street property. However, he anticipates that the council may opt for the second option, which involves future development. Regardless of the decision, Bob urges that any development plans for Seventh Street undergo a thorough evaluation by the Planning Commission, similar to the process that has occurred for the property in recent times.

Sue Manson thanked Joanne Swanson for representing those against developing the Seventh Street property. She criticized the idea of removing old growth wetlands, given the village's Tree City status. Sue expressed concern about contamination from the former DPW site, urging for immediate remediation. She criticized the current state of the property, likening it to a dump, and questioned why it's being treated this way. Sue highlighted potential traffic issues from housing development and supported reforesting the property, echoing Bob Newell's suggestion, advocating for preserving it as a passive green space.

Fred Steffens has been observing the Seventh Street property issue for about three years and expresses approval for the proposed development. He highlights the thorough environmental studies conducted and believes the four buildable lots are suitable for residential development. Fred argues that the area is not a swamp but rather a delineated wetland with minimal impact on the environment. He encourages others to visit similar developments on South Shore Drive to see the minimal impact firsthand. Fred supports continuing the development process, seeing it as beneficial for the village in terms of revenue, taxes, and attracting new residents.

Tom Weber a resident of South Shore Drive, expresses concern about recent construction in the area, citing an instance where construction was permitted in a swampy area despite objections. He believes that just because construction is happening doesn't mean it's necessarily right. Regarding the Seventh Street property, Tom sees an opportunity for the village to demonstrate its commitment to environmental sustainability. He suggests returning the property to its natural environment, planting endangered trees, and using it as an educational tool for local schools. Tom emphasizes the importance

of prioritizing the environment over profit and urges the village to consider the long-term environmental benefits of restoring the property to a wetland or filter system. He believes this approach will ultimately benefit the community's reputation and attract people who value environmental protection.

Anne Harper thanks the Planning Commission and expresses concerns about the housing issue. She emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to affordable housing, suggesting that simply building on the Seventh Street property may not be the best solution. Anne highlighted the challenges of building affordable housing on a small parcel and suggested preserving the property while working on a long-term plan for affordable housing. She appreciates the council's efforts and urges them to consider the broader picture when making decisions.

Robert Swanson expresses gratitude towards Joanne Swanson for her compelling argument. He acknowledges the importance of local government involvement. Robert respectfully disagrees with a previous statement regarding contaminated soil, suggesting that it is not perfect as described.

Bonnie Shiner expresses support for the village considering the sale of the buildable lots on Seventh Street. She believes that the village would benefit from the income generated from the sale, increased tax revenue, and improved sewer system usage. While acknowledging the importance of environmental protections, Bonnie believes that selling the lots for single-family residences, ideally year-round occupancy, would be beneficial for the community as a whole.

Nichole Arbury, speaking as a resident and neighbor, supports option two for the Seventh Street property. She emphasizes the importance of protecting the wetlands and the woods on the property. Nichole believes that the southwest portion of the parcel, which is not affected by contamination, could be used for housing while still preserving the sensitive areas. She suggests that option two provides an opportunity to address both environmental protection and the need for attainable housing, allowing for phased development and further evaluation of the front portion. Additionally, she acknowledges the need for housing in the community and believes that option two could make a positive difference for families wanting to join the community.

D. Public Questions:

Village Manager Jim Dyer addressed three questions that arose during the discussion. Firstly, he clarified that the council initially approved proceeding with the sale of the property on January 4, 2018. He also mentioned that other affordable housing options are actively being explored, although specific locations have not yet been identified. He explained the potential use of tax increment financing for such developments. Regarding the review process for any development on the property, he confirmed that there would be a requirement for site plan review by the Planning Commission. Additionally, he responded to a question about using the proceeds from selling the property to fund sewer improvements, stating that while it may not make a significant impact, there are restrictions on using general fund dollars for sewer funding.

Village Council Discussion Concerning Seventh Street Property:

Trustee Harper addressed misconceptions about the impact of additional housing on sewer revenue and property taxes, emphasizing that the revenue increase from adding three homes would be negligible. He highlighted the costs associated with providing services to additional homes and stressed the lack of financial benefit to the village. Harper expressed skepticism about the economic feasibility of developing the land and cautioned against proceeding further without accurate data on its value. He advocated for preserving the land and reiterated his opposition to the village becoming a property developer. Trustee Harper also suggested considering alternative uses for the land, such as overflow parking for the marina, while acknowledging the need for further discussion. Additionally, he emphasized the importance of environmental stewardship and the potential risks and costs associated with soil remediation. Lastly, Trustee Harper underscored the need for caution before undertaking costly environmental studies and emphasized the importance of focusing on viable housing solutions.

Trustee Ager expressed gratitude to Trustee Harper for initiating the discussion on the development of the Maude Court property and acknowledged his significant contribution to the conversation. She emphasized that trees were cleared for all existing homes along North Shore, highlighting the inevitability of environmental impact in residential development. Ager prioritized human needs over environmental concerns, stating her support for option two proposed by Nicole Arbury. She advocated for the construction of either two Habitat homes or a four-unit apartment on the Seventh Street edge of the property while preserving the remaining land as a wetland.

Trustee Cook expressed a deep connection to the area, having considered it his playground for 65 to 70 years. He emphasized the consensus among the council to eliminate option number three, indicating a shared commitment to preserving the wetlands in their current state. Trustee Cook acknowledged that the decision between options one and two would require careful consideration based on community input and individual perspectives, but he felt comfortable moving forward with either option now that option three was off the table.

Trustee Gale, having been involved in the process since the beginning, expressed a preference for pursuing option two. She highlighted the potential for exploring various approaches within this option, such as establishing a conservation easement or dedicating the wetlands area as a park. Trustee Gale proposed the possibility of creating residential lots for Habitat homes on Seventh Street, along with initiatives like reforestation to mitigate environmental impact. While recognizing that a final decision had not been made, she expressed a desire to move forward with this option.

Trustee Cavendish provided a thorough review of the Maude Court property, expressing strong support for option one. She emphasized the complexity of addressing housing needs, wetland preservation, and sewer issues simultaneously, suggesting that one property should not be expected to fulfill all these needs. Cavendish underscored the importance of preserving wetlands for future generations, highlighting the limited financial benefit of developing the property compared to its environmental value. She questioned the decision-making process that led to the village having control over the property, expressing reservations about the property's intended use. Regarding affordable housing, Cavendish advocated for considering other village-owned properties that are more suitable for development, expressing concern about the feasibility of building workforce housing on the 7th Street property due to environmental challenges. She proposed re-naturalizing the area and designating it as an official parkland to ensure long-term protection through a public referendum vote.

Trustee Conley, although new to the council, expressed familiarity with the project dating back to 2018. She emphasized the importance of preserving the wetland area, citing concerns about potential contamination and groundwater pollution. Trustee Conley highlighted the need to protect the bay and suggested exploring options to address environmental risks, such as conducting further assessments of the site. While initially favoring option one, she expressed openness to option two, albeit with reservations about its adequacy for addressing housing needs.

President McCann reflected on the village-owned 7th Street property, recalling his involvement in the process since 2018. He acknowledged the challenges of decision-making in the public sector compared to running a business. McCann expressed support for exploring the second option, which would allow for some type of housing development on the property. He emphasized the importance of rental options in Northport to accommodate individuals who cannot afford to buy homes but still want to live in the community. McCann highlighted examples of low-income housing in neighboring areas and stressed the responsibility of making decisions that benefit both the community and its residents. He thanked the Planning Commission and citizens for their input and emphasized the love people have for Northport. McCann concluded by expressing optimism about exploring housing options while prioritizing wetland protection and remaining open to revisiting option one if needed.

Public Comment:

Joanne Swanson requested the council to consider a motion to eliminate option three from further consideration.

Village Manager Jim Dyer suggested directing him to provide a recommendation following the meeting to offer clarity on the next steps regarding the discussed issue. The recommendation would serve to inform the council and stakeholders about the direction to be taken and the timeline for further discussion. Dyer suggested that setting a timeframe for decision-making ensures that the matter is not left unresolved and provides a clear path forward for all involved parties.

Mike Stoffel clarified his earlier comment, suggesting allocating the funds towards the sewer system to provide some assistance, although acknowledging that it wouldn't directly impact taxes or lower sewer bills. It was simply a suggestion to utilize the funds in a manner that could benefit the community in some capacity.

***Trustee Gale Moved, Supported by Trustee Harper to direct the Zoning Administrator/Village Manager to explore options one and two and make a recommendation to the council at the May regular meeting. Motion Carried.**

Mary Betzold expressed gratitude towards Trustee Cavendish for her efforts in documenting and summarizing the discussions, acknowledging the challenging task she undertook. Mary appreciated the thoroughness and quality of Trustee Cavendish's work, noting that it provided valuable reading material for an extended period. She commended Trustee Cavendish for her exceptional job in capturing and presenting the discussions effectively.

Council Comment:

None

Adjournment:

Trustee Harper Moved, Supported by Trustee Conley to adjourn the meeting. Motion Carried.

President McCann adjourned the meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 9:16 pm
Several Citizen's Attended Via Zoom

Joni Scott, Village of Northport Clerk