

**UNITED GROWTH FOR KENT COUNTY
MINUTES OF THE COALITION MEETING ON JUNE 17, 2008**

PRESENT: Kendra Wills, Holly Zoe, Mike Williams, Mary Jane Robinson, Russ Lewis, Paul Haan, Carol Townsend, Eric Doyle, Laurie Hurley – a citizen of the southeast side, works for NTH consultants; Alan Rumbaugh, Tom Norine, Shockey, Peter Homeyer (works for Land Conservancy of west Michigan), Kevin Wisselink, Conrad Venema of The Rapid, Tom Korth of the Ada Township Planning Commission, Tom McWhertor, and Pete DeBoer from Land Conservancy of West Michigan

Chair Paul Haan called the meeting to order about 8:35 a.m.

MINUTES: Motion to approve, Alan; seconded by Kevin – motion passed.

PRESENTATION: Kevin and Conrad tag-teamed on this presentation about the future of the Rapid. They distributed some maps and diagrams.

They defined the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) line – it is an enhanced busway on Division Ave. that has to meet certain criteria in order to get Federal transportation funding. It would have to have exclusive right of way at least 50% of the corridor, as well as enhanced stations. One way to look at it is as a light rail system on rubber tires. There are three factors which need to be in place to get the Federal funding. There has to be a non-Federal partial match; in the past the state of Michigan would have supplied it but now the state is hanging back, even though it is a great return on the dollar. The FTA also requires that there be a long-term commitment locally, reflected in some kind of operational funding mechanism. The projected start date would be 2012. The project is currently in the environmental impact study/engineering phase.

The other project is the streetcar study for downtown, which would be independent of the BRT. When the study committee was looking at the 2 corridors, they realized that there was a need for a streetcar, which has been approved by the City Commission. The route is very simple and straight currently; if it is hugely popular there will be spurs, as has occurred in most streetcar systems. It will cost about \$30 million a mile, so if you overextend and overbuild it initially it can be perceived as a failure by the public. The BRT would be more commuter-based; streetcar has stops closer together. People regard it as an economic development tool.

Someone asked if they are looking at the Portland model, and Conrad replied that the Portland streetcar is what they are looking at, not a retro-style streetcar. Research has shown that when they use the old-fashioned streetcars, ridership is lower. Also, the difference between the two is that the streetcar is dependent on purely local, probably private money. The lines will interface, but they should have “distinct branding.” For the BRT, integrating parking lot fees or even a Tax Increment Financing district are being looked at – even local improvement districts. The investigative task force approved the alignment of the streetcar. There is a funding subcommittee. Former Mayor Logie is official chair.

Someone commented that at Growing Communities they had a public transit workshop which they found very interesting, with the sense that once transit is built and is successful the development around it seems to happen somewhat magically, with mixed use, etc.

The BRT is a limited stop express bus and gets around faster than cars can.

What is a potential timeline? If everything goes well, it would be scheduled to open in 2012. There should be a return from riders' fares to offset the operational funding. Russ commented that he started riding the bus exclusively around Thanksgiving of 2007, and has noticed, anecdotally, that ridership has increased 15-20% with more business people appearing to use it for commutes. Conrad confirmed that that percentage was just about what their number showed.

Conrad said people could contact him any time with further questions. His phone number is 456-7514.

PRESENTATION BY DENNY HEFFRON: Denny Heffron of the Citizens for Kent County Farmland and Open Space Preservation political action committee made a brief presentation. Denny said that the original speaker who was going to present, Rob Steffens, was unable to, so he agreed to fill in. The committee was formed about two and a half years ago, to combat political forces working diligently in opposition to farmland preservation and PDR. The committee has two focuses: to educate people about what has happened with PDR's success in communities out East, and to support political candidates who support PDR. Two years ago in the elections they were just getting their feet wet, but still felt good about what was accomplished. Denny said that this election cycle they have positioned themselves very well. They sent out a questionnaire to county commission candidates; Denny said it was surprising how poorly educated on this topic the commissioners were. There are people on the commission who were adamantly opposed to any funding of PDR who now support it, after finding out more. Denny was asked if the primary audience was legislators or the general public. He said that breakfast education sessions have brought in everyone from inner city people to agribusiness, but they do target elected officials primarily. When asked who is opposed to funding PDR, Denny said that the homebuilders and realtors fight it the most, but the Chamber of Commerce is not far down the list. However, he feels that it is not really the whole organization in any of those cases that opposes it, just a few outspoken individuals.

RNC COMMITTEE: Paul gave a report – there are 2 principal activities for the committee, long term. The new zoning code education for citizen-based groups in the city; the RNC is getting the infrastructure for the education session set up and starting to work on brochures. As an example many people don't realize that the new zoning ordinance is complaint-based, with the city waiting for a complaint to take action. The committee hopes to create a vision much further in to the future, asking what we want Grand Rapids neighborhoods to look like in 20 years. There will in particular be an emphasis on creating objective measures to achieve that vision and to see where we are in the process of reaching it.

LAND PRESERVATION COMMITTEE: Kendra reported that the committee has secured two grants and produced the land preservation brochure, which lists all the options a land owner has to conserve and preserve their land. They are now focusing on 4 townships, on property owners f

40 acres or more: Vergennes, Alpine, Sparta, and Ada. They are contacting every property owner. Marsha Wilcox who could not be present, chairs the committee, and she and Deal Salisbury are talking to people. The committee is helping to host a breakfast soon at the Country Basket fruit market to talk about wind energy and other issues.

Paul asked, how does wind energy affect farmland preservation? By supporting the farm industry with income, it allows people to stay on their land. Farmers do have a spectrum of opinions on wind tower settings. There is some talk about jointly-owned land for wind towers and then using the money to fund community betterment.

GREEN CITIZEN PROJECT: This would be a certification-type program that would recognize citizen achievements as well as a promotional tool for UGKC. It would be web-based. Holly has been working on this project. Cynthia and Russ volunteered to be on a limited-time committee to consider it.

NEWSLETTER COMMITTEE: Cynthia, Herb Ranta and Bonnie Blackledge have agreed to work on the newsletter committee. Anyone else interested should contact Kendra. There will be meetings starting in the fall.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS: We reviewed upcoming events and talked about the urgency of people renewing their memberships

On June 27 there will be a Grand Walk bus tour, using a little Go Bus. Many people have signed up already.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Russ announced that the Greater Grand Rapids Foods Systems Council is currently closing out the West Michigan FRESH Guide to Local Food, which United Growth advertises in. He said that agri-tourism is a growing field and the project hopes to partner with it in the future. He also said that the next guide will be started earlier, as in October, partially to avoid the busy season with farmers.

We adjourned at 9:30 a.m. Paul reminded people that we will skip the month of July, and our next meeting will be August 19.

Respectfully submitted,
Cynthia Price