

**Minutes**  
**Railroad TIF Advisory Board Meeting**  
**May 19, 2022, 10:00 a.m.**  
**Held via Zoom Virtual Platform**

**Board Members Present:**

(*Vice Chair*) Rose Casey, 6<sup>th</sup> Ward Neighbor  
Jon Iverson, Property Owner  
Anne Pichette, MBAC  
Janelle Mickelson, School District

**City Staff Present:**

Ellie Ray, City Planner II & Grants Coordinator  
April Sparks, Administrative Assistant III  
Chris Brink, Community Development Director  
David Knoepke, Transportation Services Director  
Mark Young, Transportation Engineer

**Members of the Board Absent:**

Terri Hamilton, URD Resident  
Bruce Day, Helena Food Share  
(*Chair*) Max Pigman, L&C Brewery

**Public in Attendance:**

HCTV

**Call to Order & Staff Introduction:**

Meeting was called to order, introductions were made.

**Minutes from Last Meetings: January 20 & March 17, 2022**

Minutes from January 20 and March 17, 2022 were approved unanimously without discussion.

**Budget Report**

City staff presented an updated budget report to the Board. Ms. Ray noted that there is interest in a project to improve parking in the area, and an application could come from either from Ray Kuntz or Transportation Systems and stakeholders would be meeting soon. Ms. Ray also noted and explained the 10% Reserve for Affordable Housing. Mr. Iverson asked what constitutes affordable housing, and Ms. Ray stated that the city's Housing Coordinator could present to the TIF board to explaining the parameters of the Affordable Housing Trust Fund. Ms. Pichette asked for clarification on Ms. Ray's statement regarding the set-aside. Ms. Ray explained that the resolution establishing the Trust Fund was passed just prior to the start of the pandemic and that TIF boards had yet to be established, so the set-aside was put on the backburner in a sense, but the set-aside will be properly calculated.

**Discussion Topics**

- **Presentation from Transportation Systems Department on Five-Point Intersection Study**

David Knoepke and Mark Young gave a presentation on the findings of the Five-Point Intersection Study. Vice-Chair Casey asked some questions about the size of proposed trail crossings. Mr. Iverson made a statement that it would be good to see signage

indicating both pedestrian and bicyclist crossings, he also asked about the rumor of the Roberts St railroad crossing closure in exchange for a grade separation and the validity of that. Director Knoepke has stated that there have been no decisions made on the closure of the Roberts crossing and there currently is not any funding for the grade crossing. Ms. Pichette asked about pedestrian access in the roundabout in figure B and if there was a refuge island. Director Knoepke explained the different options for the pedestrian crossings. Ms. Casey stated a roundabout would be great, but it is linked an overpass or underpass would be problematic for businesses in the URD and prefers the option to reconfigure the traffic signal as it is the most economical. Director Knoepke stated the roundabout and overpass are not linked, the roundabout is 5-6 million and while reconfigured traffic signals are cheaper but will not give the advantages of the roundabout and will cost a significant amount to be considered interim. To limit the steps, you would have to look at the project, as a whole, using this study as a starting point, look at what interim conditions could be instituted while funding for the roundabout is secured, but the bigger picture needs to be looked at as grants typically don't fund interim solutions. Ms. Casey clarified her statement and said she does not consider the reconfigured traffic signal an interim solution and that her concern is the round about only works if there is an over or under pass. Director Knoepke stated his comments were meant to point out that the designs of an under/overpass or a roundabout would need to consider the other and that the roundabout solution does not require either an overpass or underpass on Montana Ave. If funds are found at some point to change the at-grade-crossing [railroad crossing] on N. Montana, the roundabout should be planned so that the city does not have to tear up part of the roundabout. Mr. Young addressed the option of reconfiguring the traffic signal stating that MDT is also a player in this process and one of the problems and the reason why it is in the current configuration the level of service will go down if those other movements are put in so people can more easily access the 6<sup>th</sup> Ward, as everyone will have to wait longer for those movements. MDT would need to be convinced that is an acceptable level of service because the city is trying to accommodate that movement into the 6<sup>th</sup> Ward. Mr. Young stated that it may be difficult to convince MDT, as they have standards and if the level of service drops, especially given that this is on a highway they will not be super amenable. While the city currently does not have those numbers, MDT looks at those periodically to make sure things are running well, and that is the other piece to moving those pieces in. Director Knoepke asked Ms. Casey if they had clarified for her that the roundabout can be an independent project, and the department wants to make sure projects don't get impacted and that it is just part of the planning process. Ms. Casey stated in the larger picture a roundabout sounds great but an over or underpass would be detrimental to the way businesses are growing in the Railroad District. Ms. Casey also expressed her concerns over closing the crossings at Roberts and National Streets. Director Knoepke stated that it is an identified issue and before it is ever stated it will be this or that, there will be a feasibility study to look at it and impacts to the neighborhood and if any mitigation can happen. There would not simply be an announcement that this was the plan, but there would be a public review/comment process. Director Knoepke also stated that the public process would also apply to the potential closure of crossing on Roberts. Director Knoepke then spoke about the intersection improvements that are being proposed for Helena and National Avenues, and additional improvements along Lyndale and other pedestrian corridor improvements into the 6th Ward. Ms. Casey asked about an ordinance that trains cannot block tracks for more than 10 minutes. Director Knoepke stated the Roberts crossing is part of their yard,

and acknowledged the ordinance, and noted that the Railroad likes to say they were there first, and that people need to make these issues known either through the city or directly to MRL (Montana Rail Link). Mr. Iverson asked about the exact veracity of the 10-minute time limit and Director Knoepke noted he would have to check the ordinance or Federal guidelines. Ms. Casey stated she was told this information by Commissioner Sean Logan. Director Knoepke stated that he knows what the ordinance says but is unsure if it lines up with Federal regulations, and while reporting may not seem to do much, the more reports there are the more likely to address the issues. Ms. Casey asked what the most efficient way is to make a report for a train blocking an intersection. Director Knoepke stated the easiest way is to use the MyHelena App, or to contact MRL directly via their comment/send us a message on their website, and to document time, direction of travel and an engine number if possible. Mr. Iverson asked Director Knoepke about how to navigate the MyHelena app.

- **Review of Project Prioritization Matrix**

Ms. Ray and Ms. Sparks discussed some of the vacancies on the Board. Ms. Ray then began leading the Board in a review of the Project Prioritization Matrix and reviewed the answers that came in from the Board members who sent in their numbers, and where the most popular priorities laid. Ms. Ray asked if there were any questions before they got started. Ms. Casey asked if it would be possible to know what the other Board members reasoning/strategy was when completing the exercise. Mr. Iverson stated he was focused on making targeted investments to make the neighborhood more appealing to people to spend time. Ms. Casey stated it sounds like he was interested in enhancing the historic features and giving it an increase in personality, that had been her second consideration. Her first consideration is to take care of some of the properties that people want to get out of there and create some good opportunity spaces for retail/manufacturing and to clean up the neighborhood, and by getting rid of some of the dilapidated areas of the neighborhood it will make the neighborhood more inviting. Ms. Mickelson stated her focus was safe routes to schools and playgrounds and safe crossings for people with disabilities. Ms. Pichette stated that she looked at it from the perspectives of someone who doesn't live there but does business there, economic development that may draw people and safety concerns that will encourage them to spend more time there, but also put funds in planning, as with planning things can be more cohesive when creating signage or image or a theme feeling in an eclectic area.

Ms. Ray started going through the matrix by first examining the answers for the first defined goal, Emphasize the District's Historic Importance, and invited recommendations for priorities and timeframe for the first item, Promote the railroad depot area as a defining feature of the District. Ms. Casey stated that the park is doable but brought up the [railroad] depot and the inability to do anything with it. Mr. Iverson pointed out that MRL is going away and being consolidated with BNSF and it's unsure if BNSF will continue to use the depot in the same manner as MRL and it would be worth asking BNSF their plans. Ms. Casey stated she felt this would be medium priority and long-term. Board members agreed.

Ms. Ray moved on to the next item, Review and update as needed the 2003 Architectural Guidelines and formally adopt as guidelines and noted that there was a possibility that a

Neighborhood Plan would be happening for this area. Ms. Mickelson stated she thinks that it is ongoing. Ms. Casey stated that it needs to be reviewed to see if what was done in 2003 is still relevant. Ms. Ray noted that she should share more about the results of neighborhood planning, that there is not only a neighborhood plan but there is the possibility of establishing design standards and revising zoning. Ms. Casey stated she would assign it medium priority. Ms. Mickelson stated that the priority would depend on the neighborhood plan. Ms. Ray explained more about the Neighborhood Plan process. Ms. Mickelson asked more about the process, and Ms. Ray said that this could be used to inform that planning effort and zoning could be medium to long-term based upon the results of those actions.

Ms. Ray noted that no one added any funding to the objective, Work with the BNSF and others to pursue hot best to highlight the railroad's historic importance and unique potential for observing railcar operation from the depot area. Ms. Casey stated that was because of the terrorism concern expressed by the representative from the railroad. It was determined this is low and long-term.

Ms. Casey felt the next item, Develop interpretive signage with a consistent appearance, went along with the next item. Mr. Iverson feels that the cleanup of the neighborhood needs to happen before telling the story of the neighborhood. Ms. Mickelson stated she put some money in there thinking after the neighborhood plan has been done, and there has been public input, once it was appropriate to place signs, there would be funding available, but it is not a huge priority until other items happen and is medium to long-term. Board agreed to medium and long-term.

The next item, Retain and restore/rehabilitate historic buildings and other historic features such as brick paving, fencing, and lighting, was discussed. Responding to Ms. Casey's question about fixing private property, Ms. Ray explained how this can be a priority by relating how it happened in the Downtown District and how state law applies and that the City Commission can determine if it can be applied to privately owned property in addition to public property. Ms. Casey expressed her desire for the board to have some influence on that as the District is the oldest sections of Helena and it is important to preserve it no matter who owns it. Ms. Ray stated that the board will have that power reflected in the recommendations they give when reviewing an application. Mr. Iverson stated the reason he prioritized that is not for façade on a building, he likes to see historical character street lighting throughout a neighborhood because it ties it together. Also, the term brick paving jumped out at him and brought to mind the brick paving on the street in front of the 1500 block and he thinks it is also under the asphalt on the 1400 block and is something unique and rare to have an authentic brick road and not something created to draw tourism and it is in some disrepair. Mr. Iverson stated that the street lighting and brick paving are why it is one of the highest priority items for him. Ms. Casey stated she would rate it high priority and either short or medium. Mr. Iverson stated he is concerned for lighting as he is going to be replacing a lot of sidewalks this summer, and the historic look lights have underground wiring, whereas the current street lights utilize overhead wiring, and it would make sense to put a conduit in for the wiring for the new lights now if these lights will be installed in the next few years as this is where a majority of the expense lies, and if this is a goal, taking advantage of the opportunity to prepare sidewalks at time of construction avoids spending money twice. Ms. Ray stated

that this concern should be part of the meeting she and Mr. Iverson have with Mark and Dave, but that short-term seems the appropriate timeframe and sidewalk improvements are slated to happen this construction season with already committed funds. Ms. Pichette added that she thinks those priorities match and it goes back to her idea of planning ahead for things, i.e. knowing people will be doing sidewalks it doesn't make sense to put them in and then dig them back up if it is known it's going to happen what things can be done to plan ahead, and potentially money can go further because the board has planned ahead.

When discussing the next item, Develop and market programs and activities that incorporate education on the area's historic importance. Ms. Casey stated that there is a nice pamphlet written by Ellen [Baumler] which could be easily reproduced and made available for local businesses, but it is premature to do anything more. Ms. Ray suggested the level of low priority and long-term. The Board agreed with low priority and medium.

Ms. Ray noted how the next item, Develop an image "brand" for the District, based on its distinctive character and history, ties in with the other items, especially the previous item, as well as the fact that it had seemed to have been rated highly based upon the amounts dedicated to it by some of the Board members. Ms. Casey stated that there has already been work done on it and hopes that it happens early with the neighborhood planning so that it's ready to go so it can start to get out there; she rated it medium and short-term. Mr. Iverson stated he would rate it medium term, because if blight is removed and new places move in those changes will help define what the Board wants the image brand to be, and if a marketing company is hired today the "shiny new" neighborhood would still be 5 or more years down the line, and this item should wait until desired improvements are made to complete this item. Medium priority and medium timeframe were selected. Ms. Casey made a clarifying statement about her answers for this activity and stated there were differing instructions given for the amount of hypothetical funds to be used and that is why some of her allocations look as they do.

The discussion moved to the next goal, Increase Property Utilization and Function, and the first item, Provide technical assistance and planning to identify vacant and underutilized properties for redevelopment. Mr. Iverson asked who would be providing the technical assistance. Ms. Ray stated it could be the city seeking funding to hire a consultant to do that work, and the city is also able to do some mapping in house with the county's GIS department to figure out some of the properties that are vacant or underutilized based upon taxable value. Mr. Iverson said he was looking at the Capital Hill URD map and noted how the properties were defined, and it seems like something the city can do in house and if the Board can ask for something like that. Ms. Ray stated that an effort like that would be staff effort and prioritized by the commission, but it may be part of the growth policy a listing of vacant properties. Ms. Casey stated she thinks it's high and short-term. Ms. Casey stated she wished all the realtors knew about the development opportunities available in the neighborhood, and that it is important and the neighborhood needs help right away. It was agreed upon high and short-term.

Ms. Ray explained this spreadsheet will ultimately be used to inform the priorities of the board when considering applications in the future, and it will inform the workplan and

application available to the public so more tailored applications can come forward in the future.

**Public Comment:**

There was no public comment.

**Next Meeting:**

The next meeting is scheduled for June 16, 2022.

**Adjournment:**

The meeting was adjourned.