

GPRA May 03 General Meeting Synopsis

On May 03, 2017 about 150 Ginter Park and Sherwood Park residents gathered at the Ginter Park Presbyterian Church for our May 03 general meeting and dinner. Our featured guest speaker was the Hon. Levar Stoney, Mayor of Richmond. Following is a transcript of the most discussed issue of the meeting, the controversial "Westwood Tract" development, as proposed by Union Presbyterian Seminary and its development partners. This transcript is taken from a recording, and is directly transcribed here to the extent possible, though some errors may have occurred depending on the audio quality.

Mayor Stoney:

Let's see if I can help you out with some of the questions that you asked. You mentioned that I am the recipient of maybe some past errors. When you take office, you break it, you own it. Well, I own it even though it was already broken.

I told Dr. Blount (UPS President) that I would not sit down with them until I had sat down with the community first.

Councilwoman Gray and Council President Hilbert were hearing the same thing.

Four days later I went to Dr. Blount and said, "Is there any way we can find a win/win for the community? Because I understand the long relationship you all have shared for a very long time." He was very hesitant.

We had a meeting in February and that meeting was not as productive as I would have wished. It wasn't productive at all. The process went forward.

We talked to our attorneys over at city hall and they told us we had no legal leg to stand on, on withholding the permits. We're in a lose/lose situation, we're going to get sued either way.

I support disobedience but I do not support breaking the law. And when your legal counsel tells you it would be unlawful for me to withhold those permits, they city issued the permits.

I requested a meeting with Dr. Blount recently. And I told him I was not happy with the way...He was with his legal counsel.

He agreed, and until the board of zoning appeals happened and then pending litigation. And then I hear that we didn't know litigation was coming.

They reached out today because I guess they knew I was coming down here. And they said we will halt construction for the board of zoning appeals, but we can't commit to the litigation part. Even though they gave me their word that they would stop construction until this was settled in the courts. And so, to answer your question, yes, I support the Council resolution.

We have to find the money to do so.

The blatant errors...I have to thank Dr. Ben Campbell. Because I got to read with my own two eyes, exactly what you stated about the 1953, and all that. It was well-organized, well-highlighted. It's not a problem with just this neighborhood that there might be other neighborhoods where there are errors. But I think about the opportunity with the master plan.

Are there other errors lurking in our zoning that we've got to take a look at? I'm willing to have that conversation.

What I will do as the mayor of this city is always bring people to the table first and it sounds like that's what you all requested. And this is a clear example of when issues are resolved at the table.

I will continue to go back to the Seminary. I sat down with Veritas at the table and they told me that they might be able to be the hero in this situation, which I think would be a win/win for the community.

I will continue to go and press the case with Dr. Blount and the Seminary, as I have, as I believe no other mayor has gotten involved. I believe that is negligence on the part of the executive administrator.

My counsel said the resolution was nonbinding, but we can still do the studies. We should do the studies. We will do the studies. Okay? (Applause) We'll find the money.

Question from the audience: In a typical development the developer pays for the studies. It doesn't seem unreasonable to me to go back to the Seminary and say look, many of us know about the storm water problem. It's not a little problem, it's a big problem if you don't completely excavate Brook Road and put in a new drainage system which the city doesn't have in their budget. We have an impending disaster on our hands. I don't think it's unreasonable to ask the developer to try to resolve the problems, which we've been trying to do for three or four years, instead of spending their money on litigation.

Mayor Stoney: To me as the person who inherited this situation...I have heard that they've been a partner in this community...this was a stakeholder community...they may have financial issues ...think about the partnership they've built and the relationships they've built...to me it's just mind-boggling.

How can you use the zoning error? The 1953, why isn't that something that can be focused on? If it was issued incorrectly...The courts will focus on it.

The city attorney's office, they don't believe it was issued incorrectly, and so that's why we have a suit.

That's why we ask that no construction continue until we settle this in the courts.

Question from the audience: Ask them to pay back taxes on the property You owe us back taxes on this R-53 zoning for decades, so let's decide how you want to do this. Sit down and talk or pay back taxes.

Mayor Stoney: The city attorney doesn't work for me. The city attorney works for City Council.

Council President Chris Hilbert: Regarding this tax issue, I will ask the city attorney for a formal opinion.

Stephen Weisensale: They have split the parcel already.

Willard Scribner: One of the major flaws in the project as it is developed today is that there is no balanced, realistic view of the impact that will come from these additional 3000 trips per day. So, we have a consulting engineer working with us...probably placing a considerable roundabout at Brookland Parkway, Westwood Road, Hermitage Road, for 6 or 7 million dollars, stormwater mitigation, turn lanes, enhanced intersections, probably a small roundabout where Veritas driveway exits on Westwood. Those costs will all accrue to the city because the developer does not acknowledge that they exist. So, we're going to get those numbers to you.

Mayor Stoney introduces Tommy Krantz, RPS' Facility Director: Tommy, they want you to give a quick impact on the school system.

Tommy Krantz: So, in looking at this, let me back up, I in my experience, came out of the private sector and I got involved in school systems and that's my way of giving back to the community.

in Florida, where we have rapid growth, this has been the discussion, on what's the cost of the infrastructure, particularly on schools? There's been extensive studies done and I was on the state commission. It set up rules to calculate...

If you have 1100 units (the maximum number permitted on this site in the R-53 district) and it depends on how many, 75% of the units being residential, the typical residential unit you have 2 students, about 50% of those go to elementary, 50% divided evenly between middle and high school. If that was the case, that would generate 878 students. Where it's located, Holton cannot handle 878 students. Holton today has close to 600 students. Can I add onto Holton? Yes I can, however Holton can't handle 878 students. So that's another elementary school. A new elementary school, you've heard from the facilities task force, with one thousand seat elementary school is about \$35,000,000.

Now if we go to 300 units (the planned development is 301 units), that would generate 225 students. That's 12 classrooms. A Classroom, including the restrooms, the hallway, everything, architectural engineering everything, that's \$250K per room. That's 12 classrooms, that's \$3,000,000.

So, you say what's another solution? You say we have empty seats in Richmond. The closest school with an empty seat is Cary. Every time a bus rides on the road, every mile on road of a school bus is \$4.50. Earlier numbers are capital, other numbers are operating.

(the city council is appropriating more money for schools) Which we know, the school admin we appreciate it. This is the largest amount of new money in my time here, and I've looked at the history, that's ever been given to the school system. But there's only so many dollars to spend. There's never more than that. The challenges that you're going to put on the city, they're significant. There's other challenges the schools have, the city has, and we're all going to have to find a way to do it.

(Note: This cost doesn't address staffing the new classrooms, administration, etc.)

Mayor Stoney: The Seminary needs to hear this. They refuse to hear it.

Audience member: The city accepted it

Ruth Eggleston: As we've sat here tonight, a lot of us who have lived here more than 20 years, there were not children riding their bikes up and down the street. All of our taxes have gone up in the last two years. The fact that this Seminary is a fox in the henhouse and that they are hiding behind religion is intolerable.

Audience member: In the interest of transparency, the city attorney's opinion, can we see that?

Chris Hilbert: I will ask that, too.

Audience member: I'm relatively new to Richmond, but I've lived in cities all my life. The city attorney doesn't need to fight if it's more expeditious to settle. Perhaps somebody could explain their role. Couldn't they join with the citizens to resolve the issue? Why couldn't they, what is the timeline?

Mayor Stoney: What is the legal timeline? You all filed last week, so this could go on for a long time, till August, September (first court date is June 14).

Audience member: But would the city join us in asking for a resolution to the problem?

Mayor Stoney: Hilbert's going to ask for opinion first.

E.M. Miller: The city attorney, with all due respect, his job is to provide the best legal advice they can give, and unfortunately, lawyers differ in their opinions, it's not always the same. And so, I'm thinking that if the city attorney does his job and gives counsel at that time and gives the best opinion that he can give. I had a similar job with the General Assembly. It's up to you to decide if you're going to take that advice or not.

Mayor Stoney (concluding): Introduces staff (exec. Assistant Lincoln Saunders, director of public works Bobby Vincent, assistants Brandy Cottrell, and Jim Nolan).

You have to see your citizens, come out and listen to your citizens. This is the kind of interaction and engagement that I intend to have, hopefully at the beginning of the process instead of at the end.