

Attendees:

Rhiannon Friedman
Jim Reardon
Manny Heron
Councilman Spencer Duncan
Quinn Cole
DeAnna Goering
ShaMecha King Simms

Minutes

The group begins by introducing themselves to DeAnna Goering.

Goering introduces herself. She explains that she created the framework, structure, and processes for the Land Bank in Pittsburg, KS beginning in 2017.

Duncan clarifies that in Topeka, this is just the pilot program.

Goering begins by outlining the challenges faced in the early days of the Pittsburg Land Bank, including finding the right board members and helping the board operate effectively. She mentions that board members should be dedicated to the betterment of the community and uphold high ethical standards.

Goering suggests blinding the application information in board packets until the time of the meeting to ensure fair evaluation of land bank applicants. Goering also recommends including clauses in development agreements that allow for the land to be reclaimed if commitments are not met.

Friedman asks about typical time-frames in development agreements. Goering explained that a “reasonable” time frame is up to the applicant during the negotiation phase of the development agreement on a case-by-case basis.

Councilman Duncan mentions that the Topeka land bank is currently for residential properties only. He asks if Pittsburg works exclusively with home ownership. Goering says that there are many options for this that may change based on a more planning and zoning perspective or community engagement perspective.

Councilman Duncan asks Goering if they work more with rehabilitation or new-build projects. Goering explains that by the time a property gets acquired by the land bank, any existing structure is typically in bad shape. Before demolishing and pushing for a new-build, Goering explains that they have a group of local contractors that specialize in rehabs, which she refers to as “Larry’s,” who look at the structures and can bid to take on the property for rehab. While they often are flippers who rent the properties out, it prevents the city from eating the cost of demolition.

Goering mentions using signs to promote the land bank which led to a large increase in interest and calls.

King Simms requests background information on Pittsburg and how the land bank has improved neighborhoods, with Goering explaining recent efforts to individualize neighborhoods in quadrants. Suggestions were made for starting initiatives at a lower cost to demonstrate the Land Bank's purpose.

The group also discusses neighborhood improvement associations and events to educate the community, with Friedman expressing interest in hosting forums and meetings with developers and community members.

Duncan acknowledges the helpfulness of the discussion in addressing the conceptual aspects of the Land Bank program, emphasizing the importance of focusing on the practical aspects and logistics moving forward. Goering expresses agreement, noting that mistakes are inevitable but that the Land Bank will improve with time. She also suggested the possibility of her returning for further guidance and support.

Reardon inquires about the use of executive sessions in the Land Bank meetings. Goering clarifies that they do not hold executive sessions and highlights the importance of open communication among board members. She had conducted training sessions to prepare board members for discussions in open forums.

King Simms shares an encounter with a Pittsburg local who expressed dissatisfaction with the Land Bank, inquiring about the general public consensus on the program. Goering indicates that she refrains from engaging in public opinions and focuses on the program's ethical foundation. She mentions the community's current concern about homelessness and acknowledged the program's positive initiatives despite facing criticism from some individuals.

Goering provides an example of a community development project involving the transformation of an old building into a community square by their community development corporation. She emphasizes the project's positive reception among the community, despite vocal opposition.

Councilman Duncan emphasizes the sensitivity surrounding the city's acquisition of properties and the public's concerns about eminent domain. Goering highlights the importance of educating the community to alleviate fears and misconceptions.

Regarding her role, Reardon inquires about Goering's involvement from the program's inception. Goering explains that she started as a "TBD" position and later assumed responsibilities for the Land Bank program full-time until mid-2022. She currently serves as the planning and zoning commission clerk. She emphasizes the need for a dedicated individual for the initial years of the program's establishment, highlighting the critical role such a person plays in ensuring the program's success.

Friedman expressed the need for further consideration on the discussed points. Duncan and Herron expressed anticipation for reviewing the technical aspects of the program to identify potential areas for improvement not yet considered.

Goering logs off of the zoom and the meeting continues.

Councilman Duncan motions to approve the previous meeting minutes. The minutes are unanimously approved.

Councilman Duncan asks when the board could look at the list of parcel recommendations from police/fire. Councilman Duncan reminds the group that staff has been having discussions across departments to identify potential parcels for acquisition into the land bank. Friedman updates the group that GIS is creating a map where we can see these properties and we are going to ask the different departments to give us a short list of properties for review.

Friedman continues that in the next few meetings, staff will prepare to present this list of properties to the board for consideration. In the meantime, staff will also work to review documents sent to us from Pittsburg.

Councilman Duncan recaps some of the follow-up items for staff to work on: identifying and reviewing potential target properties and strategizing for educational meetings with specific stakeholder groups such as nonprofits, neighborhoods, developers, etc.

Friedman mentions that city staff are meeting to strategize educational outreach effort for house-flippers and rehabbers, and that interest group might crossover with land bank educational audiences.

Councilman Duncan asks that we talk about what authority the city has to waive certain development and permitting fees. Councilman Duncan suggests that waiving a permit fee or similar fee for land bank projects would be beneficial. Friedman mentions that she has the authority to waive the fees. She mentions that CHDO projects pay permit fees, but that doesn't have to be the case for land bank. Friedman will brainstorm an argument for the benefits of fee waivers.

Herron asks if it would be possible for the board to run through a negotiation simulation before interacting with real applicants. Friedman agrees that this would be a good idea.

Councilman Duncan says that with the right amount of focus, we may be able to launch in the coming summer.

Herron suggests that we prepare to thoroughly vet the developers that agree to collaborate with the land bank. He suggests ensuring that they have the proper funding to complete the work on land bank properties. Councilman Duncan agrees, saying that we should clearly define our expectations for developers.

Friedman mentions that some cities have specific residential design guidelines, but Topeka does not. Duncan suggests we should ask Goering if they have that. Herron says that, from his perspective as a developer, it is advantageous to forego design standards for land bank properties to attract greater variety.

Meeting adjourned.