SESSION #1
General Discussion of Land Use Goals

Purpose

To review and discuss an overall direction that the City should strive to accomplish within the next 5 to 10 years (and beyond) with regard to land use policies and regulations.

Overview

The City of Kent is a mature community located within a heavily urbanized region of northeast Ohio. Historically, its development has been influenced by the development of the canal system in the early 1800’s, the railroads in the mid to late 1800’s and the growth and development of Kent State University in the mid to late 1900’s through to the present day. In fact, most of the physical development patterns within the City can be linked back to one or more of these historic factors.

The demographics created by Kent State University have a significant influence on the community, especially economically and in regard to housing. Nearly 2/3’s of the housing units in the City are rental housing units and about 25% of the households have incomes at or below the poverty level. While these statistics clearly set Kent apart from neighboring communities, it is also important to note that the University as the largest employer in the City and in Portage County, is also one of the more stabilizing factors in the local economy. Thus Kent has been and still is somewhat insulated from massive fluctuations in employment that other nearby communities have experienced. Nonetheless, the City has still suffered the loss of many blue collar jobs over the past 20-30 years, most of which were in the manufacturing sector.

The City is also, by staff’s estimate, somewhere between 90 – 95% developed. Most of the development in the past 20 years has been residential, although there have been spots of commercial and industrial growth. Most of the remaining vacant land is zoned residential or open space, with probably less than 200 acres available for industrial development and probably less than 70 acres available for commercial development.

Land Use Issues

Staff has identified at least eight potential general land use issues for consideration and realizes that there may be more.

1. Limited availability of vacant land ready for development.
2. Several significant brownfield industrial sites that could be made productive but may require significant investment and cleanup.
3. The development potential of land in the two Joint Economic Development Districts that the City is part of.
4. Stabilization and improvement of Kent’s residential neighborhoods.
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5. Revitalization of Kent’s downtown and its ability to serve as a vibrant economic center for the community and surrounding area.
6. Facilitating and utilizing developing technologies at Kent State University to grow new and existing businesses where possible.
7. Preservation of environmentally sensitive areas and the promotion of activities which put our natural resources into a positive and productive use.
8. Promoting sustainable development and improving the quality of life within the community given changing internal and external influences.
9. ??????

Implications of Land Use Issues

Each of the stated eight land use issues are discussed in more detail below with regard to the implications that each has for directing future land use policies.

- Limited availability of vacant land ready for development.

**Implications:** Most of the City’s economic development in the future will be a result of the redevelopment of sites with existing buildings and uses. There will still be a few opportunities to see significant development on vacant sites, most notably the vacant land adjacent to State Route 43 and 261, a small industrial area on Fairchild, and some vacant land in southern Kent (south of SR 261). Thus land use policies should recognize the redevelopment of existing sites as a key element of the City’s future. Regulations should protect and buffer surrounding areas but also realize that flexibility is needed to allow desirable uses on sites without requiring a laundry list of unnecessary variances. Each zoning district should be evaluated for the uses they allow and whether those uses are appropriate in that zoning district. The regulations in this regard should be balanced between promoting redevelopment and protecting adjacent areas. Design criteria are an important element in regard to this issue.

- Several significant brownfield industrial sites that could be made productive but may require significant investment and cleanup.

**Implications:** There are several “brownfield” sites within the City that occupy significant portions of land area and which have passed their prime for their intended use. Labor market changes have moved many of the manufacturing jobs out of the area but there is potential for the redevelopment of these sites as locations for future jobs and businesses. Future land use policies should evaluate these sites to determine if industrial zoning is still appropriate and whether the regulations for the industrial districts should be more permissive with regard to mixed use and setbacks.
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Most industrial uses do not fit the description of “dirty” operations as was the case historically but can still create some negative impacts with regard to traffic and noise.

In addition to land use policies, the City may need to pursue or commit significant financial resources (local, state and/or Federal) to promote the cleanup and redevelopment of these sites. Some public infrastructure improvements may also be needed to facilitate redevelopment. These sites will not get better on their own and without some stimulus from the City, are not likely to become productive properties in the future.

- The development potential of land in the two Joint Economic Development Districts that the City is part of.

Implications: The City of Kent has entered into Joint Economic Development Districts with both Franklin and Brimfield Townships. Otherwise known as JEDD’s, these districts encompass commercial areas in both townships and allow both the City and the township to provide services and receive tax revenues in ways that would be impossible without the JEDD. While there is still some potential for annexation of land from the townships to the City, much of the impetus for annexation has been removed. Whereas in the past there has been a negative and competitive relationship between the City and these two townships, the JEDD’s have helped to foster improved relations and a cooperative working relationship between the jurisdictions.

Both JEDD’s have created additional land area for development that can be beneficial to the City. Given the limited availability of vacant, developable land as noted earlier in this document, the JEDD’s will serve as an important piece in the City’s economic development future. While the City does not have zoning and land use regulatory authority in the JEDD’s, the JEDD’s do provide an excellent opportunity for the City and the townships to consider joint planning discussions and where possible, utilization of township and city resources to promote economic development in those areas. Such coordinated growth would enhance both the City and the surrounding township areas. With regard to the implications for the City’s land use, policies affecting both greenfield and brownfield areas within the City can be weighed knowing that the JEDD’s are present and provide their own opportunities.

- Stabilization and improvement of Kent’s residential neighborhoods.

Implications: Arguably, this is the most significant land use issue facing the City and is not unique to Kent. The causes of change and in some case deterioration in our residential neighborhoods can be linked to many things which are not limited to land use alone.
Financial and economic issues lead this list of causes and other issues include changes in personal values, hectic schedules with work and family, single parent households and so on. Solving this problem is not solely the responsibility of the land use regulations of the City but they are a significant element needed to move towards improvement.

It would appear that the City has moved through several phases with its land use controls aimed at stabilizing neighborhoods. Prior to 1970, it is unclear whether such controls attempted to regulate rental properties, especially those known by present definition as “rooming houses”. While there is very limited information known to staff about the zoning codes for the City prior to 1971, the code adopted in 1971 and which lasted through 1985 speaks to several basic approaches related to land use. First, the residential zoning densities and types of districts promoted in the 1971 code (and before) allowed much higher multifamily densities in a broader number of areas in the City than do the codes today. This can be easily seen with some of the projects built in the 1960’s and 1970’s. It also appears that prior to 1976, when the definition of “family” was changed in the zoning code to its present form, that there was very limited regulation of “rooming houses” and similar rental units. The net result of these policies is that today we have many “nonconforming uses” and properties in certain areas of the City. Some of these properties, while adequate 30+ years ago when the use of cars was more limited, are not adequate today in that they do not have enough parking or space. This has contributed to some of the deteriorated conditions in the neighborhoods in that many back yards and some front yards have been turned into parking areas by necessity. This discussion could go on but the important point in the context for this discussion is where do we go with this in the future?

It is this writer’s opinion that attempting to address the neighborhood stability issues is in fact, a multifaceted issue that requires multiple approaches. With land use, the City needs to continue to be attentive to regulating and limiting the traditional “rooming house” type use and larger scale rental properties. These regulations need to be realistic and practical. Current regulations set parameters for new uses in these categories that are difficult if not impossible to meet. Zoning variances must be requested and if not granted by the Board of Zoning Appeals, sometimes become the subject of court appeals. At the end of four to six months of going back and forth, the court overturns the City and nothing has been accomplished. This will be covered more when we get to the session on rooming houses. Other elements of the multifaceted approach needed to stabilize neighborhoods include effective enforcement of property maintenance codes, promoting improved personal values among residents and property owners to take better care of their properties, creating a sense of “community” and developing financial incentives to encourage property owners to fix their properties.
Revitalization of Kent’s downtown and its ability to serve as a vibrant economic center for the community and surrounding area.

**Implications:** When the C-D Zoning District was adopted about 10 years ago, the zoning regulations applicable to downtown became much more realistic with regard to downtown land uses and development patterns. Prior to the C-D District, the downtown was zoned C-R, a classification that was much more suited to commercial strip development (i.e. parking, setback requirements). As future downtown redevelopment takes more shape some consideration may need to be given to making sure that the zoning is consistent with the goals and objectives articulated in that planning. A bigger issue involving land use regulations in the downtown will focus on potential architectural and historic preservation criteria, with some work already underway on that matter. The redevelopment of the historic downtown can serve as an important catalyst in regard to not only preserving and creating jobs, but also creating an atmosphere where other residents and businesses are attracted to the community. Successful downtown redevelopment may create a need for the City to evaluate zoning classifications and permitted uses in areas directly adjacent to the downtown area. This in turn, could create some potential controversies over what types of uses should be permitted and whether they negatively impact surrounding residential areas.

Facilitating and utilizing developing technologies at Kent State University to grow new and existing businesses where possible.

**Implications:** This need can be addressed in several ways and can be accommodated either through redevelopment of existing sites or new construction on some of the remaining vacant land in the City or in the JEDD’s. Some type of strategic plan / implementation strategy needs to be crafted in conjunction with KSU to identify site, infrastructure and development needs as well as sources of potential funding. Zoning district classifications and uses may need to be tweaked to accommodate the mixed nature of these uses since they have commercial and industrial uses. In this regard some careful evaluation of the existing I-R: Industrial Research District and L-I: Light Industrial District is recommended. Some of the more traditional elements of industrial zoning regulations may need to be re-evaluated as well.

Preservation of environmentally sensitive areas and the promotion of activities which put our natural resources into a positive and productive use.

**Implications:** This issue takes on at least two different elements. The first involves the protection of natural areas such as wetlands, floodplains and riparian corridors. these areas from development. There are also a set of state and federal laws that deal with these areas that provide separate protections.
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The enactment of regulations governing riparian corridors, low impact development and storm water management several years ago have been effective in protecting some of these areas.

The second element is finding a way to protect these areas but also leverage them into productive, positive elements for the community that can help promote growth and economic benefit. The recent interest and efforts with regard to the Whitewater Park is one example of this. Kent is in a unique position to develop some of these attributes and zoning regulations should recognize both the need for protection and the flexibility to develop such facilities. The O-R District and C-D District may need to be evaluated for some of these issues.

- Promoting sustainable development and improving the quality of life within the community given changing internal and external influences.

Implications: With the work done over the past 10 years by the Environmental Commission to develop goals for sustainability within the community, this entire exercise of looking at the zoning code comprehensively should be undertaken with an eye towards promoting and facilitating sustainable development. Different people look at the issue of sustainability differently in terms of its intent and direction. From the standpoint of municipal services, the better we can build and maintain our infrastructure, the more cost efficient it will be to operate. The various design standards articulated in the zoning code (and other parts of City ordinance) should be constructed with sustainability in mind. The types of land uses permitted or not permitted in certain zoning districts should also be considered in relation to what may or may not be sustainable in those areas.

In closing, there may be other general land use issues that need to be added to this list once the various boards and commissions have had a chance to discuss this topic and take public input. The above is just a starting point for the discussion with some of staff’s thoughts based on our experiences in working with these issues on a day-to-day basis. We welcome any input on this matter.