



## Summary of Zoning Workshops – St. Marys August 23, 2016

The following is a summary of the Zoning Workshops held in St. Marys on August 23<sup>rd</sup>. The workshops provided an overview of zoning ordinance regulatory approaches that could be considered as part of the upcoming rewrite of St. Marys existing Zoning Ordinance and an opportunity for participants to provide input on zoning related ideas. Connie Cooper, with Cooper Consulting Company, conducted the workshops. She is a subconsultant to Ecological Planning Group, the firm tasked with developing a new Master Plan and Zoning Ordinance for the City.

Three Zoning Workshops were held with the following groups and comments cards were distributed at the first two workshops (summary of comments provided at end of this report):

9:30 AM: Master Plan Steering Committee Meeting

1:00 PM: Public Workshop

5:30 PM: Planning Commission Regular Meeting

A link to the Zoning Workshop power point presentation is available on the City's Master Plan "documents" page. If you have any follow up comments/questions regarding the Zoning Workshops and/or this summary, please contact Connie directly via email, [cconniecooper@cs.com](mailto:cconniecooper@cs.com) or phone, 214-228-0211 or Jeff Adams, Community Development Director, via [jeff.adam@stmarysga.gov](mailto:jeff.adam@stmarysga.gov) or phone, 912-510-4035.

The next step in preparing a new Zoning Ordinance for St. Marys is completion of the "Zoning Audit and Recommendations" scheduled for review by Master Plan Steering Committee on October 6<sup>th</sup>.

### Master Plan Steering Committee Meeting

Connie Cooper gave a presentation on Zoning, and options for zoning ordinance updates for the City of St. Marys to the Master Plan Steering Committee (MPSC). At the conclusion of the presentation the Committee members asked questions and made comments; these are summarized below along with comments from Connie (in italics):

- As an example of design incompatibility, the example of the bright yellow Subway business in Thomasville's historic Downtown was discussed as something that the City of St. Marys would like to avoid within its historic district.
- What percentage of communities across the country have different types of zoning codes? *A majority of cities have a traditional zoning code, but those jurisdictions that have revised their zoning code within the last 10 year or are in the process of adopting new zoning codes are always including some elements of form-based code provisions and as well as additional design standards for certain areas of their city. Many of these new codes are addressing performance issues such as a commercial use that creates a high degree of noise being required to have greater building setback standards than those that do not create noise issues (example a car wash facility vs a clothing store).*

- What is the adjustment like when a community moves from traditional to form-based zoning? *It can be somewhat tough, but it is important that the code is very specific in addressing existing development that does not conform to the new standards. If some structures or uses do not conform to all the new standards, it is important that statements be added to the Zoning Ordinance that clarify under what conditions a structure or use would be classified as “non-conforming” or “conforming” and how these structures or uses would be handled if substantially damaged or totally destroyed.*
- There is a strong need for commercial design standards, particularly in the Mid-Town Renaissance area.
- Does St. Marys zoning code currently allow for fast-food restaurants Downtown? *No, drive-throughs are not permitted in the Downtown. Fast-food restaurants can have walk up windows to serve customers. It is likely that the lack of population density in the Downtown has prevented any fast-food restaurants from locating there.*
- City should consider regulating more exterior conditions and keeping the zoning ordinance “pure.” Currently, the City regulates food trucks, signage, historic districts, and trees through separate ordinances. *The City could consider using “licensing” rather than “zoning” to regulate some aspects, such as outdoor commercial storage.*
- *You can incentivize existing development to come into compliance with new codes or amortize the time in which they have to come into compliance. For example, seven years might be a time to bring an existing sign into compliance with a new code. You can address long-term vacancies through incentives, or financial penalties, such as a millage surcharge as is currently done in Cornelia, GA.*
- Can eminent domain be used to address vacancies? *Yes, but it’s a last resort.*
- There is major concern regarding signage regulations in St. Marys. *The regulations can be easily fixed, but the politics of adopting a more restrictive sign ordinance provisions can be daunting (businesses will say more restrictions on signage will hurt their business). The City should consider limitations on internally lit signs, and billboards. Billboards are coming from Kingsland and could accrete to St. Marys but there is still time to limit them.*
- *Enhanced landscaping regulations are also needed. In the future the MPSC will consider what types of design/form regulations are needed in each of the proposed character areas. Connie will provide a list for consideration.*

The MPSC completed an exercise where they filled out note cards stating what wasn’t working with zoning and what was working, respectively. Some of these comments are summarized below:

- There is currently too much oversight for new development. The process is too lengthy with too many steps. The outcome is unknown in that you could jump through all the hoops and still get a no answer.
- There are not enough limits on some signage in St. Marys.
- Non-conforming language. We want to be helpful to business, particularly those that add to the character of the community.
- You can encourage preservation or additions to the tree canopy by trading tree plantings for parking spaces.
- The City should give staff flexibility in addressing design permit applications.

The group then discussed architectural standards and what they understood to be prevailing architectural types in the various areas of St. Marys. There is a range of residential architectural styles. The existing Planned Developments pretty much regulate the styles of residential homes. More comments focused on the need for regulation in commercial areas including signage, setbacks, reducing front parking, landscaping, and facades. Design standards for Downtown are only guidelines for non-contributing structures and based on the Coastal Design Guidelines provided by Coastal Regional Commission. The group started to envision what types of design standards would be desirable for commercial and identified the following: Hardie Board (fiber cement board), less brick, roof pitch between 4/12 and 8/12, encourage metal roofing.

The group discussed the need to allow more of the things we want by right, as opposed to requiring people to get special use permit.

### **Public Zoning Workshop**

Connie gave the same presentation as was given to the MPSC. The following is a summary of the questions and comments that were made:

- A question was asked regarding what was presented in the morning to the MPSC. It was explained that the same presentation was given to them.
- There is a lot of ambiguity in the current code. There was an example of a recent allowance that was made for “certain political signs.”
- A resident expressed concern that several properties in her neighborhood have large boats out front, and there appears to be no regulations to prevent that. *This issue could be regulated through zoning, licensing or property maintenance standards (City of St. Marys does regulate the location of boats, trailers and campers). The resident wanted to know how new residents would be made aware of any standards for boat storage. One idea is to implement a joint public education campaign through the Realtors association.*
- It was asked why we were not going to make existing development adhere to the new standards? *Property owners have a vested right in how their property is currently developed, and thus we are limited in how new ordinances might impact their property rights. However, it is possible, for zoning ordinances (in most states) to include an amortization provision for something to come into compliance – this usually done for signage, landscaping, lighting, outside storage and paint colors, i.e. allow a seven-year time frame to meet new standards.*
- A concern was voiced that new zoning ordinance provisions would impact ability to sell house. *No, if the new zoning ordinance added design standards for residential, an existing house would not be required to meet those standards and the new Zoning Ordinance would include non-conformity language that clarified the fact existing homes were not considered non-conforming.*
- How do you regulate boat storage, especially on small lots? *You can have different standards for what is allowed to be stored onsite for different sized lots. Also you can regulate where on the lot they are permitted to be stored.*
- How can we prevent residents from storing a lot of “junk” in their front yards? *This can be addressed through enforcement of property maintenance standards.*
- Are property maintenance standards hard to enforce? *They can be, particularly if the standards are not written in a manner that are easy to enforce. It also requires elected officials to support code enforcement personnel when a violation is found.*

- Highway 40 corridor used to be all residential and it has changed over time to commercial so change is possible in St. Marys. But what do you mean by corridor? *The commercial roadway corridor such as along Osborne road referred to as the Renaissance Area, that serves essentially as the front door to St. Marys historic Downtown.*
- Property owner shared a situation with his particular property. He owns the farmer/flea market and has previous issues with zoning and sign standards. He has property that is zoned General Industrial and he doesn't feel it is appropriate for Downtown. He would like to do a micro-unit mixed use development that potentially includes some senior and/or workforce housing. He wants to see a hybrid code that would allow for this.
- Development is currently slow in St. Marys, so will this zoning code get us what we want in 30 years? *Yes, but it will not be overnight since the City has not experienced a fast rate of growth and development. Currently planned public investments in the City's infrastructure and streetscapes may spur some additional development.*
- The County adopted a Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) and it was difficult to change uses. Will it be that way with St. Marys? *The new Zoning Ordinance will not require existing uses to change, but as new businesses come to St. Marys or existing businesses undergo renovations change will occur over time. The Zoning Ordinance will also include more uses by right to reduce development delays.*
- Can the City adopt standards for trees? *Yes, through landscape provisions.*
- The City should look at requirements for lot size and coverage.
- A property owner shared a situation about his property that is within the Highway 40 commercial corridor. He wants to develop a single-family bungalow for rental since the property won't support anything commercial. He is concerned that existing zoning limits this option.
- Another person shared the fact that the current Zoning Ordinance was written in 1994, and nothing has really changed since then. It is outdated and doesn't work anymore, and the City has gotten a reputation for being unfriendly for development because of that.

### **Planning Commission Regular Meeting**

After the conclusion of the Planning Commission meeting, Connie gave the Zoning presentation. There were no comment or discussion.

### **Observations Provided on Comment Cards (verbatim entries from cards)**

#### **Positives**

- *What zoning can do for us*
  - *Can move us to fulfilling the vision for St. Marys*
  - *Attract businesses*
  - *Attract people toward our community*
- *What's attractive about zoning*
  - *We have clearly defined character areas and can zone according to them and their enrichment possibilities*

- *Codes can be used to create community cohesiveness within each character area producing a more pleasing view*
- *Revised Zoning Ordinance may give the City better guidelines to attract new businesses*
- *Height restrictions*
- *Trees*
- *Medians Downtown*
- *Lack of stop lights*
- *Historic preservation*
- *Character of city is recognized and valued*
- *Growth and development can still be impacted with zoning improvement*
- *Beautiful buildings and beautiful trees*
- *Fort Gilman waterfront park*
- *Like our Historic District and new code being drafted*
- *Love shady trees*
- *Like the way Downtown has four standard looks on historic properties*
  - *Porches for breezes*
  - *Picket fences*
  - *Windows above each other*
  - *Symmetrical design*
- *Questions can be answered by Michele as they come up – knowledgeable staff*
- *Historic preservation is good – access and preservation for commercial must be protected*
- *Like opportunity for planned development*
- *Like mixed use for Downtown commercial district*
- *Ease of communication with P & Z*
- *Historic value*
- *Quaintness*
- *Mixed use residential / commercial*
- *Love use of decorative windows, landscaping (trees, window boxes in commercial areas)*
- *Love idea of mixed use area – commercial/residential*
- *RSVP vision for Downtown areas*
- *Natural resources*
- *Waterfront*
- *Current efforts to improve planning/zoning*
- *Code enforcement officer*
- *Tree-lined streets and appearances*
- *Neighborhood friendly schools*
- *Palm trees as Hwy 40 and 95 are really a beautiful addition for St. Marys*

## Negatives

- *Code enforcement*
- *Many people are generally unfamiliar with zoning regulations*
- *Signage all over the lot – inconsistent*
- *Political nature of zoning*
- *Areas that are grandfathered – seems to be a major problem*
- *Too much governmental oversight*
- *Confusing application process and procedures*
- *Unclear outcomes*
- *Vacant bank and restaurant in Kingsbay Village Shopping Center*
- *Large trash/garbage containers in parking lot*
- *Lack of control over business owners who refuse to maintain property*
- *Midtown businesses have no sense of place*
- *Lack of authority over implementation*
- *Lack of uniformity in setbacks, façades, front parking, signage creating an unappealing view*
- *Lack of authority in Planning Dept. to solve issues without going to other boards*
- *Lack of a genuine “Welcome to St. Marys” presentation – either at Exit 1 or Downtown*
- *Lack of enforcement of substandard of junked up residential properties*
- *Limited use permitted in R-1 area – no opportunities to have cottage shops*
- *Lack of landscaping on major roads*
- *Lack of conformity of structures in some areas – odd mix of buildings*
- *Vacant unused buildings in need of repair*
- *Tacky signs*
- *Dumpsters on city ROW*
- *Incomplete code enforcement*
- *Homes not in scale with adjacent houses*
- *Too many setback variances*
- *Do not like banners or signs (other than business names) plastered on historic buildings or neon signs – signs Downtown should be historic in look, not loud and not covering architecture*
- *Do not like area from Downtown RR tracks to Kingsbay Shopping Center where there is no landscaping along the road*
- *Hate that we can't rule on building colors – see screaming blue building in front of Downtown elementary school*
- *Unkempt store fronts in historic Downtown*
- *Historic medians not kept up, lack of landscaping and not uniform*
- *Marina run down*
- *Not enough staff to implement future efforts*

- *Do not have boat ordinances or codes*
- *Rental housing property not being kept up (yards)*
- *No connections accessible by pathways in all areas*
- *Lack of consistencies in Downtown*
- *Too many ditches*
- *No bike lanes on busy streets*
- *Don't like oversized vehicles (boats/RVs/campers/junked cars) scattered on properties*
- *Multiple vehicles in yards*
- *Condition of yards*
- *Attitude of those who have lived here a long time*
- *Ambiguity of ordinance*
- *Inconsistent enforcement of existing planning and zoning codes*
- *Difficulty to get city fathers and staff to respond to egregious offences*
- *Slow to recognize changing needs and develop responsive polices*
- *Misplaced priorities – stomping on ants when elephants are running us over*
- *Classification of historic*
- *Lack of growth*
- *Lack of business*
- *Current code largely prescriptive*
- *Need citywide control*
- *Mixed use not prescribed in new areas being developed*
- *35% impervious area*
- *No patio lot use in Downtown area*
- *Rebuild to current standard if 50% rehabbed*
- *Temporary signs/all signs go through HPC*
- *Enforcement of Captain Seagles torn awnings – makes it look like there are good ole policies*
- *Sign requests are difficult*
- *8 copies to be submitted to a board*
- *Addendums not available at one place*
- *Not enough control of commercial buildings coming into St. Marys*
- *Don't like residential lot requirement for 10,000 sf*
- *Lot size requirement*
- *Setbacks*
- *Industrial near Downtown and Mid-Town; should develop residential and commercial*
- *Code enforcement or codes to minimize vacant building blight of Mid-Town and Osborne*
- *Too hard to find affordable home building sites due to unusually high square foot minimums*
- *Question: Is the name of the Comp Plan "One St. Marys??"*

## Recommendations

- *Improve image to St. Marys entrances from Exit 1*
- *Provide zoning district(s) for temporary RV sites for tourists*
- *Provide for manufactured and mobile home housing*
- *Constructive Downtown residential lot square footage minimums to facilitate more urban infill*
- *Make Downtown uniform and tourist friendly*
- *Develop a Riverwalk from Gilman Park to Meeting Street boat ramp*
- *Improve Downtown waterfront building appearance and maintenance*
- *Rights-of-way are very large; perhaps deed back to owner's portions that will never be used*
- *Improve signage by adopting better sign standards/guidelines*
- *Improve landscaping by adopting better landscaping standards/guidelines*
- *Address non-conformity issues (residential vs. commercial)*
- *Allow for shared and on street parking*
- *Mid-Town building structure guidelines*
- *No fast-food restaurants in Historic Downtown zoning district.*
- *Design guidelines for businesses along State Hwy 40 in the Mid-Town, should apply to Charlie Smith Hwy as well.*
- *Like less separation from Downtown to rest of St. Marys and some continuity*
- *We have to encourage quality, affordable urban in-fill housing options to build a vibrant Downtown. City can benefit from a diverse group of new residents ready to enjoy the retail, cultural and dining options in City. Would like a tiered approach for varying lot sizes that encompasses lots from 5,000 square feet and up with setbacks adjusted for varying lot size without having new owners go through a variance process.*
- *Provide landscaping especially in commercial areas*
- *Improved signage – consistent and similar in various areas*
- *Improved façade planning specific to area*
- *St. Marys is hot 9 months of year – need shade less paving – keep oaks – less brick buildings*
- *Signage needs to be tightened up – inconsistent presentation throughout city*
- *No tabby materials for buildings – this is an English town – Florida is across the river and was Spanish with red tiled roofs*
- *District zoning should be more specific*
- *Allowing mixed use residential and commercial*
- *Like idea of walkability and connecting paths between neighborhoods*
- *Being able to customize needs for certain structures*
- *More green (existing bump-outs with trees – to break solid parking)*
- *Form-based code to better describe the look we're after by area*
- *Some flexibility in setbacks for Downtown lots*
- *Density of homes on lots where it makes sense – such as in Downtown historic areas*

- *More mixed used districts for connectivity for schools/parks/churches/employment centers*
- *Less parking lots in front of commercial buildings*
- *Cohesive ordinances with consensus of direction needed*
- *Porches included in setback*
- *Alcohol ordinance for events in parks*
- *Sign ordinance for events*
- *Would really like concept of areas of smaller residential lots areas*
- *Need to clarify use for residential and commercial mixed uses (above and below) (side by side)*
- *Method for approval of non-historic properties in district*
- *Create catalyst sites and refer to them often*
- *Create a Community Improvement District for Osborne Business corridor*