

## September 26, 2022 West End Neighborhood Meeting

Martinsville City Council toured the West End area on September 26, 2022 beginning at 5:30pm. Those present for the tour were Mayor Kathy Lawson, Vice-Mayor Jennifer Bowles, and Council Members Chad Martin, Tammy Pearson, and Danny Turner. City Manager Leon Towarnicki, City Attorney Eric Monday, Community Development Director Mark McCaskill, Inspector Mark Price, Police Chief Eddie Cassady, Officer Coretha Gravely, Hannah Powell of Community Development, Inspector Luis Rosas, and guest Monique Holland of the Martinsville Bulletin were also present.

Tour began at 5:30 from the rear of the City Municipal Building and traveled to Bridge Street, Market Street, West Church Street then looped through the Massey Street neighborhood where Council briefly discussed the vacant V. M. Draper property. The tour went back out to West Church, crossing Memorial Boulevard to Fayette Street, down First Street where attendees looked at a fire damaged structure, and discussed the condition of the Paradise Inn. The tour traveled over to Second Street, Fourth Street, then to Third Street where they looked at a drainage concern expressed at a previous West End Neighborhood Meeting. The tour continued to A Street, Roundabout Road, and Pony Place where they viewed a drainage issue at 119 Pony Place, on to Cardinal Lane where they drove by and briefly discussed West End Park, then back out to Pony Place to Fayette Street, Pine Hall Road, and Top Street where they briefly discussed the PHR CDBG project. The tour traveled back out to Fayette and Beaver Street, turned south on Memorial Boulevard to Katherine Street then Smith Street. They traveled on to Swanson Street, Armstead Avenue and then back to the Municipal Building where the tour concluded at approximately 6:35 pm. Along the route, attendees noticed a number of properties needing attention, property maintenance issues, abandoned houses, etc. In most cases, Mark Price noted the property had already been posted through Property Maintenance. Demolition to some properties was discussed and the City is currently working through that process for those structures. For property maintenance concerns, most had already been turned over to the Public Works Department for handling. Attendees observed several inoperative vehicles and a number of locations with basketball goals in the street where Police Chief Cassady made note for follow-up. It was generally noted that most areas were clean and properties observed as possible code violations were indicated to already be in the system.

### Neighborhood Meeting, Monday, 7:00 pm, Albert Harris Elementary School Library -

Mayor Lawson opened the meeting at 7:00 pm, All Council Members and the same staff from the tour were present including Clerk of Council Karen Roberts, Public Information Officer Kendall Davis, Building Inspector Kris Bridges and Public Works Director Jeff Gauldin. Approximately 30 residents from the area attended.

Mayor Lawson opened the meeting and welcomed everyone. Lawson called on City Manager Towarnicki to summarize the neighborhood tour from earlier in the evening and to also review issues brought up at the previous West End neighborhood meeting on May 23.

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Those in attendance began asking questions during Towarnicki's presentation. With several people talking at once, it made it difficult to hear some names, addresses, and specific conversations for the minutes.

James Dalton, no address given, questioned why the same concerns are still ongoing along with more new issues, these problems continue to build up. Towarnicki explained that the City now has ARPA funding that was not available until about a year ago and that there has been a list of projects put together for those funds. Council has heard the complaints in the neighborhoods and those are some of the projects that Council has earmarked funds for. The City can not address the Paradise Inn without those funds and that is why Council is asking for community input. In relation to the Pine Hall project, the City was denied twice but finally received approval from the third application. The drainage issues have also been earmarked for ARPA funding.

Mr. Dalton questioned why the City doesn't have money for drainage projects but they have \$1.5million to spend on reversion.

Timothy Wade, 1137 Pine Hall Road says he received a letter from the City Manager stating that since no one had resided in his home for 6 months and because there had been no electricity to the home, that he would not qualify for funds to repair the house under the CDBG project so now he is homeless. Mark McCaskill stated that there are federal rules on how long a house can be vacant to be considered for redevelopment through the Pine Hall grant. McCaskill said they check the utility usage and send that information to the federal government to make the decision. The City cannot override federal government requirements. Wade asked why he was not told that before he spent all his money to pay the taxes and to hire a lawyer, stating that he could have used the money instead to fix up the house if he had known. McCaskill explained that Brandy Dudley is the one who has discussed this specific property with Mr. Wade and she is not a City employee. Council Member Martin asked what kind of issues need to be fixed up and stated that there may be help available through other organizations. *(footnote to minutes – subsequent conversations with West Piedmont PDC staff who are assisting the City in managing the Pine Hall Road CDBG project indicates Mr. Wade is not homeless and has been residing with a family member for some time)*

Danny Moore 1215 Top Street asked about the Pine Hall grant, he bought a house in the Pine Hall area and was told that the grant came through and the City received the money. People keep making promises but residents haven't seen anything done. Moore questioned why the project was taking so long to get started and said the City tells him that he does not qualify for grant money because there are liens on his property which he disagrees with, stating that there are no liens to his knowledge. Moore stated that there are many homes on the West End that are vacant and being demolished, and asked why the City can not give the residents the opportunity to buy, own and restore those homes City Attorney Eric Monday explained that title searches are completed on all homes in the area as a requirement for the grant; if there is

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a lien on the property there is nothing the City can do to override that and recommended that Moore follow up on his property liens and dispute those with the lien holders.

Lee Vernon, 15 High Street asks that details of the demolition list be shared and asked how long the list is and what priority are the homes added. Vernon asked why the Paradise is still priority over homes in the area that have not been demolished or repaired. His taxes are paid and these condemned homes are hurting his property value. Building Inspector Kris Bridges explained that there is a master list of 142 homes. Currently there are 3 properties going out to bid for demolition tomorrow and 3 more after the asbestos assessment is complete. Inspections works on properties in groups of 10 homes at a time. Previously his office only received \$15k per year to do demolitions so it would take several years to actually be able to make progress. They are giving home owners as much time as possible to take care of the house themselves rather than using tax payer's money. ARPA money has been earmarked for the demolition program so residents will see those demolitions increasing because there is a larger budget but there are still steps that must be taken before the first bulldozer can be put on the property to take the house down. Bridges confirmed that 17 High Street is one of the properties going out for bid in the morning.

Diane Hartley, 1103 Roundabout Road had questions about the demolition process, stating that her sister's neighbor's house at 127 North Beaver Street has been empty for over 5 years. She asked how the property owners are fined for not maintaining the property and how they are contacted. Mayor Lawson explained that each time the City goes out to cut the grass, there is a minimum fine to the property owner. Monday explained that the fine must reach a certain percentage or a 2-year limit before additional steps can be taken. Hartley asked about Paradise Inn, she had read that the location was being considered a Hub for a market place. Mayor Lawson explained that was a suggestion by a former community development employee, but the City does not own the property, it has huge tax liens and it would cost millions of dollars to rehabilitate it. Hartley asked if there were any projects on the books that can be considered to make this area look better, it's such an eye sore. Martin explained the food hub previously was money set aside for technical assistance to reach out to the community that would have been funded by grant money and that is why the meeting is being held, is to hear what residents want for the community.

Albert Davis, 107 Randolph Street and 912 Independence Street asked what it would take to rehab the Paradise Inn property. Building Inspector Kris Bridges shared that in 2018, just to stabilize the building would cost around \$3million just for starters. A sprinkler system would be another \$25-40,000 to get into the building plus the cost per square foot to run the piping so it could easily cost \$5million just to be able to walk into the building safely. Davis explained that if the City would pay for it, the black community would support it. Vice Mayor Bowles thanked Davis for his remarks and said they would be well received.

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Attendees continued to talk over top of each other and responses to staff answers were becoming increasingly angry. Officer Coretha Gravely asked everyone to be respectful to Council and staff members.

Bowles explained that the City would not be able to maintain ownership of the Paradise Inn property but it could be declared a public nuisance and steps could then be taken to take the building down. Monday explained that the Paradise Inn is privately owned and there are several liens with the largest being over \$300k by the federal government where the owners didn't pay the taxes. There are also several judgements and other liens that would pass through the property if the City took ownership, that would need to be settled before the City could do anything with the property. Monday also explained that the structure sits over a drainage culvert so it is not the best site to rebuild on. Monday stated that the City could require the owner to tear the property down but we all know the owners won't pay to do that. If the owners won't pay for the demolition, then the City will be able to tear it down but that will result in another lien on the property that the owners will not pay for and a cost that the community will have to bear. If the City takes the Paradise Inn down then it would be money the City spends with no expectation of recovery.

Mayor Lawson asked for a show of hands from those in attendance that feel that the Paradise Inn should be taken down, with approximately 10 people raising their hand.

Tom Salyer, from 1010 E Street loves the community, he is very sensitive to the fact that it is a historically black community full of hardworking people, beautiful homes and yards. For him as a white man wanting to be sensitive and respectable, he feels the Paradise is an eye sore to the community. If there had been documentation of famous people performing there, that could have provided information to register the Paradise Inn as a historical sight but to his knowledge, there is no documentation to that effect. The abandoned homes, unkempt homes, and kudzu are hurting the appearance of the area. As people in the community, they should spend their energy to pass ordinances to require fines in less time than 2 years. The citizens need to refocus.

Thomas Worsham Jr, 1154 Yorkshire Road asked why residents have not received updates on the progress of the Pine Hall project that should have started in March and also expressed concern about tall grass leading into Pine Hall and Yorkshire communities. Mark McCaskill shared updates, stating that the project is split between 4 groups with the first group having started in March. All of the money must be spent according to federal and state rules. There are 16 participants, the first 4 have had the title searches and qualifications done and are ready to go; they have the write up done and those documents have been put out to bid for contractors to do the work. One of those first 4 has already gotten word from a contractor to begin that work. The City must match those funds by repaving streets and infrastructure work. The first home will start soon, the next 3 will go back up for bid since they didn't receive any

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response the first time. Then there will be another group of 4 until all 16 units will be complete within the next 2 years. Worsham requested that residents receive updates. McCaskill asked if it would be helpful to set up a quarterly update. Bowles thanked McCaskill and asked if he could develop and present a timeline to better explain actions being taken and maybe list that information on the City website and/or Facebook page. Worsham asked if the City trucks can spray the sidewalks for weeds and cut the street edges. Public Works Director Jeff Gauldin explained that the City owns part of the property in question and can cut that but if the City doesn't own the property then that grass must be reported every time since property maintenance is complaint based. Gauldin doesn't believe the property Worsham is questioning is City property but he will look at that tomorrow. Gauldin will post the large message board in the neighborhood with updates on paving projects so residents can plan around those road closures.

Raymond Staples, 1210 Roundabout Road says that he owns 7 properties in Martinsville and there needs to be an eradication of kudzu and groundhogs that are taking over the neighborhood.

LC Jones, 108 Pebble Creek says that tonight's meeting was pitched to discuss the Paradise Inn and only a small portion of the West End is represented at the meeting. He asked how the meeting and the vote about the future of the Paradise Inn will represent the community opinion as a whole with so few in attendance. Mayor Lawson explained that there was no official vote tonight and no action would be taken from the show of hands. Jones says citizens just want to be kept informed on issues that are ongoing.

Natalie Hall 1212 Roundabout Road said at the last meeting speeders on Roundabout Road was discussed; she asked if the City could approve speedbumps or strips to slow traffic down. Bowles explained that The Harvest Foundation has installed speedbumps in other areas and gave Hall contact information, suggesting that they may be able to help her write a grant for speedbumps on Roundabout also. Police Chief Cassady said after the last meeting, the Police Department put a speed trailer out to monitor times that most speeding occurred along with extra patrol. Once they determine when most speeding is being done, they'll know when to send an officer out to ticket those drivers. Leon Towarnicki explained that a speed bump on a residential street is not always the best option, speedbumps could be a hinderance for emergency vehicles responding to an emergency. With snowplows and strips, employees would need to know the exact location of those strips so that they won't scrape them up by mistake.

Linda Moseley 1409 Cardinal Lane expressed concern about water coming off Roundabout Road to Cardinal Lane and into her yard. She says the wall that was installed to stop the water is no longer working and they will need to build a larger wall. Moseley was asked to provide her contact information for follow-up. Lawson explained that those run-off concerns are being identified and that part of the ARPA money will be used to correct those issues. (The

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Public Works Department investigated the following day and indicated this could be an eligible project under the earmarked ARPA funding, and homeowner appeared interested)

Ronald Hairston, 113 Crestwood Court asked if the Paradise Inn would fall under any kind of grandfather clause for repairs. Bridges said no, the Paradise has been condemned since the 1990s so any work put into that building must be done by current code. Hairston asked with all the grants, where is the money going towards improvements if it's not being applied to the Paradise; the building is a landmark. Another resident expressed that the building was nothing important anymore and that the neighborhood needs attention before the Paradise. Lawson explained that the property is owned by someone else, not the City so the grants could not be applied to rehabilitating a building since the owners have no interest in fixing it. Hairston felt that the residents could get the owners on board if the City would support them. Monday explained that even if a grant was approved for rehabilitation of the Paradise, \$350k will be shaved off of that total immediately just to cover those federal liens. The property owner has expressed no interest in working with the City the past 20 years to sell or repair the property. Hairston asked why some of the residential neighborhoods don't have sidewalks. Lawson explained that in the 1960s, the residents in some neighborhoods split the cost of having curb and gutter installed in their area. Towarnicki also explained the shared cost curb and gutter program where neighborhood residents would agree and contribute to the project and stated there are actually residents in the City that do not want curbs or sidewalks in front of their property. Turner explained that sometimes you have to change the contour of the property to install the sidewalk so some property owners would not agree. Towarnicki explained some of the sidewalks in the City were installed by VDOT, not the City. They hope to get to a point where some areas can be funded but after school funding, safety, etc. there simply has been no extra money left over for those projects. Hairston asked where the taxes are going. Towarnicki explained that the City budget is \$100million a year and taxes go into funding the City general fund which includes schools, police, fire, and safety, with the rest of those funds coming from the state. Towarnicki explained that several years ago there was a schedule of locations for a 12-year curb and gutter project and the City was able to cover 7-8 years of that project before funding ran out.

Resident asked where the money went for the Pine Hall project if it hasn't gone into the neighborhood repairs. Mark McCaskill explained that the City doesn't get the money until after the work is done, the City must spend money on the project then they get reimbursed months later. All grants such as the Pine Hall Grant are a reimbursement process from Richmond as long as the City spends funds according to the rules. McCaskill said he would share those totals in the quarterly report.

Lawrence Mitchell, 700 Second Street complained that the railroad had told the residents that the City would repair the road damage in that area caused by the railroad equipment. The

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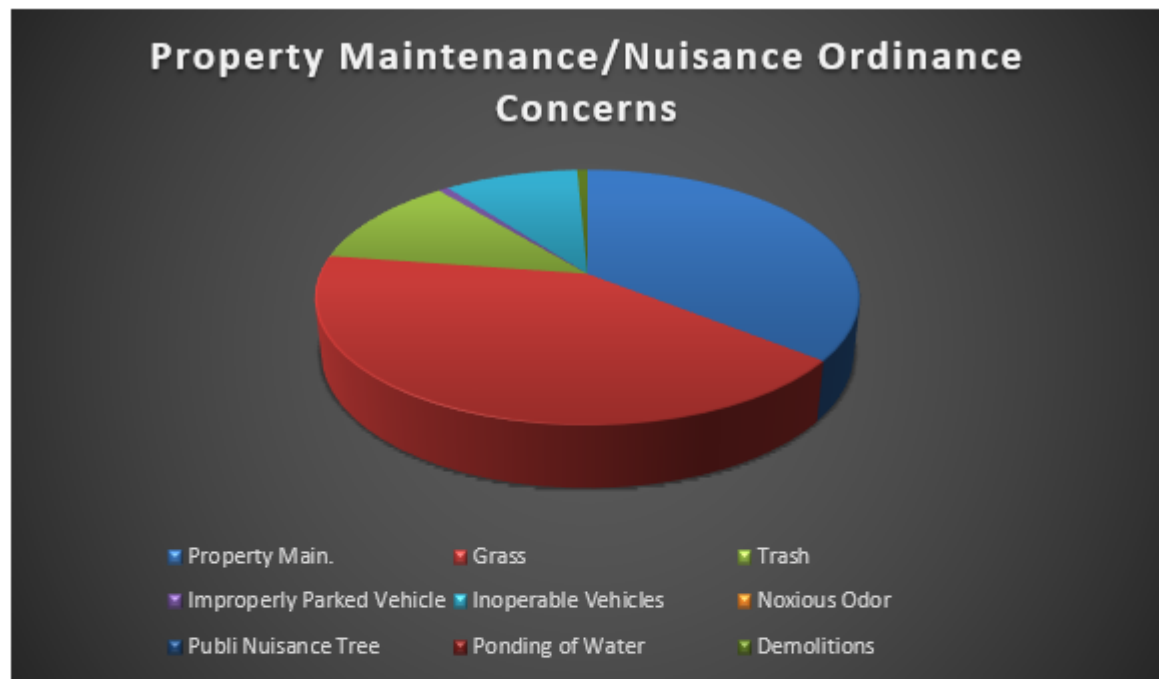
streets have been destroyed, and the City has marked the streets but no repairs have been made. Mitchell said it is the railroad's fault that the streets are torn up so he doesn't understand why they have not been repaired. Towarnicki said he was familiar with the area but was unsure if the damage Mitchell was referring too was caused by the railroad. Mitchell explained there have been multiple water main breaks at Second and E Streets and that the City had not repaired the road from those yet. Towarnicki said the only issue he's aware of is at the end of Second Street that the railroad had torn up and had agreed to reimburse repairs. Mitchell said he would send Towarnicki a copy of an email that he was sent about repairs to the street. (The Public Works Department investigated this concern the following day. The area referenced by Mr. Mitchell is a utility repair patch that has sunken and will need to be repaired)

Paul Brown, 1152 Yorkshire Road inquired what the process was to prioritize which homes get fixed first with the Pine Hall grant, stating that he felt that Mr. Wade's home should be first on the list since he was now homeless.

Rev. J. C. Richardson thanked Council for coming to the meeting. He's hearing a lot of frustration and invited residents to a meeting on Thursday October 6 at 6:00pm at Mount Sinai Church for a City Council forum. All four council candidates running in the next election will be present.

Council Member Martin says he understands the community's frustration and recognizes that it stems from a lack of communication or presenting the information that can be readily assessed. LC Jones mentioned communicating with residents in an effective way, Martin asked attendees what the best way to communicate with them would be, whether by mail, social media, etc. Residents asked for letters and requested more meetings to receive information.

Mayor Lawson shared that there would be a Council Meeting on Tuesday where additional comments on the Paradise Inn would be received. Mayor Lawson thanked everyone for attending.



Property Maintenance -49

Grass-57

Trash-16

Improperly Parked Vehicles-1

Inoperable Vehicles-13

Noxious Odor-0

Public Nuisance Tree-0

Ponding of Water-0

Demolitions-1

The meeting adjourned at 8:35pm.

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Karen Roberts  
Clerk of Council

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Kathy Lawson  
Mayor