

**CHARTER TOWNSHIP OF MERIDIAN
PLANNING COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
August 27, 2012**

APPROVED

**5151 Marsh Road, Okemos, MI 48864-1198
853-4000, Town Hall Room, 7:00 P.M.**

PRESENT: Commissioners Cordill, Deits, Goodale, Hildebrandt, Jackson, Norkin (7:03 P.M.),
Scales, Scott-Craig
ABSENT: Commissioner Honicky
STAFF: Principal Planner Gail Oranchak

1. Call meeting to order

Chair Deits called the regular meeting to order at 7:01 P.M.

2. Approval of agenda

Commissioner Jackson moved to approve the agenda. Seconded by Commissioner Scott-Craig.

VOICE VOTE: Motion carried 7-0.

3. Approval of Minutes

Commissioner Cordill moved to approve the Regular Meeting Minutes of August 13, 2012. Seconded by Commissioner Goodale.

VOICE VOTE: Motion carried 7-0.

4. Public Remarks

Chair Deits opened and closed the floor for public remarks.

5. Communications (None)

6. Public hearings

- A. Special Use Permit #12071 (Ingham County Transportation and Roads), work in the floodplain to replace the Van Atta Road bridge
- B. Wetland Use Permit #12-06 (Ingham County Transportation and Roads), impacts to wetlands to replace the Van Atta Road bridge
Chair Deits opened the public hearings at 7:03 P.M.
 - Introduction by the Chair (announcement of procedures, time limits and protocols for public participation and applicants)
 - Summary of subject matter
Principal Planner Oranchak summarized the special use permit and wetland use permit requests as outlined in staff memoranda dated August 23, 2012.
 - Applicant
Bob Peterson, Director of Engineering, Ingham County Department of Transportation and Roads (ICDTR), 301 Bush Street, Mason, introduced Jeremy Hedden, Design Engineer, Bergmann Associates, 1427 Saginaw Street, Suite 200, East Lansing and Bill Conklin, Managing Director of ICDTR.

- Mike McDonald, 5616 Wood Valley Drive, Haslett, inquired if there were written comments available from either the Director of Parks and Recreation or Senior Park Naturalist Kit Rich on this issue.

He indicated the Township has a beautiful linked riverfront park system and noted his desire for the new Van Atta Road bridge not to interfere with the flow of people on Van Atta Road who use the riverfront parks (Eastgate Park, Harris Nature Center (HNC) and Legg Park). Mr. McDonald noted each of these three (3) riverfront parks has received state and federal funds from Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund's Land and Water Conservation Fund. He believed the use of any guardrail system will impede the flow of residents from one side of Van Atta Road to the other, while acknowledging that either federal or state regulations require guardrails.

Mr. McDonald inquired as to the proposed speed limit on Van Atta Road, noting it is currently 35 miles per hour (mph). He believed there will be an increase of residents using both the river and the riverbank. Mr. McDonald expressed interest that the height of the bridge over the riverbank will be sufficient to allow residents to traverse under the bridge from one side of Van Atta Road to the other.

Mr. McDonald stated there is a casual canoe/kayak deck on the west side of the riverbank and hoped there would be funding included as part of the project for an upgrade to that system. He highlighted a statement from the Ingham County Drain Commissioner (ICDC) regarding logjam removal in the Red Cedar River, which will allow for more canoeing/kayaking experiences on the river.

- Planning Commission discussion:
Commissioner Cordill inquired as to the elevation and design of the bridge, asking how the bridge would look from the side and fit into the area.

Mr. Hedden responded an individual would see something similar to what is there today, however the span would be longer. He stated the bottom of the beam would be raised approximately 1-½ feet higher. Mr. Hedden noted the bridge would not visually look different other than the length. The existing Van Atta Roadway just south of the bridge drops down significantly so the change would be greater, possibly 3-½ feet of grade raise while the grade north of the bridge would be very similar.

Commissioner Cordill stated her concern with the look of the bridge is borne out of the fact that Van Atta Road is classified as a natural beauty road.

Mr. Hedden added there are restrictions from the state as what can be done with the funds it provides to the county, and his firm attempted to keep the bridge understated with clean lines so as not to detract from the natural look of the area. He indicated input was received from local residents that fencing is needed on the west side for safety reasons and thought was given to a vertical picket fence. Mr. Hedden stated there may be an opportunity paint or coat the guardrail so as not to have a galvanized look.

Commissioner Jackson asked the applicant to speak to the access off the bridge to the bank and the canoe/kayak deck.

Mr. Hedden responded the guardrail in the southwest quadrant of the bridge is shortened, but will not restrict flow across the street. He noted the guardrail in the southeast quadrant tapers back to the driveway.

Bob Petersen added the trailhead that goes to Legg Park is directly across from the HNC driveway and the guardrail ends before the trailhead. He indicated the canoe/kayak deck will be in the middle of the river's flow when the bridge is widened and completed. Mr. Petersen stated the ICDTR has had a conversation with the Parks Department regarding relocation of the canoe/kayak deck onto the park side of the road for easier parking of vehicles and access to the launch area. He acknowledged the Township will be in charge of that issue as it is not part of this project.

Commissioner Scott-Craig inquired as to the portion of the bridge which will be used in the future as a pathway.

Mr. Petersen answered the ICDTR is building enough of the bridge deck so it will be there to accommodate the pathway in the future.

Mr. Hedden added that portion over the river will be built as part of this project, and will terminate just off of the bridge, so there will not be an actual path leading up to the bridge on either side. He clarified an individual would be able to walk onto the bridge, but there will no linkage to anything else.

Mr. Petersen stated several environmental issues would need to be mitigated to build a pathway on either side of the bridge. While acknowledging it could be incorporated into the project, Township funds are not available to build anything other than the bridge.

Chair Deits believed it is not environmentally possible from a regulatory standpoint to add enough soil to make the slope 1 on 8.

Mr. Petersen responded that while it is always possible, there are limitations as to what can be purchased with the money available for the bridge. He noted the pathway area will have a slope on it that is traversable, but will not be a "true pathway facility."

Chair Deits stated his concern was that an actual hazard may be created, where, for example, children on bicycles attempt to come off the road, hit an upslope and are "pitched" off.

Mr. Hedden noted the area will look similar to what is currently there. He indicated that the last 25 feet outside of the bridge will transition from the flat sidewalk area back to the 1 on 2 slope which will be part of the roadway.

Commissioner Deits asked if the Township would be making a mistake by not placing a large "Do Not Enter" sign to prevent crossing while creating an "attractive nuisance" which residents cannot get to.

Mr. Petersen indicated the pathway will be separated from the road by the guardrail, no different than currently going down the embankment from the road to the river. He stated you cannot traverse this scenario on a bicycle.

Commissioner Deits expressed continued concern with the possibility of skilled bicyclists attempting the terrain.

Mr. Petersen did not believe it was possible.

Based on Mr. Petersen's response, Chair Deits noted concern that the pathway should be open.

Commissioner Scott-Craig spoke to the small compensating cut (.97 to 1) which does not meet the Township's 1:1 ratio and suggested the applicant comply to avoid going before the Zoning Board of Appeals.

Commissioner Scott-Craig spoke to the beauty of some of the existing trees, specifically the oak tree at the southeast corner of the bridge which looks like it must be removed. He questioned if other trees will be impacted.

Mr. Hedden responded there will be some tree removal along the southwest and southeast quadrants.

Commissioner Scott-Craig stated that since the roadway and bridge will be raised to provide better visibility, some driveways will need to be regraded.

Mr. Hedden added that two driveways will be regraded as part of the project.

Commissioner Hildebrandt inquired as to the need for the walkway.

Mr. Hedden clarified the bridge itself will have a three (3) foot shoulder which will transition into little width between the guardrail and the roadway.

Commissioner Hildebrandt believed the fencing on the other side of the walkway will be disruptive of the natural beauty road and inquired if the walkway was really necessary.

Mr. Hedden responded the walkway was included in the Township's non-motorized plan and was requested for inclusion. Relative to the railing, he noted the precipitous drop off requires some type of railing system for safety. Mr. Hedden added the black vertical pickets with four-inch openings will help make the fence disappear into the tree-lined area.

Principal Planner Oranchak explained that the walkway is a paved shoulder, not a sidewalk with curb and gutter.

Mr. Hedden clarified the walkway is behind a railing system, and not part of the road's shoulder.

Principal Planner Oranchak believed her version is what is in the Master Plan for Streets and Highways.

Chair Deits noted the subject pathway is unique, designated as an American Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant nonpaved pathway distinctive from the other pathway specifications in the Township. He added that designation was the result of negotiations with Van Atta Road residents approximately ten (10) years ago.

Mr. Hedden addressed earlier public comment regarding the speed limit for Van Atta Road, stating any pathway used by pedestrians on a road 40 mph or greater requires a separation of vehicular and pedestrian traffic.

Commissioner Hildebrandt noted the current speed limit is 35 miles per hour.

Mr. Petersen clarified the posted speed limit is 45 mph; however, when the bridge was made a single lane, an advisory panel was erected for 35 mph. He indicated once the bridge is replaced, the ICDTR has committed to requesting a review the speeds in the area, acknowledging that speed limits are designated by the Michigan State Police.

Chair Deits added the ICDTR indicated at a prior Township Board meeting that the speed limit signs were erroneously installed.

Commissioner Jackson asked if it was possible that the speed limit would be increased to 45 mph.

Mr. Petersen clarified the legal speed limit set for Van Atta Road is 45 mph.

Managing Director Conklin added the current black and white signs of 35 mph will remain while a speed study is conducted, but the speed limit decision rests with the State Police.

Commissioner Scales inquired who is taking the responsibility of initiating the speed study.

Managing Director Conklin responded the speed study was requested by the Township.

Commissioner Norkin asked if the Township has any authority to impact the speed limit on Van Atta Road by placing a 35 mph speed limit as a condition of approval.

Managing Director Conklin responded there are a few statutes which govern speed limits, with various ways to change them. He added the most "common" method is for the Township, road agency (i.e., ICDTR), and State Police to agree on a speed limit change based on a traffic speed study. Managing Director Conklin noted the Township does have participation in the speed limit decision, but cannot condition approval of the permit on the speed limit. He stated the State Police relies heavily on the speed at or below which 85% of vehicles are traveling. (known as the 85th percentile speed), as well as conditions of the area.

Commissioner Norkin inquired if the bridge replacement would open Van Atta Road to commercial trucks.

Managing Director Conklin responded the bridge is currently posted, but once the bridge is completed, the posting will be removed and legal loads would be able to use the bridge. He believed the Township has some no truck route roads, but was unsure if Van Atta Road is one of those roads.

Commissioner Norkin stated asphalt that the bridge tapers down to is in a wetland that is submerged a good portion of spring. He believed semi trucks traveling Van Atta would cause a great deal of damage to the road.

Managing Director Conklin clarified there are spring weight restrictions on roads where legal loads are reduced by 35%, and trucks would be on dry pavement other than during a storm.

Commissioner Norkin asked if the spring weight restrictions will be posted.

Managing Director Conklin responded in the affirmative.

Commissioner Hildebrandt asked if the Planning Commission had any leeway on restricting trucks given there are three (3) parks connected by this road.

Principal Planner Oranchak responded staff will look at how the Township has restricted trucks on other roads.

Commissioner Goodale asked if there was a concern for potential flooding for residents downriver, given the fact the bridge would be lengthened from 56 to 92 feet.

Mr. Hedden responded that when the hydraulic analysis is reviewed for a new bridge crossing, the primary requirement is that you do not raise backwater flood elevations. He did not believe the area downstream was studied as part of the consideration. Mr. Hedden noted the amount of water this structure passes is greater than what currently exists and is "somewhat" required as part of the permitting process, adding the bridge being replaced does not necessarily control the floodwaters downstream.

Managing Director Conklin asked the engineer if the design flow showed overtopping during the design event and part through the bridge.

Mr. Hedden responded that will no longer be the case. He indicated once the replacement bridge is built, passing more floodwater through the structure, the elevation would be sufficiently lower so overtopping would not occur.

Managing Director Conklin concluded the overall flood routing through the bridge will not change.

Mr. Hedden added the localized view looks at 800 feet upstream and 400 feet downstream.

Chair Deits indicated he lives just downstream of the bridge and in high water conditions, the river leaves a channel just south of the bridge and floods the entire valley from bank to bank, creating a large reservoir with great capacity to accept flood water just south of the bridge.

Commissioner Jackson inquired if the Township will receive notification when the speed study for Van Atta Road is undertaken.

Managing Director Conklin answered that according to law, the Township participates in the decision.

Commissioner Scales added the Township also has redress to the Court of Appeals regarding the speed limit decision.

Chair Deits expressed concern with visualization of the pedestrian access once the bridge is completed.

Managing Director Conklin reviewed the approach cross sections, noting there is a three (3) foot shoulder in the approach sections and bridge deck in which a pedestrian could walk or ride a bicycle.

Chair Deits continued to express concern with a three (3) foot shoulder on a 45 mph road through a park frequented by children.

Managing Director Conklin inquired if semi trucks used the road before the bridge was reduced to one (1) lane.

Chair Deits responded in the affirmative. He also expressed concern with pedestrians walking the bridge on the southwest side who step over the guardrail and walk on the other side.

Managing Director Conklin responded that somewhere across the HNC driveway, the guardrail on the southwest quadrant stops. He indicated pedestrians who travel northbound on the westerly side and choose to go behind the guardrail will walk on a slope until such time as the Township constructs a pathway. Managing Director Conklin noted the funding and requirements for a bridge design state the bridge deck must have travel lanes and road shoulders which lead up to the bridge, adding it is not within ICDTR funding, scope or mission to provide any non-motorized improvements. He added the Township is participating in a proportionate cost of the deck area for non-motorized improvement as it is one of the most expensive elements of a future non-motorized facility.

Chair Deits thought it ironic this bridge replacement makes it increasingly urgent for the Township to pay close attention to this area.

Managing Director Conklin noted any non-motorized pathway “plugged” into the bridge from either direction will further impact wetland and floodplain.

Commissioner Cordill inquired as to the height of the traffic barrier which will separate motor vehicle traffic from sidewalk users.

Mr. Hedden answered the concrete barrier is two (2) feet tall with two (2) steel tubes on top for a total height of 42”. He noted the barrier can sustain a vehicular impact and redirect the vehicle without collapsing. Mr. Hedden indicated the west side of the path would accommodate the decorative railing mentioned earlier, which is designed for pedestrian load only.

Chair Deits pointed out the nine (9) foot wide section will not be accessible to pedestrian traffic until the Township builds a pathway.

Commissioner Cordill asked the applicant if the space was being reserved.

Mr. Hedden replied it will be open, as there will not be any barriers constructed to prohibit access. He indicated there will be some slope grading to limit the amount of earth impact to the west side.

Commissioner Hildebrandt suggested the applicant provide an architectural drawing to better enable Commissioners to visualize the area.

Commissioner Hildebrandt asked if the nine (9) extra feet is along the bridge over the river, making that section 50 feet in width rather than 41 feet in width.

Managing Director Conklin explained Mr. Hedden was using a drawing on the overhead projector to shade in the walkway area of the deck and two triangles approximately 50 feet where the flatted grade area narrows down to meet the existing shoulder behind the guardrail.

Chair Deits asked if the area has a fairly steep slope, would it require plantings.

Mr. Hedden responded the area would be seeded with grass.

Commissioner Norkin inquired if, in the interim, consideration could be given to installing some type of barrier (i.e., an orange cable) to alert drivers to the fact the three (3) foot shoulder could contain pedestrians.

Managing Director Conklin suggested the Township consider pursuing sharrow marking programs as part of its discussion regarding non-motorized travel. He added this location would be one place to utilize these pavement markings. Managing Director Conklin stated funding constraints at the ICDTR prevent implementing this program for the Township.

Commissioner Norkin inquired if the ICDTR would consider a "rail."

Mr. Hedden explained the three (3) foot shoulder is required for safety of the vehicular drivers as well, and a barrier on top of the roadway compromises driver safety. He lent his support for the pavement markings, as they do not impede drivers while alerting them to the possible presence of pedestrians.

Commissioner Norkin asked if consideration could be given to utilizing yellow flashing/hazard lights to raise driver awareness of pedestrians, given its proximity to the parks.

Managing Director Conklin responded the county could look into its applicability for a nature trail crossing and report back to the Board.

Mr. Hedden noted no "official" trail crossing currently exists from the HNC to the park across the road, but the Township could work with the county to install one in the future.

Chair Deits asked if the county or state required the piece of shaded pathway to be accessible or could a barrier be installed across the north and south ends.

Managing Director Conklin responded he did not believe it needed to be accessible, but "fencing it off" would be uninviting.

Chair Deits summarized Planning Commission viewpoints on this project, expressing continued concern with the bicycle trail to “nowhere.” He noted his inclination is to condition the special use permit on the access being blocked until such time as safety at both ends can be achieved. Chair Deits believed some type of designation at the crossing was extremely important as the road could have a faster speed limit. He expressed appreciation of efforts by the county to use different fencing and coating on the guardrail as a gesture of respect for this natural beauty road. He requested ample notification to the Township when the traffic speed study is conducted.

Commission Norkin requested the Township convey its desire for a heavy truck restriction and lower speed limit on Van Atta Road when the three governmental agencies conduct the traffic speed study.

Commissioner Scales spoke in support of the plan before the Planning Commission for repair of the bridge, while acknowledging concern for the safety of the children.

Chair Deits closed the public hearings at 8:30 P.M.

7. Unfinished Business (None)

8. Other Business

A. Township Board’s Revised Goals and Objectives

Principal Planner Oranchak summarized the 2005 Master Plan Goals and Objectives as outlined in staff memorandum dated August 24, 2012.

Planning Commission discussion:

- Goal 7: Eight (8) strategies to implement sustainable energy and environmental practices is more specific than Board recommended energy conservation
- Draft strategies by the Chair to be reviewed by Commissioners and discussed at the next meeting
- Redi-Ride could be impacted by preference for hybrid vehicles
- Vehicles under contract to the Township will be, by a date specific, low energy and low emission use vehicles
- Review of possible grants for sun collectors which would allow the Township to heat water and operate streetlights
- Caution in overreaching the Planning Commission’s authority when making policy

9. Township Board, Planning Commission officer, committee chair, and staff comment or reports

Commissioner Jackson addressed the feasibility of an online Planning Commission packet.

Chair Deits reported his attendance at the DDA walkability audit where Dan Burden encouraged the Township to place a roll over roundabout at the corner of Okemos and Hamilton Roads. He added Mr. Burden noted Okemos Road would better facilitate traffic if placed on a road diet. Chair Deits indicated Mr. Burden’s slide presentation is available in its entirety on homtv.net.

Commissioner Goodale announced he has joined the Law Division of the Michigan Association of Planning and the Mid-Michigan Program for Greater Sustainability. He indicated his attendance at the DDA walkability audit where Mr. Burden affirmed the Planning Commission’s recommendation to have the urban service boundary more closely parallel the core area of the Township.

Commissioner Cordill added Mr. Burden indicated during his presentation that since the Okemos/Hamilton Road intersection is quite a distance from the highway interchange, there is sufficient opportunity for the traffic to spread.

Commissioner Norkin inquired if it was the Planning Commission's intent to have representation at the Township Board meeting where Douglas J's MUPUD will be considered.

Chair Deits responded historically the Planning Commission does not attend such meetings, but uses staff reports and documentation from its meetings to embody thoughts/actions on issues. He noted the Board can ask for Planning Commission representation if members have any questions or concerns.

Principal Planner Oranchak added Planning Commission representation before the Township Board is usually reserved for appeals and special projects.

Commissioner Norkin asked if there was a date specific when the Board will have the urban services boundary on its agenda.

Principal Planner Oranchak answered she did not have a date certain.

Commissioner Scales urged fellow Commissioners to thoroughly read the legal opinion provided to them prior to entertaining representation at the Board meeting on this issue.

Commissioner Jackson requested the minutes of the August 9, 2012 Township Board meeting regarding the Master Plan Goals and Objectives be provided to Planning Commissioners at the next meeting.

10. New applications (None)

11. Site plans received (None)

12. Site plans approved (None)

13. Public remarks

Chair Deits opened and closed public remarks.

14. Adjournment

Chair Deits adjourned the regular meeting at 8:52 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,

Sandra K. Otto
Recording Secretary