

BLUE ASH CITY COUNCIL

December 29, 2010 – Work Session

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A Work Session of the Council of the City of Blue Ash, Ohio, was held on Wednesday, December 29, 2010. Mayor Mark F. Weber called the meeting to order in the Blue Ash Conference Room at approximately 6:00PM. *(Note: This special meeting was called by the Mayor, with notice of the meeting being hand delivered to Council members on December 20, 2010. Notice of the meeting, including the agenda, was also posted to the City's website on December 20 (to both the "calendar of events," "city meetings category," as well as the "Municipal Bulletin" sections of BlueAsh.com.)*

OPENING CEREMONIES

Mayor Weber led those assembled in the Pledge of Allegiance.

ROLL CALL

MEMBERS PRESENT: Councilman Tom Adamec, Councilman Rick Bryan, Councilman Robert Buckman, Vice Mayor Lee Czerwonka, Councilwoman Stephanie Stoller, Councilman James Sumner, and Mayor Mark Weber

ALSO PRESENT: City Manager David Waltz, Deputy Clerk of Council Sue Bennett, Treasurer/Administrative Services Director James Pfeffer, Parks & Recreation Director Chuck Funk, Public Works Director Mike Duncan, Recreation/Sports Superintendent Kathy Swensen, Recreation Supervisor/Special Events Coordinator Barb Griffin, and Assistant to the City Manager Kelly Osler


Mayor Weber noted the City Manager's desire to add a short Executive Session to tonight's agenda, with the subject being property acquisition. Councilwoman Stoller moved, Councilman Adamec seconded to amend the agenda to include this item. A voice vote was taken. All members voted yes. Motion carried.

WORK SESSION – Further discussion regarding the multi-functional Golf Course Clubhouse/Banquet Center

City Manager David Waltz commented that the plan for tonight's presentation is to discuss the topic of the City's new golf course clubhouse/banquet center facility in two portions: (1) the recommended structure under which the City's new banquet facility will be operated (including analysis of how the recommendation came about, after assessment of similar organizations and advice from industry professionals); and (2) the staff's recommendation for a specific vendor and how that recommendation evolved.

Recreation/Sports Superintendent Kathy Swensen and Recreation Supervisor/Special Events Coordinator Barb Griffin coordinated a PowerPoint presentation, with highlights of that presentation and related discussion summarized below.





Meeting Agenda

- Goals of the Facility
- Principle Models of Banquet Facilities
- Banquet Facilities in the Cincinnati Area
- Recommendation
- Discussion

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Mrs. Griffin summarized the intended agenda for today’s meeting, as described in the above slide.



Banquet Facility Goals

- Desired destination for every imaginable social and business event
- Create “WOW” factor
- Complement the golf course
- Opportunity for additional revenue producing events
- Projected Annual Budget
 - Expenses: \$400,000
 - Revenue: \$450,000

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Mrs. Griffin noted that the above slide represents the banquet facility goals as was presented to Council approximately five years ago (in 2005). The desire with this new facility is to create a “WOW” factor by offering a unique customer experience in a venue that complements the existing, award-winning Blue Ash Golf Course. She noted the goal for a new facility to offer a venue for additional revenue producing events that were not accessible with the previous clubhouse facility. Mrs. Griffin reminded Council also that a marketing feasibility study was completed several years ago, and was updated since, and that this study estimated the projected annual budget could be a generation of approximately \$450,000 in revenues and \$400,000 in expenses annually.



Principle Models of Banquet Facilities

- Rental Hall
- Branded Banquet Facility

Based on information we learned from professionals in the Hospitality & Catering Industry

Cincinnati Catering
DoubleTree Guest Suites
Elegant Fare
Global Spectrum
Hamilton County Park District
Vonderhaar Catering

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Mrs. Griffin noted that the analysis process completed over the past several months allowed team members to learn much from professionals in the hospitality industry. The overall operating structure/operation of a new facility could be categorized as one of two principles – either as a “rental hall”, or a “branded banquet facility.” Area leaders in the industry who the team spoke to included Cincinnati Catering, DoubleTree Guest Suites, Elegant Fare, Global Spectrum, Hamilton County Park District, and Vonderhaar Catering. (It was noted later in the meeting that Chef’s Choice, the catering arm of Kroger, was also approached in this process; however, they declined to submit an RFP as they would not be able to comply with specifics regarding staffing.)



Rental Hall

- Multiple Caterers (Open Food Selections)
- Multiple Steps for the Customer
- Potential Loss of Revenue Opportunities
- Rentable Space

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Mrs. Griffin explained that in first considering a potential rental hall concept for the new facility, the nature of this concept would include the opportunity for multiple caterers to service the facility, offering open food selections. This concept would simply offer to a customer a rentable space – similar to what the Recreation now offers at its newly-renovated facility. Other nearby facilities, such as the Blue Ash Civic League, VFW halls, etc., also offer this type of product. She noted that a major “down side” of this type of structure is that the customer would be required to go through multiple steps in order to complete their plans for an event. For example, they would have to pick a caterer (after scheduling and participating in food tastings, etc.), and would also have to determine other event planning factors, such as the type of linens desired, do they want chair coverings, table decorations, music, etc. She explained that typically in a rental hall facility, every service is “ala carte” (involving multiple vendors), as compared to a branded facility where services can be packaged in

addition to the base service. A branded facility would offer all such services to the customer – a form of “one-stop” shopping – which many patrons would find very desirable. She noted that a loss of revenue opportunity could be experienced if the customer, and not the City, would perform some steps required in the rental hall concept (this loss of revenue was estimated to be approximately 20-30%). Mrs. Griffin noted that the team learned that there are not many existing upscale facilities in this area that simply offered only rentable space, but what was found included museums, art centers, and clubs that rented space as a secondary source of income (i.e., it was not their primary business).

In addressing a question from Councilman Sumner, Mrs. Griffin and Mrs. Swensen explained that the team learned that having an all-inclusive opportunity structure can be very appealing to potential customers. Mrs. Swensen explained that even with the Recreation Department’s existing “rental hall” type space, including with the lower level rooms at the Center, multiple park shelters available, etc., City staff performs many of the coordination steps necessary for the events utilizing these facilities (at no additional charge from the City). For example, coordinating a meeting with a potential caterer in the park to look at the park shelter being utilized is now done by paid City staff (with no additional charge received from the renter). Being an all-inclusive facility would allow the City to consider the performance of such services by City staff when determining the overall fee structure.



Mrs. Swensen summarized some of the benefits of utilizing a branded facility model:

- There would be menu choices that are exclusive to the venue.
- Being in control of more “steps” in the process assures consistency in all levels of product service. The City would have more ability to control who comes in to the facility to service a particular event. She explained that anyone, including event guests, coming to this facility will associate their experience (either positive or negative) with the facility itself and with the City of Blue Ash. Having more control of those multiple steps provides more opportunity to assure participants (including guests) have that positive “Blue Ash” experience.
- As discussed previously, being an all-inclusive, branded, facility would offer additional revenue opportunities for the City.
- In this region, the team learned that a branded facility model is the most common practice in the industry.



Golf/Banquet Facilities in the Cincinnati Area

Name	Branded Facility	Rental Hall
Hamilton County Park District Banquet Facilities -seats 150	✓	
Pebble Creek Golf & Event Center- seats 300	✓	
Windows on the Green (GEEAA)- seats 200	✓	
Courseview Pavilion (Kings Island) - seats 300	✓	
Oasis Conference Center – seats 50 to 2000	✓	
Legendary Run- seats 200	✓	
The Phalen Center @ Fairfield Golf Course- seats 130		✓

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Mrs. Griffin noted that the slides above and below show some of the Greater Cincinnati area banquet facilities the team looked at closely in their analysis.



Banquet Facilities in the Cincinnati Area

Name	Branded Facility	Rental Hall
The Manor House- seats 750	✓	
Savannah Center- seats 1200	✓	
Cincinnati Club- seats 300	✓	
Krippendorf Lodge seats 250	✓	
The Phoenix- seats 360	✓	
Receptions- seats 350	✓	
Drees Pavilion- seats 300		✓
Ronald Reagan Lodge (VOA)- seats 200		✓

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Mrs. Griffin noted that included in the team’s definition of a branded facility is the fact that menu choices exclusive to that venue are offered, with food either prepared in-house or prepared by a commissary and brought in by a selected caterer. (The new Blue Ash facility will not have the space in which food can be prepared in house.) As shown in the slide above, she noted that most in this area were categorized under the branded facility model, with very few operations in the area based upon a rental hall model (allowing multiple caterers). The Drees Pavilion was categorized by the team as a rental hall because it allows three caterers. She noted that the director of that facility explained problems experienced with coordination issues by allowing multiple caterers, especially when multiple caterers are on site for multiple events at the same time. Because of those issues, they now allow only one caterer on-site at a time. This means that a second renter in a day would not have a choice of caterers as he/she would be required to pick the one already chosen (by another customer) to be on site. She noted that the Ronald Reagan Lodge (located at the Voice of America park in Mason), also classified as a rental hall model, has a list of 12 different caterers. After talking with the director of that facility, the team learned that many difficulties do exist when trying to enforce guidelines and policies with 12 different companies/caterers.

Mr. Waltz explained that if a branded facility model were chosen for the new Blue Ash facility, a customer selecting our facility won’t necessarily know that they do not have a choice in vendors/caterers. The customer would be presented with menu choices.

In addressing a question from Council, Mrs. Griffin noted that the first three facilities noted in the slide above have a full-service kitchen, the Krippendorf Lodge (at the Cincinnati Nature Center) has a partial kitchen, and the Phoenix and Receptions have full-service kitchens. Mrs. Griffin also noted some potential problems with multiple caterers utilizing our facility, such as a caterer potentially abusing the facility, or leaving it unkempt after an event. The team believes that those multiple caterers might not care as much about the facility since they might not have that “sense of ownership.”



Comparison

Branded Facility	Rental Hall
Menu Exclusive to Venue (consistency)	Multiple Caterers (potential inconsistency)
All Inclusive for Customer	Multiple Steps for Customer
Additional Revenue Opportunities	Potential Loss of Revenue Opportunities
Most Common Practice in the Industry	Rentable Space

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Mrs. Griffin summarized the general principles discussed associated with the two models, including:

- A branded facility has an exclusive menu (offering consistency), whereas a rental hall would offer opportunity for multiple caterers (which could result in inconsistency)
- A branded facility offers “one-stop,” all inclusive services for a customer, whereas a rental hall would result in multiple steps and more work required of the customer.
- The branded facility could result in additional revenue opportunities with the all-inclusive concept, whereas there could be a potential loss of revenue opportunities with the rental hall model.
- The branded facility concept represented the most common practice in the industry, whereas the rental hall model simply offered rental space for a customer.



Recommendation: Branded Facility

- Blue Ash Experience
- Menu Created Exclusively for Venue
- Flexibility to offer Multiple Levels of Food Pricing
- All Inclusive for the Client
- More Revenue Driven Model
- Most Common Practice in the Industry

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Mrs. Swensen noted that the team does recommend that the City utilize the branded facility model with its new facility. She noted the major benefits of this model, including:

- There would be more control by the City to assure customers and visitors have a positive Blue Ash experience. Anyone visiting the facility will associate their experience with the City of Blue Ash, regardless of the management structure.
- There is benefit/value to a customer in offering a process that would make it as easy as possible.
- Even though the City would be working with a single caterer, there would still be choices and options available for a customer in terms of menus and pricing.
- A branded facility model matches better with the City's goals for this facility to be revenue driven.
- Sample "Cooper Creek Event Center" menus were distributed.

Mr. Waltz noted that having all-inclusive services would be more attractive to corporate clients as well since the City will be able to assist and make their event-booking responsibilities easier. He noted that at the same time, the City will be able to charge a premium for those additional services, which they estimate could be as much as 20% to 30%.

In addressing questions from Councilmen Czerwonka and Mayor Weber, Mr. Funk noted that the City would receive 100% of the revenues associated with alcohol sales and that such a provision would be clarified in the final agreement with the vendor.



Mr. Waltz commented that previous discussion represents why the team has recommended that the new Blue Ash facility be based upon the branded facility model (vs. rental hall), and asked Council's thoughts, with some discussion following. Councilman Bryan commented that he agrees the new facility should be a branded one, and noted his opinion that to operate it under the rental hall model would be wasteful. He explained that his profession often requires booking of facilities for fund-raising events, and explained an example and his experiences associated with their use of the Fleischmann Estate (located in Indian Hill). Councilman Bryan noted his belief that too many caterers will result in a loss of the branded experience. He noted his opinion that a branded facility should have a caterer's name that is virtually invisible to assure the experience is tied to Blue Ash.

Mr. Waltz explained that the City currently utilizes "contracted employees" elsewhere in its operations, including, for example, with National Inspection Corporation (NIC) who performs building inspections and other services on behalf of the City, fitness instructors who teach the classes at the Recreation Center, and others. He noted that the City pays those contractors (chosen by the City) while at the same time work in a partnership with them.

Mayor Weber expressed his belief that in many instances having more choices available to customers may offer a more attractive option, as compared to limiting those choices as is being suggested. Mr. Waltz noted that having someone else, other than the City, decide

certain factors can cause some nuances (as the team learned in their analysis and which will be discussed later). He noted that overall the team believes the City's ability to control the process would be more advantageous.

In addressing a question from Councilman Sumner, Mr. Funk noted that a major goal for any contractual arrangement associated with the branded facility concept would be to bring more expertise available to the City. He noted too that the planning team was surprised with its final recommendation. He added that after the analysis of area vendors able to provide desired services for the City in a branded facility, the recommended vendor is Catering Adventures, an affiliate of Vonderhaar's.



The slide features a blue header with the City of Blue Ash logo and the slogan "INSPIRE. ACHIEVE. ADVANCE." Below the header is a decorative graphic on the left consisting of a blue vertical bar with a stylized white and green mountain-like shape on top. The main content area is white with a blue title "Moving Forward".

Moving Forward

- Partner with a reputable, quality caterer that has existing clients and knowledge of the market
 - Allows flexibility for first 18 months of operation to determine if this is the best practice for Blue Ash
 - Allows support staff to learn the operation of the new facility

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The slide features a blue header with the City of Blue Ash logo and the slogan "INSPIRE. ACHIEVE. ADVANCE." Below the header is a decorative graphic on the left consisting of a blue vertical bar with a stylized white and green mountain-like shape on top. The main content area is white with a blue title "Recommendation".

Recommendation

- Catering Adventures Hospitality Group
 - Quality Experienced Team
 - Outstanding Client List
 - Quality Service & References
 - Best Option to Meet Revenue Goals
 - Best Option to get the Facility Established in the Market Place

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Mrs. Swensen noted that the team is recommending a short-term (18-month) contractual arrangement with Catering Adventures Hospitality Group, noting that the City may learn that a change may be needed. This period would provide Blue Ash staff time to learn more about the operation of the new facility, and she noted the importance of "jump starting" the process by selecting someone knowledgeable in this area and someone who has an existing position and positive reputation in the Greater Cincinnati area. This company would be able to bring in its already-existing leads and clientele to utilize our facility, making the City's revenue goals attainable.

In addressing questions from Council, it was explained that any contract with the vendor would be very specific and detailed, and can contain any provisions desired by the City. Such specifics have not yet been finalized as the team needs, and is seeking at this time, Council's approval of the overall branded facility model recommendation.



Catering Adventures Hospitality Group



In addition to the contracted manager

Team

- Owner of the Company
- Sales/Marketing- 3
- Chefs- 3
- Chef's Assistants- 2
- Banquet Captains- 6

Event Totals (2010)

- 2500 Corporate Events
- 1580 Social Events
- 270 Weddings

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In addressing questions from Council, Mr. Funk explained that Catering Adventures would hire a banquet center manager for our facility who would be directly associated with (and be a “face” for) our facility. In addition, City staff (including Mrs. Swensen and Mrs. Griffin) would oversee the work of Catering Adventures, and the City would be involved with the selection process of this banquet center manager, assuring that the person selected would have the same qualifications that the City would be looking for if it was solely involved in the process. Mrs. Swensen added that the City would have additional City (part-time) staff associated with the facility as well.

Mr. Funk noted that early in the team’s process, the team talked with Global Spectrum (who manages the Duke-Energy Center and other major well-known area facilities), and they suggested to the City that the facility follow the branded facility model and that the City contract with a vendor already established in the area (as opposed to hiring an in-house individual). This recommendation from Global was made since it was their opinion that this strategy would best match the City’s revenue goals for the new facility.

In addressing a comment from Mayor Weber, Mr. Funk clarified that a new banquet manager would still report to Blue Ash (even though hired and paid for by Catering Adventures) – and confirmed that he/she would be comparable to a “leased” employee. That person would provide expertise and would be responsible in assuring that “Wow” factor desired for the facility.

Some discussion was held relating to the selection of a Vonderhaar Catering affiliate. Mayor Weber noted that although it seems clear that Vonderhaar is in the processing of branding a more upscale division of their services (i.e., Catering Adventures), Vonderhaar currently still may have the image in the Greater Cincinnati area of being a not-so-upscale vendor (i.e., more associated with its original inception as a “hot dog and hamburger” type service provider). Mrs. Griffin explained that the team, when beginning this process, had the same perception and was surprised too that after completing its analysis and discussion with experts in the field that they would be making such a recommendation. However, she noted that the team learned of the prominent presence of this vendor in this area. In 2010 alone, they held 2,500 corporate events, 1,580 social events, and 270 weddings. In comparison, Elegant Fare (their major competitor) handled approximately 100 weddings. She noted that the team also learned more about the sales and marketing expertise of Catering Adventures (which the City would have access to), and also the fact that the City would have access to the clients they have already-established relationships with, such as those noted on the next two slides. She explained that the contractual details would still have to be worked out, and that any concerns of Council and the team would be clarified within those details.

Mrs. Swensen reiterated that with the recommended format and structure, everything associated with the event would be tied to the “Cooper Creek Event Center,” – not Vonderhaar Catering. Mr. Waltz added that in addition to the menus (samples of which were

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previously distributed), napkins, linens, staff embroidered shirts, etc. would have the “Cooper Creek” name – not Vonderhaar’s.



Mrs. Griffin noted the prominent clients already utilizing the recommended vendor, including Procter & Gamble (15 years) and Coca-Cola (20 years). She noted that the team learned that overall, this vendor has an average of 13 years of experience with the above-noted corporate clients. She also found it interesting to learn recently that Xavier University (who has an in-house food service company associated with their Cintas Center) chose Vonderhaars instead to do their President’s Luncheon, with that choice being made based upon the existing Vonderhaar/Catering Adventure’s reputation.



Mrs. Griffin noted that in addition to the previously-noted corporate clients, “social” organizations such as those included above have an established relationship with the recommended vendor. She noted additional examples, including Ursuline Academy’s use of Vonderhaar for their Grand Gala, President’s dinner, and class reunions; Seton and Roger Bacon High School’s use of Vonderhaar for various fund-raising events; and the selection of Vonderhaars for catering of many of the area’s social/political events, such as for Congresspersons John Boehner and Jean Schmidt.



Mr. Waltz noted that the team's recommendation to operate the new facility as recommended is not a 100% necessity, as he recognizes the importance for Council involvement in this decision. He too was surprised at first with the team's recommendation to contract with this vendor. However, he noted that after reviewing the analysis and taking into consideration all the factors involved with operation of such a facility, he agrees that this appears the best way to move forward at this time. He reiterated that the recommendation is to enter into a short-term (18-month) agreement – not a permanent arrangement. He learned too the importance and benefits of bringing existing experience into the process at this early stage, and agrees that this type of arrangement would be in the City's best interest in order to start the facility moving in the best direction. He noted that if allowed to proceed, the process would allow the ability to evolve, and if the City finds it is not working, the contractual arrangement will retain the City's ability to make a change. He noted that details, such as the facility's fee structure and many more, have not yet been finalized as the team first needs Council's approval of the overall direction as discussed this evening. He clarified too that one fact learned in the process is that many of the area's finest facilities go through multiple banquet center managers and that turnover is natural in this industry. Mr. Funk added that having a banquet manager who is not a City employee would be easier to change if necessary.

Mrs. Griffin reiterated that the contract can contain any provision the City desires, and noted that Mr. Vonderhaar is very excited about the prospect of this new relationship. She noted that he is familiar with Blue Ash and that doing a "class" job is how Blue Ash operates. Mr. Funk added that Vonderhaar would also feel a certain "ownership" in the facility, providing even more incentive to do an excellent job.

Some additional discussion was had regarding various details associated with this arrangement. Mr. Waltz noted the need yet to establish an appropriate fee structure, and explained that the fees may vary by the event's day of the week and type of function (for example, fees associated with a Saturday evening wedding should be expected to be higher). Mr. Funk added that there will likely be minimum fees. He noted too that the 18-month contractual period would be based upon actual operations (beginning after the Center opens in August or September); however, work with the recommended vendor would begin beforehand, including the important process of selecting a banquet manager.

In addressing a question from Councilwoman Stoller, Mrs. Griffin noted that the recommended vendor is very capable of and familiar with servicing an event requiring kosher food and service.

In discussing the naming of the facility, Mr. Funk noted that the recommended name, "Cooper Creek Event Center," would be used in conjunction with the Blue Ash Golf Course. For example, printed material might include the "Cooper Creek Event Center" wording, along with (likely in smaller font) "at the award-winning Blue Ash Golf Course." In addressing a question to Council from Mr. Waltz regarding the suggested name for the City's new facility, all Council members indicated their support of this name, with no objections expressed.

Councilman Sumner noted his support of following the branded facility model as recommended by the team and suggested that this new facility be structured and marketed so that it competes with facilities such as Marriott and the Savannah Center. He suggested

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that the City work hard to assure that the “Catering Adventures” or “Vonderhaar” names not be visible, and he agreed that such details can be finalized in the contract. Councilman Sumner noted that he also has participated in upscale events serviced by this vendor and noted that he believes their quality has improved.

In addressing additional comments and questions by Council, Mr. Funk confirmed the intent for Cooper Creek Event Center to have its own website, and that much effort must be expended in the marketing of this new facility. The team has already begun working with a company (Shape) on such efforts. It is anticipated that golf outings would still be coordinated by the City’s Golf Pro; however, the coordinators of those outings requiring use of the banquet center facilities will also be working with the new banquet center manager as well. Mr. Waltz noted the importance of not driving away the City’s current, smaller golf outing customers -- those who may not need the services of the full banquet center.

In addressing a question to Council from Mr. Waltz, a “straw” vote of Council members was taken, asking if they are comfortable with the recommendations as presented this evening by the team, including following the branded facility model and selection of Catering Adventures as the vendor. All Councilmembers noted their approval, with Mayor Weber expressing his reservations. Mr. Waltz noted that an ordinance describing the overall structure with this vendor would be presented to Council at the next regular Council meeting (January 13, 2011), and noted that a final contract would not be finalized by that time. He also noted that work will continue with Shape on the facility’s overall marketing efforts. It was noted that it is unclear as to whether or not Council would be required to approve individual fees associated with the facility; however, legal counsel will be sought to address and resolve this issue.

In addressing a question from Vice Mayor Czerwonka, Mr. Waltz and Mr. Funk noted that it is the team’s hope that by the end of January, formal bookings for the new facility would begin.

Councilmen Buckman and Sumner offered their compliments on tonight’s presentation and the hard work expended by the Administration and team in this effort.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

All items on the agenda having been acted upon, Councilman Czerwonka moved, Councilman Bryan seconded to convene an Executive Session to discuss matters pertaining to property acquisition. The Deputy Clerk called the roll. Councilpersons Stoller, Sumner, Buckman, Czerwonka, Adamec, Bryan, and Mayor Weber voted yes. Seven yeases. Motion carried.

After matters pertaining to property acquisition were discussed, Councilman Buckman moved, Councilman Sumner seconded to convene to the regular meeting. A voice vote was taken. All Council members voted yes. Motion carried.

ADJOURNMENT

All items on the agenda having been acted upon, Councilman Sumner moved, Councilman Buckman seconded to adjourn the meeting. A voice vote was taken. All members voted yes. The Council meeting was adjourned at approximately 7:55 PM.

Mark F. Weber, Mayor

MINUTES WRITTEN BY:

Susan K. Bennett, Deputy Clerk of Council