



S.P. Council Hires Firm to Draft Plan

BY MATTHEW MORIARTY: STAFF WRITER

The Southern Pines Town Council voted unanimously Monday to hire a Washington state firm to help craft the town's new comprehensive master plan.

The firm, Studio Cascade, is based in Spokane. The town's long-range steering committee unanimously recommended the firm to the council.

Studio Cascade has done only two master plans previously and has never worked with a town east of the Mississippi River, Council Member Abigail Dowd said. Though she voted in favor of hiring the firm during the council's work session, Dowd criticized the process the town used to come up with Studio Cascade.

"I have some concerns about the process," she said. "I've had problems with the makeup of the committee, the lack of diversity. I'm not real clear on the criteria used to determine the selection."

Mayor Pro Tem

Chris Smithson and Councilman David Woodruff both served on the steering committee.

"We gave everybody a score," Woodruff said. "They had the highest score."

Dowd said that the public had been asking her questions about why the steering committee chose that particular firm, and she has been unable to answer them. However, Dowd said Studio Cascade did impress her.

"I'm not questioning their decision," she said of the committee's recommendation, "I'm questioning the process."

Town Manager Reagan Parsons explained that the steering committee used a point system to narrow the number of possible firms from nine to four. From there, the committee brought in representatives from each of the firms and asked them the same questions. After that, the committee members discussed among themselves whom to pick.

He said several of the firms told him that they had rarely gone through a more thorough process.

There was no scientific formula used, Smithson said, but the committee identified what it considered important and found the firm it thought was best.

"What made them rise to the top?" Dowd asked. "I've had people say to me, 'The group of nine white men choose the only firm with three white guys.'"

When Smithson and Woodruff groaned and began to object, Dowd said, "I'm saying, let's prove to them

that that's not the case. Perception is everything."

Smithson responded, "I believe that Studio Cascade's performance will speak for itself."

One of the early steps in creating a comprehensive master plan will be to form a large committee. The council agreed that it must make sure to create a diverse committee, to keep from dealing with that issue again.

Banner Presented

In other business, the town Appearance Commission presented the council with a finalized design for a banner to hang from light poles in the downtown.

The design is based on the winning entry from a contest the Appearance Commission held earlier this year. It has a muted green, blue and yellow background and a drawing of the depot. Above the depot is the slogan: "Discover the charm of Southern Pines."

"I am really pleased with this," Mayor Mike Haney said.

Dowd said she was against the idea of the banner contest in the first place and remains against it.

"I expressed I wasn't really a big fan of banners," she said.

Smithson suggested that the Historic District Commission look at the design since it will be hanging in the historic district. Woodruff's wife, Blanche, who is a member of the Appearance Commission, said it is wrong for the Historic District Commission to have oversight of the Appearance Commission.

"I don't want to get into a turf battle," Smithson said, "but this is going to be in the historic district."

Park Alcohol Sales Discussed

The council also took a closer look at the possibility of allowing limited alcohol sales at special events for nonprofit organizations in a portion of the Downtown Park. The council remains hesitant.

It would be great for an event such as First Friday, Smithson and Haney agreed, but they questioned who would determine which events are appropriate and which are not.

"We don't want Metal Fest 2009 in downtown," Smithson said.

The town already allows limited alcohol sales during special events in the central business district. It is looking at the possibility of adding the Downtown Park to that. Most of the council members indicated that they are against it.

Smithson and Woodruff said that if the council wants to move ahead on this, it should hold a public hearing.

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