

Minutes of the Gaines Charter Township Planning Commission

Regular Meeting held January 23rd, 2025, at 7 pm

8555 Kalamazoo Ave., SE, Caledonia, MI 49316

MEMBERS PRESENT: Billips, Rober, Thomas, Waayenberg, Wiersema, Giarmo

MEMBERS ABSENT: Haagsma, with notice

STAFF PRESENT: Dan Wells, Community Development Director; Dakota Swan, Assistant Planner

I. CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

Chair Giarmo called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM.

II. CONSIDERATION OF MEETING AGENDA

No changes to the agenda.

III. CONSIDERATION OF MEETING MINUTES

Consideration of the December 19th, 2024, regular Planning Commission meeting minutes.

Motion: Motion by Waayenberg, supported by Rober to approve the minutes of December 19th, 2024, with corrections.

DISCUSSION: None.

AYES: All

NAYS: None

ABSTAIN: None

DECISION: Motion Carried (6-0)

IV. INQUIRY OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

V. PUBLIC COMMENT

None

VI. NEW BUSINESS

1. Items not requiring a Public Hearing

a. 6326, 6330, and 6338 Hanna Lake Avenue – Preliminary PUD – Authentix

Jordan Teichen of Continental Properties explained their request for a preliminary PUD hearing. Continental is a development firm based out of Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, with a legacy of developing retail, hospitality, and multifamily developments; Teichen explained that Continental is largely focusing on multifamily development these days. Continental aims to help relieve the desperate need for housing, and Teichen added that the parcel(s) in question were chosen because multifamily housing is called for in this area, as outlined in the Township's Master Plan. They are requesting a PUD since the current Zoning Ordinance allows for up to 16-unit buildings, and Continental is proposing fifteen 24-unit buildings. The preliminary site plan provided depicts development as occurring on approximately 24 of the 40 total acres, with dedicated open space where they plan to include a disc golf course, a car wash station, a dog wash station, outdoor gathering spaces, and two leash-free pet parks. Wetlands are largely planned to be preserved on the site, with the exception of 0.6 acres which will be impacted to allow for a crossing over the Anderson Drain, which runs through the parcel. Teichen concluded by stating that all Continental properties remain in their ownership and are managed by them rather than outsourcing a property management entity.

Planner Wells then gave the Township's perspective on this request and reiterated that this is a preliminary consideration for the PUD, which is the best time for the Planning Commission to bring up any major concerns with the proposal. Wells added that these parcels are one of the few areas left in the Township zoned for apartments. As far as PUD standards go, Wells stated that this request is consistent with both the Master Plan and Zoning Ordinance, and that staff found this proposal to be compatible with adjacent uses. The subject parcels are surrounded by M-6 to the north and a mobile home park to the south, separated by a steep ravine; there are no single-family homes surrounding the subject property. Staff also found that the provided building elevations illustrate a fairly modern style of buildings with varied facades and plenty of architectural details. As outlined in the Master Plan, a density of 10-12 dwelling units per acre is what would typically be expected and accounted for here, however this proposal includes a density of almost 9 dwelling units per acre. With regard to traffic and mobility, Wells said that there is a good sidewalk network proposed throughout the development and Continental would be encouraged to connect that network to the sidewalks on Hanna Lake Avenue. The Fire Marshall deemed emergency access to be adequate at this point in the process, although further review will be necessary. The proposed parking was also deemed to be adequate by staff at this point; a final count of spaces per unit will be required at the time of Site Plan Review. Wells added that the addition of 360 residential units will certainly increase traffic on Hanna Lake Avenue, and that if the Planning Commission feels like a traffic study will be necessary, now would be a good time to request that.

Wells noted that this site is complicated, environmentally speaking; initial discussions with the Kent County Drain Commission have determined that stabilization will likely be necessary as cattle have inhabited the subject parcel for several years. Re-vegetation will also be likely to be necessary along the channel of the Anderson Drain, and a bridge crossing will be necessary. The existing wetlands near the far east end of the site are planned to remain untouched, and that area is intended to be used as a disc golf course. Wells mentioned that the Township Engineer will be involved in determining how to manage stormwater on the site and the final design of detention basins. The Township Engineer and Fire Department have both given preliminary approval for this project; overall, staff feels as though the standards for preliminary site plan approval are met.

Commissioner Wiersema began discussion by inquiring whether Continental intends to gate the community; Teichen responded that a gate is not part of the plan at this time. Wiersema inquired about

the difference between the Authentix communities and other models that Continental offers, to which Teichen answered that the most critical difference in models is the level of finishes, although the amenities in their communities are largely the same.

Wiersema added that he appreciates the varied setbacks of the proposed buildings and variation amongst structural elements, however, he was disappointed that Continental was proposing their Authentix line here rather than one of their other product lines, namely The Springs. Teichen stated that the market research team at Continental extensively looks at demographics in the area to determine an appropriate price point, and that proposing a Springs model in this location would ultimately require higher rents; Teichen added that he is unsure the demand for a more expensive model is there.

Wiersema inquired further, specifically about the volume of wetlands and open space on the site, to determine if there is any possibility of connecting sidewalks on Hanna Lake Avenue to the Paul Henry Trail, with the potential to make sidewalks wider. Teichen responded that the development team is looking at this, and Continental has an ADA consultant on board to ensure all shared amenities are accessible.

Commissioner Rober stated that she believes the buildings are too big, and she would much prefer to see 16-unit buildings rather than the proposed 24-unit buildings. Furthermore, Rober added that she feels as though the buildings are too plain.

Commissioner Thomas echoed Rober's concerns and inquired about the possibility of utilizing different building materials to introduce more variety in the appearance of buildings. Teichen responded that adding features such as masonry drives up the cost. He added that there are two different building types being proposed that will vary in color, and he reassured the commissioners that the communities don't feel monotonous when driving or walking through them. Thomas added that a mixture of materials would elevate the appearance.

Commissioner Waayenberg agreed and added that a variety of colorways would also enhance the look of the community. He also advocated for 16-unit buildings, and more variation and texture in building orientation; Waayenberg agreed with Commissioner Wiersema that wider walking paths would also be ideal.

Teichen explained that although Continental doesn't have much flexibility to modify the unit counts on the proposed buildings, they will look at varying orientations in an effort to break things up. Waayenberg commented that the hope is that more upscale apartments will ultimately attract young professionals that choose to remain in the Township and transition into owner-occupied homes in the Township over time. He added that he isn't opposed to having a product that is more affordable, and that if there was variation in colorways and buildings were oriented more organically, it could go over better.

Commissioner Wiersema added that including a variety of tree species in the planting plan could be beneficial to breaking up any monotony.

Waayenberg and Rober agreed that the proposed amenities seem to be unique and worthwhile, although Rober was "not sold" on the apartments themselves.

Commissioner Billips inquired about what the rents are expected to be; Teichen responded that studio apartments will be \$1,300, one-bedroom units will be \$1,450, two-bedroom units will be \$1,775, and three-bedroom units will be \$2,050 per month.

Chair Giarmo referenced the 2024 Annual Planning and Zoning Report and stated that almost 500 units of multifamily housing have been approved over the last year, and she feels as though the Township has seen enough of this mode of housing get approved. Giarmo explained that she is not interested in seeing an attainable housing development, and she especially feels as though more upscale apartments are necessary to support and accommodate the influx of residents that will be moving to the Township in lieu of Microsoft's recent investment in the Township. Giarmo stated that she feels as though the Planning Commission needs to hold out for a more upscale development option for this parcel.

Teichen responded that resident experiences are largely the same across the different products Continental offers, as many of the offered amenities are the same, and that the differences primarily lie in interior finishes between the products. Giarmo stated that upscale finishes are what she would be looking for in an apartment-style development in order to attract a different base of residents to the Township. Teichen inquired to clarify what kind of resident the Planning Commission would be hoping to attract to the Township; Giarmo stated that ideally, they would be hoping to attract executives and young professionals as Commissioner Waayenberg had suggested earlier, and furthermore, that they are looking for stainless steel and granite finishes. Teichen stated that primarily, the residents in their Authentix communities would fall into the category of young professionals, and the offered amenities certainly attract that demographic. Chair Giarmo kindly disagreed with Teichen, and referenced her daughter's experience renting in a multifamily community in which there were issues with poor odor-proofing and soundproofing which served as an anecdote for the type of experience the Planning Commission is not looking for; ultimately, the Planning Commission is looking for a developer that can provide a more upscale experience. Chair Giarmo suggested that Continental return for consideration when they can provide a proposal that includes nicer finishes, a more creative layout, and smaller buildings, and added that the Planning Commission would likely be more receptive to considering their request under these conditions.

MOTION:	Motion by Rober, supported by Billips, to postpone the application for Preliminary PUD and Site Plan Review until Continental is ready to return with a revised site plan.
DISCUSSION:	None.
AYES:	ALL
NAYS:	None
ABSTAIN:	None
DECISION:	Motion Carried (6-0)

b. Election of Planning Commission Officers

The Planning Commission must annually elect which commissioners will serve as the Chair, Vice Chair, and Secretary of the Planning Commission for the upcoming calendar year.

MOTION: Motion by Waayeneberg, supported by Billips, for Planning Commission Officer positions to remain the same in 2025 as they were in 2024.

DISCUSSION: None

AYES: ALL

NAYS: None

ABSTAIN: None

DECISION: Motion Carried (6-0)

c. 2024 Annual Planning Report

Section 19(2) of the Michigan Planning Enabling Act (Public Act 33 of 2008) requires the Planning Commission to make an annual written report to the Township Board offering an overview of the Planning Commission's operation throughout the year. Planner Wells explained that staff has made a revision to how housing data is categorized in the report, and that the data provided displays the Townships reaction to the demand for housing in Kent County. Wells added that it appears as though the Township is doing a good job of providing a variety of housing options, and although a plethora of apartments were approved in 2024, the surge in apartment approvals is coming to a halt, as the few parcels available to sustain that mode of development are coming into fruition. The 2024 Annual Report offered an overview of projects reviewed by the Planning Commission in 2024, alongside information on Code Enforcement activity, rezoning requests, and ZBA hearings in 2024.

The Annual Report also highlights long range planning objectives and gives a brief description of the work done throughout the year to push the Township closer to achieving them. Notably, staff is looking for opportunities to connect and improve the non-motorized trail network in the Township for pedestrians and cyclists alike. Wells encouraged the Planning Commission to relay any "big picture" objectives they'd like to accomplish over the next few years to Planning Department staff and added that the Planning Commission has the opportunity to attend webinars with staff to further education. The Parks & Trails Committee also has a dedicated section in the report, in which objectives and goals are outlined. Wells added that staff, in conjunction with the Parks & Trails Committee, is looking for opportunities to acquire recreational land in the Township.

MOTION: Motion by Waayenberg, supported by Rober, to approve the 2024 Annual Planning and Zoning Report and make a positive recommendation to the Township Board.

DISCUSSION: Commissioner Billips added that she will not be present for the April Planning Commission meeting.

AYES: ALL

NAYS: None

ABSTAIN: None

DECISION: Motion Carried (6-0)

2. Public Hearings

a. Zoning Ordinance Update

David Jirousek of Horizon Community Planning serves as the Township's Planning Consultant and has contributed significantly to the large-scale update of the Zoning Ordinance that has been underway over the last two years. The project was brought on by a need for maintaining consistency between the Zoning Ordinance and the Master Plan, which was updated in 2023. Jirousek began by explaining that the overhaul process began with an audit, where a Zoning Ordinance Update Subcommittee identified issues and inconsistencies with the current Zoning Ordinance to serve as a basis for what needed to be improved in the rewrite. Jirousek stated that when the Planning Commission is comfortable with the proposed updated ordinance, the Planning Commission will make a recommendation to the Township Board, who will have two reads of the ordinance before approving and adopting it. Jirousek explained that the biggest objective with the update to the Zoning Ordinance was to ensure that the document was user friendly and consistent with the guidance offered in the Master Plan.

Part I of the updated ordinance serves as the legal basis for the document, outlining Terms of Use and applicability. Part II, Jirousek described as "the heart and soul" of the Zoning Ordinance, which contains both dimensional and land use requirements for all zoning districts. Part III includes the specifics of how land is to be developed and what those regulations look like; for example, lighting and building requirements would be found in Part III. Part IV outlines application types and submittal requirements, and Part V offers information on administrative duties and nonconformities, among other odds and ends.

One of the biggest changes in the updated Zoning Ordinance is the introduction of two new combined zoning districts: Suburban Residential (SR) and Rural Residential (RR). The SR district is a combination of the two current low-density residential districts, RL-10 and RL-14. The major difference between these two districts is the lot size requirement, which are 10,000 and 14,000 square feet, respectively. The SR district combines both together with a minimum lot size requirement of 12,000 square feet. Similarly, the RR district is a combination of the two existing rural zoning districts, A-R and A-B. Functionally, they are almost identical with the exception of a few dimensional requirements; for efficiencies sake, the two districts have been combined to form the RR zoning district in the new ordinance.

Jirousek also highlighted the addition of another new zoning district, Village Residential. This zoning district aims to bring goals from the 2023 Master Plan into fruition by providing a regulatory basis for traditional neighborhood design and encouraging a variety of housing options, such as two-family and multi-unit townhomes. Furthermore, the VR zoning district may also be used as a buffer between the SR zoning district and either commercial or high-density residential zoning districts.

Planner Wells went over the major issues yet to be reviewed and deliberated in the new ordinance; he encouraged the Planning Commission to consider Chapter 22, Private Streets and Driveways, as the Township must determine their position on road maintenance and management. Wells added that the section in Chapter 18 regarding Accessory Dwelling Units will likely need further consideration and deliberation as well. Currently, attached Accessory Dwelling Units are permitted only with the issuance of a Special Use Permit. Wells encouraged the Planning Commissioners to focus on reviewing sections of the Zoning Ordinance draft that they are interested in, and to bring their comments to the next discussion regarding the update.

Chair Giarmo opened the Public Hearing and subsequently closed it as no one approached the podium to speak.

Chair Giarmo requested one more month to go over some items in the draft ordinance, as it is a large document. She suggested that fellow Commissioners come to next month's meeting prepared for good discussion of what they like about the draft, and what they would like to see revised.

Commissioner Wiersema suggested that some revisions need to be made within Chapter 35: Definitions, and added that certain cross-references, especially to sources outside of the ordinance itself, should also be reviewed. Wiersema added that he appreciates the simplification offered by the new draft; he found the tables outlining permitted uses by zoning district in Chapter 15 to be quick and easy to use and added that this draft is a much better ordinance than what the Township currently has.

Chair Giarmo stated that she is interested in further reviewing Chapter 22, and regulations pertaining to mineral extraction more closely. Planner Wells responded that permitting at the State level covers most of what the Township regulates with regard to mineral removal; the Township has a reliable set of conditions from previous mineral extraction initiatives in the Township, and the Planning Commission has the ability to apply those conditions to future ventures. Wells added that this use is outlined in Chapter 14, Planned Unit Developments, where mineral removal is listed as a specific use.

Planner Wells stated that he finds the current regulations pertinent to private streets and driveways to be cumbersome and added that the current roads ordinance gets the Township into some difficult decisions. The Township Attorney suggested to Planner Wells that the Township should either allow private roadways without waivers, or the Township should require a private road to be built to code after accessing a certain number of parcels; Wells added that the latter is more straightforward. The question at staff level, Wells explained, is should more parcels be permitted to be added to a nonconforming road? Furthermore, if there are existing undeveloped parcels on a private drive, should the Township allow building permits to be issued without roadway upgrades? Wells stated that there are essentially two options, either the Township prohibits additional lots from being added until the roadway is updated, or the Township prohibits additional lots from being added entirely; navigating the delicate balance between the common good and individual homeowner rights is exemplified through decisions as such. Wells added that the Township Attorney stated that these regulations are highly important, however, if they are inadequate, they will inevitably make a bad problem even worse. Although the Township has several examples of private roads serving more than 4 parcels that are well

done, others are seriously inadequate; Wells stated that this has been increasingly difficult for staff to manage and would prefer a simple determination of whether parcels would be permitted to be added or not, or a private road would be required. Ultimately, the landowner desiring to create more parcels would be required to build the road and purchase the necessary easements, which would limit the number of these projects.

Commissioner Waayenberg inquired about whether there is a way to implement a hybrid solution, where if the number of parcels exceeds a certain threshold, the road would be required to be upgraded to Kent County Road Commission standards. Planner Wells explained that previously, up to two additional lots on a nonconforming road were permitted so long as there was a road maintenance agreement. The issue with this approach is that the first landowner to request additional splits would essentially limit other landowners' abilities to split off their parcels, essentially creating a race to sell and split before the roadway is required to be improved.

Chair Giarmo inquired about sending the proposed roadway regulations to the Kent County Road Commission and propose the updated ordinance to the Township Board after the Road Commission's review. Wells suggested that during the next discussion on the Zoning Ordinance, two options for roadway maintenance and management should be made available of the Planning Commissions review so Commissioners can compare the two options side by side. Commissioner Waayenberg inquired about whether there are any regulations in the new ordinance that deal with community septic systems; Planner Wells responded that if an area is found do be well suited for a community septic system by the Kent County Health Department, that will ultimately determine the number of homes that are able to be incorporated into the system, and consolidation of the community into a smaller area may be an option depending on what the land is able to handle. Jirousek added that himself and Planner Wells reached out to the Township Attorney with a specific question on this matter, and they are awaiting an answer.

Planner Wells concluded by stating that the draft ordinance has been through legal review already, and the Township Attorney's comments have been integrated into the document.

MOTION:	Motion by Waayenberg, supported by Thomas, to postpone consideration of the Zoning Ordinance update until the next meeting.
DISCUSSION:	None.
AYES:	ALL
NAYS:	None
ABSTAIN:	None
DECISION:	Motion Carried (6-0)

3. Site Plan Review

- a. None

VII. GENERAL DISCUSSION

1. Leighton Township Master Plan Update

Leighton Township updated their Master Plan and sent a piece of mail addressed to the Planning Commission to inform them of its adoption. Staff reviewed the updates and determined that there is consistency between the Township's objectives and Leighton Townships land use goals for parcels bordering the southern terminus of Gaines Charter.

VIII. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 9:26 PM.

CERTIFICATION:

I hereby certify that the above is a true copy of the minutes from the January 23rd, 2025, Planning Commission Meeting of the Gaines Charter Township Planning Commission held at the time and place mentioned above pursuant to the required statutory procedures.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lani Thomas". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Lani Thomas,

Secretary

Gaines Charter Township Planning Commission

Date: February 27, 2025