

Highland Park Neighborhood Association

April 2022 Minutes

Meeting Date: April 12, 2022

Vice President Mark Ritter called the April 2022 meeting of the Highland Park Neighborhood Association (being held via Zoom) to order at 6:05 pm, adding that President Elizabeth Sanfelippo was attending a conference and that he would be leading the meeting tonight. He introduced himself as Vice President and Judy Jones as Secretary. He thanked Stephen Foster, past president of the Five Points South Neighborhood for continuing to set up the neighborhood meetings on Zoom.

Ritter asked if residents had received the March 2022 meeting minutes and whether there were any changes or corrections needed. No changes or corrections were noted. Suzanne Baker moved to approve the March 2022 minutes. Horace Hulsey seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

Ritter and Jones performed a roll call as required by the city for virtual meetings.

Birmingham Fire Department Update. Ritter noted that no one from the Fire Department was on the call tonight.

Southside Precinct Update. Ritter noted that no one from the Police Fire Department was on the call tonight.

Public Works/Environmental Code Update. Ritter noted that no one from Public Works was on the call tonight.

Rojo 20th Anniversary Request. Laney DeJonge recalled for residents the occasion of Rojo's 10th anniversary when they'd sponsored and organized a 'field day' in Rushton Park that included all sorts of fun games and activities for adults and kids. She said this year, for their 20th, they'd like to expand on that. She said they are working on getting a permit to

close the road in front of Rojo from the 3 way stop intersection at 30th and Highland to the other intersection of 30th and Highland past Rojo. Laney said their initial thoughts are to block off the road from noon to 7 pm (daylight hours), have fun things in the park from noon until 3 pm and have music on their patio. She said she expected the event to be free though they may have some ticketed portions to offset children's prizes. She said they planned to do the necessary applications through the Park Board and the City but they'd like to go ahead and get approval from the neighborhood for the June 25 event. Laney said they were also working with Alabama Rivers Alliance so the park events would be sponsored by a different river group, which she hoped would help raise awareness (and possibly money) for the environment and the groups. Suzanne Baker made a motion that Highland Park Neighborhood Association support plans by Rojo for their 20th anniversary celebration. The motion was seconded by Atticus Rominger. The motion passed unanimously.

FIDO Flagging & Bagging Campaign/Suzanne Baker. Suzanne Baker provided the group with background on the neighborhood's FIDO organization (Friends in Dog Ownership) and explained they were a subgroup of the neighborhood's Beautification Committee. She shared that every year around Do Dah Day (around May of each year) the group executes a 'flagging and bagging' campaign that raises awareness of our responsibility as dog owners to clean up after our pets. She said even though Do Dah Day would not be in Highland Park this year they still wanted to proceed with the event around the same time. She said the group would put up signs, explaining the project and pertinent dates, and then mark poop piles with volunteer purchased and inscribed flags. She said they didn't put flags in the parks, that they focus on green spaces in the neighborhood. She said they hoped to begin flagging the weekend of April 22nd and their clean-up day would be Saturday May 7. Baker said they would notify the city of this schedule. John Kearney said he had been walking the neighborhood for 40 years and could attest to the difference this program had made since first initiation. Baker said they could always use more volunteers and that related supplies would be provided. Ray Davis confirmed they would also have a neighborhood brush and trash clean-up May 7. Jones moved the neighborhood support FIDO's 2022 Flagging and Bagging Campaign. Ray Davis seconded the motion. There was no opposition expressed and the motion passed unanimously.

Speaker – Atticus Rominger/Rev Birmingham. Ritter introduced Atticus Rominger as a Highland Park neighbor and Chief Strategy Officer for REV Birmingham. Rominger shared he was a 21 yr resident of Highland Park and really loves everything the neighborhood stands for. He shared a quote by Ed McMahon (from Birmingham) that he believes shows Rev Birmingham’s vision for the year and where they are: “Growth is inevitable and desirable, but the destruction of community character is now. The question is not whether your part of the world is going to change. The question is, how?” Rominger said you can see this at play in Birmingham as a whole but especially in neighborhoods like Highland Park. He said the real question is how do we support the good change and push back on the bad change. He complimented Highland Park’s neighborhood association and leadership saying he felt they had been real leaders in this. Rominger said their vision statement is: ‘Birmingham is the most vibrant urban market in the Southeast where everyone can realize their dreams.’ He said Rev’s specific piece of that was in creating vibrant commercial districts, examples being downtown Birmingham or Woodlawn, adding that he feels the way they go about their work is applicable even to residential districts. Rominger said a key ingredient of their work is vibrancy - those opportunities where diverse people and authentic places meet. Rominger said Highland Park is a perfect example of this, a place where diversity, age, race, gender and political persuasion meet in a funky authentic neighborhood like this.

Rominger said their primary work falls in three buckets: 1) supporting businesses, 2) strengthening places, and 3) creating experiences. He said in the ‘vibrant’ they are going for in downtown Birmingham is authentic places where jobs and businesses grow, great civic places and streetscapes, preserved historic buildings and mixed use developments and diverse mixed income neighborhoods. Rominger said they had recently reviewed the ‘Value of Downtown’ report by the ‘International Downtown Association’ (IDA) where they not only looked at the many indicators of vibrancy in our downtown but compare it to other cities. He gave examples of the information provided: 1) Downtown Birmingham has almost 11,000 residents in 7300+ units. 2) Downtown has 63,000 jobs which represents 37% of the city total and 13% of the region’s jobs. Rominger said even if you don’t work or live in downtown Birmingham, Downtown still matters to the health of our region and that it is incumbent on all

of us to be sure we are investing in and supporting Downtown. He said Downtown drives a lot of the revenue that comes back to a neighborhood like Highland Park. Rominger said the report ranked Birmingham against other cities in three categories - emerging (cities such as Albuquerque, San Antonio and Tampa), growing (Atlanta, Charlotte, Dallas) and established (Baltimore, Miami, Seattle). He said Birmingham placed in the 'emerging' category: low population density (explaining that Birmingham defines its 'downtown' as a larger area that other cities do), quickly growing residential population, high concentration of jobs (but stagnant job growth), need for more hotels, and sustainable modes of transportation (a good score explained by our street grid, bike and scooter sharing, the variety of types of transportation available to downtown residents). Rominger says all this gives us a score of 52 which is just above the midline of IDA's 'overall vitality score'. He spent some time explaining some of their initiatives to address gaps in Birmingham's scores. (Link to the report on the REV website: http://revbirmingham.org/assets/2021/11/IDA-Value-of-Downtown-Birmingham-2021_Web.pdf)

Rominger shared they were about to finish up 20th Street construction with a \$6.5 million refresh of the streetscape. He said downtown businesses funded them to locate six professional landscape architectural firms who would donate their time to come up with conceptual designs for 20th street. Rominger said they raised some funds from downtown business and property owners and were able to institute a test for the concept in front of ZaZa. He said then they were able to take that to the city and through the support of leaders like Councilor Abbott and O'Quinn, they were able to obtain strong support from the mayor's office. He said they will be partnering on a Linn Park project with the Community Foundation, the City of Birmingham and the Friends of Linn Park to hire a nationally known public space design firm to lead us through a community-led process to re-envision Linn Park's role and create a new design to make this park function the way the community thinks it should. He said they were also looking at redesign and public space projects in the Innovation District (area around the Innovation Depot).

Rominger said they were also about to launch a new logo/brand for downtown Birmingham, to brand downtown for a comeback. He said BHM is the airports acronym for the city but it

also means 'Birmingham Has More'. Rominger said they've launched a new website - downtownbhm.com - and hope visitors to the city this summer for the Games and others will be using this site to navigate our city and find great places to visit and enjoy. Rominger said another goal was to add more amenities to public spaces, that, for example, they have been working with the city to identify places for outdoor public restrooms. He said they were also working on driving more holiday-centered retail to downtown the end of this year. Rominger shared Rev Birmingham also manages CAP program on behalf of downtown property owners who fund this program through their Business Improvement District. He said they manage about 20 ambassadors who are out on the street, providing additional eyes and ears to the Birmingham Police Department. He said they clean up thousands of pieces of graffiti a year along with downtown litter. He said he thinks the District is working great and they are working with property owners and business leaders to expand this into other areas.

Rominger said Woodlawn is another success, that they had nine new businesses open there in the midst of the pandemic. He said the majority of those have been women and African-American owned businesses. He shared about a number of initiatives going on for downtown Woodlawn.

Rominger again complimented Highland Park on it's leadership, the positive things happening saying if there was anything REV could do to help the neighborhood, they'd certainly like to - that he was a resident of Highland Park, David Fleming, the CEO of REV, was a previous resident and still has a lot of love for Highland Park.

Laney DeJong referenced a large retaining wall that was across from their building. She said they talked to their landlord about doing a mural there but were told because the building had received historic tax credits that they can't modify anything. Rominger said he would look into that with some architects and historic tax credit consultants and let her know.

Suzanne Baker expressed concern about the infrastructure in Highland Park, that though she was supportive of current efforts in downtown and Woodlawn, it seemed we are struggling to keep our sidewalks, curbs, streets, lighting operational and in good repair. Rominger said he

could share that each of the 99 neighborhoods in the city has the same concerns and the same reality. He said he feels there is more money coming from downtown Birmingham to support the neighborhoods than the other way around so it wasn't an issue of improvement for Downtown versus the neighborhoods. He said with respect to City Center and Woodlawn, the public-private model where the private property owners pull together and do some of the early planning, maybe they go out and find some grant funds from sources other than the city and they get some projects keyed up and moving is powerful to competing for the ever shrinking pile of city dollars. Jones told Rominger that a group of residents had formed a 'Friends of Highland Park' organization and they were in the process of applying for their non-profit status. Rominger said this was great and added that Highland Park was already considered a model neighborhood in the city and that everything we move ahead and do will continue to set the pace for the city. Jones said the group had been challenged to navigate the system to achieve all the formation benchmarks and they've decided they want to create a template document to share with other Birmingham neighborhoods to help jumpstart their efforts should they want to do something similar. Rominger said he thinks this is politically important, that he feels there is a sense in Birmingham, which is perhaps 75-79% black, that the white neighborhoods, or white-led neighborhoods, have all the secrets and won't share. Rominger said in terms of getting city support for things in the future, the more that organizations like in Highland Park can share and outsource their best practices and be a resource for other neighborhoods, is politically smart.

Ritter thanked Rominger for attending the meeting and his remarks on REV Birmingham.

City Council Update/Councilwoman Valerie Abbott. Ritter introduced Councilwoman Valerie Abbott. He asked that she update the neighborhood on the Rhodes Park lighting issue. Abbott said they were still working on this problem, that Park and Recreation had said they were going to take care of it and then backed away from that. She said her assistant, Dr Lee, had been working on this - but had serious back surgery and wouldn't be back in the office for a while. She said she regretted the lighting issue hasn't been resolved but they were committed to getting it addressed. Abbott said the good news is they are getting some

additional funding from the federal government (American Rescue Plan) in May and this should move some additional projects forward.

Abbott announced the Mayor is having a townhall meeting April 21 at 5:30 pm at Boutwell Auditorium to talk about flooding in Birmingham. She said anyone concerned about the inadequacy of the city's drainage systems and problems with ongoing flooding should attend this meeting. She shared there is a World Games Rally in Railroad Park on May 15 designed to get people pumped up about the games coming to Birmingham in July and what will be happening.

Abbott said the Council approved today a \$500,000 contract for 'pavement patching' and she hoped this would help the many potholes being reported be fixed a little faster. She shared an event on May 10 where someone was set to speak about a historic overlay section in the zoning ordinance that will help people who are renovating buildings that are historic, giving them incentives and information to navigate the process in an effort to counter the tendency to demolish buildings rather than go to the trouble and cost of complying with regulations. Abbott shared the Council and Mayor were having a retreat this coming Thursday to discuss various issues of interest to the council.

DeJonge said she had been dismayed to see all the trash in the city, not just Birmingham but across the county/region. Abbott said Public Works has a shortage of workers right now and that has affected the city's ability to help with the problems - and they were encouraging neighborhood clean-ups to help with the problem, which is hopefully temporary. Abbott said Public Works employees have a higher rate of on-the-job injuries than does our Police and Fire personnel. She added that Public Works staff are among the lowest paid in the city, and do some of the most critical work, which might be a contributing issue to the staffing challenges. She said the city was looking next year at weekly garbage pickups using a special trash can to help alleviate the problems. Resident Suzanne Baker cautioned Abbott about the special challenges of such a system to a neighborhood like Highland Park.

Abbott reminded the group that City Council district lines were changing because of the census results and population movement. She encouraged people to look at the new maps and make comments if they wanted.

Beautification Committee Update. Ritter reported trees had been ordered and some of those would be used to replace trees lost along Highland Avenue. He said once this was complete the neighborhood would be moving forward with Phase 2 of the Sidewalk Repair Project. He reported continuing to work with the city on recovering funds from a driver's insurance company for the damaged Highland Park sign at the neighborhood entrance near Freddy's.

Friends of Highland Park. Jones reported the organization received recognition from the State of Alabama that makes Friends of Highland Park an officially incorporated entity. She said the group has submitted their application to the IRS for 501c3 non-profit status and planned to proceed and open a checking account.

Sisters/Rhodes Circle Houses Update. Ritter reported there were inspectors voiding permits and a court date scheduled for April 20.

Other Announcements. Ritter asked residents that, in the interest of time, to refer to the Facebook and website pages for the usual announcements. He said the Black Warrior RiverKeepers is having a fund raiser at Avondale Brewery on April 16. He shared Episcopal Place would hold their annual Gumbo Gala at Cahaba Brewery on April 30.

Ritter reminded the group that recycling is now the 1st and 3rd Wednesday of each month. He reminded the group that if you live in an apartment or condo building with a dumpster that the city will not pick up large trash and brush from your location. Ritter said the next large trash and brush pick up is April 21.

A resident asked about the physical condition of Rhodes Park, saying it looked terrible, and wondered if it was any schedule for improvements or maintenance. Suzanne Baker said she

thought Sanfelippo was working with someone in the city about re-seeding the grass in Rhodes Park and trying to address erosion issues in the park. John Kearney said, again from his perspective as a long-time walker in the neighborhood, the erosion problems were due to the number of the dogs (predominantly unleashed) in the park.

Councilwoman Abbott mentioned the new SeeClickFix system replacing the old 311 system and encouraged residents to use that system.

Next Meeting. Ritter said the next meeting will be held 6 pm Tuesday May 10, in person and Zoom, at the Highland Golf Club.

Ritter asked if there was a motion to adjourn. Suzanne Baker offered a motion to adjourn. Laney DeJonge seconded. There was no opposition and the meeting adjourned.

The April 2022 Highland Park Neighborhood Association meeting was adjourned at 7:05 pm.

After the meeting was adjourned, Phyllis Oden-Jones, candidate for Representative of State House District 55 introduced herself and made remarks to residents.

Respectfully Submitted,

Judy Jones

Secretary, Highland Park Neighborhood Association