

You are the expert. If you are here, you are responsible – no one knows the community like those who live or work in Tuscaloosa. Whether you are a new or life-long resident, your perspective is vital to the plan’s success. Share your ideas, your input and your feedback to ensure that this plan represents the authentic voice of the community. – Framework website.

March 15, 2020

Dear Mayor Maddox, City Council Representatives, Mr. Moore, Ms. Crites, and Mr. Wright:

The above quotation from the Framework website is a powerful statement of the City’s respect for community input and a call for citizen participation in the city-wide master plan process. It is in the spirit of this calling that we write to you today concerning the content, format, and structure of future public hearings related to Framework that are held before the Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC). The public hearing on March 4th did not measure up to what the community and the City should expect in a public hearing. The attached letter from Ms. Serena Fortenberry, Vice President of TNT, that some of you received earlier, succinctly summarizes the problems that the community and PZ commissioners encountered.

The purpose of this letter is to propose actions that will a) improve the PZC’s understanding of the future land use proposal in Framework and their role in the Framework process, b) provide better coverage of the content in Chapter 2 “Growing,” and c) create a fairer, more transparent process for discussing the six concentration area maps in Chapter 2. We recognize that the proposed changes will require more time from the PZC and the public, but we believe this additional time will help the PZC make better-informed decisions and will restore the goodwill of the community.

1. *The format, structure, and management of the meetings should be re-considered to better accommodate community input and improve decision making.* We recommend four corrective actions:

a) ***The March 4th meeting was confusing because the agenda did not match the actual content of the meeting.*** The agenda (attached) stated that each “objective section” would be taken up individually and that public comments would be recorded in a PDF of the January 31st document of the plan. The agenda indicated that the PZC would review the Downtown-University and West Tuscaloosa concentration area maps. Furthermore, we expected that the public comment period at the end of the agenda would permit additional topics from Chapter 2 that Planning staff did not present. Yet, Planning staff told citizens in attendance that the descriptions of specific Future Land Use Character types (see p. 20 of the Framework document) would not be discussed and that public comment on additional sites visible on the Downtown/University map would not be allowed. Moreover, although adding public comments in real time to the draft document is well-intentioned, many of the comments staff added did not capture accurately the detailed and nuanced comments of speakers at the public hearing. Staff were also inconsistent in adding comments across speakers. Moving forward we urge the following:

- Published agendas should accurately communicate the topics to be addressed in the public hearing.
- The extra called PZC meetings for Framework should appear in the weekly notices posted by the City.
- Because an inaccurate representation of public comment is problematic, the practice of live edits should be discontinued. The live recording of the meeting is a better record.
- The video record of each meeting should be posted on the Framework site so it is all in

one place and easier to access.

b) ***The methodology for selecting the sites on each map for Planning Division staff presentations and for recommendations should be clearer.*** Planning staff offered no explanation of how they selected the comments and locations on each map that the PZC should consider. Not all sections with a large number of public comments from the November Open House meeting and from the Framework website were presented. Some areas presented had recommendations from the staff and others did not. These inconsistencies make it seem as if the Planning Division is giving preference to some areas and individuals over others. It is not transparent how the public comments made on the November draft plan are being systematically and fairly considered and if they will have any effect on the plan. Planning Division staff can correct this problem by being more systematic in their approach and elucidating the public and PZC on their process.

c) ***The stated time limit on public comments should be increased.*** Although the public was informed that comments would be limited to two minutes, this restriction was not consistently followed in either the February 19th or the March 4th PZC meetings. TNT is grateful that the PZC allowed some citizens more time to present their concerns about the concentration area maps. Citizen's comments often contain pertinent facts that only people who live in the community can provide. Some citizens came prepared with maps and other documentation to support their requests. We recommend that the time limit be raised to 5 minutes.

d) ***The PZC role in reviewing each section of the Future Land Use and Character plan is not clear.*** It was not clear what items required a vote of approval, what constituted a motion, or who could offer a motion. Votes made in haste without full consideration of the property characteristics could become problematic later. Additionally, clarification is needed as to the role of votes on sections of the proposal in relation to the final adoption of the Concentration Area land use maps. We recommend:

- The Planning Division staff and City Legal advisors should educate the PZC on the voting process and before each meeting, this process be summarized for the public.
- It would be prudent in many cases for the PZC to direct staff to address a particular issue and bring it back before the Commission for a vote before the final adoption.
- We do not believe that it is feasible for the PZC to vote to approve a map revision the first time it is presented to them.

2. Have one or more PZC meeting dedicated to reviewing for the Commissioners the purpose of the Framework Comprehensive Plan, its content, and their role in its adoption. This should specifically incorporate an educational session on the Future Land Use and Character section of Ch. 2. A meeting on this topic should occur prior to any additional meetings. The character types are essential to understanding the area maps and are at the heart of many people's concerns. Technical terms related to the core objectives in Ch. 2 need to be clearly understood before designating a future land use. The relation between the land use designations and current and future zoning codes needs clarification. The issue of property owners' right to develop their property as it relates to the land use plan needs clarity. The expectation that multiple zoning codes may be applied to a single land use designation needs more explanation.

3. Each of the six concentration area maps should be discussed at separate meetings. Each concentration area map, not just selected areas, should be considered in its entirety in a separate meeting. Many people at the March 4 meeting left after 2 hours and before the West Tuscaloosa

map was considered and thus had no opportunity to speak. Although this change would add some burden to the PZC, as well as to the public, the tradeoff will be a more focused meeting with clearer public expectations that can hopefully be completed in a reasonable amount of time.

4. *Revisit the discussion of the Downtown/University and West Tuscaloosa area concentration maps.* In light of the issues raised above with respect to the conduct of the March 4 meeting, TNT believes that citizens should have further opportunity to comment on these areas.

We understand there will be hiccups with a large undertaking such as a city-wide master plan, and appreciate all efforts to date by city staff, commission members, elected officials, and volunteers who agreed to serve on the Framework Steering Committee. Please know that our goal is to assure that concerns and opinions from representatives in every sector of the community are heard and addressed. Our objective here is to assure every citizen feels included and buys into the eventual land use plan. TNT believes that addressing the concerns in this letter will engender confidence among Tuscaloosa residents that Framework is a fair, transparent process.

Sincerely,

The Officers and Board of Tuscaloosa Neighbors Together

Linda Parsons, President,
Serena Fortenberry, Vice President
John Earl, Secretary
Joan Barth, Treasurer

Debra Brown, District 1
James Mize, District 2
Dan Lavendar, District 3
Ginny Raymond, District 4
Lib Davis, District 5
Tom Fanning, District 6
Susie Smith, District 7

March 5, 2020

From: Serena Fortenberry

To: Ashley Crites acrites@tuscaloosa.com, Brendan A. Moore bmoore@tuscaloosa.com, Jimbo Woodson jwoodson@tuscaloosa.com, Walter Maddox mayor@tuscaloosa.com

Cc: Phyllis Odom podom@tuscaloosa.com

I cannot adequately express how disappointing the management of the special called PZC meeting for public comment on Framework planning was last night.

It was clear from the beginning that commissioners were not familiar with the definitions for the character types represented on the FLU map draft. That entire section of the "Growing" chapter was not even reviewed during the meeting or opened up for discussion, even though the Growing chapter was the first agenda item for last night. It was clear that PZC members were unfamiliar with the form-based character types, did not understand how they differ from more traditional use-based types, were unfamiliar in general with form-based as opposed to use-based zoning, and were also unfamiliar with the proposed range of uses within each character type. Planning staff never rectified this situation.

Additionally, there was no opportunity for public comment specifically upon these pages that define character-types, even though these pages and definitions will have direct impact on the zoning codes that result from this framework. So, in effect, it was clear that very little preparation and education of commissioners took place prior to this meeting, and it was also problematic that the most important section of the Growing chapter, since it is so heavily linked to the FLU map, was completely overlooked and ignored in the staff presentation and never opened up for public comment.

Additionally, PZC members are charged with maintaining unbiased and impartial positions with regard to their decision-making processes. Multiple times, one commissioner displayed contentious, combative, and certainly biased behavior toward citizens who were, at the invitation of the city, at this meeting to share their concerns and ideas about planning for their areas. At another moment, a different commissioner made a personal attack on a resident who was sharing concerns about his neighborhood. This behavior, so lacking in decorum, professionalism, and ethical standards is a poor reflection on the city, and it certainly erodes citizen trust in the Commission's management of planning and zoning issues.

Beyond this, multiple times it was clear that the commissioners did not understand the purpose of the work they were doing last night; they did not understand what merited votes, what was at stake, or what the FLU-map's relationship is with actual zoning; in short, they were ill-prepared for the work at hand.

Finally, the two geographical areas covered in detail were downtown and West End. Because the growing chapter overview (even with the omission of the character type definitions) and the downtown area took so much time, 3 1/2 hours had elapsed by the time West End maps were presented. By that time, every West End resident who had turned out for the meeting had left except for me. In effect, an area where less-affluent citizens, with far more challenges and far less leisure time than many of their counterparts in other parts of the city, were robbed of their opportunity to voice ideas and concerns about their area of town because of the ongoing lack of structure and mismanagement of this meeting. That mine was the sole voice left to advocate for map improvements and address concerns for an entire geographical section of the city, parts of which I am not very familiar with, was ludicrous. The meeting should have been adjourned at that point and reconvened at a later date to review the West End maps.

In sum, this was a travesty of a public meeting. The tenor of it, the disorganization, and the length of it together reflect poorly on the city and very poorly on the ongoing comprehensive planning process.

Serena Fortenberry

AGENDA

TUSCALOOSA PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN SPECIAL CALLED MEETING Comprehensive Plan and City Code Update

City of Tuscaloosa, Alabama

March 4, 2020 | 5:00 pm

Purpose: Public hearing to begin the adoption process for Framework.

Note: All current Framework Comprehensive Plan documents can be found at <https://framework.tuscaloosa.com>

1. CALL TO ORDER PZC [Play >>](#)

♣ Introduction of PZC Members [Play >>](#)

2. CHAPTER DISCUSSION City Staff [Play >>](#)

Note: Each chapter and objective section will be taken up individually. Public comment will be taken after each objective is discussed. Comments will be recorded in a PDF copy of the January 31, 2020 DRAFT document and placed online for review following the meeting.

♣ Chapter 2 – Growing [Play >>](#)

♣ Chapter 2 Map – Concentration Area: Downtown/University Area [Play >>](#)

♣ Chapter 2 Map – Concentration Area: West Tuscaloosa [Play >>](#)

3. PUBLIC COMMENT [Play >>](#)

4. NEXT STEPS City Staff [Play >>](#)

♣ Meeting schedules