

Draft

Planning and Zoning Board

Minutes

Thursday, January 29, 2015

7:00 p.m.

The Blowing Rock Planning and Zoning Board met on Thursday, January 29, 2015 for a special meeting. Chairman West called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm. Members present were David Laughter, Lisa Stripling, Alice Roess, Wes Carter, Genie Starnes, David Harwood and Natalie Bovino. Staff members present were Planning Director Kevin Rothrock and Administrative Assistant Tammy Bentley.

Chairman West explained the process for the meeting. He said that speaking times would be limited to 5 minutes per speaker, and added that speakers would be allowed to speak more than once if they so desired.

1. Discussion of Sign Options on Highway 321 in the ETJ

Mr. Rothrock reviewed the attached staff report and PowerPoint presentation (attachment 1). At the December 18, 2014 Planning Board meeting, the Board made a recommendation that the Town Council approve a draft ordinance allowing for flexibility for Appalachian Ski Mountain to have a larger ground mounted sign than code currently allows. At the January 13, 2015 Town Council meeting, the Council made a motion to send the draft ordinance back to the Planning Board for further study and consideration of an ordinance that would apply to a broader area of properties along Highway 321 where the posted speed limit exceeds 35 mph. Mr. Rothrock noted that subsequent sign plans received from Appalachian Ski Mountain indicated an increase in actual sign size from 53 to 65.3 square feet.

The Board discussed possible sign ordinance amendments for property located within the ETJ along Highway 321 with a posted speed limit exceeding 35. In deliberating, the Board considered several factors including Watauga County's sign ordinance and the number of properties that might be affected in that area.

Mr. Harwood asked how many properties might be affected. Mr. Rothrock said probably 10 or less. Chairman West asked if Appalachian Regional Healthcare System (ARHS) would develop the outparcel on the Chestnut Ridge property. Mr. Rothrock said that he did not see much development potential for that parcel.

Chairman West opened the meeting for public comment.

Mr. Brad Moretz, owner of Appalachian Ski Mountain addressed the Board. He said that the proposed sign was increased because High Country Host had approached him about occupying the Welcome Center as they may lose their current space and should they occupy the welcome center additional signage would be needed to indicate their occupancy. Mr. Moretz added that the letters in their logo aren't huge and pointed out that the "R" in the Roots sign is 27" tall and that the letters in the Tanger Outlet sign are 19 ½" tall, more than twice the size of their proposed lettering. He said that they are proposing a more elegant sign and a beautiful gateway sign into Blowing Rock. Mr. Moretz added that he had looked at other ski area sign heights and Beech Mountain's sign is 14', Sugar Mountain, Maggie Valley, Sapphire Valley and Wolf Laurel are all 20' in height.

Mr. John Aldridge, resident of Blowing Rock, addressed the Board. He told the Board that App Ski Mountain is important to the area and that he thinks something simple is being made complicated. He thinks the issue is how to accommodate App Ski Mountain and asked the Board to consider sending alternatives to the Council. Mr. Aldridge added that he thinks a broader ordinance will open a can of worms and collapse under its own weight. Mr. Aldridge also said that allowing the sign as proposed would not set a precedent because any other applicant asking for the same flexibility would also have to show the same facts and circumstances as App Ski Mountain has shown.

Mr. Carter told Mr. Aldridge that his 5 minutes were up. Chairman West asked if anyone else would like to speak. No one approached the Board to speak. Chairman West then asked Mr. Aldridge if he would like to speak again.

Mr. Aldridge told the Board that he thinks the "precedent" wording should be reconsidered. He reiterated that someone with the same set of facts and circumstances should be given that same flexibility as App Ski Mountain is requesting. He added that he did not think that this was a possibility due to the uniqueness of App Ski Mountain. He said that they bring over 100,000 visitors per year to Blowing Rock and employ 400 people during the ski season. He asked that the preamble be expanded to indicate that the proposed sign is smaller and more aesthetically pleasing than the current billboard and include the economic impact that App Ski Mountain has on Blowing Rock.

Mr. Brad Moretz addressed the Board again. He said that he had received a letter from NCDOT suggesting that sign lettering be 10 to 12" in height along higher speed roadways. He also said that people have a hard time finding them now with the billboard. He said that he had spoken with Rob Hudspeth with ARHS. Mr. Hudspeth told Mr. Moretz that with the required DOT setback, the setback from the creek and Middle Fork Greenway extension across their outparcel he did not see any room for development of that parcel.

Mr. David Rogers told the Board that he was sure that his opinion was known as he had expressed it on his widely read website. He said that he echoes Mr. Aldridge's feelings and thought that passing an ordinance for areas over 35 mph in the ETJ was a mistake. Mr. Rogers told the Board that they could use Section 16-17.5 of the sign ordinance to exclude App Ski Mountain due to their historical significance.

Mr. Carter asked for the history regarding why App Ski Mountain is losing their billboard. Mr. Rothrock responded that it is due to the construction of the entrance to Chestnut Ridge and that this was the best location for the entrance due to the grade and to align with an existing intersection that will have a year round signal once Chestnut Ridge opens.

Mr. Harwood asked Mr. Moretz if the current DOT brown directional sign to the ski resort would remain. Mr. Moretz said he had asked DOT that question and they answered maybe.

Mr. Harwood asked if High Country Hosts occupancy of the welcome center would constitute a multiple-occupancy. Mr. Rothrock said yes. Mr. Harwood asked Mr. Rothrock what size sign would be allowed for multiple occupancy. Mr. Rothrock said multiple occupancies would increase the sign face by 10 square feet. Mr. Rothrock added that a column sign for single occupancy would allow up to 60 square feet of signage. Mr. Harwood asked if this size applies to speed limits over 35 mph. Mr. Rothrock confirmed.

Chairman West noted that Mr. Rogers exemption refers to the actual sign and not a historic business. Mr. Rothrock noted that one perspective would be that without the attraction, there would be no need for the sign.

Mr. Rogers said that in clarifying Section 16-17.5 both App Ski Mountain and The Blowing Rock are far away and the only difference is the visitor center at App Ski Mountain.

Chairman West closed the public comment period.

The Board discussed addressing the entire over 35 mph corridor of Highway 321 as requested by the Town Council. Chairman West added that many of the Town Council members thought that the proposed sign is too tall. Ms. Stripling said that looking at Watauga County's sign ordinance and nearby ski area sign heights she does not think that 18' is too tall. Mr. Carter asked if there were any thoughts on the overall ordinance. Ms. Stripling noted that 10 or fewer properties would likely be affected by an overall ordinance.

Mr. Laughter said he would like to make a motion to send the originally proposed ordinance back to the Council, but add language regarding precedent arising only if another applicant could prove the same facts and circumstances as App Ski Mountain.

Ms. Bovino said that she agreed with Mr. Laughter and that the ordinance needs to very much establish the uniqueness of App Ski Mountain.

Mr. Rothrock read the proposed ordinance that was sent to the Town Council for approval (attachment 2). The ordinance language is very detailed as to the uniqueness of App Ski Mountain and their need for the sign.

The Board discussed the proposed motion and looked at the overall ordinance for areas where the speed limit exceeds 35 mph. The Board also discussed changing the ordinance for multiple occupancies.

Ms. Stripling asked Mr. Moretz if any height less than 18' would work. Mr. Moretz said that he heard the Town Council's comments and wanted to take those to heart and that in the spirit of compromise they came up with a design that is 16' in height and will work.

Mr. Rothrock said that in order to avoid setting a precedent the language must be very specific.

Mr. Carter said that the Council was concerned with the height of the sign as compared to the height of the welcome center and that he thinks 16' is better in appearance. Chairman West noted that the roof slope for the welcome center approved in the CUP is less than the code requires.

Mr. Rothrock said that language covering the possibility of High Country Host occupying the building needs to be included. Mr. Harwood asked if the original amendment is moot due to the High Country Host issue. Chairman West confirmed and said that they must consider information from Mr. Moretz regarding High Country Host.

Chairman West suggested adding "or other tourism directional related activity allowed" after Ski Mountain on the third line of the original ordinance.

Mr. Laughter made a motion to amend the original ordinance by adding "or other tourism directional related activity allowed" after Ski Mountain on the third line, adding "limited to 70 square feet per side on line four, and adding that the sign face shall be separated by no more than 10 feet. Ms. Striping seconded.

Mr. Rothrock asked Larry Greene, architect for the project, if both sides of the sign would be seen when looking at the sign head on. Mr. Greene said yes, but that they would not be readable. Mr. Rothrock said he wants to be sure that both sides of the sign would not be seen. Mr. Greene said that he did not draw the elevation that way, but he does not think that both sides will be readable.

Chairman West asked for a vote on Mr. Laughter's motion. **All members were in favor of the motion.**

Mr. Carter made a motion to add a line to Section 16-17.12.2.7.1 regarding multiple occupancies in areas with a posted speed limit over 35 mph.

The Board discussed the motion. Mr. Harwood asked Mr. Rothrock if he thought the multiple occupancy section should be amended. Mr. Rothrock said that he did not think so.

Scott Fogleman, Town Manager, suggested addressing height as well. Chairman West asked Staff to analyze the interconnectedness of ground signs, column signs and multiple buildings on one site where the posted speed limit exceeds 35 mph.

Mr. Fogleman also suggested that if the signage square footage is increased that the Board look at the size of the supporting structure, currently limited to 80 square feet, and consider a proportional increase of the structure.

Mr. Carter rescinded his motion, but asked for more information from Staff at the next meeting.

Ms. Roess made a motion to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Mr. Laughter. All members were in favor of the motion.

Chairman West adjourned the meeting at 9:25 pm.

Chairman Jim West

Tammy Bentley, Administrative Assistant