



Business Loop CID addresses voter's concerns, discusses sales tax

By Blake Nelson

Columbia Missourian

Published Sept. 17, 2015

COLUMBIA — The board of directors for the Business Loop Community Improvement District responded Thursday to concerns brought by one of the district's residents in an occasionally tense meeting.

The board also postponed a closed session intended to discuss Carrie Gartner's future as executive director. The district does not have not enough money to pay her salary.

The majority of the regularly scheduled meeting was spent responding to a letter sent to the board Sept. 9 by Josh Oxenhandler, a lawyer representing MU student Jen Henderson. Henderson, who was present at the meeting, was originally thought to be the only registered voter in the district. Her skepticism about a proposed half-cent sales tax had previously led to the board postponing a vote on the issue.

Thirteen additional voters were recently discovered, though none were present at the meeting.

The letter listed several things Henderson was concerned about, including a lack of sidewalks on the Business Loop, the makeup of the Business Loop district's board of directors and the impact the tax would have on surrounding neighborhoods.

Board Chairman Tom May said he agreed with many of Henderson's concerns.

"I appreciate you addressing your comments and concerns, and I want you to feel welcome to do that every time you need," he said.

Henderson also wanted the district to be more specific about its future plans. Gartner said the board can't give more specifics until it receives more community feedback through its survey and hires a consultant to develop a master plan.

That, however, requires tens of thousands of dollars.

In an email, Gartner wrote that the district's property assessment, projected to bring in about \$50,000 a year, is currently ".4778 per \$100 of assessed valuation," and would not be allowed to exceed ".60 per \$100 of assessed valuation."

The proposed sales tax was projected to bring in at least \$200,000 a year. It could eventually be raised to a full cent but not without a separate election.

Board member Cris Burnam estimated that the maximum revenue the district could collect from the assessment and sales tax was \$500,000 a year because of various restrictions.

Other funding options, such as federal grants, are possible but unlikely without a full-time staff to write them. The district's board is made up of volunteers.

Gartner and a quorum of four board members ran the meeting, which took place in the Parkade Center on Business Loop 70. Board meetings are open to the public, and 11 members of the community, including representatives of two neighborhood associations, were present.

Board members pushed back against the idea that the tax was intended to exploit residents.

"We're just working people," Gary Ennis said. "We're not big business owners."

Pat Kelley, the treasurer for the Ridgeway Neighborhood Association, said it recently voted to oppose any sales tax increase to fund the district. That vote is not binding on the district's board, though board members have said they want to act with feedback from neighborhood associations.

The end of Oxenhandler's letter said, "Ms. Henderson has incurred attorneys fees and other expenses as a result of the actions of the CID board." It suggested that the board could "pay her fees and expenses."

However, in an email, Henderson wrote that her lawyers are working pro bono, and that "we have not talked about fees or expenses."

This was reiterated in the meeting by one of her lawyers, Richard Reuben, who said they were working pro bono. Reuben is also an MU law professor.

The board largely dismissed the possibility of reimbursement, though Gartner said the point was irrelevant as long as the district lacks money.

Henderson also explained why she had sought legal counsel.

"I needed extra support," Henderson wrote in an email. "Even after the board was told several times not to contact me, they did."

Gartner apologized to Henderson in the meeting and said she had not known Henderson did not want to be contacted.

Later, Gartner clarified in an email that "I apologized that there was a misunderstanding, but I was careful not to apologize for my actions, which were proper."

Henderson had originally wanted to unregister to vote after her first meeting with Gartner, but she changed her mind after she had more information about the district's borders.

Several board members also pushed back against the idea that the district's borders were gerrymandered.

"There was nothing gerrymandering about this," Ennis said.

Burnam said the only criterion in drawing the district's boundaries was whether the property touched the Business Loop. If it did, it was part of the district. If it didn't, it was excluded.

That decision meant the Ellis Fischel Cancer Center, where Henderson works and lives, is part of the district. Other houses close by, however, are not.

Dan Cullimore, president of the North Central Columbia Neighborhood Association, said that he appreciated learning the intentions behind the district's borders and that not knowing had "led to a situation of distrust."

At the end of the meeting, the board voted to approve a response to Oxenhandler's letter, but it made no move to schedule a vote on the sales tax.

Henderson also wrote that she was glad there were other voters in the district.

"I think 14 total voters is still a small piece of the larger community that will ultimately be affected by the sales tax, but it is better than being one person's decision," she said.

There is still the possibility that more voters might be found. Gartner wrote that she is working with Boone County Clerk Wendy Noren to search for any additional voters.

Supervising editor is Scott Swafford.