

Affordable Housing Commission

Minutes

April 18, 2025 at Noon

City Administration Building – Council Chambers

Members Present: Mollie Fitzgerald, Solveig Spjeldnes, Megan Vogel, Zack Dye, Mary Abel, Meghan Jennings

Excused Members Absent: Shay Myers, Maria Modayil, Kimberlee Francis, Polly Sumney

1. Introduction – Solveig welcomed everyone and stated the Commission’s mission: The Athens City Affordable Housing Commission is a commission of city government established to review best practices, investigate community affordable housing models, and identify needs and opportunities within Athens’ city limits to advance decent, safe, sustainable affordable housing for all city residents. The commission is tasked with providing advice and guidance on measures and policies that influence access to and needs within the local housing market.

She emphasized the AHC looks at housing developments on all points of the housing spectrum.

2. Establish Quorum – Quorum met.
3. Disposition of Minutes – AHC had committee working sessions last month so don’t have meeting minutes to approve.
4. ***Speaker(s) – Chris LaGrand from Woda Cooper Companies* - Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) Projects*** – Solveig introduced Chris LaGrand and read his bio. Woda Cooper wants to be a good owner operator of projects in Athens. Woda Cooper is a national developer of affordable housing located in Columbus Ohio. They do business in 18 states. They are vertically integrated (developer, construction contractor and property management company). They are employee owned and therefore have an interest in ensuring the company is successful. Woda Cooper prefers long-term projects.

Chris provided an overview of the LIHTC program. It is essentially a public private partnership that creates credits through tax code allocated to the states. The states

decide what types of housing they want. It's a reduction in tax liability in exchange for equity in a project. They seek an investor who becomes an investor in the project and they get the tax benefits. If the housing performs, Woda Cooper and the investor benefit. Money is dispersed in equal number of tranches for 10 years. The tax credits have two 15-year compliance periods (30 years total).

Chris is here today to talk about myths vs reality of the program and to respond to recent criticisms of the Kershaw Greene development.

Myth 1: Affordable Housing is low quality yet expensive. Costs are \$150,000/unit at Kershaw. This is dependent on state requirements for tax credits, which could increase price (energy performance standards for example). But in theory, these units could be above typical market standards. LIHTC is based on a point system. If it's in the QAP, they will likely do it to win credits.

Myth 2: Woda Cooper takes money from Athens to Columbus. Woda Cooper spent about \$900k in taxes, fees, permits, etc. to the city/county. All trades were bid locally and spend \$6.7mm on local subs. Local contractors are typically less expensive and are in Woda Cooper's interests. Chris believe they spent \$12.8mm on subcontractors from the region and adjacent counties. They also have other services that are being paid for locally. Solveig asked about supportive services – HAPCAP only gets \$100/year for this. She understands concerns folks have about Kershaw Greene and would personally like to see LIHTC projects have someone from the social work profession to handle certain situations (mediation, referrals, etc.). This would need to be someone other than a property manager. Would Woda Cooper consider this? Chris said the definition of supportive services is broad and there is an entire spectrum. Woda Cooper does different arrangements based on contracts – this varies by state. They are open to having this conversation.

Solveig also brought up the Ridges and NCA. That project is looking for a full-scale supportive facilities as part of the redevelopment plan.

Myth 3: Woda Cooper's total development cost was around \$30mm – where did it go? There is a lot of risk for a deal of this size. The investor requires Woda Cooper to guarantee on budget completion, annual operation consistent with the rules, tax credit delivery at end of construction, etc. Woda Cooper has to pay back the investment if these things are not done. There was \$5mm in total developer fee, but \$1.4mm of this was loaned back into the deal. They will get that back over life of the

deal. Developer fees are given to Woda Cooper at various milestones - not all at once.

Myth 4: Affordable Housing is a closed club and not open to new developers. LIHTC is a complicated and specialized program that takes a lot of time and effort. It's a situation where the state allocators and investors choose developers with experience and successes. Woda Cooper was founded in 1990 and has existed almost as long as the credits have.

Myth 5: Affordable housing increases crime and lowers property values. Woda Cooper thinks the opposite. Quality housing supports the local community and has a positive influence on the neighborhood. Solveig noted there is no evidence that Kershaw Greene has increased crime or hurt property values. Woda Cooper did an audit of 2024 police calls. There were 41 total call . Chris gave a breakdown of the calls. They only resulted in 3 arrests. This does not demonstrate a significant crime issue in their opinion.

Myth 6: Affordable housing is poverty housing. There is no extreme concentration of poverty in their projects. Affordable housing has more workforce components. The government does not run and manage these projects, unlike HUD. Chris gave an overview of AMI for units. {32 units at 30%, 50 units at 50%, 41 units at 60% and 68 units at 80%}. They elected to do income averaging for Kershaw Greene, meaning they may earn more income than those who are typically eligible (teachers, police and fire, entry level private sector jobs). If your income goes up you can continue to live at Kershaw Green until recertification (which is very rare or not at least for 15-20 years). Solveig shared this is the biggest complaint about Kershaw Greene. It's confusing and may be helpful to better communicate how this works. Happy renters are more responsible renters. Chris shared the limits are those they are not allowed to exceed. They typically set rents less than that and there is opportunity for rents to go up, but won't exceed 30% of their income level. There is a waitlist if there isn't a unit available at your income level. Woda Cooper's target is between 5-10% vacancy.

Amy Lipka commented on local housing articles from WOUB. One of the articles talked about a positive experience with Kershaw Greene. It's part of the compelling story about who we can offer housing to. Chris mentioned fair housing obligations. They must work with those who come in the door.

Mary Abel asked how many total units are currently vacant. There are very few. It took a while to lease it up due to construction phases, but now the vacancy rate is low. She also asked about accessibility and sidewalks and whether Woda Cooper sees it as their responsibility to provide this. This depends on a few factors. Typically, when Woda Cooper proposes a property, they are required to meet extensive standards for accessibility. As soon as you leave the property, that falls to the City/community, but Woda Cooper is supportive of this as it helps market the property and makes it more attractive. They supported these efforts with \$70,000 which they were not required to do.

Robert Delach (Morris Ave) asked about car ownership rates. Chris said this varies from property to property. Parking can be controversial – some want a lot, some want none (urban). They will meet the community requirements and think in most cases 1-2 spaces/unit is good. It depends a lot on local zoning. Rob noted there are arguments against these developments around parking and transportation services.

5. City Updates – Meghan Jennings (City Planner), Solveig (City Council), Shay Meyers (BZA): See
6. Committee Reports/Updates – 10 minutes – Progress on Projects and Goals
 - a. Nominating Committee (Ad hoc) - *Mary, Megan, and Amy Lipka*: N/A
 - b. New Development Committee - *Mary, Megan V, Meghan J, Mollie and Shay*. Today's meeting focused on the Housing Roundtable concept – identifying potential sites and processes for developers in hopes of attracting them to Athens. We are waiting on an updated report from code on STR. ADUs will be a bigger topic for another meeting.
 - c. Neighborhood Revitalization - *Maria, Zach, Solveig, Polly, Kimberlee, Megan and Michelle Papai as our consultant*. The Westside had two beautification events (bike path cleanup and campaign to spruce things up and take advantage of spring cleanup week). This also included prep for Recycling Day on April 26. There will be another cleanup event tomorrow. This creates a great sense of community and keeps neighborhoods in good shape and safer. Zach is going to a conference this week in Detroit and the state-wide conference too. He will gather good info and ideas for Athens. Neighborhood Revite is also looking into providing better information to renters and

landlords. They requested the info from the City. Solveig spoke with Jim Kauffman (Director of Real Estate) and gave an update on Ridges – should go to controlling board in June and will generate 700 new units. The university is willing to partner on housing solutions. Solveig is looking into having a task force to review rental inspection processes.

- d. Communication/Education Committee (Ad hoc) – *Polly and Amy*: N/A

- 7. For the Good of the Order – None

- 8. Concluding Remarks – Meghan Jennings shared at the planning commission meeting , there was a returning zone change for 111 Hooper Street. They are going for a different pool of money through the state and the planning commission approved that to move forward. Spire Development didn't need a zone change but did get Title 41 approval from planning commission for Blackburn Landing LIHTC project.

- 9. Motion to Adjourn - Adjourned at 12:58p.

NEXT MEETING: Tuesday, MAY 20th at 12p in Council Chambers

Committee meetings held at 11am.