

**XENIA CITY COUNCIL
MEETING MINUTES
FEBRUARY 6, 2021
SPECIAL MEETING**

1. CALL TO ORDER: President Wesley Smith called the Special Meeting to order at 9:05 a.m. at Emmanuel Baptist Church, 1120 N. Detroit Street, Xenia.

2. ROLL CALL: Vice President Levi Dean, Councilman Thomas Scrivens, Councilwoman Rebekah Dean, Councilman Cody Brannum, Councilman Will Urschel, Mayor Sarah Mays, and President Wesley Smith were present.

3. COUNCIL RETREAT: City Manager Brent Merriman said the purpose of the meeting was to discuss many subjects, including 2021 projects, policy and project needs and concerns, and Council's priorities for 2021. He distributed Council's priorities from their 2020 visioning session; however, he recognized that Covid-19 has changed a lot of things. He asked everyone to review the 2020 priorities as they discuss 2021 priorities with the following limitations:

- Covid-19: Still a lot of political uncertainty (i.e., \$15 minimum wage in Ohio will affect small businesses), long-term economic impact is unknown, small businesses continue to struggle, the City's revenue lines are down, many staff (especially Police, Fire, and Public Service) out with Covid-19 or quarantined due to exposure, etc.
- Insecure Relationships: Xenia Community Schools, Xenia Township, Greene County Board of Commissioners, noting they continue to work on these relationships but it seems they are not on the same page
- More to do than time to do it: Administrative staff struggle to keep up, core service delivery concerns (Public Service, Police and Fire call volumes continue to increase, etc.)

Mr. Merriman presented some competitive factors that should drive decisions in setting priorities to make Xenia a community of choice for residents and businesses alike:

- Safe community/quality safety services
- Access to great education
- Parks, amenities, and recreation
- Employment opportunities
- Quality, reliable infrastructure
- Consistent, equitable, responsive governance
- Retail and service options
- Affordability
- Intergovernmental cooperation
- Access to local healthcare
- Diverse housing options

Councilman Scrivens suggested adding "relationships/advocacy with the business community/Chamber of Commerce" and "annexation/openness for community growth (population, boundary)" to the list above. Mr. Merriman agreed. President Smith said many things listed above are related to one another; however, economic development is the most important. They must go after opportunities and be proactive and aggressive in pursuing them. He asked if City Council needed to be more involved in that effort. Mr. Merriman said Development Director Steve Brodsky would be joining them later in the morning. However, he noted some of the

challenges they face including lack of work force, lack of rail, lack of higher end restaurants (marketplace), poverty rate, graduation rate, housing values, median household income, those on public assistance (no tax base/high demand for services), etc. Councilman Urschel said people used to live here in Xenia and would drive to work in other communities and WPAFB. Now, WPAFB is 90% white-collar jobs—they shuffle paperwork but don't build anything. The 675 corridor is also white-collar jobs. However, 80% of Xenians are only high school educated. People and businesses will not look at Xenia if Xenians do not value education. He did not know what City government could do to change that culture. They need to address the core issues of the folks living here in Xenia; County resources are here in Xenia, but there's no coordination or collaboration. Greene County is not focused on Xenia at all. Mr. Merriman said part of the fix has to include attracting growth in the tax base with a diversified population. Mayor Mays said perhaps they could develop something at Xenia Towne Square to shift the culture. Mr. Merriman agreed, noting some great ideas have been discussed with regard to the redevelopment of Xenia Towne Square that will be presented to Council at a later date. Regarding the community itself, it comes down to partnerships—they all (Chamber of Commerce, Xenia Community Schools, Xenia Township, Greene County, City of Xenia, business leaders) need to be growing in the same direction. If they are not communicating, it will be impossible to move this community forward.

President Smith asked why Xenia cannot get a business like Chick-fil-A, Kohl's, etc. He would also like to see more neighborhoods with \$200,000+ homes. Mr. Merriman said certain businesses and developers simply do not want to take the risk based on the City's demographics/census. He noted it will take generations to build up Xenia's labor force. He agreed better housing would attract higher wage earners. Mr. Duke agreed. Years ago, there were very few high wage earners in Xenia (over \$100,000 per year), but that number has gradually increased over the years. Further, the median income has increased over the years. However, he expressed concerns with the outsiders' perspective of the school system, which he feels is impacting whether or not people chose to purchase a home in Xenia. President Smith said City Council and City government cannot control the schools or the perception of the school system. Further, it's not as bad as some people think—the preschool through fifth grades are great—they are doing a phenomenal job. Mr. Merriman agreed; however, the graduation rate and State test scores need to improve because it impacts retail recruitment and residential development. Yes, Xenia students can graduate and be college-ready if that's the path they chose. However, Beavercreek's graduation rate is about 97% and Xenia's graduation rate is about 80%.

(Development Director Steve Brodsky arrived at 10:00 a.m.)

Councilman Urschel said many surrounding jurisdictions' (Miami Township, City of Beavercreek, Sugarcreek Township, etc.) residential neighborhoods are completely built out with limited opportunities for future developments. He asked if Xenia has any areas for new neighborhood development. Mr. Brodsky said yes, noting three housing developers are currently looking at Xenia for future development. Further, Ryan Homes has finished the build out (20 in-fills) of the existing Sterling Green subdivision and also built a new section of 159 homes that have sold for an average price of \$202,000. He felt they should not accept any new construction that is basic and simple and not less than 1,800 square feet. President Smith said Xenia needs some high-end apartments as well. Mr. Merriman agreed they need to meet the demand, but they do not need any more subsidized housing. Mr. Brodsky said at some point, they need a developer to take a leap of faith

to establish new housing to establish a higher market rate. Mr. Merriman agreed; developers look at the market to reduce their financial risk, and they will need to take a risk for higher-end housing.

Mr. Brodsky said the Xenia Community Schools will be placing two levies on the ballot in May 2021, one of which is to replace Warner Middle School. He said nobody can walk through that school and not agree that it needs to be replaced. However, if the School Board wants the community to invest in the school system, the school system needs to invest in this community (noting the majority of students reside inside the City limits) with Tax Increment Financing (TIFs), Community Reinvestment Areas (CRAs), etc. Councilman Brannum said from a taxpayer's perspective, the schools are receiving 64-65% of his property taxes. They built five new schools that are already showing wear and tear.

Those present recessed from 10:20 to 10:30 p.m.

Mr. Merriman said he would like to transition from higher level thinking to more policy and project concerns and opportunities. He asked Division and Department heads to share their issues, concerns, and/or opportunities that are top priorities for 2021, which he shared as follows (items in *italics* are already underway):

Legislative/Regulatory:

- *Charter Update—Ballot Measure*: This will be a huge public relations endeavor
- Systematic Code Section Review and Update: Law Director Donnette Fisher is making strides with this, noting some information has not been updated since the 1950s and 1960s. However, there is a lot of work involved for both the Law Director and Department Heads for these updates.
- Rules of Council: Ready to present the first draft to Council in the coming weeks, including looking at restructuring some Boards, Commissions, and Committees
- Lobbying for Municipal Court Funding Change: Working with the City of Fairborn to start a regional conversation on the structure of Municipal Court funding in the State of Ohio.

Public Safety:

- Fire Service Collaboration (Xenia Township, et al.)
- Public Safety Call Volume: Relates to both Fire Division and Police Division
- EMS Billing: Switched to new billing partner and revenue is way down due to how calls are coded (basic life support [BLS] vs. advanced life support [ALS])
- Dispatch Spinoff and/or 911 Dispatch Consolidation: He thinks it's time to make Dispatch its own stand-alone division.
- K-9 Program: Currently relying on County's K-9 or partnering jurisdiction when needed (but not always available); working on an arrangement for a drug-sniffing K-9 at a very reasonable cost.
- Emergency Management Live Exercise: Biggest vulnerability is weather related. Need to pursue a live exercise if possible.
- Leadership Succession Planning: When Police Chief and Fire Chief chose to retire, it will leave a huge void and will be a big impact, especially with staff turnover below them.

Councilman Urschel said he doesn't understand how the City can put people in jail for certain things, but they cannot seem to put drug dealers in jail. He said the people he works with know exactly where to purchase drugs, where the drug houses are located, etc. He's been told that there are federal and state regulations that the Police Division must abide by before they can make a case and an arrest. Mr. Merriman said the evidentiary needs to ensure a conviction are definitely higher. Councilman Urschel said the drug issue is a gaping wound for this community, and he is

very concerned. People know what they can and cannot get away with in this and surrounding communities.

Development/Planning:

- Eavey Building/Hub District Redevelopment: Mr. Brodsky said he anticipates seeing some activity at the Eavey Building very soon.
- Downtown Revitalization/Main Street Program: Had great conversation with a downtown group about 18 months ago, but since Covid-19 hit, their effort has completely stalled. Councilman Urschel asked what happened, noting those individuals are still in this community. Mr. Merriman said they are burned out. There will not be any First Friday events, because there is no volunteer group. Further, the Xenia Community Festival is canceled also. They need to recruit community members who want to put their time and effort into these programs—it should not be local government. With Covid-19 and timing issues, he did not believe they could get a group together that could be ready to accomplish anything this calendar year. President Smith said perhaps they need to focus on doing one thing very well, especially with limited resources, and just be known for that one thing—specifically, the Fireworks Festival. Mr. Merriman agreed that a few quality events would be better than many mediocre events.
- Xenia Station Reuse: The City is wasting money on this facility. They need to market the site to locate a project or business there, and with that presence, hopefully reduce vandalism at the site.
- Community Housing Improvement Program: Greene County receives most of the funding from the State of Ohio, and this would be a good partnership opportunity.
- XTS Redevelopment
- Vacant Building Registration Ordinance Update: This was instituted a number of years to varied success; need to gauge Council's interest in enhancing or pulling back on this program.
- Property Maintenance Code Update: This will require a comprehensive update and will be a big project.
- Vacant Land Reutilization Program: There are things the Community Improvement Corporation (CIC) and the City can do, but the reality is there are some commercial and industrial properties and many residential properties that are dilapidated and/or vacant that the property owners simply do not care about. Further, some have not paid their property taxes for many, many years. Greene County lets them sit for years, and the likelihood of receiving payment of the taxes and delinquent charges is slim to none. He's been told if a property doesn't reach a certain dollar threshold, they are left alone. Further, there is no accountability for property owners. Ms. Fisher said Greene County does not wish to set up a land bank. Further, if a property is forfeited to the State of Ohio, the City cannot assess the State of Ohio for mowing costs. She said the Greene County Sheriff's Office is supposed to hold an auction every year, but she was not certain if that was being done.
- X-Plan Update: An update should have been done at the five-year mark; they are now in years 7 and 8. This is a great comprehensive and relevant plan, but they have chipped away at it over the years, which is why there needs to be an update. An update requires public engagement, but due to Covid-19, an update was not done in 2020.
- Retail Recruitment: They need to continue to look at how to create a marketplace that retailers want to be located in.
- Building Inspection Services: He knows this continues to be an important issue, and further discussion on this subject is needed.
- Parks/Recreation Strategic Vision: This could be tied to the X-Plan update, but they need to look specifically at where the community wants to go with regard to parks and recreation.

Utilities/Public Service/Landfill:

- Street Rehab Program: There is still no long-term, funded strategy to deal with the City's streets.

- Stormwater Funding Model Update: The stormwater system conversation goes hand-in-hand with the street discussion because those appurtenances are tied together.
- Parks Rehab Plan: Public Service staff are aware of Council's concerns, and they are looking at how to realign current staff to focus more on parks, including painting park shelters, park maintenance, etc. Councilman Urschel said there are many churches in Xenia who are looking for community "work day" projects. Mayor Mays said she knows of a local church who wants to be assigned one park for the entire summer. Mr. Merriman said staff does not have a lot of faith in "volunteer days" due to low turnout for past events, but if the community does more in high-visibility locations, that would be great. President Smith agreed, noting past volunteer days were held the second week of May, which coincided with school proms, etc.
- Sewer Master Plan—Phase I Glady System: They are doing Glady Run first because it is not a full treatment capacity plant (material is taken to Ford Road).
- Closed Landfill Management Plan: Need to develop a master strategy for the closed landfill. The groundwater issue continues to be a concern. It seems they are holding steady with gas migration issues. He was still awaiting OEPA's final approval of the explosive gas management plan (EGMP).
- Landfill Liability Insurance

Finance/IT:

- Cyber Security: Protecting the City's systems and all the sensitive information is a weekly challenge, which includes recent fraudulent unemployment claims for numerous City staff. Mr. Duke said cyber attacks are "big business," and the City's Information Technology staff are doing their very best to secure the network. However, it may be time to look at purchasing some insurance in the event the City is hacked. Nobody, even the federal government, is exempt from this issue. Mr. Merriman agreed—hospitals, colleges, credit card companies, local/state/federal governments, etc., have all experienced data breaches. It is a constant battle and growing concern. Mr. Duke explained how employees are being trained to recognize and report phishing attempts.
- Fiber System Buildout: The value of a more robust network has been realized this past year, especially during the pandemic. They need to determine future buildout of the network.
- Software Systems Replacements (Utility Billing, Finance): Mr. Duke said the last time the City issued an RFP for Financial Software was in 2005, and the current system has been in place and in use since 2006. Various update/upgrades have been accomplished over the years, but certain components are becoming more unreliable. Further, the vendor is no longer supporting certain components, and it is time to issue another RFP. He cautioned this will be an expensive endeavor (\$300,000-\$350,000 range).

Community/Social:

- Neighborhood Rehab: Focused effort on individual neighborhoods with CDBG dollars, code enforcement, law enforcement presence (culture, drug activity).
- Special Events—Sustaining First Fridays and other community events.
- Homelessness Abatement: This continues to be a problem in this community. However, there is no single thing or collection of things they can do to wholly solve this issue. Councilman Urschel commented on the number of homeless individuals utilizing the homeless shelters in the City, noting they have all adopted the same criteria, including they must be Xenia residents. Further, Greene Memorial Hospital's psychiatric wing is shut down, and TCN has went from a full-time psychiatrist to a part-time—and sometimes no time— psychiatrist. Many folks have been banned from shelters due to their mental health instability, etc. Further, there's no hospital to send them to, they can't get treatment or prescriptions, etc.; therefore, they are wandering around the streets and purchasing whatever drugs they can get their hands on. They need to engage with the Mental Health Recovery Board and TCN on this issue.

Mr. Merriman said the first three items listed below are his top three concerns. The City is experiencing unprecedented turnover including almost one-third of the Xenia Fire Division in the last 18 months. Further, people are just not taking Civil Service tests [for all positions in all seven union groups] the way they used to—for example, they used to get hundreds of applicants for fire and police positions, and now they are lucky to get 20. Also, for the first time since he's been with the City of Xenia, they recently lost two laborer positions to Greene County because they are receiving better benefits and \$6 more an hour. He and other staff has spent countless hours discussing these issues to determine the “why,” which could be cyclical issues, people leaving for purely financial reasons, generational changes, etc. Unfortunately, the younger generation is simply not interested in government jobs and they don't want to work weekends or holidays. Insurance and wages also continue to be issues, and the City is losing ground very quickly. Surrounding jurisdictions are adjusting their pay scales, and the City of Xenia isn't—except for cost of living increases. Either way, the City will pay either in salary/wages or in turnover/training costs/inexperience (mistakes), etc. City employees in professional positions are also in jeopardy, noting one employee has been offered \$10,000 more with better benefits and less responsibility. Yes, Council could say to go ahead and let the employee take that job. However, the City that advertised that job opening posted the position for a month and received only two applications. They need to consider how many applications Xenia would receive in comparison for the same job with 20% less pay and benefits and more responsibility. This non-union position is a unique professional position with a skill-set that is in high demand that cannot be filled by just anyone, and the employee is already topped-out in the pay range. The turnover issue is a growing problem that is creating morale concerns, operational concerns, etc.

General:

- Staffing—Attraction and Retention
- Compensation Plan Review and Update
- Civil Service System Overhaul
- Divesting Excess City-Owned Properties

Those present recessed for lunch from 12:10 to 12:40 p.m.

Mr. Merriman asked if anyone had any questions or had anything to add to any of the above lists. Councilman Urschel asked Mr. Merriman to expound upon the subject of divesting excess City-owned properties. Mr. Merriman said some City-owned properties are small parcels, some are tax foreclosures, some are underutilized parks, etc. They need to do a comprehensive review of these properties to determine what they need to keep and what could be marketable. He noted all transactions require Council approval, but the bottom line is he thinks they can all agreed that they would rather have properties in private hands as taxable properties rather than owned by the City of Xenia.

Brief discussion was held regarding Central State University, the Greene Regional Business Park, the West End shopping centers (new Aldi location, new Skyline location, etc.). Councilman Brannum asked if Council could be provided with a monthly report about economic development opportunities and projects. Mr. Brodsky said many times, he doesn't even know until permits are pulled. Mr. Merriman cautioned they needed to be careful ... until the agreement is signed, nothing is final, and they don't want to jeopardize any deal. Once it is public information, they can freely share the information.

Mr. Merriman asked each City Council member to identify his/her top five priorities, which can be specific things or “big picture” things. City Clerk Michelle Johnson and City Manager’s Secretary Karly French tabulated the following priorities:

1. Economic development/retail/industrial (business attraction, business growth/community development) (5 votes)
2. Building Inspection Services (3 votes)
3. XTS Redevelopment (3 votes)
4. Streets/Stormwater long-term plan / Infrastructure (water/sewer/roads/fiber) (3 votes)
5. City Relationships w/Township, County, Schools (3 votes)
6. Fire/EMS / Police over Dispatching / Public Safety / Fire Service Collaboration (work with Career Center to develop program for Fire training) (3 votes)
7. Staffing Attraction/Retention (2 votes)
8. X-plan Update / Community Involvement (2 votes)
9. Downtown Revitalization/Main Street Program
10. Increase City Revenue
11. Public Service Concerns
12. Landfill liability Insurance
13. Neighborhood Rehabilitation
14. Higher End Housing

The group discussed the priorities receiving the most votes, including the top four items enumerated above. Mr. Merriman said many items have a nexus with economic development, and he asked if Council wishes staff to be more aggressive in a different way. Mayor Mays said it is difficult to answer that question because she did not know what was being done right now. She agreed with Councilman Brannum that a monthly report would be helpful. Mr. Merriman said many things are being done on a regular basis including reaching out to community stakeholders, noting a lot of development gains are directly related to relationships, which is why they work to build and enhance those relationships. They participate in site visits as well. Mr. Brodsky noted that the initial site visits include Mr. Merriman and himself and possibly someone from Greene County. These companies and/or site selectors are looking for specific things on that first site visit. At last year’s roundtable events, he was told Xenia was doing everything right, but they “A” sites with a “B” location—many companies want a highway interchange nearby, and US 35 is a divided highway and not an interstate. Also, about 75% of companies/site selectors want rail. Further, education, housing, proximity to an airport, etc., are taken into consideration. Mr. Merriman said by the time he or Mr. Brodsky know that a company is looking at Xenia, they are already well into the evaluation process.

President Smith said the Xenia Towne Square project needs to be the top priority because there is a lot of money at stake. Mr. Merriman agreed—he and staff recognize the importance of this project, noting Council will review a property management agreement in an upcoming meeting. He feels this is a unique opportunity that they had to take advantage of, and they need to share the information with the public on the specifics of the project, funding resources, etc. They will work with a developer to determine what type of development will be good for that space and what the site plan will look like. The developer will also manage existing and future leasing arrangements.

The group discussed Building Inspection Services. Mr. Merriman said he has talked with his peers in other Greene County communities, and they all have received a growing number of complaints.

He said if the problem is the mindset of the people providing the service, they cannot change that. He believed it was time to start talking about the provision of building inspection services once again. Council directed Mr. Merriman to evaluate the current situation and potential options and report back in 90 days.

The group discussed infrastructure issues including the current stormwater fee structure (residential: \$2.50 per month, commercial/institutional/governmental: \$7.50 per month, and industrial: \$12.50 per month). Mr. Merriman said funding for streets is a huge priority, and a tax increase is necessary to make significant progress with streets, etc., because there's no money anywhere else. Otherwise, the forecast is bleak. Mr. Duke agreed. Only the City of Dayton receives less taxes per resident. He noted 15 years ago, the overall tax burden is less. He agreed that nobody likes to pay taxes, but he asked what an appropriate amount is to be taxed. Mr. Merriman added the residents are demanding services, new streets, etc., but they do not want to provide the necessary funding. Regarding the stormwater fee structure, it needs to be updated to the equivalent Residential Unit (ERU) method. Even if they just double the current fees, it would not be a burden for anyone or any business. He felt stormwater conveyance was just as important as crack sealing. Mayor Mays said if the stormwater rates are increased, she asked if that would generate enough revenue to fix all the catch basins. Mr. Merriman said yes, they would be able to gain some ground with the catch basins, but there are bigger "six-figure" projects that also need to be done.

4. ADJOURNMENT: Motion by Mayor Mays, seconded by Councilwoman Dean, to adjourn the Special Meeting at 3:04 p.m. No discussion followed. The Roll on this was the following:

Ayes: L. Dean, Scrivens, R. Dean, Brannum, Urschel, Mays, Smith

Nays: None motion carried.

Michelle D. Johnson
City Clerk

Wesley E. Smith
President, Xenia City Council