ELLENSBURG ENVIRONMENTAL COMMISSION

July 21, 2021 Regular Meeting
(5:15 p.m. to 6:24 p.m.)
Remote Meeting via Zoom

Members Present: Laura Busby, Kristine Steinkoenig, Andrea Sledge, Christina Wollman, Steve Luten, Daphne Condon

Members Absent: James Rivard(excused)

Also present: Nancy Lillquist, Council Liaison; Heidi Behrends Cerniway, City Manager; Stacey Henderson Historic Preservation Planner; and Laura Wilson, Planner.

Commissioner Wollman called the meeting to order at 5:15 p.m.

The Environmental Commission members introduced themselves.

AGENDA
Commissioner Luten moved to approve the agenda as presented. Commissioner Condon seconded the motion. The motion was passed with all in favor.

STAFF UPDATE/DISCUSSION ITEMS

Update for Helena Avenue Complete Streets Project

Josh Mattson, Assistant City Engineer, presented the design for the Helena Avenue Complete Streets project. The primary focus would be to finish the north side of Helena Avenue by installing sidewalks, stormwater buffer strips, street trees, and street lighting. The construction may begin late 2021 or early 2022. The project will also include grinding down and repaving street and adding new striping. The goal is to add a dedicated bicycle lane because Helena is on a designated bicycle route on the Active Transportation Plan. The proposal would eliminate street parking on the south side of Helena between Water Street and Walnut/Airport Road and eliminate street parking on the north side of the street from Walnut to the east to the termination of Helena. A letter was sent to the residents who would be impacted in an attempt to reach out to the residents. To help mitigate the removal of street parking, the city has offered to widen the resident's driveway access as well as potentially add a second driveway access to their property. Mr. Mattson had not received replies from all of the residents though, but of the responses, most were questions to clarify what the project was doing and what were the impacts. He noted there was expressed frustration that the parking would be lost but there were also concerns about the current amount of speeding in the area. The project would make the street safer and additional crosswalks would be installed. A transit shelter would be added to the bus stop. He compared this project to the Willow Street improvement. The bike lane would continue to the Palouse to Cascade Trail at the eastern end of Helena Avenue. The project would take between 1.5 to two months to complete.

SEPA Training

Stacey Henderson, Senior Planner, provided a brief explanation of her role reviewing SEPA's. Chairperson Wollman added that the question of what the purpose and responsibilities of the Environmental Commission had come up. After reviewing the history of the commission, it was noted that reviewing SEPA's wasn't a direct duty of the commission, but it did fit in with reviewing environmental projects. Her concern was how can the Environmental Commission's time be most useful to the city and if their comments and recommendations useful. She also asked how city staff has used the Environmental Commission's

recommendations and how can they be of greater use to the city staff.

Mrs. Henderson stated her goal was to clarify the SEPA process and ensure everyone was on the same page. SEPA stands for *State Environmental Policy Act.* She explained that SEPA's were a tool the state uses to help agency decision makers, applicants, and the public understand how an entire proposal or project would affect the environment. SEPA's could be used to modify or deny a proposal in order to avoid, reduce, or compensate for probable impacts. SEPAs are usually the first step in the permitting process. One challenge with the SEPA is that a project may not be completely developed in the planning which often leaves people wanting more information on the project, but the information isn't known at the time of the SEPA review. When proposed projects are submitted to the city, thresholds are used to determine if the project requires a SEPA. If a threshold is met, the city can be the lead agency. The city is tasked to determine if enough information was provided to determine if the project has a significant impact on the environment. The goal was to think about the overall impact of the project. Mrs. Henderson noted that the projects get reviewed for compliance with the other codes such as stormwater, fire code, and public works/street code.

Mrs. Henderson explained the SEPA checklist. The SEPA checklist was divided into different environmental categories such as earth, water, air, plants, animals, environmental health, and other categories. She explained that staff's role is to understand the basics of the impact the project has on all of the different categories and how the project will impact the overall environmental quality of the site. An overarching question she asks is what the proposal is on the parcel and is it a compatible use, zoning, surrounding properties and neighborhood, etc. She suggested the Environmental Commission use this approach when reviewing the categories within the checklist.

The last thing Mrs. Henderson reviewed was how staff processed SEPA checklists once submitted. She explained the 2 different review processes: optional process or standard process. The more basic projects were reviewed under the optional process. When the optional process is used, the proposal typically does not impact critical areas or have significant impact to the area. If the application is deemed to have the required information, a pre-threshold notification is issued and the application is sent to state and local agencies, city departments, a notice in the paper is published, and neighboring property owners of the proposed project site. Pre-threshold notifications state the expected threshold determination to be issued. Threshold determinations are often DNS, Determination of Non-Significance or MDNS, Mitigated Determination of Non-Significance, but a Determination of Significance is possible and could trigger further environmental studies. It is during this 21-day comment period the application receives comments on the project. Once the 21-day comment period is over, the applicant is sent all the comments and is required to respond to city staff regarding the comments. The applicant may agree, disagree, or provide further explanation regarding the project depending on what the comment was. Mrs. Henderson offered to provide the Environmental Commission with the applicant's response for future SEPAs. The second type of process was the Standard Process. This process was similar to the Optional process but has an additional comment period. The Standard Process is typically used when there are critical areas impacted by the proposal or there may be significant impacts to the area. The Standard Process has two different comment periods. Once the application is deemed to have the required information, a pre-threshold notification is issued first to agencies with jurisdiction. Some of the agencies are Fish and Wildlife, Department of Ecology, State Historic Preservation Office, city departments, and the Yakima Nation. Those agencies have 14 days to comment on the proposal. Examples of the comments may be requests for a cultural resource study, a wetland study, or a traffic impact analysis. After the 14-day comment period, the applicant is sent the comments and is required to respond. After the applicant's response has been received, the preliminary threshold determination is issued, a notice in the paper is published, neighboring property owners are notified, and the Environmental Commission can review and comment. The second comment period lasts 21 days.

Chairperson Wollman asked how staff decided what to require as mitigation. Her reasoning was because often the Environmental Commission has made recommendations that were beneficial to the environment but may not be mitigating specific environmental concerns. Mrs. Henderson noted that most of the conditions deal with mitigating the impact of the project. She said, in general, the point of the SEPA was to ask the question 'Does

this negatively impact the environment and how do they know?'. Staff can only require things in the determination that help them stay in compliance with the environmental code. Commissioner Luten agreed they should ensure the commission was serving the process and city council. He compared their involvement to a focus group that tested the idea of the project by asking the right questions to ensure things were not getting overlooked. He clarified that city staff was not asking the Environmental Commission for a professional opinion. Mrs. Henderson assuaged concerns that projects could still be vague at the SEPA review process, and the commission may not have questions or recommendations on some projects. Some Environmental Commission and public comments have been included in the threshold determination and at times the comments have triggered staff to ask the applicant for more information before the determination was issued. Chairperson Wollman relayed her own experience processing SEPAs. She agreed that it could be compared to a focus group. She noted that what the Environmental Commission does could also easily be done on their own. Instead, they come together as a group with their various knowledge and interests and look at the projects from an environmental perspective. Sometimes there aren't comments and sometimes there are long discussions, but there hasn't been much follow up after their recommendations are made. Mrs. Henderson and Mrs. Wilson offered to relay the applicant's response to comments and the SEPA determination to the Environmental Commission on future SEPAs.

There was a brief discussion on city code requirements and areas where recommendations could exceed those code requirements. An example was the recommendation of requiring a wetland mitigation plan on the Foster Subdivision off of Dry Creek Road. Chairperson Wollman noted that often the commission is looking at the SEPA but they are also reviewing the project in general and comments on that could also be appropriate. Commissioner Busby asked for feedback to see what has been incorporated into the determinations. She expressed interest in knowing the mitigation points that would assist her in knowing what comments are of value. Commissioner Busby also asked if there were any reference materials to review. Mrs. Henderson said she would try to provide suggestions or items for the commission to consider when reviewing future SEPA's.

The meeting adjourned at 6:24 pm.

Respectfully Submitted by
Laura Wilson
Recording Secretary (Drafted 7/22/2021)