



WORK SESSION of the Greenbelt City Council
Held Monday, November 8, 2000
For the purpose of meeting with representatives of newspapers and advertising papers
using freestanding news racks on City rights-of-way

Mayor Davis started the meeting at 8:15 p.m. It was held in the Multipurpose Room of the Community Center.

PRESENT WERE: Council members Edward V.J. Putens, Rodney M. Roberts, and Mayor Judith F. Davis.

STAFF PRESENT WERE: Michael P. McLaughlin, City Manager; Kathleen Gallagher, City Clerk; and Robert A. Manzi, City Solicitor.

ALSO PRESENT WERE: Sheldon Goldberg, Windsor Green; Andy Reinhart, the Thrifty Nickel; Tony Ragazzo, the Gazette Newspapers; Deji Olobatuyi, Employment News; Jamaal Jefferson, Employment Guide; Carol Melamed, the Washington Post; J.R. Steschner, Greater Washington Publishing; James Heyward, the Washington Times.

Mayor Davis gave a brief historical overview. By 1995, the City Council had become sufficiently concerned with the proliferation of news racks that it introduced an ordinance to regulate them. Subsequent discussion with representatives of the various newspapers resulted in the tabling of the ordinance in favor of an understanding that the papers would cooperate with the City voluntarily, and this worked for some time. Earlier this year, it became apparent that the news racks were once again getting out of hand. In September, Council introduced a revised ordinance for first reading. This time, the problem lies primarily with the free (that is, unlocked) advertising papers. The racks they are using are garish in color, and young people are strewing the papers—and sometimes the racks themselves—in the streets.

Mr. Manzi said that he and Ms. Melamed had talked a few times. He concurred with the problems identified by the Mayor and added that little judgment is being exercised in where the boxes are located. They are too close to corners, blocking handicapped access and pedestrian crosswalks, attached to stop signs and bus shelters, anchored and unanchored. In some places, the boxes are clumped and, in other places, they are scattered willy-nilly. He also mentioned that not one but two Washington Times boxes have recently appeared on City property in Roosevelt Center despite the fact that the papers are for sale at several stores at the Center.

Mr. Putens emphasized that Council members have received many complaints from residents, who begin to feel as though their neighborhoods are being trashed by the papers. He suggested this is not a way to build sales or good will.

Mr. McLaughlin then provided an armchair tour of the worst of the boxes via a photo display. He said these boxes represented roughly half the boxes in the City.

Mayor Davis added that although she realized the effect was not intentional, the "final insult" was a Prince George's Journal box that partially blocks the "Welcome to Greenbelt" sign as one enters the City on Southway.

Mr. Manzi said successful ordinances have been passed by cities when the legislation is content-neutral: that is, when the ordinances restrict themselves to such requirements as that boxes must be anchored, not more than a certain number in a location, at least a certain minimum distance from the corner, etc. He said he would prefer that the City be able to reach agreement with the papers on a voluntary basis but that we would proceed with the ordinance if need be.

Mr. Putens mentioned having seen some uniform boxes, later identified by Ms. Melamed as "corrals" that he and Mayor Davis had seen in another City and found to be unobjectionable. Ms. Melamed said they are used in Philadelphia by USA Today and, generally speaking, are considered an acceptable alternative by papers.

Ms. Melamed added she would like to take away from this meeting some general principles of what the City considers to be acceptable and unacceptable. It would be helpful, for example, if the City could specify the acceptable congregating areas, as well as those that are totally unacceptable. She disagreed with the idea that it is because papers are free that they are strewn about and noted the Gazette as a conspicuous exception. Mr. Ragazzo said one factor may be that the Gazette does not stuff its boxes full, so the quantities may be less appealing to kids. Ms. Melamed said she thought it was also a question of the heft and security of the rack itself.

The following items were agreed to:

Mr. Heyward said he would see that the Washington Times boxes are removed from the Roosevelt Center location.

Ms. Melamed said she would ask the Journal to move the box at the "Welcome" sign.

Mr. Olobatuyi and Mr. Jefferson said that, as a short-term measure, they would make a voluntary effort to get their boxes into compliance with the general principles that were expressed this evening and which they had worked with in Alexandria and some other locations: e.g., concentrating rather than scattering the boxes, lining them up, anchoring them, etc.,

After members of Council have had the opportunity to see what vendors are offering in the line of corrals at the National League of Cities meeting in December, the City will work with the papers to set up a prototype location, probably at Mandan and Hanover.

Ms. Melamed said she hopes the papers and the City can work with a voluntary agreement. She added there are parts of the ordinance she considers to be of dubious legality. Mr. Manzi said that did not surprise him. She also said she would like to involve Cathy Campbell, the Post's Circulation Director, and perhaps others in circulation and marketing, in the long-term plans.

Mr. Heyward said he liked the idea of the corrals and asked that the City please get in touch with him if there are any other specific problems the Times can deal with while we await the longer-term solutions.

The Mayor mentioned two informational items, and the meeting was adjourned at 9:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathleen Gallagher

City Clerk