

**ZONING BOARD OF ADJUSTMENT  
MEETING MINUTES  
Tuesday, July 20, 2021**

**Members Present:**

Tiffany Bell ..... Vice Chairman  
Isaac T. Henry III.....Member  
Linn Cardner..... Member  
J. David Derosier ..... Member  
Keith Longlois.....Alternate Member  
Mark Ferrell.....Alternate Member

**Members Absent:**

Ed Freiberg .....Chairman

**Council Members Present:**

None

**Staff Present:**

Kelvin Knauf, Director of Planning & Community Development  
Wendy Lloyd, Planning Secretary  
Jay Trahan, Assistant City Manager & EDC Director

Vice Chair Bell called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m.

**CITIZEN COMMENTS**

Chairman Freiberg asked for any comments. None were made.

**REGULAR BUSINESS - MEETING MINUTES**

Vice Chair Bell asked for motion to approve the June 15, 2021, meeting minutes

Member Henry motioned to approve

Member Cardner 2<sup>nd</sup>

**Vote: 5 - 0**

**Motion Carries**

**PUBLIC HEARING**

***Case No. 21:10.* Conduct a public hearing on a request from Kevin Hall representing Friends Helping A Friend, The Helping Hand Foundation for a Special Exception to construct and operate a commercial greenhouse at Abstract 59, Tract 016, N. Cordrey Addition also known as 200 W. Turrett Avenue.**

Vice Chair Bell opened the public hearing at 5:31 p.m.

Mr. Knauf stated before you is an application from Friends Helping A Friend and this is the old Orange Trade Days building, and they would like to build an indoor greenhouse and in that greenhouse to actually grow vegetables and some other items and then sell those to the public where the public could come and buy fresh vegetables. Member Cardner stated kind of like a farmer's market. Mr. Knauf stated yes kind of but it's an indoor greenhouse. Under the zoning ordinance it's permitted in this location only by special exception. That's why it's before you today because you would have to decide whether or not to grant the special exception to operate the indoor greenhouse at that location.

**Charles Smith – 2214 Redberry – Houston, TX:** Mr. Smith stated the greenhouse program we have a couple different versions of. We have a program we supply a greenhouse to a school and then we have a UTPHD education program for children at the school. Those programs vary depending on the age range of the kids, the primary years, the middle school years, and the high school years. The intent of that program and all of our programs when it comes to the greenhouse is self-help. I can give you something and then however long it lasts, you're out there looking for something else. In the schools what we are trying to do is expose them to the various technology related agriculture and how that will not only perpetuate the agricultural business but how they can take the things they learn in that greenhouse in some other trades, biology, genetics, computer science. All these greenhouses are automated and hydroponic and so they are a closed loop system greenhouse. One of the problems that we see in like communities is again a fresh vegetable scenario, but these things allow these kids to learn how to produce. In this greenhouse, we are hoping we will be able to put some vets in this thing and we can help them deal with various issues they are dealing with, bring them through that and they can operate the greenhouse, have a job, hopefully getting some self-help somewhere. You see that Turrett area and when I looked at the whole area, it seems to be highly concentrated in subsidized housing and I don't know this for a fact. I saw one of the Orange Housing Authority projects and the other properties that I see around there that look like a production product. What we're looking at doing is once we put this greenhouse up and try to give people an idea just how to take care of yourself. I'm a big advocate of the concept of no handouts meaning that you get up, you go to work every day and if you make \$5 an hour, you learn how to live on that \$5 an hour and not ask for anything. We make a substantial investment in a greenhouse the size we want to build, and this is 43,000 square foot but it will probably cost us 2 million to put up. We do have a model and we do believe that we can recoup that investment from the product that's produced. We have a wonderful ratio in that product production as it relates to say road crop. If I was growing the same area with a road crop, I'd get 1 crop. Here with the hydroponics, we'd get 4 crops. Also, the concept of the economics of it, trying to expose people to what it actually takes to manage this thing. We are there. We provide some help with the intent that somebody in that neighborhood is going to be the manager of that greenhouse. We are going to have to train them. We'll probably have to fire a few people and go through the routine but the concept of get up, come to work every day. The work in the greenhouse is not hard because it's hydroponic but you have to pay attention to it. You have to pay attention to the temperatures. You have to pay attention to the humidity. You have to make sure that the systems are working and the systems in the greenhouse are all controlled by an app. So, everything is pretty much automated, but you have to check for bugs. There's a lot of things that you need to do in there and hopefully the intent of this program is to help them develop that concept of I produce it, we eat it, and we can say we made it. That area is a food desert. Like I said, I don't know Orange all that well. I have some cousins who live here so I come here from time to time, but I don't know the city. But I

don't know where they buy their food at. When I drove through there, I don't think I even saw any convenience stores or corner stores in that area. In other metropolitan areas, usually if you don't have a major grocery retailer, you have small mom and pop convenience stores. They may be there, but we think that we can produce a fairly decent product. We can bring some viability back to a dead center. Other than it being made out of concrete, most cities would have had it torn down. We are just trying to provide a product. We were approached by the guy who owned it originally and we are willing to make the investment if you guys let us do it. Hopefully we will break even but I don't doubt we will. It's just going to take a little while. Our investment is almost 2 million bucks. The greenhouse is about a million eight. So, it's a big investment but we'd like to put it there and we can work with it. Like I said if we put one down for a school, it's \$350,000 and that's before we build the pad. We've got to have a pad that slopes 2 percent because water runs downhill. We think it would be something good for the neighborhood. The neighborhood needs something. You have an outside guy coming here and telling you need something for your neighborhood. I don't live here so I can't tell you what you need but I do believe that if we can get it there, we're not going to save everybody but if we can save 5 or 6 people or 5 or 6 kids really because we have to have people committed to work but the intent is hopefully some of those kids will get in there and see and participate. I just know from my childhood that we stayed busy when I say busy I mean my mother made sure we stayed busy, or we got switched. When you are a poor kid and you see poverty and grow up in poverty, you have nobody showing you how to get out of poverty. They need to see something that's successful. We believe if they can see something that is successful besides some of the repetitive cycle poverty issues, you never know maybe they'll go right here to Lamar and go to school. We would like to do other things on the site, but we haven't decided. There will be excess land there but if you have input and ideas, we do have some resources we can commit to things. When you have situations like that housing is always an issue, you have education issues, you have study issues. A lot of kids who are poor, don't know how to study. They can read and write but they don't know how to study. Maybe in the future we can do something with Lamar University here. I understand it's a teaching college but it's an evolution and you guys are the first real contact we've had with some sort of authoritative figure. We figured a greenhouse would be a pretty safe bet because you don't have to be a genius to work there. You just have to come every day and it's not complicated. We figured that could be our first step and we are doing this all over the country. The greenhouses are manufactured in Spain. If you all look at Almeria Spain, they were very successful in taking an area of Spain that was impoverished in the early 60's and they started building these greenhouses and now they are the breadbasket of Europe. 50 percent of every tomato in Europe is produced in Almeria. We are not saying we could do that here but if we can instill some entrepreneurship, some study habits and better work habits, we think we could be successful. If they have a farmer's market and we could find other sources of food to farm to table, it could be a good thing for the whole area. I know in Houston and other cities that farm to market is a big movement.

Member Derosier stated have you purchased the property or are you in the process. Mr. Smith stated we own the property. The foundation owns the property. I'm not sure how the title transfer was but I believe it was a purchase. I don't know if we bought it from Snyder or Charles Thomas maybe. We try to get that religious concept involved. If everybody came to the table and told us something different, we are going to try to work with your suggestions. We have a portfolio of real estate that is fairly extensive.

Alternate Member Longlois stated it says a portion of building to be demolished, is that for certain

you are going to destroy that portion of the structure. Mr. Smith stated there's a portion of the structure that looks like it had been burned at one time. When I walked through it, it needs to be torn down. Alternate member Longlois stated it was once used to store waste plastic and had a significant fire there. It says remove existing foundation. What would trigger destruction of the remainder of it or is that even a concept? Mr. Smith stated well we'd like to figure out what to do with the remainder. If you look at something as an economic asset and you have a structure. There's the storage going on but again you have a real estate asset, so we have to be accountable to our board about what we want to tear down and what we don't, and sometimes people aren't real reasonable about when they have a building and they put a value on it, and I go tear it down. I want to be as reasonable as possible. I have a pretty extensive concrete background. The building itself on the other section I saw is pretty solid. I saw one column in there that was bad but the section at the far end needs to come down. My idea on that is that I need to break the slab on the west end and take that building down and bring in a crusher and use that crushed material to build a base. Do you have any issues with it? Alternate member Longlois stated its just unsightly. Mr. Smith stated again if you guys have a suggestion and its economically viable, we are open to it. Mr. Knauf stated is repairing the parking lot part of your 2 million investments. There's a lot of cracks. Mr. Smith stated some of that will be taken out and some won't. We'll probably put the weed eater on it. Again, that's part of the maintenance and operations of it. I've seen a lot of sites in the last 7 or 8 months and we try to go in and get blithe property. This property was pretty clean. There's some things that need to be cleaned up but overall, it's pretty clean compared to stuff I've seen around the country. Yeah there's grass and stuff growing between the sidewalks and whatnot and something else you have an asset that is pretty much 100 percent paved, the more paving you take out and let's say you have cars, and you have people in mud and dirt and that's going to create another problem. We want to use our best judgement on what we remove and what we don't remove simply because I've done things where I've gone in and ripped it all out and then guess what we're dealing with. Repaving at \$7.50/8.00 a square foot for concrete before you stabilize. It can get expensive quick. We don't have endless pockets. The biggest thing I would see there would be to rehab that parking lot and one of the best ways is to put the weed eater on it and put some Round-up on it to kill all the weeds and maybe seal coat that when I get done. Mr. Knauf stated maybe you could put in some landscaped islands to just dress the whole thing up. Mr. Smith stated we could do that. We don't want something that's ugly so there's some things we can do. When I say preserve the asset that is negative response to doing things like that. We take the value of the asset and use it as best we can and again we have a board we have to account to for money to be spent. We have to be reasonable. The greenhouse itself is about \$1.4/1.5 million before utilities and this greenhouse will have electric utilities. That doesn't include the necessary demolition. The scope of the project is fairly large.

Member Henry stated if you get the approval then what's the timeline you're looking at. Mr. Smith stated we own the greenhouse. We have one that is not assembled. I think there's another one on the ship. I play developer, architect, engineer and a variety of things and I do that because of my real estate background. So, I don't want to load that site up with greenhouses. There's excess land, there has to be excess or other uses. So, we want to put a large greenhouse there. We have one. I don't know what your permitting process is or how long it takes but if you all say yes we can get the project going.

Alternate Member Longlois stated best case scenario could you have it running this spring. Mr. Smith stated yes. We also used what we call training labor. We can bring in professional steel

erector. These things aren't anything super complicated. The most complicated thing is a bicycle chain on a rack that will turn and open the louvres on the roof. The idea is to give the opportunity to the people that need it most. So, a job that should be built in 4 weeks may take 3 months.

Member Derosier stated so you think you might have something finished this calendar year. Mr. Smith stated yes if you all tell me I can do it, we will get it up. Like I said, I have a greenhouse available.

Alternate Member Longlois stated I like it on the surface, yet I don't want to see something come to this property, get started and stall and then 3 years down the road we have a stalled project. Mr. Smith stated that won't happen. We have to recoup our investment and I'm not going to lose my job and like I said I have a long construction history. I've owned a construction company for 35 years. I've been in real estate and grew up in the real estate business. I can't afford not to get my product produced. So, no it's not going to stall. We don't get the resources we get if we don't finish things.

**Rick Brazelton – 515 N. Sam Houston Pkwy, Houston, TX:** Mr. Brazelton stated we are invested in Orange, Texas and we want to be successful.

Mr. Smith stated we are outsiders. We don't live here and like I said I got some cousins that are my age that grew up here and live here. All I know about Orange, is coming out here and having fun with my cousins and getting a whooping cause we did something we weren't supposed to do. But every project that I have personally worked on, and I have done some big ones and if you go to Houston and go to some basketball games and things like that, you're walking on my concrete. At one time I was the largest minority construction contractor in this country. I sold that business in '03 and have been developing since then. Put it this way, we start it, we will finish it.

Vice Chair Bell asked for any other discussion. None was made.

Vice Chair Bell closed the public hearing at 5:56 p.m.

## **DISCUSSION/ACTION**

***Case No. 21:10. Consider a request from Kevin Hall representing Friends Helping A Friend, the Helping Hand Foundation for a Special Exception to construct and operate a commercial greenhouse at Abstract 59, Tract 016, N. Cordrey Addition also known as 200 W. Turrett Avenue.***

Member Derosier stated as presented I don't see any major problems. It's a good use for the site and the intentions appear to be good. We are hoping that financially you're stable enough. I think it's a big improvement and a good use of the property.

Mr. Knauf stated we did send out letters to people within 300 feet advising them of the request for the Special Exception and the public hearing tonight. We received no response at all.

Alternate Member Longlois stated this is consistent with other industries we have in Orange like Saxon Becnel off 105. They're a commercial citrus grower. This is very similar but not exactly

what they do. Stark Foundation also does this sort of work also so this dovetails in with 2 others that I am aware of here in town now. As far as skill set, in theory someone could come here and learn a skill set and take that skill set to other places in Orange. To me that's a positive.

Member Cardner stated the whole thing is an improvement. I've been here long enough; I remember when wine gardens and all these other things and it was thriving and then suddenly we've got this. This is an eyesore especially if you come off I-10 onto Simmons Drive. I find it reprehensible frankly, so I think that as presented this is super. I think it's kind of a blessing to us if you want me to get into my religious thing. Mr. Brazelton stated that's what we are all about.

Mr. Knauf stated I could also see some spillover effects from when we have events. People come in for the events and drive by here and see this and say let's just see what they've got and stop and buy some fruit or vegetables or whatever. It's kind of complimentary to the events. Mr. Brazelton stated a lot of times we sell to the school districts and the college to help them reduce some of their costs. Mr. Smith stated in Florida we have a contract with Miami-Dade Hospital. So that product that's produced in those greenhouses goes to Miami-Dade Hospital and what that does is that it evens out the commodity factor. My family we were in real estate, and we farmed. My mother grew up in Louisiana in St. Landry's Parish and we still farm that. We put this past spring we put 7200 acres of production of soybean mostly. So, I'm very familiar with that commodity. I'm very familiar with the concept of storing product or having that product that's level, a fall product that you can buy in the winter that is the same price as it is in the fall. That's where I talk about the economics of it. If you cannot teach people to be financially independent and that doesn't mean that you have to be the king of the stock market. You could have a lawnmowing business. If we can teach a few of these concepts to people, maybe somebody in that area will be able to find some independence and step up or step away from subsidized housing and get on their own.

Vice Chair Bell stated I don't have anything because everything I wrote he covered. I'm good.

Vice Chair Bell asked for any other discussion. None was made.

Member Henry motioned to approve special exception

Member Cardner 2<sup>nd</sup>

**Vote: 5 - 0**

**Motion Carries**

Member Henry motioned to adjourn

Alternate Member Longlois 2<sup>nd</sup>

**Vice Chair Bell adjourned the meeting at 6:06 p.m.**