

Developers decry delays by city

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“Once a process takes longer, it just costs more,” Norton said. “Time is money.”

COMMUNICATION CONCERNS?

Flint Drake, an attorney at Drake Law Firm, P.C., said he has represented many businesses and developers who have worked with the city, and he often hears the same complaints of poor communication from city staff and a feeling that the city does not adhere to agreements it makes with developers.

“Either they don’t hear back at all, developers and businesses, or they don’t hear back timely, or they don’t hear back with a tone that they care for,” Drake said.

He declined to name specific instances experienced by his clients, citing attorney-client confidentiality.

An email Drake sent to city officials that was obtained by the TH describes an instance in which an unnamed client had a lease agreement requiring the city to take “maintenance action,” but that action ultimately was not taken.

“The city refused to abide by the contract, and the client was spending tens of thousands of dollars to carry out the work that was to have been performed by the city,” Drake’s email stated. “The client approached the city and asked that it at least contribute to the cost. The client was told, ‘Sue us and see how that goes.’”

The city sends customer satisfaction surveys to anyone who submits an application to the Planning Services Department, seeking assessments on city staff friendliness, timeliness, expertise and consistency in informing applicants on the approval process.

From the city’s fiscal year 2007 to fiscal year 2022, the planning services department received an average of 12 surveys every year and scored on average 95% approval or above in all categories.

However, Wernimont said the surveys are not mandatory, and the city does not keep a record of the percentage of applicants that complete them.

Gronen said many business owners and developers do not reach out directly to City Council members out of fear of retaliation by city staff. Several of the signatories to the May 10 letter who declined to speak to the TH said they feared retaliation by the city if they were to speak publicly.

“Let’s acknowledge that there is a fear of reprisal by approaching the elected officials,” Gronen said. “It’s a common thing that I run into. People are afraid to approach their elected officials and have robust conversations.”

Van Milligen said he is unaware of any incidents of reprisal by city staff and that any form of retaliation is not condoned by the city.

“I don’t condone it, and I wouldn’t do it,” Van Milligen said. “If the perception is that



Officials at A. Y. McDonald Mfg. Co. said the company didn’t consider Dubuque for its new foundry because of a perceived lack of support from the city.

happens, I would like to help change that perception.”

City Council Member Katy Wethal said she was unaware of the business community’s frustrations until she received the emails and letters sent to council members in April and May. She since has reached out to many business owners to let them know that she wants to hear their concerns.

“I can’t have an understanding unless there is communication,” Wethal said. “My door is always open, and my intention is to lead with listening.”

City Council Member Laura Roussell said she was unaware some business owners feared reaching out to the council for fear of retaliation and that she wants to hear more specifics from the business community on what aspects of city policy need to be improved.

“It’s important for us to work with our developers,” Roussell said. “We of course also have to balance the needs

DAVE KETTERING • Telegraph Herald

of the community and the responsibilities of representing the taxpayers.”

‘COMMITTED TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT’

Since the letters were sent to City Council, local business owners and developers have expressed optimism about the city’s response and efforts to make changes to policy.

Gronen said he and other business owners and developers have begun holding discussions with city officials on how to improve the relationship between city staff and business leaders.

On June 1, Van Milligen issued an official response to Gronen’s April 26 letter and addressed its suggested action steps.

Van Milligen’s letter states that the City Council plans to hold a work session June 26 to discuss economic development and that a previously disbanded “developers roundtable” organized by city staff will be

reimplemented. He wrote that he intends to participate in those meetings.

Speaking with the TH, Van Milligen said the previous iteration of the roundtable was abandoned by the city after it received little interest from local businesses and developers.

“It just sort of drifted away,” he said.

Van Milligen also stated in his letter to Gronen that the city leaders intend to improve the work of the city’s design review team, which meets with developers who submit plans for projects to address any issues city staff may identify.

“These meetings are intended to be problem solving opportunities,” Van Milligen stated in his letter. “It is clear that based on your comments this is not working successfully. We will work to improve the results of the meetings.”

Van Milligen stressed that the city is taking the letters and emails submitted to the city seriously.

“I as an individual and our organizations welcome constructive criticism because that is the only way to get better,” he said. “We are committed to continuous improvement.”

His letter also pointed to the city’s successes over the years reaching agreements with developers, noting that negotiations often are difficult “in that neither party ends up with their original position.”

“The city would like to see every project work, but realizes while trying to make that happen the city must not create

undue taxpayer risk, dispose of important community assets or commit taxpayer resources that are needed to both keep down taxpayer costs and accomplish the other costly responsibilities of the city,” Van Milligen wrote. “I do not need to go through the many project successes in Dubuque as you (Gronen) are well aware of them, in fact, you were part of several of them.”

A memo Van Milligen sent last month to officials in the city’s economic development, housing, planning services and engineering departments stated that the city has committed about \$31 million since 2016 for projects aimed at job creation and development of commercial properties.

The memo also states that programs supporting housing creation brought \$42 million in grant funds to downtown redevelopment and housing creation in the past five years, along with \$34 million in tax increment financing grants.

Still, Van Milligen acknowledged in his June 1 letter a responsibility to continue learning “how to do things better.”

Though the process is in its early stages, Gronen and other developers and business owners said efforts toward addressing their issues with the city appear to be moving in the right direction.

“I had a meeting with Van Milligen that was very positive,” said Mike Portzen, founder and president of Portzen Construction. “It seems like things are starting to improve.”

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