

Harmony EDA Minutes

March 20, 2014
7:30 AM

Community Center
Council Room

Present: Chris Skaalen, Steve Donney, Deb Swenson, Andy Batstone, and Kerry Kingsley

Also present: Ralph Beaström, Emily Ellis, Melissa Vander Plaas, Jill Fishbaugher, Steve Cremer, Roxanne Johnson, Umbelina Cremer, Jeremy Kruegel, Marilyn Trouten, Rebecca Rumsey, DNR Representative, Jerome Illg, and Chris Giesen

The special meeting was called to order at 7:36 AM by Chris Skaalen

Review Visitor's Center Purchase Offer

Batstone entered the meeting at 7:41 AM.

Giesen gave background on an offer received to purchase the Visitor's Center property for the construction of a Dollar General store. The offer was to the City of Harmony, in the amount of \$25,000 from The Overland Group. Giesen explained that they had been looking at property in the industrial park and several other locations along Highway 52, but after running into issues at each potential site they inquired about the Visitor's Center location. Consensus of the board was that this would not be a good deal.

Several members of the public, the Harmony Area Chamber of Commerce, the Harmony Historical Society, and a representative from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources were all in attendance and spoke to the issue. All were opposed because it would detract from a viable community space and not be a good fit with the neighborhood. More comments from citizens are attached.

The board discussed at length amongst themselves and with the public in attendance. Motion by Donney, second by Swenson to recommend to the Harmony City Council that they decline the offer from The Overland Group. Motion carried unanimously.

Adjournment

Skaalen adjourned the meeting at 8:00 AM.

Harmony Area Historical Society (HAHS) initial thoughts/concerns relative to proposed offer to purchase and redevelop the Visitor's Center area for a Dollar General Store.

Some of our initial concerns:

We have a beautiful main street with many historical buildings including the Village Green historical buildings. The entrance to our main street reflects the history on Harmony and the City should be vested in preserving our historical image. The presence of a Dollar Store at this location would significantly impact the historical image at the entrance to Main Avenue. We are concerned about a "big box store" (& big yellow signage) on our main street from a historical viewpoint. We need to preserve the historic integrity of our main street.

Relocation of HAHS operations and displays would significantly impact the effectiveness of our efforts. HAHS has worked hard with the Chamber & Tourism Committee to create interpretive displays at the Visitor Center tied to the Karst Interpretive Site on the Bike Trail & HOBO Camp to create an inviting environment for local residents and visitors to Harmony. HAHS continues to explore additional display material that would enhance the Historical impression of Harmony at the Visitor Center.

We feel that the City should preserve the beautiful green space at the Visitor Center that is tied to the trail and is essential in supporting events such as Harmony Hustle (4th of July event), Taste of the Trail (September) and hopefully Rockin Fossil Fest in the future. Events in this space are supported by parking available at the trailhead lot and availability of accessible restrooms at the Visitor Center. Locating a Dollar General Store at this location would disconnect the trail from our main street.

Additional comments received:

The significance of the tourist industry to the well being of Harmony can not be overstated. To locate a Dollar General store at that location would be an insult to the people, organizations and businesses that have worked so diligently over the years to attract people from all over the world to our community and now we expect to build on those efforts by greeting visitors at our front door with a Dollar General store. We all are aware of the appearance of such stores and the Harmony Visitors Center is not an appropriate location for that business. This store would be a first impression, and lasting impression, visitors would take away from their visit to our community.

My initial thought is wow what a loss of great community space that I think any other community is jealous of, and always thinking of developing... Especially the trail towns.

I don't think the city of Harmony is using that space to its potential and should seriously think about putting a little money into that building to bring more people into Harmony.

Dollar General wouldn't "fit" there. Build a Dollar General out by Oak Meadow.

My thoughts mirror the HAHS and I just can't believe that this is a vision that a majority of tax payers would agree with.

My concerns include:

- How traffic could possibly be handled at that spot. It is a very short distance to the intersection with 52 and with a potentially high traffic business having cars pulling in and out of that area seems like it could cause some serious issues. Not to mention the semi-traffic already there from Harmony Ag but how would Dollar General's semis handle that location as well.
- The general aesthetics of our Main Ave would be severely compromised. I can't even picture in my mind how this would look and what kind of feel it would give our downtown area.
- It would seriously compromise our trailhead and the associated activities that occur there. Would we just not have one anymore? No public restrooms available to our visitors?
- I cannot determine a plausible location for our visitor center that would be easy to find and easy to access to continue to promote our community if this location is no longer available.
- I think not only from the competition Dollar General would bring but that location would undermine our downtown viability. I think it would hinder visitors from exploring our downtown area if that is the entrance to our business district.
- Based on the items that were discussed at the DMC idea meeting this would be a huge departure from the ideas and goals discussed at that meeting. Those discussions I believe were highly centered around having an available and active visitor center. If we are trying to use DMC as a plausible base to attract people from this would be a major step backward in accomplishing those goals in my opinion.
- Not based on the location alone but the idea as a whole, is this even a company that the community is supportive of our representatives courting to become a part of our community. I know that you can't stop a business from coming to town but based on

information available to me it seems we are bordering on bending over backward to get them here.

- What does this business mean to us as a community? # of jobs, commitment to the community, property tax base, etc. Our local businesses are so supportive will Dollar General be supportive or will they hinder our efforts by creating a hardship for our existing businesses which will hinder the support they are able to provide.

I am sure there are more issues that I have that I am unable to recall at the moment. My biggest issue is this proposed location. Too many unanswered questions at this point and I don't feel there is enough thought and concern being offered by the parties in charge to even have pursued this option to this point. They got the idea to buy this area from someone and that means that we don't have people that are focused on the bigger goals of this community.

Over the past twenty years many organizations, including the city, has seen a need and worked hard to develop this space into a beautiful and welcoming environment for residents and visitors alike; Trail Committee, Tourism Committee, Lions, Historical Society, DNR as well as many individuals and businesses. One main reasons we have owned and operated businesses in Harmony is our small town look and feel, this proposal would be counterproductive to the vision of these efforts.