**Southeast Urbana Neighborhood Association Annual Meeting**

**Wednesday, May 21, 2014 7 – 9 PM**

**Yankee Ridge School Gymnasium**

**Present:** 56 signed in. Some latecomers did not sign in.

**SUNA Business Meeting**

Kathy Wallig called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm.

She introduced the current Steering Committee members.

The Financial Report was presented and accepted. Kathy reminded folks that it shows how dues collected are used.

The slate of volunteers for Coordinators and Steering Committee members for 2014-2015 was presented and unanimously approved by voice vote as follows:

**Coordinators**: Pauline Mak, Theresa Michelson, Kathy Wallig

**Steering Committee members**: Eileen Kohen, Sarah McDougal, Marilyn Michals, Neil Parthun, Barak Rosenshine, Peggy Staske, Nancy Uchtmann.

An update on SUNA’s neighborhood involvement followed. SUNA had a quiet year, continuing to attend meetings of the Neighborhood Safety Task Force and the Philo Road Business Group, and to clean up Colorado Avenue between Philo Road and Anderson. It promotes Block Parties and Neighborhood Watch Groups as ways for neighbors to interact with each other. In addition to the two Listservs, maintaining the new Website and creating a Facebook page have provided additional ways of keeping in touch with members.

At 7:10 the business meeting ended. Remarks by elected and appointed city officials followed.

**Mayor Laurel Prussing** brought her own Real Estate Tax Bill to make the point that there was a zero increase in the city’s tax rate. She explained that the overall property tax increase resulted from other taxing bodies such as the School District and the Park District, deciding to raise their tax rates to deal with the impact of the ‘Carle effect’ created by the state law which exempted hospitals from paying property taxes for providing charity care. She added that with 83 percent of Carle properties located in Urbana, the city is unduly burdened by the loss of taxes, and its 41,000 taxpayers bear a disproportionate share of providing charity care for the 1.2 million people served by Carle over a widespread area beyond Urbana.

The Mayor indicated that the city has a game plan to bring down Urbana’s property tax rate to Champaign’s level. That goal requires the city to add $120 million of assessed value to its tax rolls. If the lawsuit filed by the city challenging the constitutionality of the state law that exempts Carle from paying property taxes, were successful, Carle and Presence would together add back $90 million in taxable property. The recently approved construction of the student apartment complex on University Avenue is expected to add $9.7 million. These additions would get the city close to $100 million. The remaining $20 million is seen as attainable and the goal to bring Urbana’s tax rate in line with Champaign’s as achievable.

**Ward 7 Alderwoman Diane Marlin** referred to two specific items impacting SUNA:

1. The Windsor Road reconstruction from Philo Road to Race Street is to finally get underway. The $5 million cost of the project is to be shared by the state and the city.
2. Issues of maintenance and crime related to rental properties are ongoing in view of the fact that rental properties make up two thirds of property in Urbana. She said the new system of automatic ticketing and increased fines, in effect for 6 months, was working well as a deterrent. In the first 3 months, $7,000 in fines were collected from one landlord. She described the Silver Street properties as a blight on the neighborhood.

She thanked the police, fire and public works departments for their team support, noted her involvement as city council representative in economic development and Market at the Square, and stated her appreciation of residents’ emails and input.

**Urbana Police Chief Pat Connolly** introduced other members of his department who were present: Deputy Chief Sylvia Morgan, Lieutenants Seraphim (Detective Branch), Surles (North District Commander and Metro Squad Leader), and Fitzgerald (South District Commander). He repeated his annual message to prevent “crimes of invitation”, especially ‘smash and grab’ motor vehicle burglaries and home burglaries which can be avoided by locking car doors and turning on home lights. He mentioned that electronic items and women’s purses are the main articles taken from vehicles. He said his department is accessible to the public and encouraged residents to report out-of-the-ordinary activity in the neighborhood.

**Lt. Bob Fitzgerald** reported there was an uptick in crime activity in Southeast Urbana for the first quarter of the year, concentrated in the areas of Silver and Vawter Streets and S. Philo Road. Extra car patrols and bike patrols are assigned to that area. He is working with apartment owners to fix problems. He said 80 percent of the city’s Neighborhood Watch Groups are located within SUNA and a new group was recently added in SUNA. He will continue to have quarterly meetings with the Philo Road Business Group and will focus on revitalizing the group and increasing attendance by business owners. He mentioned a “Walk” to take place on July 15, from 5 to 7 pm, in Southeast Urbana and Prairie School neighborhoods. Volunteers will be going door-to-door to deliver school readiness information. *( SUNA* *Note: Diane Marlin will have further* *information on the “Walk” for SUNA later*.)

**Economic Development Director Libby Tyler** noted that her work encompasses economic development, city planning, and housing inspection. She works closely with Urbana businesses, organizes tours to showcase the city’s neighborhoods, and promotes events and services the city has to offer through “All About U”, a monthly TV talk show. She said sales activity is on the uptick. Projects such as the new Birkey’s Farm Store on Route 130, the Clark-Lindsey villas under construction, Verdant Prairies 50 unit residential complex approved for development on the former Windsor pool site, the expanding Market at the Square, and increased occupancy of downtown buildings will contribute to growing the ciy’s tax base.

On the problems with apartment buildings and their owners, she indicated that steps have been taken to improve the situation. These include improved ordinances, increase in rental regulations, hiring a code enforcement officer, and keeping condemned apartments unoccupied. She provided contact information for reporting property related problems and concerns.

**Public Works Director Bill Gray** described upcoming projects. Foremost among them is the reconstruction of Windsor Road from Philo Road to Race Street. After explaining the need for rebuilding, he highlighted the proposed improvements –a new pavement with better drainage off the surface, a wider raised green median, and signal lights at Windsor and Race intersection. The pavement at the approaches from Meijer and the Pines to the intersection of Philo Road and Windsor Road will also be improved. Some closure and disruption may occur during that phase of the work. The project is funded fifty percent by the state with the remainder to come from selling $2.8 million worth of municipal bonds to be paid off over 10 years by the local Motor Fuel Tax. Bidding is to open in late June for work to begin by Labor Day and completed by Fall 2015. During the reconstruction one lane of traffic in both directions is expected to remain open.

Another project to start soon is the installation of new traffic signals at Florida Ave. and Philo Road to upgrade the system to allow for longer crossing time. This is to be completed by early Fall.

In the SUNA area underground sewer lining work will be done on Meadow Drive, at Cureton and Mumford, and on Montclair. Residents on those streets will be notified ahead of the work.

**Urbana Park District Executive Director Tim Bartlett** listed park projects at 3 levels. At the regional level, new bike trails in the Kickapoo Trail system will be laid out. At the community level, promotion of Crystal Lake Aquatic Center will continue. In the SUNA area, improvements will be made to Sunnycrest Tot Lot and to the Japanese Garden and landscaping at CrestviewPark. Wheatfield Park will get a new playground, picnic tables and drinking fountains, and will have a name change from Wheatfield Park to Larson Park, in honor of retired Park Commissioner Bruce Larson.

He encouraged people to call the Park District if they have concerns about park safety.

At 7:55 Questions and Comments followed.

For the sake of coherence, questions, comments and answers are grouped together by topic.

School Board representation

It was noted that a School Board representative was not among the official speakers present to communicate with constituents. Kathy Wallig clarified that School Board members are not allowed to speak publicly on official policy. Only an appointed official can do so. She said an effort will be made to request a speaker from the School District for the 2015 Annual Meeting.

Carle and other tax exempted properties

Q. What is the status of the court case against Carle? Mayor Prussing said by mid June the case will go to the local Circuit Court, then to the Appellate Court, finally to the Illinois Supreme Court.

Q. Does the exemption also apply to the clinics? Yes, the Mayor said. Based on the amount of charity care they are said to provide, they pay no property taxes at all.

Q. How much of Urbana property is tax exempted? Libby Tyler said anywhere between 28 percent to 50 percent of all property in Urbana is tax exempt. City officials are studying the situation to get at the exact number.

Q. What does the University contribute in lieu of taxes? Libby said it used to give an amount to the School District for students from Orchard Downs, but it no longer contributes any financial aid.

Public Works

There was objection to the short notice given to inform the public of the Open House on the Windsor Road project.

Some discontent was expressed that bike lanes took away parking spaces and in some cases caused people to have to park some distance from where they live. Some lane markings are confusing and create safety hazards for both drivers and bikers.

There was support for installing traffic lights at the Windsor Road – Race Street intersection.

Traffic congestion at certain times of the day at the intersection of Pennsylvania Ave. and Lincoln Ave. was described and blamed on the timing of signals which did not take into consideration the length of time it took for the extended buses to make a turn. Not having turn signals also creates a long wait period and a very short turn opportunity, all of which add to the congestion.

Apartment issues

The condemned apartments on Silver Street were the focus of numerous questions and comments. Mayor Prussing pointed out that ordinances had been changed and steps taken to deal with landlord issues, from first giving notice to fix violations within a set time limit, to condemning buildingsrepeated that and exacting fines, and finally to revoking building permits. Both the Mayor and Libby Tyler emphasized that they are looking at rezoning the area to reduce density. Libby added that she will be studying the zoning pattern and talking to residents to include them in planning changes for the neighborhood.

A member of the audience was of the opinion to “get rid” of the apartments on Silver St.

She was “afraid” to sit out or open her windows. She said the area was “going downhill” and “realtors blame the mayor” for this situation. Mayor Prussing repeated that the building permits for those apartments had been revoked and argued that the city had to pursue a legal strategy to undo decades of existing problems. She pointed out that “landlords have rights, and you can’t just go in and bulldoze the place”. She referred to the fact that the problematic Urbana town homes are now gone, and said she is “determined to bring back the neighborhood”. Libby added that the legal process takes time, but discussion is ongoing.

Another comment suggested a moratorium on construction in Southeast Urbana. Mayor Prussing repeated her case for a change in zoning to reduce density as the preferred approach.

Diane Marlin stated her position is to “tear down” the apartments, “reduce density”, and to “always stand with citizens against slumlords”.

Expanding the tax base

The question was, other than residential and retail projects, what new industries are expected to grow the tax base. Libby listed ongoing projects and others to come:

~ opening up access to North Lincoln Avenue with the construction of Olympian Drive

and business development along it,

~ a road project in North Urbana to serve proposed Frasca expansion,

~ renovations of Main Street buildings now account for the highest occupancy rate in

downtown Urbana,

~ commercial development in the east campus area near Krannert Center and in Lincoln

Square,

~ completion of Birkey’s and expected future development along High Cross Road.

She remarked that economic growth in the city has been balanced and smart, based on infill development and not on sprawl. For this reason growth in Urbana is rated among the least sprawling in the country.

Urbana’s Downtown Post Office

A question had to with the downtown post office being moved to the N. Neil postal facility. Mayor Prussing said no such move is planned.

At 8:35 pm. the meeting was adjourned.

June 4, 2014