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Dan Hoffman:

We're here to talk with Mike Ruddy about planning and development. So let's go ahead and ... He's kind of already sitting here. Let's go ahead and start that right now.

Hello and welcome to the City Works portion of the podcast of the Rouse Review. We kind of call it City Works just because it's kind of a separate part. If you didn't listen to the first part, then-

Amy Simmons:

Shame on you.

Dan Hoffman:

Shame on you. In the first part, we just covered what's happening tomorrow at the Council meeting, for the most part, and a few things around town. Today we are talking to one of the newest members of our senior management team, Mike Ruddy. Welcome, Mike.

Mike Ruddy:

Thank you for having me.

Dan Hoffman:

Yes. Mike is our new Director of Community Development. So for those of you who don't know what that is, which is probably most of you, here in Winchester, that is the person in charge of planning and zoning and inspections and now housing. And Mike just joined us, it's now been a month? Three weeks?

Mike Ruddy:

Four weeks.

Dan Hoffman:

Four weeks. One month on the job. So he oversees some of the folks I think that we might have had on before. I know we've talked about blight, we had Dave Parker on before, so he oversees Dave. And have we had Alfredo on?

Amy Simmons:

No, but Tim used to do our history lessons.

Dan Hoffman:

Oh yeah, yeah.

Amy Simmons:

A long time ago.

Dan Hoffman:

We've had Tim on at least once. So he oversees Tim Youmans, our Planning Director. And he comes to us most recently from Leesburg, but Mike, why don't you go introduce yourself real quick.

Mike Ruddy:

Yeah, I'm most recently from Leesburg, where I was the Assistant Zoning Administrator, but for a long time before then over at Frederick County. Most recently there as the Director of Planning and Development. That's where I've been working, but of course I live here in the Winchester, Frederick County area. So I'm extremely familiar with the community. I lived here for quite a while now. My accent is gradually changing.

Dan Hoffman:

I was about to say, for those of you-

Mike Ruddy:

To reflect the Winchester accent.

Dan Hoffman:

For those of you who aren't familiar with a Frederick County accent, this is what someone from Frederick County, Virginia, sounds like. If you've never been to Frederick County, Virginia, just take my word for it, everyone there sounds British.

Amy Simmons:

Yeah, if only, right?

Dan Hoffman:

Exactly.

Mike Ruddy:

So we're gradually converting, but yes, I have a lot of experience working in the community and living in the community and raising a family here in the community.

Dan Hoffman:

Absolutely.

Amy Simmons:

But we got to cover where you are originally from with that accent.

Mike Ruddy:

I'm originally from Nottingham, England. And I've just been over there recently to visit the family, so the accent gets a little thicker when you visit.

Dan Hoffman:

Oh yeah. Just like when I go home, South Carolina and I have a couple of beers with my buddies. Oh, it comes back.

Amy Simmons:

Yep.

Dan Hoffman:

So real quick, before we talk about housing, is there a castle in Nottingham?

Mike Ruddy:

There is.

Dan Hoffman:

Oh, there is?

Mike Ruddy:

Nottingham Castle. And right underneath it is the oldest in England supposedly, the Trip to Jerusalem.

Dan Hoffman:

Oh, wow. That's the name of the inn?

Mike Ruddy:

It is. Where they all used to congregate before they went on the crusades.

Dan Hoffman:

Oh wow.

Mike Ruddy:

At least that's the legend. Along with all of the other legends of the city, the least of which of course is Robin Hood.

Dan Hoffman:

Yes. That's why.

Mike Ruddy:

There is Nottingham Castle. The original gatehouse still stands, the current castle is probably a little younger, from the 1500s.

Dan Hoffman:

Not from Robin Hood times?

Mike Ruddy:

Not from Robin Hood times.

Dan Hoffman:

Okay. Now I'm going to resist the urge ... I'm about to go down a deep-

Amy Simmons:

Yes, deep hole.

Mike Ruddy:

There is a Robin Hood Circle here in Frederick County, just out west of Winchester.

Dan Hoffman:

Was that your doing?

Mike Ruddy:

No, no.

Amy Simmons:

It would be meant to be, though.

Dan Hoffman:

Exactly. Okay. So, let's stay focused here because I could easily go down to rabbit hole. So you've been with the City now for a month. Initial impressions.

Mike Ruddy:

There's an awful lot of activity happening here in the City of Winchester. Some great projects to get our hands around. Well advanced, in many cases. But in addition to all of the projects and activities and meetings that we have with Council, with Planning Commission, with PED, with BAR, there's also an awful lot of great people working here within the city. So my impressions, in particular with everybody I've encountered, has been wonderful. It's been a great experience for the first four weeks. Looking forward to many more.

Dan Hoffman:

It's all downhill from here.

Mike Ruddy:

First impressions. Good first impression. No, but it's been wonderful. I appreciate the welcome from everybody. But it's been great to be able to jump right into all of the different projects and meetings with all of the different bodies here within the City of Winchester.

Dan Hoffman:

Yeah. A lot going on. So for those who are not particularly familiar with city government, when we say planning, zoning, inspections, housing, we all put that under Community Development. And we'll talk a little bit about the name change from Development Services to Community Development in a minute. But give a quick description of what those functions are and how they are different from each other. Because a lot of times when folks hear Zoning Administrator, they think, well is the guy that comes and inspects my house? Or, oh, the Planning Director, is that the guy that determines what I can do in a particular zone? So there is a bunch of coordination between the groups, but talk a little bit about how would you define the differences between them?

Mike Ruddy:

Yeah, they're certainly integrally related to each other and work well together. But Community Development, I think you have the connotation with that, is that exactly what it says? You're building the community. And how can you do that through a variety of means, each of which has their roles; planning, zoning, inspections and housing. On the planning side, it's more visionary, perhaps. Where you work through a Comprehensive Plan, supplemented with, at least your strategic plan, where you can create a vision for the community. And what do people want to see? Planning, of course, helps facilitate that, but it's done by the community itself.

And here in the City of Winchester, one was recently updated in March of this year. So the 2022 Comprehensive Plan is in place. So that provides the vision for a variety of different things, not least of which is housing, redevelopment of catalyst sites, and overall wellbeing and growth of the community. Again, that's fundamentally the planning side of things. And planning also deals with processing lots of development applications as they come through that also seek to implement that Comprehensive Plan. Implement the vision of the community.

Dan Hoffman:

Yeah. And for those of you who aren't aware of where those applications come from, they come from developers. We do not propose new development. It's a common misconception out there for folks that, either intentionally or unintentionally, want to paint a picture of how development occurs. We get an application from a developer to develop on their land, it's not our land, it's not our application.

Amy Simmons:

Not our idea.

Dan Hoffman:

It's not our idea. All we can use are those guiding documents. The Comprehensive Plan, our City Code, the zoning map. We use all of those tools, but we do not propose new development. Move on. Now, moving up.

Amy Simmons:

Soapbox.

Mike Ruddy:

We can only hope to implement [inaudible 00:07:37] the community.

Dan Hoffman:

Yes, exactly. And the community is represented by nine City Councilors. So that's another thing that ... I think we're going to talk about this a little more in a moment, but we are going to put some more effort into trying to educate and inform people about development processes themselves. Because I think there's a lot of misconceptions out there as to how that works. Ultimately though, approval of these applications, that are not staff applications, that goes to the Planning Commission and the City Council. They've been elected, they represent the citizenry, and it's ultimately up to them. They are the embodiment of the community, from the perspective of the City of Winchester.

Mike Ruddy:

A lot of people give up a good amount of expertise and their time to help the city on the Planning Commission, City Council, not least forgetting Board of Zoning Appeals, Board of Architectural Review, and other entities too. So it all comes together on the planning side of things, again, to try and move the city forward in a positive way. To develop the community as we would like it to be developed.

Dan Hoffman:

You mentioned the name, Community Development. For those of you who have paid attention to city development for a while, that department used to be the Department of Development Services. It's changing to the Department of Community Development. It might seem like a small change, but we're doing it for two reasons. One reason being that we have split the EDA portion out.

Amy Simmons:

Economic Development.

Dan Hoffman:

Economic development, thank you. The Economic Development Authority, it's an independent thing, they have their own staff, they are overseen by the Board of the EDA. So Economic Development, the group that really promotes new development or assists with incentives and other types of financial mechanisms to help facilitate development, that's their role, that's their function. This department, which is now just focused on planning, housing, inspections, and zoning, is really focused on developing community. So tell me a little bit about your thoughts and the distinction between Development Services and Community Development.

Mike Ruddy:

Yeah, I think the Community Development on the planning side then supported in the zoning and building inspections. Hopefully can do a fine job of making sure that the community is how we want it to be and that all of the projects that come through. So there's quite a practical difference, I think, too. And when you get into the zoning, zoning enforcement, it's ensuring that the projects are done according to the codes and regulations that are in place. And building inspections, similarly so. Implementing the statewide building code, making sure buildings are put up safely, correctly, straight.

Dan Hoffman:

Generally good. Generally good.

Mike Ruddy:

Generally good. And then the housing thing, the housing side of it, is quite interesting too in that we get to bring a couple of employees back into a restructured Community Development side of things. Where we can take a little bit more time here to focus on housing and come up with a strategy, if you will, that further implements the Council's goals with regards to housing here in the City of Winchester. So we're very excited about not only bringing existing housing specialists into the group, but developing our housing abilities to a greater extent. Again, all with which wraps back around to the community as a whole and trying to move the community forward.

Dan Hoffman:

Definitely.

Amy Simmons:

Because if you're not moving forward, what are you doing?

Dan Hoffman:

If you're not moving forward, you're stagnating and-

Amy Simmons:

Dying.

Dan Hoffman:

If you stagnate, you die. So unfortunately, I think when people see that we're adding population to the city, again, the city employees are not adding population. When these new developments come through, we're creating housing units.

Amy Simmons:

And it's because of demand. It's not like they're just doing it for fun.

Dan Hoffman:

Absolutely.

Mike Ruddy:

You're managing the situation. You're managing the scenario. We're in a location, we don't want to be blind to our location, that it's a pretty dynamic place.

Dan Hoffman:

Yes, it is. Yes, it is.

Mike Ruddy:

And we have to take all the factors that are surrounding us, and that are also unique here to the City of Winchester, and mold those.

Dan Hoffman:

Yeah. So we can't control the birth rate. People will have kids, it's going to happen. There will be a natural amount of growth. And there will be, I think to your point, Winchester's a great place to live. Living here is in demand and that is evidenced by our housing prices. So as long as people are looking and trying to live here, and they're looking to pay a premium to live here, that's going to keep putting upward pressure on housing costs here. Which is a concern for us, from a city planning perspective. You want to make sure that folks in all stages of life and of all different socioeconomic backgrounds can find a home here in Winchester. And City Council has stated that as a priority as well. So when we have people eager to move into Winchester, if we're not creating a reasonable, a thoughtful, and planned amount of housing, then it just keeps pushing those housing costs higher and higher and higher because supply and demand.

Amy Simmons:

And if we don't have those developers coming in to do it, then it just compounds all of the problems we have.

Dan Hoffman:

Exactly. Exactly. So it's something that your department, ultimately, is a steward for, kind of a shepherd for, and proposer of policies and guidance. Comp Plan is guidance and housing policy is something we're going to focus a lot on next year. We have added housing, so we've shed the EDA portion and we've added housing. Tell me a little bit about, obviously you have a new deputy as well that came in right about the same time you did, Nasser Rahimzadeh. He's not here right now.

Mike Ruddy:

Nasser is on the job, though. He's attending the Virginia Governor's Conference on Housing. And hopefully we're bringing some extra skills back here to help us in the City.

Dan Hoffman:

Exactly. So aside from housing, you also have Zoning and Inspections. Tell me a little a little about that.

Mike Ruddy:

Zoning and Inspections, yes, two separate departments. Both functioning extremely well here within the city. That's an exciting part of the role that I've taken on is that the planning, zoning, inspections, are all well established programs who do very good work here within the city. The zoning side of things seeks to implement the Comprehensive Plan and the development plans and the rules and regulations to make sure things such as blighted properties, short-term rentals. You name it, zoning tends to deal with it. Again, just making sure that the development and the community is following through on the expectations.

With inspections, again, that's more of a building code, statewide building code, and ensuring that the properties are safe and being constructed correctly. Again, they're operating here within the community, doing a great job, but that's how it all works together. And the Community Development Planning side of things, you're engaged in all of those aspects, so I think each of those departments and the people that work with them have a good appreciation for the big picture of how the community is growing and developing. And do a wonderful job.

Amy Simmons:

And probably one of the reasons why we're so desirable is because we have a vision and we execute it and it's always beautiful.

Dan Hoffman:

I just got this comment from a resident the other day that the city was run, relative to wherever they had moved from, very well. The trash gets picked up on time, snow gets cleared in a timely manner. We are responsive and generally things work like clockwork.

Mike Ruddy:

And it's a great city. So the bones of the city, from a historical perspective, are wonderful. It provides a great foundation for the community to orientate around, whether that's replicating the growth or even



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just places to congregate. Community needs places where people can come together and Winchester is one of the finest examples of that, that you may see.

Dan Hoffman:

I think we need to have an audio version of the Comp Plan and have Mike read it.

Amy Simmons:

I like that.

Dan Hoffman:

I'm not even going to try.

Amy Simmons:

Don't even try.

Dan Hoffman:

While we're sitting here, I might pull up the first chapter and just have you read the preamble.

Amy Simmons:

Maybe you could read my announcements today.

Dan Hoffman:

Oh, yes.

Amy Simmons:

In your best British accent.

Dan Hoffman:

All right. Hope that is his actual British accent. It's his actual ... that's how he talks.

Amy Simmons:

You got to take out the American.

Dan Hoffman:

It would be funny if, at the end of this, he actually broke into a completely American accent. This was all made up.

Mike Ruddy:

My kids will be cringing.

Dan Hoffman:

All right. Well Mike, thank you very much for walking through it with us. I know that you're also just got interviewed or it's happening later today. Brian over at the Star is going to interview you and Nasser a

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little bit more. So if you're interested, keep an eye out for that in your local paper. And we are going to be creating more opportunities for folks to come into City Hall and learn about the things we talked about today; the Comp Plan, the zoning map, the development process in general. So keep an eye out on the City website, we'll be posting information about how to sign up for one of those opportunities in the very near future. Mike, thanks for coming in.

Mike Ruddy:

Thank you again for having me.