

**EATON COUNTY  
PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING  
August 6, 2019**

**Call to Order:** Brian Ross Chair of the Eaton County Planning Commission, called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. in the Board of Commissioners Room, Eaton County Courthouse, 1045 Independence Blvd., Charlotte, MI.

**Pledge:** The Pledge of Allegiance was given by all.

**Roll Call:** Brian Ross, Tammy Halsey, Jack Owens, Tim Catron, John Little, Barbara Rogers, and Blake Mulder

**Absent:** Ben Tirrell and Jeana Rohrs

**Staff Present:** Claudine Williams and Brandy Hatt

**Agenda Approval:** A motion was made by **Commissioner Mulder** to approve the agenda for the August 6, 2019 meeting. **Commissioner Rogers** supported. Motion carried.

**Minutes Approval:** A motion was made by **Commissioner Owens** to approve the July 9, 2019 minutes as printed. **Commissioner Rogers** supported. Motion carried.

**Public Comments:** None

**CU-1-07-2:** Request by Sunny Crest Youth Ranch for a Change of Conditions to an existing Conditional Use Permit which allows for the operation of an Educational Institution (child caring institution) per Article 14.10 of the Ordinance at 13014 Sunny Crest Lane, Section 4, Sunfield Township.

**Staff Report:** Ms. Williams read the staff report into record. She also read an additional communication from Sunfield Township and the Sherriff's Department. Ms. Williams informed the Planning Commission Sunny Crest intends to show a power point, a copy is at their seats.

**Applicant Statement:** Mr. Brian De Vos stated he is the director of Sunny Crest Youth Ranch. He stated Sunny Crest Youth Ranch attorney Mr. Dave Colven, and Chair of the Board Derek Coppess are also present. Mr. De Vos stated he believes there may be some confusion with regards to the Sunny Crest Youth Ranch Mission. Mr. De Vos read through his power point. In addition, Mr. De Vos stated he is working with the Lakewood School District to hold schooling on campus at Sunny Crest. He added Sunny Crest recently obtained state approval to increase their staffing ratio from one to five to one to four. He stated they are now able to have three staff members on the first and second shifts and two staff members on the third shift.

Mr. De Vos stated their staff has training requirements of fifty hours in the first year of employment and twenty-four hours each year after. He explained Sunny Crest is an open facility, it is not locked; kids do run away, and they try to chase the youth that do, but if they are unsuccessful in locating them, they are required to call the police. He said they are working with the school so they do not have as many school related issues. Mr. De Vos stated they have updated their admission and discharge procedures and they will not take in children with a violent crime history. He stated they have had seventy referrals since January; they have rejected fifty and accepted twenty.

Mr. Dave Colven, Attorney for Sunny Crest Youth Ranch, stated Mr. De Vos has been at Sunny Crest Youth Ranch for about a year. He added he had a conversation with staff and was informed that Mr. De Vos has been good to work with. He stated he reviewed the staff report for this evening, they are requesting a Change of Conditions to address some of the discrepancies pointed out by staff, specifically, to change house parents to twenty-four hour staff and allow for ten children in each home rather than eight. Mr. Colven stated the alarms as required will be installed. He said he believes the gate on the second drive has already been installed. Mr. Colven stated Sunny Crest is doing a better job of screening out children with violent assault charges and/or criminal sexual assault charges,

Additionally, he said if a child accepted shows patterns of violent or sexual behavior, they will be discharged to another facility.

Ms. Colven stated Sunny Crest Youth Ranch will comply with the suggested regulations and conditions of Sunfield Township; while they have approval to construct six homes, they are willing to limit the number of homes to the four, which have already been constructed with each home having ten children. He stated the cost of the security system is only an estimate; but said it will be installed. He stated the staffing increase has been approved by the state. He stated they are confident with the proposed changes Sunny Crest can continue to help these children.

**Commissioner Ross** stated he hears children are being screened, but it seems like in 2019 the Eaton County Sherriff's Office, Michigan State Police and EMS were out there for multiple trips daily. He asked why this issue was not addressed sooner. Mr. De Vos explained the calls were not daily, but for different agencies all there on the same day. He said on average there are about twelve calls a month, which is ten too many. He stated several of the calls are for AWOL children. Mr. De Vos stated children coming into the system look different on paper from how they may act; kids are tougher and harder to screen. He stated they get blanket referrals and need to spend the time to see if the child actual fits in their program.

**Commissioner Owens** stated from 2010 to 2018 there were five-hundred 911 calls. He asked if Sunny Crest is a private business. Mr. De Vos stated they are a 501c3 non-profit; they are more comparable to a detention center. He stated the county gets paid an allocation for the county detention center; Sunny Crest gets paid by each youth.

**Commissioner Cattron** stated in attachment 2, A-3 it states there will be a gated entrance with lighting and signage indicating all visitors must go to the office. Ms. Williams stated this attachment was part of their application, not a requirement from the Planning Commission. **Commissioner Cattron** asked if the house alarms would ring in the office. Mr. De Vos stated it will be installed as required. Ms. Hatt clarified, the alarm system is required to be installed so that someone in an adjacent house is aware if something is going on.

**Commissioner Halsey** clarified there are four homes and the request is to have up to ten children in each home, for a ratio of one staff member for every four children. Mr. De Vos stated the ratio is one to four, if there are eight children in a home, they will have two staff members, if there are ten children they will have three staff members.

**Commissioner Mulder** asked for further clarification on the educational component. Mr. De Vos stated he has been working with the assistant superintendent of Lakewood Schools. He said he intends to come up with a screening process to see if the children are a fit for the public school system. If they are not a fit, they will have online schooling at the ranch with a special educational teacher at the ranch for one hour each day. Additionally, the Lakewood School principal will stop in from time to time and they will employ a full time teacher. Mr. De Vos stated they also offer technical training for their children.

**Commissioner Mulder** asked Mr. De Vos to explain the expected duration of stay for children at the ranch. Mr. De Vos stated previously they had children for more than a year, but the program is changing to short term placement; expected stay is six to twelve months.

**Commissioner Ross** invited any speaker in favor or opposition to the request to make public comment.

**Speakers:** Mr. John Hulinec, 1315 Gidner Road, stated he has a unique perspective on the ranch. He stated he installs central vacuum systems and has been on-site during construction. He stated while on-site he has seen staff with the children teaching them how to be men when they come from a diverse background. He stated his services calls are unscheduled, he is there at all different times and

central vacuums are installed all over the houses so they would not be able hide anything from him while he is there. Mr. Hulinek stated he has not seen a lot of problems there. He said it has been great every time he has been there. Mr. Hulinek stated Sunny Crest has lost very few children and he gives them credit for taking on the task of teaching these boys to be men and raise a family.

Mr. De Vos asked Commissioner Ross if he could speak again. **Commissioner Ross** said yes.

Mr. De Vos stated the State of Michigan Licensing Rules require each home to have a phone. He stated some of their children have called 911 as a joke; they are trying to find a solution. They cannot lock the phone up.

Mr. Rob Piercefield, Eaton County Commissioner for District one, stated earlier this year his concern of the safety of the children and community lead him to arrange a meeting between Sunny Crest Youth Ranch and the Sherriff's Department. He said there is a tremendous amount of work to be done, but he supports the requested changes. Mr. Piercefield stated this should result in a more secure and safe situation for everyone involved and hopefully will reduce 911 calls. He said he volunteers at Sunny Crest and there are thirty to twenty-eight kids there now. He said usually there are only there to five that are a problem, but the rest of the kids are good and really need the program. He stated he would like everyone to know he cares about the safety of the kids and Sherriff's Department. He stated his is commitment to work as hard as he can to see the changes made and follow through to see the are implemented and adhered to.

Mr. Zackary Week, 4160 N. Clark Road, Woodland, stated if he is not mistaken, the Sherriff's Department has recommended to have the children stay on-site to go to school. He stated his son was bullied by one of the children during the last school year. Mr. Week said he understands this is a need in the community, but he has concerns about the children attending public school. If they are only there for six to twelve months it makes more sense to have on-site schooling. Mr. Weeks stated his son now does on-line schooling because he was tired of being bullied. He stated he does not want his daughter to have the same issues.

Mr. Tom Reich, Eaton County Sherriff, stated he gives Mr. De Vos and his board a lot of credit; we have a lot of troubled people and teenagers. He stated the Eaton County Sheriff's Office receives many calls to go to Sunny Crest Youth Ranch, and it is taxing on the Sherriff's Department and Michigan State Police Department. Sherriff Reich said Sunny Crest has an honorable mission and he is hoping the proposed changes help the number of calls decrease because he does not want to neglect the other one-hundred thousand people he serves. He stated it is important to provide support to Mr. De Vos to continue, but he believes the recommendations have to be adhered to and within a certain amount of time. He stated his deputies are at Sunny Crest daily, this is not about the calls, it is also about the time they have to spend onsite.

**Public hearing closed:** 7:55 p.m.

**Commissioner Owens** read the letter from Ms. Terri Dow, Sunfield Township Clerk. He stated Sunfield Township is requesting to have the Planning Commission postpone a decision on the application until our October meeting.

**Commissioner Mulder** stated as a County Commissioner, he understands the troubled youth we have and noted some of the worst are in our juvenile facility. He stated he appreciates what is being done by Sunny Crest and other facilities and commends their service as it keeps children out of the juvenile facility. **Commissioner Mulder** stated with these changes and the increase staffing he is in support of the changes.

**Commissioner Owens** stated if we had another business that had five hundred calls to the Sherriff's Office they would be closed. He stated he understands the mission statement, but what about the community. **Commissioner Owens** stated he believes they are missing a piece of the pie, which is the

community they live in. He asked how the changes are going to be monitored, will it be based on the number of calls a year.

**Commissioner Rogers** stated it was mentioned that the state requires them to call the Sherriff's Office. **Commissioner Ross** stated that is correct for some things. **Commissioner Rogers** stated what they are doing is needed, getting the boys are off the street. She hopes they get good guidance and become good citizens, that is everyone's goal.

**Commissioner Mulder** stated the Planning Commission does not have a September meeting scheduled; he asked if postponing to October would be a hardship for the applicant. Ms. Hatt stated Mr. De Vos submitted his Change of Conditions application earlier than he was required to and additionally was not aware of the recommendations of the Eaton County Sherriff's Office until this afternoon so it should not be a problem. **Commissioner Mulder** stated the Planning Commission should defer the application back to Sunfield Township. Ms. Williams stated Sunfield Township was not aware of the new information from the Sherriff's Office when their letter was written.

**Commissioner Ross** stated he appreciates hearing from the townships regarding applications. He stated he the application is postponed, he would someone from Sunfield Township present when the case is heard.

**Commissioner Halsey** stated she likes the recommended regulations from the Sherriff's Office. **Commissioner Owens** asked about constructing a school on the grounds. Ms. Hatt stated Sunny Crest was approved to construct a school and activity center on the grounds in 2015. **Commissioner Halsey** stated she does have concerns about the students going to public schools and also agrees schooling should be held on-site. **Commissioner Mulder** stated the schooling has to be monitored and regulated. He added some kids would benefit from going to public school while others should be educated on site. **Commissioner Cattron** stated the harassment of other students should be a reason to hold the children back and have schooling on-site.

**Commissioner Owens** asked Commissioner Ross if he could asked Sherriff Reich a question. **Commissioner Ross** said yes.

**Commissioner Owens** asked Sherriff Reich if his suggested changes were implemented, would his concerns be addressed. Sherriff Reich stated it is a start in the right direction, but they may also need to be changed in the future.

**Commissioner Cattron** stated he likes the suggestion of installing a fence to keep the kids from running toward the road. Ms. Hatt stated Mr. De Vos just received the Sherriff's recommendations this afternoon and there have not been any conversations with Sunny Crest to determine how and if they can accommodate the recommendations. Sherriff Reich stated there are a lot of youth facilities across the state; he stated Highfields has problems, but they were able to make corrections. They do not have a fence. **Commissioner Halsey** asked how Highfields was able to make corrections. Sherriff Reich stated he is not sure, but knows they have a different director and owner. **Commissioner Mulder** stated he believes it was a change in management that cleaned it up resulting in a better run facility.

**Commissioner Ross** stated it may help if we table the application to give the applicant time to review the recommendations from the Sherriff's Office and to determine what they plan to implement. He stated this would also allow the township to review again.

**Commissioner Little** moved to postpone **CU-01-07-2 Change of Conditions (Sunny Crest Youth Ranch)** to the October 1, 2019 Planning Commission Meeting to be held at 7:00 p.m. in the Eaton County Courthouse located at 1045 Independence Blvd., Charlotte, MI.

**Commissioner Rogers** supported. A roll call was taken with seven (7) voting aye and none (0) voting nay. Motion carried.

**Commissioner Ross** stated he would like an updated report from Central Dispatch for the October meeting.

**Other Business:** Ms. Williams stated the Planning Commission needs to review and possibly update the Eaton County Masterplan. Discussion was held. **Commissioner Mulder** asked if there is a subcommittee that could determine if it needs to be updated. Ms. Williams stated the Administrative Committee could look at it. Ms. Hatt stated the members of the Administrative Committee are Commissioners Ross, Owens, and Catron. Ms. Williams stated the Planning Commission at a minimum needs to review the Master Plan. **Commissioner Mulder** stated he believes the Administrative Committee should review the Master Plan and make a recommendation to the Planning Commission. The Planning Commission agreed. Ms. Williams stated she will work on scheduling an Administrative Committee Meeting for September.

**Reports:** Ms. Williams informed the Planning Commission the Board of Appeals heard and denied one application for a variance this evening.

**Upcoming Cases:** Ms. Williams informed the Planning Commission there no applications to be heard at their September 10, 2019 meeting.

**Public Comments:** none

A motion was made by **Commissioner Rogers** to adjourn the meeting. **Commissioner Owens** supported. The meeting adjourned at 8:23 p.m.