



City of Ashtabula

Ashtabula City Council

Community Development/Economic Development/Parks & Recreation Committee Meeting

Wednesday, November 5, 2025 at 5:30 PM

Council Chambers

4230 Lake Avenue, Ashtabula, OH 44004

Minutes

Opening of Committee Meeting

Call to Order

The meeting of the Ashtabula City Council Community Development / Economic Development / Parks & Recreation Committee was called to order at 5:30 p.m. by Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo.

Roll Call

Members Present: Chair: Ward 5 Councilor Jane DiGiacomo, Vice Chair: Ward 4 Councilor Jodi Mills, Member: Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman

Absent: Clerk of Council Stacy Millberg

Officers Present: City Manager James Timonere, Assistant City Solicitor Catherine Colgan

Parks and Recreation Board Members Present: Blake Hinkle

Visitors: Ryan Lencl

Sunshine Law Certification

A quorum was established as defined by the Ashtabula City Council Rules of Order. The meeting met the requirements of the Ohio Sunshine Laws Open Meetings Act.

Welcome and Acknowledgement of Visitors

Special Guest Presentation

The Nature Conservancy

Becky Donaldson presented on behalf of The Nature Conservancy. Ms. Donaldson introduced herself as the current president of Blackbrook Audubon, a resident of Eastern Lake County who works professionally for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources in the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves, specifically with the Scenic Rivers program. She also works as the Mentor Marsh naturalist in Central Lake County for the Cleveland Museum of Natural History.

Ms. Donaldson provided information about the economic impact of birding, sharing that according to the Fish and Wildlife Service, there were 96 million birders in 2022, representing 30% of Americans. She emphasized the substantial economic impact of birding, with \$108 billion attributed to bird watching in 2022, compared to \$99 billion for fishing and \$45 billion for hunting.

She explained how birders track bird sightings using eBird, a free app that allows users to log where and when. Ohio ranks eighth in the nation for eBird checklists submitted. Ms. Donaldson noted that Ashtabula County is number 31 in the state for the number of eBird checklists submitted.

Ms. Donaldson shared examples of successful birding tourism, including the "Biggest Week in American Birding" in Lucas and Ottawa Counties, which brings in substantial tourism dollars. She discussed how birders tend to be good patrons who tip well and often stay overnight, bringing economic benefits to communities that promote

birding.

Ward 4 Councilor Jodi Mills asked when the event took place. Ms. Donaldson explained that the Biggest Week in American Birding is a 10-day event because they try to encompass two weekends. It is usually held the first weekend though the second weekend in May.

The presentation concluded with Ms. Donaldson expressing that Blackbrook Audubon would like to host events in Ashtabula to promote birding in the community. She suggested possibilities like after-work birding events in the spring, and offered to partner with the city to help attract more birders to Ashtabula. She emphasized that Walnut Beach's restoration has created good bird habitat that could be promoted more widely. Ms. Donaldson also mentioned the possibility of creating an Ashtabula-specific project within iNaturalist to encourage citizen science participation.

Blackbrook Audubon meeting in Lake County and hosts monthly bird walks. The group hosts natural history speakers on the third Tuesday of every month. The group also leads a six-week spring bird walk series, taking place the last three Sundays in April and the first three Sundays in May.

Committee members expressed interest in the economic and recreational potential of promoting birding in Ashtabula, with Ward 4 Councilor Jodi Mills noting how it ties in well with health department initiatives to get people more active outdoors.

Ward 5 Councilor Jane DiGiacomo asked about the typical demographic of birders. Ms. Donaldson explained that typically birders tend to be a little bit older, with many being retired. Many of the events the Blackbrook Audubon has hosted have seen a wide range of age groups, including college students.

Residents interested in learning more about birding can visit Blackbrook Audubon Society's Facebook page or email them at blackbrookaud@aol.com.

City Manager's Report

City Manager James Timonere reported that with winter approaching, parks operations were winding down. The restrooms at the parks have been winterized and closed for the season, and equipment such as mowers have been put away for the year.

Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman asked about the installation of the playground equipment at W. 38th Street Park. City Manager James Timonere stated that the swing set installation was completed that day, though the actual swings had not yet been installed as the concrete needed time to set. Ruber mulch was expected to be delivered later in the week, along with border material to separate the grass from the mulch area. The installation was expected to be completed as soon as all materials arrived, rather than waiting until spring.

Parks & Recreation Committee Report

Blake Hinkle, of Ward 1 and Parks and Recreation Board representative, reported that the Parks Board had informed members about vacancies, which were then passed to the Clerk of Council, with reappointments made at the last meeting.

He discussed the tree legislation, noting that the Parks Board had unanimously voted to change some language per the City Manager's recommendation. The board hopes to move the legislation forward to completion.

Mr. Hinkle mentioned that with Mike Speelman declining reappointment, there is a vacancy on the Parks Board, and they hope to get good candidates for the City Manager to choose from.

He also announced that he would be showing "Home Alone 2: Lost in New York" at the Ashtabula Public Library on Friday, November 7 from 6 to 9 p.m., with a food truck selling pizza in the parking lot. The free event is part of his movie appreciation club's efforts to build relationships with the library and encourage use of public spaces.

City Manager James Timonere distributed draft language for the tree ordinance, suggesting it be inserted into Chapter 959 of the codified ordinances dealing with parks. He also recommended adding a cross-reference in Chapter 113 (which covers trees) to refer to the park-specific tree rules. The committee agreed to review the document and address it at the next meeting.

Unfinished Business

New Business

Brief update on 60 properties - Assistant City Solicitor Catherine Colgan

Assistant City Solicitor Catherine Colgan provided an update on approximately 60 properties that were jointly owned by a husband and wife. She explained that the wife had unexpectedly passed away, and the husband has suffered health issues and is now incapacitated. Some of these properties have been the subject of complaints brought before City Council and staff.

Ms. Colgan reported that as of the previous week, a guardian had been appointed for the gentleman who will be able to make decisions about the disposition of his property. The estate of the deceased wife is being probated by attorney Sarah Lewis. The City is engaging with the land bank for properties that might not be re-habitable but might not need demolition.

Staff and Ms. Colgan are working to connect the various legal parties with potential buyers or developers. She invited committee members to refer anyone interested in these properties to her, noting that interested parties can identify the properties by looking for owners named Jack and Jody Lane on the Auditor's website.

Ryan Lencl, of Main Avenue, asked if there was a more formal public process for making the properties available to people, suggesting an auction. Ms. Colgan explained that properties are not owned by the City. The guardian has a local attorney who is facilitating these property matters, and it's up to the guardian to make decisions about the properties' disposition. The goal is to get as many properties as possible back into useful residential life, while demolishing those that can't be saved.

Next Meeting

December 3, 2025

The December meeting was canceled.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 6:14 p.m. by Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo.