



City of Ashtabula

Ashtabula City Council

Community Development/Economic Development/Parks & Recreation Committee Meeting

Wednesday, March 4, 2026 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 4:30 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: none

Officers Present: City Manager James Timonere, Clerk of Council Stacy Millberg

Parks & Recreation Board Members Present: Tim Dibble, Len Jury

Visitors:

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

Kelly Sposito - Executive Director NEO Fund

Kelly Sposito, Executive Director of NEO Fund, presented on the organization's role in economic development throughout Ashtabula County. Ms. Sposito shared her background as a former business owner who operated Harbor Perk on Bridge Street for 16 years alongside her late husband, Jake, and explained how those humble beginnings led to her current work supporting small businesses and startups.

NEO Fund began informally around 2008 when the Lift Bridge became stuck in the upright position, disrupting traffic to the Harbor area. Local business owners formed the Lift Bridge Community Association and what would later become NEO Fund to develop marketing and business strategies to attract customers despite access challenges. Ms. Sposito emphasized that the early days were just a group of local business owners getting together and sharing ideas and business strategies without formal funding or training.

Through her presentation slides, Ms. Sposito demonstrated the gradual development of Bridge Street from 2008 to present day, showing how the area evolved from having 14 to 15 businesses in the early years to becoming a thriving district where parking is now difficult to find. She highlighted key initiatives including the annual Wine and Walleye Festival, the Beach Glass Festival, merchant meetings, and collaborative efforts that attracted attention to the Harbor.

NEO Fund now provides comprehensive business support services including one-on-one mentoring, business

planning assistance, bookkeeping classes, and "So You Think You Want to Start a Business" classes, all free of charge. The organization has facilitated more than 77 loans to small businesses and startups in Ashtaula County through partnerships with local banks and non-traditional lenders. Ms. Sposito noted that banks like Huntington, Andover Bank, and others are more willing to work with NEO Fund clients because they know the organization provides good support and preparation.

Looking forward, Ms. Sposito explained that the success model of Bridge Street could be applied to Main Avenue as part of the City's corridor development initiative from Lake Avenue to Main Avenue. She acknowledged that Main Avenue presents a different climate but expressed confidence that similar collaborative approaches would work there.

The organization offers monthly networking meetings throughout the county, visiting different businesses with 30 to 40 attendees regularly.

Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo commented on her positive personal experience with NEO Fund, noting that she had taken their classes for education and that her husband used their services to open a business. She also credited NEO Fund with helping facilitate the sale of her salon by assisting the new owner with financing.

Ms. Sposito concluded by emphasizing the collaborative nature of Bridge Street's success, stating that nobody wants to claim to be the one responsible because everyone involved was responsible. She stated that the business-friendly climate in the City makes such development possible.

Additional information and a schedule of classes and events are available on the organization's website, neofund.org.

City Manager's Report

City Manager James Timonere provided updates on several ongoing initiatives.

- **Code Enforcement Activities:** City Manager James Timonere provides statistics from January 1 through February 28. The City's two enforcement employees, one housing inspector and one code enforcement officer, issued a total of 89 code enforcement letters and door hangers. There were 59 rental units scheduled for inspection, though not all necessarily occurred due to cancellations and rescheduling. Additionally, 13 tenants or landlords called requesting rental inspections outside the scheduled timeframe, which were completed. Most of the 89 enforcement letters resulted from neighbor complaints, community member reports, or drive-by observations rather than rental inspections.
- **Main Avenue Facade Program:** Following Monday's Council passage of the ordinance for the sub-recipient grant agreement for the Appalachian Community Grant Program, staff has been working with Main Avenue merchants, business owners, and building owners interested in the facade program. Six participants are ready to proceed and will be putting bids out for construction. Other companies are working with building and business owners on different project components to prepare for additional bidding. A pre-construction meeting is scheduled for next week with the contractor handling all sidewalk work, which should provide details on construction start dates, timelines, and other information to share with Main Avenue businesses and building owners.
- **Transportation Updates:** GoBus service began operating this month with twice-daily stops on Bridge Street in front of the public parking lot. While no ridership data is yet available, City Manager James Timonere encouraged those interested in this travel option to visit the GoBus website for information about special and discounted trips. The service provides affordable transportation with stops in Painesville and near Cleveland Hopkins International Airport at a park-and-ride facility, connecting to RTA and other transportation throughout Ohio and Pennsylvania.
- **Victory Cruise Line:** Another visit from Victory Cruise Line representatives is scheduled. The plans to add the City as a stop in 2028 are nearly finalized. It is possible the City will become a "can stop" by the end of 2026 or in 2027. Can stops provide ready itineraries for emergency situations when boats need to dock due to weather, mechanical, or other circumstances. The Convention and Visitors Bureau and Lift Bridge Community Association are heavily involved in this initiative.
- **Amtrak Initiative:** City Manager James Timonere has been meeting with representatives from All Aboard Ohio (not Amtrak directly) who are working to establish another train stop and line. With federal infrastructure funding potentially available for transportation options like Amtrak, this appears to be an opportune time to reinvigorate these conversations. A representative would like to present to the committee

sometime in June, July, or August, when letters to federal congressmen and representatives may be needed to support the initiative.

- **Seasonal Operations:** The night shift crew returns to day shift operations starting Monday, March 9, as winter operations conclude. City Manager James Timonere noted that this would allow significant work to be completed before spring mowing and maintenance activities begin, describing the upcoming period as a busy spring and summer.

Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman asked who was involved in the development of the itinerary for the cruise line. City Manager James Timonere explained that representatives from the cruise line, Ashtabula Convention and Visitors Bureau, and Lift Bridge Community Association are involved. He stated that the cruise ship travels with two 50-passenger coach buses. They plan to provide several levels of itinerary, including high-end excursions such as wine country tours, local community tours including the three Harbor museums (Marine Museum, Hubbard House, Finnish Museum), and passport-style activities for those preferring to stay in the local area rather than take excursions.

Ward 4 Councilor Jodi Mills inquired about the Welcome Home Ohio housing program scheduled for next month's presentation. City Manager James Timonere confirmed the Land Bank has signed necessary documents with the developer, with goals to have the first three houses completed by May. The 90-day construction period includes site preparation, with houses ready for occupancy within two to three days of delivery. The houses are modular homes designed to blend with neighborhood architecture rather than appearing as typical modular construction. The first three will be two-story homes with first-floor master bedrooms for accessibility, and will include garages (attached or detached depending on lot configuration). Additional ranch-style homes are planned for lots near the new bus garage. The program includes income qualification requirements and deed restrictions, ensuring homes remain affordable housing for specified periods. Purchasers must complete financial literacy courses and homes come with appliances to prevent additional debt accumulation. A website will soon be available for collecting interested applicant information, with the developer handling qualification processes.

Parks & Recreation Committee Report

Tim Dibble, secretary of the Parks and Recreation Board, presented the board's unanimous recommendation for allocating \$12,000 in Parks Levy funds for Phase 1 of the Veterans and Cornelius Memorial Parks memorial and beautification project.

The initiative focuses on two established memorial spaces, Ashtabula Veterans Memorial Park (the City's primary location for Memorial Day, Veterans Day, and patriotic observances) and Lance Corporal Kevin M. Cornelius Memorial Park (honoring a local fallen service member). Both parks serve as highly visible public spaces used by residents, visitors, and families attending community observances.

Phase 1 Components include:

- **Granite Cenotaphs:** Installation of two granite grave-style cenotaphs matching the existing Lewis Shepherd Memorial (honoring Ashtabula's Medal of Honor recipient). The new cenotaphs will honor Private Isaac James, recently discovered as Ashtabula's second Medal of Honor recipient from the Civil War, and Lonell Dobie Moore, one of Ashtabula's Montford Point Marines who received the Congressional Gold Medal in 2012 and passed away in his nineties in 2021. Estimated cost is \$1,400 to \$1,800 based on Ashtabula County Commissioner and funeral director JP Ducro's estimates of \$700 to \$900 per cenotaph.
- **Memorial Markers:** Installation of a Blue Star Memorial marker at Veterans Memorial Park (honoring all armed forces service members) and a Gold Star Memorial marker at Lance Corporal Kevin M. Cornelius Memorial Park (honoring families of those who made the ultimate sacrifice). Each marker costs approximately \$2,500 with required 7-foot posts. The Gold Star marker will be placed in a landscaped bed near the fountain facing West 44th Street to create a peaceful, visible reflection space.
- **Beautification Partnership:** Collaboration with ATech's horticulture program under instruction Ken Noble's supervision. Students will grow and plant flowers with patriotic themes and symbolic meanings, including forget-me-nots representing disabled American veterans, poppies relating to the American Legion and VFW, flowers arranged as "USA" near the bugler's traditional location, and an American flag designed in flowers at the memorial facing West 44th Street. The estimated cost is \$4,000 to \$5,000.

The total projected cost for Phase 1 ranges from \$1,400 to \$11,800, leading to the board's recommendation of

\$12,000 to provide modest contingency for cost fluctuations or installation needs.

Timeline: The granite cenotaphs and ATech plantings should be completed by Memorial Day observances on May 25, 2026. The Blue and Gold Star memorial markers have a six to nine month fabrication and delivery time frame through the national process, with installation and formal dedication ceremonies following delivery.

Historical Context: Mr. Dibble provided extensive background on the parks' memorial development timeline, noting the Veterans Memorial Wall installation in 1988, the Kalinowski Memorial in 2007 honoring Private Henry Kalinowski (killed aboard the USS Arizona, Ashtabula's first WWII casualty), the Battlefield Cross and Memorial Boulder for Lance Corporal Cornelius in 2010, and landscaping improvements completed in 2024. He emphasized that significant improvements have occurred only periodically over several decades, making this an opportune time for renewed investment.

Community Significance: Mr. Dibble noted that the project complements ongoing downtown infrastructure improvements and facade programs, ensuring memorial spaces reflect the same level of care and pride. These highly visible landmarks serve residents and visitors traveling between Bridge Street, Walnut Beach, and waterfront areas.

Ken Noble, ATech horticulture instructor, explained his program's community involvement, citing previous work providing flowers for the VFW and planting perennials at the Hubbard House. He described the educational value for students who can take pride in seeing their work throughout the community, particularly with the patriotic-themed gardens planned for the memorial spaces. The program can potentially provide small placards identifying plants and their symbolic representations, possibly utilizing other ATech programs for laser etching or routing signage.

Committee members praised the comprehensive nature of the proposal.

Mr. Dibble also reported on other parks activities, including completion of West 38th Street Park improvements in partnership with INEOS, featuring new playground equipment, repainting, and rubberized mulch installation. Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman asked for updates on fence repairs. Mr. Dibble stated that repairs to the fence are being coordinated with Public Works and the City Manager.

Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman also commented on the Parks Board governance documents, commending their clarity, thoroughness, and actionable content, suggesting other boards might benefit from a similar structure.

Discussion of East 48th Street Park confirmed the City maintains the property under a railroad lease agreement, with recent merger activities between Norfolk Southern and Union Pacific creating uncertainty about future property arrangements.

Motion: Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo moved that the committee supports the Parks and Recreation Board's recommendation for improvements to Veterans Memorial Park and Lance Corporal Kevin M. Cornelius Memorial Park; Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman seconded.

VOICE VOTE

Yeas: Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo, Vice Chair Jodi Mills, Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman

Nays: None

Motion carried.

Parks Board February Meeting Minutes

William Todd - America 250 Tree Proposal

Unfinished Business

New Business

City Clean Up - May 9, 2026

Ward 4 Councilor Jodi Mills announced the City Clean Up is scheduled for Saturday, May 9, 2026, from 8:30 to 11:30 a.m. Participants will meet at City Hall, with the City providing bags and gloves for cleanup activities throughout Ashtabula. A lunch will be provided at the library following the cleanup. The committee is actively seeking participation from various groups, including churches, businesses, friends, and community organizations.

Interested parties can contact the Clerk of Council at 440-992-7119 or reach out to any committee members. Email notifications and additional promotional efforts are planned to encourage community involvement.

Memorial Day Parade - May 25, 2026

Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo announced that the Parks Board will host the Memorial Day Parade on May 25, 2026, at 11 a.m. Organizations, businesses, and individuals interested in participating should contact her directly to receive participation packets and additional information about the parade arrangements.

Next Meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for April 1, 2026. The Welcome Home Ohio program will present at that meeting, providing additional details about the affordable housing initiative discussed in the City Manager's report.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 6:25 p.m. by Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo.