



City of Ashtabula

Ashtabula City Council

Community Development/Economic Development/Parks & Recreation Committee Meeting

Wednesday, June 3, 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 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: none

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

Parks & Recreation Board Members Present:

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

Bruce Schlosser - BHHS Professional Realty

Bruce Schlosser, a real estate broker, investor, and general contractor with over 38 years of experience in the Ashtabula market, presented residential single-family housing statistics for 2025—the most recent full year of available data. He noted that market conditions have remained essentially unchanged into 2026, and that meaningful statistics for the current year would only be available from approximately April 1 onward, as the first quarter consistently reflects the slowest activity.

Mr. Schlosser reported that the average list price in Ashtabula County was \$232,800, with a median of \$189,700. Within the City of Ashtabula, the average list price was \$185,600 and the median was \$160,000, significantly below county figures. He noted that list prices function as "wish prices" and that sold prices are the more meaningful metric. For context, he also provided figures for neighboring areas: Saybrook Township averaged \$239,800 (median \$197,700); Ashtabula Township averaged \$155,900 (median \$141,000); North Kingsville averaged \$240,400 (median \$220,000); and Conneaut averaged \$214,500 (median \$173,900).

Approximately 330 single-family properties closed within the City of Ashtabula in 2025, at an average sold price of \$166,374 and a median of \$155,000. County-wide, approximately 950 properties closed at an average of \$211,100, meaning the city accounted for over one-third of all county transactions. Members noted that the wide range of sale prices within the city, from approximately \$60,000 to \$80,000 at the low end to \$300,000 at the high

end, naturally pulls both the average and median figures downward.

Mr. Schlosser cited U.S. Census Bureau (ACS) data indicating that within the City of Ashtabula, 55.8% of housing units are owner-occupied, 44.2% are renter-occupied, and 12.3% are vacant, out of approximately 8,087 total units. He emphasized that communities where non-owner-occupancy exceeds 50% face an extremely difficult path to housing stock recovery, and characterized Ashtabula as "dangerously close" to that threshold. He noted that while the high rental demand benefits his own rental portfolio, which maintains a vacancy rate below 2% with a waiting list, he views the broader trend with concern.

The active listing volume for Ashtabula County in 2025 averaged approximately 77 listings per month across nearly 46,000 total county rooftops. The average days on the market was 59.5 days countywide, though Mr. Schlosser noted that backing out the 30 to 45 days typically required to close a loan leaves very little actual market time. Months of inventory averaged 2.75 months, well below the four to six months the National Association of Realtors (NAR) considers a balanced market, confirming strong demand and limited supply. He attributed post-COVID price appreciation to increased flexibility in where people live and work, as well as a broader societal shift toward multigenerational living.

Mr. Schlosser discussed his company's current spec house project on Stevens Road in Ashtabula Township, a 2,250 sq. ft. ranch home in which the total investment will approach \$600,000, or approximately \$270 per square foot. He noted this compares to roughly \$88 per square foot when he built his own home 25 years ago, and approximately \$100 per square foot when he last presented to the committee. The primary drivers are the cost of materials (e.g., plywood that once cost \$4/sheet now costs \$12 to \$13) and labor, with an estimated 1.8 million unfilled construction trade jobs nationwide. He acknowledged building at this price point in the city only because of the tax abatement the city offers, and stated he would not build three additional lots in his development under current conditions.

He was direct in his assessment of infill redevelopment: because renovation costs in many city neighborhoods exceed achievable sale prices, no private developer will undertake the work without a financial incentive. He recommended that the City consider subsidizing the gap, essentially absorbing \$60,000 to \$70,000 per property, to make development pencil out for investors at a standard 20% gross profit margin. He described the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program as currently too diffuse to have meaningful impact, and advocated for concentrating resources on a block-by-block basis to create a genesis effect for neighborhood revitalization.

The committee discussed the Welcome Home Ohio program as an existing mechanism aligned with this model, and City Manager James Timonere noted the county had received a new round of funding, though not the full amount requested by the land bank. Committee members underscored the importance of advocating to the state to continue these programs, particularly in the event of a change in state administration.

Mr. Schlosser affirmed that anything reducing the cost of housing, including CRA tax abatements, is beneficial. City Manager James Timonere provided context on ongoing work to revise the city's tax abatement framework, including discussions with the County Auditor on what types of improvements (as opposed to routine maintenance such as roofing or windows) would genuinely increase property value and justify abatement. The committee discussed structuring abatements by occupancy type (owner-occupied vs. investment), investment threshold, and rental category.

Mr. Schlosser also highlighted the national trend in first-time homebuyer age, which has risen from approximately 23 years old (a generation ago) to 38 years old per the most recent NAR data, driven by student debt and the rising cost of homeownership. He encouraged the committee to invest in first-time homebuyer programs. He also briefly noted the reappearance of no-documentation ("liar's loan") mortgage products in the market as a concern, connecting them to the conditions that preceded the 2008 mortgage crisis.

Mr. Schlosser noted that the national average two-bedroom rent in 2025 is \$1,811/month, a 37% increase (approximately \$505/month) since 2020. His own rental portfolio charges between \$575 and \$1,000/month, well below market, which he attributed to a deliberate strategy of maintaining low vacancy rates and serving tenants on fixed incomes, while reinvesting approximately \$65,000 to \$70,000 per year in property upkeep. The committee acknowledged that some city neighborhoods are seeing rents of \$1,200 to \$1,400/month, and City Manager James Timonere noted that the City is likely to be 30 to 50% under-rented relative to market conditions.

Mr. Schlosser noted that Ashtabula is in the 20th percentile of housing costs nationally, and that the area's

affordability, combined with waterfront amenities, wineries, and tourism, has attracted relocating buyers, particularly following COVID. He reiterated the central principle guiding his career: "Nobody has ever said, 'I wish I hadn't bought a house.'" He expressed confidence that values will continue to appreciate over the long term.

City Manager's Report

City Manager James Timonere provided the following updates:

- **Code Enforcement Activity:** From May 1 through May 31, code enforcement staff issued over 130 letters and/or door hangers and conducted 35 rental unit inspections. Year-to-date (January 1 through May 31), more than 131 rental units have been inspected and over 300 code enforcement letters and/or door hangers have been issued. He noted that a significant portion of staff time has been consumed by ongoing activity at Harbor Ridge.
- **Tax Abatement Program Review:** City Manager James Timonere reported that staff has begun drafting revisions to the City's tax abatement process and has consulted with the County Auditor on what is legally permissible. He noted that the Ohio Department of Development oversees the City's CRA agreements and would need to be involved in any changes. Areas under consideration include: tiered abatements based on owner-occupancy and investment level; Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) structures with contributions to Ashtabula City Schools and ATEC; the possibility of including newly approved levies in the tax obligation of abated properties; and differentiated treatment for long-term rentals, short-term rentals (e.g., Airbnb), and commercial uses. The County Auditor is compiling guidance on the minimum investment thresholds and eligible improvement types that would substantively increase property value. City Manager James Timonere indicated he would return to the committee with options for further discussion.
- **Main Avenue Reconstruction:** Concrete pouring is underway and City Manager James Timonere expressed satisfaction with the contractor's performance and responsiveness. The west side of the project is expected to wrap up by mid-month, after which the contractor will transition to the east side. Full project completion is targeted for August per the contract terms. All bases and conduits for the new light poles are in place and wiring is run; the light poles themselves remain on order and represent the longest lead-time item. The new poles will be of a style similar to those recently installed in the Bridge Street parking lot and will feature flower/banner brackets and electrical receptacles at the top for seasonal decorations. Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo noted she had incorrectly informed constituents that a new sound system would be included; City Manager James Timonere confirmed no sound system is part of the current project, as a separate conduit run would have been required. Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman raised the question of security cameras. City Manager James Timonere noted that ADDA has an existing contract with a local company to install cameras on Main Avenue, which had been paused pending the new pole installation and will now proceed.

Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman asked about how many construction workers on city projects are local residents. City Manager James Timonere noted that Aqua and Koski Construction employ a number of local workers, while Miller Pipeline and CATT's Construction (based in Lake County) likely have their own crews with limited local hiring. He noted that income tax is collected on workers who are in the community for 28 days or more. Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman inquired whether local-hire provisions could be incorporated into future contracts, particularly as an opportunity to connect residents, especially younger people, with the construction trades. City Manager James Timonere acknowledged this is more feasible on larger projects where contractors actively recruit from local union halls or trade schools, and noted that current projects, while significant in dollar amount, involve relatively small crews.

Parks & Recreation Committee Report

Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo reported that no formal Parks Board committee meeting was held during the prior period, as staff time was devoted to the Memorial Day Parade. The parade included 31 units and was described as a successful and moving event. She noted that thank-you notes had been prepared for all participants and expressed hope that the event would double in size in future years. Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman added appreciation for the ceremony held at Veterans Park following the parade, which was well-attended.

Unfinished Business

Food Truck Legislation

Discussion took place regarding the background check requirement in the food truck legislation currently in place. City Manager James Timonere stated that the original intent was to establish some regulatory control over food trucks operating independently in public spaces, and potentially to enable City-sponsored food truck events. He acknowledged that the resulting ordinance became more burdensome than intended.

The central point of contention is the ordinance's requirement that food truck owners submit to annual FBI and Ohio BCI criminal background checks. Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo noted that this standard exceeds what is required of school teachers or police officers on an annual basis. City Manager James Timonere observed that the background check applies only to the owner of record, who may not even be present at a given event, with no requirement for employees, making it both inconsistent and potentially ineffective.

City Manager James Timonere also emphasized that events such as Wine & Walleye, Beach Glass Festival, and the Mount Carmel Festival are held on private property and do not require a City permit. Food Truck Mondays at Smith Field similarly operate under a private sponsor arrangement. As a result, no food truck operators have applied for a City permit under the current ordinance.

Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman read into the record a constituent email expressing strong support for retaining the background check requirement. The email argued that food trucks' mobility, unlike fixed brick-and-mortar establishments, reduces ongoing community accountability; that food trucks regularly operate at venues serving children and vulnerable populations; that a dual FBI/BCI check closes potential gaps in state-only records for operators who have relocated; and that City-backed screening would build consumer trust and benefit reputable operators. Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman stated she was in agreement with the constituent's position.

Discussion continued and addressed the practical difficulty of acting on a flagged background check, including questions about second chances, fairness relative to brick-and-mortar businesses, and the absence of defined disqualifying criteria in the current ordinance. City Manager James Timonere noted there are currently only approximately 13 to 14 food trucks in the local community, and that the food truck environment in the City does not resemble the large, roving operations that might warrant heightened scrutiny. He reiterated his concern that the existing ordinance would deter participation if the City wished to sponsor its own food truck events.

Committee members discussed whether a less frequent check (e.g., every two or three years) could serve as a reasonable compromise. Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo ultimately stated her view that the background check requirement constitutes unnecessary red tape and moved to recommend repeal.

Motion: Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo moved to bring the repeal and replacement ordinance, removing the background check requirement, out of committee for Council's consideration; Vice Chair Jodi Mills seconded.

ROLL CALL VOTE

Yeas: Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo, Vice Chair Jodi Mills

Nays: Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman

Motion carried.

New Business

Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo introduced a draft moratorium on data centers within the City, modeled on prior moratorium legislation passed by council. The draft definition of "data center" was drawn from language used by other municipalities. City Manager James Timonere noted the draft had not yet been reviewed by the City Solicitor.

City Manager James Timonere clarified that the City is not currently being approached by any large-scale data center operators and, given the City's density and land availability, does not have what such projects require. He stated that he does not believe a large data center would be a beneficial or feasible use of City land, and that the moratorium is largely ceremonial in practice. He expressed preference for the issue to be addressed through the forthcoming zoning update, which will include guardrails such as minimum acreage requirements, applicable zoning districts, and conditional use review through the Planning Commission. The zoning update is anticipated to be completed in early spring of next year.

Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman expressed support for the moratorium as a protective measure, noting that a future city manager or council could hold a different position. City Manager James Timonere agreed that embedding protections in the zoning code is the most durable approach.

After discussion, the committee agreed to table the data center moratorium to allow members time to review the draft and for the Solicitor's Office to provide feedback before any vote.

City Manager James Timonere reminded the committee that the final public meeting on the Master Plan would take place the following evening at ARMC Hospital (new building, meeting room off the main corridor) at 6 p.m. A follow-up public survey will also be released after the meeting. He noted that school being out of session reduces outreach options compared to prior survey rounds, and that social media remains the primary distribution channel. Committee members were encouraged to share the meeting and survey widely.

Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman requested that all members take note of upcoming Juneteenth events in the community and attend at least one. She highlighted a Juneteenth celebration at First Congregational United Church of Christ, 41 East Jefferson Street, Jefferson, Ohio, on Friday, June 19, at 6:30 p.m., featuring arts, music, reenactments, gospel ensemble, and historical character portrayals including Harriet Tubman and Martin Luther King Jr.

Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman announced that the presenter for the July 1 meeting is from the Northeast Ohio Community Resilience Centre and will address emergency preparedness and disaster response, as well as share results from a recent community assessment.

Next Meeting

July 1, 2026

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:28 p.m. by Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo.