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## Action group's plan stalled by city vote

Council wants to meet to resolve the impasse

By Richard Crumbacker  
Crisfield-Somerset County Times

CRISFIELD — The City Council's failure last Wednesday to endorse the Greater Crisfield Action Coalition's mission, vision and strategies was a setback for its board and supporters. Nevertheless, the two dissenting council members expressed a willingness to continue the conversation at a future work session that will be scheduled to "iron out the wrinkles."

The 2-2 vote meant the measure did not pass despite Councilwoman Charlotte Scott wanting to break the tie. City Solicitor Michael Sullivan said with Ms. Scott the GCAC president, it would be "very much a conflict of in-

terest" for her to vote. Meanwhile Councilman Erik Emely took a "proactive step" and resigned from the GCAC board. He made the motion to support the non-profit, which was seconded by Councilwoman Barbara Ward.

"We are not here to take anything away from the city," Mr. Emely said. "We're not asking to be another City Council." He expressed his frustration that he had to resign from a volunteer post intended to support Crisfield. "What a sad state when people are trying to volunteer and do everything they can to help the city and we can't get it passed," he said.

"We want better things for Crisfield," Ms. Ward said, and pulling together "can make a significant difference." "It might not be this time right now, but don't give up."

See GCAC Vote — Page 5

# GCAC Vote

Continued From Page 1

"It's hard to take when you don't get the support you need," Ms. Scott said. However, she drew strength from the standing room only crowd of supporters that spilled out into the hallway. "If you don't quit," she said to the audience, "I won't quit."

GCAC is a community development corporation, the kind of entity that the Lofton Report recommended for Crisfield as far back as 2002. Like many plans — including the Strategic Revitalization Plan from 2008 that cost \$185,000 — it was essentially shelved because the city lacked the capacity to implement the recommendations.

An Economic Development Task Force, which was created as an arm of the Somerset County Long Term Recovery Committee after superstorm Sandy, compiled the top ideas from all prior studies, and came up with various goals that were unanimously adopted by the City Council in November 2013.

Phil Riffin, who chaired that task force, said he supports the GCAC action plan and told the City Council that "It provides a well-designed roadmap for a brighter future for Crisfield." In fact, the goals of the task force "are in that action plan." He said GCAC "has already taken on various tasks to implement the strategies," and with the city's endorsement can then be used at the county and state level when applying for grant funding.

"We can't do anything without the city," said Darlene Taylor, secretary of GCAC. "We've been told there's money out there, but without the city, we can't get those things." "This is about jobs, this is about opportunity, this is about training, being able to have stores on Main Street again...this is about trying to revive a city."

City Council Vice President LaVerne Johnson said with this vote "We look like the bad guys," and she had preferred that the measure be tabled so it could be more thoroughly discussed. She said the help was needed, "and I appreciate the help" but GCAC was created outside the council's involvement. She said Mr. Riffin's task force "came to us... they were inclusive and we were invited" and that was not the case with GCAC. Had that happened, "We would not be where we are tonight."

Ms. Johnson was encouraged

by the fact that City Manager Rick Pollitt has been invited to become an ex-officio on the GCAC board. "Don't count me out," she said, expressing her willingness to meet and talk "to move forward."

Councilman Mark Konapelsky said prior to the vote that he would not give an "open blanket acceptance" for the plan, but would consider items brought individually. "This would open a door that could be very dangerous for the council," he said. "It is too extensive." He said later, "We're not closed-minded." "We're not closing the doors to discussion, we're actually welcoming it."

Like Ms. Johnson, he endorsed having a work session, "with specific things that you want," and Ms. Johnson will try to schedule one as soon as possible.

Former City Councilman Mike Atkins said he has no objection to the mission of GCAC, and that "everyone wants to see improvement." But if this becomes a public-private partnership, then grant applications by the city and GCAC could be made to the same state agency for a limited pool of funds. Likewise an award to one could hinder a request by the other. His

other concern is grant money could be spent on salaries in GCAC for administration, when the city has staff in-house for this. "I think grant money should go to the City of Crisfield for control," he said.

Keith Campbell, workforce development director for GCAC, said the non-profit has already worked with the city on a grant application for housing. And from his perspective he would like to see grants run through the city. This would free up GCAC to spend time on strategic issues and not on completing government paperwork.

The mayor said he knows this impasse "if very painful for Ms. Scott" and the GCAC board. However, he wanted the leaders to understand that "when they make decisions, that the next thing they have to do is find out if it's part of the city's plan."

"I hope the work of the Greater Crisfield Action Coalition is not shelved by those of us who articulated our concern," the mayor said.

More philosophical was County Commissioner President Randy Laird who said simply GCAC "just lost a vote." With everybody "working together I think we can make this work for Crisfield." "I think it's a positive thing and hopefully our town will flourish."

