

Thetford Planning Commission
Minutes – Meeting March 6th, 2007

Present: Stuart Blood, Mike Brown, Hayden Brownell, Heather Carlos, Dennis A. Donahue, Donn E. Downey, Lori Howard, Rick Howard, Wayne Parks (Chair)

Absent: Liora Alschuler

Guests: Bill Bridge, DRB; Mariah Capurso, Thetford Fire Dept.; Don Fifield, Thetford Fire Chief; Norm Marshall, former PC member and Principal of “Smart Mobility Inc.,” Norwich; Doug Stone, Thetford Road Foreman; Chad Wickham, Thetford Fire Dept.

7:15 Meeting Called To Order

7:16 Public Comment: None

7:17 Review of Prior Minutes: adopted as amended, with one abstention.

7:18 Town Plan Update - Report on Meeting with Selectboard: the next SB hearing, March 19th has been warned. It was remarked that no copies of the Town Plan had been taken from the PC booth at the Town Meeting.

7:19 MEG Grant Seminar: SSB has contacted an experienced trainer, Sharon Murray, to discuss a training topic. This is still undecided; SSB is waiting for an e-mail response. He won't be at the next meeting but will pass any information he receives on to WP beforehand. HB has also contacted someone who could tailor a topic to the PC's needs; he recommended this individual as a “good fit.” The information will be passed on to WP before the next meeting. SSB will send his list of topics to HB so everyone can get on the same page. If anyone else comes up with other issues, they should communicate by e-mail for a composite list.

7:24 Old Business: None

7:25 New Business: HB discussed a document he had drafted and previously circulated to the PC list, regarding the zoning & subdivision bylaws. In order to make implementation of the bylaws more streamlined and consistent with the town “GORP” (Goals, Objectives & Recommended Policies), he recommended a procedure eliminating the distinction between Major and Minor subdivisions and incorporating a review process similar to that used currently-one that allows for a degree of flexibility and discretion. His recommendation includes incentives for new applicants to adjust their building specifications to conform to the town GORP. The objective is simplicity, uniformity, and flexibility. A precedent for this has been set by other towns. The trainer he consulted regarding the MEG seminar could present to the PC regarding this issue. Further discussion of New Business was delayed to let the guests address the meeting.

7:35: Lot & Site Layout and Road Design: SSB invited the guests to address the PC regarding standards for road design (village & rural residential). He passed out copies of the pertinent subdivision bylaw and a table titled “Standards for Street Design.” N. Marshall reviewed the current bylaw item by item. He noted that it encourages the opening of multiple driveways

rather than a local access road. Roads require a 50 ft. right-of-way and 2 10-ft. lanes are required for a road with 12 houses or more. He pointed out that the current set of standards probably “came from somewhere else” because it includes language not pertinent to Thetford road conditions. For example, the stipulation of a “Shoulder” is irrelevant to gravel roads. D. Fifield emphasized that, as the town expands out into remote areas, emergency crews more frequently have to deal with inaccessible private driveways and/or the lack of turn-around space for vehicles. He noted two concerns: private driveways not in compliance with standards (either too steep or too long), and difficulties with access to a water supply. When tankers are brought in, they need passing room so cul-de-sacs and narrow drives present a problem. He asked if the bylaw can be changed so that all private driveways are in compliance. He stressed the potential for tragic consequences if medical services don’t have easy access.

N. Marshall clarified that “conductivity” i.e. a “block” configuration is recommended for major subdivisions (with a waiver option) and high-density areas. Historically driveways haven’t needed to be reviewed by the PC. He recommended simplifying the Table of Standards by reducing it to one column. HC asked whether one standard was needed for paved roads and another for unpaved? Don F. responded that steep grades make paved driveways especially difficult in slick conditions, but width makes no difference provided it’s at or beyond the minimum requirement. DED asked whether the table refers just to subdivisions or to private driveways as well. It applies to any drive serving three or more houses. The existing width specifications are acceptable, but the grade specifications are potentially problematic depending on the overall layout of the drive. He noted that the 50 ft. right-of-way is needed for drainage and “cuts-and-fills.” D. Stone concurred with D. Fifield’s comments; town road crews need the same access conditions as emergency crews. WP asked whether any numbers in the current requirements need to be changed. No, roads built within the last 10-15 years are fine. D. Stone summed up the dilemma between ensuring safety requirements and respecting personal property rights. He also stressed how important up-to-date information about new driveways and roads is to emergency crews. WP asked whether the zoning administrator provides information about new construction to the fire department. Yes, but D. Stone noted that permits include information about road distance but not about grade. D. Fifield pointed out that erosion from steep driveways onto town roads may offer the town an opportunity for action; currently, driveways can be any shape and configuration provided town roads aren’t affected. HC asked whether anything should be added to this section of the bylaws. N. Marshall said that a maximum block size would encourage loops and connecting streets.

D. Fifield raised the issue of wild-land interface, especially the impact of a house fire on wildlife and habitat. This is a more serious question today because of recent building in remote areas. He would like to discuss a standard for a “green buffer” at a future date. He also anticipates a future (10 years out) requirement that all new buildings have sprinkler systems. WP asked about the consultation process. The fire department is usually consulted regarding water supply and driveways in bigger subdivisions. WP asked whether the fire department could produce a pamphlet for homebuilders. D. Fifield said that such a pamphlet was available 5-10 years ago and could be made available again; he will follow up on this. The guests left the meeting at 8:25.

8:26: Resumption of New Business: WP asked whether all construction be considered “conditional use.” Not for already existing subdivisions, even if permits haven’t been issued yet.

HB Isn't sure about the universal application of his recommendations, but they should be applied as widely as possible. WP concluded that this would mean all new subdivisions. SSB clarified that HB's proposal would treat all subdivisions by PUD (Planned Unit Development) standards, which include a long list of requirements. HB proposes a checklist of requirements to identify those which would apply and those which wouldn't. HC expressed admiration for HB's "thinking outside the box;" the flexibility is positive, but perhaps it would be too ambiguous and not provide the DRB consistent standards for implementation. DAD considers the issue of flexibility critical; he cited specific cases of PUD which encouraged creative problem-solving between applicants and the town. DED asked whether the PC really wants the town to have a say in all construction? DAD responded that the PC needs to help people follow the Town Plan. DED pointed out that this flexibility exists under current regulations. B. Bridges supported DAD's position calling for flexibility and town involvement at an early stage of construction planning. He sees "2-acre zoning" as unsatisfactory; a new way of thinking is called for. HB clarified that the DRB's role would be more consultative, less "judicial;" he suggested incentives and alternatives to reach compromises consistent with the town GORP. This would help people get the big picture, i.e. an idea of regional design rather than lot-by-lot "patchwork." DED expressed concern about the potential for prolonged negotiations or even extensive litigation between the DRB and property owners. LH concurred. HB suggested that "overlays" would help adjust priorities. The MEG workshops could educate the PC about other towns' models. WP concluded that in this case compliance would be on a voluntary basis, and expressed three concerns: property owner are entitled to a minimum set of requirements as a basis for approaching the DRB; the market will ultimately decide and probably doesn't want PUD's in rural areas; the proposal provides for too much flexibility and susceptibility to personal bias on the part of the DRB. RH remarked that this proposal "muddies the waters" and would offer less guidance than current bylaws. HC would like to see this idea developed further. DED would like further research into comparable models in other towns first.

Meeting adjourned at 9:00

Respectfully submitted,
Jennifer Jabareen
(PC clerk)