

Thetford Planning Commission
June 7, 2011 – APPROVED Minutes

Present: Kevin O'Hara, Patrick Kearney, Terry Longo, Michael Schunk, Liora Alschuler, Dean Whitlock (Recording Clerk)

Absent: Rick Howard

Guests: Donn Downey

(Numbers below refer to agenda items)

1. Meeting called to order by Kevin O'Hara at 7:17 PM

2. Public Comment: None.

3. Review of the Minutes of May 17 (7:18)

The minutes were approved as amended. (Liora had not been present at the meeting and abstained). Patrick will make corrections and post.

4. Selectboard Report (7:27)

Donn Downey reported on the June 6 selectboard meeting, at which the selectboard had discussed the next steps in process of adopting the draft zoning bylaw. He said the general consensus was that they were very close to completion, with a few minor changes to make before approval. They had formed a working group to discuss the uses table; specifically which uses were permitted in each district and which were not allowed. Mike Pomeroy and Tig Tillinghast would be working group members from the selectboard, and the Planning Commission would provide 2 members. They would discuss scenarios and make recommendations within the next week or two. He also said that nobody on the selectboard wants to send the draft back to the Planning Commission or put it to Australian ballot.

Liaison Policy: Donn reported that the selectboard has drafted and adopted a liaison policy to define and detail the expectations and duties of the selectboard liaisons with each of the town committees. This will be an addition to the handbook as a policy guide, not an ordinance. The policy specifies that each liaison will meet with the committee head within 1 month after Town Meeting to define the process and schedule for contact. The flexibility recognizes that the committees do not all operate the same way. Donn said he will email the new policy to the Planning Commission listserv.

Jumping back to the draft zoning bylaw, Kevin asked if the selectboard had had any discussions about the Connecticut River setback. Donn did not recall that they had, but said they have not gone through all of the comments from the hearing yet.

Liora asked if the selectboard had discussed any guiding principles with regard to the upcoming decisions about permitted uses. Donn said there had not been. Kevin reviewed the principles used by the Planning Commission: statements in the Town Plan and language in the

current zoning bylaw and public comments on both, with the self-imposed mandate not to impose any policy changes where there was no clear guidance from the town. The Planning Commission would like to see these principles maintained. Not all changes suggested at the recent public hearing are consistent with these guidelines. In the case of the Town Plan rewrite, everything is on the table. Liora asked if that should be the case now for the draft zoning bylaw. Terry Longo said he felt there should always be guiding principles in mind, both with the draft bylaw and with long range planning. Donn said he would coalesce these ideas and present them to the selectboard workgroup, with the suggestion that they start by setting guiding principles before going through the matrix of comments. Liora suggested they also set the scope of changes beforehand, to deal with potential conflicts of vision. Donn will send the workgroup decisions to the Planning Commission, and Kevin will send the names of the Planning Commission members who will take part once they are selected.

Donn left the meeting (7:40)

There was a brief discussion of the recent selectboard hearing on the draft bylaw, for those members who had not been able to attend. Kevin reviewed the comments about the CT River being exempt from any setback. He also said he felt the selectboard's discussion on the next steps at their 6/6 meeting was very positive. Liora concurred.

5. Election of Officers (7:47)

Kevin said the members needed to elect a Vice Chair and a Clerk, and offered to open the position of Chair as well, though no one took him up on that. He then read the duties of each office and opened the floor to nominations. After some discussion about the need for experience versus the advantages of learning on the job and having new blood involved, Terry nominated himself for Vice Chair. Patrick immediately seconded. The vote was unanimous in favor.

Kevin was asked to further clarify the duties of the clerk, after which there was future hemming but not so much hawing, and Patrick offered himself for the role. Michael seconded and the vote was unanimous.

6. Town Plan Rewrite (7:54)

Kevin introduced the topic for discussion: Where do we go from here? After the thorough review of the municipal grant workplan and the role of Two Rivers Ottawaquechee Regional Commission (TRORC), it was time to deal with the nuts and bolts of working on the town plan. He turned to floor over to Liora to lead the discussion, based on her experience with the previous town plan rewrite.

Liora said that the workplan and contract with TRORC is excellent in that it provides a structure for the planning process, but it also gives flexibility in the degree of revision the Planning Commission chooses to make. We can do the minimum or take this as an opportunity to involve the community in thinking about the future of Thetford. Though there will always be some disagreement, the Town Plan represents where the townspeople agree. The commission needs to determine what else, in addition to the meetings and forums specified in the workplan, can be done to get input from as many people as possible. She said it is incumbent on the members to try to open up the discussion with people who don't come to meetings.

There was a brief discussion of the plan to readopt the current Town Plan in order to have more time to work on the new one. Kevin confirmed that that was first step: to make the minimum updates necessary and readopt quickly. It will be necessary to meet the reporting requirements of the grant, but that doesn't mean that the planning process will be done when the grant is done. There was discussion of developing a timeline. There are known items that require change, and the members can divide these up by chapter and form workgroups to make recommendations. There are broader policy issues that must go to the townspeople for input. There are comments deferred from the previous town plan hearings, along with plan-level comments from the zoning bylaw hearings. The members can categorize these and make recommendations to spark the discussion with the town. Finally, there will be the formal review by TRORC to make sure the draft plan meets state requirements and is consistent with the regional plan.

There was a brief discussion of the history and authority of the regional commission and regional plan, and the consequences if Thetford were to choose to be independent and not try to conform to the regional plan (mostly a matter of grants that wouldn't be available). Michael said he would like an overview of where the town stands now in relation to state requirements, which the regional plan might provide. He thought it might provide some guidance to the town and help start a dialog with townspeople. The TRORC review of our plan will be a start, but he would like to see the full regional plan. Kevin said he would arrange to get copies for everyone, either digital or hard copy.

Liora asked if the members thought it would be better to start the forums with a list of topics or with a blank slate. After some discussion, the sense of the meeting was that it was best to start with the structure of topics but then to open up the meeting to any topic. There was a discussion of where to hold the meetings: in villages or in neighborhoods? Small meetings with local organizations such as churches or other community groups were discussed as a way to reach people who would not otherwise attend a planning forum. Patrick asked if the commission could send a mailing to the entire town. There are budget issues with that, but Dean suggested that the newsletters specified in the workplan could be used for the same purpose, and perhaps there was money in the grant to cover mailing. Kevin said he would look into it. In terms of timing, the sense of the meeting was that a mailing should wait until after initial discussions identified topics that needed broader discussion. There was also discussion of trying to make the town plan a subject of study in the schools. Liora will research that possibility.

Terry said he thought the key to reaching as many people as possible was to make the message personal: Get each property owner to ask, "What's at stake for me as a business owner, farmer, etc.? How will this affect me and my plans to build new barn in 5 years? Will I be able to subdivide? What rights will I lose?" Unless the issue is personal, no one will come. Getting this message across will not be an easy task. Mike agreed, adding that the message will transcend where the meeting is held.

There was further discussion of a timeline. Terry suggested using a time box process. Kevin said that first he needed an idea of the scope of the issues, starting with the deferred comments already recorded in the comment spreadsheets. Liora will resend the documents to all members. Between now and the next meeting, everyone will review it and be prepared to suggest

categories, priorities, and sort the items into town plan chapters at the next meeting. Terry will work on ideas for messaging and reaching out to the townspeople.

7. Other Reports: None. (7:48)

8. Old Business: None.

9. New Business

a. Kevin reminded the members about the public meeting on a town trail system, scheduled for the coming Thursday. Several members reported that they were planning to attend.

b. Kevin reviewed the selectboard's discussion of the table of uses and the decision to form a workgroup to decide which uses to change. He asked which two members would like to join Tig Tillinghast and Mike Pomeroy on the workgroup. He said Rick Howard had expressed interest in being involved. Liora volunteered and the other members approved, due to her experience. She noted that she will be away for several days in the next few weeks, and Kevin was nominated to serve as her alternate if the need arose.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:01 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Dean Whitlock, Clerk, Thetford Planning Commission