

Thetford Planning Commission
December 6, 2011 – APPROVED Minutes, including Open House Comments

Present: Kevin O'Hara, Patrick Kearney, Rick Howard, Liora Alschuler, Dean Whitlock
(Recording Clerk)

Absent: Michael Schunk, Terry Longo

Guests: Donn Downey, Chris Sargent (TRORC)

Attendees at the open house: Connie Snyder, Eric Pyle, Helena Binder, Jane Francisco, Jennifer Davies, Jim Zien, Joshua Kol, Kimberly Kol, Li Shen, Libby Chapin, Marty Jacobs, Neal Meglathery, Peter Blodgett, Sally Duston, Stuart Blood, Tig & Lucy Tillinghast, Wayne Parks.

(Numbers below refer to agenda items)

1. The meeting was called to order by Kevin O'Hara at 6:55 p.m.

2. Public Comment:

None

3. Review of the Minutes of 11/15/11:

The minutes were accepted without changes (a first for this clerk).

4. Selectboard Report: Donn Downey went over the proposed Planning Commission Budget for next year. He noted two significant changes: 1) Two Rivers Ottauquechee Rivers Commission (TRORC) dues have gone up, for the first time in many years, by \$550; 2) the clerk is apparently too efficient and his hours to date for FY11 are much lower than they were for FY10. The selectboard recommends reducing the amount for clerk's wages and social security. Donn started a discussion of the other items, to be sure that the amounts were enough, but not too much. Kevin said that the members were doing many tasks themselves rather than hiring out. Liora noted that there should be money budgeted for editing the final draft of the new town plan. Dean pointed out that the FY10 clerical hours included several months where the commission met three times rather than twice, and also that the meetings ran much longer as the deadline for completing the new zoning bylaw approached. Those conditions will probably come up again in FY12 as the deadline for completing the new town plan approaches. After further discussion, Donn said he would suggest to the selectboard that the clerical budget item stay at the original amount, and that editing fees could be charged to that. Kevin and Chris Sargent will look at the budget for the Municipal Planning Grant to see if there are funds allocated there for editing, advertising, and/or printing.

5. Town Plan

Kevin introduced Chris to the members; he is our new representative from TRORC, replacing Sally Hull. Because of the open house, scheduled for 7:30, there wasn't time to discuss

the grant schedule or other issues with Chris this evening. He will join the meeting again at the next meeting, 12/20, for that purpose.

Liora informed the members that she will attend the next Conservation Commission meeting, on 12/14, and also their January meeting (which Chris will also attend). She will go over with them the open house comments related to conservation issues to get their viewpoint. She will also cover the current status and schedule for developing the new town plan. All of the Planning Commission members are invited to attend.

The members went over the preparations for the open house, reviewing Liora's slides and assigned who would lead each section prior to opening the floor to comments.

6. Old Business

Kevin reported that he had contacted the working group on subdivision regulations. They have assigned different sections of the regulations among their members to review and prepare for a meeting after the new year.

Liora reported on the Vital Communities conference: there was some good information, but the discussion was diverted by local disagreements so no new initiatives were developed. Patrick concurred that the event was disappointing.

7. New Business - None

8. Open House 2 - Thetford Villages

Kevin welcomed the attendees and began the open house at 7:32 p.m. He introduced the commission members and Chris Sargent and gave a quick overview of the agenda. Liora briefly presented the comments received at the first open house, broken into the major categories, including the vision statements that had been put forward, and ending with the Village category, which would be the focus of this second open house. Patrick then showed examples of the contrasting comments received and explained that we hoped to come to a third viewpoint – Perspective C – that would reconcile the contrasts. Kevin then opened the floor to comments from the attendees.

Comments: Liora recorded comments in the table on her computer. That document will serve as the complete record of the comments and will be posted on the planning commission archive. The following record gives the gist of each comment but is not verbatim.

Marty Jacobs asked if there was a vision for the town. She said it was hard for her to comment without a vision to comment about. She said that, to develop a vision, the commission would have to reach out to all of the stakeholders in town, to go where they are. Kevin responded that going door-to-door was very difficult for the commission, since they were all volunteers with full-time jobs. He noted a similar comment at the first open house, but when he asked the commenter if they would like to host a meeting at their house, they said no. He asked the group to please suggest other ways to reach out.

Donn Downey said that he felt better forgetting about the old plan and a vision and just asking the townspeople what they wanted to see the villages looking like in the future. He would like to see more activity, business and social, more people using the villages, and “more stuff” going on. He would like the villages to be hubs of activity, not just bedrooms.

Li Shen said it would be nice if the villages could meet more of the resident’s own needs; for example, food (a bakery) and renewable energy. It would be nice to encourage more trades- and crafts-people, more economic activity; for example, small orchards or vegetable gardens instead of lawns, as careers for the residents, respected in the community. She would like to see development encouraged within the village boundaries by increasing the density so that they would not spread out into the surrounding agricultural land. She thought this would foster more social networking and other values. Liora noted the town would need to learn how to encourage people to work at several trades.

Jennifer Davies said she would like to see more traffic calming, even on the state roads, to reduce the speed of cars passing through. She also said she thought the businesses must meld with how people live there now (regarding noise, hours of operation). She would also like to see either sidewalks or wider roads to encourage more walking.

Kimberly Kol said there should be attention paid to how the villages look to make them more attractive and welcoming to newcomers and visitors. For example, the town garage in Thetford Center affects how people feel about the village.

Jane Francisco: The villages have a unique character and it’s important to use care to maintain the character and preserve good features despite the inevitable changes. Liora asked if she meant to keep things just the same, or to allow some change? Ms. Francisco suggested allowing clustered buildings to avoid sprawl. To encourage the same style of architecture and to maintain and preserve existing buildings.

Eric Pyle said he echoed many of the ideas expressed; for example, the bakery, and to encourage and expand small business to serve residents and home business so people didn’t have to travel as much to work or to shop. This goes for rural areas, too. It would add to the vitality of the town. Similar to a bakery, a small store with necessities would reduce travel.

Patrick note that Thetford has five villages in one town, which is unusual. He asked if this was a benefit or a problem. How does it affect our development?

Jim Zien asked how many residences in each village were year-round and how many were seasonal? (No one could say on the spot; Chris Sargent said the 911 data would provide that number.) Mr. Zien said that economics would dictate the viability of a bakery. How can we encourage more year-round residents? This precipitated a brief discussion about Thetford being underpopulated for economic success. Mr. Zien said he didn’t think the town could truly encourage small business without huge, unacceptable tax incentives. Stuart Blood said there was

a possibility of offering incentives to in-fill the villages, creating more residential density; municipal water and sewage, for example. Mr. Downey said that the spread of our population (2400) across centers was too thin to encourage economic density; we might need to focus on 1 or 2 of the 5.

Sally Duston said some businesses serve more than just the town. How would you encourage businesses like that in Thetford Center, without absorbing more land?

Kimberly Kol noted that there was redundancy of businesses between the villages; do we need it? Chris Sargent suggested considering creating hamlets instead of villages, zoned for different levels of use. Liora asked if there was a functional definition of "hamlet." Chris replied, no, it would be different for each town.

Kevin remarked that, in the past, the planning commission has steered clear of issues of aesthetics and architecture. He asked what people thought about this policy? Ms. Kol said she realized it was hard to define but felt it would be worth the effort. She thought that it would be easier to tell with businesses than residences.

Wayne Parks raised the issue of closed post offices; if they go, as in North Thetford, there is nothing in the village to draw people. There was a brief spate of speculation about which post offices might close.

Sally Duston pointed out that the town was lacking an inn, where there used to be at least two. Having one would help make the town more of a destination. Kevin noted that the zoning bylaws allowed them as permitted uses. Ms. Duston added that a local realtor had mentioned getting many inquiries from people seeking land not for houses only but arable land that could be used for commercial agriculture.

Jennifer Davies, returning to the topic of unregulated aesthetics and village water systems: these allow the building of condos. She would prefer to make sure that condos fit visually into a village. Mr. Parks, as a former planning commission member, said that it is very difficult to zone aesthetics but that citizens can express their opinions early on in the development review process, before final plans had been drawn up. It was his opinion that most developers would listen to the neighbors and adjust their designs accordingly. He then returned to the topic of inns, asking why had they closed; was it due to lack of business? This sparked a discussion about making the town a destination.

Jim Zien said it would be more useful to think about the assets we already have that could be made more active, such as (on Thetford Hill) the library, the Parish Players, the Church. The town might be better served to better support these organizations to improve their service to residents rather than to attract outsiders. For example, the town could run an event or create a special town map highlighting its attractions. (Kevin and Donn referred to the possibility of having such a map on the town web site.)

Jean Francisco referred again to traffic issues: speed and congestion during certain times of day, such as when school gets out. She said the town should encourage car pools and smaller, fuller buses.

Jim Zien returned to the post office question, suggesting that the town approach the post office administration and sell the idea of one central town post office in a small business complex in Thetford Center (replacing the town garage). He said we don't really have five villages, we have five hamlets. Liora commented that this would provide a good town-wide draw and asked for other similar ideas.

Libby Chapin returned to the topic of village/town character and preserving what we already have. She said she was against sprawl and thought we should save our open spaces. Since a lot of the business suggestions depend on critical mass, it's better to concentrate development in the villages.

Li Shen remarked that attempting to move the town garage would open a can of worms, but that she liked the idea of a central post office complex that could be expanded to include a bakery and similar services. Chris Sargent remarked that Vershire had been trying to move its town garage for 10 years. It is expensive as well as contentious.

Peter Blodgett spoke of several initiatives that the Peabody Library Trustees had discussed for awhile, including creating a kitchen (perhaps in the Odd Fellows Hall in Post Mills) to make meals for seniors, and moving the Peabody Library (building and all) down Route 244 to the head of the triangle/intersection with Robinson Hill Road (by Church, Cemetery, Airport). This would allow parking and a playground space, as well as a usable cellar, bathrooms, etc. He also asked the group to consider Thetford as having a necklace of villages connected by trails. Another idea was to create parking for the Grange Theater on Thetford Hill, perhaps behind Slater Hall. He also noted that the Thetford Hill Post Office was originally designed to absorb the business of the other post offices if/when they were closed.

Jim Zien asked what the state was doing with the Thetford Hill State Park. Mr. Downey said he would be able to check next Monday night. The state is wanting to hand it off to another operator.

Libby Chapin asked about the status of the Malmquist Mill site in Post Mills. No one knew.

Patrick returned to the issue of traffic calming, and there was a brief discussion of speed bumps. Dean Whitlock said they were discouraged as causing accidents. Patrick said he was concerned that wider roads meant higher speeds (his experience as a bicyclist and seconded by Jim Zien in reference to the recent work on Route 244). Trees close to roads were said to cause people to slow down, with sidewalks on other side of trees. Patrick suggested that the bad pavement on Thetford Hill be torn up, leaving it dirt until the state was able to repair it properly.

Liora noted that East Thetford was a potential location for mixed development, with the auction site currently not being used as a business. It already has a concentration of commercial services. Ms. Kol remarked that it's also easier to get people to come there. Her practice was originally in Thetford Center, and many clients complained that it was way out of the way. Even clients who live in Randolph and have to drive past her old office to get to Thetford Center feel that it is easier to get to. Ms. Francisco said it seems to make sense to concentrate business there since it has already been developed that way.

Dean Whitlock asked what ideas people had about how to increase residential/business density in villages in order to avoid having them spread beyond their current boundaries, creating sprawl. For example, what did people think of having another road between Academy Road and Godfrey Road, creating a new tier of residences and businesses? Or having clustered development. Mr. Downey replied that he did not think there was enough demand for new housing in the town to cause 8-10 unit clusters. In the villages, only a few landowners have enough land to develop. It also seems more a market decision than a zoning issue. Chris Sargent noted that the planning commission had done a very good job in encouraging cluster dwelling in its zoning bylaw, but he agreed that it would be more affected by the market.

Jim Zien asked what other areas in the villages were available for development apart from the auction site in East Thetford and mill site in Post Mills. Liora said there was the train station in East Thetford but not much else.

Sally Duston wondered if the train could be used to carry freight and passengers from Thetford to other places, perhaps connecting to a boat landing in East Thetford for day trippers. Peter Blodgett hypothesized about having a bicycle-powered ferry to Hanover/Norwich on the river, and a chair lift up Thetford Hill (admitting it was a bit far-fetched).

Jim Zien, returning to a more serious topic, suggested that the town could obtain the Thetford Hill State Park and turn it into a cross-country ski center, as has been done in the Burke Mountain region. It could be a running center in the other seasons. Ms. Shen added that our back roads could be part of a walking network.

Kevin ended the open house by putting out another plea for ideas and help in reaching out to other sectors of the town. He also mentioned that the commission would be meeting with other town committees in the coming months and all were welcome to attend.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Dean Whitlock, Clerk, Thetford Planning Commission