

Thetford Planning Commission
January 17, 2012 – APPROVED Minutes

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

Absent: Terry Longo,

Guests: Bill Bridge (7:15-7:40)

(Numbers below refer to agenda items)

1. Kevin O'Hara called the meeting to order at 7:15 p.m.

2. Public Comment.

Bill Bridge joined the meeting. He asked the Planning Commission to consider an amendment to the new Zoning by-law adopted last year. He explained that he had researched the process and found that the first step was to approach the Planning Commission. If they chose not to consider an amendment, he has the option to circulate a petition and present it to the selectboard. Specifically, he asked the commissioners to consider changing Article 6.04(D)3.c on page 27 to add a 100-foot setback along the Connecticut River. The current language reads, "For third order streams and streams of higher order, the setback shall be three channel widths from the center of the channel, except that for the Connecticut River the regulation in this subsection will not apply." He proposed to change the final phrase to read, "... , except that for the Connecticut River the setback shall be 100 feet from the top of the bank." Bill noted that there had been a lot of discussion of this clause at the public hearing, with many people supporting a setback on the Connecticut River. He believed that the Connecticut River was the first place that should have a setback. He also pointed out that the Town Plan specified being consistent with the Joint Rivers Commission, which recommends a setback there, and neighboring towns, which specify setbacks for the Connecticut River in their zoning.

There was a discussion of why other third and higher order streams had a setback expressed in terms of channel width rather than feet, and whether "top of bank" or "center of stream" was more appropriate. Most of the discussion was a review of why the commission had written the clause as is. Liora suggested a review of the reasoning since many of the current commissioners had not been involved in drafting the new bylaw. Rick explained that he was against a setback then and still was. He explained that, as a farmer, he was already required by state agricultural regulations to leave a 50-foot buffer along the bank of the Connecticut, which removed a lot of his acreage from use. The town also has a Flood Plain regulation that specifies a setback based on elevation. Most of the river bank in Thetford is controlled by this Flood Plain regulation or is in the railroad easement, so there is very little land that would be affected. There was a discussion of the difference between a buffer, which bars all use, and a setback, which only bars the building of structures. With a 100' setback, farmers would still be able to graze, plow,

etc. to within 50' of the bank. Rick said he still felt the existing agricultural buffer and flood plain rules were enough.

Michael said he would like to see a map showing the setback. Kevin said he would get a copy of the one Stuart Blood had prepared, which compared the flood plain regulation setback to the 100' setback and also indicated the railroad easements. He will also put the topic on the agenda for discussion as soon as possible.

Bill Bridge left the meeting.

3. Review of the Minutes of 1/3/12 (7:40)

The minutes were accepted with changes.

4. Selectboard Report: None.

5. Town Plan (7:50)

a. Readoption of the existing Town Plan, discussion of documents prepared by Chris Sargent of the Two Rivers Ottawaquechee Rivers Commission (TRORC). Chris had emailed a Memo to surrounding towns, a Notice to print in local newspapers, and a draft of the Town Plan (with only a date change). Dean suggested breaking one long sentence into two, to make the meaning more clear. Kevin pointed out an incorrect date. Patrick noted incorrect spacing and punctuation of "p.m.". Liora suggested adding the proposed date of the readoption hearing on the cover of the draft plan and adding the original date of adoption on the second page. Patrick moved to accept the three documents with the suggested changes; Michael seconded; the vote was unanimous in favor. Dean will send the changes to Chris as soon as possible.

Kevin suggested posting the announcement as is on the town listserve. Chris will distribute the announcement to newspapers and the memo to neighboring towns. Kevin will check with Chris that all procedures have been properly followed. There was a brief discussion of attendance on the proposed hearing date (Tuesday, February 21). Neither Liora nor Kevin will be able to attend. Kevin will check with Terry to make sure that he can attend, and will also check with Chris to see if a quorum is necessary to hold a hearing.

b. Rural Residential Open House - when and where. (8:05) The open house is scheduled for the next regular commission meeting, on Tuesday, Feb. 7. There was a discussion of where to hold it. Rick said that he had been contacted by Roberta Howard of North Thetford. The library group there would like to host an informal discussion similar to the one held in East Thetford. This would not be the Rural Residential open house, but he wanted to bring it up now so it would be considered in the discussion. Liora spoke briefly about the informal nature of the meeting in East Thetford and the different atmosphere that created. She said the open houses, at warned meetings, had to be more formal, but that both formats were valuable. The commissioners decided to see if the Thetford Center Community Center would be available for the open house, hoping that people who were uncomfortable coming to the town offices might be more inclined to come to the community center. Patrick will check with Lois Paige about the date and fee. If the community center is not available on that date, the open house will be held in the town hall as before.

Liora presented a set of contrasting statements to spark interest in and discussion about the Rural Residential district. The group discussed the language of a couple of them (and made some editorial comments). In discussing contrasting statements, Rick asked if overlays were technically possible (for example, to create separate areas of greater or lesser density within the RR district). Kevin said that it would be easier in some areas of town than others. Michael said it would be great to have maps available at the open house. Kevin will look into getting large ones from TRORC; Liora might be able to project them using digital versions. The sense of the meeting was that using contrasting statements on the listserve and a flyer, and having a brief introductory presentation at the open house, had been successful in the first two open houses, so those tactics would be used again. Liora will add a slide about the informal discussions. Everyone was in favor of having food. Dean will make another gluten-free cake, Michael will bring cookies, Kevin will bring snack foods, and Liora will make sure there is hot water for tea or coffee.

c. Blocking out a timeline. (8:35) For the newcomers, Kevin and Liora described the timeline used during the zoning bylaw process. Kevin will send a sample to them. He is concerned that, while the commission is collecting a great deal of useful comments, it has not yet started drafting any new language. The timeline is necessary to stay on track with the municipal planning grant and also with the completion of the new draft plan. He suggested forming a workgroup to develop a timeline. Michael volunteered to work on a very first draft of a timeline, once he has a sample to work from. Rick reminded the group that his term is up in March. He is currently assigned to the Land Use chapter and the Transportation chapter, which will have to be reassigned to someone else

d. Energy - Report on meeting with Energy Committee. (8:50) Michael and Kevin had both attended the recent meeting of the Energy Committee. Michael reported that the committee members were surprised and pleased to be invited to participate so directly in the process. They want to meet on Feb. 2 to brainstorm ideas with representatives from the commission. They will send copies of their town energy report before that meeting. Some of the topics they would like to address are town lighting, the PACE program, and long term alternative energy programs. Michael and Kevin discussed with them the need to update the energy chapter statistics and holding an open house at which they would make a presentation to start discussion. They are enthused and eager to take part.

Liora reported on her visit to the Conservation Commission meeting with Chris Sargent. It was a good discussion, and they would like to write the first draft of the new Natural Resources chapter. Topics they want to consider are the Linking Lands concepts on open space, having different minimum lot sizes for different areas within Rural Residential, adding a soils map to go with the wetlands inventory and map (which has been completed), model language on water resources, improving the organization of the chapter, removing redundancies (and better cross-references between chapters), and adding an appendix that has a list of outside sources and references for planning. They had questions about the definitions of goals/objectives/policies, which Terry had been trying to make more clear. Michael suggested that they could be the test case for Terry's new definitions and table.

e. Outreach. (9:00) Liora reported on the informal meeting she had initiated in East Thetford. Twenty-five people had come to Isabell's. Rick also attended and noted that this was an entirely different group of people than those who had come to the open houses. Many of them were business owners/operators in East Thetford. The meeting had a very different atmosphere than the open houses. Some of the ideas they discussed included adding crosswalks and trees along the roads; putting in a park with swing sets; installing a sign that flashed your current driving speed. All of these would have the effect of slowing traffic and making the village more pedestrian friendly. They also talked about creating a walking path from the end of Cedar Circle road to the other businesses. They came up with a long list of other businesses they would like to attract to make the village more complete. They discussed what might be done with the train station property. They discussed how the new zoning bylaw might affect these plans. They discussed septic issues and community energy sources, the scheduled replacement/repair of the East Thetford-Lyme bridge (how to include a sidewalk, bike path, and river access), and fun things they village could do together. They agreed to meet again in 3 months; before then, a group will walk out the best routes for a path or sidewalk.

Liora said they have given the commission a lot to consider, and that a Village Center designation could be very useful for new business development there. She said there was no discussion of residential issues, except the matter of mixed use zoning, which now allows apartments over businesses.

Patrick reported that, after an initial contact from Patricia Norton about having an informal discussion in her neighborhood, he had not heard back. He will contact her again.

6. Old Business (9:15)

Kevin reported that the Subdivision Regulation workgroup had meet a couple of times and was making some headway. The meetings had included Tim Taylor, Sean Mullen, Don Longwell, Stuart Blood, and Kevin. They are going to remove the major/minor subdivision distinction, because it has been confusing. The standards are consistent across the board, so the distinction is not needed. The group had identified some confusing language in Section 6 of the new zoning bylaw with reference to the subdivision procedures. The group will put clarifying language in the new subdivision regs, and hopefully the zoning bylaw will be clarified at some future date. There is a proposal that boundary line adjustments be handled by the Zoning Administrator, with review by the Development Review Board if necessary. (TRORC has said this is okay.) They are going to focus now on the procedures chapter and are working on a checklist to guide applicants through the process. They have a meeting scheduled in three weeks and will then prepare a draft to submit to the commission.

There was a discussion of document formatting difficulties. Liora suggested hiring a professional Word expert to fix it now, rather than struggle with it throughout the process. Kevin will look into the availability of funds.

7. New Business (9:25)

Rick brought up the North Thetford library invitation again, and there was a brief discussion of how to arrange it. Rick will work out a tentative date and time with them and report back to the commission. Michael and Kevin are interested in attending.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:35.

Respectfully submitted,
Dean Whitlock, Clerk, Thetford Planning Commission