

Thetford Planning Commission
February 7, 2012 – APPROVED Minutes

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

Absent: Terry Longo,

Guests: (Attending during the Open House segment, 7:30-9:15 p.m.) Connie Snyder, Li Shen, Sandra Miller, Dan Grossman, Dana Grossman, Beth Young, Sally Duston Whitlock, Paul F. Rump, Susan Rump, Charlie Shepard.

(Numbers below refer to agenda items)

1. Kevin O'Hara called the meeting to order at 6:54 p.m.

2. Public Comment - none.

3. Review of the Minutes of 1/17/12 (6:55)

The minutes were accepted as amended.

6. Old Business (partial) (7:04)

While Liora was setting up the projector, Kevin reported that the North Thetford discussion meeting was scheduled for next Wednesday, 2/15, at 7 p.m. at the North Thetford library. Rick, Kevin, and Patrick will attend, and Michael may be able to. Patrick reported that the Thetford Hill gathering being organized by Patricia Norton had been postponed so that she could round up some more attendees. He is waiting to hear from her.

4. Run Through Open House presentation (7:10).

The commission quickly went through the presentation and set up for the Rural Residential Open House.

5. Rural Residential Open House (7:36)

Kevin welcomed the attendees and introduced the commissioners, then reviewed the order of events. Patrick went over the purpose of the town plan and the planning process. Liora summarized the comments collected at the first open house, with special note of those relating to the Rural Residential (RR) district. Kevin then went through the contrasting statements intended to start people thinking, and opened the floor to questions, comments, and discussion.

Beth Young asked if there were maps to show the Rural Residential district. Liora found them on her computer and displayed them. The maps showed the villages, and Kevin explained that everything not in a village district was current part of Rural Residential.

Comments: Liora recorded the comments in the table on her computer. That document will serve as the official record of the comments and will be posted on the archive of the Planning Commission listserv. These notes present the gist of the comments.

1. Beth Young asked what would be the maximum extent of development possible. Liora said that was hard to calculate, since some areas were not physically appropriate for development (e.g., wetlands, very steep areas). The minimum lot size in RR is 2 acres; in the villages it is roughly 1/4 acre (2000 square feet). The Planned Unit Development process allows for higher density if the developer meets energy or pricing criteria or sets aside open space.
2. Li Shen commented that all large tracts of forest and undeveloped land are in RR, and that you can't say a 2-acre minimum will protect the natural value of the property. For example, the blue-throated warbler requires 500 acres of northern woodland habitat for breeding, and 35% of the total US population breeds in Vermont. We are their stewards, and roads into forest tracts make it easier for predators to gain access. She said that Hartford has a town plan that encourages keeping larger plots intact.
3. Dana Grossman said she felt something to be avoided are long driveways and access roads, which cut up large tracts.
4. Beth Young said she was surprised that 2 acres was the minimum. In Maine, 5 - 10 acres is common as a minimum. Kevin noted that larger lots make it harder for many to afford.
5. Dan Grossman said he would like to see 2 acre lots along built-up roads, rather than 10 acre lots in the middle of a large tract of back land.
6. Sandra Miller asked if there were regulations regarding minimum road frontage to prevent the creation of "spaghetti lots." Liora replied there was a minimum for that reason. She didn't remember the exact length, but that it was a set number rather than being based on a proportion or ratio.
7. Sally Duston asked if terrain was taken into consideration in zoning. Kevin replied that the latest draft didn't resolve the issue of steep slope. It was felt that the driveway regulations would resolve that issue, as the fire chief had been involved in developing them. Other ecological features might require scrutiny during a zoning application, but not slope. Paul Rump noted that slope does not appear to be much of a factor anymore, at least in the Sawnee Bean area, giving as example an incident where a new builder used dynamite to change the slope. He said there seemed to be no restrictions on modifying the landscape.
8. Paul Rump said he felt only price would limit growth. But he asked if the commission could project the potential maximum development and create a plan around that. He suggested that looking at the original town charter survey, which laid out plots for all of the original landowners, might provide some insight and a scenario of maximum growth - then try to control

that. Liora said they would have to look at what was buildable, and Paul added also what was available, noting that most people in town now couldn't afford to buy or build what they have. There was further discussion about how to calculate or project maximum development and who could afford to buy property in Thetford now. Li Shen noted that there are habitat analyses for other towns that rate habitat, so there is data out there. Paul said perhaps we could combine conservation data with a build-out projection and include other towns to plan for the entire region.

9. Regarding affordability, Dan Grossman questioned if one could deal with affordability in a town plan. He noted that Dartmouth was not able to control pricing in Hanover so that all of their faculty could afford to live in Hanover. On the other hand, it should be possible to deal with the damage that might be caused by one lot in the middle of a 500-acre habitat. He pointed out that even cities have relatively large patches of green space in their parks and commons. These have been saved because the city's planners valued that space and preserved it. So it can be done. Many people live here in Thetford because of the large undeveloped spaces. Beth Young suggested starting with the green spaces on the map (state forest etc.) and working out from there. Dan Grossman said it was important to avoid building, for example, 10 houses in a space where it would have an oversized impact on habitat, other people, terrain, etc. Save the large green spaces for multiuse.

10. Connie Snyder said she had come here 30 years ago from Miami, Florida. Her relatives there used to live way out in the boonies, but exponential growth has turned their neighborhoods into urban areas. It can happen overnight. Development builds on itself. Thetford is very open now, but that could change very quickly. Paul Rump noted that, in just the past few years, a couple of large farms in Thetford had closed down. If they are broken up--for example, to pay college tuition--it would have a huge impact. The potential for development is enormous. Population happens. Susan Rump said that development happens incrementally but it happens. She has noticed the traffic increase on Sawnee Bean Road, which indicates the amount of development just as much as being able to see houses along the roads and ridges.

11. Kevin noted that there are many people who want to maintain the character of their roads and land, but there are also landowners who want or need to break up their property in order to send their children to college. The planning commission is trying to create a plan that makes sense and doesn't screw things up. How do we reconcile these opposing pressures? This led to a discussion of the imperfection of town plans in surrounding towns.

12. Sally Duston asked if a large, commercial organic farm would be possible under current zoning. Kevin said yes. There would be Act 250 and agricultural regulations to deal with, but such a farm would not be excluded by the zoning regulations. Sally said it seemed a good idea to keep recently farmed land open and intact for future use as farms. Kevin said the most recent zoning changes took some small steps to address soil type and other features of prime agricultural land and habitat, and that the commission and Development Review Board are now working on incorporating that into the subdivision regulations. Beth Young asked if a

commercial farm was an allowed rural use. Kevin replied yes. Liora and Dean noted that there is statewide protection for agricultural uses. Structures on farms are regulated but not excluded.

13. Kevin asked the group if they thought 1 RR district was the right answer. Should there be more districts allowing different levels of development? Sue Rump replied that she thought 1 RR district is the right answer. Historically, all families had to do some type of farming, whether it was a garden, raising chickens for home use, or raising a cash crop of some kind. She thinks we will all need to do this again. Many people have already started.

14. Don Grossman said that the entire town is rural, so he could see other grades of residential regulation. Some parts are rural residential and some are rural timber and some are rural habitat. He said he didn't know how many zones would be needed.

15. Li Shen noted that some areas are more densely settled (for example, Gove Hill). The plan could encourage in-filling in these "hamlets." Dana Grossman agreed that it made sense to encourage development where it is already developed rather than mapping out specific areas for development. Putting one house in a big undeveloped area has more effect than 2 or 3 new houses along Gove Hill Road.

16. Connie Snyder pointed out that the land trust encourages small lots on the edges of large tracts. She asked if there was a way to honor people who had kept large tracts intact but now need income? Is there a way to encourage putting new lots along existing roads and boundaries? Beth Young noted that terrain can get in the way of that. Road frontage requirements can lead to the creation of new lanes to get back to the buildable portions of lots. This led to a discussion of the cluster concept and the need for flexibility rather than rigid restrictions.

17. Dan Grossman questioned the effectiveness of lot-sizing, noting that it could lead to unintended consequences. He gave the example of a state regulation regarding sewage requirements for 10-acre lots that led to the creation of many 10.1-acre lots. He noted that there isn't a huge difference in the price of a building lot, whether it's 2 acres or 10 acres.

18. Paul Rump said there was a great deal of pressure on Thetford from developers building 2nd homes for people out of state with Vermont fantasies. Thetford may be the next Lyme or Norwich. People are building on impossible terrain because money is no object for them, and human scale be damned. This led to a discussion of lot size restrictions in neighboring towns, particularly a case in Hanover where only seasonal homes were allowed in one area in an attempt to reduce population growth there.

19. Connie wondered what having so many seasonal homes did to the fabric of community in a town and the respect for land. This led to a discussion of Thetford already being a bedroom community and having many 2nd homes, with a history that goes back to the early 20th century. At what point does this change the character of an area? Charlie Shepard noted that only 1 out of every 5 houses sold in Vermont was a primary residence for someone from the area. The other 4

are sold to people who are coming from out of state or live out of state. Dan Grossman noted that it was hard to verify those numbers.

20. Charlie Shepard asked about laws and regulations regarding wind towers and cell towers. Kevin said that the town has regulations (zoning and communication bylaws) that dictate what conditions must be met but that don't ban such development. There will be an energy section in the plan to address such questions. The Energy Committee is already involved in working on it and there will be an open house or forum about it. In any case, cell towers are allowed and wind towers aren't specifically addressed. Bob Walker of the Energy Committee says that Thetford is not a prime location for wind generation.

21. Charlie Shepard commented on the need for a dynamic balance. For example, East Thetford is busy in its quiet way. The goal should be to encourage such a balance. We can't keep a static town, but we can hold onto what makes Thetford desirable and encourage development with respect for neighbors and habitat. There was a brief discussion of balance and having free enterprise with controls.

22. Paul Rump said we should develop the villages with services, as hubs for the rural areas and with Thetford Center as the municipal center. We need to revitalize Post Mills and North Thetford, if possible, and maintain the village characters.

The open house ended at 9:15 p.m.

6. More Old Business (9:15)

Michael presented his first draft of a timeline. He explained that he had tried to match the original implementation plan of the Municipal Planning Grant, with additional steps to actually complete the new plan draft in time for approval at the 2013 town meeting. 1/26/2013 is the deadline for a warned item in the town report. Rick said that he knew from past experience that it's not going to happen. There was a long discussion of the schedule being too tight to do a thorough job. Liora noted that, in addition to the rewriting the planning commission needs to complete, there are also maps, statistics, and other items that will have to be prepared by the regional planning commission. She said it would be best to determine what can be done easily and do those first. After further discussion, Kevin thanked Michael for getting the timeline started. Kevin will put it into the timeline software and work on the next draft

Kevin reported that Terry is arranging to be able to attend one meeting a month for as long as he is working out of town. Kevin and Liora will not be able to attend the next meeting, so Patrick will officiate. Terry will hopefully be able to make it. The re-adoption of the current town plan has been postponed until 3/20 (probably). There was a brief discussion of when the open houses and other information-gathering sessions would end and the draft writing began, and a reminder that Rick will be leaving at the end of his term on Town Meeting Day.

7. New Business - none

The meeting was adjourned at 9:45.

Respectfully submitted,
Dean Whitlock, Clerk, Thetford Planning Commission