

Thetford Planning Commission
March 20, 2012 – APPROVED Minutes

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

Absent: Terry Longo, Michael Schunk

Guests: Donn Downey (7:17-7:34), Bill Bridge (8:23-8:52)

(Numbers below refer to agenda items)

1. Kevin O'Hara called the meeting to order at 7:17 p.m.

2. Public Comment - None.

3. Review of the Minutes of 3/6/12

The minutes were accepted with corrections.

4. Selectboard report (7:22)

Donn congratulated the commission for the good turnout at the two informal forums, in East Thetford and North Thetford. He said it appeared to be an effective technique, and the selectboard will probably try to make use of it. Kevin brought him up to date on the current status of the town plan process. There are at least 2 more open houses (energy and conservation) needed to meet the requirements of the municipal planning grant (MPG). The commission continues to receive comments and feedback via email. The informal forums brought in a lot of new faces. The commission is starting to lay out a timeline for the rest of the process but are not using it yet and not ready to publish it. Each commissioner has assumed responsibility for at least one specific chapter in the town plan to focus on during the rewrites. Liora noted that Terry Longo was working on workable definitions and structure for the goals and objectives tables. Chris Sargent of the Two Rivers Ottawaquechee Regional Commission (TRORC) has been filing the necessary reports for the MPG.

Donn reported that he is still the liaison with the planning commission, after the selectboard's post-town-meeting reformulation. Tig Tillinghast will remain the contact regarding the MPG, but Donn will handle new grants that might come up.

Donn said the selectboard is working on reappointments and new appointments for all of the town committees. He confirmed that Kevin and Liora were willing to be reappointed for three-year terms. As far as new appointees go, no one has volunteered in response to his post. They received 3 volunteers total for 40 open positions, but none of the 3 were for the planning commission.

Donn left the meeting.

5. Hearing to Readopt Current Town Plan with New Date

Kevin opened the hearing at 7:34 p.m. There were no members of the public present to comment. Kevin moved to take the steps to readopt the town plan with no changes other than the date. Patrick seconded. There was no discussion. The motion passed unanimously. Kevin closed the hearing at 7:37.

6. Town Plan

a. Reports from commissioners regarding progress made with their chapters - Kevin started with a discussion of forming a workgroup, headed by Liora and including Rick and Wayne, to rewrite the Land Use chapter. Patrick suggested that it might be best to rewrite the Land Use chapter last, after the other chapters had been scanned for sections that should be moved into the Land Use chapter. Rick said he thought it would also be best to wait for all public comments to be collected. Kevin pointed out that some components like tables of data need updating and won't be moved to Land Use, so the workgroup could start there while the other processes move along. There was a brief discussion of the tables and gaps in the data. It was noted that the Flood Plan bylaw and Zoning bylaw had been completed and that the subdivision regulations were in process, so those references need to be updated. All language related to the future of the town needs to be updated. Regarding the workgroup for land use, Liora said she would prefer it if Rick and Wayne would organize the first meeting and they could decide the leadership there.

The group discussed the sequence of the chapters and general format. The sense was that it looked okay, although it might make sense to move Land Use next to Natural Resources.

The group next discussed editorial control: who would be responsible for maintaining the work drafts and creating, formatting, and copyediting the final draft, and what was in the budget to cover it. For now, Kevin suggested that each commissioner would deal with their own chapters, then hand them over to the editor at the end when it was time to create the final version.

Patrick reported on the Transportation chapter. He will work on updating the data tables and also take Terry's recommended definitions for goals and objectives to figure out what they will be. He would like to add trails to the table of roads and will find out the status of the trail plan. Other points to deal with in the current language were statements about congestion and what state highways would look like in 20 years. He said he hoped Route 113 wouldn't look the same, considering the current condition, shoulders, and lack of bike lanes. He particularly referred to the stretch from I-91 down to East Thetford. Kevin noted the discussion at Town Meeting over the funding request from Stage Coach and also comments at the North Thetford gathering. Public transit will have to be considered in this chapter.

Kevin discussed the Energy chapter, standing in for Michael. The Energy Committee hasn't gotten back to either of them yet, so no date set yet for an open house. There was a brief discussion of the process for that open house. Kevin voiced his hope that the Energy Committee would make a very brief presentation and leave most of the time for public comment.

Utilities and Facilities: Kevin reported that he has contacted the fire chief and the road commissioner about the data tables and narrative paragraphs for their respective operations. He has provided the pages for them to scrutinize and respond to. A tentative meeting he had scheduled with TRORC and the selectboard about town buildings had to be postponed.

b. Energy Committee report - as Kevin noted earlier, Michael was not present to report.

c. News from Terry on Goals, Objectives, Programs, Policies, and Guiding Principles - Terry was not able to attend via phone due lack of proper equipment. Kevin referred to his email of 3/19, to which he attached his "revised and significantly simplified rationale for how to structure the content in our forthcoming Town Plan revision." In the email, he listed these primary changes: a) definitions more consistent with TRORC per Sally's feedback prior to her departure; b) less aggressive structure, specifically dropping the concept of "program" and omitting the use of cross-reference tables. Liora commented that "Guiding Principle" seemed hard to distinguish from "Goal." Patrick said he would have to try to develop some in order to sort it out, though he thought he could sense the difference between the two. There was a brief discussion of the concept of guiding principle, ending with a general expression of hope that Terry would be present at the next meeting, at least by phone. Liora said she thought a guiding principle should be in the narrative, not in a goals table. Patrick commented that the commission's goal was to get a new town plan approved, and he feared that adding guiding principles would make a clear goal vague. Rick said it seemed from the examples to be an opinion, or could be seen that way by the reader; that it would be good to keep everything as simple as possible. The sense seemed to be that the purpose and definition of Guiding Principle were made confusing by Terry's examples. Kevin noted that he would have to check with TRORC to see if adding Guiding Principle to the table would fit their guidelines. He will do that research before the next meeting. Patrick will try to develop some for his chapter as a test.

d. Timeline: next steps - Since Michael was the lead on this process and was absent, this item was postponed to the next meeting.

e. Outreach: new ideas - Patrick is waiting to hear back from the Elder Network about having an informal meeting with them. He reported that Patricia Norton on Thetford Hill couldn't enlist what she felt was enough people to make a meeting worthwhile, so she will try to get to any upcoming formal discussions.

Bill Bridge joined the meeting.

7. Connecticut River Setback: Discussion/Vote? (8:32)

Bill referred to the comments about the setback that Li Shen had collected from the Conservation Commission and the state agencies involved in response to his queries. He summarized the state's response as, yes, it is hard to determine the character of that stretch of the Connecticut River, but it would be good to have some setback and 100 feet seems good. He said he sees the river as an important public asset that should be recognized in planning policies. He doesn't want to restrict farmers, and therefore he would like a setback for structures, but a buffer wasn't necessary. Liora said she feels that a setback would be consistent with what we have elsewhere in town. Kevin said he agreed it would be more consistent but also valued the work the planning commission put into the new zoning ordinance and the process along the way. He voted for a setback but also supported the decision that was reached by the commission. The

group voted twice but failed to pass a setback. Bill said that he didn't want to hold up passage of the zoning bylaw when it came to the selectboard's vote, so now he was approaching it at the next level. Kevin said he had reservations about having a vote on the issue by the planning commission now, since the new members had not been present to hear all of the previous discussions.

Liora asked Bill what he wanted to ask the planning commission to do now. He explained that the planning commission can ask the selectboard to reconsider the issue now, or he can try to get enough signatures on a petition requesting them to reconsider. Liora said she had expected the issue to come up again in front of the selectboard. She thought it would be reviewed due to the strong difference of opinion shown in the comments during the public hearings. But the selectboard didn't choose to review it. She felt the commission should recommend to the selectboard that the setback decision be reviewed, given that there was no definite consensus among the planning commission members.

Patrick asked if land being used for agriculture was sold, could it be built on if there wasn't a setback there. Other local towns have setbacks that range from 75-200 feet, and the experts consulted seemed to think 150 feet was appropriate but didn't say why. Given all that, Patrick thought that 100 feet was in the right ballpark. Bill agreed that 100 feet has some resonance.

There was further discussion of whether the commission should recommend a decision or merely ask for a review. Kevin said he felt the need to determine the exact responsibility of the commission, since he didn't feel comfortable having a revote on the issue. Liora said that, after hearing all of the comments at the hearings, she was comfortable sending the question to the selectboard for reconsideration. Kevin said he had hoped to resolve the issue tonight but now felt he needed to research the commission's responsibility and would put it on the agenda for the next meeting, and at an earlier time to accommodate Bill.

Bill Bridge left the meeting.

8. Old Business

Kevin brought up the difficulty of finding new members. A major concern was not having enough members to constitute a quorum at meetings and hearings. There was a brief discussion of whether Dean could serve as a voting member while also being a paid clerk. Did that create a potential conflict of interest? Dean also said his current work situation was such that he had very little more time to devote to anything other than attending meetings and writing up minutes. Kevin said that, while taking Dean's limited time into consideration, he would research the conflict of interest issue.

8. New Business - None

The meeting was adjourned at 9:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Dean Whitlock, Clerk, Thetford Planning Commission