

Thetford Planning Commission
May 15, 2012 – APPROVED Minutes

Present: Kevin O'Hara, Patrick Kearney, Michael Schunk, Patricia Norton, Dean Whitlock
(Recording Clerk)

Absent: Terry Longo, Liora Alschuler

Guests: 7:15: Ridge Satterthwaite, Jim Masland, Heinz Terbitz, Dale Gephart; 7:29: Mark
McMahon, Jody Biddle, Manny Grewal

(Numbers below refer to agenda items)

1. Kevin O'Hara called the meeting to order at 7:16 p.m.

2. Public Comment

Jim Masland said he was sorry to have missed the earlier open houses; they were a good idea. He also said he thought it was great to have a separate chapter on Energy in Thetford.

3. Review of the Minutes of 5/1/12 (7:18)

The minutes were accepted as amended.

4. Selectboard report (7:24)

Kevin reported that the Selectboard had held its hearing on the readoption of the current Town Plan, and that they had approved the plan as is.

5. Town Plan (7:25)

a. Senior and Affordable Housing Presentation

The guests joined the meeting. (Mark McMahon, Jody Biddle, and Manny Grewal arrived a little bit later.)

The guests represent three related organizations: The Senior and Affordable Housing Committee (SAH), the Thetford Elder Network (TEN), and the Ompompanoosuc Community Trust (OCT). Dale Gephart presented a quick review of the history of the organizations. In brief: the original focus was on senior housing. The members quickly recognized that there were related needs that had to be met if seniors were going to be able to live in Thetford (social contacts, as well as local access to food, services, nursing, etc.), so TEN was formed as a spin-off organization. At the same time, the housing issue expanded to included affordable housing for all age groups. Finally, when the purchase of an appropriate parcel of land fell through due to lack of immediate funding, the OCT was founded as a 501(c)3 charitable trust that could raise and administer funds for housing and elder projects. Other towns in VT have similar funding organizations, but OCT was set up as a regional organization to share resources with our neighboring towns.

Mark McMahon gave a presentation on SAH. He provided a handout with the vision statement and a statement on Senior Housing Priorities. The committee was founded in 2006. Members are appointed by the Selectboard. The goal (summarized) is to allow Thetford citizens to stay in their own homes as long as possible, and to provide affordable housing opportunities for when they are forced by aging to move to smaller dwelling units with readily available services. To demonstrate need, they got a grant for a market analysis and discovered that, in Orange County, there is a deficiency of 1500-2000 units for seniors. Started looking for sites with hopes of reusing existing properties; first Malmquist Mills, which turned out to be too far gone to save and also contaminated with toxic chemicals. The building is gone and the owner paid for the cleanup, and SAH is now at the state of figuring out mechanisms for a tradeoff. They are also looking at East Thetford as a location. There is a certain number of units needed to create a sustainable operation. Most sites are too small, so they are looking at ways to create one organization that manages units at more than one site, as well as continuing the search for an appropriate single large site. They are also trying to develop a long term budget plan. Currently, they have spent about \$30,000, all from grants and fund-raising. They need a financial commitment from the town, and hope the new town plan will include definite support and commitment to developing senior and affordable housing.

Kevin asked if there were examples in other towns of Thetford's size where they are collecting funds for such projects. Mark replied that there weren't any examples in towns of Thetford's size. Dale said that each town was different, and that Groton was similar. Mark added that the "tricky part" is affordability. Senior housing is the fastest growing market in real estate, but most of it is not affordable.

Jody Biddle gave a presentation on TEN, which was formed 4 years ago. The focus of TEN is to provide support for seniors who want to stay in their own homes as long as possible ("aging in place"). They are focused on seniors particularly, providing senior meals, Friday walks (because staying healthy is necessary to staying at home), volunteer help (e.g., from driving to setting mousetraps), and resources for independent living, such as 211 listings. They are attempting to establish the presence of a Thetford Town Nurse and are networking with the Aging in Place program at the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. She provided the TEN brochure and a five-point summary. Dale (and the summary) pointed out that the Green Mountain Health Care plan moves services for the elderly back to the community. Mark said that services must be available locally in order for seniors to live at home, and Dale added that future grant requests will have to demonstrate that services have been considered in the grant's implementation plan.

Manny Grewal gave the presentation on the OCT. The trust was set up in November of 2011 to support SAH, TEN, and similar organizations having the same objectives. Its board has members from both SAH and TEN; they are not competing organizations. He passed around a handout with the OCT vision, mission, and funding policies. He noted that the goal of supporting independent living is key to receiving the non-profit status of the trust; supporting housing alone is not considered sufficient. Because Thetford has a low population density, OCT was organized to serve a wider area. Currently, Thetford, Fairing, and West Fairlee have representatives on the board. They are still discussing the final structure of the organization and how to handle targeted donations.

Dale went back to the issue of aging in Thetford. The first item on the TEN summary reads, "The Thetford Population of seniors will increase in both absolute and relative numbers. Thus, the Planning Board [sic: commission] will evaluate each item of the town plan as to the implication for seniors." He emphasized this recommendation to the commissioners. Heinz said that they don't want to force seniors to search for senior quarters outside of town; they prefer to help them find quarters in town. He went on to discuss the issue of walking trails within villages, which would make it possible for seniors to not only get to services but also to get exercise suitable for their physical abilities. He also stressed the importance of having senior housing in the villages so the seniors can participate more easily in the town's life; for example, in events at Thetford Academy and in town meeting. He recommended that the planning commission go to the Selectboard and support walking paths, and also to encourage the establishment of a local clinic and other services, including a town visiting nurse. He also said encouraging the establishment of a restaurant in each village would be good.

Mark said they are also thinking in terms of younger generations. It is becoming increasingly difficult for them to move into or stay in Thetford. We must work to provide opportunities, such as housing, jobs, and services that would allow younger people to afford living in Thetford. Kevin agreed that this is necessary to maintain Thetford as a vibrant community.

Manny said that, in addition to prompting walking and a healthy diet for seniors, he would recommend encouraging other healthy activities, such as yoga, by providing spaces where it can take place and by incorporating the practice into the school curriculum.

Dale said that health care reform in Vermont has to be considered. TEN is starting detailed research and will hold forums to gather opinion. Someone in Thetford must keep track of the decisions made by the Green Mountain Health board that affect Thetford. Jim said it would be good in the town plan to acknowledge this work but not to fix it in place as it is still evolving.

Kevin said the commission appreciated this input and welcomed continued input in the future. Michael is in charge of the housing chapter in the town plan and will be the conduit for comments, whether spoken or presented in writing in emails, etc. The commission will want their feedback as drafts of the town plan proceed. There was a brief discussion on the length of the process and how they could give more input on the entire plan. Michael commented that perhaps the plan needed a new chapter on social networking. Patricia suggested that the members of SAH, TEN, and OCT review the 2007 plan to see where they felt their committees' input would be useful. Kevin pointed out that some major changes suggested in the 2007 plan have already been implemented and suggested that everyone also look at the new zoning bylaw and flood plain bylaw. Mark said they will appoint someone to be their liaison with Michael. He added that they were already aware of the changes in the bylaw that allowed increased density for more affordable housing development and that they were grateful. Kevin said the commission appreciated the part they had played in developing that section of the bylaw.

The members of SAH, TEN, and OCT left the meeting at 8:30 p.m.

b. Updates on Chapters

Transportation: Kevin gave to Patrick information from the Road Commissioner. Patrick will contact Chris Sargent at Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission (TRORC) to see

what additional information they can provide. Patrick needs a copy of the 2007 Town Plan in .doc format so he can copy/past portions of it into his draft chapter. Kevin will send him one.

Utilities: Kevin reported that he had nothing new to report.

Housing: Michael spoke with Chris at TRORC about census data. He is planning to update the tables in the chapter and then ask the other commissioners which ones they think are worth keeping in the plan. He said he now thought that the social content provided by SAH/TEN is needed, perhaps as a new chapter if it can't be divvied out to the existing chapters. He felt these issues were guiding principles that should be addressed in the narrative of each chapter. This led to a brief discussion of what a "Walkable Town" means: how do you define it, achieve it, and pay for it.

c. Timeline (8:50) - Kevin and Michael presented a draft timeline template developed in the special timeline software used when drafting the new zoning bylaw. There are still some uncertainties about the ending period, as they try to determine what exactly is required in the way of hearings. Kevin said he had researched previous plans, and none of them were put to a town vote. All were adopted by the selectboard after receiving comment from townspeople at hearings (which in one case at least resulted in a complete rewrite). Since a town vote isn't required at Town Meeting, the timeline has more leeway. Kevin went over the layout/format of the timeline and the process that it creates and directs (incremental readings, presentations of drafts, votes to accept). There was a discussion of what items were immediate. The commissioners also made suggestions for formatting changes that would make the timeline easier to read (if the software allowed them). Kevin and Michael will make the changes well before the next meeting.

6. Old Business. (9:12)

a. Kevin said that the copies we have of the VT Municipal and Regional Planning and Development Act are out of date. TRORC does not have replacement copies, due to budget cuts. They are very useful, and each member should have one to refer to while creating drafts, and there should always be one at meetings. Kevin will research getting new ones.

b. Michael referred to a comment recently received (to put solar collectors on utility poles). He asked how such comments should be recorded and acted upon. Kevin said Liora collects all comments, just as she does during open houses and hearings. Her spreadsheet has a Response column to record the commission's decisions. Commissioners can refer to the spreadsheet before replying directly to the people from whom they received comments, when such a response is appropriate.

7. New Business (9:18)

Kevin reported that the process to appoint a new Zoning Administrator is underway. The Selectboard will be seeking applications, and will appoint Assistant ZA Diane Osgood as interim ZA during the search. The statues require that the Planning Commission shall recommend candidates, so the commissioners will be reviewing applicants in the near future.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:23 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Dean Whitlock, Clerk, Thetford Planning Commission