

**Thetford Planning Commission
January 15, 2013 – APPROVED Minutes**

Present: Kevin O'Hara, Patrick Kearney, Liz Ryan Cole, Patricia Norton, Liora Alschuler (arr. 8:02), Dean Whitlock (Recording Clerk)

Absent: Michael Schunk

Guests: Chris Sargent and Lorelee Morrow (Two Rivers Ottawaqueche Regional Commission; 7:15-8:53), Dond Downey and Scott Hesser (selectboard; 7:15-8:53), Wayne Parks (7:30-8:53)

(Numbers below refer to agenda items.)

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

2. Public Comment: None

3. Review of the Minutes of 12/18/12

The minutes were accepted as amended.

4. Selectboard report: None

5. Two Rivers and the Selectboard – Discussion of Regional Plan as it relates to the Town (7:28)

Kevin introduced the topic. The Planning Commission is attempting to schedule a public forum in Post Mills on 1/29 so village residents can respond to a recommendation by the regional commission (TRORC) that the Post Mills Village District be made smaller. The Planning Commission would like to have a TRORC representative at the forum to explain their reasoning. TRORC had already requested that they meet with the commission and the selectboard to discuss this and other conflicts between our current town plan and the regional plan. TRORC felt that it would be best to have that meeting before the Post Mills forum.

Kevin referred to a letter received from TRORC that day (1/15) and to a list of issues, comments, and recommendations presented by our previous representative from TRORC, Sally Hull, in May of 2011. The comment relating to the Post Mills boundaries states that they extend too far along both Route 113 and Route 244, which would encourage strip development and sprawl. Chris Sargent said that the letter he sent was essentially the same as the earlier report. He gave a brief background to the changes in state policy and finances that have resulted in the current situation. State law now mandates that towns receiving state funds to help in planning adhere much more closely to planning statutes, and that the regional commissions be stricter in making this happen. TRORC has been meeting with all of the towns in the region over this.

Chris then went quickly down the list of issues. He pointed out that many were already being addressed. Land use is one area that still needs to be worked on. The definitions of our land use districts and policies regarding land use are not clear. The Utilities and Facilities chapter presents a list of them but needs to detail ongoing maintenance and expansion plans and how

they would be funded. There was a brief discussion of the level of detail that was required. The Energy chapter is being worked on by the Energy Committee, with input from Chris, and should be fine. The section on Elder and Affordable Housing was currently weak. The Economic Development section needs more detail. It can be included in the Land Use chapter and pulled from the current zoning bylaw, which is recent enough. The sections on agricultural and forestry resources needed goals addressing the various types of uses that would be allowed and encouraged.

The discussion went back to land use and focused there. The state goal calls for compact village centers surrounded by open countryside and discouraging strip development. In order to have our plan approved, it must comply with these goals and the other state guidelines associated with them, which are expressed in the regional plan. The Zoning Bylaw must also be consistent with them. If we do not comply, the town will not be eligible for certain financial incentives related to planning: Municipal Planning Grants, Block Grants, and grants associated with Village Center designation. To illustrate how the state goals discourage strip development and sprawl, Chris gave the example of large chain retail stores that have been built outside of village centers, stealing business away from the local stores and depleting business in the villages in general.

Kevin pointed out that our current village boundaries have been set (with only small adjustments) since the 1970s and strip development has not happened. Liz asked what the definition of “compact” was. Chris said he didn’t have the exact wording or know the source. In response to Kevin, Chris said the regional commission’s recommendation is to adopt tighter boundaries now and wait until the village builds out to them; then consider if they should be expanded.

Donn asked about Union Village and North Thetford. Chris said that TRORC would designate these as “hamlets,” not villages, because they are more residential and less commercial. There was a brief discussion of the town’s ability to support five thriving villages. Mom & Pop stores in each village are possible (and would be allowed in a hamlet district), but not other commercial uses. Liz pointed out that the smart growth concepts indicate that it is appropriate for each of the centers to have a place to buy food in order to avoid more trips by car. Chris reiterated that this would be allowed in a hamlet.

Liora joined the meeting.

Liz expressed surprise that zoning in Vermont is not simply a community process. Chris said the town doesn’t have to make its plan consistent with the state guidelines or regional plan unless they want to take advantage of the financial incentives. There was further discussion of the types of business allowed in the different districts, either permitted or conditional, and how stretching the boundaries out on major roads encourages sprawl. Chris restated the recommendation to draw the boundaries in and wait until the villages built out. The discussion then moved on to the idea of creating an intermediate zone between village central and rural residential that would allow the same housing density as village but not all of the commercial uses - only the uses common everywhere in Vermont, such as mom & pop grocery stores, small cabinetry shops and similar.

Donn noted that significant changes in the town plan or zoning usually result in significant resistance. He wondered how we could justify the change in district size and risk rejection of the town plan given how recently we had passed the new zoning bylaw with such a good reaction

from the citizens. Chris reminded Donn that there were financial advantages available to towns that complied with the state regulations. Patricia asked how often the town used the various grants offered as incentives. It turns out that the town receives a municipal planning grant every two years and also has used (and plans to use) other business development grants such as the incentive grant for Pompanoosuc Mills. There followed a discussion of how much change would be considered reasonable. Chris replied that the statute states we "...must make substantial progress toward..." conforming with the regional plan. After some more discussion about the uses allowed in the districts and how a change would affect Union Village and North Thetford, the sense of the meeting was that it would be worth it to consider an intermediate zone of higher density but less business development, and also to keep the focus on Post Mills. At this time, there would be no changes to the village designation of Union Village and North Thetford. Chris said this would draw some criticism but would still show "significant progress."

The discussion then shifted to the forums on January 29 in Post Mills to elicit comments from the village residents. Chris had a conflict on that evening but would check to see if Peter Gregory, TRORC's director, would be able to be there.

On a new topic, Patricia Norton asked about lot sizes in the Rural Residential district. She said is that the reason our minimum lot size is small (approx. 2 acres) is to encourage clustering in rural districts, leaving larger contiguous open land areas, which are better for the natural resources. She pointed out that TRORC was recommending larger minimum lot sizes (up to 20 acres) in rural districts. There was a brief discussion of what other towns have done to encourage leaving open space through density bonuses similar to PUDs, but Chris conceded that it is a difficult problem with no easy solutions.

Loralee then described a big project undertaken by TRORC in partnership with the Southern Windsor region (a total of 40 towns), funded by a big HUD grant. This is a sustainable community project, and TRORC is hoping to attract community involvement from all of the towns. The topics covered include resiliency in the face of climate change, affordable housing, energy use and conservation, public water supplies, transportation, economic development, etc., all with a focus on sustainability as a region. The hope is to have the goals and principles incorporated into all of the town plans in the region.

Chris, Loralee, Donn, Scott, and Wayne left the meeting.

6. Town Plan (8:53)

a. Education 2nd reading (Liz) - Liz referred to her email of that afternoon. She has received input from both Thetford Academy and the School Board and will incorporate those comments in the next revision. She doesn't have the cost information yet, but that does not appear to be controversial at this time. The bigger issue is the shrinking population. Liora said the shrinking population made it important to continue to support Thetford Academy as a magnet school that can attract students (and tuition) from other towns. Economic development is also important to broaden the tax base. Liz said she felt it was important to have the School Board provide input, not just the head of school and principal. Patricia said we also need to address early childhood care. Kevin said that it would be good to move the daycare section into the Education chapter from its current location in the Facilities chapter. Liz said the next revision (after the one she sent today) would be ready for in-depth review and comment.

b. Scenic Resources 2nd reading (Patrick) - Patrick referred to the draft that he had emailed on December 23. He reported that the Zoning Administrator was going to purchase the Vermont Scenic Landscapes document referred to in the chapter. It is no longer available from the Agency of Natural Resources but a copy is available on line. Liz suggested a second book on Vermont townscapes.

Patrick reported that the Historical Society wasn't interested in taking on the scenic road inventory, nor was the Conservation Commission. There was a discussion of the validity of these designations, made by several separate outside bodies. The sense of the meeting was that the scenic road inventory should be dropped from the chapter.

Liora raised concerns about a policy statement that would encourage protection of ridgelines. She is not in favor of it, feeling that hillsides are just as scenic as ridgelines and it made no sense to protect one but not the other, but trying to protect either a scenic resources would meet a lot of resistance from the townspeople as a taking of property rights for aesthetic reasons. The Planning Commission has a policy of not making aesthetic rules. There was a long discussion about the differences between scenic views, architecture, and landmarks. The end result was to recommend that the town provide incentives (like current use) to encourage landowners to protect scenic resources.

7. Old Business (9:28)

a. Meeting at Post Mills Church on 1/29/13 to discuss the recommendation from the Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission to make the Post Mills Village District smaller - Kevin will confirm with TRORC that someone can make both proposed meetings. The meetings would be at 1 p.m. and 7 p.m. Dean will reconfirm with Roger Daum that the church is available, and will take charge of publicizing the meetings.

Kevin went over the timeline.

8. New Business

Town Meeting – Kevin went over staffing for an informational table at Town Meeting and the need to try to attract new members.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:44 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Dean Whitlock, Clerk, Thetford Planning Commission