

Thetford Planning Commission
March 4, 2014 – APPROVED Minutes

Present: Patricia Norton, Patrick Kearney, Michael Schunk, Liz Ryan Cole, Dean Whitlock
(Recording Clerk)

Absent: Kevin O'Hara

Guests: None

(Numbers below refer to agenda items.)

1. Patricia called the meeting to order at 7:17 p.m.

2. Public Comment: None

3. Review of Minutes from the 2/18 meeting.
The minutes were accepted as amended.

4. Selectboard Report: None.

5. Town Plan (7:24)

a. Housing - Michael presented the draft that he had emailed to the Planning listserv early in the day. He said he hoped this would be the final review before the chapter could be put out for public comment. There was a discussion of the first figure, which charts the growth in number of housing units in town since 1940. Liz pointed out that the number given for 1940 (295) was much lower than that in 2010 (1238). Checking the town population figures for those years, it would indicate that each household in 1940 averaged 5 people, while the average in 2010 was 2 people. Dean wondered if the census definition of "housing unit" had changed since then; for example, vacation homes might not be included in the 1940 total, while they are in 2010. The consensus was that the graph illustrated the general trend in growth in any case.

Michael pointed out the places where major changes had been made. In the section on Affordable Housing, the statement about Mobile Homes being currently "the only type of housing offering residents the ability to have a home at a reasonably affordable price" generated a lengthy discussion. The statement does not address the issues of safety or of energy efficiency. Though there are new designs that are more efficient, traditional mobile homes do not meet the energy standards the plan tries to encourage in the Energy chapter. They do not generally build equity for the homeowner either, since they tend to lose value rather than gain it. Conversely, the new designs are more expensive, to the point that they don't meet the definition of affordable. There was some discussion of modular homes, which have similar problems regarding energy efficiency and cost. For this draft, the statement will be left as is, since it is essentially true.

Policy 8 also relates to Affordable Housing: Enable the use of accessory dwelling units. Dean pointed out that the new Zoning Bylaw already "enables" the use of accessory dwelling

units and suggested that the wording be changed to “encourage.” There was a discussion of the way the zoning regulation was written. Patricia pointed out that it could be easily misunderstood to mean that the upper limit for such a unit was 500 square feet; however, read correctly, the upper limit is 30% of the primary dwelling unit where the accessory unit is located, except that it can be up to 500 square feet in a smaller dwelling where 30% is less than 500 square feet. Dean also suggested that the narrative about options for affordable housing be expanded to include accessory dwelling units along with mobile homes. Michael said he would make these changes.

The first policy also generated discussion: Ensure the timing and rate of new housing construction and rehabilitation does not exceed the community’s ability to provide adequate public facilities (e.g. schools and municipal services). Liz pointed out that, although this seems to be a commendable action, it could have the unintended consequence of discouraging a development that provides several affordable housing units instead of just a couple of expensive units. It would also be difficult to enforce in the case where several individual owner/builders applied to build new homes on individual lots; for example, 10 new homes versus 10 units in a group development. Patricia did a quick search of the town plans in our neighboring towns and discovered similar language in some but not in all. Liz suggested moving this to a recommendation that the town explore more effective ways to keep from overburdening town services without discouraging affordable housing.

Michael will make the recommended changes and then send the new version to Patricia for formatting. Dean will then make it available for public review.

b. Forward - Patrick said that he had received descriptions for Housing, Transportation, Energy, and Facilities/Services/Utilities, and that he also had one for Natural Resources that he had just inserted. (He emailed the newest version during this discussion.) There was some discussion of the Energy Chapter description, and it was changed. The chapters that still need a description are Education, Historic Resources, Land Use, and Scenic Resources.

Though this meeting was officially Patrick’s last, he volunteered to add the missing chapter descriptions as they came in, until the public review draft was ready. Dean volunteered to take over the chapter at that point, to prepare the final draft before the warned public hearing.

c. Followup appendix, photos, etc.

Dean said he had questioned Chris Sargent at the Two Rivers Ottawaquechee Regional Commission (TRORC) about the process for getting new maps and had received a clear reply. TRORC can make changes to the maps and will supply copies for the Planning Commission, Zoning Administrator, and Selectboard, but that we will be in charge of mass production to go into the printed copies of the Town Plan meant for public distribution. The maps in the current Zoning Bylaw are correct; however, the new Town Plan will recommend changes, which should be reflected in the maps. Dean will contact Chris Sargent again to clarify if the map should show current reality or recommended changes, and also if a full town map is necessary or if the format of the zoning maps is sufficient.

Regarding Appendix A, TRORC did not know where it came from. Dean will check with former member Liora Alschuler and also the Thetford Historical Society. Liz suggested that he google a string of text from the appendix to see if he can find the source that way.

Regarding photos, Dean reported that Tig Tillinghast had volunteered to take new photos if those already available didn't include the complete list desired for each chapter by its author. Dean reminded the commissioners to make lists of desired photos for each of their chapters. The photos on the town web site are a source. Dan Grossman is also a potential source. Patricia recommended that the photos be chosen to fit the narrative, rather than simply be random scenic photos. Dean also recommended that everyone get permission from homeowners before including photos of their homes. Most people wouldn't mind, but some might.

There was a brief discussion about the cost of color printing. Liz pointed out that most people these days would be looking at digital versions of the Town Plan (PDF files), where the color has no cost. All agreed that the printed copies would be fine in black-and-white.

Etc.: The Forward and Introduction do not need to go out for public review until the warned public hearing.

6. Other Business

There was a brief discussion of which chapters remained to be reviewed before they would be ready for public review. These are Education and Energy. They will be on the agenda for the next meeting that their authors will be able to attend.

There was a brief discussion of several people who might be interested in joining the Planning Commission. Patricia urged everyone to create a list of people to approach, now that we are two people short of our full strength.

The commissioners celebrated Patrick's contributions for the past three years and wished him well in his new town and home.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:20 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Dean Whitlock, Clerk, Thetford Planning Commission