

**Thetford Planning Commission
October 6, 2015 – APPROVED Minutes**

Present: Kevin O’Hara, Patricia Norton, Michael Schunk, Liz Ryan Cole, Jason Crance, Jamie Thaxton, Dean Whitlock (Recording Clerk)

Absent: None

Guests: Richard Amore, Community Planning and Revitalization Coordinator, Vermont Dept. of Economic, Housing and Community Development; Caitlin Corkins, Tax Credits & Grants Coordinator, Vermont Division of Historic Preservation; Libby Chapin (Thetford Conservation Commission); Jessica Eaton (Selectboard Liaison)

(Numbers below refer to agenda items.)

Patricia Norton, Dean Whitlock, and Michael Schunk met at 4:45 p.m. with Richard Amore, Caitlin Corkins, and Libby Chapin to tour Thetford Center, Post Mills, North Thetford, East Thetford, and Thetford Hill to see if any of them would be suitable for Vermont’s Village Center designation, which would be discussed during the warned meeting that evening.

1. Kevin called the meeting to order at 7:19 p.m.

2. Public Comment: None

5. Town Plan - Discuss Village Center Designation

This discussion was moved to the head of the agenda so the guests would be able to leave as early as possible.

Richard Amore and Caitlin Corkins gave a presentation about the Village Centers designation program. This program is intended to support revitalization of Vermont’s villages in several ways, in order to “...improve a community’s vitality and livability.”

“Village Center” refers to the historical core of a village, and is generally a walkable area with an important commercial or community property anchoring each end of the area. It is often smaller than the entire zoned village district, and areas of modern sprawl at the edges of a community do not fit the definition.

The focus is supporting commercial activity in the village centers. One part of the program provides state tax credits to businesses that make repairs and improvements to commercial properties in a designated village center. Residences are not eligible, but commercial rental properties (multi-unit residential, income producing) are. Buildings must have been built before 1983. In addition to economic revitalization, the investments in property usually lead to an increase in the town’s Grand List, so there is more tax income to the town in the long run.

The historic preservation grant program allows municipalities, and non-profit organizations, including churches, to apply for matching grants to repair or improve historic properties in the villages. Communities with designations receive priority consideration for these grants. Finally, there are a number of other state grants available that give priority consideration to state designation. Some of these grants are for projects within the designated boundary, while others can apply to projects adjacent to or connected to a designated boundary. The granting

agencies all have annual budgets, so grants are competitive. There is a lot of support to help businesses and organizations complete the applications.

Currently, there are 122 designated Village Centers in Vermont; 22 of them are in Thetford's regional planning district. For example, Fairlee is one. There are also 3 designated Downtown Districts (White River Junction, Randolph, and Bradford), which have access to similar incentives.

In order to apply for a Village Center designation, the selectboard must formally authorize the application, either with a vote recorded in the minutes of a warned meeting or with a letter to the Vermont department in charge. They must also work with the Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Planning Commission (TRORC) and the Green Mountain Economic Development Corporation (GMEDC). The approved Town Plan must also have in it a statement of intention to consider applying for one or more Village Center designations. Each village to be considered must be named in the Town Plan and, if the decision is apply, each one must be applied for separately. The Town Plan can indicate the intention to consider applying; it does not have to say the town absolutely will apply.

Village Center designations must be renewed every 5 years, and the town can withdraw from the program at any time. Fairlee was in the program for a while, withdrew, but now is back in the program.

The application must include a map that shows the location of the proposed designated Village Center, with its proposed boundaries. It must also include a list of the commercial, municipal, community, and religious properties within the proposed boundaries, with color photographs of each. The designation is approved by the Vermont Downtown Development Board, and they may require that the proposed boundaries be adjusted.

There is no need to have anything about Village Center designations in the Zoning Bylaws. There are no restrictions in the program that would run counter to any town regulations, bylaws, or ordinances.

There is also the Vermont Village Greens Initiative, to document, showcase, and revitalize Vermont's village greens.

There are also some historic preservation programs, and Caitlin Corkins can connect the town to funding sources for grants. These can apply to income-producing properties in Village Centers that are also historical buildings, but also to historical buildings that are outside Village Centers. Non-profit organizations can take advantage of tax credits by "selling" them to banks as collateral for a loan.

Some ways the programs have been used include upgrading commercial blocks, installing new technology infrastructure (high-speed wiring for Internet, for example), repairs to town halls, libraries, community centers, etc.

If Thetford decides to consider applying for Village Center designations, Richard would come back to discuss details about applying and various programs run by different VT agencies that fall under the designation. The business owners who might apply should be involved. He provided printed information and links to more information on his department's web site. When asked about downsides, Richard said the only one was paperwork and the possibility that some projects would not be approved. He repeated that there were no regulations imposed other than the criteria for types of projects supported for tax credits and for grants. There is some reporting required to document that the owner/applicant has done the proposed work for the amounts in the application, and the work must meet all applicable standards (building codes, etc.).

Richard and Caitlin left the meeting (8:35)

Libby Chapin said she was interested in the Village Greens Initiative program because of her involvement with the Post Mills Memorial Green, now being re-landscaped. For this program, it appears that the green doesn't have to be in a designated Village Center; the town has to have at least one designated village center, but the green doesn't have to be in it. Her issue is the timing. Kevin described where the Town Plan was in the process: being reviewed by the Selectboard and TRORC, with a warned hearing to follow as soon as their comments had been incorporated. There is time to include a statement of intent regarding the Village Centers Program if we decided it would benefit the town.

Kevin asked if any of the members had reactions about the apparently small number of downsides. Patricia said it seemed the only downside would be to go through the process of applying and then have none of the businesses in town apply for tax credits or grants. Kevin said it might be possible to poll local business owners to discover the level of interest.

Jason, who is currently serving out his term on the Fairlee Planning Commission, said that their reason for applying was to revitalize their village district, which had been failing. Their designated Village Center stretches from Wings to Cumberland Farms, or perhaps past that to the Fairlee Diner. The area south of Wings on Route 5, which includes the Dollar General, fell under a different designation.

Libby Chapin left the meeting (8:50). The original agenda was resumed.

3. Review of the minutes for the 9/15 meeting

The minutes were accepted as amended. Patricia had recorded the minutes in Dean's absence and recorded the amendments.

4. Selectboard Report

Kevin reported that the Selectboard would discuss the draft Town Plan at their meeting on Monday, October 19, starting at about 7:15.

6. Subdivision Regulations - Open Space Wording

Patricia referred the group to the most recent draft of the regulations, which she had emailed on September 15. The group reviewed the clarifications to the wording about Open Space and accepted them. Further discussion was tabled until the next meeting, when Mary Ellen Parkman, the Zoning Administrator, would be present. She has reviewed the previous version (lacking only the Open Space rewording) and made comments. The members should review that version before the next meeting and be ready to discuss her comments.

7. Other Business - None

The meeting was adjourned at 9:08 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Dean Whitlock, Recording Clerk, Thetford Planning Commission