

TOWN OF WESTMINSTER
SELECT BOARD PUBLIC HEARING
September 10, 2015

Members Present Select Board: Sheldon Beebe (Chair), Toby Young, Peter Barrett, Craig Allen,
Paul Banik (Vice Chair)

Members Present Planning Commission: John Medeiros (Chair), Chris Vincent (Vice Chair),
Matt Conklin, Kathy Kingston, Randy Major

Absent Planning Commission: John Barnett

Others Present: Russell Hodgkins (Town Manager / Planning & Zoning Administrator); Phil Savoy, Cathy Mullins (DRB Members); Karen Astley (Recording Clerk); approximately 30 + residents.

1. CALL TO ORDER: Sheldon Beebe called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.
John Medeiros called the Planning Commission meeting to order at 7:03 p.m.

2. NEW BUSINESS (Discussion / Action):

Sheldon Beebe summarized the purpose of the public hearing and why the boards were present together. He also stated this was the first of at least two public hearings. If the two boards determined more hearings would be needed they will be scheduled. October 6, 2015, 6:30 p.m. is the second meeting. Sheldon Beebe had the Planning Commission introduce themselves to the public.

Items of discussion:

The group started with general comments and concerns relative to the town's goals for the future of the town. There is a consensus that the current Town Plan, as written, supports the future of farmers as there are 76 diverse working farms in Westminster per David Major. Tammy Kissell had concerns relative to retaining and promoting younger generations to start families in Westminster which transpired into a discussion about why zoning changed from two acre lots to five acres and how this would support growth especially for young families. Westminster is looking at an aging community in five to ten years where the average age will be 50 plus and older. Grand List has changed three times. Public school numbers have dropped although Beverly Major stated the population has grown and the numbers are up in both schools. A comment was made that something has to change because what we have now is not working.

Jesses Haas requested the Planning Commission to go over the changes that were made from the current Town Plan verses the proposed Town Plan. John Medeiros did that with the guidance of the "Westminster Town Plan Revisions, 2015".

John Medeiros explained the commitment of the Town Plan, agricultural, welfare, economic resources etc were major concerns. It strongly supports agricultural and protecting the environment. There are some areas of the Town Plan that need to be refined per the state and address elements such as protecting water, land and energy resources. John made comment that there is pressure for development but the Planning Commission didn't propose the Town Plan revisions based on the past plan nor did they rewrite the past. The proposed plan is an updated plan based on the changes that are required by regulations and what is known today. The Planning Commission trusted the past committee made changes based on what they knew back then. The Planning Commission did not change the goals in the Town Plan but has improved the language so it is understandable and more user friendly.

The major topics of discussion from the meeting are as follows:

A): Two Acre Lots Changing to Five Acre Lots: A subcommittee was created back in February, 2012 which at that time discussed changing two acre lots to five acres with the intent that district. A

survey was also conducted relative to changing the zone along Pine Banks Road and information exist on this topic. John Medeiros made it clear nothing is lost and the Planning Commission has this information. Advantages of changing this district back would create smaller lots so young families could manage their property, taxes and utilize what they need. It would create “tiny” homes that would fit the lot and support septic systems and add to the Grand List tax base.

Disadvantages of changing the district back to the two acre lots on Pine Banks road would be difficult as most people wanted five acre lots. If this area became clustered neighborhoods eventually it would warrant the need for paved roads and other public services which will change the character in that area.

After listening to the public John Medeiros stated that this topic was a “Zoning Bylaw” element that would be discussed when the Planning Commission starts the task of revising the 2014 Interim Bylaws.

B): Commercial/Industrial: Discussion ensued whether or not this Town Plan was incorporating Commercial and Industrial District Zones and what this would entail. John Medeiros explained that it is very difficult for business owners to bring in new business as each time they have to file an application for a change of use. By combining the commercial and industrial districts the process of being heard by the Development Review Board would be less if there is a minor change. An example was the Melsur Building. There are different businesses in the building in a commercial zone. Combining the zones would give property owners more flexibility while keeping business in town and their buildings occupied. Another example was the industrial park. With the solar array projects taking up valuable land combining the districts could give the town more flexibility with the type of business that could establish itself here.

If these districts are combined what will happen? Will this attract business and keep young people in town? Does combining the current districts in the north-eastern section and expanding the district to Route 123, Westminster Station makes sense?

In order to attract businesses to Westminster is it feasible to expand the waterline from North Westminster? There is a fee for the residents who currently have water. If the waterline could be expanded revenue would increase but at what cost? A feasibility study would have to be done by an engineer in order to determine if this would benefit residents and where the line would expand to. It could possibly attract the business as well.

Other water sources in town are located on Kurn Hattin Road and Route 123. Are there other areas that could benefit from the water sources or from the waterline?

C): Housing: There is a need for housing everywhere including Westminster. It is apparent that Westminster is mostly Agricultural and spread out. There are some limitations along the river because of the floodway and floodplain. Creating smaller lots may encourage young families to construct homes in town. “Tiny” houses as described are homes that are approximately 400 square feet in size. Building tiny homes will support elderly, one/two people, seasonal residents, and farm workers. Does a policy exist for “tiny” housing? Putney does not have a policy but supports the idea of “tiny” homes. Will “tiny” homes increase the tax base? Is this a zoning element?

Stephen Major added we need to think outside of the box as there are vacant homes in the community. We are underutilizing what we have and we need to provide for our young families with what we have. By adding in-law apartments or a barn we can provide additional housing. Could this type of home fall under “Planned Unit Development”? Is this another Zoning Bylaw element that needs to be researched and/or revised?

Pia Rabin commented that with a “tiny” home composting would be adequate because of the size although the state requires you to have something for the gray water. Phil Savoy commented that water plumbed into a house now is a 25% reduction in the system.

C): Aging Community: Kathy Kingston made comment that there are many factors contributing to an aging community. The cost to move, geography, and people are living longer. This is occurring everywhere. The question that was raised is how do we keep this a vital community?

D): State Regulations: The State of Vermont issue regulations that all towns must comply with. As part of compliance a flood resiliency element was added to the proposed Town Plan. This element was written by Windham Regional Commission for municipalities to incorporate. Flood resiliency protects residents and businesses from damages incurred from flooding. Owners are able to get assistance if flooding occurs. No business can be built in a flood area. Russ Hodgkins clarified “floodway” and “floodplain”. You can build in a floodplain if you raise the land but you cannot build in a floodway. Any existing businesses are grandfathered in. The propane tanks on Route 5 are in the floodplain and this is a permitted industrial use for that district.

Geographically and geologically should we continue to develop and expand the floodplain or do we develop elsewhere in town?

E): Zoning Bylaws: Based on several comments relative to zoning the question was raised if and when the current Zoning Bylaws would be reviewed and updated to address concerns such as lot sizes; developing lots to permit more than one residential structure on them; and combining commercial/industrial zoning districts. Cathy Mullins member of the Development Review stated that any zoning changes will need to be clear and concise guideline for the DRB to follow in order to issue a permit. It was suggested that the town eliminate zoning altogether. Owners should have reasonable use of their property.

John Medeiros stated that the Zoning Bylaws would be revised by the Planning Commission and Development Review Board, one section at a time. Once the proposed bylaws were approved by the Planning Commission the public hearings would be set and the public would be able to comment.

F): Changes in the Proposed Town Plan: The public commented that the Planning Commission should review the following and make changes as necessary:

Page 18; Item 5; fifth paragraph. Question was raised when did residents have to start calling a 603 number instead of 911? When were people going to be told this?

Page 19; Law Enforcement Recommendations item 3 should be revised as the State Police Barracks is now being built.

Page 20; Solid Waste and Recycling is out of date. This section needs to be reviewed and revised.

From Page 45 and the Proposed Land Use map the “growth center” will have to be added to the map as it is not identified on the map.

3. ADJOURNMENT: Toby Young moved to adjourn the Select Board meeting at 8:17 pm. The motion was seconded by Peter Barrett and accepted by a 5-0-0 vote.

John Medeiros moved to adjourn the Planning Commission meeting at 8:18 p.m. The motion was seconded by Kathy Kingston and accepted by a 5-0-0 vote.

Signature of Clerk

Date