

**TOWN OF WESTMINSTER
PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING (PC) VIA ZOOM
February 14, 2022**

Members Present: Michelle Chmelar, Richard Crocker, Seroya Crouch, Kathy Kingston, Bari Shamas (Chair)

Others Present: Sarah Buckingham (Recording Secretary), Russell Hodgkins (Town Manager)

1. **CALL TO ORDER:** Bari Shamas (Chair) called the meeting to order at 6:33 PM.
2. **COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC COMMENT:** Hodgkins asked Shamas to change the date on the top of the agenda.
3. **ADJUSTMENTS TO AGENDA:** Kingston wanted to add an agricultural survey to “other business.”
4. **ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES:** Hodgkins pointed out the inaccurate date on the minutes. Shamas asked for page numbers be added to future minutes. Kingston moved to accept the minutes of the Jan 10, 2022 meeting. Crouch seconded. Motion passed unanimously.

5. UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

A. Town Plan

1. Natural Resource Section -

Kingston had nothing to report. She acknowledged some people had made comments, and asked if anyone had anything new to add. Shamas wanted to move forward with an alternative name like, ‘Earth Resources.’ Crouch said there is no issue with changing it. Shamas asked if everyone agreed. Kingston asked whether ‘Geology, Ecology & Natural Resources’ is too long a title. Chmelar said yes, it is too long! Crouch asked about splitting the section into two parts - one part Ecology, one part Earth Resources. Kingston said no that would be a major

undertaking, it's all mixed in together. Chmelar says 'Natural Resources' covers all of it. Kingston said the reason she'd like a name other than 'Natural Resources' is that it speaks from the perspective that the only reason we care about what's around us is in as far as it's a resource. She wants to take a more holistic view. Chmelar said that is evident in the way the section is put together. The content reflects that perspective. Crocker said he couldn't think of anything that sums it up more succinctly than 'Natural resources.' Kingston said she'd cogitate on this input and thanked the committee members for their thoughts.

2. Agriculture Survey -

Crouch shared survey results. Five people attended a meeting last Monday night. Crouch highlighted that 60% of the farmers who responded were over 60 years old, and 3/4 were over 50. She said we're facing a real retirement of farmers in the next 10-15 years and need to be able to somehow have people switch in, turning farms over to new people. The survey asked about plans for succession and hardly anybody has one. Kingston asked if it included homesteaders and very small scale farms, the old hippies who grow their own food. Crouch said only three people who responded were homesteaders.

The largest share of respondents had been farming more than 50 years, but also a large share of less than 5 years - lots of new people coming in. We have a lot of pretty old farms, a lot of different kinds of farms. Not all major area farms have responded. Crouch said she sent out 37-38, got 17 responses, has another 20 more people on her list. Organic practices but not certified is 65%. Another 18 percent is Certified Organic. 12% regenerative practices. Very small share conventional agriculture. Most are 1- to 10-acre farms. Shamas pointed out that 10% could be only one person. Crouch said 11% is 2 people. Crouch said the bottom line is there is quite a lot of diversity. Crouch said data regarding USDA subsidies is not accurate, there was an error on the form. But some people have used this money for hoop houses or other capital equipment.

Shamas wanted more info on what products are making the most so that we know what we want to promote, want more of. Chmelar pointed out that with so few respondents the data could easily reveal someone's personal information. Crouch said the diversity is more important and doing the same thing may not do as well. The data also showed a fair amount of barter going on. Biggest challenges:

rain, or climate change in general, managing crops in unpredictable weather, and aging, and money, capital for land and equipment.

Roughly half respondents said they were impacted negatively by Covid. But, three of them increased revenue. Others said Covid did not effect revenue. Nobody closed due to COVID in the group. More than half had no succession plan, 30% plan to pass down to family. Some farmers have had negative responses from neighbors or people driving by that don't understand the nature of farming. Complaints from neighbors about cutting in the forest. Crouch told a story about a farmer doing his ten-year forestry management plan, cutting four hours per day, and he got complaints from neighbors. Crouch says there is education that needs to happen.

Perhaps the town needs more warning signage for drivers, slower speed limits, for farmers who need to move animals across roads. Crouch talked to someone who can't use his other pastures because he can't get his animals across the road with the traffic. He says drivers flip him off and scream at him when he's driving his tractor on the road. Crouch suggested more signage. Kingston asked if the town could invest in some signs - three different points of entry - this is a farming community please respect farmers. Crouch suggested cow crossing signs, sheep crossing signs, slower speed limits in certain areas. Crouch said she would propose some of these things in the policy section of the agriculture section. Shamas asked Hodgkins about putting up signs, he said there are only some signs that can legally be used. He said a sign that is up 365 doesn't work because people ignore it. The farmer needs signs the are put out so that's it's new, it's gaudy, so people see it and slow down. "Cattle crossing expect delays." Shamas asked if that's possible? Can the town do that? Hodgkins said the town can't, but the farmer can. Crocker said its like flagging for a road crew - working animals ahead. Chmelar suggested a battery pack with a flashing light. Hodgkins said there are grants for that type of signage. Chmelar talked about the importance of helping farmers. Crouch said people need to know about programs available for them, like grants for signage for example, no one knows about that.

Kingston said there should be language in the publication that people who just moved into town get. "There might be cattle or sheep and you will have to wait." Similar in the town plan, and "let's support the production of our food, there's gonna be chainsaws running, etc." Crouch said maybe we need a town byline, "famous for farming," something like that.

3. Transportation - Gravel Source

Kingston said it would be great to have a gravel source in town. Currently none. Asked Hodgkins how easily are we getting gravel? Hodgkins said no more gravel, now it's aggregate. Natural areas that are harvested for gravel and sand in our county are slim to none now but aggregate sources are a whole different animal. We had our chance a few years ago and it was "not in my backyard." It's a tough sell. Hodgkins said he will never bring it back up or endorse it because "they pinned the gravel processing to me that I would make profit off of it." Hodgkins said he would not help because when his name is brought up when it comes to gravel and aggregate things become nuts.

Shamas asked what's used for aggregate. Hodgkins said it's everything a gravel source is, but from rock. So, it's blasting and crushing and creating gravel sources. Crouch asked if noise and dust are the problem. Hodgkins said people get the wrong impression from TV about what blasting looks like today. He said it's not like a cartoon anymore, charges are timed and the site is unimpressive.

Kingston asked where are we getting our gravel from? Hodgkins listed multiple sources including Cold River Materials in Walpole, a place in Alsted, Renaud in Brattleboro, another one in Ackworth, Zaluzny in Brattleboro. He said we're traveling. The town got 10-wheelers to replace 6-wheelers to get more bang for our buck in traveling. Kingston asked is there a sense we're going to run out? In...20 years? Hodgkins said there is a huge concern we won't be able to afford, or find, aggregate gravel. It's gonna come in by rail. Some areas have already lost their sources and it's coming in from places like Pennsylvania on rail and the cost is prohibitive.

Crouch said this sounds like a serious concern that needs to be addressed in the Plan. Is there property in the town that could be turned into aggregate? Hodgkins said yes. Crouch said maybe we need to look at how to make that happen and have a strategic education plan to roll it out so people can understand that it's less impactful than they imagine and the need is so great.

Hodgkins said he had a Powerpoint and couldn't get through 2 slides out of 30 at Town Meeting. He said people went crazy and it wasn't worth it to continue. Kingston asked whether is it the Planning Commission who should be working on this topic or the Select Board? Hodgkins said it's the Select Board. We'd hire it out, no equipment no liability, hire it out. Crouch said the Town Plan should say that

this is an issue for the town to deal with. This is one of the more urgent issues in the Town Plan.

Hodgkins said in 50 years you're gonna see it on rail, within 20 years we're out of product within a drivable radius. We'll have to be hiring multi-haulers with 30ft dump trailers bringing it in and purchasing from them. Crocker said the budget will drive the issue more than anything else. Hodgkins said we needed \$150,000 of aggregate after the storm in July and that FEMA money could have gone back into the Town instead of buying aggregate. Crouch suggested creating an infographic or one-sheet on this situation. Hodgkins said he would send the committee his Powerpoint.

4. Recreation -

Shamas inquired whether people get their hunting and fishing licenses from the town. Hodgkins said very few now. So we don't know how many people are hunting and fishing in our town? Hodgkins said no. Shamas asked about hunting clubs, rod and gun clubs? Hodgkins said nearby yes, and Westminster residents are a part of that. Abenake Rod and Gun Club, Fall Mountain Archery Club, one named after Precision Valley not sure of the exact name. Chmelar said there's one in Chester, too. He said state fishing guidelines tell you where to go in every town.

Shamas said she will add info about snowmobile trails, library, scenic spots. Crouch said there is a hockey rink. Kingston didn't think that should go in the Town Plan. She said you could skate in many different places in town. Shamas asked if there was anything else people would like to see in the recreation section? Crouch said birdwatching is a big activity here. Apps like eBird, iNaturalist, and Seek were mentioned. Kingston didn't think it makes sense to put in private nordic skiing trails. They are kind of open to town residents, but shouldn't be in the town plan - definitely not without asking the landowners.

5. Housing -

Chmelar said Crocker took the section over. Crocker said he accepted that Crocker asked Chmelar if she wants to help, she said maybe. Crocker said it will

require some data-gathering, but he knows what he wants to write. Chmelar said he should just build on the chapter and update stuff, add things in, don't have to recreate the wheel. Shamas said if you want to build another wheel its OK. There was some discussion as to whether a Google Doc exists for the housing section. Kingston said there should also be an outline. Crocker said he would have a lot of questions for Hodgkins.

There was discussion about inaccuracies with the 2020 census. Hodgkins said the Census recorded 3,016 people vs. 3248 previously. Dropped 200+ people. He said we have 2468 registered voters. Hodgkins said the Census is absolute crap. He said if we don't have 3500-3600 people in this town right now, he will eat his hat. Hodgkins is upset that the Census didn't ask the Town for data.

6. Economic development -

Shamas asked who is working on this. Kingston said it's a good one for Chmelar. Chmelar said she's at her limit, not willing to take it on. Kingston asked whether Chmelar is doing any sections. Chemlar said yes, education. Shamas said there's a new committee in town working on economic development.

7. Further working meetings -

The committee agreed to an hour-long meeting on February 28th at 7:00 PM to work on natural resources section. Kingston will go through comments and send a reminder to folks to look through the section before the meeting.

On March 28th, the committee will look at agriculture. Crouch said the date conflicts with another meeting and she will have to leave at 8. The meeting will begin at 6:30. It's hard for Kingston to meet any earlier.

8. Intern: No progress.

6. NEW BUSINESS:

A. Westminster Commerce and Economic and Community Development (WCECD)

WCECD is a new committee formed by John Jones and approved by Select Board. Shamas was told the chair of Planning Commission has to be there. She went to the first meeting, but didn't say she was committing herself. She says they really want someone from our committee to go. Shamas said she is not interested in going to another meeting, but maybe it's good because we don't have someone working on the economic development section. Crouch said if we want them to do that work, we need to give them direction. Hodgkins said they are not established enough to give them anything to do yet. He said the development review board is not interested, Shamas is not interested, Hodgkins himself is not interested. He said two or three people interested in being there, that's not a committee. Hodgkins said anybody that names it commerce *and* economic *and* community development hasn't thought very hard about anything at all.

Shamas said they are basing it on other towns that have it. Kingston said she wanted more info about who is involved. She said if there after three people interested in economic development, they care about the town enough to think about this stuff, she would want to encourage them. Crouch said they could be a subcommittee of the Planning Commission, they don't need to be their own commission and they could take on that chapter of the Town Plan. Shamas read from the WCECD mission and goals. She said it's a lot of words that equal spaghetti, no sauce. She will go to next meeting on Wednesday night.

7. OTHER BUSINESS:

Kingston wanted to ask Hodgkins if we have a Sheriff in town anymore. Hodgkins said he have a Sheriff but we are way behind on service hours. Hodgkins did not pay the February invoice for the Sheriff because they are so far behind. Supposed to give us 40 hours per week. Kingston said se hasn't seen a Sheriff in West West in months. Hodgkins said 40 hrs for this officer to be in town and 40 hours in same week from Putney in off hours. So, \$82k supposed to have 80 hours of coverage and a 15-20-minute response time. We sure aren't getting that.

Kingston said it sounds like a topic for Town Meeting. Hodgkins said in the proposed new budget, we've cut it in half. Crocker said they're having trouble finding people like everyone else.

Shamas asked for other business. Crouch said Tatiana from the Conservation Commission is interested in having input and it would be good to have them review the Natural Resources section, maybe after this next meeting when we go through it.

Kingston wanted committee to know there is an agricultural survey that was done in 2002. What do you like most, what do you like least, what kinds of development should be encouraged etc. 430 responses to this survey. Crouch asked how it was conducted. Kingston thought it was mailed out. She said she would try to scan it and send it to committee members.

Crouch said it would be awesome if we could do a survey and get that kind of response. Chmelar wondered about handing it out at Town Meeting. She said it would be great to use the previous questions and have a longitudinal analysis. Crocker thought that would be very instructional. Chmelar would be excited about working on something like that.

Shamas asked when town meeting is. Hodgkins said April 30. He said the 2002 survey went out as an insert in the Gazette. Shamas suggested a link to a Survey Monkey. Crouch said a physical thing in the Gazette is better. Hodgkins said it is a lot of work to put each paper into each Gazette, and attach a sticker. Hodgkins said the Gazette is printed, lands here, you insert your flier, and then you mail them out. Crocker said he would help Chmelar insert them. Hodgkins said there would be 100-150 people at Town Meeting. Chmelar said why not have it there and send it out. Crouch suggested printing on a distinctive paper, colorful, so it is identifiable and easy to collect from people. Crocker wondered about getting responses not just from voters but maybe we want homeowners from out of state. Shamas said anybody, kids, we want to hear what they have to say. Could gather valuable housing data and see if there are differing views, full time vs out of town people.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING: Monday, March 14, 2022 @ 6:30 via Zoom

9. ADJOURNMENT: Seroya Crouch made a motion to adjourn the meeting @ 8:24 PM. Michelle Chmelar seconded. The motion passed with all in favor.

Signature of Clerk

Date

Prepared by: Sarah Buckingham, Recording Secretary