

**TOWN OF WESTMINSTER**  
**PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING (PC) VIA ZOOM**  
**April 11, 2022**

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

Others Present: Sarah Buckingham (Recording Secretary), Katrina Hamilton (Selectboard Alternate)

**1. CALL TO ORDER:** Bari Shamas (Chair) called the meeting to order at 6:32 PM.

**2. COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC COMMENT:**

**3. ADJUSTMENTS TO AGENDA:**

Shamas added discussion of tree-planting in honor of Russ Lazarek

**4. Welcome to and Introduction by Katrina Hamilton Selectboard member**

Shamas advised Hamilton that the commission members had shared thoughts about the future for Westminster at the January meeting and suggested Hamilton review those minutes. Kingston asked for clarity on Hamilton's role. Hamilton said she is not a member of the commission, she is here to offer support and currently she is just here to learn. Shamas asked about a zoning administrator. Hamilton said she has been tasked with finding a solution to that. Kingston thanked Hamilton for the work she does. Kingston suggested sharing the commission's Google Docs with Hamilton and that the commission would appreciate her feedback on whatever she is willing to look at. The present Commission members agreed to share their sections. Shamas thanked Hamilton and expressed hope for a smooth transition. Kingston shared that Bill Jewell was the zoning administrator before Russ Hodgkins, and said that he might know people in the area who are available. Crouch said there's someone in Springfield who used to work in Westminster a long time ago. Members shared when they joined the commission.

**5. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES:** Chmelar made a motion to accept the minutes from the March 14, 2022 meeting as written; Crouch seconded. The motion passed 4-0.

**6. UNFINISHED BUSINESS (Discussion / Action):**

A. Town Plan

i. Natural Resource Section - 10 min

Kingston said David Deen has been commenting. She has cleaned the section up a lot, but there's still some stuff that needs to be done and she is still very interested in anybody going through with a fine-tooth comb and making comments. She asked those who already commented to either resolve comments in the Google Doc or add to them.

Chmelar said, regarding agriculture, that people are very private and don't want to give this information out. For example, with CAFO - what's the point of us trying to get this info? So someone can give them a hard time if they're not doing it right? People either fear punitive action, or just don't want people to know their business. Crouch said these activities are regulated at the state level, and there is nothing punitive the town can do. Chmelar asked, then what are we trying to do with this information?

Crouch said the agriculture survey is to get a picture of what's going on. So far, the emerging picture is one of diversity. She said the information is confidential. We're trying to understand what's going on and see if there are ways that the town could help. In the agriculture section, we're saying, this is what's happening in our town from agricultural point of view. And we have a lot! In some areas, everyone is doing the same thing - all wheat, or all corn, all dairy, whatever. Here, it's all different! She said it's a cool point about Westminster and we want to portray that.

Kingston said that in order to do a Town Plan, we need information on what is currently in the town, to figure out what people are doing and how the town will move in the future. She said the ag survey was to get a feel for what agriculture is happening and how much land is in ag use now. The CAFO thing, is just information for the Development and Review Board. Kingston said she has difficulty with the idea that people are perceiving that we're out to get them. She said that's not the intent. It troubles her that people think that if we're asking for information, we're going to use it against them.

Chmelar said that it had come up before that there was a low response rate to the survey and she thinks privacy is part of the reason. Shamas said we need to address these perceptions and concerns and let people know how we feel and why we need this information. She said as emissaries of the Planning Commission it might behoove us to do what we can to assure the good intentions of the work that we're doing. Crouch agreed to copy and paste the CAFO paragraph into the Agriculture section. Crocker said if anyone hears that again, let's get them to come to a meeting and discuss their concerns.

Kingston was asked who David Dean is and she said he is a town resident who is on the Fish & Wildlife Board. Crocker added that Dean was a state rep for years. Kingston said she doesn't like the term "ecosystem services." Crouch doesn't like it either but thinks it's necessary. Crouch asked if there was any mention of the change in air quality during the pandemic, while in lockdown. Kingston said yes. Kingston asked Shamas to move "scenic resources" to the Recreation section. There was discussion as to whether to include a certain waterfall that is dangerous and posted by landowners. Crouch suggested including an advisory that it's dangerous and that people have died there, to warn parents. Chmelar and Crocker said if it's privately owned it should be removed from the text.

## ii. Agriculture - 5 min

Crouch said part of the grant we got was to work with an organization, Vermont Farm to Plate. They were hired by VT legislature to do a food and ag plan. Crouch will get the section to a certain point and then send it to them to look it over. She is excited about working with them.

iii. Transportation - 5 min

Transportation was Russ Hodgkins's section. Shamas said it is in pretty good shape but it would be good for all of us to look over that again. Chmelar suggested Chuck take a look at it. She will ask him.

iv. Recreation - 5 min

No discussion.

v. Housing - 5 min

Crocker met with Hodgkins and got some numbers. The info is in Google Drive and other committee members have access to it. He said that compared to the last town plan, it looks like there's been a 5% increase in homesteads vs. seasonal housing. Crocker speculated it could be second-homeowners staying here through the pandemic. He is still figuring out the numbers. He said more should be added about solar. Crocker relayed that Hodgkins had said he thought people were coming and going more often, and talked about property tax issues and challenges with the road systems. He said Hodgkins told him houses are getting bigger than they used to be. Crocker said people doing AirBnB are afraid of being regulated by the town. People don't want to get inspection, be told you need a certain outlet there, egress, etc. - they just want to rent the place. This is something to be dealt with in this document.

Crouch said the possibility of some kind of regulation about AirBnB should be discussed. She said some jurisdictions are doing this because it's damaging the housing market so much. Chmelar suggested looking at taxation on rentals. Crocker said as long as it is not a homestead it's the same rate. Chmelar said the rental rate is lower.

Shamas said this is an important piece and wondered if we're planning to lobby for taxes to be made or regulations or whatever, how do we make that happen? Chmelar said it would go through the Selectboard and that's why it's so great that Hamilton is here. Crouch said the way it works is the Planning Commission studies the situation and comes up with recommendations as part of our Action Steps, and those go for implementation through the Selectboard. Crouch said this is an issue where wider community discussion is needed. She said the number of available rentals is really low.

Shamas says there are people here that aren't earning a lot but have some property and it helps them to pay their taxes. It can swing both ways. Chmelar said those folks are doing a homestead declaration and paying the normal tax rate. Some communities have said you can have an AirBnB if you're living on the property, but you cannot have an AirBnB in a building you're not living in at all. Shamas agreed that a larger conversation is needed. She said there are a lot of complicated issues around it, but with some research and input from different perspectives, we could come up with a workable solution for the town. Chmelar suggested putting it on the agenda for next month.

vi. Economic development - 5 min

Chmelar said she had not looked at it yet but would do so before the next meeting and be ready to report back.

vii. Energy - Writing Effective Energy Plans Tues. 4/6/22 - 7 min

There was a working meeting with Michael Daley and Kingston is in touch with someone about it.

viii. further working meetings - which section next - 3 min

Kingston said she could have Natural Resources ready. Shamas said that section seems like it is already in good shape and only needs fine-tuning. Crouch was not available to work on her section. Shamas suggested instead of having a working meeting, everyone take the time to look over the work that's already been done. Shamas and Crocker will look at setting up a wider public meeting about housing.

ix. Grant 15 min

Shamas reminded the committee of a grant applied for in October, which was not awarded. She received a notification that the legislature has allocated additional monies for municipal planning grants and so the grant proposal we wrote has now been accepted. The challenge is that we have to have an authorizing officer, someone to do the bookwork. Before, it was Russ Hodgkins. So, we need another authorizing agent. Shamas said she thought the Selectboard would have to appoint someone. She pointed out that there will be other grants that also need someone in this role. Hamilton said she'd add it to the Selectboard agenda for the coming week.

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

Hodgkins was going to be the contact there, he's not here anymore. Hamilton is an alternate for that committee as well, so she will default to this role. Shamas said she looks forward to hearing Hamilton's reports.

**6. NEW BUSINESS (Discussion / Action):**

Zone Administrator absence - responsibilities

Hamilton said this topic is on the agenda for the coming Selectboard meeting. She said there are a couple of potential people that could take over, but she hasn't spoken to them or talked to the chair of the Selectboard. She will have more info soon. She said the Selectboard will be looking for someone with experience on a planning commission, a town plan, permitting process, flood planes, etc. But, a zoning administrator doesn't have to have any experience at all. The Vermont League of Cities and Towns provides training in the spring and fall. This year the spring training date is still TBD, so there might be a summer training.

**7. OTHER BUSINESS:**

Shamas said there had been discussion about planting a peach tree to honor Russ Lazarek and that permission had been obtained from his widow; she liked the idea. Shamas got a peach tree from Walker Farm and needs to figure out when to plant it. She said it seemed at the time of those discussions that Russ Hodgkins wanted to be a part of this, so Shamas wrote to him today. She said maybe the commission will have opportunity to work with him on doing that. The tree cost \$102 and anyone is welcome to contribute. Shamas will update when she hears back from Hodgkins.

**8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING:** Monday, May 9, 2022 @ 6:30 via Zoom

Kingston reminded everyone to look through things on Google Docs before then.

**9. ADJOURNMENT:** Crouch made a motion to adjourn the meeting @ 7:47. Kingston seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

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Signature of Clerk

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Date

Prepared by: Sarah Buckingham, Recording Secretary