

TOWN OF WESTMINSTER
PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING (PC) VIA ZOOM
September 12, 2022

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

Others Present: Sarah Buckingham (Recording Secretary), Sarah Danly

1. **CALL TO ORDER:** Chair Shamas called the meeting to order at 7:04 PM, beginning with remembrance for Russ Lazarus, who died about a year ago.
2. **COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC COMMENT:** None.
3. **ADJUSTMENTS TO AGENDA:** “Other Business” was moved to the top of the agenda.
4. **OTHER BUSINESS:**

Crouch explained that the municipal planning grant included a proposal from Sarah Danly on behalf of Farm to Plate, a Vermont organization that developed a 10-year strategic plan for agriculture and food systems for the state, to do contract work for the committee about policy recommendations. Danly has since moved to a different organization, Vital Communities, which is a member of the Farm to Plate Network. The proposal was emailed to committee members. There might be other people brought in to talk to us about different elements of this.

Danly introduced herself, saying she spent last 5 years at Vermont Farm to Plate Network. She has a masters in environmental law and policy from Vermont Law School with a focus on land use and agricultural law and policy. She said she really values statewide coordination and the statewide plan, but the state is made up of individuals communities and we need to work at both levels at once. We developed a planning guide around food systems and food access, other agricultural topics. Wanting to develop a model for working with towns. Farm to plate is a network of 300+ organizations working together on food systems issues. The initial proposal was to convene a group of people with the expertise and a number of hours to be split between Farm to Plate and a partner organization. Danly said the proposal has not changed, she will still lead it, but she will be at a partner organization instead of the main hub of the network. Danly said that Vital Communities serves the upper valley, and that Westminster is part of the their service area. Potential on-ramp to additional support in implementing your plan as well.

Chmelar asked what are these issues that we would be talking about that our town would need to deal with?

Danly said we’re looking at the food supply chain plus the values and goals that we have related to that - farmland access, food processing, food storage, distribution, retail sale, food preparation and healthy eating habits, workplace conditions and labor issues around processing,

health and equitable management to food, food waste. Danly asked the committee which of those things they would want to work on in Westminster.

Crouch said we have a lot of production happening here, people who are low-income in town, and if there's way we could support more people being able to purchase directly from farms and things like that rather than going to Walmart, she thinks that would be a good thing. It keeps money in the community, higher nutrition if it's fresher, things like that. She said we also have a strong group of homesteaders and small farms producing stuff and there might be innovative ways of helping that become more integrated into our community. Crouch said the state regulates agriculture a lot in Vermont, which is new to her, and so she brought information on that into the Ag chapter, along with the results of the survey she did. She is doing more of a resource inventory and hasn't gotten to the point where she can say what policies we should have. She said there's other people out there who's already figured this stuff out.

Chmelar said the state regulates processing centers and stuff like that and for low-income families, farm-direct food is not cheap. She said she can't always buy that food and she is not sure how people below the poverty line are going to, or how the town would subsidize that. It's a lofty goal. Especially heading into probably a recession, tax revenues could be down, and how are we going to attack that? It sounds like a lot of neat stuff that you work on but I'm trying to figure out how it would be integrated into our plan.

Danly said there's no silver bullets that are easy fixes right away. What we need as a state is not just regulation but pro-actively supporting what we want to see. That's where communities can really help. How can we find ways for communities who care about farm viability and access to processing infrastructure, how can towns step in?

Chmelar asked if we need a processing plant? Is that an issue? Danly said there is a shortage of meat processing plants and it's severely restricting farm viability. Danly could bring folks to speak to the committee to explore whether Westminster could play a role in that. She said the process I envision us going through, is talking to you guys about what gaps you see and then I bring folks in or connect you to resources and some things could become part of the town's plan. Crouch said these things are not necessarily tax-supported. Chmelar asked what do people want in our town? We're only five people. She said Crouch probably has the best pulse on that since this is her section.

Crouch said we don't really know what's possible, so it's hard to know what questions to ask farmers. Part of this is figuring out what's out there that we could bring into our process as potential things to do that we haven't thought of.

Chmelar asked, since this was in the grant does that mean we have to use this money? We have to do this now that we've earmarked three grand towards this? Shamas said she didn't think so. Crouch said that part of the grant, the bulk of it, is for the Windham Regional Commission, and part of it is Farm to Table Network, and the third part is the finalizing and formatting of the plan. We were told we're not allowed to switch the money around but we can leave it on the table. Danly can help give a menu of things that could work here.

Chmelar said years ago she thought there was an issue that there weren't enough places to process milk and wondered if that is still an issue. Danly said part of the issue with dairy is so many have been consolidated into larger co-ops and so then it's about which co-ops are your dairy farms members of, one has a big plant in Western MA, so if your farmers can access that it

might not be an issue. But this is another example of the type of digging I could help you do. Shamas asked if Danly has connections to local farmers. Crouch said she has not worked in Westminster yet. Danly said she found helpful information in the Ag survey.

Chmelar said succession planning is a big issue. Crouch said she talked to a 67 year-old farmer with no succession plan. It's just not feasible for young people to buy a giant farm. A plan for that would be incredibly valuable. Chmelar said maybe young people could work there over time to start getting a buy-in on the business. Danly said the Vermont Law School has a project working on different models for that. Chemlar said she thought that would be a really neat thing to explore. We have a lot of older people that don't have a plan. And a lot of younger people that have come in and want to farm.

Shamas asked, wasn't there a meat processing plant here? Crouch explained that is a halal facility and not accessible to local farmers. Crouch said she was quite excited and she thinks it could be useful and help the town deal with some of these issues.

Danly said Farm to Plate did was a series of 54 topic briefs; 2-4 page briefs on specific products, market channels, issues like farmland access. Each has data, current conditions, bottlenecks and gaps, recommendations. They were each created collaboratively by 4-7 experts; hundreds of contributors over all. She asked the committee to brainstorm some other issues and she can share briefs on those. Then based on your reaction to that, we could figure out how we want to dive into that more, and I can bring in experts to speak to us.

Shamas summarized the issues raised so far: succession planning, meat processing, and dairy processing. Danly said she would also include Food Access & Farm Viability. How do we ensure better access to people of all income levels? I heard that as a real interest.

Danly read through the list of 54 topics, for which briefs are available on the Vermont Farm to Table website. Crouch said cheese and maple are big here, and maybe agroforestry - people are doing silvo-pasture here. Shamas said she's curious about climate change with maple. Danly said there is a Climate Issues Brief she will send to the committee. Crouch said agritourism could be something. Also alternative land ownership. Crocker said he borrows land to raise sheep. Chmelar said childcare is a big one.

The committee thanked Danly for coming.

5. **ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES:** Chmelar made a motion to accept the minutes from the August 8, 2022 meeting as written; Crocker seconded. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

6. UNFINISHED BUSINESS (Discussion / Action):

A. Policy regarding absences and tardiness

Shamas said she went through all of the meetings in 2021, and thus far in 2022, and there isn't anybody that had any excessive missing of meetings. Everybody has one or two. Tardiness maybe might be a problem, but not attendance. Shamas said she doesn't mind saying that if a member misses three meetings in a year they are no longer an active member. Crouch said that seems reasonable to her and she would go along with that.

Action:

Crouch moved that active planning commission members shall miss no more than three meetings in a year. Crocker seconded the motion. No further discussion. The motion passed with three votes in favor, one abstention.

B. Public meeting on housing

Chmelar said one of biggest things we need is elder housing. She said that prior to COVID there had been a subcommittee on senior housing. It got kinda sidetracked. She thought the two could be tied together.

Crouch said that makes a lot of sense. She wondered about an in-person meeting, we're moving into cold weather, but trying to get people to participate in an online public meeting has a lot of challenges. Maybe there's a way to have an event at Westminster Cares and have input from them rather than a big public meeting.

Chmelar said if you're talking to seniors, they're gonna say great! But, it's more viable for people and the town and money staying in the town to have homeownership and not renters. She described facilities in New Jersey with one-story homes, 1-2 beds and 1-1.5 baths, a porch, living and dining room, eat-in kitchen. They live in community. They have a pool, a clubhouse. They take care of plowing and mowing and garbage service. You think about all the healthcare workers that would be needed, in a central location. You could make a development. Construction and architecture and maintenance people. It could be a big job creator for the town and grow the community.

Shamas said this is us brainstorming again and not addressing having a public meeting. Chmelar said her point was that we would have to figure out, are they in a position to buy? Do they need to rent? We would need to know about their budgets.

Crocker said he's seen these kinds of meetings be really successful, but its a lot of work. Shamas asked how much time would be needed? Crocker said time to make sure one of us gets to all the Selectboard meetings and announces it, make sure it's in the Westminster Gazette, anywhere we can talk about it we need to do it. And you have to be excited about it to get people to come. Shamas suggested November. Crocker said that's probably enough time. He said it takes all of us to be at this meeting and really work with people. We could do break-out groups on different topics but I don't think we'd get that many people. We'd be lucky if we got 20.

The committee agreed to November 15th, at 6:00 or 6:30. Chmelar suggested the Westminster Institute. She said she would check with them.

Shamas said we may need to plan a snow date, too. Chmelar wanted to see what other meetings might be happening in competition. Crocker asked about grant money to pay for advertising. Shamas thought there was something in there for meetings. She will check. Both The Gazette and The Whistler are free.

Crouch said someone is going to need to write up what this is. Crocker agreed to do so. Crouch offered to edit. Crouch said we should probably provide refreshments, too - tea and coffee and cookies or something. Crocker suggested cider donuts. Chmelar said to advertise that.

Topics to be covered in this meeting include: Affordable housing, elder housing, Airbnb and rental properties, tiny houses and zoning.

Shamas we'll need to think about how to moderate and structure this. Crouch suggested the cafe format where each topic has a different table and you just go to the discussion you want to join.

C. Energy plan

No discussion.

D. Language for policies and recommendations

Crouch apologized she had not yet found the information she wanted.

E. Work on plan

Crouch said she worked for maybe four hours on her chapter. Chmelar said she has started writing and she has questions about how to access accurate Census data. She wants very granular data. Crouch says Windham Regional Commission has information.

7. NEW BUSINESS (Discussion / Action):

A. Zoning Admin

Shamas talked to John Bennet and there is a statute in the state that says that the planning commission may nominate, doesn't say has to or will, may nominate a Zoning Administrator (ZA). She talked to Jason Perry and he is unclear about what they are doing. She said according to him it's not required that the ZA come to the TPC meetings.

Crouch said the whole point of the plan is to create the zoning bylaws to implement the plan, so it seems they should be here. Shamas said that according to Perry there is no "should." Crocker asked if anyone looked up the statute? Is that true? Shamas shared a link for the statute.

Chmelar said the committee does a lot that they don't need to sit through. Crouch added that it's only a 12-hour per week job.

Shamas confirmed the Selectboard are looking. Crouch asked whether it makes sense for this committee to have a person involved in that process? Shamas said she would ask Perry if that's a possibility.

8. OTHER BUSINESS

Shamas proposed moving the next meeting from October 10th to the 11th, since the 10th is Indigenous Peoples' Day.

Crouch said that in The Gazette it says TPC meetings are at 6:30 on the first Monday of the month, and that it's at the Town Hall. Crouch wondered about switching back to 6:30 and moving back to the town hall. Chmelar said she loves the Zoom calls, she loves being able to do it from home.

Action:

Crouch moved to return to 6:30 pm in-person meetings. Crocker seconded the motion. The motion passed with unanimous approval.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING: Tuesday, October 11, 2022 @ 6:30 via Zoom

10. ADJOURNMENT: Crouch moved to adjourn the meeting. Chmelar seconded. The motion passed unanimously. The secretary neglected to record the time.

Signature of Clerk

Date

Prepared by: Sarah Buckingham, Recording Secretary