

TOWN OF WESTMINSTER PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING (PC) February 13, 2023
Members Present: Bari Shamas (Chair), Richard Crocker, Michelle Chmelar, Seroya Crouch
Others Present: Janice Leary-Jones (Recording Secretary), Sarah Danly (Vital Communities)

Call to Order: Bari Shamas called the meeting to order, 6:30pm

Communications and Public Comment: Members of PC completed a check in.

Adjustments to Agenda: Agriculture section to be reviewed first

Acceptance of Minutes: Jan 24, 2023 Seroya moved to accept January 24, 2023 minutes.
Richard seconded. Accepting minutes passed unanimously.

Unfinished Business (Discussion / Action):

Town Plan

Review Agriculture

Sarah and Seroya met a couple of times to review this chapter and also address edits that members suggested. Sarah pulled some pieces together to help with this section and policy. Changes to narrative summarized. Changes such as clarifying language and adding information on primary ag soils. Zoning to be added to chapter. Regulations of Ag added, Act 250 and Act 143 addressed. Statewide food goals considered. Current use, land trusts, slaughter houses, herb harvesting (native plants), agroforestry, composting/organics reviewed and added to chapter.

Tables and charts to be added to make Ag chapter more easily read.

Hemp regulations can be looked at and then perhaps added to plan, as needed.

Current use: 25 acres of contiguous land that is in farm production; also available to smaller parcels that produce \$2,000 a year can be put into current use.

Michelle's new comments will be reviewed: language needs to be parsed out a bit to explain law/policy making it more accessible to all readers. Make information available on town website. Recommendation to add source information via internet links in the document as well as an index. Discussion that some of the statutes come from the state, some from the town—there has been a goal to clearly differentiate between which are State and which are Town.

Zoning: Act 143, Municipalities are not allowed to regulate Accessory On Farm Business. 50% of ingredients used in a farm business must be produced on farm per Act 143. Westminster Zoning allows for Accessory On Farm Businesses. Not listed specifically as a conditional use Restaurants, Farm Stores, On Farm Composting Facilities: conditional approval. Secondary use is defined by footage of structure. Zoning Regulations need to be rewritten in places. A good question to ask is, Does zoning allow what you want it to allow? Example: A Woodstock Farm is attempting to open an on farm restaurant—causing issues due to zoning issues and percentage of ingredients produced on farm. PC wants to have as much transparency as possible from the beginning to avoid issues like mentioned in this example.

Michelle requested information from Sarah about any other potential zoning issues that the PC members should consider when writing policy for Westminster. Sarah indicated composting is another area that would potentially require more consideration.

Goals and action steps to be reviewed and commented on by PC members.

Topics of Interest developed per PC members and Farmers: Goals were based on the top interests of farmers detailed in questionnaire answers.

Zoning Changes: Looking at Ag soils map and Accessory On Farm Businesses, discussion of separating these into two different goals/topics.

Upper Valley Resilience Network: group devoted to building up local food resiliency and could help Westminster develop its food resilience; educational activities; increase food access: subsidized CSAs (this group can help with) help make Town's vision happen; statewide programs need to be brought into the town. AFC implementation arm of PC's vision for Town.

Agricultural Literacy Week: Are our local libraries interested in participating? Schools? Mention of planning a Town wide Farm Tour (akin to Putney Craft Tour).

Educating public about farm activities, dogs barking; smells; harvesting/haying was discussed.

Additional topics for the Committee to explore listed: town wide free composters given to townspeople.

Composting to be researched more—handling concerns such as meat composting. On farm composting;

WRJ Sunrise Farm: Door to door food scrap pick up business then worked with a farm to have composting done two businesses working together synergistically.

Worm composting should be added to the Ag Section.

Members asked to review as they are able and provide feedback/edits.

Seroya's goal is to clean up chapter over the next month.

Michelle mentioned page 6, section needs more explanation to have it be understandable.

Sarah will send follow up information about cases she mentioned as examples.

Ag Maps reviewed. Three maps: Prime Agricultural Soils Map (Act 250), Town Ag Overlay District based on existing farms when the map was developed in the 1990s by Paul Harlow and David Major. More ag overlay than should be. Zoning protections come into play per Town Ag Overlay District. Map needs to be more accurate and clear. Recommendation to make Separate map for ridgelines would be helpful.

Zoning Map: Where current agricultural use is happening, Zoning Districts map (fourth map) Prime ag land zoned residential or residential/commercial

Old map needs to be updated and zoning needs possible changing

Body of water on map that is no longer there, Windham Regional Map Person will address this in the new map contracted to develop for the Town Plan.

Mention of a zoning issue in Quechee on a farm where location and size of cabins built for an accessory farm business is in question. Current query is if Act 250 comes into play.

Bari thanked Seroya and Sarah for their excellent teamwork and expressed appreciation for the great job they are doing. Sarah is able to work on Economic Development and Housing Chapters as well.

Economic Development

Wifi/broadband needs discussed. Communication and Infrastructure for this need must be addressed.

Are there housing issues for companies in Westminster? Perhaps addressing this issue in the Housing Section.

Companies are having a challenge hiring people. Michelle mentioned Mike Stack's program at the High School to help students find career paths to get into trades locally. Perhaps seeing if there are other businesses/people that would help with job training/recruitment. Partner up with local businesses to help them out with training people. \$1,050 for a single person apartment per HUD: Calculation means that jobs need to be paying more than \$21/hour to enable employees to cover cost of living.

Business costs of wages are a concern as well.

Vermont Basic Needs and Livable Wage Program: every two years a county by county report is published that outlines the real cost of basic needs (housing, transportation, etc.), Sarah will send this information to members to reference.

Brattlebore Development Credit Corporation

<https://brattleborodevelopment.com/the-towns-of-southeastern-vermont/#1501774296861-80d6463e-bd84>

Regional Development Committee for Economic Development: funding available to help businesses get up and running; they also help with transitions. BDCC owns the Cotton Mill and other buildings and uses the properties as incubator spaces for local businesses.

Review Recreation

Bari will work on this for the next meeting.

Other Town Plan Items

New Business (Discussion / Action):

A. Selectboard attendance:

January, Seroya planned to go, storm precluded her participation.

February: Seroya

March: Bari

April: Richard

B. Westminster news

Zoning Administrator: Kelly is interim Zoning Administrator.

Town Managers (hiring and keeping) common issue in Vermont.

C. Election of Planning Commission officers?

January or March: Schedule for March meeting; Michelle nominates Bari as chair. Richard nominated for Vice-Chair by Seroya; Seroya nominated as Clerk.

Other Business:

Town Meeting: new members to be elected to the Selectboard. Perhaps a new Selectboard member could be invited to join PC. Select board meets two times a month, seems like it could be a challenge to have a Selectboard member join the PC.

Richard noticed at Town Hall there is a list of voted positions that are vacant. The PC needs more members. Solutions: perhaps putting something in the Westminster Gazette; posting on the bulletin board at the Town Hall; say at Selectboard meeting the need for more members.

Windham Regional: Bari to contact to let them know they were awarded the contract.

Date of Next Meeting: March. 13, 2023

Adjournment: 8:26 Adjournment. Richard moved, Seroya second, unanimous vote.

Signature of Clerk:

Date:

Prepared by: Janice Leary-Jones