

TOWN OF WESTMINSTER
PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING (PC)
May 8, 2023

Members Present: Bari Shamas (Chair), Richard Crocker, Stephen Major (Selectboard Member/Trustee Alternate)
Others Present: Sarah Danly, Janice Leary-Jones (Recording Secretary)

1. Call to Order: Bari called meeting to order at 6:39 pm.
2. Communications and Public Comment: None.
3. Adjustments to Agenda: Added Selectboard Meeting Report to New Business.
4. Acceptance of Minutes: Amend April minutes to reflect the meeting May meeting is held on Monday, May 8, 2023. Richard moves to accept the minutes as amended by Bari Shamas. Stephen Major seconded accepting the amended minutes.
5. Unfinished Business (Discussion / Action):

A. Town Plan

i. Economic Development

For the Economic Development chapter/Agriculture Chapter Sarah mentioned Julia Scheier, Market Development Section Chief for the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets, as a resource for developing the Agriculture Business and Economic Development information in the Town Plan.

Julia is well informed about Act 143 and its impact on Town Plans and can be an excellent resource for developing this section of the Town Plan.

Sarah can make introductions/set up a meeting with Julia and Michelle and/or Seroya.

ii. Education

No updates

iii. Housing

Sarah shared the Housing chapter to review as a group.

Housing Chapter reviewed by group. Statistics: it is uncertain where current data is from, could be from census. Sarah would be able to help find data. Sarah has Housing data lists that she can access for updated information.

Richard reviewed the updates he made to the Housing Chapter document. Discussion occurred about the type of affordable housing Westminister will focus on in the Housing Chapter. Edit the document to reflect that there is a focus on affordable housing in general—not for only a specific group of people. Question was posed: How will the town support affordable housing? Housing Policies numbers 3, 4, and 5 address how the Town will support affordable housing.

Act 250: Economic Development was mentioned. Discussed Putney Affordable Housing project.

Commented that Current Westminister Zoning does not allow for a large building project like the Putney Affordable Housing project. As written, the current language on affordable housing indicates that the Town of Westminister is in support of Affordable Housing.

Richard commented he would like to see more in the Housing Chapter, addressing clustering of housing and ADUs (Accessory Dwelling Units). Westminister needs more units of housing, currently there is a strain on housing in Westminister. The town only allows for two units on a property. It was recommended to write out Accessory Dwelling Units in the body of the Chapter.

Discussion about new housing units and whether or not they are actually needed, and what type are needed. One of the reasons there are fewer affordable rental units is due to an increase of Airbnb, Vrbo housing (short term rentals) in Westminister which decreases the number of long term rentals. What are the numbers of units of short term rentals in Westminister? There has been a discussion in town of taxing short term rentals. Airdna (industry marketing professionals) has data on short term rentals by region, and perhaps could be a resource for determining the number of short term rentals in Westminister.

It was mentioned that perhaps restricting or regulating short term rentals in the town would help increase the number of long term rentals available in town. Mentioned that corporations were buying properties and renting out units, which can make it difficult to ascertain the actual number of units in Westminster. Household sizes are getting smaller/average number of people per dwelling is going down which affects population numbers.

Housing Forum results discussed. Richard shared document listing results, and PC reviewed results of the Forum. Mentioned that Property tax reflects Homestead if people are living in the residence.

Concerns mentioned:

Current zoning language could be negatively impacting Affordable Housing development.

Septic/water availability impacts Affordable Housing development.

Aqueduct: small system to supply water to a limited area.

Question raised: Is there a way to increase the number of people living in the current existing housing—there are large houses in town with many bedrooms with very few people living in them.

Perhaps supporting the development of apartments within larger homes.

Is there a way to include in the Town Plan encouraging multi-generational residences or multiple family unit housing? Can the town support this in property taxes or regulation? Is it possible to change the tax law of the Town to support these types of dwellings?

Perhaps the Town Plan can state that the Town will encourage these types of living situations and supports it. It was brought up that perhaps using the incentive of Property tax being reduced to create more housing units would affect the amount of money being available for budgeting—explained State pays the other portion of the land tax with the Homestead program. Educate availability of tax break in the Town Plan.

Town plan should state that there is support for ADUs, who the townspeople can contact, and what resources are available as a means to increase the number of ADUs in Westminster. Stated that ADUs can be added in an existing building. Windham-Windsor Housing Trust mentioned as a resource.

Suggested that information should be listed online about creating ADUs in Westminster, explain what ADUs are and what it could look like—doesn't have to be an addition. Intro to Housing Chapter should include information about the various ways an ADU can be added to an existing dwelling.

Caregiver exemption: tax is on elder income as opposed to caregivers income—language about this to be included in town plan. It was clarified that Property tax for Vermonters is based on income. Stated that Vermonters making below a threshold that is determined by the State, the state covers a percentage of their property tax.

Recreation:

Bari is in contact with Alma Beals to gain more information for this chapter. Stephen mentioned the Town Plan should include language in support of Town Forest trails/kiosk and parking.

iv. Other Town Plan reviews

By June should be done with all the chapters of the town plan. Mike MacConnell stated that an option is to reapprove the old plan temporarily. Another possibility is an Extension of grant to continue funding: have until October to use money to get the Town Plan done.

Seroya has been in contact with Mike MacConnell to obtain census data needed to update the Town Plan.

Question was raised, the Town Plan needs to go to the Select Board by when?

In October the Select Board would need to approve the Town Plan. Stephen mentioned that perhaps hearings could be on a compressed timeline to allow for the Town Plan being finished. Suggesting moving forward with the New Town Plan as opposed to reapproving the old plan.

Richard and Sarah will set up a time to meet to finish up the Housing Chapter this week. Suggestion to meet two times a month to get the Town Plan done in time.

Richard will look through the Town Plan and be in touch with Bari about what additional chapter he can write.

It was discussed to approach the School Board for input on the Education Chapter. Stephen offered to approach the School Board: this is the Town Plan, please review and see if there is input they have for the Town Plan. Sarah sent the Education Chapter out to the group, Bari emailed it to Stephen. Stephen will call the School Board Chair and ask to review/comment. Cheryl Charles is the current Chair of the School Board.

Stated for PC members to please review and comment on the Education Chapter before the Planning Commission June meeting.

Sarah will follow up with Seryoa about the Agriculture Chapter.

6. New Business:

A. Who will attend Selectboard meeting in May: Stephen will be at this Wednesday's Selectboard meeting. Bari will do the second May meeting

B. Report from April Selectboard Meeting

Chuck Lawrence recommended paving some roads at the April Select Board meeting, a couple miles a year with recycled aggregate by putting aggregate on top of dirt road.

Pine Banks, Morse Brook, and West roads were mentioned as roads being considered.

Chuck's request only includes the cost of paving the road, it did not include the cost of maintaining the road: questions on costs can not be fully answered until there is a Town Manager. Per mile/per decade cost figures are needed to make a decision on this matter. Cost of maintaining a paved road once it is paved is significant; does it make sense to pave with the cost of maintenance?

Members of the Planning Commission discussed in the April Planning Commission Meeting to include in the Town Plan that the town would research the costs of paving town roads.

7. Other Business: Stephen prefers to be referred to as Stephen.

8. Date of Next Meeting: June 12, 2023, 6:30pm

9. Adjournment: Richard moves to Adjourn meeting, Stephen seconds at 8:11pm.

Signature of Clerk

Date

Prepared by: Janice Leary-Jones