

**TOWN OF WESTMINSTER**  
**PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING (PC) VIA ZOOM**

**October 16, 2023**

Members Present: Bari Shamas (Chair), Michelle Chmelar, Seroya Crouch, Stephen Major (Planning Commission Alternate)

Others Present: Janice Leary-Jones (Recording Secretary), Bonnie Anderson (Walk Bike Committee), Gary Fox (Town of Rockingham Development Director), Rick Cowan (Walk Bike Committee)

1. **CALL TO ORDER:** Bari Shamas (Chair) called the meeting to order at 6:36pm.

2. **ADJUSTMENTS TO AGENDA:** None.

3. **COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC COMMENT:**

A. Rockingham Walk Bike Path Proposal:

Bari Shamas introduces Rick Cowan, Gary Fox, and Bonnie Anderson to the Westminster Planning Commission members. Shamas states Cowan, Fox and Anderson are in attendance of the meeting to present information about the Walk Bike Committee's proposal for the Town of Rockingham and Town of Westminster working cooperatively to apply for grants to plan for and build Walk Bike paths in both towns.

Gary Fox shared background information about the project. Fox began by reviewing Rockingham and Westminster's histories of working together for a number of years on various trail initiatives including the Bald Hill project and Pinnacle walking trails; he indicated that the Saxtons River Valley Trails Initiative (SRVTI) group, with 25 people in the committee chain, has developed from these various projects. Fox went on to explain that the focus of this project is connectivity along Route 121 for bikers and walkers to and from Bellows Falls and Saxtons River. The SRVTI is looking to connect Bald Hill trails to Bellows Falls Historical Riverfront Park trails. Along the riverfront there is an easement through Basin Farm, which would allow for these two trail systems to connect via a bridge. The Land Trust working on the project previously was able to fund a trails only bridge. The Basin Farm would like the bridge to also support tractor use. As a result of this conflict, the funds available were not able to be used, and the project fell apart.

Fox continued to explain that larger funding means needing grants to support the project. In working with the Windham Regional Commission (WRC) the recommendation was made that to properly fund the project there is a need to go through the municipalities to access grant monies. Subsequent to this recommendation from WRC, the Walk Bike Committee formed to work through the needed pieces to see the project move forward. For the connectivity to happen, the Walk Bike Committee needs to work with the Town of Westminster, as the trail

would go through North Westminster. There are Federal grants available to plan for the walkability of Route 121 which require Transportation Safety plans, public engagement, and involves transportation officials in the towns.

Fox informed the PC that The Walk Bike Committee attended the Westminster Selectboard Committee meeting in August to ask for support from Selectboard for the project. The municipal grant the group would like to apply for allots \$50,000 for a project with a 10% match up to \$5,000. This would be considered a consortium grant if the two towns work together on this project; besides the 121 overlap, there are other overlaps between the two towns. Fox states that the end goal is to partner on grant applications, with Rockingham being responsible for the paperwork. If the PC does recommend this project to the Selectboard, after tonight's meeting, the Walk Bike Committee would need to go to the next Westminster Selectboard Meeting and ask for the Selectboard to approve an application for a planning assessment for the project via a grant for up to \$50,000. The towns would then need to fund the 10% match, with Rockingham covering  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the amount and the Walk Bike Committee is looking for Westminster to cover the other  $\frac{1}{4}$ , which is \$1250. Fox indicates that as both towns have plans for improving walk/bike infrastructure in the Town Plans, this is a great way to address this goal. The process would be for the Planning Commission chair to sign a resolution to plan; then the Selectboard is asked to support and fund the project. The work involved in implementing the project includes community input, consultants being hired to develop plans and then get feedback from community members.

Michele Chmelar asked for clarification on what the Municipal Planning Grant funds would be used for specifically. Fox responded that the grant funds would address creating a walk/bike plan. Consultants would be hired to hold public meetings, develop the plan, identify issues that need addressing, and make recommendations.

Rick Cowan then references Brattleboro's recent plan. The consultants will look at how other towns in Vermont have addressed issues that Rockingham and Westminster also face. Rockingham and Westminster are currently working on a plan for rebuilding Route 121. This plan could include walk/bike plans for Route 121. Gary Fox then furthers that there are State/Federal funds available to cover up to 80% of the project, but the plan that would come from this particular grant in question tonight is needed to apply for the State/Federal build funds.

Michelle Chmelar then asks for a ballpark figure of the amount the Walk Bike project would cost. Rick Cowan answered that there is interest in not just the Route 121 Walk Bike project, but also one to improve walk/bike accessibility in Westminster West and also along Route 5. That by completing the proposed grant application, the study completed would help the towns prioritize which projects are in the best interest of the towns, and answer the question of how much money is needed to complete said projects.

Gary Fox then further states that this planning process is needed to attain funding; the State of Vermont is looking to make a bike/pedestrian trail from the Canadian border to Massachusetts along Route 5. The plan indicates what would be needed and recommendations with costs listed. As a hypothetical, Fox states that if the Route 121 is \$1.5 mil to complete, having the plan that would be the result of this grant the Walk Bike Committee is seeking permission for completing, would then allow the two towns to apply for funds which could help cover the funds needed to rebuild Route 121.

Stephen Major asks the question, is it simply the bridge on the Basin Farm causing the project to go to the federal level? And if it is the bridge that causes it to go federal level, could it just be a trail? Major then continues that from the Selectboard point of view, a 10% match, ¼ of \$5,000 could conceivably be funded at the Westminster Selectboard level.

Rick Cowan reports Gary Fox and Betsey Thurston of the Rockingham Development Office would be responsible for paperwork, which translates to a great value for Westminster for what would be obtained from the \$1,250.

Stephen Major then indicates selectboard support.

Seroya Crouch, when asked for her opinion by Bari Shamas, replies that the decision looks straightforward as Westminster has everything to gain and nothing to lose with participating; Management being handled by Rockingham is a boon. Crouch furthers that biking around here is dangerous, and having infrastructure would be fantastic.

Bari Shamas then recounts biking a fair amount in the Netherlands, and biking is an absolute joy there because of lanes, lights, and signage. Reducing Carbon emissions is also a great upside, and perhaps gaining access to funds for reducing carbon emissions could be a possibility.

Bonnie Anderson adds that in talking with folks in North Westminster—people are afraid to walk and ride bikes as it is too dangerous with the roads in their current condition. Residents in Westminster and Rockingham would like to have better access to safe places to ride bikes. Residents are reporting not being able to ride on roads—bike trails only. The economic boost to communities that have good Walk Bike trails is well documented. People want to feel safe when walking and biking.

Bari asks Planning Commission members if they are ready to vote on the issue.

Seroya Crouch made the motion as proposed in the Rockingham Development Office letter. Crouch motions that The Westminster Planning Commission moves to recommend to the Westminster Select Board that it authorizes the FY24 Municipal Resolution for Municipal Planning Grant with Rockingham as the lead applicant, jointly with the Town of Westminster for up to \$50,000 project and 10% match up to \$5,000. Michelle Chmelar seconds. The motion passes unanimously.

Rick Cowan indicates that when the new Westminster Town Manager is hired, the Walk Bike Committee would like to liaise with the new manager.

Stephen Major responds to Cowan's statement by indicating that perhaps as early as November 15 the new Town Manager will be hired, as a background check in process. Major clarifies that a selection has been made, and the Select Board is moving forward with necessary steps.

The next step for the Walk Bike grant application is then discussed. Fox indicates that the Walk Bike Committee needs to get on Westminster Selectboard's next agenda. Rockingham Selectboard has already passed approval. Rick Cowan indicates that the Planning Commission would need to recommend the grant to the Selectboard. The grant paperwork is due November 1, so getting on the agenda for next week would help stay on track for the grant application. Shamas states she will request that it be put on the agenda via a phone call to Ally tomorrow.

It is then clarified that the next Selectboard Meeting is Wednesday at 6:30, the 25th of October at Town Hall.

4. **ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES:** Seroya moves to approve the September 12, 2023 minutes. Michelle Chmelar seconds. The minutes are approved unanimously.

5. **UNFINISHED BUSINESS:**

A. Acceptance of Proposed Timeframe for Readoption of Old Plan:

Stephen Major questions, what are the required steps.

Bari Shamas shares timeframe as indicated in communication sent to members on October 11, 2023, included below:

Oct 27,2023	Plan update complete	Mike McConnell	Mike sends to surrounding town and the like
Nov 12, 2023	Public Hearing notice sent	Town Offices	Town Offices
Dec. 11, 2023	Public Hearing	Planning Commission	Town Hall
Dec. 13, 2023	First of three Select Board meeting on readaption of town plan	Select board	
Jan 10, 2024	second of three select board meetings	Select Board	
Feb 14	third of three select board meeting to readapt old plan	Select board	

Michelle Chmelar asks for clarification regarding the second and third meeting, and what the difference between the two meetings. Shamas shares that it is to allow for any changes/input made at meeting two to be made before meeting three.

Stephen Major then asks if this readoption means that the plan is the same as the old town plan except for updated census data. States that he is looking to clarify as he has a concern that this proforma state mandated process not take too much time at the Selectboard meeting. Major continues that he does not want work on the new town plan to not happen during this timeframe for readoption of the old town plan.

Bari Shamas responds that the ability to work on the new town plan during the readoption of the old town plan process remains to be seen; currently there are not enough members to maintain the planning commission, there is a need to find more members to complete all the necessary work.

Seroya Crouch and Michelle Chmelar indicate that following this timeline is what is necessary to stay in compliance.

Michelle moves to adopt the timeline as developed by Bari Shamas and Mike McConnell to readopt the old plan. Seroya Crouch seconds. The motion passes unanimously.

B. Going Forward with Creation of New Town Plan:

Seroya Crouch informs the Planning Committee of the need to resign from the Planning Commission as of the day before the next PC meeting to allow for finding another member, so that PC could get another member and hold the next meeting.

Stephen Major states that as an appointed member from Selectboard he can vote due to absenteeism—he can create a quorum per information he obtained from Katrina Hamilton. Stephen Major volunteers to be a member of the Planning Commission.

It is questioned if sitting members of the Selectboard are able to sit on the Planning Commission. Michelle Chmelar indicates, let's look into it and then go from there. Bari Shamas states that the VLCT has the rules for how this can work—it would be great to look into and get the answer. Shamas continues that more members are needed to get the work done. Seroya Crouch recommends increasing to a larger group than five, to truly be able to address the completion of the work.

**6. NEW BUSINESS:** None.

**7. Other Business:**

Stephen Major brought up the lack of access in Westminster to the Connecticut River. Members state that this has been discussed in the past. Major recounts that Walpole access now is not able to be used to get to the Connecticut River for kayaking—too long of a walk for boat access now that the field has been closed off. Bari Shamas indicates it could be discussed in the future for the Recreation Section.

Bari Shamas thanks Seroya Crouch for her service and the dedication and hard work she put into the Agriculture section.

**8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING:** November 12, 2023 @ 6:30pm via Zoom

**9. ADJOURNMENT:** Michelle Chmelar moves to end the meeting. Seroya Crouch seconds. Bari Shamas calls to end the meeting at 7:40pm.

---

Signature of Clerk

---

Date

Prepared by: Janice Leary-Jones, Recording Secretary