

**VILLAGE OF ESSEX JUNCTION
PLANNING COMMISSION
MINUTES OF MEETING
November 7, 2013**

- MEMBERS PRESENT:** Diane Clemens, John Alden, Aaron Martin, Nick Meyer, Amber Thibeault, David Nistico. (Andrew Boutin was absent.)
- ADMINISTRATION:** Robin Pierce, Development Director.
- OTHERS PRESENT:** Onan Whitcomb, Polly McEwing, Paula DeMichaels, Frank Naef, Jeff Goodrich, Maura Collins, Mary Jo Engels, Tim Kemerer, Regina Mahony.
- AGENDA:**
1. Call to Order
 2. Audience for Visitors
 3. Additions/Amendments to the Agenda
 4. Minutes
 5. Work Session – Discussion of Comprehensive Plan Update
 6. Other Planning Commission Items
 7. Adjournment
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1. CALL TO ORDER

Diane Clemens called the meeting to order at 6 PM.

2. AUDIENCE FOR VISITORS

Jeff Goodrich

Jeff Goodrich, resident, asked about input from the Planning Commission on the proposed multi-purpose path parallel to the railroad tracks from Central Street to Grove Street. Robin Pierce explained the Village Trustees approved the design of the path. There is a contract with the consultant for the project. The Planning Commission provides input to the Trustees when requested. There were four meetings with the Trustees on the project - two with the application for grants, one with the UVM engineering students for their presentation, and one for the RFQ and to sign the contract. Mr. Goodrich said he was not notified of the meetings even though his property abuts the project area. Robin Pierce will confirm meeting notices were sent out.

Frank Naef

Frank Naef, Park Terrace, asked if the Planning Commission has authority over the noise regulations in the central business district, noting that the noise volume level allowed is only slightly above the noise volume being generated from On Tap. Diane Clemens stated the Planning Commission is involved in drafting the noise ordinance or amendments. Chairwoman Clemens suggested contacting staff to be included on a future agenda to discuss the issue.

3. ADDITIONS/AMENDMENTS TO THE AGENDA

There were no changes to the agenda.

4. MINUTES*September 19, 2013*

MOTION by John Alden, SECOND by Nick Meyer, to accept the 9/19/13 minutes as written. VOTING: unanimous (6-0); motion carried.

October 3, 2013

MOTION by John Alden, SECOND by Amber Thibeault, to accept the 10/3/13 minutes as written. VOTING: all ayes except one abstention (Nick Meyer); motion carried.

5. WORK SESSION – Discussion of Comprehensive Plan Update**AGRICULTURE**

Onan Whitcomb, Whitcomb Farm, noted the following relative to the Whitcomb Farm in Essex Junction:

- Whitcomb Farm has been a viable working farm for the past 150 years and continues to be a profitable operation. The majority of the farm is dairy, but what is profitable today may not be tomorrow so there are other activities on the farm, such as pumpkin growing/sales, corn maze, and school tours. Whitcomb Farm has been nominated “Ag Educators of the Year” in the past and hosts up to 50 field trips each spring and fall. The farm also allows area residents to have access to the property to walk their dogs and such
- The farm is profitable and the family is committed to farming. The next generation is continuing the farm operation.
- The farm has 250 acres in the village and 300 acres in Williston (total of 550 acres). There is prime ag soil on the farm. The land in the village produces feed crops for the cows. The farm has its own water and sewer system (i.e. not on municipal service).
- Whitcomb Farm is a small operation compared to the vast majority of agricultural operations. The majority of the milk in the country is produced on less than 5% of dairy farms with over 5,000 head of milking cows. Large parcels of land are needed to have an operating farm and if this is not available then agriculture will move elsewhere.
- Whitcomb Farm is working with Vermont Land Trust and has a 15 acre, 2.2. Megawatts solar project on a portion of the farm. The solar project uses the sun and soil, much like farming. The panels are mounted on posts so the soil is not stripped. The farm has a 20 year commitment to the project which is a fairly short time period for agriculture.
- The farm applies sludge from the waste water treatment plant in the village.
- Agriculture changes and changes rapidly. Government’s functions do not change fast enough. The farm uses robotic milkers which have been around for 20 years, but the Federal Government still has a conditional use on the permit on health codes.

Tim Kemerer, resident, urged including support for the solar farm or other forms of ‘green’ energy in the village plan. Greater lot coverage with solar panels as part of a development could be offered as an incentive. Roof top panels could be encouraged. The

language in the village plan should be strong to say what should be done as opposed to what should be considered to be done.

Nick Meyer asked about sludge application and restrictions on growing crops for human consumption. Onan Whitcomb explained Class A sludge which is produced by the treatment plant in South Burlington has no restrictions. The treatment plant in the village is working toward Class A level sludge. The sludge that is land applied is from the village plant. There are test wells on the farm. Application is done in the spring and fall and the fields are specified. The farm has a nutrient management plan for all the fields. Nick Meyer asked about the opportunity for community gardens on the farm. Onan Whitcomb noted most of the residents in the village can make a garden in their own yard by simply reducing the amount of lawn. The land on the farm has the potential to feed the village, and in fact, 100 years ago the soldiers and horses at Fort Ethan Allen were feed from potato, corn, and hay crops from the farm.

HOUSING

Maura Collins, VHFA, gave an overview of housing and other demographics in the village and county, noting the following:

- Essex Junction is growing at a higher rate than the county (1.4% annually versus .9% annually for the county).
- Home owner rate in the village is higher than in the county. Village housing is in line with the rest of the county. Burlington and Winooski have more rentals than Essex Junction.
- There was a depression in the marketplace and lenders were not providing financing, but now there is a building boom.
- Multifamily housing in the village is 35% versus 31% in the county.
- To have perfect integration of minority households to white households in the county 400 residents would have to move out of Burlington, Winooski would lose residents, and Essex would gain residents, but there is a long way to go for equal access to housing opportunity across the county. Essex Junction saw a 14% increase in households over a decade and of that number 21% of the households were headed by a person of color. Five percent of the population in the village is persons of color. The age group of 15-65 year olds is the largest group. Essex Junction is in line with the county.
- Spending over 30% of income toward housing is a moderate cost burden. Spending over 50% is a severe cost burden. Moderate to severe cost burden typically occurs with lower education, health, and income levels. Essex Junction and Essex Town are in line with the county on cost burden. The median priced house in the village \$260,000. The median priced house in the county is \$250,000. In Essex Junction 47% of residents are spending less than 30% of income toward housing, 36% are paying between 30%-50%, and 17% are paying over 50%.
- Affordable housing includes:
 - Project based subsidized housing (income qualified and pay a reduced rent; rent does not adjust to income) – Monarch Apartments, Whitcomb

Woods Senior Housing, and Whitcomb Terrace are examples of subsidized housing.

- Tenant based voucher housing (Section 8 housing; rental assistance voucher goes with the household and the voucher adjusts to income).
- Low rent apartments (\$600/month for one bedroom apartment; quality of the apartment may be a consideration)
- Essex Junction is in line with the county with subsidized rental stock (19% versus 21% countywide). In the county there are 3,700 project based rental subsidized properties, 600 households in those units with a voucher, 1,400 households with a Section 8 voucher, and 8,500 rentals with no assistance.
- There are 1,700 affordable units for the elderly and 1,800 low income elderly renters so there is a gap of 100 to be met. There are 2,500 assisted units nonelderly housing and 5,800 low income nonelderly households so there is a gap of 3,000 nonage restricted units to be met. People are moving into elderly housing complexes later with much greater needs. Affordable assisted living units with services for the elderly are needed.
- The top 10 occupations in the county cover 25% of the workforce. Retail is the largest occupation group and the average wage is \$10/hr. Cashier is next with a wage averaging less than \$10/hr. Registered nurse is the next largest occupation group with an average wage of \$30/hr. To afford a two bedroom apartment a full time job with a wage of \$21/hour is needed. Greater than 50% of households have only one wage earner. For growth to occur in smaller lower income renter households then more than 200 rental homes per year will be needed to meet demand. Increasing rental housing does not necessarily mean new construction. Adaptive reuse of buildings can create rental housing (renovation, conversion, home sharing).

Maura Collins advised how municipalities can encourage housing to address housing needs, highlighting the following:

- The village plan must reflect the vision of the village with regard to housing and include supporting data to demonstrate what is needed/wanted for housing in the community.
- Identify land suitable for development and contact key landowners.
- Help the community visualize density by showing what is possible with well-designed housing developments.
- Key into regional planning and what other towns are doing/planning for housing.
- Be streamlined and predictable for the type of housing wanted (i.e. affordable housing).
- Apply for funding for affordable housing (Vermont Community Development Program funds where the community receives the payments and can use the money as a revolving loan for financing of further development).
- Employ transfer of development rights if appropriate.
- Be aware of the impact on cost when asking developers to provide more detailed plans early in the process.
- Make the application process as easy as possible.
- Establish a housing commission to focus on housing issues in the community.

- Stick by the density as stated in the plan. Research what the density has been in the past and why and compare that to what is written in the plan.
- Provide bonuses (density, lot coverage, height, and such) for affordable housing.
- Have targets in the plan for housing and affordable housing.
- Be aware of infrastructure, permitting, impact fees adding to the housing costs. Offer waivers.
- Be flexible with parking requirements (offer waiver, shared use parking, and such).
- Have a rule that a unit must be created for every unit destroyed.
- Establish housing codes for rental units and enforce the code. Do inspections.
- Have “on the record” review to save time and money.
- Support affordable home ownership via Champlain Housing Trust and Vermont Community Development Program for this type of housing.
- Pursue ‘downtown designation’ to provide incentives for development and housing in growth centers.
- Have inclusionary zoning that specifies a percentage of housing must be affordable.
- Establish a housing trust fund to support the types of housing wanted by the village.

Nick Meyer asked if congregate housing with a single type of unit (i.e. all one bedroom) is more desirable than units with a mix of the number of bedrooms. Maura Collins suggested looking at the surrounding development to see what fits in the area. Robin Pierce noted each housing unit must have a kitchen and bathroom so it is more cost effective to build two bedroom units than one bedroom units.

Tim Kemerer asked how the target number of affordable units as the fair share for village can be determined. Maura Collins stated in addition to the number of existing units, location and job base are also considerations. John Alden noted there are unbuilt, but permitted units (not built yet due to the slow economy) so the need did not go away.

Jeff Goodrich acknowledged demographics in the village are changing, but noted developers continue to develop and the village seems to be approving projects by the same developers. A more diverse mix of developers and growth in the village would be good. Mr. Goodrich also pointed out that the more referencing of the village to Burlington, the more the village will become Burlington. There does not seem to be reference to the communities to the south and west where single family development is occurring. The village is an island due to the geography and political borders, but there does not seem to be comparison to the neighboring communities to the south and west like there is to Burlington. John Alden stressed what is needed is a vision of what the village wants to be and a clear translation from the village plan to the land development code.

There was discussion of building affordable age restricted housing versus affordable housing without age restriction and having “wraparound services” which bumps the units out of the affordable or age related category. There was also mention of having less

demand and empty units. There was also discussion of including amenities such as trees, recreation facilities, and such with affordable or age related units. Maura Collins stated tradeoffs are made throughout the decision process.

LAND USE

The Planning Commission will forward comments on the Agriculture, Housing and Land Use chapters of the plan to staff.

Regina Mahony, PC, reviewed revisions to Chapter III – Community Vision and Strategies, noting the six Heart & Soul values have been merged into the text. John Alden suggested adding language to the planning challenge that says the village will do its share for the region to supply affordable housing. The message needs to be consistent across the planning documents.

6. OTHER PLANNING COMMISSION ITEMS

- Train Hop is December 4, 2013 in the Lincoln Hall meeting room. The public is asked to forward pictures of their favorite building in the village or other favorite downtowns for display. Heart & Soul will be utilized for outreach. Zoning maps will be on display. The Planning Commission meeting schedule will be available.
- Rural Community Design Workshop is offering a program on urban design and landscape design in the village.
- Essex Planner, Greg Duggan, agreed to attend a work session with the Planning Commission.
- John Alden reported on the session he attended at the American Planning Association Conference regarding increasing attendance at meetings on the municipal plan.
- John Alden reported on the energy workshop he attended hosted by Regional Planning. The village is in compliance with the state energy code. There are separate residential and commercial requirements. The Department of Public Service oversees the code.
- Diane Clemens reported she attended the Essex Selectboard discussion of the Colchester Essex Network Transportation Study. At the meeting there was discussion of relocating the Suzie Wilson Road/Pearl Street U-turn to prevent traffic from backing up on Pearl Street. There was also discussion of having a bike way from Old Stage Road to Essex Way and having more connectivity throughout the town to the village.
- Tim Kemerer mentioned the need to highlight on Route 117 where the town ends and the village begins, and include in the plan the need for improvements or traffic calming on the road.

7. ADJOURNMENT

MOTION by John Alden, SECOND by Nick Meyer, to adjourn the meeting.

VOTING: unanimous (6-0); motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:58 PM.