

AMHERST PLANNING BOARD
Wednesday, January 3, 2018, 7:00 PM
Town Room, Town Hall
MINUTES

PRESENT: Stephen Schreiber, Chair, Maria Chao, Robert Crowner, Michael Birtwistle, Jack Jemsek, Christine Gray-Mullen and Greg Stutsman

ABSENT: Pari Riahi

STAFF: Christine Brestrup, Planning Director
Steven McCarthy, Administrative Assistant

Mr. Schreiber opened the meeting at 7:02 PM.

I. MINUTES – October 18, 2017

Mr. Birtwistle MOVED to approve the minutes of October 18th. Mr. Crowner seconded, with a minor amendment to Page 5, regarding a crosswalk at a proposed development on University Drive. The vote was 5-0-2 (Stutsman, Jemsek abstaining).

II. PLANNING & ZONING

A. ZSC Report

Mr. Crowner noted that the ZSC meeting had been quite busy that night; they talked extensively about housing and zoning issues. The ZSC has developed a list of potential zoning amendments that the Planning Board may want to submit to Town Meeting; they whittled the list down to four or five items that seem to be higher priority. Those items are townhouses, form-based code, 40R developments, condos, and residential infill with waiver for some dimensions. There is unlikely to be any action on these items for Spring Town Meeting. The most enthusiasm and potential seemed to come from pursuing 40R developments in conjunction with form-based design standards that might allow townhouses and condos in the area around the town center, including parts of the B-G, R-G, and B-L zones. Chapter 40R allows denser development by right than the underlying zoning, in conjunction with affordable housing production. 40R developments are usually pursued with the help of a consultant to identify potential development areas and to help with the state application process. The ZSC is still in the early stages of considering that option. They would also like to look into possibly allowing supplemental dwelling units to be a bit bigger, or possibly changing their permitting process. The overall aim is to address housing issues to meet demand.

Staff advised there may be some changes needed for the recreational marijuana bylaw. Staff is also working on revising the sign bylaw and the demolition delay bylaw. The ZSC hopes that some of these amendments will be ready for spring.

Mr. Birtwistle asked why the supplemental dwelling unit square footage change could not be submitted to Spring Town Meeting, as it is a minor tweak of a figure. Mr. Crowner said it could be done, and reminded the Board that the current figure is 800 sq. ft. maximum for a detached dwelling unit and 900 sq. ft. maximum if the unit is fully accessible.

Mr. Stutsman noted that the Governor's current proposal (Housing Choice Initiative) is to allow supplemental units by right up to 900 sq. ft. The concern expressed at the ZSC

meeting was that the size in our Bylaw (800 to 900 sq. ft.) was too small for empty-nesters and elderly parents.

Ms. Chao noted that 800 sq. ft. seems so small that it would always end up as a rental unit; it is ample for a rental, but would seem small for a long-term resident (like elderly parents).

Mr. Birtwistle said he saw it as a supply and demand problem; there is a demand for larger units; why not supply them?

Mr. Schreiber reported on a design competition for small houses in Northampton, in which the units are proposed as follows:

One bedroom – 800 square feet

Two bedroom – 900 square feet

Three bedroom – 1000 square feet

Mr. Schreiber said that supplemental units could be very useful for people who inherit homes, but do not have the need for the space of a big house; they could stay in a supplementary dwelling unit and keep the big house while renting it.

B. Downtown/Town Center Community Forum

Mr. Crowner noted that the Board had received a lot of feedback concerning the form in which the downtown seems to be developing. There is a lot of demand for housing and commercial space. Figuring out how to resolve this need had been a hope for the forum, but there did not seem to be a consensus or much agreement among attendees. The Steering Committee has decided to pull back from offering a third forum at this time. It is hard to see how it would help going forward.

Ms. Brestrup said that the next step is to put the materials from the forum online, and all the sheets from the forum will be typed up by Mr. McCarthy and added to the website.

Mr. Birtwistle said that if there was not to be another forum, it is important to note that there seemed to be an overwhelming sentiment against large-scale developments of the type like Kendrick Place. To say it is just about housing or just economic development is to somewhat miss the point; the point is that the feel of downtown is changing, and what do we want it to look like? People want commercial development, but they also want the small-town feel, local ownership, walkability, historic preservation, etc. It is important to keep this in mind in planning decisions. We can't go back in time, but we can exercise restraint in encouraging development. It certainly involves holding the line on existing regulations, and not increasing allowed height, stories, etc. The Board should be cautious about accepting input from people who were not there and did not participate. The Board should pay close attention to the people who were there and who were very vocal about what they wanted.

Ms. Gray Mullen said that there was a group of people, working as a group, who were very vocal against those two buildings. Others who had different opinions felt intimidated about speaking up at the forum, she said. Lots of people said they want to preserve our downtown feel, but they also want to live there, and many people expressed a desire to downsize and have a townhouse, condo, etc. in the downtown.

Mr. Schreiber also noted that there were many people who could not be at the forum because they cannot live in Amherst, because they cannot afford to live here.

He also noted that there was a website, possibly connected to the charter issue, where they identified the Cook Block – 4 stories high – as what people want in downtown. However, the Cook Block was the 1 East Pleasant Street of its time, very big and jarring compared to the surroundings.

Ms. Brestrup noted there were a lot of complaints about form and design of the buildings, so there may be an opportunity for form-based code here, especially as more potential redevelopment happens in the northern end of downtown.

Ms. Chao said that what she had gathered from the forum was that there was a singular voice represented there, and not enough diversity of opinion. Form based code and looking at other New England towns with good examples of downtowns would be a way to move forward.

Ms. Brestrup noted the evolution of the Aspen Heights project, which while it may not be the most beautiful building, has some interesting articulation and roof design that make it seem a bit less monolithic.

Mr. Jemsek apologized for not intervening when some audience members were out of line at the forum. He saw some people filing out at that point who may have had good ideas. He said he did not understand the opposition to buildings over 2 ½ stories, since many buildings over 2 ½ stories have existed in Amherst for over a hundred years.

- C. Public Comment – none
- D. Other – none

III. OLD BUSINESS

A. Amherst Housing Market Study

Mr. Birtwistle did not feel that it was worth continuing discussion on this topic at this time since the Zoning Subcommittee is moving ahead on the housing recommendations of the Planning Board.

B. Topics not reasonably anticipated 48 hours prior to the meeting

IV. NEW BUSINESS

A. Ch. 61A Withdrawal Request – 870 Bay Road Map 27C, Parcel 56 – 1.623 acre parcel

The Planning Board was asked to determine whether the Town should exercise its right of first refusal on this small area of land, behind the farmhouse at 870 Bay Road. This parcel is being taken out of Chapter 61A protection to allow for the sale of the house on this site. The farm parcel behind will remain protected by an APR. The cost for the 1.623 acre parcel would be \$17,000. Discussion centered on whether or not the barn would have value to the farm as infrastructure, and should remain protected; it was noted there are other barns that will remain preserved.

Mr. Stutsman MOVED that the Planning Board recommend to the Select Board that the Town not exercise its right of first refusal. Ms. Gray-Mullen seconded. The vote was 7-0-0.

B. Topics not reasonably anticipated 48 hours prior to the meeting

V. FORM A (ANR) SUBDIVISION APPLICATIONS – none

VI. UPCOMING ZBA APPLICATIONS – The Spoke has submitted an application to expand into the former Sub & Pizza space.

VII. UPCOMING SPP/SPR/SUB APPLICATIONS – The Apple Brook Subdivision may come back for minor site adjustments. Logtown Road, which was a subdivision, may come before the Board to request an amendment to the Definitive Subdivision Plan to remove a reservation that was meant to provide access to the North Landfill. This access is no longer needed, according to the Superintendent of Public Works.

VIII. PLANNING BOARD COMMITTEE & LIAISON REPORTS

Pioneer Valley Planning Commission – Jack Jemsek and Christine Gray-Mullen – The most recent PVPC meeting discussed the Cannabis Control Commission’s charge and the timeline they are working with. Not much information was presented that the Board doesn’t already know.

Mr. Jemsek read the list of the PVPC’s Top Ten Resolves for 2018 including: dealing with the state rail plan, especially East-West rail to Worcester and North/South rail to New Haven; reducing greenhouse gas emissions; supporting cities and towns becoming green communities; achieving funding assistance to help towns meet water quality standards; supporting recreational marijuana implementation; the Valley Bike Share; supporting the CDBG program; the Rural Policy Advisory Commission; supporting Complete Streets; and working with the congressional delegation in Washington and the Massachusetts legislature to advance legislative initiatives at the federal and state level that can benefit Pioneer Valley communities. Ms. Gray-Mullen noted that there have been major land-acquisition problems obstructing the east/west rail project. The Planning Board did not have any comments on the Top Ten Resolves.

Community Preservation Act Committee – Pari Riahi – no report

Agricultural Commission – Stephen Schreiber – no report

Design Review Board – Michael Birtwistle – no report

Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust – Meeting next week. They will be looking at housing plans proposed for the Town, including the HPP (Housing Production Plan), and looking to articulate the Housing Trust’s own goals.

Zoning Subcommittee – Rob Crowner, Greg Stutsman and Maria Chao – already given

UTAC (University and Town of Amherst Collaborative) –no report

Downtown Parking Working Group – Christine Gray-Mullen – DPWG recommendations were going to the Select Board. There will be a meeting later this month; they are working on data from the Phase I recommendations (new machines, etc.) that were already implemented, and seeing what is needed for Phase II.

Transportation Advisory Committee – vacant – no report

IX. REPORT OF THE CHAIR – Mr. Schreiber wished all a Happy New Year, and stated he wouldn’t be able to make the next meeting.

X. REPORT OF STAFF – The Planning Department is happy to have a new Associate Planner, Maureen Pollock, who has worked in Greenfield and the PVPC. She has a Master’s degree in planning, knows GIS, and will be a big help to all. The Planning Department is finally fully staffed for the first time in a long time.

XI. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 8:20 PM.

Respectfully submitted: Approved:

Steven McCarthy
Administrative Assistant

Stephen Schreiber, Chair

DATE: _____