

AMHERST PLANNING BOARD
Wednesday, May 6, 2015 – 5:30 PM
Town Room, Town Hall
MINUTES

PRESENT: David Webber, Chair, Rob Crouner, Bruce Carson, Greg Stutsman, and Christina Calabrese, Richard Roznoy and Stephen Schreiber

ABSENT: none

STAFF: Jonathan Tucker, Planning Director
Christine Brestrup, Senior Planner
Alan Snow, Tree Warden

Mr. Webber opened the meeting at 5:30 PM.

I. MINUTES

Mr. Roznoy MOVED to approve the Minutes of April 22, 2015. Mr. Carson seconded and the vote was 5-0-2 (Calabrese and Schreiber abstained).

II. SCENIC ROADS – JOINT PUBLIC HEARING OF THE PLANNING BOARD AND THE TREE WARDEN

Scenic Road Tree Removal for Proposed Reconstruction and Upgrade of Sidewalk along Pine Street between North Pleasant St and Sand Hill Rd:

Public Shade Trees impacted by this project include the following trees (Sizes indicate “diameter at breast height” – DBH):

- 80 Pine Street – 20” Silver Maple
- 84 Pine Street – 16” Sugar Maple and hedge row of Blue Spruce
- 180 Pine Street – 30” Silver Maple
- 208 Pine Street – Two Crabapples
- 299 Pine Street – Two 24” White Pine
- 319 Pine Street – 16” Spruce
- 329 Pine Street – 30” and 22” White Oak

Mr. Webber read the preamble and opened the public hearing.

Mr. Snow presented the application. The town is in the final stages of construction of Pine Street, including the extension and improvements to the sidewalk. The Public Shade Tree Committee and the Tree Warden walked the site before the project began and determined a list of trees that should be saved. The Department of Public Works has worked with the list to guide the design. There was a Scenic Roads hearing last fall to remove two Norway Maples for road widening. The Tree Committee had held a meeting in March about the trees currently being proposed for removal.

Nonny Burack of the Public Shade Tree Committee reported that the Committee had voted to save as many trees as possible.

Mr. Snow described some of the situations that cause the trees to need to be removed. He stated that the hedge row of Blue Spruce can be saved for now, but over time the hedge row will need to be removed. They have been growing on town property for the last 20 years.

Mr. Snow stated that the crab apples need to be removed to make room for the crosswalk. He noted that the large double leader pine and two oaks at 299 and 329 Pine will also need to be removed.

Ms. Brestrup stated that the Board had made a site visit and that there was a Site Visit Report that described almost verbatim what Mr. Snow had said about the trees on the site visit that are proposed for removal.

Mr. Crowner stated that the decision to remove the trees was difficult. Sidewalks are very important. It is hard to get from one side of North Amherst to the other on foot. But there is a reason that this is a scenic road. Mr. Crowner expressed disappointment that the Public Shade Tree Committee didn't have specific recommendations on trees that they would like to save. Mr. Crowner noted that the trees at 84 Pine Street, 180 Pine Street, 229 Pine Street and 329 Pine Street were particular contributors to the scenic nature of the road. Removal of these trees would result in big gaps. Cutting all of the trees proposed to be removed would change the character of the street. Mr. Crowner expressed concern about the loss of character and expressed ambivalence about the project, noting that both the sidewalk and the trees were important.

Mr. Carson asked what would happen if some of these trees were not removed.

Mr. Snow stated that the sidewalk could be built around the trees, but eventually this would kill the trees.

Ms. Calabrese stated that based on the condition, position and health of the trees and the fact that some were planted improperly and some were pruned improperly, the situation will get worse. The town has an ability over the long term to plant new trees and this makes more sense.

Ms. Calabrese stated that cars move fast along Pine Street. It is dangerous to walk on Pine Street without a sidewalk. The benefits of a sidewalk outweigh the cons, she said. Some of the trees were planted on public property by private owners.

Mr. Carson stated that he was concerned about the time that would be spent by renegotiating with property owners. This project has been a long time in coming. Pine Street is a dangerous road and a sidewalk is really needed.

Mr. Roznoy agreed with the comments of Ms. Calabrese and Mr. Carson. He also expressed concern about the design of the crosswalk. It should be redesigned to be wider. Mr. Roznoy noted that the grass belt had been discussed at the site visit. It is necessary to keep the grass belt between the street and the sidewalk to provide a buffer from the road and a place to plow the snow.

Mr. Snow stated that it may be possible to save one tree, the 30" Silver Maple at 180 Pine Street. The sidewalk could be moved towards the street, eliminating the grass belt. However, the sidewalk would then need to run along that stretch of road along the curb line, from the driveway at 180 to the driveway at 188 Pine Street, without a grass belt.

Mr. Roznoy expressed support for retaining the grass belt. He also asked about conveying the Planning Board's thoughts about the crosswalk.

Ms. Brestrup stated that, although the Planning Board does not have direct jurisdiction over the town's roadways, the Board may wish to convey its concerns about the crosswalk and other issues to the Select Board and the Public Works Committee.

There was discussion about moving the sidewalk to the rear of the 30" Silver Maple. Mr. Snow stated that the excavation for the sidewalk would still affect the tree.

Nancy Higgins stated that the Public Shade Tree Committee shared Mr. Crowner's concern about the removal of the trees. She asked if the road would still qualify as a Scenic Road if the trees are removed.

Mr. Snow stated that Town Meeting had designated Pine Street as a Scenic Road and that the law still says it is a Scenic Road. He noted that some of the trees are at the end of their life span and that the town has tried very hard to preserve trees on this project.

Sheila Seaman of Leverett stated that she loves the double Pine tree at 299 Pine Street. She asked if there were any way to save those trees by rerouting the sidewalk around the trees. Mr. Snow stated that there had been discussion about preservation of trees on that side of the street. He doubted that there was a way to save the Pines.

Marcy Sala of 161 Pine Street noted that this is a complicated project. There are a lot of pre-existing factors that prevent a perfect scenario. There is increasing pedestrian and bicycle traffic on the road. It is not safe for pedestrians and bicyclists to travel on the road. It is treacherous. There is a lack of buffer between the sidewalk and the road. The question is scenery versus safety. She urged the Board to err on the side of safety. The hedges that are proposed to be removed or trimmed are there for the screening of private houses. We have a one-time opportunity to make this street safer to be navigated by pedestrians, bicyclists and drivers. She urged the Board not to sacrifice safety at the expense of other things.

Ms. Brestrup noted that the Spruce hedge that was originally proposed for removal is now proposed to be pruned. The Arborvitae hedge will be removed and replanted further back on the property.

Mr. Snow cautioned that private landowners should get permission from the town to plant on town property.

Larry Kelley asked if all of the originally proposed trees (all 10) would need to be removed.

Mr. Snow stated that the town was working to meet the needs of everyone. He may be able to come up with a "temporary fix" for the Blue Spruce hedge, by pruning it rather than removing it. He stated that the Arborvitae are not considered to be street trees.

Claude Tellier of 235 Pine Street stated that the sidewalk will be a big improvement. The speed on the road is fast. The town can plant more trees. He supported the project as proposed.

Ruth Hazzard of Pine Street agreed with the previous speakers. Pine Street is dangerous for families. Children who live on Pine Street can't walk to other destinations. The lack of sidewalks limits movement for people who live here. The addition of a sidewalk will make it a more livable neighborhood. She noted that there is an area of poor visibility for those coming out of State Street entering onto Pine Street. The Arborvitae hedge is also a block to visibility. There has been a lot of thought put into how to build the sidewalk and a lot of opportunity for the public to comment on the sidewalk. She suggested that the town consider ways to manage the speed of motorists and manage lighting along the road. She suggested installing flashing lights at the crosswalk to improve visibility, to slow the speed of vehicles and to make it safe for pedestrians to cross the road.

Nonny Burack acknowledged that construction will damage the roots of trees so the trees will need to be taken down. But, this will allow smaller trees to mature.

Ms. Brestrup explained that the Planning Board and the Tree Warden need to agree on the proposal. The Planning Board needs to vote on whether to accept the recommendation of the Tree Warden to remove the trees as proposed. Otherwise the proposed removal needs to go to the Select Board for approval.

Mr. Snow stated that his recommendation is that the listed trees should be removed.

Mr. Crowner still had reservations about the removal of the double Pine tree at 299 Pine Street.

Ms. Brestrup asked if efforts could be made to save the 30" Silver Maple between 180 and 188 Pine Street.

Mr. Schreiber expressed support for keeping the grass belt between the sidewalk and the road. This is a densely forested area where the trees will regenerate. When the sidewalk is routed around the trees it becomes difficult to travel along the sidewalk. He expressed support for the opinion of the Tree Warden. There is no way to accommodate all of people's concerns. The town is making the road safe for pedestrians. The tree canopy will repair itself with the help of the Tree Warden and nature.

Mr. Roznoy noted that he attended the site visit and was impressed by the number of trees that would be saved. The Tree Warden is trying to save as many trees as possible. It is more than trees that make the road scenic. New trees will also make it scenic.

Mr. Roznoy MOVED to close the public hearing and to accept the Tree Warden's proposal to remove the listed trees. Mr. Carson seconded. Mr. Webber agreed with many of the comments that had been made during the public hearing. He thanked the Public Shade Tree Committee and the Tree Warden for their work on this project.

Mr. Snow stated that keeping the grass belt in front of the 30" Silver Maple is important. However it may be possible to do some investigation during construction to find out where the roots are located. If there are no structural roots on the side of the excavation, maybe the tree can be saved. He will try to save the 30" Silver Maple, but if it can't be saved it will be taken down.

Mr. Webber agreed that there is a safety issue. He is always startled to see people walking in the road along Pine Street. The sidewalk will link North Amherst Village Center to Cushman. A mitigating factor in the tree removal is that people be able to see more scenic vistas. Mr. Webber amended the motion to include the investigation of whether the 30" Silver Maple at 180 and 188 Pine Street could be saved. Mr. Roznoy accepted the amendment.

The vote was 7-0-0.

Mr. Roznoy noted that the Transportation Plan had identified the need to provide a focus for the responsibility for issues related to transportation. The Select Board has jurisdiction over the roads, so they and the Public Works Committee need to be contacted about issues related to safety. The Board members discussed writing a letter to the Select Board and the Public Works Committee about their concerns about the crosswalk design and the need for lighting, especially in the vicinity of the crosswalks.

Mr. Roznoy stated that he had made a presentation of the Transportation Plan to the Select Board and that the idea of continuing the Transportation Plan Task Force in some form is supported by the Select Board and the Town Manager.

Mr. Roznoy stated that the crosswalk across Pine Street needs to be modified and designed in accordance with the Transportation Plan recommendations. In addition, lighting needs to be added at the crossing area.

Mr. Stutsman stated that when other crosswalks come up for review they should also be designed for visitability in accordance with the recommendations in the Transportation Plan.

Mr. Webber agreed that the Planning Board should send a letter. The first paragraph would recommend that the crosswalk on Pine Street meet the requirements set forth in the

Transportation Plan and the second paragraph would recommend a similar design for any crosswalks proposed for renewal. Mr. Carson stated that there was also a need for a streetlight at the crosswalk, and not the tall cobra-style type but one that is lower and shines on the crosswalk.

There was discussion about the fact that the streetlights in downtown Amherst are not shielded and shine in all directions, including in the eyes of drivers. And there was an acknowledgment that lighting along Pine Street is not good. Mr. Webber recommended that lighting be installed at the crosswalk that would light up the area of the crosswalk for the safety of pedestrians.

There was discussion about whether to ask for a flashing light at the crosswalk or low reflectors in the pavement. There was also discussion about installing a light that could be operated by a button to shine light on the crosswalk. Board members acknowledged that there were many options for lighting the crosswalk. They also noted that the location of the crosswalk is not the best in terms of visibility and that the speed of traffic is high along this stretch of road. The Board discussed asking for a lower speed limit along Pine Street. Ms. Brestrup explained that federal guidelines require a posted speed limit to be within 5 mph of the 85th percentile speed of free flowing traffic.

Mr. Webber announced that this was Ms. Calabrese's last meeting. She is moving to Montana. Ms. Calabrese thanked the Board for a great learning experience. She enjoyed her service on the Board and was sorry that it was so brief. Mr. Webber thanked Ms. Calabrese for her service.

III. ZONING

- A. Zoning Subcommittee Report – none
- B. Public Comment Period – none

IV. TOWN MEETING

- A. Zoning Amendment Issues – Mr. Tucker reported that there was a growing movement among concerned Town Meeting members to pass Article 21 and to defeat Article 22, in the hope that tax incentives alone will provide affordable housing. He also noted that there would be a motion to move Articles 21 and 22 to Monday, May 11th. There may also be a motion to consider Article 22 before Article 21. Mr. Tucker reiterated that the two articles are meant to work together. He also noted that Articles 23, 24 and 25 may come up tonight [May 6th]. He thanked Ms. Calabrese for her service on the Planning Board.
- B. Topics not reasonably anticipated 48 hours prior to the meeting – none

V. OLD BUSINESS

- A. Signing of Decisions – The Board signed the following decisions:
 - SPR2015-00012 – Trustees of Amherst College – Marsh House – 81 Lessey Street
 - SPR2015-00013 – Town of Amherst – Town Hall Parking Lot, 4 Boltwood Avenue
 - SPR2015-00014 – Town of Amherst – Puffer's Pond Conservation Area
- B. Topics not reasonably anticipated 48 hours prior to the meeting – none

VI. NEW BUSINESS

Topics not reasonably anticipated 48 hours prior to the meeting – Mr. Schreiber announced that he had artwork on display at the Burnett Gallery of the Jones Library. There would be an upcoming Art Walk on May 7th.

VII. FORM A (ANR) SUBDIVISION APPLICATIONS – none

VIII. UPCOMING ZBA APPLICATIONS – none

IX. UPCOMING SPP/SPR/SUB APPLICATIONS – none

X. PLANNING BOARD COMMITTEE & LIAISON REPORTS – none

Pioneer Valley Planning Commission – Bruce Carson

Community Preservation Act Committee – vacant

Agricultural Commission – Stephen Schreiber

Transportation Plan Task Force – Rob Crowner

Amherst Redevelopment Authority – vacant

Design Review Board – vacant

Housing and Sheltering Committee – Greg Stutsman

Town Gown Study Steering Committee – David Webber and Greg Stutsman

Master Plan Implementation Committee – vacant

Zoning Subcommittee – Rob Crowner, Bruce Carson, Greg Stutsman, Stephen Schreiber and Christina Calabrese

XI. REPORT OF THE CHAIR – none

XII. REPORT OF STAFF – none

XIII. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 6:31 PM.

Respectfully submitted: Approved:

Christine M. Brestrup
Senior Planner

David Webber, Chair

DATE: _____