

AMHERST PLANNING BOARD
Wednesday, January 6, 2016 – 7:00 PM
Town Room, Town Hall
MINUTES

PRESENT: David Webber, Chair, Stephen Schreiber, Rob Crowner, Bruce Carson, Greg Stutsman, and Christine Gray-Mullen

ABSENT: Richard Roznoy and Pari Riahi

STAFF: Christine Brestrup, Interim Planning Director

Mr. Webber opened the meeting at 7:05 PM.

I. MINUTES

Mr. Schreiber MOVED to approve the Minutes of December 16, 2015. Mr. Stutsman seconded and the vote was 6-0-0.

II. ZONING

A. Zoning Subcommittee Report

Mr. Crowner presented the ZSC report. The ZSC had thought that it had a number of zoning amendments finished, but after discussion at the ZSC meeting it was clear that there was more work to be done on some of them.

The ED zoning district requires review of projects 60 days prior to the start of construction. The Planning Board would benefit from continuing to hear about projects in the ED zoning district, but the ZSC proposes dropping the 60 day requirement and merely asking to review the plans prior to the start of construction. Board members agreed by consensus that this was a positive change.

There are several footnotes in Table 3 of Article 6 that are incorrect and unnecessary. Because Article 6 was reorganized several years ago, Footnotes “g”, “n” and “o” refer incorrectly to sections of Article 6 that are not relevant to the dimensions that they are associated with. In addition, there is no need to refer to sections of Article 6 for explanation of dimensional requirements since Table 3 is part of Article 6. The ZSC recommends deleting these three footnotes from the list of footnotes and inserting the word “RESERVED” in place of each one, rather than reorganizing the lettering of all of the footnotes, which would require changing the footnotes in the dimensional table.

The ZSC recommends separating the B-L and COM zoning districts in Table 3, but leaving the dimensions unchanged and deleting Footnote “j” because it would no longer be needed.

The ZSC recommends adding the B-L zoning district to Footnote “b”. Currently there is a requirement for a minimum lot area and additional lot area per dwelling unit in the B-L district. This makes it almost impossible to create new residential dwelling units in the B-L zoning district, because many lots are too small and there are few parcels with more than 20,000 square feet. The ZSC also recommends adding Footnote “b” to the dimensional requirement for additional lot area per family in the B-L district in Table 3, after the dimension “4,000”.

There are several areas where the B-L district exists in town including areas surrounding the B-G zoning district and along University Drive. All of the B-L districts surrounding the B-G (downtown) are in the Municipal Parking District. The ZSC is comfortable in applying Footnote “b” to each of the B-L zoning districts.

The ZSC recommends an article that would clarify which projects require Site Plan Review. It would filter out things that don't need Planning Board review and give the Building Commissioner greater discretion. The Board members mentioned generators, air conditioners, the Boy Scout shed at the Lutheran Church, and renovation of the tennis courts at the Middle School as cases that may not have needed a full Site Plan Review.

Mr. Webber noted that Site Plan Review has been useful at times to identify issues such as noise.

Mr. Crouner would like to relieve the burden on staff for producing reports on Site Plan Review applications. He stated that some projects don't need Development Application Reports or Site Visit Reports. There was general agreement that it would be good to streamline the process for some projects.

The ZSC recommends several amendments having to do with Cluster Subdivision zoning issues, which were raised by The Retreat. One is the issue of non-owner-occupied duplexes. The ZSC recommends that these only be allowed with a Special Permit. Another issue involves clarifying the extent to which dimensional modifications may be made under Footnote "k". The ZSC recommends that the dimensional modifications be limited so that they can result in no less than 80% of the original requirement. That is, if there is a requirement for 100 feet of frontage, the requirement may be modified down to 80 feet under Footnote "k". The third issue is the Yield Plan that is required as part of a Cluster Subdivision application. The ZSC is proposing a definition for the Yield Plan so that the Planning Board has some criteria with which to evaluate such a plan.

The ZSC is also working on Mixed-use Building Standards and trying to clarify the uses that are allowed in a Mixed-use Building.

Mr. Crouner reported that the ZSC process seems to be working better. It is more collaborative.

He mentioned that the ZSC had heard a presentation from a citizen about creating a new zoning district that would encompass lands that are currently protected. The ZSC concluded that this proposal is too complicated and is not a priority and they declined to pursue this proposal.

B. Public Comment Period – none

IV. NEW BUSINESS

A. Appearance – Attorney Thomas R. Reidy of Bacon and Wilson, - proposal to rezone property on University Drive - Map 13B, Parcel 33

Attorney Tom Reidy presented a proposal to rezone a parcel on University Drive. He was accompanied by Bill Fideli and Kirsten Brown of Northstar. He and his clients hope that the Planning Board will sponsor the rezoning proposal.

Mr. Reidy stated that the Master Plan, the Housing Market Study and the Housing Production Plan all support the concept that Amherst needs more housing. The property proposed for rezoning is currently zoned OP (Office Park). No residential uses are permitted in the OP zoning district. The proposal is to rezone the property from OP to B-L (Limited Business). He asserted that all the uses allowed in the OP zoning district are allowed in the B-L zoning district, in addition to residential uses. Rezoning the property would maximize the use of the property.

The property is near UMass, on a bus route and close to commercial and retail uses. It is 5.8 acres in size, but much of it is covered by wetlands. The wetlands have been delineated and the delineation is currently being reviewed by the Conservation Commission.

Northstar is proposing to construct residential townhouses on the property. They would like sponsorship of the rezoning proposal from the Planning Board.

Construction of residential townhouses would require a Special Permit from the ZBA, removal from Chapter 61A designation and review by the Conservation Commission of a Notice of Intent.

Mr. Reidy presented a concept plan of the development to the Planning Board. The concept plan showed 32 townhouse units, which is less than the density that is currently allowed in the B-L zoning district. The wetlands pose a significant limitation on the number of units that can be built.

The concept plan shows two curb cuts entering the property from University Drive.

The west side of University Drive is zoned B-L and the property directly to the north, on the east side of University Drive, is zoned B-L.

Mr. Reidy presented architectural renderings and photographs of projects that his client had built in various parts of the country and one from Durham, New Hampshire.

Mr. Crowner stated that the ZSC had discussed this proposal and thought that it was worth presenting to the full Planning Board. The ZSC was not ready to make a recommendation as to whether the Planning Board should sponsor the proposed rezoning or not.

Mr. Crowner noted that a similar proposal to rezone this property had been made a few years ago and that it failed at Town Meeting. The abutters were opposed because of drainage problems. The former Town Engineer spoke against the proposal at Town Meeting. Mr. Crowner acknowledged the issues related to drainage, but stated that the town needs housing and there is plenty of retail in the area.

Board members discussed issues that were brought up during the first attempt at rezoning, including challenges related to drainage and the concern that a project on this site may cast shadows on adjacent parcels.

Mr. Schreiber stated that he would prefer a more urban plan than the one presented.

Mr. Webber stated that UTAC and its predecessor had identified University Drive as having high potential for future development. He liked the idea of bringing a more urban/town center feel to the area.

Mr. Carson suggested that the buildings be closer to the street in order to provide more of a buffer for the neighborhood on Charles Lane.

Mr. Reidy stated that the proposed development is over 300 feet from the Charles Lane residences and over 1,000 feet from residences on Blue Hills Road.

Mr. Crowner noted that the Planning Board was independently working on changes to the B-L District and he expressed concern that the two efforts may be linked in the minds of the public. He suggested potentially postponing consideration of the B-L article.

Board members discussed giving priority to an actual project such as that being proposed for University Drive rather than a possible conceptual project.

Ms. Brestrup noted that the Board had been hearing for the past two years from Sarah la Cour and the BID as well as from John Kuhn of Kuhn Riddle about the need to change the dimensional requirements of the B-L zoning district to allow residential development to occur there. She also noted that the proposed project on University Drive does not need changes to the dimensional requirements of the B-L zoning district to allow the project to go ahead.

Mr. Reidy stated that the acreage of the parcel would allow a development of 59 dwelling units, but the wetlands would limit the number of dwelling units to 32.

Mr. Webber stated that the Board needed time to think about whether it would agree to sponsor the rezoning of the property on University Drive. He asked that the Board table a decision until the next meeting.

Mr. Reidy stated that he would encourage his clients to speak with the current Town Engineer, Jason Skeels, about the issues of concern regarding drainage.

III. OLD BUSINESS

- A.** PVPC (Pioneer Valley Planning Commission) – Top Ten Resolves for 2016 – review and comment – The Board discussed the need for train service to run through Palmer in order to provide train service between Boston and Springfield. They agreed to read the Resolves carefully and be prepared to discuss them at the next meeting. Mr. Carson was encouraged to see that the regional bike share project was moving forward.
- B.** Signing of Decisions – the Board signed the following decisions:
 - SPR2016-00005 – Simple Gifts Farm – 1089 North Pleasant Street
 - SPR2016-00006 – Grace Episcopal Church – 14 Boltwood Avenue
 - SPR2016-00007 – Harry Auerbach for Agnoli Signs – Northampton Cooperative Bank a division of Greenfield Coop Bank – 253 Triangle Street
- C.** Topics not reasonably anticipated 48 hours prior to the meeting – none

IV. NEW BUSINESS

- B.** Invitations – the Board acknowledged and read the following invitations:
 - 1. Welcome Reception for new Economic Development Director Geoffrey Kravitz – Thursday, January 7, 2016 – 3:30 to 5:00 p.m., Town Room, Town Hall
 - 2. Community Forums about Amherst’s Next Town Manager – What are the Skills, Experiences and Attributes Amherst Needs for its Next Town Manager? – Tuesday, January 19, 2016, 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 to 9:00 p.m., Town Room, Town Hall, and Wednesday, January 20, 2016, 9:00 to 11:00 a.m., Woodbury Room, Jones Library
- C.** Topics not reasonably anticipated 48 hours prior to the meeting – none

V. FORM A (ANR) SUBDIVISION APPLICATIONS – none

