

TOWN OF WESTFORD
PLANNING COMMISSION MINUTES
Minutes for September 30, 2019 Meeting
Approved on November 19, 2019

Commission/Board Members Present: Koi Boynton, Gordon Gebauer, Seth Jensen, George Lamphere and Mark Letorney.

Commission/Board Members Absent:

Also, Present Melissa Manka (Planning Coordinator), Wendy Doane, Allison Hope (7pm-8pm), Julia Andrews (7pm-8pm) and William Cleary (7pm-8pm).

The meeting began at: 6:03 p.m.

Amendments to Agenda

M. Manka requested that discussion of Kate Lalley's letter to Senator Sirotkin be added to the agenda.

Citizens to be Heard & Announcements

No citizens to be heard or announcements.

FY 19 Planning Commission Town Report

The Planning Commission briefly discussed potential Town Report topics. G. Gebauer said he would draft the Planning Commission Town Report and distribute it to Commissioners for review and approval.

FY 21 Draft Planning Commission Budget

The Planning Commission reviewed and revised the draft budget. They increased the legal notices line item to \$750 and decreased the legal and professional line item to \$150 resulting in a level funded budget.

The Commission discussed using their special project reserve and line item to repay a CWSRF loan, village revitalization projects, and grant matches.

The Planning Commission then discussed the establishment of a grant committee staffed by a paid grant writer. They agreed the grant writer should serve town boards and community groups. W. Doane described Fairfield's experience and success with their grant writing committee. She noted the committee meets once a month to discuss grant research and identify projects and the grant writer applies for grants and acts as administrator, if awarded. The Commission agreed to recommend the hiring of a paid grant writer and establishment of a grant writing committee to the Selectboard.

S. Jensen MOVED to approve the proposed FY 21 Planning Commission Budget.

G. Lamphere SECONDED the motion.

The motion PASSED: 5 – 0.

Minutes of the August 19, 2019 Meeting

G. Lamphere MOVED to approve the minutes as amended.

G. Gebauer SECONDED the motion.

The motion PASSED: 5 – 0.

Municipal Facilities & Services (Selectboard & Planning Commission)

Town Common Parking & Paving

Julia Andrews requested that prior to starting any further discussion, that the request to extend parking on the common be talked about. The Selectboard meeting on 9/26 discussed this. Allison clarified that the board had a couple of questions regarding the pavement part of the request. It would be free of charge now, but what about later maintenance issues it might cause? Those would come at a cost. With all the events on the Common this summer, the Common Committee noticed that there was a need to expand parking greatly. The Common Committee was hoping to extend the north parking to the 1st telephone pole. The new parking would accommodate about 7 or 8 spaces and would be tilted towards the road for drainage, to keep water away from the top of the common. Jeff Hutchins had offered to pave this area since it would be in front of his store.

Allison explained that all of the Selectboard's concerns related to paving. Melissa talked with John Roberts briefly and there did seem to be some benefit to paving due to the amount of gravel on that corner. Allison reiterated that just because it is free it doesn't mean they have to say yes. Koi Boyton had concerns that it would be a large, new and reoccurring expense. Seth also had concerns that when the town did implement new wastewater in the village, they would be digging up asphalt and not gravel in that area. George Lamphere thought that a good compromise here would to say yes to the road improvements and parking, but no to the paving.

Community Wastewater System

The Planning Commission have been working on a public septic system in the village for about 10 years. To figure out what to do, they have done testing in town on various public properties to find suitable land for a system. During the first study done, the only suitable land was behind the White Church, which was also only good for a mound system. Then the Jackson Property was purchased. There is a 7-acre parcel on the Jackson Property that would be suitable for an inground system. It would be around 2 million to install that. Lots of the research work is already done, including what equipment would be needed.

To make Westford eligible for funding we'd need to complete some next steps soon, such as research into what the user fees would be. Westford is eligible for a planning grant from the state that would have 50% forgiveness. In Gordon's research it would take around \$38,000 to get to the next step, but he would prefer to bump this number to \$50,000 to be safe. This means that the state would reimburse \$25,000. The payback term for this grant is 20 years. The Planning Commission would like to move forward because the project will not go anywhere without the information. They would use the Planning Commission's special project fund which is currently at \$5,600 carried over from previous years with an additional \$8,000 from this year's budget. Once they get the information, they can use it to go after other funding sources such as grants, loans and bonds. The goal is to find as much funding as possible without using taxpayer dollars. George thought it was worth noting that regardless of the price of the project, the Planning Commission

realizes that the project would be a no go if it relied on taxpayer dollars, which is why grants and securing funding are so important. Gordon said that the goal is that 75% of the money would come from grants. Julia thought that the project would be a tough sell to residents no matter what and thought that a communication strategy for the project would be helpful. Melissa explained that they had been talking with both the White Church on the Common and the Brick Meeting House, both organizations are supportive of the project.

Allison asked if the Planning Commission had a feel for the operating costs of a wastewater system. Seth explained that operation would be around \$18,000 a year on the high end, paid by the users. The cost would cover yearly inspections and regular maintenance. The operating costs did not include potential emergency maintenance, there was also \$1,000 put aside for miscellaneous repairs. The next study wouldn't just be environmental and engineering, but it would also look at septic ordinances etc. Seth explained that the additional \$1,000 covered billing etc. Bill had faith that the planning commission had done the research and knew the information, his concern is the user fees. If people don't want to use the system, then the funds to use would be very high. Seth explained that this was part of the study to be done, they want to see who would want to use it now and for future use on lots. All is speculative until we get the numbers.

George explained that a wastewater system is Westford's future. With a wastewater system it benefits the new store, and makes properties, such as the Pigeon Property, more valuable and usable to develop. George also mentioned that we don't yet know how Brookside Road will develop, this isn't about now, this is about the long-term picture for Westford. The current private systems in the village will not last forever. The Planning Commission does know that there is ledge in the way of this project which is why the White Church area doesn't work for the capacity needed, they have not dug in yet, but are anticipating a lot of ledge. The in-ground system uses a smaller pipe which is easier to drill. The nice thing about the Jackson property is that it would be a conventional system. Gordon asked the Selectboard if they had any thoughts on the Planning Commission spending money to begin the next steps. He reminded them that the cost is spread out over 20 years. The town needs to find out if this project will work. The Special Projects fund is taxpayer money, but Allison has no problem spending for next steps. Julia was also in support.

1705 Route 128 Property

The Pigeon Property next to the town office is now up for sale. The Planning Commission has been talking to the owner, George Pigeon. They view this property as having huge potential for Westford and the development of the town center. Mark has assisted in connecting George Pigeon to the CCRPC for their brownfields study project. They did a Phase 1 testing on the Pigeon property, which is important since it used to house automobiles, they are now waiting on Phase 2.

Bill asked if they could currently go to Phase 2. Mark explained that the Phase 1 testing showed a small mystery tank under the property. George Pigeon is happy to dig it up and is planning in doing so soon, but things look promising at the property. Bill was curious if there was any contamination. There is not anything obvious yet, but further testing is needed. Seth explained that anytime there is a post-automobile property a Phase 2 Soil Clean Up is needed. The Planning Commission and George Pigeon have been working with a contractor for CCRPC and the funds are coming from the CCRPC. For Phase 2 the funds do need to be discussed. The town and

Planning Commission would not have to pay for Phase 2, that would fall on the CCRPC and George Pigeon.

The Planning Commission are interested in working with the Selectboard in being involved in the development of the parcel. This would include from buying the property to getting concessions from the buyer, such as forming a non-profit to buy the property. They want to give George Pigeon an alternative to selling to a private citizen and so far, he has been receptive. The non-profit role is important. There are big barriers in brownfield and wastewater. The Brownfields for non profit would be able to get grants vs. the loans that a private citizen would have to get. It opens up doors to make the project lower costs. What's important is that there are also things the private sector does better such as permitting and a partnership, such as a non-profit, that does both allows for a lot of potential. The Planning Commission has been doing a lot of work on the new town plan. In their minds, the common doesn't look like a Jolly or a Dollar General. They envision multi-use buildings for both community and residential use. They feel this would greatly benefit the community. This would also help address the fact that the town office needs more space. A new or expanded town office could be built.

Mark thought that it would be nice for the Selectboard and Planning Commission to share a vision. The common has no density limit, so the potential is huge. A town office that provides income for the town such as a mixed-use building would offset expenses for the building. To move forward the Planning Commission would want to put together a steering committee to see how the town wants to be involved, if at all. George Pigeon is very interested in creating a memorial building for his parents, who were the long-term owners of the property, and has given the Planning Commission first option. So, if the town is not interested, we need to tell him because he has other people interested in the parcel. As a town we need to visualize the best use of the property.

This strip, with the Library and Town office, has the potential to be a main street for Westford. Whatever role the town ends up having in the development of the Pigeon Property, the planning of how everything fits and works together will be important. Allison stated that she can get behind a steering committee concept. The Spiller lot was an interesting, but not successful exercise. She thinks the kind of partnership a steering committee could have with George Pigeon could make something come to fruition on the property. Allison feels very comfortable with this. Mark stated that there is a lot of potential to recover the money spent and provide much needed income for the town, he thinks it's a very important project. At the VCRD Community Visit Meeting there was the suggestion of doing a study to see what sort of businesses and uses of buildings could survive long term on the Common.

The best way to describe the cost of the Pigeon property would be a range. A lot depends on the brownfield study and which buyer buys the property. If the town reached out with a reasonable budget, George would be receptive, especially since he really wants it to be a memorial building. Allison was curious of a ballpark number; Mark does not expect to buy it for less than 500,000 or 600,000. Bill thinks this is a lot to get by voters before anything can even begin. Mark suggested that if the town was to purchase, they would present a development plan to the voters. Taking a step back, brownfields clean up funds are loan based; bond based. It's important to have wastewater if this development project goes forward. There are conversations that need to happen concurrently.

Melissa thinks that first the Planning Commission should talk to George Pigeon and see if he is willing to wait until a committee can be formed. Bill was curious that if George did end up selling to a private buyer if the town would end up with a business or building use that they don't want. Mark explained that this was not necessarily true, but George Lamphere elaborated that it's a valid concern. There are Dollar Generals going up in all the towns surrounding Westford. Melissa reminded everybody that Westford has Form-Based Code that would at least protect the village look aesthetically. The overall concern is that the property would not be used to full potential if bought by private sector buyer. This sort of project would really allow Westford to push the boundaries on how nice and aesthetically pleasing buildings on the Common can look all while benefiting residents to its full potential.

The Planning Commission would like to move forward and wonders if the Selectboard is looking to them. Allison replied that the board is, but also feels like the Selectboard should have a representative present on the committee. George Lamphere warned that he has the feeling that if they went to George Pigeon and asked for 6 months he would be unwilling. Julia thinks that it all relates back to the future of the town. The Planning Commission decided that Mark Letorney would continue to be the point of contact for discussion with George Pigeon. The Planning Commission will put a Steering Committee together if George is willing to wait. It is all very dependent on the time he gives them. It should be individuals hand-picked by the Planning Commission.

Town Grant Writer

The Planning Commission had been discussing hiring a grant writer. Wendy Doane had a lot of information on Fairfield and how much they have acquired by hiring a grant writer. The Fairfield Community Center came and talked with the White Church. The Community Center is a municipal non-profit Grant Writing Committee. The Committee takes request from organizations in town and looks what is out there for grants. A grant writer for them in 2016 was paid \$4,700 and they got back 1.5 million in grants. Julia thinks that the hiring of a grant writing would align with a lot of the items talked about at the VCRD meeting. Bill thinks it is just easier to budget for a grant writer if we know how much we'd get in return, but unfortunately it would be an unknown. Koi explained that statistically you usually get 1 grant for every 7 you apply to. Julia thinks that once the town has a handle on the future of the town center, the hiring of a grant writer will become very important to help prioritize not just one property but the town as a whole. George thinks that if we are not ready to hire a grant writer, we could hire one on a contracting basis to see how it would work. Allison thinks that the Town Org Chart needs to be redone prior to hiring anybody new. There's been a lot of discussion lately that the community cannot keep running on volunteerism alone. They need paid employees that feel valued. Allison agreed that a contracted position is easier to accept. She is not a huge fan of having town employees attached to boards and committees since that is not really working well for the Recreation Coordinator. There needs to be more accountability.

Additional Information

The Planning Commission warned that they will be sending a memo asking the Selectboard to make the Road Committee full-time. Based on the VCRD meeting it would not surprise them if VCRD suggests a full-time event coordinator because that was a large aspect of the meeting. In Julia's opinion we have technology available to us that can self-serve that position. The town

might need to put some money aside to make improvements to the town website, potentially with a moderated event calendar. The Planning Commission thinks it would be good to meet with the Selectboard at least twice a year, these discussions between the two groups very valuable.

2020 Town Plan – CCRPC Inquiry re: Healthy Communities Language

The Planning Commission had a lengthy discussion as to whether healthy community language similar to Jericho’s draft language should be included in the Town Plan. The Commission believes the existing plan already includes many of the goals, objectives and strategies the state is seeking. The Commission was reluctant to add and/or tweak the plan in a way that would have the town be marshals over people’s personal habits. However, they welcomed the State’s review of the existing town plan and a summarization of the elements they believe the plan is lacking. They agreed they would like to focus on healthy community design and accessibility to which the municipality can act as opposed to regulating personal choices.

Draft 2019 – 2020 Work Plan & Project Updates

The Planning Commission reviewed their October 21st work plan and made minor revisions. They will review the draft 2019-2020 work plan at their next meeting.

Sirotkin Letter on Housing & infrastructure

The Planning Commission will review the letter and respond with comments and a decision on whether the Planning Commission should sign the letter.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 9:02 p.m.

Submitted by,
Melissa Manka, Westford Planning Coordinator