

SELECTBOARD MEETING
August 27, 2020
Minutes

Present: Julia Andrews Callie Hamdy
 Bill Cleary John Roberts
 Greg Barrows Nanette Rogers

Guests: See attached list

The meeting was called to order at 6:47 p.m. The meeting was held via Zoom. All attendees attended remotely.

CHANGES TO AGENDA

Under Discussion Appointment to CSWD was added, minutes were moved up to before the Community Block Grant Discussion.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

ROAD SCHEDULE

The Road Foreman, John Roberts, discussed the August 21, through August 27, 2020 Road Schedule. Bill Cleary made a motion to approve the Road Schedule, seconded by Julia Andrews. Motion passed: 2-0.

MINUTES

Bill Cleary made a motion to approve the August 20, 2020 minutes as written, seconded by Julia Andrews. Motion passed: 2-0

CHITTENDEN SOLID WASTE DISTRICT APPOINTMENT (CSWD)

Katie Frederick used to work for CSWD and was interested in being Westford's new CSWD representative. Julia knows Katie and feels it would be a good fit. Bill Cleary made a motion to appoint Katie as Westford's CSWD representative, seconded by Julia Andrews. Motion passed: 2-0.

COMMUNITY BLOCK GRANT PUBLIC HEARING

Julia opened the public hearing on the Community Block Grant. Julia explained that she understands that many people have questions about Community Wastewater and agrees that the Pigeon Property and the Wastewater project are connected, but for the time set aside in this meeting she prefers to keep discussion to the Pigeon Property and the Community Block Grant.

Vicky Ross was present to moderate the discussion. Julia took the meeting roll call and passed the presentation over to George Lamphere, Chair of the Planning Commission.

George explained that the Planning Commission is looking to get support from the community to develop the Pigeon Property. The Town is investigating how and to what degree it could be involved in the redevelopment of the property. As part of the hearing, the Planning

Commission are asking the Selectboard to sign a resolution that will allow the grant to be submitted for consideration.

Why? A lot of it stems from information that the Planning Commission has received from public surveys on what residents would like to see in and for Westford. They feel that this project would help the Town explore many of those desires. The Town has a vested interest in the property and the Planning Commission believe the grant will help them explore permanent public river access, improve parking and pedestrian safety, affordable housing ideas, expanding or replacing the town office, and economic growth for the town center. They would like to explore expanding services on the common such as moving the post office back to the town center, community wastewater, and improving soils. The Planning Commission and the Vermont River Conservancy have been partnering together to establish permanent river access which, with other partners, will allow the Town to expand on many things such as commercial development and affordable home ownership.

Taylor Newton from the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC) was present with a presentation about the Vermont Community Development Program (VCDP), Project Intent and Existing Work, Scope of Work, Budget, and Match Requirements amongst others.

The VCDP administers Community Develop Block Grants that benefits low- and moderate-income housing. The Planning Grant through VCDP is one of four different grant programs VCDP runs. The grant has a maximum limit of \$60,000 and requires a 10% local match.

The intent of the project is to do planning and predevelopment work to support public river access, public facility use, and six to eight perpetually affordable homeownership units. There has been a ton of work already on the Pigeon Property. The property is a former gas station so there is contamination on site. The property, with the Pigeon Family Trust and town support, was entered into a Community Brown Fields study to continue to monitor and delineate contamination. The CCRPC has funded these studies thus far. That work will be completed likely this fall but could go into spring 2021. This fall, through the CCRPC, they are going to have an Archaeological Resources Assessment and Historic Resources Assessment. Both are required by the application of the grant.

Taylor went over a breakdown of the Scope of Work. Amongst these items was a Commercial Appraisal which will be important to determining the site's value for commercial development and the development of a site plan to determine where buildings, parking, and pathways would go.

The budget is still a work in project because total project costs are about \$75,000. Grant funding is at \$66,730 and the budget would need to decrease to \$60,000 to get the \$7,905 match. VCDP is providing 13% match funds at \$60,000. The Town would provide \$540 in kind, CCRPC would provide \$6,365 in kind, Green Mountain Habitat \$500 in kind and others are to be determined.

In terms of the timeline, the Planning Commission want to move fast because that is the desire of the Pigeon Family Trust. They need to apply for the block grant by September 8. Notification of grants awarded will be in early December.

Taylor explained that the public hearing was required to apply for the grant and that next steps would be to have a resolution in favor of the project before September 8th. The Selectboard is going to hold a special meeting after the Public Hearing to determine their thoughts.

Vicky began by announcing the questions that were submitted. The first was from Carol Winfield who asked, *"Wow! Just read the Q & A on this from the link on FPF. First, huge thank you to whomever put that all together! Very well done. I learned a lot that I had wondered about but never got around to asking."*

One more question: what about the current house? Could it be remodeled and used for one of the desired purposes? What condition is it in? It is such a nice period home as seen from the street, and I for one would hate to see it go away. It is also a lovely reminder of two lovely people who were such a huge part of this town. Kind of a memorial to them. "

George explained there was no decision about the house because there had not yet been an assessment on the condition of the building. There has been no decision on whether to raise and move it or keep it in its current location. All choices are on the table. They will learn more as they do more studies on the project. Taylor added that a lot of the property as they envision would end up being owned by Champlain Housing Trust. If the house were to remain and be owned by them, they would need to know by Champlain Housing Trust if the building is valuable to them.

Next was from Robert Pittala who said, *"My opinion of revitalizing the town center is negative. I like a quiet town and development brings more traffic."*

Besides that, I have a few questions. In Melissa's post the other day on this subject, she mentioned in the 1800's the town was vibrant. I would like to know how many stores and professional offices there were. And what type of stores besides a general store, blacksmith and tannery were there at the same time?"

Heidi Tardie wrote into the Front Porch Forum asking about the school, and if there is a chance of the school closing and Westford buying it back for a dollar? I would like to hear more on this topic. Also, what was the cost of blasting and putting a septic system behind the white brick church?"

George responded. The town center is a nice quiet town, and that concern remains on everyone's mind. George believes that the zoning Westford has in place allows development to an appropriate degree. It is good to know that they need to be conscious about the development. The more the Town can control the more they can be part of the process. George explained that they want things that are complementary to the village from a business perspective.

Gordon Gebauer gave some background regarding septic behind the White Church. He explained that this option had been explored before the leach field on the Jackson Farm & Forest project had been determined to be a good site for wastewater. They initially thought there was capacity only in a small area behind the White Church before the Jackson Property came up for sale. If the site behind the White Church was to be connected to the town office, library, and White Church it would take up almost the entire possible capacity. If the Brick Meeting House were connected it would go above the capacity. Gordon explained the costs

and that it did not include the engineering work or pre-treatment both of which would be required. If they didn't do pre-treatment it would have a much-reduced capacity. It would be a mound system.

The Town had been working on the option behind the White Church because it was the only option available at that time, but then the Jackson property became available and it has ten times the capacity that the area behind the White Church has. He urges everybody not to look at the total costs of construction for each area, but what the Town's share of that cost is. If they use the White Church property, there is no funding options available because there are no residential or commercial businesses that would be involved or using the system. This means that 100% of the cost would fall on the Town and thus taxpayers. On the other side of things, the Jackson property allows the Town to apply for many grants, one of which has a 50% match. So, at the end of the day for the same amount of money or less that the Town would pay for a system behind the White Church, they can use that money to develop the system at the Jackson property. The cost after construction would be shared by the users and not totally on the Town.

George explained that its worth noting that they are trying their best to address many of the current comments and concerns brought up by the community in their FAQ Document on the Planning Commission page of the town website.

Vicky read a comment from Donna and Gordon Hill who said, "*Village septic should be funded by those who use it not by whole town. If mine fails the whole town would not want to pay for mine, can't blame them taxes are high enough.*"

George thinks that is fair to say and they will address things that relate to wastewater as they open public discussion to that subject. He asked residents and taxpayers to keep comments coming. The Planning Commission will learn and share more as things continue.

Vicky read questions from Barb Peck who said, "*Here are my thoughts pertaining to the Public Hearing/Selectboard/Zoom meeting 8/27/20:*

- 1) *What is the intended purpose of the Pigeon property, and does it presently have the septic capacity required on site for single purpose and/or multiple purpose uses?*
- 1) *If a sewer service is required off site, will Westford pursue the Jackson property location (as there have been engineering studies done already for wastewater/sewage plant feasibility). And if so, will this be built in stages as other municipalities usually do? For example: first satisfying municipal needs around the common (i.e. municipal buildings, whether it be the proposed Pigeon property or the current town office and library), before it continues past the houses in the town center?*
- 2) *If the Sewer line is built and passes in front of a property within the town center, will the houses be required to hook up at their own expense (even if they have a working septic system)? Then will each house pay a monthly sewer bill as other municipalities do? National averages range from a low of \$35.00/month to a high a \$150/month.*
- 3) *Who will maintain this system once built?"*

George explained it is the Town's understanding that the existing septic leach field from the Pigeon Property is the same as the town office septic leach field, both of which are under the parking lot of the town office. George doubts there is any capacity there for multipurpose and would be risky for single purpose. He thinks that the grant will help identify the septic option for single or multipurpose usage. Gordon added that a lot of it is up in the air but the vision the Planning Commission has is for mixed use, certainly involving residential and commercial, either retail or office space. It would not be one kind of development and the development partners share that view.

Mark Letorney explained that they are responding to community surveys by adding mixed use residential which will attract residents to the town center instead of traveling out of town.

Taylor explained the reason for partnering with Chittenden Housing Trust and Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity. It would be preferred that the housing included in the property would be ownership. Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity would construct the housing and the properties would be transferred to Champlain Housing Trust, who would enroll the properties in their shared equity trust. This equity trust helps low- and moderate-income people with attaining home ownership.

George explained that this is a model that the development partners have been using around Chittenden County and encourages people to go to their website to check out their other projects. They are good partners with a strong track record.

Vicky read the rest of Barb's questions which were, *4) Will the Selectboard allow a vote on whether the taxpayers in Westford want to re-develop the Pigeon property and subsequently fund or partially fund a sewage plant? I realize the Pigeon property and the sewer/wastewater project/Jackson property are technically two separate issues, but they really are closely tied together in my opinion.*"

George deferred to Julia on that question. It is his understanding that this would be required, not allowed. Julia said in the spirit of transparency she doesn't know the threshold of asking for money from taxpayers. If they were to use any taxpayer dollars it would need to go before the voters. Gordon added that as they have researched funding options, many of the options such as the grant, require public participation and many of them require a public vote. Even if the funding is 100%. The Planning Commission view is that they want the public engaged and they wouldn't move forward without public opinion and vote because they want to make sure this is something residents really want.

Vicky read Pat Haller's comment, *"I don't agree with Mr. Pittala's worry about development taking away from the quietness of our Common. The Common is bound by Route 128 and a lot of traffic flows through. I doubt any scale of development could possibly make it louder. In fact, it would be great if they slowed down and enjoyed some of the assets that might be afforded here in Westford. I think it's great to think that our common could finally have some more vitality and possibly help tax base."*

Vicky read Becky Roy's comments and questions from the chat, *"I am confused. We are talking about having a vibrant community and bringing businesses in, yet you are talking about housing. I believe you are talking about mixed use but how much space is available by the time there is business, private residence, and parking? We have heard that there is more*

need for more space for the town office, shouldn't it be considered to expand the town office into that space?"

George explained that that is a lot of the items that are driving them to look at the grant and opportunities. They look at the stretch of Route 128 from the town office to the "hotel" and how it could be subdivided and what kind of buildings and businesses could fit in there and how it would fit with the appropriate parking and private residences. That is the catalyst for looking at the grant opportunity.

Taylor mentioned that they are talking about housing because they have partners in town that do housing already, and the desire was for mixed used development. The project is about figuring out how much space they have.

There are physical constraints that complicate the amount of housing that can be put in. The priority is to housing and commercial components, both of which would be huge benefits to the town.

Andre Roy asked, "How much land does the Pigeon property contain vs the Spiller lot? Given that the leach system on the Pigeon property is only suitable for the dwelling how can we be talking about development? The development will need wastewater in place. Isn't the project tied to viable wastewater being in place?"

Mark explained that they are not looking for wastewater capacity on the Pigeon property. This development will not take place without a municipal wastewater system. No further development on the common can happen without municipal wastewater. The reason the wastewater and this development project are tied together is because the development project will benefit the wastewater system.

Andre was concerned that if the wastewater project does not go through, they would have a property they cannot use. George explained that the Town is not trying to purchase the property. The property owner and Vermont River Conservancy (VRC) are in conversation about creating river access. If that were to happen, the VRC would be interested in helping Westford obtain affordable housing while preserving river access. They would need to understand the viability of the potential project and once they have a better vision, they would then take it to the next step, but these baby steps are necessary to learn more about the property. There is little to no cost to the Town to do this. This step will get us smarter and wiser for the future.

Taylor explained that this project was about planning and predevelopment. Its important to do this work because to access future grant funds for the project you need to have these sort of plans in place.

Vicky read questions from the chat section on Zoom.

Maura O'Brien asked, "How much land is there on the Pigeon property?"

Dave Lavallee asked, "What the acreage of the property was?"

Taylor explained it is around 3.3 acres but they need a new survey to be sure. Maura then asked for a description about the land by the river. George explained that there is a steady slope that takes you down to the river and by the river there is a spectacular view of the falls.

Heidi Tardie commented, *"I am concerned about canoes and kayaks going down to the river access and where are they going to park. They added parking on the common for the store, but she doesn't want the common looking like a parking lot. What is the timing with the wastewater?"*

Gordon responded and explained that the wastewater is something the Planning Commission has been looking at for the past 12 years. It is a project that has been interrupted several times. The wastewater project and the Pigeon property have come together around the same time and looks like they will be moving towards town discussion and approval at around the same time. The controversy is that there is no development on the common, including the Pigeon property, without wastewater in place.

Heidi asked if the building on the corner of the strip on Route 128 was really a hotel back in the day? That was Gordon's understanding. Ira Allen, who owns the building and is a longtime resident was present and confirmed that it was a hotel. It was originally constructed as a hotel but has been remodeled many times and is now apartments. It at one time had a full two-level porch.

Ira commented that when talking about development of the common an image of the Five Corners in Essex Junction comes to mind and he explained his distaste for the large building on the corner in that area. He wants it used as a cautionary tale. Driving or experiencing the common you have an experience of the openness, but also you have the experience of the surrounding properties outside of the area that contribute to a unique feature of the downtown which is the openness of the common. As we move forward with development, we need to be careful to preserve that feeling.

Mark thanked Ira for his comments. It should be pointed out in the site sketch there is a 30 foot green space between Route 128 and the housing area and that space would be used for pedestrians with plantings and a sidewalk. They lined up the river access with the gazebo so there would be a continuous green space flowing from the common down to the river. The "hotel" will be around the closest thing to Route 128.

Vicky read a comment from Louise Jensen, *"I would like you to consider housing that would meet needs of young families as well as residents who are looking to downsize. It would be nice for some of the units to be one level"*.

George explained that that is one of the things they want to communicate to the housing partners, but it is also good to remind them.

Vicky opened those dialing in on phone to unmute to ask questions, there were no comments or questions.

Andre Roy was confused about the figures Gordon had regarding the wastewater program and asked for clarification on what the White Church property would cost. The 2016 estimate was \$134,000 with add ons like pre-treatment etc. not included in that cost. Estimated cost for the Jackson property septic was \$1.8 to \$2.2 million. Gordon explained that the state wants this

project to succeed. One thing they are having done is a preliminary engineering report prepared which will be finalized in the fall/winter of this year. After that is complete, the Town can apply for other funds both state and federal.

Andre asked if user fees would defer the potential bond the Town would take on for the construction? There is implied maintenance, and they wouldn't be getting user fees until there are users. George explained that this was agreed, and part of this next step is to understand what the Jackson property wastewater system would look like and then the Town can begin to go to people around the common and the other residents and explain what the engineering report has told us and what it means, how it would affect property owners, and ask if they are interested.

There are several property owners around the common that want to subdivide their property and develop it, this would help with that. Julia explained that they are only looking at planning and next steps for the grant, none of these other things go forward without voter approval so more information about the projects will be coming.

Hugh Clark asked if the Town has river access at other locations. George explained there is limited access. Mark explained there is no public river access in Westford, especially nothing that would be like the access on the Pigeon property which is easy access in an ideal location on the river itself.

Bill Cleary stated that Taylor keeps mentioning the housing aspect, when he looks at the site plan concept there are three building locations. He gets from Taylor that the commercial aspect isn't what he is focusing on. When Bill looks at the most recent town survey, a majority of people want to see economic activity in the town center. He would like economic activity in the town center and not to let the housing trust force the hand on the housing.

Mark explained that one must understand that they are in a process where they are exploring their options, this includes the potential partners which are the VRC and the Housing Trusts. One of the reasons they want to be in the position in owning the property is because they can control the subdivision of it. This would allow the municipal building control, Pigeon house and any housing developed between the Pigeon house and hotel would be mixed use with any commercial development. Right now, they are looking at four to five residential units and two commercial units. This is the Town of Westford working with the partners, there are going to be compromising on both sides. Westford's intentions are directly based on the public outreach surveys.

George wrapped up the question and answer section. The Planning Commission really appreciates the community engaging in these tough questions. The Planning Commission has been working diligently on this for some time. This is an incredibly important topic and critical to the community and they will continue to solicit feedback. The Planning Commission urged those with further questions to continue to reach out. They will continue to update their FAQ page and will be continuously updating on Front Porch Forum. The Planning Commission fees they have some momentum and have partners that have a lot of experience working with small towns like Westford. They are hoping that the Selectboard will approve their resolution to apply for the grant.

Julia thanked the PC for their work; it has been an enormous body of time, energy and thinking. She is grateful for how creative and thorough they have been. She also thanked the

community members that came out tonight to participate in engaging with the Town in this complicated conversation.

CORRESPONDENCE

There was a phone call a complaint about the volume and speed of traffic on Cambridge Road. This person has written to the Board before regarding this complaint. Nanette responded that the Town is already engaged with doing traffic studies and Cambridge Road is one of the roads being studied.

COMMUNICATION

Julia will post a thank you to the community for participating in tonight's public hearing and on Front Porch Forum.

ACCOUNTS PAYABLE & PAYROLL WARRANTS

Greg went over the accounts payable. There was discussion on the \$6,000 increase from the City of St. Albans for dispatching. Julia wondered if the Town refused to pay the large increase, if there even was another option. Greg said we could research to see if we are paying a disproportionate amount based on our size. They are invited to discuss this further at a meeting in September.

Nanette explained that 12-15 years ago, Essex Rescue served all of Town. However, especially during bad weather, response time to the northern part of town was slow. Fairfax Rescue can respond sooner due to their proximity, so the change was made. Essex Rescue is dispatched by Essex police and Westford is not charged for the dispatching but that could change. Fairfax rescue is dispatched by St. Albans. The option would be to go back to Essex Rescue servicing the whole town, but the response time issue would arise again. Julia was curious of the statistics, so we are prepared for the meeting with the City of St. Albans.

ADJOURN

The meeting adjourned at 8:47 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Julia Andrews, Chair
Selectboard

Callie Hamdy
Assistant Town Clerk

GUEST LIST

George Lamphere
Vicky Ross
Dave Lavallee
Caroline Brown
Andrea Letorney
Lynn Gauthier
Gordon Gebauer
Hugh Clark
Pat Haller
Alyssa Black
Buddy Meilleur, LCATV
Andre Roy
Mark Letorney
Becky Roy
Lori Johnson
Taylor Newton
Pat Hechmer
Martha Heath
Kim Guidry
Ira Allen
Ann Pigeon
Heidi Tardie
Maura O'Brein
Seth Jensen
John Doane
Sandra
Louise Jensen

**TOWN OF WESTFORD HIGHWAY DEPT.
ROAD SCHEDULE
August 21, 2020 – August 27, 2020**

Work to be done

- Grade roads.
- Add gravel to Old Stage Rd.
- Continue with FEMA work.
- Ditching project on Old Stage Rd.

Work completed

- Added gravel to Manley Rd. (75 loads), Pettingill Rd. (8 loads), Rogers Rd. (27 loads)
- Graded Sections of Old Stage and Pettingill Rd.
- Hauled in gravel for road surface work.
- Hauled in winter sand.

Approved at the 8/27/20 Selectboard Meeting.