

**TOWN OF WESTFORD
PLANNING COMMISSION
MINUTES FOR MARCH 18, 2024 MEETING
APPROVED ON APRIL 15, 2024**

Commissioners Present: George Lamphere, Mark Letorney, Mo Reilly, Gordon Gebauer, Seth Jensen

Commissioners Absent: *No absent commissioners.*

Also Present: Harmony Cism (Planning Assistant), Maria Barden (Minute Clerk), Ron Rodjenski (Westford Project Manager), Carol Winfield, Lori Johnson, Maureen Wilcox, Paul Birnholz, Sheila Franz, Kim Guidry, Ira Allen, Ian Gehlbach, Sue Roediger, Andrea Letorney, Erin and Basil Panattu (Westford Country Store)

Meeting Began: 6:30pm

George Lamphere discusses having the chat option only for roll call and public comment.

Amendments to Agenda: *There were no amendments to the agenda.*

Citizens to be Heard - Items not on agenda: *There were no citizens to be heard at this time.*

Minutes of the February 19, 2024 Meeting:

Mo Reilly made a motion to approve the February 19th minutes.

Mark Letorney Seconded the motion to approve the February 19th minutes.

The motion Passed 3-0.

Planning Commission Candidates:

Ian Gehlbach was present, he introduced himself to the PC and residents, he thinks it would be beneficial to have younger residents involved in the Town. He reviewed the Town Plan online. He discusses his vision for the Town, he believes Westford is one of the last “hidden gems” remaining in Chittenden County with its “rural” character. Ian discusses his background in working in the insurance field, he feels working in that industry has helped him with rules and guidelines, he feels he knows how to find and use his resources well.

Lori Johnson was present; Lori introduces herself and talks about living on the common and how she knows quite a bit about the town which she feels brings a good perspective to the PC. Lori wants to clarify that this is not an interview but just an introduction; Lori feels she can bring a new and unique perspective because of her background, she worked in logical troubleshooting and feels that helps her solve problems and produce viable alternative solutions that might be outside the box. She has read the town plan and part of zoning regulations, along with some of the other documents on the town’s website. Lori would like to refrain from answering any further questions from the PC and wait for her interview from the SB.

George Lamphere discusses that the Selectboard will be the ones conducting the interviews and they will not be bringing their opinions to the SB; the SB will be provided with our minutes from this meeting.

Paul Birnholz was present, he asks the PC if there are any plans for a new town survey and amendments to the town plan? Paul does not want to introduce himself or respond to questions from the PC since the SB will be interviewing later.

George Lamphere answers Paul's question regarding the town survey, he discusses a new town survey not being part of their current work plan, he states they are currently working on amendments to the town plan. He thinks once they get the new commission together, a new survey will be a discussion they would like to have.

***Seth Jensen** was present; he would like to recuse himself from the discussion regarding the candidates for PC since he is currently on the board himself. George reminded him that this was not an interview but that recusing himself was fine.*

Seth Jensen introduced himself to those who may not be familiar with him, he discusses his background growing up in Westford, he has been in town about 41 years and has seen some of the change and evolution of the Town. He discusses a little about his background working with the PC starting in 2005. He currently works for the Lamoille County PC, as the deputy director and is involved with flood recovery in surrounding towns as well. Seth discusses his vision for Westford, he says he wrote his thesis on Westford and its "rural character", he feels rural character describes a community that is tied to the land and natural resources but also being tied to the people as well. He feels it should have small businesses that are supportive of the land, he feels conservation language can be used to gate communities and remains a big challenge for diversity in the Town. Maintaining (rather than preserving) the town, land base, diversity and affordability is a goal of his.

Mel Allen has withdrawn his application for PC.

Wastewater Update:

- The WAC continues to meet every week on Tuesdays at 3pm.
- **G. Lamphere** asks that the PC continues to stay up to date and check out the recordings/minutes on the website.
- \$5k was requested to the SB and was approved to move forward to look at the 1705 Pigeon property.
- CRRP, an ARPA based funding, has been withdrawn from the state, \$750,000.
- **R. Rodjenski** discusses that CRRP was generous, giving more time to us following the bond vote, after giving multiple extensions they eventually pulled the funding. Ron does not feel the door has totally closed but the town needs to determine what they will do next and re-apply for that if they want to move forward.
- **G. Lamphere** discusses the NBRC grant being still active; he believes there was an update that was previously managed by Melissa. Ron is now working on those updates with Holly. NBRC schedule is different from the ARPA funding, as of now they have not pulled funding, but they may in the future if they see no progress to move forward.
- **M. Reilly** asks Ron what his thoughts are on sending a letter updating CRRP and if that would be worth looking into. Ron believes they have had an update and would like to add a note that there will be drafts of the matrix on the website if anyone wants to look at those.
- **Carol Winfield** was recognized and would like to reassure everyone that WAC is working hard to find solutions. She does not think that funding timelines will take away from the challenging work they are doing right now to find a solution as quickly as possible.

Fee Schedule:

H. Cism discusses what the accessory structure fee reduction would end up costing us, it may not be worth cutting back the fee, between 2-3k would be the lost revenue. She also discusses bumping the CO permit fee from \$30.00 to \$40.00 because we are a lot lower than other towns. Harmony also discusses that Melissa recommended a fee be waived if something is deemed "affordable housing," the fees for

signs, fences over 6 ft in height, moving more than fifty cubic yards of fill. These were not on the fee schedule but do require permits.

The PC and H. Cism discuss whether this would be a good idea or not and discuss bringing this to the Selectboard to see what their opinion is on the matter. The PC does not feel it would be wise to cut something and lose revenue that would be going to the town.

Next Steps: Harmony will investigate how many principal structures vs accessory structures come in, and what the fee increase would have to be to decrease the accessory structures. The PC would also like to know what Harmony's increase in labor has been over the last couple of years. Mark and Mo will work with Harmony before the next meeting to figure this out before bringing it to the SB.

Mobile Food Vendor Ordinance:

Westford Mobile Food Vendor Ordinance currently applies to an area at the common but not the whole town. There have been requests that it expands elsewhere in town. The PC has been working on this, they have produced some good ideas and have had some valuable feedback. They do not know what the town or the SB will decide but would like to produce a draft that they can bring to the SB to start the conversation.

M. Letorney substituted language that reflected the "Common Zoning District" with the "Town of Westford." All the requirements remain but it now expands to the whole town rather than just the Common zoning district. He thinks it will go well with legal review and will leave that up to the attorneys for the next steps. (He notes that this keeps safety/rights of way in mind.)

R. Rodjenski thinks if it is a Town ordinance it should go through to the SB first but believes it should bounce back and forth as a cooperative effort.

G. Lamphere questions whether other things such as Christmas tree sales, Mother's Day flowers, etc. should also be looked at before continuing the efforts on this or discuss with the SB whether these other things should be allowed as well. **H. Cism** believes that those things would be covered under, "farm stand" and they can get permits for that. **S. Jensen** feels we should not slow the food ordinance down by discussing the other things right now because we do have a request currently for the mobile food vendor.

Next Steps: Advance the edits M. Letorney has made to the ordinance to the SB with a clear note stating there has not been legal review currently, to allow the SB to review it to get their opinions on the matter before advancing to the Town's attorney. Harmony will ask Holly to add this to the SB agenda.

Section 326 of WLUD – Signs:

Discussion of adding internally illuminated signs to the bylaws.

M. Letorney has produced a draft. He began with researching other towns, he looked at internally illuminated signs, they are prohibited by about half the communities in VT. He thinks we can either make it town wide or only the common zoning district. This would prohibit branded products such as alcohol, lottery, etc. It would also have to fall under a certain size sign. The sign would have to be a solid color, no reflective backing, no flashing, blinking, etc. and it can only be illuminated during business hours. Two further approaches to take are: add standards to figure 3-11 in signs that specifically calls out illuminated signs and add in internally illuminated signs to the definition section.

The PC discuss why other towns may have prohibited illuminated signs; they do not know for sure why a lot of towns prohibit them; they discuss whether there needs to be a discussion of neon vs LED, or other specifics they need to make when it comes to the signs.

E. Panattu thinks what the PC has discussed sounds good to her. She likes the limit of two lights and only having them on while the business is open. She thinks the size is good for them because nothing bigger would fit in their windows.

H. Cism asks if this would be added to exempt or permitted signs? M. Letorney answers, this would be added to permitted signs.

R. Rodjenski's recommendation would be to go the route of the exemption with clarity of what boxes the applicant needs to check to not get a permit, this would take away some of the issues that Harmony would have to deal with, when deciding what signs are ok and what signs are not ok.

G. Lamphere and the PC propose they take this language that Mark has prepared, Add internally illuminated interior signs vs internally illuminated signs and say it's going to follow the exemption route (if all the boxes are checked) rather than permitted and add to 326.D as #13 and delete 326.C(8) and add "free standing" to 326.C(9) under prohibited and get the process moving.

Next Steps: Bring the edits to the SB for their next meeting with the changes made prior to and discussed at tonight's meeting to get something out there. Schedule a public hearing with the PC at the next PC meeting.

The PC also discusses sandwich board signs and whether the store would like them to move forward with discussing those as well to see what is allowed, the store would like them to move forward with that because they are a little confused on what is and what is not allowed when it comes to sandwich board signs. This is a little more complicated since they must take into consideration the right of way and work with VTrans, they also must take into consideration the common use policy and rules. The PC does not want to slow down the illuminated signs so they will move forward with this separately.

Next Steps: Harmony will investigate this and gather more information before the next PC meeting as an agenda item.

Public Comment: Carol Winfield thanks the PC for their work for the Store signs. Erin and Basil thank the PC as well.

Correspondence:

- Email funding announcement hazard mitigation grant program.
Highway Department looking into this; S. Jensen will call Holly to discuss ways the PC could potentially help.
- Upcoming online workshop March 27th, 6-8pm
George and Mark are both going to try and attend the workshop.

Selectboard Meetings

February 22nd and March 14th Selectboard Meetings - Minutes and recording available to check out, reminders to commissioners to look at those.

March 28th and April 11th - Bringing a couple of agenda items to the SB 28th meeting. PC interviews on the 28th. Mo will try and make the SB meeting on the 28th.

2024 Work Plan-Next meeting is April 15th

Sandwich board signs

Mobile Food Vendor Ordinance

Internally lit/illuminated signs

Adjourn- Meeting adjourned at 8:55pm.