

TOWN OF WESTMINSTER
PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING (PC) VIA ZOOM
January 10, 2021

Members Present: Michelle Chmelar, Kathy Kingston, Bari Shamas (Chair), Richard Crocker, Seroya Crouch

Others Present: Sarah Buckingham (Recording Secretary), Russell Hodgkins (TM/ZA)

1. **CALL TO ORDER:** Bari Shamas (Chair) called the meeting to order at 6:32.
2. **COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC COMMENT:** None.
3. **ADJUSTMENTS TO AGENDA:** None.
4. **ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES:** Kathy Kingston made a motion to accept the minutes from the December 13, 2021 meeting as written. Discussion: Richard Crocker said that numbers he was looking for were missing from the minutes which disappointed him. No additions were suggested. Michelle Chmelar reminded committee members that they can take their own notes. Sarah said she would welcome committee members checking to ensure specific information was recorded, either verbally or in the Zoom chat. There was discussion of video or audio recording Zoom meetings and the associated storage and time/labor concerns. Chmelar seconded the motion to approve the minutes as written. Motion passed unanimously.
5. **UNFINISHED BUSINESS:**
 - A. Intern: No updates.
 - B. Items related to Town Plan:
 1. What is your vision for the town for the next ten years and beyond? What would you like to see? (30 min) Five minutes allotted to each member and Russ to talk about this.

Chair Shamas wondered if committee members are all on the same page. She would like to know where the differences are and how to make sure the plan committee comes up with is something all members feel good about.

Kathy Kingston expressed hope for community connectedness, saying there is a sense of division between east and west. Kingston would like to see the town eliminate that sense. We all have common goals, we all want good neighborly relationships and roads we can drive on, etc. She would love to see the town move to more clustered development and avoid parcelization of

the forests. She acknowledged that she herself has a house out in the middle of the woods and its not ideal for the wildlife, but would like to see a focus on trying not to interrupt big tracks of lands. She is concerned about climate change and said the town plan needs to include things that can be done on a town level to help mitigate climate change; not telling people what to do, but providing information. Her hope is that the town plan is educational and people can do what they want with the information they receive. She sees the plan as a source of information and guidance for the Development Review Boards. Regarding the economy, this is a bedroom community and there is uncertainty about how to make it feasible for people to live here and have work that pays their bills.

Russell Hodgkins agreed with Kingston that the plan should be information that new residents can take and gather history and information that will help them want to participate. Participation in the town is huge, we need to do that. Regarding zoning, Hodgkins supports cluster housing; there is an influx of new people with new ideas on what a "homestead" looks like and they want more water and sewer ability, better internet, they want facilities to be enhanced. He said the Select Board was working on senior housing but passed due to Covid. We have no place for our seniors when they get to the point they can't handle their own home. They need utilities, town water and sewer resources. He said he doesn't see us snapping our fingers and becoming an industry town.

Richard Crocker said he likes the flavor of the town the way it is. Crocker is concerned about real estate purchased by people from out of town paying inflated amounts for housing, which raises prices of everyone else house and makes it hard for people who already live here, and putting houses where they probably shouldn't be, on long roads or at the tops of hills, which causes interruptions to the environment and wildlife. Crocker loves living in Westminster West and would like to be here for a while. He said clustered housing can work to an extent, that there must be better ways to make septic systems at less expense, and maybe all town buildings should have solar panels on the roofs and Tesla batteries. Not sure how to have people work here more, main jobs are farming, logging, carpentry.

Michelle Chmelar said she thinks development should stay minimal. She does not see the town setting up factories, shopping strip, that's not necessarily what Westminster is. The simplicity of the area differentiates us from other areas. Chmelar saw a national survey that showed Vermont has more in-migration than any other state in the U.S. She will share the study with the committee. It showed a the 55+ demographic, then a big gap, and then a younger demographic, maybe 18-35. A lot of people came because they didn't want to live on top of other people, they want to be able to go outside and have a yard able to have kids run around or be able to be out without worrying about running into other people. People don't always come for jobs, some people work remote and there are requests for increasing bandwidth for remoter workers. Covid is changing how people work and what's important to them. The people who are gonna come here either know they can work here or do their job remotely from home. People don't want a tiny house anymore, they are sick of being on top of everyone else, they want to be able to go to another room. We can offer that opportunity here. Some want solitude outdoors, need alone time. Chmelar wants to be able to keep what we have - the history, forests, recreational areas, the solitude of places, that's of interest. She said senior housing is important but there are a lot of facets to that problem. On the one hand, there are seniors who don't have money.

“Affordable” housing is not affordable. It is going to have to be a private enterprise. She does not think people want some big structure with 25 units in the middle of our historic villages.

Seroya Crouch agreed about elder care and said she personally dislikes those kind of affordable housing units. She said people are miserable in elder care units and that it’s nicer to have it integrated into the community. Some other communities have home-based elder care where someone with extra rooms in their home takes in people who need care and provides meals and takes them to appointments. For resident it is more like a home as opposed to an institution or apartment. She said that kind of care is possible to do in Westminster, in a way those bigger developments are not because we don’t have sewer and water, etc. for those bigger units. She is looking forward to seeing the study Chmelar mentioned. She said that friends in other parts of country say the same thing is happening everywhere. As Vermont gets broadband, the interest in living in Vermont is going to shoot up even higher; we have so many things that people want and we’re in the middle of where there is going to be water in the future according to climate projections, while other regions are drying up. Vermont can offer an opportunity for a normal life not compromised by drought. Speaking as a climate refugee who came from southern Oregon because everything was drying up, it was agony, people are leaving the west in droves and it’s going to accelerate. Regarding septic, Crouch agreed with Kingston that we need to protect environmental values and she wondered if composting toilets could replace septic systems. Is there a way we could promote another technology?

Bari Shamas said that in addition to broadband and drought, she sees Boston, New York, Miami, going under water because of climate change and people from those cities are gonna come here. Shamas said housing is a big issue. She appreciates the recreation we have, and noted that a huge amount of the town has already been bought by Windmill Hill association, so that will be maintained as wildlife and recreation. Shamas said people can get high quality food that is produced locally, and that is another part of the quality of life she wants to see maintained. She has mixed feelings on cluster housing. She wants to see more solar-electric and is curious about what potential there is for wind, although she doesn’t think there’s a whole lot. As far as business, she said places to buy food are most important. She hopes for electric vehicle charging stations in the future and feels broadband access is important. She liked what Crouch said about elder care being integrated into homes. Elders who have a home can get elders to come live them and we can find ways to support that, not necessarily up to the town, but she would love to see U.S. government be more supportive with tax breaks or other incentive when you’re caring for an elder or child or partner who is not able to work.

2. Natural Resources: short discussion to prepare for the working meeting Jan. 24, 6:30 via Zoom (15 min)

Kathy Kingston shared a draft of Chapter 3, Natural Resources as a preview so the committee can look through it before the working meeting. It is 28 pages long. Kingston would like the committee to think about the term ‘natural resources.’ She said a lot of people are talking about rethinking this label to shift focus from everything being thought of as resources, to thinking about our environment. One idea is Ecology & Natural Resources, or maybe Ecology & Earth Resources.

The chapter is organized from bottom up. Policies from the old town plan are in here, the committee could discuss renaming them. No changes have been made to the policies section yet. The air quality section is copied from Newfane's town plan and Kingston would like Crouch to make additions. Crouch said Covid has showed us how much our air quality is impacted by Western industry. Crocker said the air cleaned up when people stopped driving because of Covid. The noise pollution and light pollution sections were also copied from the Newfane town plan. Russell Hodgkins said we have a noise ordinance that should be placed in the chapter. He will get a copy of that to Kingston.

Forrest is a big section, because of Act 171. Forest resource policies from Newfane and Westminster are in the document. Kingston said that a look at policies and recommendations would come after writing the body of the plan, because they reflect what is in the body of the plan. But, some are really good and make sense and maybe inform how the plan is written.

David Dean will giving feedback on parts of the Fish & Wildlife section. Kingston reported that the dam at the corner of Patch Rd. and Westminster Rd. is not going to be taken out, the owner doesn't want it taken down. Hodgkins said it was all based on money, they couldn't come up with enough state relief to make it feasible for the owner. Even with seven state agencies involved.

Kingston said songbird and bird populations are having some issues, but the raptor migration that goes on on Windmill Ridge is exciting. There is also information on deer wintering, bear habitat, rare species, natural communities, and backyard wildlife. The conversation commission is thinking about putting scenic resources in a separate section, Kingston is fine with it staying here. Shamas says it could go in recreation.

Kingston said she feels OK about the length of the chapter because it won't be printed, people can go to it online, but she asked the committee how long the whole plan should be. Is it OK to have a lot of information in here? Crouch said it is not too long, even if printed it only gets done once every eight years and it guides so much that happens in that period that it's worth it. We shouldn't be extra wordy but should include what needs to be included. Crocker said much of this section stays the same from plan to plan. Shamas reiterated the committee's desire for the Town Plan to be largely informational.

Kingston said the ridge between Westminster and Westminster West, the land to the east is from a separate continent from when these collided, this section is fascinating. Seroya said the top of ridge is like a fault line completely different geology on each site. This town has a lot of neat things!

Kingston stated her preference is for members to use the comment boxes in Google Docs to add their comments and edits. Other members can comment and discuss on each others comments that way, too. Crouch wanted to acknowledge how big a section this is, and that Kingston took it on on her own, a huge amount of work, and Crouch wanted to say thank you. Other committee members agreed.

3. Flood resilience: Working from Town Plan version as opposed to starting over from outline: Seeking approval from Board (5 min)

Kingston wants to work from the original and make sure everything is covered rather than work from the outline. Crouch said we have a recent flood plan, there is no need to redo it. Shamas talked to John Bennett and asked about flood resilience incorporated in previous plan, he said it was approved by the board in 2015, Windham Regional Commission did its review and approval in 2017, so everything is fine as it is. Crouch asked whether that was a separate document created after the plan. Hodgkins said, yes, there is a separate flood mitigations document mandated by the state and FEMA, which is currently being updated. He said the town was doing it before Irene, but the changes that occurred were forced by Irene and the July 2021 storm, which was worse than Irene, made a huge difference in our plans and how we react. The mitigations document could be referenced in the Town Plan's flood resiliency section. Kingston said once work on that section is complete, the committee could send it to Hodgkins for him to add or change as needed. He agreed. Kingston wanted consensus to work from flood resiliency document and make sure things from the outline are covered in it. The committee agreed.

4. Soil overlap map: Russ report what he found on State maps (10 min)

Hodgkins said he had not done anything with the state, but that he spoke at the last meeting about maps that the town has. Shamas said when the municipal grant was written, there was discussion about finding out whether good agricultural soils may be under forest land, and Hodgkins said he thought the state had that information, and he would look into it. Hodgkins apologized that he had not done that yet but said he would get on it. Kingston said the state has comprehensive soil maps that tell you what the particular soils are. Crouch wants to get a town soils map and then put the existing agricultural overlay on that to know where the fields are and to know where we have fields that turned back into forest after lack of use, which may need to go back into production as food needs increase.

6. NEW BUSINESS (Discussion / Action):

A. Planning Commission Report to Town

Kingston wanted to confirm that Hodgkins had received the report. Hodgkins said his Administrative Assistant had received it. The committee thanked Crouch for her work on that report and Shamas thanked the committee for taking time on short notice to look it over and give approval.

B. vtvast.org map

Kingston showed a map of the snowmobile trail discussed at the previous meeting. She would like to find maps showing Class 4 roads but is having a hard time. Crouch would like the VTVAST trails to be on the town map. Kingston said it can be referred to in the Recreation section.

C. Delegation of responsibilities (8 min)

Shamas said the committee was caught off-guard when it came to writing the planning commission letter and wonder how we can enhance and work with Russ and Kelley in a way that gives us a little more lead time. Shamas was on the town website and noticed there had been meetings for the American Rescue Plan, which the committee did not know about. She asked how to get better communication and more lead time. Chmelar said committee members should make a point to check the town website because there really is a lot there.

Hodgkins said, regarding American Rescue Plan funds, the Village of Westminster got \$40,000 and the Town would get \$80,000. He said \$20,000 would be given to the town clerk to digitize records so people don't have to come into the town office. He said the town would be asking for more, but there are parameters, projects must be related to public safety, public information or the underprivileged. Hodgkins will send a list of the criteria to Shamas. Kingston asked for clarification about the committee making these decisions. Hodgkins said there are 12 people from all over; the village has three representatives, the rest are scattered. There is not need for more volunteers on that committee. The committee gathers information and makes recommendations to meet criteria and enhance project proposals. The Select Board has the final say.

Shamas said that as Chair, she received no training or information as to what her responsibilities are or what the town needs from her. For example, the deadline for submitting meeting agendas. She asked how can we better communicate what the responsibilities are, whose responsibilities they are. Hodgkins asked Kingston if she still had the document he sent to her regarding roles and responsibilities of the committee. Crouch said there is a state document online, maybe on VLCT.org. Crouch said the committee relies on Hodgkins as Town Manager to communicate if things are happening, asking him to please give a heads-up. Kelley said we needed to submit a report this week, the committee chair was on retreat, Kingston and Crouch saw the email and tried to get on it. Hodgkins said he has four reports to write himself and that Kelley's reminders are necessary because people put it off. He said he is scrambling, too. Kelley needs them January 14th.

Shamas said Kelley told the committee she needed their report by Friday and that is why the committee didn't officially approve it. Hodgkins said she tells you its due the 7th so that she'll definitely have it in the town report by the 14th. Shamas said as the Chair of the committee she does not want the assumption that she is not going to be able to get something done on time. She would rather have voted on it at this meeting knowing that we had the opportunity to do so. She said Kelley knows when committee's meetings are. She wants to be able to work as a team with the Town Manager and Administrative Assistant without the assumption that the committee is not going to get things done.

7. OTHER BUSINESS:

Shamas spoke with John Bennet who said there was an amendment to the Town Plan made about the four village centers in our town, but it is not in the Town Plan or on the website.

Bennet wanted to remind the committee of it so we could include it. Kingston remembered the committee had to approve it. Hodgkins has a hard copy. He said he adds them to the town plans as he gives them out. Kingston said it should be on the town website. Crouch wondered which section of the new plan should include it. Kingston suggested Land Use.

Crouch wondered if it might be advisable to have a member of the Select Board sitting in the Planning Commission's meetings so they are appraised of what direction we're going in and they can keep the Select Board informed. Or, vice versa, have a Planning Commission member sit in on Select Board meetings. Chmelar said the Select Board has a lot of meetings and they do a lot; it is a lot more work than you would imagine. She said she doesn't know who would do it, or who would have time. Hodgkins said the committee's alternate is Jason Perry. Kingston suggested sending the Town Plan document in a few months to give them a heads and ask if there are any red flags with it. Hodgkins agreed, suggesting the committee send a draft to the Select Board well prior to final adoption, as was done last time.

Shamas wanted to add further discussion on public consultations to the next agenda. Crouch suggested public consultations on housing in particular. Chmelar said there were three seminars available for people to watch. She added regarding senior housing, that Westminster Cares is involved and it's not gonna be a government role, it's going to be done by the people who decide that they're going to invest in this and do something. She will send like to those meetings so the committee can discuss whether to do more. Crouch suggested inviting someone from Westminster Cares to a committee meeting.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING: Monday, February 14 @ 6:30 via Zoom

9. ADJOURNMENT: **Kathy Kingston** made a motion to adjourn the meeting @ 8:12 PM. Michelle Chmelar seconded. The motion passed with all in favor.

Signature of Clerk

Date

Prepared by: Sarah Buckingham, Recording Secretary