

**TOWN OF WESTMINSTER
PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING (PC)
October 11, 2022**

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

Others Present: Sarah Buckingham (Recording Secretary)

- 1. CALL TO ORDER:** Bari Shamas (Chair) called the meeting to order at 7:06 PM
- 2. COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC COMMENT:**
- 3. ADJUSTMENTS TO AGENDA:** A letter from the Conservation Commission was added to “Other Business”
- 4. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES:** Corrections to spelling errors in the minutes from the September 12, 2022 meeting: Russ Lazarek not Lazarus; John Bennett not Bennet.
- 5. UNFINISHED BUSINESS (Discussion / Action):**

A. Town Plan

i. Natural Resource Section

No discussion.

ii. Agriculture

Crouch said there were no changes since last meeting.

iii. Transportation

Chmelar will check to see if Chuck edited the chapter online or offline.

iv. Recreation

Shamas said she will complete a draft by next meeting.

v. Economic development

Chmelar had no update.

vi. Contract for Farm to plate/ Sarah Danly

Shamas mentioned that the contract has not been set up yet. She will contact Jennifer Lavoie to see who in the town needs to sign it. Crouch will contact Sarah Danly to see if Farm to Plate has a boilerplate contract the PC may use.

vii. November Housing Event

Chmelar said she needs to sign the rental agreement for the Westminster Institute. Crouch posted a notice in the last issue of the Gazette and sent it to the Whistler. She will also put it on Front Porch Forum. Chmelar said she would reach out to Westminster Cares to see if they would like to be involved since they work with Seniors. Crocker and Chmelar agreed to work together on a press release. Crouch read the “save the date” notice.

Chmelar will send the PC an article on the VT Affordable Housing Coalition’s SWVT Virtual Town Hall with affordable housing experts and legislators. She reported that they said physical accessibility is important. Chmelar raised concern for elders without income; there is a need to have rental units rather than units for people to buy. Crouch thought most elder housing is rental. Crocker said that’s why they’re \$300k/unit, so someone on an income of \$1500/m can afford a payment. Crouch asked how they could that cover that. Crocker said there are deep subsidies. Chmelar added that there are tax credits for the wealthy, too. Crocker says there’s CBDG funds; usually controlled by the Selectboard. Chmelar will send the committee an article that suggests the only solution is denser housing. She said the homestead tax in some areas is actually lower for second homes. It used to be higher. Here, it’s the same, or it was last year.

The committee discussed inviting Windham & Windsor Housing Trust to come to the meeting. Shamas suggested the committee members email their personal contacts in Westminster; in addition to the two land trusts, Westminster Cares, and a septic engineer to discuss population density and what’s changing around septic systems. She said that’s what really limits what we can do here. Chmelar agreed that from zoning standpoint it’s based on septic, but there is still not enough infrastructure to do what Bellows Falls can do with The Garage.

Crocker said wondered how many other towns in Windham & Windsor countries are like Westminster, without sewer and water infrastructure? Maybe other towns would be interested in getting involved with a project like that. Crouch added some environment will never have water or sewer, like Saxtons River. Crocker said the intent of that gets into the plan. Crouch agreed it could go up the food chain too, they can take it on as a model for other towns. Crocker noted that everyone talks about Newfane Town Plan now. Crouch said everyone is struggling with these issues. Crocker will get ahold of Bruce Whitney. Shamas suggested he could maybe do a five-minute presentation about what they do and what has been thought of for our county what’s already happening here. Chmelar suggested Crocker ask Whitney if where to get statistics for income in our little area.

Crocker showed documents from 2018 from the County Planning Commission website. He said there’s also tax information that is useful. For example, the number of homestead exemptions.

Shamas asked why second-homeowners would be charged less tax? Chmelar said it was because they’re not gonna have kids in school, so they’re giving them break. Crouch said 25% of homes in VT are second homes, and it is probably worse since COVID. They used to have to

pay more, and they should be, they are taking rental units off the market. It's a luxury tax, essentially. They're not adding to the community, they dilute the community in a certain way and because we have zoning regulations about how many units on how many acres, we can't subdivide. There's a real limit to how much development can occur in rural areas. Chmelar asked how much do we really want? No one wants to lose our woods, foliage, farmland. Crouch said the PC could recommend increasing tax in the town on second homes and investment properties. Chmelar said she thought there should be an additional tax on them. Crouch agreed the impact is huge on the community and tax is how you do social policy in this country. Crocker asked how would that happen? He said the state has a throttle hold. Crouch said it used to be that way, higher for non-homesteads. Shamas asked Chmelar to ask Kevin Hughes about the process for changing the budget around taxing second homes.

Crocker said she expected to find out that it is fairly difficult to do. He shared history of Act 60: in the 1990's, towns like Ludlow created 900 units of ski housing, upper level housing, but the taxes were like \$200/m and nobody was going to the schools.

Chmelar said the education budget has gone up since she moved here, even though enrollment has gone down. Shamas said it's because of health insurance and special education and the cost of cleaning staff. Crocker said that's why he thinks it's hard to change. After Act 60, the state got involved in how taxes were done. He said before that it was the Miller Plan. You can't do it without contention.

Crouch asked who would run the November event and how it would be structured. Crocker and Chmelar will run it together. Crouch asked about equipment - markers, flip chart, cards.

Chmelar said if people will be moving from table to table, there should be a set amount of time at each table. We could have questions given out to people. Crouch said she was thinking people who are interested in a certain topic go to that table and dive into that topic. Crocker said everyone would all go to one table and there will be something that's boring to everybody but still needs to be discussed. Chmelar said if you get people to move around from table to table you get their input on everything, rather than one topic. She said there should be a facilitator who is recording the discussions.

Shamas wanted engineers to come and talk about septic systems. Crocker said there should be a few minutes at the top to set an overview. Crouch emphasized the importance of sticking to a time limit. She said the event is not about people lecturing, but about collecting data.

There was discussion about asking a real estate agent to come. Maybe Kate Barry at EXP who has some low-income expertise.

Chmelar said there should be an agenda at each table with talking points, questions. She and Crocker will work on that. She pointed out there are only four committee members and suggested bringing some other people in to facilitate tables. Perhaps Katrina from the Selectboard. Shamas will ask Kathy Kingston. Crouch it doesn't have to be someone in an official capacity. Crocker said it could be someone from the crowd. Shamas asked how many topics/tables there would be.

Crocker said if there's sentiment in the room on something we don't have on there we need to be able to adapt pretty fast.

Crouch listed four topics: elder housing, cluster housing, airbnb, other. Crocker suggested two tables, 15-minutes a piece. Crouch said more time would be needed. Chmelar said with four tables, that's two hours and no one will want to stay longer than that. Crouch said there should be summary at the end; a report-back from each table.

6. NEW BUSINESS (Discussion / Action):

A. Going to Selectboard (SB) meetings

Crocker said he doesn't think there is good communication between the SB and PC. He said takes faces, going to the meetings and talking about what we're working on. He said the bringing part of the meetings are for public comment and he thinks the PC should go and report.

Crouch said in some towns there is a SB member sitting on the PC and vice versa, and with the Conservation Commission, too. She said the SB is operating a complete vacuum.

Crocker said PC members are responsible for some of that, too. Crouch agreed. She said it is partly a function of having a small PC, in there were seven members and those duties could be better shared. She said she is a little concerned because the PC is kinda doing its own thing in terms of the plan, but the SB has to approve it. She said if the PC bring the plan as a *fait accompli*, in the 11th hour, and they don't like it....She said since there's no communication she is nervous they might not want to move forward with the plan. Crocker said he agreed. Crouch said in that case we wouldn't have a a plan, we'd be in breach or dereliction of duty.

Shamas asked Crocker if he was making a proposal for the PC to vote on. Crocker said he thought PC member should just go to SB meetings. Chemlamr said she'd call in and talk during New Business and share information about the housing event. Crocker said the SB might be a good place to collect data and see what the pulse of the town is. Shamas said she wouldn't mind going once a month and suggested the committee rotate. She suggested each member take a month and go once in that month. We don't have to do both of them. Crocker said he would be happy with that. Chmelar will go this month, Crocker will go in November, Shamas in December, Crouch in January, Chmelar in February, then Crocker, then Crouch, and so on.

Crouch wondered how to get on the agenda. She said half the town doesn't even know we're doing a plan.

Crocker asked if the PC would be getting a new member. Shamas said there has not been interest. Chmelar said it would mean bringing someone in at the 11th hour, but maybe that's OK. Shamas thought it should be somebody who's really good at writing.

Shamas suggested Chmelar ask if anyone from the SB wants to be a monitor at one of the tables. Crocker said in most towns he's worked in, all the SB or most of them came to public meetings.

7. OTHER BUSINESS: Conservation Society

Crouch shared a letter from Alma Beals on behalf of the Westminster Conservation Commission regarding Allen Marsh. Allen Brothers wants to drain and fill the marsh and the CC will be doing an event. Crouch wanted the PC to know about it. Henwood Hill Marsh has amazing wildlife and bird sightings, there is an active Facebook group, and over 170 species of birds have been seen there. She said it is our town's ecological hotspot, and it really needs some attention. It is also used in winter as a hockey rink.

Crouch proposed the PC go back to meeting via Zoom. Other members agreed. There was no vote. The warning in the Westminster Gazette will need to be changed to indicate PS meetings take place on Zoom and not at Town Hall.

Crouch said the agenda for next month's meeting should be just this housing event. The PC will need a lot of time to discuss it.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING: Monday, Nov 7th 2022 at 6:30 PM via Zoom.

9. ADJOURNMENT: Chmelar moved to adjourn the meeting @ 8:33 PM. Crouch seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Signature of Clerk

Date

Prepared by: Seroya Crouch & Sarah Buckingham