

TOWN OF WESTMINSTER
PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING (PC) VIA ZOOM

September 12, 2023

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

Others Present: Janice Leary-Jones (Recording Secretary)

1. **CALL TO ORDER:** Bari Shamas (Chair) called the meeting to order at 6:31pm.
2. **COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC COMMENT:** None.
3. **ADJUSTMENTS TO AGENDA:** None.

4. **ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES:** Michelle Chmelar moved to accept the August 21, 2023 minutes. Seroya Crouch seconded. Motion passed unanimously.

5. UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

A. Town Plan

1. Readoption of Existing Town Plan-

Bari Shamas spoke with Mike McConnell of Windham Regional Commission (WRC) regarding the necessary steps to readopt the existing Town Plan. In this conversation, McConnell stated that WRC will update the existing Town Plan with new census data, and then the PC would need to approve the existing Town Plan noting the updated census data. McConnell also stated that the PC meeting to accept the existing Town Plan would be regarded as a Public Hearing, as long as it was clearly stated on the Agenda and advertised as such. Subsequent to this meeting, the PC would then send the Town Plan to the Selectboard for acceptance. McConnell indicated that WRC would be able to update the census data soon.

Seroya Crouch raises the question, will the process as outlined by McConnell meet the requirements of the State of Vermont law regarding the acceptance of Town Plans. Crouch continues, stating that the statues state criteria such as having a Hearing warned 15 days in advance and publicized widely via multiple venues (website, newspaper, notices). Crouch raises concern that following the recommendations as outlined by McConnell, does not appear to be in alignment with State statutes.

Bari Shamas, Michelle Chmelar and Seroya Crouch then discuss that perhaps the process for adopting an existing plan is different from that of adopting a new plan.

Bari Shamas states she will double check the process with Mike McConnell, to ensure the PC is in compliance with State law.

If WRC updates within two weeks, Crouch states that then the PC could conceivably have an interim meeting before the next scheduled PC meeting to move the acceptance

timeline along and then the October PC Meeting could be the Hearing. Shamas and Chmelar both state they are in favor of this plan, and would hold an interim meeting.

2. How to Proceed with the Creation of a New Plan-

Michelle Chemlar would like to continue on the Planning Commission and would like to talk with others to build up the numbers of the Planning Commission. With more people, the workload would be less for each member, and the plan may be successfully completed before the extension expires.

Bari Shamas feels that the time she is putting into the PC is mostly finding people to get the basic tasks done. Bari would like to see the work that has been done thusfar by the PC come to fruition and would like to see the project through.

Seroya Crouch mentions that the Selectboard should work with the PC for it to contain more members. Crouch states concerns about completing the document in a four month period. Furthermore, Crouch mentions working with an outside group to generate a plan may be in the best interest of the town. Crouch continues to be looking for housing and will likely move out of the Town of Westminster due to a lack of available housing in the Town of Westminster; however Seroya will stay on the Planning Commission until a plan is adopted as long as she is living in Westminster.

Michelle Chmelar mentions taking existing chapters that are completed and then finishing chapters that need to be completed would conceivably make it possible to finish the Town Plan in four months.

Bari Shamas mentions that if an outside group is contracted in the future, it would be beneficial to the community.

Seroya Crouch states that with the development of a new Town Plan, the Town has an opportunity to think about the dramatic weather changes that are occurring nationwide and make a plan to address resiliency in the face of these weather challenges.

Michelle Chmelar then comments that at this juncture that best course of action may be to finish the PC as is, and then moving to contract an outside group to facilitate a community discussion for the next Town Plan, as this would allow the PC to meet the four month extension and allow for the development of a future Town Plan that could address such things as resiliency.

6. NEW BUSINESS:

A. Westminster News

1. New Town Manager: It is understood that there are a number of good candidates, and the interview process wrapping up and an offer should be made soon.

Michelle comments that perhaps the PC would yield good results for the Town by finishing up the Town Plan the PC has been working on, and then once the new Town Manager has become acclimated to the Town, work with new Town Manager to develop a good plan for the Town of Westminster moving forward.

Bari Shamas brought up discussions about issues the Town of Brattleboro is facing, in regards to homelessness and drug trafficking. Housing is a twofold problem,

as Brattleboro is challenged both by homelessness as well as public housing being accessed by drug dealers. Public Housing being used in this way sets up a problem for the community, as well as poses an eviction challenge.

Michelle Chmelar indicates that Fentanyl is a nationwide problem, our area has been a heroin corridor for some time.

Another area for consideration brought up by Bari Shamas is a need for housing for refugees seeking homes in Southern Vermont.

Bari Shamas is noting that housing an issue for multiple reasons not mentioned previously in PC meetings, but also the above mentioned, and perhaps it is worth noting as thinking about when developing the future Town Plan.

Bari Shamas notes another area of concern is Migrant issues as State, Town and Federal laws do not always agree on this issue, and the Sheriff needs guidance as far as how to proceed within these structures.

The question is raised, how does the town want to respond to homelessness, drug issues, and refugees in the Town Plan.

7. Other Business: None.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING: October 16, 2023 @ 6:30pm via Zoom

If WRC can get the Town Plan updated, the PC could hold an interim meeting before that date and then hold October 16 as the Public Hearing.

9. ADJOURNMENT: Michelle Chmelar moves to close the meeting at 7:06 PM. Seroya seconds. Unanimous. Bari adjourns the meeting at 7:07 PM.

Signature of Clerk

Date

Prepared by: Janice Leary-Jones, Recording Secretary