

**Minutes of
The Williamstown Planning Board
TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2015
7:00 p.m. at the Municipal Building**

Members Present: Amy Jeschawitz, Chris Winters, Ann McCallum, Carol Stein – Payne, Elizabeth McGowan

Others Present: Andrew Groff, Van Ellet, James Art, Shaun Garvey, Michael Deep, Stan Parese

Ms. Jeschawitz opened the meeting at 7PM and asked the board to consider the August minutes.

MINUTES

Ms. Jeschawitz noted that the date needs to be amended on the minutes.

Ms. McCallum moved to approve the August Minutes.

Ms. McGowan seconded.

The Motion Carried Unanimously.

NEW BUSINESS

Advisory Hearing, College Parking Structure

Atty. Jamie Art on behalf of the College with Project Manager Shaun Garvey.

Atty. Art stated that this ramp will connect to the second level of the parking deck. The project is by right and does not require Planning Board permits but the College is present to ensure open communication and make sure the public is aware of the coming changes. The current issue with the parking garage is that the second level of the deck is not accessible in winter due to a malfunctioning ice melt system. This proposal is for a driveway to access the parking structure with a new ramp into the second level from the existing traffic circle. Five trees will be removed and replaced with five additional trees. The importance of this project is to ensure that these spaces are available year round.

Ms. McCallum asked why the heating system is being abandoned.

Atty. Art stated that the College believes that the ice melt system is seriously flawed and will not function.

Mr. Garvey stated that this is a very unusual garage as it has an uncovered ramp. Extensive research has been done on how to correct this issue. Even when it was functioning properly it could not keep up with snowfall. Excessive snowfall can seriously overpower the system.

Ms. Jeschawitz stated she took a look at the garage earlier this week and inquired about improved signage.

Perhaps a sign could direct theater goers towards town.

Atty. Art stated that the College is not opposed to that idea. New signs obviously need to be developed for the winter but in the summer something that helps promote getting theater goers into town could be good.

Mr. Winters asked if there is a net increase in light fixtures.

Mr. Garvey stated the number will remain the same. The existing sidewalk fixtures will be used for the new sidewalk

Mr. Winters noted that the sidewalk as proposed might be an issue as people are likely to cut across the grass to access the Center for Theater and Dance.

Waubeeka Zoning Change Request

Mr. Parese requested that the Waubeeka discussion be moved to the end of the agenda.

The Board agreed

OLD BUSINESS

Housing Policy Study

Ms. Jeschawitz added that she has some additional information on single family homes. There are currently 75 results listed on Zillow in our zip code. Bulk of homes are listed between 400 – 600 thousand dollars. Additionally single family home sales have risen through July. Total sales in Berkshire County are up 56% in 2015.

Ms. Jeschawitz also presented a data set from the Berkshire Eagle.

Mr. Winters noted that the presented sales data shows that there is over 60 months of inventory.

Ms. McCallum stated one problem is the lower end of our market needs a lot of work.

Mr. Winters added they could have very high land value because they are in Williamstown.

Ms. Jeschawitz added this has been her experience with houses in her neighborhood.

Ms. Jeschawitz stated that Ann has prepared some schematics of what a particular housing type would look like on

a well-known piece of land in Williamstown. In this case the Agway parcel.

Ms. McCallum stated that there are many people looking for smaller units including persons looking to downsize as well as individuals who are looking for affordability. This drawing is a first step at planning some community outreach documents. The idea is to ask people in town what alternative housing types could be possible in town. What would people agree to?

Ms. McCallum described several concepts for the Agway site including some multifamily proposals with townhomes. The town home proposal is 14 units which is double what can be done in the general residential district.

Ms. McCallum asked if the Board thinks this is something that we could propose to the community.

Mr. Van Ellet asked how large the units are.

Ms. McCallum stated the units are about 1200 square feet.

Mr. Ellet asked what would have to change to allow this to happen.

Ms. McCallum stated that the zoning would have to change, the town would have to allow this type of multifamily housing under its zoning rules. It currently does not.

Mr. Groff presented the Board with a summary list of items that are necessary to change in the zoning bylaw to be able to create a development of this type.

Mr. Groff also outlined a list of remaining zoning provisions that restrict housing other than single family homes.

Mr. Groff stated that a way forward from this point could be creating a few subcommittees of the Board. Each group could work on specific problems and then report back to the board in order for the board to begin the process of designing some outreach sessions or charettes. These could take the form of some of the recently successful Economic Development Forums.

Ms. Jeschawitz and Ms. McCallum stated they would volunteer to create a subcommittee to work on some of the draft alternative housing type proposals.

The Board agreed.

Waubeeka Zoning, cont.

Mr. Michael Deep stated he purchased Waubeeka Golf Links in 2014 and added that owning Waubeeka has been one of the best experiences of his career. It is a wonderful place that has wonderful people. However the club is losing a tremendous amount of money. There is a major problem with the sustainability of the golf course. The manner in which the property is structured is two corporations. One land, one golf. The golf operation should be paying rent to the land company. This has not happened. Mr. Deep added he has never taken a nickel of salary from either operation. Financial sustainability is a major concern.

Mr. Deep stated that he will hang on to this course as long as he possibly can but he cannot do this long term. However there's a possible solution. Recent stories in the Berkshire Eagle note that a hotel with some resort style elements could be possible. This might be a way of monetizing the course. This might be way forward. This building would be an improvement to the 1966 clubhouse that currently exists. This will not be an inexpensive vinyl clad building, it will be a community asset. It will offer recreational opportunities to the community.

Mr. Deep noted he has thought carefully on if this building will damage South Williamstown, if it is done right, done with community input it won't. In addition it will be green and sustainable as the current utility bill is very high (\$5000-\$6000). A 3- story high New England Style Inn at a location just to the north of the current site would be set at a lower elevation and could be an important contributor to the community. One that would not detract from South Williamstown. The existing clubhouse will also be replaced, at the same location.

Mr. Deep noted that this will be opposed by many, but the bottom line question is. Is this good for Williamstown? It could be.

Atty. Stan Parese stated he is representing Mr. Deep on the details of the process. The main points to hit at this early stage of the conversation are as follows;

- The current business model is not viable.
- The Planning Board should consider a southern extension of the Southern Gateway District. This is the zoning district that runs along Cold Spring Road.
- If one looks at for profit business in Williamstown, finding one that has existed as long as Waubeeka is difficult.
- The S. Gateway extension is not the only possible idea. Additionally an overlay district could work well.

Atty. Parese stated that this is a very important piece of town. If we lose Waubeeka we lose this recreational resource. We need to have a community conversation on how to preserve it.

Atty. Parese stated if the Planning Board is willing to entertain this idea. We would meet with staff and attempt to create an outline of what a bylaw amendment would look like. Any bylaw amendment would be crafted to be able to create the vision outlined by Mr. Deep.

Atty. Parese stated he has never represented the owners of Green River Farm or Five Corners. These businesses have been fragile over the last few years. The farm is dark, the store was dark. It could also be a worthwhile exercise to look as a community at how we could create an environment that encourages sustained economic viability in South Williamstown.

Atty. Parese stated that the permitting history of these two properties is a torturous one. These businesses existing in this fragile environment. It is worth undertaking to figure out how to stabilize this place in our community.

Atty. Parese stated that the Five Corners is a very special part of Williamstown and having it be a place of economic stagnation is not in keeping with its history.

Ms. McCallum stated that she believes this idea is good. Also this project could take pressure off of the Spring Street proposal. People could have a choice of an urban stay or a rural stay. We keep the beautiful entry to Williamstown while maintaining the golf course. Issues that need to be overcome include title five, septic disposal, and a certified public water supply.

Ms. McCallum ran through some options on how to extend zoning.

Atty. Parese noted that extending the S. Gateway linearly is not a recommended approach it would be an island district.

Atty. Parese noted that there will be some serious constraints on the project. Title 5 and water supply are major constraints. Zoning at this point is the biggest constraint.

Atty. Parese added that as a piece of this process he would encourage the Board not to place provisions like room number restrictions upon any proposed zone. These previously mentioned type of constraints as well as market constraints will keep that from happening. To have serious conversations we have to have zoning that lets you do it. There are people that come to town and simply move on.

Ms. McCallum stated that it is interesting that we have two hotel proposals that are dramatically different but vastly similar.

Mr. Groff explained some of the differences between the two areas and noted that the most significant difference is that the Waubeeka proposal involves creating development where there has not been such in the memory of most towns people but there was historically. The College proposal on the other hand involves extending an existing already developed business district.

Atty. Parese briefly noted the history of South Williamstown and the Idlewild Inn, a facility that was near Waubeeka in the 19th Century. The notion that by not letting anything happen we are preserving is a fallacy. If we don't let things happen little by little we will fail. Communities can stagnate.

Ms. McCallum stated that one thing we should do is say we are in favor of this as a concept.

Atty. Parese stated it would be preferable if this is a full and collaborative process that is crafted and moved forward by the Planning Board. There is no plan on the table to approach the Town Meeting with a citizen's petition. The Planning Board needs to be a supporter and have some ownership of the process for this to be successful.

Ms. Jeschawitz stated that Waubeeka has a long history in the community. We know that over the past decade the course has struggled mightily. Every course around us has a source of revenue that brings in revenue from non golf sources. It is our responsibility as a community to help a business owner who wants to stay in business do so.

There are many options. We could extend the S. Gateway district. We could also create a small business district at Five Corners which is more in keeping with its history. We could also really create a beautiful little village

Ms. Stein Payne stated that we should want to help businesses succeed.

Ms. McCallum stated we should poll the board.

Mr. Winters stated that this seems too official for this stage. Right now it seems like we don't have major objections.

Ms. McGowan asked what the next idea is.

Mr. Deep stated that he met with the South Williamstown Community Association. (SWCA) There were eight members of the Board of Directors at the meeting. These folks have legitimate concerns. We listened to those concerns. The idea is we're trying to work with people and incorporate all feedback. One question was do we need more services from the town. We will not use water, we will not use sewer, we will not send kids to school. This could be a net winner for the town, generating taxes and not needing many services. It would hopefully employ many people as well.

Ms. McCallum stated that the College has had a hotel consultant do a lot of work on their hotel proposal.

Mr. Deep stated he spoke to the College about the proposal. They noted that all of this work is proprietary information. We would have to do another study. A study done by Daryl English at Williams College that shows this might not work. The bottom line is if we get any proposal these people will do major due diligence. In the end hopefully everyone in Williamstown will say, "what a beautiful place."

Ms. McGowan and Ms. McCallum noted the tax generating and job generating potential is important.

Mr. Winters stated that Waubeeka will not waste time and money making plans if the Board has no desire to pursue the project. We need to propose some specific ideas and then test them.

Ms. McCallum stated that if the applicants decide that a hotel just isn't viable they might not come back.

Ms. Jeschawitz stated that they are in a catch 22. They need us to change the zoning first. Mr. Deep won't be building this site, he needs a partner. The partner won't commit unless they know they could possibly do it.

Atty. Parese stated he would like to be able to work with Mr. Groff at taking a next cut at a possible bylaw amendment and then return to the Board.

Ms. McGowan stated this could be similar to how the Board approached changing the zoning district boundary in Village Business. We need some things to react to. Maybe we should also open this next meeting up to the public.

Atty. Parese stated this sounds like good use of time at the current stage, we need time for a comprehensive conversation.

Ms. McGowan stated we should also invite residents and businesses to the meeting.

Ms. McCallum maybe we should create classes of hotels. We can do small hotels in RR2 we need to think about this from this angle.

Mr. Winters stated that this is a very important thing that Atty. Parese brought up the Idlewild Inn. We have a tendency as people to think that what we have is what we've always had. This isn't necessarily the case.

Ms. Jeschawitz noted that everyone from the city has always come here, the Berkshires have a long history of tourism.

Latham Street, Fohlin Proposal

Ms. Jeschawitz stated that the former Town Manager presented this via email to various Town Officials last week and wanted to share it.

Ms. McCallum stated that this would preclude one of the possible hotel proposals. The committee is currently studying the possibility of the Dennison Park site as well as an L Shaped site. This plan would completely preclude the L Shaped site. It is important to note that the College is actively pursuing study including traffic and geotechnical analysis

Ms. Jeschawitz stated she just wanted to share this as the town has talked about this at various times throughout its history. Right now there are so many things happening in this area. There will be work done on the science center, a new book store, and potentially a hotel. We have a real opportunity to investigate the possibility of this happening.

Ms. Jeschawitz noted that the Board doesn't have a direct role in creating this corridor but it could be possible to cheerlead its completion. If the Board thinks it is good from a Planning perspective we should do it.

Ms. McGowan noted that the Clark will also have to solve some of its parking problem as this summer the on street parking has been quite bad.

Ms. Jeschawitz stated that there have been 100,000 people at this year's Van Goh exhibit.

Ms. Jeschawitz stated that we really need to start addressing some of these systemic issues we have. We need to plan for the future to alleviate some of the pains we have.

Ms. Jeschawitz stated that the Board should also remember that those 100,000 people went to the Clark.

Mr. Groff added that the inclusion of the hotel is on this plan. This plan seems to accommodate the hotel nicely.

Ms. McGowan stated that the College would have to undertake a major traffic study

Ms. Jeschawitz stated that the Board will have a joint meeting with the Economic Development Committee near the end of September.

Ms. Jeschawitz noted for general awareness to the community the College will be conducting geotechnical engineering at the base of Spring Street. There will be some drilling going on at that location.

The meeting adjourned at 9:05 PM.