

Minutes of
The Williamstown Planning Board
TUESDAY, AUGUST 11, 2015
7:00 p.m. at the Municipal Building

Members Present: Amy Jeschawitz , Chris Winters, Ann McCallum

Others Present: Andrew Groff, Van Ellet

Ms. Jeschawitz opened the meeting at 7:02 PM.

MINUTES

Ms. McCallum moved approval of the minutes from July as presented.

Mr. Winters seconded.

The Motion Carried Unanimously.

OLD BUSINESS

Housing Policy Study

Ms. Jeschawitz Mr. Groff has put together a synopsis of some important baseline data on housing.

Ms. McCallum stated that she and Mr. Groff discussed this topic earlier in the week and it is in fact depressing. We are getting smaller as a community. The youngest cohorts are also declining the fastest, this is not a promising trend. The Economic Development Committee is working on the one side of the coin and perhaps they can address some of these issues and we can address this housing piece.

Ms. Jeschawitz, page four shows some of the most interesting information which is the highlighting of the building permit data for the last several years. The multifamily housing information is quite interesting. There seems to be demand for multi family units but little manner of permitting these through zoning.

Ms. McCallum added that based on her discussions with real estate professionals pied-a-terre's small units are the demand.

Mr. Winters added that an additional issue is that our prices are too high.

Ms. Jeschawitz noted that this is correct and part of the problem.

Mr. Winters added that this is a supply problem, if you create conditions for supply, you would see the demand.

Ms. Jeschawitz stated that there is a need for all levels of housing in the community. We don't have some of the things we want, and smaller single family homes might be in demand and as Mr. Winters notes we aren't seeing it. We need a broad base of housing so were are accessible to everyone.

Mr. Winters added that in the heavy red line (referring to demographic in baseline report) we are seeing the lack of starter homes.

Ms. Jeschawitz stated the way we can look at this is we're developing a plan that goes 5 years out or so.

Mr. Groff added that this is an excellent time to be taking steps to solve some of these issues as the 2020 census is 5 years out and will highlight changes in these population trends.

Ms. Jeschawitz noted that Highland Woods is starting to take applications for their units and the add lists income limits and the like the Cable Mills affordable units have also been advertised. It will be fascinating to see how fast or how slow each of these developments fills up. We need to watch this closely especially Cable Mills to see where the market goes and how it absorbs the demand.

Ms. Jeschawitz added that the most fascinating piece highlighted by the report is the zoning regulations and how they perhaps have helped to create some of this problem.

Ms. McCallum added that the Board seems to think we have a market but maybe we will find that these new projects have absorbed the demand within the market. Some of these ideas the Board has had previously on allowing more market freedoms are based on form based coding and smart growth ideas. One of the concepts behind this is to make the Village business district a stronger district and a more vibrant area. Having more people living and walking in this area will create more economic activity. In fact people who live in their downtown and walk tend to spend around 60% more than others. We can approach this one of two ways, we can allow more uses in more areas, or we could change our multifamily regulations

Ms. McCallum gave a broader description on loosening up the rules for multi-family regulations adding that loosening specific regulations would not lessen current dimensional standards for the basic zoning districts.

Ms McCallum added that there could be pushback if this type of development is allowed too liberally, does the board think that people will like multi family developments scattered across the landscape?

Mr. Winters noted that the Board needs a diversity of type and location. People of all backgrounds love and

appreciate rural living there's no reason we shouldn't allow those types of people to live in a certain part of the community.

Ms. McCallum I think the downside to this is that if people think the rural character of the community will be damaged we will damage our appeal to tourists we do not want to kill the goose that laid the golden egg.

Mr. Winters stated, that is a perfectly rational line of argument but what if we took it to the extreme well that is exactly what we've done since we accepted zoning to begin with.

Ms. Jeschawitz stated that when we get to doing community forums we will test this and get feedback. That is why the Board will do this kind of outreach we're not going to decide this today.

Ms. McCallum added that eliminating the provision on converting large homes could be a simple manner of providing additional units with little impact.

Mr. Winters asked if the Board knew what the intent of this provision was.

Mr. Groff stated that it precludes places in town like the Leake House or the Park Street Condo. In terms of intent, this is unclear.

Ms. McCallum stated it was likely in response to fears that apartments would attract different types of residents than large homes.

Mr. Winters and Ms. McCallum also added that the way in which required open spaces are regulated for multi and some single family developments presents constraints on development.

Mr. Groff added that open space residential development is possible in certain areas of the community. This was tried several years prior following an in depth study and could once again be an appropriate approach to some of these issues and provide flexibility for both developers and preservation proponents.

Mr. Groff also added that Major Residential Development (MRD) in the existing bylaw prevents any development over 7 units or 7 lots that is not in the Cable Mill district or a 40B type development. The Board should not forget about this provision it is the single most restrictive provision in the bylaw regarding housing.

Mr. Winters asked if has anyone ever used it.

Mr. Groff, no.

Ms. McCallum noted that she has prepared some information on how townhouses could work in Williamstown and added that it would be fascinating in doing public outreach if we show people what we could do let's talk to people and figure out what is and is not a scary thought.

Ms. Jeschawitz added what would be interesting to do is to take a big plan of the downtown and find a spot and stick a draft development on the page. Let's show people what a new zoning bylaw could do.

Mr. Groff noted that this is the type of work the Planning Board can really excel at. If the Board develops a set of goals and a vision the nuts and bolts work of figuring out which provisions in zoning must be altered and exact legal mechanisms to get there can be done by town staff.

Ms. Jeschawitz and Ms. McCallum noted that perhaps Mr. Groff could prepare an additional report identifying some of these bylaw impediments to assist in a conversation in September.

Mr. Groff agreed.

Ms. McCallum asked for information on in-law apartments to be included.

The meeting adjourned at 9:05 PM.