

Barre City Planning Commission

August 12, 2021 Meeting Minutes

Present: David Sichel (Chair), Jackie Calder (Vice Chair), Michael Hellein (Secretary), Amanda Gustin, Thomas Lauzon, Jim McWilliam, Rachel Rudi

Staff: Janet Shatney (Director of Planning, Permitting & Assessing)

1. Call to Order

6:30pm

2. Adjustments to the Agenda

No adjustments.

3. Public Comment

No public comment.

4. Old business

A. Approve meeting minutes of July 22, 2021

Motion: Gustin, Second Rudi, Approved

B. Discussion of Housing Whitepaper with future steps

Gustin made further changes to the whitepaper and is almost done incorporating new data, with housing sales data from 2018 still to be added.

Calder suggested a header before graph explaining that housing conditions are changing quickly so we have included up-to-date data.

Gustin will prepare a final draft and Planning Commission will consider sending to City Council at our next meeting of 8/26.

5. New business

A. Signage Discussion

Shatney mentioned that window signage is a controversial issue for some businesses downtown, as the City is beginning to inform businesses with signs that are out of conformance. Many cities wait for complaints from the public to inform them about signs that do not conform.

Hellein stated that as a Planning Commissioner he believes the signs ordinance is correct, with the exception of the prohibition of vinyl material. He expressed concern that the DRB may sometimes be moved by sympathy for businesses that are out of compliance due to ignorance, but that seems to describe a communication problem not a shortcoming of the ordinance.

Sichel stated that variances are granted under specific rules set out by state statute, and that while we could create an avenue for conditional approval, currently a variance is the only way to approve is by a variance.

Shatney explained that for decades there were no rules on signage behind glass, but we were fortunate that no one plastered their windows. She shared images of the facade of Dominos, which is completely covered by vinyl signage.

There was some discussion of what constitutes a sign, and the current ordinance was reviewed.

Shatney mentioned that the sign regulation does not have a section for "Temporary Signs". Sichel said that a good way to think about what is allowed is to consider what downtown would look like if every storefront did it: what would downtown look like if all the windows were covered.

Hellein questioned whether there was a reason for temporary signs, since all regulations are related to the physical form of signs. Lauzon said a good use for temporary signs was to help out a business that was having a clearance sale, for example. Lauzon also supported removing the prohibition of vinyl signs, and suggested looking at other municipalities' code for examples. Gustin suggested that a big sale may be a good reason to permit a temporary sign.

Gustin suggested using the experience of visiting a town that seems like it has good signage as an indicator that they may have a good signs ordinance. Gustin supported removing the prohibition of vinyl signs in the Design Review Overlay from the ordinance..

Sichel suggested looking at 10 cities in Vermont the size of Barre with a downtown. **Shatney will review ordinances from other cities and prepare a summary for the Planning Commission the Friday in advance of our next meeting.**

B. Municipal Planning Grant Application

Shatney mentioned that walkability is a hot topic, and a Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan would be worth getting funding for.

Gustin mentioned housing related plans, and Sichel and Shatney said more sources of funding for housing are likely coming soon.

Hellein mentioned study for a comprehensive traffic calming strategy. Shatney stated that the Police Department has a new speed cart, and that the Chief asked for where problem areas are. McWilliam observed Tremont, and Shatney observed that Maple Avenue by Hope Cemetery has high speeds. Hellein said that speeding was everywhere in the City, with Gustin adding that her dead end street sees cars traveling at high speed. Hellein continued that the problem is so easily observable that it should not require gathering data before taking action.

Calder said that hiring a Planning Consultant should require that they publicize the grant work, and Shatney confirmed that it will be part of the contract.

Motion: To authorize Shatney to prepare a Planning grant application that would address pedestrian and bicycle safety with an emphasis on traffic calming strategies to achieve this. Moved Gustin, Second McWilliam, approved unanimously

C. All in for Barre Community Visit August 25, 2021

Sichel encourages any Commissioners who are available to attend the All in for Barre events.

Shatney said that the City is doing a city-wide mailing of a promotional postcard.

6. Staff Updates

No new staff updates.

Calder noted that a lot of senior staff will be leaving the City in the near future, and wondered if there was a backup plan for if positions are not filled. Shatney said it's a decision between the City Manager and department heads to decide whether a deputy can step into the role, and in most cases it requires advertising the position.

7. Round Table

Sichel stated that Shatney forwarded an email from Joelen Mulvaney of the Diversity and Equity Committee about coming to a Planning Commission meeting to present the Equity Assessment Tool.

Hellein mentioned that a Ward 2 seat is opening on the DRB.

8. Adjourn

7:45pm, **Motion McWilliam, Second Calder, Adjourned**