

February 1, 2022 Planning Board

Present were: Regular Members: Chair Lori Langlois, Tom McCue, Suzanne Wasileski, Dan Whittet, Brian Valerino (excused at 7:23pm); **Ex-Officio member:** Lise Barrette; **Alternate Members:** Henry Noel, Amy George, Jeffrey Quackenbush.

Excused were: Regular members: Anthony Valliere, Theodore Bosen; **Ex-Officio member:** Lucie Remillard; **Alternate Members:** Jennifer Lazzaro, Karen Collins.

Others Present: Pamela Laflamme, Community Development Director; Michel Salek, Building Inspector.

Chair Langlois called the meeting to order and appointed Alternate Members Amy George, Jeffrey Quackenbush and Henry Noel as voting members.

Public Comments

None

Approval of January 2022 minutes

Some errors were found in the minutes. Theodore Bosen was listed as Present and Excused, he was actually Excused. Under Approval of Minutes, it was written that November 2021 minutes were approved, it should be written as December 2021 minutes were approved. Mr. Whittet made a motion to approve the minutes of the January 2022 meeting with the corrections. Ms. Wasileski seconded the motion. All in favor, the motion carried. Mr. McCue and Mr. Valerino abstained.

Site Plan Review/Design Review, Phase 1 (ATV rentals/staging area) – Savannahwood LLC (Bruce Luksza, agent) Tax Map 407, Lot 12 off West Milan Road located on Jericho Lake Road

As Mr. Luksza is out of State, Ms. Laflamme is sharing the review of the project. Mr. Luksza has an agreement with the owner of Savannahwood LLC to be his acting agent. Ms. Laflamme shared the plan and explained the location of the lot which sits along West Milan Road and along Jericho Lake Road. This lot has direct access to the trail system and they are working closely with the NH Bureau of Trails. The NH Department of Transportation is also working closely with them because Jericho Lake Road is a State maintained road. The areas they are looking to develop are a check-in tent, a vehicle parking area, Quonset huts for storage, machine parking, and a large Training Park for ATV's. In the past there have been many accidents happening due to inexperienced beginner drivers. Clint Savage from the NH Bureau of Trails have been working closely with Mr. Luksza in coming up with training procedures to help in lessening the number of accidents occurring on the trails. Ms. Laflamme also mentioned that she has read the Governor's and Council minutes where it says that the State has received a contract to expand State Campgrounds and Jericho Campground is one of them. This will increase ATV tourism in our area.

Mr. Quackenbush asked how many machines they are expecting and will this be seasonal or year-round. Ms. Laflamme say they are planning 300 machines and to be seasonal. Yet, they are working with a company where they may also include snow machines during the winter time. Mr. Quackenbush asked about the wetlands and the impacts on them. Ms. Laflamme said she will mention the concern to Mr. Luksza and also assured that they have experience with dealing with wetlands and it rules and regulations. She says she believes the wetlands in this area have already been mapped and will look into it. Mr. Quackenbush asked if we have a Conservation Policy in place for the City. Ms. Laflamme explained that we do not, but in the past, it has been discussed about creating a Conservation Committee.

Chair Langlois asked about lighting and access to electricity. Ms. Laflamme stated that there is electricity available at the Jericho Lake buildings and this is something that they will have to look into.

Mr. Valerino spoke from a law enforcement perspective. He likes the proposal and especially the training area. He has seen many issues with ATV rental companies and renting to beginners without any sort of training. Last year some rental companies put a governor on the rental machines which puts a speed limit on them. They have found that their calls involving ATV's have decreased significantly. He knows it's not something that can be mandated but he's wondering if there was a way to get that incorporated into the plan. Ms. Laflamme says she will bring the suggestion to his attention.

Mr. Whittet asked if there will be a bathroom facility. Ms. Laflamme says for this upcoming season they are planning on using porta-potties.

Mr. McCue asked who the abutters are. Ms. Laflamme says this is a 535-acre parcel and the abutters are the State Park and Jericho Road, more land owned by Savannahwood LLC, and she wasn't sure of land to the North. Mr. McCue also pointed out that we will have to factor in more vehicular traffic on Route 110. Ms. Laflamme shared that the Governor and Council have approved the agreement with the City of Berlin in acquiring the extra two miles on Route 110. This plan may actually help lessen ATV traffic on Route 110.

Mr. Quackenbush asked why the developers think this is a good idea since there are many ATV rental companies in the area. Ms. Laflamme says they are working with a new company to help in expanding their product and they plan to make it be better received by families.

Ms. Wasileski asked about the cleared area for the 300 machines and is wondering if that parking area is big enough to accommodate them. Ms. Laflamme says this is a preliminary plan which is not to scale and there will not be any paved areas this upcoming season. Ms. Laflamme says they are also aware that the land is in Current Use and they will be paying a penalty when they start to develop. They also are aware of filing an Intent to Cut for Timber with the City. There is an existing road or trail that they will be utilizing to begin their clearcutting.

Capital Improvement Program – Presentation and Vote

Ms. Laflamme explained the Capital Improvement Plan is a document created with the input of all departments and is a tool used to help with budgeting. The Planning Board is the first to view, approve and recommend this document to the City Council. As this was her first year putting it together, she realized that over the years there hasn't been much consistency with the way it was done between all the departments. The Finance Department is currently looking at new software which will have the capability to help with this process. She is counting on this process being done very differently next year. She explained that the document being shared is made up of index pages for each year and does not include the individual sheets for each project. Some of these projects have been on the list for a very long time, some are Capital Items and some are small items which may not even belong on this list. A few projects that were pointed out were the Downtown Snow Melt System, or otherwise known as Downtown Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Project. This is a very large project which appears each year although she has found that this number may be larger. There are some projects that carry over each year like the Housing Initiative and the PW Equipment Replacement. The City Council will not necessarily budget for each of these items, it is used as a guiding document to help in creating the budget. Budget cuts usually come the Capital Projects first. There was some discussion around items like retaining walls and police cruisers.

Mr. Whittet asked if it is indicated whether the money for each project comes from tax income, bonds or grant funding. Ms. Laflamme says that each department is asked that question to anticipate if the money will be coming from the general reserve or grants. Mr. Whittet asked about where the money was coming from for the Route 110 Sewer Extension. Ms. Laflamme says that we already have received grant funds for the design of the water and sewer extensions and there have been discussions with the State about accessing infrastructure funds. In five years, the City will have total maintenance responsibility for Route 110. There was more discussion around the design of Route 110 as a Gateway to the City, the zoning in that area, and the needs for changing driveway access regulations.

Mr. Quackenbush asked about where we can find information as to whether these are Capital Initiative Projects or a Capital Maintenance Item. Ms. Laflamme said that the spreadsheets and individual pages will be available online. Mr. Quackenbush asked if it states anywhere as to whether the projects are related to the Master Plan or it's a department goal. Ms. Laflamme said that question is also on the individual project sheets.

Ms. George say she is very happy to see this document tie into the Master Plan. She looks forward to it becoming public knowledge so that it can create more specific goals for all. Ms. Laflamme said that with the new software being purchased it will help in putting it all together and Capital Improvement Projects will be tied into it.

Mr. Whittet asked who is determining which software is going to be purchased. Ms. Laflamme said that Holly Larsen the Finance Director has been looking at different software since last summer. She's looked at four specific ones and talked to other communities and assembled a committee to study them.

Mr. Noel asked about whether we will see the Water Works budget as it ties in with the Route 110 project. Ms. Laflamme said their budget would probably appear on their website but it does not go through the City Council. There have been discussions already between the Public Works and Water Works in coordinating their jobs with each other.

Mr. McCue made a motion to recommend to the City Council to adopt the Capital Improvement Plan. Mr. Whittet seconded it. All in favor, the motion carried.

Other

Ms. Laflamme shared a suggestion from Mr. Salek concerning camping and the parking of Recreational Vehicles (RV's) on land. This has become a common question from people who want to purchase vacant land and put an RV on it. Currently our Rural Residential zone allows Seasonal Dwellings but this excludes RV's. Our Floodplain Ordinance, which was adopted from the State, allows RV's for no more than 180 consecutive days on areas affected by the flood plain. This creates a conflict between our ordinances. The suggestion is to change our Zoning Ordinance to correspond with the Floodplain Ordinance by allowing property owners in the rural residential zone to site one RV per lot for use as a "seasonal dwelling" for a maximum consecutive time period of 180 days between May 1st and October 31st.

Mr. Quackenbush asked whether it was allowed to just park your RV on your own property. Ms. Laflamme explained that a homeowner can park their RV on their land, just not live in it. The issue comes up when people want to buy a vacant parcel and make it their home base with an RV instead of parking it in a campground.

Mr. Whittet expressed his concern on whether someone can just move their RV from one end of their lot to another after the 180 days. He was assured that the RV has to actually be removed from the property. Ms. Laflamme said that we can limit the seasonal use from May 1st to October 31st which is 184 days.

Mr. Quackenbush asked how we are to know whether someone is living in it. Some people do make it their permanent residence. Ms. Laflamme said the winter environment is probably less desirable for people to live in an RV so it may hinder someone from living in one year-round. There was also some discussion concerning whether we would allow multiple campers on a lot or allowing people to install their own septic system for the RV to hook into.

Mr. Quackenbush suggested using a permitting process which would help in knowing when there is an RV parked somewhere. This would make the Fire Department and Police Department aware that it is there. Ms. Laflamme said that we could work at creating some type of permit with a fee.

Public Comments

None

Member Comments

Mr. McCue brought up some discussion on the Short-Term Rental issue which has been in the news in Conway. The City of Berlin has taken a stand back approach to see what other communities do and what Legislature decides. There has been a gain in short-term rental properties in Berlin in the past year.

Mr. Quackenbush asked if there is a concern that it affects the housing stock in Berlin or are the disturbances a concern. Ms. Laflamme said there haven't been too many disturbances that have come up over the years and that we used to have a 15.6% vacancy rate which has now dropped down to .6% rate. This drop in the vacancy rates is not all due to short-term rentals, there are also many people purchasing houses in the area for second homes. There was more discussion around cluster housing and its impacts.

Mr. Quackenbush brought up the Downtown vacant building that can be used for housing on the second and third floors. Ms. Laflamme talked about the two current buildings on Main Street with housing and they are always filled. Mr. McCue said it's difficult for people to rehabilitate these old buildings with modern day codes and it becomes very expensive. Ms. George asked about finding grants to help with these costs. Ms. Laflamme said that grants are always tied to certain demographics and there is also a Downtown Tax Incentive program. There was more discussion around the NH Housing Authority, HUD program and block grants.

Chair Langlois brought up that in April 2024 Coos County will be expecting a large increase in traffic for the Total Solar Eclipse which will be visible in our area. They have predicted tens of thousands of people coming to the area for this event. There was more discussion around this event concerning electric car stations and hotels. There will also be a partial eclipse event out west in October 2023 which will be watched closely to see how those communities manage it.

Ms. Barrette asked about the status of the 121 Main Street building sale. Ms. Laflamme said that the sale has not been finalized. The individual who is interested in rehabilitating the building for housing has found some things that would increase his costs. They are taking some time to determine if they want to take on the project.

Planner Comments

None

Adjournment

There being no further business to come before the board, Mr. Quackenbush made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Mr. McCue. All in favor, the motion carried.

The meeting ended at 7:23pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Lise Barrette

* Note: These minutes are unofficial until they have been accepted by the Planning Board by motion.