

February 7, 2023 Planning Board

Present were: Regular Members: Chair Lori Langlois, Vice-Chair Tom McCue, Henry Noel, Anthony Valliere, Dan Whittet, Karen Collins; **Ex-Officio Member:** Lise Barrette; **Alternate Members:** Jeffrey Quackenbush, Lori Korzen.

Excused were: Regular Members: Larry Laflamme **Ex-Officio Member:** Lucie Remillard
Alternate Member: Micah Bachner, Amy George.

Others Present: Pamela Laflamme, Director of Strategic Initiatives; Phillip Warren, City Manager.

Chair Langlois called the meeting to order at 6:30pm. Chair Langlois appointed Alternate Members Jeffrey Quackenbush and Lori Korzen as voting members.

Public Comments

None

Approval of January 10, 2023 Minutes

Mr. McCue made a motion to approve the minutes of the January 10, 2023 meeting as presented. Mr. Whittet seconded the motion. All in favor, the motion carried.

Public Comments

None

Capital Improvement Plan Review & Recommendation to City Council

Mr. Warren presented the Capital Improvement Plan. This is a five-year plan put together with the City Manager and Department Heads for anything that is over \$10,000. In the future he hopes to make that limit much higher. He also shared his thoughts on changes for next year in making it a comprehensive list including funding mechanisms with recommendations and to include debt service. Many of the items in this Capital Improvement Plan should actually be part of the operating budget. Some questions were asked about how the future Plan would look like, Mr. Warren answered that for the future it will show how the project or item correlates with the Master Plan, it will show the intended use of life for the item, and it will identify incremental replacement costs.

Ms. Langlois asked if there is a prioritization to these items in particular the Snowmobile Trail item. There was some discussion around the future of the snowmobile trail that sits on the sidewalk through downtown and where it could possibly be moved to. With the Downtown Reconstruction Project, it will not be able to remain on that sidewalk. There were more questions and discussion around some items including Moxie Alley, retaining wall replacement, Heritage Park roof, the Pavement Resurface program, HVAC units at the school, voting machines, and the sand & salt shed.

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

Lot Merger, Big House Studios, 112 Pleasant Street, Map 119 Lots 35 and 36

Ms. Laflamme presented the merger. The two properties are owned by Big House Studios who runs their business as Tree City Arts. Lot 36 has the building on it, they recently purchased Lot 35 from the City. Lot 35 is fenced off and there isn't a concrete pad, it's a dirt lot. Mr. McCue observed that these two lots are contiguous, they have common ownership, it's a simple merger requested by the owner and it will create one tax bill, and it is also in the best interest of the City to have them merged.

Mr. McCue made a motion to accept the merger of Map 119 Lots 35 and 36. Ms. Collins seconded the motion. All in favor, the motion carried.

Board members discussed the application to create Findings of Fact as follows:

- The lots are contiguous
- This is a simple merger requested by the owner
- This will create a single tax bill for the owner
- It's in the best interest of the City and it conforms with all Zoning and Planning Regulations

Ms. Collins made a motion to approve the Findings of Fact. Ms. Langlois seconded it. All in favor, the motion carried.

Other:

Ms. Laflamme explained that the building permit fees have changed. The land use fees have all remained the same except the Driveway Permit fee still needs to be changed from \$10 to \$25. Driveway permits applications are reviewed by Public Works and by Ms. Laflamme.

Mr. McCue made a motion to change the Driveway Permit Application fee from \$10 to \$25. Mr. Whittet seconded it. All in favor, the motion carried.

Public Comments:

None

Member Comments

None

Planner Comments and Project Updates

Mr. Quackenbush asked if the stakes along the Riverwalk will be removed. Ms. Laflamme explained that they are there for the winter to use as guides for public works plowing. They should be removed in the Spring.

Ms. Barrette asked about the sale of 121 Main Street and whether the new owners are following through with their project. Ms. Laflamme explained that the Tax Incentive was

passed by the Council and she has reached out to the owner with a sample of a covenant he will need to Register. The new owner has plans to start renovations in May or June.

Adjournment

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

The regular Planning Board meeting ended at 7:11 pm.

Master Plan Implementation Committee

Ms. Langlois called the Master Plan Implementation meeting to order at 7:11pm.

Ms. Laflamme shared that she hopes to soon set up an area on the website where she can put all the Master Plan minutes and other information.

Mr. McCue made a motion to approve the Master Plan Committee Conversation minutes. Mr. Whittet seconded it. All in favor, motion carried.

Mr. Quackenbush asked about the status of the project for updating the Zoning Ordinance. Ms. Laflamme said she has had reached out to four consultants and has been turned down by all due to their lack of staffing and overabundance of work. She will talk to Resilience Planning and Design again to see if they would consider doing it in the future.

Ms. Laflamme read through the following Implementation points for Section 2 with discussion as follows.

2A.1 Conduct an inventory of the critical community health issues in Berlin. Both Coos County Family Health and the North Country Health Consortium were doing recurring surveys until COVID happened. Ms. Collins has worked in these areas and has always seen a disconnect between the entities always assuming the others will do certain parts. She doesn't feel all community stakeholders get the surveys, especially people who don't use Coos County Family Health. She says she would like to connect with them in the future to see if they could use her help in making connections for better survey results.

2A.2 Fund and invest in the City departments that can promote and support healthy living such as the Health Department and Recreation Department. Angela in the Health/Welfare Department is a one-person department and does what she can to promote her resources. We hope to have more website activity for the Health Department in the future. DJ of the Recreation Department has more volunteers available and has done a great job in creating new and different activities. He is getting some training on the website to become better at promoting and marketing. Ms. Langlois mentioned that something we ought to explore in the future is the UNH Cooperative Extension Master Wellness Program who have workers throughout NH to help support healthy living.

2A.3 Work with Tri-County CAP to better promote their services to the broader population. Tri-County CAP has been making lots changes to improve their promotion of services and programs.

2A.4 Identify ways the City can support community organizations and social service providers, such as Tri-County CAP, Coos County Family Health, and North Country Healthcare working to address issues like substance abuse and homelessness in the community. Both of these issues have come up as topic of conversation at recent staff meetings and the Police Department has been working in both these areas. Tri-County CAP and our Health Department have been working with the homeless. The Police Department

has shared some statistics on substance abuse where numbers have grown back to previous high numbers we've had. Ms. Collins believes this would be a good opportunity to have a round table discussion in the future. She will have more time in the future to focus on this. Tri-County CAP has recently done a count of the homeless and there are approximately 30 individuals in Berlin. They are difficult to count because some are couch surfing during the winter months. It's difficult to give them resources because they are unable to stay in their own rents and establish a living and there aren't many places that will not take the homeless in for various reasons.

St. Barnabas Church has been making efforts in opening up twice a week to have a warm place for the homeless to hang out at. Ms. Korzen shared her experiences working in Boston with a type of program called Housing First which can work here in Berlin. It gives people a place to live first and then help them to find income and/or work. Ms. Collins said the Tri-County CAP uses the Housing First model. Someone is paired with the person in need, they get them an apartment and help them get assistance and then look for a job. The problem in Berlin is that there isn't enough housing available and there also isn't any Sober Living program. There is a group in Littleton and some other for-profit group that have tried several times to bring Sober Living here but have been unsuccessful. There was some talk about the stigma of people in recovery and homeless. Ms. Collins spoke about the NH Certification of Recovery Residences which is a state group which has a process that individuals have to follow to be certified by the state. There was some discussion about what Sober Living would look like and the different models of them.

There was also more discussion about the drug trafficking into Berlin. Mr. Whittet said that it sounds like this topic is large enough that we could have a separate committee to work on this like the Energy Committee has done. This will be explored further.

2A.5 Pursue development of a downtown community wellness center to provide gathering space, medical office space, counseling services, educational space, and other needed community amenities. Coos County Family Health is still interested in doing this although they have not found the right space. It would take a couple of big organizations to make this happen. Mr. Quackenbush asked if it could be tied into a new Recreational Facility, yes that can be the City portion of the project. Ms. Langlois mentioned two grants that are available. One is through the Campus Compact of NH and Partnership for Rural Impact for Family Engagement Centers. It's a five million dollar grant for five years. They plan to create a Family Center in Manchester and are potentially looking for a space in the North Country, possibly Berlin. Also, there's a branch of the Boys and Girls Club out of Concord has spoken at the College about the need for this program in the North Country and they are looking for opportunities.

2A.6 Better understand the childcare needs of families in. This is the mission of the Coos Coalition for Young Children and Families. Kids Only is closing, but we have new owners of the Mother Goose Day Care.

2A.7 Encourage and facilitate the investment in resources that help the elderly to age in place. This is also a large need. We have a lack of housing and amenities for the elderly. There were different models of housing discussed such as young people living together with the elderly. Service Link and their part in this endeavor was talked about. Tri-County

CAP is making strides in their public transportation. Another group that can be looked into Transport NH.

2A.8 Continue to build out community and family friendly amenities like playgrounds, indoor community/play space, and community fun/educational events to encourage healthy habits and living. DJ of the Recreation Department is trying to build this up.

2B.1 Revisit hosting a farmer's market in in the summer. Tree City Arts is looking at the possibility. Gorham has a strong robust Farmer's Market for the past few years.

2B.2 Identify potential sites for a community garden. Ms. Laflamme has discussed with a student at the College who is doing a project and is looking at Friendship Park on Mason Street. It has raised beds and some equipment. Other entities discussed that could help with this issue is Farm to School, the Food Coop, and the UNH Wellness Program. Mr. Quackenbush mentioned that the Highland Park off of Ruby Street would be a great area for gardens.

2B.3 Continue to promote the City's food pantries and support the ongoing visits of the NH Food Bank's Mobile Food Pantry. The NH Food Bank is coming to the area on a regular basis. The Health Department shares information about the food pantries to clients regularly.

2B.4 Continue to support the establishment of a co-op grocery store to serve both locals and visitors. The group currently have 312 members. They need approximately 500 to 600 members to begin actual site plans. When they reach 800 they will be ready to look into actual construction.

2C.1 Collaborate with surrounding communities on regional housing and public transportation solutions. Ms. Laflamme discussed the House Bill 44 which will take away local controls. This law states that there can be up to four residential units on a lot where you have water and sewer. This is not practical on a 50 x 100 lot. It does work well for larger lots. There is concern around legal implications when there are two houses on a lot and we need to try and create two lots out of it. There was discussion about short-term rentals and the concern that we are being overrun by them. As of 2019 there was a survey that said there were approximately 35 short term rentals out of 4,784 housing units. Looking at the current information through the Assessing Department there are 3,309 housing units. She has found that there is approximately 72 units that are short-term rentals. These numbers show that short-term rentals are not causing a big strain. When Corcoran Consulting ran numbers last year as to how many out of town owners there are, it was found that it was around 20%. Another issue that lends to the shortage of housing is people living in two family homes and for multiple reasons decide not to rent out the other apartment. There are multiple causes for the shortage of housing which can be looked into, one of them being revisiting the Land Use codes.

2C.2 The current lack of public transportation. This was discussed in 2A.7, particularly bringing in Transport NH to the area.

2C.3 Launch a public awareness campaign in Berlin to educate the public about housing issues that exist in the City and create a call to action. North Country Council is doing this for the region as a whole. We may want to create another committee to do this in the Berlin area.

2C.4 Investigate the feasibility of establishing a housing trust in Berlin. The Housing Authority had thought about looking into doing this, but due to the transitioning of hiring a new Executive Director it will take time.

2C.5 Allow for a range of housing alternatives in City zoning. This could involve anything from shared housing with elderly and youth to allowing tiny houses.

2D.1 Evaluate and improve, where needed, the ADA accessibility. As this is something that would involve all public buildings and pedestrian access, it's something to keep in mind for all future projects.

2E.1 Maintain trails, sports fields, courts, playgrounds, and other amenities. There has been a new position created in the Parks Department to help with these tasks. It would be good to have volunteer groups to help with this.

2E.2 Ensure all parks and recreation resources have adequate lighting. Most of our parks are supposed to be closed at dusk.

2E.3 Add amenities to parks and recreation resources. Amy Welch who works in the schools has been working with students who wanted to get more trash cans in our parks. Unfortunately, we do not have the Public Work staffing to take care of more trash receptacles which turn into dumping ground for large items. The students have decided to put together an education campaign to come up with signage and language for the community and will present it to the council.

2E.4 Pursue opportunities, in collaboration with partners, to create parks and walking paths. The Tondreau Park allows dogs although they are not an official dog park. Ms. Korzen is putting together a Story Book Trail. In the future it would be good to focus on existing park spaces and trails.

2E.5 Continue to support the work of local and regional artists through public art competitions, funding for creating gallery space, support for creation and use of theater space, and encouraging the use of vacant space for displaying art. Tree City Arts and AVH displays art. St Kieran's Center for the Arts has lots of events. There are many local artisans in which we can touch base with to make changes. The Main Street program is also looking into pushing art events.

There being no further Master Plan Implementation business to come before the board, Mr. Whittet made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Ms. Collins. All in favor, the motion carried.

Respectfully submitted,

Lise Barrette

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