

June 6, 2023
Planning Board

Present were: Regular Members: Chair Lori Langlois, Vice-Chair Tom McCue, Henry Noel, Dan Whittet, Larry Laflamme; **Ex-Officio Member:** Lucie Remillard and Lise Barrette; **Alternate Member:** Micah Bachner

Excused were Regular Members: Anthony Valliere, Karen Collins; **Alternate Member:** Jeffrey Quackenbush

Others Present: Pamela Laflamme, Director of Strategic Initiatives; Andre Bergeron

The Chair called the meeting to order at 6:30pm. Ms. Langlois appointed Alternate Member Micah Bachner as a voting member.

Public Comments

None

Approval of May 3, 2023 Minutes

Mr. McCue made a motion to approve the minutes of the May 3, 2023 meeting as submitted. Mr. Laflamme seconded the motion. All in favor, the motion carried.

Lot Merger Map 132 Lot 45 and Lot 47, Maurice and Natalie Croteau

Mr. and Mrs. Croteau purchased the small Lot 47 which is surrounded by their other property of Lot 45. They are asking to merge both lots into Lot 45.

Ms. Remillard made a motion to accept the lot merger as presented. Mr. Bachner seconded it. All in favor, the motion carried.

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

- It's a voluntary merger requested by property owners
- Both lots are in the same zone and will create one tax bill

Mr. Bachner made a motion to approve the Findings of Fact. Mr. McCue seconded it. All in favor, motion approved.

Housing Opportunity Grant – NH Housing - update

Ms. Laflamme shared that there is a signed agreement with the Barrett Planning Group for the Housing Opportunity Grant. The group plans on being in Berlin on July 18th through the 20th to hold interviews with different stakeholders in the community. They will also be touring the community and begin discussions on engagement strategies to get input and feedback from the community. They would like to meet with the Planning Board on July 18th at 6:30.

Ms. Laflamme and Ms. Langlois have both completed three out of five sessions of the Housing Academy. Sessions have been centering on how to hold discussions in the community.

The goal of the grant is to review and audit all regulations. They will be looking for anything that might be a barrier to housing.

We have until July 2024 to finish the audit, the community engagement pieces and the update to our regulations.

Ms. Laflamme and the Board members tried one of the activities that was shown in the Housing Academy. She will ask a couple of questions and each person will have to answer in 60 seconds or less.

The first question was: What do you believe is the biggest cause or contributor to the lack of available rental housing in this City? Answers were as follows:

Mr. McCue: the high costs to the property owner.

Mr. Whittet: lack of employment with reasonable wages.

Mr. Bachner: the increase of the percentage of out-of-state owners who are not invested.

Mr. Noel: the outmigration of working population and very little in-migration.

Ms. Remillard: lack of development opportunities and people don't have enough funds to build or maintain.

Mr. Laflamme: many rentals are not owned by people who live in the building which causes a lack of local ownership with no investing.

Ms. Barrette: tenants have more rights than the landlords which causes people to not want to rent out their property.

Ms. Langlois: local people are fearful of advertising and renting out their property and would rather leave their apartments empty.

Ms. Laflamme: agrees with most of what was already shared.

The second question was: What do you believe attributes to the increase of the costs of single-family homes? Answers were as follows:

Ms. Langlois: people from out of the community buying property has increased since the Pandemic and many are opening short term rentals or using them as second homes.

Ms. Barrette: agrees that many people from out of the area are buying properties and using them as short-term rentals or vacation homes and they are paying high prices since they can afford it.

Mr. Laflamme: there is a lack of inventory, and Berlin has a lack of building lots.

Ms. Remillard: it started with Covid and it drove people here and it comes down to supply and demand.

Mr. Noel: he thinks that owners of the buildings are discovering that people have more money than what we give them credit for.

Mr. Bachner: the price of a mortgage is equal to monthly rental fees. Mr. Whittet: our housing prices relative to others across the Northeast are low, the inflated prices are creating pressure for people.

Mr. McCue: the low interest rates contributed to the hot market and also pointed out that out-of-area people are buying properties here for their retirement homes.

Ms. Laflamme: pointed out that the percentage of short-term rentals is very low in our community.

Ms. Laflamme mentioned some ideas they have come up with to engage the community to come to a city meeting. One is to have an event at a local food establishment and have food to people. Another is to set up a booth at a big City event asking people to write their opinions on post-it notes. Story telling circles is another idea where people can share each other's housing story.

Mr. Noel mentioned that we can also do something like a campaign and knock on door surveying people.

Ms. Laflamme asked the Board what they thought would bring themselves and community members to the table to talk about housing issues in the City. A few ideas were mentioned including talking to different businesses in the area, distributing surveys by tapping into the volunteers they had at the Day of Caring, having a speaker at the event and putting an article in the Daily Sun.

Ms. Laflamme discussed forming a Housing Opportunity Committee and named some possible members from the community.

Other:

The City is currently looking at selling the Court House. There have been several parties interested in the building within the last twelve to eighteen months. There will be a Request for Proposals put out and we will need at least two Planning Board Members in addition to other members of the community to review the proposals. Mr. McCue and Mr. Laflamme volunteered to be part of the review committee.

Public Comments

None

Member Comments

Mr. Laflamme asked Ms. Pam Laflamme if the City has any regulations on Accessory Dwelling Units. At this time, they are required to be attached but, in the future,, we may think about allowing detached ADU's also.

Mr. McCue shared his concern about the converting of commercial buildings to residential and would like people to keep in mind that we don't want to wipe out the commercial base in the community, especially in the downtown area.

Ms. Remillard said she has been approached by some residents who are asking how they would go about getting a manufactured home, the process involved, and how to set up connections with the City. There is a possibility, in the future, to create a list or pamphlet for residents with information on building new houses.

Project Updates

Ms. Laflamme shared that she is working on many grants at this time which are asking for Community Benefit Plans. They want to know how the City deals with workforce hiring. They are asking for a Plan of Climate and Resiliency as well as a Plan for Equity and Justice. There was some discussion around trying to get some assistance for her grant work.

The next meeting will be on Wednesday July 5th and also a meeting with Barrett Planning Group on July 18th.

Adjournment

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

The Planning Board meeting ended at 7:40 pm.