

July 18, 2023
Planning Board

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

Excused was Alternate Member: Jeffrey Quackenbush

Others Present: Pamela Laflamme, Director of Strategic Initiatives; Lisa Connell, Berlin Daily Sun; Judi Barrett and William Downie of Barrett Planning Group

The Chair called the meeting to order at 6:30pm.

Public Comments

None

Approval of June 6, 2023 Minutes

Mr. McCue made a motion to approve the minutes of the June 6, 2023 meeting as submitted. Mr. Valliere seconded the motion. All in favor, the motion carried.

Housing Opportunity Grant Discussion with Barrett Planning Group, LLC

Ms. Judi Barrett explained that they are currently holding interviews with Berlin residents and they also wanted to meet with the Planning Board. They would like to have a discussion at the Board level to see what Board Members want to see coming out of this process. They are in the process of learning about issues people of the community and Board Members see as barriers to housing development. They are currently doing the Regulatory Audit which involves reviewing the City Zoning Ordinances, Subdivision Regulations, and Site Plan Regulations.

Board members introduced themselves and shared their questions and concerns about housing. Some of the issues discussed were: wanting to look at a comparable community to see how they went about the process, wanting to tie-in the Community College into the process in some way, the increase of homelessness and rising costs of living, the City becoming a tourist destination, developing fewer restrictions on the development of housing and businesses, and that the City has been tearing down old dilapidated housing yet not too much is being built.

Ms. Barrett asked how much of this is due to land use regulations or other factors. That is what they will be looking into.

Ms. Laflamme gave some history of housing in Berlin. She gave information about some developments created over the years, one being Loon Road, which has only 2 houses at this time. About 20 years ago, the city took on the demolition of close to 500 units which needed to be torn down. With lots of demolitions and a lack of demand to build, our housing inventory has declined. In the past few years, there have been more new houses

being built for the first time in a very long time. We have changed the ordinance to allow 50 x 100 lots and the building of manufactured homes anywhere in the community. At this time, we do allow Accessory Dwelling Units, but they must be attached. We have a shortage of senior living, we don't have any assisted living or starter homes which would be more affordable. Some of the things we can do is loosen some restrictions on development and create incentives or programs to help people with development.

Mr. McCue brought up the fact that we have a lot of older commercial properties which need to adhere to modern codes. There was discussion following Historic Building Codes and whether it was applicable to NH. A program called StrongTowns and our ability to use their ideas on development was discussed.

There was some discussion around the Manufactured Housing development on Victoria Lane and how they are unable to expand on their land due to the costs of water and sewer development. Some ideas were talked about on how to help a situation like this.

Mr. Laflamme made a point that when a developer comes into a community they are looking at the costs involved in following building regulations, fire codes, life safety codes, and sprinklers codes. They then look as to whether there is a reasonable return on their investments and how they can cut costs.

Ms. Collins said that many members of the community are low income and are not looking for beauty when it comes to finding housing, they are just looking at what they can afford. This led to discussion about jobs and careers in the area, downtown businesses, the development of downtown vacant building, and modern building and fire codes.

Ms. Judi Barrett explained their next steps will be to continue looking at what can be controlled through regulations and what can't be. In a couple months they will come back to the Planning Board with a draft Regulation Audit.

Other

Ms. Laflamme said there will a site plan for review at the next meeting and a couple subdivisions that will be coming to the Board soon.

Public Comments

None

Member Comments

Ms. Collins shared that there will be a Berlin Community Collaboration concerning the high overdose rates in our communities. It will be held on July 19th at 6pm at the White Mountains Community College and it will be live streamed and recorded.

Project Updates

The Riverwalk is almost complete, there are a few small tasks which still need to be done such as rededicating some memorial trees, a dedicated bench, and a light. The Riverwalk has received a recognition award from Plan NH.

Ms. Laflamme has submitted the Grant Narrative for the RAISE Grant. It looks as if we might be able to begin the hiring process for a design engineer in October or November.

Ms. Laflamme is working on a second grant from the Department of Energy which will aid in developing district heating for downtown buildings which would tie in with the heated streets and sidewalks.

Ms. Laflamme has met with the Preservation Company which will be helping with the development of our exhibit room at the Historical Society.

Adjournment

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

The Planning Board meeting ended at 7:44 pm.