

Housing Task Force Meeting

September 15, 2011

In Attendance:

Jim Libby, VHCB, co-chair

Jack McCullough, Legal Aid, co-chair

Angela Timpone, City Council District 3

JoAnn Troiano, Montpelier Housing Authority

Polly Nichol, VHCB

Gwendolyn Hallsmith, Planning and Community Development

Carol Doerflein

Becca Clark, Trinity United Methodist Church

Edmar Mendizabal, Property Owner/ Landlord/ Developer

Ken Russell, Community Development

Introductions and Announcements

JoAnn discussed the impact of the floods on surrounding areas and her walk-in visits to the Weston's trailer park community in Berlin. She spoke of Governor Shumlin convening the Irene Housing Task Force, that includes the Housing Council and others. Jennifer Hollar is the chair. JoAnn indicated that she felt that was a disconnect between FEMA's understanding and what was happening on the ground, including an underestimation of those displaced by the flooding. She described the work of the Vermont State Housing Authority issuing vouchers, and the work of HUD, including Kathleen Burke. The thinking is that FEMA will be able to provide assistance for the first 2-3 months until the slower moving HUD assistance becomes available. She described one unit available at Montpelier Housing Authority, and 4-5 at Weston's. She indicated that Sanders' and Leahy's offices suggested that Federal vouchers were unlikely. She mentioned the new housing units at 58 Barre.

Jack talked of the Legal Aid Task Force and of the Housing Council Task Force, and that among area municipalities, Berlin has learned the most since the May floods – with the hits on the River Run and Weston's trailer parks -- and has the most and best information. The group mentioned Fecteau having 60 mobile homes (or mobile home sites) and the requirements of NFIP, the National Flood Insurance Program, including the need for municipalities to participate in order for structures within town and city limits to benefit, and the restrictions – including a requirement to build one foot above the 100 year flood level -- for building in flood plains. It was pointed out the Weston's is not in the flood plain but that a park on Barre-Montpelier road was raising its foundations four feet.

VSHA was mentioned, and Jim talked of \$30,000 for homeowner loans from FEMA, SBA loans for mortgages, and that applying for SBA could be a critical step for opening the door for further FEMA assistance.

The group discussed the stigma that some potential landlords hold for people coming from trailer parks. It was suggested that trailer home owners should be actually considered better risks given what it has taken to acquire and maintain the trailers.

Jack discussed a success of Legal Aid's work with the Haven in Barre, that due to the work of Chris Curtis and pro bono work by Anthony Iarapino, that the Haven was granted essentially everything they were seeking, and can stay open.

Gwen announced Neighborhoods Day at the Winter Market at Montpelier High School on November 19, an effort being organized by our AmeriCorps VISTAs Hannah Snyder and Scott Humphries.

Angela announced the Community Spaghetti Dinner on October 26, also at the High School.

Barriers to Housing Report -- Angela

Angela discussed the Barriers to Housing working group of City Council and its progress. She expressed that she is very interested in finding good data on the number of workers in Montpelier. Polly expressed that she was struck by the survey indicated that many of the respondents were concerned about the quality of the housing stock. Angela suggested that incentives should be considered. She and others discussed the efforts in Burlington's Old North End, and things like the Neighborhood Improvement Program, and efforts that balance mandatory inspections with incentives, that those things are often applied in equal force. Jim suggested that information on rentals is difficult to obtain systematically.

Carol emphasized the need to look at business activity as a strong factor in housing and suggested looking at business incubators, such as the one in Newport and a Capitol Investment Fund. She described her work promoting such efforts in foreign countries and expressed great confidence in their effectiveness. Edmar weighed in on that, pointing to the efforts of Mayor Bloomberg in New York, while pointing out that Montpelier is not New York. The work of Montpelier Alive and the possibility of doing something at Vermont College was mentioned. Angela suggested that efforts starting at City Council would be most effective and suggested that a committee there might form. Carol suggested looking at best practices in this area.

Gwen talked of existing attempts in this area including a discussion about Norwich sponsoring an incubator space in the Dickey Block, and suggested that there are issues with this model, that you need an anchor, perhaps funded by CDBG, and that a non-profit incubator is another model to consider. She also distinguished between the donations collected and disseminated by Montpelier Alive after the May floods from a largest investment program stating that Wall Street interests have a lock on this sort of activity.

Angela announced that the Barriers to Housing group would present its findings at the October 26 Council Meeting. She described a first report on debt and fund balance. A discussion was had about helping the council receive well the report.

Polly, Jim and others discussed the Housing Task Force's willingness to be ready to take up council recommendations and to be tasked with work. Jim suggested that often money is a factor, and the group touched again on the capitol investment fund, and also on the Housing Trust Fund. Edmar talked of the Kickstarter model, and some discussion was had about the scope of that. Group members suggested that such efforts would be effective being channeled through existing efforts such as Montpelier Alive, or through SBA efforts.

Edmar announced that he is interested in forming a landlording group. Jim pointed to the rejuvenation of the Central Vermont Landlord Association. Edmar suggested that he had a different model in mind, one that did not involve dues, and discussed ideas including working together on community gardens, and on a program of advisory visits by Glen Moore, the building inspector.

Membership and Governance

Jim discussed Carol's earlier email in which she made suggestions about the working of the Housing Task Force. He suggested that the lack of meeting minutes in the previous year was partially a function of Garth's ill health, but that he would work with Ken to get documents up on line. JoAnn discussed the ease of predicting the schedule. Some discussion was had about the new conditions for meetings at the police station, including the police department's concern about some community meeting participants using emergency lines for computer access.

Carol described some of her ideas and concerns for the task force, including a request that the group look at housing not just for low-income groups but for people of higher incomes looking for starter homes. Angela stated that her understanding was that we have been advocating for housing for the full range. Carol said that regardless she felt that a broader representation on the group was important, and that a private sector perspective was crucial. Angela described some of the demographic issues in town including with the high school and how that there are currently not enough kids to support some of the excellent programs that are currently offered, ones that now serve small groups of students. In response to Carol's point about the range of housing, Jim suggested that availability of community development money was a factor in deciding what was achievable. He described the success of having 50 land trust homes, and that marketing is an issue. Several members of the group echoed that notion. An idea was voiced of educating realtors about the work of the Homeownership Center at CVCLT.

Some discussion was had about whether the name "Housing Task Force," should be reconsidered given that a task force is usually meant to meet for a short term to address discrete tasks, but further discussion suggested that a name transition could be confusing and unwieldy.

Jim and others discussed Neighborhoods Day, Boomfest, and the Community Dinner as good opportunities for sharing information on the Housing Task Force with the community.

ACTION: Jim and Ken will work together to post minutes, biographical information on members and other related documents on the Housing Task Force section of the City website.

ACTION: The group will have an opportunity to comment on the draft report of the Barriers to Housing group before the City Council Meeting on Wednesday, October 26.

CALENDAR: The Housing Task Force will meet next on Thursday, October 20th and will review the report then.

AGENDA: JoAnn listed three agenda items: Workplan, Barriers Report, and Task Force Publicity.

ACTION: Jack expressed a willingness to speak on behalf of the Housing Task Force in support of the work of the Barriers to Housing committee in Jim's absence. The group discussed that it would be good to discuss who we are, and that we are available to work on perhaps a subset of council recommendations.

Jim and Polly talked of the Housing Trust Fund and Accessory Apartments initiatives of the Housing Task Force as existing instruments. Members discussed past work of the group including marketing including a resource guide, accessory apartments, the master plan, and the zoning ordinance.

ACTION: Angela will get the group onto the agenda. Jim will help.

--Minutes compiled by Ken Russell 9/16/2011, (902) 223-9506 x32