

Montpelier Planning Commission
November 14, 2011
City Council Chambers, City Hall

Subject to Review and Approval

Present: Jesse Moorman, Chair; Jon Anderson, Vice Chair; John Bloch, Kim Cheney, Eileen Simpson, and Tina Ruth; Emily Campbell, Youth Member.

Call to Order:

Jesse Moorman, Chair, called the meeting to order at 7:00 P.M.

Review and Approval of October 31, 2011 Minutes:

Upon a motion made by Mr. Bloch and Mr. Cheney the October 31, 2011 Minutes were approved unanimously.

Other Business:

Mr. Cheney said he thought by the agenda the Planning Commission was going to give final approval of all of the districts so they could talk about them on November 19th.

David Putter said there are some points that they as community members in their own little neighborhood and have some points which they have been put together in a petition. Looking at what has been proposed since the time that has followed the World Café, which is when they first submitted the petition, they were surprised to find that some of the Planning Commission hadn't received it and they were also surprised to find there seems to be come disconnect between where lines are drawn for districts and how it affects the character of where they live. They have a really low density footprint. They only have approximately $\frac{3}{4}$'s of an acre of land per residential unit and it is single family homes. They are almost all single family homes and occupied by the owners. There are various setbacks and various sizes and architectures but the neighborhood itself is a cohesive entity. The Planning Commission has proposed to join them with other areas that don't have a lot in common. They are geographically isolated and like it that way. There is a single route of access for ingress and egress and two cul-de-sacs and there is no immediately adjoining development. The most desirable aspect of their neighborhood is what they value in it – peace, tranquility and semi-rural nature because there are a lot of woods. What someone has designated as town and country they are trying to say they aren't town and country. They are pretty much country with $\frac{3}{4}$'s of an acre a unit. It is a major change that someone would propose you have 14.52 units per acre where they are. They don't understand how the lines were drawn. That doesn't follow the pattern of the neighbors or traffic they have or the pattern of their lives. They are their own community there and what they are proposing to do is rip them apart. The concept of 41 percent of the land can be covered by impervious services, be it a building, footprint or pavement, doesn't look like them. They have horrendous drainage problems already, if that were to happen it would aggravate this. Part of the process is to be sure their interests and situation is somewhat protected and preserved. This map is very different than what is up there.

One of the arguments which have been raised for having such a dense development is that we need to address the property tax situation in Montpelier. In February of 2011 in *The Bridge* there was a message from City Hall written by Bill Fraser entitled, "What Do Our Taxes Pay For?" Here is what he said. The grand list, the total of all assessed valuations is flat or too low. Shouldn't we develop more taxable buildings and property to reduce taxes for the rest of us? Clearly, an expansion of the grand list would spread local property taxes further. We have already referenced communal ties with per capital grand lists that are 1.5 to 2 times greater than ours who provide full services for much lower taxes. South Burlington, for example, delivers essentially the same services as Montpelier for an effective municipal

tax rate of 35 cents versus 99 cents here. New housing development might reverse our slow trend of declining enrollment in the schools which is driving per pupil spending up. The City Council in fact has set a goal to create 500 new housing units in the next 5 to 10 years and they are revising regulations and providing funding to help make this happen. Some caution needs to be exercised, though. One major consideration is the impact of any additional services demand created by the newly developed property. Are we cancelling out our new revenue sources with new expense requirements?

It takes 9.1 to 9.2 million dollars in taxable value to change the tax rate 1 cents - \$22 on the average tax bill. That represents 40 to 45 new houses. As a comparison the entire downtown area combined is valued at \$78.5 million, or only 9.5 percent of the total grand list. National Life is valued at \$44 million, or 5.2 percent of the grand list. Grand list growth is unquestionably important to the long term financial health of the community. It's important however that people understand that the vast amount of property growth necessary to create substantial tax savings, assuming no costs, is unrealistic. If the downtown were replicated in its entirety and those property values added to the grand list the tax rate would drop only about 7 cents or \$150 to the average resident and that is without any additional service requirements. Reducing the tax rate by 50 cents which puts us more in line with the neighboring communities would require new taxable property equaling 55 percent of our current grand list. \$455 million in new property would increase the city's size by half again. For scale think 10 or 11 National Lifes, 5 or 6 new downtowns or 2,100 to 2,200 new houses. Again, none of that accounts for the added costs of serving this new development. Keeping a steady eye on both is important but it should not be viewed as the one key element to significant tax reduction. These are Bill Fraser's words and he was asked to read them to you. This was in the February 17, 2011 Bridge on page 4.

This is supposed to be a community infusion process. It is interesting to see that the arguments that are raised have to be examined carefully on a fact by fact basis and not just accepted in theory. They ask for your help. They want their thoughtful consideration to what their situation is and part of that requires the Planning Commission be given the materials well enough in advance so they can give them the benefit of your attention and intelligence. He has heard that people have asked him to talk about the fact that apparently the administration gives you these things on Friday afternoon and expects you to vote on them on Monday night. Members of the public may want to come and talk.

Mr. Cheney said in interest of full disclosure David Putter is a neighbor of his and the potential impact of development of his house abuts the only developable portion of land in his district. He lives in the woods down below. There are two issues for him. These districts are huge. The suburban district covers a lot more than the town and county. Would they be neighborhood specific?

Mr. Putter said there should be specific standards. It talks about neighborhood specific standards on the back page. Unfortunately, when you get down to town and county it says no specific standards. If there is some infill but doesn't drown it probably four or more units should be a conditional use so one could consider the various criterion that the conditional use statute contemplates when you are putting in more than a development of a certain size.

Mr. Cheney said he is concerned that Bill Fraser's article essentially undercuts the whole thrust of what they have been doing because the whole purpose is to increase density downtown to spread the tax base. It seems to him that Mr. Fraser makes an argument that negates that very idea. He thought they were going to go through these districts to get ready for Thursday.

Tom McCormack, a resident of Main Street, said they are part of the Murray Hill neighborhood. However, on the College Hill neighborhood map it looks like half of the property is in the College Hill neighborhood. They really like the Murray Hill neighborhood. They made this point at a meeting at

Vermont College. He and his neighbor believe they should be in the Town and Country District rather than College Hill. He believes they would be the dividing line. The north side of Main Street more reasonably belongs to Town and County with the woods in the back and good sized lots and they aren't integrated with the homes across the street. They would urge them to join with the Town and County District.

Mr. Cheney asked if he had heard of any word about developing the woods.

Mr. McCormack replied not lately but there is some surveying going on up there now. He would second what Mr. Putter said about the 80 percent building coverage. If you put a lot of impervious surface above where he is there will be worse runoff problems. That would be an impossible situation.

Mr. Anderson asked how far down Main Street. There are four or five houses that go down to Lincoln Street and it should be at least that far.

Mr. Cheney asked if he had any comments about the density issue.

Mr. McCormack said it would certainly change the character of the neighborhood if you start putting multiple housing units on these lots.

Ms. Simpson said this gives rise to something that has been a concern of hers since she joined. The way the agenda is structured and notice is given and she has three requests she would like to put forward for consideration at a future meeting. As a preface to the first item they specify the boundaries and the neighborhoods that are covered by the agenda in lay terms that are readily understandable by members of the public using existing understandings of what neighborhoods they are in. The second request is that in addition to the agenda items they have proposed action items so people will have sense of what activity or what result they expect to have by the end of the meeting. Third, they have where appropriate pro and con presentations. She can recall a couple of times where there have been individuals reflecting one point of view. For example, in the historic designation she would have appreciated having a presentation of both points of view by a neutral party which would help her as a decision maker. When one side shows up she is well informed on one side and prefers not to make decisions on that basis.

Mr. Anderson said he would like to respond to David Putter's comments. Everyone should be reassured they are not anywhere close to making a recommendation to the City Council. This is an early rough draft. He is pleased with the progress they have made in the last four or five months. Secondly, they should be receiving comments on moving boundaries back and forth. That is the history of writing a successful ordinance. He would urge them to look at the uses in the district and what is going to be allowed uses versus conditional uses and what will be prohibited. The draft they have in front of them proposes a huge broadening in the uses that can be made in the district. In reading these four districts he thought three were pretty good.

Mr. Putter said the Master Plan says "All development undertaken in Montpelier preserves the integrity and character of the city's respective neighborhoods." That speaks to their neighborhood and the values they have specified.

Mr. Anderson said his experience watching zoning ordinances get drafted in Montpelier that at the end of the day unless everybody is happy they get voted down. He has every confidence they will find a way to honor every neighborhood in the city and have them all working together.

Mr. Moorman thanked Mr. Putter and Mr. McCormack for attending and giving their input.

Discussion of Neighborhoods Day on November 19th:

Mr. Moorman said he believes their mission should be outreach and letting people know what the Planning Commission is doing. The Thanksgiving Market runs from 10:00 to 2:00 and they want a presence at the meeting.

Ms. Ruth said she thought the meeting at Noble Hall at Vermont College was really good and staff had planned it ahead. She thought it was very effective.

Ms. Simpson said they should identify the meta principles guiding this reform are in easily identifiable language like fewer districts with higher densities. With whatever the underlying directives they think they have heard as major discussion points that need to be changed and then we should start identifying them.

Ms. Ruth said they are trying to enable more growth to take place but nothing is required. It will be what somebody will be permitted to do with their property if they want to, but it's not pushing a whole lot of mass development. We need more housing and can benefit from it, but it will go in appropriate places.

Mr. Cheney said that the City Manager's article it seems to him to undercut the goal that Gwen is telling us we are trying to do and the Master Plan guides that.

Mr. Moorman said the Barriers to Housing Committee just issued a report to the Council which said "More housing and more residents will increase the city's grand list, spread the costs of services over more households and utilize excess capacity in the schools and the water system." It does note that some residents want the city to continue as it is with limited growth and they point out that the optimal or maximum size for the city was not discussed by this committee. Then they identify some recommendations and conclusions for various areas.

Mr. Bloch said we are one of three municipalities in the state of Vermont that has a tertiary sanitary sewer system and it cost four times as much as a two-stage. Secondly, we have 8,000 people that don't live here but use our city every day because of the presence of state government and agencies. It's not really fair to say Berlin has only got \$3.80 per \$100. They aren't supporting a five-story hook and ladder truck. They are trying to get some regional services going so it lightens the load not only on Montpelier but other towns as well. At the same time we have a significant minority in this town that thinks we owe them a city park which should be developed for decent multi-income housing because the sewer and water is right there. There are competing interests. Are they balanced and weighed so the common good gets served or just one sector being served?

Mr. Cheney asked if he was concerned if Mr. Fraser's analysis undercuts what we are doing.

Mr. Bloch replied he is concerned.

Mr. Moorman said he isn't as concerned. He sees it as pointing out that growing the grand list is not the silver bullet.

Ms. Simpson said the other thing she understands to be part of the tax rate issue is that at some point in the Master Plan it says we have excess capacity in our services. As we build we don't have to add as many services.

Ms. Ruth said development won't reduce our property taxes but will spread them out over more people if we have more housing. She thinks the article is about mostly about taxes overall and there is a small section that development is not the be all and end all to reduce it. She doesn't think it is inconsistent, either.

Planning Commission discussed how they were going to conduct the Neighborhoods Day and in what format.

Scheduling Next Meeting:

The Planning Commission has been meeting every Monday for the past three months and he wanted to have a good outreach campaign. Mr. Cheney said he felt it would be interesting to have an organizational meeting early in December. The 2nd Monday in December would be the 12th. He would like to meet with Clancy and Gwen to receive their feedback.

Discussing of Gateway District:

Mr. Moorman said he noticed after looking at the regulations is the same as the version they looked back on September 19th. The minutes only talked about the western gateway area. One result from that meeting was to put Toy Town in the Gateway District. Our discussion about the Western Gateway was a lot about preserving the view scape as you come in off the Interstate and enter our city. The notion was that the existing office park regulations had those protections in them and they were good for the Western Gateway District. The draft before them doesn't have any uses in it so they can't have a long discussion tonight. He thinks they should be clear in their purpose and description of what is important to them in these three neighborhoods. He is struggling at the moment to find a unifying piece between these because the Western Gateway has qualities that we want to protect but the Eastern Gateway doesn't have the same qualities. Toy Town is a different neighborhood all together.

Ms. Ruth said the last page has the neighborhood specific development standards with the neighborhood s listed and nothing there. We could consider them all gateways and still have quite precise different standards for each of them.

Mr. Bloch said there are two interesting phenomena in Toy Town. You have small businesses, a barbershop, and an automotive repair place to a dairy crème. On the other side you have a sizeable apartment building but everything is single occupancy or duplex. There is a residential side and a commercial strip. He doesn't know how they protect those small businesses or how they protect the residential area. It is quite a substantial grouping of residences.

Mr. Cheney inquired why they needed protection. What is the size of the lots in that district now? The biggest discussion he heard was the road coming into town and the nice view scape you get coming into town. Toy Town is very different from the Interstate entrance.

Mr. Moorman said the minutes said the Office Park District has specific guidelines. Site development shall provide visual protection for gateways to the city and view corridors. Alan said if you look at Crest View that is the view out of the left side coming into town. Right now it is all undeveloped on Route 2.

Mr. Bloch said how we designate and have permitted uses has an enormous impact over a period of time.

Mr. Anderson said he thinks the Gateway District is trying to hold too many things that are very different together under one district. He is very satisfied to have something that looks like the office park zoning for that gateway. The other two gateways are different. The gateway on Route 2 which includes Toy Town he doesn't know that it is fair to make people have to work to be a gateway to the community. There is a nice residential development with a commercial strip that could be redeveloped to serve that neighborhood to put stuff within walking distance. That could easily be done by having a suburban zoning district and have a commercial strip area that would allow certain things. We don't have to stay true to these neighborhood concepts. The other so-called gateways on the eastern part of the city are farm and factor. By and large they are commercial strips. He thinks Montpelier is admirable in the zoning we have had that has said there is a place for commercial strips and that will make it easier to have the village. He doesn't know if there should be a commercial/suburban district so there would be a formal gateway, the commercial/suburban and Toy Town in a suburban district. He would also move Crossroads out of the Village/Commercial District. He doesn't think that a lot of that drive is a village commercial. It's a drive-by strip development. It is a high traffic area. Businesses love being on busy roads and residences generally doesn't.

Mr. Cheney said he tends to agree with Jon in that these are very different places and should be treated as such.

Mr. Anderson moved that the Planning Commission ask staff to develop a gateway approach that would treat the main entrance with the office park type of zoning, that would allow predominantly commercial on the eastern entrances to the city and have predominantly residential with convenience in the Toy Town area. The eastern gateway would be a district that would be predominantly traffic oriented commercial for one block and then residential.

Mr. Bloch said from the roundabout out it is farm and factory.

Mr. Moorman replied that is River Arts District also.

Ms. Simpson said how about staff giving us some neighborhood specific development standards for the Western Gateway, Farm and Factory, Toy Town and Cross Roads.

Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. The motion to ask the staff to develop neighborhood specific standards for the Western Gateway, Farm & Factory, Toy Town and Crossroads was approved unanimously.

Adjournment:

Upon a motion duly made by Mr. Cheney and Ms. Simpson the Planning Commission adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Transcribed by: Joan Clack