

Montpelier Planning Commission
September 19, 2011
City Council Chambers, City Hall

Subject to Review and Approval

Present: Jesse Moorman, Chair; Kim Cheney, Tina Ruth, Jon Anderson, John Bloch and Alan Goldman.
Staff: Gwen Hallsmith, Director, Planning & Development
Clancy DeSmet, Planning & Zoning Administrator

Call to Order:

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

Comments by Chair:

Jesse Moorman, Chair, reported that David Borgendale had submitted his resignation. He thanked him for his service.

Zoning:

They are looking at the Gateway and River Arts Districts this evening. They hope to have a rough draft of the district zoning bylaws for the public to consider in advance of the Neighborhoods Day on November 19th. The neighborhood specific standards will be flushed out as well. Ms. Hallsmith said the River Arts neighborhood was originally a part of Village Commercial.

Mayor Hooper shared with City Council the comments that they thought there were a lot of districts and she urged them to talk to the Planning Commission about this. She thinks there is something distinct and special about the Historic Downtown. One of the neighborhoods, the Crossroad, is a distinct area though part of the Village/Commercial. One of the interesting planning issues they need to be dealing with is the whole corridor coming off the Interstate and going through the city. They should be creating a more welcoming enticement to Montpelier and there could be an opportunity with the zoning. The River Arts District on the other side of the river there are some very interesting and important housing, both affordable and historic housing. It feels like we are abandoning that to a commercial feel right on Memorial Drive and River Street along Route 2. She would consider getting rid of the Crossroads District and calling it something else.

Ms. Hallsmith said with the boundaries they drew the housing out of the River Arts District.

Mayor Hooper said in the River Arts District the first block from Northfield Street going down to Berlin Street there aren't a lot of houses but probably a half a dozen residential properties but also the introduction to the residential section behind. Creating something that would work for cars but would also work for people it would create a much more attractive neighborhood for both those going through as a traveler but also the experience of people living up in the neighborhoods up behind as well as on the street. You would see more of a place to make those connections across the river. It feels like we have abandoned that area and cars just zip through there.

Ms. Hallsmith demonstrated a map showing the neighborhood lines and the district map drawn from the neighborhoods. Crossroads is an interesting area, partially because a lot of it is the gas stations. It is known as "Gasoline Alley" in some circles.

She presented some work with form based codes in the River Arts District which was done by an intern this summer. She thinks River Arts District lends itself to form based codes is because there is a multiplicity of

uses there that tend to be commercial/industrial uses. One of the challenges they had recently with the new building that is going up in what is proposed as the River Arts District was the developer was building a building but didn't have it completely committed yet. He was building it on speculation and didn't know what the uses would be. He came to the DRB with a whole list of different uses put into a structure that a particular architectural form but because we don't do form based zoning but use based zoning the DRB had a really hard time giving him permission to build the building for a potential list of uses. Do we really care if there is a dentist office in there versus a chiropractor's office? It tends to be a transition district between our more industrial area down at the farm and factory area into our downtown so they want the transition to work. One of the ways to get that transition to work is to very carefully define the way the buildings are created and constructed but allow a lot of different types of uses that would be appropriate for the district. In a residential or historic area form based codes would be a lot more problematic. In Montpelier where we have a lot of infill and smaller pieces that are fitting into an overall neighborhood or we are trying to build in an historic district and maintaining the historic character it lends itself a little less to form based code as would an area where you are completely redeveloping it.

Another thing that is promising about form based code for River Arts is the redevelopment potential. We might be able to transform what tends to be a strip area into something a little more pedestrian friendly and more compatible with our historic downtown.

Mr. Moorman asked if there was more cost with form based cost zoning because it is a different way to do it.

Ms. Hallsmith said initially there is a cost to develop the code because it tends to be a lot like building codes. It is more architecturally based. It might actually be easier to administer because it is very prescriptive.

Mr. Bloch asked if on Stone Cutters Way if they weren't too far down a rabbit hole to having large office buildings.

Ms. Hallsmith replied there are no more developable spots there.

Ms. Ruth inquired if there was a plan for the Salt Shed lot.

Ms. Hallsmith said she was just describing which is the proposed they have where they had a form but the uses weren't all defined. There is a new building that is permitted to go up in that space.

With the River District what could it be with form based codes? What is the value of adding form based codes laid out over this area?

Clancy DeSmet, Zoning Administrator, said it would be a lot more pedestrian friendly and not just a strip. There would be higher density buildings with not just parking in front. There could be more respect for the river. There could be parking for businesses underneath so when there is another flood event it would only be storage area and parking we would be losing and not infrastructure.

Mr. Bloch said one of the districts that are most at risk if it isn't handled with some care and foresight is this one.

Mr. Anderson said something that is state of the art for the commercial district you can't do that for the residential areas along lower Berlin Street. In the form based code you have to have commercial activity with lots of fenestration and it has to a minimum of 35 feet you just outlawed every residence we are trying to hold on to along Berlin Street. One decision they may want to make is to put Lower Berlin Street back in with Prospect Street as a residential. What has gone commercial is commercial and not going back to

residential. What is residential would continue to be residential, and for that particular area there seems there are enough neighborhood gathering places that would be in the River Arts District that we don't need to provide a gathering place or carve out more of the residential uses in that area to provide an additional gathering place for them.

Mr. Moorman said the map shows clearly a line down the middle of the river so Prospect Street and Lower Berlin Street are separate neighborhoods distinct from the River Arts which is across the river down Stone Cutters Way. He agrees with what Jon's view is which echoes Mary's sentiments earlier that we should preserve to the extent possible the existing residential along that stretch. Form based codes wouldn't really fit with the residential area. We are looking at a commercial/industrial zone.

Mr. DeSmet said if they were to pursue a form based code in this area could they just exempt existing residential one and two-family structures? There are commercial developments between some of those. He is trying to think of a way to preserve what is there and to foster new development.

Mr. Cheney asked Mr. Goldman if he had an opinion on form based codes as a developer.

Ms. Hallsmith said there is design control in a lot of these areas as well. They are going by the Cityscape book and some of the older standards. With Stone Cutters Way there is a significant concern about design along the river. The difference between form based code and design control in an area that isn't being controlled because of its historic value is that the form based code gives you a very clear non-subjective method for deciding on the design. They decide on the design now and people have a very certain approval of a particular form and don't have to go back and forth. It is just like a building code. It is adding certainty to a process that right now can be quite subjective, both in terms of the leeway we grant the boards in terms of their conditional use determinations and also in their design determinations.

Mayor Hooper said with form based codes there is a little more thought to the relationship of a new project to where it is. If you are in a neighborhood that has front porches and ancillary buildings with side yards and the new project would look like that so the folks in the neighborhood who experience it are more comfortable with it.

Mr. DeSmet said the River Front District already has additional design guidelines beyond Article 7 and beyond design review.

Mr. Moorman said while Jon Anderson and Mayor Hooper made good points he thinks Clancy raised a point that is worth considering. What if you keep the River Art District generally along the outline on the map but exempt one and two-family residential dwellings from the form based code. You are going to preserve the existing residential. It would just be for along the street strip which has the most potential of those existing residential neighborhoods developing into commercial.

Mr. Bloch asked what the city is doing to knit itself together. We need to make a critical decision about what we do along the Route 2 strip all the way out to the Ford dealership or else piece by piece it falls into dis-use and nobody takes civic ownership and you have an eyesore that is the entrance to the city.

Ms. Hallsmith said the question is, is the housing on the southern side of River Street in the River Arts District or in the Residential District.

Planning Commission members discussed what should be included in the River Arts District and where the lines on the map should be delineated. They also agreed there should be an exemption for residential from commercial.

Mr. Anderson inquired if they were in favor of form based code. Mr. Bloch replied form based with housing exemptions built in. Mr. Bloch said it would be very desirable residential if there was public access to the river.

Mr. Anderson moved the Planning Commission to ask staff to work on a River Arts District zoning that would broaden the number of allowed uses and would exempt existing housing and keep the boundaries as they are, and have a level of form based zoning that staff recommends based on their discussion tonight.

Mr. Bloch seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Gateway District - There is the western gateway coming off the Interstate and the Farm and Factory District which is where the rotary is at Routes 2 and 302 which is the eastern gateway.

Ms. Hallsmith said the Gateway District includes significant entrances to the city located on major arterial roadways. These corridors lead travelers to the urban core. New projects will need to include transit, pedestrian and bicycle transportation, energy efficiency and renewable energy, the integration of mixed use to promote economic viability and affordable housing needs.

Mr. Bloch said they could also use Route 12 as it is coming in from Northfield.

Ms. Hallsmith said the way the current land use is configured the other gateways tend to be more residential than these two.

Mr. Moorman said there are some office buildings there.

Ms. Hallsmith said Farm and Factory has the Two Rivers Center for Sustainability, Agway, Tractor Supply, the car dealerships, Casella Waste and the industrial district. It's a pretty busy area. The western gateway by comparison the state uses and the high school and Green Mt. Power but is largely undeveloped except for National Life up on the hill. Both of them are significant entrances to the city. In looking at the map they had been discussing Toy Town and how it didn't fit into Village Commercial but it could be its own gateway district.

Mr. Moorman said he is trying to tease out why they are gateways to the city.

Mr. Bloch said they are an introduction to the city and a break from the open landscape. It has been pointed out with Routes 2 and 302 a lot of commercial and industrial sitting at the prouferay.

Ms. Hallsmith said there are additional design questions that come up around gateways to the city that need attention because of the fact that they are the entrance to the city. Even though it's not a city restriction when the state was considering developing the triangle area for their archives and other office space National Life was particularly interested in not impinging on their view shed. There is a view shed issue as you come into the western gateway. They didn't want to see the development at the triangle. We do care what people see when they come into town.

Mayor Hooper said she would suggest that the western gateway in particular is an extraordinarily important introduction to the Capitol of the State of Vermont and it is unique in that you come off a pretty Interstate and instead of suddenly being into a commercial area you come through a grassy and softer landscape. Until 20 years ago almost the first thing you saw was the State Capitol, and that is extraordinary. It was a very charming experience coming into Montpelier. If we are not very careful she can see that western gateway becoming the sort of experience you have when you come into Colchester on Exit 18. The

western gateway is still intact and there are some interesting opportunities with the other gateways of merging Barre and Berlin with Montpelier.

Mr. Cheney said he thinks the eastern and western gateways should be treated differently. The western gateway is unique not only because it is undeveloped but because it is a unique piece of land. The eastern side isn't like that at all. He doesn't think the description sets forth so well the importance of that district. The description should be changed and they shouldn't lump the two together.

Mr. DeSmet said they are both essentially the same district now. They are very different but we have treated them very similar although they are developed very differently.

Mr. Anderson said he would propose in that area they should re-allow residential development as part of our concept of allowing mixed use. The office park does not allow residential. National Life's vision was there should be residential use and for a while we were saying no we needed to add to the tax base.

Mr. DeSmet said under state law they can't prohibit housing anyway even though we do.

Mr. Anderson said the other consideration he would like to see that makes that gateway different is that a large part of it is within walking distance of downtown and it really has the potential to contribute to building the base to support downtown whereas the eastern gateway does not have that potential.

Ms. Hallsmith said the standards for the Office Park District are found adjacent to the Riverfront District in the zoning and it states very clearly that one of the specific design guidelines is: "Site development shall provide visual protection for gateways to the city and view corridors." It has standards for review. It requires as part of design control that within the Office Park District all land shall be developed as part of development. Parcels of at least 10 acres. They need to be submitted as part of a master plan that includes interior roadways. It is quite restrictive. It would trigger an Act 250 review. Except with the interest of the state they have never seen a proposal to develop this.

Mr. Moorman said they talked mostly about the western gateway.

Ms. Hallsmith said she thinks the Rural District will be relatively easy. Compared to Farm and Factory it is a relatively easy district so they could do both next week. When they talked about the rural areas one of the things was to raise the lot size to 5 acres but incentivizing it back down to the current density through clusters and other types of development. Existing lots would be grandfathered.

Adjournment:

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

Respectfully submitted,

Gwen Hallsmith, Director
Planning & Community Development

Transcribed by: Joan Clack