

Shaftsbury Planning Commission Meeting
July 28, 2020

The teleconference, held via the GoToMeeting platform, came to order at 6:04 pm. Present were commissioners Chris Williams (chair), Naomi Miller, and Mike Cichanowski. Mike Foley joined shortly thereafter. Also present was Select Board member Art Whitman and zoning administrator Shelly Stiles. Several citizens also attended, not all of whom identified themselves. They included Tom Huncharek, Barbara Bacchi, Andrea Bacchi, Dorothy Buxbaum, Ben and Elaine Hulett, David Rosner, Jennifer Hoffman, and others.

Mr. Cichanowski moved to approve the July 14 minutes. Mr. Williams seconded the motion, which passed 2-0-1.

The group moved to a discussion of an expansion of the Roadside Commercial (RC) zone. Mr. Williams said the Commission had been told by the Select Board that it wished to rezone the west side of Route 7A to RC from West Mountain Rd. to Birch Hill Rd., and to rezone the three parcels north of and including the Clearbrook Farm farm store parcel to RC.

When asked why, Mr. Whitman said that the Commission had already agreed to propose rezoning a cluster at the intersection with Hidden Valley RC, where some commercial activity already exists, to protect the possibility of continued commercial activity there in the future. Using the same rationale, he said, more of the west side of Route 7A should be rezoned RC because, beginning at West Mountain Road, it includes the Propagation Piece orchard farm stand, a logging operation, another logging operation, a concrete contractor's operation, the Governor's Rock motel, the Serenity motel, and then the Hidden Valley cluster as well as many residences. If they were all included in the new zone, Mr. Whitman said, the town would avoid spot zoning. As for the east side, to Old Depot Rd., he said a road provides a more logical defining boundary than a property line.

Andrea Bacchi said she is concerned that the rezoning could permit chain stores, which will negatively impact local businesses. Mr. Williams said there is already plenty of RC along 7A that has not been developed for commercial uses. He doubted that the new zone would produce much activity and certainly not many jobs. Mr. Cichanowski said the Commission is thinking 30-40 years out.

Mr. Cichanowski said extending the zone to Old Depot on the east could reduce the number of driveways built on Route 7A and the impact on traffic flow they would cause.

David Rosner said the process – using remote meeting tools – is flawed. It is hard to find out what is going on and to discuss it.

Ms. Miller said a reasonable case could be made to table the issue until public meetings can once again be held in person. There is no reason to rush this.

Ben Hulett said the proposal is asinine. Commercial activity should be concentrated in the Village and steps should be taken to make that possible.

Mr. Rosner said a balance should be struck between development and preservation of those features that make for a desirable quality of life. An RC zone in the northern part of town would “kill the goose that laid the golden egg.”

Mr. Huncharek suggested tabling the issue until everyone can have a say at the table.

Dorothy Buxbaum said she had trouble navigating the website, that she couldn't easily make sense of the meeting minutes, that the website does not provide email addresses for Select Board members. She is not in favor of the proposal and asked how it came to happen. Mr. Whitman said it began with a suggestion from Ken Harrington to rezone as commercial Route 7A to the Arlington town line, which got the Select Board to thinking. The Board wanted to protect the commercial cluster at Hidden Valley but wanted to avoid spot zoning.

Ms. Miller suggested sharing the earlier Commission proposals with the public. She noted the proposed expansion under discussion has not been vetted by the Commission, but has been put forth instead by the Select Board.

Ms. Bacchi asked that the town make greater use of social media in getting information out – Front Porch Forum, FB.

Mr. Whitman noted that the Select Board’s request to expand RC came as a surprise to the Commission. The issue didn’t come up at all during a recent revision of the Town Plan. Mr. Cichanowski said the Plan prioritizes economic development.

A few people noted that their lives had changed because remunerative jobs were so hard to find in Vermont – that they had had to leave to seek work elsewhere for some time.

Mr. Huncharek said that although people may think nothing undesirable will move in, the DRB must follow the zoning bylaw and allow what it permits – and it could be a chain store.

Mr. Williams will find out if RC-zoned properties will see their taxes go up.

Jennifer Hoffman asked that the Commission do a better job of sharing their activities and proposals with the public. She said it would be a great loss should the aesthetic of the intersection of Old Depot and 7A change. And she is still interested in making kennels possible in town.

Ms. Bacchi suggested referencing the VT Futures Project and reaching out to its director Lorrie Smith. The project has collected data on what young people, especially, want to see in a future Vermont.

Ms. Miller moved to make the three earlier Commission proposals available to the public. It was agreed to do so, but the motion was not moved forward.

Mr. Cichanowski moved table the discussion of an RC expansion for four Commission meetings, while information is gathered and shared with the public. Mr. Foley seconded the motion, and said remote access is a major obstacle to participation.

Ms. Hulett said what is being proposed would change the landscape of the area.

Mr. Williams said Bennington County has descended into a place of natural beauty and not much more. He noted, however, that local agriculture in Clearbrook and Mighty Food Farm are bright spots. He recounted a story regarding the development of MassMOCA at the old Sprague mill in North Adams, where out of the box thinking helped save the community. He suggested that rezoning is not out of the box thinking.

Ms. Miller moved to amend Mr. Cichanowski’s motion to table discussion until we can hold public meetings in person. There was no second. A vote was called on Mr. Cichanowski’s original motion, which would table discussion of RC until October 13. It passed 3-0-1 with Ms. Miller abstaining.

Mr. Williams declared the meeting adjourned at 7:56 p.m.

Notes by ZA Stiles.