

Town Plan Steering Committee Meeting Notes 10/30/21

Kent: Comments on website

Have layout settled, colors and arrangements, content will be malleable

Allison: Sent an email to dept chairs, heard from 6 people for a basic outline of what they want to see for their committee.

KL: Once we sign off on the layout, that gets turned over the web people who will built that.

They will want to know what parts of the existing site we want to scrape and put onto the new site.

Let's get it better rather than best, look at forward-facing elements, then backfill the rest of it.

Dick: Like the idea of having headlines on the front page, avoid the problem of news being too late for the tracks

KL The primary tab will be the news, in between tracks, a place to communicate about those.

A lot of towns go with primary tabs: Govt, town directory and how do I?

I suggest: About us, Govt, Community

Then tracks, events, we will think of more things

Community could include new on things like redoing headstones, etc.

Dick: Is there a plan to have local businesses on the site?

KL: Yes there can be a listing of local businesses under the community tab, not unlike the listing on the back of Tracks

Jodi: School, Libraries

KL There will be overlap between About Us and Community.

Susan: Color scheme a little dreary, should be more inviting color wise. A warm accent, I noticed a red banner on the home page for one town.

KL We lost contrast from the original design when the proposal came back; now it's all very middle range. Originally, there was deep blue and lighter blue, some golds; the designer lost the golds and went to ice grey...

The platform allows three levels of user permissions

AM: Is there a limit on the number of admins?

KL: There's a limited to the number of people who can call in to the help line at the website service provider—a limit of 2 users in person to person tech support.

AM: If there is a tech issue, it needs to go through one of two people

Audience: Will any resident be able to post things, we don't want to get into the Facebook situation. Are there legal issues?

KL I will look to whether others allow comments, is it just on the Select Board

All the contact us links are not emails, it gets directed to people.

AM: People need to contact our govt officials.

KL Yes, we are just using a filter to keep those emails from being spammed. The links are just a shield.

Don Gagnon

We wanted to get Laura or Phil to come. Kent has had some conversations with

Berkshire regional planning.

Phil is no longer with BRP. They are out looking for someone.

Tom is heading things up for now and filling in.

Kent had convos with Phil as to how we should manage the next steps as committees, and those ideas have been filled in by Tom.

KL: The idea of breaking into small groups didn't seem to be suited to our small group. There's a lot of cross pollination between the various topics.

Tom said, that's fine, what I suggest is you focus on a couple goals, try to find some things to do.

There seems to be a lot of energy coalescing on housing, senior and affordable; business; communications

Let's decide on three areas to request assistance from BRP: Tom convo: we should be driving towards two or three projects that we need help and resources to get to the next level. Take these topics and try to get to what is the thing to do next, Survey, Research, Drafting, to move to next levels.

DG: Tom had some interesting comments about Washington in relation to Berkshire county.

We may have to change some zoning, he had a lot of input and spoke about accessory dwellings, from a zoning perspective, we have a bylaw that handles single family and two family homes.

This accessory dwelling, an inlaw apt. Its been a hot topic, we may want to consider building on, also an opportunity to do airbnbs.

If we go little further, we get involved in making changes to zoning bylaws that would require a lot of input and could drag things down. This is something we probably want to add to that.

KL A dwelling unit has a stand alone capability: a bathroom and kitchen and living space. If you add onto your house, it's not a problem. If you create another structure, or convert a garage or barn, you'd have to get permitting. The idea is that if that would solve a number of issues, it seems to be an easy uplift from our existing zoning. There are lots of properties with accessory units, probably grandfathered, and some are rented out.

Susan: Shared housing, would we be able to have it within zoning regs. They say you can rent out a room, it's just not having a kitchen or bath.

KL: It's something anyone can do now. You can have a roommate. It's something we can educate and advocate for.

Susan: I could do a piece on shared housing with Anne Marie to bring it into discussion for Tracks

DG:

Tom said consider where you are, you're in Washington. Yeah, you have a quick drop

into Pittsfield and Dalton, but you're out here, and as for something that's going to require people coming and buying at retail, is someone going to place that business in Washington? He felt there were things commercially we could do aside from someplace like Bucksteep as an event facility, or if you brought in an office structure where people would be working. But if you wanted to go to lunch, you'd have to drive somewhere.

I walk past the cannabis operation and, at noon, all the cars are driving out, at one pm, all the cars are driving in. They need to go somewhere for lunch.

KL It's sparked by zoning: What kind of business do you want? That's part of the question. What exists in other towns. We asked Tom: He had a furrowed look, that's when he said I don't think there's a whole lot your town could support. The group identified one opportunity, the short term rental or lodging opportunity, he thought that was good because we had the natural assets, like Canterbury Farm, skiing, hiking trails. Perhaps there are efforts to encourage more of that, but without lodging we don't capitalize on it. Rather than retail operations, we could leverage our broadband—a tech support center on a property in a beautiful setting, Tom thought there might be some opportunity in that. But we don't have the dining infrastructure to support that resource.

Carol: When I was looking into what we want to do with business, short term rentals offer us revenue that does not come through towns people. Short term rentals or lodging will bring in money. Other business will be someone bringing in taxes that doesn't increase costs for school. Rentals an intriguing thing to look into.

Susan: So why don't we change the zoning.

KL If we do, we need to identify, what do we want to change it to, support it with research, and present it to the zoning board. Accessory dwelling unit might enable another aspect of that.

Susan: Look at another town that has this

KL We are one of the first touching this in the Berkshires: Tom did not know of any others, but he is looking into it. To undertake one of our projects with BRP for Washington to adopt Accessory Resource Zoning.

Tom: What about the special permit process

KL Is that adequate? It presents a control mechanism and it presents a slight barrier. If someone looks at opportunities in Becket and Middlefield and Washington, and Becket or Middlefield don't have requirements, they might not come here. Do the changes you propose to enable a certain thing, are there other things you want to protect against.

Dick: Is there a legal obstacle that prevents us from discrimination accusations if we don't want certain kinds of things in town.

KL We have to decide, do we open the door or keep it closed. That where Special Permits come in.

Don Gagnon reads Zoning Laws: In harmony with general purpose of this bylaw, not detrimental to this bylaw.; also reads what is not allowed.

There are opportunities to address our needs in a new bylaw.

The planning board gets requests on adding a bylaw or changing one from different places.

We have been given direction by the select board and have taken action on the request.

The process involves bringing in BRP. We made some changes to home occupation for businesses. Planner brought in home occupation bylaws from all over the state, reviewed them. It took us nine months to figure out what the town would go with and to write it up. There are two categories now: one where you have one employee, the other you have more than one employee.

Then the bylaw change goes to public hearing, make changes if necessary, vote, then it goes to the select board, then goes to a special town meeting for a vote.

The marijuana bylaw took a year and three quarters.

KL I'd suggest we not focus on zoning, focus on what are the primary areas we want to encourage, what do we research to say, yes, this is what we want to request of BRP.

We need to identify what it is that we are trying to enable. If we are trying to enable more opportunities for senior housing or aging in place, then how does accessory housing play into that. Lodging, dining establishments? What are those things we want to drill into to figure out if it works for our town?

Accessory Dwelling Unit Zoning and Education

Is there anyone willing to volunteer to be the point on this?

Jodi: I think we are better off trying to approve accessory dwelling rather than reducing lot size. Town would be more accommodating to that than reduced lot sizes.

KL It takes money to construct them.

AM There may be a handful of people in town who would do it if they knew it was possible.

Jodi: Don already read that it can't be intrusive

KL Community would want impacts on setbacks, wouldn't be allowed on lots that are already filled, the planning board would need to investigate how it works in other places.

AARP is advocating for this to be considered in communities because it enables aging in place or extra senior income.

Affordable Housing, Senior Housing, Lodging

What do we mean by affordable, is senior housing a need, lodging, market research, taking the temperature.

One of the things that frequently can be done to underscore the discussion is a housing needs assessment. I have a copy of what was done in Great Barrington; Becket had done one. BRP could help do it: A data analysis of current housing stock, by size, lot, age, condition, drawn out of assessor database, looking at median income, demographics. The analysis creates a data picture of what exists, Maybe a town has a lot of homes of one character and the people don't match up: That's considered a housing burden, if you are spending so much on your housing, that is a burden, a mismatch of the housing availability and housing needs. We can say, we want to move our community in the direction of more young families, or if business takes off in Pittsfield and we want to cater to those workers.

Susan: that sounds interesting. If we just way, we want to have senior housing, how many people would take advantage of it?

Jodi, Isn't most of that analysis done in the town planning process?

KL This adds more, it's not a duplication, takes the same data sources and slices and dices it in a certain way.

Carol: I propose we put on the map that we look at short term rentals with the idea that they can help alleviate the tax burden of our residents. As Dick said, consider what are we allowed to do, what not allowed. What do we feel comfortable with. Exploration of what we want.

Jodi: Commercial is rearing its head: Lodging, Short term rentals

AM: I like the idea of office space, I think we could draw some small business into the area

KL Encourage people to consider Washington, the commercial corridor we had discussed along RT 8 (Wildcat Springs).

AM Montgomery Mountain has a small lunch counter.

KL There isn't anything in the area except for Heather.

Jodi: The select board could be working on the competitive incentives. When we approach people to come here. If we want to fill that spot maybe the select board researches what kinds of incentives work.

KL: Come to the select board to incentivize these things we want. There are tools a municipality can use—tax breaks, property tax suspension, loan programs. I don't know that we are in a position to do any of those, but we could identify what these are and how they work. Then it would kick to the Select Board.

The income and accessory food model, was successful at Bucksteep.

Jodi: If we start doing monthly write ups, we could get a spot in Hilltown news publications like The Country Journal.

Carol: We can work on monthly articles for Tracks. Create a subcommittee for Tracks: Do the posts need to be approved by a public meeting? The purpose is to draw the residents into thinking about these things we're talking about. Some would require the

towns enthusiasm, if townspeople were brought along the way, they might be more inclined.

Sean Connors: Important to measure the incremental gain, from purely residential use, if you are adding a commercial building, what is your incremental gain. You end up with steel buildings, lighting issues, which is fine as long as we know what we are signing up for, and as long as there is an incremental gain in revenue. You can use a home business as long as it is not objectionable.

KL In any of these projects, if we are going to pursue them, we need to ask, what are we gaining, whether tangible and intangible. In the planning process to expand our revenue base, certain things will have a high gain for low costs; others have low cost but low gain. We have to prioritize.

Commercial property in and of itself does not change the tax base, unless it is a lot that would not be developed as residential.

SC: Eateries have not been successful: Ozzies, Harriets

JG Yes, but Dream Away has been successful. You have to look at the type of establishment.

Don: It would be easy if we got an overlay district; those have a free pass. Maybe land we want to move on, discussion of a commercial zone beginning from here at the town hall to the town park. If we do an overlay, you can build incentives around the overlay and create incentives around the district. The marijuana bylaw exists in the overlay district.

KL It doesn't change the underlying zoning; it adds, in this area, this exception, or this restriction. There's an educational piece Phil sent us from BRP that we should distribute.

An overlay district as a solution that we should educate ourselves on.

SC: The guy who bought Woody's, the first thing he said, I want to put in a marijuana dispensary. There is revenue out there. Ask voters, do you want a marijuana dispensary there?

KL All he needed to do was put in a request. We tried to layout the reality. We answered that we can only tell you it will take the same process you see in other communities, if you want to undertake that process.

SC But we didn't say, We're looking for revenue, put it on the docket.

KL But we as a town have not taken that position. Do we want to promote that? He also proposed a ten-room lodging. I ran the numbers: If he had 30 percent occupancy in Jan, 40 percent in March...played out through the year, with ten rooms, two nights of turn around, that ten-room lodging unit would be worth \$18,000 per year to the town.

Jodi: There are the three projects for BRP: Website, Accessory Dwelling with all bullet points, Commercial, with those bullet points

KL ADU: Explore further and put together outline of what that would look like it. Do we want to undertake a housing needs project, a separate project?

Jodi Are we restricted to what we ask BRP to do? Budget and our time.

KL We need two or three things.

Jodi: The Housing Assessment is almost done.

KL Not almost done but not a big project. It assesses what exists; it doesn't look into the future. Looks at existing housing stock and how it correlates. Research for HNP can happen at same time as ADU.

We get HNP going, then we ask them to put in this also, play out a scenario, analyze it from this perspective.

AM: Looking at what Carol sent out, that's not a project we need under BRP, we should be working on and I would like to work on that.

Jodi: People writing articles, but who will approve content. Is it freedom of press, or is it oversight?

KL We want to have some general agreement and check for facts, allow group to go forward. The group should be empowered to speak on our behalf, depending on topic. If we approve it as a group, they speak for us.

CL: Short term rentals, it's the same catch 22: Are they going to come and do it here if there are catches? Do we want control? We need to figure out what do we want here, what are other places doing, what are the parameters and are they legal.

The ground work of a bylaw is right, we don't want three stories, we only want two stories, it could lead to that, If we look at other towns and what they are doing we could start with some parameters that could work toward priorities in a bylaw.

Don I'm looking at MA laws on hotels and inns, there's more to it.

KL: There are aspects that must go into other elements that would govern these operations in terms of health code and building code. What are the break points in sanitary condition, contemplating a six room falls here on the health code, ten rooms falls here. How do those factor in? What support to do need for this?

CL: BRP may be helpful. There needs to be a group of people who know the parameters.

Susan: If the person hires a good architect, it may look fabulous in five stories and not so great in two.

SC: My head goes to low hanging fruit: We currently allow people to rent rooms. How do we incentivize people to rent out their rooms post-Covid. So that we can ultimately raise the room revenue you are talking about.

KL Is that a project we want to move on, to look into encouraging people, make an action to put together a communications project.

SC: Reach out to property owners, Have you considered renting your room? Find out from the assessors who does and doesn't do it.

KL I have a list of them, it's five from whom we have currently collected revenue. SC are there other people who would consider renting rooms? Can we figure out who is suitable.

KL Project for more info on ADU, Tom already gathering info

Are we all on for HNA, we should ask for it.

Lodging part and short term rental part: What can be enabled for short term rental,

What parameters do we want to focus on

What are other towns doing?

Can you distill this down on sanitary and other regulations?

Don: We've got another meeting in two weeks, need to do some research for what we want. Do we put committees together today? We will get info that we will forward to you all, please review and think about it.

Of interest from a zoning perspective, Tom was going to send us info on how other towns are handling it.

Lodging: We are going to be asked about it. I have no clue what the state requires. If you have a ten-room facility, you are going to have a kitchen area. All of that needs substance.

People with second homes, do they want to rent their second home when they are there.

I still propose we get started on this Tracks thing. We create a little committee to decide what we are going to figure out what are we going to write. Don, Carol, Josh, Can we go and do that?

JG: Rather than form a committee, let's get together informally and write up a first post for Tracks. Then we can circulate it to the committee and use that as part of the process of how we vet posts for the communications group.

A report to the community about what we are doing, an educational piece.

There could be a lot of different topics over time. It could be a highlight on a business.

Dick, have you thought about asking in the Tracks what people are interested in.

The pie charts caught my eye.

Short stories, articles, how is the town getting their revenue, put that question out there and get feedback.

KL and Don to provide a paragraph for the Tracks to describe what committee is doing. And will get back to Tom with asks.