

**BENNINGTON SELECT BOARD – PLANNING COMMISSION
SPECIAL MEETING – JOINT WORK SESSION
BENNINGTON FIRE FACILITY
130 RIVER STREET
BENNINGTON, VERMONT 05201**

MONDAY, AUGUST 26, 2015

MINUTES

SELECT BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Tom Jacobs – Chair; John McFadden -Vice Chair; Michael Keane; Jim Carroll; Justin Corcoran; Donald Campbell

Absent: Sharyn Brush

ALSO PRESENT: Dan Monks, Zoning Administrator & Assistant Town Manager; Charlie Copp (Planning Commission); Barry Horst (Planning Commission); Mike McDonough (Planning Commission); Keith Whitcomb - Bennington Banner; Linda E. Bermudez – Secretary; (3) Citizens

At 6:00 P.M., **Tom Jacobs** called the meeting to order.

1. WORK SESSION – PROPOSED TOWN PLAN UPDATE

Tom Jacobs stated the goal is to not let the Town Plan go dormant. He would like a general discussion for what is to happen after the adoption. Mr. Jacobs fears the former Johnson Controls debate could be seen as a distraction.

Justin Corcoran reviewed the history of the former Johnson Controls property. It has now been vacant for 25 years. He believes there are revenue issues in Bennington and the zoning change to this property could change that.

Mr. Corcoran also supports the “Local Sales Option Tax”. He stated Bennington is a local shopping hub for a thirty-mile radius. All those who shop here would contribute. These funds could support budget items such as road repairs and other infrastructure needs that they are using anyway. Mr. Corcoran sees this as a way to provide property tax relief for local property owners.

John McFadden agreed with Justin Corcoran’s comments.

Jim Carroll felt Mr. Corcoran’s comments are persuasive. He is willing to work with Mr. Gladstone. Mr. Carroll however felt Mr. Gladstone missed an opportunity. This is a Brownfield site. It could be a great solar energy location that would then provide over \$14 Million Dollars worth of tax credits. This would save forested land and utilize already cleared empty space.

Donald Campbell stated the purpose of the plan is provide what is wanted to be see within the community, not what a developer wants for a parcel.

Michael Keane stated he respects both sides’ opinions. However, this document is over 150 pages and is concerned that the focus is on only (3) lines of the document. He would like to see a bigger discussion.

Tom Jacobs stated that the zoning of this property could be changed at any time if the developer had a good plan in place. He would like to see something that appeals to the motorized public. Mr. Jacobs questioned if there is really a need for big retail in our town. If there were, he is ok with that, however he would like to see it used for other ideas/purposes.

Jim Carroll stated this developer has a history of building strip malls. He is concerned that this would wipe out many of our existing stores.

Charlie Copp noted that there is already a large amount of commercial space available in Bennington. At this time they can't be sold. These owners continue to pay full value taxes. Mr. Copp continued by noted that the Developer/owner went to court to have the assessed value reduced due to contamination. The Developer now pays less on those 18 acres than Mr. Copp pays on his own home and 0.5 acres. Mr. Carroll asked if the owner cleaned up the property would those taxes increase. Dan Monks stated they would not. The value/taxes would only increase once something would be built.

Mr. Copp stated that the State has offered assistance to owner in the clean up of the contamination of this property yet he still refuses to do so. The owner also has been marketing this property as commercial (even though it is still industrial) and there still has been no interest. Mr. Copp stated that if the developer came before the DRB (Design Review Board) with a valid plan that would show benefit to the community they would certainly be open to it.

Mr. Corcoran stated this developer brought a conceptual plan before the board previously. Why would he spend money on a detailed plan if the Town were holding the property hostage? It would be more beneficial to wait until the actual opportunity exists (zoning changed). Mr. Corcoran believes that if the zoning is changed now it will generate interest and within (5) years we can all reap the benefits.

Mike McDonough stated that the debate is not actually about the zoning change. What is being debated here is speculation. Each side has a vision for the property and what is the best speculative outcome. There is greater need for a heavy weight solution. The State of Vermont is making a big investment into that railway to keep it accessible and viable. Mr. McDonough stated he would like to see the property utilized for a broader based employees/employers (high-tech engineering etc) instead of the "stuck" industry of retail only providing retail commercial jobs and store managers.

Tom Jacobs stated there are plenty of already developed industrial sites available in Bennington as well that can't be given away. For example the TE Connectivity site which is over 60,000 sqft.

Discussion continued regarding the definition of industry as well as the train access for this property. Barry Horst stated that someone would need to be a fortuneteller to see what would actually attract a developmental plan to that location. Perhaps this should be called something else instead of commercial or industrial.

Dan Monks cited a report done that stated the Town of Bennington has currently 950,000 square feet of available commercial retail space. The projected need for the town over the next (20) years is only 400,000 square feet. Why add more commercial square footage to this stock. In addition, this would devalue other properties already available.

Michael Keane stated that either way, this specific property is not the magic potion to cure all the Town's needs.

Jim Carroll moved on to discuss renewable energy and site locations for solar. Tom Jacobs noted that the State has not given Towns/Municipalities any power in this subject.

Mike McDonough stated that the Town Plan establishes a vision, not a roadmap for the Town. Dan Monks cited more detailed documents that have been established with, and in

support of, the Town Plan to implement actions stated in the vision of the plan (i.e. Land Use Regulations, Economic Development Plan etc).

Discussion continued with the idea of making the Town Plan more of a tool with implementation steps within. As it exists now, it is very general and used more for grant applications. The idea of establishing an appendix of actual goals, not just aspirations, was mentioned. Mr. Monks stated that he would be happy to work with the Board for that direction in the future.

Mr. Carroll stated this would then hold all future Select Boards to maintaining the goals set for the Town. Mr. Corcoran stated the current format does not hold any sitting Select Board accountable. Donald Campbell stated the Town Plan is a foundation piece with “bite size pieces” for each subject. There are then public processes for each piece further. They aspire to be inclusive; there are many public meetings but unfortunately no one shows up.

Dan Monks stated that if there were changes the Select Board wants to make to this Town Plan, now is the time to request them in order to make it eligible for adoption. Minor changes can be made (15) days before its adoption. Major changes require (2) additional hearings.

Justin Corcoran stated he would like to sit on the information exchanged this evening and not jump to voting.

John McFadden asked Dan Monks if he felt the previous Town Plans had developed the right vision for Bennington but were poorly executed. Mr. Monks disagreed. They have been the right vision for Bennington however there has not been enough resources to execute the plan.

Tom Jacobs asked that Select Board members share their suggestions for changes to this Town Plan with the Chair. He will then consolidate and share for discussion at the next regularly scheduled Select Board meeting on September 14, 2015.

2. OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business this evening.

Respectfully submitted,

Linda E. Bermudez
Secretary