

Minutes of the East Montpelier Planning Commission

Approved 5/18/23

May 4, 2023

PC Members Present: Zach Sullivan (Chair), Maia Stone (zoom), Nik Khosla, Richard Hall, Erica Zimmerman (zoom), Gianna Petito (zoom), Clarice Cutler, Mark Lane (zoom)

Others Present: Deirdre Connelly, Emily Hackett (zoom), Lynnette Claudon (zoom), William Wilson (zoom)

Call to Order: 7:03 pm

Changes to Agenda:

None.

Public Comment:

None.

Review Minutes

The group reviewed the April 20, 2023 minutes and made a few edits for clarity.

Motion: To approve the April 20, 2023 minutes with tonight's amendments. Made by Ms. Cutler, second by Ms. Zimmerman. Passed unanimously.

Conversation re: Village Wastewater Funding

Mr. Sullivan introduced Lynnette Claudon, Emily Hackett, and William Wilson. He gave some context for the discussion, explaining that wastewater capacity has limited growth in the village area. The town has some past studies but they are out of date, and the PC is considering whether the town should look for new sources of funding for a wastewater project.

Ms. Claudon shared a presentation that she emailed to the group after the meeting. She mentioned that the EPA uses an affordability metric, the annual user rate divided by the median household income of the community, and determined that a rate of 1-2% is considered affordable. She gave a few examples of decentralized wastewater systems around Vermont, including Warren, Brownsville, Rochester, Westford, and Montgomery. Warren installed a decentralized system under their ball field. Brownsville purchased the Ascutney Mountain system when the ski resort went out of business.

Ms. Claudon mentioned Grafton as a town that looked into installing a wastewater system. The system was too expensive so the town created a local pump out ordinance that costs residents approximately \$300 every five years. Westford was another town that looked into a system, but their town was ineligible for USDA Rural Development funding because their household income ratio was too high.

She gave some information on funding opportunities. Towns can apply for an engineering planning advance, which are first come, first served loans and only go into repayment if the project goes into construction. These loans can take at least six months to receive. The Clean Water State Revolving Loan Fund offers loans at a low interest rate and they also offer subsidies up to a certain cap.

Ms. Claudon mentioned that for loan funds all projects must be within the .25-mile buffer around the designated village area. Mr. Sullivan asked if all the infrastructure must be within the buffer and Ms. Claudon explained that a leach field could be outside the buffer, but the service area could not be.

Ms. Petito asked if the loan funds could be used to hire people for planning a wastewater project or for hiring the RPC to manage a grant or loan. Ms. Claudon said yes and mentioned that many villages do not have municipal staff to manage grants and they rely on their local RPC for that work. She added that RPCs can help with the request for qualifications process that is required for revolving loan fund applications.

Ms. Cutler asked for more information about the household income ratio that disqualified Westford for funding. Ms. Claudon explained that towns must have a median household income at or below the statewide average to qualify for USDA RD funds. The PC looked up East Montpelier and determined that the town MHI is too high to qualify for USDA RD. Ms. Claudon mentioned that the PC could survey the service area in the village to see if it has a lower MHI than the town as a whole. If it does, the service area would be able to apply for the funding. Ms. Petito asked if USDA was the only entity that uses MHI to calculate funding eligibility. Ms. Claudon stated that the State Revolving Loan Fund also uses it, but that requirement is in flux.

Ms. Claudon mentioned that projects can't be funded if they are in the flood plain. She pulled up a map and the PC looked at the village center for potential sites. Ms. Claudon pointed out the solar field along Route 2 and mentioned it might be a potential co-use site. Ms. Petito asked how the town would handle serving residents located in the flood plain. Ms. Claudon explained that septic tanks would be flood-proofed and the control for the pump would need to be elevated so it couldn't be damaged in a flood.

Ms. Petito asked how much value Ms. Claudon saw in reevaluating the existing studies. Ms. Claudon said that East Montpelier's studies were done by some of the best professionals in the state and most likely wouldn't significantly change with an update. Mr. Sullivan asked if technological advances would merit updating the studies. Ms. Claudon mentioned that there have been some advances in technology, but ultimately wastewater systems rely on soil, microorganisms, and geologic features that don't change.

Ms. Cutler mentioned that part of assessments was looking at the cost for homeowners to replace their septic systems over time and she wondered if that should be revisited. Ms. Claudon explained that replacement for failing systems can cost \$20-30k, but really varies a lot based on the site. She said the village can generalize, but it's hard to come to a firm number for those costs without quotes. Ms. Cutler mentioned that the town received a planning loan in 2007-08 for the earlier study and asked if they would be eligible to apply for funding again. Ms. Claudon said the town is eligible to apply again, and if the town wants to take advantage of funding now or in future years, having updated planning documents will be important to have on hand.

The committee thanked Ms. Claudon, Ms. Hackett, and Mr. Wilson for their time.

The present members discussed the presentation. Mr. Khosla said that moving forward on updating a study seemed like the logical first step. Ms. Cutler wondered if this is a project for the PC or whether the village committee should take it up. She added that the MHI restriction was discouraging. Ms. Petito agreed that there is a question of whether the PC should be the ones take up this project and whether the future ratepayers are even interested in moving forward on this project. Mr. Khosla noted that the conversation about water and wastewater began with the question of how to encourage and enable more development in the village center. Ms. Zimmerman asked if wastewater was limiting growth or an active concern for existing residents. Mr. Sullivan explained that it was more that it limits future growth, but the current residents seem to be doing ok.

Mr. Hall noted that with the senior housing topic, septic systems seemed to be a big issue, but it seems drinking water is the more pressing issue for current village residents. Crystal Springs is a fragile system and serves many and seems to be the higher priority. Ms. Cutler added that it seems if drinking water is addressed for the village center it may be easier to handle wastewater. Ms. Zimmerman pointed out that the opposite is true as well. Mr. Sullivan noted that if the town didn't have a drinking water system it wouldn't be an issue to address, but because Crystal Springs exists and serves many it is a more pressing issue.

The group will discuss drinking water and wastewater planning in more detail at a future meeting.

Discuss work with Energy Committee

Mr. Sullivan explained that the Energy committee would like a single representative from the PC to attend meetings to keep messaging consistent. They have also expressed a desire for more formal instructions around what the PC would like them to work on. The present committee members discussed inviting the Energy committee to the next PC meeting.

Updates

- **Capital Improvement Committee-** None.
- **Energy Committee-** Above.
- **Resilient Roads Committee-** Mr. Lane reported that the logger working on ash tree removal found additional trees, so the town is going to pay extra for the additional work. The work is nearly done.
- **Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission-** Ms. Stone reported that the next meeting is next Tuesday. The Municipal Technical Assistance Program will be discussed and Ms. Stone thought that recordings may be available after meetings if anyone is interested.

ZA Report

None.

DRB Report

No meeting this month, no updates.

Other Business

Mr. Sullivan noted that the committee has new print copies of the LUDR and Town Plan. He also noted that Mr. Troia is not interested in being the Acting Zoning Administrator, so the town is recruiting for that position. If anyone knows a good candidate, please contact TA Jenkins.

Motion: To adjourn. Made by Ms. Cutler, second by Ms. Petito. Passed unanimously.

Meeting closed at 8:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Deirdre Connelly.