

Minutes of the New Downtown Ashburnham Focus Committee Meeting, March 28, 2016

Present: Duncan Phyfe, Chairman; Pat Frederick, acting Secretary; Steve Coswell, Bob Fichtel, Noel McGonigle, Pat Stewart and Richie Wright.

Duncan called the meeting to order at 6:40 PM.

The minutes from the November 9th meeting were accepted as written.

The focus of the committee is to make the Downtown more appealing. Rosemarie Meissner, who was unable to attend this meeting, has shared a couple of links to online sites offering suggestions for improvements to towns.

At the last meeting, State Rep. Jon Zlotnik spoke to us about grant money availability.

After we have met with the DPW, Kevin Flynn of the Mass. Department of Transportation will attend one of our meetings, to inform us on the "Complete Streets" program.

The committee has discussed some possible actions characterized as "low-hanging fruit", projects immediately within reach, requiring the least effort for the largest return. Some such projects might include the following:

Cleanup of the DPW property; a mural on the blank wall of the Family Pharmacy; spring cleanup of yard waste on downtown properties; curb repairs; the removal of tree stumps growing through the fence around the library; acquisition of more land for off-street parking; and a search for likely grants.

Before applying for grant money, we need to develop a Downtown Urban Renewal Plan.

Duncan said the DPW is every town's most important department.

A special budget for the maintenance of the Town's buildings is being established under the heading of Capital Planning.

Richie Wright said that although many local nonprofit organizations approach his business for donations, when he has offered instead to supply them with everything needed for a fundraising carwash, no one has taken advantage of his offer. There seems to be a lack of initiative.

Pat S. said we need to make townspeople aware of what the town has going for it, such as the history of its older buildings: for example, a private home in her neighborhood was once a schoolhouse. She suggested that if we could develop such resources as a fine woodworking shop or art studios, we might attract people from Boston.

Steve said we should start small, with projects demonstrating to townspeople that things are moving forward, and build on those successes. One very visible place to start would be sidewalk and curb repairs. People have all kinds of ideas for what this town needs, but we must maintain the rural character of our downtown. And while an entrepreneurial spirit is necessary, we must first appeal to our own townspeople on a daily basis, not depend on weekend visitors from Boston. We should have some lively debates, make some compromises, then move forward. People who say, "I don't want to get involved, and I don't want to pay more taxes; the government is a problem!" just want to complain! The Highway Barn property could become a farmers' market.

Richie pointed out that we have a new, home-based micro-brewery in town. He said we need twenty more such enterprises.

Pat S. added that we need a producer-managed/community-owned place where people can make a profit without having to pay a middleman to market their merchandise.

Richie and Steve commented that sales of produce, baked goods, butchered and canned goods are subject to state regulation. Also, since many farm products are seasonal, providing a steady stream of merchandise throughout the year could be a challenge.

Pat S. stated that licensing for canned goods in Massachusetts is different from licensing in New Hampshire.

Steve said a community kitchen would need a business manager to recruit enough people to make adequate use of the facility.

Pat S. said that teaching people cooking and other sufficiency skills could save the town. She also suggested sponsoring a self-guided tour of local attractions during a single weekend in September, similar to the 250th Celebration's "Houses and Gardens" tour.

Duncan said we need to update plans based on the former Focus Committee's work.

Steve recommended starting with Downtown beautification and safety improvements. He recommends cutting down some badly damaged trees in front of Town Hall. Pat said lumber from harvested trees could be used for benches and other items for Town use.

Pat S. moved to adjourn the meeting at 8:10PM. Richie seconded the motion. So moved.

The committee will meet jointly with the DPW Committee on April 11th at 6:30 PM, in the Training Room at the Public Safety Building. Regular meetings after that are to take place on the fourth Monday of each month, downstairs at Town Hall.

Respectfully submitted,

Patricia H. Frederick

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Acting Secretary