

Downtown Focus Committee- February 22, 2016.

Opened: 6:30 PM

In attendance: Duncan Phyfe, Rosemarie Meissner, Bob Fichtel, Steve Coswell, Richard Wright, Pat Frederick, Kelly Hansen,

Absent: Pat Stewart and Noel McGonigle

Guests: State Rep. Jon Zlotnik, Liz Penney (Greater Gardner Chamber of Commerce), Jim Bellina (Greater Gardner Chamber of Commerce), Beth Wojnas (Ashburnham Business Council)

No Minutes to approve.

Guest State Rep. Zlotnik spoke during the first part of the meeting.

Zlotnik has been meeting with local businesses for the last few years. This past week he met with a second round of businesses. In Ashburnham this included Pat Frederick of the Historical Piano Museum and Ryan McGuane, Advent Financial Planners and downtown property owner. Discussion included complaints, what the State was doing right, wrong, better.

Zlotnik mentioned that recently three bills were introduced as a result of his touring local businesses.

The discussion continued with Ashburnham specific recommendations for economic development strategies. Zlotnik spoke about the importance of private/public partnerships as well as the availability of federal, state, privately funded grants.

For example, large scale, MassWorks programs, and EPA grants for polluted/brownfield projects. There is not a one-stop shop place to find state economic grants. Locating these grants should be a community effort or you need someone employed by the town to be on top of grants. Gardner has a re-development authority- four people dedicated to locating money. These are economic development people.

Discussion re: possible grants.

- Suggested we target large dollar grants. Gardner got one last year for \$1M.
- \$1-2K with match to upgrade website. Mobile friendly.
- Energy is another big source. Energy efficiency.

- Improve the business climate. Community compact. New program created by the Baker administration. Town aligns procedures- best practices. Gets into minutiae of things. One option is economic development.
- I.e. Public Safety, get bonus points for PS grants.
- **MassWorks** will be the most impactful. Towns our size have applied and been successful. A plan is required for the grant. Must show measureable success based on the plan.
 - Most successful towns have a comprehensive detailed plan. Help with grants. Grantors want to make sure the Town/City is a good investment.
 - Grants can also come in increments. More manageable and able to get more than one source of funding. Lots of smaller grants.
 - Urban Renewal Plan- Gardner has one. They got \$2.5M for Main St. "Rear"; \$1.2M for re-development behind Stop & Shop.
 - The Urban Renewal plan is the basis for the MassWorks Grant. It is possible for Ashburnham to update existing documents. Zlotnik suggested that the Town have an individual to head up the activity- town planning.
 - Best to be consistent with a plan. Some of what we have might be sufficient. Stuff can be old.
 - The cycle- MassWorks is every year with a response in 6-8 months. Different grants have different cycles.
 - MassWorks budget had \$30M last year. Biggest MassWorks grant was \$3M last year for Quincy re-doing their downtown.
 - MassWorks is stressing public/private partnerships. Need to have buy-in from developer and businesses from the get go. Prove to the State that the project will bear fruit. Under 12 months from when you start talking to them. Tie the partnership into the project.
 - Overlay for zoning so a developer can just come in and do it without any real difficult work.
 - Tie in with regional economic development people is also advantageous.
- **Other possible grants:** website to match Google mobile friendly grant; grants for energy

- EOCD guys could come. Zlotnik could arrange. Ask questions and plot a plan.
- Duncan mentioned he has spoken to MASSDOT to have them come in and speak to us regarding Complete Streets. Kevin is coming.
- Funding is coming directly out of the State budget. Under \$100K projects can be tap into this funding but it is a lengthy and risky of a process. Not fund rather than cut. The State explores on a case by case basis. MASSDOT grants tend to be for infrastructure. Subject to 9C; not the top priority for funding. State tends to look to be “last mile” funding.
- Zlotnik recommended we look at places like Burlington VT and Durham, NH re: their economic development.
- The key to grants is letters of support: MRPC, Zlotnik, Flanagan, Chamber, etc.
- **CPA- Community Preservation Act.** Deed transfer, \$10 surcharge. Prop 2.5 override. Only communities who pass it can take advantage of it. Tax increase. Nobody has gotten the match in a few years. Zlotnik says don't do it. You can only use the dollars for Affordable Housing, Historic Preservation, and Public Space. Affordable housing includes senior citizen housing. Ashburnham has not accepted. It would have to be passed by ballot and would cause an increase in taxes.
- **HUD money.** Can't depend on it. Usually low income communities. Federal funding has dried up.

Rep. Zlotnik left as well as other guests. DFC meeting continued.

Minutes from the first meeting will be approved and accepted at next meeting.

Duncan goes through agenda.

Brief Discussion re: Complete Streets.

Chairman's Report

Duncan reminded people about the open meeting law.

Old Downtown Focus Committee Business:

Signage by-law is being updated.

It was decided that the definition of the DFC scope of area encompass the downtown village center as outlined in Village Zoning documents. Suggested that we review the zoning individually.

The Town received a grant from the EPA to determine if the soil on the DPW property was contaminated. It is not a brownfield. Dumped materials on DPW materials will be moved to new site or sent to re-grind facility in Gardner.

Duncan explained that the original mission of the DFC has morphed into DPW replacement. i.e. Sale/development of the land.

Member of the original DFC who sit on the current DFC spoke about their travels to other towns to make comparisons re: their Highway Depts. Recommendations were made. i.e. the development of the DPW site included senior housing.

Bob Fichtel and Steve Coswell spoke about their recollections of the original Downtown Focus Committee.

Comment that the Downtown Focus Committee should tell the story of the original Downtown Focus Committee as well as its purpose in an effort to sell the idea to the community and potential developers.

Steve Coswell reported that at the Planning/Zoning Meeting changes in the signage by-law were discussed. Ryan McGuane presented. Not much discussion. A by-law change required.

It was suggested by Dick Reynolds that banners be removed because they don't comply.

The signage by-law is still a work in progress. Probably will be an item for vote at the fall town meeting.

Richie Wright discussed the need for more parking, particularly off-street. Brief discussion re: MADOT parking rules. Get further information when representative attends meeting.

The Greater Gardner Chamber of Commerce is willing to help- write letters of support to help garner community acceptance.

New Downtown Focus Committee Business:

It was decided that the Downtown Focus Committee focus on the small things first. First step is to list the low hanging fruit. What can be accomplished with little or no funding. Do this before next meeting in preparation for discussion.

Next meeting: 4th Monday of March.

Adjournment: Motion: Bob Fichtel; Second: Steve; Vote: Unanimous; Closed: 8:25 PM