

Town of Great Barrington, Community Preservation Committee (CPC)

Minutes of October 28, 2014

Great Barrington Fire Station

The meeting was called to order at 5:30 PM by Chair Karen Smith.

Members present: All members were present: Ed Abrahams, Thomas Blauvelt, Jessica Dezieck, Martha Fick, Suzanne Fowle, Kathleen Jackson, William Nappo, Deborah Salem, and Karen W. Smith.
Also present: Town Planner Chris Rembold.

Administrative Business

Dezieck moved to approve the minutes of the October 7, 2014 as amended. Abrahams seconded. All were in favor.

Discussion about Process for Step 2 Applications

Smith asked the Committee in what sequence they would like to proceed with application reviews. After some discussion, Dezieck moved that applications be evaluated in random order as determined by lottery. Fowle seconded. All were in favor. Rembold suggested he and Smith do the lottery prior to the December 9 meeting. All agreed.

Rembold said that for the December 9 meeting all Committee members will arrive having scored each application according to the criteria in the score sheet. Abrahams asked if applications met the criteria, but the idea does not have any merit, should it even be looked at. Smith said that the Committee can eliminate applications early by a 2/3 vote. Then the Committee can proceed with discussing the scores of the remaining applications.

EVALUATION OF A SAMPLE PROJECT

Smith asked everyone to take the score sheet, and using a sample project, work through the 13 criteria to see if the process works and members interpret the criteria in the same way. Rembold suggested using the Mass. DCR Benedict Pond dam and beach improvements in Beartown State Forest, which was actually completed a few years ago. For sake of argument it is assumed here that DCR is applying for \$100,000 in CPA funds out of a \$500,000 total project cost. They have all their design completed but they still need wetlands permits. The project is listed in state and local open space plans and the master plan. The Committee went through the Step 2 criteria.

1. Is it consistent with the Master Plan? Yes, this is.
2. Quality of Application: Abrahams asked what exactly are we looking for here. Smith suggested we look for clarity and completeness of the application. If after reading the application you don't have a good sense of what it's about or why it's eligible, you would score it low. For the sample project, the Committee assumed the DCR application was good but not perfect, and scored it 4 out of 5.
3. Public benefit: For the sample application, the land is already conserved and there is open public access. Fowle said that she wanted to see increased public benefit over what already exists. Dezieck said if they are preserving the benefit, like the trail is unsafe or eroding away, that should be ok too. Jackson said since the Master Plan talks about picnicking and passive recreation, this application meets that need and there is a benefit. Fowle said further that since there are so many applications, she will really want to see an increase in benefit, a positive change from what already exists. In this case, Fowle gave the sample project 3 out of 5 points.
Jackson reminded the Committee that in some of these places the Committee might need to visit them in order to understand them better.
Salem asked how much time we should give to discussing each criterion. Smith said we have to be sure that we discuss relevant counterpoints and the minority is always heard. However we also need to get to consensus quickly and we cannot repeat each other.

4. Leverage: There was a discussion of what this means to each member. Dezieck said to her it means that money other than CPA is committed. Blauvelt sees it as the amount of return on investment. Fick said there should be a match or better. Nappo sees it similar to how a bank evaluates a mortgage—the applicant should have skin in the game. Fowle said she wants there to be more other money than CPA money, but if it was a small project without much match, it might still be deserving of support. Jackson agreed with the others. Salem said she liked the idea that little money could attract other money. Abrahams agreed. Smith said she agrees and also sees it as risk and reward—a small amount of CPA money could lead to getting other money involved. This sample application was given a score of 5.
There was a discussion that if a project does not have matching money, it might still be worthy of CPA support. Dezieck said this is true especially for small projects and where it's early money for feasibility studies. Nappo said those seeking seed money should not necessarily be penalized in the scoring system. Fowle suggested if a category, like leverage, is not applicable we can waive that category and then simply evaluate projects scores as a percentage of their possible total, rather than the sum of all possible scores.
5. Multiple CPA Purposes: In this sample case it's just one CPA category so it scored 1 point. Abrahams wondered if projects with more than one CPA purpose should get more than just an additional point. Fowle cautioned that if we score those too much higher, we might end up favoring only the bigger projects that span multiple categories.
6. Community Input/Support: In this case the project is listed in multiple plans that were all developed in public process and there were letters of support. Jackson asked if letters could be included? Rembold said yes and that applicants are welcome to include letters. Fowle said the Committee should recognize that absence of attendees at a meeting could mean that nobody knows about a project, or that everyone already supports the project. All agreed that it was the content of support letters that counted, not necessarily number of letters per se.
7. Project Team: For the sample project, it is assumed that the team is well organized, that they have engineers that designed the plans, but the team group has never done this before. In this case the team gets a score of 1. Nappo said we need to know there are professionals on the team and they have the credentials they need. We don't want these teams to have a big learning curve. Dezieck said plans should be signed and stamped by the professional.
8. Viability of applicant: Blauvelt said he wants the applicant to have a track record, and be sustainable. Nappo agreed and added he doesn't want to give money and then the team walks away.
9. Readiness: In this case the needed permits are known, and they have filed for the permits. The permits are in process but not yet in hand. In this case it gets a 3/5 since it's not 100% ready. If they have no idea the permits they need then it would get a much lower score. And if no permits are needed this category could be excluded as not applicable. Fowle said that using percentage of maximum possible scores would help us judge fairly even if a category doesn't count.
10. Project in Progress: Abrahams said this criterion seems to want projects that have started, that are out of the gates to the point they really will happen. He said if the ball has started rolling, then that might mean it is safer for us to put CPA money in.
11. Immediate Need: Salem said this seems clear—some projects need funds now in order to complete something or get other funding. Others can wait until next year. She also said that there are immediate needs like more affordable housing. Smith said if a historic building is falling down that might be immediate need. Jackson said immediate need for an open space project could mean that a working farm needs to be preserved right away or it will get sold and developed.
12. Town-wide / Long Term Perspective: There was discussion about how to measure this. It was generally agreed that projects should benefit many people over a long period of time. For housing, it might be just as important to serve a small handful of people, since in general an overall public need for affordable housing.

13. Town Project: Blauvelt said it is a municipal project or it is not. Abrahams asked how much advantage this should bring and should it be assigned a score rather a simple yes or no answer. Smith said this is just a guide, a tie breaker, and not everything can be quantified. It will help us weigh things in our discussion.

Fowle returned to her suggestion about using percentage scores. So if a category, like leverage for example, doesn't apply, then it's not a total possible score of 53 it's a total possible of 48. And if the project gets 100% of that possible max score of 48 then it might be a better project than one that only gets 90% of a total maximum of 53. All agreed the percentage system could work well.

Rembold asked when the Committee would judge the projects according to the specific CPA category. For example, this open space and recreation project meets only some of the priorities and needs on page 7 of our CPA plan. The Committee thought that once initial scoring is over, the specifics of each CPA category plan would help determine if a project was worthy of more discussion and funding consideration. It was decided that if a project scores highly on the first 13 criteria above, but it does not really meet the specific CPA category needs, it should not be funded.

Jackson asked if any of these 13 categories gets scored as a 1 or a 0, should that project get kicked out automatically. Abrahams said somebody could make that motion at the beginning and 2/3 could vote to not consider the project further. And if a project scored below 50% of the possible score, or below the average score of all projects, maybe that project should be passed over.

Rembold said that the public benefit category needs to be met, according to the law. If there is no public benefit, that gets a 0 and the project should not, by law, be funded. The application must demonstrate what the benefit is.

Jackson suggested quality of application be considered the same way. Blauvelt said the first three score criteria were the most critical. It was to be consistent, clear, and provide a public benefit. If they fail on these they should be rejected. Rembold said if in the course of discussion it becomes apparent that a project just is not that strong, then a motion to pass over the project could be made. If 2/3 vote in favor then the Committee moves on to the next one.

Jackson wondered what would happen if it becomes clear that a project really is not eligible for CPA. Rembold said in that case, if they cannot prove it fits in that CPA matrix, the Committee should reject it.

Smith asked that if the perfect score was a 53, plus the two "yes" answers, should there also be a minimum score that projects have to meet in order to be considered. Abrahams said rather than pick a number now arbitrarily, when we are done scoring we have that discussion about the lowest of the bunch and decide then. Fick said the scores will help put things in line and it will become apparent. Fowle said she didn't want to assign a number, but off the top of her head, if something is less than 50% it would be comparatively weak. Or, only those that are above the median score should get considered further.

It was again agreed that everyone needs to arrive at the December 9 meeting having already scored every project in every criteria.

Jackson wondered when people would change their scores, if the Committee discussion convinced them to reconsider. It was suggested that everyone arrives having scored, there is a discussion, and the final score is determined there at the meeting while the discussion is still fresh in everyone's mind. In other words the only time to reconsider a score should be at the meeting itself. Jackson agreed this sounded good.

Abrahams said that gives us the chance to argue each other for different scores. But in the end I don't have to change my 3 to a 5, and you can keep your score at 5. But the final score for that category would be the average score of the 9 of us? All agreed that this would be the method.

All agreed that they would come in ready to share their numbers, have discussion, and then each individual score is incorporated into an average.

It was suggested we have score cards for 1 point through 5 points so we can each hold up a card.

Salem asked for clarification on the system. Jackson said that before December 9 meeting, the lottery is decided by Karen and Chris, and everyone scores the applications for themselves. At the December 9 meeting, we then have a quick conversation about those who are in or out discussion, and a 2/3 vote can eliminate a project right away. Then we discuss the scores for those remaining projects not thrown out. All agreed.

So the process for Meeting 1 (Dec. 9) will be:

1. Arrive having scored all
2. Then 2/3 vote re: thumbs up or thumbs down? In or out?
3. Discuss scores in order as determined by the lottery, column by column, can change scores in real time during discussion.
4. Consensus if a column does not apply to a project
5. Each of the 9 members' scores are averaged, and the result is totaled to give a project score, which is then represented as a percentage of the maximum possible total for that project after categories are excluded (the Fowle system).

There was then discussion about how to evaluate the results. If there were a few projects that were obviously strong or "home runs" they could be the short list. They could be put aside for later, and then debates could determine others that fell more or less in the middle – the "maybes". Or, if we don't have enough budget to fund more than just the short list, should we stop and only proceed with the short list?

Smith reminded everyone that the projects need to be looked at according to the criteria for that CPA category, which we wrote into the CPA plan.

Jackson said if there were 5 home runs and 10 maybes, then we evaluate the 10 maybes against their CPA specific categories and let them compete against each other in the category. Fowle disagreed saying that she might not be ready to make a short list without having utilized the CPA category criteria from the Plan. There was general agreement that the next step should involve looking at the CPA category criteria.

Fowle said there are 4 sets of projects to be evaluated. Three that are 1 CPA category, and 1 that is for projects that meeting multiple categories.

Fowle suggested that the possibility of a 2/3 "thumbs up or down" vote should be available to the Committee to use at any time in the process. Dezieck agreed saying if a project is clearly faulty and there is consensus to reject it we should not be wasting time. All agreed this could be an option at any time.

Smith suggested that Meeting 1 (Dec. 9) is for vetting, throwing out, and scoring. Meeting 2 (Dec. 16) could be the evaluation regarding the CPA categories, and also a time to decide whether site visits and presentations would be needed. Smith said at some point we will have to ask the finalists what they will do if we can only fund part of their project.

Rembold said applications will not be sent to the Committee until the December 1 deadline is passed. Then he will send a list of the complete applications, and he will distribute the hard copies.

Smith said members should plan on a 4-hour meeting for Dec 9, and we'll bring food.

Reports from Committee Members

None

Next Meeting

At the next Committee meeting, the Committee will review these procedures, and will also review the items that will be considered under each CPA category, as outlined by the CPA Plan

The next meeting will be Thursday, November 20 at 5:30.

Adjourn

Hearing no further business, Smith adjourned the meeting at 7:35 PM.

Materials presented or distributed for this meeting:

- Minutes from October 7, 2014 meeting
- Draft scoring sheet for Step 2 applications

Respectfully submitted: _____



