

Town of Great Barrington Community Preservation Committee (CPC)

Minutes of November 14, 2017

Fire Station, 37 State Road

Members present: Ed Abrahams, Thomas Blauvelt, Martha Fick, Jeremy Higa, Bill Nappo, Patricia Sharpe, and Karen W. Smith. Absent: Jessica Dezieck

Also present: Town Planner/CPA Administrator Chris Rembold

Call to Order 5:35 PM by Chair Blauvelt

Administrative Items

Smith moved to approve the minutes of October 11. Abrahams seconded. All were in favor. Blauvelt reminded all to complete the open meetings law certifications.

Review Step 2 applications

Five of the nine Step 2 applications were reviewed:

Clinton Church Restoration (CCR): Mr. Wray Gunn, President of the CCR, spoke. He said CCR is a nonprofit organization to restore the former church, and it has been active for a year now, after purchasing the building. This is a former small black church and has been there since 1880s. It was a place for black families and the entire community. It's the oldest standing black church in the original building in Berkshire County. He said the former pastor Rev. Esther Dozier was instrumental in community affairs and took in the community, including AA and Construct, which started in the church. So it should be restored and kept active, and not torn down.

Diego Gutierrez, CCR board member and architect, handed out a summary sheet about the CPA application. He reviewed the public benefit of this project, the strong community support, the funding sources, and he noted that it is no longer a consecrated church. He said the CCR was able to raise funds to pay for facilitated planning sessions and to buy the church, stabilize it, and bring consultants in for the planning sessions. He said this grant request is only 18% of the Phase 1 budget and their fund raising track record is strong. He said CCR is already seeking other grants and private funding. He said the idea is this building will be not a museum but something more active.

Steve McAlister, an architect from Clark and Green, said his firm is doing a historic structure report now, which will help the building get grant funding. The report identifies the significant features of the building and how to preserve the building. He said they have a plan and Phase 1 is stabilization. He said there are a lot of historic and community benefits with this. It is associated directly with W.E.B. DuBois so and it has always been a community center. The basement community space and sanctuary are both socially significant including hosting NAACP meetings and it is where Construct was founded.

Fick asked if the parsonage was significant. McAlister said yes. It was added in 1939. The Massachusetts Historical Commission indicated it was significant. He said the interior will likely be rearranged and renovated, and it probably would not be a residence, but it should remain.

Fick noted a significant amount of the budget is a projected National Parks Service grant and asked what they would do if it was not received. McAlister said they would have to find the money. He said the grant we are pursuing is for significant sites in the civil rights movement and we think this has some strength in that regard. Gunn said their vision is that people can come here and research DuBois. They will have active programs and meetings. He said maybe there will be on-site office for the facility manager.

Smith asked for the full cost of renovation. McAlister said that without knowing the program will be, he would guess \$1.25 million. That includes these Phase 1 costs. Gutierrez said he thinks getting this phase funded and completed will help get the ball rolling and help fundraising for future phases.

From the audience Paul Ivory of the Historical Commission said this project is a 100% grass roots effort to save a National Register building. He said they have done it by the book so far, in terms of getting support, saving the building, and beginning to define the end use and its programming.

Blauvelt asked if the building was past the point of saving. McAlister said it's bad and if we don't save it now it will go. We need to act very soon, and then we can phase the future work as needed.

Nappo asked if people will be able to use the building in the meantime. McAlister said not likely, since there is not a certificate of occupancy.

Sharpe asked Gutierrez why he said it is "not a museum," because we need a DuBois museum. He said he meant it would not be something static. He said we want to respect the history and heritage but also serve today, not just to look back at history.

Municipal Affordable Housing Trust (MAHT) – for rehabilitation and down payment assistance, and a property acquisition fund: Bill Cooke, John Katz, and Jonathan Hankin of the MAHT were present. Cooke quoted from the Town Master Plan statement about the housing cost burden so many homeowners and renters face. He said so many local employers need housing for workers. He said our town has an affordable housing crisis. He said development projects can take years to accomplish. He said the MAHT wants to offer programs that the CDC, Berkshire Housing and Construct do not offer. So these are the three things we are seeking funds for tonight. First is the down payment assistance program, similar to successful programs in Lenox and Williamstown. Second is the need for rehabilitation homes. And third is to have funds to purchase property as it becomes available, so we can create more housing. He said a site makes it easier to get grant funding to build new housing, and there is a need to have the funds in order to act quickly in the marketplace. He said our Town Meeting voted to establish the trust to do things just like this.

Fick asked where the Lenox and Williamstown Trusts get their funds. Cooke said from their CPA primarily. She said since the banks could make profits on these programs they should give money too.

Fick asked if they have property in mind that they want to buy. Cooke said no because the ones that are affordable are snapped up quickly. He said if we had the funds we could buy it.

Nappo and Smith asked them to explain the \$250,000 budget for the rehab and down payment programs. Cooke said this is for 5 rehab projects at max of \$35,000, and there would be an administration cost. He said that equals \$210,000. That leaves about \$40,000 for mortgage assistance at a max of \$15,000 per grant.

Smith asked if there are funds other than the CPA, and, could the MAHT do a project now with existing money and see how it works? Hankin said we are trying to get the programs off the ground. Cooke said we've only been around a short while. Katz said they have a private funder, who is willing to participate and help finance some of these activities. He said yes we have thought about other funding, and we want to get one going but we have not been able to yet. We want to have some started before the Town Meeting.

Higa said he thinks they have done a good job since beginning as an organization. He said it is a good idea to have one project in place for Town Meeting.

Fick asked what they could do with less money. Cooke said they would probably do down payment or rehab programs, but there would not be enough for acquisition.

Blauvelt asked if down payment assistance recipients had to be a Great Barrington resident. Cooke said no, not now, they could be moving here from somewhere. But the home would have to be their primary residence.

Katz added that they are exploring that if somebody buys a house with the Trusts assistance, then sells it later, a percent of proceeds could come back into the Trust program.

Abrahams asked why the programs would not ask for all the money back. He said after 15 years if somebody sold, the Trust wouldn't get anything back. Cooke said the 15 year deferred payment is a good model, and other towns do this. He said case could be different.

Conservation Commission for McAllister Wildlife Refuge: Gaetan Lachance and Jess Toro reviewed the proposal. Lachance said this grant will pay for removal invasive plant species from the hedge rows to provide better habitat for endangered bird species. The project will remove bittersweet and hazard trees and hopefully retain the Elm tree if it can be saved. It will remove the large rocks and stumps. This would all happen in the ant season. Toro said connecting the two open fields into one larger area is the biggest bang for the buck for improving and expanding the potential bird habitat area.

There were questions about other funding, and about the budget, as the table in the application seemed incomplete. Lachance there are two different projects in different areas of property. He said \$18,950 is our total cost for this project. But there are other things happening at McAllister which include a \$2,164 forest stewardship plan that is funded by DCR. That is being done by a forester. Having that plan will help make us eligible for funds for forest sections of McAllister. He said the Friends of McAllister is a group that is being formed to help steward the property. It will be an independent nonprofit.

There was a question about where this proposal would happen on the site. Lachance showed the map and said this is for 10 of the 94 acres. After this project there are still 84 other acres to address. He said the rest of the property is mostly forest. There are invasives in there too but that might be the focus of forest program grants after the forest plan is done. CPA is best for the 10 acre meadows because all the other grants focus on forest or wetlands. It is hard to find funds for habitat management funds and hedge rows.

Nappo asked if they could do with less money. Toro said she would not recommend it. In other places we have done partial projects but the invasives might take over, and we don't want to leave stumps or large rocks. We want this to be a complete project.

Higa asked if this would make it more accessible as open space and recreation. Lachance said it will help us make sure we do not lose the field, and it will improve the views from the trail. It would make the area more visible in general. He said the Greenagers will be adding a kiosk, with information and dog waste station, in order to encourage more use and access.

A site visit was set for 3:00 Monday, November 20 for those who are not familiar with the property.

Housatonic Valley Association to create a Housatonic River access: Dennis Regan said HVA is a nonprofit watershed organization formed to protect and utilize the River as a community resource. HVA does this through access to the River, education and community projects. He said we want to get people

on the river because once people get to know the river they will want to protect the River. He said HVA runs trips throughout the year, and people have a lot of fun.

Regan said there has been a lack of access and over recent years they have created seven more access points along the river's length. He said this south of the Rising Pond Dam in Great Barrington has long been on HVA's radar because it is a beautiful stretch of river and there are eagles. He said access through the Rising Mill property near the dam is not possible. This is the closest access point possible south of the Dam. The solar developer who owns the property is giving us access along Division Street, and this will connect to the walking trail that BNRC will be creating in the near future. There is an informal access here now but it is very limited. The landowner will construct the parking lot. HVA will make the trail over to the river and will harden the riverbank for people to use it. He said the Conservation Commission has permitted this already.

There was a comment that the proposed budget should show how much the parking lot and other items would cost. Then the CPA portion would clearly be shown as part of a larger project budget.

There was a question about signage. Regan said there will be signs and river maps at the access point. People will be able to see the various access points so they can plan to put in and take out.

Reports of Committee members

None

Citizen Speak

None

Next Meeting

November 20, to review last 4 applications

Adjourn

7:25 PM

Submitted By:
