

Great Barrington Master Plan Committee (MPC)

Minutes of May 26, 2011

Great Barrington Fire Station
37 State Road, Great Barrington

The meeting was called to order at 7:30 PM by Co-Chairperson Michele Gilligan. She announced that the meeting was being recorded and asked members to sign in and pick up their materials for the evening. She designated Shep Evans as the recording secretary since Richard Dohoney was not present.

Members present (alternate members *without* voting power at this meeting are denoted with *italics*):
Barbara Bailly (Alternate), Ryan Caruso, Shep Evans, Michele Gilligan, Jonathan Hankin, Paul Ivory, Bill Meier, Mary Beth Merritt, *Vivian Orłowski (Alternate)*, Deb Phillips, Christine Ward (Alternate), Michael Wise

Members absent: Andrew Blechman, Richard Dohoney, Jack Musgrove, David Shanahan, Karen Smith

Also present: Chris Rembold, Town Planner; Amy Kacala, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission.

Minutes of April 28, 2011

After a motion by Wise, seconded by Hankin, the minutes were unanimously approved.

Subcommittees Task Force Reports

Gilligan thanked those task forces who delivered a report for their work and reiterated her offer to assist subcommittees in developing the first two sections of the subcommittee reports (the sections related to the 1997 and 1974 plans), but not part three, which is the portion regarding issues we need to consider for the new master plan.

Rembold said that the key with these reports is for the task force members to learn about what the town has identified or accomplished in the past on these particular issues, and to start thinking about what we need to plan for as we move ahead with the new master plan.

Agriculture report: (Meier, Merritt, Orłowski)

Meier began a brief slide show and said that both the 1997 and 1974 plans highlighted that agriculture and open land make important contributions to the tourist economy, and both plans called for support of agriculture. Today we need to be more cognizant of our dependence on foreign oil, the use of factory farms and petroleum based fertilizers, and how locally we can address these issues with organic methods. The 1974 plan actually foresaw the fertilizer issue and said that Taft Farms was one of the first to embrace non-pesticide-based techniques. Looking to our new master plan, we should reinforce the goals of the 1997 plan including (1) encouraging high density housing to reduce development pressure on farmland, (2) being creative with zoning and tax incentives to support and promote farming, (3) supporting an interagency task force (similar to Keep Farming). Zoning changes might include incentive zones, broadening uses allowed as accessory to agricultural uses, and loosening regulations that hinder backyard agriculture.

Orłowski continued the slide show saying that small, backyard, or more “urban” gardens play important roles in local agriculture and should be encouraged. People will need to have cold frames or other

structures for four-season farming, and we will need to encourage four-season farmers markets also. Small scale organic agriculture should be encouraged. Finally, we need to recognize that agriculture plays an important role in the food system and in the economy and in providing jobs. Gilligan asked if the income of farmers is still relatively low. Orłowski indicated that as oil costs increase, then the value of local farming will increase. Merritt reminded people that the Keep Farming plan is investigating the economic issues in more depth.

Merritt said that providing job training for agricultural support sectors will become more important and we need to tie this into the economic development and sustainability areas of our next master plan.

Economic Development report: (Ivory, Phillips, Smith, Wise,)

Wise presented a brief slide show and referred to the committee's report that was handed out. The strengths of our area include cultural and natural resources and also a lower cost of living (except here in GB) than other areas. (Much of the jobs and economic data is about Berkshire County; GB has more in common with Columbia County and Litchfield County than with the larger cities of our county, so these nearby areas should also be our comparison points.) Back in 1974 the largest employer was industry and manufacturing, and that has obviously changed. Today the county offers well educated workers and good infrastructure for business and industry, such as electricity and rail and plenty of available sites for industries looking to locate here. An abiding concern is still a lack of high speed data infrastructure, though that is on the way. Education and health care are our largest employers (even more so here in GB than in the county). Other large employment sectors are retail and services and leisure/hospitality (again, more so here in GB than in the county).

A graphic slide illustrated county-wide data comparing sectors by size, pay and growth. Agriculture is shrinking. Professional and management sectors, which pay better, are growing. Service jobs are growing too, but they are lower paying. Education, health care and social assistance are generally stable and pay an average wage. In average income level, Berkshire County lags far behind the state and country, but GB is about the same as the national average.

Some issues to consider for our next plan: (1) Retail and services is what we do most, and we need to ensure that we continue to do it well. We also need to preserve our village centers and our open space so people and businesses continue to come here. Niche, boutique retailing is important in those centers: we need to better understand what draws and keeps such retailers, with better information about costs, rents, occupancy and entry-exit histories. (2) Cottage industry and self employment is either the wave of the future or the last resort of desperate workers. We need good data on the extent of self employment, which could require a Town Census question on this topic. (3) "Lean" industry and headquarters operations, such as Iredale Mineral Cosmetics, have a place here and seem to offer fair paying jobs with local impacts. We should attract and support more such small-medium firms.

Historic Resources report: (Caruso, Evans, Ivory)

Ivory presented for this subcommittee, noting that our town is rich in historic resources, and these are fundamental to our town. They give our town identity and visual character and are critical to our overall image and therefore to our economy. They are authentic. Missing from the last plans was any sort of action plan with priorities, timelines, and goals to ensure the preservation of our historical assets. We recommend this as we move forward. The first step in this plan would be an historic inventory, and we have commissions / society locally who could lead this effort. We do have a Local Historic District with some regulatory teeth, but it is relatively limited. Finally, we should consider programs to protect these resources, such as demolition delay bylaws, and adoption of the Community Preservation Act.

Cultural Resources report: (Caruso, Evans, Ivory)

Ivory summarized this report also. He said that past plans did not give this topic much thought. However in GB and in Housatonic we have a number of these sites that enrich the lives of our residents. We need to encourage and protect these since they are not only important to residents but also draw tourists and arts-minded second home owners. Advertising and promoting the cultural and historic resources should be a priority in order to keep GB a great place to live and work and to make our town a good place to set up a business.

Housing report: (Bailly, Evans, Musgrove, Ward)

Ward began with a brief summary of the 1974 plan, which identified the new trend of scattered single family homes in outlying areas of town, as well as the suburbanization of GB via small subdivisions. The 1997 plan estimated that 5% of GB's housing was seasonal or second homes. The median home price in 1994 was \$105,000, and the median rent in 1990 was \$478 per month. The 1997 plan included a number of implementing actions including strategies for low income families and for seniors, and for providing a broader range of housing types and choices for those with modest means.

Ward also presented a summary of designated low income housing currently in our town. Brookside Manor (by the senior center) and Flag Rock Village (Housatonic) are operated by the GB Housing Authority for low income families. Bostwick Gardens is senior housing for rent, operated by Berkshire Housing Development Corp. Hillside has 10 rental units operated by the CDC. Christian Hill Commons has 40 low income rental housing units, operated by Berkshire Housing Development Corp. Beech Tree Commons has 66 units. Forest Row, with 18 units, is a low-cost housing option under the community land trust model. Gilligan indicated that there are some Section 8 subsidized rental apartments in downtown. Phillips added that Blue Hill Commons has affordable housing also (25% of total). Some affordable housing is proposed, at the to-be-redeveloped Searles School and New England Log Homes sites. Orlowski noted that Construct provides supportive housing in our community.

Evans reported on current conditions, indicating that as many as 13% may be second homes. 64% of occupied housing units are owner-occupied. This represents about 55% of total housing units. 31% are renter occupied. The median County income as of 2009 was \$42,290. The median monthly rent for a residence is \$815, just within the range of affordability for that median income.

Homeownership is quite a different story. The median sales price of a single family home in Great Barrington in 2010 was +/- \$325,000. The monthly payment for mortgage principal, interest, taxes and insurance would be about \$2,087. This monthly payment implies an annual income of \$89,000. (See housing report for more detailed data.) This is well beyond the incomes of most working year round residents of Great Barrington, and undoubtedly beyond many, if not most new arrivals hoping to start a family here.

Evans highlighted that local folks can only afford to stay in the area by selling and using the the cash contributed by second home buyers to fund a larger than usual down payment. This "capital gain recycling" may be as or more important to the local housing picture than locally-earned ordinary income, and the market might thus be dependent upon large infusions of second home purchase money to keep it going.

He also pointed out the growth in bigger and higher value homes and the price trends of residentially-zoned vacant land, where his quick survey of residential parcels on the market today in Great Barrington showed 10 lots under 5 acres offered at a median list price of \$197,500.

In conclusion Evans noted that it is clear that supplying low cost housing in the years ahead is going to be largely dependent on creative re-use and redevelopment of existing, often blighted properties that will not command the affections and pocketbooks of second home owners and others with accumulated capital gains.

Ivory noted that preserving historic buildings (like mills and school buildings) and providing for affordable housing is a convergence of interests, an opportunity for both interests.

Bailly said she hoped the new zoning regulations that allow for accessory dwelling units in single family homes will create more low cost rental housing.

Caruso asked if we could gather data on cost of living, rather than just median income, including housing, food, utilities, taxes, etc. The cost of living here is cheaper than Manhattan, obviously, but much more than say Pittsfield.

Open Space report: (Caruso, Evans, Meier, Ward)

Caruso noted that the 1997 plan and 1974 plans don't compare well, since the 1997 plan dropped much of what was discussed in the older plan. The 1997 plan did not cover trails and paths well, though it did highlight a southern extension of the river walk.

Meier discussed recreation briefly, saying that competitions and events could help promote our open space more effectively. For example, a small triathlon is happening at Lake Mansfield. Events like this should highlight our historic sites or open spaces. People who attend might stay for a weekend, a week, or forever.

Ward noted that the 1974 plan encouraged a town-wide trail network, which would "make the entire town a park." While we have a significant amount of open space, only recently, within the last few years, has the GB Trails and Greenways (see vision map at www.gbtrails.org) group actually pursued the idea of trails throughout town and connecting natural resources and open spaces to historic and cultural resources. The "central loop" walk connects resources like the River Walk with Lake Mansfield. More recently, a trail connecting Berkshire South Community Center with Fountain Pond State park has been completed.

The open space committee recommended that the town document the open spaces and trails that we have and include the contact information for each management area in our new master plan. They also noted that adoption of the Community Preservation Act is critical to future open space preservation, historic preservation, and housing.

Conclusion

Gilligan thanked everyone who presented tonight and commended the work. Those who did not present this month will need to be prepared next month.

Outreach and Schedule Update

Rembold said that the first town forum, the Vision Workshop, will be held on **Thursday July 14** with the session from 7:00 to 9:00. It will be in the Fire Station. This is the Great Barrington specific event.

The south county vision forum for the Regional Sustainability Plan will be July 13 (the night before).

At these meetings, Rembold and Kacala will present a brief picture of existing conditions and trends (where we are and where we are going) so that people can respond and tell us what they like and don't like about our town, and what they want the town to be in the future.

After these vision workshops, we will proceed through the summer and fall with interviews, focus groups, and small neighborhood meetings to flesh out specific issues in more depth.

All members of this Master Plan Committee should try to be at both meetings, but at the very least they need to attend the Great Barrington forum on the 14th.

Rembold will provide more information about the structure of the July meetings at our June committee meeting on June 23.

Adjourn

On a motion by Hankin, seconded by Phillips, all in favor, the meeting adjourned at 9:05 PM.

Next Meeting

Thursday, June 23 at 7:30pm, at the Fire Station.

Materials distributed or presented during this meeting:

- Agenda
- Reports and PowerPoint from subcommittees:
 - Agriculture
 - Economic Development
 - Historic Resources
 - Cultural Resources
 - Housing
 - Open Space
 - Services & Facilities