

Great Barrington Master Plan Committee (MPC)

Minutes of April 28, 2011

Great Barrington Fire Station
37 State Road, Great Barrington

The meeting was called to order at 7:35 PM by Co-Chairperson Michael Wise.

He announced that the meeting was being recorded and that CTSB was video taping the meeting. He asked members to sign in and pick up their materials for the evening.

Members present (alternate members without voting power at this meeting are denoted with *italics*): Barbara Bailly, Ryan Caruso, Richard Dohoney, Shep Evans, Jonathan Hankin, Paul Ivory, Mary Beth Merritt, Jack Musgrove, *Suzanne Fowle Schroeder (Alternate)*, David Shanahan, Karen Smith, *Christine Ward (Alternate)*, Michael Wise

Members absent: Bud Atwood, Jim Clark, Michele Gilligan, Donald Goranson, Bill Meier, Vivian Orlowski, Deb Phillips.

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

Minutes of March 24, 2011

After a motion by Smith, seconded by Musgrove, there was a brief discussion of the March 24 minutes.

Wise indicated that after reviewing the existing conditions presentation again, specifically slide 20, he would like to amend the minutes. The second paragraph under Existing Conditions on page two should read that while Great Barrington has a high number of second homes, it is not as high a proportion as any neighboring towns.

Smith moved to accept the minutes as amended, Musgrove second, all in favor, none opposed.

Outreach and Schedule Update

Rembold indicated that he hopes to modify the logo color to a deeper, forest, green.

He reminded that the first public forum is still targeted for that second week of July, probably an evening event, sometime after July 10. He will coordinate with Kacala.

The media outreach will begin in earnest on June 1. Maps, statistical snapshots, etc. will be printed and placed in key locations, businesses, and in advertising in order to generate interest and recognition.

Existing Conditions Presentation

Rembold presented a slide show on Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Parks and Open Space, continuing the process of educating members on important background concepts and issues.

He began by noting that the concept of “sustainability” is the key to understanding how the issues in a master plan should interact and relate to each other. The traditional understanding of sustainability has been as a vision that environment, society, and economy should ideally overlap and inform each other.

The new concept of sustainability is best understood as a series of dependencies. In other words a healthy environment forms the basis or the foundation for everything else. A strong society cannot exist without a health environment, and a vibrant and resilient economy depends on both a strong society and a health environment. He asked the committee to apply this model of sustainability to our planning decisions as we move forward.

Rembold discussed three main categories of natural resources: land, water, and organisms.

Land resources: Rembold showed a slide of geology and bedrock characteristics, and noted how this determines to a great extent the shape and topography of our town. Bedrock and soils determined where mountains and ridges are, where our water, rivers, and wetlands are located. Our rivers, transportation routes, and best agricultural soils are found in the bottomlands between the mountains and ridges.

Water resources include rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, wetlands, and so forth. Drinking water sources are found in either surface water supplies, like Long Pond, which supplies the Housatonic Water Company, or in groundwater aquifers roughly under the Green River and the western plains of town, which supplies all of the water for the Great Barrington Fire District. Floodplain areas are also important water resource areas, correspond to agricultural soil areas, and to a great extent limit building and development.

Organisms: especially rare and threatened species, are important for assessing the health of our ecosystems. The new Bio Map II details resource areas that are home to these organisms and the natural areas that support these organisms. Evans noted that the areas listed in Bio Map II are priority conservation areas, at least as the state level. Ivory asked whether these areas are referenced in our zoning regulations or other laws. Rembold said their locations and resource areas may be protected in some way already, either by Natural Heritage regulations, wetlands or other regulations, and so on, and/or they may be on land that is in permanent protection (i.e. state or municipal conservation land). Some of these resource areas are already protected, whether by regulation or ownership, but many are not yet protected. Fowle clarified that Bio Map II is not regulatory, only policy guidance.

Rembold discussed agricultural resources briefly. He noted that in the 1800s, 70 percent of the land locally used to be in agricultural use; today, 70 percent is forest. He noted that while the number of farms is decreasing, the average acreage per farm is increasing. Hankin said that many times land owners may not use their own land for farming, but rather allow farms to utilize it. Rembold showed the location of prime agricultural soils, typically in bottom lands. Hankin asked whether these areas overlap with critical species habitat. Rembold affirmed and also noted that the prime agricultural soils may also overlap with other issues, one of those being a proposed PCB landfill on GE land on the western side of Rising Pond.

Rembold discussed the “Keep Farming” program briefly, noting that the program is not interested in preserving farmland simply for scenic qualities, but rather to ensure that farming can remain an important contributor to the local and regional economy. Keep Farming is a two-year, three-phase process, and is underway now. Assessment teams have been formed. The end product, an action plan, will be folded into the Master Plan as a chapter. Wise said he is hoping that the assessment teams arrive at some way to measure economic significance of the aesthetic attraction of the countryside. Evans said there have been studies on the economic value of conserved open space, but not necessarily on the aesthetics of farmland. Shanahan said that the economics of agriculture go well beyond our community. There are regional factors, trends; there are regional producers, suppliers, and consumers.

Next, Rembold presented an overview of parks and open space, including a breakdown of acreage of protected lands in Great Barrington—1/3 of the town’s total acreage is in some sort of permanent protection (federal, state, local, or non-profit ownership). He showed a “scenic areas” map from the 2007 Great Barrington Open Space & Recreation Plan (OSRP). It identifies various scenic areas in Great

Barrington. Rembold laid this map on top of a map of protected lands, which illustrated how a great deal of what the 2007 OSRP identifies as “scenic” is also protected by virtue of its ownership status. State ownership, for example, protects much of the scenic areas of Beartown and East Mountain. The scenic areas of Monument Mountain are protected by non-profit or state ownership. However, the scenic areas along the banks and the Green River and Housatonic River, are not protected by ownership, per se. On the other hand, many areas that are not protected by ownership may in fact be protected by virtue of regulations such as water quality zoning, floodplain zoning, scenic mountains act, or wetlands and endangered species. Thus we are fortunate that areas we think of as “scenic” have some level or mode of protection.

Rembold concluded the presentation by reiterating that our natural resources form the foundation for our town’s long history, have dictated how we have developed, and should continue to figure prominently as we plan our future. He asked the committee to keep in mind agriculture as important as an economic contributor, not just as bucolic landscape, and to recognize that open space is important for protecting sensitive areas as well as providing ways to connect with our natural resources.

Other Issues

Wise asked what the topics are for next month. Rembold said the topics will be historic resources, energy and climate, and transportation.

Wise reminded subcommittees that they are to follow the assignment handed out in March, and follow the outline that Michele Gilligan emailed recently.

A member of the audience asked whether subcommittee meetings are public meetings. Rembold said no, that they are not officially designated subcommittees, but rather small task forces or working groups that will convene at their convenience and then report back to the larger group at a public meeting.

Adjourn

On a motion by Dohoney, seconded by Evans, all in favor, the meeting adjourned at 8:45 PM.

Next Meeting

May 26th at 7:30pm, at the Fire Station