



TOWN OF NORTHBOROUGH Zoning Board of Appeals

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Approved 3-25-08

Meeting Minutes Joint Meeting of the Zoning Board of Appeals and Planning Board February 7, 2008

ZBA Members in attendance: Richard Rand, Chairman; Mark Rutan, Clerk; Richard Kane; Dan Ginsberg, Alternate; Sandra Landau, Alternate

Planning Board Members in attendance: Rick Leif, Michelle Gillespie, George Pember, Robert Rosenberg, Donald Hewey

Others in attendance: Kathy Joubert, Town Planner; Elaine Rowe, Board Secretary

The Zoning Board of Appeals returned from executive session at 7:53PM

Chairman Leif called the meeting of the Planning Board to order at 7:53PM.

Chairman Leif noted that, even though Judi Barrett could not be here tonight, he would like to go through a quick update of what has transpired since the last meeting. Chairman Leif explained that the board had been looking specifically at the Route 20 corridor. Ms. Barrett has provided some options and input about multi-family housing via email, a copy of which is available tonight for review. Chairman Leif suggested that the two boards spend some time discussing the multi-family housing issue and establish a concrete plan for moving forward.

Chairman Leif noted that there had been a considerable amount of conversation at the last meeting about the Route 20 corridor, specifically the area known as the Southwest Cutoff and the land surrounding the Loop development, and the consensus was that developing it correctly would require some analysis. The board has asked Ms. Joubert to work with the consultant to come up with a proposal as to what this analysis will cost so that the Planning Board can make a decision about using some of their mitigation money to fund this effort.

Ms. Joubert explained that she had spoken with both the Town Engineer and DPW Director about the infrastructure issues that exist. It was agreed that an analysis would be valuable, but there are still some issues that need to be finalized before she can provide Ms. Barrett with the necessary information to draft a written scope of work and cost estimate. Ms. Joubert stated that she will provide this at the next meeting. Chairman Leif asked Ms. Joubert to email it to the board members in advance of the meeting so that they can be prepared to make a decision. He also suggested that the board reserve judgment about whether to include it in the proposal for Town Meeting 2009.

Chairman Leif noted that Ms. Barrett's email poses the question of whether the town wishes to allow multi-family housing at all, and he would like to get a general consensus from the group. He stated that there seems to be a general feeling that it is important to have different types of housing options available in Northborough, and multi-family allows different types, styles, and price points. He voiced his opinion that it seems to make sense to have this type of housing available.

Chairman Leif noted that previous discussions have also addressed the desire to create a pedestrian-friendly downtown area. By providing for multi-family housing, it allows us to locate more people in and near the downtown area. Chairman Leif reiterated that he is still in favor of allowing multi-family housing, but encouraged others to offer their comments.

Ms. Landau asked what the argument would be against allowing it. Chairman Leif noted that Mr. Kane had talked about a variety of housing options in previous meetings. Mr. Kane stated that his personal experience with two separate towns were less than favorable. He noted that, when these two towns introduced multi-family housing, it eventually resulted in the loss of their business districts and the area deteriorated into slum-like conditions. He noted that Northborough does not have a very large business district, and there has been much conversation about what can be done to encourage more business in the downtown area. He also voiced his opinion that, if the town chooses to allow multi-family housing, it must be done carefully and with consideration of whether the businesses will view it as an advantage or disadvantage.

Mr. Ginsberg asked if there will be any limit on the height of the buildings. Mr. Farnsworth noted that multi-family housing refers to anything over two units, and includes townhouses, apartments, and condominiums. He noted that Ms. Barrett has suggested that the members stipulate specifically what types of multi-family housing they would like to allow.

Mr. Rosenberg voiced concern about existing properties, and questioned the number of potential multi-family projects that might result on Pleasant Street and School Street. He reiterated his fears about changing the character of the downtown neighborhoods. Ms. Joubert noted that, other than the project on School Street, she believes that every other multi-family project in town has been developed either by variance or comprehensive permit.

Chairman Leif asked Mr. Rosenberg if he would allow some multi-family housing if the boards could find a way to allay his fears. Mr. Rosenberg commented that he was not sure about what would work. He noted that the multi-family housing units being developed most recently have been done through comprehensive permits, and he feels that providing for other multi-family options outside of that will simply exacerbate the problem. Ms. Joubert suggested that the board could include inclusionary zoning for multi-family developments.

Mr. Rosenberg stated that he is not sure what our need for diversity is at this point, especially given the number of rental units that will soon be coming to town. He voiced his opinion that, given our senior housing, over 55 developments, and rental units, we

have more diverse housing stock than any community within 20 miles other than Marlborough.

Mr. Ginsberg commented that Main Street in Marlborough is littered with strip malls and apartment complexes, and he questioned whether Northborough is heading toward a similar situation along the western end of Main Street.

Ms. Joubert noted that Ms. Barrett's memo suggests allowing multi-family structures of up to 8 units by right and 24 units by special permit in the downtown district. In the Business East and Business West Districts, she suggests 8 units by right and 16 by special permit. Ms. Joubert stated that we are in no way talking about large apartment complexes.

Mr. Kane asked how these allowances fit in with the restrictions for businesses. Ms. Joubert noted that each of the business districts have their own criteria so that there is no possibility of a "big box" store along Route 20.

Chairman Leif stated that the numbers suggested by Ms. Barrett are still up for negotiation, but that the bylaw should attempt to allow for conversions as opposed to tear downs and possibly allow for residential units above businesses. Chairman Leif asked if any of the board members are opposed to providing for some type of multi-family housing in the new zoning. Ms. Joubert suggested that a vote be taken before moving on to the next issue.

Mr. Rutan asked for clarification of the allowance of 8 units by right in the downtown area, and discussed the possibility that the building where Lowe's was once located could be demolished and replaced with 8 housing units. Ms. Joubert explained that the bylaw will require a minimum amount of square footage for these developments, with a 29,500 square foot lot being required for an 8 unit multi-family housing project in the downtown area. Mr. Rutan voiced his desire not to establish a by-right bylaw that will provide the potential for over-development or a deterioration of the neighborhood.

Chairman Rand agreed that the town has a need for multi-family units, but indicated that he shares the same concerns voiced by Mr. Ginsberg. Mr. Rutan commented that he would be in favor of lowering the by-right maximum in order to have some control over development.

Chairman Leif voiced his impression that most of the board members appear to be in favor of allowing some multi-family housing in the bylaw. He polled the group, and noted that all voted in favor of including multi-family housing in the new zoning.

Chairman Leif noted Ms. Barrett has asked if the town wishes to encourage or simply provide for multi-family housing. Ms. Landau voiced her impression that it will be easier to control development if we simply provide for it.

Mr. Hewey voiced his opinion that the town should allow some multi-family housing by right, but noted that 8 units seems to be excessive if the boards want to have some control over it.

Ms. Joubert noted that Ms. Barrett has addressed the issue of locations of multi-family housing and density. She also recalled previous discussions about not wanting to allow multi-family developments if it will result in tear-downs. To prevent that, there was a suggestion to limit re-development of existing structures to conversions only.

Mr. Kane stated that the boards need to consider that the town and its business zones may change considerably with the development of The Loop. Chairman Leif agreed, and suggested that the boards may want to consider multi-family differently. He suggested that the town ask Ms. Barrett to include this area in her scope of work.

Chairman Leif asked members of the board about where they would like to allow multi-family housing. Mr. Ginsberg suggested that it might be easier to identify those areas where we would not like to see it. Chairman Leif asked if anyone envisions revisiting the decision not to allow it in the Residential A, Residential B, and Residential C districts. Mr. Hewey voiced his opinion that doing so would change the character of the town. Ms. Landau suggested that, if the town wishes to provide for affordable housing, then to the extent that we provide for it by special permit enables us to maintain some degree of control.

Chairman Leif voiced his support of the proposal to provide for multi-family housing because it creates less expensive housing options. He also noted that, even though we currently have different multi-family housing options in town, he does not believe that they address all of the price points. Chairman Leif also stated that he would like to pursue the option of providing for some by right and some by special permit, and focus on which zones to allow them in. He also stated that, at a minimum, affordability is one of the public benefits that we would be seeking by providing for multi-family housing.

Chairman Leif explained that there does not appear to be much business coming up for the Planning Board, so March and April could provide an opportunity to continue working through some of these issues. He would like to try to reach an agreement within the next two to three months so that Ms. Barrett can prepare a revised document for the boards to review. He also noted that, once the final editing phase is complete, Ms. Joubert and Ms. Barrett will need to ensure that it all fits together. He believes that it is possible to complete this work in time for Town Meeting 2009 as long as we continue making progress from month to month. Chairman Leif also stated that the objective now is for everyone to agree that conceptually it all makes sense. Ms. Joubert suggested that the Planning Board dedicate an hour out of each of their meetings to discuss the zoning process. Chairman Leif suggested that the board schedule two one-hour meetings in March to continue the zoning discussion. He also noted that, once the issue of multi-family housing is resolved, the boards can begin to work through Mr. Rosenberg's list of concerns. Once the boards arrive at a comfort level of what the revised zoning will be, they can begin to develop a plan for community outreach.

Ms. Gillespie commented that several other board members have provided comments and concerns that need to be addressed. Chairman Rand voiced his support of the proposal to use the first hour of each Planning Board meeting for a joint meeting.

Ms. Joubert questioned what degree of involvement the board would like Ms. Barrett to have. Chairman Leif suggested that the boards work together, and invite Ms. Barrett to attend should questions arise.

Mr. Pember asked if it is necessary to reconvene the subcommittee. Chairman Leif suggested that the members of the subcommittee be notified of the upcoming meetings in case they wish to attend.

Ms. Joubert suggested that the two boards continue the discussion about multi-family housing on March 4th at 7:00PM. Michelle Gillespie, Donald Hewey and Richard Rand all indicated that they would not be available on March 4th, but will send their comments and input to Ms. Joubert.

Review of Minutes of the Joint Meeting of January 16, 2008 – Richard Kane made a motion to accept the minutes as submitted. Richard Kane seconded, vote unanimous.

Robert Rosenberg made a motion to accept the minutes as submitted. Donald Hewey seconded, vote unanimous with George Pember abstaining.

Mark Rutan made a motion to adjourn the meeting of the Zoning Board of Appeals. Richard Kane seconded, vote unanimous.

Robert Rosenberg made a motion to adjourn the meeting of the Planning Board. Donald Hewey seconded, vote unanimous.

Adjourned at 9:45PM

Respectfully submitted,

Elaine Rowe
Board Secretary