

Sturbridge Finance Committee
Meeting Minutes
April 19, 2012
Town Hall
7:00 pm

Meeting was called to order at 7:04 pm with the following members present: Kevin Smith (KS), Mike Serio (MS), Larry Morrison (LM), Prescott Arndt (SA) and Patti Affenito (PA). Members absent: Joni Light (JL) and Arnold Wilson (AW).

Invited Guest: Jean Bubon (JB), Town Planner.

Minutes:

Motion to approve April 12 minutes as amended made by MS, LM seconds. Vote 5-0-0.

Motion to approve April 17 minutes as amended made by PA, MS seconds. Vote 4-0-1.

Town Planner: JB begins with a brief history of the Commercial Tourism District Plan (CTDP): a District-Local Technical Planning grant was received in 2009 from the Central Mass. Regional Planning Commission. This money can be used only on items that enhance the State's smart growth principles and looked at the area from Route 148 east to Burgess School Rd. Specific items include transportation corridors that are pedestrian- and vehicle-friendly and parking enhancements, how to encourage tourist development and urge visitors to stay in the area longer. The results of this study are on the Planning dept. web page, but includes some betterments such as pedestrian crosswalks and sidewalks; narrowing travel lanes so a bike lane could be added to local roadways and speaks to possibly connecting to the Quinebaug River and/or local bike trails. KS asks about the big X project, JB responds that she is familiar with this project and the CTDP is similar. JB goes to say that spin-off businesses are possible if river access can be expanded. JB does also say that grant-funding sources have been consolidated under a MassWorks program and this program only considers 'shovel-ready' projects (meaning that engineered plans have been completed). JB says that the CTDP is a list of seven tasks; the eighth is engineered plans. KS asks if the \$120,000 pays for tasks 1-8, JB responds no, but will pay for tasks 1-7. The cost for engineered plans may be as high as \$1,000,000. KS asks if there is a time limit on approvals? JB answers that if the Town approves, we can move forward if MassDOT approves the traffic details and MassDOT will abide by the plan. She also says that this is unlikely to get funded in full but will be broken into phases. JB states that the MassWorks program vets proposals from all over the State. JB truly believes this can be done but the Town needs to plan for the long-term, think about how to fund and put in the budget. LM makes the point that we exude a personality whether we want to or not. JB agrees saying that we are creating a blueprint for what we want the Town to look like. MS says that area around the Town Hall is iconic, in spite of the recent changes to the roadways; LM agrees but points out that the Town had a stillness from Thanksgiving to late February, and Brimfield was almost visible due to the open vista along what is now Route 20.

Annual Town Meeting Warrant:

Article 19 Proposed Zoning Amendment – Historic Commercial District: JB says that the Publick House approached the Town in 2009 to expand their business. The Planning Board approved the zoning change in this area of Town. Residents had real concerns and asked that since the Master Plan was being revised could the pace at which this process was moving be slowed? The Publick House withdrew their request saying they would wait for the Master Plan process to conclude. In June, 2012, the Master Plan was adopted by the Planning Board. The Plan recommends revising the Historic Commercial zone to accommodate the lodging currently present and to protect the historic nature of the area along Route 15. JB says that the process of revising looked at the area in question and made changes that would preserve the National Register Historic District. The committee used standards from the Secretary of the Interior and the Massachusetts Historic Commission among others.

JB feels that this revised bylaw allows further development in this area but that the development will be in keeping with the current conditions. JB reads from the bylaw text (Chapter 13, subsection 13.01(c)) regarding the types of businesses that will be permitted. KS asks if the phrase specialty food and beverage stores should read specialty food or beverage since this current phrase seems to imply that both items must be available on the premises. LM asks about a convenience store being permitted, JB answers that type of establishment does not really fit the description in the bylaw. KS moves to section 13.01(i). JB says this is part of the smart growth principles that the Governor has endorsed. JB also says this is appealing to prospective owners as a supplemental income stream and may also encourage a developer to build a structure that is more in keeping with the surrounding buildings. There are several benefits: more pedestrian traffic due to residents, local workers walking to a store for their meals, this type of housing is likely more affordable. JB goes on to address a concern of KS: this section will allow anyone interested in living in this type of dwelling to do so, rather than restricting tenants to familial relationships. JB now moves to section 13.01(d) and says that the definition has been changed because it was so narrow; many more options for professional offices are included. Section (e) has been changed from 65 rooms to 125 rooms. The Publick House would like to expand to this number of rooms. JB goes on to outline the Historic Commercial District; KS asks why the houses that line the back of the Common were not included. JB explains that they are part of what gives the Common a special feel and to allow the houses to become businesses would change that special feeling. Other commons were researched and those that had allowed a change in use had suffered as a result.

JB notes that the rest of the sub-sections are substantially the same. She does go on to say that residents should not be concerned by the restrictions in subsection 13.03.1; they will be able to make changes to their residences. Business plans will just need to complement the National Historic District guidelines. JB gives a brief overview of the intent of section 13.03.3 of Article 19: it is intended to guide any project within the Historic Commercial District with regards to scale, mass and appearance from a right-of-way. She also makes a few remarks regarding the new lines of sight as a result of the tornado. The planning department is very aware of this and is working to address this issue as it arises around Town. The acceptable buffers between commercial and residential structures are different and the Town uses a 300' distance as the guide for including abutters (these are abutters with standing).

LM makes a motion to amend Article 19, Chapter 13.01(c) to read candy, nut and confectionary stores, and dairy and specialty food and/or beverage stores and approve as written, MS seconds. Vote 4-0-1.

Article 20 Proposed Zoning Amendment – Historic Commercial District: LM makes a motion to approve Article 20 as written, MS seconds. KS points out that these definitions apply throughout the entire bylaw. In discussing the ordering (sequence) of the three articles, JB thinks the Planning Board should have a discussion about the consequences if Chapter 13 does not pass with regards to the map changes in Article 21. Vote 4-0-1.

Article 21 Proposed Zoning Map Amendment: LM makes a motion to approve the article as written, MS seconds. Vote 4-0-1.

New Business:

KS sent a list of past topics to members for review and comment for this year's report and for the Memorandum of Findings. The printer's deadline is looming and KS really wants to begin writing now so that he can format the book and give the printer the number of pages. KS will also entertain any other topics from members. SA suggests that discussion needs to begin about the retirement of the Fire Chief, if or how the department will be restructured, and whether there should be a Director of Public Safety. KS notes this would encompass Fire, Police and Emergency Management. MS asks if the Police or Fire Chief would be the Director, he asks SA if a new position needs to be added? SA says no, not with the current structure. KS sees the position as one to whom police and fire would report; he also notes that the Police chief is the emergency management coordinator now. SA thinks the current chief would probably apply for the position and he goes on to say that building maintenance would be overseen by this person. Also, there are grants for which the Town cannot qualify since emergency management is considered to be under the fire dept. responsibilities. There is some further discussion about the potential salary for this position, and how the department would be structured. LM asks if it would not be prudent to re-visit the idea of trying to attract bio-tech and/or high-tech businesses to Town through the efforts of the newly re-organized Economic Development Advisory Committee. KS agrees saying that this idea as well as many others, while raised in the recent past, still have relevance today. There is also discussion about an enterprise fund where town employees or others can field ideas for growth and development within the Town. LM makes a few comments about the State having a finger in many pots but this program will give people an incentive to think outside the box. The discussion circles back to the Fire Dept. with LM making a point that while emergency management duties fall to the Fire Chief, only the Police Dept. can affect a person's personal liberty.

Motion to adjourn at 8:40 pm.