

WEST WINDSOR PLANNING COMMISSION

Minutes

July 21, 2009

Present: Hal Pyke, Joe D'Anna, Glenn Seward, Mark Isenberg, Barbara Truex, Tom Kennedy, Martha Harrison, Bob Smith, Anne Duncan Cooley, Jens Hilke, Tom Kenyon, April Harkness, Win Johnson, Bruce Boedtke, Jim Kenyon, Bill Young, Dennis & Betty Lemire, David Jaacks, Dana Waters, Laura Stillson, Shelley Jarvis

1. Call to Order - Chair Hal Pyke called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM and introduced Tom Kennedy and April Harkness from the regional planning commission, and guest speakers Anne Duncan Cooley and Jens Hilke. Tom Kennedy said the Planning Commission (PC) is in the process of rewriting the Town Plan. Tom Kennedy then spoke briefly about the purpose and required elements of a town plan and mentioned that the PC will be hosting a series of forums to gather public input for the town plan. Tom Kennedy said a town plan is often required for federal funding and is also the foundation for zoning and subdivision regulations and capital budgets. Jens gave a short PowerPoint presentation on natural resources. Vermont is 80% forested. 81% of land is privately owned. Wildlife habitat is being degraded by the pattern of development. Vermont is losing about 6,500 acres of land to development every year. Most jobs are no longer tied to the land. Vermont is shifting to a tourist economy. If the landscape is attracting tourists, the landscape should be protected. Habitat loss is the single greatest threat to Vermont's biological diversity. In the 1970's, there were 6 feet of retail showroom space for every American; today there are 35 feet of retail showroom space for every American. Sprawl is the growth pattern embraced since World War II. Where we put houses and how much density we allow matters a great deal for the natural world because of the link with habitat loss. Tom Kenyon said he thinks tax policy often destroys areas because open land is assessed at its highest and best use. Jens agreed. Anne Duncan Cooley said housing is affordable if it costs less than 1/3 of your take home pay. Housing is sometimes subsidized for those making up to 80% of area median income. Housing for those making between 80% and 120% of area median income is called workforce housing and is not subsidized. Anne said the median income for a family of four in West Windsor is \$64,000. Anne said a family with an income equal to 120% of the median income for this town could afford a \$200,000 home. Anne estimated the cost of a lot in West Windsor at \$75,000. Anne said a 1,000 square foot home would cost about \$150,000 to build, not including a \$20,000 septic system and \$10,000 for site work (driveway, etc.). Anne said the easiest cost factor to change is the cost of the lot which can be lowered by reducing the required minimum lot size. Anne said providing public water and sewer would also reduce costs. Anne said large lots are difficult for both wildlife habitat and human habitation. Mark said he thinks business influences will bring the market back to a more accessible point for most people. Barbara asked what planners can do about wildlife corridor fragmentation. Jens said that depends on what kind of wildlife the people of West Windsor want to have. If people want to maintain the quantity and quality of wildlife species currently present, the PC should identify the large blocks of habitat and the roads that divide them and find ways to minimize development along those sections of road either by working with landowners on voluntary measures or through zoning. Barbara asked about clustering development on the perimeter of an area. Jens said smaller lot zoning allows people to split off, for example, three one-acre lots from the edge of a large farm parcel to pay for their kids' college tuition whereas larger lot zoning wouldn't allow that. However, Jens said, one-acre zoning would also allow the entire farm to be split up into one-acre lots. Dennis said farmers have to break up their farms when they retire in order to stay on the homestead so development, little by little, is going to happen. Dennis said he doesn't think there can be a hard and fast rule. Hal said when the town reappraised three years ago, many farmers were faced with that situation. Hal said land drives real estate values in this town, not houses. David Jaacks said he understands the economics of small lot sizes but you need an acre of land per individual to maintain

the gardens and livestock necessary for self-sufficiency. David said it is difficult to find a piece of land large enough for self-sufficiency in an affordable price range. David asked if there are any organizations that promote the use of small lots for self-sufficiency. David said Vermont is unique because there isn't much agricultural land left between Connecticut and Virginia. Tom Kennedy said Cobb Hill in Hartland is a cooperative community with agriculture and dense housing. Anne said the largest LEED-certified residential development in the country is next to Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center. Tom Kenyon said the current use program has saved West Windsor from total disaster. Tom Kenyon asked if affordable housing is more of a regional problem than a West Windsor problem. Tom Kenyon asked if West Windsor is expected to build a certain number of affordable housing units. Tom Kenyon suggested that it might make more sense to provide affordable housing in Windsor where there is already public water and sewer. Anne said it is both a regional and a local problem as more and more communities find that the affordable housing crunch is affecting the composition of their town. Anne said the Hanover Fire Department has members who live in Bellows Falls because that's what they can afford. Anne said if you have a big fire, that's a problem. Mark said his parents started off humbly and, as they saved, became more proficient in their professions, and invested wisely, they were able to improve their quality of life. Mark asked if people now feel entitled to have a home in the best community. Anne said people's expectations have gotten ahead of themselves and that has been problematic. Anne asked if there are enough young families to maintain a school in this town. Anne said Vermont has an aging population and asked how that is going to change what it's like to live here. Mark said either market forces will create a job base here or we'll revert to an agrarian society. Tom Kennedy said 24 V.S.A. §4412 says that "no bylaw shall have the effect of excluding housing that meets the needs of the population." Tom Kennedy said each community is now mandated to address all types of housing. Tom Kennedy said in the past towns with public water and sewer provided the majority of workforce housing and rural towns did not have to address the issue. Barbara asked how to determine the need for affordable housing in a town like West Windsor where there's no employment nearby. Barbara said if you have affordable housing in a town that doesn't have an employment center, you have to address the transportation issue. Anne said from a regional perspective, it does make sense for Lebanon and Hanover to provide more affordable housing. Win said the northern part of the town is fragmented by many roads and the chances of getting viable corridors for mega fauna back in that area are doubtful, but in the southern 10% of the town, we have one of the best corridors in the area. Win said the town should protect that magnificent corridor. Win added that he thinks the town should provide public sewer and water in the village, which might help with some of our housing issues. Jens said habitat connectivity is important for fish and salamanders as well as bear, so he wouldn't necessarily write off the northern 90% of the town. Jens said there are some significant roads to the west of Mount Ascutney and Little Ascutney so from a habitat connectivity point of view, the town should consider how to connect that large habitat block to other habitat blocks because isolated wildlife populations are more likely to die out. David Jaacks said the post-World War II sprawl was initiated by the Department of Defense to spread out the population so we no longer had massive targets for nuclear attack. David asked if that paradigm has changed and if the government has initiated any new models that reflect the new paradigm. Jens said Vermont has embraced "smart growth" principles and cluster development with the downtown program and the growth center program. Tom Kennedy agreed and said, with the new administration, there is more investment in public transit. Dennis said if you asked everyone in this room if they want to live in "clustered development," they would say that they don't want to live like that. Tom Kennedy said "clustered development" in West Windsor would be five or six homes. Tom Kennedy said he thinks people would jump at the opportunity to be able to afford a house in West Windsor even if the house were on a ½-acre lot. Tom Kenyon said you have to be careful when you build clustered housing that the listers don't reappraise surrounding property on the assumption that clustered housing is the "highest and best" use. Tom Kenyon said when they first built clustered housing in Greenfield Massachusetts, there were green spaces in between, but now there are houses as far as you can see. Anne said creating "granny flats" is another technique for incorporating affordable

housing in small communities. Anne said for a long time accessory dwellings were not allowed in many communities, but now they are. Tom Kennedy said shrinking enrollments are a problem and school boards are starting to talk to Planning Commissions about how to attract younger people into the community. Tom Kennedy said if the town wants to keep its school, the residents and the PC may want to think about that. Dennis said in order to do that, you're going to have to get the average price for a building lot down from \$75,000 to \$20,000. David asked if there were an 80-acre parcel with an existing home on it, do existing regulations allow clustered housing near the original homestead so that the existing road and power supply can be used. David said he is trying to find a property that would enable him to care for his parents and his children at the same time. Hal said West Windsor has five-acre zoning, but Planned Unit Developments are a way to avoid the 5-acre minimum. Hal said for "granny flats" there has to be a certain size relationship between the main house and the accessory dwelling. Joe asked if there are any lots available in West Windsor for \$75,000. Anne said she found a couple of lots in that price range on-line. Joe said, as Dennis pointed out, you've got to lower that number to be able to build an affordable house. Joe asked if the state is prepared to buy some land to put affordable houses on. Bruce said in some communities, large developers are forced through the permit process to provide some land at reduced cost for workforce housing. Bruce said he thinks that is a valuable tool for West Windsor to consider. Dana said it's a good idea. Dennis said it's a good idea, but who is the scapegoat who is going to reduce his price. Tom Kennedy said generally a large developer is required to set aside a certain percentage of units for affordable housing. Dennis said you might get them to give up 10% but then are you going to sock them with impact fees. Tom Kennedy said you need to balance the needs of the developer with the needs of the community. Tom Kennedy said in this area there has never been a developer who walked away from a housing project. Tom Kennedy said the regional plan requires a certain percentage of units to be affordable. Anne said big developers expect this. Tom Kennedy asked if the PC should develop policies to limit development on the top of a ridge or is that the right of the individual who owns the property. Dennis said it's obtrusive to see rooflines on the top of a ridge but the person who bought the property paid a lot of money for it because of the view. Dennis said let the market decide. Tom Kennedy said if you let the market decide, you'll have houses on all your ridges. Hal said the state is pushing for windmills on the tops of mountains. Hal said side issues, such as energy, have to be taken into consideration. Jim said we may have to put windmills on the mountains or go without enough electricity. Jens said the rosier forecast for how much energy Vermont could get from windmills is 1%, but it should be part of the discussion about the town's energy future. Tom Kennedy reiterated his question about long driveways or roads encroaching on ridge tops. David said there was discussion last year about increasing the required width for driveways, which would increase the cost. David said if the town allows development on ridge tops, the property owner has to make the financial decision to go that distance. Tom Kennedy said the reason for the increased width was for emergency equipment. David said he understands and agrees with that. David added that a person really has to be motivated to build a long driveway. Tom Kennedy said there are people who are financially motivated. Bruce said, from an engineering perspective, there are ways to provide homes on higher elevations and not have them be obtrusive. Bruce said he has a neighbor, who is hardly ever there, with a motion-activated flood light so the light is on constantly, which prevents him from enjoying the starlit nights. Bruce said he thinks development should be done in a careful, respectful manner. Jens asked if the town feels it has a responsibility to maintain the quality of existing wildlife habitat or if the property owner has a right to impact the habitat. Tom Kenyon said he thinks it's better to have one \$3 million-dollar house than thirty \$100,000 houses. Mark asked Jens if he could speak specifically about a species that has been significantly impacted by the development that has taken place in West Windsor. Jens said no. Mark said then he thinks the property owner should be able to have the road up to the top of the hill until someone can show specifically what is being impacted. Mark said he can't go on vague representations that corridors are being impacted. Jens said without a specific case study, he can't tell what will be impacted. Jens said there is not a magic threshold that he can point to and say "this is when you will cease having bears in your town" because the pattern of development matters a lot.

Tom Kenyon said when he was a kid if there was a bear in Reading, it made the news and nobody ever heard of a moose in this area. Tom Kenyon said he sees more species of birds now than he has ever seen in his life. Tom Kenyon said he thinks West Windsor has done a very good job of looking after its natural resources. Jens asked what West Windsor has already done for wildlife habitat. Tom Kenyon said the resort owns part of Mt. Ascutney and the rest of it, 1300 acres, is owned by the town. Win said the area extends west, through conservation easements, to Little Ascutney. Tom Kenyon said the Conservation Commission has done a good job. Hal said the town plan should encourage people to think about where they're placing their house and consider the value of forests, vernal pools, and the like. Win said more open pastures are going back to forest land and he thinks the town plan should encourage people to mow in order to maintain habitat for marginal species. Jens said if the town is interested, there are folks at UVM who could help with a formula for cutting hay that is consistent with managing for grassland birds. Laura said there is a very small representation of the diversity of the townfolk here. Laura said one of the reasons we're seeing so much wildlife in town is because it is being pushed out of other areas. Laura said it's important to get the people who are in the woods all the time involved in the planning process. Dennis said unless you're going to zone out ridgeline construction, the next best thing would be to mandate that, when those lots are cleared, they leave some trees in front for screening. Tom Kennedy said there will be additional forums on Economic Development, Land Use and Energy. Someone asked if there is a desire for more students in the school. Hal said the local school board has been talking about consolidation with surrounding towns whose schools are losing children. Hal said if consolidation doesn't happen voluntarily, he thinks the state will mandate it. Mark said he thinks the local school enrollment has been trending up in the past few years. Win said we have a magnificent school facility and he hopes the town won't sit idly by and watch the school population and the young people in this town disappear. Win said tax policy does seem to drive a lot of this and asked how we influence that. Win said from an energy point of view if you put a windmill or solar panels on your property, is it going to drive up your property value. Win said the town should mitigate the tax burden for these initiatives. Hal said he suspects that those types of investments would increase the value of the property. Laura said the average price for a house in this town a few years ago was \$465,000. Anne said she did not include second homes in her calculations. Anne said the income she mentioned is the median income for residents. Tom Kennedy said \$314,257 is the average value of a homestead (a house and two acres) in West Windsor. Tom Kennedy said the PC is going to be meeting twice a month to work on the town plan and invited people to participate.

2. **Adjourn – The Planning Commission adjourned by consensus at 8:45 PM.**

Respectfully submitted,

Martha Harrison