

Draft minutes, Planning Board meeting, December 19, 2013

Present: Diane Poland (Chair), Joe Strzegowski (Vice-chair), David Chichester, Mary McClintock, and David Barten

The meeting began as posted at 7:00 pm. There were six agenda items:

(1) Minutes—the minutes for the meeting of November 21st were unanimously accepted;

(2) Warrant article – the Board had sought to have two articles placed on the Warrant for the upcoming Special Town Meeting on January 13, 2014. Both were requests for money for feasibility studies, one for a Safety Complex in the old garage buildings, and the second for a Center village wastewater system. The latter had been rejected by the Select Board for inclusion on the Warrant, whereas the first was accepted after Diane had made a strong argument for its being there.

But, in a private conversation with Joe, Ken Ouimette, Chair of the Garage Committee, asked if the PB would consider withdrawing the article focused on the Safety Complex. Joe in response brought the question to the Board. Ken's reason: a focus on the Safety Complex at the same time when the Garage Committee was going to ask the Town for more money to move the garage project forward another step might confuse residents about priorities. The members acknowledged that Ken had a point.

The members then discussed the matter of the Safety Complex from two points of view, as a possible project to be sited on the Town-owned Rose property, and as a possible project placed where the present Town garage is located.

Diane first voiced what surfaced as the sentiment of the other members about the project being placed on the Rose property: more than likely the Town would not vote in favor of putting a Safety Complex on it, for any number of reasons, especially the very strong opposition of abutters. Therefore, by default the Housing Committee, which will soon have a senior housing complex designed for the site, possibly will make use of the property, likely with the Town's blessing, because the project is not large, is privately funded, and would seem welcomed by some Conway seniors who want to down-size and continue to live in the town.

As for the old garage, site and buildings, the members were agreed that even if it should prove feasible to build a Complex using the old garage buildings, such a project would be a major expenditure, which could only be absorbed by the Town once the large first payments for the new garage have been made. The members concluded that since the old garage will not be vacated until 2015, when the new one is completed, and that substantial payments will have to be made from tax money on the loan taken by the Town, before residents would even consider another large expenditure, there seems no need to focus on the Safety Complex at present, except to gain facts about the site.

The members then decided unanimously that the Warrant article asking for money for a feasibility study at the SPTM should be withdrawn. Diane volunteered to e-mail Ken Ouimette about the Board's decision, and to ask Tom to remove the article from the Warrant, if it is not too late to do so. However, in the interest of "knowing the facts" about the property, the members agreed that a request for funds for a feasibility study should be on the Warrant for the Annual Meeting in May.

(3) Newsletter--the Board had thought that it should inform those who attended the October 16th informational meeting in a newsletter about the members' response to what had been said by the residents on that occasion. A draft copy had been created by the Clerk, and then amended by Diane as Chair. This revised copy was sent by e-mail to each of the members of the Board, and became the focus of discussion. It was concluded that much time has elapsed since the informational meeting, and that numerous happenings since then have made the revised newsletter somewhat dated.

Joe thought that the Board should focus instead on formulating a statement for the Annual Report. He surmised that the Board's statement was likely due sometime in February, and that some of what would have appeared in a newsletter could be put into the Board's report of its activities. The members agreed, and decided that at the next meeting, attention should be given the statement for the report.

(4) Medical marijuana dispensaries— at the previous meeting the members had decided, instead of holding a regular meeting of the Board on December 5, to attend as a body the FRCOG Seminar held that day, which focused on the Amherst Planning Board's way of regulating growing and distribution of marijuana.

Diane's question was: What had we learned from the FRCOG presentation? Before the members answered, they agreed that in a few years there is the real possibility that a new law allowing marijuana to be used for recreational purposes will be passed by the Legislature, therefore making the present law and regulations regulating its use for medical purposes obsolete. Given this possibility, the best course of action for the Board is to make its bylaws relating to growing and dispensing as simple as can be.

Joe thought that Amherst's Board in writing two bylaws, one about growing, and the other about dispensing, was the best way to proceed. While Conway is not Amherst, addressing both aspects would cover all bases. As for growing and dispensing, the Board need do no more than quote the State's own regulations about both the growing and dispensing of marijuana for medical purposes, referring separately to both in Conway's Protective Zoning Bylaws "Use Table."

Joe volunteered to speak to Peggy Sloan at FRCOG about placing separate references in the "Use Table" to growing and dispensing, as both require Special Permits.

(5) The Elderly and transportation—Diane and Joe had attended a FRCOG seminar on the growing population of elders in Franklin County towns, the prediction being that in the not-so-distant future a goodly number will be top-heavy with seniors. Most of these elders, if judged by the present trend, will want to stay in their homes. The question posed in the seminar was whether the present way of transporting seniors through weekly subsidized local transport, primarily to stores and doctors, will continue to be viable in the future as their population grows in number. Shouldn't there be more flexibility, both as regards frequency of trips and destinations, and if so, how would an organization having an overview of the towns and this system be organized?

The discussion began with Dave C. saying this was a topic in which he was extremely interested, and as it turned out, in which all were just as interested.

Diane and Joe reviewed figures about the elderly, which had been mentioned in the seminar. These included the surprisingly small percentage nationally, of the elderly actually are in nursing homes; the figure is 4%. This suggests that many live alone or with others, elderly single women more likely to be living by themselves than men of the same age. Also, these single women are more likely to be poor, never having contributed to the Social Security system because they were always homemakers. Conversely the men of the same age often living with daughters are supported by monthly Social Security payments.

Also, very surprisingly, where once 75% of the elderly in Franklin towns visited Senior centers where a daily meal was served on a regular basis, only 25% being served by meals on wheels, today the figures are reversed. With so much available in the way of home entertainment that can be experienced without leaving the house, and in the absence of the experience of supportiveness and social interest shared by the World War II Generation, many more older people prefer to stay at home rather than go to senior centers.

Nonetheless, despite being stay-at-homes, in general, these elderly men and women need to shop, visit doctors, and socialize in ways they choose, which is more likely to be visiting friends in other towns and in nursing homes rather than playing bingo, as used to be the case. As it is, the transportation system by which these elderly get about, subsidized by large local retailers, provides visits mostly to stores and doctors, though in fact, elders often redirect drivers to other destinations as well where they can visit socially.

Diane and Joe directed the discussion to the suggestion made in the seminar that in all the Franklin towns, the elderly men and women would be better served if those who don't want to or cannot drive, were able to get transportation "on call." A system of this kind, it was proposed, would have a central administrative center where calls for transport would be directed to the local towns from which the calls were made, and where a cadre of volunteers would be ready to use Town-owned vans or their own cars to take elders where they had to go and bring them back.

Such a system would remove the self-interested hold retailers have over how, when and where elders are now transported.

Diane and Joe indicated that Conway and Ashfield were identified as possible participants in a pilot program for which money is available, FRCOG having been given a grant to pursue the experiment. This possibility means that the Board needs to know more about the situation of the seniors in town before it can recommend participating or not, and it has also to determine what its own relation is to the seniors, given the existence of the Council on Aging.

The discussion that followed began with Mary's distinguishing between the roles of Conway's COA and the Planning Board. The PB should be the agency that examines need, in contrast to the COA, which implements programs, as the COA does in overseeing the present arrangements for transporting seniors. As the members pursued the matter of the Board's role, having accepted Mary's distinction, it became clear that they know little about the overall situation of Conway's senior population, which numbers about 700 people ages 55+, a population of which the Board members are themselves a part. Four of the five members recognized that they themselves, as seniors in the mid range, or 70 to 76, were concerned about whether they could afford to live in town, and if so whether quarters were adequate for a presumed decline. These questions are likely ongoing topics of conversation between spouses and seniors around the town.

It was concluded that the Board needs to learn more about the overall situation of Conway seniors, and to this end it was decided that it needs to have a meeting in which the members listen to seniors. Such a session might lead to other meetings, as necessary before the Planning Board can make a recommendation to the Selectmen about whether to participate in the proposed experiment focused on transporting seniors.

It was decided that the proposed senior meeting will be an agenda item for the Board's first meeting in the New Year, on January 2.

(6) New business/old business—David B. said that Bob Anderson, member of two committees and resident on Elm Street, spoke to him about Russ French's problem in expanding his business, asking for an update on how the Board was proceeding. He also wanted the Board to focus on the fact that Ed Rose is selling prime real estate abutting his restaurant on Rt. 116. Bob asked: wouldn't this property provide a place for a market? David provided Bob with the answer to Russ's problem, but placed before the Board the question about the last remains of Parson land, which Ed owns.

Mary took the lead in saying that a market might work in town, if created and run by the Greenfield Market Co-Op, which seems to want to expand. Such a market might support the seniors who want to live in their own homes by making marketing trips much shorter. The discussion morphed into one on the creation of a Conway Business Association, which would be the logical vehicle to pursue a market in town.

Because the meeting was nearing its end, Diane proposed this topic of land and market be placed on the agenda for the January 2nd meeting.

By way of summarizing, the January 2nd meeting will have the following agenda items: a focus on the elderly in Conway and a meeting for them, the statement for the Annual Report, the February Public Hearing on the proposed changes to Conway's Protective Zoning Bylaws, and the creation of a both market and business association.

There being no further business, the members voted unanimously to end the meeting at 8:30. The next meeting of the Board will be January 2 at 7:00 pm.

Respectfully, submitted

David Barten, clerk