

Land Use Regulation Update Committee *Town of Ferrisburgh, Vt.*

FINAL – Minutes for meeting of December 11, 2019; approved on January 8, 2020.

Members present: Bonnie Barnes, Gail Blasius, Anne Cohn, Carl Cole, Clark Hinsdale, Arabella Holzapfel, Karen Pettersen, Kurt Plank.

Visitors present: Eric Blair, Jen Cirillo, Israel Evarts, Kurt Haigis, Ashley LaFlam, Sean LaFlam, Katie Quinn, Lee Shorey, Steve Tremblay.

Call to order. Arabella Holzapfel called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m.

This meeting was called to gather ideas from interested parties as the Land Use Regulation Update Committee (LURUC) continues its work on rewriting the town’s zoning bylaws and subdivision regulations.

Arabella Holzapfel, committee chair, and Bonnie Barnes, Ferrisburgh’s zoning administrator, began the meeting by presenting brief overviews of the committee’s goals and how the process has played out so far.

Bonnie Barnes explained the town adopted a new town plan in 2017 and the primary goal of the LURUC is to come up with new land use regulations—which have not been updated in decades—that reflect the principles and achieve the goals laid out in that plan. The town plan represents the governing document, she said, and the bylaws provide the rules for implementing the plan. There are different zoning districts with different rules for each. The zoning administrator addresses straightforward projects in the various districts, while the zoning board addresses more difficult issues. And subdivision regulations spell out how existing parcels can be broken up, changing the maps in the town’s records; most of these decisions require approval from the town’s planning commission.

Arabella Holzapfel said members of the LURUC have been working together since the fall of 2018. The committee, including representatives from the planning commission and the zoning board, also sought as members other Ferrisburgh residents interested and active in land-use issues. She said the committee has spent time talking about the town plan and the current zoning bylaws, and has had a lot of conversations about philosophy, and what the town wants to accomplish with revised zoning regulations. The town had also hired a consultant, Brandy Saxton, to help committee members understand the current state-wide landscape regarding land-use regulation, and to draft language on some of the more technical sections of the new bylaws.

Much of this work has been captured in a rough draft of the zoning bylaws and subdivision regulations, pulled together by committee member Jean Richardson. It captures parts of the existing bylaws, draft regulations from a 2007 update effort that was never implemented, ideas put forward by committee members, and work done this year by the consultant.

Holzapfel said the committee is now wrestling with how to make the zoning bylaws more flexible in ways that address the current housing market. She also shared a map showing large swaths of the town are state land, conserved land, or part of the conservation zoning district; most of that land cannot be developed.

Kurt Plank said property owners have to go to the zoning board to do almost anything of consequence with their land. He hoped the new bylaws would include more permitted uses, meaning uses that can be approved by the zoning administrator without requiring a hearing before the zoning board. He does not believe landowners should have carte blanche, but thinks the town should make it a little bit easier to get approval for projects, to better serve the needs of the townspeople.

Holzapfel reported that the town had received a municipal planning grant from the state, about \$9,000, to help the committee in its work and particularly in its outreach to townspeople. She expected this meeting would be one of multiple opportunities over the next few months for Ferrisburgh residents to weigh in on land-use issues and the new bylaws.

Clark Hinsdale said the recent issues regarding the Ferrisburgh Central School have sharpened the committee's focus on how to "right size" the town, to provide a critical mass of families with school-age children, as well as a stable tax rate. He said in the past the town and school boards have been in different silos, but that the recent proposal from the school board to close the school in Ferrisburgh made it clear there needs to be more overlap. Closing a school, he said, is not just an educational issue but a question of community planning.

Carl Cole said there will be hearings after the committee completes its work on new zoning bylaws and subdivision regulations, but the committee wants to hear from townspeople while the document is still a work in progress. Arabella Holzapfel said the committee is also interested in ideas on what kinds of outreach work best and invite the most public engagement.

Eric Blair from Cornwall, Vt., said he was attending the meeting because of his interest in town planning and land-use policy. He agrees the town plan is the policy document and the regulations provide the teeth. But he thinks the words "zoning" and "subdivision" are not helpful, and that "planning" and "design" should take precedence. The goal, he said, should be to create viable communities, places where people want to live. Two-acre zoning in the town center is not the way to accomplish that, he said.

He said a new generation of planners wants to see towns go back to their roots, preventing sprawl and creating town centers that allow for smaller lots and a diversity of housing and commercial building types, not just by size but by price; this will require, among other things, allowing much smaller lots than most towns' current zoning bylaws. If there are no people living in town centers, they wither and die, he said.

Communities all started as rural crossroads, he said, with hamlets becoming villages, villages becoming towns, and towns becoming cities. He described a density continuum in Vermont, with the wildness of the Green Mountains at one end, running through farmland, past single-family homes on larger lots, to areas with townhouses, then multi-use buildings (business downstairs, home upstairs), and finally into the densest, most intensively developed areas in the center of towns and cities.

Kurt Plank noted Ferrisburgh's town plan envisions adding more uses in areas designated as town centers, to help generate economic development and population growth. He said the economy of Ferrisburgh, once mostly a farming community, is changing, and the current school crisis is evidence the town needs to determine how to recreate itself. The school connects families from all over town, he said. With an aging demographic in the state and the town, it becomes more difficult to keep small schools open, and engender that sense of community.

Eric Blair said he had been involved in a proposed project in Cornwall to create a hamlet within the town, but it would have required allowing smaller lot sizes. You can't build a viable hamlet with 2-acre zoning, he said, and since the town was not interested in making the necessary changes, the project, so far, was getting nowhere.

Kurt Plank said septic capacity plays a role, and denser development is really only possible where that capacity exists. But he hoped the town could set up rules to make it possible to create parts of the town with more development density, where people would want to live in smaller houses, on smaller lots, with mixed commercial and residential development, allowing communities that are walkable. He said the Hollow in North Ferrisburgh, where he lives and works, might benefit from some increased density, and adding a little more commercial development to the mix.

Jen Cirillo, a member of the Ferrisburgh Conservation Commission, described an effort in Burlington a few years back in which residents were asked to share their visions of the city in 2030, with the goal of having these community visions drive planning decisions. She said input was sought in various ways and across many different venues, with the hope of understanding what would attract people to live in Burlington.

Kurt Plank said the town plan in Ferrisburgh does envision more diverse uses of land in the areas designated as town centers, and that the town is looking to its residents for their vision of what those town centers might look like, and how to accomplish that vision.

There was a brief discussion of the Atkins Farm subdivision, a project which had sought to develop a parcel with smaller lot sizes, near the school and the town hall. Kurt Haigis said he thought this was a good vision that had not been realized, which made him concerned about future possibilities. Others felt that attitudes are changing in town, with people looking to get more involved in land-use issues, and that the debate about closing the school was one factor driving the change.

Bonnie Barnes pointed out that there has never been dense development anywhere in Ferrisburgh, so the town can work on creating density where it makes the most sense, focusing on a town center, or centers, that are viable, and not artificial.

Eric Blair recommended the town consider the charrette process. In this context, a charrette is an intensive planning session where citizens and designers collaborate on a vision for development. It provides a forum for ideas, offers immediate feedback to the designers, and allows everyone who participates to be a mutual author of the plan.

Ferrisburgh resident Ashley LaFlam said she wanted to see the town grow in a sustainable way. She said the school issue has led townspeople to call for changes in the process, and a desire to be more involved. People want to live here, she said, but need to know how the town is going to grow.

Eric Blair said the metrics for growth are important, and that you can't build a village "feel" if you're limited to 1-acre lots. If you're informed and understand the issues, you can do a good job, he said, but it doesn't happen by guessing or throwing darts.

Lee Shorey, a Ferrisburgh resident, said she felt the town was primed for a debate on these issues. Timing is important, she said, and the town has really reached a crisis point. Now we have to pull everyone together, she said, by reaching out and getting things moving forward. Anne Cohn recalled an Orton Foundation effort to get artists involved in pulling people together to help illustrate their dreams for their town and wondered if something along those lines would help.

Clark Hinsdale said his analysis of the recent school vote, in which Ferrisburgh residents voted 884-160 against a plan to close the Ferrisburgh Central School, showed that people without children in the school voted at least 3-1 against closing the school. He added that getting 85 percent of townspeople to vote for anything is almost impossible. He said he feels this energy gives the town a great opportunity to "right size" Ferrisburgh, to help townspeople maintain the things they value in their town, like the local school.

Kurt Plank said Ferrisburgh has a new town plan and is hearing lots of good ideas, all steps in the right direction. He said among the goals should be creating more opportunities for people who already live in town, and attracting others to move here. Adaptive reuse of existing buildings can be an important part of that, he said.

Katie Quinn pointed out Ferrisburgh has historically been an agricultural community, and the town center for farm families was really in Vergennes, one of the reasons the town doesn't have much in the way of infrastructure.

Ashley LaFlam said all the empty buildings along Route 7 represent a problem but also a great opportunity. She talked about her effort to help restore and reuse the Union Meeting Hall, which she believes can help draw people to town and make for a livelier town center.

Anne Cohn said she has long been a proponent of creating opportunities for walking and bike-riding in the town, and believes these are important for bringing people together, providing destinations and interaction. Ashley LaFlam said one destination could be after-school programs. They're on the chopping block at the school, she said, but if the schools can't offer them, the community can do it elsewhere.

Bonnie Barnes mentioned the importance of encouraging home offices, as well as affordable rental properties. Eric Blair said rental opportunities can provide housing for workers, which would allow more businesses to consider moving to Ferrisburgh.

Anne Cohn said senior housing could also be an important part of Ferrisburgh's future. Clark Hinsdale said this would be a win-win, since there are elders who want to stay in Ferrisburgh but can't afford, or manage, their large homes and lots. If they were able to move to senior housing, he said, their homes would be available for families who want to move to the town.

Lee Shorey said the school vote shows the courage of the community. She suggested the town should not allow regulations to close the community, but instead open the town up to creative people with new ideas. Ashley LaFlam said the town can't wait for the state to change its ways, emphasizing the need to act locally. Kurt Plank said it's important to create an opportunity for good things to happen, allowing for both planned and organic growth. Bonnie Barnes said the town can and should eliminate barriers to sustainable growth, but that it will take the creativity of others to generate the actual projects. Clark Hinsdale added the town should welcome economic development and the organizations that promote it, and make sure the town's regulations support their activities.

Anne Cohn said the message from tonight's meeting should be that the committee, and the town, want to hear your ideas.

Adjournment. Clark Hinsdale made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 7:30 p.m. Carl Cole seconded. All voted in favor. **Motion approved.**

— Respectfully submitted,

Tim Etchells