

Planning Commission *Town of Ferrisburgh, Vt.*

DRAFT – Minutes for meeting of January 15, 2020.

Members present: Bob Beach (chair), Gail Blasius, Kristin DeBellis, Arabella Holzapfel, Mike Quinn, Walter Reed. **Absent:** Al Chamberlain, Anne Cohn, Bessie Sessions.

Town official present: Bonnie Barnes, zoning administrator.

Visitors present: Eric Blair, Jessica James, Ashley LaFlam, Sean LaFlam, Diane Nadon, Mary Neff, John Paul, Karen Pettersen, Katie Quinn, Norm Smith, Kate Yarbrough.

Bob Beach, chair, opened the meeting at 7 p.m.

Beach welcomed the visitors and in particular Eric Blair, a planner, designer and consultant from Cornwall who had agreed to make a presentation to the Planning Commission. Blair recently attended two meetings of the town's Land Use Regulation Update Committee and felt he had some advice to offer on planning for the future as the town works toward amending its zoning bylaws and subdivision regulations.

He said he had worked as a town planner and designer in both the public and private sectors all over the country, including the Southeast, the Pacific Northwest and New England. For two years, he served as town planner in Middlebury, and says he has worked in both the public and private sectors, wherever he felt he could have the most impact.

He titled his presentation "Placemaking," saying it was about creating communities where people want to live, work and play. He provided some history of town planning, which dates to the earliest settlements in the country. Traditional town planning represents the way things were done from the 1700s to the early 1900s, with a geographic continuum, from least to most densely settled: from wilderness natural areas, to rural farms, to neighborhood edges, neighborhood centers, and town or city centers. In New England, the continuum often runs from natural areas to rural areas to village edges to village centers.

Design principle basics for traditional American planning include streets, blocks and buildings, and the details involve center and edge, with a walkable distance between them, and an appropriate mix of uses, as well as an interconnected network of pedestrian-friendly streets, and an integration of civic and public spaces.

Contemporary American planning began to dominate in the early 20th century, and he said it has since shaped about 80 percent of the built environment in the United States—and mostly not in a good way. He showed slides of suburban sprawl and tract housing, both of which reflect automobile-centric designs. He said zoning regulations have also had an impact, leading to homogeneous neighborhoods and cookie-cutter homes. In Vermont, he noted, spaghetti lots and spider-web development have marred the landscape, with both attributable in part to septic and water issues, as well as inflexible zoning regulations—such as 2-acre or 4-acre or 10-acre zoning—that actually discourage creative solutions.

Blair said the planner's mantra has to be that if villages and towns are to remain vibrant, people must want to live *in* them, not *away* from them. He said even well thought out zoning regulations will not necessarily translate to creating town or village patterns that make sense and attract more residents to the town.

He argued a more traditional approach can create a new village that conforms to old patterns, and showed an aerial view of just such a village in coastal South Carolina. It included a town green, or common, along with shops, an inn, a post office, a general store and other businesses, and more than 50 homes, all contained in a parcel of about 20 acres. (He noted this level of density is not currently allowed, or envisioned, anywhere in Vermont.) He said the village was designed to meet the needs of various residents, with some stand-alone single-family homes, plus townhouses and apartments, none terribly ostentatious, offering housing at different price points. One key, he said, was the integration of civic, public and private development to create a walkable, liveable whole.

Blair opened the floor for questions, and the first came from Norm Smith, chair of the town's Zoning Board of Adjustment. He wondered how planning had worked back in the early 19th century, when a lot of successful, traditionally planned towns had been created. Blair noted that planning had not necessarily been a democratic process in the country's early days. Often it was a small group of people or even a single individual with a vision.

Smith said his vision was for village development in Ferrisburgh, in what most people would describe as its center, the area around the intersection of Route 7 and Little Chicago Road, just south of the town hall and east of the Ferrisburgh Central School. He wondered how the area could be turned into a vibrant village center. Who would build, or rebuild, the commercial buildings required? How would a village center be supported in terms of water and wastewater capacity?

Blair said part of the answer is to look at current success stories elsewhere, and decide Ferrisburgh is going to plan its town in such a way that people, including developers, will see that there's an open door here. If you change the way you plan your town, he said, people will want to get involved. Of necessity, he said, it all starts with a plan.

Katie Quinn, also a ZBA member, noted that much of the spaghetti and spider-web development in Vermont is a result of dairy farms that have been broken up, because their owners could no longer afford their property taxes, so felt the need to sell off lots. Blair said it was important to come up with answers for these farmers, providing relief in some way that did not lead to spider-web lots.

Kate Yarbrough, a Ferrisburgh resident, talked about the importance of bike and pedestrian opportunities, and preserving rural space for recreation of all kinds. She also felt it was important for the town to provide affordable housing options for elderly people, who are not interested in purchasing a large home on a large lot.

Blair noted the case of Montgomery, Alabama, a relatively small city with lots of problems. He said one person got fired up about this, and felt he understood what the problems were. He decided to run for office, was elected mayor, and began to make positive changes that are still under way today. One person's passion, he said, can change a city.

Bob Beach asked Blair what he recommended the town do to encourage better development in the future. Blair said there is no quick fix, but that starting the conversation, as Ferrisburgh has shown a willingness to do, is an important first step. While there are physical limitations—much of the town’s land is conserved or owned by the state—those should not stop the town from planning for a better future. One key, he said, will be to identify where the town’s center is. And he said there needn’t be just one, offering the example of Middlebury and East Middlebury.

The town, he said, needs to develop the bullet points: Where are your centers? How do you want the town to grow? Then look closely at the current town plan and the zoning regulations and see if they are encouraging the kind of development you want. Don’t let developers plan the town, he said, but let the town create a plan that will attract quality developers.

Physical planning is the key, he said, rather than regulation. For those who want to learn more, he suggested a book, “The Architecture of Community,” by Leon Krier, an architect, urban theorist and planner from Luxembourg.

Arabella Holzapfel, a Planning Commission member and chair of the town’s Land Use Regulation Update Committee, asked how a community can encourage effective central planning in the current environment, where so many people are distrustful of government mandates, and government in general. Blair said uninformed public input can often be the death of good projects. He emphasized the need for sharing information and educating, informing people about good development options. He said it’s important to let people know what’s possible. Educating even a few dozen people in the town can provide momentum for better planning in the future.

Norm Smith asked about how to structure regulations to promote the kinds of development the town wants. Blair said it is more important to provide a plan than regulations. It’s better to have guidelines based on your planning goals than a set of strict regulations. Smith wondered if there was a template available, and Blair said there absolutely is. Smith said the town has, in its current center, blighted and empty buildings and vacant lots, and realizes that the current 2-acre zoning is not going to solve the problem.

There was a brief discussion of the process the town is now in the middle of, creating new zoning bylaws and subdivision regulations. In light of new ideas being shared, should the town be in a hurry to adopt new rules? Bob Beach said it seemed more important to do it right than to do it quickly. Bonnie Barnes, zoning administrator, says she does feel some urgency, since she has to deal with the current bylaws every day, and knows there are gaps and inconsistencies that need to change.

Arabella Holzapfel said all the discussions about new ideas mesh well with the municipal planning grant the town recently received from the state. The grant is designed to help with outreach from the town to its residents about whether, and where, denser development might be desired and appropriate, and how to make it happen. She expects there will be many more opportunities for people to share their ideas and learn more about what’s possible, and how to create a vision, visually, for the town’s future.

Adjournment: Arabella Holzapfel made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:34 p.m. Mike Quinn seconded. All voted in favor. **Motion approved.**

— Respectfully submitted,

Tim Etchells