

Walpole Planning Board
Workshop Meeting
September 25, 2018
7 pm

Present: Walpole Planning Board: Chair Jeff Miller, Vice-Chair Robert Miller, Secretary James Aldrich, Dennis Marcom, Jason Perron, Joanna Miller, Jeff Colley, Steve Dalessio, Selectboard representative to the WPB.

SWRPC: JB Mack and Lisa Murphy from Southwest Regional Planning Commission.

Rockingham Planning Directors: Chuck Wise and Gary Fox.

Rockingham Planning Commission members: Chair Renee Vondle, Laurie Rowell, Bonnie North, Nathan Bow, Bonnie Anderson, Miles Michle. Two other members of the Rockingham Planning Commission arrived later in the meeting.

Windham County: Chris Campany, Executive Director of the Windham Regional Commission.

Mr. Mack said the reason for the meeting was to see if what is happening in one community (Walpole) is the same as what was happening in the other community (Rockingham). While the communities are in different states, they are part of a regional community. He continued that earlier this year a few Walpole Planning Board and Selectboard members met with members from the Rockingham community to discuss the Vilas Bridge. The bridge links Walpole with the Bellows Falls' downtown and with the bridge being closed it has had an impact on the downtown merchants. Before it was closed 5,000 to 6,000 vehicles a day crossed that bridge each day. Mr. Mack wants to facilitate how these two communities can work together to create opportunities for both towns.

Many people, in fact 104 people who live in Rockingham, work in Walpole. Many people, in fact 105 people who live in Walpole, work in Rockingham. Another link between the two towns is that people who live in Rockingham, shop in Walpole and vice versa. Mr. Mack asked the Board members from both communities - what are the three challenges your town will be facing in the next three years?

Mr. Campany said these communities are across the river from one another. He asked, What are your common needs? Is there is a specific economic focus that you can work on together for a grant?

Rockingham is made up of the village of Bellows Falls and the towns of Saxtons River and Rockingham. Rockingham goes all the way Chester, VT. Each has its own zoning, water and fire department.

Walpole has three districts: Walpole, North Walpole and Drewsville. Walpole And North Walpole Villages have its own water and sewer system. Walpole and North Walpole's waste water goes to a treatment center in Bellows Falls. There are two lines, one under each bridge that crosses the Connecticut River at the point where the railroad facility is. The Selectboard is exploring moving the line under the Vilas Bridge 100 feet to the north.

Walpole and Drewsville have the same Selectboard Zoning Board and fire department while North Walpole has also its Commissioners, Zoning Board and fire department. They share a Planning Board and the police department.

JB Mack asked again, What are the big planning issues?

1.

Mr. Wise said Rockingham is doing a comprehensive rewriting and updating of its planning document. It hasn't been done since the '80s. It includes looking at land-use regulations, subdivisions, industry and providing for its youth and elderly.

Mr. Fox said a priority is the island – getting an industry in there. The island is the land across from the canal in Bellows Falls. Mr. Fox said the island is a brownfield. The paper mill and other buildings are crumbling and can't be saved, so they will come down this winter. The brownfield will be cleaned up by the end of May. The town secured \$1.1 million in five grants for this project.

The land is zoned industrial and has water, sewer and power. Nearby is a bus stop, intercity rail, Greyhound bus service and plenty of parking. Two challenges are the infrastructure – the sidewalk needs to be replaced and one bridge to the site needs repairs to support heavy truck loads.

Mr. Fox said they have already begun a marketing campaign to get an industry in there and most likely it will be food-related. That is what is popular in the industry right now, he said. His targets are breweries, dairies and specialty foods.

Mr. Dalessio said it is unlikely Walpole will bring in a major industry to the town so he told the Rockingham people to encourage businesses like Sonic and Chroma. Walpole has only about 30 pieces of commercial land left and those will probably be small retail.

Mr. Fox said downtown Bellows Falls also has two small industries, one a screw manufacturer. These manufacturers occupy small buildings – about 4,000 square feet. It also has a downtown and practically all of the shops are full and thriving. The spirit of this meeting is the spirit of working together.

Ms. North said people should be looking at taking advantage of the natural beauty of the area. That's why she moved here. She asked if the people at the meeting had ever stood on the middle of the Vilas Bridge and looked around. "The view is unparalleled," she exclaimed. She envisions the Vilas Bridge being for pedestrians and bicycles and there being kiosks and art events there, maybe even the Farmers Market.

Mr. Dalessio said repairing the Vilas Bridge to be open to traffic is a good 10 years away. It's at the end of the state's 10-year plan for repairing bridges in the state.

Mr. J. Miller described Walpole as rural. The residents like its rural character and it hasn't changed much since he was a boy growing up here. Most of the commercial area is north of town on Route 12. "We've been status quo and that the way people like it," he said.

Right now, Mr. J. Miller continued, the Walpole Board members are looking at writing a solar ordinance and have concerns about large installations and how they impact neighbors. He added all subdivisions must be decided by townspeople who vote in March on warrant articles.

A concern is for young people looking for good jobs in the area and for the elderly who want to stay here, but care and housing are issues. The only place now specifically for seniors is Applewood and that's always full. Applewood is also based on income. The county nursing home is in Westmoreland and is getting an upgrade that will take two years to complete. There will still be 150 beds, but the building, which is being renovated in sections, will be completely new.

2.

Mr. Dalessio said improving public transportation to Keene and maybe a route from Hanover to Keene is needed. Rockingham has Park & Ride as well as the Current, a bus service that primarily serves people in Bellows Falls.

Ms. Vondle said they are working on increasing child care and adult day care. Businesses say this is what's needed in the area. She would also like to see a higher education facility so residents could take of advantage of classes. Right now Vermont Tech is setting up a class for the fall where the labs will be local and the reading material online.

Mr. Dalessio said many are utilizing Claremont Community College and in Lebanon, Hypertherm is spending millions educating people who they are training to work for the company.

Mr. Campany said the Connecticut River Resource Commission treats and helps communities that work together as a priority. The federal government earmarks money for states working together on outdoor recreation projects or transportation projects.

Mr. Perron said the townspeople like Walpole's rural character. There are a few things we could do to help our tax base and community transportation is a good idea. But people need a reason to go to a place, to have a destination such as the Bridge of Flowers in Massachusetts.

Ms. Andros said people go to Bellows Falls to the movies and there are some good places to eat. They like the book shop and Stone Art Church events.

There is some competition between the towns with student baseball, basketball and track competitions. And the Meeting Waters YMCA brings youngsters from both communities together.

Mr. Fox said the merchants are part of the National Main Street program, which helped them replace lamp posts and display banners on Main Street, plus focus on keeping the facades of the buildings similar. That downtown group is also responsible for the Christmas lighting in the Square.

The question was asked how does North Walpole fit into the Walpole community. Mr. Dalessio said recently a small park at the bottom of the road near the school was rejuvenated. It was cleaned up, the manager has a place on the recreation committee, water and electricity was restored, and a building that was boarded up has been refurbished for storage. There are picnic tables there and the residents had a Christmas tree lighting there last year. It's an important part of the North Walpole community today.

There was discussion of the rail trail in Walpole. There are portions of it that are not passable and in one spot it goes through a person's backyard. That should be improved but the town needs someone to champion it, Mr. Dalessio said. In other words, the project needs someone to lead the improvement.

Someone from the Rockingham contingent said Rockingham has no access to the river and would like to have it. Discussion ensued about the portage area, which is locked, and how to achieve the river access goal.

Another person suggested having a Christmas tree lighting involving both communities on the new bridge crossing between the two towns. Many thought that might be a good start to how to bring the two communities together.

3.

A subcommittee was formed that would work on that and future projects. Mr. J. Miller said he would be part of the group as did Joanna Andros. The two Bonnies from the Rockingham Board agreed to be part of the committee as did Mr. Mack and Ms. Murphy. Cheryl Mayberry's name was one who should be asked from North Walpole. She is a Walpole Selectboard member and she will be asked if she is interested in being a subcommittee member.

The meeting broke up at 8:30 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Marilou Blaine

See attachment: Attached is a sheet in which three Rockingham Board members answered the question: What are the top 3 issues/challenges that Rockingham is facing?

4.