

Selectboard & Planning Board Housing Subcommittee Meeting via Zoom
Wednesday, February 8, 2023

APPROVED

1. CALL TO ORDER HOUSING SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING – Chairperson Leigh Davis called to order the Selectboard and Planning Board Housing Subcommittee meeting at 5:30 pm.
2. ROLL CALL - Leigh Davis, “present,” Malcolm Fick, “present,” Jeremy Higa, “present,” Garfield Reed, “present.”
3. APPROVAL OF MINUTES – Mr. Fick moved to approve the draft minutes of January 10, 2022. Mr. Higa seconded. Ms. Davis, Mr. Fick and Mr. Higa voted yes. Mr. Reed abstained.
4. SUBCOMMITTEE’S ANNOUNCEMENTS/STATEMENTS – None
5. NEW BUSINESS
 - a. Ms. Davis introduced the new Housing Plan summary worksheet. Mr. Fick explained that the items on the sheet are the same as the master sheet, using the same numbers. A column for impact was added to show rank-order for each initiative. Mr. Fick said the initial rank-ordering was based on his judgement, but he expects them to change upon discussion. He pointed out that items 13 and 24 were the same, so 24 was not included.
 - b. Ms. Davis presented a revised slide presentation for item 13 (previously item 24), a tax exemption for owners of affordable year-round rental housing. The slide show is intended for presentation at the February 13 joint Selectboard/Planning Board meeting.
 - Mr. Fick suggested that Ms. Davis show, but not dwell on, the Provincetown slides.
 - Mr. Higa asked if the threshold for the exemption should be renting to 80% AMI or a higher threshold such as 100% or 120%. Mr. Fick pointed out that “affordable” rent is based on 30% of the AMI for housing costs, including utilities. According to tables prepared by Chris Rembold, the “affordable” rents for 100% and 120% of AMI were actually higher than market rate. It was agreed that Ms. Davis should only propose a threshold based on 80% of AMI but be prepared to discuss the issue.
 - Mr. Reed questioned if the town taxpayers would pay higher property taxes to subsidize this exemption. Ms. Davis pointed to the number of towns who have already benefited from the program. Mr. Fick said that, based on the presentation, ten affordable units might cost the town \$30,000 per year, which is less expensive than other options. Mr. Reed pointed out that the \$30,000 was based on estimates and that confirming the estimates would be desirable. Mr. Higa said that it would be hard to predict actual usage but proposed that a cap could be used to limit the financial exposure of the taxpayers.
 - Mr. Reed expressed a need to simplify the presentation. Mr. Fick suggested removing the financial charts that require a lot of explanation, diverting attention from the primary message.
 - Bill Cooke requested to speak on the issue. He asked if the properties must be owner-occupied. He also asked if the property tax exemption amount would be enough incentive for landlords to accept reduced rent. The committee expressed

agreement that these are issues that will have to be more clearly defined in the next phase, if this initiative goes further.

- Lori Bashour asked to speak on the issue. She described a multi-unit property she owns in Housatonic and expressed support for the concept.
 - Ms. Davis said she would revise the slides based on the committee's suggestions and present the slide show to the February 13 meeting.
- b. Ms. Davis presented a slide show for item 20, a local transfer tax to fund the Affordable Housing Trust.
- Ms. Davis said many towns have adopted this program and more are in the process of adoption. Also, legislation has been proposed in the state that would make separate Home Rule Charters for this initiative unnecessary.
 - Mr. Higa asked if the proposed state law might invalidate any efforts that we might take. Mr. Fick expressed an opinion that the state laws would unlikely invalidate Home Rule petitions already granted by the legislature. Ms. Davis said that the proposed legislation seems to give the town's flexibility regarding the tax rate and exemptions that would be important to Great Barrington.
 - Ms. Davis said that she would revise the slides based on the committee's suggestions and present it to the February 13 meeting.
- c. Ms. Vivian Orłowski presented a slide show that she had prepared advocating a change to the Senior Tax Deferral program.
- Ms. Orłowski said that the existing program has only one participant and proposed increasing the income threshold and reducing the interest rate charged.
 - Ms. Orłowski pointed to income thresholds and interest rates used in other towns that have greater participation than Great Barrington. She pointed out that the program is a deferral of taxes, not tax forgiveness, and that there is no cost to the Town.
 - Ms. Davis asked if the program might be abused by people with wealth but no income. Mr. Higa pointed out that the program requires a lien on the property which people would not consider this lightly. Ms. Orłowski pointed out that if you have wealth, you still have income on your tax return but it will be interest and dividends rather than salaries and wages. The initial program had been thoroughly vetted by the Finance Committee over the course of several meetings.
 - Ms. Orłowski said that this change only requires approval by the Selectboard and not by Town Meeting.
 - The committee expressed its support for this initiative and recommended that it be presented directly to the Selectboard.
- d. The committee discussed the plan for the joint Selectboard/Planning Board meeting on February 13.
- Mr. Fick will begin with a brief introduction to the summary worksheet, pointing out the initiatives that will be presented at the meeting and those that are otherwise under way.
 - Ms. Davis will then show the presentations for the tax exemption and the local transfer tax.

Housing Subcommittee Minutes, January 24, 2022

- a. Monday, February 13 at 6:00 pm to present recommendations to the Selectboard
 - b. Next HSC meeting, TBD
7. CITIZENS SPEAK TIME – No members of the public wished to speak.
8. SUBCOMMITTEE’S TIME – No members requested to speak.
9. MEDIA TIME – No media members requested to speak at this time
10. ADJOURNMENT – M. Fick made a motion to adjourn. Mr. Higa seconded the motion. Chairperson Davis adjourned the meeting at 7:20 pm without objection.

Respectfully submitted,

Malcolm Fick, Vice Chairperson