

Selectboard & Planning Board Housing Subcommittee Meeting via Zoom
Joint meeting with The Affordable Housing Trust Fund Board
Tuesday, November 7, 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. Chairperson Davis called the role: Leigh Davis, “present,” Malcolm Fick, “present,” Jeremy Higa, “present,” Garfield Reed, “present.” Also attending, Sam Nickerson
3. APPROVAL OF MINUTES –
 - a. Mr. Higa moved to approve the minutes of October 24, 2023. Mr. Fick seconded the motion. All voted yes.
4. SUBCOMMITTEE’S ANNOUNCEMENTS/STATEMENTS -- None
5. NEW BUSINESS
 - a. Mr. Nickerson was asked to present his thoughts on why housing development is not keeping up in Great Barrington. Mr. Nickerson is a developer with several successful housing projects in the town and other projects that posed challenges that he was prepared to discuss.
 - Mr. Nickerson gave a prepared presentation describing difficulties builders face in town. While emphasizing that housing shortages are not a local problem, but are found nationally, he described several hurdles that builders must overcome.
 1. The permitting process is costly and introduces delays if neighbors object.
 2. The cost of materials remains high.
 3. Skilled labor is hard to come by.
 4. Interest rates remain high.
 5. Access to capital is tight since the pandemic.
 6. Building code requirements impose high costs on rehabbing buildings.
 - Mr. Nickerson summarized the effect of these hurdles.
 1. The complexity of the process reduces the pool of potential developers.
 2. The process for small projects is as complex as that for large projects. The scale required for profitable projects doesn’t make sense for rural areas.
 3. Because of the nature of the business, builders have to have a high tolerance for risk. Because everyone seems to like attacking developers, they have to have thick skin as well.
 - A general discussion of constraints on housing development ensued.
 1. Mr. Nickerson said that zoning restrictions regarding allowable uses and dimensional requirements inhibit sensible development. He contrasted the per acre value of a downtown Railroad Street property with a shopping center. The downtown property value is much higher but could not be developed because of dimensional constraints. He said, “Everything I want to do is illegal,” regarding the conversion of existing non-conforming buildings.

2. Mr. Nickerson pointed to what he considered structural bias in the Special Permitting process in the Town's bylaws. He said the "public" at the hearings are dominated by typically white homeowners who are older and opposed. The process does not engage younger residents, renters and families with children.
3. Committee members discussed the idea of pre-approved housing designs. These have been tried in South Bend, Groveland, and Kalamazoo. Members expressed interest in the concept.
4. Mr. Nickerson mentioned parking requirements as an inhibitor to land use for residences. He recommended the book, *The High Cost of Free Parking*, by Donald Shoup.
5. Mr. Nickerson said that recent building code changes create even more problems for older homes. Ms. Davis asked if zoning and building codes need to be fixed before subsidies can work. Mr. Nickerson pointed out that the Town cannot do anything with the International Building Code.
 - b. Because of member time constraints and the lengthy discussion with Mr. Nickerson, it was decided to defer the additional new business until the next meeting.
6. Next Meeting Date – December 13 joint meeting with the Affordable Housing Trust.
7. Citizens Speak – None
8. Subcommittee Time – None
9. Media Time – Noen
10. Mr. Higa moved to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Fick seconded. All voted "yes."

Respectfully submitted,

Malcolm Fick, Vice Chairperson