Great Barrington Economic Development Committee

Minutes of Thursday, October 3, 2019

Present: Michael Andelman (Citizen Member), Leigh Davis (Selectboard), Jeremy Higa (Planning Board Alt.), Philip Morrison (Higher Ed), Tim Newman (Citizen Member), Vivian Orlowski (Citizen Member), Steve Picheny (Entrepreneurship), Chris Rembold (Assistant Town Manager), Richard Ruth (Citizen Member), Karen W. Smith (Citizen Member)

Absent: Tony Blair (Commercial R.E.), Malcolm Fick (Planning Board), Sean Flynn (K-12), Meredith O’Conner (Finance) Anne O’Dwyer (Finance Alt), Karin Watkins (Arts & Culture)

Call to Order: Chair Picheny called the meeting to order at 6:10pm

Minutes of September 3, 2019: Smith moved to approve, Higa seconded. All were in favor.

Announcements:
Chair Picheny said that the new non-stop express bus service has started between Great Barrington and New York City. It took three-years of efforts to establish. Picheny also introduced and welcomed Philip Morrison, Director of Finance and Administration at Bard College at Simon’s Rock. He will replace Ian Bickford (who has resigned) as higher education representative on the EDC (subject to approval by the Selectboard).

EDC Vision and Mission Statement:
Chair Picheny thanked Tim Newman and Karen Smith for working on our vision and mission statement. He handed out copies to everyone and asked us to take home and review before discussion at our next meeting. Karen read aloud the vision and explained the organization of the mission framework.

Discussion: Housatonic Neighborhood Meeting (9/10):
Chair Picheny said the Selectboard has asked the EDC for Housatonic School recommendations for the best use of the Housatonic School, to be submitted by the November 4 Selectboard meeting or November 18, if needed. Vice Chair Davis said Selectboard Chair Bannon asked for a one-page executive summary. Picheny asked members who attended the Sept. 10 meeting to comment. Higa said that residents want to hold onto the building and be assured access if controlled by the town. Andelman said Selectboard needs to re-assess what’s involved in demolishing the building. If other re-use is pursued, there needs to be a time limit. Ruth expressed confidence in the residents of Housatonic to organize and take leadership of developing proposals for reuse. Smith wasn’t at the Sept 10 meeting, but said that redevelopment hasn’t been financially viable for 12 years. Problems include limited parking, not impinging on playground/park land. If the town decides to take on redevelopment, the whole town will pay for it, not just Housatonic. Newman attended Sept. 10 meeting and agrees not realistic to expect a developer to come in. Thus, two choices: town project or tear down. A town project must have a time limit and town resources/staffing to explore/obtain grants and loans. High population density of Housatonic could create energy for economic development. Davis agreed that the town will need staffing in order to take on this project. Housatonic community has a passion for its future. Need to collaborate with residents. Smith said $100,000 and two years of staff support would be needed to research and get grants. Picheny said Housatonic residents feel like second-class citizens. He spoke with developers and no one will take on. Looking for commercial developers is a waste of time.
Discussion: Housatonic School:
Picheny said Housatonic Village needs rejuvenation and an anchor institution. He suggests that the town keep the property as a community resource and establish a child care center. Lack of childcare is one of the biggest obstacles to the town’s economic development. The redeveloped Housatonic School could have a childcare center on the ground floor with direct access to the park and playground outside. Eldercare, VIM, CHP and/or other social services on the second floor. The third floor would be suitable for co-working and incubator space. Residents from other parts of Great Barrington could travel to Housatonic for these services/businesses, just as is the reverse. Picheny added that BHRSD Superintendent Peter Dillon is interested in a pre-school, but the district does not have space currently. Orlowski mentioned successful track record of worker cooperative child care centers, which increases benefits and minimizes turnover in otherwise low-paying jobs. Picheny said we can learn from other examples of schools converted to childcare and co-working space. Smith agreed that the town should take on the project and find out how other towns have done similar school redevelopment. Rembold suggested Eleven Principles for Turning Public Buildings into Community Anchors, published by Projects for Public Spaces. Davis said this would be an opportunity to unite Housatonic with the rest of Great Barrington. Could be helped by new grant from Mass Department of Transportation to develop shuttle services (between Housatonic and downtown Great Barrington). Andelman emphasized and Picheny agreed that there should be a limited timeline to develop. Three Housatonic residents who attended the meeting said that people wanted to keep the school and childcare would be fantastic, but some people in Great Barrington want to sweep this project “under the rug.” Davis offered thanks to Chris Rembold for his support.

Reports and Announcements:

- Upcoming Event: MMA/MSA conference — Rural Policy, Oct. 5. Selectboard members Davis and Cooke will attend this conference, with a focus on housing and other topics.
- Upcoming Event: EForAll Pitch Contest, Oct. 22. Newman that this is an entrepreneurial training program with a pitch contest followed by a one-year mentorship program.
- Upcoming Event: TechStars Startup Weekend, Nov. 1-3. Newman said that this is a program of an international business accelerator. The program at BCC in Great Barrington is for beginners.

Next Meeting Date: Tuesday October 29, 6:00pm. Location TBD.

Member Speak: None

Citizen Speak: None

Adjournment: Smith moved to adjourn. Newman seconded. The meeting adjourned 7:27pm.

Respectfully submitted by: Vivian Orlowski