Great Barrington Economic Development Committee

Minutes of Tuesday, September 3, 2019 meeting

Present: Michael Andelman (Citizen Member), Tony Blair (Commercial R.E.), Leigh Davis (Selectboard), Jeremy Higa (Planning Board Alt.), Tim Newman (Citizen Member), Anne O’Dwyer (Finance Alt.), Vivian Orlowski (Citizen Member), Steve Picheny (Entrepreneurship), Richard Ruth (Citizen Member), Karen W. Smith (Citizen Member), and Karin Watkins (Arts & Culture)

Absent: Ian Bickford (Higher Ed), Malcolm Fick (Planning Board), Sean Flynn (K-12), Meredith O’Connor (Finance),

Call to Order: Chair Picheny called the meeting to order at 6:05 PM.

Minutes of July 31, 2019: Smith moved to approve, Davis seconded, all were in favor.

Discussion: Housatonic School and Community Center Site Visit:
Several members had attended a 5pm tour, led by Town Manager Mark Pruhenski, and Picheny asked for comments. Many commented that the school building was in much better shape than they’d expected. Concerns were raised about environmental problems and remediation costs. Pruhenski offered that a portion of the $600k that had been approved by Town Meeting for roof and window repair, to stabilize the building, was for remediation, but that we don’t have a full estimate of the entire remediation costs. Newman suggested that we focus our discussion on what is the best future use for the building. It seems clear that the building is too small to be a feasible housing development. Discussion focused on co-working and office spaces on the upper floors, and perhaps some community space on the first floor. Orlowski suggested some sort of food/agriculture emphasis would be an appropriate use. One suggestion was that the Town should do the remediation and then transfer the building to a developer. High-speed internet and parking will be significant challenges for any developer on that site. Taking a small portion of the playground area for parking would probably be unacceptable to the community.

The committee would like to know what went wrong with previous development agreements, and Mark Pruhenski will attempt to do an informal “post-mortem” with Bill Nappo.

It was agreed that the future of the building, and its appropriate redevelopment will change the entire village, either positively or negatively. It will be important that whatever is there contribute to the sense of community.

Picheny encouraged as many members as possible to attend the Housatonic School Redevelopment Neighborhood Meeting on September 10 and come back with notes and ideas.

Review EDC Vision & Mission Statements:
Picheny thanked the six members who had submitted drafts and recommended that we review the drafts as a group, highlight key words and phrases, and then Tim Newman will wordsmith those notes into a consolidated final draft. Drafts from Davis, Higa, Smith, Orlowski, Newman, and Blair were distributed and discussed. Newman will share a consolidated draft with Smith, and then a final draft will be sent to the full committee in advance, so that it can be approved at the next meeting.

Town Support of Committee Work:
Picheny and Davis reported that they had met with Steve Bannon and Mark Pruhenski to discuss the need for staffing support. The committee can continue to meet and discuss ideas, but we can’t actually get any work done without paid staff support. Pruhenski confirmed that Chris Rembold, Laura Brennan (Berkshire Regional Planning Commission), and Joe Grochmal will all be available to support the committee’s work.

Report: 8/29 Planning Board and Selectboard Joint Meeting:
Davis reported that the two boards had met to review the Master Plan Progress Report. They flagged a few gaps where we haven’t made sufficient progress: Economic Development, Affordable Housing, and Environmental/Sustainability. The Master Plan Progress Update (dated 8/20) is a helpful document to link the
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Master Plan to the work we’re doing. The committee requested printed copies on larger paper so that we could more easily review.

Next Meeting: Thursday, October 3 at 6pm. Location TBD.

New Business:
Picheny reported that Ian Bickford has asked to have Phil Morrison, Simon’s Rock Director of Finance & Administration, replace him on the committee. Pruhenski explained that Bickford should resign, and then the EDC should recommend to the Selectboard that Morrison be approved to replace him. Picheny will invite Morrison to the next meeting.

Member Speak:
Tim Newman described two interesting programs relevant to the EDC work:

- 1Berkshire had been running a program called Get Mentored, but is phasing that program out. EforAll is replacing Get Mentored with its own year-long entrepreneurship program. They are a larger, national organization, and will begin in the Berkshires in late October, coordinated by Peter Taylor of Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation, with a new Executive Director recently hired for the Berkshires.

- Also, Newman is on the organizing committee for a Start-Up Weekend (Nov 1-2-3 at BCC-South County), run by a large national accelerator called TechStars.org. Anyone with an idea presents it, they are voted on, then developed into business plans during an intensive mentoring weekend. Each team pitches their idea on Sunday 11/3 at the Mahaiwe.

Davis: Berkshire Regional Planning Annual Dinner Meeting - September 19, 5:30 at the Stationery Factory in Dalton.

Watkins: Downtown Great Barrington Cultural District Annual Meeting, September 17, 9am at Saint James Place.

Citizen Speak Time:
Dan Tawczynski of Taft Farms discussed the closing of the Division Street bridge, and its impact on his business.

Davis suggested we conclude each meeting with any items that the committee would like her to deliver to the selectboard.

There being no further business, the meeting was Adjourned at 7:35 PM.

Minutes prepared by: Karin Watkins