

Strategic Sustainability and Livability Committee of Great Barrington

Minutes of April 27, 2022

Location: Zoom

Start: 5:35

End: 7:30

Name	
Natalie Narotzky	X
Jovanina Pagano	X
Mark Phillips	X
Aretha Whitehead	X
John Morrell	X

X = present O = absent

Housing Panel Notes

- Chris - Housing affordable housing is something I work on the most - working with partners, non profit partners like construct and Jane and the CDC of South Berkshire, RRSYP, Affordable Housing Trust Fund
- Vivian - Discussed what recently published food plan has to do with housing
- Jane - The pandemic took an issue that was already tight and exacerbated it, economic, sustainability for tenants and landlords, full support of the eviction moratorium but a lot of mom & pop landlords struggled, as it's gone on the other big thing has been the boom of folks coming and buying.
 - Market watch report from Berkshire County realtors - the amount of money that has passed - in 2017 the total amount of money spent in this quarter was around 2,700,000, in 2021 it was over 12,200,000. Anytime there is tension and tightness in a system and anytime there is tension in a system those at the margins get squeezed. We know that there is racism in our housing system.
- Chris - Thank you to both Vivian and Jane for examples of how interconnected the housing issue is with everything else we do - how we live, how we get our food. When we talk about housing numbers and prices and incomes we focus on the dollar signs and the number figures and we think in very personal terms sometimes. Jane and Vivian went into the system as a whole and how important housing is.
 - Horrifying numbers - Conversations like this are fantastic. Town has a lot of active programs. Before COVID the planning board and housing trust fund have done a lot on regulations and funding and CPA. We've rewritten zoning bylaws to allow more affordable units.
 - Berkshire Housing, CDC, Construct have built 100+ rental units
 - Scary numbers - The actual income that a 2 adult 2 children household needs to live is about \$140,000/year. To afford a 300,000 home you need 90,000 per year. According to the Berkshire County board of realtors - the average sale price was \$411K (2020) to \$652K (2021)

- Difference between census median income was \$56K, median sales price \$345K. The typical household cannot touch that. They are to the negative \$130K. It got worse in 2020 where the median sale price went up again.
 - The difference between ability to afford and actual price has gotten deeper and deeper
 - The impacts of this type of crisis in ownership or renting units is felt across the board.
- Vivian - Affordability challenges to those who are older and long time residents - 60% of seniors fall short of income
- What is being done
 - Jane - construct was one of the first entities that was able to provide COVID related rental assistance. Affordable housing trusts fund was able to fund those things and then were able to get other private funding to do more with the Rental Assistance Program. Use of technology has really enabled our ability to reach people who need health and safety reasons. There are many more seniors seeking our services and wanting to stay in the home they're in and not knowing what they're going to do if they do come out. The content and ability to do those things is incredible. The strong relationships it's possible to have with the Town of Great Barrington and the town committees.
- Chris - Intersecting forces causing housing issue - There are so many and so many that were here before covid. Supply is very low. Can't build ourselves out of a supply crunch and construction costs are too high. We need units created every day.
- Vivian - How we can learn from other towns and states for innovative ways to keep folks in their homes
 - State statute 41A without raising taxes - enabled seniors to use their own financial resources to stay in their homes. People will be asked to follow these recommendations at Town Meeting
- Chris - Part of Vivian's description of that program is about keeping folks in homes in their homes affordably. Planning Board just received a grant for TA to look into those.
 - How do we incentivize people who need to stay in their homes and need money for repair? Low or no-interest loans to make repairs is critical.
 - Incentives to rent accessory units to low or moderate-income households. Only one other town has done that through a property tax abatement - Provincetown - takes special state legislation
 - Providing funds to create an extra unit and going through the permitting process with them. So cash can get to people who can create the unit and afford the taxes that come with the taxes I'm happy to say that PB is going to be able to do that. Those are some efforts that we are looking at.
 - Other very heavily touristed areas are dealing with issues that we're dealing with like purchasing affordable housing restrictions on homes and if I'm a household that needs cash now the town would purchase the restriction - similar to Agricultural Preservation to preserve farmland. You're purchasing future sales proceeds up front. Things like that could be really helpful - takes money and buy in from partners, boards, etc AND town meeting
- Jane - What I would love to see:
 - More funds into the hands of the affordable housing trust to more nimbly respond to issues as they come up
 - Pioneer Valley has created a revolving housing development fund so they can tap into that to secure the land. Get an acquisition loan, and pay themselves back
 - Construct wants to expand existing properties to use space more efficiently on properties that we know are working already.
- Vivian

- Grants for Community Garden
 - Jane noted Construct has done this at several of our properties
- Energy efficiency measures are also important
- Helping older people with the ADU process and financing - Junior ADUs - there are statutes in California that enable this
 - Chris - Yes PB has been very proactive in looking at different options. How much of a different building lot can you build on and do the requirements restrict us from adding that little bit onto our house.
- Q&A
 - Eileen Mooney - Talk about the rescue funds
 - The town has earmarked \$850,000 for affordable housing purposes through the ARPA - America Rescue Plan Act. A week or so agreed for 850K of the 2million of where that will go on affordable housing. A few important initiatives are underway that could use support in the very near term. This is not the list but what I am considering - not official yet
 - could include affordable housing trust work on North Plain Road and partnership with habitat
 - could include work as the Housatonic school
 - could go to buying affordable housing restrictions and loans and
 - additional covid related emergency rental assistance
 - General household expenses like childcare
 - Eileen - Is anything going to be presented at Town Meeting?
 - Chris - I don't anticipate that. Not subject to voter appropriation and I don't anticipate a formal presentation for that reason. But will communicate it in other ways.
 - CarrieAnne Petrik - I serve Great Barrington as the Regional Coordinator for MVP. This conversation has been really interesting to me and in my role as Regional Coordinator working with the 51 most rural communities within the state, I'm pretty familiar with how so many problems face multiple municipalities but because of how municipalities function we tend to get very locked into our municipal borders and as the panelists were all speaking, I was thinking a lot about how GB is an economic hub and many of the folks who work here would not necessarily live here. How to take this conversation beyond municipal borders and think about it from a regional perspective and if there are any examples of how that's been successful?
 - Jane - Another silver lining of COVID that we started working on was a regional plan for the Berkshires to address housing needs more broadly and recently a housing vision for the Berkshires came out. One Berkshire Came out and we were really involved in those discussions.
 - Scattered site low-income tax credit project - being able to build units across municipalities. The challenge with that is that LITECH is for profit and that is a challenge for developers.
 - Chris - One of the things that we identified in MVP in addition to housing was transportation. That is definitely a regional issue and helps those folks who live in outlying towns and need to get to employment centers.
 - Vivian - Another way that Great Barrington can help the region is by pioneering certain things
 - CarrieAnne - Also want to talk about the climate migration issue - be in touch with me if you want to work on this
 - Jovanina Pagano - How do you not make this an us versus them?

- Jane - requires being willing to be uncomfortable and be uncomfortable with ideas that are different than my own. Why do I think that is possible? It's a hospitable place - people like their neighbors. There is much more sense of a recognition of what it takes for a town to thrive and to be sustained and we have those conversations to be sustained.
 - Jane - When it becomes antagonistic it's usually because someone is scared or hurt.
 - Chris - These are existential issues for any town. The more conversations we have about the impacts of the housing crisis on the town, the seniors, Every town deals with this us and them issue to some extent. We all have to be intentional in our listening and our outreach. We all have something to offer. Great Barrington would not be the town it is without the community we have.
 - Vivian - faith community
 - Vivian - New major project with school system and how it may include a modest housing component for those who work there
- Vivian - State got ARPA funds - how much of that presents opportunities for us to be part of state programs
 - Jane - Housing and community development of area median income. They've also funded at a much higher level the rural small town initiative that allows a town to apply for funds to expand affordable housing
 - Chris - State funds for infrastructure, more for education, more for the MVP program - there is funding through the recovery act and the state budget through CPA.
- MVP Updates
 - CARE GB/Multicultural BRIDGE event on 5/5
 - Chris - we have been working with Multicultural BRIDGE we came up with four key themes on access to parks and housing and transportation and we are trying to further each of those in various ways.
 - May 5 Event (from BRIDGE's Social Media Post)
 - Join us at the end of our journey on May 5th for the UMASS Western Mass Public Health Institute's mini documentary, Mosaic, debut and community celebration.
 - 4PM @ Giggle Park
 - 5PM @ Community Resource Fair in Mahaiwe Lobby
 - 6PM @ Mosaic Screen with Panel Discussion
 - Letter of support for MVP project and vote
 - Chris - Existing project for not only ecological reasons but that is critical but these other improvements are very important to making the space more welcome as a community rec space. This is the first phase of major infrastructure improvements. Walking path would be a future project
 - John made motion

- Aretha seconded motion
 - All approved
 - Motion approved 7:10 pm
- Aretha - regional culvert MVP project in towns of Lenox, Stockbridge, and Pittsfield and Greenagers has been paired with quite a few other organizations and we've been doing the actual surveying with a crew of young people - started last fall and starting up again now in the Spring and now they're assessing culverts. Average 6 culverts a day. After they are assessed and put through a digital model. Model helps assess risk for the next 100 years. Very cool to see young people involved in this project.
 - The web of interconnectedness and our community partners and stakeholders and I love sharing the work you're all doing
- **Chris - Tate Coleman is wanting to connect with us about transportation - will bring him to a future meeting**
- Approval of past meeting minutes (February)
 - Mark made motion
 - Aretha seconded motion
 - All approved
- Compost project update
 - Mark will be cycling off the committee in May
 - Compost project note - Unfortunately grant we were going to apply for the funding ran out this fiscal year. Mark will tee up an application for the next round. Mark is also exploring a program for subsidized home composters. Will do a little research to try and do an easy way to get us enrolled in that project.
 - Aretha will take over and continue the grant writing and will work with Mark on transition
- Growing Better Great Barrington final report
 - John - Have been part of the core team on Growing Better Great Barrington Grant - facilitated a collaboration between the town and Conway School to produce a policy relevant report aimed at imagining a more resilient local food system in the context of climate change. Involved two community forums and many stakeholder and team meetings.
 - The report is 125 pages and beautifully illustrated - organized around three primary recommendations and sub recommendations
 - Accessing Land
 - Food Processing Infrastructure Locally
 - Regional coordination - Imagining an individual or a body of individuals that would help to enhance regional coordination

- May 4 at 10 am Coffee with the Town Manager to present on the findings
- Next meeting dates and times
 - **May 25 @ 5:30pm**
 - **June 22 @ 5:30 pm**
- Citizen Speak
- **Adjournment - 7:30 pm Eastern**

Resources to Share

- Jane shared the following
 - <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnwake/2022/04/01/the-real-reason-house-prices-are-skyrocketing-what-the-real-estate-industry-wont-tell-you/amp/>
 - <https://berkshirerealtors.net/2022-1st-quarter-market-watch-january-march-sales-comparison/>
 - <https://www.wcax.com/2022/03/28/habitat-humanity-addison-county-searches-families-fill-homes/>
 - <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/03/526655831/a-forgotten-history-of-how-the-u-s-government-segregated-america>
 - https://1berkshire.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/1Berkshire_Housing_DIGITAL_v4.pdf
- [Growing Better Great Barrington Report](#)
- MVP Letter of Support (attached)

Minutes submitted on June 6, 2022 vby Jovanina Pagano