

# August 22, 2012

## Special Meeting

7:30 p.m., Upper Level Meeting Room

**MEMBERS PRESENT:** Mrs. Roberts, Mr. Rimsky, Mrs. Jahnke, Mr. Frank, Ms. Gager

**ALTERNATE PRESENT:** Mr. Osborne

**ALTERNATES ABSENT:** Ms. Bishop-Wrabel, Mr. Carey

**STAFF PRESENT:** Mrs. Hill

**ALSO PRESENT:** Mr. Looney, Mr. Harrall, Mr. Bedini, Mr. Charles, Mr. Hileman

Mrs. Roberts called the meeting to order at 7:36 p.m. and seated Members Roberts, Frank, Jahnke, and Rimsky and Alternate Osborne for Ms. Gager.

Mr. Looney circulated copies of the draft report, "Demographics and Housing," dated August 2012 and explained this was the first topical memorandum in the update process.

It was noted that the 2000 census had undercounted Washington.

Mr. Looney briefly reviewed the tables and maps in the report; first population statistics and then housing data. He noted that the population numbers have remained relatively flat recently, but are projected to decline by 200 by 2025. Also if the current trend continues, by 2025 more than half of Washington's population will be over 55. He noted that the southeast block of Town had a 22.7% decrease in population, while in New Preston and Marbledale it had increased. Mr. Looney said he would look again at the southeast block because there was no apparent reason for such a decline.

*Ms. Gager arrived at 7:45 p.m.*

Mr. Rimsky asked how the Town demographics compare to the state. Mr. Looney said the state was also declining, but not as dramatically as Washington.

Mr. Looney noted the 2000 census found there were 312 fewer dwelling units in Town than there were in 1990. He asked the commissioners why they thought this was. Mr. Hileman, past chairman of the Housing Commission, said that Commission had studied this matter and had determined that the 2000 census had been miscounted. He said the 1990 and 2010 figures matched up. Mr. Looney noted that the 2010 census showed the number of units up by 312.

The statistics on housing prices and affordability were then reviewed. It was noted that the Town goal for Affordable units is 95 and the number of actual Affordable units is 37. Mr. Looney noted that while there are other affordable units in Town, only those that are deed restricted are counted by the state to reach the Affordable goal.

Finally, Mr. Looney referred to the Summary Observations and the Preliminary Goals and Objectives sections of the report. Eight possible approaches the Town could take regarding affordable housing were listed. It was noted that Housing will be a key issue in the updated Plan.

Mr. Rimsky noted that state trends clearly impact Town demographics and so asked how the Town could make changes when it has no ability to manage trends statewide. Mr. Charles said that Washington has many resources and so if utilized, the Town would not be so controlled by the statewide trend. Mr. Looney stated that since Washington is so small (3500 population vs. 3.6 million state population) a small step could have more impact here than it would throughout the state.

Mrs. Roberts thought the public was unaware of the problems the Town faces and asked how Washington residents could be made to realize that they exist.

Mr. Bedini asked the consultants if they actually believed that the population decline could be turned around by bringing young people in. He noted the population problem was connected to housing, affordability, and jobs so it would not be easily solved.

Mr. Harrall responded that it would be a challenge. Regarding jobs, he said there was presently no advantage for a company to locate in Washington. While he thought Washington probably would not reach the state goal of 10% Affordable housing, he thought the existing 37 units was impressive because they had been accomplished by a grassroots effort. He said most towns do not have a self reliant approach or an entity such as the Washington Housing Trust.

Mr. Rimsky thought the Town should take a proactive approach using its own resources to work against the state trend.

Ms. Gager suggested the Town might try to work to solve the problems of the older population first, saying that this might result in improvements that would attract younger people to Town. For example, if more condos were built so that older residents could downsize, more jobs would be created and more houses would be available for young families to move into.

Even so, Mr. Harrall did not think that housing prices were likely to fall in Washington due to the huge market area. Ms. Gager thought that even a modest price decrease would be helpful. Mr. Harrall noted that during the last four years there has been a housing depression with prices declining except for Washington, where there had actually been an increase. He said this was true for the region in general.

Mr. Harrall thought that Washington was a unique market and that one of its resources was the wealth in the community. Mr. Osborne noted that the rich provide a lot of business in Town. Mrs. Roberts said this was true, but pointed out that the wealthier people moving to Town don't support the public school system or the Town's other basic services. She was concerned that there would be no more volunteers to keep taxes low. Mr. Harrall agreed that many well off people would rather pay more taxes than to volunteer themselves. Ms. Gager suggested that perhaps \$200 per household per year should be added to the taxes to help pay for services or for paid staff when there weren't enough volunteers. She added that this could be one way to create some jobs. Mr. Looney noted that these issues would tie in with the study of the Town's economic issues.

Looking over the list of possible objectives, Mrs. Roberts remarked that the Zoning Regulations were frequently mentioned. She said as a Planning commissioner this was frustrating because to date the Planning Commission had little success working with Zoning. Mr. Bedini agreed that the Planning Commission did not have the authority it should have and he cited other towns where he had lived, which were run according to the Plan of Conservation and Development. Mr. Rimsky

noted that Planning had met several times with the other commissions to get a consensus regarding which were the most crucial issues facing the Town. Mrs. Hill noted that 10 and 20 years ago when the Plan had been updated, Planning's main concern had been open space. Since then, she said, Planning's viewpoint has evolved, just as the Zoning Commission's has. She thought that if Planning met with Zoning now, Planning would find they are much closer on these issues than Planning thinks they are. Mr. Harrall recommended that a workshop session for these two commissions be held within the next two months. He said it was important to get Zoning's input before finalizing any plans or recommendations so Zoning would buy into the process. Mr. Frank agreed this was necessary so that once it was adopted, the Plan would be implemented.

Several members thought it would be a good idea if the two commissions met on a regular basis.

Mr. Charles urged the Commission to consider the number of people who commute here to work who might become volunteers if they could afford housing here.

Mr. Osborne said that most young people don't want to rent; they want to own their own house, but noted this is very difficult when you are young and earning only \$40,000 a year. He urged the Commission to look forward 100 years, not just 10 or 20 when planning for the Town's future. He suggested that soil based zoning was a major reason that real estate prices were so high and said it must be changed.

Mr. Looney pointed out that denser development was recommended for the village center areas. Mrs. Jahnke noted, however, that the Depot, for example, was in a flood plain, which would limit development.

Mr. Osborne disagreed with Mrs. Roberts' earlier statement that most residents were not aware of the Town's crucial problems. He said most are aware and want action taken to help both the young and the old to live here. He said there was a need for smaller houses on smaller lots and suggested help should be provided for young people to make down payments so they could own their own homes.

Mr. Charles noted that one reason Myfield on Mygatt Road is affordable is because it has a water company to supply the water. He said there are several parcels in this area of Town, including Town owned property, where Affordable housing could be constructed and urged the Commission to advise the Town to commit to installing a water main while it is doing work to upgrade Mygatt Road. He said smaller, more affordable lots would be possible if a water company provided the water.

Mr. Bedini asked how economic development was connected to the other issues that had been raised. Mr. Harrall said that promoting economic development in Washington would be a greater challenge than working on the housing issue. He thought the Town would have to think regionally about this issue. Mr. Rimsky noted that education is the Town's industry. Mr. Harrall pointed out that it is not a growth industry and that it will decline. Mr. Hileman noted that not many of the people who work at the schools live in Town.

*Ms. Gager left the meeting at 9:10 p.m.*

Mr. Hileman made several points. 1) Although it was true that the demographic shift was reflected in both the state and the Town, the Town's population was decreasing at a faster rate. He noted

Washington had lost a larger percentage of people under 20 than the state had. 2) The will of the people to work for change should not be ignored. 3) One quarter of the property in Town is owned by people who reside out of town. He said they come here to get away from the issues and so could not be relied upon to get involved. 4) In addition to geographic constraints, he noted the commercial districts and village centers were also hampered by historic districts and scenic roads. He said that left farmland and forest to be developed. 5) It is more difficult to plan for a decrease in population than it is to plan for growth.

Mr. Rimsky said the enormity of the problems should not keep the Town from acting because every small step made would have a proportional impact. He thought the public, including the out of towners and the wealthy, should be educated about why they should become involved and how it would benefit them.

Mr. Hileman noted that with the aging population there would be an increase in health care industry jobs in Town.

Mrs. Roberts said that in addition to calling attention to the Town's problems, the Commission must make strong recommendations about how to solve them.

Mr. Hileman agreed it was a good idea to try to bring in young families to keep the Town viable, but he said the Commission must realize the population is decreasing and should not attempt to create a Plan with the sole goal of promoting growth.

Mr. Harrall said that demographics was the sum of individual decisions and added that in a small town you have a better opportunity to influence those decisions.

Mr. Bedini thought the July 28th public meeting had been beneficial because there had been so much input from the public. He thought the public needed to hear the kind of discussion that was taking place tonight and to get responses to the issues that had been raised. He agreed with Mrs. Roberts that public education was needed.

Mr. Harrall asked if there had been any recent commercial ventures in Town that had been opposed. Mr. Charles he thought the reason there had been opposition to some commercial proposals was that until they had been proposed, the public had not imagined they could actually happen. The proposed Wykeham Rise Inn was given as an example of a commercial venture that had been opposed due to its location in an established residential neighborhood. Mr. Frank explained to the consultants how the Planning Commission had unanimously determined that the Zoning Commission's proposal to allow inns on town roads did not comply with the Plan because it would not preserve the rural character of the Town. Mr. Rimsky noted that also the definition of inn had been too vague. He said perhaps if the Zoning Commission had consulted the Planning Commission prior to proposing the revision, a more appropriate regulation could have been written.

The scheduling of a joint Zoning/Planning meeting was discussed. It was noted that Planning's first meeting with the business community was scheduled for 9/13 and so it was thought a meeting with Zoning should be held at the end of September or beginning of October.

Mr. Rimsky asked if any workshops had been scheduled in the village centers. None have been scheduled at this time.

Mr. Frank asked what the Commission's next step should be. Mr. Looney asked the commissioners to read and review the draft memorandum and to advise him of anything that had been left out, any questions, any errors, etc.

MOTION:

To adjourn the meeting. By Mr. Frank.

Mrs. Roberts adjourned the meeting at 9:35 p.m.

FILED SUBJECT TO APPROVAL

Respectfully submitted,  
Janet M. Hill  
Land Use Administrator