

April 24, 2012

Special Meeting

1:00 p.m. Land Use Meeting Room

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mrs. Roberts, Mr. Frank, Mr. Rimsky, Mrs. Jahnke

MEMBERS ABSENT: Mrs. Gager

ALTERNATE PRESENT: Mr. Carey

ALTERNATE ABSENT: Mr. Osborne

STAFF PRESENT: Mrs. Hill

ALSO PRESENT: Mr. Charles

1:00: Mr. Buckhurst and Mr. Okolichany

3:00: Mr. Connor, Ms. Barberi

5:00: Mr. Scanlan

INTERVIEWS

BFJ Planning:

Mr. Buckhurst: Planning degree, background in architecture

Mr. Okolichany: Certified planner, Civil engineer

Mr. Fish: Zoning and environmental expert would head the team, but could not be present due to jury duty.

Examples of Work:

Monroe and Trumbull POCDs, New Canaan Master Facilities Plan, Oxford Incentive Housing Zone Study

Handouts:

Agenda with list of relevant projects and project schedule

4 page report: Municipal and Public Use Facilities Master Plan, Town of New Canaan, Ct.

4 page report: Willow Street Master Plan

Written responses to questions

Mrs. Roberts noted the Commission did not want a steering committee; the Commission itself would take on this task.

Mr. Okolichany noted the firm was willing to focus on the chapters specified in the RFP and said the work would be grouped into three phases. Phase I: Kick off meeting, data collection, site visits, research, identifying trends, etc. Phase II: The bulk of the work would be done in this phase and would be completed by the end of 2012. He said because the Commission values the 2003 Plan it would be updated as needed and new chapters on Economic Development and Sustainability Strategies would be added. Public workshops would be held during this phase. Phase III: This would be mainly the 65 day review period, public hearing, and final revisions.

Mr. Buckhurst and Mr. Okolichany responded to the questions sent to the consultants: (See attached sheet for questions.)

1) Because the Commission was concerned, they said they would not focus on a single public

meeting, but would hold three, the first one very early in the process, and at different locations in Town as the Commission directed. They said they understood the advantage of holding the meetings in different areas of Town. They noted how in one Town they had school children draw pictures of what they wanted their town to look like and used these to draw the parents in to a workshop meeting held at the school.

2) Mr. Okolichany had researched several area economic studies in preparation of the interview including the 2010 Village Center Vitality Program Study for towns within the NW Ct. Regional Planning Collaborative. He said, yes, some of its policy recommendations can be applied in Washington, but suggested expanding upon it so that the chapter is localized for Washington. He also recommended a Market Assessment and Gaps Analysis to help determine by business category where money now being spent out of Town could be spent in Town and what the demand was for certain types of businesses.

3) They said they would meet with business leaders from the NW Ct. Chamber of Commerce and the Washington Business Assoc. as well as individual business owners, would invite them to attend all workshops, and would solicit their input on drafts.

4) They were aware of the declining school population and noted there was a projected decline for the next 9 to 10 years. Forecasts of anticipated changes in household makeup would determine the need for various types of housing. They were aware that the Zoning Regs allow cluster housing, said they would review this section to determine whether it would work well, and suggested an appropriate location for additional housing would be the village centers.

5) They stated the earlier the community outreach, the better, but said the first three to four weeks would be spent on research and learning from the Commission in order to lead a more fruitful dialogue with the public stakeholders and community leaders. They stressed that meeting with key individuals was very helpful as a way to provide the firm with a range of ideas.

6) The three inter related issues; housing diversity, vitality of the village centers, and infill housing in the village centers was seen as the most difficult issue to address and the most important aspect of the study. The need to create more attractive community focal points was noted. They stated the Zoning Regs would have to be carefully studied and that the centers could be revitalized with more mixed use. Mr. Buckhurst noted that upon walking through the Depot, it was not a good walking experience and needed to be tied together.

7) To hold costs down, the firm would stay on schedule and keep to the agreed upon budget. They explained the same team would work together on the project from beginning to end. They also said it would be helpful to have a person from Town serve as the coordinator to distribute drafts and help them to focus on the comments.

8) To encourage the participation of other boards, Mr. Okolichany said they would meet early on with the department heads to familiarize them with the process and to get their comments. They would also send each draft to the dept. heads to involve them at each stage. They would also encourage commissioners to attend the public workshops.

9) To ensure public input, Mr. Buckhurst noted that good graphics are essential. He presented the 4 page brochures as examples and said text slides would not be used. The idea to increase the number of public workshops had already been agreed to.

Mr. Frank noted that economic development was a new topic for the Commission. Mr. Okolichany spoke briefly about how the revitalization of the village centers was a priority, but that other areas such as agriculture and marketing were important, too. Mr. Rimsky asked if they had any experience with the relationship between agriculture and the conservation of land, an economic use, he noted, that would be compatible with conservation easements. Mr. Buckhurst noted the firm had experience with farmers markets in Long Island and that once established the demand for fresh produce usually increases. Mr. Rimsky noted there was enormous pressure drawing people to spend money outside of Town. Mr. Buckhurst stated that a townwide strategy encouraging green markets, more mixed use, community spirit, and special activities and events would help steer business back to Town.

Mrs. Hill asked about the Oxford Housing Incentive Study and whether it would be relevant for Washington. It was noted that Mr. Fish had worked on this and they would send the Commission a copy of the complete report. They noted it included education of the public about affordable housing and a conservation component.

There was a discussion with the commissioners regarding the need for population diversity. Mrs. Roberts noted how residents resist newcomers, but said they are needed for the volunteer services the community provides. However, it was noted there is a lack of jobs to attract people to Town. Mr. Buckhurst suggested that modest townhouses in the village centers might be one way to add to their vitality.

Mrs. Hill noted their price was on the high side of those received and asked if that was because some extras were included or if they were flexible and could take some steps to lower the cost. Mr. Buckhurst noted the major cost would be the work on the new chapters, and if it was found that only minor revisions were needed throughout the text, that would save money. How much work would be done would be subject to Commission approval.

Mrs. Hill noted a Board of Finance member had asked her to find out whether the issue of housing diversity could be zeroed in on and completed before the rest of the Plan, but she noted with the proposed schedule showing the bulk of the work would be done by the end of 2012, it would not be necessary in this case.

Mr. Rimsky noted that the lack of action by the Town is beginning to tell on the health of the community. He said since there were no proactive measures taken in the past, the economic health of Washington is now critical. He said the entire community would have to be involved in the solution and the Commission and consultants would have to communicate to the population in a way that would activate them. Mr. Okolichany agreed that was their goal.

Martin Connor:

Mr. Connor: Certified planner, many years experience in NW Ct., Torrington City Planner, Goshen Town Planner

Ms. Barberi: Certified zoning and wetlands officer and landscape architect degree. Artistic and computer background

Example of Work:

Torrington POCD

Handout:

Copy of 3/16/12 proposal, Written responses to questions

Mr. Connor said he understood the Commission was concerned about the number of public meetings proposed. He explained the first kick off meeting would be with the commissions, staff, and elected officials. The goals would be explained at that time. He stressed these people need to know they are an important part of the process.

Mr. Carey said he would like to get the public involved. Mr. Connor said there would be a public meeting after the kick off meeting.

Mrs. Roberts asked whether the public meeting would break down into round tables with a Planning commissioner at each table to guide the discussion. Mr. Connor said it would begin as one large group that then would break down into smaller groups. Ms. Barberi said she could facilitate the discussion of diverse ideas under non threatening conditions.

Mr. Connor said the next step would be a working session with the Commission to outline what could realistically be included in the update. He understood new chapters on Sustainability, Housing Diversity, and Economic Development would be included and said he would also work on incorporating ideas for the revitalization of the village centers and for low impact development. He hoped the various Town departments would take ownership of the sections that concern them. Ms. Barberi said if department goals are included in the Plan, it can help with grant applications.

Mr. Connor said the existing mapping would be updated and new useful maps created. Each map would be a plan in and of itself. He would use the NW Conservation District for this work.

Ms. Barberi suggested using Facebook to communicate with the public. She would control the Facebook page. The Town website could also be used. Mr. Rimsky asked how they would get weekenders involved with the Facebook page. Ms. Barberi said the press would be invited to the public meetings and there would be flyers around Town. Mr. Carey noted the Town newsletter could also be used.

The proposed budget was approx. \$20,000 with an additional \$3000 for mapping and additional expense if more public meetings were added.

Mr. Connor responded to the questions sent to the consultants:

1) Mr. Connor said he could hold additional meetings in different sections of Town, but it would add to the cost. Mr. Rimsky cautioned that if the residents of the various villages weren't contacted directly, they would not engage, and there would not be a consensus. He added that Marbledale and New Preston are critical areas in Town because of their location along Rt. 202. Ms. Barberi noted that ultimately the Plan is for the entire Town, not one part of the community.

2) Mr. Connor stated there is an ongoing economic development strategy study by Mark Waterhouse and that information could be mined from it. He also noted that the Northwest Ct. Economic Development Corporation and Northwest Chamber of Commerce would be consulted.

3) Mr. Connor said he would meet with the Washington Business Assoc. and whoever else the Commission recommended. Mrs. Roberts noted that not all businesses belong to the Association and Mr. Connor responded again that he would get the Commission's recommendations regarding who to meet with.

4) Mr. Connor noted that declining school population is not a problem unique to Washington. He stated that young people and the aging need affordable rentals and he noted that the term, "work force" housing has a less negative connotation than, "affordable housing."

5) Mr. Connor noted that all community groups should buy into the process. If they are involved, they are more apt to follow through and implement the recommendations that apply to their group. He said it was important to get the department heads involved.

6) Mr. Connor said he did not have office expenses that would add to the cost, but that he would add on for extra meetings.

7) To encourage the participation of the Town boards at the kick off meeting, he proposed refreshments and to make it fun.

8) To ensure public input, Mr. Connor said he would use press releases, posters, Facebook, and going to the villages for meetings.

Mr. Frank noted that including information on education would be a change from the 2003 POCD and he asked Mr. Connor how he would deal with the education system. Mr. Connor said it was important to get the Board of Ed to the table. Mrs. Roberts stated education here was in crisis. Mr. Rimsky noted there was a fine line between the jurisdiction of the Board of Ed and the Planning Commission and said the Commission could not ignore the education problems even though it has no authority. Mr. Connor advised the Commission to consult with the Board about its facilities and future needs, adding the Board of Ed usually doesn't want advice. Mr. Rimsky noted that in addition to it being a demographic, economic, and education issue, it was also a Town issue in that although we are in a regional school district, the Town owns the elementary school building. Ms. Barberi said the Superintendent and First Selectman should be asked to attend all public meetings. Mr. Carey thought it was impossible to come up with a realistic policy to control the cost of education, noting that consolidation had been a possible solution, but it had failed. He questioned whether education was worth addressing in the Plan. Mr. Connor said that was the Commission's decision. Mrs. Roberts thought there must be a way to suggest there are looming problems that can not be ignored.

Mr. Rimsky thought the last Plan failed to make people understand there are real problems in the community that must be addressed.

Mr. Carey noted in Vermont non residents pay higher taxes. Mr. Connor said this was true, too, in Florida and he thought it was a good idea.

Mr. Frank asked whether in addition to many recommendations that would be made in the Plan, the Commission could concentrate and emphasize three or four. Mr. Connor noted that was how Torrington had handled its Plan and he thought perhaps the chapters could be revised one at a time; each being a complete unit in a useable form.

Mrs. Hill asked if Housing could be zeroed in on first. Mr. Connor said it could.

Mrs. Roberts noted that many updates were needed throughout the entire text.

Mr. Carey suggested that a useable living document where the Commission tries to keep pace with other communities would be a great idea.

Mr. Frank asked if the State's POCD priority funding areas map was out yet. Mr. Connor said it was not.

Mr. Frank noted that Mr. Connor and Ms. Barberi work full time for Torrington and asked if that would cause conflicts. Mr. Connor stated that Torrington offices are closed on Friday afternoons so he would be available then and evenings. He also stated he would work closely with Mrs. Hill.

Mr. Rimsky noted there are many weekenders in Town and he hoped some events would be scheduled to include them.

William Scanlan

Mr. Scanlan: Masters in Planning, regional planning experience, sole proprietor

Example of Work:

Woodbury POCD

Handouts: None

Mr. Scanlan noted his planning experience in Massachusetts, which, he said, was similar in both people and planning procedures to Ct. He stated that community planning was his field of expertise and that he had done many plans and studies. He showed a lengthy Power Point presentation of preliminary goals and strategies that he had done for Woodbury in preparation of that town's final public hearing. He noted Washington would have different challenges, but this presentation would illustrate how he works. When working on the Woodbury POCD, Mr. Scanlan said he had done a low cost web based survey, interviewed local officials and environmental groups, established four focus groups, held a community wide forum at the beginning of the process, drafted a vision statement, and had held a dozen meetings with the Planning Commission who had wanted to be in charge of the process.

Mr. Rimsky asked if the web survey had been set up independently from the Woodbury website. Mr. Scanlan said survey monkey had been used and that 400 responses had been received. Mr. Rimsky asked how the survey had been promoted. Mr. Scanlan said he had worked hard to publicize it.

Mrs. Roberts asked how many Woodbury residents had been involved in the process. Mr. Scanlan stated that 25 to 30 people had attended the larger meeting and that for the focus groups held on specific topics, he had relied on recommendations from the Planning Commission about who to invite.

Mr. Rimsky asked how the regional school district's problems could be dealt with in the Plan. Mr. Scanlan said he had met with Woodbury's financial officer to incorporate school needs into Woodbury's Plan. Mr. Rimsky noted his concern regarding the declining school population and the declining condition of school facilities. He asked how to negotiate a conversation with the Board of Ed and noted the school problems are interconnected with housing and economic problems. Mr. Scanlan agreed that the school population was declining and Washington's general population was aging. He noted that to encourage young families to move to Town a good school system as

well as services for young families are needed.

Mr. Rimsky noted affordable real estate is also needed. Mr. Scanlan noted real estate values in the state were declining overall.

Mr. Frank noted there had been a dispute in the Woodbury-Bethlehem regional school district regarding how to split the grade school. Mr. Scanlan said he had no expertise to help the school district make those kinds of decisions.

Mr. Frank explained that a major issue was whether there should be a consolidated elementary school or whether each town should maintain its own school. Mrs. Roberts said that while this was not under the Planning Commission's jurisdiction, the Commission is concerned and would like the Plan to show some interest in this matter. Mr. Scanlan noted that Woodbury had decided to renovate its existing school rather than build a new one.

Mr. Rimsky noted the Town is approaching its goal of 30% open space and asked how the Plan should address the sentiment of preserving rural character balanced against rising real estate values and affordable housing availability. He also suggested that farmland that is no longer productive could be used to attract agriculture back to the region. Mr. Scanlan said Washington should work on a regional basis to establish farmers' markets, organic farms, herb farms, co ops, etc. He noted that open space would not be a major concern in the update of the Plan; Housing Diversity, Economic Development, and Village Character would be the topics explored most thoroughly.

Economics was discussed briefly. Mr. Scanlan said a declining population could not support a large commercial base and so the Town's economic strategy would have to be more individually based. He suggested operations such as home based businesses, farming, logging, snowmobiling, and tourism as rural based industries.

Mr. Rimsky noted that economic pressure is moving up Rt. 202 and the Town does not want strip development. He said there are distinct village areas along Rt. 202, each needing its own approach. He said since they do not cooperate, the Plan must draw them in together. He thought the focus groups could be used as public outreach to include each village in the process. Mr. Scanlan said while a focus group of 6 to 8 people could be held in each village, it was important for these areas to integrate.

Mr. Scanlan responded to the questions sent to the consultants:

1) Yes.

2) Yes, he would look at those studies to get an outside perspective and to use as a jumping off point, but the study would have to be brought to the town level.

3) Yes, he will meet with business owners if the Commission wants him to. Mrs. Roberts said that not all businesses belong to the business association and so a way to reach them all was needed. Mr. Scanlan asked what the Town's business base was. The response was schools, real estate, restaurants, the bookstore and hardware store, local food market, two liquor stores, banks, drug store, law firms, Sanitized, shops, and galleries. Mr. Rimsky was concerned about the lack of population to support them. Mr. Scanlan noted Woodbury had done a good job with the antiques trade. Mr. Rimsky said in terms of tourism, it was difficult to think of Washington as a destination.

He said there had been an idea recently of an arts council to coordinate artistic endeavors and said the businesses want the Town to be more proactive with the economy. Mr. Scanlan noted a goal for a rural community with natural resources and beauty would be to develop an economic strategy without changing the character of Town. He cited snowmobiling and horse training as examples of businesses that would fit this concept.

Mr. Paul asked if the other commissions would be enlisted to help prepare the Plan. Mr. Scanlan said their support was important and that the entire burden of implementation should not fall on the Planning Commission. He said each recommendation and who is responsible for implementing each should be clearly listed. Mrs. Roberts said the Planning Commission should focus on getting the other commissions involved so they are invested. Mr. Scanlan said they could be invited to the working meetings.

Mrs. Roberts asked if Mr. Scanlan would use the Town website to communicate with the public. He responded that it was a good idea to take advantage of the existing technology.

4 and 5) He said these had already been covered in the discussion. The participation of all Town groups would be encouraged.

6) Mr. Scanlan stated that economic development would be the most difficult issue to deal with. He said the question of how a small town can promote economic development and increase its tax base is a difficult one.

7) Mr. Scanlan said he would stick to the agreed upon work to keep costs down. He said he had proposed \$30,000 and asked how that compared to the other proposals. Mrs. Roberts said there was a wide range of prices and that his had been competitive.

Mr. Scanlan noted that Massachusetts is aggressive in promoting renewable alternate energy sources; solar farms to generate the tax base, low impact wind turbines, etc.

Mrs. Hill asked if the work on the chapter on Housing Diversity could be fast tracked so that it was completed first. Mr. Scanlan said it could.

Mrs. Roberts adjourned the Meeting at 6:22 p.m.

FILED SUBJECT TO APPROVAL

Respectfully submitted,
Janet M. Hill
Land Use Administrator