

April 30, 2012

Special Meeting

1:00 p.m. Land Use Meeting Room

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

MEMBER ABSENT: Ms. Gager

ALTERNATE PRESENT: Mr. Carey

ALTERNATE ABSENT: Mr. Osborne

STAFF PRESENT: Mrs. Hill

ALSO PRESENT: Mr. Charles

1:00: Mr. McDermott, Mr. Looney, Mr. Harrall

3:00: Mr. Chalder

INTERVIEWS

Milone & MacBroom:

Mr. McDermott, Sr. Vice President of the firm, lives in Bethlehem and was Woodbury's first town planner. He said Milone and MacBroom has done many village district plans and economic development plans, is a multi disciplinary firm, which includes engineers, planners, scientists, traffic specialists, landscape architects, etc., and understands the infrastructure necessary to support growth and development.

Mr. Harrall is a planner experienced in town Plans of Conservation and Development and in downtown revitalization projects. He said this experience could be applicable to a smaller town such as Washington. He said he had worked with school enrollment and redistricting problems. He cited related small town experience such as his work on the Avon Village Center, Winchester's limited impact development regulations, the Cornwall Village Center Marketing Program, and a regional comprehensive economic development strategy for the Litchfield Hills and Northwest Ct. He recommended agriculture friendly regulations and a build out analysis to realistically determine what the Town can absorb based on its regulations and natural resources. Mr. Harrall said the firm had done POCDs for Sprague, New Milford, and Haddam and provided on call services for Southbury, Litchfield, and Ridgefield.

Mr. Looney said he understood Washington wanted to increase housing diversity, encourage economic development, and enhance its village centers yet maintain its environment, rural character, and quality of life. He noted the recent shift in Washington's demographics: its population of 25 to 44 year olds had risen from 42.6% in the last census to 49.7 in the current census, while the number of school aged children dropped by 200. During the same time period he said the median price of a house in Washington rose from \$235,000 to \$710,000. He thought housing would be the most difficult issue to deal with, especially with the corresponding change in population. Mr. Looney stated he had completed a housing study for the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials. Regarding economic studies done for the area, he said these were a useful base of information and could potentially be used in formulating plans for the village centers. He noted that outreach to the Town's business leaders and individual business owners was important

to understand how the micro market in Washington works. He said two goals of the Plan would be to build upon the Depot Study and to expand the tax base beyond residential property values. Another goal would be to tailor an economic approach based on its character for each of the village centers.

Mr. McDermott noted since there were no public sewer systems, any development would be a challenge, especially in New Preston with its hills and proximity to the East Aspetuck River. He said questions such as, can Marbledale and New Preston expand and can these areas retain the antique businesses already there, would have to be researched.

Mr. Looney said issues such as preservation of the Town's environmental quality, maintaining soil based zoning, protection of its open spaces and natural resources, and drafting of sustainable development practices would be in capable hands at Milone and MacBroom due to its experts on staff in both engineering and planning. Mr. McDermott said the issue of protecting open space vs. open spaces as well as maintaining both farm and forest landscapes is important to Washington. Mr. Looney noted he had worked on open space priority plans for other towns.

Mr. Looney briefly described the process for the update. The 2003 Plan would provide the framework for any modifications and would be reviewed first to determine exactly what needs to be changed. As each element of the Plan is addressed, a background outline containing the issues, policy considerations, suggestions, strategies, and action steps would be circulated. An action agenda would be included at the end of each of these documents and would include goals, responsible party, and timeframe for implementation. He proposed four meetings for public outreach and to get the Town boards involved; possibly one in each section of Town. Mr. Looney recommended a breakfast meeting with the business community. There would also be a final meeting for a brief on the elements of the Plan. He said the firm would participate in the public hearing that would follow and noted that the Town website would be used for communications throughout the process. Mr. McDermott noted they had learned by reading the minutes that the Commission did not want to conduct charrettes. Therefore, he recommended that the outreach meetings be organized by topic and he also suggested that a survey using survey monkey be conducted. He noted the results would not be statistically valid, but that it was a good way to get opinions. He also said the firm would occasionally have a staff person work at the Town Hall and hold an "open house" and the public would be welcome to come in to speak with him on those days.

Mr. McDermott listed what makes Milone & MacBroom different from other firms: 1) small town experience, 2) a knowledge of Washington and an understanding of both local and regional issues, 3) work experience in both the public and private sectors; they understand the need for a balanced approach, 4) in house expertise in areas such as water resources, environmental science, critical preservation issues, and landscape architecture, and 5) they would provide a fresh look at Washington in a way that hasn't been done before.

Mr. Rimskey noted that Mr. Harrall said earlier that the firm had worked on school issues. Mr. Rimskey saw a connection between the Town's commercial growth and development and the school enrollment and he asked 1) where was the line between the jurisdiction of the Planning Commission and the Board of Ed and 2) considering Washington is part of a regional school district, how should the Planning Commission proceed when the other towns in the district might not agree with Washington. Mr. Harrall responded that this situation is not unusual and that there is usually very limited communication between the Board of Ed and other Town boards. He added

that part of the solution is to convince the school board staff that it is appropriate to integrate with the Town in its planning efforts. Mr. McDermott stated that each side needs to listen to the other's concerns. Mrs. Roberts was concerned the Planning Commission would be perceived as interfering. Mr. Harrall made it clear that the Board of Ed sets the school policies, while the Planning Commission should express the importance of land use issues as they relate to enrollment. Mr. Frank noted the current POCD addresses only school facilities and asked how far the Commission should go with that. Should it take a stand on the question of whether to consolidate the three primary schools? Would it be appropriate to make such a recommendation? Mr. Harrall thought that was a policy issue that went beyond the jurisdiction of the Commission, although he noted the Commission would get a referral per the state statutes to comment on it. He explained the Board of Ed would decide any reconfiguration issue based on its educational philosophy and policy, while the Planning Commission would review the adequacy of the facilities. Mr. Harrall noted, too, that the legislative body making the financial decisions should also be consulted and that these conversations should take place in a cooperative effort rather than by presentation.

Regarding housing, it was noted that housing costs are pricing the people who serve the community out of Town. Mr. Rimsky thought the community was not well served if it had no children or young families. Mr. McDermott noted the influx of weekenders has had an impact because they don't add children to the school system. He said the problem was similar in places like Martha's Vineyard. Therefore, a basic question the Plan must address is, how do you support the people who make the Town run?

Mr. Frank said it had been suggested that the Commission concentrate on only three or four recommendations and work to get the other Town boards to agree upon these early in the process so that there would be a greater chance that they would be implemented. Mr. Looney thought all of the issues should be kept on the list, said he preferred to work on five solid actionable ideas, but agreed the Commission could focus on a few. He said they had done this in the Haddam POCD. Mr. McDermott noted that was the reason they had emphasized specific topics earlier in the presentation. He advised the Commission that it was possible at any time to address other topics and/or work on supplements, which could be incorporated into the Plan. This would keep it flexible and up to date. Mr. Harrall noted that the number of focus points is often limited by budget constraints.

Mr. Rimsky thought that workshops in each community were essential at the beginning of the process in order to engage the public. He said the Commission held events for the 2003 Plan, but he thought it had failed to build a community consensus and ultimately much of the Plan had not been implemented. He also thought it was important to get the other boards involved early on and said he liked the "open house" idea.

Mr. Frank asked how the team would work together. Mr. Looney stated he would be the project manager who would bring in the needed resources. He said either Mr. McDermott or Mr. Harrall, according to his expertise, would attend each meeting with him.

Mr. Frank asked if a section, Housing, for example, could be fast tracked and adopted and whether that would satisfy the 10 year update requirement. Mr. Harrall said it would. Mr. McDermott said the update could be done on a topical basis, but pointed out that the Commission had already identified three very interrelated topics; housing, village centers, and economic development, on which it would focus. He reminded the commissioners that the first step would be to review the

existing Plan and said if the vision of the community had not changed in the last ten years, they would not waste unnecessary time there. Mr. Looney noted the Commission's fourth focus issue was sustainability.

Mr. McDermott noted that while the Commission was comfortable with its current section on natural resources, they would introduce low impact development standards.

Mr. Frank said that he had reviewed the Sprague POCD and was concerned about its readability due to its heavy reliance on statistics. Mr. Looney explained that was not his normal style, but had been what that Commission had requested. Mr. McDermott said the Commission could opt for an appendix for the statistical data.

Planimetrics:

Mr. Chalder stated Planimetrics has four planners and a GIS mapping specialist. The firm develops strategic visions and the regulations to make them happen. He noted he had worked with communities, as a planner, as a real estate developer, and as a consultant, which gave him experience from many viewpoints. He also noted Planimetrics had worked with the Commission on the Town's 2003 Plan and that workbooks had been used at that time to guide the process. He referred to recent work the firm has done in surrounding towns, which, he said, gave him first hand experience with smaller communities and their issues. He urged the Commission to include an update of the property line base map early in the process.

He said the three main issues to consider when drafting the Plan are: 1) What is it that you want to preserve? Qualities? Natural Resources? 2) How will you grow as a community? He noted that change will happen even if growth does not, so asked, how would the Town decide to guide it. 3) What do we want to provide? Facilities? Roads? He said the goal is to engage the community in the discussion of these three issues, which overlap to form the POCD.

He briefly reviewed uses for POCDs, which include guidance to

1) the Planning and Zoning commissions to direct growth and change and

2) the community to coordinate activities between municipal, private agencies, and private landowners, and stressed the document should be user friendly.

He said POCDs are levers for change and can either advocate for the best solution or if there is no agreement on a solution, they can urge the community to keep working to find one.

Mr. Chalder said he understood there are some parts of the current POCD that don't need to change.

Regarding implementation strategies, Mr. Chalder stated these, and who would be responsible for each, would be clearly listed. He said they had to be specific and workable.

Mr. Rimsky noted the first public workshop held for the 2003 Plan had gone well, but a lot of the implementation at the end of the process had not been accomplished. He asked how the public could be engaged early on so it would be invested in the Plan and work to implement it. He suggested there should be community meetings in each district of Town and with the business

owners and that the Commission should focus on implementing three to five of the most important strategies. Mr. Chalder explained how the first public workshop (“casino night”) is organized, how it gets the community involved, and the type of information it generates. He said he is generally not an advocate for separate neighborhood meetings because those in attendance do not hear all of the conversation. He said he would rather focus his attention where the input is most critical: 1) casino night, 2) interaction with neighborhood groups to learn both common grounds and differences, 3) a meeting to get public feedback after the first draft, and 4) the public hearing. He noted the public hearing is important because you want momentum at the end for implementation. Mr. Rimsky still thought separate district meetings were necessary. Mr. Chalder agreed that all neighborhoods should be heard, but stressed that the budget is an issue. He recommended either that some neighborhoods come together at a single meeting to try to unify them or that the budget be readjusted.

Promotional tools were briefly discussed. Mr. Chalder showed examples of signs that had been posted in other towns; “Plan like your kids will live here” and “The most fun you’ll have at a meeting,” but said community buzz was what usually gets people to attend meetings, not promos. He advised that if the Commission makes each meeting relevant, the public will attend.

Mr. Carey asked what Mr. Chalder thought about electronic surveys. Mr. Chalder favored telephone surveys over on line surveys such as survey monkey because they reach a broader range of participants.

Mr. Frank noted Washington must deal with the problem of declining school population. Mr. Chalder said he was familiar with the regional school district and would study the demographics and how they will impact the district. He noted the state is trending like Washington. He said the Town must understand where it will be before it can evaluate facilities and decide controversial issues. He noted that sometimes a controversial matter is turned into an actionable plan that everyone does not necessarily favor, but everyone understands why it was determined to be a reasonable course of action.

Mr. Frank asked how the Commission should deal with the Board of Education. Mr. Chalder responded that the POCD should address facility needs, but it could not dictate the policies inside the school buildings.

Mr. Rimsky thought the Commission could advocate to address the current population imbalance and, in turn, would impact the school population. He said it was not healthy for the Town to have no children and no young families. He asked what could be put in place to mitigate the current trends. Mrs. Roberts asked how to get the Town’s disengaged community involved in the discussion and said she thought a dialogue with the Board of Ed was important. Mr. Chalder said it would be most cost effective to use the 2003 Plan as a foundation and to meet with the Town boards, including the Board of Ed, to ask for their input. Mr. Chalder spoke of how economic issues also contribute to this problem. He thought housing diversity, incentive housing, etc. should be discussed. He also noted that a dialogue with the Board of Finance would be important.

In response to further concerns about implementation, Mr. Chalder suggested it would be a good idea to focus on a few of the most important recommendations and to conduct annual state of the Plan meetings to review how implementation is progressing. He noted the Commission can continually maintain the Town Plan rather than waiting for a major revision every ten years.

Mr. Frank asked what happens when the Zoning Commission considers the POCD to be non binding. Mr. Chalder said a continuing dialogue is needed with Zoning to make sure this does not happen. Mr. Rimsky explained how several recent Zoning referrals on proposed regulation changes concerning land use issues had not been considered wise planning by the Planning Commission, and although Planning had recommended discussions be held between the two commissions prior to the drafting of proposed Zoning reg revisions, the Zoning Commission had not acted on this recommendation. Mr. Chalder again stated that open discussions between the two commissions on how to work together are needed, and these could be held possibly twice a year.

Mr. Frank asked how the work to update the Plan would be organized. Mr. Chalder said he would be the assigned project manager and that he could begin work quickly because he knows the issues. Two other senior planners would help.

Mr. Frank asked what he thought the most difficult part of the project would be. Mr. Chalder thought business issues would be the most difficult because they are tied in with everything else going on in the community. There was a brief discussion about how co ops can sometimes be used successfully in small communities. Mr. Chalder noted that high housing costs in Town are blamed in part due to large lot size requirements, but he pointed out that the cost of a lot is not usually based its size but rather on the ability to build a house on it, no matter what its size. It was noted there are housing options now available in the Zoning Regulations, but it was thought more diverse options would be needed.

Mr. Chalder said he understood the priority issues of the Plan update are: 1) healthy village centers and 2) housing options/diversity. The rest of the 2003 Plan would be brought up to date and possibly more funds would be invested in public participation.

He concluded with three pieces of advice for the Commission regarding its selection of a consultant: 1) Check his references, 2) Discuss with him how to get the maximum outcome from the amount budgeted, and 3) Let your consultant tell you what he thinks is the best approach and then react to it. Otherwise you might not hear what his ideas are.

Mrs. Roberts adjourned the meeting at 4:24 p.m.

FILED SUBJECT TO APPROVAL

Respectfully submitted,
Janet M. Hill
Land Use Administrator