Planning Commission

MINUTES

Special Meeting of the Economic Development Subcommittee

January 13, 2015

6:30 p.m. Upper Level Meeting Room

Subcommittee Present: Mr. Bedini, Mr. Rimsky, Mr. Sherr

Staff Present: Mrs. Hill

Also Present: Mr. Lyon, Mr. Hubelbank, Mr. Solley, Mr. Carey, Mr. Rosenfeld, Ms. Kaplan,

Mr. Williams, Mr. Verrastro, Mr. Ackerman, Mr. Charles, Mr. Whelan, Ms. van Tartwigk, Mr. Low, Mr. and Mrs. Matthews, and others

Mr. Rimsky called the meeting to order at 6:35 p.m. and noted the purpose of the meeting was to discuss with the Town’s business community the POCD’s recommendation that the Town hire an Economic Development Director. Included in the discussion would be consideration of the following issues: 1) What are the business community’s concerns about the economic health of Washington, 2) What does it expect an Economic Development Director to do to address these concerns, and 3) What other ideas or advice should be considered when the job description for the Economic Development Director is drafted.

Mr. Sherr first asked Mr. Verrastro (Washington Food Market) to comment on how his business is doing and on any economic trends he had observed.

Mr. Verrastro reported his business has been fighting the decline in population for the last ten years, he did not see much growth potential, it was a challenge to maintain stability during the winter months, and that due to the lack of “downtown vibrancy,” he had become more dependent on weekenders. When Mr. Rimsky asked if he thought an Economic Development Director (EDD) could help him improve business, Mr. Verrastro did not think so unless the population grew, but that even if that did happen, new families might opt to shop at the big chains, which are his major competition.

Mr. Rosenfeld (The Smithy) thought a major role of an EDD would be to create a public sense of loyalty to local merchants. He said the Town must capitalize on the reasons people make a choice to come here, not elsewhere, on weekends. For example, he said The Smithy tries to maintain its old country store feeling.

Mr. Rimsky noted there are many village centers in Washington and asked if the businessmen thought they could all cooperate to support each other. Mr. Rosenfeld responded, yes, that the Washington Business Assn. (WBA) has 110 members who look to enhance cross merchandising opportunities, to create a Town brand, and who are working on a new website. He gave Community Day as an example of the cohesion the WBA is trying to create.

Mr. Sherr asked Mr. Rosenfeld to talk about the progress New Preston has made in the last seven years. Mr. Rosenfeld noted that New Preston is compact, walkable although there are no sidewalks, and offers a range of products. He also noted the natural features in the area such as New Preston Falls and Lake Waramaug draw people and that one positive point is that many of the business owners are their own landlords and, therefore, have pride and energy to invest in their properties.

Ms. Kaplan stated the sense of community and beautiful environment in New Preston attract customers.

Mrs. Matthews observed that The Depot is not pretty and is not maintained like New Preston. She thought Town beautification should be a Town budget item with someone appointed to spearhead the effort.

Mr. Ackerman (The Pantry) said signs along Rt. 202 to direct passers-by to the businesses and cultural institutions in The Depot would increase opportunities there. He said currently there was no prideful identification or branding for The Depot. He listed other concerns such as poor walkability, lack of parking, and no hospitality.

Mr. Matthews said The Depot is depressing with all of the empty store fronts. He thought local stores must provide world class wares in order to compete with on line purchasing.

Mrs. Matthews stated local rents are too high and landlords will not contribute to outside beautification. She suggested an EDD could bring landlords and tenants together to draft a plan to attract new businesses and customers to the area.

Mr. Matthews said that small signs were needed at corners to direct customers to businesses and that the regulations governing business signs were too restrictive. A few others agreed that signs were a problem.

Mr. Rosenfeld stated that all parts of the community; tenants, landlords, and the municipality must work together in order that the Town may flourish.

Mr. Millington spoke of the need to fill the empty store fronts, possibly by moving some of the existing businesses to more visible locations, to move hi tech businesses into Town, and for the townspeople themselves to meet with businesses outside the area to urge them to open here. He complained workers could not afford to live here and he said he did not trust that an outside consultant would understand “what we’re all about.” He said Washington was a unique cultural and educational center that “we” knew better than any consultant. Mr. Sherr responded that these were issues than an EDD would work on.

Mr. Rimsky noted that Mr. Millington thought “we” could work together to improve the Town’s economy, but said in his experience, work by committees was cumbersome and that it was difficult to get a consensus from a group with a wide range of interests. In contrast, he suggested an EDD would be a go to person who would galvanize groups, create a strategy, and then work in conjunction with the business association and municipality to move it forward. He noted, too, an EDD would be knowledgeable about applying for funding and grants, which would be a return for the investment of his salary.

Mr. Ackerman noted that retail business has changed and so the Town should look for other ideas to make it a destination. He suggested Washington should make use of its history and culture and encourage craftsmen and artisans to operate studio/retail spaces that would draw people to Town. He thought an EDD could coordinate this initiative.

Ms. Kaplan stated a professional EDD; a person invested in the revitalization of the Town, safeguarding its uniqueness, consulting with the stakeholders, acting as a conduit to collect the necessary information, assessing recommendations, developing a brand, building a consensus, and developing achievable and meaningful recommendations and goals and then carrying them out, is essential. She said townspeople are tired and think that nothing ever changes and therefore, we must take an active role to direct change within a specific timeframe for the benefit of the community.

Mr. Williams said downtown Washington is not a beautiful place where people want to spend time, but said its beautification was not the responsibility of an EDD. He thought the Town should assume this responsibility itself. Secondly, he questioned whether an EDD could “reverse the laws of economics.” He agreed exorbitant rents were a major problem and suggested the Town implement punitive measures for landlords with empty or unkempt buildings. He also suggested the Town work with the state to get the northwest corner known as a livable community and to bring new businesses and families to the area.

Mr. Rimsky commented on the reasons past POCDs had not been implemented or well executed. These included the municipality’s limited capacity to galvanize people to accomplish goals and the fact that there are usually several commissions that must work together to make progress. Who has the authority, who has the knowledge, and who has the time, he asked. That is why an EDD is needed, he said, to lead, plan, and execute ideas for revitalization. In response to Mr. Millington’s earlier comments that consultants had not previously been successful, he noted that consultants are obliged to make recommendations, but are not hired to carry them out, whereas an EDD would be hired to execute the plan.

Mr. Rosenfeld suggested that some of the EDD’s compensation should be tied to his level of success in executing the plan.

Mr. Rimsky asked those present what they expect an EDD to do. Various responses included: to listen, to be an expert in his field, to have a sense of what this community is, to have demonstrative experience.

Mr. Rimsky then asked how should the EDD’s job be defined when the rfp is drafted. Various responses included: capability to link efforts with municipal support, to be able to obtain approval for projects and to successfully get grants, to pull the Town’s history forward to be able to capitalize on what is already here, to bring the glue that will bind the five village centers together so they will all thrive.

Mr. Rimsky asked the representatives of the institutions present, how their organizations would work with an EDD. The man from the Indian Institute said it is the responsibility of each institution to promote and market itself. He said that the creation of a destination must be built from within each and then communicated to the general public. The woman from the Art Association said she would appreciate being able to exchange ideas with an EDD.

Mr. Miller made several additional points. He noted that New Milford has an EDD and has made considerable progress with affordable rents. He also thought grant applications and working together with local assets to sponsor events to draw people downtown would be worthwhile. Mr. Rimsky noted it is difficult for volunteers to organize such events and so an EDD would be helpful in this respect. Examples of the types of events that could draw people to the area were tours of Rossiter homes, the Art Assoc. clothesline sale, a taste of Washington, a classic car show, expansion of the young writers event, etc.

Mr. Low (The Gunnery) was skeptical that any EDD could make a lot of progress until “we change our culture” as many in Town do not want change. He thought the local commissions also needed to change and that all the assets of the Town should be celebrated.

Mr. Matthews asked how it would be possible to get Mr. Jackson and the Board of Finance to finance an EDD. He said although no one ever wants an increase in taxes, Washington has one of the lowest mil rates in the state and that paying for an EDD would not result in much of an increase. He stressed that Mr. Jackson had to be convinced this is a priority issue.

Mr. Ackerman noted how busy people are and so thought an EDD was needed to direct energy and get things done.

Mr. Rosenfeld said the EDD would engage the different sections of the community to work in harmony and would be a voice on their behalf.

Building on Mr. Matthew’s question, Mr. Sherr asked, if the Planning Commission drafted an EDD job description that reflects the concerns raised tonight, if the stakeholders would support that. It was the consensus that it would be supported depending on what it included. Mr. Sherr said it would be circulated so that interested stakeholders could comment and have input and that once it was finalized, their support should be conveyed to the Boards of Selectmen and Finance. It was noted the stakeholders would also reach out to the WBA for support. Mr. Millington was the lone dissenter. He again noted what he considered past failures with consultants and that there is a large segment of Town that is always against everything. Mr. Sherr explained the proposal was not for a consultant, but for a full time professional who would be responsible for carrying out the revitalization plan.

Mr. Hubelbank, Selectman, noted that all three selectmen were present and would soon begin working on the budget. He suggested the budget request should be submitted by the end of February.

Mr. Rimsky thanked those present for their useful input and said the subcommittee would begin to draft the job description in a timely manner.

Mr. Millington asked if an EDD was not approved, if the Town could continue to work to solve its economic problems in more of a piecemeal way, such as getting a cultural expert to help first in one area, and then someone else in another. Mr. Rimsky agreed that alternative measures would be tried if the first efforts were not successful.

Mr. Sherr adjourned the meeting at 8:15 p.m.

FILED SUBJECT TO APPROVAL

Respectfully submitted,

Janet M. Hill

Land Use Administrator