

Plan of Conservation and Development Progress Report – DRAFT
Town of Washington Planning Commission

October 1, 2019

To: Town of Washington Planning Commission

From: Tim Cole

Re: Mid-course Progress Report on 2014 Plan of Conservation and Development

Attached you will find summaries of input received from leading members of the Board of Selectmen (Jay Hubelbank), the Conservation Commission (Suzie Payne), the Economic Development Committee (Dan Sherr) and the Zoning Commission (Nick Solley). They comprise responses to itemized lists of goals set out in the town's 2014 POCD for which each body was assigned primary responsibility in the Plan. I had very helpful personal conversations with each of the individuals mentioned as part of the process of soliciting their input.

The Plan identified a total of eighty-nine goals to be addressed during the 10-year span it covers. Of these, twenty-eight were assigned to the Board of Selectmen, seventeen to the Zoning Commission, twelve to the Conservation Commission and twelve to the envisioned Economic Development Director. As we know, early on the decision was made to substitute an Economic Development Committee for the Director. The committee has assumed responsibility for addressing the pertinent goals set out in the plan. Together these four bodies are responsible for sixty-nine of the goals.

At this stage in the process, my primary take-away is that, except for the Economic Development Committee, the POCD does not provide active guidance for the work of the other bodies. Understandably, in many instances their activities address issues and concerns identified in the Plan, because those issues and concerns were prominent when the Plan was created. Generally, however, each body focuses its attention on the demands of the moment, for which it has clearly defined responsibility or longstanding concerns. Longer term objectives spelled out in the Plan do not command the same degree of attention.

Altogether, the results to date are mixed. Although Washington is a small town and leading members of the respective bodies know each other well and may serve together in other capacities, coordination of efforts by the respective bodies depends on the needs or opportunities of the moment – such as the very promising initiative to bring wi-fi service to the Depot. The Plan may serve as a reminder of longer-term objectives, but it does not appear to provide active guidance.

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Drawing on my experience as a strategic planning consultant, I will say this is a common result of many well-intentioned planning efforts. Committed and engaged stakeholders actively participate in a limited-term process which provides opportunities to become clear with each other about the challenges and opportunities facing them over a reasonably foreseeable time period. A Plan is created spelling out strategies for addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities. Participating stakeholders sign off on it. Life happens. The people who took part carry the legacy of the process with them, but the Plan *per se* may play little role in how they proceed with their work together in real time, unless and until an important outside body such as the State, a leading funder, or a governing board calls for an accounting. When resources, financial or human or both, are limited, the present needs of the moment command attention.

Highlights:

Plan goals are set out under six headings:

1. Demographics and Housing
2. Economic Development
3. Village Centers
4. Sustainability
5. Natural Resources and Open Space
6. Community Facilities

Demographics and Housing

Three main themes run through the list of goals: diversification of housing stock to attract younger residents and improve options for seniors; improve services available for seniors, with appropriate facilities and access; generally, make the town more attractive for younger people by leveraging cultural and environmental assets. Overall, it appears that there continues to be interest in moving forward towards these objectives. The Housing Trust has projects underway. An Adult Services Steering Committee is actively working on options to improve services to seniors. The town is working closely with Region 12 to ensure that families with children are comfortable with the educational options available. However, progress toward enhancing housing options for both younger and older people is moving very slowly due to concerns about zoning and environmental impacts. There is strong interest in improving the senior center facility, either by a full rehabilitation of the present building or by creating a new facility. Sites on Bee Brook Road or at the former town garage location on Titus Road have been mentioned. All options will have a significant impact on the town budget. It is also proving challenging to move forward with the goal of increasing employment opportunities. The leading employers are Region 12 and the private schools. The retail sector may have limited growth potential, given competition from

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neighboring towns and the fact that for a significant portion of Washington residents their properties here are second homes. The Economic Development Committee is exploring the idea of setting up co-working space comparable to the Makery in New Milford, in order to attract younger professionals and independent business owners.

Economic Development

The idea of hiring an Economic Development Director as a first step towards implementing the Plan appears repeatedly through the document. However, once the decision was made to transfer the responsibilities assigned to the Director to a newly configured Economic Development Committee, promptly went to work. With a modest line item in the town budget, a promotional website and newsletter were set in motion with positive results. The Committee has formed a cooperative relationship with the Washington Business Association to ensure the concerns of local retailers are heard. Additionally, the EDC has provided leadership in the creation of the Judy Black Memorial Park and Gardens and getting the exciting and very visible programming up and running in collaboration with local arts and environmental groups and active support from the town. Together with the redesign and renovation of the Bryan Hall Plaza, this work has given the center of the Depot a new look and feel. In addition, the EDC has supported the effort to bring wi-fi service to the Depot and collaborated with the Washington Arts Association on the creation of the Titus Park space on the site of the old town garage.

EDC members work closely with the Northwest Hills Council of Governments to ensure Washington is part of regional development efforts. Through its relationships with neighboring towns, the Committee play an active role in the launch of a website to promote tourism opportunities in the region: ColorsoftheLitchfieldHills.com. As noted previously, the EDC is the one body that appears to keep Plan goals actively on its radar screen. Attention is already being given to tasks envisioned for the second half of the Plan cycle. These accomplishments are impressive, especially considering the fact they have been achieved by a very energetic, experienced and dedicated group of volunteers. To the degree that growing the employment base and promoting opportunities for new residents remains an important goal for the town, I believe more capacity will be needed to get there. This would require that the town revisit the question whether a paid position, possibly part time, would be helpful. To be determined is what the value added would be from an increase in the economic development budget line item relative to enhancement of the town's economic viability.

Village Centers

The Depot and New Preston have commanded much attention during the first half of the Plan cycle. The results in the Depot are very visible, as already mentioned. The story in New Preston

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is more complicated. While there is active interest in reconfiguring pedestrian and traffic patterns in the retail district, getting there is proving challenging. Disruption of traffic flow while reconstruction is underway is to be expected. Local retailers understandably worry about the impact on customer flow and revenue when the center of the village turns into a construction site. Under the aegis of the Conservation Commission, progress is being made toward construction of a park to facilitate access to the Falls. Divisions set in motion by the transfer of The Pavilion to Plain Goods remain strong among local businesses and may inhibit further efforts to attract more customers from the pool of visitors to Lake Waramaug. The other village centers seem to be attracting much less attention by comparison. Projects in Marbledale (expansion of the White Horse) and at the Green (One Kirby Road) have raised issues for the Zoning Commission to attend to which appear to have been resolved. However, regarding Marbledale and Woodville, the Plan included several goals which have yet to be addressed and further progress in New Preston needs to be made.

Sustainability

With the creation of the Sustainability Committee as a subcommittee of the Planning Commission, the commitment to adopting sustainable practices in land use, facilities management and business practices now has an agent and advocate. Some tasks initially assigned to the Conservation Commission and the Zoning Commission have been taken over by the Committee. The Committee is leading an effort to achieve certification for Washington as a Sustainable Community by SustainableCT. Meeting the requirements for certification entails covering many of the sustainability goals set out in the Plan.

Natural Resources and Open Space

With strong leadership from the Conservation Commission and support from the Zoning Commission, overall the commitments to preserving the town's natural resources and promoting sustainable agriculture listed in the Plan are being consistently followed through on. Like the Economic Development Commission, the Conservation Commission has dedicated and experienced advocates among its members who do not lose sight of the conservation and sustainability goals spelled out in the plan. Less clear, however, is the degree to which there is strong interest in moving forward with the housing and economic development goals spelled out in the Plan that may need focused attention to ensure environmental impacts are taken seriously without becoming game stoppers for advancement in those areas.

Community Facilities

With support from the Buildings and Properties Commission, the Board of Selectmen has primary responsibility for ensuring that essential services are competently provided for and facilities are

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well maintained. Generally, the record is encouraging. The need for Senior Center facilities renovation or relocation has already been mentioned, as has the fact that this will likely be a costly undertaking either way. One area where work has yet to be done concerns meeting the goal of “completing an energy audit of municipal facilities; and retrofitting with efficient equipment and features where feasible.” From both a sustainability and an environmental perspective, this remains an important task yet to be fulfilled.

In closing, I offer three observations:

1. Overall, good people are doing good work across the board respecting the areas of concern spelled out in the Plan.
2. There is room for improvement as far as consistent coordination of efforts and communication among the bodies responsible for carrying out the Plan are concerned. The Planning Commission may have a role to play in encouraging and facilitating such improvements.
3. In all areas, there appears to be insufficient capacity to move forward more assertively and comprehensively. To address this primarily would require increased staff support at Town Hall. To pay for more staff will have budgetary implications. The question on the table is whether opportunities to strengthen the town’s position going forward may be missed for lack of resources to pursue them.