

NOTES OF THE BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
FOR TOWN OF NEW LEBANON
HELD ON July 12, 2021 AT SHATFORD PARK PAVILION

Present: Deb Gordon (Board Liaison), Tistrya Houghtling, Danielle Kuffel, Jack Lancto, Erminia Rasmussen, Sharon Powers, Monte Wasch (Chair), Josh Young

Absent: Richard Beckwith, Gregg Carroll, Anna Duhon, Rita Carver, Chuck Geraldi, Ellen Ann Kafkalas, Mitch Kelleher, Peg Munves

CALL TO ORDER:

The meeting was called to order at 6:35pm by Monte Wasch

Since there was not a quorum, no official motion to approve the minutes could be made, nor could any motions be passed this evening.

DISCUSSION

Monte said that tonight we had three things to discuss: report from the Outreach & Marketing Committee, Infrastructure, and the economic part of the Comp Plan.

COMMITTEE REPORTS

Outreach and Marketing Subcommittee, presented by Erminia Rasmussen

The committee has thus far received 21 slogans and the deadline to submit is August 8. Erminia said she is going to suggest to the O & M committee that we propose rank choice voting of the slogans so we can come up with suggestions to present to the Board at their October meeting. The committee had discussed doing another mailer in the August Town newsletter but they are going to, instead, focus on coming up with the Town slogan. There may be a mailer in November, the year's last opportunity to put in a publication from this committee. Tistrya Houghtling asked if we get input from others to let us know if the committee could produce something that would be of assistance to businesses. We also discussed, briefly, the best way to find out if there are businesses in town we do not yet know about and a way to get them included in the business directory.

Infrastructure Committee

Deb Gordon reported that she had met with Grow the Valley to get their assistance with businesses in town. They were willing to help but had valid questions regarding costs and procedures and Deb was going to work on getting those answers. She reached out to Hillsdale and spoke with Augie Sena, who was involved in the sewer project. He gave her the name of the person who runs the sewer treatment plan, but Deb did not think we were ready for that stage yet. Hillsdale has a local law on their website which discusses how they come up with charges for those who participate in the water and sewer lines. Each property has a value which translates into units. Users are charged by their number of units. For example, in Hillsdale, one unit is \$50 a month for maintenance charges (one unit is average for a house not a business). Deb also emailed their town assessor to find out changes in values and taxes before and after the water and sewer was put in. Most buildings in Hillsdale had been underutilized before they put these in. There are 61 properties served in Hillsdale and people have the right to opt out.

Monte pointed out that lots of new construction has occurred in Hillsdale.

Josh, Monte & Deb might wait for the water treatment plant (they were told to also check out the treatment plant at the Berkshire Farm School), but Monte said that costs and administrative information is most important – does higher costs spill over into the rentals. He wants to meet with Augie and asked for Deb to set this up with him. Sharon Powers said they should ask if the water and sewer treatment has resulted in more permits and hurdles for those on the line when they have plumbing issues, i.e.

want to add bathrooms or other things involved in the main water lines. Everyone stressed that the ability to opt out is most important so no one is forced to participate if they don't want to. Deb was also encouraged to get notes from relators in support of her theory that they could not rent in New Lebanon or they had lost sales because of the lack of water and sewer.

Monte summed up the next process:

1. Meet with Hillsdale
2. Meet with a realtor
3. Get a list of all property owners on the Miracle Mile – he asked Danielle Kuffel to do the research on this – information is available online and Tistrya said that a map and assessment book is available in the Town Clerk's office and she would help Danielle use it if she wants to go that route

COMP PLAN DISCUSSION

Each Town committee has been tasked with reviewing their section in the preview of the Town Comp Plan that was sent out by Ted Salem. The discussion for the BEDC centered around that, after some general comments were made by Josh Young that he disagreed with the plan coming up with recommendations based on so little town input at this stage. Josh Young was disappointed that only one farmer had come to the Farming focus group and suggested that another focus group be had. Sharon pointed out that there will be a few Community Forums held where everyone can have their say and plenty of other opportunity for comment for those who want to participate but the issue with the Farmers, in particular, is that it is tough to get Farmers together during their season. Everyone acknowledged that Focus Groups held during a pandemic presented unique challenges as well.

About the specific Economic Parts of the Plan

Monte disagrees with a conclusion in the plan that states that tourism is not important to New Lebanon – he said that it's vital to get people to come here and spend their money so the businesses can survive. The issue might have been in the question on the survey that stated New Lebanon should be a Tourist Destination. The use of the word Destination might have thrown people off, making them think that New Lebanon should become like Disneyland. He wants to suggest that the emphasis go back to drawing people to New Lebanon but removing Destination from the equation and perhaps put something in like encouraging New Lebanon to Welcome Visitors and actively pursue bringing in tourists. Every town has an economic driver and we have to advertise what it is about New Lebanon that people should visit, stop, and spend their money.

Some pointed out that things like Welcome Packets that are mentioned in the plan are already being addressed by the BEDC and this should be updated to reflect what the BEDC is currently doing.

Next steps: Since the comments to Ted Salem are due by July 21, Monte suggested we all get him comments by July 18 on the two sections of the plan (in the profile and in the Strategies) that have to do with business and economic development. Tistrya suggested that all suggested changes be included in whatever is sent to Ted. Monte emphasized that members should focus on big picture items and not spend time on fixing grammar. Deb Gordon said that if there is a small picture item that is patently false or misleading, it be mentioned as well. Josh emphasized that we should look at conclusions that may have been drawn from survey results and make sure that they were not misinterpreting the data or jumping to the wrong conclusions.

Monte will take all suggestions and meld them into one document and send it to Ted by the deadline.

This is the second meeting the BEDC has had without a quorum, and it was suggested that Monte reach out to members who are no longer attending to see if they are still interested in being on the committee. We may have to revisit the number of people on the committee or make an active effort to recruit more people to serve.

Meeting adjourned 7:50

Next meeting: There will be no August meeting and September's meeting will be September 8, 2021 at the Town Hall.

Respectfully submitted,

Sharon Powers

Letter from Deb Gordon:

I have something I would like to have put on the agenda for the next BEDC meeting re: water infrastructure. The reason we get nowhere with this discussion is that we have no real information. None of us. Neither those who support water infrastructure nor those who oppose. In the absence of information, it is impossible to have a productive discussion or draw reasoned conclusions. So I propose that we educate ourselves about what types of systems are available to us (given our geography), what the costs and pros and cons of each would be, what funding sources are available to us, and what the cost is of doing nothing.

This means a feasibility study, which is expensive. The good news is, because of government stimulus efforts resulting from the pandemic, financial assistance is available on both the State and the federal levels. Recently I spoke to Nicole Allen of the Laberge Group. She gave the talk on municipal water infrastructure at the Association of Towns training session last winter. She told me that the Empire State Development Corporation gives grants that cover up to 50% of the cost of a water infrastructure feasibility study. Normally there is one grant deadline per year and the grants are quite competitive. This year they have quarterly deadlines (the first is June 30th) and more money to give out, with the intention of making the grants more accessible.

However, Empire State Development will cover **not more than** – and quite possibly less than -- 50% of the cost of the study. But Nicole pointed out that water infrastructure is one of the things supported under the federal stimulus plan, and that the remainder of the cost of the study (the part not covered by the ESD grant) could be funded with this money. This is potentially a big savings to the town. Moreover, if, after studying our options, the town decides to go ahead with some type of water infrastructure, there is now both State and federal money available for construction.

Laberge would charge \$5000 to write the feasibility study grant. That money would have to come out of our coffers. But it would leverage tens of thousands of dollars in grant moneys and permit us, as a community, to have an informed discussion of this complicated issue. Such a discussion was strongly encouraged by the 2005 Comprehensive Plan, the 2009 Housing Study, and the 2014 Hamlet Revitalization Plan...but it continues to elude us.

I am asking the BEDC to support a recommendation to the Town Board that they allocate \$5000 to hire the Laberge Group or another similar firm to write a grant to fund a water infrastructure feasibility study, with the understanding that a match will be provided from New Lebanon's share of the federal stimulus money.

This was my letter to Monte, which I had hoped he would circulate amongst the membership because the subject is complicated and I wanted you all to have time to digest it so that you could formulate questions, etc. I hope you all are faster at absorbing information than I am.

Since writing the letter, I realize that there is another important piece of this equation. The most problematic aspect of contemplating water infrastructure for the Miracle Mile is its relative lack of density (compared to other small towns: think Chatham). The 2009 Housing Study identified a need for low income housing, single family and apartments, as well as housing for the elderly (since our population was and still is aging). In focus groups: “Participants overwhelmingly supported the future construction of affordable senior housing and affordable two story rental housing when asked what types of housing are most needed and would be most welcome in New Lebanon. Participants encouraged the development of cluster housing on smaller lots, mixed use neighborhoods located in the center of Town near services with smaller homes or condos, starter homes for young couples, and multi-generational housing that would not isolate senior citizens but allow them to live with and interact with younger couples. ..[M]any participants felt...that the Town needs to provide incentives to develop a variety of affordable housing types” (page 27).

Density is key to affordable housing. (The well and septic system I put in at Fisher’s Store cost \$25,000.) Water infrastructure is key to density. The center of town has already been identified as the preferred location for affordable housing. It can not happen without water infrastructure, and only the town can offer that “incentive.”

One final thing. I sit on the Comprehensive Plan Rewrite committee. In our discussion of the “housing” section of the plan, one member worried that if we built affordable housing in town, that would attract more low-income people. Possibly true. But we have learned a few things during the pandemic, and one of them is **who**, exactly the **essential workers** are. My personal attitude is: welcome.