

Quality of Life Committee, Town of New Lebanon
Minutes for monthly meeting held via Zoom
June 28, 2022

Present: Marianna Anthonisen, Bob Gilson, Tistrya Houghtling, Sharon Powers
Guest: Sharon McArdle

Meeting called to order at 4:06pm by Tistrya Houghtling. She began by explaining to Sharon McArdle how the Comprehensive Plan talked about the many unrelated things that need to be addressed in New Lebanon, and how we came up with the Quality of Life committee. She related how we had met with Mike Tucker from the Columbia County BEDC to find out where the funding is available, and he had pointed us in the direction of housing. He advised us that mixed-use housing is preferable, vis-a-vis grants, such as those that had specific units for Affordable Housing, Seniors, Veterans, etc. The Q of L committee is still trying to determine what type of housing we should be focused on.

Tistrya mentioned that Bob Gilson had come up with the idea of dual-purpose projects - restoring homes or buildings that are in foreclosure into useful properties. We all want to attract younger working families. Our question to Sharon McArdle was, what do young families want? What are the trends? What do you hear about NL that we could do to help make this work.

From Sharon McArdle:

People come to NL because it's less expensive than Chatham, and very inexpensive compared to NYC. She said the biggest drawback is not having a grocery store. Assets include a good school system with small class sizes. The proximity to other services and amenities in the Berkshires is central and we have nice restaurants. Improved internet service is also very helpful. Negatives: most people don't want to live on Route 20. Most people moving here either have young kids or are retirees. We are not attracting people who are in between because there's not much for them to do here. Some things that might be good would be a community center, bowling alley, and places to hang out. Sharon McArdle said that her real estate agency had 42 closings last year, and only 2 were from city people.

Tistrya said that housing is currently very expensive in New Lebanon, relative to local wages. She said the going rate for a two bedroom apartment is \$1,200 a month, which may be more expensive than owning a house.

Bob Gilson said that it would be easier to attract new residents to the town if it was more attractive. This would mean ensuring that buildings along the Route 20 corridor are well maintained. Tistrya said that some of the people and businesses could not afford to maintain their properties, but she noted that there is a grant available from the state that would pay for up to 75% of any exterior improvements made to properties in our downtown.

Both Tistrya and Sharon McArdle spoke about house "zombie properties" which are a problem for the town. Marianna Anthonisen mentioned an urban renewal project that she

recently saw in Albany's Arbor Hill neighborhood that had rooftop gardens and solar panels. This reminded Bob Gilson of HUD urban renewal projects that he saw in Rochester, New York in the 1970s and in Albany in the 1980s. Abandoned properties were made available to people for a very modest sum with the provision that buyers spent at least \$100,000 over 3 years restoring the property up to code, and that they had to live in the property for a specified period of time. Tistrya said that this is an interesting idea, but that we would have to create a very specific set of criteria to ensure that houses were being properly restored, and that the program didn't become a magnet for real estate speculators. She said we would have to approach the county to see in these houses could be obtained for back taxes. It was also said that if any of the houses are historic, there are tax rebates of up to 40% for restoration projects.

Marianna Anthonisen said that she has a great idea for the old Hess station location. She said that given the location is at the intersection of Routes 20 and 22, it would be a great place to house a drive through coffee shop called *School Grounds* that would be staffed by students from the high school and supervised by someone on the faculty. Students would learn about holding a job, financial management, etc., and all profits would be funneled back to the school to help support its programs.

The next Quality of Life meeting, scheduled for July 26 at 4:00 pm, will be held in person at the Town Hall. It was also agreed that, if necessary, a person could attend over zoom; however, s/he would not be able to vote.

The meeting adjourned at 5:00 pm.

Respectfully submitted: Bob Gilson