

Great Barrington Master Plan Committee (MPC)

Minutes of December 8, 2011
Fire Station
37 State Road, Great Barrington

The meeting was called to order at 7:40 PM by Co-Chairperson Michael Wise. He designated Paul Ivory as the recording secretary.

Members present: Barbara Bailly, Andrew Blechman, Ryan Caruso, Richard Dohoney, Jonathan Hankin, Paul Ivory, Bill Meier, Mary Beth Merritt, Vivian Orłowski (Alternate, not voting), Deborah Phillips, David Rutstein (Alternate, voting), Karen Smith, Christine Ward (Alternate, not voting), Michael Wise.

Members absent: Shep Evans, Suzanne Fowle-Schroeder, Michele Gilligan, Jack Musgrove, David Shanahan

Also present: Chris Rembold, Town Planner

Minutes of October 27, 2011

After a motion by Dohoney, seconded by Hankin, the minutes were approved.

Conflict of Interest and Ethics Certifications

Rembold read the names of those committee members who have not yet filed and encouraged them to complete the certification process as soon as possible.

Outreach and Engagement Activities

A. Reports on Neighborhood Meetings (in chronological order of meeting dates). There have been nine meetings to date; two remain to be held.

1. STATE ROAD (Gilligan and Smith)

- Smith reported that 10 people attended the meeting and focused on 5 aspects:
 - ✓ Diversity of population
 - ✓ Equidistant to NYC and Boston
 - ✓ Absence of ugly signs
 - ✓ Need for jobs for younger people
 - ✓ Taxes are too high
- Much of the discussion echoed the discussions of the Master Plan Committee.
- There were many comments on areas about which the committee can do nothing.

2. GREAT BARRINGTON EAST SIDE (Musgrove, Ivory)

- Ivory reported that 15 residents attended.
- There were many positive feelings about the town, some of which include:
 - ✓ Outstanding historic character and variety of architecture
 - ✓ Richness of the landscape and open space
 - ✓ Quality and variety of cultural activities
 - ✓ Diversity of population
 - ✓ Quality and range of restaurants
 - ✓ Strong and supportive educational system

- ✓ Farms and agricultural pursuits to provide access to local food
 - ✓ Authenticity: real stores and real people, not stage props
 - ✓ Walkability: plentiful hiking trails; neighborhood density and proximity to central business district promotes personal interaction walking to town for shopping
 - ✓ High community spirit
 - ✓ High level of sophistication for a small town
 - ✓ Residents are here because they chose to live here
 - ✓ Intact eco-system that promotes long term sustainability
 - Some of the negatives included:
 - ✓ Air of general community favoritism of the “Hill” over “Brooklyn.”
 - ✓ Crime wave, including drugs, breaking and entering, robbery and assault in East Street neighborhood
 - ✓ Heroin addicts in town are a cause of crimes and not being discussed openly
 - ✓ Underwhelming response by GBPD
 - ✓ Norm for many drivers to break speed limit on East and Gilmore Streets creating great safety hazard
 - Blechman responded that lots of the negative items have been addressed and settled.
3. *HOUSATONIC (Caruso, Bailly, Fowle-Schroeder)*
- The diversified audience of 30-40 people included both life-long and newer residents.
 - Negative Views
 - ✓ High taxes
 - ✓ Minimal job opportunities
 - ✓ Increasingly expensive cost of living
 - ✓ High cost of local schools
 - ✓ Lack of necessity businesses (i.e. general store)
 - ✓ PCB pollution in Housatonic
 - ✓ Proposed dump in Risingdale
 - ✓ Dearth of economic/business incubators
 - ✓ Need more robust assignment of GBFD officers to village
 - ✓ Excessive speeding on various streets
 - Positive Perceptions
 - ✓ Fitting combination of rural ambience and sophistication
 - ✓ Ramsdell Library is a key asset
 - ✓ The mills and school building are unique resources that present economic and aesthetic opportunities
 - ✓ Mills and other structures provide great historic value to town
 - ✓ Fine walkability
4. *NORTH PLAIN ROAD (Rutstein, Meier)*
- The 12 attendees represented both newcomers, recent retirees from NYC, longer term residents and renters.
 - Positive Feelings
 - ✓ Walking proximity to central business district is a big plus
 - ✓ Great cultural assets in a rural area: “cultured country”
 - ✓ Vibrant Main Street is a core attraction
 - ✓ No big box stores
 - ✓ Proximity to Albany and Bradley Airports provides relative ease of access; it requires less time than it takes NYC residents to travel to metropolitan airports.
 - Negative Observations

- ✓ Preponderant demographic component is older folks making it difficult for younger population to move to area and secure jobs.
- ✓ Blighted buildings, such as Betros Market, Fairgrounds. Participant Kevin O'Donnell (GB town Manager) explained that the condemnation procedure requires proving that the buildings are no longer viable. It also costs public money, requiring an increase in taxes.
- ✓ Excessive speeding on North Plain Rd.
- ✓ The neighborhood area's location on the fringe of the town has resulted in lower volume and quality of town services, such as cleaning sidewalks.
- ✓ The Senior Center is a great asset, yet it is inundated by an overwhelming volume of use. Additional assistance needs to be provided, such as social services. Many senior citizens don't know where to look for the support they need.

5. *CASTLE HILL (Ward, Wise)*

- Two meetings (one on a weekend) attracted a total audience of about 30.
- Positive Comments (not already mentioned by other groups)
 - ✓ Groups felt gatherings were a fitting opportunity to assemble and discuss problems.
 - ✓ Committee group leaders viewed gatherings as the genesis of attendees' future involvement in the community
- Negative Comments
 - ✓ Concern for traffic hazards
 - ✓ Worries about water pipes
 - ✓ There is a need for the proposed NYC passenger train route
 - ✓ There is a need for more job creation
 - ✓ Young professionals find it difficult to be happy in town, yielding a poor retention rate for this part of the demographic.
 - ✓ Support is needed for low income families
 - ✓ Too many noisy dogs
 - ✓ Need a way to connect residents with common needs, i.e. car pooling, that could be resolved with a community bulletin board website
 - ✓ Concern for the aging population

6. *EGREMONT PLAIN (Hankin, Shanahan)*

- Twenty four residents, ranging from second home owners to lifers, attended.
- Positive comments
 - ✓ Overall, attendees were very happy with the town.
 - ✓ The natural beauty of the Green River is a salient asset
 - ✓ A pleasing combination of rural and cultural attractions
 - ✓ Walkability
 - ✓ Proximity to shopping
 - ✓ Good public safety for families
 - ✓ Embrace of historic preservation which has helped check adverse development
 - ✓ Preserve the fairgrounds as a public park. When Chris queried whether attendees would accept an additional 2% in taxes for open space preservation, the resoundingly negative response revealed a disparity between the desire to achieve this beneficial goal and the willingness to pay for it.
 - ✓ Reuse airport for industrial site
- Negative comments
 - ✓ Town government shows general hostility toward businesses. There is poor provision for employee parking.

- ✓ Primary dependence on tourism means a lack of diversity in the town's mercantile base and could yield potential economic instability.
- ✓ The high cost of living makes it difficult for many to remain as residents.
- ✓ Lack of affordable housing
- ✓ Need more ethnic, cultural, economic diversity

7. *SEEKONK (Phillip, Orlowski)*

- Attendees included the newly arrived and lifers but all were home owners with major investments in their properties.
- Negative Remarks
 - ✓ Crushing barriers to contractors seeking permits
 - ✓ Plethora of potholes
 - ✓ If the proposed solar farm is installed it will degrade scenic views and the rural ambience that attracts people to Great Barrington.
 - ✓ High taxes
 - ✓ Speeders on roads
- Positive Feelings
 - ✓ Natural and scenic beauty
 - ✓ Walkability
 - ✓ Abundant agricultural land and new recruits to farm it.
 - ✓ Access to town shopping
 - ✓ Strong cultural scene
 - ✓ Pure democracy of the town meeting governing system.
 - ✓ Town needs to defend against encroaching development that degrades the quality of life and scenic environment.

8. *BERKSHIRE SOUTH (Blechman, Dohoney)*

- The six attendees represented full and part-time residents and a range of ages.
- Positive Responses
 - ✓ Variety and abundance of wildlife
 - ✓ Proximity to Beartown
 - ✓ Good amenities
 - ✓ Green River is a great asset
- Negative Comments
 - ✓ Concerns about air pollution
 - ✓ Need for:
 - More composting and mulching
 - Road repairs
 - Reverse 911
 - More bike trails
 - More hike trails
 - Dog park
 - Canoe launch in area of Division St
 - Development of fairgrounds
 - ✓ Drains support mosquitoes

9. *UPPER MONUMENT VALLEY (Evans (report delivered by Rembold))*

- Attended by four people, including Evans and Rembold
- Positive Responses
 - ✓ Natural beauty and open space

- ✓ Year-round vitality of activities
- ✓ Fairgrounds not only represent a potential development opportunity but agricultural land as well.
- Negative Feelings
 - ✓ Need to control encroaching business sprawl on north and south gateways to town through concentrating development in designated area(s).

General Observations and Conclusions of the Committee

- It is important to reconvene the groups to provide answers to their concerns and ideas
- There is a disconnect between the desire for more services and amenities and the willingness to pay additional taxes for them. There seems to be a sense of entitlement that because we're here, we deserve all the enhancements but shouldn't have to bear the levies. Perhaps the town should sponsor a forum at which a facilitator could explain the range of extra services that could be provided as well as the cost in increased taxes.
- It is important to develop sound town-wide policy for broad issues, such as alternative energy and agricultural land use, instead of making specific responses to individual brush fires. Avoid the "ready fire aim" approach through establishment of vision and policy and then apply the policy in a uniform manner as situations arise.

B. Summary of Neighborhood Meeting Results

Rembold thanked Planning Department Intern Levi Vigneron for summarizing the neighborhood discussions into such a useable format.

Rembold summarized several key themes (see handout for details)

1. The discussions reflected geographical concerns; i.e. adverse gateway development, blight, rural area issues versus Housatonic Village
2. Universal salient topics included: the high cost of living, plight of the fairgrounds, and need for more business and job opportunities.
3. Some issues, such as the solar farm, State Road drainage and crime in the Gilmore St. Area, are being addressed.
4. Rembold recommended reconvening the neighborhood groups in six months.

Smith suggested organizing the results into two categories of concerns: general and neighborhood-specific. Some common themes included:

1. Protect natural beauty
2. Affordability: housing, taxes
3. More job opportunities are needed.
4. In the denser neighborhoods: quality of life, traffic, safety concerns
5. Mills need to be saved through adaptive use. More debate is needed for the fairgrounds, however.
6. Passenger rail service is needed along with increased frequency of local public transportation.
7. Strong sense that bad development threatens our quality of life.

C. Surveys, Interviews and Topical Workshops

Rembold noted these programs are still in the planning stage. The first session, on open space, was held at a GB Trails and Greenways meeting but poorly attended. Rembold asked Ivory and Rutstein to organize the session for history and historic preservation groups.

Draft Vision and Goals

Rembold will prepare a draft vision statement, based on workshop results to date, to launch a serious discussion by the Committee at the January 26 meeting. This step can be undertaken even though not all parties and stakeholders have expressed their concerns and ideas.

Other Issues and Concerns

Orlowski reported that about the Mass Public Health Association Survey. The MPHA is conducting a survey on people's access to food. One strategy that is being explored is to subsidize the siting of supermarkets in "food deserts," areas lacking food outlets, as well as underserved and rural locations. Greater Great Barrington is not affected by this problem but outlying areas are. The deadline for the survey is December 16. Vivian will e-mail links to the committee membership. She encouraged everyone to not opt for big box solutions, rather the subsidization of home grown options and agriculture.

Adjournment

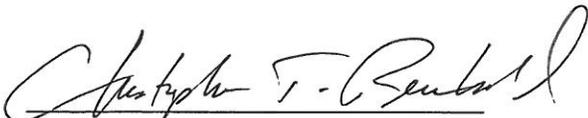
On a unanimous vote, Wise adjourned the meeting at 9:10 PM.

Next Meeting

Thursday, January 26, 2012, at the Great Barrington Fire Station, 37 State Road at 7:30 PM.

Materials distributed or presented for this meeting:

- Minutes of October 27 as amended.
- Summary of Neighborhood Meeting Results, dated December 8, 2011



Christopher Rembold, Town Planner