

Great Barrington Master Plan Committee (MPC)

Minutes of January 26, 2012
Fire Station
37 State Road, Great Barrington

The meeting was called to order at 7:30 PM by Co-Chairperson Michael Wise. Chris Rembold was designated as recording secretary.

Members present:, Andrew Blechman, Ryan Caruso, Richard Dohoney, Shep Evans, Jonathan Hankin, Deborah Phillips, David Rutstein (Alternate, voting), David Shanahan, Michael Wise.

Members absent: Suzanne Fowle-Schroeder, Michele Gilligan, Jack Musgrove, Barbara Bailly, Paul Ivory, Bill Meier, Mary Beth Merritt, Vivian Orlowski, Karen Smith

Also present: Chris Rembold, Town Planner

Minutes of December 8, 2011

Wise suggested two minor amendments. After a motion by Hankin, seconded by Dohoney, the minutes were approved as amended.

Draft Vision and Goals

Rembold presented the draft Vision statement to the committee. Wise noted that this is a good start, and asked the Committee if they felt anything was missing from the draft.

Phillips said we seem to have agreed so far that supporting and fostering agriculture is important. That deserves specific mention in the Principles section. It is part of economic development, open space, and part of sustainability. Hankin suggested that the statement also include some thoughts about self sufficiency and community support.

Wise asked the Committee how big the community is that we serve. Hankin suggested that it is the population or geographic area that we generally serve, or roughly southern Berkshire county and surrounding towns.

Blechman noted that we have not addressed how we should interact with our neighbors. Wise agreed, adding that the regional dimension has not been acknowledged. Great Barrington is a hub of services and professional offices, but some of the things that we want might be more effectively or efficiently provided in neighboring towns than here, for example skilled manufacturing jobs might be better located in industrial parks in Lee, rather than in Housatonic. Dohoney generally agreed, and said adding a statement about regional equity and cooperation was a good idea.

Evans pointed out that Great Barrington provides more municipal services than other towns, more so than would generally be provided by a town of our size. And the reason for that is that we are the hub, providing services for a much larger population than actually lives here. And we do this because it is in our economic interest to be the business hub.

Hankin said we must also acknowledge that our community is failing in some ways. We are losing our young people, and the things that are keeping us afloat, tourism and second home owners, are not

necessarily sustainable. This is leading to disparity in wealth. Our master plan needs to acknowledge that trend and plan ways by which we can adapt or change those trends.

Blechman asked about economic development. Wise indicated the draft currently phrases this as economic growth, when development or change might be the more precise term, and the more realistic scenario. Phillips said she does not think we want rapid growth, and there are limits to growth. We need sustainable development. Evans said part of the answer is about reusing and recycling the infrastructure and land that we already have.

Hankin said we should be known for being a sustainable town. It would be great if a community-wide effort at sustainability could manage costs and put us on the map as a responsible town. This includes small scale issues like composting and backyard chickens but also more visible efforts like energy generation projects. Shanahan thought the trails system is a good beginning of that effort. We hope to attract people who will not only visit and park their car while they are here, but also live here and use the trails for transportation and recreation.

Phillips agreed but suggested we add being a model for sustainable or renewable energy. Blechman wondered if energy independence should be a vision. Discussion on this subject was varied. Dohoney said that energy policy cannot possibly be set at the municipal level—it is a regional and national issue—but that it would be wise for the town to be a model for renewable energy use. This master plan could include a directive to develop a comprehensive energy policy.

Hankin added that sustainability should include fiscal issues as well. We should have a tax base that can fund our government and that can maintain our infrastructure.

Wise asked if there are other big ideas not mentioned in the draft. Hankin noted that education was not mentioned. Specifically, he wondered if relocating schools in the village centers should be considered. Dohoney suggested that small neighborhood schools are not necessarily the most successful way to educate our students.

Many on the Committee discussed economic development and jobs. There was disagreement about whether the town is or is not business friendly. Some noted that the existing zoning and lack of a split residential/commercial tax rate was very business friendly. Blechman said that the reality is not bad, but the Town needs to change the perception, including fostering existing businesses and attracting new ones.

Wise asked the Committee if the Vision statement should address demographic trends. Should the town simply accept the trend that we are aging, and growing more polarized in terms of incomes? Should we work actively to change or reverse these trends? Should we call attention to the fact that we are becoming more ethnically diverse, that new people are moving to our region? The last plan assumed growth, or more of the same, without actually doing anything.

Dohoney said we need to realize that working to change trends will mean big changes in the way things are done. If we want more young families, then we will need more expensive schools, cheaper real estate taxes and plenty of good jobs. Phillips said a sustainable community is one that is home to a mix of age groups. Blechman suggested we set a principle of being a town with a healthy mix of people of all ages, of all incomes, and ethnicities—of diversity in every way.

Rutstein said the only way to get this mix of people is to have industry and manufacturing, a sector that is no longer here. If we don't have good jobs like that, then we can't achieve the goal of higher wages for more people. The future jobs will come from the service, health care, and tourism areas.

Wise asked if there is anything in the draft vision statement that should be left out, and, how can we be sure that this plan will really be used to guide our town's actions. How can we use this plan to answer big questions that might come up, such as a potential convention center at the fairgrounds, or a solar farm in Seekonk? Rembold said a clear statement that the Plan will be used, that it sets town policy and directs Boards in their actions. We have put a lot of effort into this, there has been widespread participation, and we expect our representatives to adhere to these policies and priorities.

Outreach and Engagement Activities

Rembold said he would send out a new draft of the Vision to the Committee. We can refine it over the next few meetings and get feedback from the community at the forum in May or June. A draft could be distributed at Town Meeting in May.

Over the next few months we are continuing to investigate specific topical areas, interview stakeholders, and hold focus groups.

Rembold asked how best to promote the planning process and keep it in the public mind. Dohoney said the interviews in the next few months will help ferret out all of the important information and test some different goals. Rembold suggested that outreach in the coming months could include a presentation of the vision and neighborhood meetings.

At the next meeting we will discuss our next outreach activities and topics.

Immediate steps will be getting the simple questionnaire out to winter tourists, setting up more interviews, revising the draft Vision statement, and also continuing outreach to youth in schools.

Other Issues and Concerns

Rutstein reported exciting news that the Historical Commission received a grant to develop an I-Phone / smart phone-based walking tour.

Adjournment

On a unanimous vote, Wise adjourned the meeting at 9:00 PM.

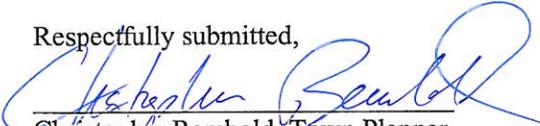
Next Meeting

Thursday, February 23, 2012, at the Great Barrington Fire Station, 37 State Road at 7:30 PM

Materials distributed or presented for this meeting:

- Draft Minutes of December 8, 2011
- Draft Vision Statement

Respectfully submitted,


Christopher Rembold, Town Planner