

## **Great Barrington Master Plan Committee (MPC)**

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

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The meeting was called to order at 7:45 PM by Co-Chairperson Michele Gilligan.

Members present: Barbara Bailly, Charles Bouteiller (Alternate voting), Ethan Culleton, Shep Evans, Suzanne Fowle-Schroeder (Alternate voting), Michele Gilligan, Jonathan Hankin, Paul Ivory, Deborah Phillips, Karen W. Smith (not voting). Also present: Chris Rembold (Town Planner)

Members absent: Andrew Blechman, Ryan Caruso, Richard Dohoney, Bill Meier, Mary Beth Merritt, Vivian Orłowski, David Rutstein, David Shanahan, Michael Wise

### **Minutes of May 24, 2012**

Phillips moved to approve, seconded by Smith, all were in favor.

### **Summary of June 21 Public Forum**

Gilligan gave a brief overview of the forum, noting that there was a relatively low turnout. There were comments and notes recorded on the posters and voiced during the discussion. Those comments have been incorporated into the latest round of goals and strategies for each topic area. Committee members were provided with these latest versions for tonight's meeting. Rembold said there were no deletions and very few edits to the draft goals and strategies that were presented. He summarized for the Committee some of the discussion and additions.

Agriculture: There was little added to the Agriculture section; there was general support for the goals and strategies. Rembold shared with the Committee data he recently received from the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission regarding agricultural soils. In Great Barrington, there are 4,500 acres of prime agricultural soils (15 percent of town), and about 1,500 acres of those agricultural soils are, in theory, buildable (not yet built on). That is about 34 percent of our agricultural soils. Where these overlaps occur, however, are not necessarily in the most desirable or practical locations for new development; for example, there is no practical access, there are substantial constraints like wetlands or ridges that would need crossing, etc. in order to reach these buildable areas. So it is unlikely that significant amounts of agricultural soils will actually be built on.

Culleton pointed out that it may also be unlikely that these areas will be farmed. Hankin noted that "agricultural soils" does not mean it is currently being farmed, it only means that the soil type could support farm production. For example, much of "the hill" and Housatonic village, are agricultural soils. These areas are built already and won't support much farming. Fowle said that means that of the 4,500 acres, some of those will never be in farm production.

Smith asked for a more realistic number of buildable agricultural soils. Rembold estimated perhaps 10 percent, further noting that some prime agricultural soils are in floodplains, such as the fairgrounds, perhaps making them more likely to be used for agriculture than for intense development. Rembold showed a map of prime agricultural soils from a previous Committee meeting.

Evans indicated that these prime agricultural soil areas do not overlap substantially with the areas identified by the state as important priority conservation areas. Those priority conservation areas are concentrated in the northeast corner of town, the Beartown area, slopes around Monument Mountain, and around Butternut and East Mountain. Rembold said he would email the priority conservation map that has been developed by Regional Planning.

Gilligan suggested that the Master Plan recommendations should attempt to balance agricultural, development, and conservation areas. All agreed that a balance must be struck, and that it is important that Keep Farming provide us with guidance related to agricultural constraints and opportunities.

Economic Development: The forum included a good deal of discussion of economic development strategies without much new input. Phillips indicated that an economic development committee will be established by the Selectboard but its mission has not yet been finalized. One addition was to market the town's history of industry and invention to make Great Barrington a next generation town of innovation and invention. Although Pittsfield is today the center for innovative industry, Great Barrington's role may be more in cultural innovation, revolving around arts, film, media, and design. Hankin noted the flow of the river drove generations of industry, but the future will be driven by the flow of information over fiber optic broadband internet.

There were suggestions about the town taking proactive positions in redeveloping blighted properties, including taking an equity position in redeveloped buildings. Rembold noted that the regional plan is discussing a regional community development agency for this purpose. Ivory said that design guidelines should be in place to suggest appropriate scale and design govern redeveloped buildings. Rembold agreed saying one of our draft Guiding Principles includes development in keeping with the character of our town. In some areas, like the village center, design review controls are already in place.

Smith said she believes there are a few specific things in the Master Plan that an economic development committee should focus on first, including establishing broadband and attracting passenger railroad service. Then, it's a matter of marketing those strengths and infrastructure. It is a "build it and they will come" approach to attract new businesses rather than try to pick and choose specific industries we think we want. If we provide the fertile ground of community and infrastructure, then businesses will figure it out and locate here.

History and Culture: Suggested additions are to make the historical inventory more available to everyone, to develop a historic walking tour of Housatonic village, and include an architectural tour.

Housing: There was a focus on creating lower cost and affordable units, including providing tax abatement for owners who rent at below market rates. Bouteiller suggested that most people just do not want to be landlords. It can be a lot of work and state laws favor tenants more than landlords. It is not necessarily the zoning laws that make it hard to create more apartments, it is that owners do not want to rent space out, particular space in their own homes. He added that historically, low cost housing was created by homeowners renting out rooms in their homes, which is easier than renting out a rental apartment. Boarding houses were examples of this model. Rembold said this is allowed currently, up to three boarders can be accommodated in a home, by-right. In fact many today homeowners rent rooms over the internet to tourists via websites like airbnb.com.

Natural Resources, Open Space and Recreation: The first strategy has been redrafted to respond to a concern that the first draft had a negative tone. Phillips said that a goal that says increase department staff by one person is not a long term goal—a better way to phrase this would be "ensure there is adequate staff to maintain buildings and grounds..." Smith said there needs to be a long term plan and concerted effort to maintain properties, not year-to-year gap filling.

A new goal was added: "embrace the Housatonic River," with four strategies. All agreed this was a good addition. Fowle said the Housatonic River connects our villages and is perhaps our greatest asset. It should be a linear "park" that is about more than just canoe access. Ivory reminded the Committee that the Housatonic Valley Heritage Area is an important partner and collaborator in this regard.

Council on Aging comments: Gilligan summarized the Council on Aging review of the draft goals and strategies. Copies of the comments were provided to the Committee.

**Draft Goals and Strategies Maps**

The Committee reviewed and commented on a draft vision map for downtown. It illustrates strategies including a Business Improvement District (BID), pedestrian connection and park strategies, the railroad, street and parking improvements, and development sites. Hankin suggested that the residential areas of Pleasant Street and Dresser Avenue should be included, as these are prime areas for mixed use and the arts. The river should be the BID boundary. The railroad station should be added too. Ivory said the existing Historic District should be illustrated and design guidelines enforced in that area.

The Committee agreed to review at its next meeting a map for the east and west side neighborhoods, and for the rural areas and crossroads. The September meeting will cover Housatonic.

**Other Issues and Concerns**

Gilligan announced the next meeting will be August 23. It will be at 320 State Road. The meeting will begin as usual at 7:30 PM.

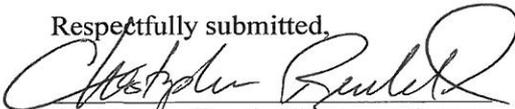
**Adjournment**

Hearing no further business, Gilligan adjourned the meeting at 9:05 PM.

Materials distributed or presented for this meeting:

- Draft Minutes of May 24, 2012
- Revised goals and strategies for all topics
- Comments from Council on Aging
- Draft goals and strategy maps for downtown and environs

Respectfully submitted,



Christopher Rembold, Town Planner

