

## Great Barrington Master Plan Committee (MPC)

Minutes of January 8, 2013  
Great Barrington Fire Station

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The meeting was called to order at 6:07 PM by Co-Chairperson Michael Wise.

Members present: Barbara Bailly, Andrew Blechman, Charles Bouteiller, Ryan Caruso, Richard Dohoney, Shep Evans, Jonathan Hankin, Paul Ivory, Vivian Orłowski, David Rutstein (voting alternate), David Shanahan, and Michael Wise. Also present was Chris Rembold (Town Planner).

Members absent: Ethan Culleton, Suzanne Fowle (alternate), Michele Gilligan, Bill Meier, Deborah Phillips

### Minutes of December 17, 2012

Wise corrected several typos. Hankin moved to approve as amended. The motion was passed without objection.

#### Draft Land Use chapter

The Committee discussed the Land Use draft handed out last month.

Wise suggested that the recommendations should be prioritized. This will be revisited by the Committee.

Hankin suggested the section about nonresidential growth patterns should mention the recent expansions at Simons Rock.

Hankin asked how much agriculture land there is and whether we are losing agricultural land. Rembold will provide these statistics.

Wise asked whether the town should negotiate PILOT (payment in lieu of tax) agreements with nonprofits that do not pay property taxes. Blechman noted the Selectboard is going to be reviewing this issue. Bouteiller asked how much land was now not being taxed. Rembold said he would research the question for the Committee. Bouteiller noted that some municipalities have a small tax base because much of their land is not taxed. On the other hand, Ivory noted nonprofits do contribute to their local community, offering services, providing jobs, and so forth. They are not just free loaders. Blechman noted that tax exemption is state law and towns have very little leverage to get nonprofits to contribute. He said it would be good to have a goal in the master plan

Hankin said infill development has met resistance at Town Meeting in the past. Blechman said he thinks the mindset about this is changing and there is a desire for infill. Hankin said there is an educational component to be addressed. Rembold said he will provide some of that discussion in the plan. Hankin said the portion about commercial growth seems to indicate that if there is to be commercial growth then it has to be either redevelopment or infilled into residential neighborhoods. This needs to be clarified.

There was discussion about Housatonic. The parking problem needs to be addressed. And natural gas is needed in the village. Both of these are needed if there is to be redevelopment. Rembold said he is not aware that any of the various planning task forces in Housatonic have been able to find space for parking. He said property owners will need to cooperate to address the parking supply problem and said he would make sure this issue is mentioned in the plan. He said extending the natural gas main is too expensive, unless there is a very large end user in the village that would make it feasible. Even the redevelopment of the mills would not be enough. The mills have spoken to Berkshire Gas about this and know it is likely

not possible. Bouteiller added that natural gas isn't necessarily the cheapest long term energy source. Rembold said he will mention this issue in the economic development chapter.

A discussion about Housatonic school ensued. It was noted that the only likely private-sector redevelopment seems to be affordable housing with some small office component. Rembold said the last task force report strongly noted the school was not an appropriate site for housing, and that property should not be sold.

Orlowski said the Keep Berkshires Farming group is considering how residents with large yards could lease small plots of surplus land to young farmers for market gardens, but not livestock. It would give property owners a way to offset increasing property costs, and a way to make land available at a relatively low cost to young farmers looking for land. Rembold said this could be considered as a home occupation. Wise thought this could happen, but performance standards could be used to control noise and odors.

#### **Draft Housing and Demographics chapter**

There was discussion about aging trends. Dohoney noted, looking at the 25-44 year old age group, Great Barrington is not aging as fast as the County or the State. We have lost less of that critical age group than other towns, the county, or state. We have the same percentage in this group as the state does. This is because people who move to Berkshire County, whether they are working in Pittsfield or elsewhere, they want to live in Great Barrington more than other towns. Wise wondered if this was the case, whether the town would begin to see an increase in school age children in the coming years.

Bouteiller suggested the master plan should focus more on attracting good jobs, that pay enough to afford local housing, rather than focus on providing a lot of affordable housing. We can't put all of our emphasis providing affordable housing because it will have tax consequences in terms of school needs and reduced property taxes if those developments get tax breaks. An audience member said the issue goes both ways; the town will not be able to attract employers unless there are houses that their employees can afford.

Noting the large difference in median incomes and home prices, Wise asked if the town was unique in this regard, or if all towns are experiencing this issue. He asked that the references to median incomes be clarified, because different data sources have different figures. He also said the terms for affordable housing implying a subsidy program and affordable housing meaning a home that can be afforded are confusing. He suggested "subsidized" housing be used to refer to housing for low income families subject to a subsidy program.

Ivory, noting the intersection of historic preservation and affordable housing needs, thought the plan should state the possibility of meeting affordable housing needs through the use of the Housatonic School. There was not a consensus about this.

In terms of organization capacity, Hankin noted the Town needs to be involved more directly in the housing work of Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation. He also suggested there are distressed properties that could be used for affordable housing (either subsidized housing or housing that is affordable). It would be more cost effective and faster than relying on state grants to build large housing projects. Cara Davis of Construct said their organization did this early in their history, flipping properties to first time homebuyers, but it is a time intensive process. Rembold wondered if there was some private sector partnership or developer that would take advantage of this. Hankin suggested the town should investigate this; perhaps using a fund such as Berkshire Taconic to purchase the properties or provide loans to homebuyers. Shanahan said that local business owners might be interested in participating in such a program; they have a vested interest in providing housing for employees, particularly in nearby locations where people can walk to work.

Hankin said there is a strong market demand that should be mentioned. People want to move out of the country and into town centers, where they can walk to things; they want to downsize to smaller units.

**Other Issues and Concerns**

The economic development chapter and other drafts will be discussed at the next meeting. The next meeting will be January 24 at 7:30 at the Fire Station.

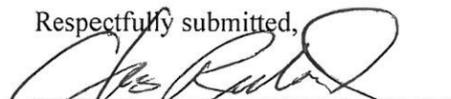
**Adjournment**

Hearing no further business, Wise adjourned the meeting at 7:50 PM.

Materials distributed or presented at this meeting:

- Draft Minutes of December 17, 2012
- Draft Housing and Demographics chapter
- Draft Economic Development chapter

Respectfully submitted,

  
Christopher Rembold, Town Planner