

Great Barrington Master Plan Committee (MPC)

Minutes of January 24, 2013
Great Barrington Fire Station

The meeting was called to order at 7:40 PM by Co-Chairperson Michael Wise.

Members present: Barbara Bailly, Andrew Blechman, Charles Bouteiller, Ryan Caruso, Shep Evans, Bill Meier, Vivian Orłowski, Deborah Phillips, David Rutstein (voting alternate), David Shanahan, and Michael Wise. Also present was Chris Rembold (Town Planner).

Members absent: Ethan Culleton, Richard Dohoney, Suzanne Fowle (alternate), Michele Gilligan, Jonathan Hankin, Paul Ivory.

Minutes of January 8, 2013

Wise corrected several typos. The minutes as amended were approved without objection.

Draft Economic Development chapter

The Committee discussed the Economic Development draft handed out at the last meeting.

Bailly asked that Strategy 3.1 be amended to include supporting the redevelopment of the Housatonic School. All agreed. Rembold will add it to the next draft.

Phillips noted the cost of living is relatively low compared to New York and Boston, but it is likely high compared to the County. Wise said we know housing is more expensive here, and taxes are high. He noted that if retail prices are comparable across the county, then it is housing and taxes that drive up the local cost of living. Evans, noting the second paragraph, said the real estate decline in Great Barrington is continuing; it is not over, according to his data on brokered sales of real estate.

Orłowski thought that there should be more about opportunities and strategies for local financing and investing in local initiatives. While it is listed in the Goals and Strategies, there is no much set up for it. BerkShares for example is not mentioned at all. Orłowski said we have many wealthy people who choose to live in the area, and may also wish to invest in initiatives in the local area. She also suggested that the concept of incubator should be encouraged as a way to redevelop old buildings.

Sharon Gregory, Hollenbeck Avenue, noted that while Great Barrington is the center of the south Berkshire economy, certain important economic or business infrastructure is lacking. She cited, for example, lack of reliable electric power, fiber optic internet, and transportation to and from the major passenger airports. She also said there is a multiplier effect from local businesses using local services. Iredale Mineral Cosmetics (IMC) for example, was responsible for about 1,000 visitors to the local area in one year. All of the local entrepreneurs demand services like copying, printing, hotel rooms and so. She suggested an Economic Development Committee should compile a list of important business resources that Great Barrington has, and also what we need. This will help us understand what it will take to attract more local employers like IMC. She suggested this have a stronger presence in the economic development section. Also it would be useful to add a list of top or important local employers. Blechman said that this should be jump started or led by Town staff or a consultant.

Wise asked whether it was realistic to market old unused privately-owned buildings to small and medium sized companies. Gregory said that renovations like Bryant school take a long time and tremendous cost, so it is not easy to accomplish. She said that even if buildings are not condemnable, she does not see the town taking very much action in this area. Phillips suggested including a general goal statement such as aggressively pursue potentially reuse of buildings. Strategies toward this might include looking at

incentives or other ways to encourage purchase and reuse. But, the Town must get something clear back, like new employment, in exchange for the incentive.

Wise asked for more discussion in the text as background and lead-in to Goals 1 and 2, with some background about Business Improvement Districts, advantages, and local history.

Draft Transportation chapter

There was a brief discussion about the draft transportation chapter.

Members asked why the Town performs winter maintenance of private roads. This responsibility was accepted by Town Meeting and by ballot in 1995. Rembold said it would be unlikely or impractical to revert back.

There was a brief discussion about bridges. Blechman advocated that bridges are the most important part of our infrastructure and they should take priority over general road maintenance, for example. Timing of bridge repairs is also critical. Wise asked whether bridges should be prioritized over sidewalks or other infrastructure improvements. There was no consensus.

There was a brief discussion about parking supply constraints in both downtown Great Barrington and Housatonic village.

Blechman thought the Committee agreed on a vision of light rail / trolley on Route 7, i.e., returning the trolley service to Route 7. Rembold said a bus system is less expensive and more flexible than a rail system and a new rail system is unrealistic. Shanahan said the Berkshire Street Railway failed one hundred years ago. There was no consensus on the Committee for light rail / trolley.

Meier said this chapter, and other sections, need to have a vision for disaster preparedness. In particular, how will each chapter address the impacts of climate change? This is part of a larger sustainability issue. It is our responsibility to use this to plan for global warming and severe warming. Gregory suggested each section discuss risk. Orłowski said there should be a look at immediate and long term effects of weather related disasters, on agriculture, economy, and transportation. We should point out how the actions of the plan are relevant in short and long term responses. She asked for more emphasis on efforts toward sustainability and climate change adaptation.

Evans suggested that all crossings of water courses, not just bridges, but including culverts, should be considered in our infrastructure planning for the impacts of severe storms and climate change.

Other Issues and Concerns

Wise and Rembold will coordinate an extra meeting to be held in early February.

The next regular meeting will be February 28 at 7:30 at the Fire Station.

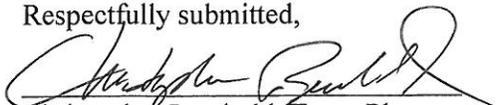
Adjournment

Hearing no further business, Wise adjourned the meeting at 9:10 PM.

Materials distributed or presented at this meeting:

- Draft Minutes of January 8, 2013
- Draft Economic Development chapter
- Draft Transportation chapter

Respectfully submitted,



Christopher Rembold, Town Planner