

**APPROVED MINUTES**  
**MAIDSTONE PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING**  
**Thursday, August 24, 2023, 7:00 pm**  
**Held by Zoom Video Conference**

Members present (via Zoom): Bruce Barker, Bob Champagne-Willis, Chris von Alt

Other members of Town Government present (via Zoom): Administrative Assistant to the Zoning Board, Planning Commission, and Selectboard Mary von Alt

Also present (via Zoom): Alison Low of Northeastern Vermont Development Association; Ed Tully

At 7:02 pm, the meeting was called to order by Chris von Alt, Chairman. Chris welcomed Alison Low of the Northeastern Vermont Development Association (NVDA), our regional planning commission.

Chris reminded meeting attendees that the Rules of Participation are in effect; this is a public working meeting, but not a meeting of the public. Public participation will be welcomed as scheduled on the Agenda and during the meeting, as possible.

**APPROVE 2023-07-20 MINUTES:**

Bob made a motion to accept the minutes as presented for the 7/20/2023 Planning Commission Meeting; Bruce seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

**CONTINUE TO WORK ON REVISING THE TOWN PLAN, DISCUSSING AND ACTING UPON AS NECESSARY:**

A discussion among the members of the Commission and Alison Low addressed the survey of people who reside in or have property in Maidstone that the Commission plans to conduct in order to elicit public input in the creation of the next Town Plan. Topics discussed included, but were not limited to, the following:

- Does NVDA have a survey template that Maidstone could use? Alison said NVDA does not have such a template, but she suggested looking at surveys conducted by other towns, mentioning Craftsbury and Sutton; she then emailed her copies of those surveys to Bob for distribution. The Irasburg survey was discussed as a resource at the last Planning Commission meeting; Bob expects a Word file of that survey to be sent to him;
- How to make the survey available to all people who reside in or have property in Maidstone. Online surveys have the advantage of more efficient aggregation and analysis of responses, but some people are not comfortable with responding online or do not have easy access to the Internet. Alison said that in her experience, online surveys receive a lower level of response than paper surveys. Chris asked about sending a card to inform people of the online survey and provide the address; Alison said that she has observed that if you send somebody a postcard and they have to go online, they probably will not take that step; however, if you send a hyperlink, they are more likely to fill out a survey. The eventual consensus was that multiple forms of the survey and access to the survey should be provided in order to facilitate a robust response;
  - The Town does collect email addresses and could send out one or more email blasts to encourage responses to the survey;
  - The Town's Facebook page can be used to promote the survey;
  - *Front Porch Forum* is useful in this regard, said Alison. Chris has some experience with this publication.
- How to write questions that are clear and concise, that address topics about which the Commission wants to gather input, and that have clear response options that will not discourage people from responding by being too complex and time-consuming;
  - Alison suggested that less pointed questions be used in general, with pointed questions reserved for topics about which the Commission perceives a need for specific information. She said that open-ended questions can be used in surveys;
- The importance of including a comment section in response to each question. Both Bruce and Bob spoke of the value of the comments in response to the 2006 Town Survey;

- Alison's view that demographic questions should only be asked if the responses will be used in survey analysis. There may be value in identifying whether the responder is a year-round resident or seasonal, considering becoming a year-round resident at some point, a landowner or renter, etc.;
- Chris's concern that important topics such as growth and the zoning regulations in effect in some sections need to be viewed in context and do not lend themselves to limited survey questions. Alison suggested that inviting people to an open community forum, a round table discussion, might be an effective way to facilitate an in-depth conversation about some topics;
- The challenge of creating survey questions that address the Required Elements. Alison's advice was to pick the questions that the Commission thinks are really relevant to Maidstone, questions that people will be really interested in providing answers to;
- Chris said that while there are Elements that do not lend themselves to survey questions, there are others that pose hard questions that must be discussed for the benefit of the community in the long run. The Required Elements are there for a reason; there is a need for people to be educated about some of the stuff that is going on - for instance, #9, the energy section that requires the Town to create policies as well as programs to implement those policies. The State has committed to reducing emissions. Household insulation plays a role in those emissions. Do we need programs to help people with energy improvements/resiliency? Renewable energy policy is part of that Element. How do people feel about development of commercial renewable energy sources in Town? These are issues that need to be discussed.
- Efficiency Vermont's Energy Burden Report for 2023 about the high amount of money Vermonters are spending on energy, and about how people who really could use help with this "energy burden" are not receiving either the information about available programs to reduce costs nor the help itself. The Town has a responsibility to inform its citizens about such programs. There is interest at the Town level in implementing energy efficiency and resiliency at Town Hall through the Municipal Energy Resilience Program (MERP) grant. Programs to help citizens need to be publicized.
- Chris pointed out that as much as one would like to link to the past, things are changing rapidly now. We have a responsibility to try to bring awareness and achieve consensus about how people want to deal with these issues. The Town could help a lot of people who have a large energy burden that is difficult for them to afford.
- The State mandated approval process requires two public hearings; Alison suggested that we host public gatherings to discuss the proposed Plan earlier in the process, perhaps including a potluck at Town Hall. That elicited a positive response from everyone. Alison cited the example of Brownington, which held a community breakfast after conducting a survey and analyzing the results. A member of the Planning Commission presented the results of the survey, which everyone then discussed.
- Chris spoke about the importance of maps in recording and conveying information, his work with Geographic Information System (GIS) maps to record and visually display Town data, and his interest in incorporating and manipulating data from the State. Alison suggested he contact Tracy McIntyre, the GIS specialist at NVDA.

Bob raised the issue of the Town needing guidelines on how bylaws must be written/revised to adhere to new legislation signed into law regarding municipal zoning requirements, including those affecting Accessory Dwelling Units. Alison explained that the State had been working on guidelines that were intended to be available this summer, but that such efforts were sidelined by the need to respond to the flooding disaster. Guidelines will be forthcoming at some time. Meanwhile, she pointed out that not everything in that legislation goes into effect right away.

Bob asked for more information about the availability of municipal planning grants. Alison confirmed that the online application for the **Municipal Planning Grant for fiscal year 2024** opens on September 1, with grant applications due by November 1, 2023. Such a grant could help to cover the costs of a Town survey and additional public events, as well as hiring someone to help put together the Town Plan. She said she would share a link to the program and to funding priorities and examples of what was funded in last year's grant. Alison also suggested that the Commission view **other Town Plans in the NEK** that are available on NVDA.net. The State also has a **directory of Town Plans and Bylaws**.

One of the Required Elements in the Town Plan is a flood resilience plan. In raising this topic, Bob said there has been an issue in the past with Maidstone not being in the National Flood Insurance Program, and that there seems to be a big hesitation in Town to move forward with anything that would require flood insurance. Alison said that she thinks there is some misunderstanding about the National Flood Insurance Program. She continued, "If you are selling a house that's in a floodplain, and the person who is buying the house is trying to get a federally backed mortgage, [that buyer] has to get flood insurance in order to get that federally backed mortgage, whether or not the Town participates in the National Flood Insurance Program. If the Town does not participate in the National Flood Insurance Program, the buyer cannot buy flood insurance through the National Flood Insurance Program, but must buy flood insurance through the private insurance market." Private flood insurance is more costly. Alison pointed out that a buyer's need to buy private flood insurance could make it more difficult to sell a house in Maidstone's floodplain. One benefit of the Town participating in the National Flood Insurance Program is that property owners and people buying property in Maidstone would then be allowed to buy flood insurance through the National Flood Insurance Program, rather than have to deal with the private insurance market, through which flood insurance would be more costly and possibly not available.

Bob asked if participating in the National Flood Insurance Program is independent from the requirement that flood resilience be addressed in the Town Plan. Alison did not respond directly to this question, but said that since the Town does not participate in the National Flood Insurance Program, she would definitely recommend that we include a discussion of what that means for people in Maidstone; this might give us the opportunity to dispel the notion that by adopting flood regulations, the Town would be forcing people to get flood insurance.

Chris said that as he understood it, the resistance to being part of the National Flood Insurance Program sprang from the inaccuracy of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) flood maps that incorrectly portrayed some properties as being in a floodplain. New, corrected maps have been promised, but are not yet available. Chris does not think that there will be a problem with joining the National Flood Insurance Program once the new maps are available.

Mary asked if Alison would be willing to come to a Selectboard meeting to explain the impact of Town participation in the National Flood Insurance Program, as it is the Selectboard that must vote on the Town's participation. Alison said that she would. Chris said that Jesse Noone of NVDA had explained this issue to the Local Hazard Mitigation Plan (LHMP) Committee (Brad McVetty, Bill Sanborn, Sandy Gray, and Chris von Alt), but that he himself agreed it would be a good idea to address the flood insurance issue publicly at a Selectboard meeting, as it is in the Town's best interests to participate in the National Flood Insurance Program.

Alison highlighted another important impact that a Town's participation in the National Flood Insurance Program has, which is on the Town's eligibility for additional money from the Emergency Relief & Assistance Fund (ERAF), to cover the costs of public infrastructure damage in the event of a federally declared disaster. After declaration of a disaster, the federal government contributes 75% of the cost of damage to public infrastructure in a town, including roads, bridges, and culverts; the State of Vermont provides an additional 12.5% of that cost, **IF** the Town meets the following eligibility criteria:

1. Participation in the National Flood Insurance Program;
2. Adoption of the State's current Town Road and Bridge Standards;
3. Adoption of a Local Emergency Management Plan (LEMP);
4. Adoption of a FEMA approved Local Hazard Mitigation Plan (LHMP).

As soon as Maidstone adopts the LHMP, it will meet three of the criteria. If a town does not meet all four criteria, then the percentage that the State contributes to the Town drops to 7.5% of the cost of damage to public infrastructure. Alison said that in the past, some Vermont towns have indicated that they were not concerned about a drop of 5%, but that now, faced with the high costs of flood damage this year, people are

realizing how much that 5% can actually be; she cited, as an example, 5% of \$1.2 million, which is \$60,000.00. Alison added an “interesting observation from past flooding experience” - that some of the usual places did not flood this time, but places that have not had floods before did sustain significant damage, a change from the experience with Hurricane Irene. Chris referred to “water bombs”, the name now being used for extreme rainfall events that dump an enormously excessive amount of water in a region within a short amount of time. These water bombs are unpredictable and erratic in location.

Ed asked if we all would have to get flood insurance, but received the response, “No.” The FEMA maps that need to be replaced include incorrect designations of some properties as being in floodplains. If a property includes land in the floodplain, but the house itself is not in the floodplain, Alison said that the property owner could probably obtain a Letter of Map Amendment in which an engineer verifies that the house is not in the floodplain, therefore does not need flood insurance. *(NOTE: According to FEMA, A Letter of Map Amendment (LOMA) is an official amendment, by letter, to an effective National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) map. A LOMA establishes a property's location in relation to the Special Flood Hazard Area (SFHA).*

The discussion then extended to briefly mentioning zoning issues such as when a parcel includes land in two zoning districts, the consequences of road frontage oriented development, the value of forested areas for wildlife, the State goal of reducing/preventing strip development, and any interest in having a town center in Maidstone, issues raised but not discussed in depth or resolved.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Alison will send copies of surveys from other towns.
- Chris will experiment with an online survey.
- Mary will gather survey questions from various sources, including Maidstone’s 2006 survey, for the Commission members to mark up/modify/indicate approval, etc., to bring to the next meeting.

#### **OTHER BUSINESS:**

There was no other business.

#### **SET DATE FOR NEXT MEETING:**

The Commission decided to meet next on Wednesday, October 4, 2023, at 7:00 pm via Zoom.

#### **ADJOURN:**

Bob made a motion to adjourn; Bruce seconded the motion. All voted in favor. The meeting was adjourned at 8:53 pm.

Respectfully submitted,  
Mary von Alt