

APPROVED MINUTES
MAIDSTONE PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING
Wednesday, February 28 2024, 7:00 pm, Held by Zoom Video Conference

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

Other members of Town Government present (via Zoom): Town Clerk Amy Pear; Administrative Assistant to the Planning Commission Mary von Alt

Also present (via Zoom): Jim Bennett, Alexa Bernotavicz, Ray Lovell, Jesse Noone of Northeastern Vermont Development Association (NVDA)

At 7:00 pm, the meeting was called to order by Chris von Alt, Chairman.

APPROVE MINUTES:

Bob made a motion to approve the minutes for the January 7, 2024 meeting; Bruce seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Approval of the draft minutes for the Presentation and Discussion of the Maidstone Town Survey on January 27, 2024 was not on this agenda, therefore people had not reviewed the draft minutes for the meeting. Approval was tabled until the next meeting.

DISCUSS JANUARY 17TH PRESENTATION & DISCUSSION OF TOWN SURVEY RESULTS:

The discussion included, but was not limited to the following:

- Chris felt the presentation itself went well. Referring to the comments made by some attendees dividing the Town into lake people and town people and about lake people trying to run things, he said he understands that this feeling has been in the Town for quite a while, but does not know what the Planning Commission can do about that.
- A lot of concern was expressed about property taxes; most are education taxes from the State, not under the Town's control. Bob described tax mitigation programs offered by the State: Current Use and income-based reduction of Homestead taxes
- Bruce observed that there is great similarity between the responses to the questions asked on the 2006 Town Survey and to those same questions asked on the 2023 Town Survey.
- Jesse asked questions about how the Commission was going to proceed; Chris replied, citing the resource documents that had been created and that each Commission member had their assigned Required Element to concentrate on and gather the necessary research and information. Jesse asked for more information about that; Chris said that discussion was next on the Agenda, but first he was trying to finish the current Agenda item, discussing the January 17th meeting.
- Jesse suggested that the Commission should be creating a timeline with adoption dates 6 - 18 months out, and going through exercises before starting any draft-writing. He said that the Maidstone Commission is a lot more ambitious and self-starting than he is accustomed to, and said he needs to reframe his approach. He continued to comment on what should be part of the process.
- Chris again said that discussion of how to proceed was next on the Agenda, but first we had to conclude discussion of the meeting on the 17th.
- Chris asked for any further comments or questions about the meeting on the 17th from anyone, including the public attending the meeting. Hearing none, he introduced the next topic on the Agenda.

DISCUSS PROGRESS ON FIRST DRAFT OF THE 2024 TOWN PLAN:

Before the discussion began, a sound from Ray Lovell prompted Chris to ask if Ray had something to say. Ray replied that he had been taking some notes. Ray then asked, "How many years did Maidstone get along without zoning?" Chris said he didn't know, but thought zoning had existed in Maidstone for about 50 years. Ray then listed the neighboring towns that do not have zoning and said that "the public should have input in zoning at Town meetings." "Would a draft of the Town Plan be distributed to all townspeople to vote on?", he asked. Bob began to

answer that question, but Ray continued talking, saying, “The people who feel that they are outnumbered by the lake won’t participate. They already feel outnumbered. What we need, why do we need zoning at the lake? I got a lot of issues. I just feel like I am really just being bulldozed by the majority of the people that are at the lake. They are just running the show.” Chris asked him if he could be more specific. Ray responded, “Why do we need the lake? If we didn’t have the lake, we wouldn’t have this problem. The townspeople down here ... I am going to call them the townspeople and the lake people. The townspeople down here are struggling to make a living. They are farmers or whatever or they work away from home. So they can’t hardly...”. Problems with his audio prevented Ray from being heard, so he stopped talking. Ray contributed more comments near the end of the meeting.

A discussion ensued that included, but was not limited to the following:

- Jesse said Ray’s comments were why the draft outline should slow down. He said that he had not spoken with the Commission since the week before the survey. (*Note: Jesse did not attend the Planning Commission meeting held on December 6, 2023. He did attend [the meeting on January 7, 2024](#) and participate in discussions, as well as the [Public Presentation and Discussion on January 17, 2024.](#)*)
- Jesse said he thought he understood from what Chris had said that the next time the public would be engaged would be when the Commission had a draft plan. This misunderstanding was clarified in further discussion during the meeting; public input will be solicited and welcomed at Planning Commission meetings and more informal group discussions will be scheduled.
- Chris went over the Work Plan that the Commission is following that was submitted as part of the Municipal Assistance Grant application: “We develop and distribute the survey; we analyze the surveys; we work to generate maps; we revise the Town Plan, and then we have things to work with, presentations for people to talk about and comment on. That enters us into Phase II, Community Involvement, where we will now be in the season where people can get around a little bit easier, and we’ll have a series of meetings.” He suggested that Bob might want to focus on the Education Element, as he has done so much work in that area for the Town;
- Jesse continued to press for details about the process, asking what “revise the Town Plan” meant. In response, Chris said his idea is that it’s a first draft of trying to construct the issues that we have to undertake. The Town Plan in the past did not address all of the issues that are now mandated by the State. Jesse asked if that means a bullet point for each Element. Chris said it would be whatever made sense, bullet points or text. Looking at the Elements and the goals, and doing research will bring out a lot of issues that need to be looked into and discussed. The first draft of the Town Plan is intended to bring all of the various issues together, to build a common knowledge about their background, what is going on, who is involved, and what is being done. This will enable the Planning Commission to have meaningful data to discuss with the public at focus groups and gatherings for public input.
- Jesse acknowledged that he does not know what the Commission’s process is, but continued to offer suggestions and comments.
- Chris thanked Jesse for his comments and again pulled the meeting back to the topic at hand, discussing the progress thus far and what the Commission wants to do before the next meeting. He had created and distributed a Draft Table of Contents to use as a framework for the Town Plan. Bruce created a document, "[Draft Town Plan Outline](#)", that pulls together the history of what is in the 2016 Town Plan, the survey results from both the 2006 and 2023 Town Surveys, and what each topic must be mapped to, including the State and Regional Planning Commission Goals. Chris said the focus should be on making the Plan readable and interesting to the Town, and asked Bob and Bruce to talk about where they are in the process.
- Bob said he had been overwhelmed with other work, but does like the idea of concentrating on Education.
- Jesse asked Bruce to describe how he created his Draft Town Plan Outline; Bruce said he used the Required Elements; the Maidstone Town Plans from 1993 - 2016, in which Bruce said there is a lot of commonality; the Vermont Planning Information Center (VPIC) Planning Manual; the State Goals; the Regional Planning Commission NVDA’s Regional Plan; and history sources he found online.
- Jesse continued asking questions about the process and about the Commission’s analysis of the effectiveness of the 2016 Town Plan, and making suggestions for what the Commission should be including in the process.
- Chris again returned the discussion to the Agenda topic: what the Commission has accomplished to date and what it wants to do between now and the next meeting. He suggested that the Commission members choose one Required Element to focus on, not necessarily writing prose, but bringing together the Element and goals,

making sure all the research has been done, and perhaps beginning to pull all together in an interesting narrative, leaning heavily on Bruce's document.

- When Jesse changed the subject to ask Bruce a question, Chris stopped him and turned the meeting back to a discussion of the topic at hand. He expressed appreciation for Jesse's input, but said it was now time to hear from the Commission members.
- The Commission members then discussed how to proceed. Each chose an Element: Bob's chosen Element is Education, Bruce decided on Preservation Policies for Natural Areas, Chris will focus on the Energy Element and will work with the GIS Specialist at NVDA on the maps to include in the Plan. The following Action Plan was decided upon:

ACTION PLAN:

1. Each Commission member, having chosen one Required Element to work on, will create a document including the following for the next Planning Commission meeting:
 - How previous Town Plans have addressed this Element, including narrative, objectives, policies, programs, and recommended actions;
 - Survey questions and results related to this Element;
 - State and Regional Goals related to this Element;
 - Related data including from the American Community Survey reports shared by Jesse as well as from State agencies or non-profits;
 - Identification of additional sources of information;
 - A plan about what other community development/engagement the Commission needs to do to involve individuals affected by the particular Element and learn from them what is working and not working;;
 - Conclusions.
2. This information will be shared with Commission members just prior to the next meeting to give them an opportunity to read it.
3. Amy will send an email blast out to let people know what Elements/Topics will be discussed at the next Planning Commission meeting, encouraging them to attend the meeting and to be engaged in whatever way they can, even if not able to attend the meeting.
4. After the meeting, a summary of the discussion about each Element will be posted online and distributed by email with an invitation to attend the next meeting to discuss it, or to respond with comments by emailing the Commission members, Amy, or Mary. This will function as a progress report or newsletter, as Jesse had suggested.
5. The Commission members will select another Element to work on for the next meeting and repeat the process above.

Jesse and Bob briefly discussed the changes to Zoning Bylaw mandated by Act 47; NVDA may offer guidance to towns in complying with this.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Chris asked if there were any public comments. Hearing none, the meeting moved to the next topic.

SET DATE FOR NEXT MEETING:

A discussion began about when to schedule the next meeting, given the availability of everyone. At this point, Ray Lovell said he had a bunch of issues to talk about. He agreed to Chris's request that he hold on for just a few minutes, so the next meeting date could be set. After discussion, it was decided to meet on Friday, April 12th, at 7:00 pm via Zoom.

Chris then asked Ray to speak. Ray said the following:

- "Why do you want to create a GIS system for the Town when it exists at the State level?"
 - Chris said we are not trying to recreate that wheel.

- “Unless you are employed by the Town, how many other employers are there in the Town? Maidstone relies on neighboring towns for jobs. How about a plan to create jobs in Town? As it is right now, no industry can come to Town. I think that’s really really bad.”
- “Affordable housing for people who are not retired and well off. There are places that were farms, farmland ... they could all have low income housing or maybe not low income housing, but then let’s create jobs. Let’s bring industry into Town.”
- “There are no cows left in Town and there isn’t going to be any no matter what the State wants to do; the taxes drive the farmer out - everything he buys he buys at retail and sells at wholesale.”
- “No town can survive without growth.” At this point, Ray’s audio was breaking up, making it difficult to understand everything that he was saying. He mentioned something about growth at the lake, and then referred to somebody building a house on Stevens Pond, which he said was allowed “because they had a little bit of money or they pulled some strings.”
- “Only have zoning at the lake.”
- “How do people at the lake feel about getting rid of zoning? The State has plenty of rules to protect water.”

Due to the audio problems, Mary telephoned Ray, put the phone on speaker, and held it to her computer, so that the others on the Zoom could hear Ray. These were Ray’s comments:

“I’m 77 and I’ve lived here my whole life. This farm has been in the family for 150 years. I just feel like the 200 camps or people at the lake - I’m not against you ... but there are so many issues that I don’t think should be applied to zoning in the Town that you people want to have at the lake. #1 that really bothers me a lot is that you can’t have a Conex box. People are making homes out of Conex boxes - they’re putting them side by side, or on top of each other. I understand why you don’t want Conex boxes at the lake, but down town they shouldn’t be restricted.”

“How about voting zoning out? How do we do that for the Town? Let you people at the lake control your environment. Go down to Guildhall and drive up through the Town and see how the Town has been destroyed with zoning. It wouldn’t have mattered. In 1972 or 73, whenever it came in, this town wasn’t destroyed. It hasn’t been destroyed. You talk about natural resources, I can’t think of one that has been destroyed in this Town.... The townspeople haven’t destroyed the Town, but you are so worried that you have to have all of these rules because all of a sudden, somehow, the Town is going to get destroyed. The townspeople are not going to destroy this town; they love it. But the people at the lake have all of these issues that maybe in 25 years; I think in 25 years, Christ might have come back and there would be a lot of changes, but who knows? I just get so upset as I think about the zoning.”

“Chris keeps saying “we”, like “we at the lake want to do this”. That’s the feeling I have, that “we want to impose these rules on the Town, that we we we we we.” “The townspeople down here are so busy trying to make a living that they don’t come to the meetings, they’re so busy taking care of their kids, or doing whatever they do to make a living. You people are making the decisions, you’re making the rules... The Plan that you want, you want not the townspeople. Farming, it’s a terrible thing that’s happening to farming. The land is being overtaxed. You worry about agriculture. Agriculture is just doomed. I really need to take a picture of all that I have written down. I just get overwhelmed with the fact that you want to implement all these rules on the townspeople, the townspeople that have been here all my life. You want to go up in your woodlots that you’ve had for a hundred years and you want to build a camp, but you can’t - you have to have road frontage. You’ve owned the land for a 150 years, you’ve paid taxes forever, and now you can’t go back up there and build yourself a camp That’s just not right. It’s not right. It’s not going to destroy the Town.”

“I can understand when your camps are built almost touching one another, you don’t want junk cars up there. But it’s the stories that I’ve heard that one guy can build a little tiny house, a little storage shed next to his camp, but the next guy can’t because zoning is not applied evenly. It’s not. If you have the right name, spell your name right, go to the right meeting, you talk to the right people, you do whatever you gotta do, you get your thing approved. Do whatever you want to do at the lake, but have two-tier zoning and leave the Town alone. We haven’t destroyed it ever. We farmed it, we grow hay. We don’t need zoning down here. I would love to see zoning go away because the State has already got all the rules in the world that control you. If the State is implementing the rules, it’s going to feel different than having a group of people that are way better off, retired, and don’t work for a living, telling the people who have worked their heart and soul out trying to keep their farm and then those people are

telling the poor farmer how he's going to survive. You want to build a shed, a barn, a storage shed, you got to get a permit. If they don't like it, they don't give you a permit. Now you have to get a variance, now you got to spend some more money. You spend half the summer to get a permit to build a hay shed. You shouldn't have to have any regulations. The farmer knows what he needs to try to keep his land. You people have no idea what it's like to be a farmer."

"I will take a picture of what I wrote. I would just like to just do away with zoning downtown and have the State control it. You people can control your little community."

Mary said that she had been trying to figure out how she could help Ray - maybe by meeting him at Town Hall and typing out everything he said in order to share it. Ray said he would just bring the picture he took to Town Hall. Everyone joined in thanking Ray for coming to the meeting, for taking the time to write his thoughts down, and for spending the time talking to the people at the meeting. Ray concluded with, "Control your little area. Don't try to control the farmer. You talk about Ed Tully and how wonderful it is, what a good thing it is that he has a little farm stand. A farm stand doesn't pay the taxes; it probably doesn't pay the bill to run the freezer to keep the stuff cold. Come on! Try it! Come work the land and try it! I put up a greenhouse and I learned. As far as a flood - the Town is paying for flood insurance. Just tell me where the Town is going to ever flood. It's not going to. Why are we giving the State flood insurance money? I could go on and on and on."

Ray was again thanked for saying all that he had and for taking the picture of what he wrote down into Amy tomorrow. Ray said he would bring it in, so a picture could be taken of it. He wants to keep it and wants to be sure that it is circulated. Everybody thanked him again.

ADJOURN:

The business of the meeting concluded, Chris thanked Jesse and Jim for coming to the meeting. Bob made a motion to adjourn; Bruce seconded it. All voted in favor. The meeting was adjourned at 9:18 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Mary von Alt