

**Montpelier Planning Commission**  
**January 12, 2004**  
**City Council Chambers, City Hall**

*Subject to Review and Approval*

**Present:** David Borgendale, Chair; Carolyn Grodinsky, Vice Chair; Curt McCormack; Irene Facciolo, Richard Sedano. Valerie Capels. Planning & Community Development Director

**Call to Order**

The meeting was called to order by Ms. Grodinsky.

**Approval of Minutes and Review of the Agenda**

There were no minutes to approve and no changes to the agenda were proposed.

**General Appearances**

Gary Schy said he has been purchasing residences in Montpelier for the purpose of creating affordable housing and that he has found the regulations in Montpelier hinder the creation of affordable housing. Mr. Schy noted the cost of property, taxes, insurance, water, sewer and maintenance can be prohibitive with regards to the number of units vs. square footage. He feels the regulations prevent the creation of a building with more than four units. He said the requirement of 1,500 square feet of lot space per unit limits how many units can be put into one building. Mr. Schy said if the regulations would allow for the potential for high density, two-family homes to add a unit on the third floor, for example.

Mr. Schy said he knows of places in town where there are violations of the regulations he is attempting to meet, but there is no enforcement. He said many of these building owners are not going to come forward about problems with the regulations, since those owners could get in trouble. The requirements do not take into account the size of units in a high density location. He is having difficulties getting funding for his affordable housing projects as well as banks look at the city's regulations. Mr. Schy concluded that the regulations would effectively shut down affordable housing if more owners had to limit their units, which could also mean rent increases.

Ms. Grodinsky said the issue of the regulations and affordable housing has been discussed by the planning commission, particularly on the subject of increasing density within the city. Mr. Schy said he hoped the city would come up with its own guideline definitions for affordable housing, as the current numbers mirror HUD guidelines.

Carol Dorflein introduced herself as a new board member of Friends of Sabin's Pasture. She said the proposal submitted by them in the fall does not show the bike path as they were using slightly dated maps. She said the proposal assumes the bike path will be in place as they are strong supporters of the bike path as an alternative transportation.

**Forum on Historic Resources**

Irene Facciolo introduced the subject and outlined the questions that panelists were asked to consider:

1. What are your thoughts about what is provided in Chapter 4 (pp. 21-28) of the present Master Plan in terms of the changes that have occurred over the past five years and changes anticipated over the past five years?
2. What is your vision for Montpelier's historic resources and built environment in the near and distant future?
3. What are your most important recommendations for Montpelier to move forward?
4. What can Montpelier do to move ahead with those recommendations?
5. And what are the impediments, if any to realizing these recommendations?

Below is a bulleted summary of comments from the forum panelists.

**Sandy Vitzthum**, Architect, Educator

- The planning commission may want to move beyond the boundaries of the Capitol Complex. She's not sure if the city has authority of design of the capital complex, but she thinks it should take back that authority, most importantly with state house.
- The residential qualities along Baldwin street and Court Street need to be maintained.
- In the Master Plan's neighborhood listings, the Loomis Street and Liberty Street area is not named. She said the name "Loomis Farm" would be geographically appropriate from research she has done on the area. She said the area is growing as a neighborhood and had its first block party last summer.
- The guidelines outlined by the chapter are good in helping connect streets with new development.
- A major issue of concern is demolition in the city. There has been the destruction of a few houses in order to create little parks. She felt a significant open space was more important than smaller spaces. She acknowledged that the river access is important, but noted that Burlington is looking more into how to keep buildings intact by allowing garage development. If many lots are eliminated off the grand list, the city makes it difficult to achieve the goal of a walkable city.
- She is concerned about the loss of smaller secondary structures such as garages and sheds and the rise of residences being put to office use.
- She worked with a group two summers ago to try to put in an assisted living complex that would be walking distance to downtown as well as have affordable housing. They tried everything, but there was no place that a feasible project could be located as some residential districts did not allow for it. Ms. Vitzthum said much available housing is going to students and many older residents are unable to drive.
- She was surprised to read that someone in the Loomis Farm neighborhood could have a six-story building. Ms. Capels corrected that the maximum in that district is in fact three stories, downtown allows six stories.

**David Schutz**, Curator of State Buildings

- He proposed a future meeting with the entire Capitol Complex commission and the planning commission to address concerns mutually. He said the only times the two might have had conflicts with the other was when there is not enough communication between the two.
- The Master Plan chapter was heartening to read, particularly in reflecting how far Montpelier has come and how willing it is to do what it takes to protect historical resources.
- He didn't find more of the "poetry" of the city's historic resources in the document. He said while the document talks about what Montpelier is trying to accomplish in saving these structures, there was very little language to celebrate why they are important to the city's residents.
- The state house is the principal tourist attraction in the city and is the third most visited site in all of Vermont, with Shelburne Museum placing first and Ben & Jerry's second. The Capitol is the most visited among historical sites. Though there is no paid admission, the best estimates show the state house gets 150,000 visitors a year. It is also the top attraction for school visits.
- There are several things the state house has been doing, such as blending in with the State Street streetscape by means of lighting and dealing with parking issues.
- The city needs to protect the unique asset that it has with the state house complex. He reiterated that he felt the chapter is a wonderful document to fine tune.

**Nancy Boone**, Vermont Division for Historic Preservation

- She was on the Montpelier Planning Commission for five years.
- She felt the chapter's overarching statements about value is helpful, but information is needed about how the general goal is met by individual cases. There are ways to use new technology such as GIS to map out historic districts and tell the stories of these buildings.
- Describing the different neighborhoods is good but could use more descriptive assistance, perhaps from the neighborhood groups themselves.
- She suggested that the Master Plan should consolidate the conclusions of included studies that have specific recommendations.
- It would be great if the city could do more to help people understand how they can create accessory apartments, such as technical assistance to help with permits, codes and financing. It is important to expand the use of Montpelier's upper floors of buildings downtown.
- Montpelier has passed a Certified Local Government ordinance, which means it can set up a commission and get funding. Ms. Boone suggested following through with this.
- In conclusion, her vision is for someone to come back to Montpelier 50 years from now and immediately recognize the city, but can admire the way it is today, citing the importance of maintaining its quality and community infrastructure.

**Mary Hooper**, Montpelier Downtown Community Association

- An amazing thing about Montpelier is its incredible resources. The city has a designated downtown which is intentionally large to include outlying areas.
- She felt the plan needs a lot more strength to better communicate the value of the built environment, which includes bridges, streetscape and signage. The plan needs to better articulate the economic value of the Montpelier built environment.
- The cityscape is welcoming, functional and invites people to linger as well as work and visit. Businesses want to locate in downtown Montpelier rather than the Barre-Montpelier strip and the city needs to value and preserve that choice.
- She would like the plan to articulate how Montpelier allows its residents to meet friends and neighbors in the street, walking around the downtown for shopping needs.
- Downtown gateways need more work. Certain areas have businesses, but there could be ways for the gateway to be more inviting. She cited the corner of Main Street and Barre Street; Spring Street and Main Street and State Street and Bailey Avenue as gateways needing improvement. There are small buildings that are not of the scale and grandeur of welcoming people into the downtown area. The street wall could use rebuilding as well as the city having regulations that encourage buildings to build on the street instead of set back away from it.
- The city needs to do more than simply keep housing from turning into commercial use. The city can look into ways of allowing for more commercial development and taking the pressure off the housing stock. There needs to be some setups created for commercial development. There needs to be a focus on how parking and traffic impact the built environment and how the city risks being overcome by vehicles.
- The sign ordinance needs work. Many people would like to see projecting signs allowed, which might do away with the abundance of sandwich board signs seen downtown. The Montpelier Downtown Association has worked with the Design Review Committee to try to make it easier for visitors to find where they are going as well as make signs visually interesting. One reason the downtown is so successful is because of the design review ordinance. There needs to be acknowledgement of the ordinance and make it work for all.

- Fire protection in the downtown area is critical and fire is one of the biggest threats to the community. She noted the loss of buildings in recent months and past years and how that has affected the downtown.
- Investment patterns as being important, as the downtown is owned by people who care deeply about the community.

**Margot George**, Realtor, commercial property owner, Montpelier Design Review Committee, Montpelier Heritage Group

- The downtown went the way of the mall design in the 1970s, but the mixed method of what was attempted was hard to do. When the bicentennial came around, it helped people realize that history is important.
- Montpelier is a unique community where people come to live and work because it works for them.
- It is important the Master Plan address issues such as archeology.
- She would like demolition standards that suggest the city go in the direction of preventing the demolition of neglected structures.
- She noted the importance of lighting in downtown areas.
- In planning for the future, mixed use is essential in order for areas to not strictly have the appearance of a small office park. The zoning should say that corner lots should be a minimum of two stories. In areas such as Portland, Maine, corners become a motif accentuating the gateways of a downtown.
- If offices move out of housing structures, those homes should be able to return to residential housing without needing new permits.
- There needs to be an economic study for what it costs for someone to build in downtown in order for the building to pay for itself.
- The design review standards should include national historical preservation standards as basic guidelines.

**Steve Everett**, Insurance, commercial property owner, Montpelier Design Review Committee

- He moved to Montpelier 33 years ago and mentioned a visitor who returned to Montpelier each year, noting that they felt Montpelier was how their own community used to be 30 years ago.
- Some renovations to buildings are very costly, such as insurance companies not covering buildings with an apartment on an upper floor.
- Zoning ordinances should be revisited to look at density as he felt the regulations don't allow for high enough density. There are some residents who do not have cars, but regulations require parking spaces.
- There are those who have bought up multi-family houses and converted them to single family homes, but if zoning would allow, an additional unit could be added within the house to balance that loss.
- Regarding the on-street parking ban, it has a definite effect on the city. There are some alternative solutions, such as having cars move off the street for snowstorms, but otherwise leave parking on the street.
- Regarding the modern look of new development in the downtown area, there is compatibility with new design and all depends on the skill of the architect. Something modern in a historic district can be successful or unsuccessful due to various tastes.
- Improved design guidelines might help someone walking in the door understand what questions would be asked and make the process easier.

It was noted that the cityscape workbook does have good principles, but it does not necessarily apply to residential or non-downtown buildings.

With regard to parking, Ms. George noted that many residents are creating parking spaces on lawns, which she feels degrades the residential quality of the area.

Jim Sheridan said he has a lot of memories of living on State Street. He said he has lived downtown for the last 10 and a half years and has always wondered why cars have to be off the streets in the winter. Parking downtown is also difficult for those who live downtown as many have to get up early to pay the parking meter. The downtown is a neighborhood, but it is difficult for residents to get to know each other. Since there are no porches, residents rely on benches for visiting. He said the town needs to keep downtown green spaces available as well as benches. One reason for having residents living downtown was when he witnessed a burglary and was able to alert the police and business owner. Mr. Sheridan also noted the problems with the number of apartments downtown turning into office spaces.

Ms. Facciolo was commended for the excellent panel and discussion.

### **Other Business**

#### **Proposed Pedestrian Bill of Rights**

Mr. McCormack spoke about the intolerable pedestrian conditions in Montpelier and what he is planning to present to the city council. He has noticed some people in the neighborhoods that have not been able to venture outdoors this winter due to the sidewalk hazards. He agreed this has been a tough winter, but he noted the danger of people walking in the street and sidewalks not being cleared near schools as examples. There was discussion about snow removal and circumstances that have led to these poor conditions. Commissioners asked that DPW Director Steve Gray be asked to attend the next meeting to help them better understand the details.

#### **Election of Chair**

Mr. Borgendale noted that the rules of procedures require that officers be elected in January. Commissioners agreed that it be taken up at the next meeting.

#### **Next Meeting Agenda**

Next agenda items will include Steve Gray re: sidewalk snow removal; election of officers; transportation survey; and master plan time line.

### **Adjournment**

A motion was made by Mr. Sedano to adjourn, seconded by Mr. Borgendale. The motion was approved unanimously and the meeting was adjourned at 9:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Valerie Capels

Transcribed by Nicole Parker Van Iderstine

*These minutes are subject to approval by the Planning Commission. Changes, if any, will be recorded in the minutes of the meeting at which they were acted upon.*