

Montpelier Planning Commission
July 18, 2005
Police Community Room, Pitkin Court

Subject to Review and Approval

Present: Marjorie Power, Chair; Carolyn Grodinsky, Vice Chair; Anne Campbell; Craig Graham; Ken Jones; Richard Sedano
Staff: Valerie Capels, Planning & Community Development Director

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by Ms. Power.

Public Appearances

There were no public appearances.

Review of Minutes of July 18, 2005 Meeting

The Planning Commission deferred action on the minutes until there was a quorum of members who were present at that meeting.

Review of Agenda

Ms. Grodinsky said that she would like to go over the process for all of the work items that the Planning Commission had pending and discuss how the Commission will proceed with the work.

Mr. Jones suggested that, as a first step, the Commission could look at the Master Plan and the existing regulations and then see how they fit the Commission's goals for Sabin's Pasture. Ms. Power said that the mayor clearly feels that the Commission should fit the existing code to Sabin's Pasture. Ms. Grodinsky said that approach could potentially require even more work than adopting new zoning since the approach could result in a major revision of zoning citywide. Ms. Power said she was concerned that the zoning subcommittee took the position that whatever was done for Sabin's Pasture had to be applied to the rest of the city. She expressed concern that the goals for infill development are not always the same as the goals for development on undeveloped land. She did not have a problem with different standards for infill and undeveloped land. Ms. Capels pointed out that, in some ways, the current standards do that now through the planned development standards for undeveloped land and the regular standards for infill development.

Ms. Grodinsky said the Commission needs to take the step of looking at the current rules and decide whether the Sabin's Pasture zoning will fit in. She did not want to lose sight of the zoning work that was done previously by the subcommittee. Ms. Capels said the Commission had received advice some time ago that stand-alone regulations for Sabin's Pasture would not be advisable and the regulations should be integrated into the overall ordinance. Ms. Power said that a new zone could be created for Sabin's Pasture and later applied to the rest of the city. Mr. Jones said the Commission should focus on Sabin's Pasture while looking at the existing zoning and then decide if the existing zoning is adequate. If it is not adequate, the Commission will need to decide if the SmartCode concepts can be used without revising the Master Plan. Ms. Power said that the recent Master Plan amendment addressed that question. Mr. Jones said he was not convinced that the Master Plan and land use map will be adequate when the Commission begins to work on the zoning map. Ms. Power said the definition of conservation

area that was adopted allows for the desired mix of residential, commercial and open space uses. Ms. Capels said that the land use map contains several mapped areas that do not appear in the zoning map, but inform how the zoning will be drawn and applied. Ms. Campbell asked whether there was anything Mr. Jones would want to accomplish that was not encompassed in the definition of "traditional patterns of neighbor development." Mr. Jones said the definition adequately encompassed the goals, but he questioned whether the city has a zone that would meet the goals. Ms. Power said that is the Commission's task. Ms. Capels said that the goals do not necessarily have to be accomplished entirely through zoning. However, development standards such as those for roads, landscaping, and design review could also be used to address the goals. Ms. Power said that Ms. Grodinsky's question was whether the Planning Commission will set up a wholly different construct for Sabin's Pasture or whether the Commission will tweak the existing structure to accomplish the goals for Sabin's Pasture.

Ms. Grodinsky said that it might be better to try out new concepts on a new piece of undeveloped land rather than adopt them into the existing zoning that applies to other part of the city. Ms. Campbell said that if the zone was crafted in a manner that did not result in an increase in the number of units allowable on the Sabin's Pasture property, some of the political concerns would be addressed. Mr. Sedano said that the Commission should do what is necessary to achieve its goals for the property without focusing on build-out comparisons.

Ms. Power said that there seems to be a general consensus that the GB zone is not appropriate for the property. She suggested that the MDR zoning could be used as a starting point. Mr. Jones said that the Commission had agreed to talk about street standards as a starting point. Minimum road frontage requirements from the MDR zone could be used to address density by considering the number of homes that could be built without adding new roads. The inter-connectivity of roads should be considered to address the principle of making the development compatible with the neighborhood. Ms. Power said that topographic and environmental constraints have to be considered also as they might affect the feasibility of connecting the streets. She asked whether the Union Institute has shared its plans for the location of affordable housing. Ms. Campbell said that the college does have plans and would probably be willing to share them. She said that Union Institute has talked to the Zorzi's about cooperating on the curb cut. The result could be that the entire development would be funneled through one road extended from Barre Street.

Mr. Jones said that the question is whether the tool that limits the number of units permitted along a road will influence how people think about roads. He added that the more the space available for development is constrained, the more dense and grid-like the development will be. He thought that earlier discussions leaned toward grid patterns. He asked whether the current regulations encourage connectivity. Ms. Capels said that language to that effect is in the street standards. Mr. Sedano said that there may be fatal flaws preventing the connection of streets. Ms. Capels said that any housing development of three or more units must go through the planned development review where these types of issues could be worked out. Ms. Campbell said the zoning could require that the streets be interconnected. Ms. Power said that the regulations could also require more than one entrance road for any development of a certain number of units. Ms. Capels said that high infrastructure costs may stifle affordable and mixed housing. One tool to require street connectivity would be for Montpelier to adopt an official map showing future street networks. Developers would then design development in accordance with the map. She said that few municipalities in Vermont have such a map, but added that the approach works where it is used.

Ms. Campbell asked whether the regulations would prevent more than one curb cut along Barre Street. Ms. Capels said there could be more than one curb cut, but the railroad right-of-way is a hindrance. Mr. Jones asked when it would be clarified whether the right-of-way had been abandoned. Ms. Capels said that the matter is still in dispute and the City has not exhausted its efforts to establish that the right-of-way has not been abandoned.

Ms. Campbell said that standards could be adopted that require at least two means of ingress and egress for development. Mr. Sedano said he was not sure that the Commission would want to make that an absolute requirement. Mr. Graham said the Commission should also consider what effect the development would have on traffic if the Granite Street bridge is restricted or closed for rehabilitation in the future. Mr. Jones said he did not think that the traffic impacts could be fully addressed unless the developer does a detailed analysis.

Ms. Power said the question is how many units will be permitted to be developed. Mr. Sedano expressed concern that the numbers not be pushed so high that they would create unrealistic expectations. Ms. Power said she could argue that the City has already established the road network by creating the Kemp Street right-of-way. Mr. Jones said there are a lot of technical transportation ramifications that the Commission will not be able to address. The Commission should focus on numbers and general standards. Ms. Capels observed that Montpelier's street standards are pretty good and are compatible with the concept of traditional patterns of neighborhood development. Ms. Power said that the design requirements like road widths will affect the allowable vehicle speeds on the roads. Mr. Jones said the requirements should be set to encourage designs that will result in slower speeds. Mr. Graham said the starting point should be the minimum width to allow access by emergency vehicles. Ms. Power suggested that design features like mountable curbs could be used.

Ms. Campbell asked whether the standards had to be rewritten in order to allow for the rezoning of Sabin's Pasture. Ms. Capels said that they did not have to be rewritten. They were updated in 2002 and already include many provisions consistent with the SmartCode and TND concepts. The materials she included in their packets showed aspects that were relevant to street standards. Ms. Power said she saw aspects of the standards that might set up priorities the Commission would not agree with. Mr. Jones suggested that the Commissioners review the information and each develop a list of things that should be changed. He said most of the changes could probably be held for the Master Plan amendments, but some might be appropriate now. Mr. Graham clarified that the first changes should address Sabin's Pasture. Mr. Jones agreed. He said that issues related to Sabin's Pasture and quick fixes could be addressed first and other changes held for the Master Plan amendment.

Mr. Sedano suggested discussing density and related tools for the next meeting. Ms. Power suggested that copies of the Friends of Sabin's Pasture and the Housing Task Force reports for development could be included in the Commissioners' packets for the next meeting. She thought the Commission needed to have a vision for what it wants to see at Sabin's Pasture and then back into that vision. She noted that Mr. Borgendale would disagree with that idea because he feels it is not the Commission's role to tell the developer how to develop the site. She thinks a vision of the desired outcome is needed to do the work. Mr. Sedano said the Commission should try to envision the type of development that it would want to see and then try to describe tools to get the desired outcome. Ms. Power agreed and said the Commission needs to try to see what it can do to induce the result that it wants. Ms. Capels said that the planned development standards and process and the Master Plan amendment and map that was just adopted

can be an effective way to accomplish that. Ms. Campbell said she did not have a sense of whether the planned development standards will do what is needed. Ms. Power said that those standards could be the next topic for discussion. Ms. Capels said she would not have time in the next week to prepare information for that discussion. Mr. Sedano said he agreed that the Commission members all need to understand that section. Ms. Power said the only reason that the Commission might not want to do that would be if it is planning to set up specific zones for development rather than using the planned development standards. Mr. Sedano questioned whether the Commission was to the point where it could make that decision. Ms. Power said the Commissioners should probably learn about the planned development tool.

Mr. Jones said he did not have an understanding of what tools were available to zone an area for no development. That might be another topic for future discussion. Ms. Power said that there are planned development standards and conservation overlays. Mr. Jones said he did not think that conservation overlays will get the Commission to where it wants to go. An initial look at the overlay might say that the lower pasture should be preserved because of a higher concentration of natural resources. Ms. Power said the criteria do not have to be based only on natural resources, but could also account for the fact that the community highly values the upper pasture. There are pieces of land in the city, like the college green, without a great deal of natural resource value that are still highly valued. The Commission may want the regulations to say that undeveloped land may not be developed unless a natural resource survey has been completed. Ms. Capels said that type of requirement could be incorporated into the planned development standards. Ms. Power said she would want the requirement to be applied to development that did not rise to the threshold that would require the planned development review.

Mr. Sedano said the Commission seems to be lacking a list of questions to answer so that the discussion can be more focused. One of the nice things about the SmartCode was that it formed an outline to work through. Ms. Power said that the question was whether the Commission wants to use the SmartCode. Mr. Sedano said that the flip side of the question is whether the existing tools can be used to do what is desired. He thought the Commission had previously agreed to start by working through the existing regulations. Ms. Campbell said she thought that was the legal advice. Ms. Capels clarified that the advice was to not create a stand alone set of regulations for Sabin's Pasture. That was also a recommendation of the Smart Growth Collaborative. Ms. Power said she believed that the Smart Growth Collaborative had different goals since they would view the completed development of Sabin's Pasture as an anti-sprawl measure.

Mr. Jones suggested the Commission take the two development proposals and ask the question of what specific zoning decision would be needed to make those plans work. Mr. Sedano said the Commission will also have to look at the tools that would be used in addition to zoning since there might be other avenues besides zoning. Ms. Capels said she thought that information on the subdivision and planned development standards would be needed to inform the discussion. Mr. Sedano said the Commission needed to start using the tools in order to understand them. Ms. Power said that Mr. Jones' suggestion was that the Commission look at the Friends of Sabin's Pasture and the Housing Task Force proposals for the next meeting. She suggested that Commissioners also go to the Web site <<http://www.vtspawl.org/Initiatives/projects/tvn.htm>> to look at proposals that the Forum on Sprawl had prepared. Ms. Capels agreed that those were interesting as design exercises, but she would be interested to see what tools were developed to implement the designs.

Ms. Campbell asked what kind of time line the Commission was working on. Ms. Capels said that the plan had been to work on discrete subjects at each meeting and also take on the Chapter 117 revisions at the same time. Ms. Power said that the Chapter 117 revisions should be the first topic for the next meeting.

Mr. Sedano suggested that the Commission should convene near Sabin's Pasture before the next meeting. The Commissioners discussed the scheduling of the site meeting. They agreed to meet at Foster and Sabin Street at 6:15 p.m. on July 25.

Adjournment

Mr. Sedano made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 9:55. Ms. Campbell seconded the motion. The motion was approved unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Valerie Capels

Transcribed by Kathleen Swigon

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.