

Montpelier Planning Commission
June 25, 2007
City Council Chambers, City Hall

Subject to Review and Approval

Present: Ken Jones, Chair; Carolyn Grodinsky, Vice Chair; Christopher Peterson, and Mark Kaufman. Also present was Montpelier Mayor Mary Hooper and Gwen Hallsmith, Director of Planning and Community Development.

Comments by Chair:

Mr. Jones said for tonight's agenda the Planning Commission is going to cover the progress on Envision Montpelier, parking and transit public engagement strategy and specifically a strategy for the Carr Lot, and some energy ideas to use as an example of how the Planning Commission can think about a web site. Then, they need to think about some additional members to the Planning Commission.

Ms. Hallsmith said she had more information on the Carr Lot.

Public Appearances:

Mayor Hooper said she would like to discuss the parking issue.

Envision Montpelier:

Ms. Hallsmith reported the first big stakeholder meeting was held on June 4th, and over 55 people attended. Ken Jones gave an overview of the project. Since the meeting on June 4th, there have been three committee meetings – social systems, human development, and natural environment. All of the meetings were well attended. She has been doing some preliminary training at the meetings on facilitation skills and what doing an asset inventory involves. There is a governance meeting coming up this Thursday.

One of the things to talk about tonight is what to do about July 3rd at the Independence Day celebration. As Planning Commissioners we could all take the cards and pass them around. Having a booth would be good. Mayor Hooper said the Montpelier Downtown Community Association is going to have an information booth and they could have some cards to hand out.

The next meeting is scheduled for September 11th at Montpelier High School at 7:00 p.m. Mr. Jones inquired about the committee meetings that take place this summer, what are the specific expectations the Planning Commission has for them? Ms. Hallsmith said she was hoping to cover some basic training. There are three things that occur: 1) short training session, 2) identify other people who should be on that committee, and 3) to identify learning objectives for their committee in the areas they are focused on. Part of the idea of the process is that the committees will learn quite a lot about the issues they are responsible for developing goals for, and work from both the vision developed by the public and the information they have gained through the asset inventory. Hopefully, everybody on the committees will know something about the issues, which is why they were interested in serving on the committees, but not everybody knows what everybody else knows. For example, the Infrastructure and Built Committee Subcommittee which is responsible for housing would want to have the Housing Task Force come and talk about the work they have been doing and the kind of goals they have already developed with respect to the master planning process. We aren't trying to reinvent the wheel but bring all of the information into one place.

Ms. Grodinsky said the Natural Resources subcommittee met last week and assessed all of the different areas and identified all of the different assets. She said they need to be able to package the materials well for folks to review and add to and go to one place to get a broad base of knowledge about that topic.

Ms. Hallsmith added that once a lot of the information is gathered in one place, then when they have questions it will be relatively easy to answer them. What the Human Development group did was that each of them worked on each of the issue areas, because the committees are structured around a cluster of needs that are met in that particular system in the city. The natural environment meets the needs for water and food and waste assimilation,

and what we need from clean air. The Human Development group looked at recreation and education and developed a list of questions they wanted answers to. They have compiled the questions and we'll figure out ways to answer their questions. Montpelier is a pretty active and sophisticated city. Each of the committees have ideas about how to deal with that, and the Planning Commission's job as facilitators is more to bring out their ideas rather than coming with a pre-packaged formula for them.

Ms. Grodinsky said she felt involving a greater set of people is good and we can help them identify things we still need in a plan. Ms. Hallsmith said as we pull some of the data together the staff will help identify some important trends that are in place and do a systems analysis of what is going on.

Ms. Hallsmith said she had tentatively selected two finalists for the AmeriCorps position to work on Envision Montpelier. She has to finish the reference checks, which she hopes to complete this week. They will be starting August 10th. They need to go to an orientation in Rhode Island and start on the job the 13th of August.

Carr Lot:

The update on the Carr Lot is that a remediation plan was prepared and submitted to the State of Vermont, which put it out for public comment back in May. The State sent the remediation plan to the City Clerk's Office, but it wasn't circulated in city government so we didn't receive copies of it before the public comment period ended. Ms. Hallsmith had several calls into the state offices during that period of time asking what was going on because from their last conversation they were supposed to have done the testing in the spring time. They could have submitted to us a courtesy copy since the Planning Office and City Manager's Office has been involved in this, but none of it happened. The city asked last week for the state to reopen the public comment period. The state did not receive a single public comment, which speaks to the effectiveness of the public outreach strategy they used.

Mayor Hooper asked if they published it. Ms. Hallsmith said it was published in the paper on May 23, 2007. Given all of the City's involvement in this, she would have expected more communication from the state as common professional courtesy.

Mr. Kaufman inquired if this was indicative of a problem in their outreach, or is it indicative of our community's desire to be involved in the Carr Lot. Ms. Hallsmith said she believes it is a flawed public outreach strategy. The city dropped the ball, too, admittedly, but sending something only to the City Clerk's Office during tax season is a recipe for not getting the word out. She said the Planning Office doesn't have a copy.

Mr. Jones said to keep the Planning Commission posted because there have been some additional discussions that if indeed the state approval of the remediation plan there are still some things the city has a responsibility for. The remediation plan, as they understand it, includes paving the Carr Lot, and that raises storm water issues.

Mr. Kaufman asked who created the remediation plan. Ms. Hallsmith said the consultant for Alan Carr because he is under an order to do something. There are two tracts they could follow. One is the testing and the implementation track, which is what the city thought they were doing and from the last discussion they had thought they were doing. That is easier in some ways because once you have the testing done you are clear of that hurdle as you move forward. The testing turns out to be extremely expensive, somewhere between \$40,000 and \$100,000. Mr. Carr has decided to choose tract two, which involves working in much closer cooperation with EPA as you move forward with the implementation and testing as you go, which explains why we haven't seen the test results. One of the things she learned from her conversations with the Agency of Natural Resources is that the testing Mr. Carr is doing now will be completely useless to the city for a high occupancy use. If he had done the grid tests that were initially thought to be required, then that would have told the city a lot about what was going on with the site. Since he isn't doing that now and he is going to proceed with the remediation plan without that level of testing, we don't have anything to wait for effectively now to decide to take action on the property because whatever he produces won't be that useful to the city.

Mr. Jones said they have heard a summary of what the plan entails, which is to pave it. The city has offered Alan Carr the amount that came out in the appraisal, and he has turned us down. He is not paving it to see if the city

wants to buy it. He isn't interested in selling it to the city. His testing won't provide the city with the level of information it needs to use the lot for a high occupancy use. We would need to do much more extensive testing before we could determine what our remediation plan is.

Mr. Jones said the city now has a project manager, but what is the status of the project? Ms. Hallsmith said the project is on hold pending property control. The project manager isn't doing anything because the city doesn't own the land.

Mayor Hooper said the other piece of this is to have a parking garage across the street, and the city is continuing to pursue that idea. Can the city build a garage across the street on state property? Mayor Hooper said it was her understanding the city still wants to see this developed like they had first planned, and they are still chugging ahead.

Mr. Jones said he doesn't understand what chugging ahead. What steps can we take?

Ms. Hallsmith said the only option at this point, given that Mr. Carr has denied the city's offer given the appraisal, is to proceed with some type of eminent domain. Mr. Jones asked if the City Council has raised the possibility of eminent domain. Ms. Hallsmith said they have raised it but it is a very serious prospect. Mayor Hooper said she couldn't talk about what was talked about in executive session relating to the purchase of the property.

Mr. Jones said he isn't trying to pry, but this is one of the pieces of the puzzle with regards to the parking issue and parking discussions the Commission will be talking about. There is a parcel which people have identified as an interesting parcel to develop.

Mr. Kaufman inquired if there was anything the Planning Commission can do or be made aware of beyond its sitting at this point and waiting for further information. Ms. Hallsmith said not that she was aware of, except if they open up the public comment period again then the Planning Commission might want to comment on the current plan. The Conservation Commission had some interest in that because of the storm water issues.

Mr. Jones said there is a list of reasons because of their interest, and certainly storm water because it is location on the confluence of the river. Also there is interest in future flood preparation. Any river front property is very interesting from a future flood prevention perspective.

Mr. Jones said if indeed that area is to be paved, does the city have a role in getting a permit for this. He imagines this affects Montpelier's storm water management strategy. He can't imagine that Mr. Carr can pave that entire parcel without another round of review with regards to storm water issues.

Parking and Transit Public Discussion:

During a meeting he had a month ago they had agreed the Planning Commission would take a role in promoting the discussion in Montpelier about parking needs leading up to the kinds of solutions that might help address parking needs in the city, and the relationship of parking to transit. As a first part of that strategy, we are going to open the public dialogue by following up on the series of articles in *The Bridge*. There is another article to put in the paper which comes out Friday. We are going to start with an article and ask people to provide some information. We want to engage the public, and this information will provide a baseline. What kinds of parking needs do people feel that Montpelier has? From that we can establish focus groups to look at the different kinds of solutions with a heavy focus on cost and where is the money coming from. These focus group sessions can take place over the summer. Sometime in September we can have a Planning Commission meeting dedicated to what people have learned and spoken about relating to parking. The focus groups would be around the types of solutions, such as parking structure, management and use reduction. If you look at the surfaces we have available for parking now, the mix we have in terms of parking meters, permits, available private space, could it be managed in a way so that its capacity could be better utilized? If there is parking that isn't used for daylight hours because it has a night time use, is there some way we can utilize it for daylight hours for one purpose while keeping its primary purpose also available? The study done in the city in 2001 identified many of these types of

strategies. Mr. Jones said they want to make sure the Infrastructure committee of Envision Montpelier is part of this process.

Mr. Kaufman voiced concern that they were focusing too strongly on a single form of input. Meetings and getting people together to say things are wonderful, but there are a lot of people out there who either don't want to go to group meetings, or cannot voice their opinion. Could they do something as simple as a citywide mailing with

these issues outlined showing the schedules of the meetings and giving them a chance to go to an interactive web site and put in a comment. The people who attend meetings are the highly charged voices on either side, and they aren't always the true voice of the community.

Mr. Jones said he agreed and they need multiple modes of participation. He is fascinated by the potential to strengthen the city web site, and as the results become available perhaps this could lead to a blog.

Mr. Jones inquired what the mechanism would be to include something in the tax mailing or a sewer and water mailing. Mayor Hooper said it is possible. It's a matter of talking to staff in City Hall. He should start with the Finance Director and City Clerk. Gwen could talk with Bill Fraser. Actually, this would be an interesting discussion to have with the Regional Planning Commission. They have a lot of expertise on transportation issues.

Ms. Hallsmith said she was a little concerned that the article only looks at parking. Parking is a problem, and a chronic problem, but what we aren't seeing all of the things that are connected to it like mobility and how people get around. She feels they should also ask questions about other types of mobility issues. Transit is an obvious one. For example, you have \$11 million to invest in the future of Montpelier, do you build a parking garage or a transit system that will serve the needs of people here and regionally? If we are looking long term and investing an enormous amount of money in building a parking garage, we need to think about what the alternatives are. Does the average citizen in Montpelier have a strong opinion about short term parking, long term parking, or parking for state employees? We're much more connected to these issues and much more tuned in to what kind of parking is missing. She isn't sure that the average citizens of Montpelier are.

Mr. Kaufman said when he is asking citizens about parking, he is getting varied responses. He would like to see a fourth question added about public transit and let the responses guide the next set of questions. There could also be a question dealing with alternate modes of transportation.

Mr. Jones said one of the things he would do to modify the article is to put another paragraph in that talks about the parking discussion being the start to discussions about alternate modes of transportation in the city recognizing that parking is only a piece of the problem. Mr. Kaufman said he feels that one of the questions should be whether people think parking is a serious problem.

Ms. Grodinsky said the first sentence should be a compelling reason for people to read it and answer the questions. Mr. Jones said the first communication would be through *The Bridge*. His suggested title would be "Now It's Your Turn to Address the Parking Solution in Montpelier." There have been three articles, and this would be a follow up.

Mr. Kaufman said parking is a result of a variety of issues. Are there other transportation issues that are of concern? Mr. Jones said they could recognize that parking is only a part of the transportation issue. Think about the future. How do you envision people moving around Montpelier?

Mayor Hooper said she reviewed agendas for the City Council for the last 12 months to see how many times they had talked about something relating to parking or street safety, and it was at least half the meetings they talked about this issue. It is the most common conversation we have.

Web Site:

The Planning Commission discussed various preliminary options for a city and planning web site. Planning and Development will have money in their budget after July 1 to set up a web site.

New Planning Commission Member:

Mr. Jones said they are going to need at least one new Planning Commission member. Carolyn Grodinsky's term is up in July. There is no downtown business presence on the Commission presently. Anne Campbell's term is up. Ken Jones said he is staying on the Commission. City Council needs to appoint new members to the Planning Commission.

Adjournment:

Ms. Grodinsky moved adjournment. Mr. Kaufman seconded the motion. Planning Commission adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Gwen Hallsmith
Director of Planning and Community Development

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.

*Transcribed and Prepared by:
Joan Clack, City Clerk & Treasurer's Office*