

**Montpelier Planning Commission**  
**January 8, 2007**  
**City Council Chambers, City Hall**

*Subject to Review and Approval*

**Present:** Ken Jones, Chair; Carolyn Grodinsky, Vice Chair; David Borgendale; Christy Witters; Craig Graham; Anne Campbell; and Alan Goldman.  
Staff: Gwen Hallsmith, Director, Planning & Development

**Call to Order:**  
The meeting was called to order by Mr. Jones at 7:00 p.m.

**Public Appearances:**  
There were no members of the public present.

**Minutes:**  
The first item on the agenda is to review the minutes from the December 11<sup>th</sup> Planning Commission meeting. Members voiced concern that they had not received minutes and had not reviewed them.

**A New Year and a New Direction for Montpelier:**  
Mayor Hooper was interviewed by Sue Allen in *Talking Points*, which is a series she started in the Times Argus. Sue Allen invited Ken Jones to participate in a Perspective for the editorial page. Ms. Grodinsky said as a citizen they need to say right off why the Planning Commission is participating in this process and why planning is important for the direction of the city. We need to stress that planning is the template and we need specific strategies to implement our vision. We need to stress to people why it is important for them to participate in the process. Mr. Jones said we need to stress that these are strategies that leads to action by the city and not just a set of ideas. This is a description of some activities that can happen in Montpelier that will make a difference.

Ms. Grodinsky said with regards to the Montpelier Energy Team can come up with ways for the city to cut costs. This is evaluating costs of energy for the city, such as electricity and fuel.

Ms. Campbell said she agrees with what Carolyn is saying. She would like to see the article more personal to the citizens of Montpelier. Do we want to limit the amount of growth in the city? Do we want the city to grow as fast as possible? What do we want to do about parking, traffic patterns and flows? This should be stated in a personal and direct way.

Mr. Borgendale said he feels there are two fundamental issues that drive everything. The first one is the graying population and the change in the age demographics. Montpelier is becoming a retirement community. Another issue is the continuing commercial and employment growth and development in the city that basically is growing faster than our population. There are more and more people working here than who live here. Is it in the community's best interest to become predominantly governmental and commercial as opposed to residential? What are the implications?

Ms. Campbell said there has been a tremendous amount of commercial development along the river front and very little increase in housing development.

Ms. Grodinsky said both articles compel you to care about the city and want you get engaged in the planning. She thinks the article should stay focused on getting people engaged in the city's planning.

Mr. Jones asked what they were calling this project. Gwen Hallsmith said there is "*Imagine Montpelier.*" Perhaps there could be "*Montpelier Tomorrow,*" which would invoke the future. There is Leaving a Legacy to our Children and Grandchildren. Burlington called their project "*The Legacy Project.*" Ms. Witters said "Imagine Montpelier" is friendly, non-threatening and creative. Commission members discussed the possibility

of having a contest to come up with a slogan for planning. Ms. Grodinsky said students could put names out in the survey and have people vote on them.

**High School Planning Survey:**

Geoff Beyer was contacted by the High School because he was wondering how the Conservation Commission could work forward on open space issues. The survey lists housing, open space, traffic and parking and jobs, and it asks people to determine which is the most important. The survey is underway. They haven't distributed it to citizens yet, but they are surveying the high school. Jobs is the most important item in the school. Mr. Jones said he hopes this shows that he doesn't have a pre-conceived notion that we should preserve more open space. The mechanisms on how to conduct the survey are probably more important than the general sentiment should be. The survey has gone to the press. He tried to impress upon the students that the answers from the survey aren't statistical results but rather the use of the results to foster some real discussion within the school. What is the relationship between jobs and open space? Do you believe Montpelier is putting too much emphasis on open space and therefore losing some real economic growth?

Mr. Borgendale asked what kind of methodology is involved. If it is a statistics class, are they actually pre-selecting people to receive the survey? Mr. Jones said they are determining where they can get the best list of residents in the city and do a random mailing with follow-up. There will be a biased response in that only certain people will respond. It is not just a survey but an exercise for students. There will be telephone follow-up with folks who receive the surveys.

Mr. Jones said the remainder of the questions on the survey concern demographics, such as income, renter versus owning, how large your house lot size is. Mr. Borgendale said he was interested in the demographics of citizens taking the survey, such as age, income, etc. Mr. Jones said the students will have the data to do that. After they have done their statistical work, they should be done in March. Then, they can put the same questions on the web site and let everyone answer them.

Mr. Borgendale inquired if students were going to visit the Planning Commission to report on the results. Mr. Jones said absolutely; everyone wants that to happen. He said members would be impressed with the quality of the students participating.

**Montpelier Energy Team:**

Mr. Jones said he believed City Council made a charge to the Montpelier Energy Team and they have been doing work for several months in terms of gathering the current use of energy in the city, not just city government but including residences and businesses in the city. On March 5<sup>th</sup> they are planning for a town meeting on the topic of energy and hoping for a significant turnout. This will feed into the Planning Commission's work about the future and master plan. Ms. Hallsmith said this will be on March 5<sup>th</sup> at the Montpelier High School for the energy town meeting. It begins at 5:30 and there is going to be food. There will be some exciting outcomes. People will learn about what they can do as a city, neighborhoods, businesses and residences.

Ms. Hallsmith said she received something from the District Coordinator about the capitol complex heating plant. There is a jurisdictional project review sheet about a new central heating plant for the State of Vermont Capitol Complex. People involved are the Department of Public Safety, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Air Quality Division, and Water Quality Division. Mr. Jones asked what is the driver behind them wanting to change their current plant. Mr. Goldman said presently they use wood pellets. They have had access for years. We could even heat the downtown with it.

Ms. Hallsmith asked if there was someone from the Planning Commission who is also a member of the Capitol Complex Commission. Mr. Jones said he had attended one meeting. They are a design group. At the last meeting they talked about the possible new building at Redstone, the Dog River, and the use of National Life. None of those buildings are in the capitol complex so they aren't used to dealing with those. There has been a history of the city not being supportive of expanding the boundaries of the capitol complex. The city has said no because of the properties being taxable. Mr. Jones said that is a topic that should be reconsidered. It doesn't

include the Departments of Labor and Liquor Control. Mr. Jones said if they build a new heating plant he understands the state is going to move it out of the capitol complex.

**Master Planning Process:**

Ms. Hallsmith explained a draft master plan timeline, which they discussed at an earlier meeting. She also included some detailed agendas from other cities that have gone through the master planning process. She said the first task on the timeline for the master plan is endorsement by the City Council. She said she had mentioned this to City Council at budget hearings, and they have added monies to the capital budget for the master plan. There is also money available from last year as well. There is \$11,000 left from last year and another \$5,000 in the capital budget.

One of the first steps in working with the City Council that the Planning Commission had discussed doing is the "All Board meeting." At a recent meeting they had reviewed some tentative dates. Because of the budget process backing into town meeting it seemed like it would be better to have this after the March meeting because there is a new City Council elected then. It seems to make sense to start afresh with a newly elected City Council. They are looking at dates during mid March for an "All Board meeting." She said she would imagine that the All Board meeting would either proceed or follow an endorsement by City Council of moving forward with a master plan.

Then, looking to form a multi-stakeholder group and training them, when Ken puts his article in the paper asking if they want to participate in the process people who contact the Planning Department would certainly be put on a list of potential stakeholders. We also need to do some work to identify other people to be involved.

Mr. Jones asked who would be included in the "All Board meeting." Ms. Hallsmith said the Planning Commission, Development Review Board, Design Review Committee and possibly the Conservation Commission. The idea of that meeting is two-fold. One is to start a regularly quarterly or biannually process for all of the boards who are involved in development to get together and compare notes. There is a new zoning ordinance that is being implemented by the Development Review Board, and the Planning Commission are the ones who make the revisions to that. It would be a good idea to hear how that is going with the DRB and to offer some feedback. The second reason would be a kick-off for the new master planning event. This would make sense to include other boards in addition to the development related boards. There was some concern of becoming unwieldy.

The stakeholder group would convene in possibly a retreat where people are committed to getting together and receiving some training. We also need to talk about how the web site can support the effort. There is already a web site that has been developed to support master planning initiatives. It is expensive to develop but available to any city that wants to use it. It is easy enough to upload Montpelier's logo into the site.

Mr. Jones asked where they see that. Ms. Hallsmith said one place is [www.earthcat.org](http://www.earthcat.org), which stands for the Earth Charter Community Action Tool. The City of Montpelier endorsed the Earth Charter, so that might be a good tool to use. The other web site, which has some information about local economic development included, is [www.global-laser.org](http://www.global-laser.org). Laser stands for Local Action for Sustainable Economic Renewal. The way to see all of the tools available on the web site is to go sign in as you were going to sign in to a web site because it is a fairly complex system in that you sign in and get privileges. You can see all of the other communities that are using the web site. If you go to sign in, you'll get to a page that gives you a few choices. Montpelier is actually included as an existing community from when she was working with the city on the creative economy issue. It speaks to something about how Montpelier is doing something to promote the creative economy. Or, you can just sign in as a guest and go to demo. The stakeholders essentially would be the owners of plan with the support of the planning board rather than the Planning Commission being the main owner hearing from people. It just gets the community more engaged on what is going on.

Ms. Grodinsky said the issue is just getting people engaged and getting them to the table.

Mr. Borgendale said he is wondering if it would be appropriate for the Planning Commission to assign responsibility for recruiting people. Ms. Hallsmith said one of the best ways to recruit people to do this is to first convene a small group of people that represents a variety of different perspectives in the community. We should find a couple of clergy members, members from social service agencies, big employers and getting some of them to help recruit people for the stakeholder group so that everybody who is asked to join is asked to join by somebody they know first. It is a big commitment, and it is important that people are involved. She said her experience in getting people to make commitments like this is to ask them personally by somebody they know. This also assures that the people involved do represent a cross section of the community and not perceived as just the mayor's friends. The idea of the process is to make sure the whole community has a voice.

Ms. Hallsmith said the other role stakeholders are encouraged to play is to figure out ways that the organizations that are there to implement the plan, so it is not just a city plan. The plan has legs in other parts of the community. One of the challenges in doing any master plan is that there is a lot of turnover in city government. The other role that stakeholders are encouraged to play is to figure out ways that organizations that are there to implement the plan. Having a broad stakeholder base helps embed the plan in the community. The community owns it instead of it just being a product of one relatively narrowly defined city administration.

Ms. Grodinsky said the stakeholder process has got to be divided up. Ms. Hallsmith said there are quite a few pieces of the plan that have been developed. In Calgary, Burlington and Newberg some of the committees involved were social development, governance, economic renewal & development, the built environment and infrastructure and the natural environment. The first category would relate to cultural, recreational, and families and relationships. These are the needs to have our social development met, such as education. One of the categories also included is spiritual development. In Calgary they didn't like that term because people linked it to organized religion. These are things that foster a sense of community, which is what we all live for. Some of the most important stuff we have as a community is our relationships with our families and friends, the cultural life the community has and the faith traditions we practice, but very rarely do you see this stuff addressed in municipal planning. Municipal plans tend to focus on infrastructure and development. That assumes that money makes us happy when in fact it is all the stuff in the social development area that really does make a community a vibrant place to live. What they have been doing with the new sustainability planning is looking hard at what really makes a community a community and not ignore the most important parts of community life.

Governance looks at the issues around governance in the city, such as conflict resolution, decision making, specific services, and how equitable the community is. Ms. Grodinsky asked if this would be presented at the "All Board meeting." Ms. Hallsmith said yes. At the "All Board meeting" someone should make a presentation. She could also include some things that other communities have done to put it into context. There are already a lot of available resources.

Ms. Hallsmith said if we are looking at the future of Montpelier, and looking 30 years out, or even 50 to 100 years out, if we are concerned about sprawl in the surrounding countryside, then we are looking at a more intensively developed community. We really need to plan for that. Burlington became concerned about sprawl because they don't want all the farm fields gobbled up by housing developments.

Mr. Jones asked what steps the Planning Commission need to take to prepare for the "All Board meeting." Ms. Hallsmith said it would be important for them to help identify the people who can recruit the stakeholders. She said there is a lot of information on the web sites she mentioned. Laser has a huge repository of information on local kinds of economic development activities and things you can do to create a sustainable economy. It would be good to familiarize themselves with what other communities are doing. Mr. Jones said members in the next couple of weeks should start having discussions with folks about the planning process.

Ms. Hallsmith said she had written a report on the Calgary and Newberg projects that members might be interested in looking at. They are stories about how the projects worked.

With regards to the “All Board meeting,” perhaps the first Wednesday in April would be best. It will be after town meeting. That would be April 4<sup>th</sup>. Ms. Hallsmith said she would coordinate the dates with the boards involved for the meeting.

**Parking and Riverfront Issues:**

Ms. Hallsmith said she would give Commission members an update on the Carr Lot project. The Carr Lot has been closed. She said it is her understanding that they will be opening up the parking lot again once the city has put down an interim cap that includes 2 inches of gravel, a layer of indicator fabric and another layer of gravel. The layer of fabric is being put down not because it serves any level of protective function but only that it shows that the surface has been disturbed enough that some of the contamination comes through.

The Carr Lot has been subject to two fairly extensive environmental studies, one in 2001-2002 by the city and we have just finished an environmental assessment of the lot for purposes of developing it into a transit and welcome center for the City of Montpelier. The data they were looking at when they decided to close the lot down isn't really new data, but there is an interest on the state and EPA erring on the side of caution. The data in old and inadequate in their eyes. There isn't a lot of information about any of the contamination, which has clearly been shown as being tested from 1 foot to 4 foot down, has managed to come to the surface over the years the lot has been used for parking. It is just a gravel surfaced parking lot subject to pot holing and grading. As the plan they have been working with the owner of the parking lot has moved forward, the EPA asked the owner to do more extensive testing. They did some testing on the part of the lot which is a known hazard spot but not a lot of surface testing. Essentially, what the testing has shown is that the contaminants underneath the lot show it is a contaminated site. It used to be used as a junk yard, so there are organics, PCBs, and heavy metals. Most of the contamination is well under the surface. When the city started using it as a parking lot years ago the city added a good solid 6 inch layer on top of what was there.

The city envisioned the lot being used long term for parking. When you are mitigating a site for a low occupancy use, such as the use for parking, the level of clean-up you have to do is lower than when you are cleaning it up for when people are going to be on the lot quite a lot more. The plan that is in place is inadequate for transit center development, green space, bike path, or housing which is one of the uses that had been envisioned there. The city has to take steps as it moves forward with the transit center project to control the land and then revise the plan for the higher occupancy use, which will be a substantial amount of clean up than what it would have been for parking. There is a lot of work to be done.

Mr. Goldman asked if this was eligible for federal funding. Ms. Hallsmith said yes, it was. It is earmarked and dedicated to the site, some of which is even earmarked for clean up. She gave members a copy of the RFP for the Project Manager. Applications are due on January 19<sup>th</sup>. The city has also issued a Request for Quotes (RFQ) for an appraiser to help the city with the evaluation of the property to move forward with the landowner on negotiations for purchase of the site.

The city has also been engaged in a study about alternative parking places around the city because another part of the money that has been earmarked for the project is designated to replace the parking that is lost when the site is developed as a transit center and park. Ms. Grodinsky said more people will be taking public transportation so we won't need as much parking. There has been a study of a bunch of different lots around town to see how many spaces would be gained with a simple parking structure built. The planner was instructed to stay away from state properties, although he did look at a few. The municipal properties were look at first because we control those. The state properties they looked at were on the south side of State Street rather than Court Street. This is partially because of the traffic flow. The south side of State Street rather than the north side would involve less coming into the city. There are a number of promising sites, and one right across from the transit center. This is the parking lot behind Motor Vehicles and the Chittenden Bank. That is one of the state lots which were reviewed. The state lots were primarily on the south side of State Street. They also looked at the lot beside the old transportation building. The sooner you get people parked as they come into the city off the highway the less traffic there will be.

Mr. Jones asked if the Planning Commission has a role in the location of a parking structure, if the Carr Lot suggests changes to design and location, and where we put a structure versus the open space. In the past he doesn't think the Planning Commission has played a role in that decision. What role might the Planning Commission have as these topics evolve?

Ms. Hallsmith suggested that the Planning Commission might take a role in developing an overall parking plan for the city. It could be part of the master plan. There could be a plan that looks at all of the different parking facilities and makes recommendations around where appropriate structures might go. That would be a good role for the Planning Commission.

Mr. Goldman asked if they used current traffic counts to rule out Court Street. The main reason parking was ruled out for Court Street was more to do with who is the outgoing Buildings and General Services Commissioner who said we couldn't use state property. The Court Street site could be resurrected now. Having a stronger link to the Planning Commission would be a good idea.

**Floodplain Update:**

Ms. Hallsmith gave members a new map from the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission. She presented a paper that talks about and some of the recommended changes to Montpelier's zoning once the new maps are out. There is a process for reviewing flood maps. It is also a point in time when the city's entire approach to flood plain management is scrutinized by the federal regulators. If we do not bring the city's regulation procedures into conformance we could lose our flood insurance. There is a 90-day comment period and a 90-day appeal period before the maps are finalized. The city will be responsible for notifying the landowners within the flood plain as indicated by the new maps that they may be being redefined as part of a flood plain. This exercise is a big part of the reason she said they needed to change the way the Planning Department is structured, because this is one of the things that has fallen beside the wayside since the planning position was eliminated in the department. It was something that the old planner would have done.

It is a busy department and eliminating a full-time position has had an impact, so in the restructuring some of this will fall to the zoning administrator. This is appropriate given the fact they are the ones that would be reviewing applications to make sure they are in compliance with the regulations.

Ms. Hallsmith said if you look at section 309.B., the part they added says these regulations shall apply to all areas in the city of Montpelier identified as areas of special flood hazard in and on the most current flood insurance.... Maybe this is a huge addition to our zoning bylaws that needs to be added in order to keep our flood insurance. Her impression from the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission is that most of the cities and towns in their area are well behind in terms of keeping their flood plain regulations and procedures up to date. These are the recommended actions to bring them into compliance. Now that the maps are being updated Montpelier has a specified legal amount of time to bring the bylaws into compliance if we don't want to lose that coverage. This is a priority for 2007.

Mr. Borgendale asked if they knew what kind of changes would be on the maps. Ms. Hallsmith said she was aware of places that should not have been filled in back in the days when regulations were more lax. Once you start filling in flood plain, it just relocates it. Any filling that has been done since the last time the maps were issued the flood plain could change. People who haven't been in the flood plain before may suddenly find themselves in a flood plain. There were lots filled out toward Agway, and that is flood plain.

Mr. Jones said because we are talking about construction of the bike path on the Carr Lot, much of that is in flood plain, do we know if there will be changes in the regulations to affect that kind of city sponsored project. Usually parking lots and bike paths are okay because you can close them when the flood waters come and it won't affect any residents or businesses.

**Other Business:**

Mr. Jones said the Planning Commission has had some informal discussions about getting some information from the Development Review Board with regards to some summaries of their decisions. As the Planning Commission considers broad changes to the master plan and decisions as a result of the zoning ordinance changes, some rough feedback with how proposals are being evaluated from the DRB. We need to hear from them.

Ms. Hallsmith said they have a very extensive data base relating to the DRB decisions and it should be relatively easy to get reports. You could look at the variance applications that have come in. The Capital Heights application decision is about to be issued, and that is a fairly complex project. Mr. Jones said that would be a hard decision to summarize. He is more interested in looking at trends.

Ms. Hallsmith said in 2006 there were 12 variances and 187 applications. 22 were applications for signs, 19 of which were in the design control district. 32 required site plan review. 21 required conditional use approval. 12 required a variance. 93 were issued administratively. The vast majority are administered without having to go through the Development Review Board. The Capital Heights project application was made prior to the changed zoning so it won't come in under the new zoning regulations. Capital Heights has a 15-year implementation schedule. 2007 will be the real litmus test for the new zoning.

**Adjournment:**

Ms. Grodinsky moved adjournment of the meeting. Mr. Goldman seconded the motion. The Planning Commission meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Gwen Hallsmith  
Director, Planning and Community Development

Transcribed and prepared by:

Joan Clack,  
City Clerk & Treasurer's Office

*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.*