

Montpelier Planning Commission
May 14, 2007
City Council Chamber, City Hall

Subject to Review and Approval

Present: Ken Jones, Chair; Carolyn Grodinsky, Vice Chair; Alan Goldman, Mark Kaufman, and Christopher Peterson.
Gwen Hallsmith, Director of Planning and Community Development

Call to Order:

The meeting was called to order at 7:05 p.m.

Review of Minutes:

The Planning Commission reviewed the April 9, 2007 minutes. Mr. Kaufman moved approval, with Mr. Paterson seconding the motion. The April 9, 2007 minutes were adopted unanimously.

Comments from the Chair:

Mr. Jones said the Planning Commission was going to hear some news from the Planning Department. They are also going to have a discussion about the progress and next steps with regards to "Envision Montpelier." They are also going to hear about some recent news and next steps with the Carr Lot. Mr. Jones said he had a news topic he wants to relay in terms of the strategic planning process for the North Branch Nature Center.

Public Appearances:

None.

Planning Department Update:

Ms. Hallsmith said the Planning Department has hired a new planning and zoning administrator, Leslie Ratley-Beach. She has been working with the Vermont Land Trust for 12 years and is an attorney. She will begin working in the Planning Department July 2nd.

George Seiffert has been a big help, and has served as the zoning administrator for many years so he has some institutional memory about how the zoning works. Audra Brown, who is the new planning and zoning assistant, is learning her job really fast. The Planning Department will be a bit under staffed for the next couple of months.

There are other projects besides the Car Lot. Ms. Hallsmith has been working to get the money from the Tax Department so they can actually build Turntable Park. There is also some Brownfields cleanup needed there, and the city has received an extension on that project to allow the current plans for the project to move forward. They will need to apply for Brownfields funding to clean up the Carr Lot and to do the project at the Pylalisk.

Ms. Hallsmith said they were in the process of upgrading and updating the web site. She reported she was drafting an RFP, which is in the capital plan for 2008 for a major web site upgrade. They are hoping through the process it will become more interactive. They hope to use it for online permitting, and they might also enable certain elements of the community who use the web site, such as the MDCA and the Senior Center, to update their own parts of the web site. The new structure will allow people to post community calendar items without it having to come through the Planning Office. Mr. Jones asked to keep posted on this because as it becomes functional the Planning Commission would like to take advantage of some of the interactive opportunities.

Ms. Hallsmith said she has been working a lot on energy because of the energy town meeting. There have been discussions about local energy generation possibilities, including bio-mass and hydro. There is interest in using some of the new transportation enhancement dollars which are available through a grant to do a comprehensive bicycle plan for the City of Montpelier. There is the proposed bike path coming across the Carr Lot which has a bridge, which the city has received a grant for, that puts people in the parking lot behind Aubuchons. We don't have a good way to get them out of the parking lot onto another safe bike path across Main Street.

All Board Meeting:

City Council Member Nancy Sherman said the Council members felt the All-Board meeting was very useful and that the boards and Council should meet regularly. Ms. Hallsmith said there was something reflected in the goals and priorities for the year around board communication. There was talk about doing a list serve. Council Member Sherman said there should be regular check-ins.

Envision Montpelier:

Ms. Hallsmith said it looks like the city may receive funding from the Mazer Foundation, which may be \$100,000 with \$50,000 a year for the next two years. This money would be to implement some of the strategies that we come up with as part of the planning process. The grant would be given to the City of Montpelier.

On May 19th there is going to be a kick-off for Envision Montpelier. She has secured permission from the Episcopal Church to set up a table and tent for visibility during the Farmer's Market. There is going to be a scavenger hunt and an opportunity for people to fill out questionnaires about what they want for the future of the city. There should be an article in the Times-Argus prior to the kick-off on Saturday. They are interested in doing a series of articles to support the project with issues each week. Mr. Kaufman said there should be press releases out to the radio stations as well.

Mr. Jones explained the scavenger hunt to members. The purpose is to give people something fun to do and help them see things in the city for the future. There was discussion around alternatives as well as the scavenger hunt to get peoples' participation in the event. There could be two maps of Montpelier, a downtown map and a larger map, where people identify special places and provide them with a way to reference the special place.

Mr. Jones said for the kick-off they are conducting a scavenger hunt and have a pair of maps for people to identify their favorite places. The committee discussed setting a possible rain date for the week of the Fashion Show.

Mr. Jones said the way he understands the "Envision Montpelier" process it starts to get people think through what is important about Montpelier and what we want to preserve, to have that be a robust discussion, and from that identify the activities that will get us there. How do we integrate that with some of the other things like the energy team work? There will need to be input from the Housing Task Force and the Energy Team. Mr. Jones said the Energy Team is striving towards an 80 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by the year 2030.

Ms. Hallsmith said how she picture the different pieces of "Envision Montpelier" working is that the vision by the Energy Team's initiative is that by the year 2050 the city of Montpelier is energy self-reliant and relies for the majority of its needs on renewable sources of energy that we harvest and use in a sustainable low impact way. That is how we want to be 50 years from now.

Mr. Paterson said the question before them is what does the Planning Commission see or want to promote as the relationship between Envision Montpelier and other potential groups that are moving forward with specific actions. Ms. Hallsmith said she sees Envision Montpelier as a way of weaving those groups together, making everybody aware of what everybody else is doing. What do you want Montpelier to be like 30 or 50 years from now? Ms. Hallsmith said she has had very positive feedback from people she has talked about. People are excited that Montpelier is taking a proactive stance toward planning rather than reacting to big developments that come in and trying to catch up with zoning and master planning to accommodate the big developments.

Mr. Jones said this takes them to the next discussion for a stakeholder recruitment and training event. When should this happen?

Ms. Hallsmith said she was nervous about the training because Montpelier is a fairly sophisticated group of thinkers, so she is thinking about incorporating a bit of training into each agenda at the beginning of the meeting. They need to have a substantial meeting before the summer schedule hits. Perhaps they could meet at the Library June 4th.

Carr Lot Project Update:

The Historical Commission met to discuss the possibility of using the state owned lot across Taylor Street from the Carr Lot for the replacement parking they are developing as part of the multi-modal transit center. They felt strongly that before we put a parking garage in such a prominent location in the city that we should completely exhaust the possibilities of putting it behind the Dickey Block, because that was the original preferred site for a parking garage when the project began. When she was hired she believed that site was impossible. The Historical Commission unanimously voted a recommendation that the Dickey Block is the first choice at its full build out and that it be conclusively evaluated and pursued, including any appeals, through the environmental assessment process, which should also include an evaluation of the viable alternatives at that site.

Mr. Goldberg inquired about the possibility of the Court Street lot. Ms. Hallsmith said that is state owned land. For a long time with the multi-modal transit center project they were not looking at state owned properties because the Commissioner of Buildings and General Services said not to think about it. The Court Street lot could be considered for the development of a parking garage, but is it appropriate to consider that site for the replacement parking on the Carr Lot development is the question. One of the things the city asked their engineer to do was to look at all of the different lots around the city and recommend which ones would make a nice relatively easy and inexpensive place to build a garage that could accommodate the number of spaces we are trying to replace.

Mr. Jones inquired if 150 was the number. Ms. Hallsmith said 160 plus parking spaces.

Ms. Hallsmith said initially the idea was to put a one-story structure above an existing parking lot to get those extra spaces built. That would replace the parking. That is why the North Branch site was considered, because it is relatively close to the Carr Lot and has the capacity to put in that number of spaces. The same is true with the lot across Taylor Street. Could any of the other sites be considered as well? Yes.

Mr. Jones asked if the engineer would be looking at state owned land. Ms. Hallsmith said the property the city is now moving forward to do another environmental assessment on, which is the site across from the Carr Lot, is state owned land. We have partial agreement with Tasha Wallace, who is the Commissioner of Buildings and General Services that they are willing to enter into a conversation about it. They are interested in exploring the site with us to see if it is possible.

The Carr Lot project is a very complex process. It involves funding from a number of different agencies, action on the part of our Washington delegation with respect to the federal budget and earmarks, grant applications to the EPA for Brownfields cleanup, and implementing the grant the city already has from the Federal Transit Administration to build a multi-modal transit center. The multi-modal transit center is actually the furthest along in a lot of different areas. We already have the money. We have completed an environmental assessment of the Carr Lot for that project and have developed an approved site plan for the multi-modal transit center there. There has been a city bond vote of \$800,000 that was allocated to purchase the property. Now we are just completing the appraisals on the property that are needed to use federal dollars to purchase it. Now that the appraisals have been completed the city is for the first time in a position to start negotiation with the land owner about purchasing the property.

One bit of cautionary bits of information is that the appraisals have not come in a way that would indicate the value of the land could help pay for the cleanup. The Federal Transit Administration funding also does not cover cleanup. The city needs to figure out where they are going to get the money for the cleanup in her opinion as a city employee and taxpayer before we take over a site that has such huge liabilities associated with it. In order to apply for the particular Brownfields funding we are eligible for we need to own the land. We are hoping that the characterization of the site that was ordered by EPA and ANR back in December, which was a fairly extensive grid pattern of testing, will be completed soon. It was supposed to have been completed in April or May of this year so we'll know with some level of certainty what the cleanup costs will be.

Ms. Grodinsky asked if we couldn't receive funding contingent upon the city buying the land.

Ms. Hallsmith replied it might be possible. Brownfields funding is a competitive grants program. It is not a guarantee.

Mr. Kaufman said federal allocations of the earmarks cannot be used on a contingency basis. Ms. Hallsmith said they can't do it that way. It's a tricky project. It would be helpful moving forward if the characterization was complete at this point. We know it is not.

Mr. Jones talked about the Capital Complex Commission meeting. In the year 2000 the city/state commission developed a Capital District Master Plan which includes land uses for the state owned land across Taylor Street. Then the idea came up of the possibility of putting a parking garage on that state owned land it only made sense to go to the Capital Complex Commission, which he is a member, to pose the question whether such a parking garage would be consistent with the plan. Two results came from the meeting that discussed this. One is that the Capital Complex Commission decided they don't want to be the ones to determine the consistency of something like a parking garage with the master plan. It is not clear that is the role of the Commission from the Commission's perspective, although they are going to seek a legal opinion on it.

Secondly, and more importantly, Tasha Wallace was present at the meeting and laid out the specific concerns that the state has with regards to using the state land for something like a parking garage. One of their concerns is directly related to the Montpelier Planning Commission's responsibility. She said the state does not want to be in the position of having to defend the decision to put a parking garage there. That has to be seen as the city's decision. The city needs to make sure that the sort of public engagement takes place and that the city's residents are aware of how the decision is made. It is clear that it is not a state decision but a city decision.

Ms. Grodinsky said one time Tony Reddington was working with Buildings and General Services on an EPA funded program where they would actually buy parking spaces for people who were carpooling. That was an opportunity the state didn't buy into, but is something worth revisiting. The second part of the Capital Complex Commission meeting was that one of the reasons the Commission is not that crazy they are feeling responsible for the master plan is it never had an action plan attached to it. The Buildings and General Services folks will be starting in June with the development of an action planning process to implement and translate that master plan into action. An important piece of that they agree with is to gain a better understanding of the number of employees, today and in the future, of the capital complex, the use of parking, today and in the future, to support that number of employees, and also any future construction. The state has been considering doing some new construction in Montpelier outside of the complex to accommodate some of the functions that cannot be currently accommodated in the complex.

This speaks to one of the ideas we raised before the legislative session about developing the triangle – I-89, Dog River access road – for some archival materials and perhaps the Department of Motor Vehicles. The Capital Complex Commission will be considering all of these things – future employment levels, parking and traffic, and future construction. One of the reasons for considering construction outside of the complex is lack of parking. Certainly, this year's legislative session was very challenging with regards to parking, and they heard a lot of negative feedback on that. They are part of Montpelier, so the Montpelier traffic and parking discussion is also the state's parking and traffic discussion as well. As the state starts developing their materials starting in June, it is Mr. Jones hope that the Planning Commission has the same discussion about what are the current levels of employment in Montpelier outside of state government, inventory of permitted and metered parking spaces, and use that as part of a public discussion about what is next for Montpelier. Yes, we need replacement parking and maybe we can come up with creative ideas to find 166 spots within our existing downtown structure by buying the parking rights from folks who currently have private land. If there seems to be some expansion in mind, a combination of the state and city can work together. This may be a time to think about the future and the ability to move parking outside the city and make a functional system for people to get from proliferal parking to downtown. The downtown can be for people who come in to stop and shop, and anybody who is working for eight hours in Montpelier they can park on the outside of the city and have a convenient and easy way to get into downtown.

Mr. Jones said this will allow the Planning Commission to think about transportation because one of the problems with transit is if you want to take people to all of the places they want to go in a customized fashion it makes transit very hard. If there are central locations for parking and transit, then it makes transit a lot easier. He would love to be able to take a bus to the Burlington Airport, but he knows no one is going to pick him up at his house and he can't park downtown to catch a bus to the Burlington Airport because he can't leave his car for three days.

As soon as the city puts a structure on the Carr Lot, it kicks in the requirement that we need to find the parking. It may be very hard to build a parking structure anywhere in Montpelier because we have learned that parking structures in northern Vermont are very hard to maintain after you build them. There is a lot of snow, studded snow tires, and the operational costs of maintaining a parking structure are very expensive and often under estimated. When we start adding up the costs of building parking garages, and maintaining them, it may be that it will make more economic sense to get people to use alternate modes of traffic to get to downtown Montpelier.

Within the next three to six months the Planning Commission should foster a public discussion about the issues of parking, traffic and transit for Montpelier. This discussion will help with the Carr Lot discussion and will integrate it with what is happening with the Capital Complex. This is a big piece of "Envision Montpelier."

Mr. Jones said he would be glad to take an initiative before the next meeting to outline what kind of activities they might want to pursue.

Mr. Goldman said he would like to hear a little more about why the state doesn't feel it needs a parking garage, why it has to be driven by the city when it is their need. Mr. Jones said this is not going to provide the state necessarily with any more parking. They would get all of the parking they would lose by putting the garage on their parking spot.

Ms. Hallsmith said the city has said if they build the garage to replace the Carr Lot parking on state land the city will make sure the state has the same number of spots on their land, and the additional parking spots will be the city's. It will be the city's parking lot. It doesn't address their issue at all.

North Branch Nature Center:

Mr. Jones said the North Branch Nature Center is going through a strategic planning process and has asked for input from the City of Montpelier. He was approached during the Conservation Commission meeting about whether the Planning Commission could play a role in providing some input to the strategic planning process for the North Branch Nature Center. To the extent that city goals and objectives are met in part by even a potential list of North Branch Nature Center functions they would like to be made aware about those kinds of objectives, such as educational, open space, water quality, etc. If they could get some city participation in articulating that, it would help them. They are a new organization trying to better understand how they can do all of the good things and find the funding and positive community energy to sustain themselves. They would appreciate the Planning Commission's input.

He said the specific request is whether anyone from the Planning Commission would be willing to sit down with a representative of their planning team. Ms. Grodinsky volunteered and said she has been involved in some of the events they have been doing.

Other Business:

Mr. Jones said he had met with the Friends of Sabin's Pasture. There may be a confluence of events that brings up some development possibilities for the Sabin's Pasture land. If some development ideas arise let us see what we can do to review those kinds of ideas in a collaborative approach rather than having different groups identify things they disagree with for a development proposal. Let's see if there can be communication between the Planning Commission and people who have concerns with a development proposal before it becomes contentious.

Mr. Jones said the appraisal process for Sabin's Pasture has been completed and the property tax appraisals are going to be coming out within a month. The transfer of Union Institute's lands to the new consortium will be

taking place fairly soon. Next year there is going to be a bike path constructed. That confluence of events leads to what might happen to that lower pasture portion.

Another topic they talked about at the Friends of Sabin's Pasture meeting is, what does the upper pasture look like? What does it mean to preserve it? What can happen there? What role does the Friends of Sabin's Pasture play in helping with the purchase and considering the management of the land?

He suggested the Planning Commission meet on May 29th. One of the topics is a presentation from the Montpelier High School's statistics class on the open space survey. They have their results in, and they are going to be developing a presentation for the Planning Commission on their interpretation of the results.

Adjournment:

Ms. Grodinsky moved adjournment, with Mr. Goldman seconding the motion. The motion was voted unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Gwen Hallsmith, Director
Planning and Community Development

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