

Minutes 3/2/22

In attendance: Tim Shores, Steve Freedman, Tom Ewing, Richard Paul Nathhorst, Ken Kahn, Jean Bergstrom

Absent: Van Stoddard

- Tonight's agenda is to conduct interviews with two planning firms that submitted proposals for the Master Plan RFP:
 1. Innes Associates: <https://www.innes-design.com/about>
 2. VHB: <https://www.vhb.com/>
- The Board agreed to record the interview sessions, with the permission of the interviewee.
- Jean moved that we approve January minutes, re-submitted by Steve in February after discussion of changes at the February meeting. Unanimously approved.

7pm to 7:47pm: Interview with Emily Innes

- Ken K. introduced himself as chair, and Tom led the interview
- Emily gave permission to record the interview, and gave her presentation.
- Q&A coordinated by Tom Ewing. The following notes by Tim Shores are not a transcript, but a best effort to write the essential details of each question and answer.
 - Q1. Tim: We listed several town documents in the RFP. Which documents would you recommend that the town ignore in this process?
 - A1. Emily: Would not use the word 'ignore', because you never know what kind of information you'll find in any document. Gave examples from the city of Medford, in which old documents surfaced. Instead of 'ignore', use the word 'prioritize'. You'll find that some documents will be important for the process of planning for the future, and other documents are important for showing the history.
 - Q2. Jean: Do you know who else you would like to bring in to work with us?
 - A2. Emily: I don't anticipate needing others for the majority of this project, but I work with engineers, open space and environmental engineers, and designers. As questions come up, I would call them for consultation. e.g. RKG Associates, FXM Associates.
 - Q3. Ken: We are budget-limited in the grant. Was there anything you saw that would take us over the grant amount? And the timeline is also inflexible, will that be a problem, given that you have other projects happening.
 - A3. Emily: I understand the reason not to extend it, as I'm very familiar with state grants. I thought carefully about timing before applying to the Leverett RFP. I have other small planning projects, and I'm attending MIT's real estate finance course in June, so I will need to complete the Leverett project before then. This lines up well with the need to keep Leverett on schedule. I'm confident that I'll get the report draft completed in time for the One Stop for Growth application deadline on June 3.
 - Q4. Steve: How would you assist with the assembly of the working group?

- A4. Emily: Any working group varies by community. We'll look for people who are interested, who are experienced with the community, and we'll seek diversity along several lines (age, longevity in town, business owners and non-business owners, some elected officials, town staff, and openness to people who have not previously been in town govt but who are interested in town govt). Size of the working group: smaller is more helpful when there are hands-on tasks. For the full comprehensive planning process, a larger group is preferable, because it helps to get the word out.
- Q5. Jean: Do you have a recommendation for how to round up working group members?
- A5. Emily: Nothing beats personal attention. People like to hear from people they know. Technology can help (e.g. Doodle Poll).
- Q6. Richard: I've worked for UMass capital planning for 35 years, and recently participated in the UMass master plan. My major concern in Leverett is environmental, and in particular, Leverett faces the floodplain bylaw updates and FEMA map updates. That will have a significant impact on the town. We have two streams and a man-made pond. How would you integrate planning with these upcoming changes?
- A6. Emily: You hit upon two of my personal passions. One is regulatory, the other is climate change -- in particular, how municipalities can integrate these related needs in their planning. Scituate has done a lot on their coastal resilience, so in terms of thinking about increased precipitation rates, in terms of intensity and number of events, which will play a role in the updated floodplain maps. I worked with the town of Harvard on planning for orchard lands. My approach is to call this out as something to integrate in planning, and to ask ourselves, how do we have these conversations so that our community will have a successful integration? Talking about adaptation, integration, and retreat, is interesting when it comes to the discussion of historic buildings -- what to do with them, and whether their historic meaning is the same when they're no longer in the same location.
- Q7. Tom. The state has a set formula for what goes into a master plan. How do we make tradeoffs for the adaptation process outlined by the state process?
- A7. Emily: Section 81D does lay out the topics that must be in a comprehensive master plan. The planning that I and my colleagues advocate for is to also look for the themes that cut across the required topics, and to explore the ways these themes go beyond what is required by Section 81D. I begin by asking the town what their priorities are, using Section 81D as a starting point, and then leverage the highest priorities.
- Q8. Steve. Could you talk a little more about the visioning process? You don't spend a lot of time talking about it in your proposal, but it seems like a key process.
- A8. Emily: I understood the visioning as the working group setting up the process, and then helping the community through the visioning. I propose a community survey as a way to help set this up. Visioning includes the discovery of the priorities, and what do we want the future to look like? It

includes a discussion of pain points, and also an exploration of topics where there isn't a consensus, to figure out how the community can figure out what to do about those topics. Building out structure for the next part of the process.

- Q9. Tim: I think conflict and conflict resolution is important, especially for a community process. How would you respond to the worst, most intractable conflict imaginable?
- A9. Emily: One of the things about a comprehensive plan is that it doesn't necessarily solve everything, but it can give you a framework for discussion. It might be that an intractable conflict can be addressed in such a way that the plan itself highlights the need for more ongoing attention on that issue. I have found the opportunity to schedule extra meetings, and to put some time between the meetings, so that people can cool down in the meantime. It's also helpful to look back at the values and common objectives established earlier in the process, to keep people on track towards the comprehensive plan.
- Q10. Tom: When do you recognize the need for more money than has been allocated by a grant or other sources?
- A10. Emily: The first stage will include helping you see what will be required for the second stage. It can also help everyone to learn what the right size is for community participation and event coordination for this specific project. If additional meetings or approaches are called for, such as when a conflict arises, then the participants will have learned how to make these judgments.
- Q11. Tom: Will you plan to provide GIS maps?
- A11. Emily: Yes, I use ArcGIS Pro and ArcGIS Online.
- Q12. Steve: Having done this a few times, what are the most difficult parts? Where do problems arise?
- A13. Emily: The pandemic didn't help. South Hadley and Scituate shut the process down due to the pandemic, and it was hard to get the process restarted. There's a data gathering task, a public engagement task, and a report writing task, and keeping these three tasks on track can be challenging, especially since you want to make sure to give public engagement as much time and attention as it needs. Changes in town staff can also be a disruptive event in the middle of a planning process.

7:59pm to 9:10pm: Interview with VHB, represented by Ken Schwartz (Senior Advisor), Julia Mintz (Project Planner), and Donny Goris-Kolb (Project Manager)

- Ken K. introduced himself as chair, and Tom led the interview
- VHB interviewees agreed to recording the interview. Ken S. introduced the presentation, and Donny presented most of the content.

- Q&A coordinated by Tom Ewing. The following notes by Tim Shores are not a transcript, but a best effort to write the essential details of each question and answer.
 - Q1. Richard: I've worked for UMass capital planning for 35 years, and recently participated in the UMass master plan. My major concern in Leverett is environmental, and in particular, Leverett faces the floodplain bylaw updates and FEMA map updates. That will have a significant impact on the town. We have two streams and a man-made pond. How would you integrate planning with these upcoming changes?
 - A1. Donny: We've worked with a few communities that have water issues and who take pride in their water resources, e.g. Sterling, septic systems and water quality impacts. Palmer has rivers and we worked with them to help protect water quality, including an environmental constraints analysis that we incorporated into the comprehensive plan. Westborough has bloom issues, so we tackled those as part of the project. We have water and natural resource experts that we can tap for a project, as needed. It does seem that Leverett has its own specific issues and concerns with water, and I'd reach out to those experts so we can tailor the solutions.
 - Q2. Steve: Talk to us a little about assembling the working group.
 - A2.
 - Donny: We'd work with you about finding potential stakeholders. We'd identify people representing town departments, interest groups, and at-large members. We'd work with the Planning Board to draft an email or mailed invite. Would communicate clearly the duties of the role, and that it would require a commitment of several months. The Planning Board would then send the invites.
 - Ken: We've worked on comp plans where the advisory committee is as small as 8 or 10 people, or as large as 30 to 35. We've learned in our experience that 12 to 15 is the right number. Having a strong chair and vice chair to run the meetings is important. Diversity is important -- people with different experience in town matters (historic, economic development, capital, etc.). Strong commitment is also very important.
 - Q3. Steve: Do you think June 30 is a realistic goal for phase 1?
 - A3. Donny: Absolutely.
 - Q4. Tom: Do you see Planning Boards as part of the working group?
 - A4. Donny: The Planning Board has full responsibility for the comprehensive plan, and has oversight of the working group, but is not a part of the working group with the exception of one or two individuals acting as Planning Board representatives on the working group.
 - Q5. Ken K.: You have 1,600+ professionals at VHB. Do you have any relationship to any other company?
 - A5. Donny: We have purchased other companies before, if that's what you mean.
 - Q6. Ken K.: The grant term ends June 30. Do you see anything that would prevent us completing the task by that date? This schedule is immutable.

- A6. Ken S.: We're careful about scheduling, to make sure that we have the staff availability for the schedule that you've laid out. We can certainly deliver what you laid out in your RFP. We don't anticipate that being a problem. Before we decide to bid, we look at the scope and we look at the budget. Given your RFP, we're confident that we can deliver based on the budget and scope in your RFP.
- Q7. Ken K.: Would you be able to assist with additional grant fundraising?
- A7. Donny: The town of Palmer project was also dependent on grant funding over a two fiscal year period, and we needed to stick to tight deadlines to facilitate that. For the first phase of this project, we'd want to line up the working group and meetings right away.
- Q8. Jean: I'd like to hear more about the visioning process, and how you see that working. It seems like the major thing you'll be doing here.
- A8. Donny: The visioning is one of the most important tasks of a master plan. Since the time horizon is 10 to 15 years, you want to make sure there's representation, inclusion, that people have had a chance to review and contribute. Our approach is to go to the community, have early stakeholder conversations, and present data that we're analyzing and interpreting, and we get reactions: Do you like this about your town, do you want to improve this about your town? We show presentations, we have real-time polling during those presentations, we gather polls from venues outside of the presentations and working groups. We facilitate a public forum, and we continue to facilitate public discussion after the public forum, for example with surveys. Finally, we synthesize a draft vision statement that we try to make all-inclusive. We draft it, we get feedback, and we revise it. What we find is that people become bought in to the final vision statement, such that there's no need to revise it after the comprehensive planning is completed.
- Q9. Tim: I'm curious to hear more about regional synergies that you mentioned, both in terms of your awareness of the region, and in terms of how you distill those matters so the working group can understand these matters and keep them in balance while holding onto local matters.
- A9. Donny: Responsible regionalism is a tenet of a sustainable master plan. We always go into a planning process while understanding what's going on outside the boundaries of town. There are always transboundary issues, for example climate issues that impact at the regional level. We pay attention to what other plans and studies are occurring. What other communities are doing. We do stakeholder interviews, and in many cases, there are regional representatives at those interviews to help us identify regional priorities. In Palmer, the Mass Central Rail Trail initiative had a big impact on mobility, so we made sure to incorporate that into the Planning process. In Westborough, water issues had a lot to do with regional issues. We catalogue regional issues and then see to it that we're capitalizing them, finding co-benefits, engaging neighboring groups for possible partnerships.
- Q10. Tom: Julia, what about this project in particular appeals to you?
- A10. Julia: I've spent a lot of time looking into Leverett in terms of the environmental aspects, the closeness of the community, the quiet nature,

and it leaves me wanting to engage with this community. Working with the VHB team, I'm looking forward to working more in the master planning world. I'm new to the land development team at VHB, and I would like to gain the experience of working with Leverett.

- Q11. Steve: It's clear that you've worked on many plans. Could you generalize in terms of what the most difficult parts are? Where do the problems arise?
- A11.
 - Ken S.: When plans lose momentum and drag on for too long, it can be a problem. I don't think a comp plan should take more than a year. When a municipality drags on for two years or more, people lose momentum, they stop going to the meetings. More effective plans that I've worked on are the ones that happen in a finite period of time, with an effective and devoted committee.
 - Donny: In some cases, town departments and staff get busy, and it's important to have their participation. In some cases, it does take prodding to get them to sign off on the implementation plan, and we produce clear and straightforward implementation plans to help everyone understand roles and responsibilities, because the staff need to see a feasible implementation plan to gain confidence in it.
- Donny had a question for us: We see that Leverett has no Master Plan, why create one now?
 - Tom: It boils down to the fact that in the 1970s, when UMass was expanding, Leverett got concerned with overdevelopment. People who lived here cherish the woods. Our thinking was directed at protecting that. In the last few years, taxes have been going up, we take pride in our school but it's quite expensive and the population is going down. That prompted discussion about what to do about that, and how maybe we need to take another look at how we want our community to develop. There are social equity issues with our high tax rate. Our desire to protect the environment has not diminished but we're also thinking about the economic consequences. We started with exploring economic development studies, and after spending time on that, we circled around to the idea of a master plan, because planning is an area where we can influence town development.
 - Richard: I'll say one thing, infrastructure. We're looking at the lack of housing construction, and we have difficult geology for septic and wells, and that tends to result in large lots. This tends to mitigate for expensive houses. The question is, how does Leverett build municipal water and sewage? Municipal services are running into issues with Eversource not being interested in upgrading power systems to the town and actively discouraging photovoltaics by not developing three-phase power. We have a number of infrastructure issues, and we can't meet social equity issues because we can't provide housing that's affordable.

- Steve: The challenge that the Planning Board has faced over the last 10, 12 years, is maintaining the balance between the town's rural character and economic development. Taxes are starting to really hurt, so we need to focus on economic development. We need to consider how to maintain this balance.

Post-interview discussion

- Steve presented reference checks that he made on Emily Innes. In some of these cases, Ms. Innes has just started the planning process, so they didn't have much to say. Steve had more substantive conversations with South Hadley and Scituate. Both said that she's a fantastic communicator, and no negatives surfaced in terms of her ability to get the work done, her responsiveness, her availability, and she can take a group and move them along persuasively.
- Tom presented reference checks that he made on VHB (Palmer, Sterling, Maynard). People were gushing about Donny's work on their projects. VHB showed flexibility about pricing, they worked very hard, were always available, the technical component was strong. Sterling had VHB re-do chapters that their regional agency had done, easy to communicate with, very happy with their work, very professional.
- The Board discussed merits and concerns of both candidates.
- The Board agreed on the following about how to fill out the evaluation form: VHB has top scores in all criteria; Emily Innes has 1 point less, for not having completed 4 Master Plans (as far as we can tell -- she has a lot of experience with previous firms).
- The Board agreed to vote by writing a candidate's name on a slip of paper, and holding them up to our video cameras at the same time. Our vote tonight: Richard, Tim, Steve, Jean, Tom, Ken: all voted for Innes.
- Tom will submit both pieces of decision information to Margie to get procedural feedback

Meeting adjourned unanimously.