

Master Plan Working Group meeting #3 minutes

Thursday, May 19 5:30 to 7pm

At Town Hall and on Zoom

WG Attendance by Zoom: Kim VanWagner, Mike Fiscella, Kathryn Stoddard, Lizzie Alwan, Molly Daniell, Melissa Colbert

WG Attendance in person at Town Hall: Silas Ball, David Henion, Arlyn Diamond

Planning Consultant: Emily Innes

Planning Board member observers: Richard Nathhorst, Tim Shores, Tom Ewing

- The format of this meeting is a discussion, rather than a presentation.
- Emily led a discussion of the existing conditions documents. How do they fit into the context of a comprehensive plan, in terms of the subject matter, and in terms of the information in them? Again, the nine primary elements required of the plan by MGL Chapter 41 Section 81D:
 0. Goals & Policies
 1. Land Use
 2. Housing
 3. Economic Development
 4. Natural & Cultural Resources
 5. Open Space and Recreation
 6. Services and Facilities (municipal and capital)
 7. Circulation (Transportation)
 8. Implementation
 - The Planning Board also intends to plan for four additional elements that are of value to Leverett:
 0. Climate Adaptation and Sustainability
 1. Social and Economic Equity
 2. Energy
 3. Regionalization of Town services
- Silas requested a recap of the second Working Group meeting, and Arlyn had questions as well. Emily reviewed the discussion of how to reach out to the community and engage people in the planning process.
- Tim pointed out that minutes from the first two Working Group meetings have been circulated by email, and after review by Mike and Emily, submitted to town clerk Lisa Stratford. Lisa's usual practice with minutes is to print them and file them somewhere at Town Hall.
- Discussion of Existing Conditions documents:
 - Mike found the AARP livability index interesting. He was surprised by how low we ranked - total score was 53/100.
 - Emily wondered how recent was the data used, and she mentioned that the AARP described their methodology for the different metrics that

went into that overall score -- this will be something important to notice in other document review, and the planning process, how we can use multiple metrics to arrive at aggregate index scores, and a town like Leverett can score high in some metrics and low in other metrics.

- Molly asked if Emily has benchmark scores for livability (for example) from towns that are similar to Leverett, or that are models of what Leverett could become. Emily responded that there are examples that would be very useful to the community conversations.
- David Henion recalled that Fay Zipkowitz at Town Meeting said that a substantial portion of town was older (30% over 65, 50% over 50), and to emphasize the need to consider these demographics in planning for town services.
- Lizzie spoke about how her master's thesis work has included research on the Franklin County aging-friendly and livability initiatives. She noted that the AARP livability index doesn't distinguish between urban and rural, which is problematic -- it may not be the best metric for Leverett. She could look into getting access to the full data set of Leverett and nearby towns, which could support more apt comparisons.
- Tom Ewing also spoke to the importance of having benchmarks and comparison data to help planning participants get a clearer sense of where Leverett is at, and the direction it could go in. He asked which report would provide these comparisons, because it's important to establish a common set of facts and a shared understanding of conditions. Emily replied that a full set of comparisons would come later in the planning process, but she would think about ways to provide this in the existing conditions report due in June.
- Emily asked: given how many complex documents were made available in the Existing Conditions folder, she wonders how much of it was new to members of the Working Group?
- Kathryn had just read the Sustainable Economy Committee report, and she was impressed with its contents, however she felt that the report jumped to some unwarranted conclusions -- particularly, it didn't consider the possibility of developing on route 63, where the traffic already is, in favor of developing around traditional town centers, which would draw traffic to where it's not already going. The linkage to historic preservation is also a leap, especially if it's driven by nonprofits which would not pay taxes.
- David Henion reflected on his past experience with Amherst town government and a buildability study that got very detailed about the possible amount of building that could be done, and how that would affect the potential for tax revenue. Is there a similar source of info for Leverett? Richard replied that the assessors and the Planning Board have done work in the past to determine the number of lots and how many could be built on, and though he doesn't recall the numbers, he knows that there are not very many lots that are candidates for new development. Emily observed that zoning bylaws also impact

buildability, and the Comprehensive Plan can propose or plan zoning changes that could make more effective development use of available lots.

- Molly asked if "comprehensive plan" is synonymous with "master plan". Emily said yes, and in the planning field people often use "comprehensive plan" which is specifically about municipal planning, whereas "master plan" can also be used to describe a development plan for one or more parcels.
- Arlyn pointed out that the town has political realities that shape decision-making that impact Leverett. For example, the state of Massachusetts currently has a large financial surplus, however Leverett has no significant influence over how this surplus will be used.
- Richard pointed out that Leverett zoning, and the size and number of lots, are also constrained by geology and geography, which limits our ability to build septic systems that will comply with state regulations. To this end, we'll need to think about drinking water and sewer infrastructure. Emily recounted that the discussion going on in many communities about well water and septic, piped water and sewer infrastructure, water treatment, and how alternative methods of serving these needs are becoming very interesting and dynamic discussions in the planning field. The state will also have resources available for this kind of infrastructure, and the comprehensive plan will include these resources as options for how the town of Leverett can meet its comprehensive planning goals.
- David observed that he found the 1973 document *Where We Stand* very interesting, and wondered if the people interviewed in that text were still in town. Tim observed that Portia Wieskel is still in town, and the name Woodard shows up in that text, which is a name he's heard in town. Emily suggested that it would be very useful to get people together in focus groups from that text, and others named in earlier documents, as a special source of historical knowledge. Melissa Colbert observed that she's interested in that knowledge especially in terms of what didn't work out -- for example, recreation.
- Pressures on the town budget: Silas suggested that every tax payer in town is aware of the pressures on the town budget. Kathryn observed that this year we have gone through a reduction in the tax rate, that was able to balance with the budget, due to the large increase in taxable assessed value.
- David observed that a single property in town is responsible for a disproportionately large amount of tax revenue, and the near term future of that is uncertain due to speculation that it will become a nonprofit and removed from the tax role. He added that he thinks the town is doing well with taxation and responsible budgeting. Also, a large proportion of town is tied up by conservation, such as the mountain owned primarily by Kohl's and the Kestrel Trust. He knows that Cinda Jones and Kohl's are currently in conflict with the town of Shutesbury, because there is a

lot of pushback against a large solar farm proposed in a forest area. He wonders if solar would be a good revenue-generating option for Leverett? Richard responded that Leverett has clear zoning bylaws that would not make it easy to establish a large solar facility.

- Lizzie described a solar community choice aggregation in Pelham that may be an interesting comparison. Also, she knows that Phil Woodard was one of the interviewees in Where We Stand, and she knows that he passed away because she and her husband are living in his house. However, he had ten children, and if any of them are still living here, it would be great to hear from them about his life and civil service to the town, and about their own point of view on Leverett's past, present and future.
- Tom Ewing observed that the past documents to do with the planning efforts of the 70s are valuable, and it's also important to observe that the population of Leverett has doubled since that time 50 years ago. For the past several years, many people in the community have debated and deliberated over the rising tax rate, affordability, and the challenge of maintaining town services that people value, like the school, conservation,
- Kim suggested something missing from the existing conditions documents is asset mapping: something that documents the people, organizations, and businesses that are in Leverett today, in terms of what skills and contributions they can bring, and where they're located geographically and socially.
- Kathryn seconds the idea of asset mapping, and emphasized the home-based small businesses in town, and observed that Leverett has attracted a lot of people who are creative and active -- she counted 27 nonprofits based in town, which is great because they add to our community, even if they don't add to the commercial tax base.
- Arlyn said that in Leverett the arts are very important to the community. There are many professional and amateur artists in Leverett, and she believes this makes Leverett very attractive. Emily pointed out that there's a noticeable lack of a cultural organization that could be similar to the historical organizations we have, which they could discuss further.
- David said that Belchertown is working on a cultural initiative to grant a parcel of 400 acres to a Native American community. He wonders if Leverett could explore a way to come to terms with its own Native American grievances and history and present-day cultural activities.
- Next meeting will be Thursday, June 2 at 5:30pm, at Town Hall and on Zoom. She will produce a draft of the report, and the Working Group will review and provide feedback on the draft. Also, the Planning Board has begun working on the grant application for the next phase of the Comprehensive Plan, and the Working Group will provide comment on the scope of work for that grant application.