

## **Master Plan Working Group meeting #4 minutes**

Thursday, June 2, 5:30 to 7pm

At Town Hall and on Zoom

**WG Attendance by Zoom:** David Henion, Lizzie Alwan, Kathy Stoddard, Miles Palmer, Kim VanWagner

**WG Attendance in person at Town Hall:** Silas Ball, Arlyn Diamond, Denzel Hankinson

**Planning Consultant:** Emily Innes

**Planning Board member observers:** Tim Shores, Tom Ewing, Steve Freedman

Minutes taken by Tim Shores

- **Review of tasks**
  - Emily presented the Working Group (WG) Existing Conditions report draft that she shared by email (Tim shared a printed copy with Silas a couple days before this meeting). The WG has two weeks to review and send comments and questions to Emily.
    - Today's discussion should focus on what the WG noticed about the report: What was surprising? What was missing? What works, and what doesn't work?
  - Tim updated the WG on the phase 2 grant application for \$75,000: after Planning Board members Tim, Tom Ewing and Swan Keyes collaborated on the draft, Town Admin Margie McGinnis submitted it to the Massachusetts Community One Stop for Growth online platform. We expect to find out the award results by October.
- **Discussion of report draft**
  - Arlyn: Some parts of the report are easier to address than others. She was surprised to see the median home price near \$400,000, which is significantly higher than the town median income. We should also ask about the factors of our regional economy, such as incomes and jobs, in order to distinguish what is under the town's control (like open spaces, trails, zoning that attracts housing suitable for younger families) and what is not (incomes, real estate market), and reflect this distinction in the report.
    - Tom Ewing supported this idea.
    - Emily responded supportively, explaining that identifying land use change goals, and the zoning and policy changes to achieve those goals, was the original purpose of Comprehensive Planning. The planning practice has grown over time to include more elements, some of them not fully under municipal control. However, a town can exercise influence. Municipal governments can change staffing resources and delegation, including of volunteers, take more proactive approach to partnering with community and regional groups, advocate for community action, advocate for regional and state initiatives. She observed that the fragmentation of Leverett

town government across many boards and committees could be better organized according to the guidance of a Comprehensive Plan.

- Kathy noticed that the report spoke of the challenge of having a narrow tax rate, and the importance of preventing tax rate growth in order to stay safely below the Proposition 2 ½ tax rate limit of \$25 per \$1,000 in assessed value. Given this immediate need, the historical documents and maps seem less important.
  - Emily agreed about the priority of Prop 2 ½, and pointed out that though it may not be important for this town's needs, the state requires that a Comp Plan include analysis and planning of Historical and Cultural Resources. This subject matter in the existing conditions will also better inform a planning consultant who comes with expertise in Western Mass rural economy.
- Denzel asked how closely will planning be to the budgeting process? Will the Comp Plan provide direct guidelines for budgeting?
  - Emily: The final Plan can provide direct guidelines. Defining workable budget guidelines depend a lot on how well a town's staff are included in the planning and implementation process.
- David pointed out that we have a Leverett Historical Commission and a Leverett Historical Society that seem to sometimes work against each other's interests. He thinks they're both doing good work, but they should be in closer alignment for planning purposes. There have been ideas and recommendations recently about development of historic town centers, but not a clear alignment on support for this.
  - Kathryn agreed and pointed out that there is overlap in their membership.
  - Tim clarified that the LHS is a private organization, whereas LHC is public.
- Tom explained the background of the plan: the Revenue Committee spent two years researching commercial development opportunities for the town. The work included a survey of over 300 residents and discussions with planners and developers. The idea of adaptive reuse for historic town centers and buildings gained momentum on that committee. However, more recently it has become clear that there is disagreement about this idea, and about other development ideas. After a couple of years of Revenue Committee research (Tom and Tim were both on that committee), the revenue development idea evolved into Planning Board support to pursue a Comp Plan. Planning Board members and others agreed that there was a lack of clear information that everyone could access, and this makes it difficult to have clear discussion about making changes and resolving problems. One of the top goals is to build widespread awareness and agreement among residents on the Comp Plan as a common set of facts that anyone can refer to when proposing or discussing public initiatives, such as zoning changes, warrant articles, or committee decisions,

- Tim replied that it's worth emphasizing: The hope is that the Comp Plan becomes a shared set of facts about the town – no agreement is perfect, but a common agreement can be achieved. Therefore, the WG task is to ask: Is there anything in this Existing Conditions report draft that doesn't belong? Is there anything missing from this report draft that must be included? This will help us create a better report, and next year it will help the town create a better plan that informs everyone of a realistic set of choices and tradeoffs.
- Arlyn observed that the report draft is missing a notion of values. There are many intentional communities in Leverett – she has in mind churches, ashrams, the Peace Pagoda, Hands Across the Hills, Leverett Connects. Hadley may provide a cautionary tale of what happens when a town opens up too much to commerce. Too much commerce could result in a declining sense of community in Leverett.
  - Silas said, "Amen".
  - Emily agreed, and described the planning processes of community visioning, and further on, the process of exploring different development scenarios. Rather than pursue a singular kind of commercial development, there are many different kinds of economic development that could be designed to fit the town, the land, and the community.
- Kim commented on the absence of climate change documentation in the Existing Conditions data. She did notice a hazard mitigation plan on the town website. It would also be useful to add more resources about circulation (transportation), including trail guides and trail maintenance, especially in terms of senior accessibility.
- Lizzie has a recommendation for how to improve planning outreach and advocacy. She likes the asset mapping approach, but would like to hear more about where an asset map (and knowledge resources) could be stored for resident ease of access. Leverett Connects is accessible, but perhaps too broad for town resources like this. It would also help to have a usable place to receive ideas and requests from residents.
  - Emily replied that she has seen many towns struggle with civic software management, both in terms of the resources required to buy and make good use of it, but also in terms of the work of balancing transparency and permanence with digital public records keeping. Researching suitable systems would be a good summer research project for Leverett planning.
- Kathy suggested taking a step back, to ask what is most important at this stage? It's good that we have a lot of data. Referring to Tom's description of the planning background, we've identified the concern about the Prop 2 ½ tax limit, documented awareness of the revenue imbalance due to a single property that supplies approximately 10% of tax revenue, and concerns about whether that property will become incorporated as a nonprofit asset to the detriment of the town revenue. This led the town to a

discussion of how to develop economically. She wants to make room for the possibility that the community will choose not to develop economically.

- Emily described scenario planning and fiscal impact studies that the Comp Plan could present when the time comes to discuss options and tradeoffs. The planning consultant will be able to present different levels of development including a zero development or minimal development scenario. The scenarios will include projections of fiscal impact on revenue and services. This will give residents tangible options and tradeoffs to discuss.
- Kim suggested that we will need to pin down the community's response to the question, "who are we?" We should have the values discussion before the scenario planning.
  - Emily suggested that she designed the phase 2 timeline without specifying the order of the values discussion and the economic scenario discussion. The order should itself be up to the town. Either order is valid, but she suggests that establishing values first could be problematic if chosen values will only map to options with difficult tradeoffs.
- Denzel showed a large textbook that he brought, and suggested including it in Existing Conditions data: a History of Leverett, written by a Field family member around 30 years ago.
- David requested that Emily suggest gaps in our data, based on her experience.
  - Emily said that she has seen many rural communities face a conflict between beauty and commerce. She suggests that we'd be served by better data on the value of these to our town and community.
  - She also suggested that there's a gap in economic data to do with proximity effects: we have Amherst and Boston expenses, without the benefits, amenities, and revenue potential of Amherst and Boston.
- Tim asked if Com Planning can include fiscal impact timelines, since development can take many years to deliver an impact. People are likely to spend a long time wondering what all of this was for.
  - Emily replied that it's possible to estimate timelines for fiscal impact, with limited precision depending on the methodology.
- Tom explained the importance of understanding the difference between tax rate and tax burden. Tax rate was a top concern in town for many years, because Leverett's tax rate is high and the state's Proposition 2 ½ has a hard limit of \$25 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. The Revenue Committee's report analyzed tax rate growth trends, and found that it has not been growing as quickly as it seems at a glance, and since property values have gone up so much, the tax rate has actually been going back down. With this concern less of a priority, there is still a problem of tax burden, or the total dollar amount a property owner pays the town in taxes in a year, has created a problem of affordability in

Leverett. The Planning Board's hope is that the Comp Plan will provide evidence-driven guidance on housing development, and on commercial development if possible, that will broaden the tax base and reduce tax burden. Nobody wants to reduce expenses because this would amount to a reduction in the amount or quality of town services, and people in general don't want to reduce services ... this means we must add development to broaden the tax base in order to improve affordability while keeping up with sustainable growth of services and expenses.

- Tim added that Ken Kahn from the Planning Board added Regionalization of town services as an element of interest to Leverett's Comp Plan. This is an important detail, for two reasons: if the Leverett community does advocate for a low or no development scenario, then we will need to explore regionalization of police, fire, education, highway, and other services in order to continue to afford them; or, if the community advocates for more development, but the fiscal impact timeline is longer than we can afford to wait, we will need to explore regionalization of town services to avoid overwhelming our revenue potential prior to development impact.
- Kim suggested that this description, particularly what Tom described about tax rate and tax burden, be included in the report as a logic model, and communicated to others in town. She found it very helpful to her own understanding of the goals and needs of this planning process.
- Kathy suggested that the report include information about the cost of services vs. the revenue benefit of added buildable lots, especially since the number and parameters of buildable lots will be one of the most important planning levers that the town has control over.
  - Emily replied that the fiscal impact analysis will focus on this detail.
- Kim recommended consideration of local economy in asset mapping, to support finding creative ways to reduce expenses by relying on local skills and services. With this in mind, the town budget can itself be seen as a statement of community values.
  - Emily replied that this is a good theme for community discussion, as a way to explore how to synthesize values and economic scenarios.
- Silas remarked that the choice of whether to grow or not to grow has already been made by our zoning bylaw. To enable future change, the zoning must change. We can only plan so far into the future. Given that the Comp Plan won't be useful forever, how do we know that it can guide us toward the amount of zoning changes that Leverett needs to achieve the kind of growth that Leverett needs?
  - Emily explained that the gold standard is to review a Comp Plan every 10 years. Zoning impact is always slow, so the planning consultant will analyze existing conditions to identify low hanging fruit: big zoning changes that can be implemented early on for maximum impact.

- Kathy replied that the town is limited by its hilly topography and lack of water and sewer, and the zoning is already designed to optimize buildability on the land that we have. We may need to resolve these big infrastructural changes before we can know what big zoning changes to propose.
  - Emily replied that there is a lot of field data and expertise on the fiscal impact of water and sewer infrastructure investment, and this can inform scenarios and fiscal impact studies. She is consulting on a plan for water and sewer in another town right now, and at Tom Ewing's request, will provide reports related to that.
- Tim said that he also wonders about how a Comp Plan could support a series of smaller, incremental changes to zoning over several years. If conditions change unexpectedly during that time, it would be nice to know we can consult with a planner to correct course, rather than invest in an entirely new plan.
  - Emily replied that Comp Plans are designed to be modified and updated periodically, and it's much easier to correct course when the town has a Comp Plan in place.

Meeting adjourned at 7:10pm