

# TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT

## PLANNING COMMISSION

### Minutes of March 8, 2023

**7:00 pm at Brown Public Library Community Room  
(also available remotely via Town Zoom Account)**

The meeting was called to order at 7:15 pm by Clerk Mitch Osiecki.

**Roll Call:** Present for the meeting were Planning Commission members Julie Lappin, Royal Delegge, Steve Davis, and Stephen Fitzhugh. Also present was Clerk Mitch Osiecki. Also in attendance were Economic Director Tom Davis and Juli Beth Hinds of Birchline Planning.

All participants were in attendance at the Community Room, except Tom Davis and Juli Beth Hinds, who participated via Zoom.

**Public Participation:** Mitch Osiecki led a round of introductions.

#### **Organizational Meeting:**

Discussion of meeting date and time. Consensus that the PC will meet on the first Wednesday of the month at 6:30.

*Terms of office.* The Select Board, when making appointments to the Planning Commission, appointed members to unexpired terms as follows:

- Stephen Fitzhugh: one-year term, expiring in 2024
- Royal Delegge and Steve Davis: two-year terms, expiring in 2025
- Julie Lappin: three-year term, expiring in 2024
- There is one open seat, a four-year expiring in 2025

#### *Election of officers*

Steve Davis nominated Stephen Fitzhugh as Chair; Royal Delegge seconded.

Vote to approve: 4-0-0.

Royal Delegge nominated Julie Lappin as Vice-Chair; Steve Davis seconded.

Vote to approve: 4-0-0.

#### **Zoning Regulations**

Juli Beth Hinds presented an overview of the history of zoning regulations in Northfield. Zoning regulations were first adopted in 1973 and have been amended periodically, most recently in 2017.

Currently, some of our regulations are out of compliance with state law. Others are confusing.

When the Planning Commission undertook revisions to the current regulations, the first step was to reorganize the document in order to improve readability. Juli Beth explained that she is working with the town under grant deadline that will require a draft to be completed by the end of May. This deadline may require that the PC defer some tweaks to the regulations to a later date.

Brief discussion of Home Occupation regulations. Juli Beth noted that if the Planning Commission has the time and inclination to delve into the subject, it would be useful to clarify questions such as what exactly constitutes a home occupation, along with what rights (and limitations) might properly be considered.

Other, meaty considerations, such as creating new conservation districts, or making substantive changes to allowable uses in existing districts, or revising density standards, might best be deferred to a later date.

Question from Steve Fitzhugh: what is the status of the floodplain regulations?

Juli Beth explained that the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is currently remapping flood hazard areas. The CVRPC recommends that we wait until that project is completed in our region before updating flood regulations. The state has a model law that we will be able to adopt and basically drop into our regulations as an amendment. Updated flood mapping should be completed in late 2023 or 2024.

Discussion of the process for adopting revised zoning regulations. The process is essentially as follows:

- The PC will need to warn and hold a Public Hearing on the revised regulations;
- The PC will approve a final draft, including feedback from Public Hearing;
- The Select Board will then warn and hold another Public Hearing;
- The Select Board will vote on a final version of the revised zoning regulations.

Juli Beth will pass along a revised draft of the current regulations, which Mitch will share with all members. We should have another revision available by the date of our April meeting as well.

Mitch will provide PC members with copies of documents of interest: Town Plan, current zoning regulations, draft of reorganized and revised regulations.

Juli Beth departed approximately 7:45.

Mitch discussed with the Planning Commission some other general organizational and other matters addressed in the zoning regulations that we might wish to revise. These include:

- Composition and procedures of the Planning Commission and Development Review Board. The Select Board can adopt separate policies covering these matters; they don't need to be included in the zoning regulations. An advantage of this change is that it's easier for the Select Board to make changes to these items as separate policies. If they're embedded within the zoning regulations, changes can only be made by amending the zoning regulations, which as described above, is a multi-step process;
- Enforcement of regulations. Currently, enforcement of zoning regulations requires the zoning administrator to issue a formal Notice of Violation, which triggers imposition of a fine that accrues daily until the violation is corrected. Under current regulations, the town must take the matter to the State Superior (Environmental) Court seeking a judgement in the town's favor. This is a time-consuming and expensive process. An alternative remedy exists, which is for the town to issue a civil citation for zoning violations. If we use this method, the matter can be resolved through civil (small claims) court, rather than the Superior Court. This is a remedy we might want to consider adding to our regulations.

Mitch also advised the PC that Juli Beth has offered to lead a brief presentation she calls Planning & Zoning in Vermont 101, to help get everyone up to speed on the general duties of the Planning Commission.

Mitch also provided the PC with a broad overview of the board's primary duties (revising the Town Plan, and revising zoning regulations). Beyond those broad duties, the PC might have the time and energy to pursue other planning projects. Some examples: wildlife or natural resource management or protection; housing issues; supporting infrastructure such as bike paths, trails, or expanding municipal water or sewer service.

Mitch also discussed some other resources (Vermont League of Cities & Towns, Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission). Mitch mentioned that Northfield does not currently have a representative to the CVRPC. It would be reasonable for a PC member to volunteer for that role. No hurry, but something to consider. CVRPC holds a monthly meeting, which the town's representative would typically attend.

The CVRPC also has a Transportation Committee, which could also use a Northfield representative. Tom Davis is currently serving in that role, but he may prefer to step aside to focus on his core missions if another representative steps forward.

Mitch advised the PC about a series of Town Forums that are planned over the next three months. Each discussion will feature six topics, such as public safety, housing, Norwich, recreation, etc. Residents are encouraged to attend, schedule permitting.

**Next Meeting:** Wednesday, April 5 at 6:30 pm.

Note: Juli Beth will be in Vermont the week of April 16

We may try to convene a brief special meeting that week – date to be determined.

**Adjournment:** Steve Davis moved to adjourn; Julie Lappin seconded.

**Motion carried, 4-0-0.**

Meeting adjourned at 8:38 pm.