

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
PLANNING COMMISSION SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes of April 20, 2023

The meeting was called to order at 9:03 am.

Roll Call: Present for the meeting were Planning Commission members Stephen Fitzhugh, Julie Lappin, Royal DeLegge, Blake Pierson, and Steve Davis. Also present: Clerk Mitch Osiecki and Juli Beth Hinds of Birchline Planning. (Steve Davis joined the meeting in-progress at approximately 10:50 am).

Adjustments to Agenda: None.

Zoning Regulations

Juli Beth Hinds led a discussion of some of the open items on revisions to the town's zoning regulations.

At the April 5th meeting, Mitch had mentioned to the PC that organizations such as the Ventral Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC) or the Vermont League of Cities & Towns (VLCT) may be able to perform a review of the final draft zoning regulations. Juli Beth agreed that having someone review the draft regulations could be valuable but recommends that we consider using a law firm for this review. Juli Beth can suggest some firms we might want to consider. Mitch will follow up.

Juli Beth noted that the current draft has a stray section break, so the page numbering is incorrect. Will correct in the next release.

Discussion of section 5.5 – Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)

Question about the requirement that either the principal dwelling or the ADU must be owner-occupied. This was an intentional decision by the legislature. Among other things, this provision prevents adding extra rental properties by absentee landlords. The legislature believes this should reduce instances of excessive noise and other undesirable behavior by renters.

Discussion of provisions of hearing notification. Can we specify "town web site" rather than "electronically?" Yes, we can.

Discussion of the requirement for a zoning permit to raze a structure. Northfield used to have such a requirement, but it was dropped at some point. PC could recommend requiring such a permit if it seems worthwhile. Ultimately, it will be up to the Select Board whether or not this requirement is reintroduced.

Brief discussion of permits for retaining walls. The gist of things is that, in rural areas, where lots are large, a failed retaining wall is likely to affect only the landowner who constructed the wall.

However, in the village where lots are small and structures are close together, a failed retaining wall is more likely to create a hardship for an adjacent property owner. PC should arrive at a consensus recommendation, but the Select Board will have to make the final decision on this as well.

Discussion of temporary Certificates of Occupancy. Northfield currently requires a C/O only for development with the flood hazard area. Municipalities often require a C/O upon completion of most permitted structures. C/O must be issued before a structure may be occupied or otherwise used. The requirement that a C/O be issued can be a useful tool for enforcement of zoning regulations.

Discussion of Home Occupations. Juli Beth described an approach wherein relatively low-impact home occupations could be allowed without issuance of a zoning permit. For instance, “benign home occupation might be one where several standards are met, such as:

- No more than two employees, one of whom is a principal resident of the property.
- No on-site sales.
- No parking/traffic impacts.

A proposed home occupation that is more “intensive” than characterized above would require a home occupation permit, notification of neighboring property owners, and a public hearing before the DRB.

Discussion of section 6.2.5, particularly the ability of the DRB to waive (or reduce) requirement for off-street parking spaces. Reduction by 25% or 50% might be appropriate, but perhaps not more than that.

Discussion of section 2.6.9, particularly the “character of the neighborhood.”

Discussion of height requirements. Many communities restrict building heights to 35 feet in all districts. Taller heights might be appropriate in the Village and Institutional districts.

Stephen Fitzhugh departed at 11:20.

Juli Beth discussed plans to provide one more revised draft in the next few days.

Julie Lappin asked whether Juli Beth might be available to lead discussion of the zoning regulation revisions at either the Planning Commission or Select Board public hearings. Juli Beth agreed that she could do so.

Approval of Minutes: Tabled until next meeting.

Next Meeting:

Wednesday, May 3, 6:30 pm at Community Room

Adjournment:

The meeting adjourned at 11:25 am.