

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
NORTHFIELD COMMON REHABILITATION
PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING
Minutes of May 16, 2024

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board members Merry Shernock and John Stevens. Also present were Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Emily Lewis (Project Manager, DuBois & King), Sally Davidson, Bethany Drum, Richard Wobby, Gail Hall, Beulah Mazogi, and Shauna Foran.

The meeting was called to order at 5:00 p.m.

- II. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Scheduled):** None.

- III. APPROVAL OF MINUTES: April 24, 2024.** Motion by Mr. Wobby, seconded by Ms. Davidson, to approve the minutes. **Motion passed without objection.**

IV. DISCUSSION

- a. Public Meeting Follow-up.** Manager Schulz said there was great attendance at the public meeting held in the Community Room two (2) weeks ago (05/02/24) and there were many good comments regarding the Common Rehabilitation Project. He added that we also have been receiving a good number of responses to the online and hardcopy project surveys. Ms. Lewis said we have received about 185 responses since the survey was first circulated early last month. All but about ten (10) of the survey responses were online and Ms. Lewis felt tomorrow (05/17/24) might be a good time to close down the online survey. Mr. Wobby agreed, saying that he didn't think any additional online responses would be received at this point. Motion by Mr. Wobby, seconded by Ms. Davidson, to shut down the online survey on Friday, May 17, 2024. Ms. Lewis said we could continue to collect the hardcopy surveys for a while in case residents haven't been able to access copies to date. Mr. Wobby didn't feel this would really change the survey results. Ms. Lewis said she expected to have about two hundred (200) completed surveys all together and she thought that was a fairly good response for a community this size. **Motion passed without objection.**

Ms. Lewis said she has only skimmed through the survey responses so far but she will produce a deeper summary at a later time. Mr. Wobby thought that a few of the survey questions were rather open ended so it might be difficult to easily summarize the results. Ms. Lewis will be using ChatGPT to help with the summarization as this software helps to categorize general themes, etc. She added that there are some recurrent elements in the surveys, such as residents wanting more and better benches, tables, accessible bathrooms, etc. The survey also included a number of positive statements about the Common and how it could be improved. Ms. Davidson felt that some of the current benches and chairs are not suitable for older and/or disabled persons. Ms. Lewis thought that was a good point. Ms. Hall said that greater accessibility was a topic that came up frequently at the public meeting. Board member Shernock said that one suggestion that surprised her was to move the old fountain to the Northfield Historical Society.

At the previous committee meeting, Ms. Foran brought up the possibility of expanding the Common green space by eliminating the parking spaces around the interior of Depot Square (not the storefronts). She asked if that possibility might still be under consideration. Mr. Wobby did not see that as a possible options as one topic that came up during the public meeting was the lack of nearby parking during popular events, such as Farmers Market and Friday nights when the American Legion hosted special activities.

Mr. Wobby said one possible way to increase the Common green space would be to eliminate those trees that have overgrown the location. Ms. Davidson has spoken to some residents who would like the trees kept in place as they provide comfortable shade on summer days, etc. Ms. Hall thought that a wider sidewalk around the perimeter of the Common would improve accessibility to the interior for wheelchair occupants, etc. Mr. Wobby remembers seeing a park in Washington DC that had sets of inner and outer sidewalks with vendors located in the space between. He added that this park had a much larger footprint than our Common. Ms. Davidson said the surveys did indicate that residents do appreciate the Common's green spaces. Ms. Foran thought closing down some or all of Depot Square to vehicular traffic could turn this into a pedestrian plaza. Mr. Wobby didn't think this would ever happen due to the adverse effect it would have on the merchants located around Depot Square. Ms. Foran suggested that perhaps the Farmers Market could be relocated elsewhere in order to better accommodate the accompanying entertainment, etc. Ms. Lewis said that could be a consideration but is probably beyond the scope of this project. She felt it was very possible that the way the Common is used will change in the future. Mr. Wobby agreed that it is possible the Farmers Market could outgrow its Common footprint at some point. He did feel that any plans developed for the Common through this project should be designed for the long term. Ms. Lewis said she plans to attend the Farmers Market next week to observe its operations and also interact with vendors and patrons. As for other outreach attempts, Ms. Lewis said she has tried to engage with local school administrators about student involvement. Unfortunately, the email responses she has received have not been encouraging. Since the school year will end in about a month, Ms. Lewis said any engagement with local youth might have to occur outside of the schools. Board member Shernock will make her own attempts to contact school officials about coordinating in-school outreach sessions with the students. Ms. Lewis thanked her for this.

Mr. Wobby asked if there have been any new developments regarding the outreach to local businesses. Manager Schulz had nothing new to report other than that Economic Development Director Tom Davis has begun to prepare the groundwork for this. Mr. Wobby felt obtaining the views of local business leaders should be done before any recommendations for Common rehabilitation are developed. Board member Shernock noted that very few attended the public meeting. Mr. Wobby feels they should be considered important stakeholders in the process, nevertheless. Manager Schulz said there will be a separate survey drafted for the local business owners.

Ms. Lewis thought it would be very useful to have an informational booth for this project at upcoming Farmers Markets. She would be willing to attend herself in order to engage with anyone with questions, suggestions, etc. Ms. Lewis thought it might be helpful to put together some project posters beforehand. Another future public engagement event would be the design workshop where community members would be able to start putting their ideas down on paper. Those ideas would later be brought back by DuBois & King to be included among the project recommendations. Ms. Foran thought it would be useful if the posters included examples of similar common space rehabilitation projects done in other communities. Ms. Lewis agreed that it would be helpful to show elements from similar projects in order to represent popular notions of what could be done to improve the Northfield Common based on successful efforts elsewhere. Ms. Foran believed that visual illustrations would make it easier for residents to understand what could be done here. Ms. Lewis said it is necessary to start moving towards the design phase of this project now that the bulk of local feedback has been received. She said that this public engagement was always considered to be a major component of this project in order to develop recommendations that would have broad support.

Manager Schulz agreed that it would be useful to have some visual depictions of rehabilitation possibilities that are based on the public feedback to date. As we are in the very early stage of the design phase of this project, these depictions don't need to be too elaborate or detailed. Mr. Wobby thought it would be best to focus on possibilities that would be based on the current Common footprint. This could include such options such as new tables, benches, etc.

Ms. Lewis then showed on the computer screen a document that DuBois & King created for the "Milton Downtown Core Master Plan." It showed how the Milton VT town center area then appeared as well as depictions of how it could be enhanced. Ms. Lewis noted that this project involved a much larger space than the Northfield Common project. The attached snapshot depictions of the various options included boxes where the survey taker could indicate whether they liked or disliked the suggested each particular option. Ms. Lewis then showed the "Richford Streetscape Visionary" project that allowed the survey taker to choose between alternatives for crosswalk painting, bike rack designs, bench options, etc. Board member Shernock was particularly fond of this presentation. Ms. Lewis will provide draft versions of similar handouts for the Northfield Common Rehabilitation project for the committee members' review before they are distributed to the general public. She would like the design workshop scheduled for mid-June 2024 and would like these graphic depictions available for the workshop participants. Ms. Lewis said she would be present at the May 28, 2024 Farmers Markets but would be out-of-town the next couple of weeks. She suggested that her DuBois & King colleague Cait Campbell would be able to attend the next market (06/04/24). After some discussion, a tentative date was set for the design workshop on Thursday, June 20, 2024 at 6:00 p.m. Ms. Hall will check tomorrow and reserve the Community Room for that night if it is available.

- b. Other Items.** As he did not attend the initial committee meetings, Mr. Wobby asked if he could get a copy of the DuBois & King project proposal and the signed contract for the Northfield Common Rehabilitation project. Manager Schulz will provide copies for him and for any of the other committee members who would like to have it.

V. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Unscheduled). There was none.

VI. ADJOURNMENT. Without objection, the meeting was adjourned at 6:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

These minutes are subject to approval at the next committee meeting.