

Greensboro Selectboard

April 24, 2024 – Minutes

[This was a hybrid meeting held at Lakeview School, with some participants joining remotely]

SELECTBOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Ellen Celnik, David Kelley, Peter Romans, Eric Hanson, MacNeil

SELECTBOARD MEMBERS ABSENT: None

OTHERS PRESENT in person: Tom Guare, Brian Niemi, Jane Hoffman, Sarah Lammert, Patti Sunday-Winters, Nat Winters, Cynthia West, Davis Barnett, Devin Burgess, Angie Kehler, Dave Brush, Matt Benham, Bill Berman, Jay Barrett, John Schweizer, Elizabeth Baum, Brett Stanciu, Kim Greaves, Josh Karp, Chief Dave Brochu, Jr., Erika Karp, Bobbie Nisbet, Tim Nisbet, Dawn Morgan, Rick Morrill, Patrick Shattuck, Meghan Meachem, Kyle Gray, Ed Sunday-Winters, Jennifer Ranz, Nancy Hill, Alex Utevsky, Tim Brennan, Sherral Lumsden, John Mackin, Hal Gray, Sandy Gebbie, Elissa Mackin, Naomi Ranz-Schleifer, Rob Brigham, Linda Shatney, Mateo Kehler, Lynette Courtney, John Moffatt, Mike Lammert, Nancy Lammert, Jig Gresser, Ila Hunt, Wayne Young, Mary Young, Karl Stein, Terry O'Connor, Rick Ely, Linda Ely, Becky Arnold, Keisha Luce, Alice Perron, Meghan Wayland, Galen Fisher, Craig Dezell, Rod Kerr, Nat Smith, Stew Arnold, Fan Watkinson, Liz Steel, Jennifer Lucas, Jerilyn Virden, Mavis MacNeil, Skip Hoblin, David Allen, Mike Reddy, William Rodgers, Rosann Hickey Cook, Janice Dinsdale

OTHERS PRESENT remote: Sally Wallace, Tony Acheson, Margaret Altman, Aileen Gebbie, Alden Launer, Anne Altman, Anne Stevens, Auriel Gray, Bethany Warner, BJ Gray, Brittany Butler, Cathy Irwin, Della Hall, Dana Bascom, Dede Stabler, Diana Cazaudumec, Eleanor Guare, Elizabeth Sartorius, Erik Synnestvedt, Janet Long, Jay Modry, Jeffery Bennett, Jess Nichols, John Stone, Judy Carpenter, Katherine Simpson, Kathy Watson, Linda Ramsdell, Lindsay Beer, Lisa Yokana, Lise Armstrong, Liz Hatch, Louisa Mattson, Margaret White, Megan Wright, Melissa Moffatt, Mimi Benedict, Nancy Riege, Rick Lovett, Robert Merrill, Robert Calcagni, Robin Hardy, Samantha Friend, Sheila Dillon, Stefanie Cravedi, Steve Kirby, Valerie Carter, Nick Sowles, Shaun Hill, Michelle Mackin, John Reynolds, Vince Razionale, Glenn Olds

Meeting began 6:45 PM

Zoning Administrator Brett Stanciu announced there's an open seat on the Development Review Board, and for anyone interested to let her know by the end of the day on Monday 4/29. She added there are also two open seats on the Planning Commission.

PUBLIC MEETING ON THE RURALEDGE PROPOSAL TO TURN THE TOWN HALL INTO HOUSING UNITS

Introduction

MacNeil presented a history of how this proposal came to be. In the spring of 2019, a housing committee, a subcommittee of the Planning Commission, was formed and was chaired by Kent Hansen and Ellen Celnik. The Planning Commission hired Development Cycles to perform a housing assessment. One of the recommendations was that the town partner with non-profit housing developer RuralEdge.

While housing didn't end up being a top priority at the 2019 Greater Greensboro meetings, this was because the housing committee was already actively working on the issue.

The updated town plan was approved in late 2019 with housing as a major goal.

The housing committee reached out to RuralEdge about constructing new housing, and while sites in the Bend and Village were discussed for a few years, these were no longer an option after increases in property values due to the pandemic. In 2022, with WonderArts no longer pursuing a renovation of the town hall, RuralEdge was invited to evaluate the building for a potential housing project.

Ellen said after the option agreement was signed between RuralEdge and the town in May 2023, the Selectboard discussed holding a public meeting about the project. She wished the meeting had happened, but before it could be scheduled the July flood came, and the meeting never occurred.

Written questions answered by Patrick Shattuck and the Selectboard

Town moderator Tim Nisbet read questions about the project that had been submitted to the town, which were answered by RuralEdge executive director Patrick Shattuck (PS) and Selectboard members.

Q: How does the scale of this project compare to other RuralEdge projects?

PS: RuralEdge's largest project in St. Johnsbury has 48 units.

Q: Can this project be smaller?

PS: These projects need to be a certain scale to be sustainable to operate. You not only need to build it, but operate it for the long term. RuralEdge considered 18 units to be the minimum size to work here, and we looked initially at 24 units but went down to 20 units, after deciding to add more of the larger three-bedroom units.

Q: Can the town offices move to the Grange?

PS: This could happen, but initial investigations show this would be an expensive option, as the site and building have numerous challenges. While it would be possible to pump Grange wastewater across the road to the town hall's new septic system, Patrick recommended leaving the town offices in the town hall basement.

Q: Parking for tenants and the town offices?

PS: We've made sure there will be enough parking spaces, our housing projects don't have parking issues.

Q: Doesn't this project destroy the town's rural character?

PS: I wouldn't be proposing a project that would do that. We believe it will enhance the town's rural character. RuralEdge commonly takes over older, underutilized buildings and restores them for housing, and our projects are often transformational for communities.

Q: What architectural features of the building will be maintained?

PS: The pressed tin and wood wainscoting interiors will be preserved, and the building will be reinsulated from the exterior. This will be reasonable to do since the exterior features and details are not complicated.

Q: Will the project need Act 250 approval?

A: While Patrick said the project must meet all local zoning requirements, he didn't clarify the question of Act 250, other than saying the legislature recently proposed changes to the development law to make building housing less burdensome.

Q: Do we need another housing study?

PS: We know people need housing. We've done a housing needs assessment for the NEK overall along with a local needs assessment for the Greensboro area - plus the Planning Commission undertook the 2019 housing assessment and housing survey as noted earlier.

Q: Is there septic capacity for the project?

PS: We've gotten confirmation that a septic system can be installed on the village green.

Q: Will rents be affordable? Is this subsidized low-income housing?

PS: Rents will range from \$833/month for one-bedroom units up to \$1387 for three-bedroom units, with all utilities and heat included. This is not subsidized housing, it's just affordable rent for those with moderate incomes. We're seeking grant funding to support construction costs to help keep rents below market rate. We set rents partly based on pay rates of local businesses.

Q: Landscaping and energy efficiency features?

PS: Most of the village green will become a leach field, but it will still be maintained as a green, available for the public's use - though without vehicle access. In our developments, we try to minimize hardscapes and maintain as many trees as possible. The existing raised beds can be maintained and expanded.

We consult with Efficiency VT for all our projects, and design our buildings to be very efficient. This building would be covered by the VT energy code which requires some EV charging stations and the capacity to add more. The heating system hasn't been designed, but some of our buildings use heat pumps and pellet boilers.

Q: Who will be the tenants and what kind of screening is done?

PS: This housing is for working people, families, retired folks. The local needs assessment showed the need for all types of housing, including accessible smaller one-bedroom units for older folks. We do extensive background checks for prospective tenants. For those concerned about drugs and crime, we have a very strong lease and we enforce it.

Town residents will be given six months advanced notice for the new units, prior to them being added to our main list.

Q: Is this the kind of housing renters want?

PS: I think it is, given that RuralEdge is managing over 700 units and has long waiting lists.

Q: Who manages these units?

PS: We have a property management team that takes care of every aspect of the property. We are not an absentee landlord; we are on site often and have cameras around the building to help us keep an eye on things. Sometimes you have tenant personality conflicts, our goal is to deal with such issues early on. There are tenant meetings, we try to create a healthy, vibrant community. We also offer programs to help elderly and disabled folks stay healthy, active and engaged in their community, including health assessments and screenings. We also offer a variety of classes including cooking and homeownership.

Q: How could this project cost \$10 million?

PS: I've been doing this work for 30 years, and the cost of projects has always been an issue. Now, construction costs are up 30% from just a few years ago. The building will need lead, asbestos, PCB remediation. Fire permits, historic preservation work and energy efficiency upgrades are all expensive, with architectural drawings costing \$400k alone. We have to follow many HUD and VHCB requirements. Some of the funding resources we use are inefficiently structured, adding considerable legal and auditing costs. All these costs are why a single, larger building leads to a more efficient project.

Also, we have to successfully operate this building in perpetuity, and we have to pre-capitalize repair and replacement costs for things like the roof. We have to operate in such a way that we are able to maintain this asset.

Q: What will the town pay for this project, and will RuralEdge pay property taxes?

PS: The town pays nothing, this is RuralEdge's project. We estimate RuralEdge will pay the town \$20k a year in property taxes.

Q: How much does the town hall currently cost to operate?

A: Treasurer Brett Stanciu said the figure is about \$50k per year, and that's with deferred maintenance.

Q: What about the giving closet and recycling center?

PS: The Giving Closet is very consistent with RuralEdge's mission and we want to keep it operating, we'll find a space for it. Many of our developments have food shelves.

Eric said recycling could possibly be moved to the town garage, if a new equipment storage building is constructed at another site. He said if we move to drafting a Purchase & Sales agreement, many of these questions will be negotiated, including the value the town wants for the town hall building, whether the town offices remain in the building, and if so, how that long-term arrangement is structured. The building is appraised at \$390k. Eric said the voters will be able to have their say on this project.

Q: Can RuralEdge sell the redeveloped town hall?

PS: RuralEdge's intent is to own and operate the building in perpetuity. If it was sold, there are perpetual deed restrictions where any buyer would have to manage the building in a very specific way, the same way RuralEdge would be operating it.

Public Comment / Q&A

Ed Sunday-Winters: We're in a state with a housing crisis, and I commend the Selectboard for pursuing this project. The town housing committee and others reached out and networked to find a workable solution. We'll no longer have to maintain this large building and it will go on the tax rolls. This is a transformative opportunity, and I hope we can judge this project on its merits. The process hasn't been perfect but this looks like a gift.

Mike Lammert: You've referenced RuralEdge projects in much larger towns such as St. Johnsbury and Lyndonville. This project is too big for Greensboro Village.

PS: RuralEdge has 28 units in Groton, a town the same size as Greensboro. Other small towns with RuralEdge properties include Irasburg and Gilman.

Rosann Hickey Cook: I live directly across from the town hall. This proposal feels too big to me as well, but I know we need this housing, and I know change is inevitable. But I do have concerns about parking and all the cameras.

John Mackin: The fire district needs to know how much water you'll need, and if we'll be able to supply it. We need enough capacity for our users and also to have well-functioning hydrants for village fire safety.

PS: While the building's water needs have yet to be looked at, we assume that since the building was once a school there will be adequate local water capacity. The building will have sprinklers and storage tanks can be installed as necessary to meet capacity requirements.

Rod Kerr: A part of the overall housing problem is that so much land in Greensboro has been preserved, plus large minimum lot sizes. First, they set aside all this land for conservation, now they're asking for more housing.

Mateo Kehler: The solution is more children. Our business has created many jobs in this community but we're losing folks, and can't fill positions, because there isn't anywhere to live. This project is really 20 years too late, if it was built years ago our school would be thriving now, we're stuck in this feedback loop. This town hasn't invested in anything for a generation at least. If we don't double down to support the community that lives here, what's going to be left? Please consider supporting this project.

Nancy Lammert: Where will parking be, and what about outside lighting?

PS: Both parking and lighting are highly regulated, and yes there will be outside lighting for public safety.

Keisha Luce: People who have housing don't realize how hard it is to find a place to live here, and what it's like to not have stable housing. Many of us are moving from house to house, renting rooms. This project is simply providing some permanent housing.

Alice Perron: I've lived here my entire life. Working at the Greensboro Nursing Home, I can say that we've lost some great staff members because they could not find housing locally. Some nurses drive here from

Lyndonville, a long drive in the winter. We've had teachers turn down contracts because they can't find a place to live. Please consider our local businesses and the school.

Terry O'Connor: Greensboro needs housing but this is not a good site. I can't believe a septic system can be put on the green, and you have to move the recycling center. Let's change zoning so folks can build more housing.

Skip Hoblin: We need to look at the long-term outcomes of what we're trying to do here. For example, Woodstock is all 2nd, 3rd, 4th homes and it's now a dying village. Greensboro is at risk of this.

Dede Stabler: Why wasn't the public involved long ago? Why is the town in the position of the Selectboard making a decision of this magnitude with minimal public input?

MacNeil replied that the community has been involved, the PC formed the housing committee, we've been working on this for five years. Meetings are advertised and we've invited public participation. This is how the process works - we can invite people to show up and contribute, but if folks choose not to get involved, the process continues.

Ellen: Prior to getting elected to the Selectboard, I spent a year attending their meetings and most of the time I was the only member of the public. People have busy lives, they elect Selectboard members who they trust, who then appoint members of the Planning Commission and other town committees, who in turn make things happen in town.

Jennifer Ranz: The town hall belongs to all of us. Tonight, I feel I've been at a sales pitch, but I don't want to buy their proposal. 20 units is out of scale for our community, we need to look for other ways to solve our housing problems, people who own property could build more rental units, duplexes. I wish the Selectboard had included us in this process earlier, this meeting is a year too late – but at least it's happening now.

Tim Brennan: Thank you to the Selectboard and Patrick. I read through all the materials on the town website, it's a very interesting plan that addresses a real need. We've been talking about this for many years, this is a great opportunity. Patrick, if the town votes this project down, what happens if we come back to you in five years looking to do a housing project?

PS: We've got towns calling us every day saying they desperately need housing and want to work with RuralEdge. Many communities believe projects like this are key to town viability. Things have aligned here in Greensboro - we have a building, and we've worked to design a project that, as we understood it, the town wants. I don't think our board would be so excited to come back here in five years if the town rejects this project. We've worked with the town for five years and spent almost \$100k to date, which we're on the hook for if the project doesn't move forward. Our view is that the signing of the option agreement showed that the town intended to move forward with the project, and I'd like to think we're in this together. We feel we've been very transparent, and while I support a public process, our goal is to build housing.

Sheila Dillon: I do affordable housing for a living in Boston. I feel that I've been talked to, this has not really been a back-and-forth conversation, I'm surprised this has been going on for five years. I feel the project is much too big for this site. It's odd that we don't have a site plan to review tonight, this would have specific details and would answer many of the questions we all have. If the town votes this down, there will always be funding rounds in the future.

Meghan Wayland: It's strange for me to not be in favor of this project because I work for an organization that helps people find housing. But the town's 2019 housing study showed that most residents wanted new housing to be small units, either single family homes or duplexes. Some of us would like affordable housing with some land.

Ellen said as much as we'd like to do housing on a smaller scale, if you look at the combined cost of land and construction these small units wouldn't be affordable.

Patrick said sometimes renting an apartment is a stepping stone, RuralEdge has programs to help renters move towards purchasing their own home. In terms of smaller-scale development, he noted that Habitat for Humanity is planning to build a house in Greensboro Bend.

Matt Benham: Working at Jasper Hill Farm, we were initially very lucky to find an affordable rental in Greensboro. This allowed us to save some money and now we've been lucky, again, to find an affordable house in Craftsbury. Some are saying this project is not the right for this community. But you inherited a process, through the creation of the housing committee, and this process has led you here. Ask yourself, if this isn't the project you want, how are you going to move forward and actually create affordable housing in Greensboro?

Mike Reddy: I'm not a fan of RuralEdge's larger scale and bureaucratic "management team" structure. In the 2019 housing study, many were in favor of subsidized buydowns of home values as a way to make them more affordable.

Bill Rodgers: The character of the town is going to change, period, it's not going to stay the same if we turn down this project. We need housing and this sounds like a well thought-out and responsible plan.

Mavis MacNeil: It's interesting to see that those opposed to this project are not in support of what the town really needs. I would love to have more neighbors closer to my age, this would be a positive shift in the character of the town. I moved here during the 2020 pandemic and would have jumped on one of these apartments had one been available. It takes a real stroke of luck to find an affordable place to live in this area. I'm a teacher at Hazen, I've seen people take jobs and then have to leave due to lack of housing.

Bobby Nisbet: I appreciated the big picture review of the process we've gone through to get to this point. Our community has done some amazing things here, taking care of the lake, the village, the land around the village. It's rural, the way we want it to be, and we pat ourselves on the back for these things, it's what makes Greensboro, Greensboro. But what about the people who work here, who make this a place to come back to, employees at Willey's, the Greensboro Garage, the nursing home. These folks meet the needs of our residents and visitors. We're an aging community, who's going to serve on local boards, who's going to deliver your Meals on Wheels? I've been a member of the housing committee and it's been a long haul to get to this point.

Naomi Ranz-Schliefer: It's exciting that we've begun this public conversation. I've heard that a huge barrier to affordable housing is water and wastewater infrastructure. I would really like to see that conversation come first. So much of what we're trying to do in town is based on these things. We have \$6 million on the table for a wastewater project, let's get that going.

Eric Hanson: In fairness to RuralEdge and the housing committee, we need to come to some closure about this project. We need to decide how to proceed, and how the Village Trust Initiative fits into this process. The Selectboard will be discussing the renewal of the option agreement, and if a Purchase and Sales agreement is signed, the voters will then have the choice to vote it up or down.

Naomi Ranz-Schliefer: You should know that if you renew the option agreement, you are relinquishing site control. Since the Village Trust Initiative requires towns to have site control over the buildings in the application, we wouldn't be able to move forward with the VTI application for the town hall.

The meeting ended at 9 PM.

Respectfully Submitted, Josh Karp, Selectboard Clerk