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MORRISTOWN/MORRISVILLE
PLANNING COMMISSION
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Minutes of October 20, 2009

Members Present: Bill Henchey, Lauren Traister, Max Paine, Andrew Volansky, John Meyer

Members Absent: Reeves Larson, Paul Griswold

Staff: Mark Leonard (ZA), Bill Rossmassler (LCPC Planner), Heidi Krantz (Community Coordinator)

Guests: VT AOT Aviation Program Manager Rich Turner, Morrisville-Stowe airport manager Dave Whitcomb, Leon Whitcomb, Rhoda Bedell

Agenda: see attached

Chairman Bill Henchey called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm and introduced the guests. He reviewed the agenda, focusing on zoning issues associated with the Morrisville-Stowe airport. Bill noted that around the country, the biggest challenge airports large & small face is encroachment by residential development, which invariably raises conflicts between the airport and nearby residents. He said the large undeveloped parcels to the west & north of the airport may be up for sale soon, which will intensify the need for compatible zoning.

AOT Aviation Program Manager Rich Turner said there is a statewide study underway to identify 'best practices' for zoning around the state's airports. The study focuses on three areas: the takeoff & landing zones off the end of runways, obstacles & hazards to flight around the airport, and noise & light issues. He said non-residential uses such as commercial, industrial, and agricultural are generally more compatible with airport operations than residential use, owing to complaints from nearby residents about noise typically generated by aircraft operations, as well as safety concerns. He said concerns about existing & potential noise at the Morrisville airport dominated public meetings about proposed airport expansion several years ago.

Max asked about future plans for the airport, including whether there was the potential for regularly scheduled passenger service. Rich said while the Master Plan developed for the Morrisville-Stowe airport identified a desire to extend the runway, there are serious environmental limitations on that project which make it unlikely anytime in the foreseeable future. Without a runway extension, there is no prospect of any sort of scheduled passenger air service, which would also require a costly increase in on-site support services such as fire/rescue, security, and passenger terminal.

Rich did say that there is a currently funded project to shift the existing 3700-foot runway to the south, enhancing the safety zone on both ends of the runway, and to resurface the runway. In conjunction with this project, his department is contacting some nearby property owners regarding purchasing 'avigation' easements which would allow AOT to remove or otherwise limit the height of trees in the safety zones off the south end of the runway.

Airport manager Dave Whitcomb said he sees the airport as an economic development asset to the Morristown community and surrounding towns. It is a plus for local businesses who use it to move people & products in & out of the area more directly than using the Burlington airport and may also entice new businesses to locate here. In addition, the airport supports the local economy by bringing in customers for many of the area shops, restaurants, & lodging businesses. He said most airport traffic is charter & business (corporate) aircraft, in addition to both local & transient private aircraft owners. He, too, doesn't anticipate a commercial passenger carrier ever operating out of Morrisville, but that with current & potential airfield improvements, more of the current types of aircraft could use the airport with fewer operating restrictions.

Bill H said any new airport zoning would have to be defined by geographic points. He posed the question of how far out from the airport should such a zone extend, or should the boundaries be defined by

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other references, such as noise patterns or the airport's local flight paths. Rich Turner replied that specific boundaries would be hard to define and would be driven, in part, by the area's topography and existing land uses. Bill R said the types of uses (commercial? business park? Industrial?) permitted in such a zone would need to be explored. Bill H noted that non-residential development around the area might compete with efforts to revitalize the downtown and to develop the Business Enterprise District (BED) just south of the village.

The ZA noted that the existing Airport Hazard Area (AHA) provisions in the zoning bylaws are focused on aircraft safety, rather than land use and do nothing to limit any type of development involving structures (potential flight hazards) less than fifty feet above the surface. He also drew the members' attention to an obscure footnote in the Commercial zoning district bylaws which applies the zoning in that district to state-owned airport property.

Lauren asked if other state airports are located near high-traffic, scenic corridors like Route 100, or are they located away from heavily-travelled areas. Rich responded that most are more remote than Morrisville's airport and are more often surrounded by industrial areas. He noted that most state airports pre-date local zoning rules.

Heidi said she views the airport as an asset to the town but urged that any contemplated non-residential uses should require adequate screening & setbacks to limit their visual impact along Route 100.

Bill R asked if AOT has partnered with conservation groups to preserve open land around airports, preventing any potentially conflicting development; Rich said no.

John asked Dave Whitcomb if, in his opinion, any of the current visitors using the airport might be turned off by commercial development around the airport. Dave acknowledged that many visitors are drawn to the area for its scenic quality and agreed that new zoning & development should be designed to preserve the scenic quality of the area as much as possible.

Gene Ann Condon offered her opinion that the airport doesn't significantly benefit Morristown, while acknowledging it does help out other towns (most especially Stowe), and that it should not be expanded. She voiced her complaints about frequent flights by a single pilot out of the airport, saying he is the cause of much of the noise objections people have about the airport. Dave explained that how & where pilots operate is governed by the FAA and that this pilot is complying with all applicable FAA rules & restrictions. He explained that the pilot competes in aerobatic events around the country and his frequent flights are practice for such competitions.

Bill H asked if a larger minimum lot size around the area would limit residential encroachment around the airport. Rich said that fewer houses means fewer residents who might object to airport noise.

Bill H thanked those who provided their thoughts on the subject and tasked Bill R to gather more information from other towns in similar situations for the Commission to review.

Heidi provided an update on downtown development projects. She noted that the establishment of a recreational trail along the old railroad route has been delayed by a recent ruling requiring the project obtain a state land use (Act 250) permit. She said she was submitting a grant application for a 3-year redevelopment project along Pleasant Street and another to extend the village sidewalk along Route 100 south of the village to the Bishop Marshall School.

Bill R advised that the subject of the next meeting (November 3rd) will be a discussion with state development officials on Growth Center designation, zoning options along the Route 100 corridor, and retail store size limits.

The ZA reminded members about the warned hearing on October 26th for final review & approval of the proposed zoning & subdivision bylaw revisions by the Select Board.

On a motion by Andrew, seconded by Max, minutes of the October 6, 2009 meeting were reviewed and accepted as presented.

The meeting adjourned at 8:55 PM.

Respectfully submitted:
Mark Leonard

Minutes approved on: 11/3/09