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MORRISTOWN/MORRISVILLE
PLANNING COMMISSION
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Minutes of June 17, 2008

Members Present: John Meyer, Andrew Volansky, Bill Henchey, Lauren Traister, Max Paine, Steve Berson, Kelly Rogers

Staff: Mark Leonard, Morristown ZA

Also Attending: see attached list

Chairman Bill Henchey called meeting to order at 7:00 pm. He advised that the main topic for the meeting was to begin the review of the Rural Residential with Agriculture (RRA) zoning district. The ZA reviewed the current RRA boundaries and uses (permitted & conditional). Bill solicited public comments on what, if any, changes, should be considered for the RRA district.

Richard Lowe, owner/operator of Green Mountain Landscaping on Route 100, said the Town must allow for more commercially zoned areas if it is to remain viable. He said there needs to be more business properties to develop jobs and contribute to the Town property tax base.

Dana Wildes, Village Trustee and owner of Country Home Center, agreed with the previous comments regarding the need for more commercially-zoned areas. He said businesses and property owners need greater flexibility to be economically viable. He reviewed the initial planning underway to provide the requisite utility & road infrastructure to help realize the goal for commercial development in the Business Office Park (BOP) zoning district.

Lori Stancliff, property owner along Route 100, said there is a need to diversify the uses allowed along Route 100 and urged the Planning Commission not to 'handcuff' economic development. She said commercial uses should be allowed on any properties fronting on Route 100.

Steve Greaves, whose family owns a large undeveloped parcel of farmland along Route 100 across from the airport, said the existing zoning in that area immediately precludes many potential businesses from setting up in Morristown. Speaking for his family, he said they can't keep the farm going and need the flexibility to develop their land to provide for their future. He's not for unrestricted development, noting that any possible new commercial uses that might be added to the RRA or to any new zoning district that might be carved out of the RRA would have to meet conditional use standards.

Bill asked Steve how far back from either side of Route 100 any new district should extend. Steve said he didn't know; maybe any existing parcel with frontage on Route 100 should be included.

Lauren asked those who might favor a new Route 100 corridor district if they would be agreeable to design standards within such a district. Richard Lowe said he was fine with that, as were others.

Barry Coffin, who recently established a TV & electronics repair home business at his home on Jersey Heights (Route 100), just inside the Village boundaries in the Low Density Residential (LDR) zoning district, recounted the difficulty he had in finding a suitable location for his business. The conditions of his home business approval prevent him from selling items he services, significantly impacting his business' viability. He would like to see the area he is in, along a main thoroughfare, be included in either an expanded BOP district or become part of a new Route 100 corridor, either of which should allow limited retail sales.

Steve Rae, Conservation Commission chairman, said zoning changes to the RRA is a complicated issue. He acknowledged business owners' interest in expanding the areas where businesses could start or grow, noting the potential to help the local economy. Citing the results of last year's community survey, he said others are concerned about preserving the Town's rural character, keeping property taxes in check, and preventing traffic congestion. He said the DRB needs to be armed with more specific conditional use standards and given the technical assistance to implement them in order to more effectively review conditional use applications. The ZA reviewed current conditional use standards and the enforcement process to ensure that approved conditional uses comply with their conditions of approval.

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Tara Beeman, a realtor who has an office on Route 100 as a home business, said that the 'highest and best' use of properties fronting on a main highway such as Route 100 is commercial. She said no one wants to build residential or live in a house on a busy highway. People want to live close to where they work; more commercial areas would help that.

Richard Duda said the Planning Commission needs to consider splitting the RRA into several new districts, each with its own minimum lot sizes and allowable permitted and conditional uses. Well-planned & managed mobile home parks, similar to the Sterling Valley mobile home park in Hyde Park, should be considered for inclusion in some or all of these new districts. He would not like to see the Route 100 corridor commercially zoned, feeling that it would make the area less desirable for tourists and other visitors. Instead, he would prefer to see greater density and in-fill of properties in current commercially zoned areas.

Ron Stancliff agreed with the idea of splitting up the RRA district, reflecting the differences in areas across the Town.. He noted that Route 100 is a state-maintained road and they (through the Agency of Transportation) would have to approve any new curb cuts along it. He voiced concern that any new development along Route 100 would increase traffic and restrict its flow. He said Route 100 is the primary route used by heavy truck traffic going to and from the interstate. Increased commercial development, with its increased traffic, could be detrimental to the Town's overall economic well-being. Tara Beeman responded that a lot of small businesses don't significantly increase traffic flow.

Alex Garven encouraged policies that allow people to shop, work, and play locally, saying this saves gas and helps the local economy. She advocated 'out of the box' thinking to allow more commercial uses while still preserving the Town's rural character. She would be open to 'thoughtful' development. Lauren asked for examples of 'appropriate' or 'thoughtful' types of businesses. Alex encouraged the Planning Commission to look at examples of 'thoughtful' development policies that have worked in similar towns in the region, citing parts of Conway, New Hampshire and Shelburne for what works and what doesn't. Steve Rae also encouraged this approach.

Bill said any expansion of commercial zoning should be coupled with stricter design review standards. He asked whether increased commercial development along Route 100 would adversely impact existing businesses in the Village and North End. The consensus response from those present was that it would not, with Barry Coffin saying that new businesses would likely draw people to existing businesses in the Village.

Leon Whitcomb advocated for expansion of allowable non-residential uses along Route 100, although he did not favor including uses such as local, state, or federal government facilities that would be exempt from local property taxes.

The ZA reported that he had received various request in recent years to allow child care centers in more areas of the Town, noting that these are currently noted allowed in the RRA. Those present supported including this use in any revised RRA bylaws.

Steve Rae suggested having draft bylaw revisions for each district out for public review and comment prior to taking up proposed changes.

Bill asked the other commissioners if they wished him to stay on as chair or step aside and give someone else the opportunity; they unanimously said they wanted him to stay on as chairman.

Minutes of the June 3, 2008 meeting were accepted on a motion by Lauren Traister, seconded by Steve Berson. On a motion by Andrew Volansky, seconded by John Meyer, the meeting was adjourned at 9:10 PM.

Respectfully submitted:
Mark Leonard

Minutes approved on:

7/15/08 (LT/AV)