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MORRISTOWN/MORRISVILLE
PLANNING COMMISSION
P.O. BOX 748
MORRISVILLE, VT 05661
Phone (802) 888-6373
Fax (802) 888-6378

Minutes of February 6, 2007

Members Present: Bill Henchy, Richard Duda, John Meyer, Andrew Volansky, Lauren Traister, Kelly Rogers

Members Absent: Steve Berson

Guests: see attached list

Recorder: Mark Leonard, Zoning Administrator (ZA)

Chairman Bill Henchy called the meeting to order at 7:05 PM. Agenda for the meeting was: 1) review draft revised Housing section of Town Plan; 2) review draft Design Review Standards proposal; 3) discuss pending Pope Meadow subdivision application; and 4) review proposed community development survey. Due to the number of people apparently present for the Pope Meadow subdivision discussion, that item was moved to the top of the agenda.

The ZA reviewed the background on the Pope Meadow application, which proposes to subdivide an 8.9-acre parcel on Elmore Street in the Medium Density Residential (MDR) zoning district into 22 two-unit residential lots. The application first came before the Development Review Board (DRB) last spring when the hearing on it was recessed pending additional information. The applicant returned to the DRB last month with updated information. Due to the scale of the proposed development, several DRB members suggested that the Planning Commission review the proposal and offer its thoughts on whether the project conforms to the goals and policies of the current Town Plan, particularly as the PC is presently reviewing the Housing section.

Thurlow Greene outlined the reasons many of the residents of surrounding properties oppose the project. The primary objection is to the number of units (44) being proposed, with neighbors noting that surrounding properties in the immediate vicinity of the project are predominantly (though not exclusively) single-family homes on lots of roughly one-half acre. The proposed lots would be roughly one-quarter acre with a two-unit condominium on each. Mr Greene cited goals and policies in various section of the Town Plan which he believed were in conflict with the proposal.

Marci Young asked about the process for reviewing the proposal. The ZA explained that the Planning Commission has no formal review authority over subdivisions or other development proposals; that is the DRB's role. The Planning Commission is responsible for preparing and updating the Town Plan and the zoning bylaws. In this instance, the Planning Commission might offer the DRB its interpretation of the plan and bylaws, but it would be an advisory action only. Marci said she and others hope to see a negotiated solution that produces a "win-win" outcome that satisfies the needs of the developer and the concerns of the neighbors. She said some sort of cluster development would be preferable to the current proposal.

Pam Gonyea, representing the applicant, explained the reason they were seeking the number and configuration of units for this project. Primarily, in order to construct the necessary infrastructure and the residential units themselves and keep them affordable for moderate-income households, they need to fully develop the site within the density allowances established for the MDR district. She agreed the project was of a higher density than the established neighborhoods in the area, but noted that development patterns and costs today are far different than when these developments were built. She appreciates that a change of this kind can be disconcerting for those in the surrounding neighborhoods. She said that the project supports the Town Plan goal of encouraging denser residential development within the village boundaries in order to avoid rural sprawl. She said while the project would remove nine acres from agricultural use, it would enable the current owners to preserve other farmland they own. This aspect would be addressed in the state Act 250 permit review process.

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LCPC land use planner Mike Miller said the proposed unit cost of ~$180-190K for the 900-square foot, two-bedroom units is within the range of housing affordability for median income households. He said any increase in the total housing inventory of the town would have a positive impact on the housing needs of the community.

Steve Rae, Conservation Commission chairman, said he was pleased to hear that this project was linked to plans to preserve other agricultural land.

Elmore Street resident Julie Hickory asked whether the fact that the existing municipal water pressure deficiency requires the use of a private well to serve the proposed development bears on the number of units that could be built. The ZA advised that density is solely based on the size (6000sf/unit) established in the bylaws.

Sonny Sanborn recalled that a previous owner many years ago had planned to build on this lot in a similar pattern to the adjoining Fairwood Parkway development. She would prefer to see this type of development rather than the pending proposal.

Thurlow Greene said he hadn't met anyone who favored the project and had urged the DRB to deny the application for failing to conform to the Town Plan. He asked the Planning Commission to send that message to the DRB.

Dawn Andrews, representing the Lamoille Housing Partnership (LHP), said she was only just now becoming familiar with the proposal so could not speak definitively for LHP. She said that it appeared to be ' mixed blessing', not necessarily the most desirable development pattern but offering an affordable option to moderate-income households

Turning to the draft revision of the Housing section of the Town Plan, Mike Miller highlighted an expanded 'housing needs' section. The ZA noted inherent contradictions in some of the policies. 'Safeguard permitting process to allow for quality housing for middle and lower income groups without sacrificing water quality and land conservation or creating suburban sprawl' could be cited in the example of the Pope Meadow proposal as either supporting or opposing the project.

Dawn Andrews said zoning in general needs to be more flexible to accommodate specific special needs groups identified in the draft. She mentioned lower parking space requirements for senior housing projects and the need to address the needs of homeless or transitional populations. She said the Town Plan and zoning bylaws should not hinder efforts to make more affordable housing available.

Leon Whitcomb asked the Planning Commission to consider allowing mixed residential and commercial uses in existing structures such as the one he owns on Route 100. Not having that option has hampered his efforts to sell or further develop his property.

Given the length of the two previous discussions, the members opted to postpone the review of draft Design Review Standards until March 20. They agreed to hold an extra meeting on February 13 at 6 PM to consider their input to the DRB on the Pope meadow project and to review and finalize a community development survey for Town Meeting. Minutes of the January 16, 2007 meeting were reviewed and accepted as presented.

The meeting adjourned at 10:00 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Mark Leonard, recorder

Minutes approved on: 3/20/07 JM/RD