

WOODSTOCK ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION
Draft Minutes
May 3, 2018

Commissioners present: Julia Cooke, Joe DiNatale, Courtney Lowe, Michael Malik, Barry Millstone, Tom Weschler, Charlie Kimbell (p.t.)

Commissioners absent: Mica Seely, Jason Merrill

Visitors Present: Sally Miller, Beth Finlayson, Adrian Tans, Cary Agin, Hank Smith, Joe Sheperd, Peter Goulazian, John Wetmore, Phil Camp, Ray Bourgeois, Jessica Abston

I. Call to Order

Mr. Weschler called the meeting to order at 7:03.

II. Approval of Minutes

On a motion of Mr. Milstone, seconded by Mr. DiNatale the minutes of April 5 were approved as submitted.

III. Citizen Comments

Ms. Abston presented her application for “Emergency Funds for Bridge Construction Impact on Who is Sylvia? And Primrose Garden.” She is the owner of Who Is Sylvia? (WIS) and stated that the construction has had a detrimental impact on her and her neighbor’s businesses and this request will cover outstanding expenses and bills due to demonstrated losses.

Following her presentation there was discussion about State payments that were made to building owners for easements, including the previous owner of this property. Mr. Goulazian, who bought the building in April 2018, is trying to recover the funds (\$3,000) that were distributed to the previous owner of the property. He was here to support applicants.

Mr. Agin, Village business owner, spoke in support of the application and in favor of keeping the vitality of businesses.

Mr. Weschler questioned whether the EDC is going down a “slippery slope.” Who else will be asking for these types of funds? Are all businesses being represented?

Hank Smith, property owner, thought it was a unique situation that the building was not accessible.

Mr. Milstone asked whether these businesses are in risk of closure. He thinks that the EDC’s mission to help existing businesses. Ms. Abston said that they did not know what to expect. Both businesses are one-woman shows and have very tight budgets.

Mr. Weschler questioned the numbers provided by WIS.

Mr. Sheperd, third owner of WIS building, stated that all businesses suffered, as usual in April, but it was impossible to get to the businesses on the other side of the bridge.

Mr. Weschler understood that businesses on the east side of the contraction were impacted more than those on the west. Why have we not heard from others, like Pi?

Ms. Abston went to bridge meetings, but impact was unexpected. Mr. DiNatale wanted to know if the bridge company approached her business and stated that at these meetings, which he attended, the bridge company never specifically indicated where materials would be stored and what would be inaccessible.

Mr. Lowe asked who determined what would be closed. (Mr. DiNatale thought it was a company decision.)

Mr. Tans spoke in support of the business, stating that it doesn’t make sense that the former owners were compensated and not the businesses.

Mr. DiNatale stated that he thought the EDC is here to encourage and support businesses, especially small businesses that have unexpected situations.

Ms. Abston stated that even with the bridge open, there are still materials in front of their stores.

Mr. Smith stated that these are precisely the kinds of businesses that we want to preserve.

Mr. Weschler was looking at the fairness of the request and reconciling the numbers including profit margin and rent reduction contribution.

Mr. Smith stated that the EDC should consider how to help these businesses, not turn them down.

Mr. Milstone felt that the EDC wanted to help but were looking more granularly at the application.

Additional discussion followed about how many stores were affected. The Vermont Standard story was referenced, which may or not be accurate. Ms. Finlayson thought that most businesses will not tell the newspaper that they are not doing well. Mr. Malik felt that this grant was a way to keep storefronts filled.

Mr. Milstone made a motion to commit to providing some compensation to businesses (including Primrose, WIS and Pi) with the amount to be determined. Ms. Cooke seconded. There was further discussion about the numbers for anticipated losses.

Mr. Weschler made a friendly amendment for up to \$7,500 for bridge disruptions. (Not seconded).

He reminded the applicant that it needs to go to Selectboard for final approval, so it can't happen immediately.

Mr. Lowe wondered if the Commission could go into Executive Session (not sure if possible.)

Mr. Milstone made an amendment to grant up to the request (\$5,600) for these two businesses. (Not seconded.) He thought that the commission needed to review numbers so they could commit before the Selectboard meeting.

Mr. DiNatale asked to bring to vote. The motion failed on a vote of 2 in favor and 4 opposed.

Mr. Malik made a motion to accept the grant as presented. Mr. DiNatale seconded the motion.

After further discussion, the motion was approved with a vote of 5 in favor, 1 opposed and 1 abstention.

IV. Financial Report

Mr. Weschler stated that he had not received an update from town. He reviewed the recent receipts - about 645K has been received to date, which includes the last receipt of 75K. About \$400K in funds is available and the goal is to spend it wisely.

V. Chairperson Report

Mr. Weschler reported on the community visioning process which has another meeting scheduled for May 21. They are posing the question "Where do we want to be in 10 – 20 years?" He cited the recent VPR program on aging and various school reports. He also recommended the recent VPR Brave Little State podcast titled "Is VT losing its young people?"

Mr. Weschler stated that an MOU has been signed with Chamber and the organizations will have a stakeholder meeting later in month.

VI. Coordinator Report

Ms. Miller started the job earlier in the week and looks forward to working with the commission. She will be getting a townorwoodstock.org email.

VII. General EDC updates

No action taken.

VIII. Subcommittees

a. Promotion / Website

Mr. Weschler reported that the website (woodstockVT.com) launched on March 1. The website had 200,000 views in 2017. In the first month page views were up 56% with people going all over the site. The unique visitor's number was similar to in the past.

They are currently working on integration with other platforms including Facebook and Instagram and are looking for someone to sell advertising and listings. The intent is to run the website as a business. They are in the process of hiring a new digital content coordinator; they interviewed 14 candidates and expect to make decision by next week.

They have an active leadership group (Jennifer Vincent, Tayo Skarrow, Patrick Fultz, Ms. Finlayson, Mr. Weschler, and Mr. Lowe) and expressed thanks to Ms. Cooke for content which is done except for the opening paragraph.

b. Economic Resources

Ms. Cooke reported that the grant workshop at Optimist Center was attended by about a half dozen people who had good questions, and it will hopefully generate projects. A second one is scheduled for May 24.

Mr. Milstone has been working on a loan program. There is not much interest from banks, but it might be possible for personal assistance and emergency funding. Lukas McGowen will be talking with Mascoma Bank.

Ms. Miller gave an update on the Housing study. Doug Kennedy Advisors from Norwich has met with the steering group (Ms. Miller, Mr. Kimbell, Mr. Milstone, Sonya Stover, and Susan Boston.) He will talk to the community and compose a survey. The study will also look at businesses and other regional towns. The final report will give us some advice – “Do we have a housing need?”

Mr. Lowe provided some context; he has heard that Hilton Head is targeting Vermonters because they can get a better deal in SC (due to tax burden).

c. Civic Revitalization

Mr. DiNatale reported that the group (Mr. DiNatale, Mr. Malik, Ms. Seely, Mr. Bourgeois, and Gary Thulander representing Chamber) met with Dubois and King recently. The Chamber is starting work on the Green, so they are determining how to have a collaborative effort. They are moving forward with citizen's comment format with tent on farmers' market which will have the plan to review and will also move to the library or conference room of Inn for further input.

Mr. Malik stated that the goal is to make sure that improvements happen uniformly.

Mr. Bourgeois said that D+K will have meetings with business owners and property owners and community.

d. Recreational Assets

Mr. Weschler said that he is passionate about the Riverwalk idea having just experienced it in Austin and seeing how it is part of the fabric of community. (Like Stowe, too.) Ideally there will be a loop that connects the East End and River Rd.

Mr. Malik has copy of Riverwalk project done in 2000 and is trying to figure out where to start.

Ms. Cooke would like to think about pedestrians being able to walk from the Woodstock Farmers' Market to Worthy Kitchen.

The D+K study will include a bike/ped analysis.

Ms. Miller will attend a state Bike/Ped conference and report on observations.

IX. New business

No action taken.

X. Focused Discussion

The Selectboard has requested that the EDC develop a plan for this coming fiscal year, so that they can see what is coming. They would like to understand the budget with dollar numbers and percentages.

The subcommittees will need to give idea of what they expect:

What are you going to deliver?

Where are you putting your efforts and what are priorities?

Mr. Lowe thought the EDC should look at the mission. Ms. Cooke asked for clarification. The five-point version is correct.

XI. Other Business

Mr. Kimbell reported that WAMBA ran into Act 250 issues. Land that they were using already had an Act 250 permit, so it will need to be amended to proceed.

Mr. Weschler stated that all new grants will have a timeline for spending. The commission needs to review what is still open and get reports to summarize success for monies spent.

XII. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 8:46 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Sally Miller
EDC Coordinator
May 11, 2018