

Woodstock Economic Development Commission Agenda

Draft Minutes
November 5, 2020

All participants on the Zoom due to COVID-19

Commissioners present: Jon Spector, Larry Niles, Courtney Lowe, Mica Seely, Julia Cooke, Alita Wilson, Joe DiNatale, Mica Seely, Michael Malik

Commissioners absent: Elizabeth Reaves

Others Present: Sally Miller, Mary Riley, Beth Finlayson, Jeffrey Kahn, Bill Kerbin, Isabelle Chicoine, Karim Houry, David Brown, Neil Allen, Charlie Kimbell, Lev Belford, Devon Kurtz, David Green, Jill Davies, Robbie Blish, Ray Bourgeois

I. Call to Order

Chair Spector called the meeting to order at 6:06. The agenda was reviewed. The meeting was recorded. A copy is available on the EDC webpage under Videos - <https://www.woodstock-vermont.com/videos>

II. Additions or Deletions to the Agenda

None.

III. Citizen's Comments

None.

IV. Approval of Minutes

With a motion from Mr. Lowe and seconded by Mr. Niles the minutes of October 1 were unanimously approved. No roll call was taken.

V. Financial Update

The updated financial report is available in the meeting documents. Ms. Miller reported that the balance of the Relief Fund is \$39K. Four businesses have repaid their "loans." The amount received from the State for the Local Option Tax 2nd quarter (April – June) was about \$20K, approximately 30% of 2019. The WUHS Apparel grant made in 2018 was re-paid in full. Ms. Miller submitted all the paperwork for the Riverwalk Municipal Planning Grant. When final payment is received the EDC will pay the matching grant portion (\$2,370) to the town.

VI. New Business

a. Funding Request for Marketing Wassail Weekend

Ms. Finlayson presented the request. The Wassail Committee is well represented by community organizations and businesses as well as town officials. They decided not to do the parade with concerns that the manpower would overwhelm town and it may not be something that the Town wanted. They will continue with something fairly traditional without having large crowds gather. See the schedule in the application. It will be spread over two weekends. The horse and wagon rides will be done by reservation and by pods. Billings Farm will be open both weekends.

Adrian Tans will create a scavenger hunt. Ms. Finlayson reviewed the expenses for the weekend; the focus is on attracting Vermont people.

Ms. Seely thinks that it is a great job – creative and festive.

Mr. Niles asked about safety. Ms. Finlayson said that Health Officer and Fire Chief, David Green, and Police Chief, Robbie Blish, have been part of the discussion.

Ms. Wilson thinks both Chief Blish and Chief Green need to look at the plan and agree.

Ms. Cooke is concerned about pulling people who are not local especially with the virus spreading. She does not want to support anything that is not approved by Chief Blish and Chief Green.

Ms. Chicoine said that the intent is not to bring people to town. They will advertise to Woodstock people to participate. They are trying to keep Woodstock on the map for future years.

Mr. Kahn thinks that the events are safe; there is no indoor gathering and the mask ordinance will be enforced. He suggested that the EDC approve funds pending approval from Chief Blish and Chief Green. The project supports the business community and is important to survival.

Mr. DiNatale applauds the effort. He thinks it's great but thinks it will be attended by more than Woodstock people. We are getting into a bad time and the risk is high.

Mr. Malik is happy to see some semblance of Wassail. If masks are effective, then it shouldn't be a problem.

Mr. Kurtz thinks that Woodstock is a destination during the winter months anyhow so people will be coming.

A Restart Vermont grant went to the Chamber and is being used to advertise Vermont businesses to Vermonters. It is being used for the passport program.

Mr. Niles said it is hard to tell how many people are coming for the Wassail events. He also has a concern about how it is progressing in Vermont. He agrees that it needs to be approved by the Health Officer.

Ms. Seely wanted to know if there is the possibility for a walking patrol.

Chair Spector suggested that it is important to hear directly from Chief Green and Chief Blish. The Select Board can't approve funds until their meeting on November 17, so the EDC can postpone a vote and schedule a special meeting. Chair Spector will poll EDC members for a time.

Mr. Niles asked Mr. Lowe if they will send a notice to Woodstock Inn guests. Mr. Lowe said they have lost guests because they sent a note that they would not be doing Wassail.

Ms. Seely suggested doing branded masks.

There were no objections to tabling the request.

Chief Green joined the meeting. He has the list and doesn't see anything of concern. He wanted to know if the wagons will be sanitized after each use. Ms. Finlayson said yes. He would like some "soft" enforcement of mask wearing. Maybe pass them out to people who don't have them. The EMS has some and Chamber does, too, at the Welcome Center.

Mr. DiNatale wants to know if it is just Woodstock people, why are we worrying about masks? Local people are good, but COVID is getting people to move here, and he doesn't think that it is worth taking the risk of inviting too many people.

Ms. Seely wondered if the EDC doesn't give them money will Wassail still happen? Ms.

Finlayson said that some things will happen. If Wassail is going to happen anyway they want to make sure that it happens safely.

Mr. Kahn said that the task of the EDC is to make economic decisions. If the Health Officer says that it is safe, he thinks the EDC should approve it.

Chief Blish joined the call. He was asked about using EMS people to monitor mask usage. He could put on extra personnel.

Ms. Cooke was weighing the local vs. tourist tensions. She doesn't want to support anything without enforcement.

Mr. Malik wanted to know if mask ordinance is enforceable. Chief Blish said that it is only educational.

Chair Spector made a motion that, based on the conclusion by the Health Officer that the activities as proposed are safe, the EDC will allocate up to \$5,000 for the project for advertising to locals, contingent on polite enforcement of the mask ordinance, and it being acceptable to the Select Board when they vote on it. Mr. DiNatale seconded the motion.

Ms. Seely clarified that Chief Blish would be able to provide manpower.

Mr. DiNatale is worried that it won't be a Woodstock event even when it is just advertised in Standard which goes to other towns. Chair Spector amended that it will only be advertised in Standard.

Chief Green wants it to be contingent on following the COVID guidelines of the State on that date.

Chair Spector said that EDC is just approving the funds. The Select Board will need to make the day of decision.

A roll call taken. All approved except Mr. DiNatale. Chair Spector will present at the Select Board meeting.

VII. Old Business

a. Update of Housing Taskforce

Chair Spector said that these efforts were getting launched before COVID hit, and we still need to work on some of these issues. Mr. Kimbell has reconstituted the housing group. He updated the work of the group. The five-member group is looking at the eight recommendations in the Housing study and will make suggestions to EDC and Select Board. Things have changed in the last two years; they are trying to isolate what has changed. They are gathering information from a variety of sources.

The real estate market has seen substantial increases - over 20%. Properties are on the market for a short time with less inventory.

The effect of long term occupancy of COVID refugees. A significant increase of new stops for Casella Waste. Ellaway Property Services thinks 40 – 50 families are occupying their homes full time.

They looked number of students enrolled in schools; there are 90 new students in supervisory schools, but the number is hard to tie down because homeschooled are not included but remote learners are.

The number of registered voters is also going up.

There is definitely no relief on the housing market. Promoting housing development is on the list of recommendations.

They will be focusing on two recommendations:

- Assuring that employees can afford to live in town.

- Make sure that there is housing for young people.

Large projects are not feasible right now because of the high cost of construction. They will look at converting existing housing. The next step is to explore specific recommendations.

What can the town do?

They envision a public meeting to get input.

One idea might be to offer financial incentives - converting existing rental units to keep units affordable. 2:1 grants \$7K to \$14K

Grants to organizations that are converting existing spaces.

Grants to purchase land to build housing, but prices are high right now. Safford Commons is building four additional units for home ownership starting at the end of this month.

Mr. Houry wants to make sure that any funding doesn't create a burden on other residents – Impact on property taxes either positive or negative.

Mr. Kimbell said they will consider all proposals for their impact. There are also concerns about increasing development. It may be zoning and regulatory issues as well as financial.

b. Launching Business Environment Group

Chair Spector will be forming a group. Ms. Reaves, Mr. DiNatale, and Mr. Niles have expressed interest; they will launch and set a meeting.

Chair Spector proposed that they will

1. Recommend municipal policies that might accelerate business. They will talk to existing businesses, new and old, to get a sense of what policies might be constraining growth. They will talk with Planning and Zoning.
2. Village rejuvenation – initiatives to rejuvenate key buildings from Maplefields to Town Hall.
3. Identify types of business or specific businesses that we would like to recruit.

Ms. Miller will check to see if anyone on the Planning Commission wants to join the group.

Mr. DiNatale wants to know if citizens asked to join. He is hoping to get other representation. He will brainstorm who else to ask.

VIII. Adjourn

On a motion from Mr. DiNatale and seconded by Mr. Malik, the meeting was adjourned at 7:24.

Respectfully submitted,
Sally Miller
EDC Coordinator
November 9, 2020