

**Town of Ashburnham Planning Board**  
Wednesday, February 7, 2024 @ 6:30 PM  
Town Hall – 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, Upper Auditorium

(Rebecca Merrell, Town Planner, taking minutes to begin meeting)

**1. Opening Business**

**Call to Order** – WM called to order at 6:32 pm.

**Attendance Roll Call** – Chairman, Walt Meisner (WM); Vice-Chairman, Stephen Coswell (SC) – participating remotely; Dave Perry (DP); Sean St. Cyr (SS); Associate member Roger Hoyt (RH), and Town Planner Rebecca Merrell (RM). Anthony Orlando (AO) joined just before the Approval of the Minutes.

**Notifications**

- Agenda is posted on the Town website and includes items reasonably anticipated by the Chairman 48 hours prior to the meeting. VOTES MAY BE TAKEN. Order and exact times of agenda items may vary at the Board's discretion (except for public hearings which cannot start prior to the scheduled time). Documents submitted for review can be found under the Planning Board tab on the Town website.

**Chair and Vice-Chair Comments**

Chair: WM – On tonight's agenda, we will be discussing the Bray Ave. request to release funds from the Passport account, approving minutes from the last meeting, and then will have the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) presentation on the Town's Master Plan chapters on Housing and Open Space and Recreation. Also, we are cancelling the February 14<sup>th</sup> Planning Board meeting.

Vice-Chair: SC - None

**2. Public Comment**

**3. Hearings and Applications**

-ANR Henrie Lot A – Pratts Road: Ed McSweeney presented the plot for the owner. The PB confirmed the square footage, frontage, and setback requirements were met. There were no other questions.

➔ SC motions to accept. SS seconded. Approved unanimously.

#### 4. Administrative Matters

##### Old Business Updates

###### - Bray Avenue – Request to Release Funds from Passport Account:

WM: As request, Mr. McSweeney submitted a letter requesting the release of funds for Bray Ave. Mr. McSweeney was invited to comment on his request. There are no open issues, and the Conservation Commission has signed off. RM confirm all required letters of support have been received. WM confirmed that Town Counsel was consulted and impressed upon the Mr. McSweeney that his attorney should connect with Town Counsel to resolve the title issues as soon as possible. WM: moved to approve the release of the remaining funds from the Passbook account provided that the release of funds does not constitute a full and final release of the covenant due to outstanding title issues with the roadway preventing the Town from accepting the entire roadway.

WM made the motion, DP seconded. Approved unanimously.

WM: The PB will write a letter to Mr. McSweeney and the treasurer regarding the close of this matter.

##### New Business

###### -House Number Requests

-Parcel 38-2A was assigned the number 71 Brogan Rd

###### -Member Reports from Other Boards & Committees (if any)

- MRPC: RH – None
- Bylaw Review: RH – Committee is reviewing outstanding 278 questions
- Capital Planning: RH – None
- Accessibility: RH – None
- MJTC: RM – None
- Economic Development: SC – Sign and Façade program has started
- Community Events and Playgrounds: SS – None
- Zoning Board of Appeals: DP – None
- Marijuana Review: WM – None

###### -Town Notices and/or Announcements (if any)

None

###### -Approval of Meeting Minutes (if ready)

- January 10, 2024 – Approved unanimously

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(Anthony Orlando takes over keeping minutes)

-RH officially opened a Bylaw Review meeting at 7pm.

## **5. MRPC Presentation of Master Plan Chapters – Housing and Open Space & Recreation (Visioning Session #3)**

WM gave a brief overview of the schedule for the Master Plan. The website has the updated and modified schedule. There are nine chapters to the MP. In reality, there are 10 chapters because cultural and natural resources have been split. Updated chapter drafts have been added to the website. Although public comment may have closed on earlier chapters, you can send additional comments to Town Planner Rebecca Merrell.

Tonight is the MRPC presentation on Housing, as well as Open Space and Recreation. There was an Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) published last summer. Much of that plan was used to inform the new Master Plan chapter. After tonight, there will be only two chapters left, probably to be presented on March 13<sup>th</sup>: Goals and Objectives for the Town, and Implementation chapters.

Once we get to April, we will be almost ready to publish. We may have a final meeting for additional discussion. We hope to publish in May. This Master Plan will guide the direction of the town for at least the next 10 years.

Joseph Boyle (JB), Jeff Legros (JL), Jonathan Vos (JV), and Ryan Doherty (RD) are presenting for MRPC.

JB presented first about what the Master Plan process is and underscored our Community Vision which was discussed at previous meetings. He also presented an overview of the Master Plan chapters that we have covered, will be covering tonight, and will be covering in the future.

### HOUSING

JV: Gave an overview of the scope of the housing chapter. The Town has seen population growth of 50% over the past 40 years. There is fairly evenly-distributed growth across age categories, more so than in other communities in MA. Most housing is single family residential. More than half of residential units were built between 1980 and 2010. Housing prices have risen dramatically over the past four years.

Weaknesses: Lack of affordable housing in the area. There is a need for new residential development near the Town Center. Respondents to survey want to see more Mixed Use Residential & Commercial.

JV shared the Housing Vision statement on the current chapter draft: “Ashburnham will promote the creation of complete neighborhoods and a diversity of homes and housing types and styles that are healthy, sustainable, functional, and affordable for all.”

WM asked what a “complete neighborhood” means. JB: The definition includes being walkable, bikeable, and with access to public transit. Another consideration is easy access to the Town Center or perhaps to a redeveloped South Ashburnham core.

Abby Arpano (AA): We need to flesh out what “complete” means for Ashburnham, for the Town Center, and for South Ashburnham.

JB: We had a great conversation in a previous Master Plan visioning session about Tweedo’s and whether the Town wants more commercial amenities closer to other areas of Town.

RM: Lake neighborhoods can be enhanced with more services, including sidewalks for pedestrian safety.

Town Administrator, Bryan Doheny (BD): Slow, predictable growth is what we need.

Nadine Leger, Westminster: In several of that town’s finished neighborhoods, there are problems with too much vehicle traffic.

Anna Wilkins (AW): We need to determine what type of housing development we don’t want.

JL shared a worksheet for members of the public to fill out with their ideas for what should and should not be included in these chapters that we’re discussing tonight. This will also be online to respond to later.

JV discussed the Housing Goals & Actions. What is affordable housing? Defined by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as that which costs no more than 30% of a person’s gross monthly income.

BD: Pretty much all of the housing we put up would have to be affordable housing to meet the benchmarks set by the state and avoid Chapter 40B – where developers are allowed to implement a plan that does not meet the town’s zoning because the Town hasn’t produced enough affordable housing.

(Clerk’s note: Chapter 40B is a state statute which enables local Zoning Boards of Appeals to approve affordable housing developments under flexible rules if at least 20-25% of the units have long-term affordability restrictions.)

JL: Some additional mixed use might help to alleviate the affordable housing burden.

BD: We need to have accelerated permits to approve affordable housing to avoid 40B.

JL: Shared the SWOT analysis worksheet so everyone can list the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats for this section of the Master Plan.

JV: One option is to adopt a Chapter 40R Smart Growth Zoning Overlay District. Only needs a majority vote in a Town Meeting to adopt.

(Clerk's note: It appears that a 2/3 vote at Town Meeting is actually required.)

JV: Another goal is to maintain the character of Ashburnham.

AW: What is "flexible development?" JL says it may be referring to mixed use. There is some ambiguity here. We can edit this with a better and specifically-defined term.

JV: Another goal is to leverage public and private resources to the greatest extent possible to develop affordable housing. He discussed some bullet points to help accomplish this.

RM: Do we have any affordability deed restrictions in Ashburnham? She will do some research to find out. Most deed restrictions have to do with sewer and water supply restrictions.

#### OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION

JL: Started by defining different things that constitute Open Space. JL reviewed the 9 chapters of the Town's 2023 Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP). The Master Plan is taking info from the OSRP and putting the most important parts into the planning document.

JL discussed the abundant great open space opportunities in the Town, including the current and future development of the Rail Trail.

RH: Is there a map of what's developed and what's not developed? And what's potentially developable?

JL: Yes, but it is outdated.

AW: Are Chapter 61 lands evaluated for housing or other municipal purposes?

JL: No. We did an inventory showing where the Chapter 61 lands are. But that doesn't necessarily mean that it's the highest priority for conservation.

DP: Is there a way for the Town to develop affordable housing *themselves* and is that a viable option?

JB: Sometimes a town will have a quasi-public agency that will use Chapter 40R: Smart Growth to develop their own affordable housing.

BD: Lunenburg tried this with Tri-Town and it was a failure because tax rates went up because they got re-zoned to rentals.

JV: Chapter 40R has a density requirement of 20 units per acre, and there has to be 20% affordable housing, if the town wants to receive funds to subsidize the development.

According to the survey, the Town places high value on Open Space and Recreation. Also, the survey said the Town parks and playgrounds need to be updated.

Chris Picone (CP), member of the Conservation Commission: There are a lot of great ideas that we're looking at in the Master Plan, but who is going to do it? The few volunteer committee members in Town are spread very thin.

Rosemarie Meisner (RMM): Grants may help with this.

CP: But we'll still need people who know the community.

Patricia Frederick (PF): We went through this planning process decades ago, but much of it wasn't implemented, which may have discouraged engagement in both the planning process and committee participation.

RM: I think it would be ideal to limit ourselves to four goals to each section to make the plan seem more obtainable.

JL reviewed the Open Space & Recreation Vision, as well as Goals & Actions. See the Master Plan chapter on the website for more information.

JL reviewed the map application.

## **6. Next Meetings**

- February 14, 2024 – CANCELLED
- February 28, 2024

## **7. Adjourn**

-AO moved to adjourn. SS seconded. Unanimously approved.

-RH moved to adjourn the Bylaw Review meeting. Seconded by DP. Unanimously approved.