

PLANNING ADVISORY BOARD
Wednesday, February 23, 2011
SCOTT HEYMAN CONFERENCE ROOM
125 East Court Street

MINUTES

Members Present – Mina Amundsen, Martha Armstrong, Todd Bittner, Dick Coogan, Sue Cosentini, David Kay, Gay Nicholson, John Spence

Members Excused -- Rick Couture, Fernando de Aragon, Dave Herrick, Dooley Kiefer, Monika Roth, Scott Whitham

Members Absent – John Gutenberger, Pam Mackesey, Kathy Schlather, Andy Zepp

Others Present – Katie Borgella (TC Planning Dept.), Joan Jurkowich (TCPD), Ed Marx (Commissioner of Planning & Community Sustainability), Kathy Wilsea (TCPD)

Call to Order – The meeting was called to order at 9:10 AM by the Chair, Mina Amundsen. There were no changes to the agenda.

PAB Role in Development Focus Areas Strategy/Nodal Development – Mina said discussion occurred last month on the Development Focus Areas and how PAB can help interact with the public. She invited ideas for public outreach. Gay Nicholson said use of transit services as part of nodal development should be part of a transportation conference. She noted many workers live outside Tompkins County because they can't afford housing here, but they will be facing expensive commutes as gas prices rise. Sue Cosentini suggested using transportation as an education component to help get through the mental blocks concerning density. Mina pointed out many people think of New York City when they hear "density", and we need to draw them back from that perception. Dick Coogan said rural areas have obstacles to increasing density, such as Health Department statutes that govern water and sewer. He suggested conversations with regulators. Ed Marx acknowledged that problem, but said the water/sewer study shows we have sufficient areas with existing infrastructure to meet our goals for nodal development.

Martha Armstrong said the project in the Village of Lansing tried to include senior housing as a trade off for tax breaks on the retail component. When she asked why not built taller housing and double the number of residential units, she was told the Village didn't want that. No one mentioned viewshed restrictions. She thought some of the visuals prepared for Downtown Ithaca Alliance of mixed use development were very attractive. Mina pointed out the public outreach will have very important stages. She noted the good attendance and participation at the meeting with municipal representatives organized by the Planning Department. Ed said people choose to live in a community based on the current development, and leaders think their citizens don't want change. Actually, this style of development can protect community character. David Kay said the reality on density is it's not good for everyone. Citizens have sensible reasons to oppose density. Community character can be preserved by some elements of zoning. We don't think it's negative, but it is from their perspective. The scale of change and design is very likely to increase traffic, which is good in the pedestrian and bike aspects but not desirable concerning vehicles. He feels design is toughest to address, as it is subjective and doesn't get public support. He recently attended the National Smart Growth Conference, which had a session on state and local regulations. The speaker, Kent Banfield, felt there is not enough respect of citizens in existing neighborhoods.

John Spence said Better Housing for Tompkins County held ten town hall meetings a few years ago and heard a lot of opposition from citizens. Curriculum in elementary schools could gather many ideas for history and design. Kids can understand a community doesn't have to look like where we live today. The long-term view of children has more impact on parents than we do. Mina thought it would be interesting to provide snapshots of communities, showing their range and characters. David said local schools used to teach rural, urban and suburban factors. He felt a market demand can be built for density, especially if gas prices will be a factor. Sue said she loves the education factor – what kid wouldn't want to live in a castle?

As a group, PAB could focus on some projects and make them happen. The area next to the Farmers Market could be a site for a community. Downtown housing fills promptly with renters. Mina said she sees fears of density changing the character of our community. How can we interrelate development and our natural resources?

Martha brought up the subject of baby boomers approaching retirement. We can examine that market for what will be salable and desirable. Mina says she hears from her co-workers that they would like to live downtown. Todd said development always has a segment of society negatively impacted. Someone always “takes a hit”. We need to build on tangible factors that benefit the public, like green space and trails. Citizens fear rise of taxes due to neighboring development. Somehow there needs to be a focus on neighborhoods for tax relief, too. There has been prior discussion about forest protection at PAB, and there needs to be incentives for forest property owners not to carve up their land, plus some incentives for dense areas to become even more dense. These could spur economically viable development. Gay said Finger Lakes Land Trust was part of a state team that developed long-term tax relief for donation to land trusts. Similar action by municipalities could sweeten the deal. David said he found Todd’s comments to link tax issues to neighborhood development interesting. New York State is implementing some Smart Growth funding, which requires state agencies to examine their policies in the light of Smart Growth principles. This could yield incentives.

Ed said most citizens don’t want much change. The reality is there is no need for change in 90% of the landscape if we identify the right areas for development. Using the City as an example, most people see the West End and West State Street as opportunities for acceptable change. Transition there would be okay. These may be the only places we need to change, and that would be enough when combined with some changes downtown. Otherwise, improve the neighborhoods and work toward positive changes in lower-growth areas. Previously, we have also talked about rural areas – those that are “land rich”. We need to find viable economic models for our working landscapes – this is mostly done by Cooperative Extension now. Currently, if an owner needs money, they sell off a piece of land. David said we are seeing something similar with gas drilling leases on farmland because the landowners need the money.

Mina commented that it is frightening how dependent we are upon interaction supported by fossil fuels – trucks bring in our food, etc. Ed said building local food production and energy efficiency yield community resilience. Even if a crunch never arrives, we are more resilient. If we went from 10% local reliance to 25% local reliance, it would have major impacts for our rural citizens. They can be suppliers for local markets and other NYS markets. Compact development can be part of the preservation of our rural economy.

Joan asked if this community is ready to talk about tax benefits of Development Focus Areas. By avoiding the costs of providing more services, such as infrastructure and Health Department visits, the community saves in more ways. David said schools are the largest expense, and they are complex to study due to the complication of multiple jurisdictions and decision-making bodies. Joan said the expense impact of development was a big topic of discussion when she worked in Vermont, where citizens opposed large developments because they felt they would cause increased taxes to support new roads and schools. David said state legislation protects municipalities from keeping up seasonal roads for school buses. Fiscal arguments do have power and should be brought up in discussion. Joan didn’t think it would be an issue here, though.

David said he had no idea how popular or unpopular a tax cap would be here. Ed said property taxes are significant – many people pay as much for taxes as for their mortgage. We should be using our water and sewer infrastructure to its capacity – it’s just Yankee thrift. Todd said it’s not an all or nothing approach. Infrastructure costs are of more concern for municipal leaders than the public – it’s front and center for municipalities. Gay said we need to get conversation going. We also need to acknowledge we don’t expect rapid sprawl as was experienced in the Town of Lansing in the 80s and 90s.

Sue asked how can PAB produce an impact? Through lots of outreach or choosing one project as a model? How can PAB be effective? The Planning Department has done an incredible job, and how can we get

everyone to take notice? Dick suggested one way would be to provide customized presentation from our perspective for local planning boards, and noted planning available from the State is really targeted for large municipalities. Ed agreed, saying PAB's next agenda will include a model for this board to get behind. David suggested interacting in the comprehensive plan drafting processes going on in the City and Town of Ithaca. Mina agreed, saying we should make opportunities to demonstrate ideas not as change, but as enhancements. Gay said there is discussion about making changes to housing in the area of Cayuga Mall in the Village of Lansing (old P&C site), as that is an area where business is weak. Todd said a demonstration site would need to have both node and site models. David said a We Live New York conference will occur in Ithaca on 3/25, targeted to young professionals.

Commissioner's Report – Discussion has been re-energized on the Department of Transportation garage on the Inlet waterfront due to interest of NYS in putting a cell tower on the site. There is an effort to get discussion back on track and move DOT to Dryden. One concept is using future tax revenue to help pay for DOT move expenses. The vision for the site is mixed use, relatively dense, and walkable. • Planning Department staff met with Sue Ritter, Town of Ithaca Planner, about the Biggs property on West Hill. The County has a commitment to dispose of it, as part of the financing of the move of the Health Department to Brown Road. • The County Administrator will schedule a multi-county meeting on the Finger Lakes Region Sustainability concept discussed last month. • The Downtown Sustainability Center is also a topic of conversation with the Strategic Tourism Planning Board and other possible partners. • ITCTC Planning Committee is working on a Complete Streets plan for Ithaca. • TCPD staff is discussing outreach projects with municipal planning boards for ways to interact, keep them informed, and provide education. They will also coordinate to share with other planning professionals and staff in other County departments. • Joe Mareane, County Administrator, has made sustainability a theme within County government. • Fernando deAragon has been meeting with Cayuga Medical Center and Paleontological Research Institute about building a trail from their sites to the proposed Black Diamond Trail. • TCPD has begun interviewing for two vacancies within the department. • Concerning energy efficiency issues, there is discussion on how to bring together demand, financing and workforce.

Approval of Minutes from January 26, 2011 – These were not addressed due to lack of a quorum.

Announcements – Gay announced the second Finger Lakes Energy Challenge, to take place April 6. Focus is on municipalities and planning boards, for issues of policy: goals and gaps on federal, state and county level.

Adjournment – The meeting was adjourned at 10:32 AM.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy Wilsea, Secretary
Tompkins County Planning Department

Minutes adopted by PAB on March 23, 2011.

Membership:

Mina Amundsen, At-Large
Martha Armstrong, Economic Dev.
Todd Bittner, Natural Environment
Dick Coogan, Local Planning (non-urban)
Sue Cosentini, Business
Rick Couture, Education
Fernando de Aragon, Transportation
John Gutenberg, Education
Dave Herrick, Facilities/Infrastructure

David Kay, Local Planning (urban)
Dooley Kiefer, Associate Member
Pam Mackesey, Planning Committee
Gay Nicholson, At-Large
Monika Roth, Agriculture
Kathy Schlather, Human Services
John Spence, Housing
Scott Whitham, Cultural & Historic Pres.
Andy Zepp, Land Pres./Public Land Mgmt.