DRAFT Acton 2020 Committee Minutes

Date: November 10, 2010, 7:00 pm
Location: Town Hall, Faulkner Rm 204

Attending: Kristen Alexander, Roland Bartl, Sue Benson, Dean Cavaretta, Margaret Wooley Busse, Jim Snyder-Grant, Celia Kent (minutes-taker), Bill Marathias, Sahana Purohit, Planners Collaborative (Daphne Politis, Jim Purdy, Bill --)

I. Minutes approved

II. Agree on volunteer/data management strategy

There is some confusion between goals and master plan elements. It is too challenging for people with specific expertise to figure out which goal they should sign up for. Rather than seeking advice on a particular goal, Margaret suggested we broaden our invitation to volunteer advisors and encourage them to sign up for either a particular goal or an element, whichever is the most interesting to them.

Margaret will shortly send out an email to all workshop participants thanking them for coming, sharing the links to the posted material, and inviting them to volunteer. She hopes to generate a longer list of volunteers.

Each member of the committee was assigned an element for which they will be the main contact, similar to the goals. The committee assignments for the master plan elements are as follows:

Land Use ……	Clint
Housing ……	Sahana
Transportation/Circulation ……...	Bill
Economic Development…….....	Dean
Natural Resources ……..	Margaret
Open Space and Recreation ……	Jim
Historic and Cultural Resources …	Celia
Sustainability ……..	Jim SG
Facilities/Services ……	Sue

When people volunteer for a given element or goal via our web page, their name will automatically be added to the Phase II contacts list. We should check that list weekly and follow up with anyone who has expressed interest in the goal or element for which we are the liaison. Margaret will send us draft text for a follow-up note which we can adapt for the purpose.

Jim SG reviewed the fields of data in the contacts list including columns to indicate if they are interested in a particular goal or element. The list is sortable. We can add new people at the bottom of the list, then resort by last name.

Volunteer advisors will be specifically invited to our public meetings when our agenda includes a given goal or element which is related to their interests.

III. Discuss with PC

a. De-brief Oct. 20th workshop and c. Discuss possible changes to timeline and approach

We decided to postpone discussion of these topics until the next meeting.

b. Follow up on existing conditions inventory—what's left?

Planners Collaborative (PC) handed out several documents with data related to questions which the committee had asked after the October workshop. The discussion is summarized below based on each document:

Emerging Issues and Data Needs

Jim Purdy commented that the data requests are going in right direction and what we need to do now is to focus the analysis on the emerging issues. The Emerging Issues memo represents a partial list of what they think are the issues coming out of the process so far. The memo highlights what we know and what do we still want to know.

Schools – Plenty of evidence that school is accomplishing what it needs to accomplish. Margaret asked how we should interpret the recent 26th ranking based on the fact that Acton has more students/faculty than other top-performing schools. Sahana mentioned a conversation with a teacher who doesn't like crowding and despite being told that enrollments will be going down, their experience is otherwise. Roland agreed that it was important to get this nailed down.

Bill commented that the schools are not in uniformly good condition – Gates and Conant need work, for example rusted swing sets.

Bill also mentioned that about 40 new employees in his group are looking at moving to Acton.

Conclusion – it is important to understand school population projections and the assumptions behind them, especially the link to amount and type of housing in the town. Margaret decided we should follow up with Xuan Kong

of the School Committee about the projections they are using or the new projections they are developing.

Further discussion on school projections and implications: Jim P suggested we think about what we would do with the information. Some things you can do something about. But you don't have any control over what happens with existing housing. M stated that it is important to understand the implications for the budget. Daphne Politis suggested that we can explore the What If's beyond the projections based on specific Acton knowledge – but it'simportant to understand that this analysis will be qualitative, not quantitative. Daphne mentioned an occurrence in Chelsea where the new schools opened and enrollment was off by a 1,000 children. Then they had to try to figure out why. Jim P suggested that we think ahead to the recommendations/actions that are going to come out of this master plan. He added that you can't decide to build a new school just based on a few year's data. Margaret said that it is helpful to separate out perception from what's true if we can. Jim Snyder Grant suggested another approach would be to understand the relationship between alternative projections – could do qualitative modeling and scenario planning based on different assumptions (e.g. school population declines or doesn't, house value increases or doesn't, etc.) and assess the result. All agreed that effort would speak to the concerns we're hearing. Clint expanded on the notion of using this technique to get a long-range picture. For instance, we have 4,000 acres of buildable land. If that is built out based on zoning and regulations from 1998 plan and the 2004 community development plan, then by 2020 we will have - ? -. Margaret commented we have to think about build-out analysis of Boxborough and how that will affect Acton. Jim Purdy commented with this kind of scenario modeling we can identify the upper limit of development and how we as a town would do to react to that.

We need to leverage the school committee analysis and add our own What Ifs.

Daphne added that we are trying to guide future growth and development. So we want to think about how each of the potential centers have different character and what decisions that leads to about the kind of development we want to encourage – housing or commercial, etc. Then consider what services will be needed based on that development. There are lots of issues to consider and the schools are a part of it. Roland suggested that the master plan doesn't need to include all the answers, rather it can recommend further analysis of specific issues that are beyond the scope of the master plan itself.

Land Use Data Comparison

Bill led the discussion. He pointed out that there is a discrepancy between the MassGIS data in 2005 and the MassGIS data from 1999 because the

methodology changed. In 2005 polygon shapes changed and trees became more pronounced. One misleading result is that it looks like the area used for residential is lower in 2005 than in 1999. So 2005 is more accurate, but it spoils comparisons. He also shared a document based on a 2009 Mass Audubon Society report which looks at the quality of natural areas in a town and rates in a scale they call Index of Ecological Integrity (IEI) (see www.massaudubon.org/losignground which has an interactive section so can investigate yourself). A chart comparing Acton to other neighboring towns helps answer the question: What's protected and what's not and how does Acton compare to other towns? Margaret commented that Stow might need to worry less about protecting open space than Acton since they don't have the combination of desired location/excellent schools to attract development to the same degree.

Housing and 40B

The Acton Conservation Commission prioritizes the protection of open space land parcels based on 3 criteria. This data not in an official plan yet. Dean said it would be helpful to show the number of units that could be built on the high priority lands that wouldn't be built if the land were protected. Roland commented that open space decisions shouldn't be driven by wanting to avoid building houses. Bill added that it's important to establish these kind of criteria about ecological preservation and ways to act upon those criteria; it's not about needing to protect every parcel.

Using Acton and Mass GIS data, we have data up to 2008. Roland commented that a parcel of less than 2 acres with a house on it is probably what that land use will remain. But a parcel of 20 acres with one house on it, has the opportunity to be built on. So **he'll [clarify – does "he" refer to Bill?]** sort parcels by size and consider build-out scenarios based on zoning. Clint asked how do we predict 40B? Roland replied that we can't, but we can proactively develop a plan to get to the 10%. Lincoln managed the 10% and now just have to stay ahead of the curve, but most communities struggle with it. Acton would need 340 units, which is difficult. Daphne clarified that part of the strategy is where to put it. Margaret asked about the buy-down idea of existing multi-family units. Bill agreed that is a possible strategy. Roland cautioned that can be a political snowball – the choice can be framed as what kind of housing do we want – holes in wall or good quality? However, Roland agreed that it can be a valid piece of the puzzle. Jim SG asked about the housing production plan. Roland said it needs to be updated. Jim SG commented that the earlier prioritized parcel list hadn't included any parcel that had any development on it (i.e. the single house on 20 acres) and asked whether their approach has changed. Bill replied that yes, their approach has changed but he thinks they could go farther in considering a networked look rather than a parcel-by-parcel.

Committee Master Plan 2020 Questions (memo from Brian Barber)

Jim P led this discussion. One challenge is that the population of 5-19 years old is estimated. Margaret said it would be helpful to know who's moved in and whether there were children. Jim replied that the census info is confidential so we can't get this. He added that he can try to correlate phone survey data about intention to stay various years with the age of their kids, but it's a lot of work and he's not sure it is worth it; but he's looking it. Jim P pointed out that based on the 2000 census, there was a fair amount of turnover in the 1990's – people are living in a different house in 200 than they were in 1005.

There was some discussion about how to attract the aged 55+ population as a way of addressing school crowding. Can you give 55+ a lower tax rate? **[answer was something like "not really", but I didn't catch the details. Lynnefield made some attempt along those lines?**].

Jim P discussed data which he'd removed from the workshop handouts – the size of house per # of children model and the related projected cost of town services. He commented that bigger units generally are more costly to town given that larger units are more likely to house more kids enrolled in school. The data model provides a rule of thumb. Margaret commented that Terra's point is that the national model may be misleading in Acton where there might be more kids/# of bedrooms because of the quality of schools.

Historical data on property tax rate is only available back to 2003. When you compare % increase, Acton is about tracking inflation. Roland argued that you should use the actual tax bill rather than rate. There was discussion about how to interpret tax rate and tax bill; no conclusions.
Jim commented that the data charts in the memo which address taxes related to the education budget don't look correct – the data is "squishy" because it's from different sources.

What's Left?

Margaret asked is there other inventory data to complete? Jim P said they are still working on economic data (with the help of Jim SG). Transportation, Facilities and Services is a chapter they are still working on and they are still waiting for data from NSTAR etc. on Sustainability. They do have good data on the town's buildings, but are trying to get data for homes and businesses on energy use. Bill is working on the land use chapter.

M thanked PC and asked, does it make sense to post any of this data? Jim SG commented that it will be on docushare. Also, the data will soon be

incorporated in a draft report that can be posted, which will put it in context and make it more accessible.

Schedule The draft report will be available for review by the Committee by December 8th and will be ready to post by the end of the year.

ii. Research focus, iii. Events/Outreach, iv. Timeline

All these agenda items were postponed until next meeting.

IV. Next steps

a. Determine meeting schedule

Agree to meet first and third Wed (15th) in December instead of second and fourth. PC will come to Dec 1st. Will debrief and talk about changes to timeline and long term planning approach. Then on 15th we'll talk about the final report (we'll have had it for a week to review). Jim SG said he'd like to discuss ideas about changing wording of goals based on feedback from the workshop. PC will also make suggestions about the revision of vision/goals/objectives at same time.

b. Assign out committee "homework"

HOMEWORK

1) 1998 Master Plan. All read through first 50 pages of 1998 plan. Then look at the elements we're assigned. Also all look at implementation recommendations. PC can send memo they prepared about what % of recommendations were implemented.

2) Also read some comparative plans – Margaret will send us links. One is from PC and the other is from Lincoln. The examples illustrate different ways of organizing report.

3) BY SATURDAY 11/13. Review the results Daphne wrote up from first workshop. Read the summary (20 pages) and the raw data related to your goal and consider whether you agree with Daphne's summary of that goal. Email any thoughts on it by Saturday. Then Jim SG will post a link to the summary on web page (and provide access to raw data for those who want it). Margaret will then send out her email to workshop participants, ideally not later than Monday, which will refer to this information.

4) Margaret will think about recruiting events managers. Leigh will continue to do what did at the first workshop. She would also like to discuss tasks for the Planning Committee at our next meeting.