

Acton 2020 Committee

Minutes

December 14, 2011 7:00 pm

Town Hall Rm 204

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TOWN CLERK, ACTON

Attending: John Sonner (BoS), Paulina Knibbe, Kristin Alexander, Sahana Purohit, Margaret Woolley Busse, Jim Snyder-Grant, Celia Kent (minutes-taker), Roland Bartl, Charlie Mercier (before III), Jim Purdy (The Collaborative), and Daphne Politis (Community Circle)

I. Approved minutes from 11/22

II. a. BoS presentation – Margaret and Jim S-G attended the BoS meeting December 5th. Margaret commented that it would be interesting and important to respond to Dave Clough's question about what we as a Town can give up in order to fund new initiatives. Although deciding what to give up is a BoS responsibility, it would be useful for our committee to consider. Jim S-G commented that it would be good to focus up front on strategies that aren't a high cost so it's clear that certain things can move forward faster. There was further discussion about how to organize the executive summary:

*Paulina suggested that we should avoid putting a cost summary in exec summary as it focuses attention on the wrong thing, but Margaret thought that the costs should at least be referenced. Focuses attention on wrong thing. Jim P explained that they avoided a project timeline because gives false sense of specificity. Paulina asked– what about a timeline with out dates so that at least there is some record of a recommended sequencing? Jim P replied that there are still questions – i.e., does a sr ctr come before Kelly's corner? *At the BoS meeting Pam Harting-Barrat suggested removing reference to 40 B specifically. Jim SG – not sure should remove phrase 40B. John S – clarified that Pam's suggestion is that we don't frame our goals in terms of coming out against 40B; we can indicate that we want the Town to have more control over residential development choices. Paulina – agrees that it is more about better management of 40B development, rather than becoming "free from 40B".

*J SG commented had email exchange with some members of BoS and Town Manager about pay-as-you-throw who indicated openness to the idea. Daphne and Jim – commented that stats from other towns are clear that it's effective. J SG mentioned currently Acton has an atrocious recycling rate.

b. Paulina update. Paulina briefed the committee on new financial models that will affect the budget process. Every year the budget process results in the establishment of an amount that will be spent (by the Town and by the School) which is the maximum that can be spent. If spend less, the remaining funds are returned to free cash. Over the last few years, we have been returning \$ to free cash. So the free cash fund is larger than it has been. Now, there is more pressure from operating entities to increase their budgets; e.g. the Schools want to do an investment budget, not just a maintenance budget. This year, Finance subctee created a model to look forward long-term to what budget will look like factoring in the pension and health benefits agreed to in union contracts for upcoming retirees. Pension and health benefits have

traditionally been paid out of current budget. Those expenses are ballooning, however. The Sub-ctee developed 3 scenarios (bad, middle, optimistic) - and projected the budget shortfall in 5 years. Under the most favorable scenario, there would be a \$14M shortfall. More likely is \$26M and worst case \$60M. So, the Finance Committee is recommending that we begin to put money aside now to defray those costs in the future and have suggested \$500,000/year as a start. There is a sense that we need to fundamentally change what we do (reduce services) and that this would imply that we can't increase maintenance budgets nor invest in new things. Do we need to fundamentally change our expectations about how the town runs? Paulina explained that Acton is not alone in having to grapple with this issue. The concerns have been raised now in part because State required Towns to start tracking these long-term contractual commitments. It's important for our committee to understand the context in which the 2020 Master Plan will be considered, when some town board members feel it is a time we should be dampening expectations rather than raising them. Paulina added that on the positive side, the Town still has a AAA bond rating. She also offered to talk further with anyone who wants more information.

Roland – we should acknowledge the challenge in our document.

John – we need to make clear the plan is *not* an appropriation, but rather a document highlighting priorities. Jim and Roland – the Town needs growth to improve the financial situation, so we don't want to permanently postpone the investment that will allow for growth. We want to guide growth to residents who won't be using schools. (Charlie arrive)

III. Citizen feedback

- a. Ann Sussman. Margaret invited Ann to prepare something for a ctee meeting in January. Ann had highlighted Lincoln's and Hopkinton's master plans as a good model, but Margaret is not sure what those plans achieve that is different from our approach. She is also not clear where Ann's data on Acton's current growth is coming from (Acton isn't building 50+ new single family homes/year).

Charlie – can we highlight that we are trying to guide growth, not encourage growth per se? We don't have choices if people want to develop their property. Daphne– the population build-out projection is in the inventory. Jim SG – are we going to update it based on the alternatives we've chosen? Is the projection from the inventory still true if we choose to guide growth to centers using incentives? The June meeting materials included an analysis of effects. We should include this in the plan write-up – put in a reference to inventory # and then the projected # given the choices we are recommending.

- b. and c. Ron Beck, Aces, etc. There was some discussion about how to consider water quality and quantity issues with respect to build-out. Projections from the Water District indicate we are okay. Paulina commented there are towns around us who are rich in underground water, such as Stow, so we could develop a regional solution. They may want to partner with us by joining the Acton Water District since at the moment they are reliant on wells. M ask J SG to draft a way to respond to ACES. Jim has begun to lace comments from ACES

into online plan which is a good way to capture their concerns and begin to document the “see also’s” which help document issues that are discussed in other sections.

TO DO: Jim suggests that we should set time aside at a future meeting to review the online feedback by section.

Sahana mentioned the suggestion for a new town ctee to hear concerns from various cultural communities. Idea came from a phase 1 participant as well as more recently from Lisa Franklin. The Committee would perform an ombuds type role. Margaret thinks that’s a great idea. Provides people a way in, esp. if not a citizen. Jim SG – asked does this create another kind of marginalization? Discussion - Not really – just a guide to the right staff and services.

TO DO: Sahana will draft a sentence about the purpose of the committee and email it to Jim and Daphne.

IV. Plan write up - Framing

Margaret began the discussion with a few suggestions: a) Want exec summary to leave people feeling excited about what we can have without huge costs; b) Thinks there should be a section that addresses contingencies. Need to address concern that school enrollments will go down. Also, address what if financial environment doesn’t get better and house prices don’t rise, gas prices going up, etc. Daphne –maybe better to describe how the plan addresses these concerns rather than describe them as contingencies. Celia – how do we answer concern that small units will still attract small families with children (2nd growing demographic – single mothers)? Jim P – statistically (on average) we can demonstrate that the demographics will shift. Paulina – our best strategy is to keep people here since it is changeover that tends to generate likelihood of more families with young children. Roland – we need to give the Acton Conservation Trust as much support as possible for negotiation, and get our TDR zoning in place as soon as possible. Possibilities our plan should discuss include: a) Economy doesn’t recover, b) school population doesn’t decline, c) housing prices don’t recover, d) climate change accelerates more quickly (stormwater effects, potentially a population shift if shoreline starts disappearing). Margaret - let’s consider how to address people’s key concerns without getting too detailed.

Celia suggested we include data that demonstrate that increasing the senior population does cost a town less. Jim P - data is available – services for seniors generally cost a town less than services for families with school children. Although there is a higher need for fire dept and health svcs, it doesn’t add up to the costs of education. Margaret – we need to make sure don’t come across as anti-kid. Our goals are about balance, richer community

V. Review Documents

- a. Executive summary - committee discussion. Daphne – up to us to develop the Vision. She plunked in the phase one vision as a placeholder. Paulina – can we simplify the purpose/process part? M – should reference all the public meetings we held (one more bullet) , and add out reach and ongoing communication with town boards and committees. John S – should only have photos from Acton. Put Plan concept at beginning. Goals and

key recommendations at end.

Should key recommendations include process strategies or is that confusing? Maybe simplify this section but then have a section on key actions.

Paulina – questions whether “integrate teens” should be in the key recommendations section – important but doesn’t have the weight of other items in list.

Need to strengthen explanation of difference between 1991/98 plans. Roland will work on.

b. Ctee responsibility assignments – Jim S and Kristen working on, not ready for review.

VI. Next meeting – January 4th. Jim reviewed proposed project countdown. Will get a draft of plan before holidays. Come prepared with comments. Should also discuss publicity. Jim SG thinks need a few hrs with committee to review final implementation plan – aim for Jan 18th or perhaps Jan 11th. Put a hold on 18th. Jan 31st – final review of plan. . Aim to get on agendas of BoS and Fin Com early February. Paulina advises that it is best to get to Fin Com early, even if still draft. Then allow one month for public review before the public workshop March 6th.

- a. Warrant – present plan. Committee agreed that we will just bring the one article. Jim SG – thinks most of the ripe fruit would be best coming from the Boards/Ctees who are most involved with them. Roland – can’t ask for funds for village planning this time round or for staffing; best to aim for following year. But we can report on the things that can get underway right away. So we should insure the relevant sponsoring committees are on board and can support those action items being highlighted at town meeting. Town mtng generally structured so that the first night is about school and town budgets, all money topics. So, more likely in that model that we would be on second night. But could do hand-outs first night. Publicity should highlight getting people to attend, esp. if on second night. Could ask to be first on the 2nd night.
- b. Outline – Roland suggest 1. Plan Concept, 2. Guiding principles, 3. Key recommendations. 4. Purpose, process. M suggest Key recommendations come before implementation plan. D maybe the recommendations can be part of plan concept.

Next meeting – review low-hanging fruit list.

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