

Comprehensive Community Plan Committee Meeting Minutes

Date: June 2, 2010

Meeting started at 7:00pm

Committee Attendees: Margaret Woolley Busse (chair), Susan Benson, Jim Snyder-Grant (minutes-taker), Celia Kent, Sahana Purohit, Bill Marathias, Dean Cavaretta, Roland Bartl,

Observer: Dimitri Papathanasariou

Visitors from Planner's Collaborative (PC) , only bidders for Phase II contract: Daphne Politis, Brian Barber, Jim Purdy, Joe Brevard,

Intro by Margaret: Ctte has just started, first meeting last Friday. I'm on planning board & helped interview the new committee. At our first meeting, our committee talked about Phase 1, what went well & what didn't go well & what we can do better going forward.

Joe Brevard: We've worked in maybe 100 towns. We have a lot of strengths. We are fine with differences of opinions and concerns. We don't know enough about the details of the issues to respond in detail yet.

Jim Purdy: We're familiar with situations in which there are some people who disagree a lot, and we listen to them, but if they represent a persistent minority, we listen and then move on.

Daphne: Phase 1 was about inclusion, and getting a broad brush sense of what most people want to preserve or change. Phase 2 keeps re-visiting those goals & visions, but moves on to include more specific goals and steps to get there, and detailed data about where we are now.

Margaret: I wasn't in phase 1. I talked to people who were who had concerns. General feedback was consistent: quality of outreach was excellent. Some of the analysis of the open-ended questions seemed at a simplistic level, and was hard to understand.

Daphne: Phase II will include a more detailed analysis of the open-ended answers. Daphne did a qualitative look at the open-ended answers, and Brian did a keyword analysis, and members of the committee did a reanalysis. All looks did not change the basic results, as reflected in the phase I goal & vision statement.

Joe: No good master plan is based on a survey. Surveys are a starting point to see that we don't miss things, and to validate. The plan moves forward by discussion and analysis.

Brian: Residential Survey mailed (15% return), Telephone survey using random selection, to focus on some specific questions. Finally a survey of business (5-6%). Plus many many focus groups and meetings, and the big opinion-gathering events to learn more about details and opinions. Details in phase I report (at <http://actonoutreach.com>)

Brian: Master plan process starts divergent - data gathering, opinion gathering, low-level analysis. Then it goes convergent - winnowing & prioritizing & focusing.

Margaret: The other concern was about the math - 60% of 60% reported as a majority, as a theoretical example.

Brian: I remember this discussion. This was a methodological choice about how to deal with coding and translating open ended data, especially how & whether to include non-answers in the totals: How to calculate the base. The data was looked at both ways, so that the data could be examined both ways.

Still: didn't change the goals & results. Also remembers a conversation about whether a content analysis & factor analysis should be done. Brian has done that in the past. But it was overkill in this case. Level of detail requested was out of scope, and a look at it somewhat deeper didn't change results.

Jim P: wonders if we need to resolve this question before signing contract. Should ctte consider approaching the people who had the most concerns & have them meet with PC individually.

Sue: We need some way to talk more with those concerned.

Daphne: How can we get those concerned about phase I involved or communicated with, informally or formally?

Jim S-G: Maybe Ctte meets with those concerned & relay's PC's willingness to meet - and maybe listening is enough.

Margaret suggested we move on for now to consider the question of how committee and consultants can work together as well as possible for phase 2.

Daphne: A good system: one person from ctte or any subcommittees taking input and noting where we agree and where we don't agree & being a good facilitator to run decisions to the ground.

Margaret recalled that at our last meeting we discussed the idea of some sort of data & analysis integrity person for phase 2? Discussed pros & cons.

Dean - maybe we should figure out how to keep other town constituencies and people updated, by assigning ourselves to them.

Roland: We will indeed be doing a lot of outreach and communication and feeding ideas and data both ways. This is one of this committee's most important jobs.

Roland: It seems folks that said that they disagreed about methods may have really disagreed about results, and decided to blame the data analysis.

Jim P: Phase 2 scope includes looking at the survey data in more detail. But main parts of phase 2 are working from newly developed physical data about the elements, analysis and policy prioritization.

Dean: What makes good master plans?

Brian: Good plans become owned by the committee & then the planning board & then the town meeting.

Daphne: Inclusive of a wide set of points of view, worked through. Realistic plans that are properly prioritized and appropriate for Acton.

Roland: Ctte needs to keep a view towards a realistic plan that is bought-in broadly - but not so broadly that it is bland, and not so crowd-pleasing that it fails to move the town forward.

Ctce role: outreach. Review recommendations. individuals may work with consultants in element research. Ctce members work with town staff & committees to make sure they are deeply involved with master plan review in their areas.

Roland: some room in contingency for extra meetings or some such. Town Hall roundtable with key staff a good part of scope.

Celia: Please describe a way of working that didn't work?

Consultants: A ctte did most of starting work & handed it to Planner's Collaborative, who recommended re-doing some of the work, and were turned down. Result was unsatisfactory.

Celia: Please describe a model that did work?

Daphne: Ctce was very motivated, and worked to make sure plans were doable., and cared deeply about results. Most of the recommendations for zoning changes were taken up by the town over the next few years, and most passed. It doesn't work if there's a lack of continuity. Smaller committees generally work well. It helps to have ctce owners for particular areas and issues. Bad: meetings at 7:00 AM with no coffee.

It helps when people are willing to engage in open disagreements and resolve them.

Sahana: What are your comments on what didn't work well on Phase I?

Daphne: There was no control on contact by ctce members to consultants, we were overwhelmed with large numbers of sometimes contradictory instructions, and there were unclear expectations. Need to know who is in charge of each meeting.

-----Thanked consultants, and they left -----

What we thought about the consultants.

Bill: PC started out a bit defensive, but eventually addressed all the issues, in terms of scope creep & problems of working with a diffuse committee. They tried to accommodate everyone - pros & cons.

Concerned that we don't have a comparison - another firm. Roland reminds us that we did to a comparison for phase 1, and PC was chosen.

Margaret: PC started defensive & didn't address questions, but she became convinced during course of meeting. No longer worried about analytical skills.

Jim: It was very helpful to hear Brian's memory of specific conversations that matched concerns that were raised to Margaret. He had a convincing account of what happened.

Sahana: Yes, you can't get a totally objective way to quantitatively analyze open-ended data. It's qualitative. They don't need peer overview for their analysis. They showed their competence.

Celia: Fine with going with them. But - they were too nice and accommodating in Phase I. May be addressed by change in project manager for Phase II. Current proposal is well-written and clear, with good scope,

Sue: Already had confidence in working with them. Reviewing the phase 1 experience was helpful in understanding how the process went awry. There was not strong leadership at key times on town side, so expectations ran amok, and expectations weren't managed, and inappropriate behavior was not stopped effectively by either side. We need to have clear governance on our side & clear expectations. Some folks just came a bit and then raised a lot of issues.

Dean: Agreed with all of what's been said. PC are very skilled people. Optimistic about our ability to focus them and us.

Roland: Sympathy with the situation they got stuck in.

Margaret: Given what we know, they may or may not be the best, but they are plenty good enough for us. Recommends we proceed.

Jim moved: That the committee recommend that the town manager get a contract signed with Planner's Collaborative for phase 2.

Passed unanimously.

Discussed a proposed summary message to phase 1 members who expressed concern: "We had an extensive conversation with PC & decided to go ahead with them based on skills & experience; and we made some learnings about how to work well with them; and we have statistical skills on our committee"

Sahana & Jim & Margaret to make a group to offer to meet with phase 1 ctte members & PC to listen concerns. Ctte authorized this group to proceed, Margaret to lead in seeing what makes sense.

Margaret to contact Finance Committee chair (Marry Ann Ashton) to discuss having a FinCom liaison to our committee, and to discuss concerns raised to FinCom about PC.

We briefly discussed a revised charter that includes a possible name change, and a description of ctte role vis-a-vis the consultants. Jim had a draft of possible charter language that was read to the committee. (basically: Ctte needs to retain ownership of overall process, including managing communications and schedule). Since Board of Selectmen approves charters, Margaret to take this up directly with our BoS liaison, Lauren Rosensweig.

Discussed how to activate notion from previous meeting of making sure data uncovered during process is open and web accessible to other committees and groups in town; and integrated with existing town systems wherever appropriate. Bill and Jim agreed to work with Roland on how to communicate and agree on this with both town IT staff and consultants. They will initially work via email & may have a phone meeting at some time. Any recommendations or findings will be brought back to committee.

Next meeting: July 14 7:00 PM, place tba.

Phase I communications group may meet before then if needed - meeting will be posted if it happens.

Minutes: Jim proposed accepting last meeting minutes (May 25, 2010) as amended, Celia seconded, passed unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at 9:40