Text of notes from Donald Fellows regarding a new Planning Director position.

4/16/24

Councilors

For the Record, I am Don Fellows, a resident of Lisbon Village, former TC member, long time Planning Board member and Chair and a current member of the Finance Committee.

This proposal to add a Planning and Codes Department is a significant change for the town. It is a radically different focus. In the past we have largely targeted compliance and enforcement of zoning and building codes with some later but significant help from outside planning folks.

I have almost always advocated for Planning services for us because they are the pros in helping the town understand the future growth planning for our town. Here, the Codes Enforcement Officer as been primary in all functions which includes being primary (mostly sole) support for the Planning Board.

When I came to the PB in 2009, we had no consistent way to handle the various applications for building and for development of subdivisions even though we did have ordinances. We had no coordination with other town department and state agencies. The ordinances were there but we had no method of implementing them practically at the board level.

With the help of our first contract Planner, Amanda Bunker of Wright Pierce Engineering, we were able to develop and implement the currently used checklists for working through an application and for coordinating all the input needed from various bodies. We also developed the downtown plan and the RT 196 corridor design standards and guidelines for those entrepreneurs wishing to build or remodel along that stretch of highway or in the two primary villages.

To date and through several iterations we have had part-time contract planners. Ben Smith and Kate Burch of NorthStar Planning have been instrumental in getting us through much.

So that is planning services, and you may say that why not continue as we have been. If you came to PB meetings you would know that the all-volunteer board that sits in those seats, struggles to coordinate everything even with a planner and a CEO. We are growing as a town, and I believe we have outgrown the part-time Planning situation. Those folks have been terrific on projects, but they leave, and we have only the CEO to do what he (or any other CEO) is not trained to do. Those are the things that need to be put together and coordinated outside of projects. I think that if we honestly try to continue to meet the demand with a PT planner, we will likely spend more on contracts than we would by hiring a new director.

A big part of the new proposal is to put a Planning Director as head of the department with Codes as a member of the department. Our current CEO (as well as past ones) is not educated in any formal way (if at all) by a proper planning education. So, we have planning services but none of that other coordination of efforts and because that responsibility and expertise is not and has never been available. I remember interviewing prospective CEO's and no applicant (even the very best ones) has ever met the qualifications for a planner, but they have always been tasked with it. The closest we ever came to Planning expertise on staff was Brett Richardson when he was Economic and Community development.

Now you have a chance to have a process that will surely get better resident involvement in local change proposals. You can hire someone who will be an expert on the zoning rules and regulations or if not, be able to better collaborate with the CEO in interpreting the often-difficult meanings in the rules. Probably equally as important is that the Planning Director will be more equipped to help us deal with our updates to the Comprehensive Plan and to decide the best future land use for this developing community.

In summary, we are a town committed to future growth and to being a friendly family-oriented community that houses people affordably and comfortably and we should be able to take advantage of whatever opportunity there also may be to leverage federal and state contributions. A planning director is best positioned to do that. We need to have one table that when the Planning Department sits down with other players were there is discussion and guided direction about a proper way to proceed. The efforts put forth in a Planning Department will make public involvement more focused and relevant for whatever project or purpose needed.

Sorry, but that cannot happen with the current arrangement! We need to let our CEO do just that, enforce codes and to do it well; not to attempt to do that which is beyond his knowledge. Only if we choose to leave the rest to a well-structured Planning Department will we be ahead of the game.

The money will be well spent, and I encourage you to move forward with this ordinance revision as written and tweaked. As an afterthought, while the Finance Committee has not officially taken a position on this matter, I believe it will ultimately support moving forward.

PB -- future