

Town Council Special Meeting

Minutes

May 20, 2015

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 pm.

Roll Call

Councilors Anderson, McBrady, Goldberg, Farber, King and Hemphill were present and answering roll call.

Councilor Mahoney was absent.

Item 1 Discussion of the Economic Development Strategy Report as recommended by the Falmouth Economic Improvement Committee (FEIC).

Janice Delima, member of the FEIC, said the committee has worked on the recommendations and strategy for the last year. They gathered a lot of information on Falmouth and neighboring towns. They have had two public forums and two surveys to gather public input. Their report has four key concepts with strategies, action plans, and some prioritization with timeframes.

Chair Farber asked if FEIC planned to continue with the extra members for the next few years and whether they should review the charge of the committee.

Dimitri Balatsos, committee member, said that would have to come from the Council.

Chair Farber asked how many members are on the committee.

Theo Holtwijk, Long-range Planning Director, said there are 7 standing members; the Council added 4 additional slots but only two additional members were appointed, so they have been working with a 9 member committee.

Chair Farber thought they might review the committee membership and its charge.

Mr. Holtwijk said they need the Council and the Chamber of Commerce to implement the plan, but the committee is ready to take the next step.

Ms. Delima said they felt this work was important and it would be good to have the committee continue in some form. There will likely be a lot of dialogue between the group and the Town Council on implementing the plan in the future.

Chair Farber asked for some more information on proposed zoning changes relative to redeveloping existing properties on Route 1. She was surprised there wasn't more awareness of the recent zoning changes along Route 1.

Nathan Poore, Town Manager, said the recommendation to review zoning on Route 1 is specifically about a threshold requirement for when a property has to be brought into full compliance with current zoning. The discussion is where that threshold should be, and whether there should be a step system to allow owners to make some improvements but not all. The goal is to bring the whole corridor up to modern standards. It isn't related to the new VC districts.

Councilor Anderson asked if the committee discussed the lack of a tenant in the former Shaw's building and whether this proposal was meant to address that.

Mr. Holtwijk said the committee did some outreach interviews, and the owners of that property were included. He agreed that redeveloping an existing space under current zoning will require a property owner to upgrade the site, but there are also lease conditions that prevent infill development. The cost of renovation as well as current market conditions have combined to contribute to the situation.

Jim Damicis of Camoin Associates, said it is a market issue. Filling retail space is a market challenge across the United States and will continue to be an issue for the foreseeable future. The South Portland mall and Freeport are both large draws, and it is a tough environment for retail. He didn't think that the Town had policies that were blocking development. Redevelopment of such a large space is costly. He said perhaps a public-private partnership might be a solution to bringing the site up to standards and redeveloping the site.

Councilor Anderson asked about the perception of "business-unfriendly attitudes" listed in the challenges.

Mr. Damicis said communication with businesses is always a challenge. Communication efforts with the public and businesses should be "always and often". He has observed that Falmouth holds itself to a high standard of service, and the people have high expectations of service. A majority of the businesses they spoke with said that "business friendliness" was a problem; he found that it was more of a problem here than with other projects he has worked on. The committee decided that it should be a priority to improve the business climate. He said high profile interactions can create a certain environment. There have been a few of those in Falmouth. He didn't recommend loosening standards; in fact, he recommended strict standards to avoid low-wage jobs and "development at all costs" but he also recommended high levels of customer service.

Ms. Delima said they heard from real estate developers that they would go to Cumberland instead of Falmouth due to the process in Falmouth; they felt the process took too long and was unpredictable.

Councilor Goldberg asked how they reconcile the statement about having high standards with unpredictable outcomes; he asked if there were any examples.

Mr. Damicis said the core of it was that people hold onto the past for a long time when there are high-profile incidents. Challenging activities like the Route 1 development contribute as well, even though it might be best in the long run. He stressed a continued focus on customer service and to recognize and change ordinances when they are no longer meeting people's needs.

The Council will vote on the report on May 27 and public comment will be taken at that time. The Council asked FEIC to discuss what tasks from the report they would want to tackle in the first year. Chair Farber pointed out that some of the recommendations might be better assigned to the CDC.

Item 2 Discussion of the Route 100 Vision Report as recommended by the Route 100 Committee.

Andrea Ferrante, chair of the Route 100 Committee, discussed the committee's work over the past year. The goal of their report is to enhance the West Falmouth area – improving roadway safety for vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians; attracting business; and bringing this area of town back to life.

They held two public forums, had direct conversations with people who use Route 100, and had a survey.

Councilor King would like to see some work done to destinations along Route 100 that people might walk or bike to, like the park on Mill Road.

Councilor Goldberg left the meeting.

Mr. Poore said the Council will vote on the report at the May 27 meeting, and on authorizing staff to put out a RFP for preliminary engineering. Staff will bring back a recommendation and an appropriation request for that engineering to be paid out of the West Falmouth TIF.

Chair Farber asked about the proposed sewer improvements; she wondered how strongly people feel about hooking up to public sewer.

Steve Melchisky, committee member, said this is the time to do whatever they can do to enable people in the district to be on sewer, since they will be ripping up the road anyway. They need public sewer access to allow for business development. He felt it would be a benefit that would be reaped for generations, despite the costs to do it.

Councilor Anderson asked how DOT might be approached to participate as a member in this project. This is an expensive project.

Mr. Poore said staff and the consultants went to Augusta and met with DOT. The Town would be picking up the pieces of a DOT project that has been planned, but unfunded, for over a decade so DOT was very interested. He was hopeful that a fairly significant portion of the project might be carried by DOT, perhaps 30%, with another 30% carried by reserve funds in the TIF district, and the remaining 40% funded by future TIF funding, similar to the Route 1 project funding design.

Councilor Anderson said that while many of the proposed projects are targeted toward specific issues, others seemed designed to attract new business and residential development.

Ms. Ferrante said there might be some of that. Upgrades to Route 100 are so past due that some of these are standards that they should already have, such as sewer. She didn't know it if would attract new development, but she felt it would raise the quality of existing development.

Mr. Melchisky said most of it isn't about attracting new business, but addressing safety, traffic and neighborhood concerns. All the money is going to specific things – roadway, infrastructure and sewer improvements. They are creating a good, safe neighborhood. They are also proposing zoning changes to make it a friendlier area.

Councilor King said when they were developing the comp plan, they envisioned two hubs of economic and residential activity – Route 1 and West Falmouth.

Chair Farber said Gray Road has been a thoroughfare for a long time, and West Falmouth has been a hub for that area. This is about bringing this area up to modern standards. This is long overdue.

Councilor McBrady spoke about his work with the committee as their liaison; their goals have been about safety improvements, and not economic development.

Item 3 Order to go into Executive Session pursuant to the Laws of Maine to discuss the Town Manager's annual performance review, pursuant to 1 M.R.S.A. § 405 (6) (A).

Councilor King moved to enter executive session; Councilor Hemphill seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

The Council entered executive session at 7:08 pm and did not return.

Respectfully submitted,

Melissa Tryon
Recording Secretary