

NVDA Town Plan Review Committee Hearing Minutes
Regional Approval of Lowell Town Plan
Wednesday, November 4th, 6:00 pm
Lowell Municipal Building

From Town Plan Review Committee: Jeanne Desrochers, Coventry; Mike Metcalf, Greensboro; Paul Brouha, Sutton

NVDA Staff: Alison Low

Representing Lowell: Amanda Carlson, Town Administrator and Assistant Clerk; Rolf Koob, Planning Commission; Alden Warner, Selectboard; Keith Christianson, Planning Commission; Sam Thurston, Planning Commission; Richard Pion, Selectboard

Prior to the opening of the hearing, the committee voted to have Mike Metcalf act as Chair. The hearing opened at 6:15 p.m.

Alison explained the purpose of regional approval of local plans as per 24 V.S.A. §4350. She mentioned that the plan contained all the required elements at the time of its adoption and were consistent with the State planning goals.

Amanda Carlson, who oversaw the plan development, was asked by the committee to explain the reason behind the new plan. First, she said, the plan had not been updated in a long time so it was due for an overhaul. Also, the earlier plan had not addressed flooding and fluvial erosion. (A local hazard mitigation plan is now under development for Lowell.) When asked if wind (especially industrial) was an issue, Amanda replied that it was not a major topic area for this plan, since Kingdom Community Wind is already there – although it was not a given that this is no longer a major topic for neighboring towns.

This town plan was characterized by the planning commission as a “complete overhaul.” The history section was not there before, nor was the detailed analysis of population trends. It was noted that there was growth in the oldest sectors of the population (similar to most Vermont towns) but also significant growth in the number of young children (i.e. ages 5 to 9).

The regional approval committee noted that the plan’s objectives did vary in terms of specificity. The flood resilience element, for example, is highly specific. By contrast, the economic development element has general recommendations for light, non-polluting industry. The Sutton town plan addresses some of the challenges of siting industrial uses in a rural community, and there might be approaches and recommendations that are of interest to the Lowell planning commission.

Speeding was noted to be a major problem in town. A recent speed study found that the only vehicle that wasn’t speeding was a lawnmower.

The regional approval board noted with interest the recommendation to join the Community Ratings System. Alison pointed out that a statewide dialog had taken place regarding the CRS. Currently only three communities in the state belong. A statewide/regional effort might be able to accomplish some of the public outreach and education requirements for joining the program, and this might be easier to accomplish jointly than if a town tried to do it on its own. (Also, there are regulatory models for flood hazard regulation developed by ANR that, if adopted, will help get the town qualified for CRS enrollment as well as an increased share under the Emergency Relief and Assistance Fund.)

The planning commission indicated its intention to update the town plan on a regular basis. Hiring Amanda was going to be a huge asset for accomplishing this since she regularly interfaces with the Selectboard and has a finger on the pulse of local government.

Jeanne Desrochers suggested looking at ways the income from wind might benefit the Town of Lowell. She talked about the income from landfill in Coventry, which covers all of the municipal tax. Funds beyond that go above and beyond that go into the Coventry Town Foundation, noting that “a little bit of town funding can go a long way.” The Town of Lowell indicated an interest in exploring this further, such as determining how the foundation board was set up, how funds were administered and spent, etc.

Subsequent updates to the plan may further some of the more aspirational goals. Future plan updates will be looking at the zoning, for example, which hasn’t always played out as intended. It was noted the development is largely hemmed in by roadways.

Other areas for exploration might include impacts on adjacent communities. Properties in Lowell, for example are selling higher than assessed, but what is going on in adjacent communities? It was noted by a regional approval committee member that very few properties in Sutton (next-door to Sheffield) were selling. Another area for exploration might be performance standards for commerce and industry of an appropriate scale.

It was also suggestion that the Town of Lowell could explore Village Center designation and how it might benefit the town (NVDA can assist). Condition of ditches and culverts are also a good topic (Vermont Online Bridge and Culvert Inventory Tool and Better Back Roads are good resources).

Paul Brouha recommended approval of the Lowell town Plan by the full board of NVDA. Jeanne Desrochers seconded the motion. All voted in favor. The hearing adjourned at 7:20.

Respectfully submitted,
Alison Low