

**NVDA Town Plan Review Committee Hearing Minutes
Regional Approval of Sheffield and St. Johnsbury Town Plans
Wednesday, July 19, 2017 6:00 PM
at the Sheffield Town Offices, 37 Dane Road, Sheffield, VT**

From Town Plan Review Committee: Sten Lium, Concord; Mike Metcalf, Greensboro; Paul Brouha, Sutton; Jeannes Desrochers, Coventry.

NVDA Staff: Alison Low

Representing Sheffield Planning Commission: Rod Dwyer, Keith Ballek*, Annie MacLean, Sally Wood-Simons, Ed Richardson, Linda Kozak, Patricia DeGreenia, Erik Lavallee
*Also on the NVDA board.

Representing St. Johnsbury: Sue Cherry, Planning Commission Chair

Prior to the opening of the hearing, the committee voted to have Mike Metcalf act as Chair. The hearing opened at 6:00 p.m.

Alison Low explained the purpose of the hearing. She noted that the plans in question in reviewed by staff to ensure that they contained all the required elements and were consistent with statewide planning goals. She also noted that municipal plans are now valid for eight years, not five. While the purpose of the hearing is to confirm the towns by reviewing and approving their plans, another confirmation will be required at least once during the next eight-year lifespan of the plan. Towns are therefore strongly urged to think about options for carrying out the plan, as well as technical assistance that NVDA might be able to provide, before the next confirmation is due (about year 4 of the plan).

Mike started the review process by asking about the nature of the Sheffield plan – was it a substantive rewrite of the 2009 plan? Keith pointed out that the 2009 plan was Sheffield's first plan. The plan now contains an element on flood resilience and more preventive measures that go above and beyond basic flood regulation, such as protection to upland forested areas, which can attenuate flood flows, as well as overall concerns about forest fragmentation. The economic development section was also updated to reflect new opportunities, such as the Working Lands Enterprise Grant programs. The plan update commenced in 2012, and it became an incremental process, as multiple individuals (some of whom are no longer on the planning commission) contributed to it.

There was a question about the nature of the outreach process. Multiple meetings were held, and there were public hearings. There was also a meeting with NVDA staff in the late summer of 2015. After the selectboard hearing, the plan was put to vote at town meeting. It passed with a vote of 72-10.

There was a passing mention of the Sheffield Wind Project. It was noted that about 2,700 acres are conserved for off-site mitigation, and the town receives about \$520,000 a year for 20 years.

(Property taxes are included in this payment.) Payment to town will be renegotiated at the end of the 20 year period.

Jeanne asked what the community did with the money. Currently, the town uses the proceeds to reduce 50% of the municipal portion of the property tax. The rest is being banked for future investment, and there is discussion of the options available to the town so that property taxes don't hike at the end of the 20-year period.

Paul was interested in finding out who participated in the education section, as the plan was largely focused on the facility rather than programming. It was generally acknowledged that subsequent updates to the plan should include programming concerns. It was also clarified that Lyndon Institute is not the "designated" school for Sheffield. Rather, residents have a variety of options open to them. The range of choices, coupled with low taxes and no zoning, could be a draw for some people to move to Sheffield. There was a question about whether this benefit was causing an influx of people to move to town. The answer was no. People who had moved there -- Annie MacLean and Erik Lavallee -- noted that it was merely a nice surprise.

The discussion turned to flood resilience. It was noted that there are properties in town that cannot be mortgaged because the town does not currently participate in the National Flood Insurance Program. Alison indicated the town of Sheffield has had an ongoing discussion regarding the NFIP, and Keith said that he was hoping to have Sacha Pealer from ANR meet with the PC this fall.

Committee members noted the strong turnout of Sheffield PC. It was also interesting to note the dynamic relationship with Wheelock, which started with the shared school. There was a question regarding the Holbrook land, and it was noted by Paul that it does not get included in the overall land management planning efforts conducted by the state.

The Keniston and Dane Scholarships were remarked on.

Sten Lium made a motion to recommend full board approval of the Sheffield Town Plan. Jeanne seconded the motion. The motion passed, with all voting in favor.

Next up was the St. Johnsbury Plan. Sue Cherry explained that it was a rewrite of the 2011 plan, and it took a different focus -- namely the "Maintain, Evolve, Transform" approach (found on page 7) recommended by the Agency of Commerce and Community Development. The priorities were on healthy communities and economic development (which also explains the level of involvement from the St. Johnsbury Chamber and the inclusion of ESRI charts). Sue discussed how the M-E-T chart that starts on page 7 shows how the goals and priorities of the plan have changed from 2006 to 2011 to 2017.

Mike commented on the reference in outline form and how much he appreciated that. Sten also remarked on the sophisticated combination of vision and detail that could be found in the St. Johnsbury plan.

Sue discussed some of the major housing initiatives currently underway, such as Housing Study and Assessment and the various designations that could support neighborhood development. Village Center Designation is proposed for St. Johnsbury Center and East St. Johnsbury, and state “neighborhood designations” are proposed within walking distance of the downtown and village centers to increase the availability of housing for “young professionals, established retirees, young families, second-home owners, and income-supported residents.” Another major endeavor involves the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, which along with the Three Rivers Bike Path, represents a major contribution to town-wide recreation opportunities. The town is currently studying connection opportunities from the trailhead to the downtown, travelling along Bay Street and across Green Mountain Power land near the river.

There was a question about the identification of employers. Employer data is organized by zip code, by business segment (NAICS) and trends.

It was clarified that the CSO program should be renamed to something like the CSO Elimination program. Otherwise, the program’s intent is not clear and could be misunderstood.

There were some questions about the energy information, which did not include actual generation data on the hydro facility operated by GMP. Alison and Sue explained that the plan was not intended meet enhanced planning standards for Act 174 (i.e. “Substantial Deference”). The planning commission, however, intends to revise the plan in the near future to meet enhanced energy planning standards. Paul suggested that when they do, the Town consider the opportunities created by the Granite State Power Link project, a project by National Grid and Citizen’s Energy. (Explanation: The GSPL will build approximately 58 miles of new HVDC [direct current] transmission line from a new converter station in northern Vermont to a new converter station in Monroe, New Hampshire. From Monroe, approximately 109 miles of AC [alternating current] transmission line will run to a new switching station in Londonderry, New Hampshire.)

There was considerable praise for the colorful and easy-to-read maps and charts. There was a question about the jump in median household income. Sue stated that the jump isn’t really all that dramatic.

Paul made a motion to recommend full board approval of the St. Johnsbury Town Plan. Sten seconded the motion. The motion passed, with all voting in favor.

Mike made a motion to close the hearing. The motion passed, with all voting in favor. The hearing adjourned at 7:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Alison Low