

TOWN OF NEW LONDON
CITIZENS' ADVISORY COMMITTEE
OCTOBER 28, 2006

PRESENT: Cindy Adie, Hugh Chapin, Sue Clough (Selectman), Celeste Cook, David Dunning, Ray Ettenborough, Paul Gorman, Karen Hogle, Mark Kaplan (Selectman), Marilyn Kidder, Bob Lavoie, D.J. Lavoie, Jessie Levine (Town Administrator), Harmon Lewis, Sue Little, Doug Lyon (Selectman), Joe McCarthy, Bob MacMichael, Lois Marshall, Peter Messer, Stephanie Wheeler, Noel Weinstein.

ALSO: Read Clarke

Doug Lyon opened the meeting at 7:30 a.m. The Citizens Advisory Committee addressed four areas of business during this meeting.

1. Watershed Protection Committee

Doug Lyon distributed copies of a memorandum from Lake Sunapee Protective Association regarding the Sunapee Area Watershed Coalition's formation of an ad hoc committee to work on an area watershed protective plan. SAWC would like to include in the planning as many perspectives as possible, and are inviting interested volunteers. The ad hoc committee will meet approximately once a month for ten months. Jessie Levine explained that would be an appointment position on behalf of the Town of New London.

2. Green Space on Main Street

Doug Lyon referred to the green space between the Town Office building and the New London Inn, which for some years, has been used as skating rink sponsored by the Inn and the Town's Recreation Department. He reported that the New London Inn has approached the Town regarding the possibility of the Town's purchasing an easement for that space, and perhaps the land behind it as well. Purchasing an easement would protect that space from development. They have not discussed price yet.

Karen Hogle asked if that space can be developed. Is it large enough? Jessie Levine said yes, the space is about one acre, and it is in the commercial zone which does not have lot size limitations. Development in the commercial zone must meet the Planning Board's approval with regard to things like the building, green space, parking, etc.

Celeste Cook asked if there are alternatives being considered. Doug Lyon said they don't know, but are always trying to stay alert to the potential for development on spaces in Town where people may not feel it is desirable to have development. He noted that the Inn itself is on a significant sized piece of property, all in the commercial zone.

Lois Marshall asked if the Episcopal Church would again be able to use it for their fairs, as they used to. Doug Lyon said the Town would not be purchasing the land, but just an easement on it. The Inn would still own the land, and Bridget Leroy wishes to continue using the rink for her events. Jessie Levine suggested the possibility that allowing the church to once again use that for its fairs could be negotiated into the terms of the easement.

Marilyn Kidder said the Town might not necessarily want to preclude parking there forever. Jessie Levine agreed, they have already discussed the possibility of using the back section of this space for parking. Sue Clough said the church is also looking to obtain more parking area, without losing its own green space. Potentially this could be multi use.

Harmon Lewis said he feels purchasing an easement for that space is a good idea; he would be heartily in favor of that.

Bob MacMichael expressed the feeling that, given that Ausbon Sargent used his life savings to protect the green on one side of the Academy Building, the Town should do something to protect the green on the other side. An easement would at least give the Town a foothold there.

Bob Lavoie agreed that this would be good to pursue, depending on the terms of the easement. He asked if there are costs involved. Jessie Levine said yes, the Town would be buying the development rights, and that would require approval at Town Meeting. She said the first step would be to hire an appraiser—at a cost of \$1500 to \$3000.

In conclusion, Doug Lyon asked to confirm that the consensus of the Citizens' Advisory Committee is that the Town ought to pursue the idea of purchasing an easement for this green space. Yes.

3. Small Businesses in New London

Read Clarke opened discussion on the status of small business in New London by pointing out that over the last year and a half, the Town has lost 16 or 17 of its small businesses, and he brought the CAC up to date on recent changes in direction and focus at the New London Shopping Center specifically. Ownership of the New London Shopping center is no longer local; rather the Center has been purchased by a New York based company, and there has been some difficulty in communication. Tenants there are facing large rent increases, as well as changes in the terms of the lease. One concern is that all the leases now seem to be zeroed in on the year 2012 for expiration. That begs the question, what is the company's future plans for that shopping center. What is its strategy? He has become aware of concern within the New London community regarding the loss of New London's uniqueness. Another concern the tenants have with the new leases is the clause allowing the company to give only 45-days notice to a business that it (the business) is being moved out. He asked if the Town could review any of this. Jessie Levine said she doubts that the Town can get involved in a review of the lease.

Several CAC members raised the question, is the company planning to put a big box store there, or perhaps a group of national outlet stores. How can the town protect its uniqueness? Can big box stores be regulated out? Sue Little asked if they really have control over what happens at the shopping center. Or is the question of how to protect the Town's uniqueness directed now to the other areas? Noel Weinstein asked if there is some connection between the Main Street shops and the shopping center. Jessie Levine and Read Clarke agreed that there have been two separate evolutions in the two places, but people are talking about the overall changes in Town. Doug Lyon said the impacts from the changes in both places are similar, though there may be multiple causes for them, including (as Jessie pointed out) changing consumer habits.

Lois Marshall asked Read Clarke if he thinks that some of the current tenants of the New London Shopping Center may move into some of the empty spaces on Main Street. Read Clarke said that for businesses which are not necessarily "destination shops," there is a distinct advantage in being at New London Shopping Center. He would not say no (to Lois' question) but the businesses would have to look at their threshold traffic.

Noel Weinstein said that the tenants there have to end the mystery (of what the company plans for that area), and open up communications with the company. Ray Ettenborough asked who the tenants communicate with now. Read Clarke said for financial matters, they communicate with the company located in New York. For maintenance issues, they communicate with people in Hartford CT. Ray Ettenborough pointed out that Hannaford is the biggest rent payer at the shopping center. He asked if Hannaford would be in a more powerful position to communicate with the company that owns the shopping center, or are they having problems similar to the other tenants. Read Clarke said without talking to them, he cannot answer that. He noted that Hannaford does have a longer lease.

David Dunning asked about zoning there. Jessie Levine said that is the commercial zone, and it goes back 300 feet. The commercial zone does allow more flexibility for development. Right now, a box store could come into Town if it meets planning and zoning requirements.

Marilyn Kidder opened discussion on the need to attract the kind of businesses that the Town would like to see. She pointed out that the Town has looked quite a lot at its residential aspects, and perhaps should now look more at improving its commercial situation. She noted that it is difficult for new businesses to come in here cold, and cope with issues as the planning and zoning regulations, and the parking issue. She suggested the development of some helpful resource to attract and assist new businesses in locating here. The Town needs to project an attitude of welcoming new businesses of the type it wants. If that's what the Town wants, that should be part of the master planning. Sue Clough said the Master Plan Committee is considering appointing a subcommittee with the Chamber of Commerce as its base, and composed of people who have knowledge about business possibilities in Town.

Jessie Levine asked what role the Town should play in economic development. Should they be developing staff within the Town Office to recruit businesses and work with them? Marilyn Kidder suggested starting out smaller, with a committee consisting of business people. Business people are always good recruiters for other businesses. She said the Town needs to identify communities it would like to model itself after. Several CAC members mentioned Stowe, Vermont. Celeste Cook asked if it would be possible to identify communities like that, and find out how they go about doing this. Jessie Levine said yes, that can be done.

Read Clarke said his concern is similar to Marilyn Kidder's. Also, he noted the absence of supporting facilities for businesses in New London as for example, restaurants that stay open at night. Availability of employees is another issue businesses must face. Joe McCarthy seconded the concern about lack of support facilities particularly at night. That affects his transportation business, in that he does more transportation to areas as Lebanon.

Some CAC members asked to be updated on some of the visible changes at the shopping center:

- o Ray Ettenborough asked about the islands Hannaford has put in the parking lot. Did the Town approve those? Jessie Levine said the Town did approve a parking plan for Cricenti's, and when Hannaford wanted to change that, they did have to get Planning Board approval for those changes. The Town did not direct them to put the islands in the parking lot.
- o Peter Messer asked why it has taken so long to get a new tenant for the Pub. Cindy Adie explained that it has been difficult for the lessee to sub-lease that space for the short period of time that remains on the current lease. Also, she pointed out that there is a "no compete" clause in the lease, which rules out anyone bringing in a type of business that already exists at the shopping center. Joe McCarthy said he feels something like a "no compete" clause is a negative in attracting new businesses to town.

Bob MacMichael brought the meeting back to the first two problems presented: (a) control of the shopping center by an out of state owner, (b) the empty shops on Main Street.

Karen Hogle asked if the company should purchase the corn-field behind the shopping center, and present a "grand plan" for development in that area, what would the impact on the sewer be. Jessie Levine said anything there would be subject to Planning Board review. The sewer capacity and infrastructure in that area would have to be looked at, but she is not sure that it would involve the whole sewer line. Karen Hogle asked if the Town would ever consider approaching the owner of the corn-field regarding protecting that. Marilyn Kidder pointed out that as it is, the Town does not have a lot of commercial space right now. She suggested that they not look so much at preventing any economic development in areas, but at preventing those types of things that people do not want to see. Jessie Levine agreed with both points of view regarding the corn-field. She said that commercial taxpayers do offset the cost of residential growth, and that some towns—Raymond, for example, find themselves having to make efforts to draw in some commercial development to provide relief to residential taxpayers. Raymond has taken out a bond to improve the infrastructure including sewer and water, in a space that they hope will attract some commercial development.

This returned the meeting to the question of how New London can attract the type of small businesses that would preserve its uniqueness. Is it possible to keep big box stores out? Doug Lyon said it would be illegal to have restrictive zoning, but they can design zoning regulations to have an aesthetic component. Lois Marshall pointed out that in at least one instance in the past, private sector did its own protecting.

Bob Lavoie suggested there should be a subcommittee of the Master Plan Committee to focus on the business environment, perhaps with the services of a professional business consultant. Doug Lyon agreed that the Town needs to have more information on what other communities are doing, as well as more information on the commercial atmosphere here. For example, could a big box store even survive doing business in New London? Read Clarke pointed out that individual-owned stores need to maintain a profit margin, whereas company stores can take a loss for a while. Lois Marshall agreed with Doug Lyon that more information is needed. She noted that a problem in some regions of the country is that when big box stores move into a town, and then are not successful, the area becomes as a ghost town.

Sue Clough said the Master Planning process will be looking at all ways to keep the Town vital, not just commercial, but also recreational. She observed that Stowe has nearby thriving ski areas which are the engines driving economic development in that Town. When a Town loses destination points as King Hill and Norsk, other businesses feel the impact. Marilyn Kidder pointed out that Stowe also has wonderful walking paths throughout town to the different restaurants and businesses. She suggested something similar in New London. Jessie Levine said that Chad Denning of the Recreation Department and other interested residents are working on improving and developing walking paths within the town. That is in addition to the Town's sidewalk projects.

4. 2006 Tax Rate

Doug Lyon distributed a spread sheet detailing the 2006 tax rate calculation. The Selectmen have agreed to use \$350,000 of the Town's \$856,000 surplus to offset taxes this year. The Town's tax rate will be \$3.94 up from \$3.33 in 2005. (Without the application of an amount from surplus, the 2006 tax rate would be \$4.27.) The County tax rate for 2006 will be \$2.27; the State School rate will be \$2.54; the Local School tax rate will be \$4.14. Thus the total tax rate for the Town will be \$12.89 per thousand dollar valuation, up from \$11.79 last year. Jessie Levine added that water precinct residents will have to add 85 cents to that.

Marilyn Kidder asked if the 2006 assessed valuation shown on the spread-sheet as \$1,037,185,237 is really the valuation for 2006, or does it reflect some 2005 valuations to some extent. Jessie Levine explained that they have to assess properties as they are on April 1. She said that they did not do a market analysis in 2006. The new buildings and changes they picked up during the year, offset by abatements, came to about \$4 million. The Town is required to bring its assessed valuations to 100% at least once every five years, and between those times it has to stay between 90% and 110%.

Doug Lyon said that overall, the Town's tax base is much more accurate now that they have their own assessor.

Footnotes

Celeste Cook commended Joan Pankhurst and Linda Hardy for their handling of a recent problem that occurred with the voters' records data.

The meeting adjourned at 9 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Sarah A. Denz
Recording Secretary