

NVDA Town Plan Review Committee Hearing Minutes
Regional Approval of Coventry, Ryegate, and Brighton Town Plans
Wednesday, December 12, 2018 at 6:00 P.M.
NVDA Offices, St. Johnsbury, VT

From Town Plan Review Committee: Steve Pitkin, Albany; Mike Metcalf, Greensboro; Justin Barton-Caplin, Barton.

NVDA Staff: Alison Low

Representing Coventry: Amanda Carlson*, Moe Jacobs, Robert “Skip” Gosselin, and Carol Simmons

Representing Ryegate: Regina Hazel, Kate Davie

*Also an NVDA board member. Another NVDA board member, Mark Whitworth, joined the hearing toward the end in anticipation of attending the subsequent hearing for Brighton’s certification of energy compliance.

Prior to the opening of the hearing, the committee voted to have Steve Pitkin act as Chair. The hearing opened at 6:05 p.m., with a brief explanation of the purpose of the hearing.

Coventry was considered first. Coventry representatives described the process of updating the town plan, which was a first-time endeavor for a relatively new board. The plan update, a three-year effort, largely follows the structure of the previous plan, reinforces the same development patterns, and continues to explore how the town can “step up to the future”. Major themes:

- Detailed exploration of growth in the town – reasons for and implications of;
- Economic future and the potential for industrial to add to the tax base;
- What to do in the post Waste USA era? What does the town when the revenues stop? Currently the town has no municipal tax, and this has led to population growth, but the growth can put pressure on town services in the future.

Other issues: The school is strong and is growing. Coventry has school choice beyond 8th grade. The town opposed school consolidation, and was able to retain its own school board.

First action item after adopting the plan will be to pursue Village Center designation – there are three businesses located there, but the area could benefit from reinvestment. Town officials have already met with Richard Amore and intend to proceed with an application. Benefits include tax credit for fit-up of income-producing properties and priority consideration for grants. Another priority action item is to complete a comprehensive economic development strategy. While Coventry cannot compete with Newport, what can the town do encourage economic activity that complements what is already there?

Two technical corrections from NVDA: References to Johnson and Lyndon and page 52. Also, the plan is effective for eight years from the adoption date, not seven.

Moe said that he found NVDA to be helpful in the process and would like more communication from them.

Mike made a motion to recommend approval of the plan from the full board. Justin seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Next on the agenda was Ryegate. Justin complimented the town on the plan's format. He found it very user-friendly. Regina and Kate talked about the process of updating the plan with NVDA. A small sub-committee met regularly to review information and present working drafts at the next regularly schedule planning commission meetings.

A key concern for the commission was to have goals that were achievable for a small rural community by identifying discrete actions: e.g. pursue Village Center designation (for Ryegate Village, South Ryegate, and Ryegate Corner), and form an energy committee. The latter has already occurred, and the committee has completed an energy audit and is now exploring municipal solar generation. (Note: the plan is written in anticipation of receiving "Substantial Deference" but the planning commission will amend the plan first to include solar siting standards for large scale developments.)

The community is very rural with active dairy farms. Most residents commute to work out of town. Recreation is important to the community. Citizens, as a whole, want to keep everything the way it is. The plan update echoes that sentiment (supported by a community survey about six years ago) by advocating for development that is slow and responsibly managed.

The planning commission has a good relationship with the selectboard, and the feeling is that the town is in good hands. Leaders are open to new ideas.

There was a discussion regarding water quality. Ticklenaked Pond, which was once compromised, is now very clear. There were questions about the relationship of agricultural practices – would some open fields, for example, have an impact on areas that are hydrologically connected?

Finally, there was a discussion of Act 46. The town's school is Blue Mountain in Wells River. After much lobbying and a number of town votes, the town was not consolidated with Bradford Oxbow, and the town retains its own school board.

Mike made the motion to recommend approval of the Ryegate Plan to the full board. Justin seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Finally, on the agenda was Brighton. Brighton was last because the plan was going to be the topic of second hearing to be held that evening. This is one of the first plans to receive technical assistance to develop an enhanced energy plan intended to receive Substantial Deference in Section 248 hearings. Unfortunately, a representative was not able to attend, but NVDA staff were there to answer questions about content. Major changes to the plan (in addition to enhanced energy planning) were flood resilience. The plan recently adopted a Local Hazard Mitigation Plan, and, as permissible by statute, the plan incorporates it in order to address flood resilience.

There was considerable discussion of population loss and its potential impacts on the community. Essex County is the oldest county in the state. An aging population means a shift to smaller households, more people aging in place, and that has profound implications for demands for housing stock, goods, and services.

Steve Pitkin made the motion to recommend approval of the Brighton Plan to the full board of NVDA. Justin seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Steve made a motion to close the hearing at 7:10. The motion passed, and the hearing closed.

Respectfully submitted,

Alison Low

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