

Minutes of the NVDA Regional Planning Commission Hearing for Approval of the Newport City Plan

Tuesday, November 15, 6:00

Attending from the Town Plan Approval Committee: Mike Metcalf, NVDA board member representing Greensboro; Paul Brouha, NVDA board member representing Sutton (via Zoom); Justin Barton-Caplin, NVDA board member representing Barton; Steve Pitkin, NVDA board member representing Albany

NVDA Staff: Alison Low

Attending from Newport City: Laura Dolgin, City Manager, John Monette, Newport Planning Commission Chair; Carole O'Connell and Denis Chenette, Newport Planning Commission; Frank Cheney, Newport Zoning Administrator

The hearing opened at 6:02 p.m. Mike Metcalf was tasked with chairing the hearing, and Alison Low with scribe duty. Alison briefly explained the purpose of the hearing in relation to 24 V.S.A. §4350. She said that the staff review already found that the plan contained all the required elements for a duly adopted plan as per 24 VSA §4382 and was found to be consistent with statewide planning goals and consistent with the regional plan and other plans of the region. She said that the staff recommendation was to approve the plan at the next full board meeting of NVDA (December 15, 2022).

At this point the committee made a motion to approve the plan in case Paul's Zoom connection did not last.

The committee wanted to know if the Newport Plan was a major update. It was characterized as a completely new plan. Newport's previous plan was nearing expiration, but the consensus was the plan needed a major overhaul to reflect many initiatives that had taken place over the past few years such as the Downtown and Waterfront Master Plan. Moreover, the original plan, which was written by numerous laypeople, needed to be reorganized so that it was forward-looking and read as though written from a single voice. (The original plan was also highly anticipatory of EB-5 developments, which were no longer relevant.)

The Planning Commission reviewed several plans for ideas. After received a Municipal Planning Grant in 2019, the City hired SE Group to spearhead the public dialog and develop an outline. SE Group started their work just as the pandemic hit, so all public engagement had to pivot to a virtual environment. Nevertheless, the Newport Visioning Survey had 206 responses, and the Actions and Objectives Survey received 64 responses, which was described as "robust," considering it was the height of COVID. Following the feedback and after several consultations with the planning commission, SE Group was able to crystalize several concepts and ideas along the theme of "Live, Work, and Play," meaning that Newport City could be a vibrant place for all three. The SE Group developed a vision statement, outline, and a set of planning "realms"—with an organizational structure that could incorporate all the required elements for a duly adopted plan while maintaining a high-level and visionary perspective.

The most pressing priority was housing. Survey respondents voiced the greatest dissatisfaction with the quality of housing and the range of choices. John Monette pointed out that all ranges and types of housing are impacted. The hospital, for example, has difficulty hiring and retaining staff due to the lack

of acceptable housing. One of the priority actions in the plan is to update the City's zoning to ensure that it does not create unnecessary hurdles to quality housing. That work is already underway, since the City received a Bylaw Modernization grant.

When SE Group's work was complete, NVDA staff worked with the City to complete the final edited draft. A range of experts came to planning commission meetings to provide perspective, and this input helped the community to draft policies and actions. Experts included housing, homelessness, energy and weatherization, public transportation, and solid waste management.

The committee also wanted to know about support and buy-in from City Council. The plan development process was very mindful about maintaining open lines of communication with City Council throughout the process. Additionally, draft updates were regularly made available from the City's web site, giving the City Council and the community a chance to review the plan at multiple stages.

Comments from the review committee were extremely positive, noting that the plan is very well done and builds on important work to date by providing a unified perspective. The actions are very attainable, and the priority actions in the implementation element are well laid out. All in all, it was viewed as a very logical plan, and a very eye-catching one, thanks to colorful graphics and photos.

There was a discussion of the important pivot that occurred after the collapse of EB-5. Laura Dolgin spoke of the efforts to create a new Newport by making a major investment in downtown landscaping and by looking to the Lake and investments in the Bluffside property and recreation trails.

There was the question about the Newport City Downtown Development and what it does— It is a freestanding non-governmental organization whose mission is to focus on revitalization of the downtown. It receives funding from the City, and it organizes key downtown events. (The organization is also critical to maintaining Downtown Designation under the State of Vermont Downtown Designation Program, which provides a number of benefits, including tax credits for investments on income-producing properties.)

Other mentions included Rural Community Development Initiative funds, which allowed Northern Community Investment Corporation to provide capacity-building support to the City, resulting in about \$1.7 million worth of grants awarded.

There was a question about the fact 16% of the City's residents had no car. Considering that Newport is a regional urban center to the Northeast Kingdom, with access to critical services and transit, that was to be expected. Transit is critical. There was a question about assisted living facilities – the closest such facility is in Derby. Finally, it was noted that there is a recent influx of new residents. It's possible that these newcomers may be climate refugees, but it is too early to tell.

At the point, the committee voted, unanimously, to recommend approval of the Newport City Plan from the full board of NVDA at their next board meeting, which will occur December 15th.

The committee adjourned the hearing at 6:50 p.m., with a final commendation to the City to for their excellent work.

Respectfully submitted,

Alison Low