

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SUBCOMMITTEE
Minutes of October 26, 2022**

- I. ROLL CALL:** Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Economic Development Director Tom Davis, Subcommittee Member Charles Morse, and Subcommittee Member Lydia Petty. Also present were Carolyn Stevens and Julie M. Lappin.

The meeting was called to order at 2:00 p.m.

- II. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Scheduled):** None.

III. DISCUSSION

- a. Act 250 Conversion to 10-Acre Town.** Mr. Davis said there seems to be some confusion with the State of Vermont over how Northfield was originally designated as a one-acre town rather than a ten-acre town, which refers to the maximum size of a parcel on which development can be done without requiring an Act 250 permit. He has been in contact with Jenny Ronis from the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) about this and she said the process is ongoing on confirming Northfield as a ten-acre town. Mr. Davis said this is an important distinction because the Act 250 process is widely considered to be both lengthy and expensive and the requirement might deter potential developers. Ms. Petty asked if there was a timeline for the process. Mr. Davis said there was not but he is contacting Ms. Ronis frequently in order to keep the process going. Once state approval is provided for the ten-acre status, the Select Board members would have to formally approve this. Mr. Morse said if it seems like the process is stalling, perhaps a joint letter of support from the Select Board members might hasten the process.
- b. Amtrak Stop.** Mr. Davis has drafted a letter that will be sent to US Senators Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders, US Representative Peter Welch, and the US Secretary of Transportation (Pete Buttigieg) that shows strong reasons for reestablishing an Amtrak stop in Northfield. The letter will include feedback from a local survey Mr. Davis conducted that showed strong support for this action. The respondents indicated that 3,200 travel tickets would be purchased in the first year of the station's operation, which would generate \$515,000 in revenue for Amtrak. Mr. Davis noted in the last year, the Randolph station saw the purchase of only 468 tickets. The pre-pandemic high amount was only 2,023 in 2019. Mr. Davis felt this indicates that there are solid reasons for the re-establishment of the Northfield station. He added that Norwich University (NU) President Mark Anarumo strongly supports this action. President Anarumo once dropped his daughter at the Montpelier Junction station and had concerns about her safety due to its remoteness, etc. He also said that NU would make commitments to promoting ridership by providing travel vouchers that could be used for high-volume NU events like homecoming, graduation, family weekend, etc. The letter has been reviewed and approved by Manager Schulz but we are still waiting for NU to sign off on the wording. Mr. Davis also has contacted Senator Leahy's office and has received a commitment by a staff member that the letter will be seen by Senator Leahy as soon as possible and there will be an effort to get a joint letter of support signed by Senator Leahy, Senator Sanders, and Representative Welch. With this letter of support and the fact that the Northfield station would have public restrooms and wifi available (unlike the situation in Randolph and Montpelier Junction), Mr. Davis said there would be an extremely compelling case for reestablishing the Northfield station. He also will ask for the name of the best contact person in the federal government to make this happen.

Mr. Morse noted that there had been some opposition to this from the regional Amtrak administrator located in Philadelphia. He asked why that was. Mr. Davis said there was a quick denial based on concerns that establishing another station stop would create travel delays. Mr. Davis noted that the Randolph station has the second worst performance in the state so perhaps the suggestion should be made that adding Northfield and removing Randolph as an Amtrak stop would improve travel times. There also was a suggestion that adding the Northfield station would not provide any financial benefits to Amtrak. Mr. Davis said the extent of local commitment shown in the survey and by NU belies this concern. He added that the letter to be sent will directly refute these objections. Mr. Morse commended Mr. Davis for his work on this. Mr. Davis said he will keep fighting to help reestablish Northfield as an Amtrak stop.

- c. 70 Depot Square Building.** Related to the Amtrak station situation is what will; become of the former railroad station, which until recently hosted a Community Bank branch. Mr. Davis has spoken to representatives of nine (9) different banks or credit unions about renting space in the building. Two (2) credit unions indicated some interest but neither has any expansion plans until at least 2024. Mr. Davis also has been in contact with the building's current owner (Charles Spear), who has indicated an interest in selling to a local buyer. A property appraisal now is in process. Mr. Davis has spoken to three (3) potential buyers and all have indicated support for allowing part of the building to be used as a train station. Although he has stressed that he is neither a real estate agent nor a professional assessor, Mr. Davis has agreed to tour the building next week with a possible buyer. He noted that anyone seeking to purchase the property will need to follow the proper channels.
- d. Downtown Center Designation.** Mr. Davis has received notification from the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) that the request Northfield made earlier this year (05/10/22) to expand its Village Center Designation boundary expanded to include Freight Yard Way has been approved. Mr. Davis said this area is a potential site for economic development, such as mixed-use, high-density housing, etc., in the heart of the community. With the approval came the question from the ACCD representative asking why Northfield hasn't applied for Downtown Center Designation status when seeking this expansion. Mr. Davis explained that at the time of application, there was not a full-time Economic Development Director (EDD) in place. Manager Schulz had pursued this matter with part-time EDD Jon Ignatowski, who continued to serve on an interim basis before Mr. Davis was hired in June 2022. Now that Mr. Davis is the full-time EDD, he is willing to seek the new designation, which would provide numerous benefits to the community. This includes greater access to grant opportunities, ACCD assistance with transportation issues, etc. There are no real drawbacks but a local committee would need to be formed to serve as the Downtown Commission. Mr. Davis thought it was possible that the Northfield Community Development Network (NCDN) members might be willing to assume this role. Mr. Morse asked if ACCD is aware that Northfield is revising its local zoning regulations at this time. Mr. Davis said they were and are pleased with this development. He added that many Vermont communities are doing the same at this time due to take advantage of modernization, etc. Carolyn Stevens believes NCDN members would be interested to serve as the Downtown Commission and will bring this up at their next meeting. The only concern is how much work this would require as this is a relatively small group. Mr. Davis will look into this but he doesn't think much is required.

- e. Communications Hub.** Mr. Davis said the municipal Facebook page is operating well and his posts often also appear on the community Facebook pages maintained by Northfield residents. He also is putting information and links on the new “News” webpage on the municipal website as well as Front Porch Forum. Local feedback has been very strong with the most shared items including the recent Central Street repaving and the stormwater project on South Main Street, which saw construction delayed after a couple of weeks due to the need for engineering redesign. Department heads and other municipal employees have requested to have certain items posted in order to better inform the public of upcoming events, etc. Mr. Davis believes the improved hub has been very effective in reaching out to the community.
- f. Housing Projects.** Mr. Davis said he has worked to establish a core group to serve as the initial Northfield Housing Task Force. The first meeting will be held on Friday, November 4, 2022, at 2:00 p.m. The core group consists of himself, Manager Schulz, Ms. Petty, and Erin Hicks-Tibbles from the NCDN. Ms. Hicks-Tibbles is a data analyst and Mr. Davis thought that would be very helpful as it is often difficult to get accurate statistics regarding local affordable housing concerns as much of the data now received includes all of Washington County and Northfield is a very different community than and has many different concerns than Montpelier and Barre. Several organizational matters will be discussed at the initial meeting including how best to expand task force membership in order to better represent the community. Ms. Petty asked if Mr. Davis has been in contact with local employers regarding local housing needs. Mr. Davis said he has met with some already, including NU, and has meetings planned next week with local school administrators and Darn Tough Vermont. He added that when he was up at the Darn Tough factory recently, he spoke to a couple of employees on their work breaks. Both lived some distance away and had long commutes four (4) days a week. One of them would be willing to relocate closer if there was affordable housing available.
- Mr. Davis said there has been some interest in establishing an apartment complex on the old Cetrangolo Lot located by the Dollar General store. A brownfield survey did detect some soil contamination so a Phase 2 analysis will be conducted to determine the extent and composition of the contamination and how best to address it. Mr. Davis has seen the initial architectural plans for the housing complex and was impressed. Ms. Petty hopes that when the Main Street Bridge is replaced in a few years, part of the project will include creating the opportunity for riverside parklets for the use of the new apartment residents as well as the general public. Mr. Davis will let the property owners know about this possibility. Mr. Morse is disappointed that the local riverfront has never been properly developed as it is an underutilized public resource.
- As for Freight Yard Way, Mr. Davis has seen some interest in developing this area for local housing, etc. One problem is that the property owners have shifted their selling prices after listing the property with a real estate broker. This has deterred potential buyers. As Mr. Davis has reported before, there is an NU alumnus who is interested in establishing a business in the area that would manufacture modular homes that could be shipped on the nearby railroad lines (or perhaps installed locally). Unfortunately, modular homes, even “tiny homes”, are not necessarily affordable to all as land would have to be purchased to site them, utility hookups would have to be made, etc.
- Mr. Davis then discussed the former Videos & More building on North Main Street. He said the current owner is willing to sell and it would be good to do something with this property. Ms. Davis has been in contact with an investment group about the property. Manager Schulz felt due to the configuration of the building and the lot it sits on, there are limitations on how it could best be used.

Carolyn Stevens asked about the status of the Act 250 application to establish a trail between NU property and Freight Yard Way. Mr. Davis spoke recently with NU Facilities Operations Vice President Bizhan Yahyazadeh about this and was informed most of the local hurdles had been cleared. Ms. Stevens confirmed that NU did provide a letter of authorization to the State of Vermont but there has been no update on the application status. Mr. Davis will check on this.

- g. Grants.** Mr. Davis has been working with Chris Mureta of Mureta Meat Processing on his \$35,000 grant application that would allow his business to expand as a slaughterhouse. Mr. Davis is providing his assistance as the grant has numerous requirements and stipulations. After working with Mr. Mureta and touring his current facility, Mr. Davis believes him to be an excellent butcher as well as a good person.

Mr. Davis said he is still waiting for full specifications on a number of possible grant opportunities for community members. He is more than willing to assist local businesses with the various grant programs now available such as Efficiency Vermont, VEDA Short-term Forgivable Loan, Working Lands Initiative, Capital Equipment Assistance Program (agriculture), etc. There also are Creative Aging Grants and Mr. Davis has informed the Northfield Senior Center aware of such programs. Mr. Davis said he would remain vigilant and keep watch for any other grant opportunities that become available.

Mr. Morse thought there might be a grant program that would fund upgrades to the old train station building. This might include improved ADA access to the building's second floor, which Mr. Davis has discovered is in poor condition. Mr. Davis will speak to the current owner about this but Mr. Spear seems to be more interested in selling the property rather than improving it. Perhaps the potential property buyers would have some interest in such grant opportunities.

- h. Other Business.**

Mr. Davis said the Central Vermont Economic Development Corporation (CVEDC) has sent out information regarding three (3) Quebec manufacturers who are looking for Vermont sites where they could set up final assembly locations. Mr. Davis will contact and work with local businesses and/or property owners who might fulfill this need.

Ms. Petty told of an outside group that felt it would be good to hold a regional meeting in Northfield due to its central location. After checking out several possibilities, they went with the public meeting location in the basement of the United Church. Good Measure Pub & Brewery will cater the event. Mr. Petty thought there might be other locations available in Northfield that also could fulfill this function. Once these people are in Northfield, it would be expected that they would patronize local businesses, restaurants, etc. Mr. Davis has been working with a couple of business owners about making available some of their underutilized space for such business gatherings or just creating a space where small businesses could have a place to work and hold small meetings with potential clients.

IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Unscheduled). There was none.

V. ADJOURNMENT. Without objection, the meeting adjourned at 3:09 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk