

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT**  
**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING**  
**Minutes of January 18, 2023**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Economic Development Director Tom Davis, Subcommittee member Lydia Petty. Also in attendance: Lisa Luciano (The Veterans Place), Julie Lappin (Norwich University Applied Research Institutes), Carolyn Stevens (Northfield Community Development Network), Bob Doyon, and Merry Shernock.

The subcommittee meeting was called to order at 2:03 p.m.

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

- III. APPROVAL OF PREVIOUS MEETING MINUTES.** Given the absence of subcommittee member Charles Morse, approval of the minutes was tabled until the next meeting.

**IV. DISCUSSION**

- a. Act 250 Conversion to 10-Acre Town.** Manager Schulz said Mr. Davis has spent a considerable amount of time working on this and was able to achieve quite a lot in the process. Mr. Davis said Northfield finally has its proper designation as a 10-acre town. This means that most development projects affecting a space of less than ten (10) acres will not have to go through the Act 250 permitting process. He now is doing research to see if this new status also could benefit projects already underway that had been subject to Act 250 provisions. Mr. Davis has been receiving mixed signals about this. There are some special development categories, such as multi-unit housing projects, that still require the Act 250 permitting regardless of lot size. However, most developers on parcels less than ten (10) acres will be able to go straight to the construction phase without much delay. For many, the time and expense of Act 250 permitting was too great a barrier. Manager Schulz noted Act 250 permit fee amounts have become quite substantial in recent years. Also expensive and time-consuming were archeological and other on-site studies. Mr. Davis said there were concerns that the ACT 250 process was hampering local housing projects that are desperately needed. Ms. Petty asked if this information was on the "News" section of the municipal website ([www.northfield-vt.gov/news](http://www.northfield-vt.gov/news)). Mr. Davis said it was not but it will be soon. He has a list of items to add to this webpage but recently has been tied up with other projects. Julie Lappin asked if this change will go into effect immediately. Mr. Davis confirmed it has and Northfield now is officially a 10-acre town.
- b. Downtown Center Designation Application Progress.** Mr. Davis has spoken of this application to the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) at previous meetings. Currently, Northfield has Village Center designation for the downtown area and for Northfield Falls. He recently applied to have the borders of the downtown designated area expanded to include Freight Yard Way. However, upgrading the designation to Downtown Center would provide many additional benefits, including additional tax credits, expanded grant opportunities, and higher priority status when applying for state grant funds. The Downtown Center designation also would provide greater access to state planners for certain development projects. Mr. Davis said a new development is that some grants that beforehand only required Village Center designation and now becoming only available to communities with Downtown Center designation. This is a very good reason for seeking the Downtown Center designation for Northfield. Mr. Davis noted this would be a long process and would require the formation of a "downtown committee" that would be separate from existing municipal boards.

Mr. Davis has reached out to members of the Northfield Community Development Network (NCDN) to see if they would be willing to serve this function. There has been some interest but there also has been a request for additional information to see what this would entail. Given the proactive stance NCDN has taken regarding local economic development, Mr. Davis felt this was a natural role for its members. Other factors that might delay the process is deciding whether to wait until local zoning regulations have been modernized before proceeding, determining the proper role of the Development Review Board (DRB) regarding design and review of downtown development projects, etc. Manager Schulz said this might take some time as the ACCD has high standards concerning local zoning regulations. Ms. Petty thought it might be useful to look at town that have already gone through the process and achieved Downtown Center designation. There might be useful lessons from this. She then asked what would happen to the Village Center designation for Northfield Falls if the downtown area get the enhanced designation. Mr. Davis said he understands that we could apply to have both existing Village Centers upgraded as Downtown Centers but there remains some uncertainty about this. He is sure that Northfield Falls would not lose its designation whatever occurs for the downtown area. We are now in the preliminary phase of the application process and there remain a number of unanswered questions at this time. Carolyn Stevens is a NCDN member and she reported that the possibility of NCDN serving as the new downtown committee was discussed at their previous meeting and will be addressed again at their next one. She noted that NCDN member Kaitlyn Keating was going to discuss this matter with Mr. Davis but unfortunately tested COVID positive before this occurred. Mr. Davis confirmed that he has shared some ACCD documentation with Ms. Keating but hasn't reconnected with her recently.

Ms. Stevens said the NCDN members will discuss how they could best fill the role of a downtown committee and how Northfield Falls would fit in the process. This could include a separate application for Downtown Center designation. Mr. Davis has inquired whether one application covering both areas was best or if there should be separate applications. Ms. Stevens noted that the area covered by Downtown Center designation does not have to be contiguous. Ms. Petty noted the Village Center designation for Northfield Falls is fairly new compared to the downtown area. Manager Schulz confirmed they were a few years apart, with the downtown getting the designation in 2010 and Northfield Falls in 2017. Ms. Stevens noted that historically Northfield Falls used to have much more commercial and industrial development than currently. Perhaps achieving Downtown Center status could reverse this trend. Mr. Davis said that was a good point and a compelling argument for including Northfield Falls in the application. He knew of a Northfield resident who would like to start a metal fabricating business and currently the most feasible location for this would be Freight Yard Way. It would be good to establish Northfield Falls as an additional landing spot for such new businesses. Mr. Davis will provide an update on the process at the next subcommittee meeting.

- c. **Housing Projects Update.** Mr. Davis said the Housing Task Force has met three (3) times already but is still in the formation process. There was a good interaction with an official from the state housing financing agency at the last meeting (01/13/23) and there were a number of suggestions on how best to proceed with local housing projects. The most advanced project is the one that would place a multi-unit apartment complex on the Cetrangolo Lot next to the Dollar General store. It now is in Phase II of Brownfield mitigation and a \$25,000 grant was received that will cover these costs. This study will need to be completed by the end of March 2023 or these funds would need to be returned. The project developers are highly motivated to work quickly. The next step for this project would be to get all the local zoning permits together. It is possible the Brownfield mitigation work could be done concurrently with the housing construction, which could save considerable time and money. This also was done when the Dollar General building was built. Manager Schulz said this was exciting news.

Mr. Davis said the project would have to go through the Act 250 process given the number of housing units. However, since there already is municipal water and sewer access at the site should eliminate a number of environmental review issues. Another potential housing project involves some developers looking to build some mixed-use structures on Freight Yard Way. Negotiations are proceeding with the property owner but this might result in much-needed housing in the downtown area. The project probably would result in new townhouses. Another possible location for new housing is a 181-acre parcel located at the end of Whetstone Drive on property known as Foran Farms LLC). Mr. Davis has been in contact with Downstreet Housing and Community Development, which is very excited about the possibility of additional affordable housing units in Northfield. Manager Schulz noted Downstreet had looked at the possibility a few years ago about siting affordable housing units in the Bean Business Park but the project never went forward. Mr. Davis said it is a good sign that such projects are now in various stages of development and would result in new housing units of varying configurations. He added that the Housing Task Force is also looking for additional opportunities to expand the local housing market.

- d. Grants Updates.** Mr. Davis said he has worked with Manager Schulz on various grant applications in the six (6) months he has been employed as Northfield's Economic Development Director. To date, he has submitted grant application requests in the amount of \$218,200 and of this, there have been grant awards in the amount of \$64,200. The remainder of requests are still pending. He has worked with local businesses, i.e. Mureta Butcher Shop, Carrier Roasting Company, and the Margaret Holland Inn, on grant applications and/or tax credit requests. Mr. Davis is now working on two (2) separate Recreational Trail Grant applications. One is on behalf of the Paine Mountain School District and would be used to upgrade the trail system near the Northfield schools. The other application is on behalf of the Town of Northfield and would be used to supplement the VOREC grant funds already received for further upgrades to the Town Forest trail that starts at the end of Slate Avenue. The successful grant applications to date include \$4,000 for the Northfield Senior Center that will be used for various activity and educational events. There also is the aforementioned \$25,000 for the Brownfields Phase II mitigation work.

The Vermont Agency of Transportation has awarded \$35,000 for the scoping of the Wall/Water Street pedestrian walkway that would connect the Common to the Dog River Park. The RFP for this project is now being prepared. Mr. Davis now is researching additional grant opportunities including a program that would assist first-time home buyers. There also is a Municipal Energy Resilience Program that would provide grant funds that could be used to make municipal facilities energy efficient. A \$4,000 grant would be used for the Municipal Building and there also is a \$500,000 grant that could be used on any municipal facility. There also is a Transit-Oriented Development base grant that would provide funds to make Northfield a more walkable community, with better access to alternative transportation. These funds could also be used for possible rail travel access. Ms. Davis said the community's recent experience with the Better Connections grant program shows Northfield is serious about such matters and this is a real community concern. Mr. Davis said it is good to plan ahead because shovel-ready projects usually go to the front of the line of grant applications.

Manager Schulz asked if this grant would require matching funds. Mr. Davis said there was a ten percent (10%) match or in-kind services could be provided. He will submit a letter of interest later this week. Manager Schulz noted due to the match amount, if the process goes forward, it would require Select Board authorization. Ms. Petty would like to use local American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds for the local match amount when needed. Mr. Davis has spoken to a number of grant administrators and got the impression that most believe Northfield has not received its fair share of state grant funds as compared to Montpelier and Barre. Therefore, he feels our grant application would be very viable.

Ms. Stevens noted the new pedestrian bridge on the trail connecting the Norwich University (NU) campus with the downtown area has been completed. NU engineering students provided both the design and the construction labor. The bridge still needs approach ramps to make it fully accessible. The estimated cost for the longer ramp is about \$3,000 and there will be an effort to solicit donations and perhaps apply for grant funds. Ms. Petty has had grant experience with the national AARP as well as its Vermont branch. She noted they provide a number of smaller grant programs in the \$20,000 range that might be well worth pursuing in this case. She will provide Ms. Stevens with additional information about this. A future Recreational Trail Grant application might be another option.

- e. **Norwich University Shaw Outdoor Center Parking.** Mr. Davis has been working on expanded parking access to the Town Forest trail system on NU property by the Shaw Outdoor Center and the Green Mountain Family Practice. The Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC) Grant Implementation Committee includes this as a potential expenditure of grant funds. Mr. Davis has been in discussion with NU officials about the possibility of adding twelve (12) new parking spaces in the area and has learned there now is NU consideration of repurposing the use of the Shaw Outdoor Center for exclusive usage by the NU Mountain and Cold Weather Rescue Company. This might limit access to the building to members of the public as well as NU students not in this program. Ms. Petty said the Town Forest trail system now has limited parking at its access points. The trailheads themselves often are located on private property, most of which belongs to NU. Local feedback was received when DuBois & King presented preliminary and then finalized trail access feasibility studies to the Select Board. Most residents expressing an opinion favored dispersed parking areas at different locations as well as expanded parking opportunities near the Shaw Outdoor Center. The problem with the access point near the Shaw Outdoor Center is the steep elevation near the trailhead, which might be difficult for some hikers. There also is a need to traverse the NU trail system before gaining access to the Town Forest trail system. Ms. Petty noted another possibility is to designate existing parking spaces in the downtown area for Town Forest visitors. Using these spaces might encourage visitors to the community to patronize local shops, restaurants, etc.

Mr. Davis said he would like to get a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the municipality and NU regarding the proposed parking spaces. He has spoken to NU President Mark Anarumo about the new spaces and how they could benefit NU in the long run. There will be a NU Board of Trustees meeting next week (01/23/23) and after that we should have a clearer idea of the future of the Shaw Outdoor Center. Ms. Petty asked if the discussion was about the building itself and not the surrounding area. Ms. Davis said the focus was on the building. However, some of the NU trail system might be closed to the public so it can be used exclusively for Mountain and Cold Weather Rescue Company training. This proposal might come to nothing but there is no moving forward on the MOU until this is resolved.

- f. **Wall/Water Street Pedestrian Walkway Scoping.** As indicated early during the discussion of grant awards, an RFP for this project will be sent out soon. Manager Schulz noted a consultant would be hired to do the work and public hearings would be held before the project proceeds. He felt there could be a long process to get this project completed.
- g. **Other Business.** Mr. Davis asked if any of the online attendees has any topics that they would like to bring up. Bob Doyon said he thought it was good to see all the good work now being done on various fronts. He had nothing to add at this time. Julie Lappin is from the NU Applied Research Institutes (NUARI) and announced that NU had been awarded a \$16,400,000 federal grant for the creation of a National Cyber Fusion Research and Development Center. This will greatly enhance the university's national reputation. Mr. Davis asked where the new building would be located. Ms. Lappin said meetings are being held to determine this but no information is available at this time. Mr. Davis hopes they will be able to find a good downtown location.

Merry Shernock was grateful for this meeting and that she was able to attend online. She also appreciates that Northfield Falls, where she lives, is not being ignored. Ms. Shernock then added about the possibility of “traffic calming” in Northfield Falls. Manager Schulz said the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC) now is conducting a pedestrian safety enhancement study for the area around the Cox Brook Road intersection. This study will be in the format of a grant application and will be discussed fully with the Select Board members and Falls residents when completed. Manager Schulz added that the Select Board members are fully committed to improving pedestrian safety in Northfield Falls. He added that such a study is a prerequisite to any grant application to VTrans in order to address the situation. Mr. Davis noted that should Northfield Falls achieve Downtown Center designation, there would be additional grant opportunities available. Although Northfield Falls now would benefit the most from this, Mr. Davis noted the downtown area also has its share of traffic concerns. Ms. Shernock agreed that the speeders going through the Falls usually go through the downtown as well. Ms. Petty noted that one inhibiting factor regarding installing safety improvements in Northfield Falls is that this section of road is a state highway so the municipality has little direct control over it. Ms. Shernock also would like to see the crosswalk at the Cox Brook Road intersection repainted as well as improved connections to the downtown area. This could include dedicated bicycle lanes along Vermont Route 12 North. Ms. Petty noted VTrans will be resurfacing this section of road within the next couple of years. She is certain the Select Board members will be leading the push to have this project include bike lanes. VTrans might be reluctant to do this so it is necessary to keep up the pressure. Ms. Shernock would be willing to circulate a petition supporting this if that would be useful. She noted that a number of Falls residents don’t seem to have cars and thus walk along Route 12, which has a number of narrow spots and sharp curves. Ms. Petty thought it might be useful to get a study showing how many people walk along the roadside on a regular basis. Perhaps some photographs showing how dangerous a practice this can be might be helpful. Ms. Shernock noted some NU students run along Route 12 to the Falls and then back to campus. Perhaps NU might want to get involved if student safety concerns are involved. She also noted there might not be some cooperation from some Falls residents whose homes are located right next to the road. They might not want bike paths right next to their front yards.

Lisa Luciano is the Housing Case Manager for The Veterans Place located on Vine Street. She spends much time working with homeless veterans so she understands the importance of creating additional housing units in Northfield. Ms. Luciano said many of the veterans coming to The Veterans Place for transitional housing come from elsewhere but come to really enjoy the benefits of living in Northfield. Many say they would be very happy to live here should affordable housing become available. Ms. Luciano said this should be a real priority for the community. Mr. Davis said he has worked with veterans’ groups in the past and knows that affordable housing is a real concern. He strongly endorses the efforts of The Veterans Place in helping address this. Ms. Luciano said the building they now use has limited space and other restrictions. They will be looking for other options in the near future. Ms. Petty said they should keep in contact with Mr. Davis on this as he is always looking out for grant opportunities. Ms. Luciano then asked how often this subcommittee meets. Manager Schulz said there usually are monthly meetings but not at set days or times. The meeting notices, however, are well posted on Front Porch Forum and the municipal website.

**V. ADJOURNMENT.** The subcommittee meeting was adjourned at 3:09 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

*Kenneth L. McCann*

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

These minutes are subject to approval at the next meeting