

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT**  
**NORTHFIELD COMMON REHABILITATION**  
**PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING**  
**Minutes of February 12, 2024**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board members Merry Shernock and John Stevens. Also present were Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Emily Lewis (Project Manager, DuBois & King), Kait Campbell (Community Planner, DuBois & King), Sally Davidson, Nancy Peck, and Bethany Drum.

The meeting was called to order at 3:00 p.m.

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

**III. DISCUSSION**

- a. Project Kickoff.** Manager Schulz said the purpose of this meeting is to begin the Northfield Common update process. The municipality has hired the engineering firm DuBois & King to oversee the process, gather public input, and develop concepts for the Common update. This meeting will focus on the proposal that DuBois & King regarding this project and also start considering the scheduling of public meetings where local feedback can be provided. Manager Schulz distributed the written proposal that DuBois & King developed for this project and was provided to the Select Board in October 2023. Ms. Lewis said this project will help generate a community driven concept for updating the Common. She understands that there has been some consideration in the recent past of replacing the traditional fountain located there with a splash pad or some other type of upgrade. Ms. Lewis said the first step in this rehabilitation process is to engage the public and discern what is the local sentiment regarding what should be done with the fountain and other features on the Common. DuBois & King will provide three (3) different draft concepts and will result in the development of a finalized design that could be acted upon. It also is possible that due to local feedback, the rehabilitation process could go in another direction with little or no updates taking place. Ms. Lewis felt it was important not to make any assumptions going into the process as this would be a community driven process. She would like to start with a general overview of the current situation and therefore would like to conduct a brief site visit after this meeting. Ms. Lewis added that she and Ms. Campbell have been working together on a local sidewalk scoping project so they both have some familiarity with the Northfield community.

Board member Stevens said it probably would be best to establish a formal steering committee to assist in the process. Manager Schulz said it probably would be best to involve one of the local groups that make use of the Common for regular events, including the Farmers Market that uses the bulk of it on Tuesday afternoons from mid-May to mid-October each year. He added that Ms. Davidson's organization, the Northfield Activities Group, also holds annual events on the Common such as the May Pole gathering, "Trunk or Treat" on Halloween night, the Christmas Tree lighting etc.

Manager Schulz said there also is the annual Labor Day Weekend Festivities, the summertime "Night on the Common," the Winter Market held in conjunction with the tree lighting, etc. There also are times when local organizations hold special events on the Common. Board member Shernock noted that sometimes people pick up food at one of the nearby restaurants and then eat at one of the Common's picnic tables. She added that the relatively new Electric Vehicle (EV) chargers on Wall Street also attract non-residents to the downtown area.

Manager Schulz noted that grant funds were used to purchase these picnic tables, chairs, bike racks, etc. that are put out on the Common each spring.

Ms. Lewis said she has gotten the impression that a lot of Northfield residents can become quite passionate about the Common and how it is used by the public. Ms. Lewis said that the first step in the public engagement process is to develop a public participation plan. This plan would outline all the local groups that would have a stake in this process and should be contacted. This plan will be a working document that will help schedule local public information meetings, etc. Ms. Davidson noted that she leads a local group of gardeners that spend a lot of time on the public flowerbeds located on and around the Common. Manager Schulz agreed that their efforts and the resulting benefits are very popular with the Northfield community. Ms. Lewis said that having a local gardening group is a tremendous asset for the community. Board member Stevens noted that there also is an informational kiosk located at the bus stop on the westside of Depot Square.

Ms. Peck asked how the Common will be affected by the Main Street Bridge Replacement Project that is scheduled for 2025. Manager Schulz said the bridge will be out of commission for about twelve (12) weeks with the current one removed and the new structure installed. During this time, vehicular traffic will be diverted through Depot Square with temporary two-way traffic established on Wall Street. Cars and smaller trucks then will detour to North Main Street by way of Water Street. Larger trucks will be required to bypass the area by using Interstate 89. Fortunately, the project engineers from the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) seem certain that this will only be a three-month project that could be done between Norwich University (NU) graduation and Labor Day. Ms. Lewis said part of their sidewalk scoping project includes pedestrian safety improvements that would be even more necessary due to the increased vehicular traffic on Depot Square due to the bridge installation project. This includes allowing proper spacing for truck turning movements, etc. Board member Stevens noted this scoping study is being funded through an AARP grant.

Ms. Lewis said she would like to be made aware of existing concerns regarding the Common and how this relates to special events as well as day-to-day personal usage. Ms. Davidson said the fountain is a major concern for residents. Some would like to see it kept largely as it is now with only minor repairs. There has been a suggestion to replace it with a splash pad and this resulted in very strong opinions both for and against. Ms. Davidson thought that this could become a controversial topic when the public outreach meetings are held.

Manager Schulz said he feels the general feeling is that something should be done with the fountain. There have been numerous requests to install a water recirculation system in order to reduce water wastage. Although a recirculation system would lower the amount the municipality spends on water, there would be new expenses associated with it for chemicals, electric power, etc. Manager Schulz said there was an offer from a Northfield resident to cover the cost of a new splash pad where the fountain is located. This resulted in some public opposition to this proposal as some people did not consider this to be the proper location for this. Ms. Lewis said DuBois & King does have a fountain design consultant (Delta Fountains) who will be engaged for this project. They would be able to present a number of options and cost estimates for a traditional fountain and/or alternatives.

Board member Stevens said some Norwich University (NU) civil engineering students helped design some options for the fountain area including installing a splash pad. He will provide Ms. Lewis with the plans they developed. Board member Stevens added that there have been some public accessibility concerns associated with the current fountain as it is surrounded by paving bricks that are not wheelchair friendly. Manager Schulz said the ground around the fountain has been shifting for a number of years since those bricks, many of which are engraved, were first placed around the Common. Board member Stevens said there also are some people who think there now are too many trees located on the Common. Others would like to have a permanent Christmas tree planted there. Manager Schulz noted that there had been a permanent Christmas tree on the Common before but it had to be removed as it became too large for its location. Board member Shernock said the tree had been planted there about forty-five (45) years earlier so that is not too surprising. Ms. Davidson said a new tree could be better maintained to keep its size under control through regular trimming and pruning.

Ms. Lewis asked if there were any other accessibility issues on the Common. Board member Shernock believed that some additional curb cuts needed to be installed to make it more accessible for wheelchair users. The paved paths also may need to be widened for the same reasons. Manager Schulz said the current paths might be wide enough already. He felt an ADA compliance reassessment should be undertaken to confirm this. Board member Shernock said there are a fair number of people with mobility issues in this town. She had not been fully aware of this until recently and would not want accessibility concerns to be overlooked as this project develops. Board member Shernock said there are a number of older persons who use the Common during the daytime who might not be totally forthcoming with their concerns. This is in contrast to some other residents who are not at all reticent about what they consider to be local failings. Board member Stevens feels the standard for paved path width should be to allow two (2) baby strollers going in opposite directions to use them simultaneously.

Board member Shernock would like the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) deadlines for designating local funds and totally expending them to be taken into consideration when the plans for this project are developed. She noted when the local ARPA outreach meetings were held to determine how best to spend these funds, one common request was to have an outdoor location where residents could gather for quiet contemplation. Such a place would be very different from the recreational areas set aside for organized youth activities that can generate a lot of noise. Ms. Davidson did have one concern about the Common: there doesn't seem to be enough power outlets located around it when special events are organized.

As regards the written DuBois & King proposal for this project, Board member Shernock was pleased to see a plan to hold a "Student Design Mini-Workshop" that would provide local youth an opportunity to help design their own particular "ideal Town Common." She noted when the ARPA outreach meetings were held, there were a number of very useful suggestions provided by local schoolchildren. Board member Shernock also felt the community banners now displayed around Depot Square in non-winter months were a very good addition to the area. Ms. Lewis felt the Northfield Common already is a great community resource so we are now looking for various ways to improve it through greater accessibility, etc. This probably will become an exciting process.

As for community engagement, Ms. Lewis said she and Ms. Campbell will start outlining the public participation plan, which will include determining which local groups should be contacted to become involved in the process. In the written proposal, the section on “Initial Community Outreach” was left rather vague so that local considerations could be taken into account. The initial outreach could begin with an online and hardcopy survey along with a series of community conversations with identified stakeholders. These initial contacts could provide some insight into how to shape the much broader outreach efforts. Once the initial outreach phase has been completed, it might be possible to put some basic concepts for the Common rehabilitation project on paper.

Board member Stevens noted that public meetings often aren’t very well attended in this town. Board member Shernock said that usually happens if they are always held in the same locations, i.e. the Community Room. The ARPA outreach meetings were held at a number of locations throughout the community and there seemed to be fairly good attendance. Ms. Davidson said the timing of the meetings is also very important. Not everybody can attend afternoon meetings if they have to work during the day. Manager Schulz said this meeting was scheduled in the afternoon as a special case as a kickoff meeting isn’t expected to attract much public interest. Future steering committee meetings will probably be held later in the evening. Board member Shernock felt a major stakeholder for this project is the United Church, which overlooks Depot Square. She held an ARPA outreach meeting there and it was well attended as it was scheduled right after their Sunday services. In addition, an early evening meeting was held at the Northfield Senior Center and it also attracted a crowd that included many residents from the nearby senior housing (i.e., Green Mountain Apartments).

Board member Stevens noted that at least two (2) local surveys were conducted over the past couple of years. The most recent one performed earlier this year was to get feedback on the condition of Northfield sidewalks and this received about 450 responses. The survey conducted during the ARPA outreach got 478 responses. Ms. Lewis felt these were good participation levels for local surveys. Usually they are pleased if the respondents represent about ten percent (10%) of the local population. Ms. Lewis said it is important when collecting local views to identify and target local stakeholders in order to obtain their views. At the same time, it is important to reach a cross section of the local community rather than just reach a particular demographic, i.e. senior citizens, etc. Ms. Davidson thought ten percent (10%) survey participation seemed rather low as it seems to her that just about everyone in Northfield has strong opinions about something. It is possible some people will share their concerns with their neighbors but will not with strangers or through organized surveys. Manager Schulz said some residents seem more than willing to state strong views on local social media, i.e. Facebook. Board member Stevens agreed that the traditional fountain versus splash pad debate did become a heated matter on local social media. Ms. Lewis said perhaps we should shoot for fifteen percent (15%) survey participation here. She added that it does take a lot of time and effort to tally and categorize the survey results.

Ms. Davidson noted that the annual town meeting is coming soon so perhaps the survey could be distributed at that time. Ms. Lewis said the three-week period before the public gathering doesn’t leave enough time to create a proper survey. However, there might be an opportunity to create an information sheet for distribution at the Town Meeting Open Session (03/04/24) to let people know what will be coming. DuBois & King will prepare the flyer for distribution that night.

Ms. Lewis added that the project timeline that was prepared in October 2023 is now about one month behind schedule. She said DuBois & King engineers will be performing a survey of the Common soon. In addition, Ms. Lewis and Ms. Campbell will be developing the public participation plan that will be available for discussion at the next steering committee meeting in March. They also will work on preliminary plans for the student workshops that should be held no later than May. Ms. Lewis would be grateful if she were provided with contact information for the local schools in order to coordinate with school officials. The extended schedule would include a demonstration of conceptual designs in June, a final design based on local feedback by mid-summer, and a project wrap-up by this August. Board member Shernock said the ARPA deadlines are approaching soon so there will need to be some idea by this summer regarding how much of these funds will need to be designated for the Common rehabilitation. Ms. Lewis said the project proposal has been left rather loose as there is no way to now anticipate the results of the community feedback phase. It is possible residents will favor extensive rehabilitation of the site or just some minor upgrades.

As for the formation of this steering committee, it has been Ms. Lewis' experience that such groups should be limited to about five (5) members as larger groups usually aren't that productive in practice. Board member Shernock would like the final committee composition to include at least one local student in order to get some input from Northfield youth. Ms. Lewis agreed that there should be some diversity on the steering committee. This can be discussed further at next month's meeting. The proper timing of future meetings can also be worked out at that time. Board member Stevens suggested contacting possible stakeholders, such as the Labor Day Festivities committee, the Farmers Market, and the Northfield Community Development Network (NCDN) to see if any of their members would like to participate. Ms. Lewis said even if all these groups cannot be represented on the steering committee, there should be some reach out to them to gauge their interest.

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

**V. ADJOURNMENT.** Without objection, the meeting adjourned at 4:02 p.m. Ms. Lewis, Ms. Campbell, and other interested parties then conducted a tour of Northfield Common.

Respectfully submitted,

*Kenneth L. McCann*

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

These minutes are subject to approval at the next committee meeting.