

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
NORTHFIELD COMMON REHABILITATION
PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING
Minutes of April 24, 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, Bethany Drum, Richard Wobby, and Shauna Foran.

The meeting was called to order at 5:04 p.m.

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

- III. APPROVAL OF MINUTES: March 28, 2024.** Motion by Board member Shernock, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. A few typos were found in the minutes that will be corrected. **Motion passed without objection.**

IV. DISCUSSION

- a. Public Meeting Planning.** Ms. Lewis said the online survey has been posted since this past Monday (04/22/24) and 141 responses have been received so far. This is an impressive number so quickly and the demographics indicate that all age groups are being represented. Mr. Wobby asked if it were possible for people to submit more than one response. Ms. Lewis said it was but they had never had a problem with multiple respondents with the online surveys they have conducted in the past. Ms. Lewis added that reposting the survey link on additional local social media sites would be very helpful. She then asked about the distribution of hard copies. Manager Schulz said copies are available in the Municipal Building, Brown Public Library, and other locations. In addition, the public invitation have been circulated for the public meeting to be held on Thursday, May 2, 2024 at 5:30 p.m. in the Community Room located in the Brown Public Library. Ms. Lewis said this would be an open conversation using the survey questions as a jumping off point. However, we hope to get into much more detail with open ended questions. Mr. Wobby asked if the online survey responses are automatically tabulated or if this information has to be entered manually. Ms. Lewis said the survey answers are automatically categorized and put into an Excel-style spreadsheet. Ms. Wobby asked if these results could be shared with the steering committee members before the public meeting. Ms. Lewis said that would be done.

Mr. Wobby noted he was involved in the Northfield Common Restoration Project in the mid-1990s. He felt Northfield residents should be informed is there are any plans to alter the Common's footprint due to pedestrian safety concerns, etc. Mr. Wobby felt that taking steps to improve safety around the Common probably would make the municipality eligible for additional state grant funds. Ms. Lewis said she and DuBois & King are also working at this time on a separate (but related) project to improve pedestrian safety along the route from Depot Square to Dog River Park. As part of that project, there has been a suggestion to improve pedestrian safety at the intersection of Depot Square and Wall Street by adding a bump out at that location. As part of this proposal, they have looked into vehicle turning movements in order to determine how to narrow the pedestrian crossing area there while still allowing delivery trucks, etc. the ability to make wide turns. Mr. Wobby said improving pedestrian safety might become a more urgent need if this rehabilitation project results in increased usage of the Common area. Ms. Lewis said there are no other plans to alter the Depot Square footprint at this time. However, that might ultimately change due to public feedback received from the surveys, public meetings, etc.

Ms. Lewis noted this project is now in the early investigative phase so nothing can be ruled out at this time. Board member Shernock said it might turn out that increasing the number of possible activities on the Common might make it necessary to alter the footprint to accommodate them all. Mr. Wobby would like the historic nature of the Northfield Common to be respected when all new rehabilitation proposals are brought forward. Ms. Campbell said whether or not any new items, such as recreational or playground equipment, would be added to the Common area is the type of question that would be asked as part of the public outreach process. There also might be other constraints, such as access to public utilities, that might limit what changes can be made. Ms. Campbell felt those limitations should be known before any changes are suggested that might be entirely unfeasible. Ms. Davidson is concerned about allowing local school children to participate in the public outreach process since it is likely that they would want it turned into a playground. Ms. Lewis said there can be no certainty about what local youth would like to see on the Common until they are asked. Even if they do want a new playground there, that doesn't mean that would come to pass should older residents have strong reservations about this. Ms. Lewis feels it is just as possible that the schoolchildren will come up with suggestions for creative uses of the Common that would be popular with all age groups. Since local youth are now using the Common and will do so for several years, it would be good to have them included in this outreach process.

Manager Schulz then asked about the format of next week's public meeting and whether it would start with a presentation from DuBois & King. Ms. Lewis confirmed that she and Ms. Campbell would start the meeting with an overview of the public outreach process. There also will be a brief summary of the survey responses received by that time. This meeting will be an opportunity to ask the attendees to fill out the survey if they had not done so already. The survey questions would be used as conversation starters in order to encourage open-ended conversations about the future of the Northfield Common. If a lot of people attend, it might be useful to form smaller groups to encourage everyone to speak their minds and interact with each other. Breaking a large crowd into smaller components often has the effect of encouraging people to provide their individual views with others. Mr. Wobby said the meeting introduction probably should include some historical background on when and why the Common was first established and what then intended for its future use, etc. Ms. Lewis thought that was a good idea and said any information the steering committee members can provide about this would be very helpful. Mr. Wobby agreed to do some research on this and provide his findings to Ms. Lewis, Ms. Campbell, and the other steering committee members. He felt it was important for residents to understand the heritage of this green space located in the heart of our community. Ms. Lewis agreed that even longtime Northfield residents may be unaware of the Common's part history.

Board member Shernock felt the Common is not a fun place for young people at this time. She felt this should be made a more welcoming area for all members of the community. Ms. Campbell said this could be part of the public conversation at next week's meeting, i.e. how to make this space more inviting for more people. Mr. Wobby doesn't want any new facilities installed that hurt the merchants now located around Depot Square. He felt there are public parks located elsewhere in the community and that is where people should be directed if they want playgrounds, etc. Ms. Lewis said they would be looking at all ideas at this time.

Board member Stevens then asked how the survey that will target local businesses is coming along. Ms. Lewis said that was another topic she wanted to discuss with the steering committee members tonight. She and Ms. Campbell have been focusing mainly on the public survey and next week's meeting so they would like some committee input on this. They have been putting together some specific questions for the businesses located not only on Depot Square but also those in the surrounding greater downtown area. Ms. Campbell said they have developed tailored questions for the different stakeholders in this outreach process. This includes those residents who live and/or work in close proximity to the Common, the owners and/or operators of the nearby businesses, etc. These questions include how the proximity of the Common affects how they operate their businesses; do they make use of Common amenities to promote their business activities; whether available public parking is an issue for the business operators and their employees; are the businesses affected (good or bad) when the Common area is filled up by people due to special events; etc. She then asked if the steering committee members had any other questions to suggest.

Mr. Wobby personally feels that available parking really should not be a major concern as there is a public parking lot behind the American Legion that seems to be underutilized. However, he felt that parking issues should be part of the conversation. Ms. Campbell noted sometimes there is a perception that a particular issue is a challenge but this can be refuted through discussion with those directly involved. Manager Schulz suggested asking about nighttime lighting issues around Depot Square. Ms. Davidson agreed as she has often heard people saying they would like the Common lit up more often for nighttime use. Ms. Campbell said improved lighting also could be part of the conversation with the general public regarding safety and accessibility issues. Mr. Wobby said we can also ask whether people feel safe when on the Common. As for the survey of business owners, Mr. Wobby suggested asking what they don't like about the Common as it is now. Ms. Lewis said there is a survey question about what concerns they might have about the Common. Mr. Wobby felt that was a slightly different question. Ms. Lewis said we could ask both versions at the public meeting. Mr. Wobby said another question for both the general public and for business owners was what kind of special events should be held on the Common. Ms. Lewis thanked the steering committee members for tonight's suggestions and will incorporate them into the questions to be asked at next week's meeting and also on the business survey. Manager Schulz said he will discuss the outreach to local businesses with Economic Development Director Tom Davis as he interacts with them on a regular basis. He will contact Ms. Lewis afterwards with any useful information he might learn from this. Mr. Wobby felt distributing the business survey by hand probably would result in a better response than just sending out emails. He also felt the property owners who rent space to the Depot Square merchants also should be included in this survey process. Ms. Lewis then said she hoped that all the steering committee members would be able to attend the public meeting. All those present said they would be able to attend. Mr. Wobby would like it made plain during the public meeting that we will be discussing a common at that time, not a park.

V. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Unscheduled).

- a. Shawna Foran: Depot Square Parking.** Ms. Foran thought that there should be a public conversation about the possibility of eliminating the public parking spaces located around the interior of the Common. This would not include the storefront parking. Ms. Lewis felt there could be a conversation about this possibility. Mr. Wobby noted that during the earlier Common rehabilitation process, one-way traffic was instituted on Depot Square for safety reasons. This also allowed for the installation of additional parking spaces.

VI. ADJOURNMENT. Without objection, the meeting was adjourned at 5:52 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

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