

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT**  
**PLANNING COMMISSION**  
**Minutes of December 14, 2022**

The meeting was held at the Community Room of the Brown Public Library, and was also streamed via the Town GoToMeeting account for the benefit of those unable to attend in person.

The meeting was called to order at 7:01 pm by Chair Laura Hill-Eubanks.

**Roll Call:** Present for the meeting were Commissioners Laura Hill-Eubanks, Nancy Peck, Ruth Ruttenberg, Chandra Blackmer, and Aaron Rhodes. Clerk Mitch Osiecki hosted the meeting from the Community Room. Also participating in the meeting were sent were JuliBeth Hinds of Birchline Planning, Erin Hicks-Tibbles of the Northfield Housing Task Force, and Tom Davis, Economic Development Director.

Mitch Osiecki attended from the Community Room; all other attendees participated remotely via GoToMeeting.

**Set/Adjust Agenda:** No adjustments to the agenda.

**Public Participation:** Laura welcomed guests and made introductions.

**Discussion of the Northfield Housing Task Force**

Tom Davis made a brief introduction and explained the mission of the Northfield Housing Task Force (NHTF). The NHTF has been charged with addressing the housing crisis in town. There are many current housing needs in town: owner-occupied homes, rental units, multi-family units, affordable housing and more.

The NHTF is searching for every practical way to provide additional housing units.

The group hopes to look at zoning regulations to ensure that when opportunities arise, projects aren't needlessly stymied by zoning regs.

One priority is addressing homelessness and affordable housing.

Availability of suitable land for housing is a critical need. Northfield needs more housing not only in order to grow, but also maintain existing standards.

The task force sees Norwich University as an important partner.

Laura Hill-Eubanks asked about the potential to develop housing in Northfield Falls.

Tom responded that he's open to developing housing anywhere that makes sense. He noted that the lack of sewer & water is challenges to increasing housing in Northfield Falls.

JuliBeth noted that there is some money available that could be leveraged for the 20% municipal match typically needed for many grants.

Tom also noted that the town is currently pursuing a Downtown designation, which would make available additional funding sources for development projects.

Tom noted that development along VT Route 12 and 12A are currently the most promising options.

Tom invited questions from the PC

Ruth Ruttenberg: How many units of housing are you planning to add? Tom: In the 100's.

Density? Depends on the locations. Mentioned a location near the village that could support perhaps 40 units under current zoning standards. Also looking at the potential for developing a tiny home community. That would be denser than is currently typical.

Tom noted that approval of Downtown designation would allow for greater flexibility in the allowable uses of land. Has been mentioned previously: the Freightyard Way area is currently zoned Industrial. The area has been proposed to be added to the Village Center, which would expand potential uses.

Ruth commented that during work on the Town Plan a few years ago, many residents objected to increasing the allowed density in some neighborhoods. Some residents will resist change.

Tom responded that this will require making the case for a vision for a vital Northfield community.

### **Zoning Regulation Updates:**

JuliBeth shared a Draft Table of Uses.

The table includes various Review Processes that can be used to confer approval of proposals.

Brief discussion of Special Uses allowed by State Statute:

- farm structures (as defined by VT Required Agricultural Practices Rule);
- state-designated uses (e.g., state facilities, religious land uses, schools, solid waste facilities);
- public utility power generation and transmission lines (Can Not Be Regulated by Municipalities);
- structures for access by persons with a disability.

JB noted that Northfield's ADU regulation is out of compliance with state statute and will have to be updated.

Town regulations can be less restrictive than state statute, but they can't be more restrictive.

The current regulations are missing a lot of definitions, as we have previously noted.

Regulations should allow multi-family dwellings as a permitted use wherever appropriate. Don't have to allow multi-family dwellings in every zoning district; but in those districts where they are appropriate, approval should be administrative.

Government buildings are defined, but not currently allowed. That is problematic and should be corrected.

Too many potential uses are currently subject to conditional use review by the DRB.

Industrial uses – cemeteries and nursing homes are the only uses allowed in Industrial right now.

Tom suggested that if Northfield achieves its Downtown designation, we will need better oversight of allowable development and better guidelines for the DRB to follow.

JuliBeth shared a comparison between Northfield and Middlebury to provide a sense of where our regulations are currently weak.

One example: Middlebury defines 1-, 2-, 3-, and 4-unit residences. They define 5 or more units as a multi-family dwelling.

One note: under current Northfield regulations, a maximum height restriction is only applied in the low/medium density residential districts.

Some areas that need attention:

#### RESIDENTIAL USES

Accessory Dwelling Unit (Permitted Use): Not defined. Northfield currently requires DRB approval for some ADU's – by state statute, should be a permitted use.

We have definitions for:

- Dwelling, Single-Family;
- Dwelling, Multi-Family;
- Dwelling, Two-Family;
- Dwelling or Dwelling Unit;
- Group Living Accommodations

Should consider the expanded categories that Middlebury defines.

Student housing needs to be allowed.

Congregate Care Facilities include:

- Residential care (e.g., The Veterans Place);

- Recovery residences;
- Transitional housing.

#### SPECIAL USES – REGULATION RESTRICTED UNDER VERMONT LAW

Childcare Facilities (not defined)

Government Building: any building owned by a local, county, state, or federal agency.

#### HOTELS, MOTELS, OTHER PUBLIC ACCOMMODATION

Northfield currently defines:

- Bed and Breakfast (B&B's);
- Hotel;
- Motel;
- Tourist Home

Short-Term Rentals – it would be appropriate to define this term and explicitly allow or disallow this use in districts, as appropriate. Middlebury has a nice definition of short-term rentals.

We might consider consolidate these into something like Lodging Facilities

#### MOBILE HOMES/MOBILE HOME PARKS

Northfield has several mobile home parks. Should discuss whether updates of terms and regulations is needed.

#### COMMERCIAL USES

Animal Boarding (not defined)

Home Occupation vs. Home Business. Northfield defines a home occupation, but not a home business. Should these require a site plan review? For future discussion.

Offices -- not defined. Although Professional Office is. As is Personal Service Store.

Restaurant – not currently defined. Some towns include a definition for a short-order, high turnover restaurant.

Bar – not defined.

Retail Store – not defined.

Retail uses should be permitted in Village Center/Downtown.

## INDUSTRIAL/HEAVY COMMERCIAL USES

Several uses are not defined: Automobile Repair, Automobile Fuel Stations, Oil & Gas Storage, Parking Facilities, Parking Lots.

Junkyards vs. Salvage Yards or recycling center. Junkyards are described, but not widely allowed. (Note: there's a distinction between a beverage redemption facility and a scrap metal recycling facility).

Manufacturing – no definition. Some distinctions:

- Laboratory or research facility;
- Light industry;
- Wood products;
- Machine or metal fabrication

Truck Terminal – not defined. Consider broadening use to Transportation Facility.

## INSTITUTIONAL USES

Currently define only Childcare and Cemeteries.

Middlebury describes Institutional and Community Facility Uses, and allows:

- Religious Institutions;
- Funeral Services;
- Public Assembly Facilities;
- Museum or library;
- Artist gallery/production studio;
- Indoor recreation facility

Julibeth will put together some proposed definitions (we're missing many), and will propose a chart showing a set of possible allowed uses.

It will ultimately be the job of the Planning Commission determine which uses make sense in each zoning district.

Julibeth suggests that the focus of the PC should be on the uses to be allowed or disallowed in the various districts.

Discussion of changing boundaries of current zoning districts should be deferred to a future date.

Ruth commented that she doesn't like that the Town Forest is part of the Low Density Residential district. Wishes to protect the forest from future land development.

Julibeth advised that there are various ways to do this. Could propose a new district for the Town Forest. Or could create an overlay district, particularly if the town forest is not a contiguous parcel.

Brief discussion of home occupations. JuliBeth described how home occupations are defined and implemented in Duxbury. Home occupations are (state statute, again) allowed in all districts.

Roxbury identifies a benign home occupation, which has no impact on the neighborhood (think: home office/work from home situation).

Other home occupation uses are reviewed by the DRB. Review standards typically specify:

1. Activities conducted entirely within principal dwelling or accessory structure;
2. Uses no more than 25% of the principal dwelling;
3. Occupation carried out by an occupant of the dwelling (can employ a max of two others);
4. No excessive noise, odor, other nuisance, hazardous waste;
5. No on-premise retail sales;
6. No changes to grading, landscaping, exterior modifications to structure;
7. Limited to 10 hours of operation per day;
8. DRB can regulate on-site parking requirements.

On-site sales are generally not allowed in conjunction with a home occupation.

Floodplain Standards – JuliBeth recommends that the Planning Commission consider adopting the State's Model Law for Floodplain Regulations.

Erin commented that extending water and sewer service to Northfield Falls might be a goal that the Select Board is interested in endorsing. "Development follows infrastructure."

**Approval of Minutes:** Ruth moved to approve draft minutes of November 2, 2022; Aaron seconded.

**Vote to approve:** 4-0-1 (No vote heard from Nancy Peck).

**Next Regular Meeting:** January 4, 2022 at 7:00 pm.

(Note: PC wishes to have next meeting streamed via Zoom, rather than GoToMeeting.

Question from Chandra: how does the PC decide how to apply regulations?

Response: Discussion in public meeting; try to get feedback from people with an interest; make best decision you can with the available information.

After PC completes a final draft of the proposed zoning regulations, draft regulations will be discussed at a Public Hearing of the Select Board. If certain items face resistance from either the public or Select Board, may have to make revisions.

**Adjournment:** Ruth Ruttenberg moved to adjourn; Chandra Blackmer seconded.

**Vote to approve:** 4-0-1 (no vote heard from Nancy Peck).

Meeting adjourned at 9:18 pm.