Ward 5 Neighborhood Planning Assembly Draft Minutes

Date of Assembly: 12/19/2024
Location: 645 Pine Street and Zoom
Start Time: (Commence) 7:00 pm
Finish Time: (Adjourn): 8:30 pm
Facilitator: Jason Van Driesche Note taker: Maria Mercurio

Steering Committee Members in Attendance:

Cathy Foley, FaRied Munarsyah, Jason Van Driesche, Jak Tiano, Maria Mercurio, Lena Greenberg (on zoom)

Welcome & Guiding Principles: safe space, accessibility, respect, vital, non-partisan

Public forum

Max: I've been working on the Callahan Park team. City has approved $ for new benches in the park. Details to come.

FaRied: I'm a volunteer for the People's Kitchen. Working with the Dad Guild on a toy drive for families on the free food program. Looking for warm blankets (fleece or wool) and new, unopened toys for kids 0-12. Can drop off at the Dad Guild (Soda Plant) or the People's Kitchen on 44 Ledgemere St. Or call/text 8024913491. For financial contributions: venmo account is People'sKitchenVT or Pay Pal at People's Kitchen VT. any contributions will go a long way. Thank you.

Zach Nersinger of CEDO: memorial block redevelopment online survey has about 2 weeks left. On the CEDO website. Need public input on civic space uses for that area (memorial auditorium and properties along Main St.)
Also introducing Shawny Corey, new NPA specialist for CEDO. Shawny will be at all NPA meetings going forward. SCorey@burlingtonvt.gov

Jak Tiano: The theme of traffic safety has come up a lot in the NPA in the last year. We expanded on that during a summer event, discussing safer street design. I've been discouraged in recent meetings about the approach the city is taking on this issue. Important to keep this conversation going with more and more people
This week the City Council passed a new version of the Winooski bridge. There had been a lot of advocacy for a forward-thinking design. While this new design is an improvement over the old, it is not very forward-thinking. Many were frustrated by this process. I am on the Walk Bike Council, which advocates for changes to make our city streets more safe and welcoming for everyone.

These issues are nationwide, not just in Burlington. Vision for Burlington that is human-scale and climate-friendly. We could benefit from more people plugging in and speaking out. If this is of interest to you, please come and talk to me.

Pat: Question on the bridge design, how was it not forward-thinking?

Jak: Multi-use paths putting pedestrians and cyclists together is not ideal. Wider lanes for cars will mean that people will drive faster.

Jason: I've had a lot of the same frustration over the last 10 years. Something I've really learned from talking with Jak is that improving our streets is not just about making the streets more pleasant for us, we need it in order for the city to grow. As our population is growing we will have deadlock if we don't change our grid and if the main way of getting around is driving.

Andy Simon: This is one of the things we need to focus on in the NPA in the next year: walking and biking in Burlington and being safe in a car. As much as I admire all those folks who work in the city for public works, when it comes to imagining doing something different, they don't do it. There is a failure of imagination. One example of this is roundabouts. The roundabout on Route 7 is a huge improvement. Champlain Parkway, plan to close off the end of Pine Street, Railyard Enterprise Project, Winooski Bridge, many others. These are places that would be improved by a roundabout instead of stop lights. I'm channeling the late great Tony Reddington who was a great champion of roundabouts. Planners at DPW almost always go back to stoplights. Stoplights are one of the worst possible ways to manage an intersection. People are running red lights at an increasing frequency. Roundabouts decrease frustration for drivers and others. Planning is key to safety.

Dave Foss of Decker Towers: Can the NPA go back to focusing more on the South End Community Center? We could put together some guidance on that. Can also be a part of the conversation on transportation.
At Decker the traffic is insane. People are impatient and drive fast. Lots of near-misses. If we can get more engagement/excitement about the community center, folks may also be more engaged about traffic safety.

Steve: About walking in Burlington: some of the crosswalks downtown could be better lit.

Jason: The themes of community center and safer streets will be continued next year. The Steering Committee can be reached at ward5npa_btv@googlegroups.com

Lena Greenberg (on Zoom): About the community center: the reason that project felt impossible was because it would take so much money and time to get a center up and running with the amenities that we want/need. So a question is, what are we doing if we are paying these high property taxes and we don't have access to the spaces and resources that it feels like these taxes are for and the government should provide?

Tiff Bluemle and Bram Kleppner on the upcoming legislative session

Tiff: I've lived in VT, in Ward 5 for about 28 years. I live in Five Sisters. I ran for office during COVID. People were talking about issues that I'd spent so much of my life talking about, like the importance of childcare, and what essential work means. When Joey Donovan decided not to run I was asked to run. It's not easy, there are a lot of needs. I sit on the Appropriations Committee so I see what all those needs are. This session will be even harder.

Bram: I've lived in Ward 6 for 3+ decades. Worked for 10 years at Ben & Jerry's doing international business development. Then I was CEO of Danforth Pewter for 13 years. I've been interested in business as an engine for social justice. Transitioned out of full-time work in April and then Gabrielle Stebbins let me know she was not running again and offered her endorsement if I ran. I've been involved in public policy because rising costs have been hurting businesses. I advised during the Shumlin administration. I have been appointed to the Vermont Climate Council.
There are a lot of big, complicated interlocking problems that we have to deal with, and limited resources to deal with them.

Tiff: Overview of where the state economy is: Total revenues are 5% above what was projected. That's mostly in the general fund, the education fund is behind. 2nd lowest unemployment rate in the country. There are 2 open jobs for every unemployed worker in the state. The Agency of Human Services will likely be most affected by the national administration change. Health Care Department: 2 of every 3 dollars funded through feds. We rely on federal money. Only 10% from the state general fund. The rest are grants, usually federal. Health care subsidies due to expire in 2025. Health care premiums are already high. So this is uncertain.
We don't know what is going to happen with the new administration. Some good news: there is grant money that was issued from the Biden administration. Those dollars are less likely to be cut from us. What state officials are most worried about is medicare funding and title 1 money for special ed. Really hard for state officials to finalize budgets right now. The democratic caucus has set its priorities: housing, education finance that can lower property taxes, and stabilizing our health care system. We have hospitals on the verge of financial collapse. Bram will talk about education finance and healthcare, I'll talk about housing, and then we'll open us for questions

Bram: All connected: property taxes, education spending, health care costs. Statewide average: 65% of our property tax goes to education. In some towns that is as much as 85%. Vermont's education financing system is uniquely complicated. We are highly committed to providing educational opportunities to all kids across the state. So 130 different towns all vote on their school budgets and mail them all to Montpelier. Over the years people have said this is too complicated, no one understands it, it's not producing the quality of outcome we had hoped, and property taxes are crushing us. Studies have looked at it and many have come to the same conclusion. So we have a new idea that the tax should be entirely related to income and not property. I think moving this to an

income tax is a good idea for a few reasons. Complexity is a form of injustice. People don't know how their vote on town meeting day will actually affect their property taxes, there are so many calculations. Property tax is a relatively regressive tax. It is more burdensome on a poor person living in a $150,000 house, as opposed to a rich person living in a $150,000 house. From a data set from 2000 - 2018: property values are more volatile than income. Moving to an income tax will make our funding of education more simple and fair and sustainable, and will reduce property taxes by 65%. This is something we can probably do relatively quickly. However, many people are opposed to this. It is a big change. There are no other states that do this entirely based on income, so it can be scary to be the first with a big major tax policy. Some feel that it is a sneaky way to tax the rich. It's a large and radical change. I think this is possible though. Every legislator that has been elected (180) has heard from their constituents how burdensome and painful property taxes are. And the governor and state treasurer heard that too. So there may be enough pressure to do something meaningful.

Jason: If we were to switch to an income tax, what counts as income? If someone is retired and drawing down their retirement income, is that taxed?

Bram: Savings including retirement accounts don't count as income. If it was taxed going in, it doesn't get taxed going out. The money gets taxed at some point, but it doesn't get double-taxed. This will affect people differently based on their income and the value of their house and what community they live in. Generally, higher earners will pay more than they do now, lower earners will pay less. Also, property tax just hurts more because you are writing these big checks 4 times a year.

Jason: I've heard property taxes described as wealth taxes for non-rich people. Any traction on wealth tax on non-property forms of wealth?

Bram: It would be great to tax wealth, but it's a pain in the neck. States have tried it. Real estate is the easiest form of wealth to tax. There are all sorts of ways that rich people can hide their wealth, and they do. Florida tried to tax wealth for a few years. It didn't work and then they got rid of it. I think it's beyond our capability as a state to sort out.

Pat: What about property tax from folks who own property in VT and don't live here?

Bram: The switch to income tax would only apply to homesteads (primary residence owned by the inhabitant. Non-homestead homes would still pay property tax. There is also talk about higher rates for vacation homes and short-term rentals.

Lena: Can you say more about who/where people should direct their pressure to help us move to a more progressive tax?

Bram: We need to call the governor and put pressure on him and his office. He is not likely to be enthused on this. The chairs of the 2 tax committees, Ways and Means in

the House and Senate Finance. We should say, we do not yet know our committee assignments. There is a competitive race for Speaker.

Jak: Vermont has a relatively older and aging community. If we move to a system where income tax has to cover this bill and we aren't addressing the spending, and many residents are on a low or fixed income, that puts a lot of pressure on young people (or people who are in their most productive income years) which makes it even harder for them to get established, and that ties into the housing issue. There is a lot conspiring against people to put down roots and people are being pushed out.
From a market perspective on the housing issue: property taxes can be a good market signal to push toward utilizing space better. For example, if you have someone who doesn't make a lot of money who is living on a half acre in downtown Burlington and there is no property tax pressure for how to utilize that space better, that is bad in the long run. That parcel could support many units.

Bram: Right, but the market pressure will be there. For someone living on that half acre, people are gonna be knocking on their door offering a bunch of money to develop it into more units. In terms of the young people who are earning, it's gonna be a progressive income tax. If they are earning little they will be at the lower bracket, if they are earning a ton of money they will be at the higher end. It's age-agnostic. ABout older people aging out of the work force and having their income go down and property taxes go up, those are the people that are losing their homes that they've lived in for decades. They don't have good options if they want to stay in VT. There aren't places they can downsize into with lower taxes.

Jason: Let's open up for questions now as we had planned for an early adjournment at 8 and it's now past 8.

Cathay: I don't have a specific question but I do want to hear about health care.

Dave: For folks transitioning into Medicare, there are already a lot of medications being dropped. And our hospitals are in crisis right now. How are folks going to be able to afford healthcare and housing? What about lower taxing of social security?

Bram: So, health care. It is quite possible that Trump will succeed in getting rid of Obamacare this time around, which will mess a lot of us up. The subsidies for the exchange are ending in about a year, if those are not renewed it is quite possible that we will have a lot of uninsured Vermonters who don't have access to health care other than through the emergency room. Medicaid and Medicare provide health coverage to a lot of vermonters. Medicare is probably at less risk than Medicaid, as older people have more political power than poor people do. It's a concerning landscape and since so much of it is federal dollars, I don't know how much the legislature can do

Lena: Is there appetite for building support around Act 47 and creating a Healthcare for All Program? Or studying the economic potential of the enormous contributions schools and other employers have to make to private health insurance to fund a public option?

Tiff: It's hard to know, as we have not yet convened. I talked with Mike Fisher, a healthcare advocate based at Legal Aid who used to head the House health care committee, and he does not believe that Vermont alone can shoulder the cost of an all payer system. Unless Vermont partnered with several other states it just isn't feasible. That's what they found during the Shumlin administration. There are many aspects of this problem. We have health insurance premiums, which are really out of reach for many people, we have the fact that a number of people may lose insurance that was available through Obamacare, and we have a hospital system that is on very shaky financial footing. 9 of the 14 are in real financial risk. BCBS is putting out way more money than it typically does, its reserves are going down. And the Green Mountain Care board did a report and made recommendations including centralizing services which makes health care less accessible to rural Vermonters, pitting urban against rural needs. And now it goes to AHS. THe governor and the administration have the responsibility of responding to that report and coming up with a plan. To be frank, I'm really cynical about the ability of the administration to come up with a plan. We don't have much time (according to that report) and those departments are really pulled in a thousand different directions right now. All of us have to insist that we put our best foot forward, which means that we are open to proposals that we consolidate, whether that means schools or hospitals. Maybe we don't need 14 hospitals. But then, if you are living in Newport and your hospital is commissioned into something else and you have to travel much further for dialysis, how are you going to feel? So I'm glad that this is not immediately in the hands of the legislature, because some of those battles need to be fought in a less political arena.

Jason: So it sounds like there is potential for improvement on property taxes. Health care is in a holding pattern. Lets shift to housing and talk about priorities there, and what you see as opportunities and challenges.

Tiff: We have made a huge investment in housing since the pandemic. We invested a lot of money into emergency housing, rental support, and new housing construction. We have built 11,000 units since 2019. VHFA says we need 35,000 units by 2030. We have made positive changes on permitting and zoning. We can create more multi-unit housing where previously only single family homes were zoned for. We can rehab abandoned or not up to code buildings that can be turned into rental housing. We have a rental revolving loan fund to build affordable rental housing. But the needs are huge and we have underinvested almost since we established the Vermont Housing Conservation Board when Governor Kunin said no one who lives here will be able to stay here unless we actually invest in affordable housing. The property transfer tax funds affordable housing right now. This is gonna come in higher than it did last year, but not nearly high enough. We can incentivize development in new ways with the Act 250 reform and with certain incentives like water and sewer development money
We need about a hundred million a year for 10 years to build the kind of housing we need. CHT put this together.
Last year the only way we could figure out how to do that was to raise the income tax on 1% of Vermonters (the $500,000 or more bracket). Right now the highest tax bracket

goes up from about $245,000. We passed that as the house, but the senate didn't take it up. I think the senate will be an even harder sell this year.
I wanna ask you, how many of you write your senators? Your reps to the house?
The Senate and the House will have to work together and get the same messages from constituents. I think we are on a good trend but it is slow. We are not gonna see a huge difference in the number of units available and the vacancy rate for a while. Every single person I talked to named housing as the number one concern, usually right above property taxes.
One of the things that Bram and I need to try to do is invite your advocacy where it matters. I do not know who will be the chair of the housing committee in the house, or what stomach Ways and Means has to raise taxes. And we need to build housing and provide supportive services and fix education finance and, maybe, anticipate cuts in what people will be getting through the health exchange.

FaRied: Is there an update on the recently passed Burlington city charter changes: Just Cause eviction and Police oversight?

Tiff: That will arrive when we convene in January. Just Cause eviction is going to be very difficult to get through given the new makeup of the legislature. It was very hard last year and government ops decided not to take it up. But we were able to fund rental arrears program and rental subsidies and legal representation, at least in 2 counties. It's gonna be different and it's really hard to know how much. But we have all heard the same message and we need to act on these 3 issues. So there might even be a little more alignment than there has been in the past.

Question from Tiff to NPA: how do you want to hear from us? How useful have our posts and emails been?

FaRied: combination of FPF posting and coming to meetings is working great for me.

Cathy: Sunday night zoom calls have been very informative and convenient. You've brought in good experts to speak.

Jason: We have to adjourn now, big thank you to Tiff and Bram for showing up tonight and talking to us, and for your service and the intelligence, compassion, and dedication you bring to that role.