



Ward 6 Neighborhood Planning Assembly

Thursday, November 6, 2014 at 7:00 p.m. Greek Orthodox Church, 600 South Willard Street

Facilitator: Peter Keating; Minutes: Charles Simpson;

Cookies: Julie Richards; Videographer: Kaylee Mumford or Jeremy Partyka

- 6:45 Social time & cookies
- 7:00 Agenda overview and approval of October Minutes
- 7:05 Champlain College & University of Vermont Updates
- 7:20 City Councilors: Norm Blais & Karen Paul
- 7:35 School Commissioners: Stephanie Seguino and Alan Matson
- 7:45 Burlington Telecom - Current issues/future ownership, Lauren-Glen Davitian of CCTV
- 8:05 Mayor Miro Weinberger – Issues related to Burlington Telecom, pension reform, Champlain Parkway and neighborhood quality of life
- 8:50 Members Items
- 9:00 Adjourn

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Ward 6 Neighborhood Planning Assembly
DRAFT Minutes from Meeting on November 6, 2014

The meeting began at 7:00, coordinated by Peter Keating.

1. A spokesperson from Champlain College invited the public to walk through and admire their newly completed Perry Residence Quad.
2. Norm Blais said the City Council has approved a ballot measure on the March town meeting which asks residents to express an advisory opinion on whether Burlington should permit non-citizens to vote in local elections. Implementing this ballot measure will require the state legislature to amend the state constitution to permit localities to make such a change. Council also approved a modified protest buffer zone in front of Planned Parenthood. Karen Paul and Norm Blais indicated that Council will be considering making the gas station at the Parks and Recreation garage available to the public as a way to put downward pressure on gas prices. Both counselors indicated they were opposed. Council will also be considering imposing a smoking ban on the outside areas of the Church Street Market Place. Karen Paul indicated that currently certificates of compliance issued by the Office of Code Enforcement are now for three years; this practice will change to allow certificates ranging from one to five years. A report is forthcoming from the committee on form-based zoning as recommended in Plan BTV; this new zoning system covers the waterfront and downtown areas. Paul said that design changes for the Cliff Street sidewalk will be going back to the state for approval, then if granted out to bid probably in November. In answer to a question about whether the Council was getting involved in securing any of the Burlington College land parcel for public use, Blais said that no one has yet approached Council on the matter. Paul said as interim treasure for Burlington College, she couldn't comment. In response to a question about transitioning to the new ward election system, Blais and Paul indicated that March 2015 would be a test of a complicated electoral system: every ward electing a representative for a three year term and districts for a two year term. The odd numbered wards would subsequently elect representatives for two year terms, then in the next election cycle the even numbered wards to elect representatives for two year terms.
3. School Commissioner Stephanie Seguino said that budget discussions were continuing with a goal of providing the same level of service and number of personnel while keeping cost increases at or below 4.4%, a number driven by increased costs for insurance. She said the Board was balancing concerns for quality education with impact on taxpayers. The board is discussing creating the position of budget manager as well as developing better links between school administration and the Board. She sees some inefficiencies that remain and need to be eliminated. The search for a new interim school superintendent continues and there is a two week window before the existing interim superintendent steps down. There are over 40 applicants, indicating that the position is highly desirable. The search committee will recommend a candidate next Tuesday to the Board. With the loss of staff in major positions over the last year, the Board has had to do more micro-managing than normal but expects

to step back in the future. In response to a question, she said that the next interim superintendent wasn't coming from within the school system and so wouldn't be returning to the system at the end of their tenure, as is the current interim leadership. In response to another question, she indicated she considered the budget process flawed along with the process for the evaluation of staff and ironing this out may take a couple of years. She said the current interim leadership did both their old and new jobs simultaneously and should be commended. Question: Comment on the board's relationship with teachers. Answer: We gave them a three year contract and didn't cut lines so any tension that exists was limited to one position, the assistant principle of BHS. After 3.5 hours of deliberation, the Board reached a unanimous decision on that matter. Question: Are parents experiencing anxiety? Answer: A parent in the audience said yes. Seguino said that with 9 of the 14 members of the board being new, she expected that issues causing anxiety would be resolved as things moved forward. Q. How many hours a week do you work on board business? A. Thirty.

4. Lauren-Glen Davitian, Executive Director of CCTV, provided a short history of Burlington Telecom (BT). It arose from concerns by local resident with the high cost and poor service of existing cable in Burlington in the 1950s. Private individuals established a competing company with the goal of creating a public system. Over the years, the number of for-profit cable companies in Vermont have diminished, as has competition. Private companies, whatever their interest in public service, have a fiduciary responsibility to maximize return to shareholders, leading to sales and system consolidation. At present, Comcast is the dominant player with 30% of the national cable market and is interested in merging with Time-Warner to create a company with 50% of the national internet market. BT is publicly-owned and has a sound fiber network. It was approved with two conditions: that it build out to all households in the city and that it use no public funds as financing. These conditions left BT with inadequate capital and generally city administrations didn't champion it. In the 2008 financial transfer of funds from the General Fund to BT we were caught in the resulting political crossfire. Davitian went on to outline the present financial structure involving Bluewater and Merchants Bank. The state has now said BT isn't obligated to build out the system, which would be expensive, and BT is off the hook for \$15 million in debt though other debt is now accruing a high 7% interest. We now have a stable financial position in terms of operating costs and revenue. We have achieved stability for the next three to five years. Any buyer who appears in that time period will need \$18 million, \$12 million to pay for system assets and \$6 million for needed improvements. The virtues of a public system include lower rates, better service, more responsiveness to problems. With BT, the infrastructure already exists. Problems and decision-making are transparent. Yes, staff pay is lower than in the private sector. What's needed now is a public process to generate ideas on how to go forward. One possibility is to make BT a public utility like BED, without cable TV. This reflects the trend toward internet transmission of news and movie content now taking place. It might be possible to create a co-op of entities such as UVM and the hospital, not of individuals, which would help them achieve their economic development goals. We need to preclude having a private company own the system which would have to maximize shareholder value. Norm Blais commented at this

point that it was important to realize that there is also the fiduciary duty to taxpayers to consider in any restructuring of BT. Question: how many public cable/internet companies exist now in the U.S.? Answer: 400, with the municipally-owned system in Chattanooga, Tenn. as the 'gold standard.' Chris Mitchell, a public ownership consultant, has a presentation on this topic available to viewers on Channel 17.

5. Mayor Miro Weinberger addressed a number of topics. On BT, he agreed with the history presented by Davitian. City finances have been a priority for the last two and a half years and BT was on the top of the list. He said he believed the city had achieved its goals of protecting taxpayers and continuing quality service as well as protecting BT ratepayers. Citibank wanted \$33 million plus BT's equipment and threatened to put the company in receivership. Seventeen million of public and \$33 million of private money had been spent. The city ended up creating a competitor to Comcast and lining up a long-term partner to help us achieve development initiatives as a platform for a local tech-intensive economy. The settlement agreement was approved by the council unanimously and now by the state Public Service Board. The \$33 million owned to Citibank was reduced to \$15 million; one million in new taxpayer money was invested, and we will run it as a city department for the next five years. We can carry out a sale to whoever we want so as to help us meet our economic development goals. We may get back some public money if a buyer pays above a set threshold, which would be \$17 million plus something for the equity. In this matter, we've accomplished our goals. Question: In three to five years, what will happen? Answer: I'm open to creative possibilities, such as a co-op. The decision will be a public process. I did visit the system in Chattanooga and found it to be impressive. It combined the delivery of electricity with broadband. It used \$100 million of federal money to construct it, and ours is already built. Q. Are we making money now? A. Yes, not counting debt service payments. But including payments to the consultants, Dorman and Fawcett.
6. The Mayor then went on to consider other topics. Q. When is the next date that Moran Plant planning must meet? A. On Nov. 15 a feasibility report from the Moran team is due and will indicate the degree of success in attracting philanthropic support. Twenty million is hoped for, plus we have the TIF money already set aside. The last milestone will be in Sept. 2016. The team is optimistic. I consider it like the process of creating Manhattan's Highline Park, which began with what many thought was an unlikely idea and achieved success. On the pension reform issue: We and the Council had a summit last year. We found that in 2000 our pension obligations were 120% funded; now they are only 69% funded. In 2006 we negotiated with the unions and got some concessions and did so again in 2009. The result is a complex pensions system with 12 plans since cuts applied to new employees. We've met with the unions, council, and consultants every two weeks over the last year to fix the problem and learned a lot, for example that we'd fallen further behind than we realized and that our city was worse than average in this respect. At the moment, all unusual cost increases are paid by the city. We need to have employees share those unanticipated costs. We will release our report on this next week. We all agree on the goal of freezing taxpayer contributions for the next three years and subsequently to have them rise only at the rate of inflation. We want to get up to 85% of full funding or

require the invoking of an automatic system for making changes. Q. Can you comment on students and community quality-of-life issues? A. The Mayor asked William Ward, Director of Code Enforcement, to comment. Ward said that See-Click-Fix, the city system for managing citizen complaints, had an app for cell phones that allows the public to photograph problems such as pot holes or report illegal situations. (Download at SECLICKFIX.COM.) The information is automatically sent to the appropriate city department for response and resolution. In the last two years, 2700 noise complaints were reported. This fall we focused on a limited number of problem properties. Twelve of these had 154 noise complaints, not necessarily tickets, in this two year period. With the new focus this fall on them, eight had zero complaints in the last three months. Overall, weekend noise incidents are down 30%.

7. On the Champlain Parkway project: the Mayor said he described this as unresolved when he took office. The council and administration are now committed to build it. An associated Rail Yard Enterprise Project involves the federal government and is consequently slow. As for this latter, the city has an agreement with the federal government on purpose and need and that's the first step. The Parkway itself has an Act 250 permit. This was challenged by four parties, three of whom have which have resolved their problems. The fourth has appealed to the state Supreme Court. But, said the mayor, "The end is in sight." The South End BTV process will allow us to rebuild public infrastructure on Pine Street. Our intent is to plan with public participation as we did the downtown and waterfront. Q. Will the city be seeking public use for some of the Burlington College land? A. We've been grappling with this issue. We see a public interest in a North End connection to the bike path, improved walking paths, the preservation of existing community gardens, and keeping a rare pine/oak forest. There may be other interests. We are discussing this with our Parks and Rec department and working on it.

A motion to adjourn was moved and seconded at 9:06 pm.

Respectfully submitted, Charles Simpson