

City of Newport
Planning Commission
Tuesday, August 2, 2022 Meeting

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Members Present: Chair John Monette, Vice Chair Denis Chennette, Carole O'Connell, Kevin Mead

Others Present: NVDA Consultant Alison Low, Newly Appointed Zoning Administrator Francis (Frank) Cheney, Newport Daily Journalist Chris Roy, Council President John Wilson, MWA Treasurer Jennifer Hopkins, and City Manager Laura Dolgin

Chair John Monette called the First Public Hearing on the Municipal Plan to order at 6:30 p.m., and explained the hearing was warned in the Newport Daily on July 13, 2022; and the hearing warning and plan was circulated to the neighboring communities and the guest speakers who presented throughout the planning process on July 1, 2022. The plan has been available on the city's website throughout the planning process, which began in early 2020 as a result of a planning grant. Chair Monette opened the hearing for comments.

Chris Roy, representing the press, began the conversation with the critical question: tell us why we need a new plan and what changes are in this one:

Chair John Monette explained that the State requires plans be updated periodically. Plans used to have 5 year life spans and now they are good for 8 years. The lack of a duly adopted plan can adversely affect a community in terms of eligibility for grants and state projects, and can potentially present negative issues for applicants of act 250 permits and other types of permits. The current plan is an interim one which had a partial update a few years ago intended to bridge us through the formal plan updating process. The council approved it as did the regional planning commission.

The new plan is more forwardly focused and is no comparison to the old plan. The new plan breaks out recommended objectives and actions based on the plan's foundation elements. The new plan is rewritten from scratch rather than just an update. The Planning Commission attempted to make this plan clearer and more organized, and build on the work that has been done with other city plans.

The updated plan contains a city wide quality of life vision with recommendations to meet the vision, although the city's role is limited in implementing this. The big focus is on housing and what, if anything, the city can do within these limitations to encourage more housing development. For example, are there impediments in the zoning bylaws that make development harder than necessary. The planning commission will be looking at the zoning bylaws, through the bylaw modernization grant, to see if we can update the regulations to make housing easier. A major concern right now is encouraging housing development at all price points because there is a tight housing market statewide. It is hard to find a home and there is very little for sale; and what is for sale sells rapidly. Apartment rentals are hard to find. Major landlords are running waiting lists that they've never had before. This is happening in part because of the cost of building, which the city can't impact except in limited areas, i.e., looking at minimum lot sizes where there is access to water and sewer, which varies in the city. An example would be municipalities who require 2 acre lots no matter where which means every property in the village is non conforming. Other considerations are things such as availability of water and sewer, future job growth patterns, and overall development. The point from the city's perspective is to do what we can to ensure the existing plans and regulations do not create unnecessary or over-expensive impediments.

The timeline for approval: the planning commission is required to hold one hearing, and then 30 days after the planning commission has submitted the plan to the city council, that body will hold 2 hearings. The first council hearing is targeted for 30 days after the plan is presented to the city council, and the second hearing is targeted for 15 days after the first public hearing. The council can adopt the plan at a meeting which is held after the final public hearing. (**Update: the public hearings can be scheduled in front of the City Council on September 19 for the first, and then October 17, 2022 for the second.)

The approval process would have to begin again if there are drastic changes made through the approval process. Once the council approves it, it will go to NVDA for their process of approval.

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Every municipality belongs to a regional planning commission, and the city belongs to Northern Vermont Development Association (NVDA). There will be a hearing at the NVDA level. Once the plan is adopted at the local level and the planning process is complete at the NVDA level, then the city can participate in certain programs such as the Downtown Designation program, which are clearly valuable to the community. This process and the adopted plan allows the community to be set up to take maximum advantage of various state programs.

The planning commission opted to vote to move the plan on to the city council at the next planning commission meeting, scheduled for August 16, to give them time to go through the plan one more time. Alison Low received a set of minor typos.

After hearing no more questions, Chair Monette asked for a motion to close the public hearing. Said motion was made by Carol O'Connell, with Denis Chenette seconding, and the motion passed to conclude the public hearing at 7:02.

1. Chair Monette called the regular Planning Commission meeting to order at 7:05 pm.
2. Approve the minutes of the Planning Commission meeting held on July 19, 2022: Motion made by Denis Chenette to approve the July 19, 2022 minutes, with Carole O'Connell seconding, and the motion passed.
3. Public Comments - n/a
4. Discussion and Review of City Plan: the commission reviewed the steps of the approval process: a second copy of the plan that corrects any typos in track changes will be ready at the next PC meeting. The PC will conduct a page by page review, and once they have confidence, the PC will vote to send it on to the City Council for the first of two hearings. The city council public hearing dates are anticipated to be scheduled for September 19, and October 17. The Council can vote to adopt it after the council has their second hearing. The Regional Planning Commission will then review this as soon as possible, and take public comment at the regional level. Alison Low will schedule the notice for public hearing 15 days ahead of time. The NVDA staff review is already completed. This schedule will allow the plan to be adopted at the regional level at their December meeting, which is on the original timeline. City Manager Dolgin acknowledged the excellent work from the planning commission members as well as Alison Low. Chair Monette added the involvement from NVDA and SE Group was extremely helpful and made things a lot smoother.
5. Old Business: City Manager Dolgin introduced and welcomed Mr. Francis 'Frank' Cheney as the new zoning administrator, officially appointed at last night's council meeting. City Manager Dolgin provided a brief update on the bylaw modernization grant work: Consultant Brandy Saxton will soon visit the city clerk's office to review land records, and she will soon provide the planning commission with the regulatory audit and memo distilling key points. Chair Monette noticed this timing will be good as the municipal plan update work will be winding down which means the PC will have capacity to focus on the bylaws.
6. New business: n/a
7. Next Meeting: August 16, 2022 @ 6:30 p.m.
8. Set a draft agenda for the next regularly scheduled meeting: will be similar to tonight's meeting. Alison will have the draft for us.
9. Adjourn. Motion to adjourn the meeting made by Kevin Mead, and seconded by Denis Chenette at 7:19 (Kevin Mead let us know he will be absent at the next meeting as he will be out of state)

Respectfully submitted by City Manager Laura Dolgin
Unofficial Until Approved

Approved this ___ day of August, 2022.

Planning Commission Chair