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SPECIAL JOINT MEETING OF THE

Town Council and the Community Resources Committee

April 21, 2020, 2:00 P. M.

Pursuant to Governor Baker's March 12, 2020 Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, §20, this joint meeting of the Amherst Town Council and the Community Resources Committee was conducted via remote participation utilizing the Zoom platform. The meeting was recorded for future broadcasting.

**VIRTUAL MEETING:** <https://zoom.us/j/97568719172>

**MINUTES**

**Town Councilors Participating Remotely and Present by Roll Call:**

Councilors Brewer, De Angelis, Dumont, Griesemer - Chair, Schoen, Steinberg

**Absent:** Pam, Ryan

**CRC Members Participating Remotely and Present by Roll Call:**

Bahl-Milne, Hanneke - Chair, Ross, Schreiber, Swartz

**Absent:** None

**Staff Participating Remotely:** Christine Brestrup, Planning Director, Pamela Field-Sadler, Planning Administrative Assistant, Rob Morra, Building Commissioner, Athena O'Keefe, Town Council Clerk, Dave Ziomek, Assistant Town Manager and Director of Conservation and Development

**Others Participating Remotely:**

Gabrielle Gould, Executive Director of the Amherst Business Improvement District (BID) and Downtown Amherst Foundation; Claudia Pazmany, Executive Director of the Amherst Area Chamber of Commerce

**1. Call to Order**

Council President Lynn Griesemer called the whole Town Council meeting to order at 2:01 p.m.

CRC Chair Mandi Jo Hanneke declared the presence of a quorum and called the CRC meeting to order at 2:01 p.m.

Chair Hanneke announced that pursuant to Governor Baker's March 12, 2020 Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, §20, this joint meeting of the Amherst Town Council and the Community Resources Committee is being conducted virtually, and any votes would be taken by roll call.

Chair Hanneke called a roll call of Town Councilors and CRC members:

CRC Members Participating Remotely and Present by Roll Call: Shalini Bahl-Milne, Mandi Jo Hanneke, Evan Ross, Steve Schreiber, Sarah Swartz

Town Councilors Participating Remotely and Present by Roll Call: Councilors Alisa Brewer, Lynn Griesemer, Cathy Schoen, Andy Steinberg

Chair Hanneke announced there is no chat room available for this meeting; to make a comment, participants should use the “raise hand” option to be recognized. If technical difficulties arise, we may need to pause temporarily to rectify the problem and then continue the meeting. Discussion may be suspended while the technical issues are addressed and the minutes will note if a disconnection has occurred.

## **2. General Public Comment**

Chair Hanneke noted Councilor Schreiber temporarily lost remote connection.

Chair Hanneke explained to the public that in order to participate they must press \*9 on their phone or choose the “raise Hand” option in the web browser version of the Zoom platform. When called upon, speakers should identify themselves by stating their full name and address, and put yourself back into mute when finished speaking. Residents are welcome to express their views for up to three (3) minutes and at the discretion of the CRC Chair. If the guidelines are not complied with or the speaker exceeds their allotted time, their participation in the General Public Comment period will be ended. The CRC will not respond to comments during the General Public Comment period.

Chair Hanneke noted Councilor Schreiber had regained his remote connection.

Janet McGowan, South East St. resident, shared a concern regarding the proposed process for Zoning Bylaw amendments, specifically the joint public hearing of the Planning Board and the CRC. Ms. McGowan is of the opinion that greater efficiency will be achieved if the Planning Board and the CRC conduct separate public hearings.

## **3. Action Items – None**

## **4. Presentation and Discussion Items**

### **a. COVID-19 and Economic Development**

#### **i. Presentation from the BID and Chamber (Gabrielle Gould, Claudia Pazmany)**

Claudia Pazmany, Executive Director of the Amherst Area Chamber of Commerce began the presentation pointing out the COVID-19 crises is affecting local businesses immensely. The Chamber and the BID are working collaboratively during this unique time to explore resources and develop initiatives to support local Amherst businesses.

Ms. Gould shared while supporting businesses to traverse the immediate challenges of COVID-19, this is also an opportunity to recreate Amherst while planning for the long-term economic recovery. Ms. Gould explained that through the COVID-19 Economic Impact Survey provided prior to the closing of non-essential business and the switch to “take-out only” food operations, 70% of participants reported their businesses would not survive a shut down through May. Local employers reported they have been forced to lay off or furlough workers, and by the end of May, businesses will have lost three (3) critical months (March, April and May) of revenue needed to sustain them through the summer. Ms. Gould stated a second survey was sent out yesterday and businesses are already reporting devastating loss.

Ms. Pazmany pointed out the possibility of local colleges and the university to hold virtual fall semesters. If this is the case, the predicted financial implications for the Town include a decline in property values and tax revenue; loss of local receipts, meals tax, rooms’ tax; parking revenue; significant reduction in consumer spending across all industries.

Other initiatives developed by the BID and Chamber include a resource of up-to-date COVID-19 information and resources, a directory of businesses that are open and/or providing services remotely and the Support Local Restaurants initiative. A Virtual Tip Jar has been established, and Amherst has joined Northampton’s Feed the Frontlines program which provides lunch and dinner to front line workers at Cooley Dickinson Hospital. Additionally, BID and Chamber staff are assisting businesses to access professional resources such as the Massachusetts Small Business Development Center (MSBDC), the Valley CDC and the Small Business Administration (SBA).

Together the Bid and Chamber are providing programs that focus on immediate challenges including topics such as remote working, remote mindfulness sessions, weekly leadership and website/digital marketing webinars, and wellness resources. An event to honor frontline workers is being planned including luminaria lights downtown; blue lights, balloons and ribbons, and a car parade.

Ms. Gould explained another collaborative effort is the Relief and Resiliency Grant Program created to support the Amherst working community; a 5-member committee will review applications. Currently \$80,000 has been raised thru donations and a matching grant of \$50,000 was received. The goal is to reach \$250,000 by May 1 and then to continually increase the funds through investors and grants.

BID and Chamber staff are communicating with local, state and federal officials, other BID and Chamber organizations, and agencies dedicated to small business operations to uncover resources and understand emergency funding. The BID and the Chamber participated in the Grassroot Relief for Main Street efforts to establish the call for an urgent response from the state. A petition recommends relief calls on the state to: establish an emergency relief fund for small business grants; require insurance companies honor business interruption claims; waive state and local sales tax, meals tax, and payroll tax; adopt an Emergency Rent Rebate Tax Credit program; mandate immediate mortgage relief to commercial property owners; expand unemployment insurance protection; suspend evictions for small businesses.

Ms. Pazmany shared that the BID and Chamber staff along with local government are discussing what the economic recovery may look like. Preparation for re-opening have included discussion topics such as: thorough cleaning including power washing and sidewalk sealing; the transition and permitting for more outdoor seating; restructuring the Farmers Market; permitting alcohol on the common; continued efficient Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals permitting; using emergency CDBG funds to assist small businesses; implementing new health and safety protocols.

Ms. Gould added that fostering a strong sense of community is crucial now. Placemaking is key and the goal is to replace banners, request permission for cafe' lighting and add Placemaking signage. The BID is providing additional plantings to prepare for a re-opening that is inviting and beautiful.

Ms. Gould reiterated this is an opportunity for the BID, Chamber and the Town to work together to move forward from recovery to resilience. She stressed the importance of providing what is needed so existing and new businesses can flourish in Amherst.

#### **4.a.ii. Discussion**

Chair Hanneke shared the presentation is a reminder of the challenges facing businesses and the impact to the local economy. Chair Hanneke stated the presentation will be added to the CRC packet and will be available for viewing, and then opened the conversation to all Councilors.

Councilor Schoen asked if the slide show could be condensed to highlight the initiatives including the Tip Jar and the Amherst Foundation's grant opportunity for wider distribution including the Town website.

Councilor Brewer asked Ms. Gould and Ms. Pazmany about the importance of filling the vacant Economic Development Director position. Ms. Pazmany and Ms. Gould agreed, now more than ever, the Town needs to fill the Economic Development Director position with a strong candidate.

Councilor Bahl-Milne suggested that a list of specific needs, versus broad categories is important. Ms. Gould and Ms. Pazmany confirmed a succinct list is being compiled and will be shared with the Town Manager and the CRC for consideration.

Councilor Schreiber shared his concern that the call for social distancing may result in a fear of density which could drive requests for zoning changes. Councilor Schreiber noted it is important for Amherst to be attractive to people considering a relocation to smaller towns and cities. Lastly, Councilor Schreiber expressed the importance of remaining committed to the public projects, such as the library, that support the Town.

Councilor Schoen suggested that for people or businesses considering relocation, high-speed internet access throughout Amherst would be considered an essential factor and there could be a need for a fiber optic installation.

Councilor Bahl-Milne reminded all of the importance to retain the Town's commitment to sustainability while forming the revitalization plans.

Planning Director Chris Brestrup pointed out that although the downtown is quiet now, business is ongoing. Planning staff continue to work with applicants to move development projects through the permitting process efficiently.

Chair Hanneke recognized that, although unsure of the exact time, Councilor Darcy Dumont and Councilor Pat De Angelis had joined the meeting.

Councilor Dumont expressed her appreciation of utilizing the arts as a catalyst for harnessing joy in Amherst. Councilor Dumont reiterated the importance of integrating the Town's plans and values into the revitalization planning.

Councilor Brewer added that the Town's website should point visitors directly to the BID and Chamber for resources, rather than host condensed versions of their materials.

Chair Griesemer added that in the weekly meetings with the BID and the Chamber, the roles of the Town, Town Manager, Town Council and Council committees in Amherst's recovery from this crisis is being determined. She congratulated the BID and the Chamber for their work and the creative ideas they have brought forward.

Chair Hanneke thanked Ms. Gould and Ms. Pazmany for their presentation and for gathering the data necessary to understand the impact of the crises on local businesses.

**4.b. Zoning Bylaws – to recommend a plan for approaching zoning bylaw revisions – referred on November 18, 2019 – (Continued from December 18, 2019, February 12 and 26, 2020, March 11, 2020 and April 8, 2020)**

Chair Hanneke continued the discussion of zoning bylaw revisions. She shared the proposed flow chart intended to begin when an amendment petition is submitted by a Councilor, a resident(s), Town staff or the Planning Board. The flow chart outlines the process for a proposed amendment to move through in order to get to the Council for a bylaw vote. The flow chart was reviewed by the Planning Board, but has not been presented to the Council yet.

Chair Hanneke noted the flow chart includes a directive that when the Planning Board or Town Staff propose a bylaw amendment, the engagement of a collaborative process with the CRC would be the goal prior to beginning the steps depicted on the flow chart. Chair Hanneke shared a draft document and chart outlining the steps and timeline of the collaborative process. This document/chart continues to need work and discussion prior to presenting to the Planning Board for consideration.

Chair Hanneke stated that at the last CRC meeting Planning Director Chris Brestrup reported that Northampton approaches zoning amendments very differently. Northampton staff generally refer to their Town Council when a bylaw amendment is prudent. Chair Hanneke stated the intention is to continue this discussion, and Ms. Brestrup, Mr. Morra and Mr. Ziomek are available to answer questions.

Mr. Ziomek explained that Ms. Brestrup had to step away momentarily to meet an applicant. Mr. Ziomek and Mr. Morra shared that at this point neither had substantive comments regarding the proposed process for bylaw amendments. Mr. Morra added his focus is on the bylaw content and format.

Being the one to ask about the Northampton process, Councilor Bahl-Milne expressed this is a good time to pause and examine other communities' processes. Councilor Bahl-Milne raised the point that regardless which process model is adopted, communication is key to ensure all stakeholders understand that Amherst remains committed to being a business friendly community. Councilor Bahl-Milne suggested that the process of Burlington could also be explored as a resource.

Mr. Ziomek stated that permitting is addressed by many Town departments beyond Conservation and Development, including Fire and DPW. Mr. Ziomek pointed out that many changes have occurred to streamline and create efficiencies in regards to permitting. Mr. Ziomek said it is necessary to identify specific areas of the permitting process perceived as difficult in order for them to be addressed. Mr. Ziomek noted that in the past, Town Meeting could present challenges for progressive change, and the zoning bylaw itself presents development challenges.

Ms. Brestrup rejoined the meeting.

Councilor Ross shared that he likes the flow chart document; in his opinion the process makes sense and he likes the idea of the joint public hearing. Councilor Ross expressed his continued concern for the proposed schedule to present zoning amendments three (3) times per year. He also shared that bringing large bundles of unrelated zoning changes forward at one time could be time consuming and inefficient.

Councilor Schreiber shared that the bylaw in Amherst is complicated and to understand the context of the smallest change requires time for consideration and review. Councilor Schreiber stated Amherst should develop their own unique processes and practices.

Chair Griesemer restated that this is a large project that could consume the Planning Board. Chair Griesemer suggested reconsidering that this project be assigned to a special task force or commission, supported by staff, with representatives from Planning and others affected by the zoning bylaws.

Chair Hanneke noted there is potential for large chunks of bylaw revisions to be put forth for consideration in the next twelve (12) months. The revisions may not necessarily change the operation of the bylaws, but update them and change the way they are written.

Councilor Brewer recognized that many changes have been within inspections to create a more coordinated approach, and instilling greater efficiencies remains a continual focus. Councilor Brewer expressed concern to expect the Planning staff to work on this rewrite with the current resources while also working on the Master Plan update. She also expressed concern for the three (3) times per year schedule for zoning amendments, but recognizes that there will be times, such as the budget season, that would be inappropriate to expect the Council to consider zoning proposals. Councilor Brewer expressed support for the development of a special task force and encouraged the CRC to reconsider this model.

Councilor Schoen suggested other towns to examine would be Hanover and White River Junction. She also noted she had attended a meeting where a Northampton planner discussed their successful experience of packaging larger amendments with smaller ones for action.

Ms. Brestrup explained that the approach to the bylaw rewrite is twofold. Mr. Morra would act as the leader in the review of the organization of the bylaw ensuring things are put together in a manner that makes sense. Mr. Morra would address inconsistencies within the bylaw and create a well-formatted and usable document. Ms. Brestrup also explained there are larger issues, such as inclusionary zoning or parking, requiring attention and public forums that perhaps a consultant would work on in order to reach consensus outside of the context of this intended rewrite.

Mr. Morra confirmed he and the staff would be working extensively with the Zoning Subcommittee and Planning Board to consider the structure of the bylaw and identify the larger issues to address. Mr. Morra noted that the Planning Board gave their approval in February to move forward with the bylaw rewrite; however, to date the Zoning Subcommittee has not met due to the COVID-19 pandemic response.

Chair Hanneke shared her thought that the flow chart and schedule have been proposed on the presumption of historical process, and she is now questioning, given the time constraints of the Planning Board, if there is a better model. She suggested that the CRC have a discussion regarding process models and the idea to form a special task force or committee.

Councilor Bahl-Milne reiterated her support for researching the processes of other communities to understand the pros/cons of varying models.

Councilor Swartz stated the idea of a task force is appealing to her and she supports exploring other community processes.

Councilor Brewer noted the Planning Board should be notified that the CRC is exploring options regarding the process.

Councilor Steinberg noted the need to clarify the role of the Planning Board in regards to state statute.

Mr. Ziomek commented that the idea of a task force has been discussed over the last two (2) years. He pointed out that it is important to define the pathway for obtaining the local businesses input regarding their needs and vision.

Councilor Bahl-Milne responded to Mr. Ziomek's comment suggesting that input from a larger group of stakeholders would be beneficial. She also noted the need for business/developer anonymity when providing input.

Chair Hanneke said this discussion would need to continue at another CRC meeting. She will consider research assignments for the CRC members.

At 3:49 p.m., Town Council Chair Griesemer adjourned the meeting of the whole Town Council.

#### **4.c. CRC Meeting Times – General Discussion**

Chair Hanneke noted that finding a CRC meeting time that works for everyone has been a challenge. Chair Hanneke asked the members if they could commit to meeting on a Tuesday or Thursday at 2:00 p.m. through August 2020.

Councilor Swartz stated she could do either, but Tuesday would be her preference. She also suggested the CRC consider scheduling evening meetings in the fall.

Councilor Bahl-Milne said she is available Tuesday or Thursday, 2:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m., and evenings are generally difficult due to her class schedule.

Councilor Ross stated Tuesday or Thursday, 2:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m., work for the summer as well as the fall semester. His preference is Thursday, and he is available on some Thursdays for an evening meeting.

Councilor Schreiber is currently available on Tuesday or Thursday, 2:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m., but that could change as school and travel reopen. Councilor Schreiber prefers Tuesday, as well as daytime meetings.

Chair Hanneke will develop a list of proposed CRC meeting dates for consideration and a potential vote.

### **5. Minutes**

#### **5.a. Adoption of April 8, 2020 Minutes**

Chair Hanneke suggested minor amendments for the April 8, 2020 minutes.



**Motion:** Chair Hanneke moved, seconded by Councilor Bahl-Milne, to adopt the minutes of the April 8, 2020 CRC meeting as amended.

**Vote by Roll Call:** Bahl-Milne – yes; Hanneke – yes; Ross – yes; Schreiber – yes; Swartz – abstain (4-0-1 to approve)

**6. Announcements – None**

**7. Next Meeting Agenda Preview**

Chair Hanneke stated she expects the agenda items for the next CRC meeting to be similar to this meeting.

**8. Items Not Anticipated by the Chair 48 Hours in Advance**

Councilor Bahl-Milne asked if the CRC should discuss the vacant Economic Development Director position.

Mr. Ziomek responded saying that before the COVID-19 crises began discussions with stakeholders took place to gather information in order for the Town to plan a search. However, circumstances have changed dramatically which could change the qualifications needed in a strong candidate. Mr. Ziomek said this is on the Town Manager’s priority list and he encouraged Councilors to reach out to the Town Manager directly with their thoughts.

**9. Adjourn**

Chair Hanneke adjourned the meeting at 4:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Pamela Field-Sadler  
Planning Administrative Assistant

**Record of Agenda Materials and Documents Submitted and Available**

- 00. 2020 CRC Meeting Schedule - Rev. 2020-04-13
- 1. 2020-04-21 CRC Agenda
- 4.a.i. CRC Presentation FINAL (presenters: Gould and Pazmany)
- 4.b. Proposed Zoning Bylaw Amendment Process - DRAFT - Rev. 1 2020-04-02
- 4.b. Zoning Bylaw Process Flow Chart - Recommended by CRC 2020-03-11
- 5.a. 2020-04-08 CRC Minutes - DRAFT
- 5.a. 2020-04-08 CRC Minutes - DRAFT - MJH Rev.