



**Town of Amherst
Special Town Council Meeting
Wednesday, January 20, 2021
6:30 p.m.
Virtual Meeting**

Pursuant to Governor Baker's March 12, 2020 Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, §18, this meeting of the Planning Board was conducted via remote participation.

The Minutes of the Planning Board are not intended to be a transcript. The recorded meeting can be viewed here <https://youtu.be/IU9L-m4tOQw>

MINUTES

Planning Board Members Participating Remotely and Present by Roll Call:

Maria Chao, Jack Jemsek – Chair, Thom Long, Andrew MacDougall, Doug Marshall, Janet McGowan, Johanna Neumann

Planning Board Members Absent:

None

Town Council Members Participating Remotely and Present by Roll Call:

Alisa Brewer (6:45 p.m.), Patricia De Angelis, Darcy DuMont, Lynn Griesemer – Chair, Mandi Jo Hanneke, Dorothy Pam, Evan Ross, George Ryan, Sarah Swartz

Town Council Members Absent:

Shalini Bahl-Milne, Cathy Schoen, Stephen Schreiber, Andrew Steinberg

Staff Participating Remotely:

Christine Brestrup, Planning Director
Pamela Field-Sadler, Administrative Assistant
Paul Bockelman, Town Manager

Other: Doug Hall, PhD, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission

6:30 pm: Chair Jack Jemsek opened the meeting. Mr. Jemsek announced this Planning Board (Board) meeting is being conducted via remote participation. Mr. Jemsek explained the process by which to be recognized to speak or submit a public comment.

Mr. Jemsek determined by roll call that all Board members were present.

JOINT MEETING OF TOWN COUNCIL & PLANNING BOARD

Presentation by Doug Hall of Pioneer Valley Planning Commission - “Initial Impacts of COVID-19 on the Pioneer Valley Economy” – followed by discussion

6:36 p.m. - Town Council Call To Order

Town Council Chair Lynn Griesemer declared the presence of a quorum and called the Town Council Special Meeting with the Planning Board to order. Chair Griesemer determined by a roll call that the following Town Council members were present and participating remotely: Patricia De Angelis, Darcy DuMont, Lynn Griesemer, Mandi Jo Hanneke, Dorothy Pam, Evan Ross, George Ryan, and Sarah Swartz

Chair Jemsek introduced Doug Hall, PhD. Mr. Hall joined the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) in 2020 and is responsible for overseeing the Pioneer Valley data website and is contributing to PVPC’s efforts to help the Pioneer Valley businesses and communities recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Hall, a 14 year Amherst resident, said since arriving at PVPC he has spent most of his time tracking various economic indicators and dimensions of COVID-19 in order to gather and share the information necessary to:

- shape appropriate public policies
- to better inform businesses of what they're dealing with
- assist the people of the Pioneer Valley to access the services and resources needed to get through this bleak period.

Mr. Hall emphasized that the fact that the economic impacts and the health impacts of the pandemic are intertwined; the economy can’t be fixed without fixing the pandemic. Mr. Hall said, optimistically, the new Biden Administration is making COVID-19 a top priority ensuring that their response is guided by science; however, the economic damage is deep and a traditional economic recession may prevail.

Mr. Hall provided statistical analysis regarding the following COVID-19 impacts on the Pioneer Valley:

- Most of the impacts reinforce existing trends and disparities
- COVID-19 case count in Western MA has shown spikes
- There is a decline in post-secondary education enrollment and a decrease in the number of students attending on-campus classes.
- Students in the community affect both the public health and economic sides of the pandemic.
- In Hampshire County there has been a large decline in the amount of time people are spending away from home.
- The PVTA monthly ridership has decreased.
- Air travel from Bradley International Airport has dropped significantly.
- Regionally the unemployment rates have seen spikes; Amherst saw a 11.9% unemployment rate.
- The labor force across the U.S. is shrinking, but especially so in Massachusetts
- Impacts of COVID-19 are felt more acutely by workers of color, women and lower income earners.

- The loss and recovery of jobs over time with the leisure and hospitality industry seeing the largest loss. Over time things have gotten a little better, but lost jobs and unemployment insurance claims are still high.
- The Small Business Aid Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) has infused money into the economy in the Pioneer Valley and restaurants were a major recipient of the PPP loans. However small businesses continue to suffer and will continue to suffer until the economy is back on track.
- COVID-19 is affecting regional real estate trends negatively.
- State revenues have declined about 11.4% overall and will continue to drag on the local economy without changes being made.

Mr. Hall discussed there are many questions when trying to determine what the long-term impacts of COVID-19 could look like. He noted there are contributors we don't have the answers for, such as:

- Will the minimum wage salary increase?
- Will people leave the cities and migrate toward rural living?
- Will remote learning and working remain prevalent after the pandemic?

Mr. Hall noted that analyzing more data on the following would help moving forward:

- Broadband and the need to close the digital division
- Regional data on business closures
- Hunger and food insecurity
- Data on evictions and foreclosures

Board and Town Council Discussion

When responding to a question by Chair Jemsek about real estate, Mr. Hall said the economy was in good shape prior to the pandemic. The pandemic may have served as a catalyst for the rise in residential real estate sales. Mr. Hall will be studying additional data collected by The Warren Group on the impact to local communities; however, he expects the sales to the west are probably greater than to the east. Council Chair Griesemer added the housing study she believes Chair Jemsek referenced was national with numbers included for Massachusetts housing growth.

Mr. MacDougall asked when we might see evidence that people are choosing to move, and how are communities positioning themselves to be attractive to folks who are relocating from more urban areas. Mr. Hall said he expects that when he analyzes the data from The Warren Group he will have a better sense of the housing activity in this area. Mr. Hall also noted that widely available broadband is a key component in thinking about attractive qualities in a community, as well as diversity.

Chair Jemsek noted that Governor Baker had not approved the Rural Affairs funding of which PVPC had been a proponent. Mr. Hall said he was not too familiar with that, but he suspects that decision is linked to the fact that state revenues are down. He noted that projects that can be pushed to the side for a few years, probably will be, but if reconstituted in the future, the projects would have a measurable impact. Council Chair

Griesemer shared that Governor Baker did not sign the rural bill because similar programs have not produced the outcomes expected.

Ms. McGowan asked how the unemployment statistics in Amherst are affected by students or others normally ineligible for unemployment insurance. Mr. Hall said that most of the data sets he works with are based on estimates or modeling; it is difficult to make specific connections between jobs and students. He noted it makes sense to consider the types of jobs for which students drive demand such as bars or personal care that are being impacted by the absence of students. Mr. Hall said some industries will bounce back while others may change forever; it's important as policy makers to ensure any changes that are made should move us toward a more equitable economy.

Ms. McGowan also asked about ways to close the gaps of inequity. Mr. Hall said specifics are unclear at this point, but he suggested there is a need to expand flexible childcare options and support the affordable housing supply along with the availability of a wide range of wraparound services.

Councilor Hanneke asked about trends in expanding remote learning for higher education and how those trends might affect housing needs. Mr. Hall said his sense is that on campus learning will continue, but moving forward remote learning options will expand. This could weaken the rental property market, but possibly make single family homes more attractive for purchase.

Ms. Brestrup noted that Amherst currently has a limited housing supply. She asked if an influx of new residents in a community is considered a good thing in terms of economic development and if people relocating should be encouraged to come to a community with an existing housing shortage. Mr. Hall said it depends on the type of housing. A new subdivision development and required services might not be cost beneficial, but perhaps infill development is. He suggested an alternative way of thinking is to ensure jobs are available in your community for the influx of residents in a neighboring community.

Mr. Hall added that there are many variables without a clear answer; however, a broad range of people thinking about a broad range of components should produce intentional policies to aid in the recovery and beyond.

Ms. McGowan noted that UMass is the largest community employer and maybe a good strategy is to support our local businesses with local, state or federal funds until the fall when the students return. Mr. Hall said having educational facilities as a big part of your local community is a good economic strategy that will continue to serve Amherst well, but not being certain when the students will return is a large variable at play.

Mr. Hall concluded by offering to provide his slides for distribution, and that he is happy to answer any additional questions moving forward.

Town Council Adjournment – Council Chair Griesemer adjourned the Town Council meeting at 7:42 p.m.

Record of Agenda Packet Materials and Documents Presented

00. 01-04-2021 FINAL Special Town Council Planning Board Agenda - PVPC Presentation

PVPC_COVID_Amherst Planning Board_1.20.2021

PVPC_COVID_PlanForProgressCoordinatingCouncil_11.18.2020