

Hartford Planning Commission/ Town Plan Economic Development Steering Committee Meeting
Town Plan Economic Development Chapter Update
Draft Minutes
March 11, 2024

Planning Commission chair John Reid called the meeting to order at 6:54 p.m. He followed by reading the hybrid meeting script and conducting a roll call.

Attendance: The following individuals attended the meeting which was held at the Hartford Town Hall in Room 2 at 171 Bridge Street in White River Junction on Monday, March 11, 2024. The meeting was also available remotely and several people participated that way.

Planning Commission & Town Plan Steering Committee Members:

John Reid	Planning Commission, term expires 2/5/27
Bruce Riddle	Planning Commission, term expires 2/7/25
John Heath	Planning Commission, term expires 3/22/24
Dillon Bianchi	Planning Commission, term expires 9/5/25
Toby Dayman	Planning Commission, term expires 6/28/24
Dylan Kreis	Planning Commission, term expires 9/26/25
Colin Butler	Planning Commission, term expires 7/12/24
Kim Souza	Selectboard Liaison to the Planning Commission
Havah Armstrong Walther	Hartford Area Chamber of Commerce
Meghan Asbury	Two Rivers-Ottawquechee Regional Commission
Alana Redden	Vital Communities
Jesse Pollard	Energy Commission

Staff:

Lori Hirshfield	Director, Department of Planning and Development
Matt Osborn	Town Planner, Department of Planning and Development

Consultants:

Jason Godfrey	Better City
Serra Güllü	Better City
Kyla Ramdat	Better City

Others Present:

None

Public Comments: John Reid asked if there are any public comments. There were none.

Purpose of the Meeting: Town Planner Matt Osborn welcomed everyone. He noted that the purpose of the meeting is the kick-off of the Town Plan Steering Committee, talk about the process and timeline, and introduce our consultant team.

Update of the Town Plan Economic Development Chapter: Matt noted that the Town Plan was last updated in 2019. At that time, it was decided not to do a modest update of the housing and economic development chapters but instead wait until we had the chance to do major revisions. Vermont Municipal Planning Grants were used to update the housing chapter last year and to update the economic development this year. Additional Town funds are being used for the local match requirement.

Formation of the Town Plan Steering Committee: Lori Hirshfield noted that for Town Plan updates we have used an ad hoc Steering Committee to assist the Planning Commission. For the economic development chapter of the Town Plan, the following commissions and organizations have a representative on the Steering Committee:

Hartford Committee on Racial Equity and Inclusion
Hartford Energy Commission
Hartford Housing and Homelessness Committee
Zoning Board of Adjustment
Hartford Business Revolving Loan Fund Committee
Hartford Area Chamber of Commerce
Vital Communities
Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission

Steering Committee Meetings: Lori noted that the Steering Committee will meet approximately 5-7 times over the next six or seven months. Steering Committee meetings will be scheduled at different points throughout the project. Lori stated that staff will work with Better City to come up with rough schedule of meeting dates.

Introduction of Consultant Team Better City: Lori noted that we are very pleased to have Better City working with us on the economic development chapter update. They have a lot of experience working on economic development plans in rural areas throughout the country and prepared the Economic Development Strategic Plan in Bangor Maine. Lori introduced Better City CEO Jason Godfrey.

Overview of the Economic Development Chapter Update and Community Outreach: Jason Godfrey said that he is honored that the Town contracted with Better City. He noted that Better City was established in 2012. Their “mission is to help towns, cities and counties grow and prosper by becoming more inclusive, sustainable, and vibrant.” Better City has done work in communities throughout the U.S. Better City provides a wide range of consulting services including strategic planning, downtown revitalization, business retention and expansion, and local implementation. Jason introduced the Better City team that includes Serra Güllü and Kyla Ramdat. He also noted that Payton Capes-Davis also is on the team but was unavailable this evening.

Serra Güllü noted that the project is an update of the Town Plan economic development chapter focusing on the present and future economic drivers. The tasks will involve:

- Assessing **current economic conditions**.
- Understanding **community needs**.
- **Evaluating** present circumstances alongside national and state forecasts.
- Formulating **strategic actions** for future growth.

Serra noted that the estimated completion date for the project is July 31st. Their goal is active engagement and feedback. Better City is reviewing the following documents in preparation of work for the Town Plan economic development chapter.

- Town of Hartford Town Plan, 2019
- Town Plan Draft Housing Chapter, 2023
- Regional Plan (Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission), 2020
- East Central Vermont Economic Development District CEDS, 2020

Jason encouraged the group to suggest any other plans or studies for Better City to review.

Serra noted that Better City will create a data dashboard for Hartford.

Serra stated that community engagement is an essential part of the project. They will arrive in Hartford on Wednesday and will participate in four focus groups (business, developers, organizations and high school students). There will be numerous interviews with stakeholders including the Selectboard. A community forum is scheduled for Thursday evening at 6:00 p.m. at the Bugbee Senior Center. Serra added that Better City will create a project website utilizing Social Pinpoint.

Serra stated that the chapter update will include the following:

- Analyze discussions, insights from interviews, focus groups and the survey.
- Combine insights with data analysis and synthesize them.
- Decide vision and actionable strategies, review them with the Steering Committee.
- Prepare the Chapter and share the draft chapter (approximately 15 pages).
- Finalize the chapter.
- Present to the Selectboard.

Serra noted that they are looking to the Steering Committee as a sounding board, seeking their perspective and insights, review of actionable strategies and for feedback. She stated that the Steering Committee meetings will provide the following:

- Meeting 1: Discuss major themes from community engagement.
- Meeting 2: Examine current conditions and outline the main topics for the chapter.
- Meeting 3: Evaluate actionable strategies.
- Meeting 4: Final review of the Economic Development Chapter.

Questions: Jason asked the group if they had any questions.

John Reid noted that housing is one of our major economic problems in Hartford and Vermont. Jason responded that it is a national problem. He has some strategies to address that.

Havah Armstrong Walther stated that Vermont and New Hampshire are closely linked. Jason responded that economies are like a watershed. Havah suggested looking at the Keys to the Valley Housing Report.

Colin Butler voiced two concerns for Hartford. The economy is changing but the arts and tourism are key parts. He also noted that economic development chapter needs to hit on education. Jason responded that every community has their own unique qualities. Foundations today to prepare for ten years down the road.

John Reid suggested adding former Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) executive director Charlie Rattigan to the list of stakeholders.

Dylan Kreis asked if there is a way to measure climate change and the impact on the local economy. Jason responded that he is not aware of any modeling. He added that climate change is affecting the second home market. Jesse Pollard asked Better City for ideas for federal funding opportunities.

Kim Souza asked about a schedule for the Steering Committee meetings. Lori responded that staff will work with Better City to block it out.

Colin asked if the focus group discussions will be recorded. Jason responded that they typically don't record these since it tends to make some people self-conscious and might limit how much people will share. Lori added that the focus group notes will be made available and incorporated onto the project website.

John Reid commented that he likes the idea of a project website.

Lori thanked everyone for attending and encouraged members to help spread the word about the 3/14 community forum.

Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 7:55 p.m.