

Hartford Planning Commission/Town Plan Economic Development Steering Committee Meeting
Town Plan Economic Development Chapter Update
Draft Minutes
May 7, 2024

Planning Commission chair John Reid called the meeting to order at 6:00 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, May 7, 2024. The meeting was also available remotely and a few 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 3/11/24
Toby Dayman	Planning Commission, term expires 6/28/24
Colin Butler	Planning Commission, term expires 7/12/24
Kim Souza	Selectboard Liaison to the Planning Commission
Meghan Asbury	Two Rivers-Ottawquechee Regional 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

Others Present:

None

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

Purpose of the Meeting: Planner Matt Osborn introduced consultants Serra Güllü and Jason Godfrey of Better City. Jason stated that the purpose of the meeting is to consolidate public input and include Planning Commission Town Plan Steering Committee in a dialogue. He reported that there were 139 responses to the economic development survey. Including participants of the focus groups, interviews and community forum, over 200 people have participated in the public process. He noted that we are developing a road map that includes:

1. What does the community care about?
2. What is possible?

3. Who is going to do it and how?

Today's discussion addresses #1.

John Reid asked how does the downtown vibrancy project work tie into the economic development chapter. Lori Hirshfield responded that they are on parallel tracks. The downtown vibrancy work is for the Designated Downtown Program and is a sub-piece of the economic development chapter. The Downtown work will get woven into the economic development chapter. The Downtown Program is currently working on developing an organization structure.

Jason briefly went over the project schedule. Two Steering Committee meetings and a community meeting is planned for the next month or so. Following this meeting, Better City will focus on developing strategies.

Economic Snapshot: Jason reported that Better City has reviewed dozens of data points. The US Census comes out every ten years. The American Community Survey (ACS) supplements the decennial census but you need to recognize that there may be a sizeable margin of error and there may be anomalies. As an example, Jason pointed out the ACS information on population which doesn't match the 2020 census.

Jason noted that Hartford has a high age dependency ratio compared to Vermont and the US. Age dependency ratio refers to the # of dependents under 15 or those older than 64 over the working age population (15-64). He also noted that Hartford has a low child dependency rate which could lead to lower workforce numbers later on.

Jason noted that Hartford has high educational attainment; 30% have a Bachelor's degree and 16% have a graduate or professional degree. Yet, compared to Vermont and the US, wages are lower. Lori responded that many are working two jobs to make ends meet. The poverty rate in Hartford is lower than the State and US.

Industry Snapshot: Jason noted that the unemployment rate is low in Hartford and the labor force participation rate is high. Data show that in Hartford 4567 are employed yet only 1162 of those work in Hartford. Another 9442 live elsewhere and commute to Hartford. Jason noted that the VA Hospital is the Town's largest employer and yet no one mentioned the VA. Bruce responded that very few Hartford residents use the VA. He added that the VA does home visits. Lori added that the VA administration supported the zoning change that allows residential development across from the VA.

Jason noted that health care makes up 60% of jobs in Hartford. Lori noted that besides the VA, there are many doctor offices in Hartford. She added that Hartford also is a hub for social services. Other larger industries in Hartford are educational services and retail.

Major Themes from Community Engagement: Jason stated that those filling out the survey have a high satisfaction of living here. Parks and recreation areas ranked the highest followed by cultural and community centers and educational institutions. Kim Souza added that entertainment is important to youth. She also noted that community is important to businesses that choose to locate here. John Reid stated that we need to create more places for people to meet in village centers. Jason noted that it is clear that quality of life, small-town feel, a culture that is authentic and organic is a priority to the community.

Jason noted four areas where people saw opportunities for community enhancements:

- Public spaces and recreation;
- Transportation and mobility;
- Community services and amenities; and
- Arts, culture and entertainment.

Potential Strategy Topics: Jason presented the following as potential economic development strategy topics:

- Creative economy;
- Engagement with nature;
- Innovative economy;
- Village centers;
- Housing; and
- Hotel Coolidge.

Serra noted that young people care about amenities such as walkability and engagement with others and stated that there are opportunities with Hartford's village centers. Lori agreed. Bruce agreed that innovative economy is worth pursuing. He cited Burlington's cooperative workspace. Jason said that it is clear that there are creative people here and that the creative economy and innovative economy makes sense. He added that the future of the Hotel Coolidge is a critical piece to Hartford's downtown.

Jason asked the group for other thoughts. John Reid suggested excluding housing since we recently completed the Housing Chapter. Kim agreed and suggested directing people to the Housing Chapter. Colin stated that both chapters need to point to each other. Others agreed.

Lori thanked everyone for attending. She suggested that staff block out dates for the upcoming meetings and distribute to the Planning Commission/Steering Committee. Lori complimented Jason and Serra for their commitment to the project.

Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 7:47 p.m.