

Hardwick Planning Commission
December 10, 2024
Hybrid – In-Person and Zoom options
Public Forum on the East Hardwick Village Center Zoning District
Minutes

HPC Members Present: Dave Gross, Chair and Larry Fliegelman

HPC Members Attending ANR Forum: Gillian D’Acierno; and Kole

HPC Members Absent: Jim Lewis; Shari Cornish; Bud Stevens; Michael Haveson; and Ken Davis

Also Present: Kristen Leahy, Hardwick Zoning Administrator

Present for the Public Forum: Margaret Bledsoe (Zoom); Cheryl Michaels; Gary Michaels; Tracy Martin; Jon Hall; Susanne Gann; Erik Gann; Mike Lance; Pete Cook; Debbie Cook; Warren Hill III; Irene Hill; Warren Hill Jr.; David O’Brien; Gail O’Brien; Rachel Kane (Zoom); Emily Willems (Zoom); Jamie Emmerson (Zoom); and Meredith Holch (Zoom).

Chair Dave Gross opened the public forum at 6:30 pm. With only two members able to attend the meeting, the Commission lacked a quorum and, as a result, the agenda and the minutes from October 8, 2024 were not reviewed.

HCTV filmed the meeting – the video can be found at the following link:

<https://hctv.us/hardwick-planning-commission-december-10-2024/>

Village Center Zoning District in East Hardwick:

Currently, the East Hardwick village center is located in the Central Business and the Compact Residential and the Highway Mixed Use zoning districts. The conditions present in East Hardwick do not match these zoning districts. The HPC reviewed the draft version of the Village Center Zoning District and the draft location of the potential new zoning district. The Planning Commission created final draft versions for discussion with the impacted properties. The Planning Commission scheduled a public forum during tonight’s meeting. Letters were sent to individual property owners and information was posted on Front Porch Forum, in posters, on the Town’s Website, in an article and an ad in the Hardwick Gazette, and shared by the EHNO with their email list. HCTV agreed to video the proceedings and the link to the video will be shared on the Town’s Planning Commission web page.

Kristen conducted an informal poll to ascertain where attendees obtained their information about the Forum. Most people in attendance received a letter about the proposed change. The EHNO email list was also an effective communication tool.

Dave Gross began the public forum with a review of the preceding planning events. The passage of the HOME Act in Vermont (required changes by statute) and the Bylaw Modernization project with Heather Carrington were foundation pieces to the process. Heather identified the need for a stand-alone district in East Hardwick as the current (primary) district – Central Business – is the same district in Downtown Hardwick. The Better Connections planning work has also informed this proposal. The Village Center in East Hardwick is more of a singular entity than would be indicated by the presence of three distinct zoning districts.

The description of the new Village Center zoning district and the proposed boundaries to the district were seen as a starting point for the public forum. The public voices were sought in the planning process.

Voices from the Public:

Cheryl Michaels began with gratitude for the proposal. She appreciates the idea of a single zoning district for East Hardwick. This district has the potential to be unique and to look ahead for the future of the village of East Hardwick. Cheryl Michaels questioned the reasoning for the proposed dimensions in the new district. Why is the side setback only 5 feet? Cheryl Michaels recommended considering an increase to these dimensions.

Dave Gross answered that the reason for the proposed dimensions was that the Planning Commission sought to match what currently exists and provide dimensions that would conform to what exists.

Cheryl Michaels recommended considering not viewing what is there now but rather what East Hardwick would like to see in the future.

Jon Hall inquired about the status of pre-existing nonconformities and whether they could re-build after a fire or other event. (This was answered with an affirmative – if the work is started within 2 years).

Meredith Holch responded to Dave Gross' description of East Hardwick as a residential area. Meredith Holch reminded the audience that East Hardwick has traditionally had a business component.

Dave Gross clarified his earlier remarks. The upper portion of East Hardwick – adjacent to the Route 16 corridor has traditionally been a residential area.

Cheryl Michaels asked why Group Homes and Multi Family Dwellings were Permitted Uses and recommended that they be transferred to the Conditional Use column. Kristen clarified that the Group Homes were placed by Vermont Statute. The Multi-Family Dwelling category was transferred to the Permitted Uses as per the recommendation of the HOME Act (to clarify – this is not currently a requirement as East Hardwick does not have town water and sewer).

Jon Hall stated that he is not interested in having new people move into East Hardwick Village.

Meredith Holch stated that she would like to see more houses and more units become available in East Hardwick.

Susanne Gann stated that she is not in favor of new housing as there would be an increased need for services which are currently non-existent. She asked why the "Forestry" category was left off of the Permitted Uses list. Forestry is not currently present on the Central Business District Permitted Uses list. When the district uses were merged, this was deemed not necessary due to the lot configurations. The Planning Commission will review.

Jon Hall stated that East Hardwick cannot handle more families. There is no police oversight and no judicial system in place. East Hardwick may have some elements of "riff raff" but it is a "good place to live." The village does not have the same problems as Hardwick at this time. The village does not want more children or more families.

Warren Hill Jr. spoke from his experience on the Rescue Squad. He believes that the Rescue Squad would be overwhelmed by new community members.

Jon Hall stated that he does not want drug users or low-income people to move to East Hardwick. After a brief exchange with Dave Gross, this conversation path ended.

Warren Hill Jr. stated that Route 16 has traditionally been in the Highway Mixed Use district and he would like to see it stay that way. He believes that it may be discriminatory to change the zoning on only one side of Route 16. He firmly supports keeping the Highway Mixed Use district the same as it currently exists. Dave Gross asked Warren Hill Jr. if the Highway Mixed Use district should be extended on Route 16. Warren Hill Jr. did not wish to render an opinion on that option.

Emily Willems stated that housing is a need for our area. When people are offered jobs at our local schools they cannot accept the position because they cannot find adequate housing. Housing needs to be reasonable, safe, and affordable.

Susanne Gann asked that the Highway Mixed Use district not be extended as this would change her property. The Ganns are neighbors to the Route 16 corridor.

Cheryl Michaels returned to the question about moving the Multi-Family Dwelling into Conditional Use. She stated that the current zoning bylaws do not have an upper limit set for the number of units allowed as a permitted use. She believes that neighbors should be able to weigh in on projects at the Development Review Board (Conditional Use). She also asked about the height limit and asked if that could be reduced.

Kristen clarified that the height was standard throughout Hardwick.

Erik Gann stated that he would prefer to have the ability to have three levels in a structure. He believes that it is more cost effective to build up then to build outward.

David O'Brien spoke about the Multi-Family Dwelling that Erich Stephens rehabilitated. He praised the 3-unit project and noted that the building adds to the tax base in East Hardwick.

Tracy Martin would like to the proposed dimensions to be reviewed.

Cheryl Michaels supports combining all of the historic East Hardwick Village into one zoning district. She views this as a positive approach.

Dave Gross stated that if East Hardwick has a new "stand-alone" zoning district, then issues could be addressed without impacting other areas in Hardwick.

Susanne Gann asked what a "Cultural Facility" would be. (*"Cultural Facility" is a "museum, theater, concert hall, botanical or zoological garden, or other establishment which offers programs, performances or exhibits of cultural, educational, historical, or scientific interest, and is not operated as a commercial use."*) Kristen provided the information that the Civic Standard included that particular use in their Mixed Use application.

Meredith Holch asked about the process for adopting a new zoning district.

Dave Gross informed the audience that the Planning Commission will review the comments from the public forum and draft a new version. This version will be reviewed in a public hearing with the Planning Commission. The Planning Commission will then either vote to send the changes to the Select Board or return to the review stage. The Select Board would need to hold another public hearing prior to adopting any zoning changes. Kristen will send out letters to inform impacted owners prior to the Planning Commission hearing. The minutes will be available on the town's website.

Meredith Holch requested that the summary of proposed changes be available. Kristen will identify the proposed changes in the minutes and will summarize at the end of the minutes. The HCTV link of the meeting will be available with the minutes on the Town's website.

Dave O'Brien expressed his gratitude.

Susanne Gann asked why the category Hotel/Motel was in the Conditional Use list?

Erik Gann stated that more infrastructure would be needed before more people could be housed in the village. The fire hydrants need to be improved.

Dave Gross referred the audience to the upcoming work of the East Hardwick Fire District. The Fire District is pursuing more upgrades to the current infrastructure.

The Town of Hardwick is reviewing the possibility of installing a community wastewater system.

Cheryl Michaels stated that the definition for Hotel/Motel does not have a size restriction. She recommended the Planning Commission look for a possible new category such as "Inn" with a size restriction.

Susanne Gann stated that she is concerned about the cost of a community wastewater system. A community wastewater system would be a long-term planning goal and would involve the residents of East Hardwick at each step.

Warren Hill Jr wanted to know if the Planning Commission had researched the economic feasibility of the conditional uses proposed in the Village Center zoning district. (*No*).

The following questions arose – "How does East Hardwick maintain its character?" How do we ease the housing shortage?" and "How do we help East Hardwick grow?"

Larry Fliegelman asked if the audience had any thoughts on the purpose statement of the proposed district. Gary Michaels stated that he agreed with the purpose. Meredith Holch asked about the word "development." (*The development language is from the State of Vermont's planning goals – referring to all uses and construction, not merely business*).

Warren Hill Jr. recommended that the Select Board look at a speed limit reduction on Route 16. The trees at the intersection of Main Street and Route 16 are currently blocking the line of sight at that turn.

Dave Gross brought the work of Better Connections into the conversation and stated that the Hardwick Planning Commission has been looking at pedestrian and bike safety.

Tracy Martin reminded the audience that the Select Board will need to request the speed limit reduction as Route 16 is a State road.

Mike Lance commented that he found the phrase “pedestrian-friendly” in the purpose of the Village Center district to be humorous.

Dave O’Brien is in favor of asking EHNO to visit the Select Board now and ask about improving the safety of the intersection at Main Street and Route 16.

	Suggestions:	Community Member:
1.	Increase the dimensions, especially the side setback	Cheryl Michaels, Tracy Martin
2.	Move Group Homes to the Conditional Use list	Cheryl Michaels
3.	Move Multi-Family Dwellings to the C.U. list	Cheryl Michaels
4.	Return Forestry to the Permitted Use List	Susanne Gann
5.	Keep Highway Mixed Use as it currently exists	Warren Hill Jr.
6.	Reduce the stated height limit	Cheryl Michaels
7.	Remove Hotel/Motel from the Conditional Uses	Susanne Gann
8.	Create a new category of “Inn” with a size restriction in the definition (Conditional Use)	Cheryl Michaels

The public forum ended at 8:10 pm.

The next HPC meeting will be at 6:30 pm on January 14, 2025 on the 3rd Floor of the Memorial Building and via Zoom. This meeting will be recorded to comply with the new State Rules.

~ Respectfully submitted, Kristen Leahy, ZA