TOWN OF CHESTER
PLANNING COMMISSION
June 1, 2026, Minutes

Commission Members Present: Scott MacDonald, Cathy Hasbrouck, Jeff Holden, and Hugh Quinn at Town Hall. Absent: Carl Henshaw

Staff Present: Preston Bristow, Town Planner, at Town Hall; Susan Bailey, Recording Secretary, via Zoom.

Visitors Present: Kellen Appleton of MARC via Zoom.

Call to Order

Chair Hugh Quinn called the meeting to order at 6:31 p.m.

Agenda Item 1, Approve Minutes from May 18, 2026 meeting.

Cathy moved and Scott seconded a motion to approve the May 18, 2026 minutes. Jeff noted he had read them to keep up with what he missed from the last meeting. The minutes were unanimously approved, as written.

Agenda Item 2, Citizen Comments

There were none.

Agenda Item 3, Town Plan Chapter Priority Discussion

Hugh noted there was an all boards meeting on June 9th where most of the discussion will focus on bringing the other commissions and the Select Board up to speed on the work the Planning Commission has done to date, which will include the demographics Kellen and Allison put together; a high-level summary of the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis; and the Town Plan chapters they will focus on. Preston, Hugh, and Kellen had looked through the chapters and came up with a list of ones to focus on. The plan has a ton of words, goals, priorities, and recommendations and it was obvious there was no way to transcribe the goals from the plan into something they could have a decent discussion on at the all boards meeting on the 9th. Preston and Hugh had gone through the list and extracted what they thought would be conversation starters. They wouldn't be highlighting the things that everyone would agree were great but rather things they now may question whether they still want to do. They want to make sure all the boards and commissions are on the same page while getting feedback from the Select Board and others about whether the things are good or bad and still make sense.

For future land use, they are saying they like density and mixed use in areas with water and sewer and around those areas, they want open land with ag and forest and low-density residential. Hugh suspected it was in every town plan in Vermont because it was state statute. If it's in state statute, a town can't ignore it but can shape it in a way that benefits them. Hugh went over the bullet points in the presentation, most of which were already in the Town Plan. They

discussed refining the Town Plan and wording it better where needed. Hugh didn't think they needed to debate the merit of every bullet but put them out there to promote engagement. Scott didn't think they should include tourism and the ski industry in the Town Plan because they needed to make the town viable for itself rather than relying on others. Preston agreed somewhat but said it wasn't happening. Hugh noted it wasn't about tourists but businesses that supported them. Scott saw tourism as a drug and was fearful Chester would experience what Ludlow had. Hugh said the question was if Chester wanted to put businesses that supported tourism in a second class. Scott said there was nothing wrong with having them but they shouldn't build their plan around tourism. Hugh saw both sides and said it needed to be a mix. Jeff thought family farms had gone away because of tourism, which had been around for as long as he could remember. Jeff recalled Chester being part of Okemo Valley but didn't want Chester to lose its identity. Jeff said back when the state was formed, Chester, then called Flamstead, was the center. They agreed they needed tourism and the ski industry to survive. Scott said a functioning and self-sustaining town would draw tourism. Kellen felt the statement in the Town Plan supported that. Supporting programs that help farmers bear the burden for mandated resource protection was also included in the Town Plan. Jeff said they saw constraints imposed with Act 181 while also wanting to support them and you couldn't have both. Scott wondered why they couldn't say no to the state and Hugh supposed they could sue the state but making a conscious decision not to follow a statute could hurt them. Jeff pointed out it could hurt them because the state could withhold grants. Preston said towns can push back by telling the state that if they don't give them some money to meet the targets, they will be unable to meet them. They didn't expect to solve these issues at this meeting but rather have a dry run for the all boards meeting. Preston had called to Hugh's attention that many of the bullets had a negative connotation and maybe there was a way to be a little more optimistic, but still provide the necessary protections, so they didn't get into trouble. Regarding helping farmers bear the financial burden as discussed earlier, Scott didn't want people to think they were going to give them money. They would support a program, if one existed, to help them.

For transportation, they liked what it said about expanding the sidewalk network and encouraging bicycle and pedestrian transportation. Hugh said there were plenty of state incentives and money to expand sidewalks and widen the roads if it was included in the Town Plan that they supported bicycles and pedestrians but if they only wanted cars, they could miss opportunities. Jeff referenced a time in the 1980s when the town didn't want truck traffic but the State managed to make it so Chester has two truck routes going through it so they needed to realize there will be truck traffic. Plans Jeff had seen would narrow intersections but trucks need a certain amount of room to navigate safely. Jeff noted it took a while to get projects going so looking ahead was important and in the right direction. Cathy said when the public safety building was built, trucks lost a place to stop; now they pull over on the side of the road. The public safety building was needed but so was a place for trucks to pull over; a truck stop was suggested. Hugh wondered why they didn't use the truck stop in Rockingham. Cathy said the trucks that pulled into the area where the safety building is now, did so because they were confused. Jeff said truckers that miss Drew's have no place to turn around, but with a bigger sign, it happens less now. Kellen said there was a misconception that pedestrian infrastructure can't be in the same place as truck infrastructure, but they want trucks to go a little bit slower and have more time to to navigate more safely and see signs and be prompted to slow down when the speed changes so they don't miss their signs and similar things. At the same time, they want people who are in the village to be able to walk around without feeling like they're having to dodge trucks going 50 miles an hour so a lot of the infrastructure, goes hand-in-hand in that, and

there's a lot of really neat ways people have been able to make corridors entirely navigable for trucks and snowplows, but also pedestrians and bicycles in the main centers and villages, so Kellen said the commission shouldn't be quick to dismiss it as a goal. They weren't competing priorities but complimentary. If done well, it helped everyone. Kellen said people tend to complain about things that make streets safer because it makes them more anxious, which includes roundabouts, shared bike lanes, traffic combing, which is a good thing because people are concerned about hitting pedestrians whose presence they may not have considered before. They discussed the intersection of Routes 11 and 103, which is problematic, but weren't sure how to remedy it. Including items in the Town Plan provides rationale for including them in the budget but some things didn't require a solution in the plan in order to act on them, but including it could help them get money to remedy the issue. They discussed the public lot off Cobleigh Street and providing more parking for commercial properties. If The Fullerton were sold to someone who did something different with it, the lot could be filled. It was also noted the use of the building could change from its current use as a restaurant. Hugh reminded the members that it wasn't about a specific property but whether the town should acquire more property to be used for parking. There was discussion about the use of rail and Preston said he was a fan of rail and was trying to work on making it available. Cathy noted she would use it to go to Bellows Falls to shop if it was available. Preston said it would take money to upgrade the crossings. Amtrak has upgraded all of the stations in Vermont so the platforms are accessible. Preston has worked with the Chamber of Commerce who revived the holiday train that goes from Chester halfway to Ludlow and it's been very successful. They would like to do more. The dinner cars are already in use during fall so they can't do excursions but Preston noted they could think of some other things. Ludlow doesn't have a functioning station.The old station is there but it's boarded up and without a platform. Preston said Ludlow could have a functioning station in the blue parking lot on the access road or at Jackson Gore.

Hugh said they wouldn't read each of the bullets at the all boards meeting and only had an hour slot, so this prepared them for making the best use of the time for their presentation. Notes will be taken of the feedback. The focus of June 9th's meeting won't be to get citizen input but rather feedback from the Select Board and the other commissions / boards. There will be time at the end of the meeting for citizens to offer feedback. Preston said the all boards are the people who have stepped up and volunteered their time to the town and why they are being given the opportunity to provide input. Hugh noted it wasn't that they didn't want to hear from the public but there would be plenty of other opportunities for citizens to share their thoughts.

Rare and Natural Areas, Scenic & Historic Features was the next slide covered. Preston mentioned the DRB doesn't have any power to deny subdivisions if it fragments habitat and experts in Fish and Wildlife would do that. The bylaws were strong about quarries but the quarry had a lot of grandfathered rights, which was the problem they had encountered. Preston said they could include them in zoning, if they wanted. Ridgeline zoning was mentioned but Chester doesn't have it. Preston added that Chester doesn't have rules to stop someone from demolishing historic buildings. The question was whether they wanted any of these rules. Scott thought saving historic landmarks was important. Cathy recalled a historic pub in England she was told about that was demolished because it was in the way. Preston said it was difficult to make someone maintain a building, so historic buildings that aren't maintained could remain standing until they collapsed if a rule was in place that prevented their demolition. If people don't have the money to maintain a building, they're unable to, as was the case with the Jeffrey Barn.

For the Economic Development slide, Preston said when he was hired, the Select Board told him they wanted a business friendly approach to zoning. Preston hoped to have a more practical and focused Town Plan this time. The Town Plan wants to be business friendly, contribute toward the charm of the village and local tourist-based economy. They like home occupations, as long as they don't bother their neighbors, and they like a creative economy. This theme does not support some of the discussions about needing other businesses in addition to tourist-based businesses. Preston noted when someone wants to open a business, they aren't asked how they will contribute to the charm of the village or improving the local tourist-based economy. It appeared that whoever wrote that part of the Town Plan was only thinking of the Village Green. Cathy noted a permit wasn't necessary to open a bakery. The Town Plan needs to be broader and consider what the town's goals are for business anywhere and not just the Village Green. Preston noted a home occupation is protected but a home business isn't but a home occupation has to be contained within the home. Jeff said the businesses that do well are tourist-based and Hugh thought they needed to figure out how to change that. There are other kinds of businesses that Chester could pursue. Jeff thought there were but wasn't sure how to draw them in. Scott suggested lifting the formula business regulations and only requiring their building fit within the spirit of the town would enable them to have a corporate drug store. It was noted the policy only applied to the Village Green and that mail ordering prescriptions was hurting brick and mortar pharmacies. Hugh said the Town Plan didn't have to solve the problem but did need to describe a future they would aspire to attain.

For housing, Hugh noted the Town Plan really didn't say anything. The Housing Chapter was tacked onto the Town Plan in 2021, so they expected this time, they would have much more to say about housing. High-end housing doesn't need help, but other housing does. Preston said there were housing programs for true low-income people but the middle-income people are the ones who have no help. Chester has nice senior housing but you have to be low-income and there are a lot of retirees who no longer want to live in an 8-bedroom farmhouse but aren't eligible for the senior housing. The Housing Commission is working towards the town making it easier and safer for certain developers to create that kind of housing. They want people of modest means to live in the rural areas if preferred, but currently they have to go into the Village Center. Hugh wondered how they would approach that and make affordable housing available in rural areas. Scott didn't think houses in rural areas were more expensive unless they were mansions. Preston said the state only makes money available for affordable housing in village centers, so it's easy to say poor people can only live in village centers and rich people can live in the country. Preston expected it to change through attrition. Cathy pointed out that transportation was an issue for someone who lived in the country and needed a car. Preston and Hugh discussed making housing available in all areas. Hugh wondered if the Town Plan should support putting developments in rural areas. Scott thought it was necessary to have housing. Hugh said to put everyone who can't afford housing in the Village and people in the rural areas with half a million dollar houses out there. Scott thought it would throw the balance off and ruin downtown. Kellen said they see a lot of fiduciary incentives for affordable housing but noted housing is in short supply at all levels and part of the reason it was so expensive. Kellen thought the regulatory framework in terms of neighborhood development areas and Tier lB exemptions from Act 250, and town plans was that they want to see housing built in areas of existing density where it's going to be most affordable. Kellen expected when affordable housing is built, market-rate housing would happen at scale in or around Village Centers. The long-term consequence is the gentrification of rural Vermont but it isn't so cut and dry to say that rich people get to live on the hilltops and poor people in village centers. Hugh confirmed that Kellen thought they were seeing gentrification of rural areas.

Kellen wondered if the town and state wanted to support sprawl in the undeveloped areas of Chester but didn't think they did nor would people support it. Hugh agreed people would see the development of rural areas as sprawl but had also read about the concept of what was wrong with a planned unit development in a rural area where houses are developed in a more compact pattern with plenty of open land around the development which would create less sprawl than if they built single-family houses on 5-acre lots all over the place. Kellen thought it was better than 4-acre lots for 40 houses, but did see it as condemning the people who lived there with a commuter lifestyle for jobs and basic needs. From a planning perspective, it ruffled Kellen's feathers. They would be putting 125 people out where there are no services. Scott thought only focusing on the downtown would be sprawl and Cathy said it was infill because there were pieces of land not being used. Cathy said the old way of getting homes in rural areas was people would build a basement and live in it until they could afford to build the rest of the house. Having 5 to 8 houses together in a rural area appealed to her because they wouldn't be pockmarking the forest canopy, but agreed with Kellen there are no services to support those developments. Hugh said they weren't planning gentrification but it was happening and they hadn't figured out the solution, as town planners, to stop it. Supporting developments in rural areas wasn't good without services. Scott and Jeff said that's how Vermont was and didn't understand the hangup about there not being services. People have cars to go to work and school. Scott said they make that choice when they live here. Kellen said characterizing Vermont as being disconnected from villages and village services was historically inaccurate and only an artifact of the last 50 years. Historically, in the development of Vermont, it has developed in village centers where the vast majority of people have lived and why they characterize it that way and see train stations in most towns because of the dense development. Kellen wanted to point out in terms of planned unit developments in rural areas, as she didn't think it would fix the problem of gentrification of rural areas because it wouldn't prevent people from chopping off a 5-acre lot and putting a new house there. Trying to address with talking points how to make it affordable to live in the countryside in single-family homes without upsetting the sort of environment they were hoping for, Kellen didn't have an answer for. Cathy wondered if they could encourage PUD development in the yellow areas. It was noted that some people would prefer to live in the rural areas, no matter their income and the bylaws aren't stopping people from building a basement in the country and living in it until they could afford to build a home. This was more likely due to financing constraints. Hugh said there was nothing that prevented someone from buying land and putting their travel trailer on it and living there while they built a house. Hugh thought, as planners, to encourage development, such as the Planned Unit Development, in rural areas wasn't something they should push. Scott said certainly not on a large scale; specific criteria would be required before it could be done. Preston said the biggest obstacle to building in the country is septic and added that they get many calls from people who want to park a tiny home on a 10-acre piece of property and he tells them their septic needs to be state approved and could cost up to $60,000. The state approves community septic, which could be done under a PUD. Scott said the town sewer system was burdened which supported putting homes in rural areas because it wouldn't burden the town water and sewer. Cathy wondered if they were looking for financial support for PUDs like the support given by VHIP for ADUs in the village. Hugh said the bylaws have language that provides for Planned Unit Development that would allow what they were discussing in the rural part of town for years but it wasn't being taken advantage of by anyone, so he wondered if there was anything they could do to increase the likelihood of it happening. Hugh wondered if they were missing anything as planners or if it was the current economic situation that wasn't allowing it to happen and when that changed, their tools would be there for it to happen. Scott said it may be because they hadn't really been

talking about it. Cathy noted they had talked about it when they did the bylaws. Scott didn't think homeowners were aware. Kellen thought it was economics and it made sense to her that people weren't proposing PUDs in rural Chester. Preston agreed with Scott that they hadn't been pitching it but noted a shared maintenance agreement with 5 other people would be necessary for a PUD and some people may be reluctant because of fear the others wouldn't pay their share, where a 50-unit housing project would have a homeowner's association to deal with those issues. Preston said it didn't take away the fact that some people want to live in the country but didn't think they could fix it. Preston thought the reality was the more affordable housing would be in the village. Someone with a tiny home who could navigate the septic could end up in the rural areas. Scott didn't think they wanted bickering HOAs. There were horror stories of shared driveways where the maintenance isn't shared.

Sue Bailey wanted the Town Plan to address data centers and not wanting them. Hugh wondered if it would go under utilities. Preston was aware Sue had experience in Fairfax County in Northern Virginia with the effects of data centers. She was concerned about the added utility expense and environmental concerns. Sue thought the governor didn't want to nix any economic opportunities that could be gained from data centers but thought they wouldn't be good for Vermont environmentally. Scott didn't think Vermont had the water to support them. Sue said he may be right but thought they should be proactive rather than reactive. Preston said because nobody had done one yet, they think about it as someone else's problem. Hugh agreed with the concern but didn't think it was necessarily good to assume that because they're being built, everyone's electric rates were going to go up forever and at some point, they may make the data centers pay more for the electricity used. Hugh said Carl Henshaw had mentioned with data centers driving up the cost of energy, they should now take advantage of more renewable energy so they can drive down their electricity consumption and save money. Vermont has a lot of great renewable energy incentives which they should take advantage of and it would hopefully insulate them from the rise in the cost of electricity. Hugh noted everyone was worried about data centers and the demand and didn't think they would know the end result for another 10 years. Scott thought a statement about data centers in Chester shouldn't be politically based but come up with good reasons why they wouldn't fit in the community. Scott saw a lot of it as political. Sue agreed with Carl but was concerned about the amount of water they use. Scott didn't think they could be in Chester because of the water. Jeff noted the water department would have to give approval because of the allotments and said other businesses haven't been able to come to Chester because of the water used. Sue's concern was even if it were rural, there was only so much water available and the negative impact it could have environmentally. Given the amount of literature available, she suggested education was important, as it was a new subject to many. There was discussion about whether the water could be recycled by a data center. Hugh thanked Sue for her comment and said it was a good thing for them to research.

They weren't sure, at this time, whether they would meet on June 15th.

Agenda Item 4, Adjournment

Cathy moved to adjourn, and Scott seconded the motion. The motion carried, unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 8:23 p.m.