TOWN OF CHESTER
PLANNING COMMISSION
May 18, 2026, Minutes

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

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

Visitors Present: The Chester Telegraph via Zoom.

Call to Order

Chair Hugh Quinn called the meeting to order at approximately 6:30 p.m.

Agenda Item 1, Approve Minutes from May 4, 2026 meeting.

Carl moved and Cathy seconded a motion to approve the May 4, 2026 minutes. The minutes were approved, unanimously, as written.

Agenda Item 2, Citizen Comments

There were none.

Agenda Item 3, All Boards Meeting scheduled for June 9, 2026

Hugh included this to provide a high-level update regarding how the Planning Commission would participate in the meeting. The focus will be for the commission to begin sharing their work underway for the Town Plan. They need to cross-connect with the boards, such as the Housing Commission and Economic Development Commission, who will play a role in updating the Town Plan and will provide some early sharing with the Select Board so adjustments can be made, as they go, rather than waiting until the end. The demographics shared from Mount Ascutney will be discussed, the SWOT analysis, and they will look at some of the chapters and goals that are in the current Town Plan to generate discussion among those in attendance and gather input from them about the goals. Cathy asked which chapters they would discuss. Hugh wanted to focus on higher priority chapters they discuss at the next Planning Commission meeting. Preston said he and Hugh would plan what to share at their next meeting on June 1st. Scott asked about the three tiers and if it had been voted on. Preston said VLCT sent out an update and the House and Senate had passed their versions and were now in a conference committee with the Governor, who has said he will veto it if certain conditions aren't met. Preston thought both versions eliminated Tier 3 and the road rule. The Supreme Court had overturned the farm exemption so they were also working on that, along with enforcement of Act 250 permits. Preston didn't have a lot of enthusiasm for wanting to go through all the Act 250 criteria to approve projects. They discussed whether most professionals even had the expertise to meet the requirements. Preston said it was a much higher level of scrutiny. Hugh had discussions with regional planning who said if things changed where the town didn't have to assume

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responsibility for all of Act 250 permitting to become Tier 1A, they could revisit it but there was no hurry. The deadline for the Town Plan is 2028. Someone bought a property in Gold River Industrial Park and Preston was asked to look at all the permits and there were a lot of Act 250 which keep getting amended and that was just one project. Hugh reminded the members to let Julie know if they could attend the all boards meeting. Preston was pleased that Julie had chosen the Town Plan as a focus, which was good for the Planning Commission and the town.

Agenda Item 4, Town Plan Working Session (Review SWOT Analysis)

This was a continuation of the work they had done. Allison had provided them with a summary of the SWOT analysis. This was their opportunity to review it in preparation for the meeting on June 9th. Carl noted rail, as both a strength and opportunity, wasn't included. Cathy said regional transportation access was included under strengths. They discussed whether to specify rail. Cathy added proximity to the interstate was a strength. There was a discussion about whether to include the town solar field as an opportunity, which was one of three in the town. Scott saw the reduction in the younger population as a weakness and should be addressed at how they can increase it and he didn't think a lot of people realized it was happening. Carl said housing and affordability factored into it. Hugh would include Carl's slide about school population in their presentation on June 9th. Scott noted the school population only represented a portion because of homeschooling and private schools. Carl said it provided a litmus test for the school population dropping. Scott thought the percentage of people homeschooling and private schooling was probably up around 10 or 20% in Chester and was something to consider. Hugh said the Village Green was missing from its strengths and Preston said it was included as a strong village center. They discussed including parades and the fall festival as strengths. Cathy said they should add Readex/Newsbank and Drew's as strengths; Readex/Newsbank being information and Drew's being food processing. Under opportunities, they listed promoting Chester as a place for branch offices to attract employees. Lack of local higher wage employment was listed as a weakness. Weaknesses are something they can act on and turn into a strength. Recreation infrastructure was confirmed as a strength. Artisan Community was a strength listed, rather than listing specific businesses. Scott hoped the Housing Commission would reach out to realtors and ask them to promote what Chester has to offer with a bullet list of things they should show to prospective homebuyers and suggested a brochure and updating the town website. Carl said the Economic Development Commission is working on a website. Scott said getting more kids and businesses by getting people to move to Chester was all in the presentation. Preston agreed and added that they have an Economic Development Commission but proper marketing takes a lot of work and hoped he could put some time into it. Hugh anticipated themes would lead the presentation on June 9th and then ease into the SWOT analysis.

Agenda Item 5, AI Review of current Town Plan

Carl had offered to have AI analyze the Town Plan and he presented it to the commission. 70% to 80% of the time, AI was accurate but sometimes it over-emphasized but did a good job comparing what came in against the current environment. Carl found it eye-opening regarding FEMA and floodplain and would not have keyed in on it as that much of a potential risk and saw it as a factor regarding people and businesses locating here. They discussed the probability of flooding was more likely than every 100 years and how the change in climate is affecting the risk. Hugh thought the AI report could be used as a reference document as the Town Plan was developed because it was able to find a lot of information, cross-reference statutes, and find

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things that were inconsistent or represented a gap between when the plan was written, and what the current state of the world is today. Preston said there are some parts of the Town Plan that are things they want to do and are of value, and need to figure out a way to do them while some parts were an opportunity if grant funding became available. The grants require a quote from the Town Plan saying they should do something so that was the importance of including it. Referencing the goals for new housing in Chester, if the state wants them to achieve these goals, there are certain things they need to do. Scott said they didn't, necessarily, need to agree with that growth and thought it was dangerous to have the Town Plan dance around arbitrary thinking. Scott thought they should consider what the town will support culturally and economically and not what the state wants because the state doesn't know the town. The Actionable Update Plan was interesting and Scott said keeping it small and really nailing the important things so it didn't just look good on paper. Carl said a lot of studies back that up and the less goals you have, the more likely you are to achieve them but at the same time, it removes degrees of freedom they might want to pursue over the next 10 years, or longer. Scott thought they should focus on what they know about Chester, rather than what strangers and consultants who don't live here think. Hugh said there was a balance with more short-term attainable goals that they knew were important and there wasn't much question about their relevance in a 1 to 3 or 5 year timeframe. Hugh noted the document had to be durable enough to last for 8 years. If the world evolves and what they want to do isn't in their Town Plan, they wouldn't get funding or support from the Select Board, so it was important to have balance. The Town Plan must be reviewed every 8 years and reviewed by the Regional Commission every 4 years. They discussed reviewing the Town Plan annually by either the Planning Commission or all the commissions. Scott noted when he was on the DRB, half of the permit applications never came to fruition and he wondered why. They thought it was worth following up with applicants and conducting exit surveys, which could help steer things. They were aware costs played a part and should consider offering tax breaks to businesses. Hugh said they would use the AI document to refer to, as needed, and Carl offered to do more research when necessary.

Agenda Item 6, Let's Build Homes ROOT Zone Introduction

Hugh shared a 2-page document from the Let's Build Homes website which described the problem and offered proposed solutions and coined the resolution as ROOT, which stood for Resolution Option Overlay for Towns. Hugh discussed what some call form-based zoning where buildings and lot sizes are pre-approved and permitted administratively without discretionary oversight; many projects are delayed and stopped because zoning bylaws have too many discretionary reviews, so things end up in front of the DRB and get delayed or squashed. The ROOT zone concept would be if the home footprint, lot, pitch of the roof looked a certain way, and had a certain number of dwelling units and focused only on housing in the NDA area and not rural areas, they could approve it without delays. People would have their opportunity in the planning phase when the bylaw is being adopted to say whether they like it, rather than voicing their concern for every project. Hugh shared it with the commission because Let's Build Homes would like to look at some lots in Chester and draw up some models to see what works in small towns so they could present the models to the state and then the state creates a model of Vermont Code, it gets published, and if the municipality adopts it, housing opportunities would be quicker to implement with possible incentives. It would work in conjunction with 802 Homes, which would save a lot of time and prevent people from going somewhere else because of needless waiting periods. Hugh noted they were acknowledging that Tier 1 may not be sufficient to meet the state's housing targets. If a town doesn't have a Tier 1 designation, but they have municipal

infrastructure they would be addressed by this. Hugh said Miro Weinberger ran Let's Build Homes and he said anything in the 802 Homes Catalog would be compatible with a ROOT zone, which would fast track housing and eliminate issues with zoning bylaws and discretionary review. Chester agreed to collaborate with Let's Build Homes to have them say what a ROOT zone may look like in Chester. Chester provided them with lots the Housing Commission had identified for housing and asked them to provide how ROOT zoning would work on those lots. Chester gets the ROOT zone folks to do some modeling in Chester on properties and they get feedback about whether, in a town like Chester, it could ever be adopted in a way that would eliminate discretionary review. If they get to a place everybody thinks would work, when Let's Build Homes goes to the state to create this model code, they can say they've talked to these towns, shown them the plans, and they think it could work and be able to benefit from it. Miro Weinberger had been the mayor of Burlington and while he was mayor, a housing project was done and as a result of the hurdles and pushback, he created Let's Build Homes to make housing easier in Vermont. Scott had wondered if this would apply to businesses and it wouldn't but Preston noted it could with form zoning. Preston said the ROOT program was worth considering but not everyone would be happy. Hugh said they could have a ROOT zone and they could do site plan review, which would allow oversight that wouldn't allow them to say no but could say it was contingent upon meeting necessary requirements, which was lighter than a full DRB review. They wanted to be business friendly but needed to define what it meant, which included having housing.

Agenda Item 7, Adjournment

Scott moved to adjourn, and Carl seconded the motion. The motion carried, unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 7:46 p.m.

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