

1 **TOWN OF CHESTER**
2 **PLANNING COMMISSION**
3 **April 7, 2025, Minutes**

4
5 **Commission Members Present:** Jeff Holden, Cathy Hasbrouck, Carl Henshaw, Scott MacDonald,
6 and Hugh Quinn at Town Hall.

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8 **Staff Present:** Susan Bailey, Recording Secretary, via Zoom.

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10 **Citizens Present:** Steve Mancuso at Town Hall; and Gwen Mancuso on Zoom.

11 **Call to Order**

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

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16 **Agenda Item 1, Planning Commission Re-Organization**

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18 Hugh announced he would take nominations for Chair. Cathy nominated Hugh Quinn and Jeff
19 seconded the motion. Hugh asked if there were any other nominations for Chair and there were
20 none. The motion carried unanimously.

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22 Hugh said he would take nominations for Vice Chair. Hugh nominated Cathy Hasbrouck. Jeff
23 seconded the motion. Hugh asked if there were any other nominations for Vice Chair and there
24 were none. The motion passed unanimously.

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26 Hugh noted the rules didn't require them to have a secretary so they would skip that.

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28 **Agenda Item 2, Review & Adopt PC Rules of Procedure**

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30 Hugh said as part of the reorganization process, they needed to review and adopt their rules of
31 procedure annually and he had enclosed a copy in their packet for review. The rules and procedures
32 were largely unchanged from last year, but Hugh had added a rule associated with social media
33 use. Hugh opened it up for discussion of the proposed rules. Cathy said there were a couple of
34 sentences under social media that didn't fit the rest of the format of procedures. Cathy didn't see
35 a need for the sentence that included "social media taking many different forms." Cathy questioned
36 what a "wild" was and Hugh didn't know either. Cathy didn't see the purpose for the first sentence.
37 Hugh agreed. Cathy read, "When you are participating in social media, you are representing
38 yourself." and didn't see that as being helpful but suggested leaving the sentence that "It is not the
39 intent to restrict a member's ability to have an online presence or to mandate." Cathy could
40 understand having it but noted none of the other regulations talked about you but the Planning
41 Commission members and suggested re-wording it. Hugh agreed and said he had lifted some of
42 the language from Chester's personnel policy and thought he would try to tweak it for use by the
43 Commission and was open to adjusting the paragraph. Hugh noted the last part of the second
44 paragraph was missing language and was already planning edits. They were suggesting eliminating
45 the first sentence and adjusting the second sentence before the bullets started. Scott thought it

1 wasn't challenging for board members to never talk about board business on social media because
2 it was a slippery slope and could be considered ex parte communications in some way if it was on
3 Facebook and people would see what they wanted to see. Scott said he was only speaking for
4 himself, and he wouldn't comment about anything having to do with the Planning Commission on
5 social media. Hugh said the spirit of the section was to remind people, as a board member, when
6 using social media, the things posted will reflect on the Commission and the town, so it was
7 important to be careful when using social media and keep that in mind. Hugh noted they wouldn't
8 be telling members they couldn't use social media but reminded them, as part of the Planning
9 Commission, social media wasn't their personal platform to conduct business that should be done
10 in an open meeting. Jeff noted it wasn't just for them but for someone who wanted to understand
11 how they operated. Cathy agreed and said they had to be clear that members weren't speaking for
12 the Planning Commission but rather themselves. Cathy thought the sentence about negative
13 impacting should be the first thing mentioned. Hugh was happy to move it. Cathy thought they
14 should number them as the other sections were numbered.
15

16 Hugh asked if there was any more feedback before they moved on. He was hearing Cathy would
17 make some edits to the language and would bring it back to the Commission at the next meeting
18 for review. Hugh said if it looked okay at the next meeting, they would adopt and sign it so they
19 could keep moving forward. Hugh asked if there were any other changes and there were none.
20

21 **Agenda Item 3, Review Conflict of Interest Policy**

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23 Hugh noted it was a review and not an adoption. The policy was for the town and the people who
24 work for the town and who represent the town on boards and commissions and wasn't up for
25 negotiation and discussion. Hugh said the new members needed to understand that if there was a
26 conflict of interest in the work the Commission was doing, they needed to disclose it. Members
27 don't typically have many conflicts because the Commission isn't a decision-making body, so they
28 don't have the authority to decide anything. Their authority is to make recommendations that go
29 to the Select Board for approval. It didn't mean there couldn't be a conflict of interest but only that
30 the likelihood would be greater on the Select Board or DRB but wanted the members to understand
31 the policy and be aware. There were no questions about the policy.
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33 **Agenda Item 4, Approve February 17, 2025 Meeting Minutes**

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35 Cathy moved to review the February 17, 2025, minutes and Jeff seconded the motion. Hugh asked
36 if there were any questions or changes to the minutes and there were none. Hugh asked all in favor
37 of approving the minutes, as written, and they were unanimously approved.
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39 **Agenda Item 5, Citizen Comments**

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41 Steve Mancuso was there to solicit the Commission's opinion. Steve commented on the Chester
42 Wayfinding signs installed recently which were understandably trying to promote Chester. Steve
43 said he's been told they were a tourist-based community and economic structure. Steve noted
44 travelling from Ludlow into Chester is Chat and Chew, which is about ready to fall. Further down
45 the road was Austin Antiques, which was closed and not plowed all winter. Steve asked the
46 Commission to keep in mind that each place he mentioned had its own individual circumstances.

1 The Gassetts gas station is no longer there, and it is all residential. The farm stand on the corner of
2 Routes 103 and 10 is no longer open to the public. Steve said the only thing in Gassetts is the store
3 and the rumor was it was for sale and when it was gone, it would be a dead zone. There was a
4 farmstand further down that was no longer there and then the Jeffrey Barn. Coming from
5 Springfield into Chester there was nothing going on at Kendall's Auction Mart and they had closed.
6 Chester Depot had a carpentry shop, the former hardware store had its own problems, the pizza
7 joint on Elm Street was gone, and Yosemite Firehouse, although there were plans for it, there was
8 nothing to stop or see. Austin Antiques is now a daycare. Steve said the gas station, from
9 Londonderry into Chester in Andover, was no longer open. The former armory was now a storage
10 facility. Steve said they did get Sugar Bob's as a new business. On the Green, Raspberries and
11 Thyme was gone. The Masonic Temple was mostly gone and half residential and behind it was an
12 empty building. On Main Street, the former Calico Kitchen was an eyesore. On either side of the
13 post office, those shops were gone. Steve noted the former Jiffy Mart was closed and the former
14 Legion. Eclectic Technologies was shut down. There now is an empty lot where the former funeral
15 home was located. The former Congressional church up the street was no longer a church and
16 Steve didn't know why it went out of business and joked that maybe Chester had run out of sinners.
17 Hugh thought they had run out of pastors. From Rockingham into Chester, there was a vacant lot
18 where there used to be a supply place, a former general store, and the Spaghetti House were all
19 gone. Steve said they all had their stories, but it really didn't look good for tourists or the local
20 economy. Jeff said he rides around the state during the summer on his motorcycle and the whole
21 state was that way and thought a lot began with COVID, because people couldn't hang on any
22 longer and people couldn't be employed. Jeff said it was sad, but it wasn't just Chester. Steve
23 agreed 100%. Scott wondered who told Steve it was a tourist economy, and Steve said multiple
24 sources. Scott said none of the buildings Steve had mentioned were for sale and were just privately
25 owned. Steve said there were buildings for sale that he hadn't listed and chose to only mention the
26 properties that someone would see riding through town and could walk into. Scott said someone
27 had bought the Chat and Chew and had fabulous plans for it to which Steve replied that he wished
28 them good luck, because it had its own issues with septic. Jeff thought they had run into problems
29 with the state. Steve said he had read the previous minutes which hinted at some economic
30 revitalization. Hugh said he didn't disagree with Steve's observations about coming into town and
31 he knew there had been discussion over time about the relationship between making a community
32 better and the kind of place people want to live and work. Hugh wondered what the relationship
33 was making those things happen and what the Commission could do to facilitate it. Hugh said
34 they've had discussions with Julie, and she's indicated she wants to set up an economic
35 development board. Julie had spoken with Hugh and Preston because they collectively agreed the
36 Planning Commission isn't going to be the Economic Development team for Chester because they
37 don't have the mix of skills required to drive the kinds of initiatives to revitalize and begin turning
38 around some of what Steve had observed. Hugh echoed what Jeff said and that it wasn't only
39 Chester but the entire State of Vermont except for a few parts of Vermont that were thriving. Hugh
40 thought if you couldn't make a living wage, you couldn't run a business in Vermont and there
41 were equity, housing, economic development, and planning discussions that were inter-related and
42 needed to come together to solve the problem. Steve agreed and said it was a good opinion. Steve
43 said at their last business meeting they discussed all the empty buildings and rolled into housing.
44 Steve said they discussed how to promote Chester and wondered how to promote that it was a
45 great place to live, work, and set up camp and send your kids to school. Steve said the town had

1 just appointed someone to housing with significant marketing skills and that was an avenue to
2 consider.

3
4 Cathy said she is starting a project to add 18 units of housing to her parcel on Pleasant Street. There
5 will be 16 one and two bedrooms and a couple more in the barn and building. Cathy said they
6 weren't luxury apartments and would be for people starting out in life or older people who didn't
7 want a big house anymore. Cathy said she didn't have a lot of cash but had contacts and
8 infrastructure and hoped she could make it into something. Steve said that was good and said they
9 should extend that to soliciting people to Chester with similar ideas and wondered how to attract
10 them. Steve thought they should revisit some of their policies and finetune them and noted they
11 had worked hard on them. Steve said it might reach their new representative who was big on Act
12 250 reform and thought if they could get everyone onboard promoting Chester, it could be a bright
13 light. Cathy said to add reality, part of the reason she can add 16 units on her parcel is because of
14 the zoning changes the Commission made and when they were making changes, they questioned
15 what they could do with the land. Cathy said it was frustrating to wait to get going but she thought
16 she could do it and it would take a lot of community support. In getting that support, it may
17 encourage others to do the same and Cathy didn't mind being a poster child. Steve agreed. Scott
18 suggested a way to talk about Chester was through the local papers. Steve said it would be a good
19 avenue, and they could choose the direction they wanted to grow the town.

20
21 Hugh was aware of discussions within the Planning Commission, and they would start looking at
22 the Town Plan because it needed to be revised by 2028. Preston would take the lead work to update
23 the town plan, and they've discussed what they can do to better advertise what Chester is and can
24 be to attract people. Hugh thought that town updates and a newly formed economic development
25 group could help. Steve thought the direction they were assuming sounded like a good upbeat one.
26 Hugh asked if anyone wanted to add anything. Cathy said Chester has a history of incubating
27 businesses and they don't think much about them because they grow up and leave. Cathy said the
28 business behind the Family Center was a big deal. It was an organic processing facility that went
29 through a lot to get the designation, and they do a lot of business. Cathy noted that Putney Pasta
30 and Green Mountain Salsa had started in Chester. Cathy added that Vineyard Brands was also in
31 Chester. Next to the Inn Victoria, there is a woman who sells and makes special tools for craft
32 people and were quiet about it but were a big deal in their field. Cathy wasn't sure about the quilt
33 shop and Steve said the owner had retired. Cathy knew she had brought someone in to run the
34 business but wasn't sure how it ended up. Steve said there is an application for people moving to
35 Chester who are opening a business on the town website that appears to offer help, but Steve didn't
36 think a lot of people ended up going to the town page and it might be time to go to them. Scott
37 suggested offering incentives to encourage businesses and had heard of people who were given a
38 loan with low interest rates but noted they could file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy and never pay it
39 back. Scott suggested tax incentives that would cost much less. Cathy suggested a weekend in
40 Chester for potential entrepreneurs in the dead season, like summers which are quiet for the inns.
41 Carl said renting out the Fullerton in August when the humidity and temperatures are high could
42 deter them from considering Chester. Hugh had never heard from the Select Board or anyone on
43 the Planning Commission that Chester should only be a tourist community or the way they should
44 make their mark was through tourism. There were people who said they should support that
45 industry but not that it was the roadmap for success. Steve said it was dangerous to put all your
46 eggs in one basket. Hugh said, to Cathy's point, there were businesses who had been successful in

1 Chester, and he thought most people would agree they need both. Scott said they needed to be
2 eclectic, and a functional self-sustaining town would still be a great tourist attraction, and Hugh
3 agreed. Sue Bailey said she appreciated Steve's comments but had a more positive outlook. She
4 saw Songbird Wellness which came to the Green and offers massages and sells merchandise;
5 Mercantile on Main on the Green listed their stuff on Facebook all the time and she had recently
6 purchased something from there and noted they also offer vegan food. Sue noted that the Inn
7 Between and Which Way Tavern, which was formerly Rowell's, was new and thought not
8 everyone was welcoming at first because they were a vegan restaurant but noted there were many
9 other places to eat if you didn't like that. Stone Hearth had opened; Meditrina was expanding into
10 a restaurant; and the attorney office on the Green where Masonic Temple, even though part of it
11 was apartments, it was also a law office. She said even though some businesses had gone out, she
12 also saw growth.

13
14 Jeff noted that he runs water and wastewater and part of their limits on business are because of the
15 utilities and they've been working hard to increase them. At one point, the utilities were
16 overwhelmed with businesses stressing them. They're currently trying to increase the utilities to
17 accept other types of businesses. Jeff sees smaller businesses coming in. Unfortunately, Jeff said
18 the legislature has been hurting them with taxes and the history of Vermont hasn't been business
19 friendly and they need to start there too. Jeff said lack of workforce housing was also an issue. Jeff
20 said they must keep bringing the businesses in, but they need to incentivize them to come, and
21 Vermont hasn't been good at it. Scott mentioned they had a \$10,000 incentive to come to Vermont
22 and work from home. Steve said the infrastructure was probably the second concern after location
23 and it's attractive that it was being rebuilt in Chester. Steve said a lot of businesses, who are his
24 customers, want three-phase now, and even Town Hall, so Green Mountain has done a good job
25 in town. Jeff noted it was hard to keep up with the pace of technology and that a lot of houses in
26 town used to be 100 amp but now more service is required. Hugh joked they had started with 60
27 amp, and he had one.

28
29 Hugh thanked Steve and asked if there was anything more for citizen comments and there were
30 none.

31 32 **Agenda Item 6, Update on Housing Commission activities**

33
34 Hugh is the Planning Commission's representative on the Housing Commission, and it makes
35 sense on a regular basis for feedback loops into the Planning Commission about what the Housing
36 Commission is doing, and this was the first one and it was expected there would be more to come.
37 Hugh didn't have a lot to share but would share what remembered. The Housing Commission has
38 been trying to stay focused on identifying places that could be suitable for additional housing.
39 Rather than spend a lot of time studying the need for housing, the Housing Commission agreed
40 much of that work has been done and the bottom line was more housing is needed and the Housing
41 Commission was motivated to not spend a lot of time on the front end studying it but rather
42 determine that housing is needed and where it should go. As a result, they've identified properties
43 in Chester suitable for housing. Private landowners have expressed interest, Cathy being one, and
44 a gentleman across from the high school has expressed interest in using his property. Hugh noted
45 the town owns land next to the high school behind Drew's that they call the gravel pit because the
46 town purchased it with the idea that they would ultimately extract gravel and is under Act 250 for

1 that. Hugh said it was over 100 acres, and the work was done through a grant. Julie, who is a great
2 grant writer, was able to engage the SE Group who has done some preliminary work to identify
3 what and how the parcel could be used and what the barriers are. They haven't hit a hard no from
4 a do ability point of view. Recently they had an open house seeking input from the community and
5 several people engaged. When the Commission meets, they will get feedback from the open house
6 about how the community feels about it and the type of investment and support the community
7 wants and will guide what happens next. Hugh said to take advantage of certain funding and get
8 relief from some of the stricter Act 250 requirements, the State of Vermont has said the parcel has
9 to be in a neighborhood development area and has criteria for that. Hugh said they had been
10 working with Mount Ascutney Regional Planning to go through the process to get the parcel, so it
11 qualifies. At future Planning Commission meetings, MARC will be involved. As part of Act 181,
12 the legislation is trying to figure out how to rework Act 250 so it's easier to have housing but still
13 protects conservation land. There are maps that will come from the state and trickle down to the
14 region and the community. There are neighborhood development areas which is a legacy vehicle
15 to allow housing to be developed more easily but will require changes to the bylaws. Hugh thought,
16 to the extent possible, they didn't want their bylaws to block what could be a good project. And if
17 they haven't done their work to make it happen, that would be unfortunate. Hugh had included it
18 on the agenda to make the members aware of what was happening, and they had just finished
19 rewriting the bylaws so they were at a point where they were trying to figure out what was next,
20 so they would probably get work to make changes in the bylaws to make this happen. Jeff asked
21 what Hugh saw standing in the way and Hugh didn't know all the details but provided an example,
22 which Hugh thought would surprise them. One of the requirements from the state to allow a
23 neighborhood to be designated as a neighborhood development area, is they have a walkable
24 design and would want sidewalks to the housing area. Hugh thought regional planning was doing
25 a great job to get through the hoops so it could happen. Hugh said the town had already begun the
26 high-level planning such as the sidewalk design work to have sidewalks from the high school.
27 Municipal infrastructure is a requirement, so they need to extend water and sewer. Hugh said it
28 would come down to what they would need to do to make it happen and then they could decide if
29 it made sense to do it. Jeff noted that the sewer and water were right at the bottom of the hill. Scott
30 commented that there were sidewalks in Montpelier. Hugh thought what the state was trying to
31 accomplish was that all housing development can be in compact areas where there is infrastructure
32 and sidewalks everywhere, but in this case, it wasn't right in the center but wasn't too far out and
33 they could get it connected to water and sewer as Jeff had said. Hugh said it didn't strictly fit the
34 compact village location but still looked promising. Jeff thought everyone who was making the
35 rules wanted to live in the village but not everyone who comes to Chester wants to. Hugh knew
36 that and thought there had always been two prongs to the situation: building housing where there
37 is infrastructure, which makes sense; and how can you create more housing in the rural areas
38 through things like accessory dwelling units. The biggest barrier to all of it has been that nobody
39 can afford to build a house on a 5-acre lot somewhere and is pretty much unattainable for everyone
40 as it costs \$400,000 and young people are just trying to get started so a single house on 3-acres
41 just isn't going to work. Cathy noted another aspect was energy. If more housing is developed in
42 town, more roads don't need to be plowed to get to the housing. Jeff knew what Cathy was saying
43 but didn't completely agree and said sometimes it was easier to plow a dirt road than keep all the
44 sidewalks clear, including the Main Street, and there was still a lot of energy being expended.
45 Hugh thought it needed to be both. Hugh said everyone who talks about workforce housing says
46 it's so expensive to build and until you can come up with a configuration or design, a piece of land

1 or whatever, if the developer can't make money, it's not going to happen. Hugh said developers
2 can build multi-million-dollar homes in the country for people who have a lot of money, but
3 nobody wants to work on a workforce housing project because the margins are so thin, or they
4 can't get through the regulatory process, so he thought they were trying to solve that problem.
5 Scott asked if the town could develop, and Hugh said the town doesn't want to be the developer.
6 From what Hugh understood, they need to figure out what level of engagement or involvement the
7 town should take, because it ranges from doing nothing to completely developing and being
8 responsible for the ongoing management, which they don't want to do but they also want to do
9 something. They're trying to figure out what the right amount of engagement is. Hugh said they
10 had interactive story boards at the open house for participants to offer their point of view. Hugh
11 said when asked what amount of involvement the town should have the majority responded they
12 should do a lot of the blocking tackling for the permitting work to make it less of a barrier and aid
13 getting the infrastructure in place so that would de-risk the project for developers. Hugh felt people
14 were supportive, but the results haven't been tabulated by the consulting group yet. Scott thought
15 working with local tradesmen would be good and keep the economy in town. Carl wanted to know
16 what the net impact was on other towns they had worked in. Hugh didn't know and thought the
17 question would be better answered by someone like Windham and Windsor Housing Trust who
18 had fact-based data behind them. Hugh said they had engaged them as part of this project, and they
19 were one of the primary organizations in this part of Vermont who has developed workforce
20 housing in other towns. Hugh thought they had done something in Brattleboro and Windsor. Cathy
21 said their website had a lot of information. Carl thought talking with people in those communities
22 would be helpful to know if they needed bigger classroom sizes or more resources. Cathy said they
23 list the projects on their site and local newspapers have articles about them. Hugh encouraged them
24 to stay connected with the Housing Commission and could attend meetings with them, if they
25 liked. Scott thought it would be good to have the DRB in the loop since they would be responsible
26 for enforcement. Hugh was in support of keeping them looped in and thought it was always a good
27 idea when they were making changes to the bylaws in areas that affect them.

28
29 Hugh said there was nothing for them to decide on this agenda item but wanted to raise awareness
30 so when they engage with regional planning, they would have some context as to what and why
31 they were trying to accomplish.

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Agenda Item 7, Adjournment

34
35 Jeff moved to adjourn, and Cathy seconded the motion. A vote was taken, and it passed
36 unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 7:35 p.m.

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