

1 **TOWN OF CHESTER**
2 **PLANNING COMMISSION**
3 **February 17, 2025, Minutes**

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5 **Commission Members Present:** John Cummings, Barre Pinske, and Hugh Quinn at Town Hall;
6 and Cathy Hasbrouck via Zoom. Absent: Jeff Holden.

7
8 **Staff Present:** Preston Bristow, Zoning Administrator/Town Planner, and Susan Bailey, Recording
9 Secretary, via Zoom.

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11 **Citizens Present:** None.

12 **Call to Order**

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15 Chair Hugh Quinn called the meeting to order at 6:35 p.m.

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17 **Agenda Item 1, Approve November 18, 2024 Meeting Minutes**

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19 Cathy moved and John seconded a motion to approve the November 18, 2024 minutes. Hugh asked
20 if there were any changes to the minutes and there were none. Hugh noted they were likely a record
21 for the shortest meeting minutes, as well as the meeting. A vote was taken, and the minutes were
22 approved, as written.

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24 **Agenda Item 2, Citizens' Comments**

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26 There were none.

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28 **Agenda Item 3, Nominate Assistant Zoning Administrator for SB Appointment**

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30 Statute that says whenever an administrative officer, and in this case, a zoning administrator, is
31 going to be appointed, the position must be nominated by the Planning Commission. A copy of
32 the statute was included in their packet, along with a document that describes policy and guidelines
33 in which the position would have its authority as assistant zoning administrator. This agenda item
34 was to nominate an assistant zoning administrator to take to the Select Board and they could
35 appoint so Preston could go on vacation in March. John nominated Hugh Quinn for assistant
36 zoning administrator. There were no other nominations. A vote was taken and the motion carried,
37 unanimously. Preston said not only did an assistant need to be nominated by the Planning
38 Commission but there had to be a clear policy, which he drafted, and Julie approved. Preston didn't
39 think it required the commission's approval but wanted them to see it. March 7 to March 31 is
40 Preston's vacation and they thought having Hugh in place as assistant was a good idea. Cathy
41 wondered if the commission was able to make policy. Preston said they could recommend it, and
42 it would be in the packet for the Select Board to see it was straightforward and nothing radical.
43 Preston thought the statute didn't want confusion about who could issue permits. There was a point
44 where the zoning administrator tells the assistant they're it and then where they tell them they're

1 not anymore. Barre wondered if Preston would be available if they had an emergency. Preston said
2 he would have internet access while away, but Hugh hoped he would not need to call Preston.

3
4 **Agenda Item 4, Overview of upcoming PC initiatives.**

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6 Jeff Holden and John Cummings are up for reappointment in March. Jeff will re-up, but John will
7 not be due to other commitments. John apologized and noted he enjoyed his time on the
8 commission. Hugh said they would miss his level-headed logical thinking.

9
10 Hugh said they would be looking at town plan updates which didn't need to be updated for a couple
11 more years. Preston agreed that the plan didn't need to be approved until the fall of '28 which takes
12 a year to go through the whole process of public hearing and approval by the Planning
13 Commission; public hearing and approval by the Select Board; and public hearing and approval
14 by the Regional Planning Commission, so it felt like the time that they needed to get going.
15 Municipal Planning grants from the state pay the Regional Commission to assist Chester. Chester
16 has discussed applying for it and it probably won't be launched until this fall, giving them two
17 years to work on the town plan. Preston said the current plan was minimal and he wanted it to be
18 nicer and thought getting it out sooner than later was a good thing. Hugh and Preston had discussed
19 improving the town plan in a way that could make it more meaningful for the community in terms
20 of its content and presentation, so it was more relevant. Preston said, in theory, it should be about
21 the aspirational things they want to do in town. Preston said some towns have done a magazine
22 format with two columns, photographs, and illustrations and Chester could make it more exciting
23 if they chose to. Barre said he was part of the last town plan and thought it was more cut and paste
24 oriented and involved emergency services. Barre said it was nothing aspirational and was more
25 matter of fact. Barre thought having something on the website that was more exciting, and like a
26 country club, would be helpful because people join for what it has to offer. Barre noted people
27 who aren't born in a town choose to live there for what it has to offer. If they were thinking of
28 moving to Chester, they could read about what it has to offer in the town plan or on the website.
29 Hugh agreed. John compared it to a sales presentation or pamphlet. Barre wondered if there were
30 kids at the technical school who were into graphics and would want to be involved. Hugh said both
31 he and Preston had discussed with Julie whether the town plan could be more about what the town
32 has to offer and how to draw people in, which is related to a discussion they've all had about how
33 Chester is approaching economic development and attracting people. Julie has been pressured by
34 people in the community about what is being done for economic development. In response, Julie
35 is considering establishing a dedicated economic development group that would report to the
36 Select Board and include financing, marketing, and businesspeople. Julie didn't view that as being
37 the responsibility of the Planning Commission. Preston agreed and said the Planning Commission
38 and statute has broad discretion and most commissions update zoning and the town plan. Preston
39 said an economic commission would include legal, banking, and economic development expertise.
40 Preston didn't disagree with it and thought having two years to work on the town plan would result
41 in a good plan, but they wouldn't end up being Chester's next economic development commission.
42 Hugh agreed. Preston compared it to why the Housing Commission was formed rather than having
43 the Planning Commission be responsible. Barre wondered if they had the depth of resources on
44 the Planning Commission to address economic development and thought it might be better to bring
45 people in and add onto the Planning Commission rather than start something new, but he noted he
46 wasn't the Town Manager and didn't know who might want to be involved and agreed it could be

1 a be a better way to do it. Barre didn't know what was happening with the Housing Commission
2 and wondered if they were gaining ground. Hugh said he doesn't possess the skills nor desire in
3 economic development and wasn't good at it and thought the same may apply to others on the
4 Planning Commission. Hugh thought they needed another set of skills to make it successful. The
5 next step in moving forward was to get the right set of skills engaged. Hugh said the different
6 commissions have a relationship with each other to accomplish things. Barre mentioned a town he
7 was familiar with in Minnesota and visited recently which had been redone and said someone with
8 a vision and a plan made it happen. Since Barre has lived in Chester, he hears a lot of talk but
9 didn't think anything ever happened. Barre saw economic development as a diamond on a facet
10 for part of the town. Barre suggested parking could be reconfigured in front of the Town Hall and
11 gave that as an example of things that could change. John said he and his wife used to regularly
12 go downtown to shop, eat, and go to the bookstore when they first moved to Chester but now, they
13 go to Bellows Falls, which has everything they're looking for. John said someone was doing
14 something right in Bellows Falls that was attracting people and he mentioned some people were
15 thinking of moving there because they spend so much time there. John didn't see a lot of interest
16 happening on the Green. Barre said Robert McBride has a ton of money from the arts council to
17 bring arts and culture to Bellows Falls and said there was so much more money riding down Route
18 103 than going through Bellows Falls but Bellows Falls can get people to go there. Barre said it's
19 frustrating because he lives right on Route 103. Barre said he has good ideas but somewhat lacks
20 follow-through and saw economic development as a facet of a bigger plan. Barre said if they don't
21 make the leap, he may have to go out on his own. Hugh didn't think there was any good idea that
22 could help Chester, that is something they can't work on because it can only be tackled in economic
23 development. Hugh thought they could identify good things for Chester and help move them
24 forward. Hugh said since they've gotten the bylaws done, there's time to do those things. Hugh
25 said he didn't have any good ideas so someone else would need to. Barre said when they have a
26 functional team, they need people to do different things. Hugh agreed. Barre said Hugh has good
27 communication and leadership skills. Barre said some people think Chester is too artsy and tourists
28 aren't needed, which he disagrees with and pointed out that tourists spend money locally but aren't
29 a tax burden on the town. Barre couldn't understand why Chester didn't take advantage of the
30 tourism that comes through and had contacted Johnson & Wales to see if a building and housing
31 were provided, if they would send their students here to operate a restaurant and he was told they
32 would. Barre pointed out that Chester would need to have a building and housing to offer. Barre
33 thought with some effort, Chester could address what was lacking. Barre said Springfield is
34 blasting Facebook and there's a program in the old school that receives \$3 million annually and
35 thought Chester could do something like that. Grafton has a Foundation. Weston has arts and
36 culture and arts council money. Bellows Falls is benefitting, and Springfield is too, and Chester is
37 missing out was the way Barre saw it. Preston said they would need to do a bylaw update this
38 summer because Act 250 law requires it and told Barre the town plan was a way to get at some of
39 the things that Barre wanted to do. Barre thought the Planning Commission should have a vision
40 for the town and if Hugh wasn't a visionary guy, it didn't mean they couldn't do those things.
41 Barre thought he was doing a better job controlling himself but said he wasn't getting heard and
42 being respected. Barre thought some people were arrogant and thought they were better or were
43 too slow to keep up and he found it frustrating. Hugh didn't think anyone disagreed with the facts
44 that Bellows Falls and Springfield had something happening. Hugh said there were towns doing
45 things and some people may say the same wasn't happening in Chester and Hugh didn't think even
46 Julie would disagree with it fundamentally. Hugh wondered what it took to start doing the same

1 things in Chester. Hugh thought if they could figure it out, people would like that. Hugh said there
2 was a group of constituents who believe they don't need to worry about tourism but rather build
3 up light industry and trades. Hugh questioned if they survive on building and trades or tourism and
4 thought it was probably both and there were people who would argue for both sides. Barre offered
5 \$100 more a year than previous renters and rented the field by the Legion, had his festival there,
6 and then people were upset because he didn't clean it up. Now nobody was utilizing it. Barre said
7 in a town the size of Chester, you deal with a lot of different personalities, and it seemed the people
8 who complained the most got what they wanted. Barre said if they were going to do something,
9 they should be considerate of people's opinions but still able to run things through. Barre wasn't
10 sure they could do much. John mentioned the Starry, Starry Night event in December and how
11 much his wife was looking forward to next year's event. Barre wasn't sure how things like that
12 were communicated and John thought they relied on word of mouth, which was a problem. John
13 didn't think there was any official communication, and his wife had stumbled on it. Barre said the
14 Fall Festival made him upset because it was now non-profit with closed board meetings and he
15 feared that if experienced board members stepped down from the board, they would lose that
16 experience. John added that it was a great event. Barre said if they're able to have more success in
17 any way, the next Lee Whiting may pop out of the group and people like that are able to give more.
18 Barre said he wanted people to be successful and would help them get there.

19
20 Hugh wanted to make it clear that the Planning Commission wouldn't be the economic
21 development hub but added that they were also not relegated to only work in the traditional
22 Planning Commission Lane. Hugh wanted the commission to have enough latitude to take on a
23 good idea and see where it could go and didn't want to limit them. Barre thought having an open
24 mind to possibilities was all he wanted, and Hugh agreed. Hugh said they covered all the economic
25 development-related ideas.

26
27 Act 181 is all about some of the work being done to think about refactoring Act 250. They have
28 been in discussions with Jason at Regional Planning, and they must update regional plans along
29 with the future land use maps, which are part of their mandate. That work will make some changes
30 to Chester's potential future land use map, who is mandated to update regional plans, and that
31 work will make changes to Chester's maps and maybe town plan and bylaws because they will
32 look at things as they relate to categorizing different parts of town to reduce the Act 250 regulations
33 in the spirit of additional housing.

34
35 It's also possible the Select Board will ask the Planning Commission to do a deep dive on quarrying
36 in Chester and whether they want to do that. Nothing in the bylaws is ever perfect or done, so Hugh
37 maintains a list of updates and things they missed or should be tweaked and what he identifies as
38 routine maintenance rather than waiting years to address it. Barre said the reality of turning an idea
39 into something that can happen isn't easy and the opportunity to kick an idea around would be
40 welcomed. Barre thought he may have the next real factory that produces a product in town and
41 that was what he was attempting to do. Hugh said ideas can form how they want the town plan to
42 shape up and is a way to get grant money and support. Barre said he's also putting performance
43 space in his building and there were a lot of things happening culturally. Barre said Robert
44 McBride ended up purchasing a lot of buildings with grant money that he now owns, and he
45 wondered how legal that was, but Robert had amassed a lot of wealth from it and it also helped the
46 town. Barre said they needed someone like Robert who would do that.

Agenda Item 5, Adjournment

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3 Barre moved to adjourn, and John seconded the motion. A vote was taken, and it passed
4 unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 7:38 p.m.

DRAFT