



## **Committee on Community Resources and the Northampton City Council**

### Committee Members:

*Chair: Councilor James Nash*

*Vice-Chair: Councilor Alex Jarrett*

*Councilor Karen Foster*

*Councilor John Thorpe*

### **Meeting Minutes**

**Date: November 15, 2021**

**Time: 5 p.m.**

**Virtual Meeting Via Zoom**

1. **Meeting Called to Order and Roll Call.** At 5 p.m. Councilor Nash convened the meeting. Present were Councilors James Nash, Chair; Alex Jarrett, Vice-Chair; Karen Foster and John Thorpe. Also present were Office of Planning and Sustainability (OPS) Assistant Director Carolyn Misch and Administrative Assistant Laura Krutzler.
2. **Announcement of Audio/Video Recording**  
Councilor Nash announced that the meeting was being audio and video recorded for later broadcast on Channel 15.

Councilor Jarrett read the description of the jurisdiction of the Community Resources Committee.

3. **Public Comment**  
Councilor Nash said that if people were interested in speaking to a specific agenda item they might want to save their thoughts and questions for that discussion because they would then have the opportunity to interact with councilors and Ms. Misch. He opened the floor to general comment. There being none, he moved to the next agenda item.
4. **Updates and Announcements from Committee Members**  
None.
5. **Approval of Minutes of October 18, 2021**  
Councilor Jarrett moved to approve the minutes of October 18, 2021. Councilor Foster seconded. The motion passed unanimously 4:0 by roll call vote.
6. **'Big Picture' Zoning Discussion with Assistant Planning Director**  
Councilor Nash thanked Councilor Jarrett for helping to organize the meeting. Ms. Misch will review recent zoning initiatives, provide a brief update on the incorporation of the Community Resilience and Regeneration Plan into the Sustainable Northampton Plan and share details of initiatives to be introduced in the near

future, he related. The meeting is intended to provide a picture of what the city has done over the last decade, where it is now and where they see themselves in the years ahead.

The Planning Board will hold a public hearing on November 18, 2021 to discuss the merger of the Climate Resilience and Regeneration Plan and other items into the Sustainable Northampton Plan, so there will be another opportunity to be part of a public hearing process around that topic, he advised.

Ms. Misch thanked councilors for the opportunity to share the background for zoning ordinances they've been working on and other tools to support implementation of the Sustainable Northampton Plan.

For context, Ms. Misch explained that zoning comes on the heels of planning; it is not a stand-alone activity but one of many tools to support and implement a long-range plan. Starting with the adoption of the Sustainable Northampton Plan in 2010, a group of residents helped to roll out the first set of regulatory changes to implement it, relating mostly to zoning. Other ways plans can be implemented are through actions like the acquisition of open space and investment in infrastructure. It is really about addressing the policy document that's been adopted.

After 2010 and zoning to implement the plan related to land use changes, there was a big slug of changes related to land use rules and regulations to address housing and housing needs in Northampton, Ms. Misch continued. In 2013/2014, many changes related to housing were introduced which were supported by data that came out of a housing needs assessment done by the Northampton Housing Partnership. After that, other planning documents and studies resulted in the adoption of further regulatory changes; in particular, the barriers to fair housing report, a deep dive into where the city is lacking in housing, what the issues are and who's being left out of the housing market. The report was not just about subsidized affordable housing but about housing to meet the needs of people across the housing spectrum. It gave a picture of Northampton's population, leading planners to look hard at additional zoning proposals to start down the path of correcting issues of equity in housing and where housing is located. These were adopted by the City Council earlier this year.

On a parallel track to some of the housing changes, in 2021 the city adopted the Climate Resilience & Regeneration Plan, one component of the Sustainable Northampton Plan. This provided a more detailed look at data about energy, including where the city's biggest carbon foot print is and what factors are contributing to the greatest amount of greenhouse gas emissions. They are working now to ramp up regulations - zoning, Stormwater and other regulations throughout the city code - to meet target goals for carbon reduction and get to carbon neutrality by 2050.

A lot of changes address zoning-caused income and equity disparities, she said. Other goals are to direct housing/economic development to existing infrastructure and encourage a wide range of housing types while at the same time recognizing the important functions and characteristics of existing neighborhoods, guiding the physical character of development and implementing the climate regeneration plan. Zoning adopted this year focused on expanding the opportunities for housing and providing not only affordable but attainable housing. The City Council adopted an allowance for two-families to be developed everywhere in the city and not just in the core neighborhoods, allowing people more choice for renting and sharing costs of housing in all neighborhoods in Northampton. It also adopted a local affordable housing ordinance that tries to break down some of the difficulties non-profit affordable housing developers have in obtaining permits under M.G.L. Chapter 40B. The council also adopted zoning creating incentives for people to build smaller units in and around downtown and Florence center, creating the ability to build more small units.

The other piece of the puzzle is trying to expand and ease the ability to build multi-family housing from the ground up in downtown and Florence center.

Through the Climate Resilience and Regeneration Plan process, a lot of data was collected about where the greatest climate impacts are, Ms. Misch reported. They know that in Northampton commercial buildings have the most significant emissions rate followed by the transportation sector. Residential buildings lumped in with commercial buildings is the largest sector affecting their ability to achieve carbon neutrality. Moving forward, they will be working on ways to implement elements of the Community Resilience and Regeneration Plan by: 1) continuing to push for electrification of buildings, 2) expanding the units allowed on already-developed lots to increase development in areas near transportation, 3) optimizing walking opportunities by creating amenities to make it more pleasant and safe to walk places and 4) increasing the percentage of people living within walking distance of downtown, Florence Center, Bay State, Leeds, Village Hill and King Street.

This is the framework for most of the zoning changes that will be moving forward, she concluded.

In addition, plans call for looking at building and transportation energy use and how to reduce consumption in those areas. Building and transportation are closely linked, she noted. Even for an energy efficient, net zero building with solar panels on Sylvester Road, it is still a three-mile trip to get to Florence Center or downtown. The same type of energy efficient structures downtown or in Bay State would result in a much greater overall reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, she pointed out.

Planners are looking at form-based code for downtown Florence and Northampton. Among other things, this would allow multi-family buildings in the downtown center. To this point, they have only allowed multi-family above the first floor and have reserved the first floor for commercial development. However, they think there are supporting blocks around core downtown areas where it makes sense to really encourage that higher density.

Ms. Misch showed a map displaying car density in different areas of town. The yellow spots indicate where there are the fewest cars per household and can be seen to correspond to areas where people have other means of getting around. These core areas have good infrastructure so they need to look at zoning that builds on that and eliminate barriers to housing within those core development areas.

As an example, special permits are now required for multi-family buildings with more than seven units and planners know developers shy away from those permits. The Youth Commission is very interested in writing zoning that would create opportunities for more housing and is especially interested in working on an ordinance to remove this special permit requirement within the URC district.

An ordinance requiring electric vehicle (EV) charging ports is in the pipeline right now as part of an effort to require infrastructure to support non fossil-fuel dependent transportation, Ms. Misch added. Another zoning item planners would like to finally get off the table is a lighting ordinance to require more energy efficient lighting and lower lighting levels to be more compliant with recommendations from the Dark Sky Alliance.

Another idea coming out of the Community Resilience and Regeneration Plan is to create a point system for resilience and regeneration strategies as part of Planning Board approval. Planners have also looked at

modifying URA boundaries and possibly rezoning some URA areas to URB to realign neighborhoods to match their actual build out.

Following the presentation, Councilor Nash opened the floor to questions about the initiatives coming down the pike.

### **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Assistant Director Misch fielded questions on a wide variety of topics. Councilor Jarrett asked if Ms. Misch could talk about steps the city is taking related to historic preservation. He noted that studies he has read indicate that the most climate-friendly building is the one that already exists, even if it needs some upgrades.

The Historical Commission has discussed hiring a consultant to put together a historic preservation plan as an element of the Sustainable Northampton Plan, Ms. Misch advised. This plan will probably recommend objectives or strategies for looking at neighborhoods or historically-significant areas and establish guidelines for preserving structures there.

Adele Franks asked Ms. Misch to clarify the rationale behind the reduced lot line ordinance, and Misch gave a brief background of the most recent amendment in response. The reduced lot line provision is about locating structures on a property with less of a setback than zoning would otherwise allow but also making sure that a more consistent pattern of space between structures on a street is maintained.

Benjamin Weil asked her about any plans to modify existing parking requirements. He also asked what the city is doing to encourage biking, since it requires different amenities and facilities than walking.

Ms. Misch shared recent steps the city has taken to modify parking requirements, including eliminating parking requirements in downtown Northampton for all but two or three uses such as entertainment venues. There are a number of zoning districts for which parking is not required, she shared.

For residential districts, parking is required based on the square footage of the unit with no more than two spaces per unit.

Ms. Misch discussed some of planners' general thoughts around parking. Since Northampton is a pretty low-density community without good bus service beyond its central spine, it is unlikely that parking demand will go away, she pointed out.

As far as facilities for biking, the city has a bike plan to connect those neighborhood that don't have good pedestrian facilities and is investing in off-road and on-street bike connections. When rebuilding streets, a general goal is to include a bicycle-friendly complete street component.

Councilor Jarrett shared some of the strategies for reducing the need for parking discussed in formulating the Climate Resilience and Regeneration Plan. Councilor Foster described the challenges faced by people in her ward who don't have dedicated off-street parking, particularly in the winter.

Christopher Pye expressed some reservations about the reduced lot line ordinance, saying its effect on the neighborhood feels quite different from its intended purpose when it is used by a builder subdividing a number of contiguous lots. In that context, "it feels like [some] community standard is lost," he commented.

He also commented on the seeming contradiction that these multi-lot developments are still treated as single-family units, meaning the city has no ability to regulate the type of heating system or anything else internal to the unit.

Is one of the effects of reduced lot line that they are losing the kind of communal dimensions of what lot lines are supposed to preserve and the ability to have some kind of compensation - environmental or otherwise - for exemptions? He asked.

For the next hour, a wide-ranging discussion took place with comments from Gwen Nadab, Mack Everett, Claudia Lefko, Susan Lofthouse, Elijah Bacal and John Handzel. A speaker identified as "Sarah's iPad" expressed concern about possible unintended consequences from infill development. Even though vehicle trips are reduced by concentrating houses in neighborhoods closer to town, she cited the possibility of an overall increase in carbon emissions if new houses being built are still heated with fossil fuels. She also expressed concern about the inevitable loss of trees due to the construction of more houses. Claudia Lefko identified herself as a long-time opponent of infill development, saying she thought it encouraged people to look at their properties as a commodity. Mr. Everett said he was seeing a trend that a lot of the lots carved out for infill are going to high-end rather than affordable housing.

Pressure on homeowners to maximize the value of their properties is based on city policy, Ms. Lefko asserted. If the city didn't have the infill policy, she and others would only have the ability to sell a small house on a large lot. Because their lots are now developable, their value is very different.

John Handzel told those present that, as a spec builder, he builds what buyers want. If they told him they wanted electric heat and mini splits; that's what he'd build. However, Ms. Nadab, who has experience working on high end construction in Boston for seven years, said she can attest that there is a market for green construction. "There are buyers who are interested in buying green," she confirmed.

Councilor Nash closed the discussion by reminding listeners that the Planning Board will be holding a public hearing Thursday on the merger of recently-adopted plans into one Sustainable Northampton Plan.

7. Updates and Announcements from Committee Members

None.

8. New Business

None.

9. Adjourn. Councilor Foster moved to adjourn the meeting; Councilor Thorpe seconded. The motion was approved on a roll call vote of 4 Yes, 0 No. The meeting was adjourned at 7 p.m.

Prepared By:

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