



Committee on Community Resources and the Northampton City Council

Committee Members:

Chair: Councilor Garrick Perry

Vice-Chair: Councilor Marissa Elkins

Councilor Alex Jarrett

Councilor Rachel Maiore

Meeting Minutes

Date: January 23, 2023

Time: 5:30 p.m.

Virtual Meeting Via Zoom

1. **Meeting Called to Order and Roll Call.** At 5:33 p.m. Chair Garrick Perry convened the meeting. Present were Councilors Garrick Perry, Chair; Marissa Elkins, Vice Chair, Alex Jarrett and Rachel Maiore. Also present were Dorrie Brooks of Jones Whitsett Architects, Northampton Tree Warden Rich Parasiliti and Administrative Assistant Laura Krutzler.
2. **Announcement of Audio/Video Recording**
Councilor Perry announced that the meeting was being audio and video recorded.
3. **Public Comment**
Councilor Perry opened the floor to general public comment.

Jackie Ballance of Baystate thanked the committee for meeting on Zoom tonight. She said she just liked seeing everyone's face and feeling like she was being seen and heard.

Claudia Lefko said her concern is about the various conversations around neighborhood character and housing that have taken place over some years in various venues, such as the Community Preservation Committee, Historical Commission and Finance Committee. It's coming up in public comment in all sorts of committee meetings. Who is collating all that? She asked. It is also coming up in neighborhood meetings; neighbors are talking to neighbors, sometimes neighborhoods are talking to neighborhoods, associations are talking to the Mayor, etc. What happens to all of that; who is keeping track of it? She wondered.

Her concern is about the Barrett group. Is the Barrett group hired to be an entity that is going to look at all of this; somehow coalesce it all and make recommendations? If that is the case, she wants to express her dissatisfaction because somehow it seems that the city insists on hiring an out-of-town consulting group rather than establishing a city-wide committee of professionals, city officials, academics and the public who could engage with each other and develop a roadmap that's a bit more organic than something from outside the city.

Councilor Perry said her concern was noted and hopefully somebody would be able to get her an answer to that.

4. Updates and Announcements from Committee Members

Tomorrow - Tuesday, January 24th - the Northampton Reparations Committee and the Forbes Library is having a discussion entitled, "Why reparations? Why Northampton? Why now?" on Zoom from 6:30 to 8 p.m., Councilor Perry shared. Guest speakers and panelists include the Reverend Dr. Andrea Ayvazian, Dr. Ousmane Power-Greene, Dan Cannity, and members of the Northampton Reparations Committee.

5. Minutes of December 19, 2022

Acceptance of the December 19, 2022 minutes was tabled since they had not yet been distributed.

6. Discussion of Neighborhood Character, Energy and Sustainability Issues (Building and Trees) as they relate to Housing and its Costs.

Office of Planning and Sustainability Director Carolyn Misch has once again brought a couple of local experts, Dorrie Brooks of Jones Whitsett Architects and Tree Warden Rich Parasiliti, to discuss the topics of neighborhood character and sustainability, Councilor Perry shared.

He opened the floor to comments on this item.

Jacqueline McCreanor identified herself as a life-long Northampton resident. She read a statement calling on all city staff to significantly increase their responsible stewardship of Northampton's precious historic, built and natural resources and to work closely and respectfully with residents toward that end. She proceeded to name a number of what she referred to as "vital goals and objectives regarding housing, our neighborhoods – their design and character – sustainability, as well as civic best practices" which she believes city officials should prioritize:

- ❖ Establishing sufficient and properly-enforced housing infill design standards
- ❖ Ensuring housing infill does not overwhelm existing parking, traffic and stormwater management infrastructure, nor overtax the city's utilities, including water
- ❖ Maximizing protection for healthy and mature trees on both public and private land
- ❖ Creating an official mechanism for Northampton residents to participate in the planning, permitting and construction oversight processes regarding the development of their historic neighborhoods
- ❖ Conservation of green and open spaces
- ❖ Historic preservation at the neighborhood level
- ❖ Creating neighborhood conservation districts (NCD's)
- ❖ Requiring site plan review and special permits for all private developers regardless of lot size
- ❖ Saving their historic, modest, rehab able, moderately-priced, vernacular single-family homes on single lots
- ❖ Honesty, democracy, transparency and accountability in all departments and at all levels of city government
- ❖ Establishing deconstruction ordinances to responsibly deconstruct homes rather than adhering to the existing policy – demolition – which leads to a high carbon footprint in order to cart debris to a landfill in upstate New York since the Northampton landfill is closed
- ❖ Becoming a prominent leader in energy efficiency, renewable energy, deep-energy retro-fitting, sustainability, net zero homes and effective responses and creative solutions to the intensifying climate crisis

- ❖ Upholding and properly enforcing the tenets of the Sustainable Northampton Comprehensive Plan 2021 and the Climate Resilience and Regeneration Plan
- ❖ Prioritizing the construction of low income Chapter 40B affordable housing as well as moderately-priced housing
- ❖ Welcoming new renters and homeowners into their neighborhoods and communities
- ❖ Respecting existing renters and homeowners in their neighborhoods and communities
- ❖ Promoting growth, progress, change and a prosperous, diverse vibrant future for all
- ❖ Promoting Northampton as a historic city and destination

She is a firm believer that they can achieve all these goals and that until city officials agree to work more closely and respectfully with residents, their city will not properly steward its historic built and natural resources to the best of its ability. Let's come together and work together to create the truly sustainable and prosperous future that Northampton and all of its residents deserve, she urged. Let's create a legacy that we can be proud of and support Northampton and its resources so that many future generations can enjoy these same beautiful historic homes, downtown areas, streetscapes and stunning natural vistas.

There being no other comments, Councilor Perry recognized Office of Planning and Sustainability (OPS) Director Carolyn Misch.

Director Misch framed the discussion as the continuation of a conversation from November. At its earlier meeting, the committee fairly thoroughly covered the subject of housing and construction costs with a range of people involved in planning and development, she reminded.

She referred to other questions that have come up, such as what is meant by neighborhood or community 'character' and whether a single new house coming into a neighborhood can be considered to change the character of the neighborhood.

Questions have also come up about energy and sustainability. The Sustainable Northampton Plan has specific goals for decarbonization and conservation, and they also have a housing crisis. One of the biggest ways to reduce their collective carbon footprint is to concentrate development in areas with opportunities for expanded access beyond just single-use automobiles. They know they need to address a transportation and building connection.

She introduced Dorrie Brooks as someone who has worked a lot in the energy field as it relates to design and neighborhood character and therefore able to talk about development from a design and energy perspective. She asked Rich Parasiliti to talk about development in terms of trees and what kind of tree protection and other tools can be incorporated to offset development and create walkable, high-quality of life neighborhoods even if it means removing some trees in town to avoid removing larger swaths of trees in suburban areas where new roads, driveways and other infrastructure are also required.

Dorrie Brooks introduced herself as a principal of Greenfield-based Jones Whitsett Architects. She lives on Federal Street in Baystate and happens to be president of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) of Massachusetts. While not officially speaking on behalf of her profession, she has some insight into its positions and policies on neighborhood development, carbon emissions and building codes. Their firm, which has been in the valley for 35 years or more, was predominantly school-focused for a long time but, over the last 11 or 12 years has shifted to more of a focus on housing. As a Northampton resident, she was particularly interested in the zoning bylaw changes that happened maybe 15 years ago. She got involved in

a 'small lots/big ideas' competition that took place, then got involved with Habitat for Humanity in exploring small infill development opportunities in the city as a way of showcasing what was possible.

Behind all of this conversation is the understanding that, as a society, they have essentially been living off of borrowed time relative to the environment; basically using oil and natural gas to support a lifestyle that is pretty difficult to afford for their climate and environment. They have hit a point in history where they are having to make harder and harder decisions. This can be seen in infill development debates where the cost of housing is up against the need for housing, which is up against the need to improve the quality of the building so that it doesn't lose energy unnecessarily. All of this is creating a stew of conflict and their neighborhoods and their city are facing a lot of the same conflicts the whole country is facing.

She got into architecture because she was living in Madison, WI, a very progressive, environmental city, and, in that city, there was suddenly infill pressure when some public property was going to be sold and her neighborhood reacted in a hostile, anxiety-provoked way against what was happening. It became a very adversarial relationship which could have been detrimental to the city as a whole, but they were lucky that the city had invested in neighborhood organizers as a means to strengthen its neighborhoods. Rather than bringing in outside consultants as Claudia Lefko mentioned, this organizer did a good job of helping facilitate an internal conversation about broader issues so that instead of being afraid of what was happening in their neighborhood, they came to a larger understanding of what was needed in the community. Over a number of years, they ended up developing the parcel into co-housing projects and community gardens. They had to first own some of their hostilities and own each other's issues. That's what got her interested in architecture and why her firm thinks of themselves as community builders rather than just architects. She is interested in not just offering design solutions but in seeing people work together to figure out design solutions.

She said she wanted to share her perspective as an architect and some of the ways architects are looking at these issues today as well as some of the regulatory pressures they face.

In this committee, they talk about regulating the shape and form of zoning, or the streetscape. Another area of regulation that they collectively control is the building envelope through building codes, she pointed out.

She shared an image of 17th century Rome. The so-called Nolli Plan shows the difference between the open and closed spaces of the landscape - the closed space being what's inside the buildings and the open space being everything in between. In a way, planners have always been engaged in talking about things in between (i.e. - the open space of parks, the streetscape and the sidewalk). The question is where does that regulatory boundary end between the open space and the front stoop and the wall?

To some degree, the question of neighborhood character is what feels good in between and how they balance that in a way that preserves a sense of community while respecting individual rights to privacy and self-governance, she suggested.

Ms. Brooks showed an image of Northampton, noting that the green areas of the map are permanently-protected open space, the areas which the City Council has the greatest amount of control over.

From these large open space areas all the way to the edge of the sidewalk and the street are the territory they are talking about.

It is interesting to her because one of the reasons she loves the city is because of the open space that has been permanently protected here.

What city planners talk about is the idea that they have a kind of gradient from the open space all the way to the sidewalk. "We want walkability, we want parks, we want sidewalks," she related.

In Baystate, they have a certain amount of open space between buildings but they don't have sidewalks.

Within individual lots, the state actually influences a lot of what happens within the walls of buildings. From the building wall in and from the building wall to the street front is what property owners control and the question is how much they as city officials or any jurisdiction is going to try to regulate those decisions.

Historically in the US, they have tried to shy away from governance over decisions such as the form of the house, how the front door sits, where the kitchen is located, etc.

Redlining is a history of exclusionary mechanisms to try to limit certain things happening in neighborhoods which has led to problems people may or may not have anticipated. The AIA's position has been to strongly try to shy away from that kind of overregulation because it will limit the development of housing that is sorely needed and because of the history of how such exclusionary zoning practices have either led people to feel unwelcome or raised the cost. Even historic preservation districts are sometimes controversial because they can almost immediately raise the assessed value which can then make them exclusive.

Mores and social preferences for housing design are constantly changing over time, she noted. She gave the example of kitchens in the past being placed in a distant part of the house as sort of a service area while they are now featured prominently as the heart of many homes.

With regard to energy issues, the Massachusetts building code has only existed since 1975, so all the homes built before 1975 were built when there was no building code in place. Since 1975, there have been nine additions to the building code. Each one has increased the expectations on design and construction relative to things like energy and safety. Each time the code is updated it becomes a little more complex for architects and engineers and a little more expensive.

Regulators have updated codes for good reason and the energy and stretch codes are good examples of why the code is valuable. The stretch code was initiated in 2009 and updated in 2023 with a municipal opt-in code added in 2023.

With the stretch code, what they have been trying to do collectively is to reduce energy waste.

"You can't compare the design of a building built in 1910 or 1940 to a home built in 2023, because they're built to entirely different standards," she commented. This has an impact not only on the cost of the house and the energy use of the house but, ultimately, on the form of the house.

She cited changes to the maximum HERS index as an example.

The HERS rating is a rating that measures the energy conservation level of a home. Under the stretch code, builders typically have been aiming for a HERS rating of 52 for residential construction. Under the

new opt-in stretch code effective July 1, 2024, that target is dropping 10 points to 42 for 20% better energy conservation in new construction.

What that means is that builders have to actually construct the walls differently to keep the house and roof and floors as sealed as possible.

Her home in Baystate is a 1940's home built prior to the building code with four-inch (4") studs with zero insulation. She has spent years trying to get it to the point where she could achieve that kind of rating and she could not. Even with over a \$100,000 investment in insulation and solar panels, she could not have achieved the HERS level for new construction. Older homes just do not have the wall thickness available to them for insulation. She would have to build inward or outward.

It's influencing how builders build because they are trying to meet this standard and it is pushing up costs. The fact that new construction doesn't seem satisfactory aesthetically is also impacted by these requirements and efforts to meet these higher standards

She shared an image provided by Jackie Ballance entitled, "170 Federal Street Doesn't Fit." One of the tensions expressed in Baystate around new construction is that the area between buildings so important to a neighborhood's sense of character is being unnecessarily disrupted. This is occurring partly because of the pressure on builders to meet a market desire for single-family homes while also meeting the higher energy requirements of new construction, she suggested.

It may be a false comparison to compare the new houses on Federal Street to the older home since it was built in a time when there was no requirement for insulation. The ideal of building houses to the scale of the older home that are as energy efficient and affordable as newer construction is going to be very difficult, she opined.

"I think it's an important conversation you're trying to have about how we balance these things," she confirmed.

Ms. Brooks ended her presentation and Councilor Perry opened the floor to comments and questions from councilors and the planning director.

Councilor Maiore said she is finding this fascinating. She asked if she is saying that to make houses more energy efficient they actually have to be physically larger to make the walls thicker.

She is trying to be empathetic to the traditional builder who is trying to meet a market need for certain amenities within the home while also trying to meet the requirements of the building code, Dorrie explained. The average 1,800 square foot home now has to have thicker walls and a thicker foundation baked into the design.

Director Misch weighed in to say that what's important to understand is that, in order to get them out of this housing crisis, developers are the ones who are going to be building these homes. In setting rules about who can develop what, when and where and who decides, they don't want to go back to the days of exclusionary practices. One of the things try to do in the regulations is to create a balance and generally establish a framework for what the community decides is important for form and design and the intersection between the street and private space. Part of it involves thinking about the gaps and the rhythm along the

street. They know that neighborhoods are not uniformly built out so that the space between houses on one block may be different from the space between houses just down the block. Does that mean that if a multi-family then comes into that space it changes the nature and the character of the neighborhood? She asked rhetorically.

Dorrie was part of a conversation several years ago about looking at two-family design guidelines, Misch reminded. She thought it would be helpful to hear from her the distinction between building design and neighborhood character. Does the design of a building really affect the neighborhood character and how?

Most architects generally frown on strict design guidelines because they find it really constraining for clients who have a range of preferences and interests, Ms. Brooks shared. But that doesn't mean that they don't look to and try to relate to the appearance of the neighborhood. "Scale does matter a great deal for architecture," she confirmed. They try to fit within the scale.

She expressed her understanding that what's being asked of them as residents is that they accept some level of compromise in order to enable larger goals to be achieved.

Yes, is a compromise to have a private lot developed in a way to create a second home but it allows infill that creates a home that supports the city as a community, protects open space and promotes walkability. She agrees that they want to preserve a sense of character, but to her that character matters more on a form and open space level than on the level of a specific design.

They all have to own the larger agenda that they set out as a community, she proposed.

Regarding historic character, the point she is trying to make is that it can be a bit of an illusion to think they can produce homes of a different period when the standards and mores of society, building technology and the cost of materials are so different today. She thinks imposing this 'historicist ideal' would be making restrictive conditions that would make it difficult to create homes for people.

RETROFITTING EXISTING HOMES

Councilor Elkins asked Ms. Brooks to talk more about retrofitting existing homes. It's been suggested that with the associated costs of demolition and additional burden to the landfill and solid waste disposal system, retrofitting is obviously more efficient. It seems to her that the costs are obviously a great deal more for new construction. She wonders her thoughts on whether they could ever achieve with retrofitting what they could with new construction.

The demolition and carting stuff off and waste and carbon usage associated with getting rid of the demolished home is another part of the equation, Councilor Elkins suggested.

She is actually somewhat irritated by this stretch code because it is so focused on electrification and so inadequately focuses on carbon, Ms. Brooks shared. In pushing electrification, they are pushing everything off assuming that the grid eventually is going to become carbon neutral, and right now it isn't.

"So we're putting everything on electrification to solve the problem." But they haven't really done anything to acknowledge the carbon value of existing properties.

This new stretch code is the first time regulators have ever required some existing buildings to meet some of the new requirements, Ms. Brooks advised. Architects expected to see a real push for renovation at this point because the cost of new construction is so high. But the code push is going to have the opposite effect because it's actually going to make renovation so costly. It is so costly to achieve some of the energy goals in buildings built in the 1950's and 1960's that it is cheaper to tear them down, she acknowledged. What would help is if the carbon value embodied in those buildings was valued in their tax assessments. The AIA is working really hard to advocate for legislation to create more incentives for renovation and disincentives to demolition.

She agrees those are issues that need to be addressed to make more of an incentive to preserve existing buildings.

Councilor Elkins asked if she sees a role at the municipal level for things that can be done as opposed to at the state and federal level.

She advocates strongly at the state level, Ms. Brooks related. One of the reasons she has been frustrated by the stretch code and opt-in specialized code is that they have created a regulatory environment in which there are too many different regulations. The Housing Choice Initiative exists as a policy now to try to constrain each individual community's ability to regulate housing development in such an individualistic way; town by town.

The more they do at the state level to develop consistency, the better.

One might argue that Northampton by being a progressive community that has regulated a lot has added to the cost difference with other communities. All those things together do make it a more expensive place to live, she confirmed.

She is in favor of the stretch code and energy code requirements but they have to own what that means. There are costs associated with these things and constraints and a need for compromise. If what they are trying to do essentially is form successful communities in an age in which they are trying to avoid destroying the planet, they have to be willing to compromise as a community, she concluded.

TREE WARDEN PRESENTATION

Rich Parasiliti identified himself as a 30-year employee of the DPW, the Tree Warden since 2014 and chair of the city's Urban Forestry Commission (UFC) as well as superintendent of the DPW's Forestry, Parks and Cemeteries Division. Prior to becoming a UFC commissioner he worked closely with the UFC on all matters related to public shade trees and the city's urban tree canopy. The UFC has worked collaboratively with the Office of Planning and Sustainability (OPS) on multiple zoning ordinances related to trees (**§**350-12.3 Significant tree ordinance, among others) and developed a series of public safety regulations to help enforce M.G.L. 87. They have done a lot of work in a very short period of time considering that when he first came here in 1989 there was no urban forestry program or tree protection measures and the city was doing minimal tree replacement.

Director Misch and Mr. Parasiliti talked about the tree replacement program for replacing trees within the public right of way. Developers removing trees of a certain size are required to replant or make a payment into the city's tree fund, which is then used to replace trees which have been removed along public streets. Part of creating more walkable neighborhoods is replacing shade trees so it becomes a more pleasant

experience for people in the community to walk. Planners know it is much less likely for people to use other modes of transportation if streets are in the blazing sun and don't have protection from the elements.

Mr. Parasiliti talked about the importance of preserving the tree canopy and viewing each tree as an essential piece of infrastructure just as important as a water hydrant or telephone pole.

Councilor Jarrett departed at 6:56 p.m.

In the final 25 minutes, Councilor Perry reopened the conversation to the public and allowed presenters to respond to additional comments from Claudia Lefko, Max Everett, Jacqueline McCreanor, Jackie Ballance and developer John Handzel.

7. New Business

Councilor Perry said he would like to bring in some representatives from the Northampton Vibrancy Project to talk about ideas for dealing with the issue of empty storefronts.

8. Adjourn. Councilor Elkins moved to adjourn; Councilor Maiore seconded. The motion carried 3:0 by roll call vote with Councilor Jarrett absent. The meeting was adjourned at 7:22 p.m.

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