

MINUTES
Durham Housing Task Force
March 11, 2024
10:00 am – Council Chambers

Housing Task Force members present

Sally Tobias, chair
Charlotte Hitchcock – on Zoom
Chuck Hotchkiss, Council Rep
Michael Mulhern (“Michael M”) – on Zoom
Eileen Murphy
Paul Rasmussen, Planning Board Rep
Michael Saputo (“Michael S”) – on Zoom
Judith Spang

Others Present

Michael Behrendt, Town Planner (“Michael B”)
Nick Taylor advisor, Workforce Housing Coalition
Mimi Kell, Golden Goose Property

Members of Public

none

Call to order 10:03am

Approve Agenda with the addition of Community Outreach Planning

Paul makes a motion
Chuck seconds
Approved by roll call

Public Comments

none

Reports from Committee Members and Advisors:

Planning board (Paul): A range of feedback at the planning board hearing. There were only a few “yes, let’s do it” comments. Most were in opposition.

Sally: a lot of people who supported the amendment were new, which is impactful.

Judith: how many supporters were there?

Paul: 8-10 people commented, about a third were in support. Others were primarily concerned about changes to the entire OR zone.

Sally: The planning board needs to tweak the amendment and we got a good amount of feedback to inform the revisions.

Community (Michael B): There's an Oyster River Community Read panel tonight about housing – 7pm, Durham Public Library

Discussion about Proposed Zoning Amendments for Potential Workforce Housing Project.

Michael B: First part of hearing occurred 2 weeks ago. Second part will be this week. The planning board may choose to close the hearing this week at which point they will work on revising the draft. The new draft will be publicized once complete and there will be more opportunity for public comment.

Sally, Michael B, Chuck: Members of the task force are encouraged to attend and comment as members of the public. If the task force as a whole has anything to say about the amendment, we should make a comment by Wednesday.

Eileen: Review of comments made at planning board meeting in more detail. Many people shared that they felt this was rushed. Why didn't we look at other zone or areas of town where there is more access to transportation? Is this the best locations for workforce housing? It was suggested that we should have done more research and I might agree with that. The overlay district sounds like a good idea and many people mentioned it at the planning board meeting, but I don't fully understand it.

Michael: The overlay district approach does sound like a good way to go, but I believe it should be focused on the OR plus this lot. Regarding whether we should look at the entire town, that is a good idea, but it will take a long time. We have a potential project here, and there may not be infinite amounts of time. There are no other lots in town where we have a potential plan. We could study this longer, but if we expand the amendment we're proposing it will only take longer.

Sally: This process started because the property owner came to us. They could have gone to the ZBA, but they didn't.

Eileen: Why didn't they?

Paul: They couldn't show hardship on this lot. There are so many potential uses.

Sally: The depth of analysis that's required for workforce housing to work in other parts of town is extensive. Moving forward on just this lot allows us to respond to a

unique opportunity and a developer who's interested. But we still have a lot more to do in other areas of town.

Eileen: Where's the guarantee that this amendment will result in the Randolph's developing workforce housing on this lot?

Michael B: An overlay district rather than changing to this OR would eliminate some of the risk. In reality, workforce housing is very hard to do. It would be wonderful if 10 developers were vying to develop workforce housing on this lot, but that's very unlikely. The lot is across from Harmony Homes, the Randolph's have many reasons to buy and develop it. It could go to someone else, but it's very unlikely.

Nick Taylor: Speaking from experience around the region: it's not uncommon for a developer to do whatever they can to try to make it work. When you ask a developer why they come to a certain community, the reasons are because the community is welcoming and flexible in various ways.

Michael B: Michael M might be able to speak to the property in Portsmouth that Service Credit Union is involved with.

Michael M: We're going through a very similar process with a lot in Portsmouth. To Nick's point, there is movement amongst municipalities to take responsibility for workforce housing. And the overlay district is an important consideration. In the future it can be expanded.

Sally: There's a process for making things happen. If the task force didn't exist the Randolph's might have gone directly to the planning board, but because we have this committee, this is the process we've established.

Judith: Echoes that people are feeling rushed. How severe is the timeframe? How long can the Randolph's wait for the Planning Board?

Michael B: We don't know. A lot of revision is needed for the amendment that we proposed. A lot. If we wanted to move to a town-wide amendment, would that take 6 months to 1 year? Maybe? That might not be a problem, but I don't see value in waiting. If another town is more welcoming, the Randolph's could shift their focus in that time.

Paul: We don't know what the Randolph's timeline is.

Michael B: If it takes a couple months I think they'll wait, if we want to push this project back until we get the chance to analyze the whole town, I don't know if they'll wait.

Sally: The next step is for the planning board to revise this. It's their job to make this work, or decide it's not going to. They have the ability to do public hearings and get public input. No matter what we send to them, it would need to go through the public hearing and revision process. This is how it works.

Nick Taylor: To clarify, this is the exact same process that any project would go through?

Sally: Yes.

Eileen: Can the planning board revise the amendment into an overlay district?

Michael B: Yes. They own it now.

Eileen: So what is the role of the housing task force? Why didn't this go directly to the Planning Board?

Paul: As the chair, if the planning board decides to re-write this as an overlay district, that process (creating an overlay district) would take a year.

Chuck: That's probably not true.

Paul: Describes other planning board priorities. An overlay district is going to be a very complicated process.

Michael S: The concerns raised by Judith and Eileen, echoing community sentiment are valid, and we should still bring this to the planning board. We should acknowledge the resistance and criticism and move forward.

Judith: The explanation that "this is how development typically happens," is very helpful. We don't know how development happens.

Michael B: To be clear, this is not rushed. The housing task force got it in the best shape possible, now it will move through multiple necessary steps with the planning board before it moves forward.

Chuck: I do feel some sense of urgency. While it may not have been rushed, developers aren't going to stay in Durham if it doesn't look like we want this. The planning board should prioritize this work. Regarding looking at other places where workforce housing should be allowed: we should look at this incrementally. Down the road we can work through these things. Some community members also seemed to feel that this entire project will move forward if the zoning amendment passes, and that's not the case. This would need to move through all the necessary reviews and approvals just like any other project.

Paul: The planning board will try to prioritize this, but if it requires extensive research, it will be sent back to the Housing Task Force. That is part of the reason for the Task Force. The Planning Board will need support in this.

Michael B: The board could send it back to the Housing Task Force if extensive revision is needed.

Charlotte: If we move forward with this one property, can we later add more places to the an overlay district?

Sally: Yes. There are a lot of things we can do.

Eileen: It still seems like people don't understand our role and what we've been working on.

Paul: Part of the reason I wanted a public hearing is because people only really pay attention to Planning Board public hearings. No one is paying attention to surveys or the task force. When we bring these things to public hearing, people pay attention and give feedback. That was part of the motivation for passing this to the Planning Board.

Sally: In addition, people don't understand zoning. That's a big part of the issue in workforce housing. It's about zoning. We need to emphasize that in our outreach.

Nick: Outreach includes the questionnaires/interviews we've done. This task force has done a lot of work in this area, and even though some folks say this is the first they're hearing, there was some background outreach done.

Michael B: Michael S has put together a summary and highlights of the outreach we completed.

Judith: One thing that doesn't help is that someone mentioned that almost anything could be done on this property if the zone is changed to OR.

Sally: Reads the permitted uses in the OR zone from the zoning ordinance. There are some limitations – it doesn't open this lot up to many extreme types of development.

Michael B: Can I ask Mimi to share her thoughts?

Mimi: I agree that this is the standard process. If a developer is interested, it makes sense for the town to move through this process as swiftly as possible.

Eileen: Why did we include 4 zones in this if it was just about this one lot?

Paul: That was an idea because the other zones also made sense for workforce housing. I wanted to present the broad possibilities, knowing that it could change.

Eileen: That seemed to cloud the conversation. As did the needs assessment. People were taking issue with many things.

Paul/Sally: The nature of planning board hearings is that they are very contentious. That hearing was relatively tame.

Sally: The proposed amendment is essentially a wish list from the Task Force, now we pass it along and the Planning Board decides what to do next.

Eileen: I had hopes the Task Force could move the community towards more friendly agreement on this issue.

Paul: That may be 2 or 3 year out.

Sally: Speaking at the Planning Board might help move us in that direction. Also keep in mind that this amendment is not our only child. Outreach is going to be a big part of our work. We have more to do.

Michael B: A community conversation has started through this proposal. We've given people something concrete to talk about with this project. Over the next few months the community of Durham is going to make a decision on this particular project, and that's how this process happens. This project has a lot of challenges, but talking through them is part of the process.

Nick Taylor: A community consensus is the ideal, and despite the criticisms presented, the vast majority of people at the Planning Board said they support workforce housing. That felt like progress despite all the "buts" that came after those community of support.

Concluding the Outreach Effort to Individuals and Organizations

Michael Saputo: summarized the interview/questionnaire responses. Not sure what to say around the small sample size other than that we tried to get broad input but didn't get large response. Essentially we were only trying to get a pulse from the community.

Paul: If I recall, we did these interviews to gather stories. The response rate from businesses/employers is almost statistically significant.

Judith: Is this enough information to inform our community forum? Was this intended to lead up to our community forum?

Sally: We need to talk about how we're going to approach the community forum, which leads into the outreach plan. Surveys are challenging. It's hard to get people to respond to surveys.

Eileen: Let's ensure we remove names and contact info from the spreadsheet.

Michael B/Michael S: Agree to post a version of the spreadsheet on the Housing Task Force website and put a link in Durham Friday Updates.

Nick: What's the status of the Needs Assessment from RKG?

Chuck: Some town council members had serious concerns about the data and analyses used. They were unsure whether the town and Michael B provided the best available data.

Michael B: Todd and I met with RKG and tried to summarize the town council's concerns. Next I'll get all the feedback packaged up and return that to RKG so they can finalize the report.

Sally: Michael, why did we choose RKG?

Michael B: RKG was started in Durham and has since expanded and moved, but they are highly respected and experienced nationally and locally.

Michael M: RKG was also used by the Portsmouth Housing Authority.

Michael S: Should we ask RKG to add an explanation about why they chose these data sources?

Paul: That information is already in there.

Agreement that we should still meet in 2 weeks to discuss outreach.

Judith Spang leaves around 11:26am

Next Steps for Housing Outreach

Eileen: I'm not sure of the best way to approach this, particularly if hearings are the best way to reach the public. Also want to note that OR Community Read has a number of events on housing that are providing space for community conversation. I referred to the IWMC's outreach for some of this. Publishing something every week in Durham Friday updates seem to make sense. I don't know if there should be listening sessions or presentations.

Paul: Public hearings are for listening. We need to provide information and data to the community.

Sally: Ideas for presentation topics: Discussion of current cost of housing in Durham.
Do you live in workforce housing?

Paul: We should do the calculations on our lot sizes to see what sizes would need to be to make the house/development affordable to the workforce?

Nick: to make these work well there's a combination of listening and presenting data/information.

Michael B: maybe we can use our \$5000 for multiple forums instead of one large forum?

Sally: That would make sense. And simultaneously we continue with Durham Friday Updates.

Michael B: The timing now makes sense while we have a lot of interest currently in the planning board hearing.

Paul/Michael B/Sally/Nick: Discussion of the state RSA on workforce housing.

Sally: We should devote the 3/25 meeting to outreach. And discuss a facilitator using the funding.

Adjournment 11:49pm

Eileen makes a motion

Michael S seconds

All yes.

Approved April 8, 2024