

EAST AMWELL PLANNING BOARD MINUTES
7:30 PM East Amwell Municipal Building
November 12, 2014 - Meeting

Call to Order, Attendance and Pledge of Allegiance

This meeting of the East Amwell Planning Board was opened on November 12, 2014 at 7:30 PM. The following notice was read, "In compliance with the Open Public Meetings Act, this is a regularly scheduled meeting pursuant to the annual meeting notice as published in the January 16, 2014 issue of the Hunterdon County Democrat, a copy of the agenda for this meeting was forwarded to the Hunterdon County Democrat, filed in the Township Clerk's Office and posted on the bulletin board on November 6, 2014."

Present: Roger DeLay
Fred Gardner
Rob Gilbert
Gail Glashoff
Don Reilly
Dart Sageser
David Wang-Iverson
Gail Skupien – Alt. #1
Planner Frank Banisch

Excused: Linda Lenox

Citizens' Privilege to Speak on Items not on the Agenda

Chairman Reilly opened the floor to public comment. Seeing no members of the public come forward, a motion by Gail Glashoff, seconded by Dart Sageser to close to the public was unanimously approved.

Review of Minutes

A motion by Fred Gardner, seconded by Roger DeLay to approve the Board's minutes from 10/8/14 with no revisions noted was approved with Ms. Glashoff abstaining.

New Business – Other

Discussion: The Village Study – Part 2

Chairman Reilly explained that the Township Committee approached the Planning Board about resident concerns they had received regarding the Village District. The Board was asked to reach out to the community to determine what the concerns were and then develop a list a recommendations. Chairman Reilly noted a subcommittee of Planning Board members, Township Committee members and residents of the Village District have been working on the study since March 2014.

Mr. Wang-Iverson provided an overview of the subcommittee's finding noting that there were two visioning sessions along with a survey that was distributed resulting in two main concerns: traffic/speeding and property maintenance.

Chairman Reilly remarked that the format for tonight's meeting will be to review each of the sections of the study, allow the Board's professionals an opportunity to comment and then open to the public for input on each section.

Property Maintenance

Planner Banisch commented that a recurring concern has been expressed by the public related to property maintenance. He noted deteriorating structures and abandoned properties that have been neglected and have fallen into disrepair for decades are an ongoing source of distress for those who live and work in the village. He remarked that part of the objective of the Village Study was to get a better understanding of how the area can be managed into the future as change occurs. Planner Banisch explained that small villages and hamlets are key elements of the countryside that are becoming very attractive to agri-tourism and ecotourism because we live close enough to densely developed major metropolitan areas. He stated, “The question that has to be asked is as change occurs here do we want to be anything different than we are now? Are there certain types of businesses that would round out the complexion of the Village?” He noted that lack of a sewer system limits the size and type of development that can occur.

Planner Banisch remarked that the goal is to make a safe, walkable downtown area that will also engage visitors and tourists. He noted there are currently a handful of commercial uses and a mixture of residential properties and noted there are two approaches to reviewing property maintenance: (1) Allow the Township to do something about properties in disrepair, and (2) Utilize the community spirit that has surfaced and allow volunteers to help homeowners with some of their property maintenance issues.

Mr. Wang-Iverson commented that he believes tax abatements, low interest loans and grants are all very important to consider as well.

Planner Banisch noted that the study does not include any recommendation for a broad based property maintenance code that gets down to the detail of how tall your grass can be. Chairman Reilly remarked that while the Board has heard concerns about such things they have also heard that some property owners are finding it difficult to maintain their property for a host of reasons and the sentiment of the general public was not to harass the community. Chairman Reilly stated that the Board’s philosophy is to address health and safety issues and to tread lightly on nuisance issues such as tall grass.

Mr. Gardner asked if there were any guidelines on the mechanism for property owners to receive tax abatements. Mr. Wang-Iverson commented that Flemington Borough has a tax abatement ordinance. He explained that the way it works is that if a property owner makes an improvement on a property within their Historic District, the value of the improvement is not taxed for 5 years.

Mr. Wang-Iverson commented that he believes Hopewell Township has a program for providing low interest loans to residents but he did not know the details of how the program worked.

The following recommendations regarding property maintenance were noted:

1. In 2015, the Township Committee should consider incentivizing residents with tax abatements on improved property values for qualified residents
2. In 2015, the Township Committee should consider providing low interest loans for qualified residents to assist in building repairs
3. The adoption of a building ordinance based on the International Building Code to address safety issues associated with unfit buildings
4. The establishment of a private community 501-c3 to help fund property maintenance projects
5. The establishment of volunteer groups to assist residents with property maintenance issues

Mr. Gardner commented that there is an established model of community effort depicted in the trail system that has been created throughout the Township and remarked that some type of partially skilled leadership would need to be involved in order to implement a community volunteer group for property maintenance issues.

A motion by Roger DeLay, seconded by Dart Sageser to open to the public for comments on the property maintenance discussion was unanimously approved.

Cathy Cobb of 38 John Ringo Road came forward and stated that a maintenance priority should be sidewalk repair in the Village. She commented that you cannot safely walk from one end of the Village to the other because some of the sidewalks are in complete disrepair.

Kim Ensminger of 1066 Old York Road came forward and asked if the property maintenance repairs would be done with the permission of the homeowner. Chairman Reilly clarified that if there is a safety issue the work may just be done with a tax lien placed on the property. Ms. Ensminger suggested that the Township reach out to the property owner prior to such drastic measures being taken.

Alan George of 47 John Ringo Road came forward and remarked that property values are a concern where abandoned properties exist and he commented that there won't be a lot of voluntary support for wealthy property owners who simply don't maintain their properties.

Lora Olsen of 1123 Old York Road came forward and asked what qualifies a resident for tax abatement? How many houses in the Village are being considered? And who will be doing the inspections? Ms. Olsen remarked that low interest loans will be a problem because theoretically if the property owner cannot afford to make the necessary repairs now they won't be able to pay later.

Mr. Sageser stated that the Building Code Inspector will enforce property maintenance issues and Chairman Reilly remarked that there are no details on how anything will be implemented because at this stage the Planning Board is only making recommendations to the Township Committee.

Cathy Cobb of 38 John Ringo Road came forward again and commented that with regard to the sidewalk repair, the property owner and the Township can both be at fault if someone gets hurt.

Mark Rinker of 5 Melbourne Lane came forward and suggested that the Township try to appeal to the banks commenting that two of the worst properties in the Village are bank owned. Mr. Sageser stated that he thought there was a new law established within the past few months which makes banks more responsible for foreclosed properties.

Seeing no other members of the public come forward, a motion by Fred Gardner, seconded by David Wang-Iverson to close to the public was unanimously approved.

Traffic Calming Techniques

Planner Banisch commented that traffic calming can be accomplished in many different forms and stated that the Township needs to work with the State and County to reform the character of the two major roads running through the Village and to make them more pedestrian and bicycle friendly and then to look at specific recommendations about what might be done to reduce the width of pavement to modify each of the two "Y" angle intersections in the Village.

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The following recommendations to calm traffic were noted:

1. Bumpouts and landscaping to prevent the perception of a wide open road
2. Designated parking areas in the Village along Old York Road
3. Radar speed signs and driver feedback signs

Planner Banisch remarked that the State of New Jersey has adopted a “complete streets” policy which is a theory that states, “We own and maintain a public access network that favors vehicles over people and bicycles and we should be providing realistic opportunities for all users to have reasonable, safe access to the road network.”

Engineer O’Neal expressed that complete streets is a good concept because it encompasses pedestrians, bicycles and vehicles all coexisting in the same space safely. He stated there is virtually nothing the Township can do about the volume of traffic that travels through town and suggested that the Township focus on ways to reduce the speed at which people travel. He noted that once speeds are reduced other things like visually narrowing the road through bumpouts can be helpful. He remarked that in other towns streetscape projects have been done to include sidewalk, parking and lighting modifications which encouraged pedestrian flow. Engineer O’Neal specifically noted beacon lighting at pedestrian crossings effectively slows traffic but said that the State and County would have to approve anything established within the Village.

Chairman Reilly commented that Old York Road is a concern but believes County Route 579/John Ringo Road is the big issue. He remarked that he doesn’t believe the State or the County will think this is an important matter but thinks they should be aware that this is a quality of life issue. Ken Bogan from the County Planning Board was recognized as being present in the public and Chairman Reilly noted that Mr. Bogan had offered to be a liaison between the County and Township. Planner Banisch acknowledged the sidewalk project that was done by the County and thanked Mr. Bogan for the County’s efforts.

A motion by Roger DeLay, seconded by Rob Gilbert to open to the public was unanimously approved.

Terry Golda of 49 John Ringo Road came forward and commented that bumpouts are an excellent idea but stated they create problems with snow plowing. He remarked about the importance of keeping the Black River and Western Railroad bridge in tact because of its natural traffic calming presence.

Chris Cobb came forward and stated she is the owner of Mom’s Restaurant. She noted a big traffic problem in the Village is the cars passing the school buses when they are picking up and dropping off the children. Ms. Cobb explained that she has called the State Police who aren’t addressing the issue and she said she called West Amwell Police who stated they are concerned with their own residents and children at these times of the day. Ms. Cobb commented that rumble strips as a traffic calming technique would not be a noise issue because there are only businesses and abandoned houses in the area of the road where the strips would be installed.

Cathy Cobb of 38 John Ringo Road came forward again and suggested the existing speed limit signs be replaced with new, larger signs and she suggested the roadway be painted with “reduce speed” language to deter speeding. Ms. Cobb also commented on the loss of life that has happened from accidents in town.

Alan George of 47 John Ringo Road came forward again and stressed the importance of the sidewalk repairs for the entire Village area.

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Will Harrison of 4 Larison Lane came forward with a map from the County's 2007 study depicting an island in front of Mom's Restaurant which he explained ultimately was not implemented. Mr. Harrison commented that he thought the concept may be of interest and also stated that he wishes to continue as a Village Study Subcommittee liaison between the Planning Board and the public.

Mark Rinker of 5 Melbourne Lane came forward again and commented that he remembers 32 years ago when the County wanted to slow traffic on Route 31 North.

Cathy Cobb of 38 John Ringo Road came forward again and suggested that the "Ringo Point" be re-established with painted traffic warnings on the roadway.

Dick Ginman of 125 Mountain Road came forward and expressed concerns with the merging and sharp neck turning that driver's have to do in order to safely navigate the intersections in town and suggested a circle configuration may be something the Township should consider. Both Chairman Reilly and Planner Banisch commented that the now retired Director of County Public Works John Glynn had said years ago that there wasn't enough room to construct a traffic circle at the intersections in the Village. Mr. Ginman suggested the Planning Board "think big" and settle for less.

Kim Ensminger of 1066 Old York Road came forward again and commented that the shoulders along the roadways in the Village are not all clearly painted and the situation is unsafe for pedestrians who walk.

Terry Golda of 49 John Ringo Road came forward again and commented on Mr. Ginman's "think big" theory saying that an idea for limiting some traffic in the Village would be to utilize Toad Lane as an alternate travel route.

Seeing no other members of the public come forward, a motion by Fred Gardner, seconded by Rob Gilbert to close to the public was unanimously approved.

Zoning Considerations

Planner Banisch commented that the Village District and the Local Business District are the two zones that make up the historic part of the Village. He noted that there is a longer list of permitted uses in the Local Business District than in the Village District and there is a question as to whether or not the zone lines are appropriately drawn and whether or not the complexion of uses that are currently permitted are in line with cultivating the character of the Village for the future.

Chairman Reilly noted the following recommendations:

1. Update the Old York Pedestrian Plan
2. Review the Circulation Plan Element of the Master Plan
3. Review the permitted uses and possibly expand them to allow for greater flexibility

Chairman Reilly clarified that after reviewing the recommendations, it may be determined that the current footprint of the Village District is adequate or it may be determined that we wish to expand it.

Mr. Wang-Iverson commented that he believes the permitted uses currently allowed in the Village District are very limited. He indicated that during the visioning sessions for the Village Study he got the impression from the residents who attended that they would be amenable to expanding the uses.

A motion by Fred Gardner, seconded by Rob Gilbert to open to the public was unanimously approved.

Lora Olsen of 1123 Old York Road came forward again and asked where the Village District would be expanded and expressed concern with parking. Mr. Wang-Iverson commented that he would like to see more live/work scenarios where a structure has a business on the first floor and a residence on the second floor.

Terry Golda of 49 John Ringo Road came forward again and questioned how many structures in the Village are suitable for live/work opportunities.

Cathy Cobb of 38 John Ringo Road came forward again and remarked that historically there were a few sites in the Village that were live/work properties and she noted: Danbury Chevrolet, A Funeral Home and the current Frank's Pizzeria.

Planner Banisch commented that there is a fine line between where we want to attract business and at what scale. He remarked that without any kind of public water capacity and sewer system we can't really be much more than we are now, we can just be better.

Seeing no other members of the public come forward, a motion by Fred Gardner, seconded by Roger DeLay to close to the public was unanimously approved.

Community Events and Facilities

Planner Banisch stated there has long been a tradition of community events that have made the neighborhood spirit something to celebrate and he suggested trying to increase the number of events that take place.

The following recommendations were noted:

1. Continue engaging in discussions with the County to return the South County Branch of the library back to Ringoes
2. Study abandoned, underutilized and historic structures for possible community uses
3. Identify and promote events that encourage community interaction
4. Investigate the formation of a private, non-profit 501-c3 to promote community self help efforts

A motion by Roger DeLay, seconded by Dart Sageser to open to the public was unanimously approved.

Chris Cobb, the owner of Mom's Restaurant came forward again and offered to donate a \$100 gift certificate to Mom's to the homeowner with the best holiday decorations in the Village. The offer was met with a round of applause by members of the public present at the meeting.

Planner Banisch asked if there are any other comments on anything else that should be covered in the study. Seeing no other members of the public come forward, a motion by Roger DeLay, seconded by Gail Glashoff to close to the public was unanimously approved.

It was the consensus of the Board to ask Planner Banisch and Engineer O'Neal to amend the study to reflect the recommendations and ideas discussed at tonight's meeting and to list the matter on the Board's December agenda for action.

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Chairman Reilly thanked the public for coming to the meeting and expressing some very good ideas and concerns.

Oral Reports

FOSPC – Mr. Gardner noted that FOSPC is currently working on 3 preservation projects: The Ridge Road Assemblage (Pearson, Sporman and Helm properties), the Plimpton property on Rileyville Road and the East Jersey Developers property on South Hill Road.

Agricultural Advisory – Ms. Glashoff reported that the Farm Forum went well and that Ag is planning to host another one in the spring.

Environmental Commission – Mr. Sageser reported that there is increasing public agitation regarding the proposed PennEast Pipeline and they are considering a resolution to prohibit it as well as amending the current ordinance to prohibit fracking.

PB Secretary – No report was given.

Chairman – Chairman Reilly commented that he would like to draft a letter to personally thank each member of the Village Subcommittee.

Open to the Public

Chairman Reilly opened the floor to public comment. Terry Golda of 49 John Ringo Road came forward and asked for clarification on the correspondence listed on the agenda regarding the Scibilia property.

Chairman Reilly clarified it was notification from the County that the subdivision has been finalized.

Seeing no other members of the public come forward, a motion by Rob Gilbert, seconded by Fred Gardner to close to the public was unanimously approved.

Presentation of Vouchers

A motion by Rob Gilbert, seconded by Gail Glashoff to approve the vouchers for payment as listed on the agenda was unanimously approved.

Adjournment

Chairman Reilly adjourned the meeting at 9:45 PM.

Maria Andrews, Administrative Officer