

Richmond Planning Board Meeting
Town Hall
Minutes
May 8, 2017

Members present: Rick Bell, Adeline Ellis, John Hanson, Katherine Keenum, John Vittori
(Chairman)

Mr. Vittori opened the meeting at 6:33 P.M.

1. The minutes of the April 10, 2017, meeting were approved unanimously.
2. Mr. Vittori called on each member of the Board to comment on a possible update of the town's Master Plan.

Ms. Keenum suggested shelving the initiative for the time being on four grounds:

- (a) Under MG.L.c.41§81D, towns were required to adopt master plans (as Richmond did); but the law's lack of a penalty for failure to do so implied that not even the legislature considered it very important.
- (b) The law states that towns may update master plans, but *may* is a verb of choice. Richmond may choose not to update and still be legally compliant.
- (c) It makes sense to wait for the town's Committee on Long-Range Sustainability to report instead of taking up the question of Richmond's future separately.
- (d) The surveys commonly used for drawing up master plans are suspect because questionnaires tend to elicit the answers desired by their framers. They are not reliable predictors of how people will actually vote on an issue at Town Meeting. The most recent case in point was Richmond's 2015 Open Space and Recreation Plan. Anyone reading it would assume that the townspeople endorsed the idea of acquiring Camp Marion White for a park; yet when the proposal was actually put to Town Meeting, it went down to defeat by a vote of 163-130.

Ms. Ellis said that she agreed with what Ms. Keenum had said. She suggested putting aside the Master Plan and urged attention to the more pressing issue of regulating solar energy use.

Mr. Vittori pointed out that the Master Plan and a solar energy by-law were not mutually exclusive. A Master Plan was larger and more comprehensive, and solar energy use could be a part of it. The Board should find out as soon as possible what the Long-Range Sustainability Committee was doing, a key element in determining what role it would play in updating a Master Plan. He noted that the committee had been at work for years without an outcome. (At this point, Mr. Bell reported having asked at the May 6th Baby Town Meeting what the committee's expected outcome was and when it was likely to happen. Selectman Neal Pilson, who serves on the committee, had replied that he expected a report to the town in six months.)

Mr. Vittori observed that, over the years, town committees have been appointed to address issues; they are reactive and leave the Planning Board out of the process. He argued that it was time for the Board to retake active, powerful leadership in the town.

Mr. Hanson said that his first thoughts about attempting to update the Master Plan had been negative. For one thing, Richmond is an agricultural-residential community and many of the law's nine required sections do not, in fact, apply here. Nevertheless, he had come to think that an update could be used as leverage to get something done by the Long-Range Sustainability Committee. Without a driving force, no issue is resolved.

Mr. Bell agreed that solar should be the higher priority but said that he believed the two issues should be worked on in parallel. On the Master Plan, he named five steps he considered important for all Board members to take:

- (a) Understand the requirements in MG.L.c.41§81D.
- (b) Read and digest Richmond's 1996 Master Plan.
- (c) Look at all required sections.
- (d) At the next meeting, give opinions on how accurate each part is.
- (e) If the report of the Committee on Long-Range Planning comes out, it should be considered an input to updating the Master Plan.

A hour-long, free-flowing discussion followed during which repetitions, permutations, and additions were made to the above points. Mr. Bell averred that best practice called for regularly making sure that existing by-laws and a town's master plan are in synch. When Ms. Keenum cautioned that it was hard to stop something once it got started, Mr. Hanson offered the slightly different warning that the Board did not want to start something it could not *finish*. He had learned from the experience of drawing up the 1996 plan that once you get into the process, it is hard to know how to bring it to completion. He noted that some things which are broken cannot be fixed by the Planning Board, and factors like school population changes and the housing market are beyond its control. He offered the idea of a Master Plan Light as an alternative to doing nothing on the one hand or undertaking a full update on the other: hire the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission to go over the existing plan and issue a new version with boilerplate language. Mr. Vittori said that the Board should avoid a passive mindset. Ms. Ellis said that she did not like stale documents and favored eventually updating the Master Plan, but felt respect should be shown for the work that other people were doing. At the end of the hour, the Board accepted Mr. Bell's suggestion that Mr. Vittori feel out Mark Pruhenski, the Town Administrator, for his thoughts on these matters. Mr. Vittori asked for a volunteer to accompany him. He will be joined by Ms. Ellis.

3. The third item on the agenda was the need to regulate residential solar energy use. Mr. Vittori called for a shortened discussion in order to wrap up the meeting by 8:00 p.m. He proposed that the Board spend a couple of meetings exchanging ideas and then draft a new by-law. Mr. Bell suggested that members read the by-laws recently passed in Great Barrington, Mass., and New Lebanon, N.Y. (which he had earlier distributed by e-mail) and be prepared to say what they liked and disliked about each. Ms. Keenum said that since use of solar energy in the face of global warming was a major issue, the Board should seek information from outside sources, such as environmentalists, Eversource, and solar panel installers to learn what they see coming in the industry. Mr. Vittori said that he would speak to Tad Ames, the Executive Director of the Berkshire Natural Resource Council for ideas of who could supply helpful opinions. He proposed that each member gather and share information, after which a committee could be formed to draft a by-law.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:55 p.m.