

**Montpelier Housing Task Force
Meeting Minutes
October 20, 2011**

Attendees:

Jack McCullough, Chair
City Councilor Angela MacDonald-Timpone
Polly Nichol
JoAnn Troiano, Montpelier Housing Authority
Sam Andersen, Central Vermont Economic Development Corporation
Carol Doerflein
Edmar Mendizabal
Ken Russell, Community Development

Jack opened the meeting by initiating a round of brief introductions and then by inviting members to make announcements. Carol announced that she is unlikely to attend the next meeting, but that her colleagues Phil Dodd and John Waldo will likely represent her views well to the task force. JoAnn passed out a document with the imprint of CEDO – Burlington’s community development organization – that is a resource document for landlords, tenants, and municipalities. Jack suggested that the content of the document was put together by Rob MacDougal of the AG’s office over the summer with input from Legal Aid. The website for the document was www.rentalcodes.org. ACTION: Ken will post this document on the Housing Task Force city website.

Jack described an interest to find a form for code enforcement orders for town health officers, and that ideally the state Health Department would provide such a resource and further support.

Ken announced an upcoming meeting of the combined Montpelier Business Loan Fund Committee and Revolving Loan Fund Committee on November 1st at 5:30 PM at city hall. He indicated that City Manager Bill Fraser had suggested that the two committees combine and that committee members seemed to be in agreement with that. The meeting will take place in the City Manager’s conference room.

Angela announced the Community Dinner and preliminary budget meeting for City Council on this coming **Wednesday, October 26th: dinner at 6, meeting at 7**, at the high school, child-care to be provided. She announced that this will be the first round of discussions on the upcoming budget, that it will be an opportunity for the community to discuss the level of service that they would like to have, including emt, fire, and police. She announced that the Barriers to Housing Committee will present its report to council on **November 9th**.

Jack, Polly and others suggested that the work of the Housing Task Force for the year would likely be shaped by the response of the council to the Barriers Committee.

General discussion about the report ensued. Angela suggested that rumors have taken hold about conditions for development in the city and that the quick action with Fred Connor’s building on Stonecutter’s Way indicated that the situation is promising for development. Sam suggested that the rumors have a basis in history including the development of Stonecutter’s Way through the years. Further discussion of the group indicated that this is a good moment for shifting the narrative about development. Also discussed was that – towards the climate for development -- there is a good diversity of sectors in town, a “great mix.”

Carol asked Angela, in the context of the Barriers report, what the timeline was for the Housing Summit. (one of the charges for the committee). Angela indicated that it was too early to move towards this. Sam

and others indicated agreement with this sentiment. Angela expressed a desire to have the council embrace the findings of the report and to put its weight behind moving this work forward. She emphasized that the council had identified development of housing as a priority and that promotion of the work of the Barriers Committee would be a good way forward towards achieving these goals.

As the task force began looking at the draft Barriers to Housing Committee Reports (or the Barriers report) Angela pointed to the first priority area listed – marketing -- and spoke of the importance of shifting the conversation in the city around housing, and housing development. She also expressed that it was important for people to understand the value of the services that the city government provides including snow-plowing, EMTs, and that these things needed to be paid for.

The committee continued working through the elements of the draft report. Jack elaborated on his earlier email to the Barriers committee, in which he described the need to look at the preservation of existing housing as an important part of the equation. He suggested that it might be good to look at a Housing Replacement Ordinance. Sam suggested that it would be important, in such an effort, to consider the value of mixed use buildings.

Jack suggested that such an ordinance might have been very useful thirty years ago, and pointed to areas of the city such as Court Street, Main Street between School Street and the roundabout, and Loomis Street as areas where conversion of housing to businesses has had a negative impact on the availability of housing. Sam suggested that, again, moving to mixed use rather than to an exclusive commercial conversion, would have been good. She described the experience of a relative living in Boston and the great benefits of living in a walkable city. She described the lost housing, and how people like to be able to have both businesses and homes within walking distance of the State House.

Angela spoke of her desire to see census numbers on the number of commuters into Montpelier. Polly, Sam, and others discussed that over half of the working population commuted from outside the city. Angela suggested that there is an opportunity there, a market of people who could well be interested in buying a home in the city, and that the Barriers report recommendations of marketing, financial, and regulatory efforts – such as the new zoning laws – could well all have an effect.

Sam suggested that CEDO had resources such as a developer's guide, that would apply to Montpelier, and could be very helpful in helping make these sorts of things happen.

Angela and Ken both talked of recent efforts within the city – at Council level, and at staff level – to coordinate efforts to appeal to developers and to boost economic development. Polly and others pointed to the interconnected nature of housing and economic development.

Jack spoke of the importance of rental code enforcement and the notion of demolition by neglect. Angela spoke of the age factor in the housing stock. Sam spoke of her experience looking for housing in the city and witnessing the reality of the condition much of the housing. Edmar spoke of the importance, for marketing purposes, of how the housing stock is described.

Angela spoke – as a remedy to the conditions -- of the Barriers report recommendation to explore a Housing Improvement District, and ways that the city can incentivize housing. JoAnn talked of the similarity with this and the Neighborhood Improvement Program, from her experience, and she and others, including Jack, remarked on how certain ideas come around in cycles. JoAnn described losing Section 8 tenants, who were making the step to homeownership, to Barre, because of the lack of availability of affordable quality housing in Montpelier. Sam mentioned that Barre now has 20% more housing currently on the market for sale than Montpelier.

Jack spoke of how many of the ideas in the report were already in the Master Plan. The group continued review of the report, discussing the recommendations on incentivizing infill development through zoning, and current efforts underway, including the MATRIX study (management consultants hired by the city to look at efficiencies within the government) recommendation to move Glenn Moore, the Health and Building Inspector into the Planning and Community Development office.

Sam talked of the success of efforts around comprehensive permitting, and an essential ingredient for success was to get all the players into a room, which requires commitment on all sides. She pointed to a development that took a mere 61 days to get approval.

The group discussed vacancy ordinances, and, in particular the efforts in Barre in this regard, where vacant buildings were subject to frequent health and safety inspections – “an annoyance goose” – that operated on the theory that it would be easier to rent the building than to deal with an inspector. Carol pointed to the Economy Inn premises on Northfield Street as an example of a poorly maintained property. Discussions of the group suggested that it might be worthwhile for the city to approach the owners about subdividing the property and to bring the new division into a more productive use.

Polly discussed tax stabilization. Sam pointed to the success of these efforts in Berlin, Barre Town, and Barre City which has the most aggressive program of the three and to Darren Winnem of the Local Development Corporation, as a good resource for us, in considering what could work best for us.

It was discussed a prominent main street property was in the process of being sold, and that it would be a good idea to approach him with the idea of finding a good use for the space for, perhaps, displaced state employees, for a high-tech center -- i.e. Bear Code – and that any landlord would be interested in a good long term tenant. Also discussed was the excellent parking available at the site. Ken and Edmar will follow-up on this.

The group discussed further the next steps for the Barriers report, that it would be good to have the stamp of the HTF on the report. Much discussion was had about the positive feeling of the group about these efforts, that the report represented much good work, and provide very useful recommendations for addressing the housing situation in Montpelier.

The group discussed the need for good data on the actual situation with housing in Montpelier. Ken spoke of working with John Ryan, who authored the market analysis for Sabin’s Pasture in approaching this question effectively, and that he is working on this effort.

Edmar spoke of his experience buying a house recently, and that he sees great opportunity in helping people see the potential in properties that might not appear at first to be good bets. He describes his experience in understanding how doable renovations can be, and how cost-effective it can be to make investments in a property and to realize a good gain in investment. He announced his work on putting together a home buyer’s seminar. Members of the group emphasized that it would be important to coordinate his efforts with those of Chandra Pollard at CVCLT’s Homeownership Center. Ken agreed to introduce Edmar to Chandra.

JoAnn described how the Section 8 program requires property to be up to code. Sam said that this is similar to VHFA requirements. Edmar described that the increase in valuation of his improved house was greater than he expected, and that he was pleased.

The group discussed the district that Edmar is in near River Street and discussed that it might be a good location for a Housing Improvement District, that there are good opportunities there for improvements.

Angela discussed the process with the Barriers report going forward, that it we will circulate the document and encourage comments. Polly mentioned that the city already has a number of tools for the council to consider. The group discussed that it is important for task force members to communicate well to council their support for these efforts.

Jack shared a document regarding encouraging building density, authored by the Victoria Transport Policy Institute, www.vtpi.org, phone (250) 360-1560 entitled “Affordable-Accessible Housing Photo Essay.”

The group discussed the situation with the Dickey Block, and with the Jacob’s property known as “The Garage” next to the Farmer’s Market site, and how to find ways to encourage development in such properties, including those in flood zones. Edmar described properties covered in New York City, under the NY 2020 plan that are designed to withstand flooding that is presumed to occur, with methods such as putting the mechanical systems above flood levels within the buildings. It was announced – by Polly -- that Preservation Trust of Vermont is planning to conduct an event (10/26) in support of similar efforts.

Jack talked about Housing Task Force efforts to raise public awareness and mentioned that he was in contact with John Odum at The Bridge, in an effort that may lead to coverage of the current efforts by the Barriers Committee and by the Housing Task Force.

Edmar spoke more about educating potential homeowners on affordability, pre-approval, credit scores, about setting goals even if one has poor credit. He also spoke of teaching potential homeowners how to work with realtors and inspectors, and of inviting these experts and bankers to meet potential homeowners face to face. The group expressed good support of these efforts and suggested that banks might be willing to sponsor the events or that city funds might be available.

Meeting adjourned.