

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The two Economic Development Focus Groups were held on Saturday 2/11/2023 at 10am via Zoom and on Monday 2/27/23 at 6:30pm in person in the Media Center. There was a total of nine participants, six of whom are involved in farming and/or connected to the agricultural community. Several of the participants currently serve on a board or commission in town.

POCD Consultant Juliet Hodge facilitated the meetings.

SUMMARIZATION OF NOTES TAKEN:

Strengths - Things the town is doing well...

- Shunnock Brewery is a great addition to town. It provides a much desired “gathering place” for locals.
- Jonathan Edwards a “gem” – great events and music.
- Trillium – Held successful events at the farm in Clarks Falls with no negative impact on neighbors and is beginning to develop a more positive relationship with the palmer Farm – creating opportunity/circular economy.
- The town has maintained its character well over the years by resisting big box stores or chain establishments and preserving the farms. The small unique collection of businesses is preferred.
- The recent solar projects have generated needed tax revenue for the town without impacting services. (Though the visual impact of the solar farms still seen as a negative)
- Farmer’s market and local farm sales got a boost from the pandemic-fueled demand for local food.
- Engaged community – great community events. Great lifestyle.
- Relatively low tax rate compared to other towns and high-quality places in town that support the high quality of life... worth the taxes paid.

Weaknesses:

- The town is limited by what residents don’t want in town (NIMBY) and by what we can actually support (Lacking density and infrastructure).
- Lacking the desired variety of businesses and restaurants.
- Grocery stores and some typical services you find in larger towns are not successful in north Stonington – not enough people to support them. Price point too high.
- There are no local job opportunities for teens in the community – or things for them to do.
- High cost of utilities and CT tax rate for businesses a detriment to businesses coming to CT. Lack of water/sewer infrastructure in town is a further deterrent.
- Fear of unknown impact of a new business or initiative brings immediate resistance. People want to know what’s in it for them and how they will be impacted. In the absence of this

knowledge, they simply resist or oppose the project. Misguided negative response to projects has driven investment out of town.

- Adamant opposition to raising taxes but equal opposition to the type and scale of economic development that would be needed to stabilize or lower the mill rate and the infrastructure investment that would be required to attract and support it. Small incremental growth of mom-and-pop shops and restaurants will not lower the taxes in town.
- Lack of understanding about the land use process in general may fuel negativity.

Pandemic Impact:

- Changed the need for physical space. Don't want to end up with a lot of empty storefronts or office buildings.
- Could lead to an increase in Home Occupations
- Did provide opportunities and challenges for local farmers. Could not keep up with the demand!

Opportunities:

- Event space in rural setting – Agrotourism
- Build on the current food-related businesses – North Stonington has several businesses already such as Farm true, Jovial Foods, Kingdom of the hawk and Jonathan Edwards Wineries; Shunnock river brewery; Several farm stands and stores and the Farmer's Market.
- Investing in existing underutilized or older farms in need of new life. Diversify product to include food crops – not just focus on dairy farming. Develop new partnerships – Circular economy.
- Hescok law Office still vacant – could have a second gathering place. Desire for a pharmacy as well.
- Opportunities for larger developments in the Exit 92, 93 areas and the RCCD near the Casino.
- The new Great Wolf Lodge being built at Foxwoods may provide job opportunities for residents.
- Mill rate could decrease after all recent investments (School, EMS building etc.) are paid off.

Action to consider:

- Create a "Lessons Learned" template.
- Do a build-out analysis to demonstrate what impact new development would have on the tax rate. Determine how much development we would need to actually "lower our taxes".
- Need to come together as a town when a great opportunity presents itself and get in front of what we think are the barriers. In the absence of information, people fear the worst. Need to get people comfortable with the project before it gets to the Planning and Zoning Commission.
 - Develop a multi-specialty task force/Outreach Committee (associated with the EDC) to be a first point of contact with a prospective new business or the owners of an existing business looking to expand or start a new initiative. The group would provide feedback, identify possible barriers to success, and help get any plan or project to a place where it can be successful and supported by residents and commissioners alike.

- Work through the concerns; discuss the possible impacts and the possible benefits too. Prospective business owner needs to educate and explain the initiative fully and allow the group to tour the facility or project location or otherwise become familiar with every aspect so they can better identify barriers and understand the potential impacts and find solutions.

Current Initiatives to highlight and explore further:

- Piece by Piece Production
- Northeast Grain Alliance

Other Comments:

- PZC Chair: Would rather act on a project that is proposed than proactively seek certain development. Focused on supporting the businesses that are already in town.
- Discussed the LLHD issue regarding unrealistic flowrates used in formulas in rural towns to determine maximum number of seats in a restaurant etc. – hindering business growth.
- People move here for a reason – for the lifestyle.

HOUSING

The Housing Focus Groups were held on Monday, 2/13/23 at 6:30pm via Zoom, and on Saturday, 2/18/23 at 10am in person in the media Center.

A total of 17 residents attended the sessions. Eight of the 16 were members of a NS Board, Commission or Committee and two attendees are members of the non-profit Keeping North Stonington Affordable. Three of the 8 are also members of the POCD Steering Committee.

Juliet Hodge, POCD Planning Consultant facilitated the meeting.

SUMMARIZATION OF NOTES TAKEN:

The whole issue of “housing” and “housing choice” is a hot topic in North Stonington with those who advocate for, or speak against housing equally passionate. The topic of housing is intertwined with many other planning issues such as economic development, open space preservation, overall vibrancy and QOL in town.

The Affordable Housing Committee adopted the required housing Plan in 2021. North Stonington currently has less than 2% of its housing units counted as qualified affordable housing towards the required State minimum of 10%. This is one of the lowest in the region. There is still a great need to educate the public about what “affordable housing” actually is and what some of the different strategies are to achieve the goal of providing more housing choice for all our residents while still preserving the characteristics of town that its residents keenly want to protect.

Demographic Trends. What type of housing is missing?

90% of the housing in town is detached, 3-bedroom, single-family homes. There is an extreme shortage of rental housing. Regional Housing Studies predict that the current percentage of renters vs home owners in the region is going to flip from 34% vs 64% to 54% vs 46% and that 59% of the rental units will need to be affordable to low-income residents. Rental housing is needed to house the projected increase in EB workers over the next several years, younger residents living on their own, and for the aging Boomers wanting to downsize but remain in town.

Other notable trends are shrinking household sizes and aging population – not unique to only North Stonington but occurring in the region as well – though there were some in the group who disagreed with that trend as evidenced by new families consistently moving into North Stonington.

Median income has dropped considerably in North Stonington, and for the 1st time, North Stonington finds itself on the “Top 25 Distressed Towns” list for CT. The drop in income will cause an increase in the already rising number of cost-burdened households (meaning households that spend more than 30% of their income on housing related expenses such as rent/mortgage, taxes, insurance and utilities).

Opportunities and Opposition:

Changes have been made to the Zoning Regulations since the 2013 POCD to address some of the housing issues. Detached Accessory Apartments are permitted. Limited multi-family is permitted in some zones, as are mixed-use developments. Micro-assisted living facilities are permitted as an option for a group of seniors to live together. The “cottages and motel” near the rotary that were recently refurbished provide an example of possible future model for small affordable housing developments.

The core issue for the group was whether we are trying to increase density to support local businesses and provide housing opportunities for new and existing residents, or are we just trying to provide for our own residents, particularly the parents and children of existing residents who are more likely to need housing they can afford?

Some felt that we need to take advantage of the fact the young EB workers are looking for housing- as young people add vibrancy. Others just want to provide for the people living in town – i.e. prioritize housing for local seniors looking to downsize and children of residents who want to remain in town on their own. Some felt that if someone looking to relocate to North Stonington but could not find anything affordable, they should simply move elsewhere – where others felt that everyone, whether local or not, deserved to have an opportunity to live in a town like North Stonington and that No. Stonington should share in the burden of providing affordable housing rather than leaving that up to the urban towns in the region. This last issue is the subject of the proposed “Fair Share” law, under which the state Office of Policy and Management would assess the need for affordable housing in different parts of Connecticut. Then, towns would share the responsibility to meet that need. The goal of the law is to increase Connecticut’s affordable housing stock.

What are the consequences of not having enough qualified affordable housing?

Predatory Development (8-30g)

The State of CT currently has a law on its books that **requires** 10% of the existing housing in a municipality be “affordable” (meaning a household earning less than 60-80% of the state or area’s median income must spend no more than 30% of its income on total housing costs). If a municipality has less than the required 10%, a developer can propose a housing project without following the local zoning regulations such as dimensional requirements, setbacks, buffers, density or building character/design. Essentially, the law states that for the developer’s proposal to be rejected, the town zoning or planning commission must make a **very convincing** case that such a proposal would clearly be against public interests or somehow endanger the health or safety of the community. Towns are rarely successful in defeating this type of development. Currently, North Stonington has less than 2% of the required 10%.

There was discussion about the difference between “Affordable Housing” and “Housing that is affordable.” There are many naturally occurring affordable housing units throughout town, but they do not count in the eyes of the state unless there is a deed restriction on the unit; it was bought with a CHFA loan; or the unit was subsidized by the government (i.e. Section 8 housing). Because of our very low percentage, North Stonington is VERY vulnerable to 8-30g development (as are many rural towns). In 2007, a developer proposed to build 17, four-story apartment buildings off of Boombridge Rd. This development was rejected by PZC, but likely would have been approved if the developer had pursued the appeal. The

downturn in the economy essentially saved the Town from the Garden Court development. Many feel that the whole character of town would have been changed if a development such as garden Court had been approved

There was discussion about the difference between “Affordable Housing” and “Housing that is affordable” and the consequences of not attaining the state mandated 10% threshold. Discussed the ways housing units count toward the 10% such as deed restriction and CHFA mortgages. Some felt that 40yrs was too short a time for the deed restriction and that relying on increasing the number of CHFA mortgaged homes to count was too unpredictable and fluid as the unit only counts while the CHFA borrowers own the house.

Discussed the consequence of predatory development in towns with less than the 10% Affordable units. These developments do not have to abide by the Zoning Regulations with respect to density, building height, lot coverage, setbacks, buffering etc. The Massive Garden Court 8-30 development proposed in 2007 would have changed the character of town, and there remains a fear of a similar type of development being proposed again. This fear, however, does not seem strong enough to overcome the strong opposition to affordable housing in town.

What kind of housing should we be building and where? Who should develop it?

Suggested Opportunities:

- Frank Zaino’s property near the rotary could be converted to housing.
- Wintechog Hill property still an option for a town-designed development. Partnership between KNSA and a non-profit affordable housing developer could be explored.
- Not a lot of support for multi-family development despite the tax revenue they produce and the clear need for rental housing.
- Could consider a senior housing floating Zone.
- Conversion of lake houses into affordable homes.
- Anywhere near the highway would be appropriate for housing versus the residential zones or even along Route 2. Recent 8-30g development on Rte. 2 viewed as too dense. They want to see more tasteful housing. Need to identify other areas. A development with access directly off of Rte. 2 would not be ideal, but another neighborhood like Kingswood/Meadow Wood which is close to Rte. 2 would be OK.
- Cluster development with the preservation of open space is supported and permitted in the current regulations.
- Prefer small pockets of housing for each of the demographics in need- i.e., seniors, EB workers, young people/families starting out. Affordable Senior Housing is supported; however, it was pointed out that there is little funding for such developments.
- Mixed-age development affordable housing development like that proposed off Wintechog hill would be good.

What are the consequences of not having housing available for every age in income group seeking to live in North Stonington?

Local businesses suffer: Housing is essential for economic survival. Local businesses need a greater density of people to support their businesses and housing for their workers. There is a shortage of workers everywhere, not having available housing that is affordable to workers – particularly lower-income service workers - makes it even harder for businesses to attract staff. Cost of gas to commute is high, which cuts into money available for housing or supporting local businesses. Better to have workers in town.

Volunteers and Essential Services: Firemen, EMTs, public work crews, teachers, etc. are needed in the towns they live in – though some of the salaries for these jobs are low making it hard to afford a house in town (again – a problem in not just North Stonington).

Vitality: Losing people who don't have families who want to move here because of a lack of appropriate housing from a small household. Vitality is dependent on diversity of age and income. Need to decide what is important for the future of the town... Is attracting young families and potential volunteers and workers important? Would we rather only provide housing for the aging seniors who live here rather than providing residences for a mix of people of all ages and incomes? Some agreed that we need to Re-vitalize town and keep tax rates low (though some felt that the tax rate will always go up – need to control spending).

What is the character of North Stonington that we are trying to protect?

Discussed the changes to the CT general Statutes regarding housing and the fact that affordable housing (and other projects) cannot be denied simply because they do not “fit in with the character of town.” Towns must clearly define what characteristics they wish to preserve. The group offered the following list of “characteristics” of town worth preserving.

- Preserving natural resources important
- Water features and abundant wildlife
- dark skies
- buffer areas
- trees and stone walls
- buildings fewer than 3 stories
- low-density development pattern
- Development should be pretty, symmetrical – look planned with open places to park. High rise units not supported. They do not fit with the pastoral aesthetic that characterizes North Stonington.
- Prefer a “New England colonial vibe” development with a town green.

OPEN SPACE/CONSERVATION

The Open Space Focus Groups was held immediately following the Housing Focus Group on Saturday, 2/18/23 at 10am in person in the Media Center. All twelve of the attendees of the Housing Session stayed and were joined by an additional 5 people for the Open Space discussion. Bill Ricker, Chairman of the Conservation Commission facilitated the discussion.

SUMMARIZATION OF NOTES TAKEN:

Juliet Hodge, planning consultant reviewed some data pertaining to the types of open space in town and Bill Ricker continued the discussion by explaining the ways open space could, and is preserved as well as the difference between temporary and permanently preserved open space. These methods include:

- PA 490 Farm and Forest state program that provides a significant tax reduction if land is preserved for farming or forest for at least a 10-year period.
- Conservation Easements – restricts development on a parcel or portion of the parcel. Can allow public access or not.
- Sale of Development Rights to the State – preserves land for agricultural use in perpetuity.
- State parks/Forest: It was noted that Pachaug forest is not “permanently” preserved, though it would take 75% of the lawmakers to approve development on preserved land.

The 2013 Plan of Conservation and Recreation Lands map identified greenway corridors and key parcels to acquire should they become available. Working on protecting these important wildlife corridors including protecting the land within 100ft of the town’s waterways. Preserving the town’s water resources was supported by all.

Need to also pay attention to the historic resources throughout the entire town including the agricultural architecture – not just focus on the historic village. The history of the town is not just centered in the village, it extends to all the other former “villages” like Clarks Falls. It is important to preserve the setting within which the historic structures/resources are found.

More usable open space like Hewitt farm would be good. Preserved for public use, but with some control. Bill noted that the Hewitt Farm was purchased with money from the Open Space fund which was historically funded at \$20,000 a year. It was cut to \$5,000 and then even further. Currently have \$80,000 in the Open Space fund.

Continued thoughtful planning needed to identify parcels to preserve and those to develop. Need to maintain that balance between conservation and development. Keeping the Open Space Plan updated is important. Discussed the fact that not all open space is public – that it is often visually available, but not physically available. There is of course dedicated open space for public access. Some in the group value their privacy and have concerns about allowing public trails too close to private property.

Trails and Walkability:

Discussion continued about walkability in general and the subject of sidewalks along certain roads to allow residents to safely walk. Some favor promoting the health of the community by having public walking trails and sidewalks, however, despite the potential benefit, there was still opposition to the idea of having more sidewalks. It was pointed out that sidewalks come with other things like lights and crosswalks and future expansion. The dark skies have always been a valued asset. Discussed the fact that the walkers need to take some responsibility for their safety as well.

Suggestion to combine senior housing with a trail system the residents could use and/or cluster housing around open space and trails. Some also expressed concern about the size of new houses and asked whether a more reasonable size could be encouraged in the POCD.

It was noted that ADA or even stroller access was lacking on the existing trails. Bill stated that the Conservation Commission was working on making a portion of the Assekong trail ADA accessible.

Discussed the LOTCIP project to put a multi-use path from the Mobil Station to Little Man's Diner.

There was concern about the impact the proposed Great Wolf Lodge will have on Route 2 with respect to traffic and safety.

Agriculture:

Supporting farming and honoring the town's agricultural history still important to residents. First Selectman, Bob Carlson mentioned the creation of the "Farm 5" group- an initiative he is working on with Voluntown, Griswold, Sterling and Preston to draw attention to agriculture and provide resources for farmers. Group also discussed opportunities for our schools to promote agriculture and farming. Vo-ag program?

Someone noted that there were more young women volunteering to work on farms than young men. Also noted that more Veterans were volunteering as well.

Pandemic Impact:

More people got out and explored the trails in town, used Hewitt Farm and the lakes, etc. Concern about misuse of lakes by outsiders. Partying at the lakes was an issue during the pandemic (It was suggested that North Stonington might need their own police department at some point if development gets to a certain point.)

Food security issues came to the surface during the pandemic. Local farmers could not keep up with demand!

Things to add to the "rural characteristics" worth preserving:

- Privacy
- Low traffic
- Unspoiled area
- Presence of stone walls