

RYE TOWN CENTER COMMITTEE
Thursday April 01, 2021
5:30 p.m. – Via Zoom

Present: Chair Karen Stewart, John Loftus, Funi Burdick, Victor Azzi, Kaitlyn Coffey, John Mitchell, Lydia Tilsley and Selectmen's Rep Mae Bradshaw

I. Call to Order

Chair Stewart called the meeting to order at 5:34 pm.

II. Attestation

Statement by Karen Stewart:

As chair of the Town Center Committee, I find that due to the State of Emergency declared by the Governor as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and in accordance with the Governor's Emergency Order #12 pursuant to Executive Order 2020-04, this public body is authorized to meet electronically.

Please note that there is no physical location to observe and listen contemporaneously to this meeting, which was authorized pursuant to the Governor's Emergency Order. However, in accordance with the Emergency Order, I am confirming that we are providing public access to the meeting by telephone, with additional access possibilities by video and other electronic means. We are utilizing Zoom for this electronic meeting. All members of the board have the ability to communicate contemporaneously during this meeting through this platform, and the public has access to contemporaneously listen and, if necessary, participate in this meeting through dialing the following phone number: 646-558-8656 and Password: 755899 or by clicking on the following website address: www.zoom.com ID 824 3689 6176.

- a) Public notice has been provided to the public for the necessary information for accessing the meeting, including how to access the meeting using Zoom telephonically. Instructions have also been provided on the Town of Rye website town.rye.nh.us
- a) Providing a mechanism for the public to alert the public body during the meeting if there are problems with access.
If anyone has a problem, call 603-964-5523 or e-mail at Bbergeron@town.rye.nh.us.
- b) Adjourning the meeting if the public is unable to access the meeting.
In the event the public is unable to access the meeting, the meeting will be adjourned and rescheduled.

In the event the public is unable to access the meeting, the meeting will be adjourned and rescheduled. Please note that all votes that are taken during this meeting shall be done by roll call vote.

Roll call attendance:

- Karen Stewart
- John Loftus
- Victor Azzi
- John Mitchell
- Mae Bradshaw

Note: The Members stated where they were located and confirmed that they were the only ones in the room for the meeting.

Chair Stewart clarified that members of the committee can email any one on the committee or all the members on the committee; however, they cannot engage in any discourse (conversation) that would not be available to the public. Stating a position or sharing a thought is fine but there cannot be any back and forth.

III. Trolley Barn

Chair Stewart thanked Member Loftus for raising a couple of issues to the members. She reminded the members that the Rye Town Center Committee was silenced due to the pandemic, so they were not meeting for a while and then the committee sunsetted in the fall. She heard Member Loftus' concerns that the committee has not engaged in any discourse on issues in the Center of Town; so, she has put the Trolley Barn and the TD Bank building on the agenda for the committee to discuss.

Member Loftus stated that originally when he visited the Trolley Barn, he felt that it should be sold. Now after talking to some people and reflecting on it, he feels it is a good asset for the Town. Land values are continuing to increase and at any time that the Town would want to buy a property, it will be hard to find one for less than that property. The main problem with that building is the mold issue. He feels that it wouldn't cost a lot to gut the building. He pointed out that the slab is in good shape. He suggested some possible uses for the building. The Senior Serve keeps their van there and may possibly have a second one in the future. It could also be storage for the sidewalk snow plow. There is also the mosquito green head traps and the beach/lifeguard equipment that needs to be stored during the winter months.

Member Loftus pointed out that the lot is only 70 feet wide and will be sold as residential. The side setbacks are 20 feet, so that leaves 30 feet for the width of the building. The lot is small and it will be hard for someone to build on it. He recommends that the Town keep the building. He understands that the Select Board want to sell it and they have the right to because of the vote last year. However, he feels that the committee should go on record as to what they feel should be done with the property. He pointed out that there is no master plan for the Town Center. He feels they should step back and take a look at this property.

Member Tilsley stated that she is not in love with the idea of the building just being used as a storage garage; however, she is also not sure that the Town should sell it as a private property. She would love to see it used for the Town as something more appealing; such as, a small store or shop.

Member Burdick stated that part of her wants to understand the vision of the Town Center verses should the Town own it or not. They can always go back to the space planning idea. What's its best use? What's its best value? Does the Town need the money? Her understanding is that the Town needs the money for the new Town Clerk's office. How would that property best benefit Rye, either through financial assets or use? She suggested that there needs to be an overview of what each property brings to the Town Center. There is a need to know where they are in the town planning stage.

Member Mitchell commented that to dispose of a town owned property, without the proper process, should be avoided. He suggested that the Town Center Committee could serve as a buffer for the Select Board to engage in this type of conversation and focused planning. He stressed that the decisions being made today will affect Rye in generations to come.

Chair Stewart asked about the closed bid process on the sale of this property.

Selectwoman Bradshaw pointed out that this process has not happened quickly. In 2019, the warrant article was passed by the voters to sell the property. At that point, the property had been vacant for twelve years. In 2020, there was a warrant article to sell the property and use the money to renovate the TD Bank building to accommodate the Town's space needs, and to work on the Town Hall building to make it ADA accessible and gain more meeting space. This was passed by the voters. This process has been going on for 12 years.

She further explained the process of selling the Trolley Barn was delayed until the Select Board was sure that they had a place to house some of the town employees because the alternative would have been to move them to the Trolley Barn building. About five years ago, the Select Board got an estimate to renovate the Trolley Barn for offices, which came in at \$450,000. A year ago, the Board asked one of the members of the Historic District Commission, who happens to be a builder, for an estimate. He came back with \$750,000. Now that the Town has the TD Bank, they no longer have to use the Trolley Barn to solve the space need issues or ask the Town to give \$750,000 to restore the building, which they would not be inclined to do. To continue to use it as a storage facility is okay, but it is an eye sore. The Town can find other storage for the things currently in that building. It is potentially worth \$400,000 to the Town, which is needed, and the citizens do not want to have added to their tax bill.

As far as the actual sale, the Select Board has consulted with some local successful auctioneers. It would cost an additional 20% to go through an auction process. One auctioneer gave the Board some recommendations as to how they could structure the sale without incurring the large fee. This included advertising it themselves without a broker and having a reserve figure, which is \$400,000. If the Board does not get a bid for \$400,000, the property will not be sold in this round. The bids will be opened on April 13th or 14th at a public meeting.

Member Loftus asked if the Select Board was retaining architectural review.

Selectwoman Bradshaw responded that they were not. She added that it is not in the Historic District and the Select Board is not in charge of reviewing real estate. She pointed out that there are three very capable boards in town that review real estate; the Planning Board, Zoning Board and Historic District within that jurisdiction.

During further discussion, it was suggested that things have changed and the feelings of the public have changed since the Parsonage was demolished. There was a feeling amongst the members that the public would not vote again to sell the Trolley Barn.

Chair Stewart suggested that it is not too late for the Select Board to put contingencies into the sale, so that the Town doesn't end up with something undesirable on the property. She asked the members what they would like to do.

Selectwoman Bradshaw recommended that if this committee has a plan for the property, to take it to the Planning Board or the ZBA. They are the Board that have the jurisdiction over the property.

Chair Stewart stated that is not the best or highest use of this committee. She added that if the members feel very strongly about making a recommendation to the Select Board, as the sale is moving forward, she would support that. She has no interest in seeing the committee getting mired into one property and being taken offtrack. She pointed out that they were appointed by the Selectman to make recommendations for the center of town and they have not done that.

Member Azzi pointed out that the committee needs to get back to their first goals. They were convened and created as a committee to do some planning. So far, there has been no planning. In his mind, trying to remake the old Trolley Barn is not planning. In the same way, trying to do something specific with the TD Bank is not the charge the Rye Town Center Committee should be taking on. It is not Planning. This committee should not get involved with the design of the proposed park at the former Parsonage property, which the Rye Library now has responsibility of. He recommended that the plan should be to work together to create a plan to knit together all of the existing conditions, all of the existing properties (owned or otherwise), and all of the reasonable "want to haves" which are expected to be able to be created and funded in order to make the Rye Town Center the place that all of the members agreed they wanted it to be. He stressed that the committee is not going to get there if they are talking about inside and outside finishes and whether to keep or sell the old Trolley Barn. He added that he has been dealing with the old Trolley Barn issues for over 15 years and it is not getting any better with age, nor is the site getting any less polluted. The property is not going to be easy or cheap to deal with. Some say that the property is in great shape and some disagree. That is not up to this committee to determine. It is up to the Select Board to tell the committee of the status of their plan to sell and how that is to be conceded during the planning.

There was a further lengthy discussion regarding the responsibility and the charge of the committee.

Member Azzi asked how the planning that the committee will be doing for the Town Center will fit into the new revision of the Town's master plan.

Selectwoman Bradshaw explained that the Planning Board's grant application is focused on a visioning session later this summer to determine whether the overall master plan needs an entire rewrite or just updating of some chapters. There has been a questionnaire that has gone out to all the boards and commissions to have them look at their section of the master plan for changes that need to be made. She further explained that this is not a complete rewrite at this time. A complete rewrite will cost about \$150,000.

Member Loftus stated that part of the reason the committee was formed was because of the charette. The results of the charette found that the residents were concerned about the traffic and they wanted to keep the center of town charming. He added that is why he thinks the Town should keep the Trolley Barn to control the looks and use of the property. He understands that it is the Select Board that has the authority to dispose of the property. However, the committee could and should offer suggestions, saying that they do not think it is a good idea and these are the reasons.

Member Azzi again stressed the need for planning. He pointed out that if at this time there had been even a small amount of planning done, the planning would possibly show that throughout all the town owned properties there is an insufficient amount of storage. At that point, they would look through the town owned properties for opportunities of additional storage. Then the Trolley Barn would become a possible target for the solution of the storage shortage. He recommended that they do not go in the opposite direction of trying to find a use for one building at a time, independent of everything else, in order to find some better use or better appearance for each and every one building at a time. The committee is supposed to find a coherent, aesthetic, well related, campus-like set of buildings in the Rye Town Center that makes sense for the Rye Town Center.

The argument was that the Town has already lost one building. If it loses another, it will not be there for consideration.

Member Burdick agreed that the challenge for the committee to come up with a cohesive plan is that they do not know what pieces they have to play with. At some point, they need some definition about which parcels they are working with or they will not be able to work at all. However, they could start by broadly talking about what they mean by town center. What precipitated the Town to want to have a committee to have a town center plan? Town centers vary in construction. What is this committee's vision of a town center? What are the activities and interconnectivities? Having this discussion would be a positive way to have a discourse of the needs and what parcels could or should be used. Finally, what will make Rye have a center and what will that center look like?

Motion by John Loftus to recommend to the Select Board to not sell the Trolley Barn until further discussions are had by this committee and the Town. There was no second to this motion. Motion failed.

IV. TD Bank Building

Member Loftus offered a drawing of improvements to the exterior of the TD Bank Building.

Member Tilsley stated that she agrees that some improvements are needed to the outside of the building. She wondered if the HDC would be involved in that endeavor. She asked based on the earlier discussion, if the committee would want to plan first and then make a recommendation.

Member Coffey agreed with Member Tilsley and thanked Member Loftus for the drawings. She reported that back in 2019, Mr. Philbrick came before the HDC with some ideas of improvements to the exterior of the building. She stated that if the sale of the Trolley Barn does go through, she believes the funds would first be used for the interior space. If there are any funds left over, they would be used on the outside of the building. At that time, it would come back before the HDC. She feels that the committee should focus back on the planning and has time to get back to the aesthetics later.

Selectwoman Bradshaw reported that the plan is to have the TD Bank building fully occupied by October. As soon as possible, the interior work will be planned and done. The Budget Committee will have some input as to how the money from the sale of the Trolley Barn is spent. The agreement is to have up to \$200,000 for the interior. She also reported that there is a viable second floor that could be turned into office space. However, there will not be enough funding just from the Trolley Barn to do what would be needed to claim that space at this time. If the committee wanted to come up with a plan for the outside of the building and a way to sell it to the elector to raise the funding, the Select Board would be happy to listen. However, she does not think that is what their charge is as a committee.

Chair Stewart summed up by saying that she is not comfortable issuing a decree to cease and desist on the sale. However, she is comfortable making a recommendation, if they don't get a bid that they pause. One of the things that the committee wants to do is to embark on planning. She reminded the members that they had made great progress a year or so ago. They had identified the core values and started the long-range thinking. From that they have pulled out some tangible action items. They have started to make recommendations; such as, the speed limit. She suggested that the committee keep in mind that they may be working on parallel tracks; thinking forward in planning and anything that falls out that is immediately actionable or even semi-actionable. They need to define what those things are.

Selectwoman Bradshaw reported that they should have a decision regarding the TAP Grant about mid-July. She suggested that should they get the grant, there will be a lot of work for this committee to move it to reality.

Member Azzi clarified by pointing out that all they have at this time is a proposal of a concept. They are a long way from having the engineering drawings that will be required for bidding for construction. It will be up to this committee to work with the engineer to take the concept to design.

Chair Stewart acknowledge that the actual administration of the grant will be manage by the State for 10% of the cost of the project.

V. Other Business - None

ADJOURNMENT

Motion by John Loftus to Adjourn at 7:08 p.m. Seconded by Funi Burdick.

Roll Call Vote: Karen Stewart – Aye; Funi Burdick – Aye; Lydia Tilsley – Aye; Kaitlyn Coffey – Aye; John Mitchell – Aye; Victor Azzi – Aye; Mae Bradshaw – Aye; John Loftus – Aye.

Motion passed.

Respectfully Submitted,
Dyana F, Ledger