

**TOWN OF**
**MONTAGUE MASSACHUSETTS**

TOWN HALL

One Avenue A

Turners Falls, MA 01376

PLANNING BOARD

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### MEETING MINUTES

### PLANNING BOARD

The Montague Planning Board met at **6:30 p.m.** on **Tuesday, April 2, 2024** via Zoom.

**Members Present:** Ron Sicard, Elizabeth Irving, Sam Guerin, George Cooke, Bob Obear.. **Also in attendance**: Maureen Pollock, Town Planner and Suzanne LoManto, Assistant Planner, Luke Mitchell (VHB), and members of the public

Minutes from February 27, 2024, were tabled.

**Montague City Village Center Study** -The final report for this study and market analysis is now available, see link: <https://montague-ma.gov/files/Montague_City_Village_Center_REPORT_2024_0308.pdf>. Planning Department staff will present the report findings and recommendations to the Planning Board for further discussion and to seek guidance on next steps. See project page for more info: <https://montague-ma.gov/p/1531/>.

Town Planner Maureen Pollock gives an overview of the planning process, to date. The final report was informed by extensive community outreach and additional meetings with Montague seniors, Montague EDIC and local affordable housing advocates. A link to the final report and market analysis can be found on the Planning Department Project Page on the Town website. A meeting with the Montague Select Board is scheduled for April 22, 2024. Public comments will be accepted after the Planning Board discussion.

Luke Mitchell (VHB) shows a slide deck presentation that summarizes the yearlong planning process for the Montague City village center. VHB worked extensively with the Town Planner, the Assistant Town Administrator and Mass Housing Partnership on this report. He believes the site has many great advantages including the location and physical characteristics.

The presentation includes: the context for the planning process, the market analysis, different housing density scenarios and an overview of the development strategy for the 8-acre site.

Planning documents previously created in the Town of Montague and FRCOG were incorporated in the VHB recommendations. Local and regional conditions also informed the final plan. Market analysis was studied for a project existing on a site between Greenfield and Montague City. Residential development in Montague has lagged generally and is old. A vision statement for this project was created from the results of the community input sessions.

Site conditions recommend a mixed-use village center. The historic “urban” character of Turners Falls informed the VHB plan. Luke Mitchell reviews three scenarios: low, medium, and high-density housing. Slow, incremental development with some retail and open space is recommended. Luke Mitchell emphasizes that these schemes are not final and meant to be used for planning/development purposes. New housing projects in Amherst, Northampton, North Eastham and Belchertown were given as examples.

Mitchell presents alternative strategies for development. Three potential approaches include: the Development Agreement Approach, Zoning Overlay, and Town as Master Developer.

Mitchell briefly reviews possible financing and the pros/cons with each of the three approaches.

The Town Planner discusses the many conversations she has had with Town colleagues, residents, and planning professionals including MassDevelopment, Executive Office of Economic Development, Mass Business Development, Mass Housing Partnership, Valley CDC, Rural Development Inc., FRCOG and Wayne Feiden (Northampton Planning Director who led the Village Hill Mixed-Use Housing Project).

Based on the report recommendations and guided input regarding funding sources for infrastructure and developers, the Planner suggests a “hybrid” approach of the three strategies: creating a working group, hire a development consultant. The Planner discusses the cons of current zoning. A rezoning option could include an additional 40R, possibly with architectural standards. Additional input will be requested by residents and housing, office, and retail developers in the future. Studying infrastructure requirements necessary for any development is an additional step in the process. All these steps will take years, maybe a decade. Public engagement will continue throughout.

**Planning Board Discussion:** The Chair requests input from the Board.

Sam Guerin asks if the 40R overlay idea would include subdividing the lots. The Planner responds “yes” likely as part of the dimensional requirements that reflect the desired density. Subdividing the property would give the Town more control of village scale and neighborhood feel to the development.

Elizabeth Erving asks if the report covers owner occupied vs. rental options. The Planner responds that analysis of that topic (in addition to affordable vs. market rate housing) will be explored in the future. Financing is a key factor in what will be built.

Sam Guerin summarizes his belief that the advantage of 40R is that it sets a baseline (20%) for Affordable housing. A developer could propose more than 20%.

Bob Obear asks about the difference between Affordable vs. low-income housing. Luke Mitchell explains that the definition is a percentage of the median average income- from 50% to 80%. The lower the percentage, the higher the subsidy. This includes workforce housing. A mix of market rate and affordable housing is recommended by VHB and strongly indicated by the community. He sees a strong demand for rental housing because so little has been built in Montague in recent decades.

**Public Comments:**
Jeff Singleton (Montague Reporter) asks about/ clarifies 40R criteria as identified by law. He thinks it is 80% of the median income, with a household spending 30%.

Jeremy Toal: Montague resident and architect clarifies that 40R is really a density tool. Luke Mitchell continues that it is also a tool for funding streams.

Rob Steinberg: Member of the EDIC stated that he is concerned that we do not create a set of requirements that are unrealistic. He is conscious of the Town’s challenges, and we will need heavy subsidies, wherever we can get them.

Peter Hudyma: Montague City resident. He believes that the community is not in favor of high-density housing, and the land should benefit the residents of Montague City. He wants the Town to retain control of the site with 50% reserved for a park.

Janel Nockleby (Montague Historical Commission/resident) remarks that overlaying a block of Turners Falls over Montague City does not work historically; Montague City was envisioned as a port city along the canal. Any development should match the original nature/ architectural style of Montague City.

Dorinda Bell-Upp (Montague City) supports the idea of a revived village center. It is a unique opportunity and location. There was already-story building on the property. She supports multigenerational housing, shared outdoor space and the creation of offices and retail.

Mary Kay Mattiace (Montague City) As someone who actively goes to meetings, she supports this development in light of the statewide housing crisis. The needs of the larger community should be considered.

Linda and Joan (Montague City) agree with Peter. The women are over 65 and live in single family homes. They do not want to live in a densely settled population. They question the process because the final report only recommends housing, while the area is not zoned residential. They recommend Habitat for Humanity single family homes. The Planner responds that the presentation is a study which could include possible rezoning. Rezoning would be its own process and include the Selectboard, Planning Board, and ultimately 2/3 approval from Town Meeting.

Linda and Joan (Montague City) do not feel that their question was answered. They ask why the Town is considering a zoning change rather than inviting new industry to the site.

Leigh Rae (Montague Center) She thinks that the project is exciting and will offer future opportunities for seniors who want to downsize and stay in Montague. She would like the site to be well connected to nature and the other villages.

Rich Kuklewicz (Selectboard member) asks about opportunities for short term use of the site while the Town “grows” the vision.

Sam Guerin asks how design standards might be used to control development. Luke Mitchell cautions against challenges to development though design. He recommends that the Town creatively influences the design without being a detriment to the bottom line. For example, brick construction is probably not a financially viable construction option.
Ron Sicard asks Jon Dobosz (Montague Parks and Rec) about Town property in Montague City that could be used for a play space. Dobosz says that unfortunately the Town land is not amenable. The Planner reiterates the vision for open space, play areas, and other community spaces as part of any development.

Elizabeth Erving asks what can happen on the lot now. Walter Ramsey Assistant Town Administrator reports that the land will be seeded and maintained as an open field with a gazebo and pavilion. Additionally, the bike path could be rerouted through the former Farren site; good ways to activate the site.

Donna Gates (Montague City) is a longtime resident and asks about traffic. Ron Sicard responds that there will be a traffic study, however the former business (the Farren Hospital) had at least a hundred employees, as well as patients and visitors, who entered/exited the property day. Ron Sicard reiterates that any proposed development would require review/approval by the Planning Board or Zoning Board of Appeals.

Sam Guerin asks about Mass Works and Housing Works. The Planner discusses grants for public infrastructure improvements like construction of bike paths, public rights of way, sidewalks, sewer and water, could be leveraged by a possible development.

Bob Obear speaks firsthand about the need for housing. The cost of housing gets higher every day because of a shortage of homes. He knows that influence and money from outside of Franklin County brings positive and negative issues to Montague. He sees housing as a long-term issue that needs to be addressed now. For seniors, especially.

George Cooke is in favor of medium density housing of different types like apartments and condominiums.

The Planner thinks that the next step for the Planning Board is to consider recommending the rezoning of the parcel which would make way for multi-family development, single family homes, two family homes, office, and mixed-use development; as way as, exploring possible amendments related to dimensional regulations and design standards.

Elizabeth Erving states that this type of zoning change will make the kinds of uses identified by the community a possibility.

*MOTION by Ron Sicard to recommend the Town and Selectboard to purpose possible rezoning of the 8-acre Farren parcel. Seconded by Bob Ober. VOTE: Ron Sicard (AYE), Elizabeth Irving (AYE), Sam Guerin (AYE), George Cooke (AYE), Bob Obear (AYE). (5-0) MOTION PASSES 8:26pm*

Sam Guerin thinks a working group would be helpful for drafting the rezone. The Planner believes that a working group of residents and staff members in support of rezoning could include members from the Planning Board, EDIC, Historical Commission, residents from Montague City and others.

Comments can be directed to planner@montague-ma.gov or attend the April 22 Selectboard meeting.

*MOTION by Ron Sicard to ADJOURN. VOTE: Sicard (AYE), Elizabeth Irving (AYE), Sam Guerin (AYE), George Cooke (AYE), Bob Obear (AYE). (5-0) MOTION PASSES 8:32pm.*