

Dear Readers,

A Town Plan (TP) should provide Norwich's vision for the future. However the current recycled TP supports all the elements that the public objected to in a February, 2017 zoning public meeting. Some of the elements contained in the TP which were objectionable in the earlier zoning proposal are a promotion of intense residential and commercial development, municipal wastewater, municipal water, hamlets, Route 5 South development, destruction of agricultural soils and native habitat, an increase in taxes and an irrevocable change in the historic character of Norwich.

When it comes to affordable housing there's a contradiction between the notion that a huge tract of land consisting of 350 acres with densities up to 8 units per acres which could produce hundreds of new units and a swelling Town population is necessary or desirable to create affordable housing. What it could lead to is MEGA DEVELOPMENT and huge developer profits. Small well integrated (affordable housing) developments should be promoted for a Town the size of Norwich (3,300 people) but there's little in the TP to promote small affordable housing projects that would be consistent with Norwich.

The zoning proposal which the public objected to has been tabled but perhaps only for the moment since the TP proposal will support and promote the very things that many people objected to. It's not only a significant number of Norwich's public that objected to the zoning proposal, the Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Planning Commission (TRORC) also objected to Norwich's TP. TRORC said, "As it is written, the Norwich TP and the Regional Plan conflict within parts of the Village Center/Route 5 Land Use Area. This conflict would manifest itself for any development proposed in this area that requires an Act 250 permit." So given the objections of both the public and the Regional Planning Commission why has the Norwich Planning Commission (PC) insisted on going forward? Why also hasn't the PC been willing to do a real update of the TP when it is clearly out of date using out dated statistics and outdated conclusions?

Those who favor small integrated affordable housing are accused of being elitest and anti affordable housing. Not True. It should be noted that for the past 15 years there have been no new affordable housing developments, notwithstanding efforts made by the Affordable Housing Committee and Planning Commission. Here are a number of suggestions in no particular order of possible ways to increase affordable housing that have been made which do not appear in the TP and which it doesn't appear that the PC or Affordable Housing Committee is interested in. They include:

1. Formation of a group of investors who could benefit from federal tax credits from the creation of affordable housing
2. Increase in the \$45K affordable housing fund designated by the Selectboard
3. Tax incentives for creation of affordable housing rental and sale properties
4. Graduated impact/transfer fees on buyers and sellers of homes and property which would be added to a an affordable housing fund
5. Resuscitation of the former Agway/ABC Dairy affordable housing project by finding off-site sewage disposal capacity
6. Work more closely with Twin Pines Housing Trust, Housing Vermont, Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition, Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and others to take advantage of the new \$35 million dollar bond for affordable housing.
7. Advertise for donors of land or buildings suitable for affordable housing.
8. Redouble efforts to locate property for affordable housing.

Since most in Norwich support affordable housing and diversity, this writer included, It makes sense for those with fresh ideas to come forward. Perhaps even the Planning Commission might be persuaded to do a TP the right way starting with a Town-wide survey such as the one that was done in 2005 that had 990 responses. Updating the statistics and conclusions are equally important. And yes, that can't be done overnight but there's a right way and wrong way to do a TP. Let's hope that the Planning Commission changes direction and does it the right way. A good start would be paying attention to comments in the red line and the fact that 250 voters want to see a Special Election on the Town Plan.

Please come to the meeting this Thursday at 7pm at Tracey Hall and voice your opinion on the Town Plan.

All the best,

Stuart Richards