

SOUTHWEST REGION PLANNING COMMISSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MINUTES

October 11, 2023

Members Present: Keith Thibault, Chairman, *Southwestern Community Services*; Steve Fortier, *NH Department of Business and Economic Affairs*; Med Kopczynski, *City of Keene*; Danica Melone, *Town of Peterborough*; Mike Remy, *C&S Wholesale Grocers*; Ron Rzasa, *Town of Chesterfield*; Bruce Smith, *Town of Westmoreland*.

Staff: Todd Horner, *Assistant Director*, Tim Murphy, *Executive Director*.

Guests: Robert Graham, *Office of Senator Hassan*; Warren Haggerty, *U.S. SBA*; Julie Schoelzel, *Greater Monadnock Collaborative*; Stephon Mehu, *Town of Swanzey*; Carol Nelson, *Town of Peterborough*; Jed Toohey, *RP Masiello*; Raisa West, *Town of Hancock*.

I. Welcome and Introductions

Chairman Thibault called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. and introductions were made.

II. Minutes of April 12 and July 27, 2023

Motion: To approve the minutes of April 12th and July 27, 2023 as submitted.

Motion by Bruce Smith, seconded by Ron Rzasa. Approved by unanimous vote.

III. Regional Accessory Dwelling Unit Design Challenge

Danica Melone and Carol Nelson provided an overview of efforts in Peterborough to organize an accessory dwelling unit (ADU) design challenge. The idea for the challenge was inspired by Peterborough's updated master plan, which highlighted housing needs for young professionals and older adults looking to downsize. In addition, the Town has made several ADU-related regulatory changes and is considering making others soon. For example, the Town is exploring the possibility of allowing two ADUs on a single lot by right.

The design challenge, inspired by successful municipal challenges in other areas of the country, would invite local builders and architects to submit ADU designs based on community criteria. These designs would then be made publicly available, licensed for an affordable fee, streamlining the building process and reducing costs. Still in the conceptual stage, the challenge would focus on promoting local talent and developing ADU designs in harmony with local building styles, avoiding reliance on cookie cutter designs from larger companies and facilitating connections between local property owners, architects, and builders. Design criteria would respond to local and regional priorities, such as affordability. The design challenge would be a way to support gentle infill in rural areas and spur conversation that could lead to regulatory reform allowing for more ADU development.

The Town sought funding through the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) to support the challenge, but the proposal was not selected for an award. There may be potential to pursue the same funding source in the future—additional rounds are anticipated. Furthermore, there is interest among Peterborough stakeholders to explore the possibility of a regional design challenge that would involve multiple municipalities. A regional

approach may help streamline ADU development at a broader geographic scale than a town-specific competition. Although there may be some challenges involved with organizing a design competition at a regional scale, certain factors, such as the uniformity of the building code from town to town, would lend themselves well to working across municipal boundaries. There was discussion about connecting with municipal staff in Ulster County, New York that recently organized a multi-town challenge and exploring additional funding opportunities. SWRPC staff and Peterborough representatives will continue to coordinate and keep the EDAC apprised of future progress.

IV. Recap from Radically Rural 2023

Todd Horner provided a recap of the Radically Rural summit, which occurred in September. The annual summit, in its sixth year and organized by the Hannah Grimes Center for Entrepreneurship, has become a pivotal gathering for individuals and organizations dedicated to the future of rural areas across the nation. SWRPC staff took the lead in organizing the “Main Street” track of the summit, which delved into various issues pertinent to rural communities.

The first session of the Main Street track focused on housing, with a particular focus on manufactured housing and cooperative ownership through resident-owned communities (ROCs). ROC-NH, an initiative of the NH Community Loan Fund, and ROC USA were both key organizing partners. Session attendees visited Tanglewood Estates, a ROC located in Keene. Participants learned about what it takes to form a ROC, to manage one, and how public policy influences feasibility. The precarious nature of housing tenure in conventional manufactured housing parks, where residents own the structures but not the land, was a key point of discussion.

The second Main Street session featured how rural communities are working to become more inclusive, especially in welcoming refugees, asylum seekers, and other immigrants. The session explored this topic from various angles, including human rights and economic development. Recognizing the workforce shortages in many rural areas, the integration of these new populations was discussed as a beneficial strategy for community growth. Session presenters shared how various models of community organizing have been used to build the support structures necessary for immigrants to thrive, connecting them with transportation, housing, language services, education, and other resources.

Overall, one of the central themes of the summit was the importance of reshaping broad perceptions of rural areas. The summit emphasized moving beyond traditional rural imagery, like foliage, barns, and fields, to highlight the innovative and open-minded initiatives taking place in these communities. Rebranding work of this kind was deemed crucial in showcasing the dynamism of rural life.

The keynote sessions featured policy experts and thought leaders. These speakers, including Tony Pipa of the Brookings Institute, focused on critical rural policy issues, particularly the gap between federal policymaking, funding programs, and the practical realities of rural capacity. Their insights offered a deep dive into the challenges and opportunities in shaping effective rural policy. The keynotes were made accessible to a wider audience through public attendance and online streaming, ensuring broader participation and engagement.

The structure of the summit itself contributed to its impact. Downtown Keene transformed into a conference center, utilizing venues like the Colonial Theatre, the Hannah Grimes Center, and the Cheshire County Historic Courthouse. This setup not only facilitated a community-oriented atmosphere but also allowed participants from other regions to experience the local community and all it has to offer. Such an arrangement underlined the summit's commitment to fostering a sense of connectedness and shared purpose among attendees.

V. Update: Our Economy, A Strategy for Southwest NH

Todd Horner provided a presentation on recent data analysis conducted as part of *Our Economy: A Strategy for Southwest NH*, the ongoing update to the region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). Data analysis concentrated on regional GDP, which provides a high-level understanding of the trajectory of different

economic sectors in the region. It was acknowledged that while GDP is a rough measure and often criticized for not reflecting the lived experience of working households, it remains an important indicator of economic health. Discussion included:

- Sector-specific trends. In Cheshire County, retail trade emerged as a bright spot, showing a 33% increase since 2001, contrasting with a statewide decline in this sector. The information sector also showed significant growth, doubling its GDP contribution since 2001, indicating a shift towards a knowledge-based economy. However, it was noted that Cheshire County lags behind the state in terms of growth trends in this sector.
- Manufacturing, construction, and other sectors. Manufacturing in Cheshire County grew by 20% since 2001 but lagged behind the state's growth. The construction sector, however, saw a decline in both Cheshire County and statewide, which was linked to the region's housing challenges. Contraction in this sector is attributable in part to the impact of the Great Recession of 2008, from which it never fully recovered.
- Surprising sector performances. Despite not being considered a finance capital, sectors like real estate, rental and leasing, and finance and insurance were found to be more substantial in economic activity than expected.

A copy of the slide deck is attached.

VI. Partner Updates

Keith Thibault shared that Southwestern Community Services (SCS) is conducting outreach about its energy assistance programs. Interested households can be directed to scshelps.org for more information. Med Kopczynski shared that the City of Keene received funding through InvestNH to create a cluster development ordinance. He also conveyed that the City has engaged a consulting firm to examine how on-street parking may be more efficiently utilized in connection with housing and other land uses. Ron Rzasa said that a developer is exploring construction of a senior housing project in Chesterfield.

VII. Other Matters

There were no other matters.

VIII. Next Meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for January 10, 2024.

VIII. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 2:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Todd Horner
Assistant Director