

**Town of Plainfield
Select Board
Informational Hearing on Gallison Property Revote
May 7, 2018
Approved Minutes**

PRESENT: Tammy Farnham (Select Board Member), Ross Sneyd (Select Board Chair), Charles Barasch (Facilitator), Alexandra Thayer (Select Board Member), Linda Wells (Town Clerk/Treasurer), Keith Swann (Videographer, Friends of the Plainfield Town Hall Opera House), Cindy Wyckoff (Minutes Recorder), George Cushing (Resident), David Strong (Friends of the Plainfield Town Hall Opera House), David Montgomery (Resident), Ed Hutchinson (Resident), Dan Currier (Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission), Alice Merrill (Resident), Eric Blaisdell (Times Argus), Lori Stratton (Resident), Brenda Lindemann (Resident), Tom Blachly (Friends of the Plainfield Town Hall Opera House), Lyndal Lumbrá (Resident), Donna Pettersen (Resident), Becky Atchinson (Resident), Nathan Phillips (Engineer, East Montpelier), Bram Towbin (Road Commissioner), Laura Zeisel (Friends of the Plainfield Town Hall Opera House), Karen Storey (Zoning Administrator), Andy Robinson (Resident), and Michael Birnbaum (Resident).

Ross Sneyd called the hearing to order at 7:00pm.

Prior to the start of the informational hearing, **Sneyd made a motion to approve warrants for 4/24/18, 4/25/18, 4/26/18, 4/27/18, 5/1/18, 5/3/18, and 5/4/18. The motion was approved.**

INFORMATIONAL HEARING

- Ross Sneyd thanked everyone for attending and explained that the meeting was in pursuant to a resolution that the Select Board had adopted on 4/16/18 accepting a petition to hold a revote on the purchase of the Gallison property, which Sneyd read aloud.
- Sneyd noted that Town Moderator Charles Barasch was in attendance to facilitate the hearing. Before beginning the hearing, Sneyd presented Barasch with a cake in celebration of Barasch's birthday. Barasch thanked everyone.
- Charles Barasch explained that his role this evening was not as Town Moderator, but as a facilitator, and while the same rules governing Town Meeting would not apply, he requested that anyone wishing to speak address him, not one another, and that the discussion remain civil.
- Brenda Lindemann asked for clarification of what was included in the purchase, to which Sneyd responded both the land and buildings on it. Alexandra Thayer added that it was a .41- or .42-acre lot with a carriage house with a steep grade that would require fill.
- Ross Sneyd provided a brief history of the issue from when the Gallison family approached the Select Board approximately two years ago. He noted that the question before voters is whether to purchase the property, not what is done with the property.
- Lori Stratton asked if there has been an assessment of runoff into the Winooski River. Thayer responded that the combined lot size of the existing parking area and the Gallison lot is less than one acre and therefore does not reach the one-acre threshold in terms of what the Town would be required to do in planning for water runoff.

- Friends of the Plainfield Town Hall Opera House (Friends) secretary David Strong spoke about the Town Hall Opera House long being central to the community and thus the need to make sure that the recently renovated venue is functionally sustainable. With growing numbers of people utilizing the space, increased traffic safety issues are putting people at risk when seeking a place to park or when dropping off passengers. Strong noted that while several people have been gathering information on possible configurations and associated costs related to what might be done with the lot, the immediate question before voters is simply whether the Town should purchase the property while it is available.
- Ed Hutchinson, noting the extraordinary expense involved, stated that another dozen parking spaces is not going to fix the parking problem, but instead provide only a slight mitigation of it. He stated that he wished there was a better long-range plan defining how long it would take and what would result from it, noting that it was a lot of money down a very large hole for an uncertain outcome.
- George Cushing noted that the \$70,000 purchase price for an uninhabitable building was absurd. He noted that some realtors will not even list the property, and contractors have told him that they would pay a purchase price of only \$25,000-to-\$30,000. Cushing stated that the purchase is only the beginning of a costly money pit.
- Donna Pettersen asked if the Town had exhausted all the possibilities for parking, including compensating the Wrisleys and the owner of Black Bear Biodiesel for use of their lots during events. Alexandra Thayer responded that parking at Wrisley Auto was no longer an option and that other possibilities in the vicinity have not been discussed with the owners. David Strong stated that while Leon Cookson's field was rented out for parking as a favor for one special event, it is not an ongoing option. Strong noted that while acquiring additional parking spaces was a bonus on the Gallison property, the greater benefit is a pull-off area where passengers can be dropped off safely. Tammy Farnham asked for clarification regarding whether the question of other possibilities for parking had been answered, to which Strong responded that Cookson did not want parking in his field and that the arrangement to use Wrisley's lot was no longer an option.
- Dan Currier passed out maps showing various other parking areas, excluding commercial lots, within a quarter mile walking distance from the Town Hall Opera House. Currier detailed four scenarios related to what might be done with the lot.
- Lori Stratton asked what the current assessment on the property is, to which Alexandra Thayer responded \$90,000. George Cushing added that the taxes are \$2,118. Thayer explained the process of applying for an assessment reduction, which would need to be initiated by the property owner and which has not yet occurred in this case. David Strong noted that the property was assessed at \$136,000 a couple of years ago and subsequently reduced to the current \$90,000.
- Alice Merrill asked how the Town reached the purchase amount of \$70,000, to which Ross Sneyd provided the history of its negotiation by the Select Board.
- Zoning Administrator Karen Storey noted this evening's lack of parking at the municipal office building. She noted a lot more issues related to the purchase, beyond costs, such as whether one can procure the needed permits given such matters as river corridor designation, proximity to the Winooski River, setbacks, whether the Town allows permitting for a parking lot, and the need to request variances from the Development Review Board. While acknowledging that parking in the area is a problem, Storey challenged taking a piece-meal approach to the issue rather thinking longer term about capital improvements.

- Ross Sneyd, stating his support for the purchase, noted that what is being voted on is whether the Town should buy the property. He encouraged the Town to seize its future, of which this was an important piece, and to invest in and continue to support creative projects that make the Town more attractive to families and potential businesses. Sneyd gave examples of other uses for the property, beyond parking, that would benefit the Town, and noted that there is ample time after the purchase to decide the best options for its development. He encouraged residents to be open minded, listen carefully to all sides of the issue, and vote on 5/17/18.
- Friends member Laura Zeisel noted that her support of purchasing the Gallison property was from a public safety perspective. She related a dangerous situation she recently had to deal with when helping to direct traffic into the handicapped parking space in front of the Town Hall Opera House. She agreed that purchasing the Gallison property will not solve all the parking problems for the Town Hall Opera House or for the Village, but that it would address the safety problems at the Town Hall Opera House that currently exist.
- Alice Merrill asked how the \$70,000 is being paid in terms of the Town's share and the Friends share. Ross Sneyd responded that the vote requires that the Town pay back the \$70,000, but that there are internal Town government mechanics to determine from which fund it is drawn. This includes \$10,000 from any budget surplus at the end of the fiscal year that would go into the Town Hall Reserve Fund. If there is no budget surplus, a line item appropriation would need to be made. Sneyd added that there are currently funds in the Reserve Fund that would cover at least the first year's payment. Friends president Keith Swann read aloud a recent letter that the Friends sent to the Select Board stating that the Friends would assume the cost of removing the building and clearing the site if the vote is reaffirmed.
- Alexandra Thayer stated her continued opposition to the purchase, noting that in addition to the \$70,000 purchase price, an additional \$15,413 in interest over 10 years needs to be paid. She stated that the existing grade of the property would require engineering work and fill. While still uncomfortable with the amount, she noted that the costs that she provided a couple of weeks ago were way off. Thayer stated expenses involved in engineering work; purchasing and trucking concrete blocks; and purchasing both fill alone and with the inclusion of compacting, grading, and paving work for a total of between \$185,699 and \$148,439, the lesser of which does not include compacting, grading, and paving. The cost of an excavator would be additional. Thayer disagreed that the question is only about whether to purchase the property, but rather includes consideration of what costs will arise down the road. She noted other costs that the Town pays for on an annual basis for the Town Hall Opera House, stating that the \$70,000 would be better put towards retiring the its revolving loan debt while the Reserve Fund should go towards maintenance issues for the building. Thayer noted that along with other issues that have not been considered, there are no provisions in the Zoning Regulations for parking lots.
- Ross Sneyd repeated his belief that every possible expense that could be incurred need not be known if the Town were to buy the Gallison lot because it is not known exactly what the Town would do with the property. He maintained that the purchase would be an investment in the future.
- George Cushing respectfully disagreed with Sneyd that costs down the road need not be considered and repeated that the purchase price is not a good deal.
- Andy Robinson made the point that of the approximately \$400,000 that has been put into renovating the Town Hall Opera House, only \$70,000-\$75,000 had come from taxpayer money with

the remaining coming in through grants and donations. Robinson rejected the assumption that all the work needing to be done to the Gallison property would be at a cost to the Town, and as someone who was involved in helping to fundraise for the renovation of the Town Hall Opera House, he would also work toward doing the same for costs involved in the Gallison property.

- Karen Storey noted that the Town should develop a long-term capital budget plan rather than approaching development in a piece-meal manner. She stated how it is becoming increasingly difficult to be a property owner in Plainfield with the Town continuing to spend money on its pie-in-the-sky good ideas.
- David Strong agreed with Storey that a capital budget plan was a good idea and suggested that the Planning Commission should be working on developing one with the Select Board. Regarding the cost figures previously raised by Alexandra Thayer, Strong objected to the certainty that there is a definite amount that subsequent work will cost after the purchase. He noted that Nathan Phillips, who is an engineer, had come up with a completely different set of figures regarding how much it would cost to change the lot into a parking area.
- Nathan Phillips presented figures based on Dan Currier's options, but getting away from the idea that the Gallison property lot would need to be completely level with the existing parking lot. He noted the importance of a pull-through area for dropping off passengers in terms of improving safety. His design for the lot would require approximately \$15,000 worth of fill and include a retaining wall at least a foot above grade at the back. A final figure for going with this scenario would amount to approximately \$47,000 with a 15% contingency to cover any estimate uncertainty. Alexandra Thayer questioned the lower height of the retaining wall in Phillips' scenario, to which Phillips explained how he calculated it. Discussion followed on differences between Phillips estimate and costs gathered by Thayer.
- Bram Towbin, as former chair of the Select Board, wanted to note that the Select Board almost always level funded its budget and that a huge portion of the tax increase is not the municipal part of the taxes. He also stated that the Select Board supported the restoration of the Town Hall Opera House and that the taxpayer got a good bargain in terms of taxpayer dollars spent versus free labor, donations, etc.
- Lori Stratton noted some horrendous experiences she's had when helping with parking at events and feels that even if the lot was not turned into a parking area, there would be benefits if the Town owned the property.
- Alice Merrill asked Dan Currier about what permits would be needed, to which Currier responded that permits are needed for curb cuts and for restrictions on drainage. Although a permit is not needed, a requirement may be to assure authorities that a storm water engineer has been consulted. He stated that a permit specialist for the State should be consulted regarding the river corridor. Alexandra Thayer noted that she has already checked with a river corridor person and that that would not come into play. Currier added that once all the permits are complete, the project can move forward.
- Tom Blachly, a member of the Friends and who is not a taxpayer in Plainfield, encouraged the Town to look at the long-range benefits. He noted that a lot of people in the arts community would like to rent this space, but see a big problem with parking. The two advantages to moving forward with the purchase would be the proximity to the Town Hall Opera House and the increased safety for people attending events.

- Becky Atchinson asked what the process will be after the vote if the vote is to reaffirm purchasing the property. Ross Sneyd responded that, if the vote is approved, on 7/1/18, the Town would close on the property and own it. At that point, it would be ultimately the Select Board, in consultation with the Friends, to decide what, if anything, to do with the property. A number of options are available, including asking the Friends to coordinate next steps or to convene a task force.
- Lori Stratton pointed out that the events held at the Town Hall Opera House benefit a cross-section of the population and having closer access to it would help older people, people with bad knees, and families with children.
- Michael Birnbaum noted his conflicting feelings regarding the project, but supports the investment in the future, possibly removing some blight from the Town, making the Town more welcoming, and increasing safety. He disagrees, however, with the notion that the distant parking areas will not be used and stated that a volunteer or paid shuttle system would obviate the need for additional parking spaces across the street. He noted the possibility of a very limited parking lot with a space for a safe turnoff and a few handicapped parking spaces. He agreed that both long-range planning and seizing an opportunity are important.
- David Strong thanked Nathan Phillips and Dan Currier for helping to provide their perspectives on costs and what opportunities the Town might have. He noted that his concern was more about a safe pull-off for those attending events than adding parking spaces, and reiterated the commitment by the Friends to cover the cost of removing the building as well as partner with the Town as the project goes forward to raise more funds that may be needed to improve the site. He noted that the Friends can also draw on people who live outside Plainfield.
- Brenda Lindemann asked if there was a way to negotiate and lower the purchase price, to which Ross Sneyd responded that the Select Board had signed a legally binding purchase and sale agreement. Alexandra Thayer added that if the revote is not affirmed, the Town can renegotiate.
- Sneyd thanked everyone for coming and sharing their thoughts on the issue. He noted that absentee ballot votes can be cast starting 5/9/18. Thayer thanked Sneyd for the cake he brought for Charles Barasch's birthday, which was shared with attendees.

ADJOURNMENT

- **Sneyd made a motion to adjourn at 8:45pm. The motion was approved.**

Respectfully submitted by Cindy Wyckoff