



Community and Economic Vitality Sub-Committee Meeting Minutes

September 18, 2013, 9:30 a.m. – 11 a.m.

Members Present:

May Balsama, Souhegan Valley Chamber of Commerce
Michael Dell Orfano, Town of Amherst Planning Board
Pat Goodman, Workforce Development Center, Nashua Community College
Jeff Gowan, Town of Pelham Planning Dept.
Tracy Hutchins, Milford Improvement Team
Janet Langdell, Town of Milford Planning Board

Heather Leach, Centrix Bank
Sarah Marchant, Town of Amherst Community Development
Joe Murray, Fidelity Investments
Bill Parker, Town of Milford Community Development
Heather Tebbetts, PSNH
James Vayo, Renaissance Downtowns

Staff Present:

Kerrie Diers, Executive Director
Mark Connors, Regional Planner

Kerrie Diers began the meeting by welcoming the committee and asking those present to introduce themselves. Mark Connors noted the five other members of the committee who could not attend the meeting. Diers then briefly reviewed the committee's charge to develop an Economic Development Chapter detailing the region's economic and demographic profile, analyzing its comparative economic advantages, opportunities and weaknesses, and meeting the requirements of a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS).

This was followed by a discussion of the benefits of a CEDS, including that it provides communities the opportunity to apply for federal EDA assistance, and how the 8 towns in the western part of the NRPC Region are currently not covered by any CEDS. Diers noted that currently economic development assistance in the region is handled by a variety of different agencies across the state in a manner that is illogical and can be confusing for businesses and municipal officials.

Diers then briefly introduced the minutes from the July 17 meeting, noting that the meeting served as an introductory and organizational meeting. Diers then introduced the draft vision and goals for the chapter, noting that the document was conceptual and the objectives would likely be altered as the plan is written. She asked the committee to review the document in the coming weeks and provide any input they might have. Connors noted that the goals were compiled by reviewing those outlined in CEDS from other regions, while taking into account conditions unique to the Nashua Region. He said the goals are important because when the commission solicits communities for projects to appear in the plan, it is necessary that the project align with at least one of the goals outlined in the plan.

Heather Tebbetts inquired about the level of public outreach that would go into the plan. May Balsama said she would like to organize all the planning boards into a single room to coordinate on major issues. Langdell said it would be helpful in addressing issues and spurring development along major corridors like Route 13 and Route 101A. Diers said she was receptive to the idea, and noted that public input for the regional plan has already been extensive and is continuing. She added that the commission plans to hold workshops in different geographic areas of the region, reaching out particularly to town planning boards. Langdell suggested distributing the Progress Report on the Regional Plan to committee members because she found it helpful in analyzing how municipal plans align with regional needs articulated by residents.

Heather Leach asked if it would be possible to have officially-designated lending and support services located within the Nashua Region. As a lender, she noted it was difficult to coordinate with designated bodies in Keene and Portsmouth because they are geographically distant from the region. Janet Langdell noted that the Nashua Revolving Loan Fund has recently been extended to surrounding communities. Diers noted that a major long-term goal is to have more official financing and support opportunities located within the region.

Connors then reviewed requirements of the CEDS and the draft chapter outline for the plan, noting that the outline has been structured to meet the CEDS requirements. He noted that an analysis of the region's economic strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities would be conducted. He noted that several indices rank the Nashua-Manchester Region as one of the strongest in the nation for its concentration of technology companies and noted the plan would look at mechanisms to maintain and strengthen those technology clusters.

Connors then reviewed the four projects in the region already outlined in the REDC CEDS. He noted that most of the projects are being privately developed but require public assistance in the form of grants, loans, tax credits, brownfield cleanup and/or infrastructure development to make them economically viable. Jeff Gowan noted that the Pelham Water/Sewer study project is a placeholder designed to draw attention to the fact that a lack of infrastructure stymies economic development in Pelham. Several committee members noted that this issue was also a significant barrier to economic growth in their communities.

James Vayo then provided a synopsis of the Renaissance Downtowns development planned for Bridge Street on the Merrimack River near the Taylor Falls Bridge. He noted that the first phase of development, for 229 housing units, is already under construction. Michael Dell Orfano inquired about the state of large industrial development in the region. Connors noted that there are plans for significant industrial development in the Nashua Technology Park, but noted the project has moved slowly because Exit 1 is at or near capacity. NRPC is analyzing the feasibility of constructing an Exit 36 South which would help alleviate congestion in the Exit 1 area.

Heather Tebbetts noted that there seemed to be significant differences in the region, because Nashua appeared to be doing well economically while surrounding towns lacked infrastructure to attract investment. Several committee members noted that it was a difficult balance for surrounding

towns, because while residents might want property tax relief, many wanted to retain rural character and were reluctant to embrace significant new development. Diers noted that one common theme from public outreach efforts is that residents appear happy with the rural/urban balance of the region as it exists today.

Diers then provided a description of the REMI Economic Model, which will allow the committee to test the economic outcomes of different scenarios in the region. A scenario could measure the impact of a large development, infrastructure investment, policy changes, or demographic trends in the region. She distributed two scenarios that the Southern New Hampshire Planning Commission was planning to run to provide the committee some more context for how the model operated. She noted that NRPC would be working with the New Hampshire Labor Market Bureau to run at least one regional scenario and wanted to gather the committee's input as to what scenarios would be most interesting.

There was a great deal of discussion regarding persistent congestion along Route 101A as barrier to economic growth in the region. Diers agreed that congestion along Route 101A has been a major issue and noted plans to alleviate congestion along the corridor. She noted that a long-term goal could be to make the roadway more livable by offering transit access and better pedestrian and bicycle amenities, and said it would be interesting to measure how those investments would impact economic growth in the region. She added that NRPC had recently met with the NHDOT and were successful in making the point that the road is a major regional corridor and not the responsibility of any single municipality. Responding to concerns posed by Balsama, Diers noted that there are no plans to build a bypass around the corridor.

There was some debate regarding what investments would be most effective in helping to stimulate regional economic development. Tebbetts noted that parents were unlikely to walk or bicycle because the nature of family life and hectic schedules makes it very difficult to do so. Vayo noted that developments in Downtown Nashua would appeal to young people, because close proximity to amenities makes it's possible to live without a car in such locations. Dell Orfano said investments in walkable development were also needed in outlying communities.

Noting that the commission wanted to end the meeting on time, Diers thanked committee members for their thoughtful participation and for the wide-ranging nature of the discussion. Connors added that the commission would look to meet again in early November and would send out a poll to gauge their availability. Diers said the commission would take the committee's input and use it to draft REMI model proposals for the next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 11 a.m.