

Lanesborough Economic Development Committee
December 2, 2020 – Held remotely by ZOOM due to COVID-19 Pandemic
Minutes

Present: Barb Hassan, Chairperson. Members: Kevin Towle, Pat Hubbard, Tom Voisin, David Vogel and Laura Brennan, a Representative from Berkshire Regional Planning Commission.

1. The meeting was called to order at 5:20pm by Barb Hassan, Chairperson.
2. Laura Brennan reminded the Chair that because the group is meeting on Zoom, she needs to do a formal roll call. Barb Hassan conducted the roll call to document the attendance of members for the recording of the meeting.

3. **Review of Status of Agenda Items from October 27, 2020:**

Laura questioned the purpose of this agenda item. Barb reported that it was a way to track what had happened to the agenda items since the last meeting. It was agreed that in the case of this meeting, all the items were on the agenda for this meeting so there would be no review at this time.

4. **Agenda**

B2B Event:

A Zoom event was held on November 4th from 4:30-5:30pm and unfortunately, no businesses attended. Laura had prepared a presentation for the B2B event on the grants available to small businesses. She highlighted Community Block Grants that are available to small business with five or fewer employees. Laura agreed to send e-blast to businesses because Northern Berkshire received a total of \$850,000 in funds to distribute in \$10,000 grants to businesses. She also informed members about the PACE (Property Assessed Clean Energy) program that provides financing for commercial businesses, in the form of a betterment assessment on their tax bills, so they can make energy improvements. Select Boards in each town must agree to become a PACE community before the loans are granted because of the tax implications. Laura agreed to set up a meeting with Julie Cowen, MA. PACE contact and Kelli Robins so that Lanesborough could begin to consider becoming a PACE community and make a presentation to the Lanesborough Select Board. Pittsfield and North Adams are PACE communities. Kevin Towle agreed to share a copy of “doing business in” the Town of Adams brochure with Barb so that it could be forwarded to members for discussion at the next meeting with the goal of replicating it as a guidebook for new business in the Town of Lanesborough.

Economic Development and the Berkshire Mall:

Barb reminded members that she was asked by Mike Murphy, Lanesborough Selectman, to make a presentation for the Select Board about the activities of LEDC, the Berkshire Mall and economic development. She reported that she asked Mr. Murphy to be more specific in his request and has not been contacted by him since. She was unsure about whether all Town committee Chairs made reports to the Select Board or whether she had been singled out because of her position as Chair of the LEDC and/or professional involvement in selling and then assisting the new owners of the mall. As committee members had agreed to at the last meeting, Barb presented the following background information so that members could provide guidance about just what the LEDC role should be with the mall going forward. Tom Voisin

suggested that we refer back to the original mission of the LEDC at its formation which was to assist the town to increase the tax base of the town by attracting new business, retaining businesses by supporting their efforts and creating a business-friendly environment.

Barb reminded members that the Berkshire Mall has been and could be again, in some form, an economic driver for the region. Currently, as the new owners make necessary upgrades to the facility and discern the best, most profitable use of the commercial space, they have a tax bill of \$770,000, \$550,000 of which is paid to the Baker Hill Road District for the two-mile Berkshire Connector Road that was originally built by them to give the public easy access to the mall. This road also connects two state roads, Route 7 and Route 8. These funds also support additional police and fire support for the mall. The Baker Hill Road District, a separate entity, not connected to the Town of Lanesborough, was created 30 years ago because a Town cannot borrow money and there needed to be an entity that could borrow the money to build the road to the mall. The Baker Hill Road District was to be dissolved when the road loan was satisfied. At some point, additional funds were assessed by the Baker Hill Road District to provide additional fire and police protection for the mall and Target and road maintenance, including plowing. Even though the road expense was paid off years ago, the Baker Hill Road District continues to collect funds from the mall and Target for police, fire and road maintenance. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts DOT has expressed an interest in taking over the responsibility for the Berkshire Mall Connector Road which would significantly reduce the tax burden to both the mall and Target. Funds needed to pay for fire and police protection could be paid directly to the town for those services and the Baker Hill Road District, as an organization that has administrative expenses and salaries that contribute to the tax burden, could be dissolved, as was the premise more than 30 years ago. One other caveat is that if the Mall or Target defaults on their tax payment to the Baker Hill Road District, then the Baker Hill Road District has the authority to acquire these properties. It is a complicated situation that has lasting implications for the mall and how fairly all the tax paying businesses are treated in the Town.

Laura asked what would happen if the Baker Hill Road did not exist. Barb responded that the Town would have to assume responsibility for the road and assess the additional fees for additional fire and police protection. Tom asked who owns the land on either side of the road and whether the road ownership would have an impact on them. No one at the meeting could respond to his question.

Barb brought the group to the original question. What direction would LEDC members give her around the request she received for a presentation to the Select Board about the mall? Dave reminded members that we work at the pleasure of the Select Board. Kevin stated that he felt these situations should be considered on a case-by-case basis. He suggested that if our opinion was solicited that the entire committee should contribute and that we should respond as a group. Pat Hubbard said that she believed that a crucial responsibility of the LEDC was the advocate for all businesses in the Town, to try to ensure that all the businesses in the Town, large or small, are treated fairly. She agreed with Kevin, that any presentation, especially about the mall, because of Barb's dual role as Chair of LEDC and mall agent puts her in a difficult

position. Kevin suggested that the LEDC act as fact finders. If the committee is given a specific question or concern, it can be placed on the agenda, discussed and an opinion formed that can be shared.

Barb thanked members for their thoughtful discussion and promised to keep members informed should she receive another request from the Select Board.

Tour De Greylock – Lanesborough signature outdoor recreational event

Laura asked if the LEDC would be organizing a separate entity to manage and accept the funds from this event because the Town cannot accept funds. Pat responded that Mt. Greylock Campsite Park is prepared to organize and financially manage this event.

Organizations and businesses can be asked to sponsor the event to offset the cost of police, refreshments, marketing, etc. Pat indicated that she intends to contact the Chair of the Town Recreation Committee to see if they would like to help with the event and/or have suggestions about how any funds raised might be spent to benefit outdoor recreation in Lanesborough. Barb suggested that proceeds could benefit the bridge from Laston Park to Constitution Hill but that it would take years to raise the large sum of money that it will take to build that bridge. She suggested that the first funded project could be smaller so that it could be completed, like a skate park or new playground. Understanding that COVID may impact the organization and implementation of this event, during the winter, Pat will begin to recruit a committee to share the responsibilities of organizing and conducting the event.

Next Meeting:

Wednesday, January 6, 2021 at 5:15pm

Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 6:45pm

Respectfully Submitted by

Patricia Hubbard, Recording Secretary