

1 Town of Middlebury  
2 Economic Health Committee  
3 Draft Minutes of Meeting  
4 August 30, 2018  
5

6 Present: Fred Kenney, Scott Gemignani, Farhad Khan, Mike Capra, Becky Dayton, Karen Duguay, John  
7 Freidin, Steve Boyce and Ben Calvi (arrived immediately after minutes were approved).

8 Absent: Mary Cullinane and Jennifer Murray.

9 Also Present: Selectboard members Brian Carpenter and Heather Seeley; Beth Dow, Town Staff/note  
10 taker

11  
12 Call to Order: The meeting began at 12:00 p.m. in the Town Offices Large Conference Room.  
13

14 Introductions: Karen Duguay, Better Middlebury Partnership; Becky Dayton, Vermont Book Shop; Mike  
15 Capra, Denecker Chevrolet; Ben Calvi, Vermont Hard Cider; Fred Kenney, Addison County Economic  
16 Development Corporation; Steve Boyce, American Flatbread; Farhad Khan, Selectboard member and  
17 One Dollar Market; Scott Gemignani, Tinker and Smithy Game Store; John Freidin, retired former  
18 owner of Vermont Bicycle Touring; Beth Dow, Town Manager's office; Heather Seeley and Brian  
19 Carpenter, Selectboard members.  
20

21 Duguay made the motion to approve the minutes of August 9, 2018 and Dayton seconded. Motion  
22 approved with 6 in favor, 2 abstentions (Khan and Boyce) and 2 absent (Calvi and Mary Cullinane).  
23

24 Public Comment  
25

26 There was no public comment.  
27

28 Discuss Committee Charge  
29

30 Kenney said that he sent in a request to the Town Manager but it was too late to get into the  
31 Selectboard agenda on Tuesday night.  
32

33 Carpenter said that he read the minutes and thought of the on-boarding process for the Committee and  
34 the charge. He said that he noticed that some of the comments were relevant to current Selectboard  
35 priorities, like the water situation on Exchange Street. He said that funds for that project have been  
36 allocated for a study to determine what needs to be done. Once the study is complete, the  
37 Infrastructure Committee will ask the Selectboard for a bond vote to do the work. He said that he and  
38 Seeley were there to answer some questions and take some items off of the table to help focus the  
39 Committee. He said that one recommendation from the Economic Health Task Force was to have a  
40 standing Committee of business owners to monitor the economic conditions and make  
41 recommendations to the Selectboard. Carpenter said that this Committee was to try to focus some of  
42 that effort.

43  
44 Kenney said that the main concern of the last meeting was that focusing on these specific issues and  
45 economic development tools in the time that we have was too short and if we come back with a report  
46 then the Selectboard will be right back where they started and be looking for more. He said that the  
47 Committee was thinking we should look at it from a higher level and concentrate on a framework for the  
48 Town to use to address economic development, not on specific economic development solutions.

49  
50 Freidin asked what problems the Committee is trying to solve for and how will they evaluate various  
51 options.

52  
53 Seeley said that some of the problems are for other committees to solve. She said that there are certain  
54 tools that the original task force identified that might be helpful for Middlebury to have, like a Tax  
55 Increment Financing District, because that opens up new opportunities that we don't have now. She said  
56 that another example would be the Revolving Loan Fund. She said that we don't have a mechanism to  
57 support it with Town funds.

58  
59 Freidin asked about the \$150,000.00 in the Business Development Fund and what the best use of those  
60 funds would be. **(Note from Town Manager: The balance of the Business Development Fund is**  
61 **\$82,287.44).** Seeley said that was number three in the Committee's charge to look at.

62  
63 Carpenter received the recommendation and agreed that the timeline is too tight to solve big issues. He  
64 thinks that coming back to the Selectboard with a change in the timeline is fine but as far as a change in  
65 the charge of the Committee, that would need more discussion. He said that ACEDC is already doing a  
66 study and there is a committee that is looking at the best framework regionally. He said that maybe we  
67 should wait until those recommendations come forward and suspend this effort. Kenney said that it  
68 could take up to three years to have the documented regional economic development plan and it is  
69 regional, not local.

70  
71 Carpenter said that there are a few charges that are more specific, like retaining and expanding  
72 economic opportunities and that has to do with the current economic environment. He said they are  
73 looking at what the tools are to help existing merchants and to attract merchants to fill vacant  
74 storefronts. He said that the Tax Increment Financing came from the constant complaints about parking  
75 and he is wondering if it is a viable option to solve for the parking issue. He said that in that project, the  
76 tax dollars would make the majority of the annual bond payments. He said that if the EDI project could  
77 get energized again would we have the opportunity to help a developer make this a workable solution.  
78 He said that a lot of the hang-up was over parking. He said there is tax payer money targeted for  
79 economic development and it would be nice to put it to work but the Selectboard isn't sure of the best  
80 way to do that. He said that we have a website and maybe there are tools that businesses might look for  
81 to help them that should be there.

82  
83 Dayton said there is a little bit of a disconnect with the title of the Committee and that it's not a list of  
84 things to consider but a list of things to do. She said this is a list of tasks to tend to but it is not to look at

85 the issues of economic health. She asked Carpenter if the Committee is just a working group to work on  
86 these tasks. Carpenter said yes and that the Committee title gives it a larger focus. He said if we expand  
87 the mission we need a much larger timeline. Carpenter said that maybe it would be appropriate to have  
88 a second charge where one was more operational and one was more strategic to look at long term.  
89 Carpenter said that by the end of the construction it will be easier to see. He said that the Battell Block  
90 will have a completely different look and will be more attractive for businesses to set up there.

91

92 Freidin asked Carpenter if they would like the Committee to give numbers and requirements on setting  
93 up a Tax Increment Financing District but not do anything about parking. Carpenter said that the  
94 Selectboard is looking for recommendations on whether it makes sense to do that. Freidin said that he  
95 thinks that the Town would want to take proactive measures to get spaces filled to enhance the  
96 economic vigor of the Town. Seeley said that was the thing to focus on. Kenney said that the Committee  
97 should look at the framework and not the specific buildings or projects.

98

99 Seeley said that she attended a conference and one thing that was clear was that economic prosperity  
100 was community driven not town driven, but that the town can support the community by providing  
101 tools to help people come there. She said that when the Selectboard established the Economic Health  
102 Task Force these things came up but there wasn't time to look at them to determine if they were  
103 feasible.

104

105 Carpenter said that the Economic Health Task Force looked at the expenditure of having Jamie on staff  
106 trolling for businesses to come to Middlebury and decided that wasn't a performing process and that it  
107 was not the solution. He said that they are looking at what we can do to make it more desirable to come  
108 to Middlebury.

109

110 Duguay asked if a staff person was out of the question, or maybe they should look at someone who  
111 helped current businesses instead of attracting big business. She said that in Waterbury there is a  
112 person that is helping businesses find tax credits and that Montpelier is looking to hire a similar person.  
113 She said that this person would really be there to support businesses and answer phone calls for  
114 businesses that are interested in coming to town. Carpenter said that this would absolutely be  
115 something to look at.

116

117 Gemignani said that the list provided was enough for the Committee to get started. He asked about the  
118 Revolving Loan Fund, and if the Selectboard would be looking for the Committee to come up with  
119 requirements or if there were already some out there. Kenney said that the Committee should be  
120 looking at whether or not the Revolving Loan Fund is a good idea or if there is something better.

121

122 Freidin said that tools are only valuable in proportion to the job that you want to do. He also said that  
123 you have to go beyond the idea that everything has to be "downtown." He said that the Town won't  
124 expand a lot because it's constrained geographically but there are opportunities for expansion  
125 elsewhere. He said that to get the community behind it, you need a vision. He said that, for example, we  
126 need to get people excited about a plan to solve the parking problem, not Tax Increment Financing.

127  
128 Kenney said that the direction we need from the Town is to tell us what the end goals are. He asked if it  
129 was more businesses in town or more people in town. He said that if we are going to recommend tools,  
130 we have to know what they are for. He asked Carpenter if these tools would also include policy changes.  
131 Carpenter said yes, absolutely.

132  
133 Capra asked what the Town thinks is important because they all have different opinions. He asked if the  
134 goals include tax revenue, retail tax revenue or jobs.

135  
136 Freidin said that housing and the affordability of a place to live plays a key role in attracting people to  
137 work in Town.

138  
139 Seeley said that at the conference she attended it showed everything as a circle. She said that if you  
140 bring housing but not jobs it's a cycle that goes around and is complex. She said that they were trying to  
141 break it down into something smaller with this group to make some progress. She said that what Freidin  
142 is talking about is what she was envisioning for this Committee but wasn't sure if that was what  
143 everyone had signed up for.

144  
145 Freidin said that we have to have a vision and ideas. He asked about more automobile dealers or the  
146 multi-beverage industry which is booming here. Seeley said that the reasons the beverage companies  
147 come here is because of our wastewater systems and good water. She said that the Selectboard has to  
148 draw the line at what the municipality is responsible for and what community and business leaders are  
149 responsible for in regards to economic development. She is wondering how a municipality can support  
150 businesses and what tools can be implemented to help and encourage people to come here. She said  
151 that water upgrades are very important and the Selectboard is working on that.

152  
153 Capra said that sometimes it's what you don't do. He said that people aren't looking for a handout; they  
154 just want an environment that's business-friendly. Seeley asked what the municipality could do to  
155 change that.

156  
157 Calvi said that there were five specific charges for the Committee but everyone defines economic health  
158 differently and they didn't know what vision they were working towards. Seeley said that these were the  
159 tools that they knew about but maybe there are others out there.

160  
161 Freidin said that one thing the Selectboard could do was define the greatest advantages and greatest  
162 challenges of Middlebury. He thinks that the Board is in touch with the things that the municipality is  
163 responsible for. He is wondering what you would say to someone to get them to do business in  
164 Middlebury.

165  
166 Seeley said that there was a survey to try and identify the issues where improvements could be made.  
167 The issues are so huge: housing, job creation and pay. She asked how we would break it down into  
168 something more manageable.

169  
170 Freidin said that he doesn't want to wait for parking. He said that by the time you wait, more businesses  
171 will go down. Carpenter thinks that looking at parking is a waste of the Committee's time. He said that  
172 unless you are willing to build a structure it will be hard to solve for.  
173  
174 Kenney said that the Committee could look at what other infrastructure projects would be helpful.  
175 Carpenter said that he wasn't sure if that is what the Committee should be charged with. Kenney said  
176 that the tool is infrastructure, not necessarily parking.  
177  
178 Gemignani said that having multiple construction projects going on at once is not a good idea and that  
179 will put more businesses out. He said that we should focus on the charge. He asked if they should look at  
180 filling businesses and coaching businesses into being successful.  
181  
182 Khan said that it's hard to tell why a business is failing. He said that maybe the construction project  
183 pushed them over the hump. He said that we should be mindful of what we could do preemptively to  
184 help them like use the Revolving Loan funds to help businesses that are failing and get them counseling  
185 on the current economic environment. He said that when you talk about economic health we can't focus  
186 on just one thing, it has to be a bigger picture.  
187  
188 Freidin said that we need leadership. We don't have a mayor or a person that can speak and get people  
189 excited. Seeley said that should come from the business community. Freidin said that one thing we  
190 should do is find ways to stimulate excitement. Duguay said that would be a tool that another  
191 organization can take on, like the BMP.  
192  
193 Freidin said that he would like to know how businesses that have been here for a long time are still  
194 successful.  
195  
196 Kenney asked if they wanted to do research, how they would do that and if there was a possibility for a  
197 budget. Carpenter said that there are funds, as long as it's tied to the discussion of how we grow and  
198 sustain Middlebury. Kenney asked if we would have to come back each time to the Selectboard.  
199 Carpenter said that yes, each time, it should come to the Selectboard but would like Kathleen's opinion.  
200 He said that anything over \$2,500.00 has to be approved by the Selectboard. Carpenter said that we can  
201 make a budget and Ramsay can approve any items brought by Kenney like what was done with the BMP  
202 downtown events.  
203  
204 Kenney asked what the next step would be. Carpenter said that a timeline request and any amendments  
205 to the charge should come back and once approved, if funds need to be spent, it should come to the  
206 Selectboard. He said that once the budget is flushed out it should be brought forward.  
207  
208 Kenney said that there is a Main Street National Organization that has a lot of information for  
209 municipalities and we have a downtown organization that is recognized by the State as a Main Street  
210 Organization.

211

212 Carpenter and Seeley left at 1:05 p.m. Carpenter said that he appreciated the Committee's time as this  
213 is a huge issue for Middlebury.

214

215 Committee Discussion

216

217 Kenney asked the group if they were feeling better about the charge or had any recommended changes  
218 to it and if they wanted to ask for an extension given the commitment. Freidin said it would be  
219 interesting to start with a conversation and ask the group about their ideas and what they wanted to do  
220 before they decided how they wanted to change the charge.

221

222 Dayton said that it wasn't up to them to change the charge that they were given by the Selectboard. She  
223 said that you were either in or out. Kenney asked if everyone was still in given the charge. Dayton said  
224 that she was more comfortable with a slow and steady approach to the issues. She didn't think it was  
225 possible to answer these five charges in the timeframe given. She said that the timeframe is driven by  
226 the railroad project and that as a Committee they have to be able to look beyond the railroad project.

227

228 Duguay said that they are uniquely positioned in Middlebury to re-imagine what our downtown could  
229 look like and how it could function going forward. She said that she would rather stay on the Committee  
230 for the duration in order to do something meaningful and positively impact the Town.

231

232 Freidin said that he is glad to spend the time and that they need to think big and from high up. He said  
233 that they have to think about the issues and the questions. He said that he was not worried about the  
234 charge.

235

236 Calvi said that the Selectboard knows economic health is a complex issue and they are looking for tools  
237 as a municipality and that is the charge.

238

239 Duguay said that they should look at how other municipalities are doing this.

240

241 Kenney said that they are looking at a minimum Committee timeline of two years. He said that the  
242 community development funds have to be spent within a certain amount of time or the State would  
243 take it away. He said it has to be CDBG (Community Development Block Grant) eligible to receive the  
244 funds.

245

246 Khan said that he thinks the charge should be left alone and focus on retail first. Kenney said that he was  
247 wondering why they should only focus on retail opportunities when it should be all opportunities.

248 Duguay said that she thought that charge came from pressure because of downtown businesses closing.

249

250 Calvi said that he thought the charge should be amended to retail and other economic opportunities. He  
251 said that he would like to know what other towns are doing and said that he is not sure what a  
252 municipality can do.

253  
254 Kenney said that the first research that they can do is to see what other municipalities do to attract  
255 businesses. Duguay said that she is attending the Designated Downtown Retreat and will bring this  
256 question there. She will come up with a list of other Vermont towns to talk to.  
257  
258 Dayton asked if there are other towns that are doing this. Duguay said that Waterbury is doing really  
259 well. She said they had a clear plan and have a separate economic development person to work with  
260 businesses. Kenney said that Bristol and Bethel were also doing well.  
261  
262 Kenney said that the website has been set up for the Committee on the Town's website and there is a  
263 lot of information out there. He also asked the group about a meeting schedule going forward. The  
264 Committee agreed on the second and fourth Thursdays at noon in the Town offices.  
265  
266 Kenney asked that the group not send things to the Selectboard on their own but as a Committee. He  
267 said that the best way to do it is to send it to him directly.  
268  
269 Kenney said that the Governor is coming to town on September 11, 2018 for his Capitol of the Day Tour.  
270 He also said that ACEDC and a few other organizations are hosting a Workforce Development Summit on  
271 September 12, 2018 from 3:45-8:00 p.m. at Basin Harbor.  
272  
273 The meeting adjourned at 1:30 p.m.  
274  
275 The next meeting of the Economic Health Committee will be at noon on Thursday, September 13, 2018  
276 in the Town Offices Large Conference Room at 77 Main Street.  
277  
278 Respectfully submitted,  
279 Casey McDonough