

Town of Middlebury
Economic Health Committee
Minutes of Meeting
January 31, 2019

Present: Fred Kenney, Steve Boyce, Becky Dayton, Farhad Khan, John Freidin and Karen Duguay.
Absent: Scott Gemignani, Ben Calvi and Ex Officio Member Jennifer Murray. Mike Capra arrived later in the meeting.

Kenney called the meeting to order at 12:05 p.m.

Minutes Approval

The minutes of December 14, 2018 and January 10, 2019 were approved as presented upon motion by Khan, seconded by Cullinane.

Citizen Comments

Former Town Planner and Zoning Officer Fred Dunnington introduced himself to the Committee and expressed his interest in their work.

Main Street America Video

The Committee watched a short video on the importance of a healthy downtown from the Main Street America website. There was discussion after the video, and Cullinane and Kenney said the statement that had stood out for them was how it isn't about what we don't have, it's about what we have. Cullinane said after watching the recording of the business roundtable at the January 10th meeting, it was clear that we do have a lot of positives, and how we take advantage of that should be our priority.

Freidin said the Main Street video had also mentioned creating a plan for the future, and he said the current Town Plan is all about aspirations, and he thinks we need to think seriously about where we want to have future retail/commercial development and not just let it happen. Cullinane said she understand that's what the Planners and Selectboard are trying to do. Freidin said they aren't doing a directive and someone needs to. He said someone needs to decide where it makes the most sense to have commercial opportunities.

Dunnington said earlier Town Plans had tried to articulate what should happen on the "EDI site" behind the Library and Town Offices, but it was determined by the Selectboard to be too prescriptive. He said if you plan for something that the market can't deliver it's futile, so you have to allow for some flexibility. Kenney said he thought the charge given the Committee skipped the step of creating an economic plan, so that could be one of the first recommendations made to the Board is for the Town to create a long-

42 range economic plan. Freidin thought the Committee should express an opinion on where business
43 should be developed.

44
45 Kenney urged the Committee to go onto the Main Street America site and look at the tools available and
46 mentioned a conference in Seattle in late March if anyone wanted to attend. Freidin asked about
47 sending someone and Kenney said he'd asked the Town to send someone, but it was felt that a less
48 expensive, local one would be more appropriate. Duguay thought it would be an ideal time for
49 someone from the Committee to attend this, since we know what's happening in Vermont, and it's
50 important to find out what's happening outside of Vermont that we might not have thought of yet.

51
52 Business Roundtable

53
54 Kenney said he'd divided the comments into different areas, such as comments the Committee should
55 consider, and then things like the condition of the sidewalks that was important for the Town to be
56 aware of, but not any part of the Committee Charge. He said some things that came up are really
57 something other organizations should be working on, and there was some cross-over.

58
59 Cullinane thought there was an opportunity as an entity under "economic health", to package and
60 emphasize the little things, and to bring voice and priority to such things as making sure the sidewalks
61 are easy for folks to get around on. She said even though the Public Works Department executes these
62 things, the Committee needs to say these are the things that provide greater economic activity. She said
63 not to just identify it as a Town responsibility, but to say it has to get done. Kenney said the Committee
64 can make a broad recommendation that the Town has to provide services to keep retail vibrant in the
65 downtown, and here are some specific things for the Town to do. Freidin agreed totally and if the
66 Committee doesn't say it, it won't get said and it's a great opportunity. Dugay said it's important to
67 make sure that the things that impact the downtown are funded appropriately, such as there may need
68 to be more money in the sidewalk clearing budget. She isn't sure the Town understands it from a
69 retailer's perspective, and while they do what they can with the resources they have, maybe more
70 resources are needed.

71
72 Khan thought the roundtable was a good meeting, but thought the comments all focused on
73 "downtown" and not the town as a whole. He said we've heard from the business community and
74 what they want, but we haven't heard what the consumers want. He said he sees all kinds of
75 suggestions of what people want on social media, and thinks the Committee should listen to what these
76 people feel is needed in Middlebury. Dayton mentioned a study regarding retail that had been done,
77 but Khan said those surveys don't get to all economic levels of the community so not every income level
78 is heard from. Kenney said at some point there will be a public hearing.

79
80 Dayton asked Khan what types of businesses had been mentioned, and he said big-retail stores and
81 good restaurants by people who miss the Dog Team. Freidin said there's a lot of older people in the
82 community and they have fewer needs, and while they have the money, he isn't sure what they're
83 spending it on. Dayton said big-retailers are not interested in building in a smaller market like

84 Middlebury. Freidin suggested reaching out to the mid-level retailers to see what their criteria to locate
85 to an area might be.

86
87 Duguay had been surprised that the conversation at the roundtable focused on the downtown, and
88 thought there might be more on the Route 7 south ore Exchange Street areas, although a healthy
89 downtown does impact other areas of town.

90
91 Dunnington wondered what is the measure of success for a downtown. Is it about the character of the
92 downtown which draws people in or trying to intercept the traffic of people going to Chittenden County
93 to shop. Cullinane referred to what the gentleman in the video said – don't focus on what you don't
94 have.

95
96 Capra entered the meeting at 12:37 p.m.

97
98 Freidin felt there was a need to develop a powerful identity for Middlebury. He thought we could
99 Middlebury the Vermont hub for outdoor recreation, art and beverages, and maybe agriculture. He said
100 that would give all businesses a theme to connect to and create an identity unique to Middlebury.
101 Duguay said Neighbors Together is requesting additional funds from VTrans, and this year a significant
102 amount of the money will be a professional marketing campaign for our major assets, focusing on
103 summer and winter outdoor recreation, arts and culture and local food and beverage, provided the
104 Selectboard agree that's the direction they want to go.

105
106 Duguay said it seemed like there were a number of comments raised about the Town having a little
107 more flexibility when it came to zoning and permitting, but isn't sure what the Committee could
108 recommend along those lines, but felt it is important to hear those comments and find out where those
109 limitations are within the Town. Kenney said the Committee could recommend whatever they want, but
110 a lot is dictated by State requirements. He said there is going to be a big push in Montpelier this year for
111 more flexibility in regards to Act 250 and State permitting. He said the Town should have their Plan,
112 their zoning and permitting that works at the local and State level too, so you don't have to go through
113 two levels of permitting for downtown areas and industrial parks. Capra thought that would help bring
114 people to town, but for a company trying to come to this town and try to build and spend money, is very
115 prohibitive. He said once you get past the State, the Town makes it even as difficult, so some kind of
116 improvement there would be a dramatic improvement.

117
118 Freidin said one of the shortcomings we have here is that Middlebury has no elected leader, no elected
119 chief executive officer, nobody who is the personification of the town, or whose job it is to go out and
120 try to get a company to come here. He said there's nobody who directs his focus on one or two things,
121 and that's what a mayor does. He said he's not criticizing the Selectboard, who is largely legislative and
122 has a nominal leader, but somebody someone on the outside could go to. He said you wouldn't go to
123 the chair of the selectboard the way you'd go to the mayor, and he feels that's a real shortcoming. He
124 said there should be someone that a person could go to and get help from when they want to do
125 something different than what the town rules stipulate. He said a mayor would also be an advocate for

126 the town to go out and sell Middlebury. Capra thought this was important, because the people that are
127 here now are enforcement people, and they aren't the ones that will help you, they're there to enforce
128 what the rules are. He said as a business owner he knows that there's no one to go to when the people
129 who are enforcing the laws won't let you do what you want to. Freidin said a good mayor is an enabler,
130 not an enforcer.

131
132 Kenney said this had been discussed before, and also about having some form of economic
133 development office. He asked Freidin if he was advocating for a point-person, an ombudsman plus an
134 elected person. Freidin said he was talking about an elected person, the #1 person. He said if a
135 university or hospital wants something, they don't send their development officer, they send the
136 president.

137
138 Dayton said Freidin was talking about a whole change to the Town Charter. Freidin understood that and
139 he wasn't sure if it was an answer, but it sure is a problem. Dayton agreed with him and thought we
140 have a leadership vacuum, but wasn't sure our town was large enough for that form of government.
141 She feels the whole structure of town governments in Vermont was a serious problem.

142
143 Khan asked Freidin if he was advocating for a mayor and Freidin said he'd like people to start thinking
144 about it. He said he's not critical of the individuals on the Selectboard, but it isn't their jobs to take
145 initiatives or to pose visions or to coax along the bureaucracy. Kenney said he'd add it to the list and
146 then debate later how or whether or not to recommend it in the future.

147
148 Kenney said at the roundtable there was talk about flexible space and incubator space, although he
149 didn't think they were using incubator space correctly as that comes with services and mentors and
150 people who work with you to start and launch a business. He thought the people really meant flexible,
151 pop-up space to have short-term retail operations.

152
153 Cullinane said her new venture on Mill Street will have something like this in the market space on the 2nd
154 level. She these vendor stalls would be leased on an annual basis, with one stall to be more seasonal,
155 and the College has agreed to a stall for a 10-year period. She said the half of the level above the
156 market would have co-worker space to rent out on a semi-annual or annual basis, and the other half
157 would be available by membership where there would be hot-spots and a conference room and a place
158 to take a private phone call.

159
160 Duguay said Better Middlebury Partnership is also pursuing the possibility of pop up spaces in a vacant
161 space downtown and Kenney said Addison County Economic Development Corporation is also working
162 on an incubator space project to increase entrepreneur possibilities in Addison County.

163
164 Freidin said he thought there were a lot of people concerned about what will happen in the downtown
165 during the shutdown in 2020 with the construction project, and assumed one of the problems would be
166 how to get downtown. He thought 2019 would be an opportunity to try using the parking spaces in the
167 public schools and use a jitney to bring people to town to see if it works. Duguay said this was tried for a

168 few weeks last year when Main Street was closed, VTrans contracted with ACTR to bring people from
169 the parking at the Memorial Sports Center and the Frog Hollow Parking Lot, and stopped at the Library
170 and Post Office. She said they even gave prizes to ride the bus, and still ridership was so low that they
171 stopped the program after 3 weeks. She said it costs a lot to run a program like that, and maybe it
172 would have caught on had the program run longer. Dayton thought it was hard to get people to do
173 things too far out of their box, and doesn't think there's anything downtown to inspire people to make
174 that behavioral change. Freidin said we don't want the employees of non-profits and businesses parking
175 downtown, so it would work fine for them.

176
177 Cullinane says there has to be a reason to get people to want to come downtown, so it isn't just the
178 supply of parking spaces, it's the demand issue as well. Freidin said if word gets out there's no parking
179 in Middlebury, then visitors aren't going to come in and he thinks some of those visitors could be
180 diverted to these remote parking spaces. Duguay said in the years BMP ran the Chili Fest, there were
181 thousands of people and not once did she hear anyone say they couldn't find a place to park, and the
182 year they did run the shuttle from the high school and Mary Hogan school, no one rode it. She said she
183 also didn't hear about parking being a problem for Midd Night Stroll or the Block Party, so if there is
184 motivation for people to come downtown, they'll find a place to park and walk. Kenney said while he
185 understands there is already discussion going on about the parking problem during the shutdown, he
186 thinks one of the strategies should be telling the employees working downtown they have to park
187 remotely and be bused to their jobs so more parking is available for visitors. Cullinane cautioned
188 making that requirement, since labor is already an issue.

189
190 Kenney said Peggy Burns from Middlebury College had sent him an e-mail following the roundtable
191 discussion, and was surprised that the downtown businesses seemed uninterested in offering products
192 and services to the 2,600 captive consumers at the College who are within walking distance to the Town,
193 and suggested a College focused marketing campaign. He said there is an opportunity to liase with the
194 Student Government Association to get the students and faculty downtown more. Cullinane said that
195 the downtown should strongly urge and work with Middlebury College for a solution so their student
196 Middlebury Cards can be taken at Middlebury businesses. She feels this is something that the
197 Committee should strongly encourage the College to allow for that transaction to occur. She said if they
198 are serious about supporting the Middlebury on an economic level, then supporting that money get off
199 campus and into Middlebury businesses should be a priority. Kenney said that was something they
200 could take immediate action on.

201
202 Kenney said Burns also mentioned the Middlebury College Summer Intern Program where the College
203 pays the interns to go into the Vermont community for the summer. He's interested in pursuing this
204 program for interns to do research work for the summer and tomorrow he's speaking to the person who
205 is running the program.

206
207 The Committee went over the list of comments from the roundtable that Kenney and Freidin had
208 assembled. Kenney said this list isn't necessarily what should be recommended, but are items to be
209 discussed.

210

211 Preview of February 14th SWOT Analysis

212

213 Cullinane went over the process and said the goal is to come up with an idea of Middlebury Economic
214 Development as a whole. She asked the Committee to look at the input that they've already gone
215 through over the last few meetings so when they talk about specific strengths or weaknesses we have as
216 a community, this information is in their minds.

217

218 The meeting adjourned at 1:27 p.m.

219

220 The next meeting of the Economic Health Committee will be Thursday, February 14, 2019 at 12 noon in
221 the Town Offices.

222

223 Respectfully submitted,

224 Beth Dow