

Plan Commission & Task Force Minutes

Town of Washburn

Town Hall

Monday, September 9, 2024

Commission members present: Kim Bro (chair), Jim Park (town board representative), Tim Schwenzfeier (vice chair).

Commission members absent: Cyndi Belanger (secretary), Caroline Twombly.

Planning Task Force members present: Terri Bahe, Tom Cogger, Dennis Weibel.

Planning Task Force members absent: Phil Kraus, Charmaine Swan.

Others present: none.

1. Chairman Bro called the meeting of the commission to order at 7:03 P.M. and verified its legal notification (posted at town hall and Tetzner Dairy on September 5 and on town website on September 6).
2. The minutes of the August 5, 2024 meeting were approved (Tim moves, Jim seconds).
3. The group reviewed the “Utilities” section of Chapter 4 of the current (2007) plan. The group agreed that the rapid changes in communications infrastructure will continue in the foreseeable future such that reliable, high-speed, broadband internet will become essential to people of all ages for such services as education, research, instruction; telehealth services; governmental services, “smart home” appliances, and emergency response services. There currently are several people in the town who work remotely from their homes. Working remotely from home is a growing occupation of residents. Lumen provides DSL service throughout the town with download speeds that depend on a home’s distance from a “node.” There is broadband service throughout the town via satellite networks, and some parts of the town can receive service through cell towers. Cell towers in our area are in the range of 100 to 300 feet tall, compared to the 554-foot tall radio antenna on Maple Hill. The town previously provided cost-sharing with Bayfield Wireless and Norvado on grants to extend broadband internet service to most of the residences in the town. Norvado (Chequamegon Communications Cooperative) is extending fiber optic cables to most residences (see attached two Norvado PDF maps).

The nature of electrical utility service also is changing rapidly as more residences are generating electricity with solar panels, and the town hall is the first location in the town to establish a micro-grid with a combination of solar generation, back-up battery storage, and an electric vehicle charging station (see WashburnTnMicrogrid.PDF). As battery technology improves, combining solar generation with battery storage will become more economical. Solar panel farms combined with battery storage and electrical substations are likely to be built at nodes along the “Bayfield Loop” transmission line so that the town will not rely simply on electricity provided from a large power plant dependent on fossil fuel or a nuclear reactor (see Electric Grid Future PDF).

The group recommended that transmission lines should remain in the existing corridor rather than having more transmission line corridors in the future and that utilities should be encouraged to bury distribution lines to reduce the likelihood of power losses in storms and to improve scenic views along roadsides.

4. The group also reviewed Chapter 6 “Economic Development” of the 2007 plan. The community survey done for the plan indicated strongest importance (76% of respondents) for agriculture-based businesses. Since that time, two new town residents have joined the Bayfield Foods Farmers Cooperative: Seasonally Sourced Foods and Yoman Farm. Tom Cogger said that the best way that the town can assure the wellbeing of agricultural enterprises in the town is to encourage more residents to buy from local farms. A question was raised about the value of having larger minimum lot sizes for agricultural lands so that they will not be divided into lots too small for economic agricultural production. The group

recommended assembling a group of local farmers to discuss steps that the town can take to assure the long-term future of agricultural business in the town.

The 2007 plan called for encouraging “eco-tourism and other tourism opportunities” but did not discuss the growth of short-term rental houses in the town. There currently are only a few short-term rentals but there is a potential for homeowners who move away to retain their houses as short-term rentals. The plan also encourages home-based businesses. There are an increasing number of residents who telecommute from their homes for work. Good quality, high-speed, broadband access will likely increase the attraction of rural living and remote work.

5. The group also reviewed the “Cultural Resources” section of Chapter 7 of the 2007 plan. The group agreed that the town hall (the former McKinley one-room schoolhouse) is the most significant historical resource in the town, and however future space needs for the town develop, the old school building and its historic character should be preserved. Jim mentioned that the town has improved the building in ways that retain its character. He also noted that there now is a fairly extensive history of the town on the town website. There was some discussion about doing more interpretation of the town’s history, perhaps, with a poster that says what attending the McKinley School was like for students and a teacher who taught multiple grade levels at the same time. With the creation of the new microgrid, there may be further explanation that the former Westling dam on Four Mile Creek provided energy for a sawmill and in 1897 and in 1918 provided electricity for lights in the Westling house 30 years before electricity was extended to the town.
6. The group reviewed the 1/3-page announcement Phil prepared about the Task Force’s work to be included with a September mailing to all town residents. The group recommended some word corrections and recommended that residents should understand that they do not need to join the Task Force in order to offer suggestions. Phil prepared a revised version. Kim will talk to Lynn Adams about the announcement before she prints the mailing.
7. The meeting adjourned at 8:55 P.M. (Tim moves, Jim seconds).

Draft submitted by: Kenneth Bro, Chair, Town of Washburn Plan Commission (September 30, 2024).

Plan Commission Report

There are not town board actions required at this time other than including the announcement about updating the comprehensive plan in the September mailing. The town board approved this action in August.