

**Approved Minutes
Vermont Downtown Board
11/27/2023
Calvin Coolidge Conference Room, 6th Floor, National Life Bldg., Montpelier
& Via MS Teams Virtual Meeting**

Members Present (12):

- Alex Farrell (*Chair*), designated by the Secretary of Commerce and Community Development
- Charlie Baker, designated by the Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies, arrived at 2:07 pm
- Michelle Boomhower (*Vice-Chair*), designated by the Secretary of Transportation
- Bruce Cheeseman, appointed by the Governor, representing local government
- Billy Coster, designated by the Secretary of Natural Resources
- Cathy Davis, appointed by the Governor, representing the Vermont Association of Chamber Executives
- Michael Desrochers, designated by the Commissioner of Public Safety
- Sarah Hadd, designated by the Vermont League of Cities and Towns
- Sabina Haskell, Chair of the Natural Resources Board
- Jaime Lee, appointed by the Governor, representing the Vermont Natural Resources Council and the Preservation Trust of Vermont
- Michael McDonough, appointed by the governor, representing local government
- Chip Sawyer, designated by the Vermont Planners Association
- Laura Trieschmann, State Historic Preservation Officer

Attending Community Planning and Revitalization (CP+R) Team Members (6): Chris Cochran, Richard Amore, Gary Holloway, Amy Tomasso, Alice Dodge, and Jacob Hemmerick.

Guests (11): Cynthia Stuart, Town of Concord; Linda Blakeslee, Town of Concord; Katie Trautz, Executive Director, Montpelier Alive; Charles Dillard, Principal Planner, Sarah Morgan, Planner, Meagan Tuttle, Planning Director, City of Burlington; Alex Weinhagen, Director of Planning & Zoning, Town of Hinesburg; Javier Garcia, Champlain Housing Trust; Tyler Labrie, EverNorth; Daniel Monks, Assistant Town Manager, Town of Bennington; Shannon Barsotti, Community Economic Development Director, Town of Bennington.

Alex Farrell brought the meeting to order at 1:01 pm.

Additions or Deletions to the Board Agenda

There were no additions or deletions to the board agenda.

1. Public Comment Period

Alex Farrell opened the meeting to public comment; there were no comments.

2. Consent Agenda Items:

- October 23, 2023, Draft Minutes
- Village Center Designation Renewals
 - Town of Pittsfield – Pittsfield Village Center

Laura Trieschmann motioned to approve the consent agenda items, and Bruce Cheeseman seconded. Ayes: Michelle Boomhower, Bruce Cheeseman, Cathy Davis, Michael Desrochers, Sarah Hadd, Sabina Haskell, Jaime Lee, Michael McDonough, Chip Sawyer, Laura Trieschmann, and Alex Farrell. The motion carried.

3. Village Center Designations – 1

Town of Concord – Boundary Amendment and Renewal

The Town of Concord applied for a boundary amendment with their Village Center renewal application. The proposed boundary runs along US Route 2 (Main Street). It includes the vacant general store, telephone transfer station, town hall, town clerk's office, fire department, post office, municipal offices, veterans park, Folsom Park, the community church, Masonic Hall, and single and multifamily residences. The proposed boundary amendment proposes adding 16 additional properties along Main Street. DHCD Staff support the addition of 16 new properties that include two commercial properties, 12 residential properties, and two vacant properties, including the former general store, which they are working to bring back to the village with the assistance of this designation and the Downtown and Village Center Tax Credits. Staff recommended that the boundary amendment be approved and the designation be renewed.

Linda Blakeslee and Cynthia Stuart from the Town of Concord described how the town had lost their general store during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have worked hard to develop solutions for the property and have lined up a potential purchaser who could benefit from the designation to reopen the store.

Chip Sawyer inquired about the proposed boundary and why two properties opposite the store were included, and one other lot was not included. Richard Amore clarified that the policy is to extend the designation on both sides of the road, including the land opposite the store. In this case, the river forms a natural boundary for the village center.

Jaime Lee made a motion to approve the boundary amendment and renewal for the Town of Concord's Village Center, and Chip Sawyer seconded. Ayes: Michelle Boomhower, Bruce Cheeseman, Cathy Davis, Michael Desrochers, Sarah Hadd, Sabina Haskell, Jaime Lee, Michael McDonough, Chip Sawyer, Laura Trieschmann, and Alex Farrell. The motion carried.

4. Downtown Designation – 1

City of Montpelier – Renewal Application

The City of Montpelier received Downtown Designation in 1999 and last renewed in 2015. The city worked with staff on the application to ensure all program requirements were met and to offer any recommendations. Staff extended Montpelier's renewal deadline due to the summer flooding. The application was complete, no boundary changes were proposed, and it meets all the program's requirements; staff recommended the application be approved and the designation renewed. He also wished to note the extraordinary work done by the city, Katie Trautz from Montpelier Alive, Peter Walke, and Alec Ellsworth, City of Montpelier, in helping the community recover over the past several months.

Katie Trautz presented on behalf of the City of Montpelier. She noted that Montpelier Alive is best known for producing events, including the annual July 3rd event, which draws 10,000 visitors. The Taste of Montpelier has been very successful, as have other promotional events encouraging local dining and shopping. Montpelier Alive has also been very active in producing functional community art projects, such as the recent M bench project and the Shaw's mural. In partnership with the Parks Department, they started an adventure website to promote Montpelier as a recreation hub. Their focus has been supporting businesses, as was highlighted by their flood response, in which they coordinated thousands of volunteers and raised and granted over \$2 million to over 125 local businesses. Katie noted three impactful recent tax credit projects: the Langdon Street block, Main Street Shippee Eye Care building,

and French Block, all of which will provide much-needed housing. Significant private and public investments have also been made downtown, including the recently completed Transit Center showcasing flood-resilient design. As they look to the future, Montpelier Alive's strategic plan looks to expand organizational capacity by adding staff and supporting the city by acting as a voice for local businesses.

Laura Trieschmann added that Montpelier is Vermont's most extensive National Historic District. Members also commended Katie Trautz for her flood recovery work and the community's efforts.

Laura Trieschmann motioned to approve the renewal of Montpelier's designated downtown, and Bruce Cheeseman seconded. Ayes: Michelle Boomhower, Bruce Cheeseman, Cathy Davis, Michael Desrochers, Sarah Hadd, Sabina Haskell, Jaime Lee, Michael McDonough, Chip Sawyer, Laura Trieschmann, and Alex Farrell. The motion carried.

5. Neighborhood Development Area Designation – 2

City of Burlington – Application for Boundary Amendment

Burlington has two designated areas: the Designated Downtown, approved in 1999, and a Neighborhood Development Area (NDA), designated in 2014. The city now proposes expanding the NDA to include the South End Innovation District (SEID), which would facilitate smart growth, and a dense, vibrant, mixed-use district with additional housing. The city's proposed boundaries extend beyond the Neighborhood Planning Area, requiring that at least 80% and no fewer than seven members of the Downtown Board reviewing the NDA agree that the boundary meets criteria (A)-(D) in the application. Staff finds that the proposed Neighborhood Development Area meets the requirements for designation and that the application is complete. The expansion of the proposed NDA outside the 0.5-mile planning area of the designated downtown into the South End Innovation District (SEID) is appropriate for Burlington given the compact nature of the city, extensive complete streets planning underway, and efforts to create a significant number of new residential units (700-1000), as well as the fact that Burlington's Neighborhood Planning Area significantly extends into Lake Champlain. Staff recommended approving the application.

Charles Dillard presented the application on behalf of Burlington. He described how the proposed expansion of the Neighborhood Development Area would facilitate one of the most significant residential development initiatives in Burlington's history. The SEID includes offices, industrial space, arts facilities, and housing. The city has worked with stakeholders to establish a vision and plan for the area which prioritizes housing, and unanimously adopted the SEID proposal in July. They are engaged in a MOU with Champlain College and a private property group related to HULA, a successful coworking space in the South End. They would continue these successful partnerships in developing the area.

Michelle Boomhower motioned to approve the amendment of Burlington's Neighborhood Development Area boundary, acknowledging that the new boundary extends beyond the 0.5-mile planning area of the designated downtown, and Chip Sawyer seconded. Ayes: Michelle Boomhower, Bruce Cheeseman, Cathy Davis, Michael Desrochers, Sarah Hadd, Jaime Lee, Michael McDonough, Chip Sawyer, Laura Trieschmann, and Alex Farrell. Sabina Haskell abstained. The motion carried.

Town of Hinesburg – Application for Boundary Amendment

Hinesburg's Village Center was designated in 2019, and a site-specific NDA for Kelley's Field was approved in 2022. In its application, the town proposed adding significantly to the NDA, which would facilitate the development of the Windy Ridge project, which proposes 75 new homes (60 of which would be affordable) and is supported by Champlain Housing Trust, EverNorth, Sterling Construction, and Habitat for Humanity. The town proposed boundaries beyond the Neighborhood Planning Area, requiring that at least 80% and no fewer than seven members of the Downtown Board reviewing the NDA agree that the boundary meets

criteria (A)-(D) in the application. Staff found that the proposed Neighborhood Development Area meets the requirements for designation and that the application is complete. Expanding the proposed NDA outside the 0.25-mile planning area of the designated village is appropriate for Hinesburg, given the compact nature of the village, existing and planned pedestrian connectivity, and proposed development potential. Staff recommended approving the application submitted by the town, acknowledging the NDA extends beyond the planning area and meets the established criteria for an extension.

Alex Weinhagen presented on behalf of Hinesburg. He explained that, due to Hinesburg's zoning bylaws, it took time for Hinesburg to apply for the expansion, but when the HOME Act passed in June 2023, the proposed expansion areas became eligible at the new statewide threshold of 5 dwelling units/acre. The town has been trying to pull every lever to encourage affordable housing. After much discussion, the Selectboard felt the larger area was appropriate if flood risk areas were excluded from the proposed NDA. The town has had significant success partnering with affordable and traditional housing developers. The Windy Ridge project would be a game-changer for the community regarding housing.

Charlie Baker made a motion to approve the amendment of Hinesburg's Neighborhood Development Area boundary, acknowledging that the new boundary extends beyond the 0.25-mile planning area of the designated Village Center, and Chip Sawyer seconded. Ayes: Charlie Baker, Michelle Boomhower, Bruce Cheeseman, Cathy Davis, Michael Desrochers, Sarah Hadd, Sabina Haskell, Jaime Lee, Michael McDonough, Chip Sawyer, Laura Trieschmann, and Alex Farrell. The motion carried.

7. Growth Center Designation – 1

Town of Bennington – 5-year Check-in

Bennington's Growth Center designation was awarded in 2008. This was their third five-year check-in.

Staff found that the application was complete, all findings were met, and remain valid with no conditions of approval. A majority of growth is occurring inside the center for all development measures. No change in boundary was proposed. The town continues to make robust capital investments in the center. Staff recommended that the board determine that the Bennington Growth Center continues to meet the standards for designation in effect when it was originally designated.

Dan Monks, Assistant Town Manager, and Shannon Barsotti presented on behalf of Bennington. He detailed several projects and investments made in the Growth Center over the past five years, including two affordable and transitional housing projects on Pleasant Street, both neglected buildings now restored and listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Phase 1 of the Putnam Block mixed-use project was completed 3-4 years ago and marked a massive success in community partnerships, spurring other downtown investments. The school district recently renovated the Brush Building and has moved its offices downtown. The Village Garage Distillery was an old municipal highway garage, now a multimillion-dollar distillery with live music. Shannon Barsotti described the creation of Bennington Community Market, a community-led grocery. The town has also invested in replacing lead water lines, hoping to have most lead lines replaced within the next two years, and they have also improved water treatment facilities. Work continues to plan and connect the Bennington and North Bennington trail networks. The Southwest Vermont Medical Center and Benn High projects are also important developments, and the next planned are Phase 2 of the Putnam Block and the redevelopment of the Energizer building, which would support up to 350 housing units. There has been easily over \$100 million in investment in the past five years.

Chip Sawyer made a motion to determine that the Bennington Growth Center continues to meet the standards for the designation in effect when it was initially designated, and Sabina Haskell seconded. Ayes: Charlie Baker, Michelle Boomhower, Bruce Cheeseman, Cathy Davis, Michael Desrochers, Sarah Hadd, Sabina Haskell, Jaime Lee, Michael McDonough, Chip Sawyer, Laura Trieschmann, and Alex Farrell. The motion carried.

8. Old Business / New Business

Chris Cochran provided an update on the Designation 2050 draft findings and recommendations. DHCD has received feedback from almost 500 individuals, with approximately 120 municipalities providing their ideas and suggestions to help strengthen and improve the programs. A draft engagement report will be available for review in early December, with the full report and recommendations completed by the end of the year. The report will recommend reducing the number of designations; simplifying the designation processes in partnership with municipalities and the RPCs; removing barriers to access benefits, especially for small towns; increasing the funding and incentives to build more resilient, walkable, and vibrant commercial cores and neighborhoods; establishing new technical assistance partnerships to help communities increase the supply of housing, tackle climate change, plan and build the infrastructure needed to enable compact development and help make communities more walkable, bikeable, and connected; expanding the diversity and the expertise of the Downtown Board, and creating a new process for the Natural Resources Board to designate areas of land eligible for relaxed Act 250 jurisdiction or exemption.

Chris invited Sabina Haskell and Charlie Baker to discuss related studies to improve the consistency and quality of regional Future Land Use maps and modernize Act 250. The board discussed the proposed location-based Act 250 jurisdiction that would relax jurisdiction in areas linked to a historic center and the delegation-based proposal that would exempt the entire municipality from Act 250.

The RPCs, the NRB, and DHCD are all seeking public comments and feedback on their recommendations. DHCD expects the House will take legislative action on these studies in early January.

8. Adjourn

Alex Farrell adjourned the meeting at 3:14 p.m.

There will be no December meeting; the next Downtown Board meeting will be on January 22.

Respectfully submitted, Alice Dodge