

**ATKINSON PLANNING BOARD MEETING
MINUTES
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2023**

Members:

Sue Killam, Chair (not present)
Vice Chair Turell (present)
Ted Stewart (not present)
Paul Wainwright, (present)

John Ottow (present)
(Master Plan Team)
Heidi Mahoney (present)
Bill Baldwin– Selectman Ex Officio
(present)
Hannah Rizzo, Alternate (present)
Sue Coppeta, Planning & Zoning
Administrator, Alternate (present)

Others Present

Julie LaBranche, Planner (present by
telephone)
Ken Grant
Karen McFadden, Master Plan Team

Call to Order:

Chair Turell called the workshop meeting to order at 7:30 PM.

Public Hearings: NONE

Minutes: September 20, 2023

Member Wainwright made a motion to approve the minutes for the September 20, 2023 regular meeting as amended. Selectman Ex Officio Baldwin seconded the motion. All members and alternates of the Atkinson Planning Board present voted in favor. Vote: 7/0/0.

Workshop Topics:

1. Housing Needs Assessment Project – Julie LaBranche

a. Review of First Draft of Report

Member Wainwright requested Ms. LaBranche go through the report section by section.

Member McFadden informed the Board that median income for Atkinson is \$120,000 according to the American Community Survey which is based on the 2020 Federal Census.

Ms. LaBranche informed the Board that \$120,000 is not an actual number that is measured. ACL is revised on Census block data, it comes from a formula. It is not an actual number that is measured.

Ms. LaBranche stated that there are still areas of the report that need to be completed, one of them is demographics. She did not wish to focus on those at this point because she is not sure if they are really important. She requested the Board turn to the top of page 2, line 43. At this time, the State has not issued a mandate for towns to provide affordable workforce housing. There is a very broad interpretation of housing in general from the housing needs report issued by the Regional Planning Commission. It says this is the number of housing units needed to accommodate future population growth. She remarked that those numbers are not possible. There is no way that Atkinson can achieve those goals.

She requested the Board review page 6 of the document, lines 218 to 230, Section 10, Conclusions. She requested the Boards' feedback on the recommendations and conclusions in the report. She feels that the conclusions are the drivers for the content for the report as she has organized it.

Alternate Coppeta asked if the order the conclusions are listed in is significant and if they should be prioritized. Ms. LaBranche replied that there is no order of preference, but the Board can prioritize them if they wish. Vice Chair Turell believes that the second conclusion is the most important because the main driver for the lack of public housing is cost. The next most important is the lack of public water and sewer. The Board asked about land use regulations and incentives to reduce construction costs. Vice Chair Turell stated that grants or other incentives such as HUD could reduce construction costs.

Alternate Coppeta asked why those incentives would be in zoning. Ms. LaBranche stated that looking at things like cluster housing and conservation subdivision development, one of the biggest attractions are fewer and smaller roads. This reduces construction costs. Vice Chair Turell agreed, it also allows more density. The Board agreed that more definition is needed.

Ms. LaBranche stated that incentives could include smaller home sizes and building in a more compact manner. Incentive is allowing construction in a way and a manner that reduces the cost of development. Cluster development is an incentive. Vice Chair Turell stated that cluster developments do allow the developer to save money, but they do not regulate the size of the dwellings, they could be very large or very small. FHA and VA specify the size of the homes in their lending programs and anyone building a dwelling would build it to the minimum or greater of the FHA standard.

Ms. LaBranche asked the Board if construction cost needs to be discussed in more detail in the body of the report. Vice Chair Turell stated that regarding affordable housing, it does.

The Board decided that the conclusions should be prioritized by moving the second bullet, cost of land, to number one and the last bullet, limited availability of public water and sewer, should be second. Vice Chair Turell stated that the priority of the other two doesn't matter.

The Board agreed that the bullet with incentives and construction costs needs more definition.

Member Ottow asked Ms. LaBranche to explain the third bullet, "Current Zoning And Land Use Regulations Favor Land Conservation Measures Set As Open Space Development And Buffers".

Vice Chair Turell remarked that in all condominium developments open space is required along the main road and the houses are pushed back behind the tree line. There are large buffers between zones. Alternate Coppeta stated that cluster zoning came from the Master Plan which emphasized retaining the rural character of the Town. It was a compromise to foster open space.

Ms. LaBranche stated that current zoning and land use regulations favor land conservation measures to satisfy using land as open space development and buffers. Cluster subdivisions are the only residential developments that have come to the Planning Board recently. It seems to be a popular option to set aside land. Land that is set aside is often wetlands and land that is not preferential for development.

Alternate Coppeta stated that if the developer is able to use the unbuildable land as their open space, they are using more of the buildable land than they would be allowed to with conventional zoning so this allows for more housing. The Board agreed that cluster development allows for more units. Therefore, cluster zoning is not a detriment to adding houses. For example, Page Farm has 60 units, if each house had its own lot there would be less than 35 units. Cluster developments are a win for the developer because they make more money and it's a win for the Town because they look pretty.

Ms. LaBranche requested that the Board discuss affordable workforce housing rather than conventional housing. Vice Chair Turell stated that this report is targeted to affordable housing. The Board does not understand how the third bullet is part of affordable/workforce housing. Ms. LaBranche said there are definitions of affordable and workforce housing on page 2 of the report. Vice Chair Turell pointed out that it is all based on 2020 Federal Census information for costs. Ms. LaBranche stated that under the purpose section, there will be a statement about a focus on affordable and workforce housing.

Vice Chair Baldwin asked how it would be implemented in Atkinson. Member Wainwright stated that workforce and affordable housing is the right thing to do, although it may not benefit Atkinson. Ms. LaBranche stated that this is a snapshot of where Atkinson stands at present, then a decision can be made if something should be implemented. There is no requirement. There was a Phase 3 of the housing grants which were about implementation, but those have closed and the money has been spent. There was anticipation that there would be some level of implementation, but there is no mandate or requirement by the grantor that the Town take any of the information forward. It is about where the Town is at present, what it is doing and giving recommendations about moving forward.

Alternate Coppeta stated that she sees a fairly big disconnect between this snapshot and what type of housing is actually in the Town. Atkinson zoning is two acres, three acres and cluster

zoning. However, a significant portion of the housing lots in Town are one acre or less. She did an analysis with assessing data of dwelling units and found a bell curve which shows that a significant portion of single family houses are 1800 square feet or less. Atkinson zoning regulations are not representative of the housing inventory or size of lots actually in the Town. The report has a snapshot of Atkinson zoning, but it does not represent what type of housing is actually in Town. Vice Chair Turell stated that this is what the Town can do to make it work and where we want to go, which would be up to the new Master Plan.

Ms. LaBranche requested the Board look at page 3, lines 110 – 111 which talks about two and three acre lots. Alternate Coppeta stated that is what Atkinson Zoning regulations say, but it is not representative of actual housing stock and lot size in Atkinson. Looking at all the houses built prior to 1980 or at the Lake, the lots are one acre or less. There are a significant number of houses on those lots and they are all less than 2000 square feet. Atkinson current zoning does not allow this type of housing anymore, but they are a significant part of housing stock. Atkinson also does not have large amounts of buildable land.

Ms. LaBranche stated that those one acre or less lots would not be able to accommodate another dwelling unit and it should be called out. Alternate Coppeta stated that it seems slanted that Atkinson does not have a big mix of lot sizes and house sizes on a spectrum of affordability. Atkinson may not have the most affordable housing but it does have a large mix of different houses. Vice Chair Turell stated that in areas with two and three acre zoning, theoretically there could be more density if the lines are redrawn. This discussion should be about what Atkinson can add. A developer could buy an older development, tear it down and build something else.

Member Ottow remarked that the snapshot is incomplete. It does not discuss what is actually here, the size of the houses and the cost of the houses.

The Board discussed some of the older neighborhoods in Atkinson with smaller homes and lots.

Member Ottow asked about multifamily rental housing. It talks about the Lewis apartments but they are neither affordable nor workforce housing. They are studios and one bedrooms. It does not mention ADUs or the Settlers Ridge Apartments. The Settlers Ridge apartments are one bedroom, age restricted.

Ms. LaBranche stated that the definition of affordable housing should come to bear with new housing. If a developer did not want to enter into an agreement under workforce and affordable housing definitions, it could still build housing that did not strictly adhere to the definitions and rent it for affordable prices. The Board agreed that there should be a complete inventory of all housing in Atkinson. It can mention small apartments and small houses. Then going forward, state what zoning allows.

Vice Chair Turell stated that the PFAS pollution issue is not listed under the availability of sewer and water services.

Accessory dwelling units are also not mentioned. Ms. LaBranche stated that ADUs added to a house are not necessarily affordable. The Board discussed ADUs as affordable housing and concluded that they are less expensive than building a house.

There are also petroleum pollution issues in the water near Rte 111. They are mapped by DES.

Member Wainwright stated he looked at the tax card data from 2021 and it is quite easy to sort housing value by the value of improvements. Vice Chair Turell stated that the tax assessment has nothing to do with the price. It shows the number of square feet and condition. The Board concluded that it was not relevant.

Member Mahoney commented on Section VII, Incentives For Expanding Housing Choices, Page 4 lines 163-169. Based on feedback from the housing focus group, the biggest concern for residents is their property values. One of the things that make Atkinson desirable is the value of the homes. The question is, what will adding cluster housing or affordable housing do to the value of homes. The concern is whether property values will go down.

Ms. LaBranche stated that there is no way to project that from current conditions. Member Mahoney stated that what affordable/workforce housing will look like, where it will be located and property values has surfaced in discussions. It warrants notation that it is a big concern of residents.

Ms. McFadden informed the Board that the Master Plan would not answer the affordable housing/workforce housing question. They expected an answer from the report by Ms. LaBranche. It was decided by the Planning Board that the housing needs assessment would be done by Ms. LaBranche, not by the Master Plan Committee. They have been waiting for the report, this is housing and it needs to be in the Master Plan. Right now, they will have to go TBD because of their budget and timeline, they expected this information to be available sooner. She stated that she is hearing a lot about data on housing. She informed Ms. LaBranche that a lot of the data is available, and if she needs the data, to contact her, she is happy to share all the information with you to get it into the report. Alternate Coppeta stated that all the assessing data is in a spreadsheet. This data is as of June of 2022, if it is acceptable to use the information from June of 2022, Ms. LaBranche can contact Ms. McFadden. Ms. LaBranche requested a summary. Ms. McFadden responded that they have done some summaries and she can send her a pivot chart.

Member Ottow requested to return to the last page where it discusses beginning a community wide dialog to discuss needs for affordable and workforce housing and the mechanisms necessary to achieve it and above that housing discussion groups in October. He asked if the date for the housing discussion group has been set. He asked if it would be a discussion group, dialogs or other community input. Ms. LaBranche replied that it would be targeting people who indicated on their housing needs survey that they would be interested. It would be an in person meeting and she is planning for the last week of October. Alternate Coppeta stated that there are two days available in the last week of October, the 30th and the 31st. Vice Chair Turell stated that there are three meeting rooms, Town Hall, the Community Center and

the Library. Ms. LaBranche was thinking of the weekend and would ask the people in the discussion group. About 18-20 people responded that they would like to take part in the discussion group.

Member Ottow asked about Recommendation 2, “Convene a housing taskforce or workgroup to examine in detail issues related to affordable and workforce housing” and if that were what the grant was for. Ms. LaBranche stated it is more to give the Town information to take forward, whether it would be a work group or a committee. It would be too long a process to talk about these issues. This grant was only for seven months. Member Ottow stated he thought the grant would give details about workforce and affordable housing.

Ms. LaBranche replied that the Town does not have affordable or workforce housing zoning. She outlines what affordable and workforce housing is and what conditions impact creating that type of housing in the community. Other than that, there is no data. It just shows where the Town is and what barriers and challenges there are to creating this kind of housing. The regulatory review will outline how to address the challenges and barriers, here is what Atkinson has, how it can be changed, alternative ways to change it and consider land use regulation in the future, if the Town wishes to pursue affordable and workforce housing.

Selectman Ex Officio Baldwin stated that first, the Town residents have to decide. Going back to page 5, 18 people are being invited to a meeting. He asked why Ms. LaBranche would not want more people to be involved and stated it should be put out to the Community as a whole. On line 189-190, he is questioning the data and percentages she is using as a respondent of these questions. He feels that they are ambiguous. He stated she is basing that data off the 180 people who responded to the survey. He feels it looks a little skewed because it does not speak for the majority of residents of the community, the way it is worded is misleading. Vice Chair Turell stated it is not a random sample. Member Wainwright suggested a nonbinding warrant article asking residents if they are in favor of affordable/workforce housing.

The Board discussed the number of people who vote in Town. Selectman Ex Officio Baldwin stated that around 2000 people vote. Alternate Coppeta stated that 1775 people voted in the 2022 elections.

Selectman Ex Officio Baldwin is concerned that the report does not represent the Town. He feels a different approach is needed.

The Board agreed a nonbinding warrant might be an approach. Ms. LaBranche stated that the grant ends this month. These recommendations are for the Town. Ms. Coppeta asked if the Planning Board can edit the report and Ms. LaBranche stated yes. She will make the changes discussed at this meeting and will send out a revised version. Alternate Coppeta stated that there are no applications for the October 18th meeting. Ms. LaBranche stated that she would send it out on October 14, 2023. It will be redesigned. All the missing information will be included. She will incorporate any questions or comments from the October 18, 2023 meeting into the final report. The acknowledgement will state that Ms. LaBranche wrote the report for the Planning Board.

Alternate Coppeta stated that the funding runs out October 31, 2023 and asked if Ms. LaBranche would have the final report and the regulatory audit in time for the Planning Board to review it and make comments. Ms. LaBranche stated it would be completed by then and would attend the November 1, 2023 workshop. Vice Chair Turell agreed. Ms. LaBranche is hoping to have the regulatory audit done by the middle of next week. The audit is supposed to be a tool for the Town to use to move forward. This is why the work group or taskforce will be important. Alternate Coppeta suggested the Planning Board be the taskforce because they are most knowledgeable. Vice Chair Turell stated that would be a decision to make when the Board gets the report.

Ms. LaBranche requested the Board feel free to send her any questions or comments and left the meeting. The Board discussed the report and the grant and agreed that it was not sufficient. There is no story and no data.

b. Discussion of Outreach Plans through October 2023 – not discussed

2. **Zoning Topics – Potential March 2024 Amendments** – not discussed

3. **Master Plan Committee Report** – Member Ottow

Member Ottow will have Master Plan items to discuss for the next meeting.

Adjournment:

Member Wainwright made a motion to adjourn. Vice Chair Turell seconded the motion. Vote: 4/0/0. All in favor.

Meeting adjourned at 9:00 PM.

The next Planning Board meeting will be on October 18, 2023 at Atkinson Town Hall.