

**TOWN OF SOMERS
SOMERSVILLE MILL STRATEGIC PLANNING AD HOC COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES
Thursday, August 27, 2015
7:00pm
Selectmen's Conference Room
Town Hall**

Call to Order:

Chairman Tim Keeney called the meeting to order at 7:00pm.

Members Present

Members present included Chairman Tim Keeney, and Members Erik Ness, Tim Potrikus and Ralph Williams. Also present were Canton First Selectman Dick Barlow, Somers Historical Society President Carole Pyne and one interested resident.

Discussion with Canton First Selectman Dick Barlow re: development of historic mill site in Canton

Chairman Keeney introduced Carole Pyne, Somers Historical Society President, and First Selectman of Canton, Dick Barlow to give a brief synopsis of his recent experience with a historic mill site in Canton. Mr. Barlow described the Collins Company, founded by Samuel Collins in the mid 1800's in the Collinsville section of Canton. The largest manufacturer of bench tools in the country, the Collins Co. was the foundation of the community, building houses for workers and the first regional High School in the State. The Mill is currently owned by Rusty Tillman who has attempted to develop incubator businesses. The site includes two dams, bike trails and waterways for canoeing and kayaking. In 1999, Canton formed the State's first historical planned development district in anticipation of housing, residential and retail uses for the Mill. However, the economic development potential has been inhibited by the inability of the private owner to "pull off" a complex development. Mr. Barlow stated that should Somers become the owner of the Somersville Mill site, there would be much greater local control of development as well as opportunities for local dialogue and tax incentives. Mr. Williams added that town ownership would also allow for public stewardship of the site and active marketing by the town.

Mr. Barlow also described Canton's efforts to re-establish hydroelectric capacity with the State owned Upper Dam on the Farmington River. Though he has received significant support from the State Legislature, U.S. Congress and the Connecticut DEEP (\$100,000 to study impoundments to enhance recreation), he has discovered the biggest impediment to economic development is private ownership of the Mill. In response to a question from Mr. Ness concerning which low head hydro power vendors (new immersing technologies) the town was working with, Mr. Barlow answered: Pioneer Renewals of Massachusetts and Natell of California. Furthermore, Mr. Ness remarked that the one megawatt dam

experience in Canton might be difficult to follow on the Scantic River dam because of the need for large capital investment where there is little dam head and flow available.

In reviewing the housing potential for the Collinsville Mill site, Mr. Barlow described that the initial concept of 20 – 25 stand-alone mill houses has moved towards a preference for apartment rental units for young professionals and older seniors rather than condominiums. Mr. Hess asked whether there is a plan for section 8 housing set aside like the Bigelow Apartments in Thompsonville. Mr. Barlow answered that such a decision would be left to any potential developer. Mr. Barlow concluded by describing how Canton would like the Collinsville Mill parcel revitalized and restored without any additional traffic. For the record, there has been discussion in Canton about the redevelopment of the Collinsville Mill site for over 15 years without significant results.

Discussion with Somers Historical Society re historical significance of Somersville Mill site

Ms. Pyne presented a brief history of Mill site. The first sawmill was erected by the Billings family in 1750. A few years later, the Billings family operated a grist mill on the same site, and then a fulling mill, which was one of the first cloth mills in New England. William Chafee and Chester Spencer were responsible for building the most recent mill complex, beginning with a grist mill and a saw mill, followed by a satinette mill in 1837. This large white wooden building was purchased by Rockwell Keeney in 1879, which became the first building in the Somersville Manufacturing Company (SMC) complex, most of which was destroyed by the 2012 fire. The SMC did a thriving business in Somersville, employing as many as 400 workers and developing a national reputation for its woolen fabrics used in suiting, overcoats, uniforms and blankets for both World Wars. Records of employment and goods can be found at the Thomas Dodd Research Center and the University of Connecticut and on-line. Ms. Pyne added that any development should preserve the cornerstones and some remnants of prior buildings because of their historic value to the town.

Chairman Keeney asked about the importance of a planned development district in the Town which could preserve and interpret some of the historical relevance of the Mill site. Ms. Pyne stated she was intrigued by the concept but related how an historical district with State & Federal relevance had been suggested for parts of the town of Somersville over twenty years ago, but had been unsuccessful due to lack of support from local property owners. Discussion focused upon past and present opportunities for some kind of planned development district. Mr. Williams stated that municipal control with some teeth was important to shape development and reflect the Town's priorities and vision, without disrupting the lives of private property owners. Mr. Ness expressed concern that town control not be so restrictive as to scare off potential developers of any development zone which could include properties abutting Maple Street and School street from the Post Office to the Somersville Grammar School. Furthermore,

Mr. Ness offered to scan into the meeting minutes the maps of the CROG Rt. 190 corridor study from Enfield to Union mentioned by Ms. Pyne.

Process Discussion and Schedule for Future Meetings

Chairman Keeney recommended that the next meeting should include discussion with Adam Cohen, the Towns attorney for real estate matters and tax sales. It was agreed that the next meeting would be Thursday September 3, 2015.

Adjournment

Mr. Potrikus made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:40pm, seconded by Mr. Ness. The motion passed 4-0 and the meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Timothy R. E. Keeney, Chairman

Minutes are not official until accepted at a subsequent meeting.