

Town of Lenox
Affordable Housing Trust & Committee
February 27, 2017 Minutes

The Affordable Housing Trust & Committee officially convened at 4:15 PM

Members Present 5

Debbie Burke.....DB
Ellen Jacobsen.....EJ
Jackie McNinch.....JM
Charlene Rosen.....CR
Kate McNulty Vaughan.....KMV

Members Absent: 2

Mary Beth Mitts.....MBM
Olga Weiss.....OW

Also in Attendance: Gwen Miller (Town Planner).....GM
Judi Barrett, Director of Municipal Services, RKG.....JB
Amanda Berman,AB

Approval of October 18, 2016 and December 5, 2016 Minutes

After corrections a member moved to approve the October 18, 2016 Minutes as amended. The Motion was seconded. Members voted to approve the Minutes as amended.

After corrections and changes, a member moved to approve the December 5, 2016 Minutes as amended. The motion was seconded. Members voted to approved the December 5, 2015 Minutes as amended.

Open Session and New Business

CR recommended that the Committee raise the issue of tax credits, special assessment or restricted real estate value for affordable housing construction with the Board of Selectman since Channing Gibson indicated an interest in this idea.

JB mentioned several MA towns which are developing proposals including Amherst, Provincetown, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. She also stated that this tool is more common in the midwest in part because MA law requires special legislation. JB has drafted such legislation. There was a bill in the legislature authorizing this in the last session but it did not get much traction. JB voiced the idea that such a program would raise dollars for affordable housing since federal funds have pretty much dried up since the 1980s. She stated that such programs may be more helpful than regulatory reform (zoning changes).

DB asked CR to prepare an information sheet on this topic.

Trust Program Update

JM stated that there will be new Federal Home Loan funds available in March. However, Lee Bank will be getting \$110,000 instead of \$150,000 which it received last year. Therefore, the maximum federal grant will be \$11,000, with the usual grant being \$7,000-\$9,000. Last year there were 28 grants available, with half going to West Springfield and half to the Berkshires. The purchase price cap is \$280,000. Seven grants have been made within the last 2-3 years. Even without federal funds the Trust can still issue grants. However DB was concerned about who would do the vetting without bank involvement. JB stated that the Town could partner with other towns in the region to use regional personnel to review grant applications. She also stated that Stowe tried to develop a local affordable housing program with a strong conservation mentality. However, the state (DHCD) did not approve the program.

KMV wants to find better ways to publicize the Trust program. One idea is that the Trust Members distribute keys in front of town hall when the funds become available.

See also the discussion below on the Trust & Affordable Housing Committee developing a social media presence.

A question was raised about whether we should meet with the new director of the Lenox Housing Authority Barbara Heaphy. GM suggested we meet with her after the Housing Production Plan (HPP) is completed. Members thought this was a good idea.

Social Media Outreach Plan

EJ presented the pros and cons of using social media with the purpose of increasing awareness of the Trust program, conducting outreach to increase participation and building the Trust's credibility to the broader public. She recommended Facebook, and stated she would maintain the page with proviso that she can ask for help if she needs it. We agreed that it was important that the contents of the page could not be tampered with. She noted that the following other Lenox entities maintain a page: Town Hall with the Lenox Chamber of Commerce, the Community Center and the Police and Fire Department.

A motion was made, seconded and approved to have a Facebook page. KMV stated that any step to increase public participation is good. DB asked EJ to check with the Town and stated that this item would be back on the agenda for further discussion.

HPP Update

JB stated most of information would be presented at the second Open House following this meeting at 6:00 PM. As to the HPP's goals she referenced the written description of the HPP's goals drafted on the whiteboard at the December 5th Open House. At that meeting there was general agreement on the goals. However there was more disagreement with the following goal when the whiteboard was posted last the Town Hall. That goal stated: Ensure that affordable housing is available in a variety of building and units types, including detached single-family homes, multifamily dwellings, townhouses, congregate dwellings, and in special facilities such as assisted living residences. She recommended that we work toward understanding where the disagreement is coming from and resolve that goals wording. In drafting the HPP, JB needs direction on the Town's goals.

KMV stated that her neighbors oppose non single family homes in Lenox. Public education and outreach may help with this issue. JB suggested the strategy of explaining that diverse housing options are a state goal. Also the HPP needs to address funding for rental housing. Though

zoning is one issue, particularly in Lenoxdale, she stated it was not the sole answer. She raised the possibility of directing dollars for housing from the room/occupancy tax and tax incentives for developers. JB stated that addressing housing need and financing issues will get us somewhere.

DB stated that there were problems with available affordable rentals in Lenox. Many are substandard and old. Also, there is a difficulty in finding out about rental prices since they don't get reported. EJ mentioned the reasonable rentals at the Silk Mill project in Pittsfield. However, in Lenox the rents from the Allegrone Project is between \$1,800-\$2,800. JB stated that Lenox renters are living in units which cost more than 30% of their income and are thus unaffordable. JM stated that Brad Gordon of Berkshire Housing and the Berkshire Courier may have information about rental costs, KMV stated that the median income in Lenox has dropped slightly.

The next meeting will be on April 4, 2017 at 4:00 PM.

EJ moved that the meeting be adjourned and DB seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at 5:47 PM.