

Monkton Planning Commission
Public Hearing on the Town Plan
October 17, 2023

The public hearing was called to order at 8:00 pm by S. Wilbur.

Members Present: Wendy Sue Harper (co-chair), Marilyn Cargill (co-chair), Ivor Hughes, Gayle Grim(clerk), Gary Strait, Peter Close

Members Absent:

Visitors: Lauren Parren, Steve Parren, John McNerney, Jaime Schulte, Janet Schwarz, Laura Farrell, Ann Miller, Debra Sprague, Stan Wilbur (moderator)

S. Wilbur noted that the town owes thanks to the Monkton Planning Commission.

S. Wilbur read the warning:

The Monkton Planning Commission will hold a hybrid in-person and Zoom public Hearing at 8:00 pm, on Tuesday, October 17, 2023, at the Monkton Town Hall (92 Monkton Ridge), to take public testimony on the proposed Town Plan for the Town of Monkton.

The Planning Commission will discuss and vote on any proposed changes after this Public Hearing.

The purpose of a town plan is to provide a vision for orderly development within the town. It is essentially a "picture in time" that uses existing conditions to guide zoning and development decisions for the eight-year period covered by the next Town Plan.

Our new town plan is a partial revision of the plan adopted in 2020.

The proposed Town Plan affects all the land within the Town of Monkton. It updates sections that use US Census data to current 2020 data and adds information from the natural resources inventory conducted for the town in 2022-2023.

The Planning Commission believes the following are the significant changes offered by the plan:

1. The following sections have had data updated: Population, Housing, Education and Childcare, and Economic Development.

2. The Natural Resource sections on Forests and Water Resources have had information added from the natural resources inventory, including new maps. The Forests section has a new sub-section on Forest Integrity that identifies core forest blocks and habitat connectors, which allows the town to meet Act 171 State Law requirements.

While the Town Plan sets forth the community goals and objectives, the policies and other means of achieving those ends are set forth in the town zoning and subdivision regulations. A town plan should not be a prescriptive document. This version of the Monkton Town Plan mostly adheres to this principal.

S. Wilbur noted that this is a hearing for official testimony and the Planning Commission will not respond.

S. Parren said he lives on Silver Street. He noted that Map 12 had language that was incorrect because it refers to a reptile migration area which is wrong. He said it is a wildlife crossing but it was built especially for salamanders which are amphibians. He would like to see the wording changed.

J. McNerney emailed some comments to the Planning Commission:

A couple of minor observations/suggestions on the proposed town plan. References are to the Redline version posted on the town website.

Forest Cover and Habitat (pg 56).

The new last sentence reads: "*Although forests have made a comeback from the 1800's, the National Landcover Dataset shows losses of forest cover.*" I suggest clarifying by appending "in Vermont" to the end of the sentence.

Significant Natural Areas (pg 58)

This states "*Monkton has one forest community that has state significance: the clay plain forest communities, which can be found in the Pond Brook Valley...*" I'm pretty sure we have other Forest Communities which are rare/threatened or of significance ("State significance" or otherwise). Perhaps this should be updated and fleshed out, especially in light of the increased info available from the Arrowwood mapping project and the surveys done by the two UVM Field Naturalists. I don't have the data to suggest additions myself. At the least, perhaps this section could be modified to not be so narrow "Monkton has one forest community..." could be rephrased to name the clay plain forest as one example of a forest community of State significance.

Invasive Species (pg 58)

Last sentence notes that the Planning Commission "also appreciates town residents that work to remove them from town roadsides." There are active efforts by town residents and the Conservation Commission to remove invasives which do not involve roadside removal: the 6-year effort to remove Wild Parsnip from Morse Park, and a newer effort to control Buckthorn in the MCS woods. I suggest changing the last sentence to "also appreciates the efforts of community volunteers and the Conservation Commission to remove invasives from public areas in Monkton" -- or something to that effect.

Forest Conservation (pg 58)

The 4th paragraph lists several of ANAC's forest conservation projects. It erroneously includes "Hogback Community Forest" (Which is actually named "Little Hogback Community Forest". ANAC was not involved in that project.

Hogback Heaven Farm was also mentioned in connection with ANAC. That was not an ANAC project. I believe it was conserved in 2001. ANAC came into existence in 2006, and the proposal for how it would operate was approved in the 2007 Town Meeting. ANAC's first project happened in 2009.

I'm pretty sure of the accuracy of my statements regarding ANAC projects, since I served on that committee in its early years. I also pointed this section out to Laura Farrell, Chair of ANAC. She is reviewing it for accuracy.

Population Graph (pg 13) appears to have some errors:

The colors on the graph for Ferrisburgh and Starksboro appear to be reversed from what is shown in the legend

The Middlebury graph seems to be way off from their actual population. For example, for 2020 it shows them at about 1750, but their actual population as per the 2020 census was 9152. (Or perhaps this green line was actually some area town other than Middlebury?)

Education and Income (pg 15) "Forty eight point five" should be "48.5".

Property Usage table (pg 18) Is data missing from the 2023 column of this table, or did we really lose all of our multi-unit, accessory dwellings, and vacant properties by 2023?

L. Farrell presented a number of comments on the redlined version of the town plan:

Page 9: What is meant by 'vibrant town center'?

Page 31: 'The town continues to explore the feasibility of building a new Town Hall facility on a Town-owned property just north of its current location, with plans to house a new library space.' I believe we have accomplished this and are sitting within it!

Page 34: Fishing and hunting in these areas should be managed for the continual protection of these lands, the plant and animal species on the land, and for the recreational value that these open spaces provide to the community.

Page 39: Correct fact-wise and grammar: 'Monkton does have a general store with a gas pumps.'

Page 50 under Soils:

POLICIES

1. Development is restricted in Monkton's forestland and wetlands and prohibited in ridgelines and in those areas identified by the state as State Natural Heritage Sites and shown on the Important Resources and Habitat Map of this plan.

Comment, something to the effect of (Jaime Schulte also submitted language that may cover this): Any referral to this map for planning purposes or Development Review is to be done on the digital version delivered by Arrowwood Environmental in 2023, at very fine scale (close up), as the scale at which some features are represented is not visible on the paper version in this report. The maps presented in the town plan are for general reference, and interested parties or professional endeavors are referred to the online maps, which will be accessible where?...referenced on the Town website when completed (Soon!)

Page 51: What is meant by 'minor'? The town would like to develop a minor gravel/sand pit to supply it with materials to maintain roads and provide sand in winter. The locations of the sand and gravel resources identified on Map 9 would be disruptive to the scenic value of these areas near the core of town.

What is Forest Land Value Class on Map 9, and why isn't it applied to the Hogback?

Page 55: Under Forest Policy 3 Encourage development configurations that protect core forests and habitat connectors

Comment: Could reword to Development should protect core forests and habitat connectors?

Page 58: The Agricultural and Natural Areas Committee (ANAC) in Monkton continues to work with the Vermont Land Trust and other partners (listed on p. 76 – add New England Forestry Foundation) to conserve agricultural and forest land through protective easements, including Raven Ridge Natural Area, Pond Brook Wildlife Management Area, Hogback Heaven, and Hogback Community Forest. The Vermont Land Trust, with other partners, will buy development rights to forest lands, thus providing landowners with a monetary benefit while using conservation easements to preserve the land for agricultural uses.

First, ANAC was not yet formed when Hogback Heaven was conserved, and was formed around the same time as Little Hogback Community Forest – but was not involved in either of these conservation projects. For a complete list see ANAC's page on the town website (though two 2023 projects have not been posted yet). ANAC works with a variety of partner organizations to help conserve agricultural and natural areas. Vermont Land Trust has helped conserve much of Monkton's agricultural land, but is not well funded enough to work on forest conservation or buy development rights of many forested areas at the moment. Perhaps modify this sentence by stating that 'The Vermont Land Trust, with other partners, will buy development rights to agricultural lands, thus providing landowners with a monetary benefit while using conservation easements to preserve the land for agricultural uses.' ANA Fund is not used for direct purchase of land. Other conservation organizations, including the state, can help conserve forest habitat, and provide forest owners with financial benefits.

Page 59: The 115 acre's' Little Hogback Community Forest's' Inc. is Monkton's only community forest. It is an LLC, and it may be the state and regions only community forest! Some grammar issues too...

Page 60: The Forest Integrity and following passages are very well informed and provide excellent details to convey the important functions of these areas. A few notes that might be well addressed in the text:

Under HABITAT CONNECTIVITY, this is a definition of habitat connector. Connectivity covers the whole network of core and edge habitats, and narrower connectors are mostly edge habitat but still valuable for movement. I would like to see the point made that human activity, especially recreation including dogs, can impact wildlife's use of connectors, so it is important to consider that when placing recreational trails. Bobcats and black bears might use connections quite frequently or just a couple times a year moving between seasonal habitats.

Page 62: The West to East Forest Blocks along Monkton's Northern Border

Several forest blocks extend from west to east along the Monkton northern town border. These are shared with both Charlotte and Hinesburg. The total portion of these blocks within the Monkton border totals some 1767 acres. They form an important chain of stepping stones for wildlife connectivity and follow along the Lewis Creek corridor. They consist of several separate blocks lying north of Rotax Road and another group between Davis Road and Route 116. These are situated north of States Prison Hollow Road. An additional set of smaller forest blocks with high habitat biodiversity straddles Tyler Bridge Road north and is shared with Hinesburg and Starksboro. This can be mentioned with those above or in important forest blocks on Page 63. HABITAT CONNECTIVITY – map 17 : This is excellent – a few connectors need to be added – at least one really important one along Mountain Road.

Page 63: Monkton Conservation Committee should be 'Commission'

Page 66: Map 12 – I work with maps a lot, but haven't seen anything like these strips of crosshatching before. This map is referred to a number of times in report, but not well described. What are strips of crosshatching?! This is not an appropriate map for planning. The town just paid for and received an amazing set of maps for planning at much finer scales, and I would recommend updating this with that resource. Replace this with Arrowwood map? Important Resources and Habitat Map can someone explain the crosshatching? Is this a placeholder to be replaced with an updated map from the work currently concluding that is consolidating current knowledge of resources and habitat?

Maps 14 and 15: The numerical identification of these areas is just that, and not an order of importance. They could just as easily be called, A, B, C...ZZ or Cat, Fish, Dog, Pig, etc.

Map 16: Prioritizing forest blocks is problematic. Some of our species of greatest conservation need, including bobcats, cue into forest edge, and the higher diversity of habitat in areas like the northeastern side of town, which is also some of the first east west connective habitat south of Burlington. Highest priority and Important Forest Blocks are state designations based on models that were not ground-truthed. This is not an order in which these areas can be developed. When any of these areas are developed, a hole is left in the network.

Page 76: LAND CONSERVATION – some important updates and minor revisions

The Agricultural and Natural Areas Fund has been used to assist in the conservation of 1167 acres in the past seven years. Partners have been the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, the Vermont Land Trust, the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, the Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the U.S. Agency of Agriculture***.***Please add New England Forestry Foundation. (NEFF helped conserve over 200 acres of forest this year!) Old numbers. Newer data on ANAC page, and a couple more projects closed this year. Excited and thankful this is now correct at 1,947 acres in the past THIRTEEN years. Over 3 square miles of agricultural and natural areas conserved! Thank you little town that could! 92 acres Linehan, 220 acres Close

At Town Meeting, the Town votes on a line item averaging out over the years to about 2 cents on the grand list to assist in the purchase of development rights or direct purchase of land in order to protect open and agricultural lands. The Agricultural and Natural Areas Committee (ANAC) in Monkton is working with the wide range of partners listed above to conserve agricultural and forestland through protective easements. We cannot afford to direct purchase land.

Page 77: Water Resources – Climate change, and severe droughts such as the past few years, have made our historically consistent relationship with water less predictable. I recommend that the town consider restricting commercial mining of water for commercial resale.

Page 83: The suggested width recommended by the Department of Fish and Wildlife is 300 feet of land cover. Does not correlate with recommendation of 50 and 100 feet buffers for wetlands – increase this recommendation?

Page 87: Flood resilience - Another excellent section!

Flood resilience is essential for a safe, thriving community. By preserving permeable ground, including upland forests and wetlands that slow, spread and sink storm water...could add this wording in for illustration.

Page 92: LAND USE : RECOMMENDED ACTIONS (repeated on page 103)

Can the language be clarified and the map's current location and update process be Identified? 2. Action 6: Review and revise the Land Use Planning Map to clearly define our conservation areas, including wetlands, forested lands and ridge lines as unique planning areas that are currently based in one rural residential planning area. Is this the map generated by Arrowwood? And will it be updated by a neutral third party every year or as warranted (i.e. new vernal pools are delineated, or wetlands emerge or die out)? All planning should refer to online map for proper viewing of detail embedded at smaller scale than visible on the 8x11" map presented in these pages.

Page 92: A land use plan guides discussion on future growth and development based on the

understanding of the land base, historic and current land use patterns, the unique characteristics of land, including topography and floodplains, and on identified values and priorities of Monkton residents. A well thought out set of criteria, to which we may add 'the carrying capacity of the land for development and human settlement'

MONKTON ENHANCED ENERGY PLAN

Page 18: ELECTRICAL PATHWAYS TO IMPLEMENTATION

Solar on Roofs of municipal buildings including school!

Community Solar Procurement. The Town, led by the energy committee, should pursue opportunities to develop community-owned solar projects to power municipal buildings, including the elementary school and homes that may not be able to site solar on their property.

4. Selectboard and MEC will investigate the installation of a municipal solar and/or wind net-metering facilities to off-set municipal electric use.

L. Farrell thanked the MPC for all the writing on the natural resources.

J. McNerney echoed the recommendation to replace map 12 on page 86 of the red line version with updated information from Arrowwood, and consider recommending to the Selectboard that they replace map 12 with one that reflects the updated info.

He noted that on page 76, land conservation section, the Trust for Public Land has been discussed as a potential partner. He also commented that the town is currently working with VLT for the purchase and conservation of a town forest.

J. Schulte made the following comment: I appreciate all of the hard work of the Planning Commission on this update to the Town Plan. I think it is a clear step forward. As a member of the Development Review Board and the Conservation Commission, I have a couple of comments:

The Town Plan contains concept-level maps, generally of the entire town. While the information may or may not remain current in those town-level maps over time, the scale of our Town Plan maps is not detailed enough to be fully useful and actionable for zoning and development review activities, which generally take place at the much more detailed parcel level. The town recently contracted with Arrowwood Environmental for an updated Natural Resource Inventory of Monkton. Those new maps should be referenced in these development-related activities.

The Town Plan should then state clearly that the maps in the town plan are intended for education, awareness, understanding of our town, and the like, and that any zoning activities, particularly by the Zoning Administrator and Development Review Board, must refer instead to more detailed digital map(s). The official source-of-truth digital maps, represented by the maps in the Town Plan, and the process by which those are maintained and updated over the 8-year term of the Town Plan will be set by the Selectboard, in consultation with the Planning Commission, and made available on the Monkton Town website for the benefit of the community and town boards and committees.

The hearing was closed at 8:49 pm by moderator S. Wilbur.