

Town of Mount Desert
Economic Development Committee Meeting
July 12, 2023
Minutes

Attending:

In person:, Jamie Blaine, Dan McKay (chair), Wendy Todd, Rick Wheeler, Averel Wilson

By zoom: Nancy Ho, Kathy Miller, Stephanie Reece

Absent: Megan Bailey, Martha Dudman, Don Graves, Matt Hart, Jen Judd-McGee, Durlin Lunt, Kerri Sands, Tony Smith

Guests: Kyle Avila, Meg Ashur

Dan convened the meeting at 4:02 p.m.

1. Minutes. The committee unanimously approved the minutes of the April 12th meeting.
2. Election of officers for fiscal year 2023. Well, it happened again. This time, he had assured us, it would be different. But when Dan called for nominations for chair, vice chair, and secretary, all eyes stared at the table, no hands were raised. Some thought the chairman might have protested a bit harder, and he did caution the committee that, if this trend continues indefinitely, some senior members of the officer corps could leave their posts feet first and lying on their shields. But his words fell on deaf ears and stony hearts, and so, the team of McKay (chair), Bailey (vice chair), and Blaine (secretary) was unanimously re-elected for (to paraphrase the 1972 Republican convention) “one more year.”
3. Updates.
 - a. Broadband. Kathy said the process is not much further along than her last report, but she expected more clarity soon. Of the few properties in the town that do not have high-speed Internet, some are on park land, including Jordan Pond House, where the current absence of poles will make service installation expensive (but for the concessions operator, not the town). She expects the town will soon have full coverage from Spectrum, noting that the company is simultaneously trying to improve its speed. Fiber optic, however, appears to be several years down the road. The probable supplier, Consolidated Communications, Inc., gave an estimate of \$11.4 million for all four island towns. The company wants the towns to contribute \$5.8 million of that amount, which still needs to be allocated by town. To date, Southwest Harbor has shown no interest in the project, which would be a dealbreaker. Although MDI is not high on the list for state or federal funding, qualifying for such funding might help sway Southwest Harbor to join. That all seems several years in the future.
 - b. Island Housing Summit. Dan has received (and forwarded this morning to committee members) the Summit’s report. He said it contained little that was surprising, but he believes it is a good first step. Of note: The median income on the island is about \$76,000. The median housing price is almost \$700,000.

- c. Skating Rink. At its annual meeting, the town passed a warrant for \$210,000 to upgrade the tennis/pickleball courts. The improvements will also make it possible to upgrade the skating rink, with underground piping and compressors, which will, in turn, extend the skating season to about six months. That would make the marina courts a year-round asset for the town, six months for tennis and pickleball and six months for ice skating. The town expects to start work on the courts this fall and complete them next spring. So, for the coming year, the rink will operate as it did last year. We will need to buy a new liner, but the only other large cost is for a manager/teacher. Subject to approval by the harbor committee and the select board, as well as a successful fundraising drive, we hope to open the new rink for use in the fall and winter of 2024-2025. The town has allocated an annual contribution of \$10,000.
4. Status report re transfer of Promenade Park contributions to skating rink. After an initial snafu involving the wrong address on the return envelopes, 14 of the original 31 donors have agreed to transfer \$12,975 to the rink. One donor asked for a return of \$5,000 but will issue a new check for the same amount. Amounts listed above are the original contributions, which totaled \$75,825 from 31 donors. About half that amount was spent on plans, etc., so the remaining funds will be allocated proportionally. We have not yet heard from the town (which contributed \$30,000) or the Episcopal parish (\$5,000). Dan will follow up with the town, Jamie with the parish.
5. Discussion of proposed letter in support of Heel Way housing project. Dan had sent, with the other meeting materials, a draft of a letter to the Planning Board in support of the project. Kathy gave an update of the project's status, saying that it is in the fourth step of a four-step process, which will culminate at the Board's August 9th meeting, when the board will determine whether the project has met all the required standards. Kathy expressed confidence that 365 had. She spoke briefly about some changes it had made in response to concerns raised, noted that housing is the biggest issue facing employers on the island, and said that this project is well within the density norms of nearby neighborhoods. She took no part in the subsequent discussions (other than to answer a point of fact) and recused herself from voting.

Dan summarized what he understood to be the opponents' points: (a) they are in favor of work force housing but feel the proposed location is not the right place for it; (b) the major issue is density (there will be 16 bedrooms in the project); and a second issue was the increased traffic on Manchester Road.

He also noted that, while five houses have been built in the neighborhood in the last 10 years, the concerns expressed over Heel Way were never, to his knowledge, raised. Many of the new houses are large summer houses whose impact on the town's resources may be greater than that of this project. While open space is an important amenity of this town, the need for affordable housing is critical, and building it requires some give and take. Finally, the Planning Board's job is to make sure the project complies with all the regulations, etc. If it does, the Board must approve it. With a few suggested changes to

the letter, Averel moved its approval, Wendy seconded, and the vote carried. Kathy abstained. A copy of the revised letter is attached to these minutes.

6. Other business.

- a. Meg Ashur presented some ideas for electric vehicle (golf cart) use in the town. Among the benefits she cited were: declutter Main Street in the summer months; environmental benefits vis-à-vis fossil fuel vehicles; the ability to ferry people from the marina to the shopping district and back, which would be both good for the merchants and environmentally benign. It was not clear who would own the carts (the town? individuals? another entity?), and members raised a number of other questions, but the committee expressed interest in following up on the ideas. Stephanie said the idea had come up in the past, but it had been squashed because of insurance worries. One suggestion that got a lot of attention was for a larger vehicle, with a permanent driver, making a continuous circular route or loop to a number of points around the village and town, not unlike the Great Cranberry Island train. The committee agreed to discuss the issue further.
- b. Dan mentioned the need to recruit more young committee members (see 2 above).

7. Meeting dates. The committee will continue to meet quarterly on the second Wednesday of the month following each quarter at 4 p.m. The next meeting will be on Oct. 11 at 4 p.m.

The meeting adjourned at 5:17 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Jamie Blaine, Secretary

Attachments:
Heel Way Letter
Housing summit