



Falmouth Economic Improvement Committee

Wednesday, May 18, 2011 Meeting Notes

Attendance:

Name	Present	Name	Present	Name	Present
Ann Armstrong	√	Sterling Kozlowski	√	David Libby	-
William Lunt III	√	Anne Theriault	√	Jim Thibodeau	√
Mike Skillin	-				

Council Liaison: -

Staff present: Nathan Poore, Theo Holtwijk, Amanda Stearns, Ethan Croce

Others present: Kevin Dore, Bill Sowles, Steve Woods, Bill Gardiner

Bill started the meeting at 4:05 PM. He gave an introduction to the purpose of the meeting. The attendees introduced themselves.

1. Discussion with Invited Business Stakeholders

The FEIC invited three business representatives to discuss their experience going through the Falmouth permit review process.

Kevin Dore is owner of Christman Pool Service. He stated the following: This company, until recently, has been in Falmouth since 1981. The company bought its property on Gray Road in mid-late 1980's and started with one truck. Now the company has 15-20 service vehicles. The Gray Road location is not a retail location and his business is not a destination retail business. The access to the Turnpike that the Gray Road location gave was perfect. In 2004 he added a warehouse. Jim Thibodeau helped him with that. In 2-3 years following that business sales were doubled. The service industry is dying due to large companies such as Wal-Mart and the internet. The company's market area is Falmouth, Cumberland, Yarmouth, Pemaquid peninsula ("gold coast"). Falmouth was a great location.

Two years ago he planned an office expansion to be more efficient and have tight logistics. The proposal was to add a second floor, not to expand the footprint. The warehouse project was budgeted for \$75-90K, but cost \$200K. That process took 11 months and was frustrating. The review meetings were: how about this, followed by how about that, etc. But he worked through it. He believes he could do \$3M business per year. His 5 year plan is for a \$6-7M business and have 60 employees. He has grown his business from 12 employees to 30. These are mostly blue collar, and include local youth.

The second expansion was within the same footprint. It involved losing 4-5 parking spaces and taking down signage that had been approved by the Town earlier. The Planning Board also wanted to have a picnic lunch on the property in order to see the business. He felt that was Big Brother, and that he had nothing to hide. After 2-3 meetings he had not gotten to final design stage. At that time, due to the economy, he had a chance to buy a building for a reasonable price on Warren Avenue in Portland. Within 6 weeks he had the permit in hand. The City of Portland gave him a package of what he needed to do. The Warren Avenue location has better retail traffic. He would have stayed in Falmouth as it is easier to operate out of Gray Road location. The main issue was that he could not get quickly enough through Falmouth Planning Board.

Question: When was the office expansion application? The answer was: In Fall of 2009.

Question: Did he go to the Planning Board. The answer was: Yes, Stan Bennett on the Planning Board suggested the picnic lunch.

Jim Thibodeau added that staff did a good job, but had a difficult ordinance to work with. The Route 100 requirements were being imposed.

Kevin stated that he made a lot of improvements on the property, such as \$20K of landscaping and hired a landscape architect. Planning Board did not like some parking spots that it had approved three years before that. He acknowledged that Route 100 needed to be “cleaned up,” but felt that the regulations that governed Hannaford should not apply to him.

Question: Did he want to add anything else. The answer was: No.

Bill clarified that the FEIC would hear at a later date all sides of the story.

Kevin added that he does not dislike Falmouth, that Falmouth was an important part of his business. He felt the Town should pay attention to small businesses, as they do want to expand. He was not crying over spilled milk.

Question: Did he still own the Gray Road property? The answer was: Yes. It is a difficult property to sell because of the floodplain. There is also a fear of MDOT and the grade of the road. Storm drainage runs from the road onto the site and into the building. A second floor office would have solved that.

Bill thanked Kevin for his comments.

The group turned to the second speaker, Bill Sowles, owner of Morong Falmouth.

Bill Sowles stated the following: Morong Falmouth has been here since 1970. His company has done 3-4 expansions on the sales side of the business. In 2002 the Portland Athletic Club building was purchased and allowed a service expansion. His most recent project was to renovate his sales and former service building into four showrooms. The service project was done with the “old regime,” i.e. with staff that is no longer present.

Bill Lunt noted that the ordinances were still here.

Bill Sowles stated: He served on every Route One committee that has been in existence since the 1980's. There have been 3 or 4 committees over the years. He found the permit process expensive as one had to hire experts and there were multiple documents to follow, which were contradictory. It was hard to come up with a proposal that the Town liked. The Planning Board did try to be flexible, but the ordinances were not really clear. If he had one complaint, it was the peer review by Tom Emery. That review was all over the map. Bill asked if Tom was still working for the Town. The answer was yes. Bill felt that Tom's interpretations were "out there," that he changed his opinion and went back and forth. That turned out to be expensive. Bill felt the Town did not need a peer reviewer. He felt he had a great working relationship with Ethan Croce and that staff could handle it.

Bill understood that the work of the latest Route One committee is now with the Community Development Committee (CDC). That work was started some 10 years ago and lots of money was spent on consultants, such as Steve Mohr. But nothing has been done with that. Bill estimated that he spent \$200-250K on extras that he felt were unnecessary. One example of that was underground electric. At the final Planning Board approval meeting he was asked to put underground electric across Route One and that added \$25K. He felt that that improvement was not his responsibility. Other examples were a sidewalk that went into the woods, to nowhere. He also did landscaping which was expensive, but he did his part to make the area look good. The parking islands in the service center lot were hard to plow. He stated he was not Hannaford with lots of public traffic coming and going, but rather a destination spot with not a lot of public traffic. The islands had to be 20 feet wide and that made him lose parking spots. His business is one that is not easily moved, so he has to work with the Town, but he would change the Route One ordinance.

Question: Where would he move to, if he could? The answer was: Perhaps where there are other dealers, as each feeds off the other, but his is a destination business.

Bill stated that he worked with Theo to make sure his business was a permitted use and not a special exception. He stated he lived in Yarmouth.

Bill Lunt stated that in the last 4-5 months the Town had peer review of buildings done by an architect, not a landscape architect.

Bill Sowles commented on the blue roof issue. The color blue is what the Town said it wanted. With a later application the Planning Board wanted a different color. That color was ultimately changed by Bill, but it was a judgment call by the Board. Bill said he worked through the issues. He had sensed some frustration with Ethan about the peer review.

Question: Did the blue color issue come from the peer review, or was it mandated by the ordinance? The answer was: The ordinance required a "New England style" roof. It was a total judgment call.

Bill stated that at the end of the day, he grew up here and is proud of what he had done. He felt his business and the Town were both better off.

Question: How could it be better? Is there room for improvement? The answer was: Bill would not have built the paver sidewalk that made him lose parking.

Bill Lunt thanked Bill and turned to Steve Woods, owner of Tidesmart Global.

Steve stated that, for the record, his first ten years in business were in the pool business. He has been chairman of the Yarmouth Planning Board and last year was elected to the Yarmouth Town Council, so he has appreciation for the Town side as well. A year and a half ago his business was in the Old Port. The economic crisis allowed him to purchase the Pinkham and Greer building on Route One. His first contact with the Town had been with Nathan, who had been great. Nathan alerted him to Pine Tree Zone, which saved him \$10K's and will save him more in time to come. He felt that Ethan and Amanda were very qualified and technical. He felt that Falmouth is a different place and that issues need to be looked at holistically. He reads the letters in The Forecaster including those of Michael Doyle and sees the pressures in town, which force people to be rigid and technical. The people here are vocal and there are disparate views. The experience with the Planning Board led him to write some e-mails with capital letters out of frustration. But he felt the staff had been professional and courteous and did the best it could. The Town has diverse personalities and business sizes and the Council debates reflect that. It seemed to be a "blood sport." In Yarmouth, by contrast, there were no comments on the adoption of the Comprehensive Plan or the \$31M budget. This could be due to apathy or confidence in the leadership. He thought it was the latter. Because of the adversarial environment in Falmouth, not as effective job can be done. He did not want to comment on the details in the ordinances, such as sign size or building color. He believed that new ways needed to be thought of to have a more effective government. He suggested doing away with some ordinances and giving staff more authority. He cited as an example that he wanted a dumpster, but that he was questioned by the Planning Board if he needed a dumpster as the truck that picks them up made noise. Consultants cost money and he would have preferred to reinvest that money into his business. He felt that Falmouth was perhaps the second best community in Maine. Maine is a unique place and the Falmouth-Freeport corridor was exceptional, as were the school systems. Falmouth is a strong economic engine, more than Yarmouth, and he would like it to "get it together." He discussed leasing the old Shaw's space, but people were wondering how that was going to work. He stated that perception was reality. The perception is that Falmouth is challenging and expensive. He felt that Falmouth needed to have more clear mandates and give more control to staff, because otherwise it is too subjective. He senses negative energy in meetings around issues, but felt that Falmouth was an unbelievable city. He stated that there smart people and willingness in Town Hall, but paralysis caused by outside forces, that should be managed.

Bill thanked Steve. He stated that he appreciated everyone's time and that the group will get back to the guests. He felt there had been a lot of good, positive input.

Steve commented that to have an open discussion was a good first step.

Bill added that the group may want to speak with the guests again and that they would be apprised what the group came up with. The next step was to hear from some other applicants and to hear from staff.

The guests left.

Bill asked staff if these discussions were what they envisioned, and if it was a good idea. Nathan stated that it was great to hear the perspectives of the guests. He acknowledged that there was pressure to go by the book. He cited the example of a loam pile at AA Excavating, which was eventually removed. The Town worked with that business. He thought the comments were enlightening.

2. Review of Draft Minutes

Upon a motion by Sterling and second by Ann A., the minutes of the May 4th meeting were unanimously approved.

3. Next Meeting

A discussion followed on the underground electric at Route One. Bill stated that with power on one side, it was not fair to businesses on the other side. Jim stated he had a similar issue on Leighton Road, but that it was George Thebarger's vision to have underground electric. It was stated that Bill Sowles did not realize this was required until the last moment.

The group discussed what to do next. One guest was confirmed for the next meeting.

Anne T. suggested Pat Weigel from Norway Savings Bank. Pat also lives in Falmouth.

Ann A. mentioned that Allied Cook did the work on Gorham Savings Bank and that Cheryl Brandt would pass that experience on.

Anne T. mentioned to get someone from Ace Hardware. She was concerned with the welcome the town gave them and said that Ace was looking for a splash from the town, some event where the town could wish a new business the best. She suggested bringing in three new business owners to talk about that. Bill felt that this perhaps could be a long range project to work on.

Ann A. wondered if anyone should be asked of the 100 Acre Woods project. Jim said, since he worked on that project, he could answer any questions about that project.

Bill suggested asking one or two site designers to also come. Ann wondered if that should be an engineer or landscape architect. Jim stated that the type of consultants that work on projects varies. He suggested getting someone from Pinkham and Greer, as they were multi-faceted and local. He also recommended Andy Hyland, who he felt was very practical. Jim also suggested David Chase, a local excavating business owner.

The group decided to first find out if Adam or Beth could come. Ann will contact Beth and Adam. Bill will follow up with Adam.

There was question if People's United Bank should bother to come in. It seemed its issue was signage. Jim stated that they had a hard time with the BZA. The application was deemed not complete. Bill explained that if an application is not ready, it is not on the meeting agenda.

Jim felt the process needed to be revamped. He suggested Andy Highland as he has also worked on the Falmouth Grill project. The group agreed with that.

Jim stated that consultants cost a lot of money sitting in a board meeting. He suggested that staff needed to be empowered, that comments from other departments could be obtained and that then a formal decision could be issued.

Anne T. stated that it the permit process was a lot of money for business, but that she agreed with postponement if an applicant was not ready to be heard. Bill explained that applicants are given the choice to come in, but that the Planning Board could choose not hear them.

Jim felt the process could be made much better. He said some projects cost \$1000 just for printing of plans. He stated that on some occasions the applicant cannot address concerns that staff or the public have made. He stated that staff felt frustrated too.

Sterling suggested that this indicated that there could be room for process improvement as well.

Any guest confirmations will be reported to Theo.

The committee will meet next on Wednesday June 1st at 4:00 PM.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:24 PM.

Draft Meeting Notes by Theo Holtwijk, May 19, 2011 Rev. June 20, 2011