

# Fairlee Officials Mull Workforce Housing Plan

By Gabe Brison-Trezise Valley News Correspondent Thursday, July 26, 2018

“The bottom line is this board is committed to the downtown,” Barrett, who also is an architect, said at a meeting on Wednesday at Town Hall to discuss housing opportunities in town. Fifteen people attended, including representatives from the Green Mountain Economic Development Corp., Twin Pines Housing Trust, Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission, and developer New England Family Housing.

Bob Haynes, executive director of Green Mountain Economic Development Corporation, said the demand was there.

“I think, intuitively, it would be easy to absorb 25 to 30 units in Fairlee,” he said, arguing town officials should take an even longer-view approach.

Could Fairlee, population 1,029, accommodate up to 75 more units, he wondered.

Haynes said Randolph and White River Junction, where his organization is headquartered, had undergone

economic revitalizations that could inform Fairlee's approach.

For Selectboard Vice Chairman Peter Berger, accurately assessing the town's character and growth capacity is a prerequisite to any new construction.

"We know this is a bedroom community," he said. In other words, many residents commute to work in Hanover or Lebanon. Yet a lack of housing had led to consistently high demand throughout the Valley, he said: rarely did he see an apartment remain unrented for long.

Fairlee Planning Commission Chairwoman Miranda Clemson echoed Berger, noting that while she was working at Dartmouth she had one of the shortest commutes among her information technology department colleagues.

One concern that arose at Wednesday's meeting was the town's lack of a municipal sewer system, and the corresponding need for a septic system to be installed to accompany any new housing.

Kevin Lacasse, principal at the New Hampton, N.H.-based New England Family Housing, said it would make more economic sense to build a larger development — 30 units instead of five or 10.

"To justify putting in the septic," he said, "the more units, the better bang for your buck."

Town officials have identified several possible sites for development. These include the plot of the former Colby Block, a two-story wooden building that burned down in 2007; a property behind that one, toward the Samuel Morey Memorial Bridge to Orford; and several abutting the former Cumberland Farms convenience store.

Collectively, their grand list value is \$920,500, according to Zoning Administrator Chris Brimmer.

Fairlee already owns a plot of land between its railroad station on Route 5 and the Connecticut River, an area Selectwoman Catherine McGrath cited as a possible location for future workforce housing. She and Berger discussed whether to reserve some units for senior housing, but Twin Pines' Andrew Winter said the spaces could be constructed to accommodate a range of ages and mobility levels.

"We want all the units we create to be visitable," he said. "It's thinking about door handles and where switches are located."

Barrett, who is serving his 24th and final year on the Selectboard, stressed the need to move forward with development plans. "The window of opportunity is here," he said, alluding to the group of available properties downtown. "At some point, that's going to close."

Among the sites the Selectboard is eyeing is the intersection of Routes 5 and 25A, where the shell of a

closed Evans Expressmart stands. As of Wednesday, the “pizza shop” sign remains in the window, an ad for lowfat milk on the door, but the shelves inside are empty and weeds have poked through the blacktop in front.

Lacasse, the New Hampshire developer, said “financing and equity” were an important consideration for the Selectboard.

“Identifying these sources and who those sources are available to is definitely a key component,” he said.

Kevin Geiger of the regional planning commission added that the Evans site and any other property slated for development would need first to undergo an environmental review.

Geiger also suggested sharing any redevelopment plan with Fairlee residents and earning their support before putting it into action. Public opposition had hampered similar initiatives in other towns, he said.

“What’s most critical is that the community wants it to happen,” Geiger said. “That’s an absolutely necessary piece, and not a common piece right now.”

The next step, Winters suggested, is seeking state grant money to determine the feasibility of building a community septic system to support a potential housing development.

Down the line, the Selectboard may turn its focus to commercial development opportunities; it commissioned a 2016 report that imagined an outdoor recreation outfitter and other businesses setting up shop along Route 5.

“We have some wonderful opportunities,” Barrett said. Fairlee — Jay Barrett is bullish on Fairlee. Its easy access to Interstate 91, walkability and recreation opportunities all convince the longtime selectman the town has strong growth potential. Now, in tandem with his colleagues, Barrett is hoping to spur construction of new workforce housing along Route 5 in the village center.