

JOINT MEETING OF THE SCHOOL BOARD, SELECT BOARD, VILLAGE TRUSTEES,
PLANNING COMMISSION, JOHNSON WORKS
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
TUESDAY, APRIL 26, 2016

Present:

Selectboard: Nat Kinney, Doug Molde, Kyle Nuse, Eric Osgood, Mike Dunham

Village Trustees: Gordon Smith, David Goddette, Walter Pomroy, Bob Sweetser, Scott Meyer

School Board: Katie Orost, Heather Rodriguez, Beth Foy, Lauren Philie, Bobbie Moulton

Planning Commission: David Butler, Phillip Wilson, Rob Rodriguez, Brian Boyden, Charles Gallanter

Others: Eric Nuse, Catherine Gallagher, David Manning, Rosemary Audibert, Sandy Miller, Elaine Collins, Daryl West, Jessyca West, Kyle Hill, Bobbi Rooney, Linda Molde, Kim Dunkley, Greg Stefanski, Samuel Hartley, Mark Woodward, Ben Waterman, Jennifer Burton, Pam Aupperlee, Rick Aupperlee, one other person

Eric Osgood opened the meeting at 6:07. He thanked Eric Nuse for serving as facilitator. He said the idea of this meeting started when some selectboard members went to a school board meeting where there was discussion of test scores and their correlation with poverty and crime. The idea arose of getting all parties engaged to look at the whole picture. The selectboard has been trying to look at an industrial park. They are trying to do economic development. They have noted that there are a lot of high paying jobs in Johnson but the problem is that people who have those jobs don't tend to live in Johnson. Johnson household incomes are the lowest in the county and the gap between Johnson and the rest of the county is growing. The board applied for a grant for an electric car charging station that was approved. That is an example of one small tool we have. The hope is that the charging station will get a few people with cars to stop and spend some time in town, which will help businesses.

Katie Orost said in February a Front Porch Forum post led to some citizens attending a school board meeting who were concerned about the academic rating and reputation of the school. It was discussed that the issues are not just for the school but for the whole community. People came up with the idea of bringing all the town boards and committees together to come up with a plan. Then individual boards can come up with action plans and the boards can get together again in a few months.

Gordy Smith said the trustees are pleased to have been invited here. This is a community issue, not a village, town, planning commission or college issue. One thing the trustees are doing is renewing the downtown village plan. They are going to change some boundaries of the downtown area. They are hoping to extend the boundary down Railroad Street. That should be a valuable tool for the future.

David Butler said the planning commission's role is to understand what people within the town want so they can adjust plans for the future of the town accordingly. The planning commission will be reactionary rather than trying to change things.

Those present introduced themselves.

Eric Nuse said his understanding is that the group would like to come away with a holistic view of the issues and problems everyone sees and come up with a brainstormed list of issues that individual boards can start to work on so boards can do prioritization and see what they can make a difference with and hopefully report back to the whole group in the future.

He will pass out post-it notes and have each person start writing down ideas, then find someone else to talk with about the ideas and see if they can generate more. He will have a large sheet of paper up for each board and people can pick which group is most appropriate and put their idea on that group's paper. When that is finished the chairs can look over the ideas and then report back to the group on what consensus is emerging. Eric Osgood said if an issue applies to more than one group it can be put on more than one list.

Eric Nuse asked the group to set ground rules for discussion. A number of rules were suggested and he wrote them down.

The different groups each summarized the type of ideas they are interested in. David Goddette said economic development is a priority for the village and the town. Eric Osgood agreed. Katie Orost said the school board is interested in ideas about how to improve the school's reputation. Their concern is how best to get out the story that JES is turning out great students. David Goddette said the trustees are looking for ideas on stimulating economic development. Doug Molde said it seems to him that a question is what we can do to tell people outside of Johnson about our school system and what living here is like. David Butler said the planning commission is interested in economic development and improving our image. He thinks we need to focus on goals. Greg Stefanski said the focus of Johnson Works has been a strong business community, which requires a strong community overall. Beth Foy said she is hearing that economic development is important. This is not limited to economic development, right? Others said no. Eric Nuse said everything is on the table.

Post-it notes were distributed and people worked on generating ideas and putting them on the large pieces of paper for each group. Then the chairs of the groups reviewed the ideas and reported on them.

The different groups – trustees, school board, Johnson Works, and selectboard – each presented the ideas that had been suggested for their group. There was also an “other” category summarized by Kyle Nuse. *[See the list of ideas appended to the minutes.]*

David Butler said he loves this meeting. He hasn't been in a planning commission or selectboard meeting with this many people. If everyone brings three neighbors to the next meeting, maybe we can get people in this town to care and then we can do anything we want.

Walter Pomroy said it's not like we've never done anything before. He described some resources that are available so people don't have to reinvent the wheel. There is a document from 1998. We have actually implemented a lot of the economic development ideas in it. The document from the community visit in 2004 includes many of the ideas mentioned tonight. There was a housing study we did in 2008. One conclusion of that study was that we need more rental property, not less. There is the Johnson Pathway Plan, which deals with recreation and trails.

Some of the ideas in it have been implemented or are being implemented. There is a report on potential uses of the talc mill site – a very under-utilized asset. There are also some great state resources – a report called Imagining Vermont and another called Advancing Vermont's Creative Economy. He wants to remind people that we don't have to start from zero. A lot of good groundwork and information is out there. Some of these plans just need to be revitalized. He added that all the reports say we ought to implement zoning.

Eric Osgood said he would support some of the things Walter said. We have done a lot in this community. We have small tools and we do what little things we can. One thing the town did was eliminate the business equipment tax. The town also got approval to enter into tax stabilization plans with businesses making improvements. Butternut Farms and Sterling Market have been beneficiaries of tax stabilization plans. We have the skate park, the rec fields, the Holiday Jubilee, and Tuesday Night Live. The town is going to be working on an ordinance on blighted buildings. Recently the town acquired the Beard swimming hole.

Beth Foy said she thinks the school board has a lot of good ideas of things they can work with administration to do, and they will. They will create goals for the year as their next step at their next board meeting. She feels these boards should come together quarterly or twice a year in joint meetings to keep communication lines open, be accountable to each other, and let everyone know what is going on with the different boards.

Gordy Smith brought up the drug problem. What incentive do police have to arrest people for drug violations? Are there prosecutions? Are people given rehab? We need to see what we can do, maybe more at the county level. Problems just continue over and over on Railroad St. Eric Osgood said crime on Railroad St. is a big theme on the selectboard list.

Greg Stefanski said one thing Johnson Works talked about, related to communication and connection, is that the college has technological resources we might be able to use. The different community Facebook and web pages are not really connected. It is difficult to get the word out about things. It would be good if we could figure that out and have a better idea what is going on in different areas.

Bobbi Rooney said we can't just change Railroad St. because it has existing use. Until a property goes up for sale, it stays bound by the laws it is bound by now. What kind of money does the town or village have to buy a building if it goes up for sale, then turn around and put it on the market after creating new ordinances changing the use? That would let us change things faster.

David Butler said that is exactly what form based code does. It says we are not going to change what you are doing, but when you sell your property or you change its use you must bring it up to the standards of the code. Form based code is not saying you can't have multi-unit housing or rentals. It says you will keep the porch in good shape, have green space, provide so many parking spaces, etc. It provides a way to increase the value of the property.

Jen Burton said she gets what he is saying and she is all for form based code but rather than the town getting involved in purchasing and selling properties, she thinks it would make more sense to create a nonprofit or partner with the Champlain Land Trust.

Walter said the people in this room are not necessarily the ones who will solve this problem. He would like to get as much information as possible out to the community as fast and as often as possible. If we do that he bets we will get a lot more good ideas. He suggested putting a link to the minutes on Front Porch Forum and saying on Front Porch Forum when this meeting will be shown on public access TV.

Daryl West said he appreciates the effort to put this meeting together. He said Eric Osgood had mentioned there is already a tax stabilization program. Eric said yes; the town can enter into tax stabilization agreements with business owners. Daryl asked if that is town wide. Eric said yes. Daryl asked if that was offered to Skip Vallee. Eric said no; he hasn't asked. Daryl said he knows of one business owner who asked and was told no. Eric said this is new. All the town can impact is the municipal tax, unless it is a large business that has a big impact through providing many jobs. In that case, the school portion of the tax can be affected as well. Daryl asked if it might be worth reaching out to some people who have expressed interest in doing things in Johnson, like Skip Vallee. When is the time to apply for tax stabilization? Eric said Butternut Farms had finished their project when they asked. He thinks the town can set parameters for up to 5 years.

David Manning said often when people identify problems at a school the principal can feel on an island trying to solve the problem alone. It is encouraging that the community wants to address this not just as school issue but as a community issue. He is encouraged about the likelihood of success.

Mark Woodward asked to hear about how things are going at Johnson State College. He said we can't forget our community is tied to the health of the college. Elaine Collins said the college has spent the year getting very concrete plans together about how to grow enrollment. They set measurable goals. They created a shared governance structure where all are tasked with responsibilities to meet the goals. They are projecting growth in online adult education. On-campus housing and programming are also growing. Applications are up around 27%. Endowment and fund raising efforts are about 30% ahead of last year. She thinks things are moving in a positive manner. But she doesn't want to give false hope because at the same time there are increasing stressors on the system, such as increasing health care costs.

Beth Foy said she has heard a few times that the college is really interested in being more involved in the community. She is wondering what that looks like to Elaine. Elaine said she heard good ideas tonight about involving students more in what happens in town. JSC's mission is related to service learning and service in general. They are branding around positive social change. They welcome ideas on how to engage students in work that is being done. Greg Stefanski said JSC students have helped with the land at Laraway, have helped move items for the Historical Society and have helped with some cleanup projects along Main St. The JSC student athletes are also a very active group.

David Butler said his oldest daughter was in one of the last classes to go to JSC's child development center. Having safe educational daycare is huge for parents in the area. College students worked there. At that time it wasn't financially viable. The state hit the college with cuts. If there was any way all the boards and college could get together and form a child

development center in this town, that would have a huge effect on school ratings and people wanting to move to town. It would help keep our young professional people here when they have kids. Elaine Collins said she is sitting on an advisory board around this issue now. The college is involved in these conversations. They realize it is critical to have something like that in this area. She can't promise it would be at the college. David Butler said maybe it would be staffed by the college, owned by the town and maintained by village.

Beth Foy asked if the boards are going to meet like this again. Eric Nuse said he thinks the chairs will talk about that. .

The meeting ended at 7:37.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths

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Ideas generated at April 26 joint meeting of selectboard, trustees, school board, planning commission, and Johnson Works

School Board

Improving education/helping kids

Improve school testing results

Charter or hire an independent consultant or task force to expose the roots of the school test scores issue

Kids who go to daycare and preschool have a good start in school – more childcare centers, high quality preschool/daycare in town

Increase pay for JES teachers to increase retention

Create a program that supports social/emotional growth for those who need it.

Employ teachers who understand the needs of the current student population

Cool activities, outdoor learning opportunities

Encourage parents to be involved in their child's education

More playgrounds/safe spaces for kids to play, teen center

Family/community engagement

School welcome packet

How do we increase public input?

Parenting classes?

Get kids involved in activities of community like Green Up Day or Tuesday Night Live

Improve engagement with students and community – not test scores!

Public relations

Perception vs. reality

Good press – test scores don't tell the whole story

Positive achievements. Interviews with kids who went on to impressive achievements as adults – published in News & Citizen

Consistent social media / Front Porch Forum / press release / other media sharing of school / teacher / student successes

Publicize other-than-test-scores success stories of JES. (Could produce a series of videos.)

Leave positive reviews at GreatSchools website

A volunteer to update school rating sites or perform outreach to those entities

Consultant to promote good reputation for school

Capitalize on relationship with Studio Center

Hyde Park has problems. What have they done?

Establish school/college partnership to help with perceptions related to school

Coordinate community communication (web sites, Facebook, FPF, other)

Village Trustees

Economic development

Have packet to hand out for potential new businesses

Be more business friendly. Be more open minded and welcoming to new businesses.

Minimal regulation to encourage growth

We had a “revitalize Main St. project” that seemed to make the downtown more conducive to business success. Time to revitalize Railroad St.

Promote business

Bring in businesses that employ and give residents livable wages – advertise what a great place Johnson is

Take full advantage of the rail trail

Jobs

More use of the village community loan to improve housing and to loan to local business

Better access for loans for home and business

Improving Livability/Appearance

Stable utility rates

Form based code

Fiber high speed internet in village core

Town/college community baseball field

Work on more community-wide engagement. Festivals, 5K's. Try to include renters and college kids. Make them part of community.

Do something about blighted buildings, homes/apts

Revitalize Railroad Street

Pedestrian safety, walkable streets, bicycle safety

Increase and maintain sidewalks – sidewalk from rail trail to town

Housing/demographics

Demographics – single moms on welfare, we have many. Starting a quilting cooperative like they did in Appalachia.

More single family homes or second homes in the village

Less low income housing / rental properties

Housing redevelopment – involve other agencies, state

Advertise Johnson as a great place to develop middle to upper income housing – not low income housing

Promoting Johnson

Rather than focusing on the strengths of individual groups, focus on developing a Johnson brand

Better coordination of community communication (web sites, Facebook, FPF, other)

Better communication – a marketing message – advertising campaign

Branding partnership w/college and boards – “Where the trails meet”

Promote parts of the community we already have going for us. Walkable downtown, rail trail, etc.

Create specialized Johnson events such as “Art Prize” to bring people into the town to experience art submissions from school/college/Studio Center

Addressing crime

Reduction of drugs
Reduction of crime
Neighborhood watch
Enforce our ordinances
Create local reparative board

Planning/moving forward

Update village plan
Village center designation/expansion
Develop grants that will advance the goals/mission of multiple entities in Johnson
Create partnerships to leverage resources
Encourage private money, not public money, to stimulate economic development
Co-op with college, use college resources

What we're already doing well

Awesome tree caretakers in village – trees look beautiful
Great canoe group – bringing community together through recreation
Great Memorial Day Fun Run

Selectboard

Economic development

Be more open minded and welcoming to businesses, creating a tax base and jobs
Develop business park to attract better/more vibrant businesses
Put industrial park up for vote?
Stop wasting time and money on Jewett property. Develop brownfields – talc mill and old dump
Serious tax incentive to attract more business
Instead of attracting businesses from elsewhere, support people who live here in developing businesses
Survey residents to determine what businesses are desired/needed
Get more higher paying jobs in Johnson
An alliance (contribute time and money to hire) for getting businesses to come to our area
Public input and awareness of town and village revolving loan funds

Housing/demographics

Increase owner occupied and single family housing
Reduce / limit rental properties / low income housing units
More of a balance between low income housing and single family/middle income homes or second homes
Incentives for owner occupied and single family homes, investing in housing and nice neighborhoods
Higher tax rates for lower income, multi-family housing
Housing – improve affordability
Encourage home ownership in town by incentivizing home ownership – partnership with Champlain Land Trust or other organization, grants, create nonprofit to buy houses
Reduce transients, increase long term residents

Improving Livability/Appearance

Derelict building ordinance
Do something about blighted homes/apartments
Clean up Railroad Street
Zoning, form based code
Investments in public space, streetscapes (Railroad St., Pearl St.), parks (Legion Field, Old Mill Park, Cold Spring)
Let's make a child care center – the best in the state
More safe activities and events for kids, adults, and families
Rail trail and pathways plan

Addressing Crime

Neighborhood watch
Enforce ordinances
Create local reparative board
Reduce crime, drugs
Better law enforcement
Higher police presence in positive manner in schools and at town events

Promoting Johnson

How do we promote our town to the world?

Promote JSC events as Johnson events - sports, music, art

Get a steering committee for branding Johnson

How can we attract commuters who can still live in our community?

Communication

Respect opinions of others, trust

Better communications (including about meetings like this)

Coordinating communication and updates of websites, Facebook etc. between all of our local groups

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Johnson Works

More business or business start up. SBDC.

Develop a local base of housing, food and hospitality for the rail trail

Try to keep business in the village core

Strengthen technological infrastructure

Publicize recreation trails, streams and mountains: "Where the trails meet"

Publicize Johnson strengths of art and education for all

Keep supporting community events, recreation etc.

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Other

Quality of Life

More sports for adults and kids

Create a safe smoke/alcohol/drug free area for kids

Farm to table experiences for students

Protect the beauty of the mountain and ag land around the town

Bring broadband to all of Johnson

Public art/sculpture park

Stop speeding

Communication/Collaboration/Involvement

Quarterly multi-board meeting with all interested boards

All groups communicate positively

More/better communication and coordination of community groups – JES, JSC, selectboard, trustees, library, rec committee, conservation commission, planning commission, Laraway, Studio Center

Better collaboration among town governing bodies

Increased civic engagement, getting more people involved and volunteering

More positive interaction between JSC students and town people

Can we increase participation in town meeting by offering child care?

Climate group at the school including community members

Promoting Johnson

Johnson “Where the Trails Meet” – new branding name

Johnson multi-facet branding: JSC, programs and art studio, community events in the gym

Coordinated publicity between town and school to promote things that make Johnson great

Highlight rail trail and Long Trail

Other

Increase JSC enrollment which has a trickle down effect – student teachers, student-occupied apartments vs. low income housing

Goals: work in community and team with partners to look for sustainable options