

Town of Thornton - Economic Development Committee

Meeting Minutes 11.13-2023

Location: Thornton Town Hall

Time: 5 – 6 pm

Members Present: Joe Peznola, Jeannine Robbins-Murphy, Bob Hatcher

On Zoom: N/A

Absent: Joe Monti

Others Present: n/a

- **Chair J. Peznola opened the meeting at 5:07 with the Pledge of Allegiance**

- **Approval of Meeting Minutes from 10/16/23**
 - o Upon review of the meeting minutes the members took the following action.
 - o **Motion:** J. Robbins-Murphy
 - o **Second:** B. Hatcher
 - o **Discussion:** N/A
 - o **Vote:** 3 Yes – 0 No
 - o **Motion Passes**
 - o Minutes approved.

- **Feedback from 10/18/23 BoS meeting on Town Center project & next steps**
 - o J Peznola requested that this agenda item be moved to the new business section below

- **Discuss Battery Project**
 - o Included in a memo from Bob Hatcher to BOS

- **Discuss the formation of a 501 C3 Organization**
 - o Deferred

- **New Business**
 - o Feedback from the 10/18/23 BoS meeting on the Town Center project
 - EDC members J Peznola and B Hatcher presented the project concept and status to the BOS
 - The response to the presentation left the EDC members disheartened. Specifically, the BOS's lack of vision for a town center and lack of concurrence with the EDC mission statement
 - o Based on the response above, J Peznola informed the committee that he was resigning from the EDC followed by B Hatcher and J Robbins-Murphy
 - o A letter of resignation (Appendix) was written and signed by the three members listed above

- Upon signing the letter, a motion was made to send the letter to the BOS including a request to have B Hatcher attend the meeting and read the letter into the BoS minutes
 - **Motion:** J Peznola
 - **Second:** B. Hatcher
 - **Discussion:** N/A
 - **Vote:** 3 Yes – 0 No
 - **Motion Passes**
 - Motion submitted to cancel the December EDC meeting
 - **Motion:** J Peznola
 - **Second:** B Hatcher
 - **Discussion:** N/A
 - **Vote:** 3 Yes – 0 No
 - **Motion Passes**
- **Motion to Adjourn**
- **Motion:** J. Peznola
 - **Second:** B. Hatcher
 - **Discussion:** N/A
 - **Vote:** 3 Yes – 0 No
 - **Motion Passes**
 - Meeting Adjourned

APPENDIX

Resignation Letter

November 13, 2023

Thornton Board of Selectmen
 16 Merrill Access Road
 Thornton, NH 03285

Subject: Resignation of members of the Thornton Economic Development Committee

Dear Members of the Board:

Joseph Peznola, Jeanine Robbins-Murphy, and Robert Hatcher, three members of the Thornton Economic Development Committee hereby submit our resignations effective immediately.

At the October 18, 2023, Board of Selectmen meeting, EDC members Peznola and Hatcher witnessed first-hand the Board of Selectmen's lack of a unified, cohesive vision for the Economic Development Committee, a committee the Board voted to form.

The committee's mission statement was formulated in July of 2022; *"To promote, encourage and follow-through with the development of responsible and properly planned business and commercial growth within the community in order to expand and strengthen the local economy and diversify the community's tax base"*.

The committee members have worked diligently over the past eighteen months researching and investigating various approaches to that mission's charge. Early on, the committee reached out to local chambers of commerce and researched economic development activities in surrounding communities. It quickly became clear to the committee; Thornton has a very small commercial base to build upon. The committee moved on investigating several creative approaches to promoting economic development including creation of a business directory, exploring installation of solar panels at the transfer station, and creating a town green around Town Hall to enhance and promote a sense of a community with recreation and a gathering space.

Our vision is an active town center that one day would bring businesses to the area. We found the Board's reaction to this last idea disrespectful to the committee's hard work and dismissive of a clear vision of what our town sorely needs. The Board of Selectmen's hostility to our proposal was surprising, especially the comments of Chairman Laufenberg and Selectman Babin.

We believe the Board of Selectmen should work to build consensus on a vision of what economic development means to our community before considering reengaging an EDC in the future. Until then, we would rather not waste our valuable time chasing windmills.

We thank the Board of Selectmen for the opportunity to participate in the Economic Development Committee and share our ideas of how to make our community better. We look forward to future efforts of the Board toward that end. We have included a summary of our latest efforts with recommendations for the Board's consideration.

Sincerely,

Joseph Peznola

Jeanine Robbins-Murphy

Robert Hatcher

Thornton Economic Development Summary

The committee has been investigating several topics. The EDC feels we have brought all these matters to the point of completion for our committee.

Town Hall Land Acquisition

As discussed in the October 18 meeting, the state has all the necessary information to complete the transfer. The next step will be to schedule a closing with the state to officially take title to the land. The EDC presented ideas for improvements to the land around the Town Hall gathered from a public session.

The Board has requested information related to the construction of a gazebo along with projected maintenance cost. We feel this can be more effectively done by the Town Administrator's office. The Board has made it clear that any other improvements will not be considered at this time.

The Master Plan Survey had a strong desire to increase recreation opportunities and expand access to our wonderful natural resources. The committee believes there is a connection between these endeavors and effective economic development through making our town more desirable for young families, increased tourism and activation of a town center. We suggest the Board of Selectmen and the Planning Board continue to implement the goals of the Master Plan. These efforts will take time and could lead to unforeseen opportunities for future economic development.

Transfer Station Solar and/or Battery Storage

The committee investigated the possibility of putting a solar array on the capped landfill at the Thornton Transfer Station. A separate report on this endeavor will be submitted to the Board of Selectmen soon.

There are economic incentives from the federal and state governments, as well as New Hampshire Electric Cooperative to do so. It turns out that such an installation on that land is not viable because of the overhead electric power lines owned by Eversource and the right of way underneath those power lines. As part of our investigation, Member Hatcher spoke with several firms, one of which is Encore Energy, a Vermont firm. They brought up the possibility of using a small portion of that land for a "large scale battery station¹". For a fixed fee, we lease the land to Encore who will put a few large containers containing large scale rechargeable batteries on the site. (They are like the trailer in a tractor-trailer) on the site. These batteries are then connected to the power grid and can be used whenever needed. The batteries could be charged overnight, when power is cheap, and discharged during the day. Encore is willing to enter into an option agreement to study the potential further which could lead to a long-term lease of a portion of the Transfer Station site. The investigation and permitting could take a couple of years. The ultimate lease could yield approximately \$20,000 annually.

It has also come to the committee's attention that the state legislature passed legislation allowing the formation of The Community Power Coalition of New Hampshire. The Community Power Coalition of New Hampshire is a non-profit Joint Powers Agency governed by communities, for communities empowering towns, cities and counties across New Hampshire to:

1. Streamline the process for authorizing a Community Power program locally.
2. Share services and staff support across member cities, towns and counties.
3. Participate in joint power solicitations and local project development opportunities.

4. Share knowledge and collaborate regionally on clean energy and resilient infrastructure development.
5. Speak with one voice at the Legislature and Public Utilities Commission on public advocacy issues related to energy and Community Power.

Many communities participating in the coalition are represented by members of their local Energy Committees. The EDC recommends the Board of Selectmen look to form such an Energy Committee to further investigate joining the coalition.

Tax relief for certain segments of the town residents

The committee spent time investigating the potential to offer a homestead tax reduction to assist those residing full time in their homes. The committee learned a homestead tax reduction is not possible given state statutes but did find existing laws that allow senior residents to seek tax deferrals and subsequent tax relief.

We point you to RSA 72:38-a Tax Deferral for Elderly and Disabled.

I. Any resident property owner may apply for a tax deferral if the person:

- (a) Is either at least 65 years old or eligible under Title II or Title XVI of the federal Social Security Act for benefits for the disabled; and
- (b) Has owned the homestead for at least 5 consecutive years if the person qualifies as an elderly applicant, or has owned the homestead for at least one year if the person qualifies as a disabled applicant; and
- (c) Is living in the home.

We suggest the Board of Selectmen explore an education program to inform our senior residents of the tax deferral potential.

Formalize and hire a Director of Planning and Economic Development

We recommend the Board consider establishing the position of Director of Planning and Economic Development. We understand the Board is considering a Planning Administrator. By expanding the role to include economic development, the role could include deeper investigations into a myriad of economic development topics at the direction of the Board of Selectmen. This type of position is becoming more prevalent in town government.