

UNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

May 5th, 2021 *DRAFT* Minutes

Unity Barn Raisers Community Center*

* usually meets at the Unity Town Office but are meeting elsewhere for better social distancing.

Note: Decisions and commitments made in bold italic.

Present: Ellen B., Jean B., Kari Hulva (chair), Larry King, * Emily Newell*

Unexcused:

Excused:

Guests: Penny Sampson (Selectboard Chair) Scott Montanino (resident), Doug Lakin (Resident)

ITEM 1: Review and Voting of Minutes

ITEM 2: Old business:

no new grants received.

ITEM 2: Introduction of new (and old) members:

Scott M - has been in Unity for 2 years. Stewarding and homesteading on Southpaw Farm. Wants to add his voice to what could be happening economically in a small town.

Emily N - Is looking to see something innovative done with TIF funding. Local landlord and real estate agent.

Doug L - Carpenter, in town 11 years. Has been on the Rec committee before. Wants to see Unity sustainable and help it grow.

Kari H - Timberframe Farm, sells meat chickens. Has been on EDC several years and wants to see at least 1 impactful, long term project that makes Unity better and easier to live in.

Penny S - A long time resident with family history here (Picard and Constable families). Selectman of Unity for 7 years.

Larry K - Retired from Railroad industry, former EDC Chair, started the Market of Unity, has helped get Ice Oval races started. Interested in developing the tourist aspect of Unity (Snowmobiles/ ATVs). Lives on Lake Winnecook and enjoys fishing.

Jean B - Have purchased 3 buildings in Unity, fixing them, developing businesses and selling them. Is currently building a town library with the goal of having a registered Maine library.

Building library catalog and databases. Has been on EDC 2 - 3 years. Wants to see big impactful change via TIF funding.

Ellen B -

ITEM 4: New Business

Kari wants to create subcommittees to forward two projects

Community Solar -

Could take out a bond against TIF to build our own solar project (better ROI). Build a solar park (there are several in the areas being built as we speak), from 20 to 700 acres. There are non-profits and the town that spend money on lighting and freezers, etc. The solar system prices have dropped a lot in the last years.

To avoid losing farmland to solar projects, some are spacing panels out, and letting animals graze- keeps farmland viable, and lowers mowing costs. Unity may be vulnerable to losing farmland to solar parks because of the proximity of a large scale power line that runs nearby.

Note:Penny was able to help get Unity on a pilot program to have lighting changed to LEDs and save \$ on lighting costs.

Jean - We had been talking with Insource Renewables about electric car charging stations. They have since merged with Revision Energy and she would like to have our new contact come talk to us about solar - the possible financial structures.

Larry says, the substations/grid can only handle so much, so that should limit the number of panels that can be put up to some extent. If it doesn't we do need to pay attention so as not to have lots of power lines running through that are not attractive.

Kari agrees that Unity should be ahead of this issue, because of the money available. We need to consider zoning, or a solar ordinance. Kari would like Unity to benefit from solar, and do it in a sensitive way and not allow bigger companies to do it anyway and Unity not receive the benefit. The negatives are going to come, we should get ahead to manage it.

Scott says it is important to preserve small town aesthetics and there needs to be a balance between rural farmland charm and economic benefit.

Is the thought that organizations could "buy in" to a municipally owned solar farm (i.e. firehouse, non-profits, town). Kari says that it could even be an economic driver because lower energy costs would be attractive to certain businesses. A municipal control would allow us to tailor the types of businesses we encourage. A small scale pilot project would be to get municipal use, utility district, and non-profits on solar (or even add fixed income residents on the account to lower their costs).

New TIF district committee -

The current TIF is about to expire. There are a number of properties that could be improved for commercial developments, and we may need to be proactive about what happens to the Unity College campus. A new TIF district would aid us in those projects.

Emily says there is a low income housing TIF district that we could create. A Portland Company constructed a multi-unit building to passive hours standards at a low enough cost to offer low income (affordable) housing. It can be done.

Penny says there is also a need for an assisted living housing facility. It would create jobs and help elderly folks stay in place.

Also many substandard housing - all these things could benefit from a new TIF district.

Larry asks what we are thinking of doing with the current TIF district that has another 4 years to run. Purchase of Bryer's Beach came up again - to preserve it as an accessible lakeshore property (for lease to a business, as an investment).

Emily says, we could write a contract now to take on the sale in several years when TIF funds are built up again.

Penny says there was an environmental assessment one on the property, there are some septic issues and former industrial run off to be aware of. There was a trailer park that was built on top of discarded cedar on swampland, with septic issues and there may be wetland zoning - recommended doing remediation if it were to be redeveloped. And she wonders if the town wants to get into the business of leasing land.

Jean asks if the utilities district sewer line could be extended there - yes; current line stops at the railroad track. Is that something the EDC/ TIF could fund (also to hook up other residences there that have septic on the lake, if that isn't ineligible under TIF laws).

Doug says, in cases of pools, national parks, supporting businesses (concessions, rooms, etc.) are subcontracted, so there are models out there.

Scott, is some of the concern about the cost of remediation? Penny, also the scope- the upkeep, the public works. She would need to see numbers (cost/ revenue/ plan, etc.) (a proposal) before she (as a selectman) could consider it.

Kari reminds us that EDC subcommittees can have outside members (not on the EDC).

A new TIF district would have to be voted on at Town meeting, so the proposal/ plan has to be well developed and supported.

TIF pros and cons

says she has been reading about the pros and cons of TIF districts, especially in small towns. For example, cities can put whole blocks into development. Small towns are more spread out/ fragmented. Small towns also could find it harder to convince people on how or when or how much to spend it on.

The captured amount in TIF isn't built into our valuation so our valuation is lower, which helps on school funding, but it is also money we don't have to contribute towards the school system, and TIF is restricted in what it can be spent towards.

Emily says, this could also affect nearby towns because it shifts more burden onto the other towns because we aren't contributing as much as we might be.

Emily and Doug have volunteered to look into a subcommittee for a new TIF district.
Kari and Jean- interested in a solar park subcommittee.

We need to refresh ourselves on the rules and regulations on who, how many, and how non-EDC members get on to subcommittees.

New Ideas:

Start a high skill tech center to train contractors /builders.

Child rec center/ pool / day care.

Penny showed the cover of "Maine Town and City" magazine from April, which features a digital sign from Belgrade. The sign is nicely built and attractive and could serve as a model for ours. Maine DECD says we could use funds from streetscape or marketing to fund it.

Larry has been in contact with the state officers (Wes Ash?) who stock lakes with fish. They don't stock fish in Unity because of the quality, and because they consider the lake to be well stocked already, but Larry says they haven't really studied the lake recently and are working off older data. They could come this summer for a new evaluation.

Could we purchase fish for stocking ourselves? Bass fishing is a draw. But the state says no private stocking of bass because it is considered invasive. The cost of trout stocking is too high. Though the lake has suffered algal blooms in the past, water quality has been improved in the last few years. (Why?)

The lake is our biggest and most unused asset.

Penny reminds us about an article she sent about Fairfield's Facade improvement. They had a grant program where businesses could apply for a matching grant to improve the look of the business (anywhere in the municipality).

Kari says Fairfield has a "downtown" commercial district. It might not have the same economic impact here, unless we had a coordinated effort.

Adjourn 7:54 pm