

**Joint Economic Development Meeting
of the Charlemont Economic Development Roundtable (CEDR),
Select Board, Planning Board, and Board of Health**

Tuesday, September 16, 2014

Hawlemont Elementary School

In attendance: Representative Paul Mark, Karen Hogness, Rachel Porter, Carla LaGrassa, Cheryl Handsaker, Doug Telling, Jim Williams, Bob Handsaker, Robert Lingle, Beth Bandy, Dave Cunningham.

Ms. Hogness called the meeting to order at 7:05pm. She provided Representative Paul Mark an introduction to the Charlemont Economic Development Roundtable and highlighted the issues to be discussed at the meeting:

- Cell phone service
- Internet access
- Water/ DEP issues
- Sewer District

Ms. Hogness then provided an update on the new cell phone tower under construction on Berkshire East land. She said fiber optics are being installed on the tower, a step that will take two weeks. After that, the tower will need to be connected in Charlemont, presumably to the Verizon station. She noted that Berkshire East has leased the land to a third party and is not handling this project directly.

Ms. Handsaker asked if there is anything CEDR members can do to expedite the process, such as call Verizon. Ms. Bandy asked if there is still a plan to work with multiple carriers on the tower, which Ms. Hogness reported there is. The group discussed cell phone reception and what type of range the new tower would provide.

Ms. Hogness noted, as an aside, that the new mountain coaster at Berkshire East should be open soon, certainly in time for fall season.

Mr. Handsaker provided an update about internet access in town. He reported that the Governor approved \$50 million for last mile connection. Five million dollars of this amount have been set aside for towns with partial cable coverage (such as Buckland and Shelburne), with the remaining \$45 million to be administered by the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI), the organization that installed the middle-mile internet infrastructure. This \$45 million will only cover half of the amount needed to fully complete last mile installation. Mr. Handsaker, the Town's representative to WiredWest, said that organization's current proposal involves having the member towns co-sign on the loan WiredWest would need to take out in order to cover the other \$50 million needed.

He said there also is a new plan to borrow "a few million dollars extra" to cover the interest payments on the \$50 million load. Mr. Handsaker expressed concern about this proposal, about which he feels will be a burden on smaller, less wealthy towns, creating a schism between the northern and southern towns of WiredWest. He previously wrote to Representative Mark about this concern.

Representative Paul Mark, who noted that he is the only one of his legislative colleagues who does not have cell phone or internet access at home, provided additional information about the internet issue from the State perspective. At the state house next week, legislators will meet with MBI and reps from WiredWest. He asked for suggestions of topics to raise at that meeting and offered to report back after the meeting. One challenge right now, he said, is that MBI remains without an executive director. Another issue is that there is a race against the clock to start using the \$50 million before the administration change this winter. Governor Patrick has been a strong advocate for this project. Representative Mark stated that it is important to convince the gubernatorial candidates of the importance of investing in high speed internet access. Representative Mark noted that none of the major telecommunications companies have taken the incentives to finish the last mile using funding for the State.

Mr. Handsaker noted that DSL service is getting slower and slower as more people sign up for it. The current system can't handle the capacity.

Ms. Handsaker noted that the Town has always been supportive of WiredWest. Mr. Handsaker agreed, but pointed out that WiredWest has only come to the Town for relative small amounts of money in the past; those amounts are not comparable to a large-scale funding sign-off.

Ms. Bandy suggested that attendees of this meeting need to start organizing now to promote the need for high speed internet access in town. Rep. Mark stated that now is the time to do that work. Ms. LaGrassa asked Mr. Mark if there is information available from the State about the economic benefits of spending on internet access. Ms. Porter asks if the Secretary of Education has been to our area to see the internet access issues.

Representative Mark thanked everyone who has been involved with pushing for high-speed internet access.

Moving to the Water and DEP issues, Mr. Lingle reported that not much has happened recently, because the Legislature has been out of session and everyone is waiting to see who the new DEP head will be after the elections this fall. Legislative activity may begin once the new session starts in January. Representative Mark, Mr. Lingle notes, is very familiar with the water issues we have here.

Following a brief discussion of the water issues at Cold River Package and the future business plans at that site, Ms. Hogness stated that every business in town had a wonderful July and August.

Ms. Hogness then shifted the conversation to the Sewer District. She provided an overview of the history of the district for Representative Mark. Before the District existed, she said, sewage from the homes and businesses in the center of town went directly into the river. The Town did not want to pay for a sewer system, as many people in town already had their own private septic systems. The Sewer District opened for business in 1991 to deal with the problem of the river and sewer compliance issues in the center of town. The river is clean and, as a result of this change, businesses like Zoar Outdoor and Crabapple can exist and thrive here. Over the years, town residents have not been welcoming to the idea of making the Sewer District part of the Town government. Ms. Handsaker noted, however, that Town Hall, all municipal buildings, and the Hawlemont School all use the district, so all town residents benefit from and are part of the district.

Changing demographics in the center of town in recent years, however, have created a situation where more people rented rather than owned their homes in the center of town, she said. Under the current

arrangement of the Sewer District, the only people who can be commissioners or voting members in the district are home owners who live in the center of town.

Ms. Hogness stated that the Sewer District needs to be part of the town. The current set-up is not a sustainable model, as there are no more commissioners to come. The sewer district cannot borrow money for repairs or upgrades like a municipality can.

Ms. Porter explained that the Sewer District is bound by legislation dictating who can be a commissioner, water flow, and other issues. Representative Mark said that legislation can be changed if needed. Legislation to expand the number of people who could be Commissioners would not very difficult, he said, taking approximately seven months if started now.

Ms. Porter listed challenges facing the Sewer District. The Warfield House may want to connect to the Sewer District, but it is not clear whether the District can accommodate that addition. She said there isn't much room to expand their services without a major influx of funding. Ms. Porter stated that lids on the sewage tanks cost \$450,000 to replace, which is an expense likely to come up this winter. Rep. Mark notes that there is a new environmental bill that provides funding for sewer districts and could be used for replacement lids.

Ms. Bandy asks if there is something that the wider community can do for the Sewer District. Ms. Hogness suggested this topic be addressed at the next CEDR meeting.

The next CEDR meeting was scheduled for Thursday, October 9 at 7pm. Ms. Bandy will check with Librarian Andrea Bernard to see if the Tyler Memorial Library is available that night.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:55pm.

Respectfully submitted by Beth Bandy.