

Leverett Comprehensive Plan Steering Group

Meeting #5: September 19 2023, 6pm to 8pm, Leverett Safety Complex training room

Steering Group members present in person (9): Arlyn Diamond, Jim Field, Gary Gruber, David Henion, Isaiah Robison, Bob Weitzman, Nicole Vajda, Kimberly Van Wagner, Andrew Vlock
Steering Group members absent (4): Silas Ball, Matt Boucher, Jenny Daniell, Sarah Dolven
Clerk present in person: Tim Shores
No attendants by Zoom
Meeting began at 6pm

Andy opened discussion by inviting everyone to take turns answering: What is something you would like to keep unchanged about Leverett, and what is something you would like to change about Leverett?

- **Isaiah, Rattlesnake Gutter Rd, lifelong Leverettian:** He has been working on how he can accept all that has changed in Leverett. Many challenges to town come from conditions that are external to Leverett, beyond our political or economic control. He would like to see the Harvest Festival come back at LES. The pop-up pub that happened before the pandemic was great. This committee and the planning process we support is an opportunity to reconnect with each other and create community events.
- **David, Montague Road:** He could see a lot of people supporting restart of the Harvest Fest. Sees this committee as an opportunity to strengthen the town and prepare the town to deal with and adapt to issues that are bigger than the town and beyond our control.
- **Jim:** His concern is the cost of living, the high taxes, our need to solve water issues, improve affordability, and respond as a town to what he sees as stagnancy. He sees that younger people can't afford to build homes here, and that's going to become harder on the town as time goes on. He wants to explore questions about how to reduce costs, and how to increase tax revenue, while keeping services sustainable. He wants to change zoning and Title V regulations in Leverett to support these goals. He wants to keep agriculture unchanged – rather than building on farm fields, let's look at how to build housing on Brushy Mountain. He wants to keep the serenity and quiet natural setting, where he's only kept awake by the frogs and herons on the pond. He believes the school is very expensive and underutilized---he wants to change how much we use the school, because it can support larger enrollment.

- **Nicole, resident for 1 year:** Moved here from Maynard, a more densely developed community on Route 2. They moved here to have more land and for the rural peacefulness. She would not want to lose that rural character---could see adding more housing, but not commercial development. She would like to increase the number of collective experiences, like community gardens and volunteer get-togethers.
- **Kim, Teawaddle Hill, resident for 3 years:** Would like Leverett to keep its love of nature, the trails and other outdoor recreation. She would like to change the town focus to be highly supportive of the school, and the town center could be more well-defined as a community center. She's found it difficult to connect with other school families. The school could do more to attract choice students from outside of Leverett. Also, she wants to see Leverett put more effort into regionalizing and banding together with other towns in the region.
- **Arlyn:** Values the town's ethos and commitment to the beautiful and accessible natural settings. She really wants to explore the question of how we can preserve that while also bringing in new families and supporting affordable housing solutions.
- **Gary, Cave Hill Rd, resident for 45 years:** He moved here for Leverett Elementary School, and believes that we should preserve about Leverett, because it's the power center of the town. He would change the 6 o'clock start time for this meeting, and he would change the composition of town population because we need more young people able to bring new ideas to town government. The proportions of town expenses haven't changed much: About 2/3 to education, and it used to be 1/3 to highway but now he believes it's less with our expanded police and fire departments, but crumbs go to the rest of our service needs. What changes is who lives here and what they can contribute to town government.
- **Bob, resident for 35 years:** Likes that we get together to meet and discuss the good and the bad in Leverett. "Keep the good, change the bad."
- **Andy, Teawaddle Hill, resident for 4 years:** Agrees about the value of attracting younger people. He knows young people who live in the region and there is zero probability that they'll be able to move to Leverett. A result of this is that we lack diversity---ethnically, socially, politically. He would keep the Teawaddle Hill community that he enjoys in his own neighborhood.

Review and vote to approve or amend all outstanding meeting minutes

- Bob moved to approve with no amendments, Arlyn seconded. Vote: Unanimously approved.

- This approves minutes from meeting #2 (May 10, 2023), #3 (June 27, 2023), and #4 (July 25, 2023). Tim will submit to Lisa Stratford for official filing and will post to the Comprehensive Plan page on the Town website.

Planning for Community Vision meetings from October through December

Kim presented the timeline revised and discussed prior to this meeting between herself and planning consultant Emily Innes, Andy, Jenny, and Tim.

The Steering Group now needs to make decisions to support the community vision timeline:

- Schedule two larger, open community vision events before the end of the calendar year.
- Responsibility for smaller community events conducted by Steering Group members between the two larger events.
- Final decisions on survey questions, and how to distribute the survey. (See next section)

Emily provided dates in October and December when she and other consultants can be available for the two larger format community vision meetings. Based on this availability, the Steering Group approved these dates:

- Tuesday, October 17, 3pm to 5pm and 6pm to 8pm.
- Wednesday, December 6, 3pm to 5pm and 6pm to 8pm.

The Steering Group agreed to plan for a 2-hour long meeting program that takes place twice on each date. This will create opportunities for more people to attend.

Emily and the consultants will prepare information and documents to support vision meeting discussion and data collection. She'll address this in more detail at next week's Steering Group meeting.

Large format event locations: "Town Hall has it all" – Gary Gruber

Discussion of how to organize small meetings:

- Each meeting will be organized by minimum 2, maximum 6, Steering Group members.
- Each meeting will be organized around a focal point: a location or neighborhood, an affinity group or organization, or a topic of special interest.
- Transfer Station tabling: Jim, Bob, Nicole, and Andy will join forces with a poster and handouts. Goal: Four sessions at Transfer Station.
- Leverett Coop Friday pizza night: Arlyn and Isaiah will partner on this location.

- The Group brainstormed locations for other vision meetings with the understanding that everyone in the Steering Group can reach out to prospective vision meeting participants: Library Community Room; N. Leverett Baptist Church and/or pavilion near sawmill; Leverett Crafts & Arts; LES.
- The Group brainstormed affinity groups to reach out to:
 - Leverett Coop members - Isaiah and Gary will reach out
 - the Leverett Alliance and Hands Across the Hills participants
 - North Leverett Baptist Church – Isaiah and Gary will reach out
 - Veterans – Isaiah and Gary will reach out, they meet at Coop each week
 - Hemenway Road: Jim, Isaiah, and Silas (volunteered in his absence) can work together to meet with neighbors on Hemenway Road.
 - The Group discussed whether another Steering Group member should join them, a Group member who doesn't already share social ties with the community of Leverett residents who are from multi-generational families, tend to be working class, and who tend to feel that the town has stopped listening to them and has left them behind---therefore, they may not be receptive to this process.
 - Isaiah shared a story about the insularity of certain social groups, and how it's important to take the right first step and meet people where they are. Kim agreed: our goal is to get as many voices as we can.
 - Volunteer fire department meets each Thursday night. Jim as former Fire Chief and FD volunteer has strong ties and will coordinate meeting with them. Group suggested expanding this to include all Safety Department members: Police, Highway, Fire.
 - Leverett Crafts & Arts members
 - First Congregational Church of Leverett
 - Leverett Community Chorus
 - Rattlesnake Gutter Trust and Friends of Leverett Pond
 - Newcomers to town who may have been less visible
 - Volunteers in Leverett government: members of boards and committees. Tim advised prioritizing the Board of Health and Conservation Committee, as these organs would be significantly affected by the changes to bylaw and regulations typical of Comprehensive Planning.
 - LES parents, PTO, LES staff: Kim and Nicole can organize playground get-togethers.
 - Mount Toby Friends Meeting
 - Monks of Nipponzan-Myōhōji-Daisanga and Wat Kiry Vongsa Bopharam (Swan Keyes from the Planning Board can help make a connection)
 - Council on Aging (Tim's partner Jya Plavin is on the COA and can help make a connection)

- Porcupine Ridge Runners
- Everyone is permitted---and encouraged!---to continue discussing and coordinating small meeting opportunities outside of the Steering Group's public meetings.

Tim advised: Emily and other consultants will provide materials, including a brief questionnaire to support qualitative data collection at these small format community vision meetings ... also, try to end every meeting with two snowball sampling questions:

- "Can you think of anyone else we should talk to?"
- "Can you help us connect with them?"

Expenses: The Community Compact grant that has funded consultant contracts in support of Phase 2 of the Comprehensive Plan is also meant to be used to cover event expenses, and any other expense that supports the grant deliverable (a completed Plan). Submit receipts to Tim and/or Margie at Town Hall.

Planning for distribution of the Comprehensive Plan town survey

Emily, Kim, and Tim have also prepared a draft of the survey, and Kim will send that draft to Steering Group members after this meeting. Kim acknowledged that she had received survey suggestions from Jim prior to this meeting, and she will reconcile his suggestions in the draft before sending it to the Steering Group for review and feedback.

The Group brainstormed distribution channels: Leverett Connects, mail to all resident addresses (expense to the grant), flyers, Transfer Station.

What are respondent goals? Tim advised that two larger surveys that he helped with previously came close to 300 respondents apiece. In his experience, Leverett residents like to take surveys. If we can keep the survey open until mid- to late-December, and promote it smartly, maybe we can exceed 300. Given the comprehensiveness of a Comprehensive Plan, maybe we can exceed 500 respondents.

The Group discussed whether non-residents with a stake in Leverett should be invited to take the survey. Examples include Cinda Jones of Cowl's, Inc., other business owners with assets in Leverett, and LES staff. The Group will table this for now and continue discussing this, and to consider inviting non-resident stakeholders to large format community meetings, and maybe a small vision meeting with a focus specific to this group.

Group dialogue about demographic questions on survey

Kim and Tim explained a question about demographic questions on the survey for the Group to discuss. Emily's version included a question about age, and a question about race/ethnicity. Her rationale is that these categories were prioritized by last year's Existing Conditions Working Group. Tim agreed that these questions are important, but it seems to risk seeming exclusionary to ask about these two categories without also asking about other categories.

Tim explained that in survey design, there is no universal standard for demographic questions, but there are two rules of thumb: ask in a way that doesn't make it harder to take the survey, and ask when it serves to answer research questions.

Following the first rule of thumb is easy: put the questions at the end of the survey, concisely explain their purpose, and make it clear that they are optional.

To follow the second rule of thumb, Tim cited the protected classes of the Federal Fair Housing Act, which prohibits discrimination in housing because of race, color, national origin, religion, sex (including gender identity and sexual orientation), familial status, and disability. Given that Leverett is a community almost exclusively of houses and this is a planning and development process, it seems reasonable to use this as a standard for demographic questions. The research questions that these questions would serve are about whether people from different classes have significant differences in their experience of Leverett and in their preferences and vision for Leverett's future. Asking these questions also communicates the intent of safety and inclusivity to people who belong to these classes. Some people may take offense at the presence of these questions, while other people may take offense at the absence of these questions – there's no way to please everyone with this choice.

The downside to Tim of including these questions is that we can't guarantee respondent privacy and confidentiality. Since it's a public survey, according to Emily, someone can use FOIA to request the full data set. This can mean people from some religious communities, or with some gender identities or sexual orientations, will feel at risk if exposed.

The Steering Group deliberated over this decision at length. Some members agreed that these kinds of questions are important, although it's not clear that this is the best way to ask. Some members felt the risk was too high of offending people who would feel these questions are intrusive, and some members did not agree that there was sufficient value to the research question to take that risk. Kim proposed not asking these specific questions, and instead asking one or two fully open form questions along these lines:

“What are barriers to helping you be your full self as a resident of Leverett?”

“What are barriers to helping you feel represented and able to participate in Leverett?”

The group in general agreed with this compromise. Kim will coordinate this change with Emily, and the discussion of the survey will continue at the next meeting.

Call-in business and housekeeping items

None.

Meeting adjourned at 8:20pm.