

Hinesburg Town Plan Participation Project Summary of Public Forums

Introduction:

As part of its preparation for rewriting the Hinesburg Town Plan, the Planning Commission (PC) held 4 public forums to gather community input and educate citizens on planning issues. These forums were part of a larger public participation project to encourage discussion and garner feedback regarding the Town Plan. The project also included a community survey that was distributed town-wide in January and February.

The 4 forums were held in March and April, in the same spirit as the “Mud Season Forums” that were held 1990 to help create the first Town Plan. Each forum focused on a particular topic area as follows: 3/10/03 – Defining Hinesburg’s Village; 3/25/03 – Hinesburg Rural Areas; 4/8/03 – Managing Growth & Development in Hinesburg’s Rural Areas; 4/29/03 – Bringing It All Together. Most forums included a brief presentation followed by discussion (either “town meeting” style or in small groups). The 2nd forum was primarily educational in that guest speakers gave presentations on 4 rural area topics. All were evening forums that included scrumptious desserts, free babysitting, and poster displays on relevant topics as well as results from the survey. Attendance was: 1st forum – 90 people, 2nd forum – 80, 3rd forum – 55, 4th forum – 50. See individual forum summaries for details.

The forums were publicized via 2 town-wide saturation mailings as well as multiple articles in *The Hinesburg Record*. Thanks to grant money from the Department of Housing and Community Affairs, we were able to hire a consultant (David Spitz) to help with the facilitation of the forums. David’s responsibilities included: facilitation at each of the 4 forums, organization and planning for the 3rd and 4th forums, summary of each forum, and advising the PC and Town Planner on content and format for the forums and overall process. The Town Planner was responsible for: publicity and logistics (location, set up, take down, etc.), organization and planning (especially for the 1st & 2nd forums), administration (bills, consultant contract, grant reporting, etc.), and advising the PC. As a whole, the PC was responsible for deciding on the content and focus as well as assisting in the set up and take down for each forum. Each member of the PC also had individual responsibilities, some of which included: refreshments (Jean Isham), poster explanation during 1st & 2nd forums (John Mace, George Bedard, John Buckingham), greeters at the door (Nancy Norris, Joe Iadanza, Carrie Fenn), introductions & background presentation (Jean Isham, Fred Haulenbeek), poster creation – survey results and 4th forum planning & visual aids (John Mace).

Other Town staff and volunteers were critical in the success of the forums. Jeanne Wilson (Town Administrator) arranged babysitting for each forum, and assisted with the Village forum. Andrea Morgante (Selectboard) assisted with the Village forum, and helped secure 3 speakers for the 2nd forum. Wayne Bissonette secured Vermont’s agricultural commissioner, Steve Kerr, to speak at the 2nd forum. Rocky Martin (Public Works Director) and Beth Sengle (Recreation Coordinator) also assisted with posters for the Village forum. Thanks to all of you for your hard work and commitment to Hinesburg’s future! Special thanks go to Rodman Corey of the Hinesburg Community Alliance Church for graciously donating their facility for the last 2 forums. Special thanks also go to our dessert crew whose culinary delights nearly upstaged the planning discussions! Jean Isham led the way with help from an increasing number of volunteers for the last 2 forums, as well as, professional support from local business owner Christina Mead of Sweet Eats.

Funding for these forums was made possible by a Municipal Planning Grant awarded by the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Affairs.

Lessons Learned:

The forums were an extremely important part of this process. In addition to providing feedback on specific issues and ideas, they helped energize and educate the community. The informal dessert and poster session at the beginning of the forums worked well; however, we really only had enough poster material for 1 or 2 forums. Beyond the 1st two forums, the poster material was largely repetitive. Attendance clearly diminished as the forums progressed; however, it's unclear that we could have consolidated the content into fewer forums. We hoped that the 2nd mailing for the April forums would have boosted attendance for the last 2 forums, but it's unclear if it had any effect.

The Village forum was extremely successful and well attended. This was partly due to the fact that it was the 1st forum, but it also had a lot to do with citizens' high level of interest in the Village area. It also had to do with the format for the forum, which encouraged audience discussion after the poster session and a very brief overview. Clearly Hinesburg cares about its Village, and future efforts should continue to recognize this. The 2nd forum went over the allotted time because there simply wasn't enough time for all the speakers together with questions from the audience. Packing speakers on 4 topics into one evening was clearly too much. Future forums with speakers should focus on 2-3 speakers at most. Most preferable would be 1-2 speakers with proven public speaking track records followed by ample time for audience questions and discussion. This, however, would require longer lead times and possibly fees to reserve well-known speakers.

Next Steps:

As mentioned above, these forums were part of a larger public participation effort in support of the Town Plan revision. The Planning Commission will utilize this feedback as it begins rewriting the Plan this summer. With that said, the public participation process is not over. The community will be invited to attend the Commission's meetings throughout the summer. These meetings will focus on particular components of the Plan, and the Town Planner will try to target special invitations to community members who have expressed interest or have special expertise.

Our goal is complete work on the Plan revisions by the end of 2003 in preparation for the required public hearing prior to passing the new Plan along to the Selectboard.