



CITY OF WATERTOWN

AFFORDABLE HOUSING TRUST

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Minutes of Watertown Affordable Housing Trust Meeting January 17, 2024 6:00PM, Hybrid Participation

Members in Attendance

Cliff Cook, Jill Hyde, David Leon (remote), Helen Oliver, George Proakis (remote), Leo Patterson and Zoe Weinrobe. Non-members present in person: Larry Field (staff), Tony Palomba, Elodia Thomas, Jacky VanLeeuwen. Non-members present remotely: Linda Scott, Sam Gilardi, Kevin Ryan, Lise Paul, Joan Gumbleton, Jamie Gordon, and Josh Rosmarin.

I. Minutes of December 19, 2023 meeting

The minutes of the December 19, 2023 meeting were unanimously accepted.

II. 2024 Strategic Plan

Cliff began the discussion by listing the housing plan goals. Helen suggested the plan include potential zoning changes in Watertown Square and an accessory dwelling unit ordinance. Several members agreed that both should be on the list. Leo said the Trust could look at zoning changes in the Arsenal and Pleasant Street corridors as they were identified as transformation areas in the Comprehensive Plan. Cliff asked Larry to draft a 2024 Strategic Plan based on the Trust's 2023 Plan and tonight's discussion.

III. Continued--Potential Zoning and Permitting Changes to Facilitate Affordable and Mixed-Income Projects

Larry briefly summarized how other communities tend to use zoning incentives to promote affordable housing. Nationally, most communities that use such zoning incentives employ them along with an inclusionary zoning program. When inclusionary zoning is voluntary, the incentives are designed to induce affordable housing production. When inclusionary units are mandatory, the zoning relief is either a form of "compensation" or is designed to induce creation of more affordable units than required. The incentives that are commonly used are: density bonuses, reduced parking requirements, relaxed site or design standards, permit fee reductions/waivers and/or expedited permitting. Few communities provide incentives for 100% affordable developments (i.e., not tied to inclusionary zoning). The leading example is Cambridge's city-wide affordable housing overlay (increased height, reduced setbacks and by right permitting); another example is Austin, Texas (25% density bonus or 50% if near transit).

Cliff asked for public comment on zoning changes to promote affordable housing in Watertown Square. The following comments were provided:

- Councilor Palomba said the Trust should consider a proposal to increase the inclusionary zoning percentage.
- Elodia Thomas suggested that the Trust look at using public land for affordable housing and asking Alexandria Real Estate to provide more affordable units than required at the Watertown Mall in lieu of linkage payments. She questioned whether raising the inclusionary requirement was desirable.
- Jacky VanLeeuwen said it is important to induce more deeply affordable units and suggested density and height bonuses to achieve that.
- Sam Gilardi suggested an affordable housing overlay like that in Cambridge. Gilardi noted that Watertown's current set of incentives is limited and he is concerned that raising the inclusionary requirement would discourage housing proposals. (He also provided a written comment before the meeting and a supplemental one after the meeting; both are attached.)
- Josh Rosmarin also supported the use of an affordable housing overlay like that in Cambridge.

Several trustees supported consideration of an affordable housing overlay, with Leo and Zoe expressing interest in an overlay going beyond Watertown Square. George noted that there will be a city-wide zoning review after the Watertown Square planning effort and that a broader overlay could be considered then. He also expressed caution about raising the inclusionary requirement, noting that Somerville's decision to go to 20% seems to have been counterproductive.

The trustees discussed specific incentives, agreeing that dimensional relief, reduced parking requirements, expedited permitting and fee reductions should all be considered. Cliff asked Larry to draft a document to discuss at the February meeting.

IV. Draft HOME Annual Action Plan

Noting that the HOME program requires that the WestMetro HOME Consortium submit an annual action plan for HUD approval in May, Larry briefly summarized the draft plan as it relates to Watertown. Members, having reviewed the draft included in the agenda packet, agreed that the proposed text could be incorporated into the Consortium's plan.

V. Other Business

Larry reported that the RFP responses for the Willow Park redevelopment are now due January 19, and he will be on the review committee. He also reported that the next two public events relating to the Watertown Square Plan will be February 29 and April 4.

VI. Executive Session

Cliff said there was no need to hold an executive session. The trustees voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at approximately 7:16 PM.