

City of Keene
New Hampshire

AD HOC HOUSING STABILITY COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, May 4, 2022

3:00 PM

**2nd Floor Conference Room,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Mayor George Hansel, Chair
Councilor Bryan Lake
Doug Iosu
Natalie Darcy
Steven Bragdon
Jennifer Seher
Stacie Pickford (Arrived late)

Staff Present:

Rebecca Landry, IT Director/Assistant City
Manager

Members Not Present:

Joshua Meehan
Jennifer Alexander
Craig Henderson

Mayor Hansel called the meeting to order at 3:05 PM. He welcomed the Committee and said this meeting was an opportunity to review the recommendations before them and discuss new ideas. He said this was certainly a priority issue for the City as is evidenced in data collected by the State. He sincerely thanked the Committee members for joining and volunteering their time. As the Chair, he saw the job of this Committee as coming up with ideas, fleshing out their feasibility, and making prioritized recommendations for their implementation to the City Council. Mayor Hansel thanked and welcomed this Committee's very talented Staff Liaison, Rebecca Landry. The Committee members introduced themselves.

1) Rules of Order

Mayor Hansel welcomed the City Attorney to provide an overview of the Rules of Order for public bodies. The City Attorney shared four sets of documents. The City Attorney continued highlighting requirements of members of a public body outlined in NH RSA 91-A, which are important for the members to understand. A public body is different than private bodies like the Kawanis or Elks Clubs and church groups. Because this is a public body, business can only be conducted in the public context—at a location and time publicly noticed by Staff. While the public can attend these meetings, they are only entitled to speak at the Chair's discretion.

The City Attorney noted that this is a 10-member body and thus it was good that the required quorum of six members were present; a quorum is essential for the public body to conduct any business. All Committee business must occur in the publicly noticed locations and times; if a quorum of members were gathered socially and they discussed Committee business it would violate RSA 91-A, because the public would not be notified or present. Additionally, the Committee must be cautious about using emails, as all emails and communications should go through Ms. Landry to avoid violating RSA 91-A. It is essential to not “reply all” to Committee emails unless they are regarding attendance. Replying all constitutes a quorum without public notice. It is also essential to reply to Ms. Landry’s emails about attendance so she knows whether there will be a quorum present; it requires a lot of Staff effort to organize these meetings. There is a professional minute taker for this Committee and if a quorum is not established within 15 minutes of the meeting start time, they leave the meeting as no business should be conducted without a quorum.

The City Attorney said this is a legislative body and so the risk factors are low compared to a body like the Zoning Board of Adjustment whose issues could end up in Superior Court, which would almost never happen for a legislative body. However, the City Attorney must mention that there is personal liability associated with RSA 91-A if people act willfully and intentionally with malice to violate the Statute. However, Staff would typically alert a member of problems before this occurs. The City Attorney mentioned conflicts of interest, which members should disclose if they have a personal or financial interest in a matter—members received the Conflict of Interest Policy.

The City Attorney encouraged members to read the Rules of Procedure for an understanding of how meetings operate. The Mayor will keep meetings on track in accordance with the Rules. The Committee will vote to adopt the Rules at their next meeting. The City Attorney is always available for questions.

2) Committee Charge

Mayor Hansel said that this Ad Hoc Committee would function for up to one year with the following charge: *Develop recommendations and strategies to combat or provide for housing stability in the City.* He said that the Committee’s work may not take a full year and that the charge was intentionally broad so as to not pigeonhole the Committee into one discussion but keep it open to all new ideas and build consensus. There are many ideas before the Committee, and its job is to decide the ones to include for the City Council to consider. The Mayor and Ms. Landry will work to keep the Committee focused. The Mayor wants to focus on specific decision points/areas. He added that he would be relying on Committee members to do some of the work between meetings, because he does not want these meetings to be presentations of information that could be read in advance. Though he hoped for some presentations, especially from invited experts.

Ms. Seher asked whether the Committee would follow the same topic areas of the NH Council on Housing Stability. Mayor Hansel said that one meeting would be dedicated to the State's recommendations and determining whether/how those need to be adjusted for Keene. The Mayor and City Manager participated in the Statewide Council for Housing Stability and did some great work, but all those recommendations might not be relevant in Keene. He said this work would be in conjunction with the City Council's recommendations and ideas too. Mr. Bragdon said he had read that State report and said it was certainly from a higher perspective. He thought this group needed to focus closer on what is happening in Keene, though he did not know enough to have a real opinion yet.

3) Review of Current Services

Natalie Darcy, Human Services Manager, provided an overview of current City services. She said the Human Services Division is very passionate about this issue. She said that people are coming in almost daily and Staff are on the phone placing them with housing or trying to find arrangements for them. She realizes that hotels and shelters are band-aids and Staff try to work toward more permanent goals for individuals. Ms. Darcy continued that they are seeing a lot of homeless cases at this time and when an individual presents as homeless, Staff take their application and work with the individual on their needs—are they a family, an individual, able to travel to a shelter, do they need to stay in Keene for a specific reason, etc.? It does not matter where the individuals are from, and Staff have been working with out-of-town clients with applications in their own towns so they can continue working with those services; Staff had been able to place three or four individuals back in their own communities. Now that winter is over, she believed that Southwestern Community Services (SCS) had paid for 14 hotel rooms in addition to the six families already in hotels—their hotel contracts end in July. Ms. Darcy expressed concern that there are so many more hotel rooms now and this contract is ending; they will have nowhere to go. These individuals have not been receiving any case management, which also concerns Ms. Darcy. Ms. Darcy said that Human Services Staff meets weekly with Hundred Nights and SCS, sometimes with outside partners, and she speaks with Hundred Nights and SCS almost daily. There has also commenced a Welfare Directors meeting for Cheshire County beginning later in May. They hope to meet monthly to understand what the Welfare Directors' roles are in the common issues happening today with homelessness.

The City Manager, Elizabeth Dragon, hopes this new Ad Hoc Committee will focus on the NH welfare laws. Every town in NH is obligated to provide assistance to their residents. If those residents meet specific criteria for homelessness, the community has a responsibility to provide assistance, which is meant to be temporary. Many towns do not have shelters and so their Human Services staff work to find individuals a shelter elsewhere in the State with an open bed and then they transport that person to that bed. Then the individual becomes that new community's responsibility after 30 days. The City Manager said this shelter system does not work in her opinion; she said the more shelter beds created, the more homeless there will be in the community. She said that towns are not being forced to do something about the problem locally, so cities like Keene and Manchester continue to struggle more than surrounding towns.

Currently, the City Manager said that the City participates in the Homeless Coalition with all the service providers. They have been very active the last few years looking at how services are provided as a region and community and how to improve that process and get all the surrounding towns to participate and recognize their responsibilities. They conducted a service mapping project for the Monadnock region and one of the outcomes was Ms. Darcy taking the lead with the Welfare Directors and the communities in Cheshire County, notifying them of their responsibility. From her office on the third floor, the City Manager sees individuals dropped off downtown by police cruisers or other cars with their bags, and while she is unsure that they are homeless, it does look suspect to her and is a problem because the shelters are full of people from other communities. The City Manager said that if they want to solve the homelessness and welfare problems, they need to go deeper than just building more shelters and bed capacity in Keene. Ms. Darcy has also been working with the shelters on joint case management to discuss the person they are trying to help. The City Manager said the system was broken in the past, with Hundred Night and SCS taking actions that the City finds out later. Now it is a more coordinated system based on smart decisions, not emotions, to help solve problems. Being a part of the State HMIS system will allow tracking where individuals came from and where they end up. That was a brief overview of how the welfare system works.

Mr. Bragdon recalled that after 30 days, it becomes a municipality problem, and asked when it becomes a State problem. The City Manager replied never. There is no automatic time when it becomes a State issue, unless they apply to be a part of the State welfare system. Temporary community assistance has extended up to one year in some cases, and some people are in shelters for two or three years. Ms. Darcy called this transitory housing. The City Manager said there is a coordinated entry system now, whereas before people were entering the system through various ways. They are still working to improve entry system communication. She said one problem is that during Covid-19, there were funds available for shelters and that money was used for housing people in hotels, and those individuals were not forced to come in for case management. So, Human Services finds out at the last minute and must rush to find solutions for them in Keene or other communities. Whereas if they came directly into the system, Keene Staff could be reaching out to their home communities for assistance, bringing them back to their community if that is their desire, or otherwise support them getting back on their feet here in Keene.

Mayor Hansel said it sounded like regional coordination was important. The City Manager said she would push for State coordination because while it might be a difficult barrier, she believes the State has responsibility. Mayor Hansel said it might be worthwhile for the City Manager to get a colleague from a smaller town to give some information to this Committee from their perspective.

Ms. Pickford said one approach to regional coordination is the Shelter from the Storm transitional housing program for 8–12 months. It is coordinated with private landlords throughout the towns and there is a 93% success rate of permanent housing after reaching certain

goals. The program gives everyone a chance and barriers are not held against them. It is the Housing First approach.

Ms. Seher said she was fully on board with a coordinated regional effort. She discussed needing to treat the whole individual; housing is just one part of peoples' lives. She wondered how this Committee would look at the whole status of individuals, like age, disability, and family status. The City Manager said that is prevention. Right now, there is no incentive to help keep people in their homes, which would likely be much cheaper in the long run. Ms. Seher asked if the Committee could look at existing initiatives that are not working together. Mayor Hansel said that one goal of the report this Committee would generate is to not only present new ideas but synthesize the existing options already available that the City can build on. Ms. Seher thinks this region is more apt to accomplish this than other parts of the State because of the size and scale of the region, which could demonstrate things those bigger cities cannot. Mayor Hansel asked members to bring existing programs they are aware of to the table for discussion.

Ms. Pickford asked where the City is at with tax incentives for landlords to set aside a percentage of units for those with low-income housing vouchers. The Mayor said that one meeting should focus on long-term housing solutions. Ms. Pickford said that could help move along the waiting list. Ms. Pickford asked if the Committee had yet discussed the unsheltered population in Keene. Ms. Landry said that was a good question because in the discussion of homelessness there are those who cannot or choose not to use shelter services or are afraid to ask about shelter services.

Ms. Pickford recalled a meeting the previous month about providing access to bathrooms and water, and she asked where people go because encampments are temporary. The City Manager said that in the past the Salvation Army was the location for bathroom and shower facilities, but they shut down during Covid-19. They have reopened daily from 11:00 AM–1:30 PM and they are willing to make arrangements outside those hours. The City Manager continued that it is much easier to use existing access rather than new. Monday–Friday the City Hall bathrooms are open to the public, but the City Manager thinks they could do a better job advertising that. The City Manager said the City is seeking additional partners who would be willing to provide bathroom access as well. She is also looking at temporary bathroom structures. She said Porto-Potties are not great but are better than nothing; there has been vandalism issues in the past. They have considered a Portland Loo, but they are cost prohibitive. There has also been discussion of portable bathrooms, but they also require water and sewer hook-ups. She said it is a complicated matter. She has tasked the Parks and Recreation Department and Public Works Department with seeking temporary solutions for the summer months.

Mr. Bragdon said the State does not want to pay for this problem and the small towns do not either, so they slough the issue off to municipalities. Cities then provide any services they can with the help from charitable organizations, which he said did not seem like the best way to manage the problem.

Ms. Pickford added that quality of life for all is important. She said that every year for the past 15 years, the homeless encampment in Keene gets cleaned out. She wondered what needed to change to avoid that situation next year. She wanted to know what the City is doing right now to support the unsheltered. Mayor Hansel thought they were all good questions that would be addressed through this Committee's work.

Councilor Lake thought there was a lot of talk about the prevention and resolution of homelessness, focusing on mitigation of impacts on people and the environment. He hopes this Committee can continue focusing on bathrooms and this mitigation aspect in addition to prevention.

Mayor Hansel thought this conversation helped to lay the groundwork for what the City has done and ideally will get Committee members thinking for the next meeting. He appreciated the discussion. Ms. Landry said these topics will arise on future agendas and comments will be included in the report.

4) NH Council on Housing Stability Strategic Plan

Ms. Landry said the purpose of having of this on the agenda was to ask everyone to read the plan before the next meeting, as it has a lot of important information. She reviewed the goals and objectives of the Plan:

- Guiding Strategy – should be person-centered, data driven, equity aware, and led with lived experience and aligned with other plans.
- Overall Objective – make homelessness rare, brief, and one time.
- Individual Objectives:
 1. Promote increased housing stability at the State and local levels by improving crisis response, services infrastructure, and policies that support individuals and families to maintain housing.
 2. Remove regulatory barriers to affordable housing in order to expand NH's housing market for all people, with special emphasis on affordable accessible options and using innovative approaches.
 3. Increase production of publicly financed affordable housing with support services.
 4. Deploy targeted financial incentives, or tax off-sets, designed to promote private market housing production and use of existing structures for rental housing that is affordable to the lowest income households in need of ongoing community support.
 5. Achieve a productive legislative strategy for the 2022 session that supports efforts to increase housing production.
 6. Integrate and coordinate a housing stability governance structure, connecting State government with local communities through needs assessments, strategic initiatives, and data-driven decision making.

Ms. Landry said the culminating report from the Committee will feed into that objective for the state. As Mr. Bragdon mentioned earlier in the meeting, one of the vision elements in this Strategic Plan was: *needed services and support should be delivered in each community based on the unique assets, resources, strengths, challenges, and needs unique to each area of the State.*

Ms. Landry thought that was important. She asked Mayor Hansel about the Corporation for Supportive Housing that was selected through a competitive process to support the NH Council, and whether that was an outside resource that provided some data. The Mayor replied that they were outside consultants that helped prepare that information.

Mayor Hansel commented on the State Committee, on which he participated, saying that it moved fast and furiously. They had to produce a strategic plan within four months for the whole State and he thinks they did excellent work. This City Committee was sort of the next vision of the NH Council, while other communities are awaiting a more concrete way to do this or funding, whereas Keene is just doing it.

The City Manager said that a subset of that NH Council was the group she co-led, which was a regional group that came-up with strategies that she can share at a future meeting. Mayor Hansel also recalled Ms. Pickford mentioning the regional housing study that is happening in Keene as a pilot community for this work. The City Manager said that for the SCS housing study, every regional planning Commission is charged with an updated status of their housing. Keene has looked at the make-up of their housing, but this would help understand the region as a whole. She said there were some ambitious goals in the report on creating new housing. The challenge in Keene is that there is limited land to create new housing, so if the work force continues growing, Keene will rely on increased housing in surrounding towns. She thought that the work the SCS is doing on the housing study would be very helpful. Mayor Hansel said this Committee could try to include some of those recommendations.

Ms. Seher asked about the public health network NH care path gap analysis and assessment and other assessments in the region so that everything is not just about housing. Mayor Hansel recalled that in the City's Economic Development Plan and others, there are recommendations developed that could be pulled into this Committee's report. Ms. Seher agreed it would be good to look for issues of housing in other plans that are not specific to housing. If Ms. Seher investigates these other plans, she can send what she finds to Ms. Landry. Ms. Seher said she did not see anything specific about older adults in the NH Council's Plan and she wanted to ensure that this Committee focuses on this demographic because it is often forgotten. That is a population that struggles with housing in ways that are unique. The State Plan on Aging has some specific goals on housing. NH is an aging state. Mayor Hansel said that senior housing is a big problem in this area.

5) Future Agenda Topics

Mr. Bragdon said the charge is to provide for housing stability, but he heard all the things aligned with that and said this group needs to look at ways to organize findings. Mayor Hansel said a past strategy is to break it up into sections covering different topics.

Ms. Darcy would like to discuss barriers for people getting into public housing. There are so many barriers, like an arrest record, which lock people out of life and housing.

Ms. Pickford mentioned transitional housing from the jail. Ms. Pickford also mentioned federal funds for federal inmates at the county jail through Housing and Urban Development transitional funding as well as State resources.

Mr. Iosu was in favor of these suggestions and thought that there are multiple determinants of homelessness, from addiction to mental health and more. He thinks this Committee needs to keep the whole person in mind. Ms. Seher added that this should be beyond saying “person centered.”

Mayor Hansel opened the meeting to public comment.

Councilor Bobby Williams said that he, Councilor Lake, and Councilor Workman together submitted a letter to the City Council, which kicked-off this process. He would like attention on the points in the letter. The first two points regarded solutions for camping and what can be allowed for camping in Keene. Also, for the unsheltered population, there was the idea of a safe parking area so that unhoused people staying in their cars would have a safe place to park with access to bathrooms and social services. Additionally on housing, he thinks the best way to bring on relatively low-cost housing spread throughout the City is to better allow accessory dwelling units, like unused garages and old carriage houses. Someone could live in these for significantly lower cost than new construction. He said that Keene has ADU regulations that he reviewed, and it seemed there were a lot of restrictions. Councilor Williams wondered if there were ways to make those more popular and acceptable in terms of Zoning to bring more low-cost housing into the market.

Jodie Newell of Keene said she was trying to go through the process of converting her garage to ADU to supplement her income and to keep it low rent she thought there should be incentives to help with those conversion investments. She wondered how this Committee would involve the people actually in an unsheltered situation in this process. She recalled that this is an Ad Hoc Committee to allow for transparency and public input, which she appreciated, and she understood that there would be a lot of work outside the Committee. However, she thought that research would inform Committee decisions so she thinks that information should at least be referenced at meetings. How would the behind-the-scenes process become public?

Cindy Warmington, Executive Councilor for District Two, was grateful to be invited. The Governor’s Council approved \$100 million for affordable housing the day of this meeting. She

wanted to hear the experiences on the ground, what the Committee needs, and how she can help keep the group informed of what is going on at the State level.

Lee Smith of Keene wondered what was being done in response to price gouging with rent, with extreme increases when changing to a new lease. He said it was necessary to have a set price for your housing that you structure your life around. When private owners are not subjected to any rent caps, there is no stopping them from sudden changes, which can lead to homelessness. Mayor Hansel said it was certainly an unhealthy housing market right now, with a less than 1% vacancy rate, challenging those of all income levels. The City Manager added that the City does not have the ability to rent cap what private property owners charge for rent. Ms. Darcy encouraged anyone having difficulty with the rent to apply to the Human Services Department in Keene.

Renee Kosky of 93 Sullivan Street stated that she heard about this meeting after the camp was broken-up behind Hannaford. She said the camps are not safe for people, either physically or medically because they are inaccessible. She said this Committee really has two aspects to look at: (1) what are we doing now that SCS and Hundred Nights are closed, and (2) what will we do in the long-term for individuals. She cited a homeless person living with her who has been in and out of the hospital nine times this year. She said the public does not understand that the encampment is not all drug addicts, whereas she said they are likely recovering addicting trying to stay sober. She cited those with mental and physical health issues.

6) Adjournment

There being no further business, Mayor Hansel adjourned the meeting at approximately 4:10 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katelyna Kibler, Minute Taker
May 11, 2022

Reviewed and edited by,
Rebecca Landry, Assistant City Manager & IT Director