

City of Keene
New Hampshire

AD HOC HOUSING STABILITY COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, November 2, 2022

3:00 PM

Council Chambers

Members Present:

Mayor George S. Hansel, Chair
Councilor Bryan Lake
Doug Iosue
Natalie Darcy
Steven Bragdon
Stacie Pickford
Joshua Meehan
Craig Henderson

Staff Present:

Elizabeth Dragon, City Manager
Rebecca Landry, IT Director/Assistant City
Manager
Jesse Rounds, Community Development
Director

Members Not Present:

Jennifer Seher

1) Call to Order

Mayor Hansel called the meeting to order at 3:00 PM

2) Approve Minutes from October 5th, 2022

Mayor Hansel requested a motion to approve the minutes. Mr. Steve Bragdon, seconded by Natalie Darcy, offered motion for approval.

With no discussion on the minutes, there was unanimous approval.

3) Signs Related to Panhandling

Andy Harris, Manager of Hannafords, sent a request for education to general public about giving money to panhandlers because he has consistently been seeing the proceeds used to purchase cigarettes and alcohol. He suggested some sort of public education sign or poster placed at the entrance and exit of the Hannafords parking lot. City Manager Dragon is not in favor or opposition, but offered that she is aware of other cities and towns that have put posters educating public on places to donate to assist the those in need.

Mayor Hansel requested committee members share their opinions. Mr. Bragdon and Councilor Lake both were curious about the particulars of the sign (i.e. size, information, target audience, legality). When asked by Mayor Hansel if anyone advocated for putting it up in the parking lot, no one was in favor.

4) RSA 165: Aid to Assisted Persons- Welfare Reform

Mayor Hansel introduced RSA 165, which is in reference to Welfare Reform regarding aid to assisted persons and passed it to City Manager Dragon to speak to. City Manager Dragon mentioned that she would love to see a recommendation changing the State laws with regards to welfare as she believes changes are required in order to clearly spell out City and Town responsibility regarding current residents. The concern has been that the communities that these people are coming for are not part of the solution. These communities often do not have a Welfare person, or if they do, it is not a full-time role. There was been recent effort by welfare admin to create an Ethics Resolution. This is a great first step at defining residencies and defining the responsibilities of communities. It outlines when a person gains or loses residency, and how the responsibility of the municipality of origin is 30 days. If a person requesting services comes in from a community around Keene within 30 days and see Natalie Darcy, she can go back to the community they came from and request the original community pay for the services offered to the individual. City Manager Dragon would like to see the timeframe extended to up to 6 months as they are often are not able to get them in within 30 days for full service identification and to give the origin communities more involvement and responsibility.

In addition, she would also like to see more assistance with transitional housing options at the State level. Currently, the City of Keene is in the process of setting themselves up to use the State's Homeless Management System. She would like to see a change in their tracking to include reasons why people are finding themselves homeless. Those reasons may stay stable, but she believes that more recent reasons for homelessness are due to housing stability issues and lack of housing that might have been different than a year or two ago.

She added that recently, the State worked with the City to map their service offerings as well as look at services they provide with partners and communities, and she would like to see the State do the same thing.

These are the recommendations she is hoping to move forward at the State level with the most important being the change to RSA 165.

Mr. Bragdon stated he was not sure how one might go about doing this, but it cuts to one of the basic problems here, which is that it is always about money. The State statute does not provide for the care of the homeless to be equitably distributed among the towns or cities from which they come. He added that the State is notorious for wanting to do something and pushing it on the towns, but not funding it. While he is not familiar with specific proposals, he does agree that there needs to be something done to charge the appropriate City and Town for the care and services provided.

City Manager Dragon added that it has long been known that the State welfare system is not working as well as it could. This recommendation is a step in the right direction by addressing the lack of clarity issue of residency and broadening the reimbursement for communities. She added that one of the challenges to getting something like this passed is that you have to get enough people on board to support the change in order to get it through the legislative process. By breaking it into baby steps, it tends to be more achievable serving to keep the forward movement in the right direction. For her, it is not just about money- it is about shared responsibility and the way to get people to pay attention is money. If people are seeing a bill, they might have more stake and bring more people to the table to participate in being part of the solution.

Mr. Josh Meehan asked how residency was defined in the statute. For example, if someone has been living in an encampment for 30 days, he wondered how his or her residency is defined. Ms. Darcy responded and said that they ask each person where was the last place they paid rent, where have they stayed the last three days. She noted that it is where the individual last paid rent, not where he or she has been living. For example, if they came from another community but the place of origin was Troy, they are a resident of Troy. Mr. Meehan said he would like to see residency more clearly defined and it seems like it might be easy - based on the current definition - for each community to pass responsibility and not claim the resident.

City Manager Dragon pointed out that it does not matter if they are from the community or not- they are going to receive assistance and asked members to not forget that. The City has recently worked with two of the local shelters to further define it. The people are getting the same help, the difference is that now The City is able to go back to the community of origin and hold the community responsible for helping to pay the bill.

Mr. Craig Henderson noted how it seems weird that the City could not simply make a policy change that a person saying they are homeless determines their residency. He said it seems counter intuitive to let anyone other than the person requesting help state where they are from. He believes that no one coming into Keene is not going to admit that they are a resident of Troy if they feel they are a resident of Troy.

Mr. Iosue asked for clarification questioning whether what Ms. Darcy said was an interpretation or was the 30 days paid rent spelled out that way in the statute.

City Manager Dragon responded that it was an interpretation of the statute. It is a policy. The statute itself does not have residency clearly defined. Another statute does define it, but it requires searching and is not easily located. Through the welfare administrators, they have worked to try to define that more clearly.

Ms. Stacie Pickford said she was under the impression that it was defined in an RSA and stated that the person's residency is defined as the town they became homeless in, the last place they had mail coming to, and whether they have a license or ID.

City Manager Dragon read the legal language as "make reasonable efforts to determine current or former residency of individuals being served by requesting a form of identification, previous

housing locations, mailing address, motor vehicle registrations and such other information to assist in the determination. A resident or inhabitant of City of Keene shall be a person who has domiciled or maintains a place of abode or both in the city and who has, through all of his or her actions, demonstrated a current intent to designate this City as his or her place of adobe and principle place of physical presence in exclusion of all others.” She noted that this was the language included in the most recent shelter agreements and what the welfare administrators tried to do was work that out a little more.

Mayor Hansel asked the group if anyone was opposed to including this in the list of recommendations. With no opposition, the group consensus was to include it.

5) Exploration of Safe Parking Program Options with Community Partners/Churches-Craig Henderson

Mr. Henderson spoke on the topic of safe parking. He discussed how when he first got the letter, one of the recommendations was for a safe parking program. He had just come up with the Blue Light Emergency Program for the Unhoused. Between conversations between the City and other area organizations, it seems as though there are no regulations that would inhibit area churches from allowing parking on the property. He mentioned that Southwestern Community Services (SWCS) did get some cold weather funding recently that would allow them to pay for blue lights to be installed. He also reached out to several Porta-Potty providers regarding cost. When initially tried by the City, the units were placed in a public area with no security measures. He envisioned paying for and putting the units on private property for a six-month period during the winter months. He has already spoken with and would plan to work with Amer Electric to install the blue lights. SWCS would also have outreach workers do case management with people staying in the parking lots. He even went so far as to research heaters he could purchase for safe use in their cars.

City Manager Dragon has sent Mr. Henderson a narrative summary of some of the programs across the country. In part of that e-mail she sent to him it discussed creating a program like this as a pilot project in conjunction with faith-based organizations. Her e-mail included best practices and Mr. Henderson went through and noted the ones that he thought The City and SWCS could easily do. Included in that was on-site 24-hour management, orientations for persons served to include program rules, and suggested including in that the program participants will be allowed to stay, but as part of that stay, an outreach worker will reach out to them and a safety check will be performed by the Keene Police Department. He noted that criminal background checks were also included as a best practice, and while that could be done, he believed it might serve as a barrier. Another best practice was to establish close relationships with local police, fire and EMS, which the City and SWCS already have.

Other best practices included multiple onsite and offsite opportunities for connection with resources and garbage pick-up and trash removal, and he did not see any reason that SWCS could not provide for that. During orientation, people participating in the program would be told that outreach would happen with trained staff and volunteers. Lastly, providing appropriate interventions for people who are at risk of being removed would be necessary. Individuals might

be using this program just to have a place to stay for the night because they had a fight, but it could also be because of a domestic violence situation. There are a host of reasons someone might choose to participate in this program and SWCS could certainly provide those interventions.

Mr. Henderson asked Ms. Landry if there was a way to send the list of best practices and the e-mail out to folks. He explained that this is a list of twelve to thirteen items that are best practices and SWCS and the City could easily do nine of them without a big push. They would not have to be reinventing the wheel. He suggested this as a pilot project for any churches interested and said, "If you want it done fast and quickly, best to start with the private sector". Mr. Henderson believes it is possible for this area and success has already been shown in other communities.

Mayor Hansel thanked Mr. Henderson for his research and work on this and for bringing together the right people to make it happen. He had no problem including the recommendation in the report saying the committee encourages a pilot program for the safe parking blue light program. He asked if any other members had an issue or any opposition.

Councilor Lake asked clarification on whether there were any partners already lined up.

Mr. Henderson responded that there are no partners lined up and explained that this was just the onset of it. He wanted to make sure there was not anything that would prohibit this type of activity. He has done any other reach out short of checking with Amer and the reach out to the Porta-Potty companies. He noted that he did recently get an e-mail from Melissa Hatfield, who did say they would support this program and support the use of the cold weather funding for it.

Councilor Lake was hesitant in putting the burden solely on the faith community and asked if it was possible to change the wording to open it to the entire community so that anyone with large parking areas can also participate. There were no objections.

6) City Code Section 58-33 (2): Camping

City Manager Dragon moved onto the City Code Section 58-33 (2): Camping and changes related to that. This topic was part of a compromise suggested by Councilor Williams, which suggested looking at City Code to provide for some flexibility for the Parks and Recreation Director to address situations as they arise. Right now, our City Code does not allow for any camping anywhere. If Parks and Recreation staff comes across an individual camping, and the person just needs another night, the Parks and Recreation Director has taken initiative and allowed that time and flexibility. City Manager Dragon thinks it would be a good step in right direction to make a change in the code formally allowing that flexibility for the Parks and Recreation Director to make those decisions and allowances.

Councilor Lake agreed that the recommendation about increased flexibility afforded to the Parks and Recreation Director is a great compromise.

Mayor Hansel asked if anyone was opposed to the inclusion of the recommendation. With no opposition, the recommendation was included.

Ms. Pickford added that she was disappointed to see that the State law is the blanket approach for no camping. Given the blanket law, she asked if there were any plans to explore ways to address that.

7) **Working with area hospitals and jails to connect people with social services**

City Manager Dragon explained and she and Mr. Iosue have a few discussions around working with area hospitals and jails. She is always looking for ways to disrupt the system that is creating homelessness. One way is to look at when people are being released from a hospital or jail and determine if there is an opportunity to do something else. She questioned whether there is an opportunity when people who are held at the jail and homeless, rather than drop them at a location, is there opportunity to connect them with services? Depends on protective custody (PC), jail, etc. Doug has been great about having the conversation and would like to look at that further in the future and also have a conversation with the hospital. Would like a recommendation in the report about having further conversations about potential opportunities to increase connections to services.

Mr. Iosue agreed and said it was a good beginning conversation. He noted he had shared some data about releases and wanted to share it with the committee. Most of these people where they do not have a chance to do release planning are PC's. About 250 were PC's- half of them do not have an adult that can take responsibility. Resources are very limited. No wish to put them on route 101 to walk wherever they may go. Often have officers drive them to downtown Keene. While this conversation did not solve the problem, he agrees there is opportunity to connect them for services and open to bringing them anywhere in Keene if they designate they have a residence. We have to draw a line around staff, time and resources, so they really cannot take them outside of Keene.

Mayor Hansel asked if the previous nonprofit or volunteers still worked with individuals transitioning out of the jail. Mr. Iosue said they have a large number of volunteers that come in and provide multiple different types of support. They, at one time, had a volunteer group that was willing to provide transportation, but with COVID, that ceased to exist.

Ms. Pickford asked what the recidivism rate of those coming in experiencing homelessness and if they come back in still experiencing homelessness.

Mr. Iosue explained there is no such data. There is a 32-33% general recidivism of people released on a jail sentence within a year. There is a 40-43% return within 3 years. It is high, but actually lower than a lot of the general statistics. We know about 20% of people when asked a month or so before release will say they do not know where they will be staying if asked where they would stay the first night if released tomorrow. We work with them to find something and ultimately, many are narrowed down by family and friends. Speculate that it is higher among homeless population because of the challenges of being homeless.

Ms. Pickford asked what happens when someone is released on bail, but does not have a place to go and whether they would have to stay in jail.

Mr. Iosue answered that if someone is released on bail, especially if on probation, they are required to have an address. If they need to be moving, they have to report those changes to probation to comply with probation. Sometimes the court does not grant bail to someone who is homeless because of the risk factor or flight risk, but that is determined by the court.

Mayor Hansel asked if anyone was opposed to this recommendation. There was no opposition.

8) Land Development Code- Proposed Minimum Lot Size Changes from 5 Acres to 2 Acres.

Mayor Hansel spoke on the Land Development and shared that currently, the City of Keene and City Council are wrestling with zoning related changes to help facilitate more housing developments. Mayor Hansel said he personally believes the most important suggestion in this group is the reduction of 5- acre zoning and putting it back to 2-acre zoning (where it was back in the 1980's). He would like to see this included in the recommendations because he thinks it will open more housing opportunities and asked for comment.

Ms. Pickford shared she was in favor of this.

Mr. Bragdon said it is clear you can build more houses by reducing from 5 to 2, and agrees that reducing it will provide that. He disagrees that it will help the homelessness at a whole because the cost of building is beyond what is affordable for most.

Ms. Pickford disagreed.

Mr. Meehan said lack of housing is the common denominator for homelessness. Beefing up the stock is going to go a long way. While changing the zoning is not going to directly address it, we can certainly look at ways to support more rapid builds of affordable housing stock.

Mayor Hansel suggested a recommendation to move ahead with the change of the zoning, but put a motion to put it to vote. Motion was seconded by Mr. Iosue. Vote was opposed solely by Mr. Bragdon.

9) Communication

Mayor Hansel noted that they had a communication that came in from the same group, but came in after the agenda was sent out. Mayor Hansel suggested everyone review the additional information that was sent out.

10) Public Comment

Ms. Robin Cost, Ridgewood Avenue. Newer resident of Keene and was very involved in her previous small town in Delaware. Since she has moved here and after speaking privately with Mayor Hansel both she and her husband have become very involved. Pleased to see it being

addressed at the City level. Her husband has become a member of Monadnock Interfaith Project (MIP), her husband is a professional planner himself. They have concerns in how they are seeing this being approached in many ways. She wondered whether a strategic plan was ever developed, whether an outside consultant been brought in, how long this committee has been in existence for, what the end goal is and who on this committee has the background necessary to look at a strategic plan and help work on it. She states she believes that many of the homelessness and housing issues seem to be caught up in the terminology homelessness and housing. There are other perspectives that have not been taken into account, including the many numbers of seniors occupying homes that they want to be out of but have nowhere to go. These 70 and 80 year olds are living in housing that could be better used for families. She would like to see more planned unit developments in town with retail on base. Increased opportunities for people to be entrepreneurs. More apartment complexes that would be made mixed use. Housing is not a singular problem- everyone needs to be housed. The issue lies with the limited number of homes being turned over. There needs to be more assistance in this town with a bigger, more collaborative approach. Businesses in this town cannot hire people because of the limited housing stock.

Mayor Hansel reminded the attendees that this is an Ad hoc Committee and is in place for no more than 1 year by statute. The purpose is to bring people to the table who have relevant experience, make connections and develop the recommendations that are in progress. This report will then go to the City Council for approval and if approved, will serve as a directive for the City Manager to prompt her to start working on these different recommendations.

Ms. Cost asked if there was private involvement, whether the City would consider an extension of that one-year timeframe.

Mayor Hansel responded that he and the City Manager have participated on the statewide housing development council, which is tasked with coming up with the board strategy Ms. Cost was referencing. He acknowledged that it was a slow process. Mayor Hansel said he thinks it is important to remember that the committee is not meant or tasked with the implementation of these recommendations.

City Manager Dragon spoke and reminded that the City is currently undertaking a housing analysis. There was an initial State analysis that was done where the State determines what they think the community needs. The City of Keene has taken that a step further using funds from InvestNH to look at where there are issues, opportunities, where more housing is needed, etc. The next phase of implementation will bring about changes to zoning, which will help to target housing development in those areas that were identified in the first phase. She noted that as part of this process there would be lots of opportunity for public input and suggested involvement.

Jesse Rounds, Community Development Director announced that the housing needs analysis, that will have a steering committee, will be public. Through that grant they will be doing surveys of residents, developers, communities around us and also wanted to mentioned that SWRPC (Southwest Regional Planning Commission) is also doing a housing needs analysis that is going to build another piece of that puzzle to help provide additional potential solutions. Starting next

year, we will be going out to the community and looking at what people's concerns are with the current master plan that we have in place that was written in 2008 and implemented in 2010. There are many things to update there and while it provides a great solid foundation, we want to build it from there and look at new solutions to move forward.

Mayor Hansel noted that the last time the strategic planning process was completed there was an impressive number of community members involved in that. He pointed out that the Master Plan serves as a guiding document for the City and recommended that as many people participate as possible.

Ms. Pickford spoke up, referenced the list of recommendations, and asked if recovery centers could be included in that recommendation.

Joy Douglas Robertson, 36 Ellis Court, announced that he has 176 signatures from the public collected in the space of about 3 hours, which shows how popular the issue is. The signatures are all from people who live or work in Keene and are in support of the campsite designation. He recognizes that the campground is not the final solution. He finds it interesting this is an ad hoc committee, and while he recognizes that the committee does not have power, there seems to be a "paralysis by analysis". He noted that there are evictions are set to take place on Tuesday within the City parks and the cycle of trauma is continuing with nothing actually being done. Shrinking the zoning does not fundamentally address the problem. He asked the committee members, what their view on renters were and what their view on those working for fifteen dollars an hour because those are the individuals who need help. The economy is crashing and homelessness is growing. He stated, "You are doing everything you can to avoid the issue, not providing housing and continuing to traumatize people who are just trying to live, not as individuals, but as members of our own communities".

David Chandler, Langdon Place in Keene, said he agrees with Mr. Robertson but on the other hand, suggested everyone look at the bright side. He thanked the committee and the work being done. While not everything has been addressed, he noted his approval of what has been done and moving towards smaller parcels of land, the idea of workforce housing. He wanted to applaud the work of the committee and referenced the article by Reverend Hall in last Tuesday's Sentinel, which stated, "we must do more".

Michael Hall, Unitarian Universalist Minister in Keene, explained that he asked about the definition of "leeway" because should Andy Bohannon leave his position [as Parks Director] tomorrow without defined terms, "we are talking out of our ears". He noted that he does oppose the City Manager's idea of not having a campground. It was not meant in the letter as a permanent solution. It was a crisis idea. On the idea of parking lots, he explained that his church moved out of uptown in 1894 and now in 2022, they have minimal parking due to the buildings added over the years. He would like to see the committee explore the possibility of a park closed from dusk to dawn could be explored as one of these blue light locations. He thanked the committee for their service and expressed hope that these conversations will continue.

Mayor Hansel clarified that the recommendation would go to City Council for official change. He explained that part of the point is to not be specific, so that it allows the maximum amount of

flexibility for a case-by-case basis. He suggested paying attention to the City Council agenda because it would go to them for an official change.

Jody Newell, 32 Leverett Street, Keene, wanted to say and echo what others have been saying in that she appreciates what has been proposed in this meeting. Providing the clear cut explanation of what it looks like is very helpful. The thing that she does feel that could still be worked on going forward is having a clear picture of what a safe camping area would look like. I understand that is not where we want people to end up- it is not the end goal, but we do need to meet people where they are at. She shared personal experience to express how humiliating and demoralizing homelessness is and the need for respecting people's dignity and showing respect and compassion.

Drew, Oriole Avenue in Tanglewood, shared some basic research on the average cost of an apartment in town and got a sample size of about 40. For right now, to get an average 1-bedroom apartment in Keene, it is \$1400/month. The average American makes \$46,000 per year, which means that means the average American cannot afford a single bedroom apartment in this town at this moment. The cheapest apartment he found was \$1100 month. He added that he also recently read that for the average person, the average savings is about as low as it was right before the recession. He noted that energy costs are not great right now and how it was the hottest summer on record and it is predicted to be a cold winter. Lastly, he mentioned seeing a recent report from NHPR on the situation across the state in which he learned that between March 2021 and May 2022, the median cost of utilities rose 5.75% for a 2-bedroom apartment. Expenditures are exceeding income and expressed the need for this movement and work to continue at a faster pace.

Sean, Tanglewood in Keene, said that the possibility of the campground is excellent as is the possibility of more housing. The key is that housing does not matter if the units are not affordable. The cost of first, last and security deposit, which some property owners require, prohibits many from being able to afford getting into housing. He questioned how an individual gets into new housing if they cannot afford to leave where they are. He added that there is an approximate 2-year waitlist for SCS for affordable housing. Issues like this make it impossible for people to improve their living situations.

Ken Costa of 79 Ridgewood Avenue shared that this was his first time attending one of these meetings. He heard many people mention the crisis point, which is something we have to deal with. What I do not know and maybe it has been done- but has the committee looked at physical buildings, houses, and can we get creative in those housing forms? Tiny houses? Reconfigure different kinds of housing that could get individuals into housing with shared kitchens and spaces. There has been research to state that there are no more starter houses. There simply is not anything like that anymore. He questioned whether the City and region could start thinking more creatively about less expensive forms to address the housing supply issue. Potentially identifying ways to build inexpensive, quick buildings that people could rapidly move into and could be the step after the crises.

Kevin, Keene, thanked the committee for considering giving the Parks and Recreation director some leeway because after next Tuesday, there will be about 60 people looking for new places to live. More than likely, they will end up on City Property.

Ms. Cost shared some final words, “When you think about this community, this town, this county, this state, this country, this world, this continent, this universe... we are all on the wheel together. We are all spokes on that wheel. We all have different circumstances, different ideas, different politics, different hopes, different everything and that differentiates us as human beings and makes us unique. We all share something though. We share that hub; we all meet in that center. That center is the strength of that hub that serves all those spokes. I would like to leave you with that.

11) Adjournment

There being no further business, Mayor Hansel adjourned the meeting at 4:41 PM.

12) Next Meeting Date

Wednesday, December 7, 2022 at 3:00 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Amanda Trask, Minute Taker

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