

City of Keene
New Hampshire

AD HOC HOUSING STABILITY COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, June 1, 2022

3:00 PM

Council Chambers

Members Present:

Mayor George S. Hansel, Chair
Councilor Bryan Lake
Doug Iosue
Natalie Darcy
Steven Bragdon
Joshua Meehan
Jennifer Alexander
Craig Henderson
Stacke Pickford (late)

Staff Present:

Elizabeth Dragon, City Manager
Rebecca Landry, IT Director/Assistant City
Manager

Members Not Present:

Jennifer Seher

1) Call to Order and Roll Call

Chair Hansel called the meeting to order at 8:05.

2) Approve Minutes of Last Meeting

Chair Hansel put forth a motion to adopt. Seconded by Councilor Lake. Unanimous approval by committee.

3) Adopt Rules of Procedure

Chair Hansel asked if any question on the rules of procedure. No questions raised. Chair Hansel put forward a motion to adopt the rules of procedure. Motion seconded by Doug Iosue. Rules adopted by unanimous approval by committee.

4) Housing Needs Analysis Opportunity

City Manager Dragon discussed that the Southwestern Regional Planning Committee is currently engaged in a broad housing analysis and in process of collecting the information needed. She shared the survey last meeting. The City has taken it a step further with a separate, City study

including a request for proposals for a more in-depth analysis. This will document existing housing conditions, market and other forces that affect supply both now and in the coming ten years and also identify gaps for safe and reliable housing for as many citizens as possible.

This request went out just a couple of weeks ago. They expect to have proposals by June 14th and then it will go through the City approval process.

Rebecca Landry added that the regional planning commission has a statutory responsibility to provide an analysis, but they are simply not at a point where they can yet, but they will come back later.

5) Human Services Office Update

Natalie Darcy gave a status update. She stated that there are currently 66 individuals who have presented as homeless. Two recent house fires took housing units off the market. Human Services did use hotels to house those affected individuals, which ran about \$6,000 for the month. Individuals who came out of the woods were offered shelter housing, but most opted to stay in the woods rather than abide by the rules of the shelter. In the event that shelters are full, a homeless individual would be offered hotel accommodations. Human Services has been able to work with other towns and get the respective town to take responsibility for their residents. This has been slow moving, but successful. Ms. Darcy mentioned a recent meeting with the Town of Swanzey and Town of Gilsum in which the Town of Swanzey announced that they expect to add 120 housing units. Town of Swanzey had also planned to convert Carpenter Center into a shelter, but that request was denied. Gilsum has agreed to take responsibility for any residents in crisis and Human Services will continue to work with area welfare directors to allow residents to stay in their own town for services.

Of those housed in hotels, three families are from Keene. Ms. Darcy stated the NHERA funds for this are coming to an end. Ms. Darcy noted two issues with the program were a lack of accountability for participants and lack of requirements for recipients to do anything while they have this money leaving them in a tough spot when the funding dries up.

City Manager Dragon added that one of the things the City has been discussing is a part-time (28 hours a week) outreach-focused position to better reach the homeless population and she announced that the City is getting ready to recruit for that role. Currently, it is largely an administrative role, but are looking add outreach, communication and data tracking. City Manager Dragon is working closely with Natalie Darcy and Andy Bohannon, the Parks and Recreation Director, to redefine the job description to better connect with the homeless population to meet the needs going forward.

This position would allow the opportunity to bring some of the paperwork and requirements right to the client rather than city hall serving to reduce the intimidation factor as a barrier to services.

Rebecca Landry asked Ms. Darcy to clarify what happens when someone refuses and what are some of the possible factors that might lead to a person refusing services.

Ms. Darcy stated that if someone presents as homeless, the first thing their program is required to do is contact area shelters for availability.

Mayor Hansel suggested the reevaluation of the shelter system be used as a topic for future meetings. Ms. Pickford responded one factor around refusal of services may be that individuals are resistant due to previous experience with the system/program.

Doug Iosue referenced Ms. Darcy's earlier mention of the cost of housing at \$6000/month for the month of May and stated that sounds inefficient. He questioned whether those costs were tracked per year. Ms. Darcy responded that she has tracked it this year, but only because we have had a housing crisis. Mr. Iosue countered that there has to be a more efficient way and suggested it as a topic for discussion going forward.

Mayor Hansel asked Craig Henderson to speak regarding the funding for rental assistance. Mr. Henderson said their program provides funding for hotels or rental units. Mayor Hansel asked if they anticipated that funding to run out in the near future. Mr. Henderson responded that as an organization, they did not use or have a specific timeframe, as the funding is needs/demand-based and those numbers fluctuate. He personally suspects that it will run out sometime in September/October, but added that they are budgeting weekly/monthly based on need requests. Mayor Hansel requested the current numbers. Keene residents got most of the NHERAP program, which ran March to March. Mr. Henderson said he could certainly provide how many people, how many households were served and the total amount expended.

Councilor Lake suggested adding this funding request as an agenda item for near future to discuss further.

Jennifer Alexander spoke and stated she works with families experiencing homelessness. She questioned whether there are other folks not part of a family unit who are taking advantage of the funding. Mr. Henderson responded that there are singles using funding.

Ms. Pickford asked the committee if there was a transitional living shelter in Keene specifically for individuals to use for 8-12 months to assist with getting back on their feet. Mr. Henderson answered that they no longer have transitional housing. There is financial assistance, but not any sort of transitional housing. She asked the group if anyone knew what the average length of stay is for the women's shelter. Mr. Henderson answered that 2-3 years ago, it was an average of 60 days, but now it is around 100 days. Mayor Hansel suggested that we should add transitional housing to shelter access as a future agenda item.

A question was raised about NHERAP funding – if there is data to get an idea if there is about to be a tidal wave of eviction.

6) HB 1662

HB 1662 is section 4 housing expense for homeless. There was 5 million for FY ending June 30, 2023. Keene should receive \$111,523 (that figure came from the formula provided by the program). The bill has passed the House and the Senate. Mr. Henderson added that they have 12-13 rooms and had to keep them maintained through November. This resulted in an added

expense that Southwestern Community Services had to take on not knowing whether the funding would come through.

7) NHCHS Regional Work Group Report

There was no additional info regarding this topic. Many regional findings were included in this, but there is nothing new at this time.

8) Long Term Housing Discussion

Councilor Williams read a letter to the committee from a resident at 66 South Lincoln Street. The letter was an add-on to the letter Councilor Lake sent outlining different ideas the city could take on to address the housing issues. The original letter stated they wanted this group to review building ordinances and zoning code to look at tiny houses. By definition, an accessory dwelling unit is a mother-in-law apartment or garage converted to a living space. Mother-in-law apartments, if attached, are also considered an attached accessory dwelling unit. Detached accessory dwelling units are generally only allowed in rural and agricultural worlds.

The question was brought forward to the group of whether and how can we allow detached accessory dwelling units within the city of Keene? There are numerous carriage houses, specifically in the downtown area. Is there potential to convert those units to accessory dwelling units and would incentivizing property owners be an option?

There are some requirements to be considered an accessory dwelling units, for example, a minimum gross area of 400 square feet. Mayor Hansel noted that this was a rather arbitrary number if you go by building code. Building code technically would allow people to live in 200 square feet. There has been a rather large Tiny house movement within the past few years that has shown what can be done with tiny homes and utilizing spaces. Mayor Hansel said Keene does currently have some small cottage communities (Washington Street) and they do a great job of housing low-income individuals and families. The current issue is the current code restrictions and the barriers it provides to build more of those types of housing. Legalizing that type of construction could go a long way to addressing some of the housing shortages our community faces.

City Manager Dragon responded that Councilor Williams is right in that our codes are old and numbers are arbitrary and certainly do not seem applicable to current day needs. She agreed that providing some pushback on why those numbers are still used might have some benefit. Ms. Dragon suggested wrapping it into an agenda item with Code Enforcement and Med Kopczynski, Economic Development Director.

Ms. Pickford noted that NH RSA 79B has been adopted and expanded to include residential use. This RSA serves to increase downtown housing. It was asked of the committee if it would be possible to create information or education opportunities for the community to tie those two things together like advertising 79E and helping homeowners understand what is possible with those properties.

9) Public Bathrooms Update

City Manager Dragon discussed that the City is looking at the public bathroom situation and investigating opportunities for increasing access to bathrooms in the downtown area. They did contact a Port-A-Potty company. The first company contacted refused to put one back in downtown because there were previously issues with vandalism, cleanliness etc. The second company agreed and one was just placed near the skate park today. Ms. Dragon added that she hoped they did not have a similar experience as in the past. She stated they have a contract with the provider to come and clean it a couple times per week and the company will inform if there are any issues. Ms. Dragon also noted that the city has public bathrooms on the second floor of City Hall. They are, however; only open between 8am and 4pm when the building is open. The City is planning to send out communication with business owners to post in their business. Other thing that City is trying to do is create some way-finding signs in public areas identifying how to find area restrooms. Lastly, the City is looking for more partnerships for access to bathrooms. The best options and most preferred are the staffed restrooms in the area. She reiterated that while she is hopeful, she is not overly optimistic about the Port-A-Potty because of issues in the past. As such, they are looking and reaching out for people and business owners to open their staffed bathrooms and work with the city.

Ms. Pickford discussed that there are many local individuals living in cars or driving through town. She questioned whether there are any showers available and what options (besides parking in the Walmart parking lot) are available to those individuals. Hundred nights is open during the day for showers, but Salvation Army has yet to reopen their showers. It was clarified that the Salvation Army is now open to the public for showers again. She requested the topic be added as an agenda item.

10) Open to public comment

Mike Hall, administrator of the Keene Unitarian Universalist Church, asked if any of the space currently occupied by The Hundred Nights shelter could be utilized in the future after their move for the creation of showers/public space and suggested it as a topic for future discussion.

Laurie Jameson, MIP, Marlborough NH, told the committee that they have huge support on this topic from the faith community. She said that if the committee or City were to build the shower facilities, that there would be no problem in getting volunteers to monitor them.

Brad Hutchinson of 305 Marlboro Street stated he was told about the meeting last night. He said he was speaking as a homeless recovering drug addict. He stated he sees a disconnect between the City and those that are actually experiencing homelessness. He provided several case examples of poor treatment in The Hundred Nights shelter. He firmly believed that the community needs to be better about incorporating the lived experience into the decision making process. He also believed it was necessary to acknowledge how the lack of case management services play in and work towards increasing case management services, along with better identifying and addressing the barriers to accessing services.

Jodi Newell, 32 Leverett Street, works at a transitional homeless shelter. She said people stay there anywhere from a few days to multiple years. She mentioned the talk about paying for hotels is a great first, immediate step, but not a long-term feasible option. The space she works in offers full units and allows families to be able to stay there together. The cost of paying for hotels at even a discounted market rate, is more costly long-term than actually investing in transitional housing and providing wraparound care that can actually get these individuals to a better place where they are better set up for success.

Dave Chandler, resident of Langdon Place, stated he is a current member of Friends of Hundred Nights and a volunteer for the Keene Community Kitchen, jail, etc. He wanted to offer a discussion topic for the next meeting around some kind of camping facility for those that choose to live there. He pointed out that some people do prefer that kind of lifestyle and while not traditional, it is an option for housing. Mayor Hansel pointed out that the topic had previously been brought up by Councilor Lake and was already listed as a future agenda item. Natalie Darcy suggested a topic of discussion could be how to get individuals into subsidized housing and look at addressing what the barriers to access are.

Doug Iosue suggested an agenda item of potential funding opportunities.

Rebecca Landry noted that the committee was currently at 14 future agenda items with the goal of getting to some actual recommendations. She invited people to recommend speakers and agencies to provide info on the various topics.

11) Adjournment

There being no further business, Mayor Hansel adjourned the meeting at 4:07 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Amanda Trask, Minute Taker

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