

MINUTES
STRAFFORD REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE WORKSHOP

October 31, 2005
SRPC Office
2 Ridge Street, Suite 4
Dover, NH

Members Present: Tom Fargo, Chairman, Dover; Edmund Jansen, Jr., Vice Chairman, Rollinsford; Al Dixon, Secretary-Treasurer, Newmarket; Bruce Woodruff, Milton; Kenn Ortmann, Rochester; Rod Cools, Wakefield.

Members Absent: Tom Crosby, Madbury.

Staff Present: Cynthia Copeland, Linda Osburn.

Chairman Fargo called the meeting to order at 3:25 PM.

Chairman Fargo stated that the purpose of the workshop was to discuss financial planning, to look at what other planning commissions did, and what Strafford Regional Planning Commission (SRPC) could do. He asked Copeland for a synopsis of the meetings she had with other planning commissions.

Budget and Budget Items

Copeland stated that she liked the Nashua Regional Planning Commission (NRPC) budget document as it presented project summaries with accomplishments, initiatives for the coming year, the proposed budget compared to previous years, the organizational structure and the list of commissioners. Copeland stated that she would like to adopt the format as it incorporated three documents into one. She stated that she noticed which regional planning commissions had budgets, minutes and regional master plans online.

Copeland stated that NRPC built relationships with public officials and provided coordination with other municipalities and districts. Copeland stated that Southwest Regional Planning Commission (SWRPC) worked in non-traditional planning but drew lines to link work with traditional planning. Cools asked if SWRPC had found a way to add value to services. Ortmann stated that value could be added by relating the services provided to a community by speaking the community's language. Ortmann stated that he would find it helpful if Copeland would state that she learned from her time invested to make the bottom line look better and to make SRPC more valuable to the communities. Copeland responded that SRPC matched most closely with Upper Valley Regional Planning Commission (UVRPC) in budget line items. She stated that SPRC pays the highest cost to Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI) for software. Copeland stated that the Executive Committee directed her to move the commission away from its dependence on the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) contract funding. Ortmann asked what percentage the UPWP funds were of the total income. Copeland responded that UPWP was 35% -55% of the total budget of all the regional planning commissions. Chairman Fargo asked if any other commission had been through a NH Department of Transportation (DOT) audit of their UPWP funds and its impact on other contracts. Copeland stated that the other regional planning commissions did not discuss their audits.

Dixon asked if forming a non-profit entity was an effective tool. Copeland stated that she was not certain the combination would work. Discussion of non-profit requirements and possible advantages ensued. Copeland stated that she would follow up the discussion with NRPC regarding their non-profit plan.

Copeland stated that SRPC health costs were at the lower scale of pricing in comparison with other regional planning commissions. She suggested that the committee reconsider the percentage sharing of health insurance premiums, as there were equity and performance issues with the current policy. Chairman Fargo suggested a cafeteria plan with a total dollar limit of employer contribution. Copeland stated that SRPC moved to the top of the salary scale for staff positions. Dixon and Ortmann stated that the salaries reflected the decision to hire more skilled and experienced personnel. Chairman Fargo stated that the higher salaries increased staff retention.

Marketing

Copeland stated that there were marketing differences among the regional planning commissions. She described how the local reporters use SWRPC for background information and comments and how staff provided project summaries at commission meetings to show value. Copeland stated that the comfort level and ability of the Executive Director and staff to market made a difference in growth and stability at the regional planning commissions.

Competition

Copeland stated that the directors are concerned about the activities by non-governmental groups being counterproductive to goals of the community boards. Ortmann asked if this was a challenge and an opportunity rather than a problem. Chairman Fargo stated that the groups raise the level of interest in natural resource planning but do not have funding to educate or follow through with implementation plans. Ortmann asked if symbiotic relationships could occur with SRPC following through with implementation. Copeland stated that there had been no increase in state funding levels for over a decade but the workload had become more complex and required more technical investment in staff and equipment. She stated that the transition from a volunteer planning board to a circuit rider contract to a full time planner was not an easy process for a town. Copeland stated that the challenge for the regional planning commissions was how to provide top quality professional services for local communities while remaining fiscally solvent.

Geographic Information System (GIS) Services

Copeland discussed the various levels of GIS services and expertise at the regional planning commissions. She stated the concerns with quality control and recovering the costs incurred. Cools asked why SPRC did not complete tax maps for the communities as a product. Dixon suggested looking at fee structures to complete tax map updates for communities. Discussion ensued regarding those communities that have digitized tax maps and procedures for updates on a yearly basis. Copeland stated that the previous chair of SRPC encouraged the continuous update of the GIS systems, which she has done. Copeland stated that future land use maps are a new product that is well received by the communities. Chairman Fargo stated that he suggested hiring a new planner with GIS skills and asked if SPRC needed a GIS specialist. Copeland responded that she was told it would take ten years before the two skill sets were merged and integrated. She stated that SRPC had a GIS/transportation analyst and needed a GIS/natural resource analyst with public meeting skills. Cools stated that as the marketing of the services increased, the salary of the position would increase.

Land Use Planning

Copeland stated that the directors agreed that land use planning was the most stressful area due to multiple night meetings and the public involvement. She stated that maintaining a trained land use planning staff was costly and younger staff was not able to handle the planning board demands. Woodruff explained that the planning boards saw the land use planner as an expert and quickly grew impatient when the planner was not prepared or did not produce the product the board was expecting. He stated that the planning boards wanted training from an experienced land use planner, especially for new planning board members.

Regionalism

Copeland stated that whether it was a regional master plan or cooperative efforts, crossing the boundaries was a difficult sell. She stated that NRPC approach of focusing on meeting strategic needs, finding solutions and concrete results was a good approach. Copeland stated that a concise, streamlined regional master plan, as well as conservation and natural resources services, were good at crossing boundaries. Ortmann stated that water was a good example, as people understood that water crossed boundaries. Woodruff left the meeting at 4:30 PM. Chairman Fargo asked if there were support for regionalism. Copeland mentioned the New Hampshire Charitable Fund and the DOT long-range business plan. Ortmann suggested the governor's office be contacted as well as other state agencies. He mentioned emergency preparedness was regional by its nature. Copeland stated that Denis Parker was serving as the NHARPC legislative assistant and was looking at funding through the legislative office. Dixon left the meeting at 4:33 PM.

Goals and Recommendations:

Ortmann asked how SRPC could benefit from the interviews with other regional planning commissions by encouraging what was effective and providing opportunities to do things differently. Copeland replied that she was encouraged that the UVRPC budget reflected the same frugal and efficient budget of SRPC. Ortmann commented that even frugal organizations could run out of money. Copeland stated that tracking costs too tightly could constrain an organization from taking risks and finding new opportunities. She stated that her next step would be moving into multiple year contracts for planning services. Ortmann asked if it were possible to avoid the stressful projects and asked if the commission's expertise could be used to review plans but not attend every planning board meeting. Copeland stated that the circuit rider program involved day and night meetings as is currently happening in Wakefield while rewriting their ordinances. Ortmann asked if the night meetings would cease after the ordinances are completed. Cools answered affirmatively and stated that Wakefield would budget for a full time planner.

Ortmann asked Copeland for her short-term, intermediate and long-term recommendations based on her surveys of the regional planning commissions for the next budget cycle. Copeland responded that it was necessary to get a handle on health benefits costs and the equity issue. Ortmann asked about the revenue and image side of the commission. Copeland responded that the cities asked for educational outreach at the last Commission meeting. She stated that the cities needed to coordinate growth and needed the commission to work within the communities. Copeland stated that the Commission could provide GIS services that help the communities with policy and decision making and stay connected to data and technical applications. Ortmann asked what would help communities know what SPRC was and what it did. He referred to a branding process and suggested ways to translate what SRPC did for its communities in order to ask for additional dues. He discussed public relations and the use of publicity to help the communities see the value of SPRC services. Jansen discussed the state mandated projects such as updates to tax maps. Cools suggested keeping a person on staff to complete the updates every year. Jansen suggested marketing the service every year and cautioned that once a community hired another company to do the updates, it might not return to SRPC for the service and be able to provide the data to SPRC. Chairman Fargo suggested multiple-year contracts to provide tax map updates and planning services. He suggested developing relationships with customers and then adding on services after that. Jansen stated that the non-profit status appealed to him as well as the efficiency of providing services in-house. Cools asked about build-out analyses. Ortmann stated that the communities needed professional staff services. Copeland stated that the regional planning commissions should work together to market services.

Ortmann asked Copeland what appealed to her about the SPRC website. She replied that she found the website bright, informative and cheerful. Ortmann stated that SRPC should generate that same good reaction by translating what it does for the communities. Chairman Fargo stated that this approach was discussed at the NHARPC meeting. Ortmann asked about hiring a marketer and a professional planner.

He stated his request for the short-term, intermediate and long-term goals and recommendations for the next Executive Committee meeting. Jansen left the meeting at 4:55 PM. Chairman Fargo requested Osburn send a copy of the last SRPC Commission meeting minutes with the next Executive Committee meeting package. Chairman Fargo stated that the next Executive Committee meeting would be on November 18, 2005 at 7:30 AM in the SPRC conference room.

Other Business


Chairman Fargo noted that there was no additional business and entertained a motion to adjourn. Ortmann made the motion to adjourn and Chairman Fargo seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously, and the meeting adjourned at 4:59 PM.

Respectfully submitted,



Linda Osburn
Bookkeeper

Minutes approved on November 18, 2005.

By: 
Thomas Fargo, Chairman