

## **Equity Advisory Committee Meeting Notes**

Wednesday, May 29<sup>th</sup> from 5:00-6:30 PM

The Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission

**Attendees:** Anne Nelson Stoner, Sarah Muskin, Charlie Baker, (CCRPC); Kashka Orlow, Melissa Heitkamp, Lydia Diamond, Zoraya Hightower, Omar Derzi, Madafar Jassim, Jules Wetchi, Ragab Mohamed (EAC Members); Jazmin Hurley (In place of Elaine Wang); Mona Tolba (Interpreter)

### **1. Welcome & Introductions**

Anne Nelson began the meeting at 5:17pm after EAC members socialized and served food from Harmony's Kitchen. Everyone shared their names and something they are looking forward to this summer.

### **2. Act 250 Update**

Charlie provided an update on the Act 250 legislation and explained to EAC members the changes he has been advocating for in the legislature and the impact the bill would have down the line. He explained that the biggest change in the reform is that areas planned for growth will be exempt from having to go through the Act 250 process while strengthening rural/natural area protections. An element of the bill also includes a text increase on second homeowners, which would be used to fund affordable housing projects. EAC members discussed how unaffordable housing is and the group discussed how Act 250 reform will hopefully improve the housing crisis, noting that barriers will still exist given that private contractors and developers seek to make money off new housing projects. EAC members asked when we should expect to see impacts from the Bill, and Charlie shared that some exemptions would go into effect starting July 1 of this year, so the community could start to see new project breaking ground in the Fall. Zoraya asked about building in floodplains given all the recent flooding. Charlie explained that Chittenden County has less property in the floodplain than other regions throughout the state. Zoraya asked whether this is due to stricter regulations or floodplains, and Charlie said some of both.

### **3. Winooski Housing**

Mona asked why there are so many vacant decommissioned buildings in Winooski sitting vacant instead of being turned into new housing. Jazmin explained that there are multiple barriers to developing these lots, one being that most of them are privately owned and therefore difficult

to gain control of—they can sit on the property for as long as they'd like. The Armory in Winooski is being revitalized as housing, but the remediation process is long given the site is contaminated. The City is going through an eminent domain process with the Armory, but this rarely happens. Winooski is looking to create a vacant building registry to incentivize redevelopment. The group discussed what power/control municipalities and the RPC have in incentivizing housing development. A short discussion ensued about how municipalities, like Winooski, partner with organizations like CHT to advance housing development, since they have more access to funds and the City is on a tight budget.

#### 4. **ECOS Regional Plan Community Engagement Update**

Anne Nelson reminded EAC members that back in November they discussed CCRPC's plan for community engagement to inform the ECOS Regional Plan update and the EAC's role in that engagement. The agenda of this meeting focused on sharing back what engagement has happened, which communities have been engaged with, and where remaining gaps exist. AN provided a brief recap of why Regional Plans are important and reminded the EAC of the timeline CCRPC is working on. Engagement is slotted to be wrapped up by the end of May. May-June will focus on integrating community feedback into the plan, with a public-facing draft of the plan to come out in the Fall 2024. AN walked through what events the CCRPC team attended, what focus groups were held, and how the survey has been advertised. AN shared takeaways from the Housing Convening that CCRPC hosted at Hula in April. Mona commented on how disappointed she was that such few decision-makers came to that gathering. AN shared that getting people to show up to events seems to be a persistent challenge. Zoraya shared that this is especially the case for an organization like CCRPC, which operates at such a high level/disconnected from the daily lives of community members. Charlie shared that CCRPC, in the past, has tried to gather partners to work regularly on issues, but the silos are real and difficult to overcome. Mona highlighted that everyone needs to come to the table to solve these complex problems based on what they are hearing from the community. She added that we do not need any more Needs Assessments or engagement, we need to just start addressing the issues we know exist.

Melissa asked how developers can face the people they are building homes for. She posed the question: could we develop a policy that mandated that developers meet with their audience before developing? You should not be able to develop here until you speak to those who live here. Kashka raised that there are too many communication channels, it is hard to know how to reach your audience (or as many people as possible). Even as a local who is connected, it is difficult to know what events are happening. There are too many different players vying for your time and attention. Zoraya added that another reason folks stop engaging is because decision-makers don't listen. She used the Winooski Bridge project as an example, and emphasized not to go in and ask questions that cannot be put into action.

AN shared that CCRPC will work to share and present the feedback we have gathered to as many

people as possible to spread the impact and minimize engagement fatigue.

## 5. **ECOS Implementation**

Melissa asked how developers are incentivized to follow actions in the plan, and what CCRPC's responsibility is for advocating for things like Just Cause Eviction. Zoraya expressed frustration that some Chittenden County municipalities still do not have Just Cause Eviction laws. CCRPC and its partners ought to start developing bills/legislation now because it takes so long to see its effects. For example, the process of reforming Act 250 started 11 years ago.

Mona shared her own personal story with renting, a tenant who refused to leave, and the legal battle that ensued. Kashka said the rigid laws aren't working for anyone. There are situations where people are unjustly evicted, and others when renters can't evict bad tenants. Ragab chimed in that the American system has already failed a long time ago and cautioned to not dream too big. Melissa asked how we could engage and do relationship repair so that we don't pull out and get jaded. She advocated that relationships are the most important.

Zoraya asked what ECOS implementation has looked like in the past. Charlie shared that CCRPC used to do annual reports on the ECOS Plan to measure and track success, but we were working with so many partners that it became too difficult to manage. The original plan had 60 listed partners. The annual reports ended up taking a lot of time, and not working to build a coalition/aid progress. Zoraya suggested focusing in on 2-3 actions for a year or two and creating coalitions around those actions to not get distracted by the mass of things to do. Melissa suggested being a little more heavy-handed with our municipal plan review process to urge municipalities to get on board.

## 6. **Looking Ahead**

Anne Nelson shared that CCRPC is looking to update its Bylaws, which elaborate on committees authority within the organization. She suggested that the next EAC meeting focus on a formal EAC membership structure and discussion around what kinds of formal authority/decision-making power the EAC may want to take on. AN encouraged everyone to take some ECOS survey flyers and bar coasters. Kashka shared that if we still want to engage with youth for the ECOS Plan, we could have a "bring a kid to an EAC meeting" day. AN thanked everyone. The meeting adjourned at 6:36pm.