

CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Warren Cooper called the joint meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. and stated that in compliance with the “Open Public Meetings Act” this Meeting was duly noticed to the Hunterdon County Democrat on and the Express Times on February 18, 2015; the Agenda has been posted at Borough Hall and distributed to the Courier News, the Express Times, the Hunterdon County Democrat, and the Star Ledger on February 18, 2015.

ROLL CALL

Present for the Meeting:

Cathy Leach
Michele Liebttag
Jack Opdyke
Caroline Scutt
William Sullivan

Absent from Meeting:

John Hindman

ROLL CALL

Present for the Meeting:

Case
Cooper
DenBleyker
Dragt
Eckels
Scott
Sullivan
Suttle
Weeks

Absent from Meeting:

Dougherty
Musolino

Borough Clerk and Planning Board Secretary, Brenda S. Shepherd, was present for the Meeting. Eight member of the public was also present.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Mayor Cooper opened the public comment session. Having no comments from the public, the public comment session was closed.

NEW BUSINESS – Mayor and Common Council

SHARED SERVICE AGREEMENT - Municipal Court of the Delaware Valley

Mayor Cooper noted that there is one item of business that the Mayor and Council must take. We agreed to have a joint court with Alexandria, Holland and Frenchtown. That agreement is terminating and we must approve a new shared service agreement. On motion by Michele Liebttag, seconded by Jack Opdyke, and carried by unanimous favorable roll call vote, the Mayor and Common Council approved the Shared Service Agreement for the Municipal Court of the Delaware Valley as attached to this set of minutes.

NEW BUSINESS – Planning Board/Mayor and Common Council

Discussion of the Municipal Land Use Ordinance with public input

Mayor Cooper noted that there will be a discussion of some of the issues that the Business

Community has been facing with regard to the municipal plan, sign ordinance and village center plan. Planning Board Chairman Eckel noted that the Borough Planner has graciously offered to be with us today and help answer questions the community may have on the Borough Ordinances. This is an opportunity for the Council and Planning Board to hear from the business community. Mayor Cooper added that we want to hear your concerns and if there are aspects that the community thinks we need to address.

Chairman Eckel noted that she will provide a brief overview of why these ordinances are in place particularly the sign ordinance. These ordinances we set up when Ellen Fletcher was on the Planning Board. The point of the sign ordinance is neither to be a headache, trouble nor cumbersome but to have the business community look good, function well and be safe so the business community is managed and has a managed look to it. We have been through downtown areas that are cluttered. There is a certain look that Frenchtown cultivates which makes it interesting and funky. The sign ordinance is corky but it was designed to address that for consistency and safety. The Planning Board is trying to make things look good as a whole and that is why the Planning Board recommended many years ago that Council adopt the ordinances.

Mayor Cooper noted that going forward, in the past year, we have been receiving more and more complaints about certain businesses not following the rules. It has been difficult to navigate that because while we want to be gentle in our enforcement of the rules because we value and prize the business community and we understand how important the business community is, we are trying to find a balance to being gentle etc. We tried to communicate with everyone and we set a date for enforcement so you could submit the proper sign application by a certain date. We then would start enforcing the penalty if someone does not have a sign approval. It was his fault that it did not happen. We will make it happen and at the conclusion, we hope to hear concerns and begin addressing them. We want to share with you that we expect by March 28th, anyone that does not have a conforming sign or an application into the Planning Board for approval should expect to be fined.

As to the Sign Ordinance, Mayor Cooper asked what are the issues that the existing ordinance generates?

Janet Factor, President of the Frenchtown Business and Professional Association, noted that on behalf of a few members who could not be here, the sign ordinance is a problem. Business owners feel that they need more signs especially sandwich board to direct people to other businesses off the main area. They are looking for directional signs. We need to be able to use sandwich boards.

Sam Valsridge of Yellow Dog stated that his store and PULP sit in the alcove and their signs cannot be seen nor can the window be seen. He would like to put a vinyl in the window that you could read from a distance. That is not easy under the current restrictions. Mr. Valsridge added that he has yet to see a sandwich board restrict foot traffic. He does not understand why the town would waste time enforcing a law that is not hurting anyone.

Julia Rose, owner of Grouse, 17 Race Street, stated that one of her complaints is that once people are on Bridge Street, they will not go around the corner if they do not know what is down there.

She was on Route 12 and moved to 17 Race Street after three years. It is difficult for people to realize there are other businesses off of Bridge Street. Signage on the corners would be helpful, wayfinding signs. She thinks it is paramount. Mayor Cooper noted that we had addressed the issue last year. There is nothing specific in the ordinance that allows such a thing. The way the sign ordinance was set up, it was to design a special business sign for your location. We worked with the business association to come up with a plan that was a temporary situation where the wayfinding signs could be set up at the corners of Harrison Street, Race Street, Bridge Street, Front Street and Kingwood Avenue. The agreement was that these signs would be taken in at night and one of the business owners would have responsibility to take it in at night. The business association would manage them. John DenBleyker noted that John Hindman designed the wayfinding signs and they were elegant. Instead of having 5 different signs, there were four matching sign you could have your business name on. You would have to buy into it. We talked to both attorneys and it was a great solution. He does not know what fee was going to be charged. Unfortunately, we saw a sign at the end of Harrison and Bridge Street and then other signs started to pop up. They were not even close to what we agreed to nor is the log at the end of Race and Bridge Street. That is an impediment to traffic. No one will admit to putting them there. It also impedes property owners from clearing sidewalks. He would have to ask DPW to haul it away because it does not conform to what we agreed to. We tried to accommodate the businesses.

Janet Factor responded that the sign that John Hindman was putting together was a great idea. Several business did not get an application or fee amount. Some business that are not in the association had concerns that they could not control what was on the wayfinding sign. The log that was put at Race and Bridge Street was a non association member, Monkey Mill, who did that with good intentions. Mayor Cooper noted that he spoke with Monkey Mill on more than three occasions to submit a sign application or outdoor display permit but for reasons he cannot fathom, Monkey Mills is not willing to do that. Monkey Mill did not admit to putting the sign at the corner of Race and Bridge Street but we are at the point where we will take it away. It is inappropriate and does not solve the problem.

Chairman Eckel recommend that they resurrect the wayfinding signs the Boards came up with. Part of the problem with people putting up their own wayfinding sign is that it is easy to get to the point of ridiculous. She added that River Blue could put a sign up in front of Gallossos that says "better food across the street." John Hindman was part of the Downtown Revitalization Committee and part of the recommendations was to have a permanent wayfinding system going forward. We understand that everyone who is not on Bridge Street would like more help with that. If we could resurrect the solution that works with the laws on the book and eventually, hope the Downtown Revitalization Committee report will come to pass.

Sam Valsridge noted that in conversations with various people at Monkey Mill there were two things brought up. Is there any intention of simplifying the application procedure? He would love to submit a brief description of where decals would go and either get a "yes" or "no" answer in a simple fashion. That does not exist at this moment. Mr. Valsridge stated that it is a good idea. He added that he does not want to see an environment created where it is easier to ask for forgiveness.

Caroline Scutt, speaking on behalf of the business association, noted that Chairman Eckel and Mayor Cooper's wayfinding solution was circulated to all members. Diane Dalrymple and John

Hindman also walked the plan to the business district asking if they wanted to be a part of it. Because of cost, the answer was “no”. The folks most impacted by lack of signage did not show up to the meeting. People are not here to represent themselves. She would love to see the wayfinding signs resurrected. The cost was hindering for people to sign on and that is why it did not happen. The challenges are to come up with something affordable and enforcement is also a challenge. Caroline Scutt noted that sandwich boards on Bridge Street are set back. When we have an author signing, the sandwich board will pull people in. The neighbors do the same with sales and they are pulled in at the end of the day. She recommended that as to that section in the ordinance on page 3-18, portable signs, the Board consider amending that to somehow include other establishments and not just establishments selling food, telling what the sign can or cannot look like and that it has to be pulled in each day. We need to look at the vision instead.

Mayor Cooper noted that the Borough has applied for a million dollar grant to make changes to the downtown. We have not heard officially that we did not get the grant but we did not get the grant. Other towns have heard. When we come up with a decision, if the solution or plan going forward involves a temporary sign, it would fall under the purview of the business to handle. We cannot be responsible to communicate it to the businesses. It should be the association. Janet Factor responded that she does not see how the business association can address that. She added that if we do a wayfinding sign and another business not on the wayfinding sign sees it and put its own sign out, we cannot address that. Mayor Cooper noted that the Borough is responsible to enforce it. Chairman Eckel added directional signs by definition need to be off the location. One of the reasons the Business Association had trouble was not only the cost but because non complying directional signs were not being taken down and that is the Governing Body’s responsibility to manage. Another conversation which we proposed was to work with the Business Association so that if a new business comes into town, the Business Association would give a welcome packet to the new business which would include a list of phone numbers for the town, a sign application, etc. Most new businesses know they have to find out what the town ordinances are. If there is a change of use, they have to come to the town. Mayor Cooper noted that it is a good solution and a great idea. Molly Sumner suggested that all these things and the ordinances be put on the website. Sometimes it is not accessible. Cathy Leach noted that the ordinances are online. If you google Frenchtown ordinances, there is a link called NJ municipalities. Brian Terry from Olive with a Twist recommended that there be a link of requirements on the website for those interested in opening a business in town.

Cathy Leach referring to a simple sign application wanted to hear more about how the sign application is difficult or complicated. Sam Valsridge stated that he did not know where to obtain an application and you cannot print one out. You have to get it at Borough Hall and you have to be there at the right time. He is in his store from 10:00 am to 6:00 pm. You do not know that there is an approval of a sign. Cathy Suttle noted that there is an approval process. Mr. Valsridge responded that you can be misinformed. Mayor Cooper noted that the process of determining whether a proposed sign meets the ordinance takes minutes. Cathy Suttle explained that once you enter the process, someone goes to Borough Hall and Brenda Shepherd gives out the sign application, the application is submitted and the fee is paid. The applicant then comes before the Planning Board for approval. If you do not know the process, that is a problem. Molly Sumner commented that a packet would be great, accessibility on the website and contact information

would also be great and then someone could sit down with the applicant to walk them through the process. This is the problem with Monkey Mill. There are 16 pages and he does not have time to review it all. It is a huge failure of communication. Cathy Suttle agreed to sit down with an applicant if they need help. Mayor Cooper noted that he spoke to Monkey Mill three times and it was not just to welcome him to town.

Caroline Scutt stated that she appreciates these great ideas. She recommended that an Ad Hoc Committee be created to work on a packet for the business community. William Sullivan noted that with the exception of a few, everyone else are volunteers. We are asking you to get involved. We have people that come up with ideas and we need them to take the ball and run with it. Janet Factor responded that they would be happy to help.

Jack Weeks, Planning Board members and owner of Thistle, noted that when he started his shop 14 years ago, he was handed a sign ordinance. To go through 26 pages seems daunting. It covers all signs. If we are going to help new business, we should highlight section. Also, there has been a lot of talk about sandwich boards. Businesses use sandwich boards to advertise sales, workshops, new author to town, etc. All businesses do take the sandwich boards in at night. There are certain restaurants that do not take their sandwich boards in at night. There are two types of signage, the main sign and an occasional sign that says SALE TODAY. There is also the outdoor display application. Chairman Eckel stated that having an Ad Hoc Committee is a great idea. She thinks we might be able to come up with something where non food businesses can have a sandwich board ability. It may be three square feet. The original intent was for restaurants to put out a menu. This is allows not only in our town but in others. Much of the ordinance was borrowed from other towns. A lot of the temporary sandwich boards and outdoor display signs are made of a great many different materials and as part of the Village Center Plan, signs in the business district are required to be made of wood or wood like materials. If we apply that to the sandwich board or outdoor display signs for all business, it would create a managed look. A plastic sign flapping around is not attractive. Mayor Cooper stated that you know your business best, you know what would work for you, and what would benefit the business community. We want ideas to come from you to help businesses to succeed. In reference to the notion of sandwich board, there may be a better way to do this. Bring whatever idea that might be a good to accommodate business so we can move forward. Planner McKenzie stated that if it is not in the ordinance it is not allow and you would need a variance.

Caroline Scutt noted that the last point she wanted to make was the problem of consistently enforcing what is being done or not done. When you walk down Bridge Street, you see spinning flags, etc. The uneven enforcement is why people come to address issues. This will be addressed across the board. Mayor Cooper noted that the Planning Board and Council have been considering providing more funds for the zoning officer to enforce the rules. The zoning officer is responsive if a complaint is filed. He is not proactive to walk down the street to see if everyone is in compliance. Caroline Scutt responded that when concerned citizens come to Council or Planning Board with complaints, the zoning officer comes to the businesses at 4:00 or 5:00 pm. He should visit when the businesses are open. It should be on us to take a walk downtown. Chairman Eckel noted that when she has received complaints about any zoning issue, she shares it with the Planning Board and passes it to the zoning officer. She never shares the name of the individual who complains. Neighbors do not want to be on record or business owner that they complained about the neighbor.

She has had complaints from 10 different people. One said that the downtown started to look like a yard sale, or rummage sale. Inconsistent enforcement of the sign ordinance has been a huge problem. Anthony Grecco noted that his business survived with no signage. Mr. Grecco added that the town looks like a rummage sale. That is desperate. William Sullivan commented that enforcement came to a head this year. Every ordinance does specify to have an authority to enforce it. The Zoning Officer was contracted for X number of hours a week. Those hours are grossly inefficient because of the signage issues we are having. The Council will be increasing funding to enforce that. It is a major issue effecting Frenchtown.

Mike Margulies, architect, noted that he is willing to be on the ad hoc committee. He has worked with many towns and issues with parking. Chairman Eckel commented that if we get 4 wayfinding signs, part of it can be parking directions. Mayor Cooper noted that he met with the owner about the flapping signs and asked them to remove them and they agreed.

Mayor Cooper requested that the last half hour of the meeting address concerns with the Village Center Plan.

Referring to the whole idea of the County Economic Development Plan, Caroline Scutt ask whether or not there is an update in progress for logistical planning. There is a set of rules and no action plan inside of those rules. Planner McKenzie stated that it is not what that plan is intended to do. The purpose is to take an area designated as an area in need of rehabilitation. It allows a property owner to redevelop their property. It is not like an Economic Development Plan of the Master Plan. Within the rehabilitation area, there are controls what can be done to the site. In looking at the County Economic Development Plan, the town can come up with what we want to do in Frenchtown as economic development. An economic development plan would be part of the Master Plan. The Borough's Master Plan is old but with budgetary constraints, we are doing amendments to the Master Plan which is more cost effective. Taking a look at the Master Plan makes a lot of sense and how you develop if you redevelop in the rehabilitation area. Responding to Mayor Cooper, Council noted that they do not have copies of the Master Plan and the amendments. Planner McKenzie stated that she can give the town an electronic version of what the town has adopted so you can put it on the website.

Caroline Scutt noted that there are specifics about street furniture and lighting and we are not in compliance as a town. Chairman Eckel noted that the Downtown Revitalization Committee considered what was in the Village Center Plan and one of the points was to make the downtown more managed by getting rid of the different trash and recycling cans, etc. One of the concerns was that we did not want it to look like Liberty Village. We did not want to take all the benches out but we did not want it to look exactly the same either. The idea was to put in guidelines. Some benches are privately owned. The question is how can we move forward if we do not get the grant? Council suggested taking baby steps to do something we want on a limited budget. Chairman Eckel stated that we can get businesses to sponsor a bench but we do not want sponsors names on garbage cans. Mayor Cooper stated that this is something we want to work out with the business community and identify strategies to move forward. He asked if this Ad Hoc committee is willing to take ownership of a lot of these issues including how we pay for it? Jack Weeks noted that the Downtown Revitalization Committee had open forums to discuss the visions as well as the decision of what kind of lights, trees, benches, etc. There are benches that are in memory of someone. It has

become in lieu of flowers, donations are made to a specific entity. Donations may be a way to secure funds to do these things. Mayor Cooper noted that Raritan Borough raised \$25,000.00 that way for 14 benches for a bridge that was converted to a walkway. Planner McKenzie stated that if they are going to buy a bench, they need to follow the Village Center Plan but the problem is they do not know. Dorsey Reading stated that most of this work has been done in the Downtown Revitalization Committee. There are groupings of types of benches, garbage cans, etc. It was narrowed down to four bench styles so you have 4 choices. Signage for directions signs should be uniform. We can focus on one thing at a time to accomplish one thing at a time. Street lights are the most important thing we can do so people will come in the evening. Responding to Mayor Cooper as to the issue of money, Dorsey Reading commented that there are other parts we can do. Directional signage is paramount. We need to find a way to do it to make it work for the businesses and implement it. We find out how much it will cost to make five signs and find a way through grants or donations to make it happen. We spend a lot of time in the Downtown Revitalization Committee developing a plan. Mayor Cooper commented that it would be a reasonable strategy to reconstitute the Downtown Revitalization Committee to serve as an Ad Hoc Committee to generate ideas to review. Michael Margolis noted that Seth A. Grossman volunteered to continue to act with the committee. Caroline Scutt noted that there needs to be an action plan. Jack Weeks added that there needs to be a plan B and Plan C if we do not get funding. We need to decide how we will pay for it if we do not get grant money. Mayor Cooper stated that we could have the Downtown Revitalization Committee recommend sources of funding. One of the recommendations was the creation of a special business district that would be assessed special assessments. That was not pursued because there is a strong feeling that we are already taxed enough. When you look at the towns that have improved their downtowns, those towns that have made progress are the ones with special business improvement districts. Brian Terry stated that you can have people donating lights, etc. There are ways to market it. Selling bricks or memorials are ways to raise funds aside from taxation. If you wait, you may have this same conversation 10 years from now. Caroline Scutt stated that it is a great idea to take one thing at a time and find funding for it. Lighting is a problem and costly. Having trees lit up would be a short term solution and more attainable. She is uncomfortable with raising taxes and justifying it to the rest of the community. Mayor Cooper stated that the Business Improvement District would be a geographic area where the property owners are taxed and not the rest of the property owners but that is a slippery slope. Caroline Scutt noted that rents would be raised in that area. Planner McKenzie commented that in an economic downtown, it is difficult to look at solutions that involve spending money. You can come up with creative solutions that involves paying for memorial benches or looking at funding for historic preservation. That is what the Ad Hoc Committee can do. Chairman Eckel commented that she likes the idea of coming up with a Plan A, Plan B and Plan C. We created an excellent plan for the downtown but there is no plan for money. She knew about the million dollar grant that would have helped. Coming up with a fiscal plan that would allow us to take small steps is a great idea.

Sky Van Saun noted that she is on the safe streets and roads committee and one of the things we came up with was checking with the Boy Scouts. They have service projects to do and they get the supplies. They are a resource we could look into. As to corner signs, Hopewell has signs on posts. Chairman Eckel stated that the Downtown Revitalization Committee recommended that. Cathy Leach asked if the open space tax could be used for preservation? Mayor Cooper noted that the county money can be used for that. We need to look at the town's open space tax. We have not imposed that tax because the economy could not take it. We did not determine how we would use

that. We are in a better position now.

Mayor Cooper thanked everyone for making themselves available for a Saturday. He noted that the Downtown Revitalization Committee will be reconvened and that committee can include additional volunteers. Chairman Eckel noted that Michael Margolis and Brian Terry volunteered to be on that committee. Janet Factor asked that someone inform the people on the Downtown Revitalization Committee. Caroline Scutt thanked everyone for agreeing to do this.

Jack Weeks commented that the downtown has become more Frenchtown residents as opposed to nonresident owners and has become community based. Planner McKenzie stated that it is part of Frenchtown's charm. Mayor Cooper responded that it reminds him of the time when there was a huge number of volunteers on the Fire Department and everyone was committed to the town in every way they could. He is starting to see that again. Residents of town as part of the business district is a great feel. Janet Factor recommended that there be one committee for the website items such as the welcome packet and then the other being the downtown revitalization committee. Chairman Eckel noted that she has a list of items for the Ad Hoc Committee to review. The Committee can prioritize the items. There are some things that can get done quickly.

Mayor Cooper asked if there were any other comments. Gerry Case noted that Sewer Plant Operator Victor Gilardi is down at the sewer plant right now and he will give anyone a tour of the new plant if they want.

Having no other comments, Mayor Cooper thanked everyone.

ADJOURNMENT

Being no further business to come before the Mayor and Council and Planning Board, the meeting was adjourned at 10:06 am on motion by Gerry Case, seconded by Randi Eckel and carried by favorable voice vote.

Respectfully submitted,

Brenda Shepherd, RMC
Borough Clerk/Planning Board Secretary