

Minutes of the Comprehensive Planning Committee
Jan. 20, 2011 7:00 pm
Copake Town Hall

Members Present: Jeanne Mettler, Marcia Becker, Bill Kiernan, Charles Dodson, Harvey Weber, Rus Davis, Frank Peteroy

Members Absent: Dan Haas.

Guests: Ned Schneier

Ms. Mettler welcomed Mr. Schneier and asked Mr. Dodson to introduce him. Mr. Dodson said Mr. Schneier is on a committee to study the governance of Col. County (CC). Mr. Schneier began by saying that the committee is not a formal one, nor is it appointed by the County. It was started by George Rudenheiser and Richard Kosksy, who brought in some other people, including Ed Herrington and Jerry Benjamin from Suny New Paltz. Various executives from Greene and Ulster counties and others make up a bipartisan group.

Mr. Schneier presented us with some of the views of the Committee, as follow:

He said there are only 4 counties in NYS that have Columbia County's system of government - supervisor, etc. He opined that this form is probably unconstitutional, although no one has challenged it, and it would have to go the County Court of Appeals. In order to win a case, one would have to show damage. In regard to the CC Bd. of Supervisors, the system does not have balanced representation. Each supervisor has a weighted vote in regard to the towns. The three largest towns could win a vote. On committees, the smaller towns tend to win the issues. On committees, there is one person, one vote. People tend to be on the committees they care about e.g. highway committee.

The governance group has met with the CC supervisors, who all agree that having a person separate from each of the town boards, either elected or hired by the boards, to manage the County is very important, especially for economic development. The board members are too busy running the boards. NYS is currently about 50/50% - e.g. Ulster and Green counties have appointed executives, Long Island has elected county executives. The CC Bd. of Sups. has agreed to hire a county exec. full time. Pay and timeline are still to be determined. Syracuse U. has a program for training people for these types of jobs. Half of the NYS town and county execs. come out of that program. They are usually not from the town they govern, and they move around frequently. The exec. would take over the tasks of the current committee chairs, e.g. the highway sup. would report to him. In regard to costs, most studies conclude that it saves money. In Ulster, it has. Their county exec. proposed that all highway functions be taken over by the county, all garages and equipment shared, and excess equipment sold. They met with great resistance from the towns, so he offered the county trucks for \$1 and closed the county highway dept. Everyone was happy and they saved money. However, in

Mercer County, NJ, the county exec. established an extensive county park system and it raised taxes.

Politically, it is tough to get it [county exec.] through. But, the current system confuses the process of representation. Mr. Schneier recounted how, when he ran for office he talked to about half the citizens of Copake and no one asked him about CC issues. Local issues are what people care about and what candidates run on. Then each supervisor ends up making county decisions on the CC Bd. of Sups. He said he would like to see an elected county legislature and said many sups. want this. It would have 17-22 members (same # as the Bd. of Sups.) in order to keep the same representation that the towns currently have. Each community e.g. Copake, Hillsdale, Ancram could not have representation by itself; they would become a district. The steps would be: 1. Hire a county exec. 2. Put the issue on a ballot for the entire county. Mr. Peteroy asked, doesn't the Bd. of Sups. act as a legal body? Mr. Schneier said yes, but you want to elect those acting at the county level on county issues. Ms. Becker said that this governance committee sounded like "back room politics." Mr. Schneier said you could look at it that way, but it's a group of citizens gathering to talk about issues that are important, and the next step is for the county to appoint such a committee. Elliot Spitzer appointed a committee to study govt. Chris Grant [on the planning board] works for them. Paterson ignored the report. Mr. Schneier said NYS has more local govts. than Calif. If NYS fired all state employees, it would still pay more tax per capita than Mass. We pay town, village, state, etc. There is at least \$100,000 state funds to study this.

Mr. Dodson said that the Office of Real Property is intending to take over the GIS, and he wondered about the consolidation of assessors. Mr. Schneier said this is all part of both the discussions of the committee and the Bd. of Sups. There is talk of regional planning; it has been done in other states. In some states, there are no local planning bds. Mr. Dodson asked if the Regional Farmland Protection Plan had been discussed. Mr. Schneier did not know of it. He said they had been talking about starting more outreach to various active committees in the towns, in order to let people know what the group has been doing and to get more input. Ms. Mettler asked if they would be issuing a report. He said no, the next step would be for the county to obtain a grant from NYS to set up a committee on governance. Mr. Dodson asked how this issue affects us as a comp. plan committee, saying we would be complete by this fall. Mr. Schneier said, with a laugh, give yourselves another year. He suggested that each town should have an advisory group for consolidation issues. Copake should examine whether it would benefit more from consolidation with Hillsdale, Ancram or Gallatin. His committee has also been looking at the implications of consolidation of school superintendents. Mr. Dodson added fire depts., local court systems and police depts. Mr. Weber suggested zoning, saying once there is a county planning board, then you might have county zoning. Mr. Peteroy asked about agencies that are unionized. Mr. Schneier said that is tricky since all of them have different contracts. Mr. Peteroy said the fire depts. are separate municipalities and maybe the county is the only one who could pay them. Mr. Schneier said the trend is to consolidation, professional and paid. However, the local communities want local, so we have very inefficient govt.

Mr. Davis asked how would votes be apportioned if we went to an elected county legislature. Mr. Schneier replied, one person, one vote. Mr. Davis said if you change to an elected system based on the population, aren't you shifting the emphasis to Hudson. Mr. Schneier replied that Hudson is not that big - 7,200 pop. If Copake, Ancram and Hillsdale were made a district, that would be 6,000 people. Mr. Dodson asked what kind of offices would exist at the town level. Mr. Schneier said we would still have the highway, planning, court, etc. Mr. Davis asked how we would be saving money if we were paying county govt. Mr. Schneier replied that, for one, the sup. salary would go down, since he would not have as much work. The whole budget would go down. Ms. Mettler said that this scenario is for a county legislature and strong small towns. What about the issue of consolidation? Mr. Schneier said it would be very difficult to centralize planning. An option would be for the county to have some veto power. Ms. Mettler asked about an appointed county exec. Mr. Schneier said he prefers an elected exec, but most others (sups. and in the group) prefer appointed. Mr. Weber asked if we lose some of our democracy. Mr. Schneier said not really, because currently town sups. are not elected on county issues, but they make decisions without input from town constituents. Mr. Peteroy asked about the power to hire and fire. Mr. Schneier said they couldn't do this in unionized depts., but nothing has been decided. Mr. Peteroy said four towns were opposed to county execs. Mr. Dodson asked if it does the comp. plan any good to look at options for county vs. town govt. Mr. Schneier said no, but if there is a county study committee, one of us should be on it. Mr. Dodson asked what the timeline is, and wouldn't ideas change as other people came on the committee - Roy Brown's [head of Bd. of Sups.] job is one year. Mr. Schneier said he didn't know what the timeline would be - Carmine Rappaport might know. He also said these issues don't break along party lines. It's about different towns seeing interests in different ways. Very personal issues are involved. Gov. Cuomo may push for it, since NYS is in such fiscal crisis. Towns and school districts will be pushed to consolidate. Mr. Dodson said he thought that at a bare minimum, the comp. plan should have some info. on consolidation and a suggestion that the town should appoint a committee to stay informed about what is happening at the county level.

Mr. Schneier was thanked and the meeting continued. The minutes of Jan 11 were approved with the following corrections: top 1/3 of last page - the car club meets at the old Taconic Telephone building at the invitation of the owner of the building, who is also a member of the car club.

Delete the sentence that has to do with a \$100,000 exemption.

Ms. Mettler reported that, in light of our wish to apply to the Office of Community Renewal for a grant, she wrote to Supervisor Crowley, who directed an inquiry to Ken Flood as to whether the county is intending to apply for these funds again. We will wait to hear from him. Mr. Dodson said we will include the same goals as before: to study the 122 acres (HR land), downtown revitalization and rezoning. Then Ms. Mettler turned the discussion to our decisions and document about growth and development. Ms. Becker felt that historic buildings should not be moved. Dr. Beneke said that many building will be neglected or torn down anyway. If they are moved and preserved, they will survive and be enjoyed. He asked why they should not be moved. Ms. Becker said

they tell the history of the land they are on. Ms. Mettler said there are pros and cons, but all we are suggesting is that it is something that could be done.

Mr. Peteroy thought we should suggest buffered commercial parks, as it makes it more palatable for the future. Dr. Beneke asked if that would increase the width of the lot size. Mr. Peteroy replied, not necessarily. It is in keeping with the open space policies. Ms. Mettler asked Ms. Becker about her suggestion to note the Copake Lake Conservation group. Mr. Davis said if you specify certain groups, then you have to name them all. We decided to suggest working with all concerned stakeholders' groups. We also made some changes in naming water bodies. Ms. Becker commented that the area north of the north entrance to Copake is a difficult area [for development], with rocks and streams. It was noted that there are businesses there - auto body and the old gas station. We had discussion of the BR and B2 zone, how far back they go - behind Masters property. We also discussed the industrial zone and floating industrial district. We then approved our document on growth and development.

We then turned our attention to the report on demographics of Hillsdale, Ancram and Copake that Mr. Dodson compiled. Mr. Davis said that the new assessor had apparently found that some exemptions are incorrect. Some ag. exemptions are given to whole properties instead of just the % of land under ag. Mr. Dodson said that the idea of the report was to find the big differences and how Copake is unique. Surface water is one distinction; Copake has 10 x's more than Ancram and Hillsdale. This can impact tourism. We discussed non-taxable land, number of lots, average lot size in Copake being much smaller, and the budget per acre and per parcel. Dr. Beneke said that a similar study was done in Dutchess county which showed that the higher the pop. per sq. mile, the higher the taxes. Taxes go up as the density increases. This report shows the same thing. He asked if Camphill is more than one parcel. Yes. There are 30-40 buildings. He asked if they pay taxes. No, they have PILOT, and plan to do more. Ms. Mettler asked what this report means for the future. Mr. Dodson said he didn't know how useful it would be. He said it does tell what types of parcels are available. Ancram has more ag. parcels and larger ones. Copake is the residential town and the vacant land "capital." People have bought land and are holding for the future. But we don't have the most acreage; Hillsdale has more vacant acreage. They have only 200 parcels, but twice the acreage. Taconic Shores pulls Copake's average lot size down. There are about 400 homes on 50' x 100' lots. Other key points - 1. Copake has many more 1 family year round homes. That means a bigger demand for services. 2. Copake has many fewer parcels > 10 acres. 3. Many more seasonal homes (no heating). 4. Many more multi-purpose structures. 5. Investment properties of non-residents are much more numerous in Copake and Ancram than in Hillsdale. Dr. Beneke said we can't change the current residential demographic or our history. But he wondered about the number of town employees being so much greater in Copake. Ms. Mettler said in regard to services, maybe part of what we should be doing is putting out what assets we have and what exists in order to guide the future. Ms. Becker said that the water bodies have no amenities as they are privately owned. We acknowledged this problem and briefly discussed how we could have more public access. Mr. Dodson said we have an expert in town on riparian rights - Bill Spampinato, Esq. We agreed that we need to think about this report and what we will use in creating the plan. Mr.

Davis said he felt we should be wrapping up our process and coming to some closure. In regard to the discussion on CC's plans, he said we need to pursue our own plans; the county will be on its own timetable. Ms. Roll agreed, saying we could keep on gathering information forever, but perhaps now we need to get back to our goals and the actual writing of the plan. Mr. Peteroy said Camphill's master plan will have a big impact on Copake. We wondered if we should talk to them again to discuss their plan. Ms. Becker said they were going to reorganize the village, redo some buildings and install new energy uses. Dr. Beneke asked how that would affect Town planning. Mr. Peteroy said it would bring in workers, carpenters, etc. Dr. Beneke said we have plenty of local builders, etc.

Ms. Mettler said our next meetings would be Feb. 8, 17 and March 8, 17 and possibly one more.

Mr. Weber made a motion to adjourn, Mr. Davis seconded, and the meeting was adjourned at 9:35 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Roberta Roll