



TOWN OF WARNER

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Board of Selectmen WORK SESSION - DRAFT MEETING MINUTES

Town Hall- Lower Meeting Room
Friday, February 18, 2022, 4:00 p.m.

I. Open Meeting/Roll Call/Attendance

Chairman Clyde Carson opened the meeting at 4:05 p.m. and recognized the full board: Carson, Sam Bower, and Christine Frost.

Also in attendance: Michael Tabory, Leah Richards, Charlie Albano, Neil Nevins, Amelia Gardner, Nancy Martin, Faith Minton, Don Hall, Ed Mical, Apryl Blood, Peter Anderson, Patty Anderson, Anthony Mento, Jim Wilson, Lori Garrett, Dan Morrison and Jonathan Lord; Town Administrator Diane Ricciardelli; Administrative Assistant Judy Newman-Rogers; and Recording Secretary Ray Carbone.

- (UNCLEAR: “Madeline” ???, of 17 East Main Street, unit 4;
- “Blodgett” (longtime resident)?,
- “Susan Morrison(?) “works with Lori at the Warner Connects’ Food Pantry”-(??)

II. Warner Community Center (WCC)

Discussion about current and possible additional tenants and/or uses for the building, (aka the “Old Graded School”, the Town-owned structure is roughly 100 years old.)

Two organizations mentioned frequently: Warner Connects is a nonprofit local organization that currently operates the Food Pantry and the Family Closet, a community thrift store, both located in the WCC. Community Action Program (CAP) of Belknap-Merrimack Counties is a regional nonprofit organization; it manages local fuel and rental assistance programs and serves as referral to other service organizations in the area.

Chairman Clyde Carson introduced Charlie Albano, Chairman of the Economic Development Advisory Committee (EDAC). Charlie talked about his committee and the work it’s done since being created several years ago. The group has been especially focused on the WCC for some time now: it has done a walk-through of the whole building and established that it has 10,800 square-feet of space. He submitted some renderings of possible interior and exterior changes to the WCC drawn by a member of EDAC.

Charlie said that he's heard people say that there is limited access to the WCC, partly because of the recent coronavirus pandemic. But there are tenants there, including the Food Pantry and the Family Closet thrift shop, he said.

As EDAC has considered use of the building, one issue that has come to the forefront has been the idea of some kind of local childcare center. Such a service would be extremely valuable to the community, particularly for parents who are unable to work outside the home because of their childcare responsibilities.

Recently, EDAC worked with the New Hampshire Central Planning Commission (NHCP) to compile a survey, asking residents about businesses/services that they would like to see in Town. The results were "pretty good," Charlie said, with 150 respondents, representing about 6% of the Town residents; about 72% of the respondents identified a childcare center as an "immediate" or a "soon" need. There was a childcare business operating in the WCC at one time, and building seems to have space that may be well suited for such an operation.

Finally, Charlie told the group that there are both small and large grants that are available that could help to pay for work that might be needed on either the interior or the exterior of the WCC.

One participant asked Charlie if 6% is a good response level for determining a community's needs; he said that it was. He also said that EDAC has reached out to other childcare operations in the area, including one in Bradford. The participant suggested that the committee also speak with Robin Belkner, Director of the Warner Head Start program that operates in the WCC, and others in the nearby area who have experience in childcare businesses.

Sam said that he understands the focus on a new childcare operation, but he would like to use this meeting to gain more information about the WCC's current renters and how they serve the community. Do they feel the building suits their needs? Could they use more or less space? Is it an efficient building? Some organizations use all or some space only on certain days of the week, while others are open almost daily. How does that work out? He pointed out that EDAC has a floor plan and he'd like to use that to gain a better understanding of how the building is used on a weekly basis.

Christine asked that the conversation proceed with the participants introducing themselves, noting the organizations they represent, and that organization's use and interest in the WCC.

Madeline ???, of 17 East Main Street, unit 4, said that she had been a recipient of some of the services provided by the Warner Connects NH Food Pantry and CAP Community Resource Center and she now provides volunteer assistance at the Simonds School and at other places in the community. She said that the impact of the organizations that operate in the WCC is "remarkable," reaching about 13.4% of the community.

Amelia Gardner, Chairman of the Agricultural Commission, works at Blodgett Farm-Out in town. She stays connected to Warner Connects and serves on the EDAC.

Nancy Martin is Chairman of the Conservation Commission and serves as that group's representative on the EDAC. She also volunteers at the Simonds School.

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Faith Minton is on EDAC and serves as a local volunteer.

Blodgett??? has been in Town for 35 years.

Ed Mical, the Town's Emergency Management Director, used to handle building maintenance at the "old graded school."

Don Hall is Vice-Chairman of the Planning Board.

Apryl Blood is Director of the Parks & Recreation Department, and also works with Warner Connects.

Peter Anderson is Chairman of Warner Connects' Board of Directors.

Anthony Mento has architectural experience and has worked on several Town projects. He currently assists Charlie with EDAC work as needed.

Jim Wilson is the United Church of Christ pastor at the United Church of Warner. He said the church is a "strong supporter" of Warner Connects and hopes that the Town doesn't try to "reinvent the wheel" regarding currently available services.

Patty Anderson operates the Family Closet for Warner Connects; the store is open two days per week.

Dan Morrison has recently become a member of the Warner Connects' Board of Directors.

Susan Morrison works with Lori at the Warner Connects' Food Pantry.

Neil Nevins is the President of the Board of Directors of the MainStreet Warner, Inc., a local nonprofit organization that focuses on community needs and building connections through art, food security and ecological living practices; Neil is also the co-owner of MainStreet Bookends and a member of EDAC.

Jonathan Lord is a longtime resident and former member of the Board of Selectmen.

Michael Tabory is the Chief Operating Officer for the Community Action Program (CAP) of Belknap-Merrimack Counties.

Leah Richards is a new, part-time employee at the CAP Area Resource Center, which has an office in the WCC.

Christine thanked the participants and asked if the current WCC tenants would begin to address what services their organizations currently provide; who those support; how they currently utilize the WCC building; how they could ideally envision using the building for future needs; and any building issues that now, or may in the future, either prohibit or support operations.

Michael Tabory began by saying CAP has operated its Area Resource Center in the WCC for a long time. CAP has just completed a community assessment (which it does every three years) and one of the results of that assessment is that it identifies what the needs are for the

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vulnerable populations that CAP serves (low-income, elderly, those with food security issues, etc.). He said the assessment results would likely be available sometime in May or June.

The CAP Area Resource Center did operate the local Food Pantry for some time, but Warner Connects recently took over that function; CAP is happy to continue supporting Warner Connects to help serve the community, Michael said. Otherwise, the office staff (1 full-time and 1 part-time) provides referrals and administers various programs including fuel and electrical assistance programs and the State's Emergency Rental Assistant Program. He said the WCC provides an excellent space for the CAP services.

Leah Richards said the office space that CAP currently uses in the WCC is probably bigger than what the two employees need. She noted that, with the pandemic, fewer people come into the office now. But there are some challenges that the building creates: the entrance to the office has steps leading up to it and the door handle isn't right – it's simply a jerry-rigged contraption. In addition, while the WCC is a "beautiful old building," so is its heating system. And there is a need for proper signage to easily direct people to the CAP office. (Later in the meeting, one participant said that the top floor is uncomfortably hot during the summer.)

Michael said the new CAP assessment would help to determine if the organization sees a need for local childcare. The Head Start program, which provides care for pre-school children, has operated in the WCC for some years now, although participation had decreased due to the pandemic. (Head Start is operated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which did not provide a representative to the meeting.)

Christine asked the CAP representatives if they could provide some numbers, i.e., how many families/individuals served by the individual programs. Michael said they could and would get that information back to the Select Board.

Leah did note that there are only six children currently enrolled in Head Start. She also said that the CAP office is typically open Monday-Friday, 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Lori Garrett began talking about Warner Connects by addressing how her organization took over the Food Pantry from CAP. Currently, the operation serves about 300-325 families per month, with more than 70% living in Warner.

"Majority of what we do is food distribution and addressing food insecurity," Lori said but typically there are other issues that are noted with a new client. When someone comes to Warner Connects for the first time, they've typically delayed addressing problems for some time, either because they are ashamed or don't know where to go for help. As a result, the person/family is frequently dealing with debt problems and other challenges. Warner Connects regularly reaches out to the community for help and the assistance of both local volunteers and the support of other larger organizations, e.g., New London Hospital, local doctors' offices, the Simonds School, visiting nurses, etc.

The entire program has grown rapidly, providing "an incredible service" to people going through difficulties, and Warner Connects sees still more opportunities to serve the community, Lori said.

The idea of having a space like the Community Center (i.e., WCC) is that it's a convenient single location where people know that they can find all kinds of assistance, from specific

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programs to providing a myriad of educational resources (i.e., working on a community garden). This idea could be in contrast to some talk that has been in Town recently, about using the WCC for possible retail or other business development. "I'd rather have the building be a place focused on the community and the needs that are presented to us," Lori said.

One need that Warner Connects noted shortly after its formation was for inexpensive (or, sometimes, free) clothing and shoes in the community, Lori said. After reaching out to residents and organizations in the area, the group realized that they had enough material to open a thrift store. About seven months ago, Patty Anderson began operating the Family Closet store; profits go to funding the Food Pantry. The store has also served to introduce more people in the community to Warner Connects, educating people who may not have known about what the organization does and how it serves Warner and the surrounding areas, Lori said.

Returning to how Warner Connects uses the WCC, Lori said its offices are on the ground floor, which has access through the rear door. Adjacent to that area is a smaller room that may have been used for storage at one time; it's now used to store foodstuffs for the Food Pantry, and it's where most of the pantry's clients come to get their allotments. The organization also uses a carport in the back, a store shed in the back of the property and a storage unit in the area around Interstate 89's storage area. (The rear parking lot area is also used by Warner Connects).

"We're a very busy place and the building serves us well," Lori said.

Generally, Lori said that Warner Connects is "bursting at the seams" in the WCC. The Food Pantry uses six freezers and refrigerators that are in the office, as well as one commercial refrigerator and two other refrigerator/freezers; overflow is stored in other areas of the building as space and other operations allow. The lack of storage can create problems because often people will call in private donations and, "typically you have to pick it up now or you can't have it." There is grant money that may be available to purchase a walk-in refrigerator or freezer to help in those situations. The pantry volunteers could also use some kind of a "breakdown" area that would allow them to unpack boxes of foodstuffs and arrange them so clients can clearly see what the operation can offer on a particular day.

Currently there are about 15 volunteers who work with the Food Pantry, although most only come in one day per week. In total, there are approximately 20 Warner Connects volunteers in the WCC on a regular basis.

Lori said that, if it were possible, Warner Connects could possibly use two entire floors of the WCC for its operations. Right now it can be challenging to find a safe and quiet space to speak with clients who may only want to share information confidentially. In addition, donations can arrive erratically, creating temporary space crunches. In addition, she said, before the pandemic, the staff would sometimes provide temporary office space for service agencies that are primarily based in Concord; that would allow a confidential environment for clients. But that is much more difficult to do now, she said.

(Lori also noted that Warner Connects frequently interacts with Elizabeth Labbe, who is the Welfare Director and works with the "Gear-Up" Homeschooler group that has met in the WCC in the past). She suggested that it might be more convenient if Elizabeth's office was in the

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WCC. (Labbe was not available to be at the meeting, but Board members noted that they had received information about the Homeschooler group.)

Lori said that not everyone understands the challenges that people can have in a rural area like Warner when it comes to accessing essential services like the ones available at the WCC. Some people don't have dependable phone service and/or may not be able to drive to the facility. Mail service can also be erratic, depending on a person's mobility and on the exact spot where a mailbox is located. "We do a lot of home visits, assisting with applications at people's houses," she said, as well as coordinating things like appliance repairs. Having the WCC serve as a hub for the whole Kearsarge area is very helpful, she said.

Patty Anderson talked about her role managing the Family Closet, the Warner Connects' clothing thrift shop that opened in 2021. She said the response from the community has been "overwhelming," with donations and other support voluntarily provided. Patty said that about 45 people come into the store weekly; it's currently open only two days per the week. Users represent a range of people, from those with significant clothing needs to local bargain-hunters. Family Closet works with various other organizations, including the Simonds School and Kearsarge Partners, to identify those in the community that may have needs but may be unaware of the store (and/or other services). Patty says the space she uses now is adequate, but it's "packed to the gills... We are too tight."

Warner Connects doesn't currently have a lease with the Town for its use of the WCC, Lori said. (Later, Clyde said that the Board didn't know if a lease was necessary and that it has been glad to have the community services make use of the space.)

Don Hall said that the WCC building has been "kind of a dinosaur" for years, and that it needs attention. Christine said that there are evidently some life-safety issues in it and those need to be addressed.

Returning to the safety issues in the WCC, Christine said that the Town has to decide how it's going to proceed with the building. But she said the Select Board has been advised recently that every tenant needs to have a lease (or similar agreement) and individual liability insurance.

Christine echoed the sentiments of several people at the meeting by thanking those who represent the social service organizations for attending and for explaining their services (both in essence and how they relate to the WCC). She added that the Board would like this to be the first of several public meetings aimed at understanding how to best use the building for the community. She complimented the renderings that the EDAC presented and said the Board wants to "make sure that the building is something that everybody's proud of, wants to be a part of... And (insures) this is an asset to the community moving forward." The Board is not ready to make any announcements about the WCC right now but that the process will move forward and asked for patience.

Amelia Gardner of the Agricultural Commission talked about her "Mobile Food Pantry" that she brings down to the WCC occasionally, allowing people to have fresh fruits and vegetable. "I'm super motivated about a Community Garden that can be connected to the Simonds School and Warner Connects," she added.

III. Grant Approval

Clyde made a motion to approve a grant proposal of \$14,300 to Warner and authorize Town Administrator Diane Ricciardelli to manage the funds. Christine seconded. In a voice vote, the motion was approved unanimously.

IV. Non-Public Session – Under RSA 91:A (If needed.)

Chairman Carson made a motion that the Board adjourn the public session of the meeting and go into a Non-public session under RSA 91-A:3, II (hiring) at 8:33 p.m.; no other work will be done in a public session. Frost seconded. In a voice vote, the motion passed unanimously.

Carson thanked members of the public for participating in the meeting.