**Planning Board Meeting Date**: January 22nd, 2025

**Time**: 6:30 PM

**Location**: In-person/Zoom

**Attendees** **In-person**: Dee Daley (Chair), Josh Muhonen (Vise Chair), Bruce Ruotsala, Craig Smeeth, Graham Heagy, Aaron Bertram, Robert Fournier,

**Via Zoom**: Nichole Talbot, John Schaumloffel

**Citizens In-person**: Virginia Harden, Karin Miller, Colin Carroll, Nancy Clark, Deb Harrity, Time Jones, Liz Freeman, Robert Knowles, Susan Mallett

**Citizens Via Zoom**: Louise DelPapa, Jack Low

**6:30 PM - Summary of the Proposal**

Dee provided a comprehensive overview of the proposed changes to the cluster development section (Section E) of the zoning ordinance. The amendment represents an update of the current text and includes a mix of new provisions and retained content. The primary objectives of the changes are:

1. **Clarifying Existing Regulations:** Address ambiguities related to yield maps, density calculations, and definitions of open space versus conservation land.
2. **Fostering Affordable Housing Development:** Create opportunities for “missing middle” housing (e.g., starter homes, downsizing options) by introducing flexibility in lot size and infrastructure requirements.
3. **Proactive Compliance with State Mandates:** Ensure the town meets state requirements for housing availability and affordability consistent with NH Fair Share Housing law.
4. **Balancing Growth with Conservation:** Preserve New Ipswich’s rural character by directing development to appropriate locations while safeguarding agricultural and conservation lands.

**Detailed Presentation of Proposed Changes**

**Key Proposed Revisions**

1. **Open Space Requirements:**
   * Reduction from 55% to 35%, conservation land must be meaningful and prioritized for ecological, agricultural, or recreational use.
2. **Lot Density and Yield Calculations:**
   * Yield plans (a set of plans showing conventional plat layout for purposes of buildable lot calculation prior to development of a cluster plan/plat previously required for cluster subdivisions, would no longer be mandatory.
   * Lot density would be determined using a simplified formula: divide the buildable land by the minimum lot size for the zoning district, while excluding wetlands and steep slopes.
3. **Setbacks and Lot Sizes:**
   * Reduced setbacks from 50 feet to 20 feet to allow for closer clustering of homes, which is expected to reduce infrastructure costs and improve affordability.
4. **Shared Infrastructure:**
   * Allow for shared septic systems, wells, and access roads which may minimize individual lot costs and reduce environmental impacts.
5. **Density Bonuses:**
   * Introduced as incentives for developers to include community amenities such as playgrounds, trails, or agricultural spaces.

**Public Comment Period**

The Chair opened the floor to the public for questions, prior to position related comments

**Questions Regarding Changes**

1. **Rationale for changes:**
   * The board explained that ambiguities in the current zoning ordinance, particularly around yield maps, open space definitions, and inconsistent review processes, had created delays and conflicts. These inefficiencies prompted the need for a rewrite to streamline development reviews and encourage housing growth while maintaining transparency.
   * Several residents questioned whether the proposal was motivated by state mandates or local housing demands. The board clarified that the changes were part of a broader effort to address local housing shortages while ensuring compliance with state laws requiring towns to provide affordable and appropriate housing stock. It was emphasized that these changes aim to protect the town from state-imposed developments while allowing for locally managed growth.
2. **Housing Affordability:**
   * Was the goal of the amendments to increase housing supply and whether affordability was a significant focus of the proposal. The board identified that increasing the housing supply in New Ipswich is a key objective, given the town's lag in meeting the demand for 20–50 new homes annually. The proposed changes aim to indirectly address affordability by reducing development costs through shared infrastructure (e.g., wells, septic systems, and roads) and clustering homes. However, the proposal does not mandate affordability, which could deter developers from pursuing projects.
   * Some residents expressed frustration that the proposal lacks direct measures to ensure affordability, such as requiring developers to dedicate a percentage of homes for lower-income families.

**Public comment**

1. **Reduced Setbacks:**
   * Many residents opposed the reduction of setbacks from 50 feet to 20 feet, arguing that this would allow homes to be built too close to property lines, disrupting privacy and reducing property values.
   * **Resident Quote:** "Twenty feet between homes completely changes the rural feel of our neighborhoods. This isn’t Nashua—we live here for the open spaces."
2. **Lot Sizes:**
   * Several participants voiced concerns about smaller lot sizes leading to a more urbanized feel, particularly in rural districts. Residents emphasized that many moved to New Ipswich specifically for its spacious, rural environment.
3. **Open Space and Conservation Land**
   * There were comments and concerns voiced about the reduction in required open space from 55% to 35%, arguing that it prioritizes developer flexibility over conservation. Concerns also noted concerns about fragmented, small parcels of open space offer limited ecological or recreational value, or limited support for wildlife corridors.
   * **Resident Quote:** "The open spaces we’re left with under these rules won’t even support a hiking trail. What’s the point of preserving land if it’s just a few scattered acres here and there?"
4. **Yield Plans and Lot Count Calculations**
   * Some residents argued that removing the requirement for yield plans would reduce oversight and accountability, leaving lot density calculations open to interpretation.
   * A participant pointed out that omitting detailed language about yield plans from the zoning ordinance could confuse voters and create inconsistent interpretations over time.
5. **Water Resources and Infrastructure**
   * Concerns about the feasibility and long-term sustainability of shared wells and septic systems, particularly in areas where water tables are already strained
   * Public comments also included suggestions to consult local well companies to gather anecdotal evidence of water supply issues.
6. **Alignment with the Town’s Master Plan**
   * Concerns were noted that the proposal failed to align with the town’s 20-year-old master plan, which emphasizes preserving rural character and large tracts of open space and that more information may be gained waiting for the Master Plan updates.
7. **Density Bonuses and Affordability**
   * Several participants criticized the lack of specific criteria for awarding density bonuses in the Zoning Articles, calling for greater transparency to ensure bonuses are applied fairly and effectively. There was skepticism that including information in the Subdivision Regulations would allow as much public input.
   * Some residents expressed skepticism that developers would prioritize affordability over profit, even with density bonuses.

**Public Comment Summary**

* **Themes of Concerns:**
  + Reduced setbacks and open space requirements.
  + Perceived urbanization of the town’s rural districts.
  + Lack of clear and enforceable provisions for affordability.
  + Concerns about water resource strain and infrastructure limitations.
* **Supportive Feedback:**
  + A few residents acknowledged the need for zoning updates to address housing shortages and streamline approval processes. However, even supportive comments called for greater specificity and alignment with community priorities.

**9:10 PM** – Bruce makes a motion to close public comment. Seconded by Josh. Vote passes unanimously.

**Response to Public Comment**

The board explained that yield plans often lead to drawn-out negotiations and unnecessary delays, since it requires 2 sets of plans and there is a lack of clarity of how lot viability which has created potential for adverse interactions with developers. The Board explained the new calculation method—based on minimum lot size and buildable land provides clarity while streamlining the approval process.

The board reiterated that the proposed changes apply primarily to cluster subdivisions and do not change the minimum lot size for conventional subdivisions. They noted that clustering homes on smaller lots (where the soil supports it) allows for more open space and better conservation outcomes.

The board agreed to consider adding clearer guidelines for density bonuses to avoid arbitrary or inconsistent applications, and that was planned for the subdivision regulations. The Zoning Ordinance is not meant to be as detailed as design criteria, and some flexibility may be needed beyond a yearly vote by all townspeople to see what strategies are best for the community, however the board agreed to consider adding clearer guidelines for density bonuses to avoid arbitrary or inconsistent applications.

**Board Deliberations**

The Chair summarized the main themes raised during the public comment period. These included concerns about reduced setbacks, the loss of open space, ambiguities in the proposal, alignment with the town’s master plan, and water resource challenges. Each of these was discussed in detail:

1. **Setbacks and Rural Character:**
   * Some board members acknowledged that smaller setbacks could lead to concerns about privacy, aesthetics, and property values.
   * One member proposed increasing setbacks for rural districts to 50 feet while maintaining 20-foot setbacks in village centers or more densely zoned areas.
   * Others argued that smaller setbacks are essential for enabling clustering, which reduces infrastructure costs and preserves larger tracts of open space.
2. **Open Space Requirements:**
   * Some members defended the reduction, arguing that it aligns with practices in other communities and provides developers with flexibility to design innovative layouts.
   * Other members acknowledged that meaningful open space is critical to maintaining the town’s rural character. They suggested exploring a tiered system where larger developments are required to preserve a higher percentage of open space.
   * A discussion ensued about whether to define “meaningful conservation” more clearly in the ordinance to avoid fragmented parcels.
   * The Board also recognized there is limited ability for the Board to know where cluster subdivisions would be located or fully influence wildlife corridors. While connection may be considered, there is no guarantee that conservation areas will abut another cluster subdivision with conservation areas and there is not a groundswell of cluster proposals (only one in about 10 years).
   * The proposed draft does have wording that is more structured with an attempt minimize fragmented spaces.
3. **Yield Plans and Density Calculations:**
   * Members debated definitions of plats and yield plans. While the Board is in support of simplified calculation method (based on minimum lot size and buildable land), the comments about clear calculations in the subdivision regs was something to consider going forward .
4. **Alignment with the Master Plan:**
   * The board acknowledged that the master plan is outdated and does not reflect current housing challenges or regulatory pressures.
   * Members discussed whether to pause the proposal until the master plan survey is completed and updated priorities are established.
   * Some members argued that delaying the proposal could result in missed opportunities to address immediate housing needs and state mandates.
   * The board consensus seemed to be to move forward with the proposal while committing to updating the master plan to provide a clearer framework for future zoning amendments.
   * They noted that a community survey will soon gather input for the master plan update which will inform additional changes.
5. **Water Resource Concerns:**
   * Members acknowledged the lack of current data on water resources and well performance but emphasized that shared infrastructure (e.g., wells and septic systems) is designed to reduce the environmental impact of individual systems.
   * Some members proposed requiring developers to submit water feasibility studies for cluster subdivisions.
   * Others cautioned against creating additional barriers for developers, arguing that the feasibility of shared infrastructure can be evaluated during the planning process.
   * The board agreed to explore requiring water feasibility studies for certain developments as part of future regulatory updates. The Board noted additional well information was discussed during the drafting process (for future subdivision regs (and agreed that exploring well feasibility would be important for future developments.

**Revisions and Clarifications**

The board discussed potential revisions to the proposal based on public feedback and internal deliberations:

1. **Setback Adjustments:**
   * Proposed increasing setbacks to 30–50 feet in rural districts while maintaining 20-foot setbacks in village centers to balance density and rural character preservation.
2. **Open Space Definitions:**
   * Agreed to add language clarifying that open space must provide ecological, recreational, or agricultural value and cannot consist solely of fragmented, low-value parcels.
3. **Yield Plan Alternatives:**
   * Decided to retain the removal of yield plans but committed to including detailed lot calculation methods in the subdivision regulations.
4. **Density Bonuses:**
   * Discussed adding clearer criteria for awarding density bonuses, ensuring they align with community goals and provide tangible benefits (e.g., trails, playgrounds).

**Debate on Advancing the Proposal**

The board debated whether the proposal was ready to advance to the warrant for a town-wide vote:

1. **Arguments for Advancing the Proposal:**
   * Addressing housing shortages and state mandates requires immediate action.
   * The proposal, while imperfect, represents a step toward improving zoning regulations and fostering thoughtful development.
   * A town-wide vote would provide valuable feedback on public sentiment.
2. **Arguments Against Advancing the Proposal:**
   * Public concerns may indicate the need for further revisions and community engagement.
   * Advancing an incomplete proposal could risk undermining the board’s credibility, however it is difficult to understand the public perspective without a vote.
   * It is difficult to determine much from an outdated master plan, delaying the proposal allows time to align it with the updated master plan.
3. The deliberations underscored the board’s commitment to balancing housing needs, conservation goals, and public sentiment. While advancing the proposal was seen as a necessary step to address pressing challenges, the board acknowledged the need for continued refinement and transparency in the regulatory process.

**10:05 PM –** Dee makes a motion to replace Section E of the zoning ordinance. Josh seconds. Vote passed 4-2-0.

**Public Communication:**

* + Emphasized the need for clear, accessible explanations of the proposal during the deliberative session to address voter concerns and misconceptions.

**10:20 PM** - Josh makes a motion to continue Brook Haven Farm LLC cluster subdivision Map 6/20 & 6/20-9 to date certain February 6th, 2025, at 7:15 PM. Seconded by Bruce, vote passes unanimously.

**Adjournment**

**10:23 PM –** Bruce makes a motion to adjourn, seconded by the Board. Votes passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Steven Satterfield