

Town of Bluff
Planning and Zoning Commission & Bluff Town Council Joint Meeting
Minutes for Wednesday, Nov. 18, 2020 5:30-6:30 pm

VIRTUAL - Bluff Community Center
190th 3rd East, Bluff, Utah 84512

5:33 Roll Call

Town Council Members: Ann Leppanen, Luanne Hook, Linda Sosa, Brant Murray (joined later), Jim Sayers (joined later)

Planning and Zoning Commission: Amanda Podmore (acting chair), Robin Cantrell, Malysa Egge, Sarah Burak, Michael Haviken; P&Z Advisor: Deborah Westfall

New Business

1. Presentation on challenges of RVs in the Town boundaries (Cantrell)

Cantrell presented on the challenges recreational vehicles (RVs) as permanent dwellings posed on the Town. She noted while the P&Z Commission was working on other ordinances, and reviewing past ordinances, the awareness of people living full-time in RVs has come up multiple times. One of the major challenges is in regard to septic systems. While full-time/permanent dwellings have designated septic systems and are regulated with land use clearances, there is a grey area around RVs and mobile residences, as the ordinances are currently written.

In addition, there are significant concerns regarding the density of RVs on smaller lots, with other permanent dwellings nearby. Cantrell noted the Cottonwood addition is a pre-existing subdivision, in which multiple owners had purchased several lots. However, on the smaller parcels (0.39 and 0.43 acres, for example) there could possibly be density issues. Cantrell noted in her research, most other towns do not allow long-term RVs, except in designated RV parks. In Torrey for example, if you have a mobile home, it must be on a foundation with skirting.

The final note in the presentation was regarding the aesthetics and unsightly conditions sometimes created when long-term vehicles and trailers are parked, which could possibly devalue adjacent properties.

The presentation concluded with a few suggestions to address the concerns, including not allowing RVs as permanent homes at all, limiting the number of full-time RVs, or at a minimum requiring a land use clearance to ensure RVs and mobile homes are adhering to correct, safe, and proper density requirements for the parcel. Another option would be to create a separate ordinance specifically for RVs.

Podmore then opened the floor for discussion and comments. Common themes in the discussion included concerns about density, public health, charging for spots, and affordable housing. Each members' comments are listed below:

Murray acknowledged long-term RV habitation posed a concern to the Town, and stated he didn't want Bluff to be a parking lot full of RVs.

Haviken noted over the past 18 months, the P&Z Commission has discussed permanent dwellings in depth, but there is no specific definition of a permanent dwelling.

Hook stated in the General Plan, one of the more prominent considerations was for affordable housing. The other benefit to portable units is their ease of removal, which also can create a bare canvas for someone to come in and build upon and become more permanent. She noted DesignBuildBLUFF is working on creating more affordable housing. She also asked at what point does a dwelling become “mobile”? She asked the Commission to consider if a mobile home is built into another unit, tiny houses, and other smaller, portable units. Hook said it would be a significant change to Bluff to remove all the mobile or manufactured homes, and wanted to get clarification regarding what would be considered permanent, and if there was a timeframe that encompassed “permanent”. Hook also asked “if you have a lot in town, and you want to just come camp on it in your RV, would that be allowed?”

Cantrell noted many of these types of units are already permanently hooked to utilities, and if they are part of a house, that is a sense of permanence. These could be considered non-conforming.

Podmore said she wanted to address the density issues specifically, more so than just the 1 RV residences.

Sosa commented that on her walks on the East side of Town, she sees many RVs parked, although, many of them have left recently. She noticed there are small propane tanks and wanted to know if the land owners are charging for the spaces. If so, are they treating them like a full business and charging rent? Sosa also mentioned that she could see businesses in Town might want to encourage mobile and RV homes to house their employees as a means of affordable housing.

Burak piggybacked on Sosa’s comment about charging for the spaces, and likened it more to an RV park. Burak then said that it would not be in the best interest of people who are seasonal or need affordable housing if the Town was to prohibit RVs entirely. She suggested that it would be beneficial to have an ordinance that had stipulations regarding density and how many dwellings were allowed on a lot. Burak ended with the thought that affordable housing is a bigger issue in our community.

Egge agreed with other members, and brought up affordable housing and seasonal workers. She stated there is value in knowing a dwelling has access to septic/waste and water. Egge suggested creating a flowchart including items such as how long the resident is staying, if other RVs are already on the property, etc. She also brought up that it would be in poor taste to judge what people should or should not live in. She stressed that these decisions on the Town-level should be dictated by measurable, objective regulations, as opposed to aesthetics.

Leppanen shared that other communities are struggling with this, as well. There was a podcast about 2 years ago about people living in their cars, tents, RVs in the tech-heavy areas in California, and the Town of Bluff must use data and also look at the types of constitutional challenges states have had in mandating these types of issues. While she stressed that there are many people who live in mobile living situations, she does take concern when there are multiple RVs on the same lot. She also agreed that Bluff needs to figure out a solution to affordable housing.

Westfall agreed with other members regarding the concern for density, public health and safety in regard to septic. She said these things would be the most important considerations for the group moving forward.

The floor was then opened for public comment:

Wendy Smith: "Over in my neighborhood, on 5th street there was a double installation of trailers. Both had electricity and I assume both were hooked up. It appears that they have all the hook ups that make them legal. They have been there for over a year, and then the smaller one moved in. One has since left, the larger one (on wheels) is mobile it is for sale, there is a for sale sign on the property. If it changes hands, this could be an opportunity for the Town or Planning and Zoning to make a regulation about it."

Haviken noted that there are two lots located in Copper Cliffs II available for affordable housing that haven't been used yet, and appear to have been sitting for a long time. He thought they had been set aside by the group out of Moab for affordable housing. Leppanen confirmed that, yes, Community Rebuilds did have two lots, but while many people have applied, they have been unable to qualify because a) they would not be able to repay the debt, or b) they are slightly over the income level. Due to Covid-19, Community Rebuilds is on hold.

2. Discuss potential solutions to RVs within the Town boundaries

Podmore noted that this was Cantrell's last meeting, and while she had put a lot of time into preparing this discussion, another member might need to step up and take on this project.

Burak suggested it could be as simple as writing a short paragraph and adding RVs to the existing ordinance already in place. She noted this paragraph should specifically address density. Cantrell agreed and said the density issue is one of the biggest concerns, especially on small lots which could create health issues. Hook noted the square footage or acreage might remove control from RVs specifically. Podmore will add this to an upcoming Planning and Zoning agenda.

3. Discuss the formation of an Economic Diversification Committee for the Town (Egge)

Egge began the discussion with a presentation and asked the Commission and Council to help answer the main question of whether the Town would want to create an Economic Diversification Committee or Work Group.

If it was agreed upon to proceed, she believes this group would be quite active, and would require engaged members to help run it. She posed multiple questions such as "would compensation be available?" "Do we have the personnel resources available to staff such a group?" "What length of time would the group be considering?"

Egge shared that the Town, for the most part, has a single sector reliance on tourism which creates vulnerability and can create boom/bust cycles. Other benefits to economic diversification include reduced commuting for goods or work, and expending fewer resources by not having to leave town as frequently. The intention for this group is to grow the Town mindfully, while supporting the existing businesses. Egge stressed that financial health should not be the only measure of health, but a multitude of facets, and this would be an investment in human capital and the community. She said this project could be supplemented with partners who are already doing this work, and wanted to also consider our neighbors on the Navajo Nation.

Murray was in support of this idea, and posed a few questions. "What would be the measure of success?" "What are the goals? Is it to increase the standard of living?" He also wanted to ensure our native neighbors should be included.

Sayers mentioned Town Council was currently conducting a strategic planning session, and believes answers to whether we need such a Committee will be made clear in the near future. He suggested the Town could better speak to the questions posed by Egge after the results of the survey are obtained.

Sosa said in our area, it's very important to market ahead of time to get businesses interested in working here. She noted the limited people and limited resources which can make this difficult.

Hook appreciated the idea of collaborating with tribal groups, and thinks it would be beneficial to pursue economic development diversification as a Town, with or without a committee. She brought up that Bluff is going to be getting fiber optic internet, which will significantly help businesses and citizens. Hook thought a committee would be able to approach and work with businesses to support new ventures. In the meantime, she urged everyone to be available to opportunities that arise.

Leppanen thanked Egge for her work and time, and agreed that many good questions had been raised. She did acknowledge that tourism is Bluff's "one trick pony", and did express concern about having a big box shop come to Bluff. She supports having a committee, but asks that the timing of it happen after the Planning and Zoning Commission replaces its 2 open seats. She also said with the fiber optic installations in January and/or February of 2021, that it would make a big impact on the businesses. (This is a donation from Emery Telcom; originally the Town was not supposed to be getting fiber optic.) Leppanen asked that the committee have a representative from the Business Owners of Bluff, a member from Planning and Zoning, and someone from Navajo Nation. She said the end of winter or early spring would be a better timeframe, and that ideally Covid-19 would dissipate.

Egge appreciated the feedback from the group and acknowledged that they are all important discussion points. She shared that the committee would play an important part in the community and be in tune with Town Council, Planning and Zoning, Business Owners of Bluff, other jurisdictions around Bluff and the County. She expressed it would be great to be able to convince businesses that Bluff is a good place to be, and creating jobs and keeping human capital is in the best interest of the Town's longevity.

4. Other- none

Haviken made the motion to adjourn the meeting. Cantrell seconded the motion. Burak – Aye, Podmore – Aye, Cantrell – Aye, Egge – Aye, Haviken – Aye. All in favor, none opposed. The motion passed unanimously. Meeting adjourned at 6:27pm