



SUSTAIN SOUTHERN MAINE

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Steep Falls Pilot Project Technical Workshop March 13th, 2013

Summary of Beginning Session

Gordie Billington, the town Manager of Standish opened the meeting with some background on why Standish is interested doing this project in Steep Falls. Standish's recent comprehensive plan, completed in 2006, identified village centers in the town as the growth areas for the next 30-50 years. Standish Corner has already gone through the village center planning process and adopted a form based code to shape and guide growth. The Sebago Lake village is just finishing up their process and is moving on to implementation. Steep Falls is next in line and this will serve as a starting point for its process. Introductions are done all around and the floor is turned over to Kat Beaudoin from Sustain Southern Maine. She gives an overview of the SSM initiative and the pilot project process. She then reviewed the schedule for the day.

Bud Benson takes the floor and gives some context on the Steep Falls area. Originally a mill town there are no large employers left in the village. In 2006 as part of the comprehensive plan update a survey of residents was done. The top 3 reasons given for living in Steep Falls were rural character, relatives/family, and tax level. The village is designated a growth area because in the 15 years leading up to the 2006 Comprehensive plan update the majority of growth happened outside these centers, spread out across the town. In order to preserve the rural character that Standish residents value the town decided future growth should be focused in certain areas. The survey that was done showed that many residents supported this idea and supported the creation of a variety of housing in the centers. Current zoning in Steep Falls is primarily village center with some residential and commercial/industrial zones. These will be up for review as part of the village center planning process so participants were told not to restrict their vision to the current zoning.

At this point Caroline Paras from the Greater Portland Council of Governments was asked to talk about her work to restart the Mountain Division rail line that goes through Steep Falls. Standish has been involved in the effort in the past. The line goes from Portland through Fryeburg toward the great lakes and ran until 1984. It is being looked at for freight use at the moment to provide an alternative to trucks to get goods to Portland and the harbor and other rail lines there. In the future there is potential for passenger rail as well. Paralleling the track would be a multi-use path. It is a large project and not near term but there is a lot of potential and there is already some businesses that would like to use it should be constructed. The entire right of way is currently in public hands and so no eminent domain would be needed for the rail line. There are some areas where slopes would not allow the path to be in the current right of way and that would need to be solved on a case by case basis. That is far in the future though as engineering studies are done on a town to town basis.

There was some discussion about what this would mean for property owners in terms of access across the tracks and the potential for creating public access to people's land. These questions will be addressed in the planning process for the line as it moves forward. A full public outreach and planning process would be undertaken in the event that starting the rail moves forward. Today SSM just wanted to inform you as to all the possibilities for the future so that you can incorporate them in today's workshop.

Mitch Razor, a landscape architect working with SSM, took over to give some examples from elsewhere to inspire and inform the afternoon discussion. First he reviewed some history of the area and of similar villages. He then looked at some important themes and ideas that are useful for think about areas like this including conservation subdivisions, transit oriented developments, town greens, and integrating trails into local planning.

At this point Kat went around the room asking each resident and business owner to give their thoughts about Steep Falls.

First person: This person likes the rural character and current community that is there. They do not want a lot of new businesses or new houses but would like to see sidewalks and landscaping. Route 11 in particular is not currently walkable because it is narrow and has a lot of truck traffic. Families were not seen to be very desirable due to the tax burden. They saw the train coming through as a good thing but leery about the potential for land being taken. By rural character they mean that they like the ability to walk out their back yard into the woods and not end up in someone else's back yard.

The next person agrees, improved pedestrian amenities are desirable, particularly on Route 11. They would like to see a passenger train station but is skeptical that it will happen.

The next person is completely satisfied with the village as is and sees little need for it to change. They can see new development of a light commercial type on the old mill property and would like to see a train station/coffee shop in the center of town.

The next person said that they did not have much to add but agreed that sidewalks would be very nice and that more people would walk if it was safer to do so.

The next person also agreed that sidewalks and landscaping would be desirable and would like to see them as part of a visual treatment that would help slow traffic through the area. Is skeptical about the train as they lived in Steep Falls back when the freight train was still active and it shook their house. They could see the old mill property being developed for residential or commercial but would like architectural design standards for it and the village as a whole to make sure that new development matches the existing buildings.

The next person added that they liked the idea of the town making some recreational area along the river. They don't really want to see the village grow too much but understand the town will grow and that that growth has to go somewhere. Also they want to be able to sell their house someday and something's need to be done to keep people interested in the area and keep

property values up. They would like to see some small commercial/retail services in the area so people do not have to leave town for everything.

The next person did not live in Steep Falls but did work there and would like to see a rail line go through that they could use to commute to work from Portland.

The next person felt that development would have to come in stages and that the rail line could be a good first step to driving that growth. There has to be something in Steep Falls to draw people if we want them to go there. They felt that sidewalks were definitely the top priority. They could see more residential but also more local, small commercial/retail services.

The next person said that they really loved living in Steep Falls and that it was the people that kept them there. The river was also a great amenity and they have been working on getting the property owner to allow some of the river access to be made into a park. They would also like to see sidewalks put in and have them extend beyond the village downtown.

At this point Gordie noted that he was glad to hear such overwhelming support for sidewalks as there had been some push back on the issue in planning for the other villages.

The next person agrees with the group that sidewalks and traffic calming are desirable. Would like to see the sidewalks connect to destinations and if possible make a loop for recreational walking.

The next person didn't live in the village proper and while they understood the desire to keep it rural the village has lost some of the things that made it a village. Some more density and commercial/retail would be good. They liked the train idea. The village needs to work on its character and give people a reason to slow down or stop in it.

The next person noted that there used to be a lot to do in the Steep Falls area, there was a bowling alley and a skating rink. It still has some of those amenities, the post office and the library. They didn't like seeing how the area has become run down and thought that giving some property owners some help in maintaining their buildings would be good. They thought that the train would be a good way to get some new energy into the village.

The next person noted that traffic is not likely to get better in coming years. Truck traffic is particularly bad in Steep Falls and many of the trucks are from Poland Springs. They did not see that changing. (At this point Caroline noted that Poland Springs is talking about building a new plant in Fryburg, where the rail line would go.) They noted that logging trucks were also a big problem and that all the trucks were very hard on the roads. The library is looking to expand by its 100 year anniversary in 2016 and the village should as well. Traffic calming and lowering traffic speeds should be a priority and a first step.

Carol Morris, from Sustain Southern Maine, summed up briefly saying that here seemed to be a lot of desire to keep the same feel but improve things. She noted that one person said they didn't want to see too many families coming in and she asked what kinds of people the group did see coming to the area.

There was some discussion but this and the general consensus was that senior housing would be good. Many people did not want to see subsidized, low income housing. Families were not seen to be completely undesirable just a burden on the tax base.

A participant spoke and said that they did not want to see chain, strip development. They want to see personality. Some smaller chains might be ok if they make their buildings fit in. They specifically mentioned a Dunkin Donuts in Standish Corner that is not that bad.

One participant noted that they were not against some subsidized housing as the area really could use some more diversity.

At this point Kat reviewed the design charge for the group and went over the tasks and goals for the group breakout sessions. The results of these will be reflected in the Lessons Learned document.