

Town of Ancram
Community Development Block Grant Project Team Meeting
February 18, 2009

Members Present: Art Bassin, Suzanne Bressler, Donna Hoyt, Will Lutz, Jim MacArthur, Kit White,

The minutes of the 1/14 meeting were reviewed and approved.

1. Affordable Housing – Mr. Bassin opened the meeting by commenting that providing affordable housing in Ancram would require smaller, more flexible lot sizes, the right to build accessory apartments in single family homes, in garages and in barns, the flexibility to build multi-family homes and a way to control the growth in property taxes, which could over time make living in Ancram “unaffordable”. Mr. Bassin noted the Comp Plan directly addresses these issues by proposing lots as small as $\frac{1}{2}$ acre if water and septic are available, and by supporting accessory apartments and multi-family homes. The Comp Plan does not directly address property taxes, which tend to be based on Town, County and school spending decisions.

2. Property Tax Issues -- Mr. Lutz asked why property taxes in Ancram were so high relative to neighboring communities. The Committee discussed the mix of residential, agricultural and commercial/industrial properties in town, and noted that agricultural properties were eligible for the ag exemption. The Committee also noted there were other properties like Camp Anne and Woodhull which were either State owned or not for profits, and tax exempt. The Committee noted that the commercial/industrial tax base was relatively small, and that the Mill’s assessed value in the 2008 revaluation did not increase along with most other properties. The Committee discussed the rationale and “fairness” of the ag exemption, and the “rule of thumb numbers” used by the American Farmland Trust that farmland tended to pay more in taxes even with the ag exemption than they “cost” the community primarily because of the low density of housing on farms. Mr. Bassin said national data suggests farms and businesses “cost” 85 cents for every dollar in taxes they pay, while residential development costs \$1.20 for every \$1 in taxes they pay. School and County costs play a major role in these costs. The Committee noted that certain kinds of residential development, like large weekend homes, probably generated more in tax revenues than they cost in town, county and school “services”, especially since weekend homeowners tended not to have school age children to educate locally. Ms. Hoyt suggested establishing town policies and standards on tax assessment policies, so things like better windows, solar, exterior paint and other property maintenance efforts would not be added to the assessed values of a property. Mr. MacArthur noted that Copake had a “view tax”. The committee agreed Ancram was not ready for a “view tax” yet. The Committee also concluded that economic development could increase the property tax base and contribute over time to reducing taxes by spreading them over a larger property tax base.

2. Economic Development Plan Framework – The Committee then turned to the “Economic Development Plan as a Revitalization Tool” document Libby McKee had

found on the internet, and focused on Ancram's economic development objectives. The Committee came up with the following economic development objectives:

1. To promote a positive community environment that positions the town as business-friendly with a superior quality of life;
2. To create employment opportunities for the local community
3. To expand and diversify the tax base
4. To support small business development, expansion and retention
5. To attract new investment that meets social, environmental and economic goals
6. To seek public and private funding to develop affordable housing
7. To expand on the existing agricultural economic base and related businesses

In addition to these objectives, Ms. Bressler suggested we determine how much it will cost to implement the Ancram town center concept developed by Synthesis. Ms. Hoyt proposed compiling a list of available parcels and locations which could be used for business and commercial activities. Mr. Hoyt also proposed seeking ways to expand small scale farming by supporting "tenant farming" relationships between landowners and new farmers.

Mr. Bassin asked if Ancram could support a new business that needed to hire 50 employees. The Committee was not sure the town could support 50 new families in terms of affordable housing, and it was not clear that there were 50 people in Ancram looking for work, though that may be changing given the current economic situation. The Committee was pretty sure the town could not handle two new businesses that needed 50 employees each. If we attracted two new businesses needing 50 employees each, the Committee felt we would be providing jobs for the region, which was good, but the people attracted to these new jobs in Ancram would probably not live in Ancram. The Ancram Mill's current level of employment was estimated at about 130 people, and it was felt that most of them did not live in Ancram. Mr. MacArthur estimated that only 15-20 people currently working at the Mill live in town.

3. Mission – The Committee turned next to a formulating an Economic Development "Mission" to support the Objectives outlined above. The Plan Framework suggested answering the following questions to determine a Mission:

1. what do we do best in the community?
2. how can we adapt best to the changes happening around us?
3. what is necessary to address some of the problems -- more resources, better organization, new ways of thinking, better understanding of our challenge?

Mr. Lutz suggested we respond to the first question -- “what we do best in the community? -- by listing the Community’s strengths, which include the following things:

1. A strong agricultural base; locally produced foods
2. The fire company, both as protection and as a community focal point
3. History of the community
4. Natural beauty of the area
5. Centrally located, close to NYC, Albany, Boston; crossroads of NE
6. Excellent transportation – roads, rails
7. Excellent outdoor activities – hunting, fishing, skiing, hiking, biking, golf
8. Excellent access to cultural activities – Opera House, Tanglewood, Bard
9. Open Town Government
10. Good school systems
11. Excellent Quality of life
12. Good place to raise a family

The Committee identified the following changes going on around us that we needed to understand and deal with:

1. Housing becoming more unaffordable
2. Higher property taxes
3. Small businesses have left town over the last 25 years
4. Senior population is expanding
5. More weekenders and 2nd homes
6. Family farms are disappearing
7. Farming is less labor intensive, causing job losses
8. Residential Development pressures all around us
9. More involvement and dialogue by the people of town

The Committee agreed to focus on Q 3 – what is necessary to address these problems? – next month. In addition, the Committee will start to work on the “Strategies” necessary to implement the Objectives next month as well, and will finalize the elements of the “Short Term Plan” the Committee will propose to the Town Board.

4. Stielhe House – Mr. White, chair of the Ancram Preservation Group, commented that the APG was planning to remove the deteriorating rear portion of the Stiehle House. Mr. White said the APG would also like to move the house back away from the road if that were possible, and if they could raise the funds to do that. Mr. White commented that the Stiehle House was an important part of the center of Town, but if it had to be moved to make room for a larger town center project, APG would consider moving the house to another location, but hoped the community would rebuild something comparable at the same location to maintain the integrity of the center of Ancram.

5. Next Meeting – The next CDBG meeting will be on Wednesday, February 18 at 7 PM.

The meeting adjourned at 9 PM.