CHARLESTOWN PLANNING COMMISSION

SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday September 10, 2025 at 7:00 p.m.

Charlestown Town Hall, Council Chambers
4540 South County Trail, Charlestown, RI 02813

DRAFT

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chair, Ruth Platner called the meeting to order at 7:00 P.M.

2. ROLL CALL

Members present: Frances Topping, Sarah St Laurent, Patricia Stamps, Glenn Babcock, Carol Mossa, and Ruth Platner

Members absent: Laura Rom

Others: Sean Henry, Town Planner, Deborah Carney, Ex-Officio

3. MINUTES APPROVAL

Discussion and/or potential action and/or vote(s) concerning:

A. Minutes from August 21, 2025 Site Walk

The Commission reviewed the August 21, 2025 Site Walk minutes.

> **A motion was made by Ms. Topping to approve the meeting minutes as written. Seconded by Mr. Babcock, with Ms. Stamps and Ms. St Laurent abstaining. Motion carried.**

4. COMISSION DISCUSSION OF COMMERCIAL VILLAGE DESIGN STANDARDS

Ms. Platner began by stating that members of the Planning Commission and members from the Economic Improvement Commission have been meeting as a subcommittee to review, discuss and create a document of design standards that would be acceptable by both entities, and which would then be presented to the Town Council.

The EIC is preparing a list of items from the Shannock Guidelines and the Libra document that they feel they would and, in some cases, would not support incorporating into standards. The

EIC has stated in earlier subcommittee meetings they are very much in favor of developing standards, and they are in the process of reviewing the two documents with their Commission members.

Mr. Henry commented that he stopped in at the EIC's last meeting and they were still reviewing the list of features they felt may or may not be appropriate to regulate. He added that they intend to review the Libra document at their next EIC meeting.

Ms. Topping stated that the subcommittee members all agreed there was a need for some design aspects to be regulated but regulating some others may be prohibitive. She said the subcommittee discussed how to address the various villages, commercial areas, TVD and the scenic highway, because each area would have their own issues and concerns as to how the design for that specific area should be regulated.

Mr. Henry said he felt tonight's meeting would be a good opportunity for the Planning Commission to articulate for the EIC, the members of the subcommittee, and eventually the Town Council what parameters the Planning Commission would wish to see regulated pertaining to commercial design standards. The Commission has been coming at it from the perspective that it is important to ensure large commercial projects follow some set of standards. He said that looking to regulate large commercial projects means there will probably be some sort of threshold where a project could be too small to regulate. He advised it would be a good idea to determine where that threshold should be. This will help to assuage any concerns that the EIC may have. The EIC highlighted the concern that they do not want to burden small businesses with costly design standards that they will have to incorporate. He discussed major and minor land development projects and the requirements for both.

Ms. Platner felt the new State laws are not sensitive to the scale of development in Charlestown. A seven thousand square foot commercial building is a big building in Charlestown. The Commission reviewed an application that had come before the Commission but was eventually withdrawn due to physical constraints. The applicant chose to incorporate the Shannock Guidelines into their plan. They were not required to do so, they chose to do it of their own volition. The Commission reviewed and discussed the design and the materials the applicant was intending to use.

Mr. Henry stated the Commission has discussed what the standards are, but they have not discussed how they will be applied and whether they will be based on location, zone, use, or any type of commercial application. We have a lot of design information, but the regulatory structure is also very important for the Commission to discuss before they return to the subcommittee.

Ms. Topping stated the standards are regulated by form rather than use. Mr. Henry added that we will have to state for applicants what the standards are and where they apply or where potential exemptions may be.

Ms. Platner stated that design standards, as they exist right now in Zoning, apply everywhere.

Ms. Stamps questioned if there should be different design standards for the different commercial areas in Town. Ms. Platner responded that there may be different design standards, but whether there be different regulations remains to be determined. Ms. Topping felt that there should be some regulations for all commercial projects. She gave the example of projects on the scenic

highway where perhaps there should be more emphasis on the landscaping and the setback for the structure. Ms. St Laurent said that would depend on the visibility of the project.

Mr. Henry questioned that if the desire was to apply the standards townwide with certain elements in certain areas, then perhaps it might be better to create a document less specific than the Shannock Guidelines and perhaps more general design principles. Ms. Topping said she felt the design principles and design practices in the Libra document was a very good beginning. Mr. Henry felt some designers look for more prescriptive documents; they prefer to know what the Town would like to see regarding both design and materials.

Mr. Henry asked if the Commission felt that they should go through an exercise to try to decide which elements should have standards. There was some discussion regarding items that perhaps should and should not be regulated.

Ms. Topping said the Commission must decide if, when reviewing a commercial application, if they want to have some discretion or not. Mr. Henry stated that standards imply there is no discretion, unless they seek a waiver or variance of some kind. Ms. Platner said we wouldn't create such detailed standards telling an applicant exactly how their building must look. A building should not be designed by a document.

Ms. Platner questioned what size building should be excluded from the standards. She felt that size should not be the limiting factor when it comes to design standards. There is much less to regulate because there is no massing or proportion with the smaller commercial projects. Mr. Henry asked if the standards would apply to any commercial application that goes before the Planning Commission or the Administrative Officer? Ms. Platner added that by default, some of the standards would not apply because of the smaller applications. Mr. Henry asked if the Commission members agreed that the standards, whatever shape they wind up taking would be appropriate to apply to all commercial development, regardless of their size.

Mr. Henry continued by stating the Commission may choose to use the "a la carte" method as to which standards may apply. He explained that a porch may not apply to all applications, but windows, doors, roof standards, signage, etc. may be universal standards that would apply to all applications. If we are concerned about an element that is appearing on every building, we must be sure that we don't restrict all designs to a certain architectural style. We want to make sure the standards are general enough so they can be broadly applied.

Ms. Platner explained that through the subcommittee meetings, the EIC understands there is a need for standards, but the question remains as to how specific the standards should be. Should they continue to be like the Libra document and not be so prescriptive or should they be more prescriptive so that it is easier for an applicant to apply them? It was Ms. Platner's opinion that there should be a combination of standards and guidelines with pictorial examples. Ms. St Laurent agreed and suggested that a process to request a waiver should be offered to applicants.

Ms. Topping ended the discussion by stating once the EIC has completed their review, the subcommittee will have to mutually agree on their findings. She asked if the Commission supported the subcommittee to continue along the path to define the standards they wished to see regulated. The Commission supported the subcommittee's work. She noted that the subcommittee would report their progress to the Town Council in October.

5. PLANNING ISSUES AND CONCERNS

DRAFT

A. Chair Comments

No additional comments.

B. Planner Comments

Mr. Henry reminded the Commission that the Carolina Farms Master Plan application has been continued to the next regular meeting on September 24th. He will have a draft decision prepared for that meeting. In addition, the Final Plan application for Summer Winds will be heard that same evening.

6. ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Ms. St Laurent to adjourn at 8:23 P.M. Seconded by Mr. Babcock and carried by unanimous vote.

Respectfully Submitted,

Janet Lombardo
Planning Assistant

DRAFT