Town of Boone
Sustainability Committee
Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, December 4th, 2024
5:30 P.M.

Members Present: Vice Chair Jennifer Maxwell, Member Becca Nenow, Member Bhuwan Thapa, Member Ryan Robinson, Member Michael Weiss, Member Finley Collins, Member Jillian Schulte

Members Absent: Chair Brian Crutchfield and Member Joan Brook

Staff Present: George Santucci, Sustainability and Special Projects Manager, Brandon Wise, Deputy Director of Planning and Inspections, and Laney Wise, Grants Coordinator/Communications

Council Liaison: Mayor Pro Tem Dalton George and Councilmember Eric Plaag

Others Present: Will Bennett, Joey Crews, and Craig Hughes

Call To Order:

Vice Chair Maxwell called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m..

Adoption of Agenda:

Vice Chair Maxwell asked for a motion to approve the agenda as presented. Upon the motion of Member Robinson, seconded by Member Nenow, the adoption of the December 4th, 2024 Sustainability Committee Agenda was approved.

Approval of August 7, 2024 Sustainability Committee Minutes:

Vice Chair Maxwell asked for a motion to approve the August 7th, 2024 Sustainability Committee minutes as presented. Upon the motion of Member Robinson, seconded by Member Nenow, the August 7th, 2024 Sustainability Committee minutes were approved unanimously.

Invited Presentations: AppalCART, Summary of Ridership, E-buses , and Future plans - Craig Hughes, Director:

Mr. Santucci introduced Mr. Hughes and thanked him for presenting to the Committee. Mr. Hughes, in turn, expressed his appreciation for their time and began his presentation. The full presentation can be found in the December 4, 2024, Sustainability Committee Agenda Packet.

During the presentation, Councilmember Plaag asked why AppalCART's insurance costs had risen significantly during the 2023-2024 performance period. Mr. Hughes explained that insurance costs for public transit systems had increased nationwide during that time.

Member Weiss then inquired about the plateau in ridership post-COVID-19. Mr. Hughes noted that, before the pandemic, projections estimated total ridership would reach two million users. However, due to COVID-19, AppalCART had been unable to achieve those numbers. He was uncertain why ridership had continued to plateau but speculated that public concerns about COVID-19 and other airborne illnesses might still be influencing travel behavior. The Committee discussed additional potential factors, including the rise of virtual classes at Appalachian State University and the impact of Hurricane Helene.

Vice Chair Maxwell asked whether AppalCART participated in campus orientation. Mr. Hughes confirmed that they did but expressed willingness to increase their involvement.

Member Thapa asked if data was available on AppalCART membership. Mr. Hughes explained that while AppalCART does not have a formal membership system, the AppalCART app allows users to track ridership data, including route look-ups.

Councilmember Plaag suggested exploring incentives for downtown Boone employees to use AppalCART, referencing a similar program at Mast General Store. He also asked about the feasibility of introducing a trolley system for tourists staying in hotels to encourage public transit use. Mr. Hughes responded that maintaining a trolley would be too costly, but he suggested an alternative: wrapping a bus with a design specifically aimed at tourists. However, he noted that AppalCART currently lacks the capital to create a new route for this purpose but would continue exploring options.

When asked if he had approached the Boone Tourism Development Authority (TDA) for funding, Mr. Hughes explained that he would first need to seek funding from the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) before approaching the TDA.

Mr. Hughes also addressed route planning, explaining that many AppalCART routes avoid the Blowing Rock Road and King Street corridors due to concerns over traffic congestion and bus timeliness. However, he acknowledged the potential benefits of adding more stops at hotels and expressed openness to further discussion.

A brief discussion followed about making AppalCART stops more visible. Member Collins, a member of Appalachian State's REI Club, offered to explore installing solar canopies at bus stops to enhance visibility and sustainability.

Member Weiss asked whether AppalCART offered on-demand public transportation services. Mr. Hughes explained that on-demand services are available for elderly riders and individuals with documented needs. However, he noted that expanding this service to a broader audience would be cost-prohibitive.

Member Robinson asked whether maintenance costs differed between diesel and electric buses. Mr. Hughes responded that costs vary depending on specific repairs, but emphasized that AppalCART's maintenance team is highly skilled and capable of handling most maintenance needs.

When asked about the feasibility of achieving 100% fleet electrification by 2037, Mr. Hughes stated that it was possible, provided that grant funding and other resources remain available.

Vice Chair Maxwell inquired whether Hurricane Helene had caused any damage to AppalCART. Mr. Hughes reported that damage was minimal but shared that, during the hurricane, he and his drivers

helped evacuate over 100 individuals from flooded areas. He expressed pride in his staff for their dedication to serving the community during a critical time.

With no further questions, Vice Chair Maxwell thanked Mr. Hughes for his presentation and for AppalCART's contributions to the Boone community.

Invited Presentations: Invasive Plant Species Inventory, Assessment, and Management Plan - Will Bennett:

Mr. Bennett began by explaining that his Master's thesis involved interning with the Town of Boone to inventory invasive species found on Town-owned property using GIS software. Through his research, he identified Oriental Bittersweet as the most concerning species, while Garlic Mustard and Reed Canarygrass were the most prevalent.

Mr. Bennett then demonstrated how each species was categorized, with red labels indicating the most harmful species and green labels indicating the least harmful. Member Robinson asked whether animals were included in the inventory, to which Mr. Bennett clarified that his project focused solely on invasive plant species.

He emphasized that one of the most critical areas for invasive species mitigation is the Rivers House Property, as it will serve as the southern terminus of the Northern Peaks Trail. Given that the trail passes through multiple biomes, it is essential to minimize the introduction of invasive species into these ecosystems.

Councilmember Plaag suggested that the Town collaborate with nonprofits to assist with removal efforts, a sentiment echoed by Councilmember George, who noted that many nonprofits specializing in invasive species removal actively seek volunteer opportunities.

Mr. Bennett then presented the protocol used for ranking invasive species, which considers factors such as ease of removal, likelihood of regrowth, and overall impact. He explained that the next step in the process is to develop a handbook for the Town of Boone to guide invasive species removal. Mr. Santucci added that this handbook could also benefit private property owners by educating them on which species to plant, which to remove, and best practices for land management.

Vice Chair Maxwell highlighted that Appalachian State University students frequently seek volunteer opportunities to fulfill class requirements. She expressed interest in helping connect students with relevant resources for invasive species removal efforts.

Member Robinson then asked Mr. Santucci whether other municipalities were undertaking similar initiatives. Mr. Santucci explained that very few municipalities are addressing invasive species at the scale of the Town of Boone. Mr. Wise added that many municipalities do not explicitly ban the planting of invasive species, further emphasizing the uniqueness of Boone's efforts.

A discussion followed about effective management strategies for fast-growing invasive species, such as Reed Canarygrass.

With no further questions, Mr. Santucci announced that Mr. Bennett had accepted a position at Grandfather Mountain, where he will continue similar work. The Committee thanked Mr. Bennett for his contributions before moving to the next agenda item.

Invited Presentations: Boone's Solar Handbook Draft - Joey Crews:

Mr. Crews began by explaining that this project is intended for public use and welcomed feedback on the current document. Mr. Weiss asked if the Committee was the first group to

review it. Mr. Crews clarified that Mr. Santucci and Mr. Landon Pennington, a local solar installer, had reviewed the document prior to the Committee meeting.

Mr. Crews expressed his hope that this document would eventually evolve into a Master Solar Installation Plan for the Town of Boone. Mr. Santucci explained that certain town-owned properties, such as the Jones House, would require solar canopies over parking lots rather than traditional rooftop installations due to their historic nature and aging roofs. These canopies are significantly more expensive, but he and Mr. Crews had been researching cost-effective solutions.

He further explained that while solar energy installation may seem straightforward, there are numerous complexities involved. This handbook is designed to educate the public on solar installation requirements in Boone.

Member Nenow asked whether it would be viable to explore public-private partnerships with organizations outside the historic district. Mr. Santucci responded that he had already begun researching such partnerships. He then briefly introduced Blue Ridge Energy's Community Solar Program, which offers the potential to lease rooftops from organizations that may not have the capital to install solar energy systems themselves.

Councilmember Plaag noted that within the historic district, property owners must receive a Certificate of Appropriateness from the Historic Preservation Commission, however, solar panels are not prohibited from the Downtown Boone Historic District Mr. Santucci confirmed this.

Member Thapa inquired whether an inventory of solar installations existed in the Town of Boone. Mr. Santucci responded that Mr. Crews had developed a comprehensive cost analysis for solar installations on town-owned properties.

Mr. Wise pointed out the solar installation on the Greenway Trail picnic structure, noting that it was interesting to observe how much solar power is generated from such a small-scale system.

A brief discussion followed regarding Appalachian State University's wind turbines.

With no further questions, Mr. Santucci announced that Mr. Crews had accepted a position in Athens, Georgia, where he will continue similar work. The Committee thanked Mr. Crews for his contributions to the Town of Boone before moving to the next agenda item.

Other Matters: Projects for $10,000 or Less:

Mr. Santucci asked if the Committee would consider postponing this matter to the next meeting. The Committee unanimously agreed.

Other Matters: Helene's Aftermath, Recovery, and Flood-Zone Mapping:

Mr. Santucci again asked the Committee whether they would consider postponing the discussion on damage assessment to the next meeting, as Member Brook, who had requested the discussion, was absent. The Committee agreed to postpone the "Helene's Aftermath and Recovery" discussion until the following meeting.

Mr. Wise provided an update on flood-zone mapping, noting that the State of North Carolina would be accepting public comments on the mapping process until January 31st. Member Robinson asked whether this update would affect flood insurance, to which Mr. Wise explained that it would have an impact on both flood insurance rates and Town of Boone ordinances.

Councilmember Plaag pointed out that many residents in Boone live within the 100-year and 500-year floodplains. He shared that he had submitted an agenda item to the Boone Town Council proposing the installation of signage indicating whether a property is located in a flood zone. Additionally, he suggested amending the Town's Unified Development Ordinance to require private property owners to post signage if their parking lot is located in a flood zone.

Mr. Wise noted that, under current regulations, property owners in Boone are required to disclose flood-zone status in their leases, and tenants must sign a document acknowledging the risks. However, in the wake of Hurricane Helene, it was discovered that some property owners had failed to comply with this requirement.

Member Thapa then asked Mr. Wise about the steep slope development requirements in Boone. Mr. Wise explained that the Town requires a geotechnical analysis for all steep slope developments. However, in light of Hurricane Helene, these requirements will likely become stricter.

A brief discussion followed regarding a potential stormwater fee and the ongoing stormwater utility inventory being conducted by the Town of Boone.

With no further discussion, the Committee moved on to the next agenda item.

Public Comment:

Vice Chair Maxwell asked if anyone in attendance would like to provide public comment. Hearing none, Vice Chair Maxwell asked for a motion to adjourn.

Adjournment:

Upon the motion of Member Robinson, seconded by Member Nenow, the adjournment December 4th, 2023 meeting of the Sustainability Committee was approved unanimously at 7:50 p.m..