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The Ellsworth American.



Participants in last week's Green Plan discussion broke down into discussion groups to articulate concerns. ELLSWORTH AMERICAN PHOTO BY MAXWELL HAUPTMAN

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ELLSWORTH — Residents concerned with sustainable development had the chance to voice their opinions last week at a public forum hosted by the Ellsworth Green Plan Steering Committee.

The event involved presentations on sustainable development from Ellsworth City Planner Michele Gagnon and environmental consultant Forrest Bell.

Gagnon first defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the future. It’s environmentally sensible, economically viable, community-oriented and sustainable.”

In Ellsworth, a major focus for sustainable development has been increasing density, creating walkable environments within the downtown area. That includes both affordable rental housing at the Oriole Way development and the more upscale proposed Washington Street condos.

“Density makes sense,” Gagnon said. “When you get people where the services are, there is less fragmentation of habitat, less road maintenance and less sprawl.”

Gagnon also discussed the potential to increase the city’s overall walkability, linking the Sunrise Trail, the town’s waterfront, Knowlton Park and the Moore Community Center, as well as making High Street a more crossable thoroughfare for pedestrians.

The Green Plan Steering Committee also solicited community input on what residents valued most about living in Ellsworth, what excited and worried them about future development, what could be done to benefit future residents of Ellsworth and what residents could do to contribute to sustainable development.

As the roughly 50 people in attendance broke down into small discussion groups, a few common concerns emerged. Balancing growth while preserving some of Ellsworth’s charm, proper development of the Union River waterfront, development around Myrick Street, and handling increased traffic loads.

Some residents also expressed concern over how the city would handle zoning changes and enact future ordinances to properly control development.

“There are a lot of community leaders here,” said Ellsworth resident Nicole Grohoski, a candidate for the Maine House of Representatives. “But not a lot of government leaders.”

Looking forward, those attending the meeting also expressed the thought that education about the Green Plan and instilling a commitment to sustainable development was critical to the city.

“I’m inspired to participate so neighborhoods here can retain their character,” said Nancy Patterson of Ellsworth.

Bell briefly discussed the work his environmental consulting firm will be doing on behalf of the Ellsworth Green Plan conducting a build-out analysis of the city.

Bell’s firm will look at everything from current zoning laws and population density trends to the location of historic sites and input the data into software called CommunityViz.

“I like to think of this as taking science and using it to help inform process and decision making at the local level,” Bell said.

CommunityViz will create a rough estimate of how Ellsworth may grow over the coming decades, as well as potential environmental impacts. The Green Plan will then be able to incorporate this into its future efforts.

“I think the success of the Green Plan is going to depend on their ability to get a buy-in from the community on all different levels,” said Gagnon in a later interview. “The public, the government, big and small businesses, all willing to endorse their values.”