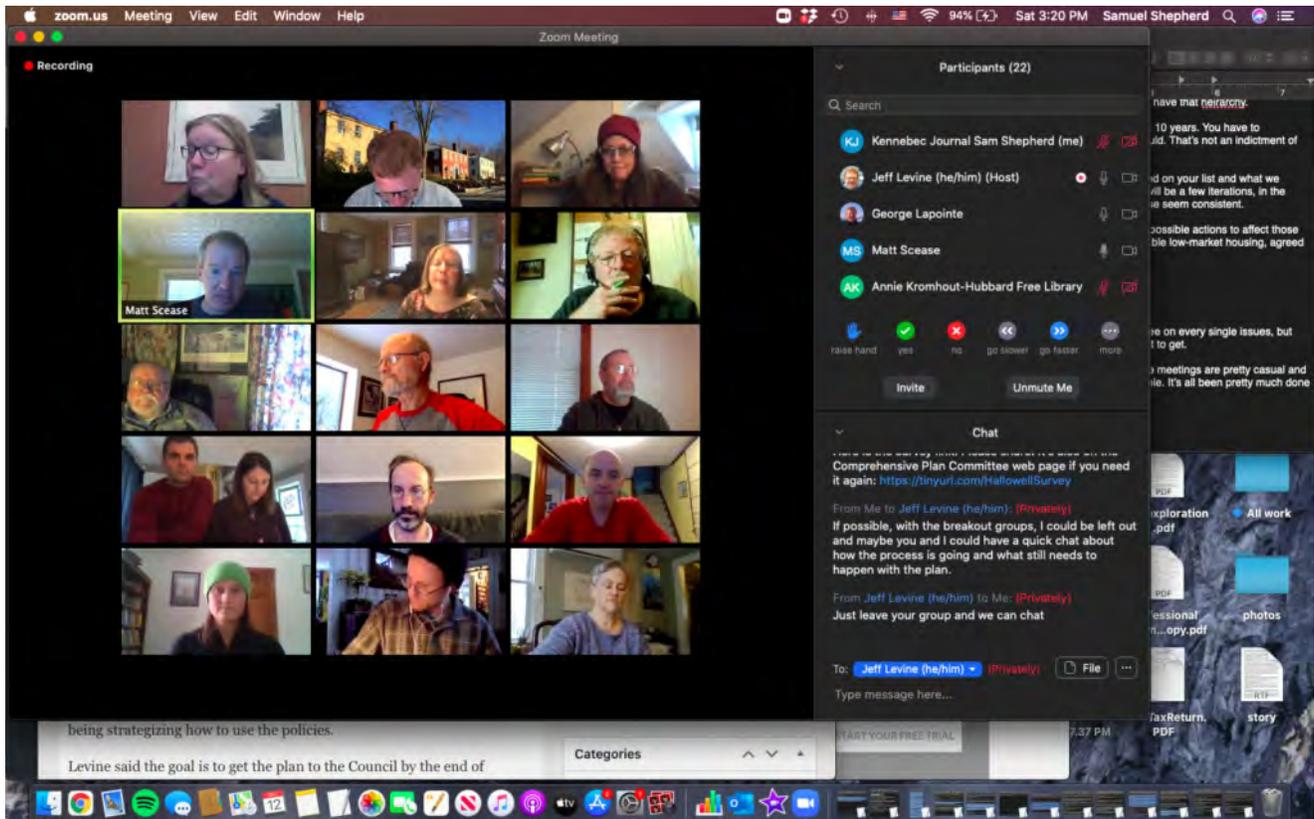


Hallowell's comprehensive planning group identifies most important issues

cm centralmaine.com/2020/12/12/hallowells-comprehensive-planning-group-identifies-most-important-issues/

By Sam Shepherd

December 12, 2020





About 20 residents attended a virtual meeting Saturday of the Hallowell Comprehensive Planning Group.
Image capture by Sam Shepherd

HALLOWELL — Members of a city comprehensive planning group worked Saturday to whittle down a set of issues important to residents.

About 20 people attended a meeting held via Zoom. During the meeting, a number of issues of importance were identified, including accessibility downtown and near Stevens Commons, and affordable housing.

Hallowell's Comprehensive Planning Group began its work in fall 2019, being guided by consultant Jeff Levine. Levine said the state asks for comprehensive plans every 12 years or so. The plan strengthens city zoning, Levine said, and gives the municipality preferential treatment in some grant programs.

Levine said the whole planning process is about 40% done. The group is currently in the second of four phases before the plan is actually written. During this second phase, the panel is identifying which issues are most important. The third phase is identifying policies that could address those issues, and the final phase is strategizing how to use the policies.

Levine said the goal is to get the plan to the council by the end of summer 2021. If councilors approve the plan, it will go to the state for certification.

During Saturday's meeting, participants were broken into eight groups and given a set of issues that have been identified through the committee's work.

After the smaller groups talk, a member of each spoke about their finding. Mathew Scease said his group discussed the connectivity of downtown to other parts of the city. He said his group thought "protecting downtown" was important, which included buying local and bringing in more stores so residents can do more shopping downtown.

Scease also said that his group was interested in bringing more families to Hallowell by building more subsidized housing.

"It seems to me like there's a lot of vacant space in Hallowell," he said. "I think there is room for growth."

On the issue of housing, mayor-elect and current City Councilor George Lapointe also reported his group spoke about the importance of housing and sidewalks. Other groups discussed the need for "complete streets," which is a term used to describe streets designed for all modes of transportation.

According to the city's website, the official group comprises Scease, Rosemary Presnar, Patrick Cunningham, Matt and Erin Cary, Lisa Harvey-McPherson, Matthew Radasch, John Bastey, Julie Horn, Deb Fahy, Marcia Gallagher and Matthew Rolnick. Councilor Maureen AuCoin serves as the City Council's liaison to the committee.

Members of the group were appointed by the mayor and ratified by the City Council, but people float in and out of the meetings. Levine said if there were ever a vote, those members would be the ones in charge, but most actions are done "by consensus."

"The meetings are pretty casual," Levine said. "The committee has been pretty good at offering (residents) a seat at the table."



Consultant Jeff Levine speaks during a Saturday meeting of the Hallowell Comprehensive Planning Group. *Image capture by Sam Shepherd*

The city's comprehensive plan was last updated in 2010. Comprehensive plans are generally used as blueprints to guide municipal development for a period of about 10 years, but are required by the state to come in every 12 years.

Levine said the city's 2010 plan puts forward a "tight vision" for the city, focusing on six points — the arts, creating a diverse population, preserving history, protecting nature, promoting thriving businesses and creating good government operations. The plan also focused on development at Stevens Commons, which has been carried out by developer Matt Morrill.

The group is currently looking for resident responses to a survey that will gauge what issues are most important to them. To take that survey, visit the group's page on the city's website at hallowell.govoffice.com.

© 2021