

Town of Harwich
Real Estate & Open Space (REOS) Committee
Meeting Minutes
December 13, 2024

Members Present: Katherine Green, Acting Chair: Elaine Shovlin, Margo Fenn, Marcie Smith, Carol Porter.
Guests: Amy Usowski, Conservation Agent; Carlene Jones, Assessing Director.

8:36 A.M. Call to Order. Elaine moved to go into Executive Session, seconded, all in favor by roll call vote

9:07 AM Regular meeting called to order

New Business: Title work status report from Carlene: Carlene distributed reports on Assessing Parcel Location and Identification Project. First question, what are the criteria for billing a new parcel: Answer, a recorded deed and chain of title check. Assessing department would check back about 50 years to make sure chain of title is correct and check registry of deeds. There are also miscellaneous titles where the location is unknown. The department has 77 of them. These date from many years. The vague description of the location removemakes it difficult to pinpoint location. These parcels can be bought and sold without an exact location. Carlene noted that with owners unknown if all resources are exhausted then town can bill owners unknown for taxes, taxes will accumulate and town can take property for unpaid taxes. Discussion around when town takes property for unpaid taxes. Heirs with no known address are billable. Pocket deeds (legitimate deeds that owners may have but are not registered with the town) are not being taxed so owners are not liable unless the parcels are assessed. Tax bills not billed to true owners are still due. What criteria is used to tax property previously not recorded? Answer: it has to be recorded to be taxed. Plans from calendar year 2024 do not apply until fiscal year 2026. Article 39 (2022 town meeting warrant) appropriated \$500,000 voted in at town meeting. How much has been spent? Carlene did not have exact number on hand but it is less than \$100,000. Discussion around issues with researching parcels of interest. Carlene is meeting with the town administrator today to determine what to do about contract for title search going forward. Assessor's office has an office set up for article 39 work. It was noted that staff time did not pull money from the \$500,000 allocated. Will work done to date help set some boundaries around the bigger parcels (that are causing so much difficulty)? No but other avenues for help were noted. A lot of clues are in the assessing office for future information and use. Question: do other towns have these issues. Answer: no other towns have miscellaneous parcels. They do have owners unknown and follow same process as Harwich. Do you feel you have made significant progress and what constitutes progress for the assessing department? Answer: Very important for assessing. Unknown boundaries can cause encroachment and lead to conflict with abutters that assessing department not responsible to mediate. In addition, the research in the past three years has identified about one million dollars per year. Unfortunately, it did not bring in more tax dollars because most of it was Town of Harwich property. Assessing department is dedicated to this project and has had a lot of progress in the smaller pieces unfortunately not a lot of luck with the larger parcels.

Little Shaver Lane has been an important parcel to determine ownership. Carlene and the assessing office has learned a lot in the past few years and has tapped into a wealth of information from people like Dave Callaghan and old time Harwich residents who are willing to share their wealth of knowledge when combined with the department's info can put something together. A portion of Little Shaver has been developed. Carlene gave info on how this came to occur and how other miscellaneous properties are recorded. Kathy reiterated that Little Shaver Lane has been and still is a priority. There is also a piece west of Hawksnest State Park that research done by Harwich Conservation Trust for the Copelas property will help assessors. A lot of research is being done off of Queen Anne. The East Harwich pit being reassessed.

A suggestion for Carlene is to be firm in getting another contract for title search. Committee voiced appreciation for the work Carlene and the assessor's department is doing and thanked Carlene for her presentation today.

Member Reports:

No chair report.

Elaine noted Affordable Housing Trust is making progress.

Margo reported on the local planning committee. There are three major components to the plan. They are reviewing Open Space and Recreation plan, the Housing Production plan and the umbrella Comprehensive plan. The committee is meeting jointly with the select board and the planning board. Margo suggests REOS review criteria for property evaluation.

Kathy Green provided an update on the Community Preservation Committee; CPC has 11 applications totaling about 3 million dollars.

Next REOS meeting is January 17, 2025 at 8:30.

9:43 Margo made a motion to adjourn meeting. Seconded, all in favor, meeting adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,
Carol Porter, clerk.