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TOWN OF NORTHBOROUGH

Master Plan Implementation Committee
Town Hall Offices • 63 Main Street • Northborough, MA 01532 • 508-393-5040 x7 • 508-393-6996 Fax

Master Plan Implementation Committee Meeting

May 18, 2023

Zoom Meeting Minutes

Approved June 15, 2023

7:00pm—Chairman's Introduction to Remote Meeting

Mr. Leif, Chairman, opened the remote meeting. Mr. Leif stated that this Open Meeting of the Master Plan Implementation Committee was conducted remotely pursuant to Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2023, An Act Relative to Extending Certain COVID-19 Measures Adopted During the State of Emergency, signed into law on March 29, 2023. All members of the Master Plan Implementation Committee were allowed and encouraged to participate remotely. Mr. Leif noted that the Order allows the MPIC to meet entirely remotely so long as reasonable public access is afforded so that the public can follow along with the deliberations of the meeting. He added that ensuring public access does not ensure public participation unless such participation is required by law. Mr. Leif noted that this meeting will not allow for Public Comment. He indicated that the public may view the meeting via the link as listed on the posted agenda.

Members Present, remotely: Rick Leif, Chair; Millie Milton, Tracey Cammarano, Julianne Hirsch, Gene Kennedy, Dario DiMare, John Campbell.

Others Present, remotely: Laurie Connors, Planning Director; Melissa Green, Weston and Sampson; Russell Archambault, RKG.

The meeting started at 7:00pm. Mr. Leif noted that Bill Peterson will no longer be representing the Financial Planning Committee. The Planning Director will work to find another representative from that Committee.

Discussion of Lessons Learned from Community Meeting #2

Mr. Leif discussed the results of the second Community Meeting, held on May 11. He noted the comments made regarding a desire for a 'quaint, historic look' for the downtown. Mr. DiMare noted the concepts that Weston and Sampson have come up with were derived from interviews taken with people in Town, and 'quaint village' was not a directive they'd been given until that meeting. Ms. Cammarano said they'd heard that a more uniform look was desired, and they should attempt to have that from signage to building construction.

Ms. Connors considered 'quaint' to be a blending of historic and modern architecture, which she thought could be articulated in the design guidelines with a special section devoted to the Town's center. Some buildings in the Town's center could be used as inspiration for architects. She thought the examples shared by Ms. Green were very modern and asked for more examples for public comment. She liked the mill examples used for the Harvey property in scenario 2, since that property has an industrial past and is adjacent to the mill at 56 Hudson Street. Mr. DiMare agreed that is contextual. He noted some of the impressive architecture on Main Street. Mr. Kennedy felt more building samples depicting a New England feel were needed.

Mr. Kennedy felt if Area 2 was enlarged to include the mill buildings on Hudson Street, it would give them the contextualization that Mr. DiMare referred to and would provide more opportunities for development along the lines of what they are trying to achieve.

Ms. Milton asked if there is a defined perimeter for the Downtown or is it within their zoning code, and if they would have to refine the zoning to make some of the concepts feasible.

Ms. Connors said all the scenarios are within the Downtown Business and Downtown Neighborhood Districts. The zoning needs tweaks; there are certain uses that are currently prohibited that they probably want to allow. She noted locations that she is interested in looking at for the MBTA multi-family bylaw, which included the Harvey property, 56 Hudson Street, and the property across the street. If included within the MBTA multi-family bylaw, the zoning would have to be reworked to allow multi-family by-right via a conventional zoning district or as an overlay.

Mr. Kennedy asked why those properties weren't included in the Harvey scenario. Ms. Connors said after the scenarios had been developed, she'd received new information regarding properties viable for the MBTA multi-family bylaw. She asked Ms. Green if scenario two could be expanded to include 56 Hudson Street and the property across the street.

Mr. DiMare questioned the inclusion of 56 Hudson Street as that is currently being redeveloped into a manufacturing use which doesn't fit in with their goals. Ms. Connors said she was thinking about the long-term redevelopment of the property. That owner is interested in being part of the MBTA's zoning and while 56 Hudson Street is under construction for an industrial use, the 13-acre parcel across the street is not.

Mr. Leif suggested scheduling a walk in the Downtown with Committee members to review the existing architecture. He asked the consultants to join them and then produce graphics that portray what the buildings would look like based on those conversations and leveraging what is already there. They could show new graphics to the public at a third community meeting. Ms. Green agreed and said she would discuss that with Mr. Law. Mr. Leif asked Ms. Connors to help coordinate the walk.

Mr. Archambault said an argument can be made to include the CVS property as part of the scenario, that is the largest property adjacent to the area they are looking at and probably has one of the strongest uses; developers will logically look at the biggest property and say that it could be an anchor. He wanted them to consider that one of the scenarios may need to include that property.

Mr. Kennedy commented that since they'd had their first mapping exercise, area 1 (area west of Church Street and north of Route 20) had been dropped from consideration, and if that could be shown as an area with redevelopment potential, it would only support any future development that takes place there, it is a key corner of the Downtown. Mr. Leif couldn't think of a particular reason why it was dropped, and neither could Ms. Green.

Ms. Hirsh said the styles of apartment buildings shown were too large and not in-keeping with the Downtown. Ms. Connors believed that a more traditional, historic look was desired. Mr. Archambault said townhomes may be difficult to build; if prospects go up, the value of land will go up and it will be difficult to justify putting a townhome on a very expensive property.

Mr. Leif said the subject of housing and the amount of housing proposed received a lot of feedback at the community meeting, and while they discussed the need for a residential component in the Downtown area, they didn't consider housing in each of the scenarios. He wasn't sure how to anticipate how much housing would be created as it would be built in different times and different situations. He was interested in hearing what they should present to the community but felt they would get the same pushback previously received regarding 300+ units.

Mr. Archambault explained how they'd arrived at the number of roughly 350 housing units. For investment-grade apartments or condominiums, it is often the minimum threshold of units for on-site professional management services. With fewer units, you lose some certainty about what level of effort and investment is going into on-site management. When they came up with these building scenarios, it was difficult to know what the right number of units because they will be built at different times in the future and will be whatever the market allows at that time.

Mr. Leif thought the Harvey property was the most appropriate place for some sort of significant housing component. There will be some commercial also but mainly residential with a park-like environment, whereas the areas of Blake Street, Pierce Street and between Assabet Park and Main Street would tend to center more on retail/commercial. Those areas could feature some housing above, especially if the developer felt it necessary to be financially viable.

Ms. Connors noted that if that land is included within the MBTA zoning (which she noted is mandated), 15 units are required per acre under the minimum density required by law. She didn't expect that it would be built to that density but if you take a 23-acre parcel and multiply that by 15 units per acre, that is 345 units. The 13-acre parcel on Hudson Street would probably not be able to support 15 units per acre because of steep grades.

Ms. Milton said it is important to remember that these developments will occur over a significant amount of time. She knew people were concerned about the traffic impact but, as Ms. Connors pointed out, hopefully there will be more destinations to walk to in the Downtown with fewer people driving. Ms. Milton asked if it was recommended to have traffic impact studies to predict what will be coming. Mr. Archambault said those studies could be done now but the developer should be required to demonstrate their mitigation efforts.

Ms. Connors suggested identifying the 'low hanging fruit' - easier tasks that can be done to propel this project forward. For the next community meeting, she suggested the use of a slide in the presentation to show sign and façade improvements with an example of a building that today is not attractive and perhaps superimposing an awning, plantings, lighting, etc, to demonstrate what it could look like with these minor improvements. Ms. Green agreed that would be ideal to do that with the buildings and places existing now in the Town. Mr. Leif thought that burying the utilities would go a long way in improving the Downtown, although expensive. Ms. Connors didn't think it would be unreasonable to mandate that all the utilities be underground for any sort of development, however, the sidewalks on Route 20 were just done ten years ago as a Mass DOT project and she didn't see taxpayer money being used to redo those sidewalks before their time; the appropriate time to bury the utilities was during construction of new sidewalks. Mr. Leif told Ms. Green the report should include what Ms. Connors just said, to indicate that it's been discussed and why it was not recommended at this time.

Mr. Leif thought the next step was to get the look and feel aspect finalized and present those scenarios at the third community meeting with pictures of what these buildings could look like and get some feedback about how people want the Downtown to look as far as the style and size of the buildings. Mr. Archambault agreed. He said that people get excited about the concepts and themes, they purposely didn't give much detail on the buildings and structures because this sort of conversation and their feedback was necessary. Mr. Kennedy said modification of the boundaries should be shared at the community meeting.

Ms. Milton suggested having an economic development discussion. Mr. Leif agreed that the final report should include recommendations on how to proceed in improving the Town's economic development capacity, whether that is recommending additions to staff, committees or both. The next step is to do a downtown strategy and begin implementing it. Mr. Leif asked the consultants to develop draft of the economic development recommendations.

The group walk in the Downtown was scheduled for Friday, May 26th, 10am, with the purpose of reviewing the architecture in the Downtown and determining the character of the future downtown, if they should play off the architecture of 4 West Main Street, some of the historic frame buildings, the library, or some combination.

Ms. Connors said she was interested in seeing an analysis of the parking regulations. She asked Ms. Green to look at the parking requirements for the types of uses that are appropriate in the downtown such as personal service, office, retail, and multi-family, and determining if the current parking requirements are appropriate for those uses.

Discuss Potential Request for ARPA Funding for Downtown Sign & Façade Program

Ms. Connors had emailed a guidance document to members regarding a sign and facade program, developed by DHCD. Shrewsbury, Marlborough, and Westborough have such programs in place. She asked members for their impressions and if they wanted to go forward with something like this. She hoped to use ARPA money as the source of funding, and they would need to make that request to the Select Board. Mr. Leif said it fits with their goals for improvements to the Downtown and asked Ms. Hirsh, as a member of that Board, if she thought that request would be received well. Ms. Hirsh said that it is consistent with the intent of ARPA funding. Ms. Connors said she was interested in submitting it within the next week or two. Mr. Leif said they'd indicated their concurrence as a Committee and for her to go ahead and take the next step.

Election of Officers – Chair and Vice Chair

This agenda item has been tabled to June when more committee members may be in attendance. Discussion followed. Ms. Hirsh noted that Ms. Bakstran's term had ended and asked if they were looking to fill that. Ms. Connors said that currently there are three openings, which include a Financial Planning Committee liaison and a Resident-At-Large seat. She noted that the Council on Aging's representative does not attend meetings. Ms. Cost will be contacted and if she doesn't want to continue, they can work with the Council on Aging to see if they can appoint someone else. Ms. Connors will follow up with Financial Planning regarding their representative.

Minutes of March 16

Mr. DiMare made a motion to approve the minutes from March 16, 2023 as submitted. Ms. Cammarano seconded. All were in favor.

There was no new business. Ms. Milton made a motion to adjourn, Ms. Cammarano seconded; all were in favor.

The meeting adjourned at 8:45pm.

Respectfully Submitted by Michelle Cilley, Board Secretary