



TOWN OF NORTHBOROUGH

Master Plan Implementation Committee
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Master Plan Implementation Committee Meeting

March 17, 2022

Zoom Meeting Minutes

Approved as Amended on May 26, 2022

Members Present, Remotely: Ashley Davies, Chair; Rick Leif, Vice-Chair; Amy Poretsky, Eugene Kennedy, John Campbell, Millie Milton, Dario DiMare, Fran Bakstran, Jeanne Cahill.

Others Present, Remotely: Laurie Connors, Town Planner; Fred Litchfield, Town Engineer.

Meeting opened at 7:00pm.

Introduction to new Town Planner, Laurie Connors

Ms. Davies introduced Ms. Connors to the board. Ms. Connors was Millbury's Town Planner for 16 years. She expressed her appreciation of Northborough's new Downtown initiative, having completed Millbury's downtown revitalization in 2019. She provided an overview of her relative experience.

Update on RFQ for Downtown Master Plan

Ms. Connors provided an update on Mr. Coderre's behalf. Ms. Connors noted that the RFQ only included two visioning sessions. She'd had four visioning sessions in Millbury; she thought four was too many, two too few. She strongly suggested involving the property owners and the business owners within the focus area, they are crucial for the buy-in, they can typically identify problem areas that others can't.

Ms. Davies asked Ms. Connors to change the number of visioning sessions from two to three. Mr. Leif wished to confirm that change, going from two visioning sessions to three, and the addition of community involvement at some points in the process, since it was different from what the committee had approved previously. Ms. Connors will communicate those changes with Mr. Coderre.

Update on status of Complete Streets program

Ms. Davies wasn't sure of updates but thought Ms. Connors might be working with Mr. Charpentier on the next steps of public outreach and prioritization planning. Ms. Connors said that was correct. She added that in Millbury, she had helped create a Complete Streets Committee and received a technical assistance grant to help cover the costs of the consultants. She noted that every community is guaranteed \$400,000.

Mr. Leif said he had mentioned to Ms. Connors that because the Town has a five-year capital improvement plan, to the extent that they can fund sidewalk improvements out of Complete Streets funding is one way to do it. If there are other projects they would like to do that need funding beyond the \$400,000, they could propose to the Town Administrator or to the Finance Committee that they set aside the plan to do some Town-provided funding at some point in the future and put it in the Capital Plan and have that come up when discussing capital projects in general. He didn't think they are limited, but the only work they can do on biking and sidewalks is limited to what they get from the Complete Streets program. The Town can choose to provide municipal funding to get some of these things to happen also. As a committee, if they feel there are other things they want to do that are consistent with a plan, they can recommend that things get built into their long term Capital Plan.

Ms. Connors said, when the Complete Streets project comes forward, that it is really important for the Downtown project to appear in the top four goals.

Discussion on Preliminary Boundary for Downtown Plan

Ms. Davies said it would be helpful if they as a committee had a general sense of what the boundary of Downtown would look like before involving consultants. Some members had submitted their suggestions.

Mr. Leif wondered if it was worth having the consultant consider another area to be the downtown other than the area currently considered downtown. He mentioned Business West, where Romaine's and Fox Run currently are, there are nice open spaces for walking, and not much as an issue with route 20 as the current downtown. He was interested in hearing feedback on that idea.

Ms. Bakstran said she doesn't want to take anything off the table, if they could get away from route 20 with the traffic restrictions and requirements, then she couldn't see why not create a little village, but she would have to defer to professionals before she could form a real opinion.

Mr. DiMare didn't think anything was crazy. He thought the area in Business West would be less expensive, easier to do since it's not as congested, but it pretty much abandons the history; if those roots aren't worth pursuing, if it is too hard, he would look at that as a plan B, because what he's read in the Master Plan is that the Town wants to celebrate it's history, which is in the older part of the town.

Ms. Davies said that this Master Plan came out of what the public wanted to see, and she didn't think the public would consider Times Square the downtown, they want to see the current downtown improved. She wasn't sure it was their place to create a new downtown location.

Ms. Poretsky said key places like the library, the old town hall, Assabet Park, the town's neighborhoods could bring walkability to the downtown.

Ms. Davies shared Mr. DiMare's version of the boundary markup on the screen, she said his method made her consider it in a different way. He had circled key areas and used it as a guide to help him decide what the downtown boundary would be.

Mr. Kennedy spoke next, saying he had municipal planning experience in the cities of Newton and Framingham. In Northborough, he sees highway-oriented businesses that people visit and route 20 that expedites people driving through. While there are distinct commercial areas, he thought the challenge for the study is to bring characteristics to the downtown of what is essentially a highway business zone, characterized now by the many gas stations. The Town introduced a mixed-use option a few years ago which has helped bring more residential and commercial. Where the downtown is now is more of a challenge to make it more pedestrian oriented. He felt that since this is really a planning committee, mapping systems are one of the primary ways to convey information, and he encouraged members to become more familiar with GIS mapping. Mr. Kennedy provided a thorough demonstration on use of the Town's GIS system to produce a pdf of a downtown study area.

Ms. Davies thanked Mr. Kennedy and asked that members produce something, even a sketch, to show their vision of where the downtown would be. Those will be compiled and discussed at a future meeting and hopefully they can come to some sort of agreement before finalizing with the consultants.

Discussion followed about sharing examples via email with Ms. Bakstran cautioning against violating open meeting rules, Ms. Connors added that decision-making outside of a public meeting was problematic also.

Mr. Leif liked Mr. DiMare's illustration of his idea of downtown. Mr. Leif thought there are two different topics from the Master Plan that they've extracted as being important; the Downtown, and transportation. If they are adding connectivity to other parts of town that the Master Plan identified as important, it should be factored into the thinking that is going on with Complete Streets.

Ms. Cahill said perhaps part of their process is to consider what they could have done differently and apply it to the next round of development. If the area in the west side does develop, they should consider what are the best practices to build in to that to ensure walkability and connectivity that develop around that new town center. Rather than building for that, they should be anticipating what would make a future development work really well.

Mr. DiMare, with regard to who they go out to bid with, said Ms. Connors had mentioned Weston Sampson, a firm that Mr. DiMare is working with now in his line of work, he thought the board might want to consider them. Ms. Davies agreed and asked Ms. Connors to forward the RFQ to consultants she has been happy working with in the past. Ms. Connors said as Millbury's Town Planner, she'd worked with Michael Noonan from Weston and Sampson during Millbury's phase 1 of their downtown revitalization and again during phase 2 after he'd moved to BL Companies and spoke highly of his work. She said she would recommend both of those firms.

Mr. Leif wished to comment that he had no ulterior motive for suggesting the committee consider Business West or anywhere else in town except to say that they are at the beginning of the process and in his mind, anything goes; he just wanted to think outside of the box. Ms. Davies said it came down to what committee members felt was best for the town, and if more than half of them come back showing the Times Square area as their idea of where downtown should be, then perhaps they change their focus, but they should keep their options open.

Mr. Kennedy said if they focus on the traditional downtown and produce other concepts, they can still be transferred to other parts of the town, they are victims of a highway system that predates all of them, an east-to-west highway that is counter to any downtown. Marlboro handled this by creating a bypass of route 20 to maintain their downtown.

Mr. Leif suggested that committee members take some time to explore downtown to help get perspective. Mr. DiMare had done so and realized there are so many of these things in town that haven't been capitalized on. Ms. Davies said the RFQ includes a site visit so that committee members can gain that perspective.

Mr. Kennedy thought as a committee they should have a handle on some of those properties that are still vacant—land or buildings—that can help drive the direction they are going in.

Consideration of Minutes from February 17, 2022

Minor edits were made. Mr. Leif made a motion to accept the minutes as amended. Ms. Milton seconded. Roll call votes followed, all in favor.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:34pm.

Respectfully Submitted By

Michelle Cilley, Board Secretary