

MINUTES
STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE FOR
VAUGHAN-WORTH-BRIDGE REVITALIZATION
7:30 A.M. – Tuesday, September 5, 2017
Conference Room A
Portsmouth City Hall

Members in attendance: Rebecca Perkins, Chair; Nancy Pearson, City Councilor; Vincent Lombardi, Historic District Commission; Dexter Legg, Planning Board; Everett Eaton, Economic Development Commission; Barbara Destefano, Resident; Jay McSharry, Downtown Business owner

Staff Present: David Moore, Assistant City Manager; Juliet Walker, Planning Director; Ben Fletcher, Parking Director; Eric Eby, Parking and Transportation Engineer

1. Call to Order and Introduction of Committee Members

Assistant City Manager Moore called the meeting to order at 7:35 a.m. Chair Perkins arrived shortly thereafter.

Assistant City Manager Moore reviewed the agenda stating that there will be discussion with City Staff regarding parking and transportation issues. He stated that the listening session was held on August 29th and next steps will include proceeding with the Halvorson Design Team to finalize a scope of work and work towards a report back to City Council by the end of the year. He noted the Halvorson team would be at the Committee's next meeting set for Sept. 27th.

2. Discussion with City Staff: Planning, Transportation and Parking Issues in Study Area

- Eric Eby, Transportation Engineer
- Ben Fletcher, Parking Director
- Juliet Walker, Planning Director

Parking and Transportation Engineer Eby explained that there is an in progress traffic modeling initiative which is analyzing different circulation options for the downtown area (one way and two way streets) and how parking impacts traffic patterns. He indicated the model will be sophisticated and will be updated with traffic studies and other inputs in the future. He stated that they are looking at connecting the one-way streets to 2 way streets and the feasibility of those various scenarios. He stated that the model will be able to be used with developments and that companies will be able to pay for the updated information and won't have to submit their own model.

Assistant City Manager Moore asked about the developments that are in permitting currently and will those figure populate the model. Mr. Eby stated they won't be included in this model and they had to submit their own traffic studies traditionally, but in the future the modeling as part of the land use process can be done through this tool. Assistant City Manager Moore asked if these figures could be added after the fact manually. Mr. Eby stated yes.

Mr. Legg asked about updating the model once it is completed. Mr. Eby stated that there are significant staff training requirements on the system. The model and future scenarios will need to be done by the firm at a cost. Mr. Legg stated that this committee will want the data to be able to continue their work.

Mr. Lombardi stated that the data was added in June but traffic varies throughout the year. Mr. Eby stated that June is the average of the peak months.

Assistant City Manager Moore asked about the potential impacts of the one-way to two-way street study. Mr. Eby stated that that Congress, State, Pleasant and Daniel will be looked at first. He stated that left-hand turn lanes will need to be added so there may be some loss of parking. He stated that he isn't sure that Daniel Street can accommodate 2-way traffic.

Chair Perkins asked if this will allow us to see the impact of narrowing the Maplewood Avenue corridor. Mr. Eby stated yes and that Planning Director Walker would be addressing that issue as this is part of the Maplewood Avenue corridor study.

Mr. Legg asked if we can model the impact of making Bridge Street one-way and Mr. Eby replied yes. He indicated it is not likely that roadway could be eliminated but it could be narrowed, for example.

Councilor Pearson stated that there are a group of people that think that marking spots will increase the amount of parking places and asked if the model will help figure that out. Mr. Eby stated no, it is more about traffic flow.

Chair Perkins asked if it will assume how traffic will circulate to the new parking garage. Mr. Eby stated yes it can, but there was already an independent study on this. Mr. Moore stated that Bridge Street will be an important access to the new parking garage so we will need to know what it will look like i.e. one-way, two-way, parking on one side only, etc.

Mr. Legg asked if we will own the model or have to pay to have it updated. Mr. Eby stated it would be both because the city staff isn't trained to make the updates ourselves but we do own it. Mr. Legg asked if we will be able to update it eventually and will it be expensive to run a scenario. Mr. Eby stated the developer will pay the fee to update the information.

Mr. McSharry asked if it will take into account the people who have to drive around looking for parking. Mr. Eby stated yes.

Councilor Pearson asked if this model will be able to take residential parking into consideration and if the streets are restricted to certain uses. Mr. Eby stated yes. Councilor Pearson asked if the city is looking into an active resident parking program. Mr. Fletcher stated yes.

Mr. Lombardi asked if the model can produce a scenario that promotes traffic calming. Mr. Eby stated it does take into account the speeds on the various streets.

Mr. Eby left the meeting for another engagement.

Planning Director Walker discussed the Maplewood Avenue corridor project stated that a consultant was hired to analyze the feasibility of a "road diet" for a portion of Maplewood Avenue from Congress Street to Islington Street at the railroad tracks. She explained that Maplewood Avenue is wide for an urban area but was part of the urban renewal process. She stated that it is an unfriendly street for pedestrians and acts as a barrier from downtown to the rest of the area. She stated that there is also not enough room for bicyclists and is a main route for them. She stated that various scenarios have been explored and a bicycle/pedestrian traffic study has been conducted with Maplewood Avenue being identified as a critical link. She stated that we are moving towards the initial phase and have released an RFP with the first goal being a conceptual plan. She stated that the primary goal is a multi-modal corridor. She stated that there are talks ongoing with developers who will help pay for some of the improvements in a partnership with the city including widening of sidewalks. She stated that the challenge is how to best connect Maplewood Avenue without having too many stop-start crossings.

Mr. Legg asked about the projected schedule. Planning Director Walker stated that they are hoping to have the concept by winter.

Mr. Lombardi stated this is important to this committee going forward.

Chair Perkins asked how this committee should work with this information. Planning Director Walker stated that the connection of the Worth Lot to Maplewood will be important. Chair Perkins stated she agrees that Maplewood Avenue acts as a barrier to the downtown.

Assistant City Manager Moore stated that Planning Director Walker does a lot of multi-modal work and asked about overall strategies. Ms. Walker stated that thinking about the future of transportation will impact the future of parking. Chair Perkins agreed stating that hopefully demand will decrease over time.

Ms. Destefano asked about the shuttle usage this season as she feels it is mostly empty. Planning Director Walker stated that the City is looking to evolve the shuttle service into an employee-driven transport which would include changing the hours and making it a 7 day a week service.

Assistant City Manager Moore asked how the committee should think about public transit in the City for example COAST bus. Ms. Walker stated that the City has a partnership with COAST and are looking at ways to evolve to address the demand in the future. She suggested that there may be an “on-demand” service that will marry the fixed route to being able to get someone from their home to a bus stop. She stated that it is challenging to expand the routes however because they need the support of the other towns as well.

Mr. McSharry asked if there is a silver bullet that will make parking problems go away. Planning Director Walker stated that it is ever-changing and that every couple of decades there is an evolution. She continued that she feels ride-sharing, Ubers, etc. will have an impact and it is going to be based on generational preferences.

Assistant City Manager Moore asked if there was any consensus in the Planning or Engineering disciplines on the impacts of driverless cars. Ms. Walker stated no but the focus is always on multi-modal.

Discussion ensued regarding the usage of public transportation.

Mr. Legg asked if the City is able to give this committee guidance in what will happen and when. Ms. Walker stated the City of Portsmouth is not ready to make that statement but can look at other communities. Assistant City Manager Moore stated it can be a part of the updated parking principles.

Next, Parking Director Fletcher stated he is glad that the conversations are taking place and that there are challenges in understanding when the changes will make an impact. He then gave a brief description of his background and experience in the field.

Assistant City Manager Moore stated that elements of Mr. Fletcher’s verbal presentation will also be given to the City Council at their work session this evening.

Mr. Legg asked if the Council has asked for an updated Parking study as the committee needs to work with updated information going forward.

Chair Perkins stated the Council has not requested that yet as there was a change in staffing in the Parking Department recently.

Assistant City Manager Moore stated we are looking towards updating the 2012 report and reconciling where we are currently with developments, etc.

Mr. Eaton asked about the private parking and if there were really 400 additional spaces added or were they being used already and are not just accounted for.

Planning Director Walker clarified that the NH Parking Initiative is different than the agreements the city has with private lots.

Parking Director Fletcher stated that the NH Parking Initiative is for profit and we don’t know the utilization numbers from before and probably will not.

Chair Perkins stated that this committee is not charged with solving the parking problem and relies on the city to implement plans. She stated that parking space is valuable but so is green space.

Planning Director Walker discussed “Park Once” stating that the goal is to have people park in one spot and be able to visit various destinations allowing them to spend money and time more efficiently. She continued that providing a friendly, safe pedestrian environment with adequate shading and rest areas is appropriate for this committee. She stated that the North Mill Park will be a place that people will want to get to and will be a part of this connection.

Mr. Lombardi asked about 15 minute parking spaces stating that they don’t fit with the Park Once initiative. Mr. Fletcher stated those spaces exist where they do because businesses requested them for patrons to be able to get in and out quickly.

Planning Director Walker stated that will be a part of the parking study. She continued that she feels the primary concern of the committee is design and if they don’t provide parking in this location, it can be provided elsewhere.

Mr. McSharry stated that the consultants had asked the committee what other amenities they wanted to see in the space for example, restrooms, water features, etc. He stated that the businesses have asked for combination of parking and green spaces, but he also wonders about what could be if they didn’t need to provide parking.

Discussion ensued regarding various walkable cities.

(Mr. Eaton left the meeting at 8:45 a.m.)

3. Updates and Next Steps

Assistant City Manager Moore discussed the Direct Abutters and Business Owners Listening Session held on August 29th stating that flyers were distributed to business owners and abutters inviting their input and approximately 15 people attended. He noted concerns were expressed at the meeting about the efficacy of the notification efforts, but he believed the event yielded some good in-depth exchanges.

Mr. Lombardi stated that the group was mostly interested in parking and dominated the discussion and provided a singular perspective.

Mr. McSharry stated he agrees but feels that green space was also well received if it was combined with parking. He stated that business feel like this is their neighborhood while others feel it is downtown and want to be a part of the area as well.

Assistant City Manager Moore stated there was a lot of parking conversation, partly in reaction to a heavy focus in the presentation on examples of activating civic spaces that are possible for the study area. He stated he did hear positive comments about the Vaughan Mall and feels that they know that the city is engaged with finding out their needs. He stated that there was also a concern about introducing additional arts facilities that would compete with existing arts and culture venues in the City and a question about whether new facilities in the study area could be sustained.

Mr. McSharry agreed that people like the idea of green space but not necessarily anymore performance spaces. He stated they did like the idea of an interactive water feature which would be kid-friendly as well.

Councilor Pearson encouraged the committee members to visit the Rose Kennedy greenway in Boston as she feels there are a lot of similarities. She stated it has thriving businesses, interactive waterway, parking

underneath, etc. and it transformed the whole seaport. She stated the committee should think big.

4. Public Comment

Doug Roberts – stated that he feels going to 2-way traffic on some of the downtown streets such as State Street will have a positive effect on the businesses. Next he discussed parking stating that people need to change their habits of driving cars everywhere but feels that won't change until the price of gas goes up and driving becomes too expensive. He concluded by stating that he is skeptical of the idea of having a park on top of a parking garage although he feels that a viewing area would be appropriate.

5. Adjournment

Chair Perkins stated the next meeting will be held September 27, 2017 at 7:30 a.m.

Meeting adjourned at 9:05 a.m.