

CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION

Islington Street Improvement Action Plan Project

March 10, 2008 – 6:30 p.m.

Eileen Dondero Foley Council Chambers

City Council Present: Mayor Ferrini, Assistant Mayor Blalock, Councilors Novelline Clayburgh, Kennedy, Spear, Raynolds and Pantelakos

City Council Absent: Councilors Dwyer and Smith

Officials Present: John P. Bohenko, City Manager; Nancy Carmer, Economic Development Program Manager; Dana Levenson, Chair Economic Development Commission; Everett Eaton, Vice Chair Economic Development Commission; Edward Hayes, Paul Harvey, William F. Gladhill, Robin McIntosh, Lisa DeStefano, Economic Development Commission members; Sue Cobler, Executive Director Art-Speak; Ellen Fineberg, Vice President Art Speak; Emma Kelly, Richardson & Associates and Dianne M. Kirby, Deputy City Clerk

I. Call to Order

At 6:30 p.m., Mayor Ferrini called the work session to order and advised the City Council and members of the public that this meeting is for review of the Islington Street Improvement Action Plan Project.

II. Introduction

City Manager Bohenko stated that tonight's work session is intended to provide the Council and the Economic Development Commission with an overview of the project and to hear feedback on the options before the final input meeting on March 27, 2008. He stated that this project is funded by the city's Capital Improvement Program in the amount of \$40,000.00 and an additional \$12,000.00 from the National Endowment to the Arts grant – Art-Speak for arts district study.

City Manager Bohenko stated that Dana Levenson, Economic Development Commission Chair and Emma Kelly, Richardson & Associates would make their presentation and then the meeting would be opened up to the Council for questions and discussion. He stated that there would be no further action required by the Council at this meeting.

City Manager Bohenko turned the meeting over to Dana Levenson, Economic Development Commission Chair.

III. Presentation

Dana Levenson, Economic Development Commission Chair stated that this project was initiated by the Economic Development Commission to update and improve the Islington Street corridor. He stated that it has been a complex undertaking largely because of the mixed land usages along the street as well as it being a major artery in and out of our city. He stated that our Master Plan suggests that the city should create a vision for the corridors that include a menu for physical and regulatory strategies for each of the corridors. He said that the goal is to create and maintain an appropriate mix of commercial and residential growth and redevelopment.

Mr. Levenson said the objective of the project on Islington Street is the identification and location and certain conditions under which we can promote art work & living space. He said the project goal is to create a long term vision as well as a plan of prioritized actions and corridor improvements. He stated that this plan when finalized will include short and long term actions that we can make along the corridor that will improve things such as circulation, pedestrian and vehicle safety and likewise we hope the plan will enhance and create opportunities for the arts and cultural activity that is consistent with the goals of our Master Plan. He stated that the city has retained the consulting firm of Richardson & Associates from Saco, Maine to perform this study. He turned the meeting over to Emma Kelly from Richardson & Associates.

Emma Kelly from Richardson and Associates presented a PowerPoint presentation on the Islington Corridor Project. She stated that the project scope of the Islington Corridor Improvement Action Plan was the shaping of a vision, preparing a long-term guide and prioritizing actions to begin tomorrow as well as building on the master plan goals of the Arts District study. She stated that they held numerous stakeholder input sessions inviting people from the neighborhood, local businesses, members of the creative community and development community. She stated that the major common themes coming out of these sessions were function, consisting of safety, legibility and accessibility; character dealing with diversity, history, and reality; and opportunity, dealing with creative re-use, and land-use flexibility. She stated that they have come up with three urban design concepts – the patchwork quilt, a rich streetlife and gateways and anchors. She stated that these three designs do not fall on a level playing field. She stated that there are recognized differences in costs, city involvement and repercussions to district and surroundings with each.

Ms. Kelly stated that the patchwork quilt idea is a collection of small, unique moves to create a diverse whole. This design would involve heavy city involvement and investment. She said this design would involve “community connector” streetscape improvements, patchwork pocket parks and satellite surface parking.

Ms. Kelly stated in the rich streetlife design we would be throwing our weight behind streetscape. She said that it is believed that once started that private investment would follow. She further stated that there are some serious, unexplored repercussions with this design. She said this design would re-align intersections and re-route traffic creating an intensified, integrated streetscape and a re-energized core. She stated that this would rely heavily on public-private partnerships.

Ms. Kelly stated that with the gateways/anchors design we would work with existing palette creating smart growth opportunities and safeguarding existing positive qualities. She stated that this design would involve “functional connector” streetscape improvements, a west end anchor consisting of a mixed use redevelopment core with flexible community open space and underground garage and a cultural gateway consisting of a cultural institution development/creative-economy re-use district, urban gateway plaza for festival/performance and parking.

Ms. Kelly went into a detailed explanation of what was entailed with each design culminating with a discussion of where funds could be secured and a timeline for completion of the project for each design.

City Manager Bohenko thanked Economic Development Commission Chair Dana Levenson and Emma Kelly, Richardson & Associates for the work done on this project.

III. Questions and Discussion

Mayor Ferrini stated that before we open the meeting up to questions and discussion he would like everyone from the Economic Development Committee and Art Speak to go around the table and introduce themselves for the people watching at home.

Mayor Ferrini said that the Economic Development Commission has been working on this for a couple of years. He stated that there has been huge public involvement in this project and this meeting tonight was to inform the City Council so they could weigh in with their thoughts so the public knows what the Council's views are on these three options.

Mayor Ferrini stated that before he opened the meeting to questions and discussion he wanted to make it perfectly clear, that this is an informational meeting and that there would be no vote on any of these designs at this time.

Dr. Paul Harvey, Economic Development Commission stated that he heard that there were 30,000 cars on Islington Street in a day. He requested if this was one direction or both. Ms. Kelly, Richardson & Associates stated that the study actually documented 11,000 cars a day and it was pretty equally distributed in both directions. She said that usage builds through the morning until about noon and then it tops off and is steady until evening with about 1,000 cars an hour.

Dr. Harvey, Economic Development Commission asked if in a loop you would be getting a half and half split. Ms. Kelly, Richardson & Associates stated that you would be getting an increase of all 6,000 cars on State Street.

Councilor Reynolds asked if it was heavy flow inbound in the morning and heavy flow outbound in the evenings. Ms. Kelly, Richardson & Associates stated that the study didn't break it out like that.

City Manager Bohenko stated that if we can not answer a question we will mark it down and make it part of the process to find out.

Councilor Novelline Clayburgh asked what the cost of each plan would be. Emma Kelly, Richardson & Associates stated that they have not looked into the extent of ballpark costs. She said we have noted where possible relative costs and potential sources of funding could come from.

City Manager Bohenko stated that if the corridor is designated as a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) corridor, this TIF money could be used for street improvements, parking and other things. He stated that there are pros and cons on using TIF funds. He stated that this is a very very expensive project. He said that this is a plan and could evolve into one plan and eventually come back to the Council and be adopted. He further stated that Ms. Kelly has divided each design into time lines for completion, but it could be 5 years before we even get to a point where we could even start on this.

Ellen Fineberg, Vice President Art-Speak requested someone to explain what CIP, DOT and UDAG funds are. City Manager Bohenko stated that CIP stands for Capital Improvement Plan, DOT stands for Department of Transportation and UDAG stands for Urban Development Action Grant.

Councilor Kennedy requested to know where and what time the meeting is on March 27, 2008. Nancy Carmer, Economic Development Program Manager stated that the meeting will be at the new Library at 6:30 p.m.

Councilor Kennedy asked which plan did the west end and the Association like the best and which plan did the community members like the best. Emma Kelly, Richardson & Associates stated that there isn't any feed back yet and that is what we will be looking for.

Lisa DeStefano, Economic Development Commission stated that she is thrilled that we are at this point. She requested if there were a lot of conversations with the stakeholders with regards to the anchors design. City Manager Bohenko stated that the stakeholders were notified with regards to the group meetings, but not concerning the actual proposals. He stated that there will be a meeting with the stakeholders. He stated that there is no since in getting people all concerned or excited about an area unless the City Council has made a decision as to where we are headed and which plan will be initiated. He stated that there will be discussions with the stakeholders between now and whenever a final decision is made. He said that it is important to bring them in and have those conversations.

Nancy Cramer, Economic Development Program Manager stated that the large stakeholders were invited to the meetings. She stated that this is the first public airing of the project. Councilor Raynolds asked if there was any data on which plan the groups like best. He further stated that there are elements in each design that he liked and would like to keep open discussion that these are not plans, but designs. He stated that he does like the design with the one way street on Islington Street to State Street. Councilor Raynolds asked if any consideration was made for bike lanes.

Robin McIntosh, Economic Development Commission stated that she is concerned that a lot of what is being discussed is zoning prospects and she only heard a little of this discussed at the end of the presentation. Emma Kelly, Richardson & Associates stated that it definitely has not fallen out of the mix. She said there was an interest in understanding which direction we are going before exploring those tools to much further. She said that some specific things that did come out of all of the input and review sessions was that there has been clear feedback that there is an interest in the scale and character of Islington Street. She apologized for not mentioning the bike lanes. She stated that bike lanes are being considered.

Dana Levenson, Chairman Economic Development Commission stated that with the reuse of the Brewery property we need to develop a vision because all these plans develop in that area. He stated that we should envision how we want to see that area as an anchor. He stated that there was a lot of discussion in the round table about developing the corridor around the track from Bartlett Street to the central business district and he was wondering if the study addressed that at all for bikes, pedestrians or green space. Emma Kelly, Richardson & Associates stated that it was discussed. She stated that it is a used rail and long term changes would be to convert it to light rail transportation or bike lanes.

Councilor Pantelakos requested if the underground parking garage discussed here is the same parking lot already under discussion by the Council. Emma Kelly, Richardson & Associates stated that it would be another one underneath Plaza 800.

Assistant Mayor Blalock stated that there was a plan in the past to turn the old Brewery into a retail residential office space. He asked if this has been revisited. City Manager Bohenko stated that the property has changed hands since then. He said the Economic Development Commission has looked at this. He said they are in contact with the owner on a regular basis to see if there is anything they are interested in doing and told them we are there to work with them.

William Gladhill, Economic Development Commission stated that it was mentioned that there are some sight line problems. He stated that from personal experience pulling out of businesses at the side streets and the nature of Islington Street you can't see one way or the other. He asked if we do this parking garage, how limited will we be with on-street parking. Emma Kelly, Richardson & Associates stated that the plans offer a range of approaches to on and off-street parking. She said that there is a life blood to businesses for on-street parking so every plan recognizes and respects that need. She further stated that every design does involve some relocation of parking at corners for safety issues. She said that Plan B actually increases on-street parking overall by the use of one way streets. She stated that they do not have the numbers of how many spaces are replaced or moved, but each plan tries to keep overall parking the same.

Councilor Spear asked if the current positives with this project come from current policies or are they organic. Emma Kelly, Richardson & Associates stated that the majority of the positives are organic. She said that there has been discussion about some of the zoning challenges of the street. She further stated that there are six different zones on one mile of this one street.

Ellen Fineberg, Vice President Art-Speak stated that there are two city projects in that area that have a real effect on the street. She said one is Goodwin Park and the other is Rock Street Park. She stated that the fact that the city has invested in the infrastructure and made a difference for that section of the community, the committee has made it a point to look at and think about how we could continue to make investments that will pay off on that street.

Everett Eaton, Vice Chairman Economic Development Commission asked if the stakeholders were in favor of the one way option. Emma Kelly, Richardson & Associates stated that the one way option was explored because it did come up in some stakeholder input. She said that it was not a universal interest, but it was explored because it was discussed a lot. Everett Eaton, Vice Chairman Economic Development Commission asked if the one way has to go to State Street or is there another option towards the by-pass. City Manager Bohenko stated that the issue of the one way street would have to stand on its own for discussion and in order to eliminate any future traffic problems a study would have to be performed.

Nancy Cramer, Economic Development Program Manager stated that invitations were sent out for the stakeholder's meeting, but State Street was not well represented. Councilor Reynolds stated that State Street corridor has a high rate of rental property. Ms. Cramer stated that the current zoning has some effect on this as well. Emma Kelly, Richardson & Associates stated that there were other re-route plans that were brought up. City Manager Bohenko stated that the March 27, 2008 meeting will be very important.

Edward Hayes stated that one of the keys in this area is to get people to walk around more. He stated that there is too much traffic in this area and it would be nice to promote more pedestrian traffic. He asked Ms. Kelly which plan promotes this idea the best and which plan provides the most safety for pedestrians and bicyclists. Emma Kelly, Richardson & Associates stated that the goal in all this was to enhance quality of life and continued growth and strength of business opportunities in the community. She stated that every option tries to promote basic improvements to safety and visual character. City Manager Bohenko stated that in Prevention Magazine, the City of Portsmouth rated 58 in the top 100 best walkable cities.

Councilor Kennedy stated that part of the problem with walking downtown is the uneven sidewalks. She asked if we can get a plan for the basic necessities to the sidewalks. She said this is a long range project and requested to know what it would cost for a quick fix now. Councilor Reynolds said we have annual side walk repairs. He stated that the Brewery building and the space they have is one of the last best chance at housing that's affordable. He stated we are going to have to overcome our fear of density. He said this corridor is an area that is already dense. He said we should not discourage this. He said affordable housing is not going to be accomplished through a few discrete projects with special financing. He said we are going to accomplish it or not through every decision that gets made in the city by the Planning Board and by the Zoning Board of Adjustment. He stated that the area between Islington Street, Middle Street and downtown is an area where people can live without owning a car.

Councilor Spear stated that he likes the gateway idea. He stated that if we go forward with something like this he would like it made very clear that the avenues to get there on foot or bike are enabled. He said that he thought the idea to build a parking garage got really negative responses. He asked how that stands with the underground parking garage at Plaza 800. City Manager Bohenko stated that the original plan discussed was for an above ground parking structure that would take up more space on the street. He said it will be interesting on March 27, 2008 to see what the people say about underground parking.

Robin McIntosh, Economic Development Commission said that at her table during the group session there were ideas that they threw out because of the cost. She said if they had known there were funds available from other sources some of those ideas may have stayed in.

Assistant Mayor Blalock said that if some of the basic things are done now that we can do what they envision with the buses and underground parking and if we give up on the density issue, the area would build up. When you have a business area where you mix in residential you have an area with people both day and night which promotes safety.

Councilor Reynolds stated the city makes the rules and controls what is allowed and those are things we can change to let the private sector provide. He said we are the gate keepers and if we do not let new concepts come in and be tried, we will not grow. Paul Harvey, Economic Development Commission stated that changes have to be made. He said he has seen many changes in his life time that we now look back on and know they were for the best.

City Manager Bohenko reminded everyone of the meeting on March 27, 2008. He stated that if anyone had any further questions, they would remain available after the meeting to answer them.

V. Adjournment

At 8:25 p.m. Mayor Ferrini closed the meeting.

Respectfully submitted by:

Dianne M. Kirby, Deputy City Clerk