

D-R-A-F-T

Mill Plaza Study Committee Minutes Wednesday, March 7, 2007 Durham Town Hall – Council Chambers 4:00 PM

Members Present: Crawford Mills (sitting in for Leslie Schwartz), Thomas Newkirk, Stephen Pesci (sitting in for Douglas Bencks), Julian Smith (Vice Chair), Dave Howland (Chair), Deborah Hirsch Mayer, Warren Daniel, Lorne Parnell, Chuck Cressy, Perry Bryant, Ed Valena (Secretary)

Members Absent: Leslie Schwartz, Douglas Bencks, Michael Davis, Edgar Ramos

Also Present: Todd Selig, Town Administrator; Jim Campbell, Planner; John Coon, facilitator; members of the public: Dick Houghton, Henry Smith, Ed Garcia, Diana Carroll, Robin Mower, Jody Potter, Annmarie Harris, Bill Schoonmaker

I. Call to Order

Chair Howland called the meeting to order at 4:07 PM.

II. Comments from the Chair

Chair Howland commented on the enormity of the task facing the committee and expressed the premium that would be placed on public participation, while at the same time noting the importance for the committee to stay on task. He recommended a fifteen minute maximum public comment period at the start of each meeting (restricted to two minutes per speaker) with the possibility of more public comment opportunities at the end of the meeting (time permitting). He also expressed the desire to keep the process informal and based on consensus, rather than on formally voting.

III. Approval of the Agenda

Julian Smith made a motion to approve the agenda which was seconded by Jim Campbell. It was noted that Mr. Campbell did not have the authority to second the motion given that he is not a formal member of the committee; however, nobody seemed to mind and the motion passed unanimously.

IV. Approval of the Minutes

The minutes of the February 21, 2007 meeting (as presented by Jennie Berry, Administrative Assistant) were met with general approval and were not amended.

V. Comments from the Public

There were no comments from the public at this time.

VI. Discussion of Proposed Timetable for Committee Work

Chair Howland presented a work plan he had developed for the committee comprised of four phases. Phase I: develop a vision statement through brainstorming, public feedback, and conversations with the architects; Phase II: generate preliminary designs with a public charette and conversations with the architects; Phase III: adopt a superior design or synthesize the designs into a hybrid plan; and Phase IV: craft a final report for presentation to the Council by the first week of June.

Bill Schoonmaker, member of the architectural team, commented that this was a reasonable, but aggressive, plan.

Chuck Cressy wondered what the timetable for the finished project would be – three years, or as long as seven years? Chair Howland responded that the committee only has control of their own work. It was generally agreed that an optimistic attitude would be most productive.

Ed Valena asked that the goals of the public hearings be enunciated. It was noted that there would be three major public hearings. The first, early in the process, would be for general brainstorming. The second, a charette session, could be a multi-day affair that could include activity at the site. The third hearing would be in the late stage of the process and would be for final feedback. Bill Schoonmaker remarked that there should be an alternative method for public feedback for individuals who can't get to the meetings. It was noted that Luke Vincent, manager of Information Technology, would be setting up a page for the committee at the town web site which would report agendas, minutes, and would allow for public comment.

Tom Newkirk asked if the work schedule was doable. Bill Schoonmaker answered that it depends on the detail of the drawings, but was optimistic that a good package could be assembled in the allotted time frame. There was general appreciation to Chair Howland for a job well done.

VII. Discussion of Professional Assistance (Including Architectural Team)

This discussion was moved forward to the *Other Business* section of the meeting.

VIII. Staff Reports

A. History. Julian Smith presented a short history of the plaza and displayed a number of vintage photos and maps. He also noted that Ed Lehoullier, one of the original developers, might be in possession of other archival items of interest.

B. Zoning. Jim Campbell offered a short lesson on zoning in the Central Business District and distributed tables from the zoning ordinances that spell out permitted uses and dimensional requirements. He noted that four story buildings are allowed in the district (50' maximum height) and offered a number of build-out scenarios and the impact on parking requirements.

C. Relevance to Durham's Community Development Plan and Master Plan. Copies of relevant chapters in past planning documents were distributed.

IX. Committee Brainstorming with Facilitator

John Coon was introduced as the facilitator. Mr. Coon is an instructor and Ph.D. candidate at UNH and is a former trial lawyer. Mr. Coon asked that members of the committee offer their visions for the property.

Crawford Mills recalled a member of the public saying how we should stop referring to the property as a "mall" and that a better operating word would be "village". He assumed that a major component of the project would be housing and expressed that this should be mixed with the inclusion of young families. He stated that the buildings should be architecturally coherent with either the brick university buildings to the west or to the "colonial" look of Main Street and Church Hill. He expressed his desire for small restaurants and a movie theatre, and called for the possibility of a parking garage so as to limit expansive parking areas. He said that the thought of 50' high buildings was scary. He referenced Westwood Village (which is adjacent to UCLA) as a model for the project.

Perry Bryant stated that the project should be re-oriented towards Main Street and should have a mixed use where people could eat, shop, and live. He noted that parking would have to be addressed.

Tom Newkirk said that the property should be the town center and that siting the library there would be important. He noted the inadequacies of the current facility. He also noted the importance of creating a better pedestrian flow, rather than the current "car to store to car" activity he observes.

Steve Pesci stated he was a member of the campus planning staff and offered whatever assistance they could in the process. He mentioned the importance of an enhanced downtown to the prestige of the University. He noted that C Lot was also a problem, but no plans for its redevelopment are currently in the works. He referenced the free transportation bus loop that regularly circles the campus and how this loop could tie in to the plaza. He also spoke to the call for more student housing in the University's Master Plan, but how it appears that it will be difficult for the University to deliver on this need in the near future. Therefore, the housing component of the project is viewed as an opportunity. Crawford Mills asked where students live now. Mr. Pesci stated that he would prepare a report.

Ed Valena spoke on locating the library at the plaza and mentioned the importance of it being sited on town owned land. He stated his wish for a larger grocery store which could offer more services (meals to go, salad bar, etc.). He referenced an information kiosk similar to those seen in European squares for announcing public events. He said it would be important to develop the stream side of the property which is presently a receptacle for snow piles and trash.

Chuck Cressy noted that his store is currently 17,000 SF, but that he could reasonably use a facility as large as 25,000 SF. He mentioned the imminent opening of two new Hannaford supermarkets in the local region. He said that the plaza is a “boring” place and could have more exciting uses. He also said that parking is key, and that if an attendant didn’t currently mind the lot, then it would be overrun by student commuters. He offered that he liked the look of Hanover. He said that he is afraid that the pace of the planning process as conducted in Durham could slow things down and kill the project.

Lorne Parnell agreed that the property would have to be multi-use to improve the economics of the site and that the tax payments reaped from the apartments could pay for a library. He liked the concept of the village and the small town commons. He noted that parking must be well thought out.

Warren Daniel said that it would be important to link the plaza with the downtown and the university for parking and noted that C Lot is a tremendous waste of valuable space. He said that it would be important to link the property for pedestrians with Main Street and that expanding retail opportunities was key. He argued that municipal uses should be limited unless more adjacent land is purchased.

Deborah Hirsch Mayer said that the present development doesn’t promote community and that the library should be sited there and should be of the proper size and fitted out with a reasonable number of public meeting rooms. She supported the idea for an informational kiosk and argued for an architectural style with “character” (possibly with an emphasis on New England with uses of colonial references and granite). She called for outdoor public meeting areas. She said that housing should be mixed and expressed the opportunity for some affordable housing. She referenced the Portsmouth parking garage.

Julian Smith said he was in general agreement with what had been said. He offered the idea of utilizing the Grange property as vehicular access to a parking structure from Main Street. He also noted that there is a significant area of land not currently being utilized at the plaza. He remarked on there having to be a better way of handling the snow and that a stormwater management system for College Brook should be a priority. He spoke of the importance of cooperation with the Town

government to deal with this and thought that it might represent an opportunity for tax increment financing. He said that he would like to see the Town purchase a vacant parcel to the east of the plaza for siting a library/town hall.

Dave Howland said that any project would need to work well with the neighborhood including the flow of cars and people. He spoke of the importance of a buffer and how this project represented an opportunity for the clean-up of College Brook which has historically been treated like a drainage ditch. He echoed the call for a mix of shops and housing (including housing for families) and how the University could play a role in this. He spoke to the importance of year round public spaces and reiterated the need for orienting the property towards Main Street.

Chair Howland noted that it was 6:00 PM and the meeting was extended to 6:15 by general agreement. Chuck Cressy excused himself from the proceedings.

Dave Coon asked if there were any fears held by members of the committee in respect to the project.

Warren Daniel noted that there are past created documents sitting on shelves and that timing is key. He said it was important to keep moving along.

Perry Bryant noted that Durham has a history of being a place where it's hard to get things done.

Ed Valena noted that it would be important for the committee to take on the role of advocacy once the charge created by the Council was met. Warren Daniel thought that adding advocacy to the timeline was a good idea.

Dave Howland said that he would work with John Coon to draft a broad vision statement from the remarks made in the meeting.

X. Other Business

General discussion was held concerning the hiring of an architectural panel made of four local professionals. Perry Bryant made a motion to direct Town Administrator Todd Selig follow through on this action. The motion was seconded by Deborah Hirsch Mayer and it passed unanimously (Steve Pesci abstained).

Time was made at the end of the meeting for public comment.

Robin Mower cited a significant environmental impact associated with this redevelopment and that environmental regulations must be followed. She spoke of the importance of hiring professionals to meet this need. She further noted that future meetings should also be held at a time more conducive to the schedules of working people.

Annmarie Harris stated her concern that too much retail development in the plaza might hurt businesses located on Main Street. She also expressed her concern that building student-oriented housing on the plaza site might import the problems associated with partying along Madbury Road to an area adjacent to a dense residential neighborhood.

XI. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 6:18 PM.

Ed Valena, Secretary