

Mill Plaza Study Committee Minutes
Wednesday, March 21, 2007
Durham Town Hall – Council Chambers
4:00 PM

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

Members Absent: Leslie Schwartz, Michael Davis, Edgar Ramos, Lorne Parnell

Also Present: Todd Selig, Town Administrator; members of the public: Henry Smith, Ed Garcia, Robin Mower, Bill Schoonmaker, Robbi Woodburn, David Clark (UNH Campus Planning), Shelley Mitchell, Doug Greene, Walter Rous, Jen Thompson, Michael Behrendt

I. Call to Order

Chair Howland called the meeting to order at 4:05 PM.

II. Comments from the Chair

Chair Howland reported on his activities as chairman since the last meeting. These included: 1) offering a public comment at the March 19th's Town Council meeting on the committee's kick-off and meeting privately with Council Chair Neil Niman; 2) sending a personal update to John Pinto, Plaza property owner; 3) arranging weekly meetings with Bill Schoonmaker, contact person for the architectural team; and 4) progressing with a grant with the American Institute of Architects (AIA) for technical support (It should be noted that Durham is on a short list with two other communities for consideration. Representatives of AIA will be visiting the town on March 27 for a tour of the property. Edgar Ramos, representative of Mr. Pinto, plans to be in attendance and committee members are welcome. The group will meet in the Council Chambers at 9AM on Tuesday, March 27).

Chair Howland also commented on a presentation on public spaces to be organized for the next meeting by Bill Schoonmaker. Committee members are encouraged to email photos to Mr. Schoonmaker (schoonmakerarchitects@verizon.net) which show development elements that they find particularly pleasing and inspiring (and also, those that might show the opposite).

III. Approval of the Agenda

Julian Smith made a motion to approve the agenda (seconded by Tom Newkirk). which passed unanimously.

IV. Approval of the Minutes

Warren Daniel made a motion to approve the minutes of the March 7 meeting which was seconded by Julian Smith. No amendments were offered on the minutes and the motion passed unanimously.

V. Comments from the Public

Robin Mower expressed her belief that setbacks from College Brook should be thoroughly discussed before the design process moves too far forward. She argued for maximizing pervious surface area between the brook and any improvements (including pavement) in order to increase the filtration potential of run-off.

Doug Bencks wondered if Ms. Mower had a specific distance in mind.

Ms. Mower responded that a minimum of 50' seemed reasonable.

Mr. Bencks offered the possibility that an expert on the university staff might be able to assist the committee. Chair Howland agreed on the importance of this issue and would seek out a list of professionals who might act as resources.

There were no other comments from the public at this time.

VI. Set First Public Hearing (tentatively 7PM, Wednesday, April 4)

There was general discussion concerning the time, setting, and promotion of the first public hearing.

The tentative time of 7PM, Wednesday, April 4 was agreed to after it was decided that an attempt to move the date to the Tuesday before would conflict with the Passover observance. (motioned by Ed Valena, seconded by Tom Newkirk and unanimously approved). A conflict with a presentation by the Carbon Challenge (at the Durham Public Library) on the same evening was acknowledged.

It was generally agreed that the Council Chambers would not support the expected crowd for the Public Hearing. Other venues were discussed and the availability of multi-purpose rooms at the middle or high school was raised. Doug Bencks offered to investigate the availability of space at the University, if necessary.

Various methods of promoting the Public Hearing were discussed. These included: 1) creating a thorough news release for Fosters to consider for a news story, 2) posterizing Durham Marketplace cash registers with news of the event (Chuck Cressey agreed to this.), 3) inserting a notice in the Friday Update, and 4) announcing on DCAT.

Discussion was held regarding a catchy slogan for the process. (One showing great promise was “It takes a village to build a village.”) It was wondered whether this activity could get public involvement on the committee website which will be online soon.

VII. Report and Discussion about Status of AIA Application

Chair Howland and Doug Bencks explained the scope of work with which the AIA team could be helpful. Mr. Bencks specifically spoke to aid the group could provide in bringing a project to fruition, and especially in the permitting process.

Chuck Cressey reported on a recent meeting with Lisa Miller, Vice President (Real Estate) of Hannafords. Hannafords is the primary leaseholder in the Plaza and holds a number of pass throughleases. Mr. Cressey reported that he expressed his idea to Ms. Miller that it would behoove the committee to try to create a number of development scenarios for the Plaza representing various degrees of complexity. This menu could then be presented to the property owner. Mr. Cressey reported that Ms. Miller agreed with this strategy.

Chair Howland voiced that the committee is energized and is on course “to set a high bar”. He stated given the scope of the possible redevelopment, the process holds the potential for phasing.

Warren Daniel spoke to the scope of the project and supported Mr. Cressey regarding multiple design scenarios. He further stated that the involvement of the Town complicates the process.

Chair Howland followed that there are three major participants – the public, the property owner, and UNH. He also spoke to the concept that large commercial properties in town centers, such as the Plaza, constitute “public space” and thus the public has a role in planning for the future.

Ed Valena reminded the committee to always remember that they are discussing private property.

Julian Smith spoke to keeping the property owner’s “bottom line” in consideration, but extended the term to include the legacy that could be created. He also extended the context of stakeholders to include tenants, Library BOT, shoppers, students and the environmental community (in respect to College Brook). He also suggested the possibility of a scrubber drainage system for run-off that could be financed by a TIF.

Chair Howland expressed his view of the committee as receiving ideas from the public, synthesizing those concepts into a summary report, and presenting those conclusions to the Town Council (and further to the property owner).

VIII. Report and Discussion about our Committee's Draft Project Statement

Chair Howland led a roundtable discussion on amending the working draft of the project vision statement. Ten statements were proposed concerning participation of the public, uses of the Plaza, design considerations, and goals for redevelopment. A number of line items were discussed (referencing the draft numbering system).

6. Design Concept. The word “original” was struck with the general belief that this goal contradicted the goal of visually fitting in with the neighborhood.

Ed Valena thought the concept of sustainability should be incorporated into the design concept and specifically speaking to the energy efficiency of the buildings. There was general agreement to include this reference.

Chuck Cressey reported on the purchase of the Laundromat building located on Main Street by Roger Hayden and his intention to redevelop it and a neighboring property. Mr. Cressey thought this represented a design opportunity. There was general agreement that Main Street property owners should be apprised of the Plaza Committee's progress and Chair Howland asked Town Administrator Todd Selig to develop a list of those concerned.

7. College Brook. There was general discussion concerning College Brook and the natural fringe of the property along the southern and eastern borders of the property. There was agreement that this natural corridor would be an important element in any redevelopment of the property.

8. Municipal Facilities. There was minor discussion as to the importance of municipal facilities being sited on town owned property.

10. Parking. There was general discussion concerning parking and whether a garage should be specified or left more open (referenced as a facility). The word “likely” was altered to “possibly” to offer a less definite tone.

Chuck Cressey believed an additional item referencing access and egress (pedestrian and vehicular) to the Plaza should be included in the vision statement. Some members believed it was “in there” while others believed in needed special mention. To break the impasse, Chair Howland included this item as an eleventh statement.

Chair Howland was encouraged to make the minor changes offered by the committee in order to finalize the vision statement.

IX. Site Zoning Visualization Exercise (Begun)

A visual brainstorming session involving an oversized map of the Plaza site and model building components was unpacked by Doug Bencks and David Clark, a member of the UNH planning staff. Given the nature of this activity, Chair

Howland thought it appropriate to move the second public comment session forward as the next agenda item. There was general agreement that this was a good idea. Chair Howland emphasized, as before, that this initial exercise was intended to provide the committee a sense of three dimensional space on the site and a sense of what existing zoning will allow on the site. He said the map and blocks can be used as a resource in future meetings to try out new concepts and to tweak plans that emerge.

X. Other Business

There was no other business.

XI. Public Comments

Robbi Woodburn spoke to the property owner's point of view and the need to acquire a list of their needs and wants in order to create a synergy with the town's vision. Ms. Woodburn likened the project to her own experience as a landscape architect and the necessity of involving both spouses in the design process from the start.

Chuck Cressey spoke to John Pinto's natural caution with the process given a rocky history with the town. Chair Howland offered that the committee was working diligently to not be blind to Mr. Pinto's needs and hopes, and that his participation is being encouraged.

Ms. Woodburn reiterated her opinion of the importance of knowing what "excites" the property owner

Micheal Behrendt spoke to the vision statement and believed a reference should be included that expressed the complexity of the challenge that lay ahead. He spoke of College Brook and the need to incorporate it as a design element for pedestrian enjoyment, rather than view it as a place to "set back from". He spoke of engineered treatment of run-off.

Mr. Behrendt believed the idea of a parking garage should be kept in the mix and that surface parking should be shielded from pedestrians. He believed language should be inserted in the vision statement that spoke to creation of a "fabulous sense of space" and referenced "new urbanism".

Robin Mower suggested the upcoming public hearing should be aired on DCAT. She thought a menu of topics should be presented prior to the public hearing to promote a more productive process. She spoke of including space in the Plaza for public events. She expressed concern that opening up College Brook to pedestrian traffic would lend the area to more littering which is already a problem.

IX. Site Zoning Visualization Exercise (Continued)

The committee returned to the brainstorming session. Doug Bencks, UNH Planner and committee member, explained the process. An oversized two-dimensional map

of the Plaza site and immediate neighborhood had been created which showed the footprints of the current improvements and College Brook. A foam core overlay depicting the elevation of Main Street in respect to the low lying topography of the Plaza. Colored blocks representing different uses (retail, residential, parking, and municipal) could be laid and stacked on the map to visualize different development scenarios. It should be noted that it was assumed in this exercise that the Grange Building had been razed in order to provide vehicular access/egress to the Plaza below.

There was animated discussion including input from the public. Two scenarios developed:

- **Concept 1.** A loop road entering at the current entrance off Mill Road, following College Brook, circling the rear of the property, and connecting with Main Street at the Grange property. Anchor stores located to the rear of the Plaza with a library site at the Main Street/Mill Road intersection. A pedestrian shopping corridor running from the Library to the anchors to the rear with the possibility of more retail along Mill Road. Residential space was depicted above all the retail space at one and two levels. The possibility of a parking garage was seen in the northwest corner of the site built into the hillside.
- **Concept 2.** A main boulevard was imagined entering the site off Mill Road north of the current entrance. Mixed-use buildings would line each side of this access road (anchor stores again located to the rear) and the focal end of the road could be the site for a municipal building. A hybrid scenario was also imagined where the municipal building site was moved to the side and an anchor store filled the rear center. A vehicular tie-in with Main Street was again assumed at the Grange property and likewise a parking garage in the northeast corner was considered.

A number of issues known already to the committee became more apparent. 1) The complexity of vehicular and pedestrian traffic (including large truck delivery) was discussed; 2) The difficulty of creating open public spaces when land is also needed for parking became more evident; 3) The problem of meeting the needs of various interest groups (tenants, townspeople, neighborhood) with a single design became obvious.

It was generally agreed that the exercise was a worthwhile activity and should be attempted again by the committee, as well as opened up to the public in a charette format.

XII. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 6:23 PM.

Ed Valena, Secretary