

D-R-A-F-T

**Mill Plaza Study Committee Minutes
Wednesday, April 18, 2007
Durham Town Hall – Council Chambers
4:00 PM**

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

Members Absent: Michael Davis, Edgar Ramos, Perry Bryant, Douglas Bencks

Also Present: Members of the public: Robin Mower, Ed Garcia, Bill Schoonmaker, David Clark (UNH Planning)

I. Call to Order

Chair Howland called the meeting to order at 4:06 PM.

II. Comments from the Chair

Chair Howland reported that he would be talking with Patricia Sherman of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) to set up an initial meeting. He suggested that this planning meeting be limited to himself and Vice Chair Julian Smith as representatives of the committee and would also include Town Administrator Todd Selig. He also noted that AIA had selected a facilitator for the project: Patrick Field of the Cambridge Consensus Building Institute. He outlined business items on the agenda which include 1) revisiting the draft vision statement, and 2) reviewing photos of public places and maps of the Plaza property in order to begin to construct a vision for project.

III. Approval of the Agenda

Ed Valena moved that time should be created in the meeting to incorporate discussion of the April 4 public hearing. It was generally agreed that this topic could be incorporated as Item 5A. Julian Smith seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

IV. Approval of the Minutes

Julian Smith made a motion to approve the minutes of the April 4 meeting which was seconded by Lorne Parnell. The motion passed unanimously. There was general discussion concerning availability of draft and approved minutes at the meetings and it was decided to deal with this procedure outside of the meeting given the limited time.

V. Comments from the Public

Robin Mower referenced a letter she had sent to the committee and questioned the accuracy of a statement regarding setback requirements from College Brook attributed to her in the minutes of a previous meeting. Ed Valena and Julien Smith said they believed the minutes in question were accurate.

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

V-A. Reflection on the April 4 Public Hearing

Chuck Cressy noted the number of comments at the meeting concerning the amount of litter at the Plaza. He noted a meeting of the Plaza merchants held on the previous day where this topic was further discussed. He mentioned the history of litter blowing onto the Plaza property from neighboring properties along Main Street. He reported that a maintenance person was to be hired for the Plaza to attend to the litter as well as to the brush growing along the perimeter of the property.

Lorne Parnell asked if this would also include the brook area.

Mr. Cressy said that it would.

Tom Newkirk asked whether brush growing along the roadside of the neighboring residential condominium could also be cut down. He noted that this brush created a dangerous situation for drivers trying to exit the Plaza.

Julian Smith offered to bring this matter to the attention of the town administrator.

Chair Howland asked if there were further general comments on the public hearing.

Warren Daniel noted the general positive feedback presented at the hearing. He also noted Malcolm McNeill's characterization of the process being "backward", with the town telling a private property owner how to redevelop his property, but also noted that Mr. McNeill seemed to become more open to the idea as the evening progressed.

Ed Valena thought it would be a good idea to incorporate a copy of the initial charge letter from John Pinto in future presentations so that the public would understand that the work of the committee is in response to a request by the property owner.

Deborah Hirsch Mayer reported that though she hadn't attended the hearing, a friend of hers discussed how she didn't want to see Durham become a destination center. Her friend was afraid that Durham would become "yuppified".

Warren Daniel reported he had heard the same thing a few times and opined that some people are just uncomfortable with change.

Julian Smith mentioned that the town is already a destination point and mentioned UNH sports and other activities as being regional attractions.

Steve Pesci spoke to the concept of traffic. He noted that while a revitalized Plaza might bring more traffic to the center of town, it would decrease the amount of traffic leaving town in search of goods and services elsewhere.

There was discussion on whether the public hearing received adequate press coverage. It was reported that it was covered by Foster's and The New Hampshire.

Julian Smith noted that Chair Howland had done a heck of a job in pulling the mechanics of the hearing together, including arranging for the videotaping of the meeting for future airing on DCAT. It was reported that the meeting would air on Friday and Sunday evenings of the upcoming week.

Warren Daniel noted that the MUB theatre proved to be a good location.

VI. Discuss Draft Vision Statement

Julian Smith spoke to the vision statement and how Chair Howland did an excellent job tying the ten principles in it to the Master Plan (2000), the Community Development Plan (1995), the Council charge, John Pinto's early letter, the AIA's Ten Principles on Living Communities, NH's Open Meeting Law, and comments from the public hearing (as well as letters and emails).

Chair Howland spoke to the assistance he had received from Michael Behrendt (town resident and Rochester city planner) in providing subheadings to the ten items. He then offered to walk through the ten items and discuss those which required further elaboration or change.

Secretary's Note: The Mill Plaza Study Committee Working Vision Statement is available at the committee website.

- **Open Process.** Warren Daniel suggested that in addition to the references listed, it should also be noted that public comments are solicited at all meetings.
- **Community-Oriented Space.** Chair Howland noted Malin Clyde's comment at the public hearing that it was good the Plaza had emerged as a public gathering space for the summer concert and that a development could improve upon the current "beach chairs on pavement".
- **Mixed Uses.** No additional comments were made.
- **Linkage.** No additional comments were made.

- **Balanced Access.** Chair Howland spoke to bicycles and the importance of considering them in respect to traffic safety.

Chuck Cressy spoke to the importance of smooth vehicular in and out traffic flow and how the bulk of the Durham Marketplace's trade is with folks who arrive by car. He noted how Hannaford considers 5.5 parking spaces per 1,000 SF of store area a minimum requirement. He expressed his concern that the statement, as written, downplayed the importance of easy parking for patrons of the Plaza and overplayed the significance of bicycle and pedestrian traffic.

Steve Pesci expressed his concern for Mr. Cressy's fears, but spoke to a balanced approach.

Ed Valena thought the present wording on traffic (cars, bikes, and pedestrian) spoke to requirements of all interests in that "commercial viability of businesses" is mentioned up front.

Chair Howland believed the present layout of the Plaza is more suburban and is typical of a 1970's development. He expressed his desire to incorporate more urban elements into a redevelopment scheme.

Chuck Cressy spoke to previously hinted-at desires by the committee for more retail space as well as service uses in a Plaza redevelopment. He recounted that his "biggest nightmare" is that patrons will come to the Plaza for the long term and monopolize the "easy parking" for their own use, and therefore deny the "in-and-out" shopper a quick shopping experience. In the end, he thought, he would lose customers to more easily accessible stores in Lee and Dover.

Warren Daniel agreed that easy access and egress was a key to his restaurant's success. He estimated that driving customers account for 60%-65% of his gross sales.

Julian Smith wondered what the breakdown was for Plaza customers in respect to "walk-ins" and "drive-ins".

Chuck Cressy spoke to how his summer business decreased by 35% in the summertime when he first started up his business, and how it decreases by only 5% in the present. He attributed this fact to targeting his business to the local resident who drives to his store and does significant shopping, rather than to the walking student customers who can only purchase what they can carry. He also spoke to his belief that 40% of parking spaces at the Plaza go unused. He pointed out areas of unused parking on the oversized photo of the Plaza.

Steve Pesci spoke to his belief that the availability of parking does not drive success and that Mr. Cressy's experience proved this point. He also wondered what the current ratio of parking to retail space was.

Chair Howland noted that this would be excellent homework for a subcommittee to study.

Warren Daniel expressed the need to study vehicular and pedestrian traffic. It was generally agreed that pertinent questions to patrons would be: 1) How did you get here? and 2) Was your trip linked with other business in town? Steve Pesci noted the need to design any redevelopment so that all traffic requirements could be met.

Chair Howland expressed the need to take a time out from the agenda item to allow Bill Schoonmaker, local architect and lead member of the support design team, an opportunity to speak to the architects' involvement with the process. Mr. Schoonmaker spoke to Steve Pesci and David Clark's work in developing maps of the Plaza area for a design exercise. He spoke of the competing interests surrounding the Plaza (Main Street, UNH, and the faculty neighborhood) and how the committee should view the "severity and softness" of the linkages between the Plaza and these elements. He also spoke of the future process and how the design team would base its work on the groundwork of the committee.

Chuck Cressy expressed his view that the committee should arrive at a bare bones list of needs for redevelopment and have the architects draw something up. He also wondered if neighboring vacant properties were being considered in the mix.

Bill Schoonmaker expressed his desire for more initial input from the committee.

Tom Newkirk wondered how the relationship between the local design team and AIA would evolve.

Bill Schoonmaker thought this was currently vague, but would become more clear in the future.

Warren Daniel spoke to John Pinto's desire to maximize his investment. He wondered if the committee had enough information to meet the task.

Lorne Parnell agreed to the need for more information. He spoke to how the Plaza property is not an open field and how advice on construction was necessary.

Steve Pesci noted that the Plaza couldn't be better hidden from Main Street traffic.

Warren Daniel wondered how the preliminary plan would be completed. He spoke to his belief on how the design activity by the committee might prove to be a waste of time.

Chair Howland spoke to the work already accomplished by the committee. He noted the articulation of the ten principles in the vision statement and the importance of using them for guidance in directing the design team. He noted the anxiety he was hearing in respect of the lack of hard data. He also noted AIA's involvement and the change in the level of thoroughness it offered. He spoke again to the ten principles in the vision statement and how they speak to the town's values.

Chuck Cressy spoke to "givens" in any redevelopment. As an example, he offered how the current delivery system for tractor trailers to the rear of the grocery and drug stores were successfully hidden from nearby neighborhoods. A given would be to continue to keep these unloading areas out of view.

Bill Schoonmaker left the meeting and discussion concerning the vision statement resumed.

- **Quality Design.** It was generally agreed that the photo exercise would speak to this matter.
- **Restored Buffer.** Julian Smith noted he had studied the history of College Brook in old planning files and believed this was an opportunity to fix a long-term problem.

Steve Pesci reported the role of the College Brook restoration in the University Master Plan and noted the future plan of returning C Lot into a "natural space".

- **Civic Elements.** There was general discussion concerning siting a library or other civic building in the Plaza and the possibility of locating such facilities on neighboring properties were they to become available.

Tom Newkirk spoke to "conflicting elements" and how the vision statement was too aggressive. He questioned if it was possible to "do it all" and thought that "something has to give".

There was general discussion concerning the role of neighboring vacant lands in the redevelopment were they to become available.

- **Fiscal Enhancement.** No additional comments were made.
- **Public Parking.** There was general discussion on parking at the Plaza and the relationship to overall downtown traffic needs. There was also

discussion concerning the seasonal effect of parking needs. Following considerable discussion, it was determined that parking requirements at the Plaza should include reference to Plaza patrons, employees, and possible future residents, as well as including possible use by patrons of downtown businesses outside the Plaza.

Warren Daniel noted his desire to include some reference to a partnership with UNH in any redevelopment of the Plaza.

VII. Mapping and Photo Exercise

Given the lateness of the hour, it was agreed to shift this exercise to a future meeting.

VIII. Other Business

There was no other business.

IX. Public Comments

Robin Mower thanked Chuck Cressy in regards to dealing with the litter issue around the Plaza. She spoke to making the committee more accessible to the public by offering evening meetings. She agreed that cleaning roadside brush located on a neighboring property was a good idea for safety's sake and that pedestrian safety in the parking lot in general should be considered. She reiterated a past comment concerning the need of creating a list of "givens" in any redevelopment and thought that reference to the Master Plan in respect to item #9 of the Vision Statement (Fiscal Enhancement) would be appropriate.

X. Adjournment

Just prior to adjournment, Chair Howland recalled Tom Newkirk's concern that the committee's emerging vision statement was too full and that "something has to give." Chair Howland said the vision statement reflects the many interests of stakeholders around the table, which he said are best articulated up front to reveal, sooner or later, where cooperation and compromise might be required in the future. He thanked everyone for a job well done so far.

The meeting was adjourned at 6:05 PM.

Ed Valena, Secretary