

Public Forum Stakeholders Meeting Notes – UNH MUB Theater II July 18, 2007

Mill Plaza Study Committee E-mail: plazacommittee@ci.durham.nh.us

The session began at approximately 7:05 pm

Introduction:

Dave Howland (Chair of the Mill Plaza Study Committee) and Neil Niman (Chair of the Durham Town Council) opened the session by introducing the process and how it began, what has happened so far with the project, and what the future process looks like as of now.

Patrick Field (from the Consensus Building Institute) then briefly went over the evening's agenda and introduced Patricia Sherman, the lead architect from the American Institute of Architects NH 150. Patricia Sherman introduced why the AIA is here, expanded further on the collaborative process looking at the redevelopment of the Mill Plaza site, and talked about the goals of the redevelopment plan, as well as emphasizing the critical role of the public in providing the design parameters for the project.

Initial Questions on the Project Process from the Public:

Will the community be able to submit questions, concerns and ideas to the project's website?

Yes, they can submit these anytime they wish to plazacommittee@ci.durham.nh.us and their comments will get anonymously integrated into a list that has been started based on interviews with several groups of like-minded stakeholders.

How wide spread is the attempt to notify the community at large of this avenue for comment?

Ideas suggested included using the schools to send home fliers, doing a public mailing to all town residents, and broadcasting this meeting and other Mill Plaza Study Committee meetings more frequently on the D-CAT network.

What is the owner's interest and involvement in this process, both now and down the road?

The property owner, John Pinto, has a representative at most of the meetings, and has personally met with various town and committee groups over the last 6 months, and will be closely involved in the upcoming design phase of the project. Mr. Pinto has

connections to the community and is financially stable; suggesting continued long-range involvement in the community and in this development.

What is the experience of the design teams in projects and processes like these and who are the teams?

All the design teams are familiar with current design processes that frequently include re-envisioning designs based on multiple sources of viewpoints, concerns and ideas. There are three design teams, composed of architects, landscape architects and others. The local team from Durham is headed by Bill Schoonmaker and will include Bobby Woodward, Nick Issac and Walter Rous among others. The other two teams are composed from design firms in NH. All the design teams will have access to similar sources of data from various consultants such as engineers and the like.

Current Site Conditions:

Patricia Sherman, with the impromptu aid of various experts and partners present, succinctly explained what the current site conditions are and some of the potential of the site. The slides can be found on the Town website:

http://www.ci.durham.nh.us/GOVERNMENT/boards/mill_plaza/mill_plaza_study_committee.htm

Questions from the Public:

Dave Howland introduced this segment of the session, encouraging people to ask questions, give feedback and comment on what was presented, noting that the process will be “all the richer for your contributions”. Questions were answered mostly by Patricia Sherman with some help from Patrick Field, Dave Howland and AIA150 partners.

What is the scope of the site? What properties does it include? What could be done with these properties? Is cooperation from abutters “all or nothing”?

The scope is limited to the plaza itself and essentially the paved parking area, but in terms of design and thinking about the site, several abutting properties are being included, ultimately dependent on the property owners’ interests.

The designers are looking at the bigger picture and in some cases there is already interest, but it is too early to say definitely what the exact scope of the site will be and which properties will be included in the final design. There is a lot of potential in some of the lots on Main Street that are underdeveloped or in marginal condition. The brook area offers great potential for natural areas and a buffer zone between the neighbors hoods and downtown. The design needs to tie into the area it is being developed near; so open areas offer more flexibility, including more access. The design can flexibly include whatever

properties are interested, but at some point a final decision will need to be made as to what properties will be included.

What could be done to study why people do not use the Plaza currently and why they do?

We are in the place of “if they build it they will come”, as right now there is limited office space, the site is not particularly welcoming, the environment is lacking, so enhancing environment may bring people in. One option to gather data would be to have a public survey, which would not be statistically valid if done informally, but could provide valuable input nonetheless. An economic analysis of viability of various options will be done.

What thinking is going into the energy efficiency of the site, including driving vs. walking? How would the buildings be better in general?

The buildings are currently 40 years old and not built to current specifications. New buildings would be more energy efficient, the site would have less run off, and essentially we are looking at totally different design from a strip mall, more user friendly and built to modern standards. Consideration is being given to the nature of the development, including thinking of the site as a “destination” to both attract folks from the area and make a more centralized center for amenities and services. One example of this concept we are looking at is Hanover.

How many buildings and what uses are envisioned for the site?

This depends on economics somewhat; there could be attached buildings, the buildings could be condominiumized, the site could include a town hall and library, housing and retail. What typically works best is to plan the whole site based on what people are interested in and then figure out ownership and the boundary lines later...figure out what you want and then make it work, do it as a whole and work out property ownership/compensation later.

What is the current thinking about parking? How can we reduce the amount of asphalt and create greens spaces, and still have enough parking, especially as you are talking about increasing the commercial and residential density of the area?

One idea that is being discussed is structured parking. The differences in grading around the site would allow for parking garage structures that could be faced with other buildings so it would not look like a garage; it could be embedded in other structures.

What are the current plans for entries and exits, and what thought is being given to wider town traffic patterns, including pedestrian and bicycle traffic?

Likely designers will try to include more than one access point. The goal is to make access for all pedestrians, cars, and delivery vehicles work, and indeed broader traffic patterns will be given much thought.

Bicycles and pedestrians are a big part of this. Bike parking will be included. UNH is interested in having a bus stop and maybe a bus shelter. Walking paths and bike paths have been discussed and so forth. This is a transportation-oriented development including everything from foot traffic to cars and buses, with an eye to making the site as

user friendly as possible. Even trains will likely be a piece of the puzzle and how it impacts downtown and the surrounding area.

Has there been any thinking about how to tie in the downtown area to this project?

The concept of connecting the rest of downtown, especially Main St. with the Mill Plaza development is crucial to this whole process and the project. At the heart of this project is the chance to re-imagine the town center.

What types of housing are being considered for this site, and is it feasible to include work force housing and/or low-income housing?

Various combinations of housing, including work force housing, low income housing, senior housing, and student housing of various sorts, undergrad and graduate, have been discussed already. The mix of residential could be income-based. It could include a certain percentage of units of certain types, housing could come with subsidies...there are many options.

What is the time frame for this project? Will it be phased building or done all at once?

The building will likely be phased, as we can't put the current businesses out while this project unfolds, while commercial and housing demands can be staged as units are built. The plan is to break ground in 2009, and 2 years would be a reasonable time frame for initial phases of construction.

What about the degradation of College Brook on UNH and Plaza property, the erosion of the natural vegetative buffer around the neighborhood and potential for flooding from further development? What is being planned for the future?

Current regulations are very different from when the Plaza was first built in the 1960's. For one thing you must deal with runoff water on your own property now, and there are regulations about setbacks and development in the flood plain. The brook is our prime natural feature of the site and preserving natural quality of brook as much as possible and adding green space would be a high priority.

Concluding Remarks:

Dave Howland thanked everyone for their participation and encouraged continued interest and involvement.

The meeting adjourned at 8:50pm.