

Mill Plaza Study Committee Minutes
Wednesday, August 22, 2007

D-R-A-F-T
Mill Plaza Study Committee Minutes
Wednesday, August 22, 2007
Durham Town Hall—Council Chambers
4:30 PM

Members Present: David Howland (chair) Julian Smith (vice chair), Doug Bencks (arrived 5:06), Tom Newkirk, Perry Bryant, Deborah Hirsch Mayer (arrived 4:43), Crawford Mills, Chuck Cressy, Mark Henderson.

Members Absent: Lorne Parnell, Warren Daniel, Edgar Ramos

Also Present: At Table: Patricia Sherman (AIA); Patrick Field, Facilitator; Robin Mower, Wes Tator (Grubb-Ellis/ Coldstream RE) Mike Castagna [AIA}, Ina Castagna (Plan New Hampshire member), Greg Grigsby (AIA 150 task force), Jeff Donohue (Donohue Associates) , Carolyn Isaac (AIA task force), Nick Isaac (AIA) , Elaine Fink, Chris Uner (Manchester Valley Team) , Bruce Dicker (JSA Portsmouth), Robbi Woodburn (Durham design team) , and Henry Smith (Town Council).

I. Call to Order.

David Howland called the meeting to order at 4:39.

II. Welcome and Overview.

David Howland introduced Mark Henderson who replaces Mike Davis on the committee as the DLA representative. He noted that representatives from the three design teams will attend future meetings. He noted that the committee can discuss what more can go into the “Criteria and Parameters” document, acknowledging that it was not complete and a “work in progress.”

III. Approval of Agenda

Julian Smith moved that the approval of minutes be placed between items 8 and 9 of the agenda. Perry Bryant seconded. Passed.

IV. Public Comment

All present at the meeting introduced themselves. Robin Mower noted that trash clean-up in the southern edge of the plaza seems to have lapsed. She also expressed concern about

the perception abutters had a minimal stake in the redevelopment of the Plaza. There was no other comment.

V. Discussion with Design Teams/ Approval of Report: “Criteria for Design Teams of the Durham/AIA 150 Community Partnership

Patricia Sherman stressed the teams were learning what’s feasible and that on September 8 each team—without discussing their proposals with other teams—will present “very, very, conceptual ideas.” There will, however, be consistencies (on matters of the scale of drawings) among the teams. They want to present images and ideas that have the common support of the owner/town/and citizens.

She also mentioned that a new economics team is being formed to explore such issues as the necessary density to make any proposal feasible.

Each design team will make a 20 minute presentation on the September 8, and each will then set up a table where those attending can provide feedback and comment.

The committee then heard comment from a member of each design team. Bruce Dicker stressed the importance of managing expectations. The process will be iterative—there is no need to “pick a scheme right away—the teams can react to ideas and comments. Chris Urner said he viewed the September 8 meeting as a chance to “get the ball rolling”—to generate ideas and get feedback. Robbi Woodburn said that her team generally had what it needed. She mentioned that there will be some question about limits; i.e. can the plans extend beyond the strict Mill Plaza site?

Chuck Cressy raised the question about the size of the various stores in the plaza, noting Rite Aid has a long-term lease. Do they want to be part of a large building, a free-standing building? How large?

Patricia Sherman asked if John Pinto or Edgar Ramos had been in touch with leaseholders.

Chuck Cressy stressed that every existing business should give an estimate of what space they want. Patricia Sherman said that planners were factoring in an increase of 8% for each business. Robbi Woodburn responded that at this very conceptual stage they could go with what information they have and modify it later.

Patrick Field noted that the outreach efforts did not include tenants. Chuck Cressy said o that could be done through Edgar Ramos. Bruce Dicker said that in a “perfect world” planners would know this information ahead of time, but they could react and adjust their plans. Patrick Field said that we may need to have a meeting with tenants after the September 8 meeting. Perry Bryant stressed that leaseholders were big stakeholders, and that breaking leases was very expensive.

David Howland said we have to agree how to communicate with tenants, and Patricia Sherman noted that John Pinto would like to control information to tenants. David Howland agreed saying, we need to respect Pinto's view on this. He noted also that tenants who want to inform themselves about the committee's work are free – as is any member of the public – to attend committee meetings and view related documents on the committee's website. Bruce Dicker suggested that we show the schemes to tenants earlier but no decision was made on this suggestion.

Patricia Sherman mentioned that the economic team will meet and issues of size and density will be discussed.

Next Jeff Donohue, a member of the newly-formed economics team, introduced himself and compared the Mill Plaza project to the shopping mall in Peterborough that the town is trying to redevelop. He stressed that the key is the financial return to the owner, and that the present situation may be very profitable to the owner. He then made some estimates of the density needed to make the project attractive—and a much higher density will necessitate structured parking that may cost \$20,000/space. Doug Bencks asked him what he thought the life expectancy was for strip mall buildings like this. Jeff Donohue said he didn't know but they are often given new fronts and upgrades.

Patricia Sherman said that much of this is true, but perhaps unlike Peterborough there is a consensus between community and owner to make a more valuable site. Perry Bryant stressed that John Pinto really isn't "at the table." Patrick Field noted that they need to merge design and economics, something Patricia Sherman added was "what we do every day."

The conversation returned to structured parking, which Donohue claimed was the "key" to the project. Julian Smith noted that the town has a need for additional parking that a parking garage might solve. David Howland reiterated that assessing these economic issues is part of the development process, and that the economic team will be an important "reality check." Patrick Field asked Jeff Donohue if he would be doing a market analysis to determine the market for housing and office space. Patricia Sherman said she would be spending time with the economic team to discuss the work they would do.

The conversation shifted to the role of John Pinto. Mark Henderson, referring to Patricia Sherman's overlapping drawing of major stakeholders, argued that the "biggest circle was the owner." Chuck Cressy said that John Pinto wants to invest in Durham, and that if the best plan doesn't work –we can modify it. Patrick Field noted that it is not necessarily in John Pinto's interest to be at the table now, and that at this stage it makes sense for him to watch the process and engage further as it evolves. Patricia Sherman concurred, that there is just not enough information yet for him to be directly involved. David Howland also concurred, saying that John Pinto recognizes the need for the somewhat unwieldy creative process underway with the community. Mike Castagna echoed a point made earlier by Patricia Sherman, that we are engaging in a process that goes on all the time in the development of a complex project. David Howland argued that

it is best to allow for creativity and brainstorming early in the process, and then explore the economics of the designs.

Chris Uner again made the point that it was important not to oversell the designs that would be presented.

The discussion shifted to the criteria document that has been provided to the design teams. David Howland said that he would work with Patrick Field to post these criteria on the Mill Plaza website. Patrick Field acknowledged that they knew what was missing in the document. Perry Bryant said there were a lot of blank pages and missing information in the criteria document. He asked if the design teams were comfortable with what they have. Patricia Sherman answered that at this stage, the teams had enough to go forward.

6. Discussion with Design Teams about Emerging Concepts

There was no discussion on this topic.

7. Discuss Upcoming Meeting on September 8

David Howland informed the committee that the September 8 meeting will take place at 3:00 in the Multi-purpose Room of the high school. Design teams will meet earlier with John Pinto. Perry Bryant asked if committee members could be there. ;k cautioned that if a quorum of the full committee met, it would have to be an open meeting, which is not what had been planned—but maybe a few members could be there. Perry Bryant asked if there would be any benefit in having a meeting with the designers, John Pinto, and the committee. Patricia Sherman responded that there is a benefit to having this information come out at one public meeting so everyone gets it at once. Both Perry Bryant and Chuck Cressy indicated that they would like to attend the meeting with John Pinto.

Chuck Cressy asked how information on the public meeting would get out. It was decided that David Howland would create fliers similar to those announcing the first public meeting. Elaine Fink made the point that it will be important that these designs not be perceived as finished products.

The discussion shifted to what meetings will follow the September 8 meeting. It was decided that that the committee will meet on September 19th at 4:30 to discuss revisions in the initial plans from the design teams. There will be a public meeting on October 14 at 1:00 in the high school, at which revised drawings will be presented.

8. Approval of Minutes

Approval of the July 11 minutes was moved by Tom Newkirk and seconded by Chuck Cressy; the motion passes unanimously. David Howland, Deborah Hirsch Mayer, Robin Mower, and Tom Newkirk suggested changes to the August 1 minutes. Julian Smith

moved to approve the minutes as amended. Crawford Mills seconded. The committee approved the minutes, as amended, which will be posted on the website.

David Howland announced that Ed Valena had resigned from the library board of trustees and thus would no longer be on the Mill Plaza Study Committee. He thanked Valena, on behalf of the committee, for his hard work. The trustees will appoint a replacement.

9. Public Comment

Robin Mower made several points. She suggested that DVDs of the committee be provided to the design teams. She expressed concern that we don't underestimate John Pinto's interest in the project. She stressed that Durham can come together to handle difficult tasks — just as the town organized against Aristotle Onassis' plan to put the largest oil refinery near Durham, Durham can also organize to support a thoughtful downtown redevelopment. And she asked that in the criteria document, there be a sentence added that mentions the visibility of the Mill Plaza from Faculty Road.

David Howland responded that the DVDs of meetings could be available to design teams if they wish to consult them.

10. Adjournment

At 6:25 Julian Smith moved to adjourn the meeting. Tom Newkirk seconded, and the motion passes unanimously.