

D-R-A-F-T Minutes
Town of Durham
MILL PLAZA STUDY COMMITTEE
Town Council Chambers
November 7, 2007
4:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.

Members Present: Dave Howland (Chair), Julian Smith (Vice Chair of Committee), Crawford Mills, Douglas Bencks, Chuck Cressy, Perry Bryant, Thomas Newkirk, Warren Daniel, Deborah Hirsch Mayer, Lorne Parnell (came in at 4:53pm)

Members Absent: Edgar Ramos, Mark Henderson

Also Present: Patricia Sherman (AIA Representative), Patrick Field (Facilitator),
Members of the Public: Robin Mower, Ed Garcia, Henry Smith, Roger Hayden, Kate Hartnett, Art Guadano, Annmarie Harris, Phyllis Heilbronner and Bill Schoonmaker.

1. Call to order 4:36 by Dave Howland.
2. Welcome and overview
Dave Howland spoke about the Committee's task to develop with the design teams a hybrid design following the last Public Workshop, and to produce a report for the town council with the Committee's recommendations and explanations by the end of January. He continued about the current meeting and discussed how the hand out "Evaluation Check List" had grown from earlier work and was drafted by himself, Patricia Sherman and Patrick Field following the Sunday, 11/4/07, Workshop.

Dave Howland mentioned that he had received an e-mail from Bruce Dicker of the JSA design team critiquing this guideline approach and arguing for looser guidelines that would not inhibit the flow of the designs as they develop. Dave Howland suggested that the Check List is seeking to be a more qualitative approach to test assumptions and thinking rather than dictate design terms.

Dave Howland emphasized the importance of seeking consensus by the Committee in order to confidently move forward with the report for the Town Council.

The Committee is working on setting dates for John Pinto to look over the designs. Also, the Committee should see a report from various landscape design and environmental folks on the College Brook by the November 28th meeting.

3. Approval of Agenda

Julian Smith moved to amend the Agenda by adding item 3a, Approval of minutes from the 10/17/2007 MPSC meeting. Deborah Hirsch Mayer seconded the motion, and the motion was unanimously approved.

Tom Newkirk moved to accept the Agenda as amended, Warren Daniel seconded the motion and it was unanimously approved.

3a. Approval of minutes from the 10/17/2007 MPSC meeting

Tom Newkirk noted that clarification regarding comments by Dick Gsottschneider related in the minutes was needed. Deborah Hirsch Mayer noted several typos that would need to be addressed as well.

Julian Smith moved to table approval of the 10/17/07 minutes to the next meeting. Warren Daniel seconded the motion and it was approved unanimously.

4. Public Comment (up to 10 minutes w/ max 2 minutes per person)

Phyllis Heilbronner raised a concern about buffer zones surrounding the Plaza, questioning if the existing trees between Main Street and the Plaza would be removed, and hoped they would not be. She also urged that consideration be given to buffer zones surrounding the Plaza in general.

Robin Mower asked if it would be possible at the next public presentation of the designs to have rough 3D models to show the relative heights of things.

Henry Smith was happy to hear about the turnout on Sunday and how it all went. He also commended the Committee and the architects for their work. With regard to the idea of a hotel on the Plaza he was taken aback as given the presence of several other similar establishments in the area. He saw the hotel idea as intrusive, out of place for the Plaza, and the people it would bring in would be passing through and thus not giving a sense of community, only dollars. He voiced that replacing housing with a hotel would not be a good idea, and that if the aim of the project is to build finances and enhance the sense of community, a hotel would be an impediment, and he voiced his opposition to the hotel idea.

Anne Marie Harris commented that the second round of plans did not emphasize public space and integrating Main Street with the Plaza. She advocated for plans that would create beautiful spaces, especially for College Brook.

Dave Howland mentioned that he and Patricia Sherman made a presentation to UNH on the Plaza Redevelopment project and went on local AM stations to talk about the project.

5. Discuss briefly how Sunday's workshop went and steps

Patrick Field introduced this item and asked Committee members for specific feedback on what they liked and did not like about the new designs.

JSA Second Round Design

Tom Newkirk commented that the JSA plan did not have a continuous roadway, and one had to pass through the parking structure.

Warren Daniel commented that there were small spaces, that things seemed split up without a sense of openness, and the brick walkway down the center was noncontiguous. He did like the public area by the Town Hall.

Crawford Mills commented he did not like the concept of a hotel at all, that the property where it was placed was not part of the Plaza property. He suggested that a developer could build the hotel on their own if it was a good idea. He continued with several examples of hotels in the area that are in questionable financial condition, raising the question if a hotel on the Plaza would be viable. Moreover, even if it were economically viable he would not like a hotel there. He did like the idea of a center square, which he found very attractive.

Julian Smith commented that he also was not enthusiastic about the hotel, and he felt that the designs should emphasize retail and services that would benefit local citizens. He also commented that if the library and Town Hall are in separate buildings, it would be hard to share facilities. He also noted that the facilities do not need 15,000sq. ft. for the library or 20,000 for the Town Hall.

Lorne Parnell voiced agreement with the above comments on access to the Plaza and about the economic comments regarding a hotel, noting that a hotel would be unrealistic. He also noted that College Brook did not seem to be included in the plan, and that enhancement of green space there should be included.

Doug Bencks commented he liked the pedestrian connections to Main Street, which created major linkages, a key aspect of the redevelopment in his opinion. He also mentioned that the project could be done in a phased way, as much or little as desired, and the grocery store and pharmacy could be moved in the long term to solve accessibility issues.

Chuck Cressy liked the green space off Mill Road and Main Street, and noted that there was space for a small building there like the Bagelry or something to tie in Main Street even more. He also commented that the feasibility of moving the grocery store over years was questionable, no matter who owns it, as the cost would be prohibitive.

Warren Daniel commented that the retail was too fractionalized, and should be more compact around the grocery store and pharmacy as much as possible, the focus of where people shop. He also liked the idea of putting in retail on the

corner of Mill Road and Main Street to connect plaza with the rest of downtown. He emphasized that space and connectivity are key.

Midnight Oil Second Round Design

Tom Newkirk noted that in this design the drug store was shifted to the end of the mall, noting the store would likely be resistant to that, and wondered how realistic that would be. Dave Howland responded that Bill Schoonmaker [not in attendance at this meeting] had heard this before and answered that it is next to another entrance so it would still be a prime location.

Deborah Hirsch Mayer noted that for UNH students access to the pharmacy would be harder, and that access to both the grocery store and the pharmacy via a parking garage would not be appealing.

Julian Smith commented that he liked the Town Hall in the corner blocking Chesley Drive.

Chuck Cressy asked how would delivery trucks get in as logistics for loading would be an issue.

Dave Howland noted that trucks would come through the parking structure somehow.

Warren Daniel wondered why the design hid the parking structure that way. He also agreed that Rite Aid would be reluctant to agree to being moved and that having the shopping clustered would make it easier.

Deborah Hirsch Mayer liked how the parking was arranged (open non-structure spaces), and gave the space a more village feel with a nice flow. She also commented that the lot looked nicer than the last design, as the greenery around the whole thing appealed. She did however like how the last design was more out of sight.

Doug Bencks liked the retail along Mill Road, and noted it created a nice edge to this area. He commented that the parking structure was convenient to everything, but it was also in the middle of everything and unappealing visually.

Crawford Mills commented that a second story on the grocery store made economic sense, thought that the design did a good job of hiding the garage, and liked that some housing was kept in.

Julian Smith commented he liked the layout of the road connecting Main Street to Mill Road, which Dave Howland also commented that he liked as well.

Warren Daniel commented that the flow of shopping connected to a garage is not appealing.

Perry Bryant commented that he thought just the opposite; he liked what they did. He liked the outside spaces created, and the garage being so available was a bonus. He also liked to see housing still included, and did not like the idea of a hotel.

Lavalle Brensinger Second Round Design

Perry Bryant liked the change of the entrance at Madbury Road and the Post Office. He liked their parking ideas, did not like the idea of a UNH Bookstore, and thought that it was unfeasible, that it did not make sense to put it where it would compete with other retailers.

Chuck Cressy commented that everyone should not get caught up in what each building would be, but to look at the square footage and the market will decide what would actually go in there. He also noted that their road conception made sense.

Tom Newkirk liked that this design did more with College Brook than other designs. He also noted that the design was missing a central square that other designs had, space for concerts, farmers market, etc.

Warren Daniel liked that all three designs had exits onto Main Street, and the designers need to look at an egress further down Main Street (near the post office).

Crawford Mills commented that the property designated as a hotel could be built into anything else.

Dave Howland read from an e-mail from Mark Henderson (MPSC member not in attendance at this meeting) that commented if a hotel was not built then something different there, like commercial or retail would make sense.

Deborah Hirsch Mayer commented that if housing were to be built on the Plaza then the hotel corner would be a nice place for retail or services for the residents. She also commented that a book store café would be nice, but did not necessarily need to be the UNH book store; and emphasized retail that would draw in folks would be important.

6. Discuss evaluation checklist, and begin consensus building process, using the list, to guide remaining design rounds and recommendations – Patrick Field to facilitate.

Patrick Field projected the original designs for comparison. He asked if anyone liked the idea of a hotel.

Warren Daniel commented that more information was needed.

Chuck Cressy asked what the owner's idea on the hotel was.

Dave Howland commented that a hotel helped the numbers pan out, and Patricia Sherman (not in attendance at this meeting) had an idea that a hotel and office grouping could raise the tax value and would let the Town have some say about the tenants there.

Art Guadano spoke for Patricia Sherman (AIA Council Representative not present at this meeting) and commented that a hotel would bring activity to downtown and to the other businesses, maybe open the possibility of restaurants and bring later hours business, as well as bring a mix of people that would create a positive feature of activity in the area.

Robin Mower commented that the addition of more adults to the downtown could also help calm the behavior of college kids.

Art Guadano elaborated that the hotel and associated businesses would be a good mix of compatible uses, add hours of use, money etc.

Chuck Cressy commented that a sense of community can be built by folks coming in, like in Ogunquit or other destination towns.

Art Guadano commented that UNH has a draw with visiting professionals, parents, etc., that would benefit a hotel there.

Deborah Hirsch Mayer commented that a nice restaurant was needed, and visiting folks to UNH do not lunch or dinner in Durham. She continued that a multi-use auditorium at a hotel could bring activity to downtown as well.

Art Guadano commented that a hotel would likely help fund the parking garage as well. He continued that one example to compare to could be the Exeter Inn.

Dave Howland noted that the RKG report outlined hotel numbers as well in terms of estimated tax revenue and so forth.

Warren Daniel commented that unlike other retail or commercial space where Committee input could not decide what would specifically go in, for a hotel it would be appropriate to discuss if the Committee wanted it.

Art Guadano noted that the zoning in the Master Plan included for hotels.

Deborah Hirsch Mayer commented that thinking about a "hotel" vs. a "mixed use inn" is very different.

Patrick Field raised the topic of housing on the Plaza site for feedback.

Tom Newkirk indicated he wanted to see housing back on the table, and that retail seems more questionable in its market demand than housing.

Perry Bryant agreed with Tom Newkirk, that housing needed to be looked at, and that a mix of housing was more viable than clusters of all the same type, i.e. not all retired or work force or student housing.

Crawford Mills also agreed that housing had a place, especially work force housing mixed in with other non-student housing.

Dave Howland commented that something like Forest Park housing would be nice on this site. He emphasized the international nature of the housing and how much that diversity added to things.

Deborah Hirsch Mayer agreed with Dave Howland's thoughts, but cautioned against too many units and the site being too dense. Specifically she mentioned that student housing if any should be on the Main Street side and not College Brook side.

Doug Bencks disagreed with this sentiment and how much density this site could handle, commenting that the place to have density is downtown. He commented that housing was key to bringing people downtown and adding vitality, and maybe some high end housing could be built to balance out the tax revenue concerns.

Warren Daniel commented that retail has tremendous potential downtown, and that housing would have a positive economic impact on that retail.

Art Guadano asked how the Committee felt about housing that was divorced on the perimeter of the Plaza rather than integrated.

Dave Howland commented that mixed and integrated would be his preference, as it would feed into idea of giving life to the downtown.

Warren Daniel asked what would we call this redevelopment project overall, a "town center" or "shopping plaza", cautioning that the Committee needs to think carefully about the big picture plan of what they want the redevelopment to be. And he would advocate for housing being central vs. on the periphery of the plaza.

Patrick Field asked what everyone thought about office space, particularly class A office space.

There was some discussion about what the difference between classes A, B, C office space was, but everyone agreed that some office space and especially class A office space should be developed.

Patrick Field asked what folks thought about retail going in?

Crawford Mills commented that the development's job is to sell stores coming here, and a flexible plan to allow for what the market will bring in should be adopted.

Deborah Hirsch Mayer voiced concern about chain/box store retailers coming in. This started a small discussion about chain stores that have actually failed in Durham, such as a Burger King and Arby's before that.

Warren Daniel reiterated that he saw opportunities for the retail market, and noted that it is a captured market and will support new retail.

Perry Bryant commented that the market will drive what actually comes in, that it will take time to fill it, and that it will be a matter phasing the redevelopment over time.

Patrick Field next raised the issue of the Town Hall and library being located on the Plaza site, noting that there seemed to be support for if not consensus about the library being located on the site, but did not sense much agreement about the Town Hall for a variety of reasons, cost, moving, tax revenue etc.

Warren Daniel commented that he was content with where Town Hall was currently, and suggested that any new building should be taxable as much as possible.

Tom Newkirk commented that he was ambivalent about the Town Hall and needed to hear more about the rationale for locating it on the site and why it should be combined with the library. His thought was that the library by itself would be preferable.

Lorne Parnell commented that the library and Town Hall being relocated were two of the original motivating ideas for looking at this redevelopment. He continued that the library would like to be on town owned land and that the corner location would make the most sense.

Julian Smith said he would agree with what Lorne Parnell had said.

Dave Howland commented that if people thought the library should go on the Plaza they should speak out concretely, and the same with other items like a grocery store, as these would give a corner stone to the designing plans.

Crawford Mills commented he would leave Town Hall where it is, as currently there is no problem with traffic or parking, but if it moved there could be issues with this and it should be kept in mind that the Town Hall serves more than those in walking distance of it.

Perry Bryant commented that he thinks the library and Town Hall should be housed in the same building on the Plaza as they would work well together.

Doug Bencks commented that the library wanted to be on the site, and whatever moved that forward the library thought was the best idea.

Deborah Hirsch Mayer said “yes” to the library being located on the Plaza site, and was open to listening to comments about the Town Hall being there.

Perry Bryant commented that if the library was on town land then it would make sense to put the library and Town Hall together on that property.

Julian Smith commented that he would like to pull the town together on that site, and supported locating both the library and Town Hall at the Plaza and sharing the same building.

Crawford Mills commented that if there were space for other town facilities there like the museum as well, then maybe there was some merit to combining the library and Town Hall

Patrick Field commented that some amount of uncertainty and flux in the design was good and he was resisting formulating concrete plans yet to allow the design process to unfold creatively with as much flex as possible.

Chuck Cressy commented that the “while I am here concept” should be looked at, suggesting that providing as many goods and services as possible on the location would be of benefit, making the Plaza a place to come for all one’s needs. He continued that the Committee needed to find a way to sell the redevelopment to folks, and this idea could be a way to do that.

Deborah Hirsch Mayer commented that if the Committee envisioned a strictly functional use of the Town Hall, for housing the Town bureaucracy and their services, then leave it where it is, but if a broader concept of the Town Hall, if the museum was incorporated or other stuff, then maybe it made sense to move it.

Chuck Cressy left at 6:30pm

7. Set next meeting dates

The next regular MPSC meeting was scheduled for 11/28/07, with some food being offered at 6pm, and the meeting lasting from 6:30-9 pm, with the location TBA.

[Announced as of 11/10/07 the location will be Gregg Hall Room 110 on the University of New Hampshire campus]

Following tonight's meeting (11/7) and the next meeting (11/28), this information will be presented to the design teams, tentatively scheduled for Wed. 12/5 or 12/12 at 4:30 pm, also with food, with the location TBA.

[Announced as of 11/10/07 the MPSC/ Design Team Meeting will be held 12/5/07 -- Wednesday at 5 p.m. at Oyster River High School Multi-purpose room]

As part of a general discussion among Committee members about the direction of the next couple of meetings and developing a report for the Town Council, Patrick Field cautioned against having specific expectations that the Committee had little or no control over, and noted that the relatively detailed designs so far will be tweaked by the owner and developer, and emphasized there was only so much the developer could be held to these recommendations. And for that reason the Committee should articulate what will be put in the report given the required flexibility of parties involved.

Dave Howland commented that a balance needed to be found, advocating for those elements that are really important to folks, and noted that creating a document that was completely open would not serve anyone.

8. Other Business

None

9. Public Comment (up to 10 minutes w/ max 2 minutes per person)

Anne Marie Harris commented on an apparent bottle neck with the loading zone, and urged rethinking of the location of the drug store given loading and walking issues. She noted that she thought the distance between stores is a non-issue.

Robin Mower echoed Warren Daniel's thinking that questioned what this space should be, i.e., a retail shopping plaza vs. a town center, and recommended that this issue be hashed out more at the next meeting.

Art Guadano commented that having the library and Town Hall together was integral to building community, that a mix of activities was a positive thing to a community center, and as much as you can bring together would be positive. On the issue of housing he wanted to see it brought back in as a key part of building a

town village and having diversity. He liked comments he heard about building retail along Mill Road, and he urged doing everything possible to give design teams a clear direction.

10. Adjournment

Julian Smith made a motion to adjourn, which was seconded by Tom Newkirk, and was unanimously approved at 6:48 pm.