

City of Keene
New Hampshire

MUNICIPAL SERVICES, FACILITIES, AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, June 10, 2015

6:00 pm

**City Hall, 2nd Floor, Council
Chambers**

Members Present:

James P. Duffy, Chair
Janis O. Manwaring
Sheryl A. Redfern (arrived at 6:04 PM)
Robert J. O'Connor
Philip M. Jones

Staff Present:

Public Works Director Kürt Blomquist
Highway Superintendent William Byrnes
Assistant City Manager Med Kopczynski

Others Present:

Councilor David R. Meader
Councilor Bettina A. Chadbourne

Members Absent:

Chair Duffy called the meeting to order at 6:00 PM and explained the procedures of the meeting.

1. MORE TIME REPORT – Public Works Director – Sidewalk Median – Central Square

Kürt Blomquist, Public Works Director, stated that at the last meeting they talked about an area on the west side of Central Square, regarding concerns with access and how the grass area was being utilized, and what could be done. He continued that staff looked at the area and William Byrnes, Highway Superintendent, will talk about a concept of what can be done over the next 60 days or so.

Mr. Byrnes referenced a drawing that he stated is not to scale. He continued that it is a representation of parking and the sidewalk area and the island on the west side of the street between Winter and West Streets. Over the years, it has been difficult to maintain the grass there, due to the tree roots and people walking over it and compacting the soil. Staff proposes what they are calling “the downtown treatment” – removing the grass, reinvigorating the soil, planting perennials and annuals, mulching it, and installing some wider paved crosswalks, similar to what is in the E.F. Lane area. They propose adding two more benches in that area as well. There are four trees that have been recognized as needing removal by an arborist. The plan is to first remove the two that are in the worst condition, which are the first (the one cabled to the building) and third.

Councilor Redfern arrived at 6:04 PM.

Mr. Byrnes continued that they would replace those two trees with 3 to 3.5-inch caliper trees. They are drought tolerant, with compact soil, tolerant of air pollution, etc. Plantings will be around them. The brick paved areas will also be spread out accordingly. Up near the Court Street end there will be a wide walkway, about eight feet wide, with a bench on it. Further down there will be a smaller one, maybe four feet wide, so people can cross to get to stores. Then there will be a wide one further down by the area of Ingenuity and Pedraza's. There would also be another one further down, not as wide. They will use the same pavers they used last year – same type of installation, gravel, and stone dust. It will be a nice walkway and enhance the area. It may not be what everyone wants now but there will be a future assessment to see what people want for the entire downtown area, which has changed over the years. Mr. Byrnes continued that his rough field drawings show measurements and locations of pedestals, existing trees, parking meters, and so on and so forth, but for this draft, he did not feel the need to put everything on it.

Chair Duffy thanked him for coming back so soon. He continued that the MSFI Committee was not expecting it this quickly. He asked if any committee members had questions or comments.

Councilor Jones asked if everything would be ground level and if there would be no raised beds. Mr. Byrnes replied no, there are island curb trees. He continued that cars pull in, and there is about a 3-foot wide sidewalk, and then there is a granite curb with about a 6-inch reveal, and that is where the grass and trees are planted. They do not plan on removing the curb. They plan on planting the existing area. Chair Duffy stated that they have a CIP overhaul in a few years, maybe sooner if the City Council decides.

Mr. Blomquist stated that this is an interim plan. He continued that as the Mayor talked about, when downtown was designed in the 1980s it was more commercial; now there are many sidewalk cafes, and they do not know what it will be like in the future. Downtown is always changing. The challenge is always trying to come up with infrastructure that can support the changes over time. This (downtown treatment) has worked well in front of the other places. This is something they can do this summer, in July and August. If the City Council wants a larger project they cannot do it this summer, and it would have to wait until next year.

Chair Duffy asked if this would require asking the Finance, Organization, and Personnel (FOP) Committee for approval. Mr. Blomquist replied no, they could use the existing operating budget.

Chair Duffy asked if any members of the public had questions or comments.

Dorrie O'Meara, of 326 Mathews Road in Swanze, Keene property owner, stated that when she spoke last time to the MSFI Committee, safety was her major concern. She continued that the downtown treatment will be beautiful but it does not address safety at all. It is putting a Bandaid on. All she asks, even if she has to put \$1,000 towards it, is for the City to take out four feet of curbing in the middle, or whatever the legal requirement is to allow a wheelchair to pass through, in whatever location they find convenient.

Chair Duffy asked if she is asking for curbing removed from the 3-foot sidewalk closest to the parking area. Ms. O'Meara replied yes, she is asking for it to be level with the sidewalk you step up on, so there is no 6-inch reveal causing you to step up and walk four feet just to step down, so

people with strollers or wheelchairs can go through. She does not know how wide it would have to be, maybe six feet. She knows it is a lot of money, but maybe the two, 6-foot pieces of granite could be re-used elsewhere. If there are wires, staff could cover them up. Staff are creative; they can figure it out. Safety was an important part of her request. It makes it safe for elderly people, people with strollers, and people in wheelchairs. Over time, it becomes uneven. It would be safer if it were the same level. There is no personal advantage to her. She is advocating for the customers that park out front.

Chair Duffy asked if any committee members had questions for Ms. O'Meara. Hearing none, he asked if any members of the public had questions or comments.

Councilor Manwaring stated that she has been looking at these gardens. She continued that it seems to her that they all step up some amount, even in front of E.F. Lane. Mr. Byrnes replied yes, they all have the 5- to 6-inch reveal of granite curbing. Councilor Manwaring stated that looking forward, she totally agrees with what Ms. O'Meara is saying. She continued that they need to get rid of it, to help people who cannot walk up and down like that. The little gardens are gorgeous but she hopes they can have space between them. She is glad the tree tethered to the property is coming down. She understands they cannot do this this year. Maybe they could do it next year.

Councilor Jones stated that if this plan is not meeting the goal of the petitioner, he does not see them going through with it. He continued that he does not know what to recommend, however.

Councilor O'Connor stated that having worked downtown as a police officer, and having been downtown looking at what is going on, he knows that the Public Works Department follows guidelines and there are curb cuts at crosswalks so wheelchairs and strollers can get through according to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). He continued that he understands that it can be cumbersome to get over the curb, but there is a level area where people can walk down 30 feet and come back down the other side so he does think the City is trying to accommodate people the best they can.

Chair Duffy stated that he understands that this might not be achieving the goals of the petitioner but that is not unprecedented. He continued that that last time, they had a man requesting the City cut a tree down and the MSFI Committee did not recommend that. With all respect to Ms. O'Meara's concerns about safety, they did address that. There is inconvenience but not clear, imminent danger.

Mr. Blomquist stated that regarding this not meeting the petitioner's request, the Public Works Department recognizes that they need to look at the trees and start to replace some of them. He continued that there are the two Mr. Byrnes mentioned that they will remove this year, and a couple more that will be removed in a year or so. They see there are some issues from people going back and forth. Those spaces where they have created the paver crossing areas let people do it more easily. People do not always have to walk the 30 feet if they do not wish to, to go around the sections. They would be interested in doing something in this area to provide a better space in which people can move back and forth. They are also interested in addressing the trees. Regarding the tree that is tethered, the City got permission from the owner at the time, the

Monadnock Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), and there is paperwork showing that. The MSFI Committee can accept this as informational, recognizing that staff will be looking at removing those two trees and they can do some of this downtown treatment in this general area to provide more ability for folks to move back and forth. As Mr. Byrnes mentioned, people are doing that now, which is creating the grass pattern that does not look as nice. He hopes this information answers Councilor Jones's question about whether they should do this plan. It will be in the operating budget after the first of the new year for downtown work.

Councilor Jones stated that it did not meet the goals of the one petitioner. He continued that he is not against the plan if it is the beginning of something that addresses the bigger picture. Mr. Blomquist replied that as the Mayor spoke about very eloquently, in the CIP there is requested request for funding to begin this process. He continued that sometimes things sound simple, but are not. If they make a space for people in wheelchairs, the question is where the person in the wheelchair comes from – would they have to move the handicapped spaces to be closer to this point? That is part of the bigger planning. Some of this is about accessibility in the downtown. The downtown is accessible, but it could be more accessible. Ms. O'Meara is identifying that. Another concept to think about as they talk about safety is: nose-in parking means that if someone with young children has to put shopping bags in their vehicle's trunk, and they open the vehicle's doors, they block the area towards the sidewalk - which means that the children would head towards the street, not the sidewalk. Other parts of the country have back-in parking in the downtown area. They flip the angled parking. Then when you open the doors you are blocking a child's access to the street. It sounds strange but it is a concept to look at when they take a more holistic look at how to create downtown for the next 30 years.

Chair Duffy stated that there are concerns about safety. He continued that he asked in an informal way, but he is wondering, is anyone getting hurt? How unsafe is the current climate? He knows it is inconvenient, especially in the winter, but what is the level of safety?

Mr. Blomquist stated that Ms. O'Meara brought forward her concerns. He continued that they have this type of configuration in other areas of Main Street so this concern is all the way down Main Street. There are sidewalks like this by the E.F. Lane Hotel, for example. The concern is all around downtown. He is unaware of specific incidents being reported to his department or the Keene Police Department (KPD). He knows downtown can be more accessible but that is something that needs to be discussed as a community. Creating accessibility means things change – for example, they might need to reduce parking to create access points. He continued that they want to talk with people and make sure everyone is on board, when they implement changes. He appreciates Ms. O'Meara's concerns but he sees these issues all over Main Street (such as people going into and out of the E.F. Lane Hotel with baby strollers), and that is why staff has recommended the project to look at how downtown is used and how to bring the infrastructure up to meet the needs.

Councilor Manwaring stated that maybe it is time to try having plants in pots. She continued that they could have flat sidewalks.

Ms. O'Meara stated that she is listening to everyone's thoughts and concerns. She continued that the average walker is 24 inches wide. The first little sidewalk is about 30 inches wide.

Chair Duffy replied that he thinks it is 36 inches. Mr. Blomquist replied that it is around 36 inches but varies a little.

Ms. O'Meara continued that the skinny walker is about 24 inches in width. She continued that cars pull up until their tires meet the curb. The first ten inches of their bumpers sit on the sidewalk. Someone with a walker could get by if they truly had the sidewalk to use, but they do not, because of how most people park. She understands that it is like that in other places in Keene. That does not make it right. It just means she is the first to bring it to their attention in hopes of preventing someone from getting hurt.

Chair Duffy asked if any members of the public had questions or comments. Hearing none, he asked for questions or comments from the committee.

Councilor Manwaring stated that she wonders if they could put a rope across, the kind like they used to have in theaters, on the end, so people would not put their bumpers up on the sidewalk. She continued that it could just be a temporary measure. Mr. Byrnes replied that it would not work because people getting out of their vehicles there would get hurt or blocked by the ropes.

Councilor Jones stated that this needs to be part of the bigger plan that the Mayor talked about. He continued that anything they see now can be handled administratively. He does not see action needed by the City Council. There is some work that can be done and they should ask that that be handled administratively. He asked if it is correct that the design for the downtown project is in the CIP for three years from now.

Mr. Blomquist replied yes, it has funding next year and the following year. He continued that this coming fall, the City Council will be discussing the CIP again. Nothing prevents the City Council from funding it 100% in the first year instead of funding it over two years. If the City Council thinks it is important and wants to adjust it, they can.

Councilor Jones stated that Ms. O'Meara was requesting widening. He asked if that is not a short term project. Mr. Blomquist replied no, it is not a short term project. He continued that people would be asking why it is not being done in all of the other places. They are not prepared to go that large at this point.

Councilor Jones asked if the walkway will prevent people from walking the 30 feet. Mr. Blomquist replied yes, it provides a more visible space for people to go to so they do not have to walk all the way down and around the ends if they do not want to. Right now they have flag stones, but this way feels better.

Chair Duffy asked if the new walkways will be where the flagstones are now. Mr. Byrnes replied that three of them will be where they are now. He continued that there is another area to put one that is not as wide.

Mr. Blomquist stated that he has an architect friend who does not build sidewalks right away but waits to see which paths people naturally take and then puts walkways there, and that is the

general approach they are taking. That is where the flagstones are – in areas that seem to take the foot traffic. Chair Duffy stated that some of the paths lead right to tables now at sidewalk cafes. Mr. Blomquist replied that that is only a few months a year. He continued that they have been working with the businesses along there and they can adjust things as necessary, to allow them to maximize the activities they are doing. The community has a unique challenge to figure out how to have all these activities work together. He would not want to do something that prevents the outdoor cafes, for example. Chair Duffy replied yes, they have a different culture and community now and compromising to meet everyone's needs takes time; it cannot be done immediately. They have to get everyone involved and do it the best possible way. Spending money in a well-thought out way is the best way to do it, and results in long lasting benefits.

Councilor Redfern asked if this is considered annual maintenance. Mr. Byrnes replied that the tree replacement is a maintenance issue. Councilor Redfern asked if that means this is budgeted. Mr. Byrnes replied yes, through the Memorial Tree Fund. He continued that the area now is pretty much dirt and weeds. For many years they have replaced sod there annually. It will not take because the soil is so compacted. The big trees have a substantial root system and they cannot properly loosen up the soil there. There have been a couple areas identified, such as by the restaurant. They came up with the downtown treatment as a temporary measure to make it more aesthetically pleasing than patches of dirt.

Councilor Jones stated that they are not meeting the goals of the petitioner but it is still a project that will make the area look better, and it will be a little safer with the walkways.

Councilor Jones made a motion for the Municipal Services, Facilities, and Infrastructure Committee to recommend that this be handled administratively. Councilor Manwaring seconded the motion.

Chair Duffy stated that he agrees with Councilor Jones but hopes that the safety concerns remain on the radar. The size of the sidewalk changes. The only vehicles that interfere with the walkway are SUVs because standard cars cannot put their bumpers onto the sidewalk. It is annoying when you have to struggle to get by, even as an ambulatory person. They should keep an eye on this as well.

Chair Duffy asked if any members of the public had comments on the motion. Hearing none, he called for a vote.

On a vote of 5-0, the Municipal Services, Facilities, and Infrastructure Committee recommends that this be handled administratively.

2. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 6:40 PM.

Respectfully submitted by
Britta Reida, Minute-taker