

City of Keene
New Hampshire

AD HOC DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, January 25, 2018

9:00 AM

IT Training Room, City Hall

Members Present:

Councilor Gary Lamoureux
Councilor Mitch Greenwald
Councilor Carl Jacobs
Katie Sutherland
Jack Dugan
Cheryl Belair
Tracy Keating
Kevin Dremmel

Staff Present:

Elizabeth Dragon, City Manager
Kürt Blomquist, Public Works Director

Members Not Present:

Luca Paris
Shannon Hundley
Shane Gormley

Kendall W. Lane, Mayor

1) Call to Order

Mayor Lane called the meeting to order at 9:03 AM.

2) Approval of Minutes – December 5, 2017

Councilor Greenwald made a motion to approve the minutes of December 5, 2017, which was seconded by Councilor Jacobs and carried unanimously.

3) New Business

a. Downtown Revitalization Forum – Report

The Public Works Director noted the consultants were at the last meeting and presented a draft report of the Downtown revitalization study; the consultants will present study results to Council on February 1. The report is high level and summarizes three days of public forums and more than 500 survey responses to describe what people identify as their ideal Downtown (gathering spaces, outdoor dining, walkable and bike-able). The presentation to Council will conclude phase one of this project.

The Public Works Director continued that Council has approved phase two of the project. Phase two will look at the concepts developed in phase one and determine where those ideas could feasibly occur Downtown. Phase two will begin in late spring/early summer 2018. The preliminary design phase will begin in FY19 and last 1.5 years; this phase will include further details about funding, traffic studies, and public involvement. The final design phase is set to begin in 2022.

The Public Works Director continued providing a summary of the report presented at the last meeting; he will send the full report to all Committee members following this meeting. Based on the forum and survey feedback, the consultants presented four conceptual drawings of how Downtown could be transformed; the changes range from minor (like widened sidewalks and parallel parking) to significant (a pedestrian mall). The Public Works Director clarified these are not proposals or recommendations from the consultants, but conceptual ideas to consider; there are no actual proposals yet. This is only to help the Committee understand what the public wants Downtown. Developing an actual proposal for public input and presentation to Council will occur in phase two (FY19).

Mayor Lane said parking (like future parking garages) will be a significant consideration as the concepts are further developed into proposed designs. The City Manager said several themes were evident from phase one including parking, bike and pedestrian access, streetscape, outdoor dining, and arts and culture. The conceptual drawings look at how the City can address those ideal themes. The report is an overall look at how Downtown works as a whole; parts of Downtown currently work well, do not work, or could work better.

The Public Works Director said this report is not yet available to the public; it will be adjusted based on Council feedback at the presentation and then made public. Mayor Lane added the consultants are developing a program for public outreach to gain feedback on these concepts. The Public Works Director said the budget for phase two is \$35,000; this is not a large budget and staff is exploring changing the scope to move up the project schedule, which may require a larger budget. He will have direction from Council and the consultants to redevelop that scope in February. The scope for phase two (current or accelerated) will be presented to the Committee in March or April.

Councilor Greenwald said the magnitude of this project is still unclear and the City is deciding how much to do. He said he hears input from the public and that input should be discussed before the project goes too far. He is not in favor of redesigning Main Street to accommodate bicycles. Mayor Lane said he is going to Washington DC to meet with 60 Mayors to discuss what Keene is doing to create bicycle space. Councilor Greenwald suggested a bike loop around Main Street behind the buildings; the Public Works Director said that is a possibility. Councilor Greenwald said he thinks these details are important. He was not happy that parking was removed from the CIP; it should not be a Council decision. The City Manager replied the CIP proposal is brought to the City Manager and the Mayor before it goes to Council, who has not decided anything yet; she is challenged developing a clear consensus about economic development.

Mr. Dremmel said as the consultants presented the concepts at the last meeting, the more radical ideas (pedestrian mall) began to make more sense, especially from his arts perspective. He said it is exciting to see that these ideas can change Downtown while still retaining its character. He thinks these concepts would increase activity with welcoming, social, and easily accessible spaces. He is already brainstorming things he could do with those spaces. Mayor Lane agreed that when he first saw the concepts he was dubious about the more radical ideas; however, in walking Downtown with the conceptual drawings a lot of the changes made more sense and would enhance activity and future progression.

Councilor Jacobs said the City Manager succinctly described the big picture themes that came from phase one; he asked the City Manager to share those ideas in a memo to the Committee. He said this discussion is not about closing Main Street but identifying desired themes for Downtown.

Ms. Keating said she is in favor of anything that boosts interest in and access to Downtown, even if it takes some discomfort to get there. She expressed concern that there is a lot of apathy Downtown and she does not want to envision what will happen if things take too long to change. She said people do not come Downtown anymore; the past year was the first substantial drop in business at her store Downtown. She said there is apathy from the Downtown group, which is a shame for stakeholders and businesses that have been Downtown a long time; there is a perspective that if the City does not fix the problem then they will not either. Mayor Lane agreed part of the issue will be how to phase in and pay for these ideas, which takes time. Even if a concept is developed quickly and the public accepts it, the City will still have to determine the logistical feasibility. The last time Downtown was revitalized the whole Main Street was reconstructed at the same time; he does not think that is possible today. He would like to see high speed broadband Downtown as a part of the project, but that will take time to develop as well. He knows this is a difficult time for merchants to survive Downtown. Ms. Keating agreed this cannot just be a four year beautification of Downtown; it needs to support revitalizing Downtown businesses. Mr. Dremmel said if people and businesses rally around a concept it will be more productive in the end.

Councilor Lamoureux recalled the size of the scope for phase two will determine scheduling. He said it seems like this effort is separate from the Downtown group; there are empty storefronts Downtown and Council and staff need to work with businesses to revitalize the Downtown group and begin making progress again. Ms. Keating said there was more involvement in the Downtown group many years ago and Ms. Hundley was instrumental in that; however, now that business is down the owners are not thinking about working together and they should be. All business owners benefit from more activity Downtown. She said there is a general sense that retail is dead, which is untrue; people want to walk Downtown and explore businesses, but those businesses need to be more creative in attracting customers. She said there was a time the City had a funded position for a Downtown Coordinator, which could be valuable again today.

The Public Works Director provided a brief summary of the concepts the consultants developed; details on each concept can be found in the December 5, 2017 meeting minutes. These concepts are the basis for the February 1 presentation to Council.

Ms. Keating said she is in favor of limited vehicle traffic on Main Street because the proximity of parking to business fronts limits the activities businesses can do (for example, fire pits for winter activities). Mayor Lane agreed with the right amenities people like to be outside in the winter. Ms. Keating said that idea is consistent with the Keene 2020 vision for outdoor experience.

Ms. Sutherland said she heard about a new roundabout scheme for central square that she is in favor of because it would make the different corridors of the City flow together better while increasing space. The Public Works Director said that concept came from a Downtown business owner and is included in the full report. Mayor Lane said a lot of the public comments are positive, creative, and optimistic. Councilor Lamoureux agreed and said it is good that there were many different age perspectives because this revitalization needs to cater to the next generation.

Ms. Keating said she obviously does not want to lose parking Downtown but she thinks as Keene transitions ridesharing will reduce the number of people who drive their personal vehicles Downtown; this is only possible when our region begins to support ridesharing. She said there is a perception of a parking problem and knows there will be backlash to a perceived loss of parking at storefronts but ridesharing could alleviate that concern. The Public Works Director agreed this revitalization is for the next 30 years, not 5-10 years, and technology and advancements like ridesharing should be considered. Ms. Belair said ridesharing to Downtown has already begun and she agreed the City needs to think globally about how society is changing.

Councilor Greenwald said he will fight for every parking space Downtown; he thinks the big picture is great but does not think parking should be reduced. Councilor Lamoureux said a transition is coming and Keene is at the beginning of that transition; a parking structure built today could be empty in 15 years. Ms. Keating said she is favor of an additional parking garage to remove parking from Main Street. Ms. Sutherland agreed there are still a lot of people who work and live Downtown and there needs to be space to accommodate that. She said it is not an antiquated idea to have a parking garage because it will facilitate visitors who do not live Downtown.

The City Manager said this conversation shows why this Committee is important; it brings different perspectives together to understand the challenges occurring. She thinks there will be compromise to meet a variety of needs in different ways; compromise will facilitate change and progress. She is studying existing infrastructure and she is surprised at how much free parking is underutilized and echoed that lack of parking space is a perception. Mayor Lane said parking is utilized least where there are parking kiosks. Councilor Lamoureux disagreed and said parking increased in the Commercial Street lot with kiosks; he said kiosks are perceived as an issue but they are not. They save a lot of money for the City. The City Manager agreed some people do not always have change

for traditional meters and some people would rather risk a \$5 parking ticket. Councilor Greenwald agreed something like the parking deck in Portsmouth that is connected to businesses would bring more business Downtown; this idea could work on Gilbo Avenue. Mayor Lane agreed the old warehouses on Gilbo Avenue were torn down in 1960 for the purpose of redevelopment that has yet to occur. Councilor Jacobs agreed the parking problem is a perception and there are educational and sales opportunities for customers.

b. Discussion on Next Steps

Mayor Lane echoed the need for input from younger generations on the Committee; the younger Committee members were not present at this meeting.

Councilor Lamoureux offered to attend meetings of the Downtown group with Ms. Keating. Ms. Keating said no one typically comes to those meetings anymore. Councilor Lamoureux replied even if only a few business owners come to a meeting, the presence of this Committee is important. A lot of people do not understand or trust what is going on Downtown and with more information they may want to participate again. Ms. Keating can invite members of the Downtown group to this Committee's meeting; however, she finds there are two factions of that group – newer business owners that are not interested in the group or older business owners that feel they have already participated enough. The catalyst for previous group participation was parking changes and Ms. Hundley was pivotal in organizing the group. Councilor Greenwald said part of the problem is there is no longer someone specifically focused on supporting and motivating business owners.

Ms. Keating suggested someone from KSC should be on this Committee as they drive a lot of Downtown business; she suggested Robin Picard. Mayor Lane will speak with Melinda Treadwell about adding someone to this expanding Committee.

4) Next Meeting Date – TBD

The next meeting will likely be in early March.

5) Adjournment

Hearing no further business, Mayor Lane adjourned the meeting at 10:07 AM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katie Kibler, Minute Taker