

City of Keene
New Hampshire

AD HOC DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Tuesday, October 3, 2017

9:00 AM

**2nd Floor Conference Room,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Councilor Gary Lamoureux
Councilor Mitch Greenwald
Councilor Carl Jacobs
Cheryl Belair
Shannon Hundley

Staff Present:

Elizabeth Dragon, City Manager
Koürt Blomquist, Public Works Director
Barry Hilton, Traffic Light Technician

Members Not Present:

Shane Gormley
Jack Dugan
Kevin Dremmel
Luca Paris
Katie Sutherland

Kendall W. Lane, Mayor

1) Call to Order

Mayor Lane called the meeting to order at 9:01 AM.

2) Approval of Minutes – September 13, 2017

Councilor Greenwald made a motion to approve the minutes of September 13, 2017, which was seconded by Councilor Jacobs and carried unanimously.

3) New Business:

a. Petition Regarding Lights in the Downtown – Referred by Council to the Committee

Mayor Lane noted the City received a petition regarding street lights Downtown and the desire for extended pedestrian walk signal time when crossing streets. The length of walk signal time is currently based on the federal guidelines adopted by New Hampshire for traffic control signs within the public right-of-way. Mayor Lane welcomed Barry Hilton, the City Traffic Light Technician.

Mr. Hilton said most people think the time they have to cross the street is while the walk sign is flashing (5-7 seconds) but they actually have until the until the stop signal stops flashing. There is a formula for how many seconds there are to cross based on how many feet wide the crosswalk is. The longest crosswalk is now Central Square and circuits throughout the City are based on that. He said if someone is in the crosswalk and the stop signal is still flashing, they still have plenty of time to cross; it is just like a yellow light when driving. This is how all lights work throughout the City.

Mayor Lane asked how long it takes the walk signal to activate after the button is pushed. Mr. Hilton replied it has its own sequence; on Central Square it does not change until West Street traffic has passed; it cannot just stop traffic but must follow a sequence and sometimes pedestrians must wait an entire traffic cycle that is typically no longer than 90 seconds. Councilor Jacobs recalled he thought this petition was because the walk signal never comes after pushing the button; he noted in some cities the walk signal displays a timer indicating how much time there is left to cross. The Public Works Director said this is where confusion arises; the City adopted a policy requiring traffic in all directions to stop before pedestrians can cross. In other places pedestrians can cross the street concurrently in the same direction as traffic. Some pedestrian advocates are concerned about the potential risk of right turns on red endangering pedestrians in a concurrent system. Mayor Lane noted rights on red are not allowed on Roxbury and West Streets. The Public Works Director replied yes and concurrent crossings might be something to explore moving forward in response to this petition; people do get frustrated, there is no good system for immediate crossing, and pushing the button will always interrupt the system somewhere. Adding time to a crosswalk somewhere will detract from a crosswalk elsewhere. Mayor Lane added many people press the buttons, cross before the light even changes, and then when it does change traffic is stopped for no reason.

The Public Works Director said traffic lights are being worked on and are in the CIP; most signals are old but Mr. Hilton maintains them well. The technology is now available with cameras and sensors to minimize congestion at traffic lights.

Ms. Belair said she has been places where the actual cross button would light up so the pedestrian knows their request to cross was recognized. Councilor Greenwald said that seems indulgent; he asked if there is a walk opportunity during the normal light cycle. Mr. Hilton replied no, the button must be pushed; sometimes buttons do break and once he is notified, he tries to repair them as quickly as possible. Sometimes it is hard to pinpoint a malfunctioning light because there is so much traffic and movement. Councilor Greenwald noted many years ago the lights in Central Square changed to flashing after 10:00 PM. The Public Works Director said that was discontinued because of the liability of driver's habits; it ultimately does not save fuel or power.

Mayor Lane said three weeks ago he was on Roxbury Street and the lights cycled multiple times before he was able to turn. Mr. Hilton said the cycles are a bit different on Central Square and Roxbury Street because of microwave detectors; this technology cannot alert the traffic light that there are cars waiting if, for example, a large truck is parked and blocking the detector. He is trying to work on improving that technology but

with the new big building projects on Roxbury, he is unsure how the traffic lights Downtown will be affected. He said even if the loops in the road were timed better. He would still eliminate the microwave detector because it is not sufficiently effective.

Councilor Jacobs said maintenance is an issue for ensuring equipment stays working; he said in the long-term, new equipment might be helpful. In the short-term, he suggested reprogramming things for concurrent pedestrian crossing, as the Public Works Director explained. Ms. Hundley said that cannot be done for all lights; The Public Works Director agreed but said it might be worth trying in the short-term. Mr. Hilton said with Downtown traffic turning patterns, he thinks the system is safest as it currently is; Ms. Hundley agreed concurrent crossings could become a liability and that consistency is good. The Public Works Director agreed concurrent crossings could be an issue both for those making right turns and for pedestrians.

Mayor Lane said, regarding the petition, this Committee needs to make a recommendation to file as informational stating the Committee recognizes the issue raised and will address it in a more effective way when different equipment is available. The Public Works Director said there is an education factor – most of the public do not understand crossing times and signals. The quote to replace the entire Central Square light system is \$160,000/approximately \$1,000 per signal; Mr. Hilton hopes to see this happen in the near future. The Public Works Director said he will explore this option with the budget in the spring, at which time he will also work with Mr. Hilton to evaluate all signals in the City to draft a report and recommendations for a replacement program in the CIP.

Councilor Greenwald said he also thinks flashing lights are effective on pedestrian crossings, like on lower Main Street by the college. The Public Works Director agreed, but only for uncontrolled intersections. Mayor Lane agreed those signals implemented on West Street have been very effective because they flash immediately. The Public Works Director said he hopes placing this issue in the CIP will help to finalize work by Elliot Street and reinforce the need for refuge islands when people are crossing. The West Street crossings cost approximately \$32,000 but there are opportunities for funding, for example, from Main Street America. Councilor Jacobs said the funding for West Street was 50/50 and something like that may be possible for other locations in the City; he said there is clearly public frustration about this. The Public Works Director added the new crossings on Roxbury Street are also solar with radio RF buttons (\$35,000); this is an effort to remove conduits from the ground making the equipment is more programmable. Mayor Lane recalled that 30 years ago police officers could manually operate lights; Mr. Hilton noted that can still occur.

Councilor Lamoureux noted that some crosswalks tell people to wait after they have pushed the button; he asked if that technology is possible in Keene. Mr. Hilton believes that technology could be acquired for the City but a problem would be wiring; all signals take up the same wiring and splitting them for concurrent crossing will require more wires, issues with conduits, etc. The Public Works Director indicated he is exploring a wireless system moving forward. Councilor Lamoureux said he thinks the indications to

wait work well in many places; the Public Works Director agreed they are also ADA compatible.

Mayor Lane suggested recommending that the MSFI Committee accept this petition as informational and allow staff to explore modifying and upgrading equipment that will permit different ways to cross safely. The Public Works Director added that staff is always conducting minor modifications to increase safety but are looking to upgrade the signal system and equipment to comply with standards in the long-term.

Councilor Greenwald asked if the petitioner is seeking any compensation from the City. The Public Works Director was not aware of any claim. Ms. Hundley and Ms. Belair agreed there was not a crossing signal where the petitioner was hit by a car and the City moved that crosswalk to a safer place on Roxbury. Councilor Greenwald asked about this Committee's response if the petitioner does plan on filing a lawsuit. The Public Works Director suggested speaking with the City Attorney. Mr. Hilton said he spoke with the petitioner and explained how the signals work. Ms. Hundley added pedestrian common sense is also required; Mayor Lane said sometimes that is asking a lot. Councilor Greenwald asked if there will be new crosswalks with the development on Roxbury Street. The Public Works Director said the crosswalks recently built will serve the new developments but are always open to adjustment.

The Committee agreed to accept this petition as informational to be handled administratively. Mayor Lane thanked the Public Works Director and Mr. Hilton for their explanations.

b. Downtown Revitalization – Citizen Survey – How it went/overview

The Public Works Director reported that over 400 people had taken the survey and there was still a week left to participate; his goal was for at least 500 people to participate. Just fewer than 200 people attended the forums over three days and shared many good ideas that the consultants will analyze in conjunction with the survey results. Councilor Jacobs and the City Manager agreed the forums were successful. The Public Works Director anticipates the data will be synthesized by mid-November, presented to the City Manager, and brought back to this Committee. Mayor Lane thinks the written-in comments will be the most interesting part of the results. The Public Works Director agreed a lot of interesting ideas were presented from making Downtown a pedestrian mall, less focus on retail, more gathering space, etc. He is looking forward to seeing how it comes together. Councilor Jacobs said he thinks the consultants listened well to this Committee.

Mayor Lane asked about the end product expected from this survey; he assumed once analyzed the project would move into the design phase. The Public Works Director replied this phase is about gathering and synthesizing the big picture of what people want Downtown to have and be. The next step is to decide where these things will be implemented and what the core of Downtown will look like. The next step is placing those features in the locations. He believes there will sufficient money appropriated in the

CIP to begin the process of physical design within at least two years' time. He anticipates an oversight group being assembled by the Mayor to oversee the project and begin work in 2020/2021. Mayor Lane noted the next election cycle is in 2019 and thinks it is a good idea to begin formulating a design before this Council's cycle ends. The Public Works Director thinks it is possible to have a preliminary design by January 2019; comparatively the Marlboro/Winchester Streets redesign took four years from beginning of discussion to completion. In today's world where a lot of input is sought, he thinks this timeframe is pretty standard. He thinks the consultants would be interested in being a part of the entire process but that will have to be decided by staff and Council if they continue to perform as they have. Mayor Lane gave credit to McFarland Johnson for getting this project off to a good start; the Public Works Director agreed they did an excellent job in Concord as well but they had almost \$6 million in private investments there. As Keene starts thinking about who is interested in this project, MEDC could be considered as a construction partner; Mayor Lane said that is why Mr. Dugan is on this Committee.

The City Manager reported she attended one of the community forums and thinks the consultants did a great job of taking input and explaining the ideas to the public. They focused on what defines Downtown and different possible options for the future. They discussed how vehicles interact with pedestrians and cyclists. She is still interested in understanding what the driving force is for people to shop Downtown. She said how Downtown is laid out is very important for ensuring walkable area. She thinks this will also help to partner with financing if sources of funding for art, tourism, etc. are discovered. She is excited to be present for the beginning of this City project to help make Downtown more vibrant and attract millennials. She thought it was interesting that most people did not include the college as a part of Downtown. Councilor Jacobs said he thinks that is a political reflection and Ms. Hundley agreed there is work to do on that. The City Manager said the issue could be partially because design elements are not currently seamless from Downtown to the college; she agreed part of the issue is political but the college drives a lot of business Downtown and there should be planning for what that generation is interested in – walkability, activities, outdoor dining. She thinks everyone working on this project is planning for that future and the City is at a perfect time to decide what Downtown will look like in the future and where funding can be acquired.

Mayor Lane said the college promotes its image as a Downtown facility. He agreed that making the connection between Downtown and the college is important because it is not well executed right now. He added that both Antioch and River Valley would like to be more centrally located within the Downtown. The City Manager said in her experience working with Plymouth State, the college can take part in that effort to be more seamlessly connected to the City – participate in the design, assist in seeking grant funds, etc. The Public Works Director said there is now more interest from the college. Councilor Greenwald spoke in support of a KSC athletic facility on Gilbo Avenue to help connect the college to Downtown. Councilor Jacobs said that planning did not include the City, the college just did it. The City Manager said there is so much potential for Downtown; Mayor Lane agreed eating and residences Downtown have really changed

and developed; those who want to live Downtown have been a driving force in this initiative.

Councilor Lamoureux said this project originally started because of Downtown flooding issues; he asked if it will also take four years for the storm drains to be fixed. The Public Works Director replied this project is programmed out for FY20-21 and other work will take place on Roxbury in advance. Mayor Lane said the overall design does not have to be complete in one day or year; it can be phased in over four to five years. Areas affected by drainage issues can be addressed first. The Public Works Director said this will be a multi-year project to be less destructive over time. Mayor Lane asked if any of the City still drains into Town Brook. The Public Works Director replied yes, sections are isolated but the Brook will likely always be used. He said there is also a project looking at Beaver Brook in general. The flood and storm water work are another layer of this project and a place will be found for them.

- 4) **Next Meeting Date – December 5, 2017 at 9:00 AM.**
- 5) **Adjournment**

Hearing no further business, Mayor Lane adjourned the meeting at 10:03 AM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katie Kibler, Minute Taker