

City of Keene
New Hampshire

AD HOC DOWNTOWN INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Tuesday, June 21, 2022

3:00 PM

**Council Chambers,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Mayor George S. Hansel, Chair
Councilor Randy Filiault
Dillon Benik
Alex Faulkner
Alec Doyle
Mark Rebillard (Via Zoom)
Brandie Wells
Nathalie Houder

Staff Present:

Rebecca Landry, Assistant City
Manager/IT Director
Kürt Blomquist, Director of Public
Works/Emergency Management
Director
Med Kopczynski, Director of
Economic Development/Special
Projects
Don Lussier, City Engineer

Members Not Present:

Councilor Mitchell Greenwald
Councilor Andrew Madison
Cheryl Belair
Robert Patton-Spruill

1) Call to Order/Welcome

Mayor Hansel called the meeting to order at 3:00 PM. Having declared a quorum physically present, Mayor Hansel recognized Mr. Rebillard via Zoom, who stated his location and that he was alone in the room.

2) Minutes – April 19, 2022

A motion by Councilor Filiault to approve the minutes of the April 19, 2022 meeting was duly seconded by Mr. Benik and the motion carried unanimously.

3) Communications

A) Disability Rights Center – NH, June 13, 2022 Letter

The Director of Public Works/Emergency Management Director, Kürt Blomquist, provided an update to the Committee on a letter received from the Disability Rights Center of NH on June 13, 2022. Mr. Blomquist said this organization advocates for those with disabilities and mobility issues throughout the State, ensuring standard care for inclusive public rights-of-way. The Disability Rights Center sent this communication to the Committee, encouraging them and the community—while considering the future of

downtown—to consider mobility and work toward reducing any physical barriers that impede participation by all mobility challenged individuals. They asked the Committee to consider two specific items:

1. Consider adding a member to this Committee who is from the disabled community or an organization to provide representation.
2. The Center would like to meet with stakeholders and to have potentially a separate public forum to focus on mobility issues in the downtown today.

Mr. Blomquist recommended adding mobility issues as a focus at the upcoming forum on June 29. Staff and the consultants would move forward working with the Disability Rights Center on the project to see where they could provide additional input. Mayor Hansel noted that there would need to be a process via the City Council to add a member to the Committee, but it was possible.

Mr. Faulkner encouraged thinking beyond just physical disabilities. Mr. Blomquist agreed and said the project goal is to be multi-use so all visitors can utilize the downtown without impediment.

Ms. Wells wondered about a liaison between the community and a local agency. Mayor Hansel was open to all ideas. Ms. Wells said she knows the mobility issues downtown personally and she has connections to the Disability Rights Center. She offered and Mayor Hansel encouraged her to liaise with them and share information with the Committee.

A motion by Councilor Filiault to accept the communication as informational was duly seconded by Mr. Benik and the motion carried unanimously.

4) Introduction of Stantec Team

Mr. Blomquist introduced the Stantec consulting team: Ed Roberge, Civil Engineer and Project Co-Lead, Bob Corning, Vision and Design Team Lead, and Dave McNamara, Project Co-Lead. The three will work together for the highest project quality in conjunction with the Public Works Department. Mr. Roberge said the project had started well and they looked forward to sharing their understanding of the project during this presentation.

Mr. Roberge began by discussing the notion of the downtown, what it is, and what it will become. One of the goals listed in the Request for Proposals was to work on expanding the Downtown Core District, which the consultants would discuss with the public workshops section. He asked what the limits of the downtown are and how to make it deeper, longer, and wider. That is what the consultants are trying to understand from this Committee—what exactly is the expanse of downtown beyond how it is zoned today.

Mr. McNamara commented on a key driver of this project, the utility work on hundred-year-old underground infrastructure; the water and sewer lines, drainage, and private utilities in and behind the Main Street area. The consultants are working with the Public Works Department Staff to understand existing infrastructure and develop the best solutions to improve them, replace them, or align them. There

are many methods that could bring the infrastructure up to standard and better working conditions. These factors would drive the impacts of the overall work and would open the opportunity to consider alternatives at street level.

Mr. Corning is a landscape architect and urban planner. He would lead the visioning and public forum design efforts for this project. With the utility work mentioned, the public realm and street surfaces would be impacted variously in ways yet to be determined. Stantec recognizes the unique historic character of downtown Keene and the vibrant arts scene throughout town that provide great character. He said the Stantec team's goal is to think about it in three ways: (1) to preserve what is important if possible and expand areas that could be improved in a way that is respectful to the history of Keene, (2) seek opportunities to expand existing open spaces, like Railroad Square, (3) seek opportunities to improve access for everyone, prioritizing pedestrians and bicycles, while keeping it safe for everyone. The parking discussion has been extensive, and the consulting mobility team is experienced working with municipalities on parking analyses/studies to ensure there is sufficient parking that is in the right places, which is a critical part of the project. The team is also looking at various sustainability opportunities.

Mr. Roberge continued on the public engagement process. Any project of this size cannot occur without public input. As a part of this project, a public participation plan was developed in conjunction Mr. Blomquist, the City Manager, and the technical review team they created. The consultants have been working with the technical review committee on the practical, grassroots elements of the project; how to best understand and engage the appropriate stakeholders for the most inclusive input. The evolving public participation plan lists the study issues to work with this Committee on and to find opportunities. Mr. Roberge wanted to focus less on what is wrong with Keene but how it could be better built and used. He thought it was great to be liaising with groups like the Disability Rights Committee, and the consultants would engage them too. He suggested other groups to engage like the Bicycle & Pedestrian Path Advisory Committee or the downtown businesses. Creating an online presence would be essential. The public engagement plan is to involve as many people as possible, to listen, try to understand, and work with this Committee on solutions.

5) Work Plan Update

Mr. Corning discussed the work plan, how it would be implemented big picture, and the sequence of work products that would continue through the process: (1) data collection and review—occurring currently, (2) prepare base mapping, including a topographic survey of downtown (3) public workshops, outreach, and interaction, (4) development of alternatives once the utility impacts are understood, (5) utility replacement design, (6) cost estimation, and (7) project phasing to minimize impacts to downtown businesses and keep the downtown open during construction for visitors and patrons.

Mr. Roberge continued on the community engagement approach to work with municipal Staff, local residents, local businesses, and visitors/patrons. The public workshops would include interactive exercises, provide a chance to talk with the project team, include compelling visuals, and include breakout group discussions. Mr. Roberge demonstrated photos of two workshop activities: (1) looking at what is possible within a fixed right-of-way so people can envision what is important to them within the space

constraints of downtown, and (2) looking at layout plans to discuss issues and concerns that are important to the character and vision of Keene that should not be changed.

Mr. McNamara continued on project phasing, a critical aspect of the project to ensure access to businesses, the ability for people to move within the downtown, and to maintain utility service to all users throughout construction. He discussed phasing limits to maintain access for business, public space and events, schools, emergency services, and multimodal accessibility as things to consider as alternatives are developed. Thus, the consultants will be looking for important thoughts on how things operate throughout the City.

Mr. Roberge discussed the project schedule. The project is currently in the planning phase, interacting with this Committee, the technical review Committee, stakeholder groups, business groups, and even the City Council on several occasions. They anticipate wrapping-up 2022 with the completion of the planning study and design alternatives. In 2023, the project will transition into construction/implementation, which would likely occur in three phases. Community engagement is embedded in each phase through the end of 2025. The consulting team takes their cues from this Committee. The schedule for the rest of 2022 is as follows:

- June 21 – Introduction of project design team; review of goals, opportunities, and project work plan; planning for public workshop #1 on June 29.
- August 16 – Review results/outcomes of public workshop #1; review existing conditions, goals surveys, issues and concerns, and initial project findings; planning for public workshop #2 on September 13.
- September 20 – Review results/outcomes of public workshop #2; review and discuss alternatives; review utilities infrastructure improvements, right-of-way, and permitting requirements.
- October 18 – Final alternative review, project phasing/implementation, and recommendations to City Council.

Mayor Hansel said this seemed straightforward and that lessons could be learned from past visioning processes. He agreed with being very sensitive to public input moving forward. He has no preconceived notions of what the recommendations will be. This Committee is not steering the community but seeking the public's input on what the future of downtown will be.

Councilor Filiault wanted to see these workshops occur outside the Council Chambers, where some members of the public might not feel comfortable. He suggested an empty storefront for more of a walk-in interaction, which he said worked well for the Walldogs Festival.

Mr. Roberge shared an upcoming site walk on June 29 beginning at Railroad Square and going back to Central Square to look at pervasive issues. He agreed with being outside the Council Chambers as much as possible.

- 6) **Public Workshop Update**
- 7) **Committee Discussion**

The Committee continued their discussion on issues, opportunities, and concerns for the downtown. Mayor Hansel said one of his major concerns is disrupting downtown businesses. He said this Committee and Stantec would do well to observe the uses for different downtown businesses and how each operates. This would be key and deserves great understanding at a granular level. At the end of this process, the Mayor wants to know there was communication with every business owner to understand how their business operates and to make accommodations for them during construction phasing to ensure their regular operations, like deliveries, are not interrupted. If a business is closed one day of the week, plan that day to replace the sidewalk, etc. It is a complex but necessary effort. Mayor Hansel said there also needs to be more roundtable sessions to facilitate those conversations.

Mr. Rebillard asked the consultants to speak to how they have done this in the past. What mechanisms and technologies are involved? Is the communication structure clear? Who is meeting with the businesses? Mr. Roberge replied using the example of a project he managed in a town that had a downtown business group that met regularly, and the project became a regular agenda item. Keene does not have such a group today and he suggested something similar that could be face-to-face or virtual to begin that interaction. The consultants want to work with Staff to create that communication using email lists to characterize businesses and their dynamic needs and business practices. The consultants will create a large database to work from to understand those issues. Mr. Roberge said he would reach out to Mr. Rebillard to work on this aspect of the project reaching out to businesses. Mr. Rebillard asked if the consultants were available for a weekly Zoom check-in with the group of businesses. Mr. Roberge replied enthusiastically in the affirmative, agreeing that this would be the level of engagement needed to understand the businesses' needs. The worst thing that could happen is leaving someone out. Mayor Hansel and the Assistant City Manager agreed that City technology is available to facilitate such meetings. Mayor Hansel would consult the City Attorney to ensure that it is appropriate, but something could likely be arranged through the Mayor's office. A quorum of seven members of this Committee could not participate in these weekly meetings.

Mayor Hansel asked if there were clearly defined roles for public communication. What are Stantec and the City responsible for in this huge public information effort? The Assistant City Manager/IT Director knew that Stantec and the City's IT team had been in communication about a project website. She said that right now, anything that needs to go out on the City's media is going through the Public Works Department. The City is looking to Stantec to provide the public information and all the resources. Mr. Roberge said the consultants had been working on a micro-website that would essentially link to the City website, sharing any new information on scheduled meetings and the goals questionnaire that the Director of Public Works released. The consultants would roll-up all the feedback and return it to the Director of Public Works. Project communication will involve public meetings like this one formalized through the City Clerk's office and public workshops. Workshop notes and meeting minutes would be available. Mr. Roberge concluded that all pertinent information would be on the website so people can see how the project is progressing. He said that communication would be collaborative between the City and Stantec. Mayor Hansel asked who would maintain the database of business owners and the status of the contacts. The Assistant City Manager said that was yet to be decided, but said the City has the resources to help with that. Mr. Rebillard looks forward to working with the consultants on this documentation mechanism/database.

Mr. Roberge said he is always active and available. He hoped members (not a quorum) would attend the upcoming workshop.

Mayor Hansel opened the floor to public comment

Georgia Casamatis of Glisum owns a business at 17 Roxbury Street in Keene, whose experienced utility work in front of her building that was completed last year, with disruptive construction. She feels driven emotionally for what the businesses on Main Street will go through, stating that it will even be disruptive to those off Main Street. She said that proper alley and Main Street use would be important. She had seen other communities go through this and while it looks smooth on paper, it will be disruptive. She was also present as a member of the Arts Alive Board and the leader of Friends of Public Art. She was a primary contributor to the downtown mural festival. She discussed the origin of the Arts Core and said she would share a document detailing the architectural study on how Gilbo Avenue could be reimagined with public input for the arts. She would like to have those future conversations and would continue attending these meetings to advocate for arts and mobilizing local artists who can remake the downtown; metal workers could make streetlights or there could be poetry written into the sidewalks, for example. She concluded agreeing that the downtown sidewalks are not accessible right now. Mr. Blomquist said he was sharing a copy of the Arts Alive work with Stantec.

Mr. Roberge spoke about the goals questionnaire (everyone was sent the link), which is a survey that would be released June 30, after the workshop. The results would be presented at the August meeting. The Assistant City Manager asked who the intended audience of the questionnaire is. Mr. Roberge replied that it is intended to reach the general public; the goal is to share it widely because it means something different to everyone. He wanted to make sure the survey made sense to the Committee in advance. People would be invited to take the survey at the June 29 public workshop. The survey is organized around goals that came from the request for proposals, discussions during the selection process, and review with Staff.

Mr. Roberge reviewed the nine goals included in the survey, in no prioritized order, per the Mayor's suggestion:

- Advancing priority utility improvements to maintain a strong downtown.
- Defining and expanding the Downtown Core District for a more suitable environment within a reasonable budget.
- Ensure everything is built to last and sustain.
- Preserve the image and character of the downtown.
- Create better, flexible open spaces to be convertible enough, through creative design, to allow for diverse activities and events.
- Improve multi-modal transportation access (bikes, pedestrians, vehicles, public transport, etc.).
- Ensure sufficient and appropriate parking in the Downtown Core.
- Create opportunities to talk to as many people as possible.
- Improve universal accessibility in circulation throughout the Downtown Core that is conscious to those that need reliable and equal access.

Mr. Roberge asked what was missing, unclear, or needed amended in the survey.

Mayor Hansel was curious if the consultants could help the City produce engagement targets for the survey. His concern is getting the depth of responses needed. He would like to see engagement targets for this whole process to know how many people should be filling out these surveys and to ensure the breadth of community opinions are captured.

Mr. Benik said he has no experience with survey design but agreed that the goals should not be numbered because it could be leading to participants. He also felt like there was insufficient context and that the questions were not accessible to the general public. He did not want to provide too much context and lead participants to an answer, but he questioned how many participants would know what the Downtown Core means. He thought there could be middle ground to make it more accessible.

Ms. Houder wondered if there could be a general context statement at the beginning of the survey. She asked if it was an anonymous survey or if it would collect demographic information like classifying businesses, residents, workers in town, etc.? She asked if Downtown Core a defined term for members of the public or if someone would understand the meaning of multi-modal transportation. She said that surveys should not lead participants, but information was needed here to be generic and clear to the public.

The Assistant City Manager said she had similar thoughts when reading the survey. All of these terms mean something different to everyone. Additionally, she reported that the average reading level of 50% the American public is eighth grade. She suggested one or two sentences of context for each question to help people understand the goal better. She agreed it would also be helpful to have metrics behind the survey to know how broad an audience actually participated.

Mr. Rebillard commented on the response fields in the survey, stating that they were small, making it difficult to craft the long answer the questions seek.

The consultants appreciated the feedback.

Mr. Blomquist recalled that all the Committee members were chosen because they represent different groups in the community. He asked that if members have lists of members utilized by the organizations they work with, to please send them to himself and Mr. Watson, who will pass them to Stantec. He needs Committee help to ensure contacts are generated. If members know of open spaces in the downtown to host these public workshops—within a walkable area of downtown—please share them with Mr. Blomquist and Mr. Watson. Mr. Blomquist has emailed 185 people from other projects, has spoken on a radio show to advertise the workshop, and he has a lot of electronic information and flyers for the workshop. He asked for less than a quorum of seven members to attend the workshop and to bring people with them who could spread the word. Any other thoughts should be sent to Mr. Blomquist, Mr. Watson, and Mr. Roberge. Mr. Blomquist meets with Mr. Roberge and other Staff weekly on utility aspects. The technical review Committee meets every other week with the head managers and City Manager. He

envisions some form of this Committee continuing past the end of the calendar year as a different focus group for the construction of phase. Members should let the Mayor know if they would like to continue in that capacity.

The second workshop is September 13. As Mr. Roberge mentioned, members should invite the consultants to meetings of the groups they are aligned with over the next few months to make that community connection and hear issues of concern.

8) Adjournment

The next meeting is August 16, 2022.

There being no further business, Mayor Hansel adjourned the meeting at 4:05 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katie Kibler, Minute Taker
June 27, 2022

Reviewed and edited by,
Kürt D. Blomquist, PE, Assistant City Manager/Public Works Director