

City of Keene
New Hampshire

MASTER PLAN STEERING COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Tuesday, May 7, 2024

6:00 PM

**Council Chamber,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Harold Farrington, Chair
Alex Henkel, Vice Chair
Councilor Michael Remy
Cody Morrison
Joshua Meehan
Elizabeth Wood
Alexander Von Plinsky
Joe Walier
Kenneth Kost, Alternate
Mayor Jay Kahn, Alternate (voting; left at 7:15 PM)
Councilor Philip Jones, Alternate (voting)
Councilor Catherine Workman, Alternate (voting;
remote)

Staff Present:

Jesse Rounds, Community Development
Director
Mari Brunner, Senior Planner
Evan Clements, Planner

Members Not Present:

Joseph Perras
Juliana Bergeron
Armando Rangel
Leatrice Oram
Emily Lavigne-Bernier

1) Call to Order & Roll Call

Chair Farrington called the meeting to order at 6:01 PM and roll call ensued.

Consultants present: David Beurle (Future IQ), Heather Branigin (Future IQ), & Leslie Gray (JS&A).

2) Minutes of Previous Meeting: April 2, 2024

Revision: Correct the spelling of Mr. Perras' name in the members present/not list.

A motion by Councilor Remy to adopt the April 2, 2024 minutes as amended was duly seconded by Councilor Jones. The motion carried unanimously.

3) Community Snapshot Overview by JS&A

Chair Farrington welcomed Leslie Gray, consultant from JS&A, who reported on the community snapshot. This existing conditions analysis will guide the think tank conversations. Ms. Gray began by reviewing how the City's economic conditions and demographics had changed since 2010 to inform where the City should go from here. The "snapshot" is an analysis of existing conditions. The snapshot will expand in phase two. The data included: census, ACS (American Community Survey), and City studies. The snapshot will help to answer two core questions: (1) How has Keene changed since the 2010 Master Plan update, and (2) what does today's economy look like? The consultants were compiling the preliminary findings to complete the snapshot report. All of this information will be distilled into a short presentation during the think tank.

Ms. Gray continued, describing some of the data (2010–2020).

- Demographics & socio-economic findings:
 - Consistent population size, though the community is not necessarily consistent.
 - High household median income.
 - Increased higher educational attainment for those over age 25.
 - Excellent unemployment rates.
 - Strong labor participation rates.
 - Indicates a good economic base.
 - 45% of those employed Keene live in Keene, which is a good indicator of economic development. Comparable to other cities in the region.
 - AARP Livability Index:
 - Keene's current score was 57 compared to the national average of 50.
 - Includes housing, transportation, environment, health, engagement opportunities, and more.
 - Compared to other communities, Keene is above average.
 - There are opportunities to think more strategically to increase the City's index score over the next 10 years so Keene can continue being responsive to residential needs, with a healthy economy.

Next, the consultants would analyze the community survey findings to present that data to the Committee.

Councilor Remy said he did not like the census slide shown because the data was collected when Keene State College (KSC; ~ 10% of Keene's population) did not have students on campus. Thus, overall, it showed a decrease. However, he said that when considering the data ward-by-ward, Ward 1 (which includes KSC) was the only one that decreased, which he thought indicated that it was a result of KSC not being in session. Ms. Gray said there were limitations with the data, and she mentioned working with other communities that also had challenges capturing the full population. She said she would analyze the ward-by-ward data for more granular accuracy and compare the data to other communities across the nation with similar student populations.

Chair Farrington appreciated the overview. He said he assumed that the increase in NH's population was not organic (i.e., births minus deaths), but rather due to people moving to NH. Ms. Gray said that was accurate, noting that there are three main ways a population can change: moving in/out, births, and deaths. The consultants had been reviewing net mobility using the American Community Survey, which showed that 20% of Keene residents are in a different home now than they were one year ago. From the macroeconomic perspective, Ms. Gray said it was clear that people are leaving bigger cities for places with more "affordable" housing relative to where they come from.

Mayor Kahn appreciated the snapshot. He said there is a local urban myth that Keene residents are being outbid for homes by people moving here from outside the region. Some of this urban flight is to find desirable retirement locations. He suggested that the consultants invite local realtors for their insight. He also suggested that this process should lead to a comparator set to understand how those other communities are advancing in the ways that Keene wants to.

Mr. Meehan referenced the livability comparison and noted that it would be good to have comparisons to aspirational communities, especially if there is data available to compare to other NH towns. He suggested keeping the metrics similar to help people understand. After the first think tank, there might be a clearer idea of people's visions for Keene, which could indicate aspirational communities. Ms. Gray agreed that great baseline data can help pinpoint aspirational communities.

Chair Farrington said that if it appears that a lot of people want to move to NH but are not aiming for Keene, there might be a need to overtly compete with other NH towns.

4) Think Tank Workshop – May 30 & 31, 2024

Mr. Beurle of Future IQ discussed the project timeline. The Steering Committee is in Step 2. The first community survey is helping the consultants to pinpoint how Keene can be competitive. Stakeholder interviews will start soon and there will be visioning sessions during the second to last week of June. He said the community engagement and outreach was going well so far.

Mr. Beurle continued, describing updates to the project portal. He showed the logo that aligned with Keene's branding and says: Keene 20Forward. He said it was an interesting exercise amongst City staff and consultants to accomplish a great logo and accompanying narrative about the project. He thanked Steering Committee members who submitted photos and quotes, which help to give a local voice as to why the project is important. The portal includes the project overview, schedule, presentations to the Steering Committee, resources, the 2010 Comprehensive Master Plan, and other reports. The consultants are building out the project portal as much as possible so the public can participate and track the project.

Next, Mr. Beurle discussed the upcoming think tanks; the agenda will be posted to the project portal soon. He thanked the Steering Committee for suggesting people for the think tanks; all had been invited and then it will be opened to others, who can sign up on the portal. A think tank is a

two-day exercise: Thursday from 5:00 PM–8:00 PM (including light dinner) and Friday from 9:00 AM–12:00 PM. As such, participants would not have to miss a full day of work. Day one of the think tank agenda will include: an introduction, an explanation of trends shaping the City’s future, and insights about key drivers (interactive). At the end, participants will be asked to rank the key drivers they think are shaping Keene’s future. Day two will include (based on an analysis of day one): an outline scenario matrix, a narrative scenario development, and a brainstorm of high-level actions. Facilitators will include Mr. Beurle, Ms. Branigin, Ms. Gray, someone from WGI, City staff, and some Steering Committee members who will facilitate the small groups. The Steering Committee will be trained at the end of day one or beginning of day two.

Otherwise, the consultants will be launching material on the project portal on May 8th. They waited so that the public could focus on the survey, which 438 people have completed to date. Ideally, the number of survey responses would increase to closer to 700+ before the think tanks. All Steering Committee members are invited to register and participate in the think tanks.

Ms. Wood pointed out a typo in the think tank agenda: “5:00 PM–8:00 PM” should be changed to “5:00 PM–8:30 PM,” with registration at 4:30 PM.

Mr. Kost recalled that at the previous meeting, Mr. Walier suggested a tagline that the Steering Committee accepted: “Learn from the past, plan for the future,” but Mr. Kost did not see it in the materials displayed. Mr. Beurle showed where the tagline was used in the various project materials, such as the survey, the think tank introduction, and the flyer. It depends on how much space is available on the various documents. Chair Farrington and Ms. Brunner agreed that on the think tank agenda, the tagline could be bold and green, so it stands out more.

Mr. Von Plinsky asked when invites should be expected for the think tank and whether there was a cutoff for invites. Ms. Brunner replied that invitations were being mailed on May 8th. She noted that some of the Steering Committee’s recommendations for think tank participants did not include contact information. She asked the Steering Committee to submit contact information for their recommendations if they had not yet.

Mayor Kahn noted that on the survey advertisement in the project portal, the project title was in all caps: “VISION 20FORWARD.” As such, the Mayor thought it could be misread or confusing. He suggested hyphenating as: “VISION 20-FORWARD.” Mr. Beurle said he would work with Ms. Brunner on it.

Mr. Meehan noted that on the portal landing page, there is an option to learn more about the Steering Committee, but it takes the user to the survey. Mr. Beurle said he would fix it.

Mr. Walier said it seemed that the community was unaware of this effort. He had not spoken to one person who knew about it. He wondered what the City/Steering Committee/consultants were missing in all this effort.

Ms. Wood suggested having a community table at the Food Festival or other events, when Steering Committee members could talk about the project and hand out flyers. This could lead to more of an audience. Chair Farrington agreed that it was a great idea. Councilor Remy would try to facilitate this at the Food Festival.

Mr. Walier also noted that there are many service organizations in Keene looking for speakers, so the Steering Committee could reach out to them.

Community Development Director, Jesse Rounds, said these were helpful comments and that talking with the various service organizations was a goal after the think tank. The Steering Committee is an important tool in this process, and they are encouraged to spread the word.

Ms. Brunner said staff could reach out to Dan Mitchell of WKBK to see if someone from the Steering Committee and/or Mr. Beurle could talk about the project, so the community is hearing voices other than City staff. Councilor Remy noted that he and Ms. Wood would be on the radio about different topics on May 16th and they would try to briefly mention this project.

5) Survey Updates

Next, Mr. Beurle provided an update on the survey (40 questions and some subsets) responses, noting that this process needs time to build momentum in the community. Of the survey responses to date, 10% of participants were involved with the 2010 Comprehensive Master Plan update, which indicates that the survey is reaching new people, ideally causing a ripple effect. He said City staff were doing great outreach.

The ~438 survey responses indicated (*early indications; data not officially analyzed yet):

- Average of 24 minutes to complete the survey, which indicated that users were being thoughtful for such a long survey, leading to high quality data.
- 70% of people who started the survey completed it, which was encouraging for a survey this long.
- A good distribution of age groups participated, aligning with the community's demographics.
- 70% of users live in Keene (03431 zip code). Users who do not live in Keene have some relationship with the City (e.g., work in Keene).
- Survey responses were evenly distributed between wards, though a little lower in Ward One.
- Participants seem very satisfied living in Keene. The community provides opportunities to thrive and grow.
- On the questions about how satisfied/concerned people are about Keene's current direction, more concerns seemed to emerge.
 - There was a full range of responses from very concerned to very satisfied. Some were concerned that Keene is moving too slowly and not keeping up with changes, as well as the ability of the community to adapt to future changes. This

interesting data makes this process more important. Residents like living here, but are concerned about the City's future direction. Users seem interested in the notion of community "identity" and key strategic position.

There will be a follow-up email to all survey participants asking them to elaborate about the City's future and share the survey with their networks.

Mayor Kahn was glad to hear the average response time. He suggested updating the first page of the survey that indicates the survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Mr. Beurle agreed. Mr. Beurle said the longer response times indicated to him that people are taking their time on the open-ended questions, though some had skipped those questions.

Mr. Von Plinsky asked about the direction/rate of change concerns. He wondered if concerns in Keene align with nationwide concerns. Mr. Beurle thought the open-ended questions would indicate what changes people are most excited/concerned about. He thought the survey data visualization would track those open-ended responses to narrow down to the most important local issues. Mr. Beurle's initial read of the comments indicated some bigger picture issues with local implications (e.g., climate change and snowfall) and others focused on local context (e.g., homelessness and drug use).

Councilor Remy asked whether there would be value in sourcing links to track survey referrals from the Steering Committee or other sources. Mr. Beurle felt—based on his experience—that breaking down the data to such a degree leads to a less reliable dataset. The goal is to drive all possible traffic to the project portal. Councilor Remy said that if a second survey is needed, such tracking could indicate that flyers are not needed, for example, because people are not accessing the survey that way. Mr. Beurle said there was not a question asking how users learned about the survey.

6) New Business

Mr. Rounds returned to the topic of the logo and tagline. He said there were many possible designs as staff worked on the Steering Committee's wishes. He hoped that this logo was what the Committee had in mind. He said City staff were listening, and he appreciated communication pointing out where the logo differed from the Committee's wishes. He appreciated all of the Steering Committee's time.

Mr. Kost said he really liked the tagline and thought it was important to help community members know that the Steering Committee values the City's history. He thought the tagline was a nice balance. Mr. Rounds agreed, noting his intention for the tagline to be used throughout the literature on the project portal. He added that the logo and tagline would be omnipresent because they are very important; it was not just about creating a brand, but also helping people to be comfortable with this process.

Ms. Brunner noted that all Steering Committee members should have received the think tank invitation via email. She asked members to email City staff indicating whether they plan to attend, and if so, whether they will attend both sessions. She asked members to also indicate whether they are willing to be facilitators.

Evan Clements, Planner, distributed 60 flyers with the survey link along Main Street. He was surprised that most business owners thought he was there about the downtown project and once they knew he was not, they were quite receptive. He said the change in tone between the two topics was dramatic.

Chair Farrington recalled an idea from the last meeting to ensure it occurs: Mr. Kost, who is part of the Monadnock Interfaith Project (MIP) with the KSC school of architecture to create mockups of what development of a high-rise multiuse building would look like on Gilbo Avenue. Chair Farrington said they did nice work. Mr. Kost also planned to talk to the Library about displaying images/boards of the KSC senior projects about Main Street.

For future agendas, Councilor Jones suggested that City staff share links to all of the important City plans and policies (e.g., Climate Action Plan and Economic Development Plan) referenced in these discussions. He thought it was important for both the Steering Committee and consultants to understand this history. Chair Farrington agreed. Ms. Brunner also agreed, noting that reviewing those plans and policies was a part of the consultants' scope. Mr. Beurle showed where all of these documents were located in the project portal, under "Useful Resources." Chair Farrington noted that since the last meeting, the School District published their Strategic Plan, which would be useful to include as well. Mayor Kahn agreed, noting that the Strategic Plan had come a long way, and would be finalized in June. Mayor Kahn could request the progress report.

Ms. Wood agreed with Mr. Clements that downtown businesses are confused between this Master Plan update and the downtown project. She suggested creating a tool to help residents understand the difference. She noted all the upcoming City events through the Recreation Department at various parks on May 18th. So, Ms. Wood suggested leaving flyers at the various events. Mr. Rounds agreed and noted that there would be an upcoming meeting on the downtown project focused on Central Square on May 8th at 5:30 PM.

Mayor Kahn appreciated Ms. Wood's comment, noting that there had been a lot of effort to gather and build momentum with the downtown businesses. He added that there are many empty storefronts downtown, and downtown business owners know what types of businesses would complement what already exists. He hoped this process would gather that information and he suggested starting with the business owners. Then, if there are generalized observations, he suggested testing them with the broader community, like survey respondents. He said it could be potential marketing leverage for the City that would add to the project data as well. He suggested that May would be a good time to present this to the Council.

7) **Next Meeting: Tuesday June 4, 2024 at 6:00 PM**

8) Adjournment

There being no further business, Chair Farrington adjourned the meeting at 7:15 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katie Kibler, Minute Taker
May 14, 2024

Reviewed and edited by,
Megan Fortson, Planning Technician