

City of Keene
New Hampshire

AD HOC DOWNTOWN INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Tuesday, August 16, 2022

3:00 PM

**Council Chambers,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Mayor George S. Hansel, Chair
Councilor Randy Filiault
Councilor Mitchell Greenwald
Councilor Andrew Madison
Alex Faulkner
Dillon Benik
Mark Rebillard (Via Zoom)
Alec Doyle

Staff Present:

Elizabeth Dragon, City Manager
Kürt Blomquist, Director of Public Works/
ACM/Emergency Management Director
Don Lussier, City Engineer

Members Not Present:

Cheryl Belair
Robert Patton-Spruill
Brandie Wells
Nathalie Houlder

1) Call to Order/Welcome

Mayor Hansel called the meeting to order at 3:00 PM. Mark Rebillard participated via Zoom due to travel and he was alone at his stated location.

2) Minutes – June 21, 2022

A motion by Councilor Filiault to approve the June 21, 2022 meeting minutes was duly seconded by Councilor Greenwald and the motion carried on a unanimous roll call vote.

3) Adoption of Committee's Rules of Procedure

The Committee held a unanimous roll call vote to adopt the Rules of Procedure. There was no preceding motion.

4) Project Update – Stantec
A) Outreach and Engagement Program

Mayor Hansel welcomed the project consultants. Ed Roberge began introducing Dave McNamara and Chris Bridle, the design team lead. All details presented would be included in a final report.

Mr. Roberge explained that 50 people attended the June 2022 in-person workshop (Council Chambers, Railroad Square, and a walk). There was also an online workshop in June–July, with 100 participants who commented and 800 website visitors (to share things people like/don't like and ideas). The July–August Stakeholder Roundtables (developed from the public meetings) included six meetings of the technical review committee (utility replacement, traffic limitations, and pedestrian access) and individual meetings with each downtown business group (via Zoom and at the Chamber of Commerce), Art's Alive group, Bicycle and Pedestrian Path Advisory Committee (BPPAC), and the Keene Rotary Club. The webpage has included an interactive map, the project goals, and has invited comments. This has created an effort of spreading the word about the project and fact-finding.

i) *Engagement and Workshop #1*

This workshop included an idea exercise in which participants ranked the major downtown improvements they wanted. The improvements included flexible street space, outdoor dining and activity, and better wayfinding, among others. The key takeaways from this workshop were:

1. Placemaking and wayfinding is lacking in downtown.
2. Downtown does not always feel comfortable for people walking/rolling and biking—accessibility and lighting.
3. Expand low-impact development/green infrastructure.
4. Car facilities are needed, but need to reduce and streamline the multi-lane road to perhaps be more pedestrian centric.
5. Infrastructure upgrades are needed.
6. Expand opportunities for downtown activities.
7. Incorporate art and history into the new design.

ii) *Webpage Interaction*

iii) *Goals Review*

The public commented on the project goals. In the following goal list, underlined portions are additions based on public feedback:

- Utility infrastructure improvements
- Define/expand downtown
- Support a more sustainable built environment and transportation center.
- Strengthen image and character, including arts and history.

- Expand flexible open space
- Improve multimodal transportation access
- Provide adequate parking
- Upgrade walking environment

Mr. Roberge asked the committee to affirm the goals or revise, and to comment on ongoing outreach and engagement efforts.

Councilor Filiault hears from constituents that they understand and support infrastructure and electrical improvements. He hears that people like downtown the way it is and do not see the need for anything dramatic beyond water, sewer, and electrical. He said everyone of course wants this done without raising taxes.

Mr. Rebillard wondered about outreach to differently abled people and handicapped populations. Mr. Roberge said that the consultants communicated with the Disability Rights Center and they were invited to past events but will be given more advance notice moving forward into the next set of workshops.

Councilor Greenwald spoke off mic. Mr. Roberge replied that the business owners are in a different level and will receive a letter invitation to meet especially about utility impacts. The letters are being drafted. Councilor Greenwald thought the goals list was too defined without the building owners' input.

Mayor Hansel asked about the goal to Define/Expand the Downtown District. He thought the area for infrastructure improvement was well-defined at this point. Mr. Roberge said that was remaining from the request for proposals; to define whether the Downtown Core is really, what people consider the downtown. The focus of the infrastructure work area is defined by the utility replacement project. For example, can portions of Gilbo Avenue be incorporated into what is known as the downtown? Mr. Blomquist agreed that the utility project is defined but past conversations with the community and downtown users brought to light some concerns about what is the downtown and whether it is limited to Main Street. As the project was developed, understanding the meaning of what people picture as the downtown was a goal, and he thinks that has come to light in the last year, such as including Gilbo Avenue. Similarly with Railroad Street, Community Way, 93rd Street, Roxbury Street, and more. Understanding this perspective from the general users of this downtown that whatever built today should be able to connect into the future. Mayor Hansel's concern was that as this project proceeds, there will be many directions that could broaden the project scope too far. Mr. Blomquist countered that it could also help to define the project boundaries for the future. There were comments noting that it is fine to define the downtown but there was concern over leading people to believe the downtown would be expanded. Mr. Rebillard provided perspective from the downtown groups, stating that it is with an eye toward the future. One thing that has come-up is the lack of circuits; the difference in traffic between Main Street and side streets is three-fold. Creating circuits to get people off Main Street is beneficial to downtown merchants.

Mayor Hansel asked about the language, “strengthening image,” of the downtown. Mr. Blomquist said that is about the image people have of the downtown, which historically has been as only the frontage of Main Street. He said it was about strengthening the image of downtown as more than just Main Street. Today he thinks the image of downtown is growing to include many side streets. This has also included strengthening the character of downtown, which is different than it was 25 years ago; for example, today there is more focus on flexible open spaces.

The City Manager commented on defining the downtown district stating that perhaps it makes more sense to state, “Defining the downtown district and expanding connectivity to the Downtown Core.” As such, the pedestrian and vehicular connections to those side street areas allows more opportunity for economic development and growth in the downtown. The City Manager continued that “strengthening image and character” likely remained from the request for proposals because there is need to decide what is replaced on top of the infrastructure improvements.

Councilor Filiault said that lighting at the crosswalks and downtown is an oft-mentioned issue, especially that at crosswalks it is up lighting, which glares in one’s face. In terms of Gilbo Avenue, he said that the underground infrastructure needs to be ready for the future of electric vehicles and the intent to maybe have parking back behind the Colonial Theater. He said the primary area to consider expansion is Gilbo Avenue behind the anchor that is the Colonial Theater and toward the Colony Mill as an immediate need.

iv) Q&A

B) Project Existing Conditions

i) *Utility Conditions and Project Limits*

Mr. McNamara discussed utilities. Stantec has worked with City personnel and records to define the limits of the utility work. He showed plans of the existing City water and sewer utilities and areas for improvements. He showed the disturbance impact area and where associated ground level work would need to occur. He noted that sewer mains run along each side of Main Street, which would likely remain due to the grading, and would leave the middle of the road undisturbed. There are some newer water mains going up Emerald Street that would be retained. The new drainage would be defined by how the road is replaced. Approaching Central Square, the utilities are more crowded and cross the Square. There is limited work on side streets, but older utilities need work on Lamson Street, Commercial Street, Gilbo Avenue, and Church Street. The sewer is similar on both sides. In Central Square, there have been more recent utility projects. Looking at Gilbo Avenue, the existing sewer ties in at St. James and the intent is to extend that sewer down Gilbo to School Street to connect to Emerald Street, filling the sewer gap in that area.

Councilor Greenwald asked where the stormwater is currently going in that area; he thought it was going from a larger to smaller pipe toward the river. Mr. Blomquist said the drainage from that direction goes down School Street to Emerald, to Ralston, to Winchester Street overflow of the Ashuelot River, and more down Butler Court. The upper section of Main Street goes to Beaver Brook via Roxbury Street. South of Central Square goes to the Railroad Square upgraded line past Water Street and toward the old Kingsbury Property. The final section on the east side goes down Water Street to Beaver Brook. There has been peripheral work that will now tie into the larger Mains. Councilor Greenwald continued that Gilbo Avenue and Emerald Street still flood and need some improvement. Mr. McNamara said that has been helpful input and there is a spreadsheet of puddling areas they are tracking moving forward.

Moving forward, the consultants are contacting building owners to do inspections to confirm utility services in and out of those buildings to be prepared to save digging during construction. Those letters would go out in the following week. The City Manager had not seen the draft letter but she hoped the introduction would direct the owners back to the website and project goals/details.

Mayor Hansel asked why a building owner would not want the utilities going in and out of their building. Mr. McNamara said they would but there was some missing data and old services ties. Those issues are expected. Mr. Blomquist said that there will also be conversations with property owners who must disconnect their roof drains and stormwater from the sewers. Additionally, too many buildings have old fire services and check valves that might work but might likely need updating. Many conversations with property owners remain about individual buildings to be ready for the next 50 years.

ii) *Traffic, Parking, and Mobility*

The key takeaways on existing open space conditions are:

- 1) Railroad Square and Central Square are publicly accessible open spaces right on Main Street.
- 2) Downtown would benefit from expanded/additional open space, especially during city-wide events and festivals.
- 3) Create new open spaces along the Gilbo Avenue opportunity corridor.

Mr. Bridle showed a plan of what open space exists. He said what does exist is beautiful and any plans would be to build upon that existing character, not change things. The public seeks more flexibility, seating, and functionality downtown. He sees open spaces as ways to connect spaces to downtown and other spaces. The underlying theme is to design for the future.

Mr. Roberge discussed key parking takeaways:

- 1) Approximately 700 total publicly available spaces
- 2) On-Street: \$0.85/hour
- 3) Off-Street: \$0.35/hour

- 4) Significant space on Main Street devoted to parking
- 5) Many additional large lots in/near downtown (not inventoried)
- 6) Additional “unregulated” spaces on side streets (not inventoried)
- 7) 80–90% utilization is “optimal”
- 8) Downtown parking is relatively underutilized in the morning, with over 450 spaces unoccupied
- 9) South Main Street and Central Square are the busiest areas

These parking data from 2021 will be updated in 2022 and will include evening counts.

Mr. Roberge shared the following key traffic data:

- 1) Block sizes downtown are short and paths between locations should be relatively direct.
- 2) Turning restrictions/medians limit connectivity through downtown, which may cause additional traffic as people have to drive out of their way.
- 3) Critical intersections: Main/West/Roxbury, Gilbo/Railroad, Emerald/Eagle
- 4) Critical movements: Main left turn to West Street, Emerald right turn to Main, and Gilbo to Main/Railroad
- 5) Peak mid-day pedestrian crossings in the summer: 171 at Commercial/Cyprus, 142 at Church/Lamson, and 123 at Gilbo/Railroad
- 6) Public safety access must be embedded in all plans
- 7) Main Street to Gilbo Avenue and West Street: limited by circulation of Central Square and restricted movements with significant delay; better alternatives will be sought. There are similar issues at Gilbo Avenue to Railroad Street, Railroad Street to West Street, and Court Street to Railroad Street
- 8) The relationship between Eagle Court and Cypress Street is based on the traffic to the Co-Op
- 9) At Main/Emerald Streets there is an issue of cross movement, but placing a median there would be an issue during times of closures
- 10) There are several sidewalk gaps where it is either not defined or it is only present on one side of the street

Crosswalk takeaways:

- 1) Crossing distances can be as high as 140 feet, which can take more than eight minutes to cross at Central Square
- 2) Crossings require people to cross multiple lanes of travel, including the “double threat” of two lanes in one direction
- 3) Median offers refuge for long crossings

Bike facility takeaways:

- 1) Bike facilities are limited downtown
- 2) Rail Trail is a great asset for bike access
- 3) Main Street is a gap for the bike network
- 4) There is no projected way for someone on a bike to get from the Rail Trail to businesses on Main Street

Mr. Blomquist said that bike access has been a challenge for the City. The BPPAC helped placing bike racks in former bench locations, which are smaller. There needs to be a more thoughtful process for locating these facilities.

Transit facility takeaways:

- 1) Bus service comes every 30 minutes on the southern part of Main Street
- 2) There are no bus stops on Main Street
- 3) There are limited amenities for people who take the bus (shelters, etc.)

Storefront access takeaways:

- 1) 85 door entrances within the project area
 - a. Business storefront entrances
 - b. Upper floor access
- 2) 56 locations barrier-free (63%) (might not be full code compliant to ADA standards, common to historic properties)
 - a. Some with ramps in sidewalk
 - b. Some with steep slopes
- 3) 29 locations with barriers
 - a. Steps pocketed within building façade (responsibility of building owner if outside public right-of-way)
 - b. Steps encroaching into sidewalks (could be opportunities to work with the Disability Rights Center)

iii) *Tree Inventory and Study*

Mr. Bridle summarized the tree study. Good and fair condition trees would be preserved, especially around Central Square. There is some potential to lose trees with the utility work, which would be augmented with new street trees as needed. Those trees that are highest assets around Central Square and others along Main Street would be preserved in the street design. Public Works gave the impression to avoid removing as many trees as possible because it is a Tree City and known for that character. Where they cannot avoid, the removal will be minimized and replaced. The consultants were compelled to be as careful as they can.

Key tree study takeaways:

- 1) 156 trees were inventoried and evaluated by Bartlett Tree Experts in July 2022
- 2) The majority of trees are mature/semi-mature and only 26% are young, with 1% over-mature
- 3) 12% of trees are in poor condition and recommended for evaluation of removal
- 4) Recommendations for root cellar excavations, pruning, and pest management (there is some disease)

Councilor Greenwald said there would inevitably be larger older trees and smaller younger trees and so the new trees should be larger size. He asked if there are species of trees less intrusive on pipes. Mr. Bridle said that roots seek water but if the utilities are built properly there should not be an issue, which the consultants will ensure in street design. New utilities would be protected. Additionally, there would need to be a planting regime for the Downtown Core to ensure it is not all pavement. Mayor Hansel was encouraged by the tree study and what can be preserved.

- iv) *Universal Access*
- v) *Q&A*

Mr. Rebillard asked where to go from here, if the purpose of this Committee is to make decisions. There seems to be limited time left to make decisions with a lot of work ahead. Mr. Roberge would discuss next steps at the end of the meeting, which are to get concept alternatives to this committee for their review process in September/October. Mr. Blomquist said this information was to help the committee and public understand what all goes into the decision-making process.

- C) **Alternative Design Review**
 - i) *Creative Design Process*

Mr. Roberge said that beyond the significant utility replacement is significant outreach to determine what the downtown will look like after the utility project.

Mr. Bridle said they had not reviewed specific designs yet, but this was an opportunity to talk about character to preserve in these new spaces and the number of open spaces desired and where. This was an opportunity for committee feedback on the trajectory of the open space design. The consultants characterized four typologies downtown: Central Square (current identity and character), Main Street (functional artery for vehicles and movement; maintain and build upon character), connection between Gilbo Avenue and Railroad Square (potential symbiotic connection less formal than Central Square), community connections (opportunity to connect buildings, open spaces, and parking lots with Main Street, opening it to other uses).

ii) *Precedent Images*

Mr. Bridle shared potential images. One connecting Central Square to surrounding buildings, businesses, and open spaces to create more event and outdoor dining opportunities. At Main Street he showed opportunities to improve function, vibrancy, and commerce as an additional open space; the central island could be connective open space. Railroad Square/Gilbo Avenue as the “beating heart” and more bohemian and artful spaces, including historical character. Finally, he described the community connections, including alleys and connecting streets that could have more pedestrian focus, including public art.

iii) *Q&A*

Mr. Roberge asked if there were other design considerations.

On open space, Councilor Filiault asked if the suggestion was for all Central Square up Court and Washington Streets to become green space. Mr. Bridle said no, it was just identified as a study area. Councilor Filiault agreed those should not be green spaces. The Councilor referred to option two that would take Main Street to one lane, which he did not agree with and thought would cause significant traffic issues. He thinks bikes should be routed around Central Square and the first two blocks of Main Street up to Emerald Street instead of biking into the heaviest traffic in the City, which is dangerous. Mr. Bridle said the consultants discussed the bike lane dilemma and it was too early to define a strategy; one thought is bringing people to Main Street with sufficient facilities to park them, which would be discussed more later. Still, the issue needs to be studied further.

Mr. Benik serves on the BPPAC, which passed a motion to identify their priority: “to request the design team focus on improving multimodal access, with a focus on separate bike lanes, and at a minimum ensure bike and pedestrian infrastructure is present and improved from its current state.” He thinks that with the current parking layout today, adding bike lanes would likely spell disaster, but he thinks protected bike lanes are possible downtown because so much parking does not need to be there. He thinks most parking complaints are because people cannot get access directly in front of the businesses they want to visit. He was in favor of community connections but thought the same for cars—to bring them to town and bring people into the downtown on foot. He thinks everyone wants safe multimodal access downtown, which Mr. Benik thinks is possible. Mr. Bridle agreed that community connections are about making the existing parking more efficient so people use it and reduce parking on Main Street. In addition to bike lanes there could be expanded sidewalks for retail, medians, and more. He thought the consultants were on the same page about creating access to Main Street.

Councilor Madison thinks downtown is becoming more pedestrian and bike friendly, which could be a sign of his generation. He would like more consideration to bike and pedestrian infrastructure downtown.

Councilor Greenwald agreed with Councilor Filiault on the bike loop around downtown to accomplish safety and quicker passage. He said you cannot mix bikes with cars backing up. He did not think there were the best drivers in Keene. In a parking analysis, he wanted to see it minus the handicapped and hotel spaces before a conversation on occupancy.

Ms. Faulkner thinks adding a bike lane anywhere people who are unfamiliar with Keene access is dangerous as she has near misses and is familiar with the town. Another thing with wheels would be a hazard. On parking, while finding the perfect spot is the problem, so is the two-hour limit. More than one problem needs fixing. She does not mind finding another way to get downtown, but she cannot easily take a bus with her strollers, etc. Mr. Bridle agreed the consultants' approach is not to add things but to make a Main Street more functional, complete, and effective, considering all implications of every addition. Mayor Hansel was glad to hear Mr. Bridle's comment, noting that the first round of this effort led the community to believe there would be substantial changes to the downtown. Instead, the downtown would be replaced and enhanced or improved to make the flow better.

Mr. Doyle aligned with Councilors Madison and Benik but said that in terms of large event promotion, he was glad to hear the traffic and parking study would be repeated this year because the Colonial was not in operation last year. He said they must also consider how the downtown can accommodate more people with many valid interests. He wants to attract more people to come from further away to the downtown and have more to do efficiently. Mr. Roberge thought that point was important because this downtown might not be touched for another half of a generation, so these decisions are important as to what happens in the 143 feet between building faces on Main Street. They must consider what technology will come in the future and prepare the downtown for it now to the greatest extent.

The City Manager thought of the various typologies as four types with similar designs and various connectivity. She liked the layout. Regarding bikes in the downtown, she finds it unsafe right now. She has traveled other places where bikes are used more frequently to access city centers. There needs to be good access to whatever biking facilities are created. There is a clear positive impact of biking on businesses downtown that will only get stronger as linkages are made to other towns and states. The more towns connecting to Keene the more opportunity to grow the economic base of the community. She does not want to push bikes around the downtown but allow them to move in a safe way.

Councilor Filiault agreed it is not pro or anti bike, but about how to make them work. Keene is a clear biking town, but he still does not think they should be allowed on those two blocks from Central Square for safety. He sees that safety as the most bike friendly.

Mr. Rebillard said it is a tough discussion whether to build for cars or people, but he thought the City had built for cars for a long time. He is in favor of pedestrian traffic and thinks more people will and can use the surrounding paths and trails. He understood the comments on safety and the difficulty to design for bikes downtown.

5) **Committee Discussion**

September 20 meeting goals:

- Review design analysis and alternatives
- Review preliminary project report
- Recommend package to Public Workshop #2 (late September/early October)

October 18 meeting goals:

- Review results of Public Workshop #2
- Review stakeholder outreach and engagement
- Recommend further study or package to City Council

From that point, it is up to the committee to decide how to move forward and what recommendations to make.

Mr. Blomquist thanked the committee for their participation and discussion of this difficult and exciting topic. He emphasized talking to the representatives like himself and the consultants who are available. He said they are planning for the next 50 years and what the downtown will be. The issue of merchants concerned with downtown during construction will be a bigger conversation as more plans and alternatives are selected. The downtown is not the same way it is today as it was after the project in the 1980s, it has changed over time, and this current project should also set the downtown up to evolve over time with larger events and attraction from out-of-town. He thanked everyone for their thoughtfulness in considering all these competing interests. The consultants will be sending out the building owner letters in the next week to start having those meetings. He may enlist City Councilors in helping to schedule those meetings.

6) **Adjournment**

There being no further business, Mayor Hansel adjourned the meeting at approximately 4:45 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katie Kibler, Minute Taker
August 23, 2022

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