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TOWN OF NORTHBOROUGH Master Plan Implementation Committee

Town Hall Offices • 63 Main Street • Northborough, MA 01532 • 508-393-5040 x7 • 508-393-6996 Fax

Master Plan Implementation Committee Meeting

October 19, 2023

Zoom Meeting Minutes

Approved as Amended November 16, 2023

7:00pm—Chairman's Introduction to Remote Meeting

Mr. Leif, Chair, opened the remote meeting. Mr. Leif stated that this Open Meeting of the Master Plan Implementation Committee was conducted remotely pursuant to Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2023, An Act Relative to Extending Certain COVID-19 Measures Adopted During the State of Emergency, signed into law on March 29, 2023. All members of the Master Plan Implementation Committee were allowed and encouraged to participate remotely. The Order allows the MPIC to meet entirely remotely so long as reasonable public access is afforded so that the public can follow along with the deliberations of the meeting and ensuring public access does not ensure public participation unless such participation is required by law. This meeting will not allow for Public Comment. The public may view the meeting via the link as listed on the posted agenda.

Members Present, remotely: Rick Leif, Chair; Julianne Hirsh, Vice Chair; Amy Poretsky, Millie Milton, Ashley Davies, Fran Bakstran, John Campbell, Gene Kennedy, Jeanne Cahill, Jen Tolman.

Others Present, remotely: Laurie Connors, Planning Director; Ashley Sweet, Weston and Sampson; Russell Archambault, RKG Associates.

The meeting started at 7:00pm. Mr. Leif welcomed Ms. Tolman to the MPIC. He noted that Ms. Bakstran replaced Ms. Cost as the representative from the Council on Aging, they are still without a representative from Financial Planning, and since Mr. DiMare had submitted his resignation, there is an opening for Citizen-at-Large.

Meeting with Consultant to discuss the September 2023 draft of the Downtown Revitalization Plan—Members were asked to provide feedback on the draft.

Ms. Hirsh thought the Blake Street plan was interesting but had reservations about selling 4 West Main to a developer. She thought plans for the Harvey property were appealing in terms of a river walk and noted that something needed to be done about the river.

Mr. Archambault clarified that they are not envisioning a sale of the property, although that could be an option, and explained the arrangement of a ground lease.

Ms. Poretsky had several comments:

- If 4 West Main St. was kept for commercial vs. using it as a Town Hall there is a risk that the property at 4 West Main might not attract more businesses and remain mostly vacant, as previous business such as a gym and restaurant did not last long at that location. She stated there still could be commercial uses on the first floor along with the Town Offices on the higher levels;

- Concerns regarding financing of the proposed parking garage, (cost stated as approximately 2 million dollars);
- She was not in favor of adding the Harvey parcel as part of the MBTA community overlay as the Town would lose control of the parcel. She stated that if the parcel was part of the overlay then it would be 15 units of housing by right with no incentive for a developer to include mixed use, restaurants, or a river walk and these were the features that the committee and residents wanted to see as part of the scenario. She felt that the parcel can be added to the overlay at a later date when there was a developer interested in the property;
- Concern regarding the repeated statement in the report that the table suggested ‘a promising future demand for multi-family housing’, that was overkill in her opinion, the charts did not back that up. She was concerned that information could be misconstrued;
- Didn’t agree housing is necessary in the Downtown and cited Northborough Crossing as having commercial turnover despite the volume of housing with Avalon Bay nearby;
- Stated parking regulations would have to be changed in the bylaws, per the parking requirement statement on page 30 of the report.

Mr. Archambault responded. If there was interest in developing the Blake Street area, there would be commitments from tenants as well as a performance requirement. It may be the Town’s responsibility to make the investment in a parking garage. Discussion followed regarding proposed municipal parking spots and on-street parking. Mr. Archambault said the demand throughout the entire Boston-Metro area is very strong for multi-family development of any type, that is where you get the first supplies of affordable housing because you're at densities that allow price variation, once you get into single family homes, it's harder to do so; when communities have a limited supply of housing choices, people will go where it is more plentiful.

Ms. Connors responded to Ms. Poretsky’s comments regarding MBTA Communities; a draft of that bylaw will be presented to the Planning Board on November 14th. Mandatory requirements and design standards will be in place for those interested in obtaining approval under the Overlay District, which she believed would give the power to the Planning Board and the Town over the design. The bylaw must be adopted by December 31, 2024, otherwise they risk being sued by the Attorney General’s Office. The Town must zone 50 acres for such use which could include the Downtown or not, but the way the zoning is currently written, the density in the current zoning is far too little to achieve this vision.

Ms. Davies’s comments:

- Thought it might make sense to strike the language regarding the MBTA zoning or perhaps make it more neutral, her concern was that they wouldn’t be able to retain control;
- If given the opportunity to restore and preserve the Assabet riverbank, that should be their priority in that area, she would not support recommendations for zoning that would not allow them to do so;
- The language is strong on housing in the report. She took issue with the tone of the language and thought people would not understand that the plan for housing is spread out over time.

Mr. Leif stressed that adopting this report does not commit the Town to adopt anything regarding MBTA communities, once the report is accepted, the way in which it is implemented falls back to the Town’s land use boards.

Mr. Archambault said the different opinions regarding housing must be reconciled before deciding to go down the path of Downtown Revitalization; they have a combination of uses that

they believe can be supported by the market. He did not believe that an extravagant number of housing was proposed for the Downtown, the housing planned is to support other development and investments for that area, and comments about that in initial outreach sessions with the community were not unanimous by any stretch; there were divergent opinions that there were too many housing units originally proposed, and based on some of those comments, those units were decreased. The committee controls the tone of the report and is welcome to make changes to that effect, but interested developers will want to know where the community stands.

Mr. Leif thought that residents might not have understood that to attract development and have a revitalized downtown, a certain amount of residential development needs to be included.

Ms. Tolman's comments:

- Parking on Gale and Monroe would be challenging and require some homework;
- She wasn't sure if the marketing analysis was centered more towards Boston or MetroWest and said she could gather information about Central Mass, if needed.

Ms. Bakstran's comments:

- Liked that both scenarios 1 & 2 were located on the north side of Route 20 and would blend better than the piece on the Assabet mill section;
- The river would need to be addressed in terms of its maintenance and to keep it safe from development;
- Didn't believe a revitalized downtown was possible without adding housing and suggested not to compare it to Avalon Bay, that is not what anyone envisions for a revitalized downtown;
- In favor of striping on the streets for parking;
- Thought Monroe Street might not be wide enough for on-street parking;
- Noted that the Main Street apartments near Monument Drive with proposed commercial below were empty because the owner had not finished construction in conformance with the site plan so that he can get occupancy permits, and not proof that housing doesn't draw business.

Mr. Kennedy's comments:

- Concerned that if they are looking at a building program of three scenarios with only 50% of the parking requirement, they will be left with the situation of too much housing and not enough parking;
- Felt that replacing housing on Blake Street with townhouses was more urban renewal than revitalization, and suggested talking in terms of a range of density or range of housing units that can better match what can be provided in terms of parking;
- Felt that repurposing the former Town Hall and fire station should be short term projects that would set the stage for future development in the downtown;
- Suggested moving the process of scenarios 1 & 2 to the midterm to allow people to digest the plan over time;
- Proposed recommending they consider either a short or a midterm objective of providing some analysis and support to ensure the protection of historic properties in the downtown;
- Commented on the amount of industrial-zoned land in Town and how little land is left for single family development; regarding the MBTA Communities Act, suggested looking at the existing industrially zoned parcels to create higher density residential development on the periphery that meets that need without overwhelming what is really a very small downtown.
- Thought the reuse of 4 West Main Street and the fire station must be discussed further, as the Pierce Street property is a prime property for revitalization and redevelopment and can

support a range of uses; he would like to see that in the short-term mix, as it would send a positive message that the Town is interested in that keystone property as the focal point for Downtown revitalization efforts.

Mr. Archambault felt that he and Mr. Kennedy had a difference of opinion on what makes a revitalized downtown. He believed there is a level of recognition for historic properties but wasn't sure there was any protection per se.

Mr. Leif said the report recommended consideration of hiring the equivalent of an Economic Development coordinator to start the work of the short-term and midterm projects. Mr. Kennedy cautioned that it must be integrated within the Planning Department and not a separate staff person reporting to an economic development commission.

Ms. Cahill's comments:

- Agreed that the Town-owned vacancies are their best opportunity and would help anchor their vision for what can be done in subsequent areas and phases;
- Asked if members found the bar graphs confusing and not clarified in the text, as she did;
- Thought the statement, from page 47, should be included in the executive summary as a key statement: 'Northborough needs to diversify its future business types and encourage local and small businesses to create a competitive advantage and distinguish itself from Northborough Crossing';
- Was surprised that Northborough has the least amount of rental housing in the region, and felt that 'if we build it, they will come'.

Mr. Campbell's comments:

- Had been hoping to see more short-term and medium-term actionable items in the report;
- Thought the area east of the Town Common, part of the Assabet Mill area in scenario 3, was the area where they could most affect short-term and staged revitalization;
- Felt the report came up short in addressing the connectivity needed to Assabet Park;
- Felt the short-term strategies were mostly organizational and agreed that the emphasis on a staff person coordinating those was important and should remain at the top of short term and probably moved up to the top of the executive summary;
- Thought the area of scenario 2 may be the least likely place where short-term change could be enacted;
- Suggested that acquisition of parcels that could provide connections between the park and common could qualify under the CPA;
- Suggested bringing forth more of the 'what ifs' in a succinct manner to enhance the introduction.
- Suggested that members be open-minded to subsets of the scenarios.

Mr. Archambault noted that the fire station and former Town Hall could be viewed by others outside the community as 'the jewel' in the downtown with an interest to remake that as the centerpiece; he cautioned against coming to a conclusion for that area and precluding an opportunity because of it not being exactly in the vision.

Ms. Tolman asked for clarification about an earlier comment regarding performance guarantees for commercial properties. Mr. Archambault provided a scenario. Ms. Tolman was concerned that small businesses would not be able to afford the cost of a newly constructed building compared to that of an existing building. Mr. Archambault said it wasn't unusual for communities to make

opportunities available for existing tenants who want to stay. Ms. Tolman suggested partnering with the Cultural Council for a feasibility study for the use of the two Town-owned properties. Mr. Archambault said there is a reference in the plan to determine the feasibility of future uses. Next, Ms. Tolman had questions regarding when the last Master Plan was done, what was accomplished since, and if a Downtown Revitalization Report had been previously done. Discussion followed. Mr. Leif explained the origins of this committee.

Mr. Leif referenced a chart on page 10 that listed specific action items and recommendations in the Master Plan that had to do with the Downtown. Mr. Leif had suggestions to update those statuses as noted: H2-4: furthered; ED-G1: achieved; ED1-4: furthered; ED1-5: furthered; ED1-7: furthered. Mr. Campbell suggested reformatting that page so that it's easier to read. Mr. Leif suggested larger text and less of a table.

Mr. Leif said it appeared as though the MPIC was moving towards a report that they can endorse and bring forward to the Select Board. Another meeting is needed for further discussion.

Old/New Business

- **Minutes from June 15th**—Mr. Campbell made a motion to approve the June 15, 2023 minutes as amended. Ms. Poretsky seconded the motion. Roll call vote followed, all were in favor except for Ms. Cahill and Ms. Tolman, who were not present.
- **Next MPIC Meeting**— The next MPIC meeting is tentatively scheduled for November 16.

There was no new business. Ms. Hirsh made the motion to adjourn; Ms. Bakstran seconded the motion. Roll call vote followed, all were in favor.

The meeting adjourned at 9:10pm.

Respectfully Submitted by Michelle Cilley, Board Secretary