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TOWN OF NORTHBOROUGH Master Plan Implementation Committee

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**Master Plan Implementation Committee Meeting
February 16, 2023
Zoom Meeting Minutes
Approved March 16, 2023**

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

Mr. Leif, Chairman, opened the remote meeting. Mr. Leif stated that this Open Meeting of the Master Plan Implementation Committee was being conducted remotely consistent with Governor Baker’s Executive Order of July 16, 2022, an Act Relative to Extending Certain COVID-19 Measures Adopted During the State of Emergency and that all members of the Master Plan Implementation Committee are allowed and encouraged to participate remotely. Mr. Leif noted that 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. He added that ensuring public access does not ensure public participation unless such participation is required by law. Mr. Leif noted that this meeting will not allow for Public Comment. He indicated that the public may view the meeting via the link as listed on the posted agenda.

Members Present, remotely: Rick Leif, Chair; Ashley Davies, Vice Chair; Amy Poretsky, Millie Milton, Tracey Cammarano, Fran Bakstran, Gene Kennedy, Dario DiMare, Jeanne Cahill, Julianne Hirsh.

Others Present, remotely: Laurie Connors, Planning Director; Johnathan Law, Weston and Sampson.

The meeting opened at 7:00pm.

Discussion with Consultant Regarding Downtown Revitalization Strategy & Design Report

Mr. Law shared the project schedule timeline and milestones reached. Mr. Leif said they will be behind schedule since the CMRPC’s traffic study had some incorrect data which needed to be redone. That data will need to be analyzed before the consultants can meet with MassDOT. Because of this, it is difficult to tell when the final completion of the study will be.

Ms. Hirsh asked if speed was one of the considerations of the traffic study. Mr. Law said the purpose of the study was to measure the traffic volumes at certain intersections and determine if traffic calming measures can be incorporated; speed has nothing to do with maneuverability throughout the town. Ms. Poretsky asked if the study would break down the number of cars versus trucks. Mr. Law said it could be done, but he didn’t think that information was valuable for this exercise.

Mr. Law next provided an overview of the first Community Meeting, which had turnout of roughly 70-80 people. Participants engaged in the exercise using stickers and hand-written notes for the four study areas in the Downtown. Analysis later showed that people expressed interest in a downtown with features such as multi-family housing, pocket parks, restaurants and bars with outdoor dining, parking lots. A desire for enhanced aesthetics was expressed, with requests for

burying underground utilities, better streetlighting, green infrastructure, improved sidewalk connections and repurposing of empty buildings.

Mr. Leif clarified the locations of the study areas. He noted that they'd received a lot of questions about that and expressed the need for those areas to be clearer at the next community meeting.

Mr. Law next provided an update on the Business Owners Meeting hosted by RKG. Approximately one dozen people participated and provided feedback with issues relevant to signage, lack of parking, safe walkability and aesthetics in the existing downtown. RKG and Weston and Sampson determined the key redevelopment catalyst areas to include specific districts: a shopping and services district; an entertainment/dining/residential district; a commercial and mixed use district; and a riverfront residential and mixed use district, with observations made with regard to suggested improvements to each of those areas.

The date for the next public meeting was tentatively set for March 23, however that was dependent on receiving the data from the traffic study. The next MPIC meeting scheduled for March 16 would be an opportune time for Mr. Law to give a preview of the design scenarios to be presented at the next community meeting. Discussion followed. Ms. Davies suggested members plan on holding both March 16 and 23 dates open. Mr. Leif agreed.

Mr. Kennedy felt this committee's feedback would be more productive if the meeting material was shared in advance of these meetings. Ms. Connors said that information isn't typically received until the day of the meeting and would be a last minute transmission.

Ms. Hirsh said she'd heard that there is a great need for housing in the state. She asked where that statement came from, how the data was gathered, and how could the consultants help them determine the kind of housing that people moving to Northborough would want.

Ms. Connors said the most successful downtown redevelopment schemes include a housing component. Because the town is sprawling and auto dominated, certain services within walking distance are not available to most neighborhoods. Businesses in the Downtown have to be accessed by car and one of the challenges for the existing downtown is a lack of public parking. In order to have a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly downtown, a density of people who live within a quarter mile is needed. Ms. Connors said studies show that people are willing to walk if they only have to walk a quarter mile but, if it's more than that, most will drive. If the goal for the Downtown is to create a pedestrian-friendly downtown, there needs to be a mass of people who live within that quarter mile.

Ms. Poretsky thought there was sufficient housing within a quarter mile of the downtown. Ms. Connors said a *mass* of housing is needed, and when housing exists downtown, commercial follows. Mr. Law agreed; the data gathered from the online survey and the community meetings say that housing is needed but there needs to be a reason for people to go downtown. Ms. Connors used Westborough as a successful example of a downtown with mixed uses; with first floor retail and restaurant spaces and offices and apartments above. Ms. Davies said this wasn't necessarily about addressing the housing crisis, it's about revitalizing the downtown.

Mr. Kennedy thought it was more important to look at the design concepts as a committee before determining a date to discuss those with the public.

Ms. Davies asked if multiple design concepts would be presented to the public so the Committee can gauge which ones may really work. Mr. Law said no, the point of the next meeting is to present the outline and get feedback which helps generate the preferred master plan for downtown.

Mr. Leif said they need to continue to work under the possibility that anything is possible. Weston and Sampson were tasked with the request to make this a real destination. He agreed with Mr. Kennedy that they shouldn't force themselves into an artificial date to get something done.

Mr. Leif said the Town is currently recruiting a committee to decide what to do with the Town Offices now that 4 West Main Street will be returning to the Town's possession. Since that location is integral to the Downtown, there should be some interconnectivity between this committee and the new one. In speaking with the Town Administrator about his concerns, the suggestion was made that either the Chair or Vice Chair of this committee be a part of the Town Offices Committee for those purposes. Mr. Leif had that discussion with Ms. Davies, she is interested in participating. Mr. Leif planned to recommend to the Town Administrator that Ms. Davies be considered the MPIC's representative on that new committee.

Mr. Leif discussed the new Traffic Safety Committee being set up. He will speak with the DPW Director to communicate that there should be some interconnectivity between the MPIC and this new committee, especially if the new committee will be reviewing traffic in the center, as that has to integrate with whatever Weston and Sampson or MassDOT thinks may work for the center.

Ms. Milton asked if there have been discussions regarding creation of a committee tasked with economic development. Ms. Cammarano said towns such as Marlborough and Hudson have invested in economic development over the last twenty years while Northborough has not and it is clear. She said she was a huge proponent in having direction provided beyond a small committee of people and instead by someone being paid to do it. Ms. Connors said in her experience, the communities that are the most effective in this regard have a full-time staff position charged with that responsibility. Ms. Cammarano agreed that this is a key investment in moving forward. Ms. Davies thought it was in keeping with the goals of the Master Plan.

Mr. Leif asked Mr. Law if recommending creation of that position could be considered. Mr. Law said he could discuss that with RKG.

Ms. Connors discussed the success the Town of Ayer has experienced under the guidance of their fulltime Economic Development Director. She believed Grafton had a similar program but without a director, she wasn't sure of how effective that program has been. Ms. Cammarano believed the paid position would be more effective than a committee.

Update on Status of Complete Streets Prioritization Plan—At the last MPIC meeting, Ms. Connors had reported receiving comments from MassDOT with suggestions for amending the prioritization plan. Those comments were addressed and the updated plan was resubmitted. They have since received final approval and the Town is now eligible to apply for \$500K in grant money.

Mr. Leif was pleased to see that a number of the first high priority projects were related to projects discussed by this committee; he asked if they would be done in the order placed. Ms. Connors said it is dependent on which project is shovel ready at a particular time.

Ms. Cahill said the project involving striping Route 135 for bike lanes was untenable and should be reconsidered.

Curbing was briefly discussed. Ms. Connors said her preference for the downtown area was vertical granite curb and concrete sidewalks and asphalt sidewalks and berm for neighborhoods. She didn't envision Complete Streets money would be used for neighborhood projects; they are only allocated a maximum of \$500,000 within a four year timeframe.

Minutes from January 19, 2023—Minutes were approved as submitted.

Discussion of MPIC Member Appointments—Mr. Leif said terms will expire in April for himself, Ms. Bakstran, Ms. Cahill and Mr. Kennedy. Mr. Leif, Mr. Kennedy and Ms. Cahill plan to seek reappointment. Ms. Bakstran will not. When she was appointed, her intention was to assist the committee with the transition from the Master Plan Steering Committee into the Implementation Committee. She plans to continue to participate as a resident.

Any Other Business That May Come Before the Committee

Traffic Study: Ms. Hirsh thought it would be valuable to have the traffic study provide a breakdown of the number of cars versus trucks. Ms. Connors said that since the data from two of the cameras had already been compiled, she did not believe it was possible to get this information.

Next Meeting: The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for March 16th, but members should keep March 23rd open.

The motion to adjourn was made by Ms. Hirsh to adjourn. Ms. Cammarano seconded. Roll call vote was as follows: Ms. Hirsh—aye; Ms. Poretsky—aye; Ms. Milton—aye; Ms. Cammarano—aye; Ms. Bakstran—aye; Mr. Kennedy—aye; Ms. Cahill—aye; Mr. Leif—aye; Mr. DiMare—aye.

Meeting adjourned at 8:37pm.

Respectfully Submitted By
Michelle Cilley, Board Secretary