

City of Keene
New Hampshire

AD HOC DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, March 16, 2017

4:00 PM

**2nd Floor Conference Room,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Carl Jacobs, Councilor
Mitch Greenwald, Councilor
Gary Lamoureux, Councilor
Katie Sutherland
Jack Dugan
Shane Gormley
Kevin Dremel
Shannon Hundley

Staff Present:

Medard Kopczynski, City Manager
Rebecca Landry, IT Director & Assistant City
Manager

Members Not Present:

Cheryl Belair
Luca Paris

Kendall W. Lane, Mayor

1) Call to Order

Mayor Lane called the meeting to order at 4:02 PM and Committee members introduced themselves.

2) Overview of Committee Charge

Mayor Lane welcomed Committee members and thanked them for their participation. He said this Committee has assembled to think about future revitalization of Downtown. It has been 30 years since any significant work has taken place Downtown and the area has changed in that time – e.g. less large retail stores.

Mayor Lane noted the challenges this Committee faces:

1. How to define the physical boundaries of Downtown
2. What the City wants Downtown to look like in 30 years

Mayor Lane continued that fortunately, Downtown Keene is iconic and has been a symbol of the community, an economic driver of the community, and attracts visitors. He

said the work done Downtown in 1988 has proven successful, but is growing outdated. He noted that the City places a lot of demand on Downtown, and we should think about how to best support that demand in the future.

3) Administration – Tom Mullins

The City Attorney was unable to attend the meeting. He will explain Committee administration at the next meeting.

4) Role of Downtown

Mayor Lane continued noting the different roles Downtown has played for the City in the past: retail shopping (what it has traditionally been), a parking lot, a pedestrian mall (there was an effort to eliminate vehicle traffic in the 1970s), a cultural center, a gathering place (festivals, demonstrations, etc.), and an economic center. Councilor Jacobs added the high percentage of residences in our Downtown and that Downtown is an education center. Mayor Lane agreed that both Antioch and River Valley have expressed desire to be closer to Downtown, if there were space, and that many more people live in our Downtown than others.

Following the 1988 renovations, the City was named one of the Top 10 Open Spaces in the Country; downtown was considered cutting edge. Mayor Lane noted that in 1994 he began Between the Rivers, fostering commercial activity Downtown between Beaver Brook and the Ashuelot River. In the late 1990s, the Main Street America program found Downtown Keene far beyond the standards they were trying to promote. People have traveled from all over New England, and the country, to experience our Downtown and get ideas. Mayor Lane said Keene is fortunate that Downtown is dynamic and exciting, but it is getting old. Though not 100%, he said Downtown is currently substantially full and we want to keep it that way. The City is at a point to rethink what Downtown is and what we want it to be in the future.

5) Identification of Downtown

Mayor Lane noted two possibilities of how Downtown could be defined:

1. Broad – between the Ashuelot River and Beaver Brook, and between the Keene State College (KSC) and Mechanic Street
2. Narrow – just main street

Ms. Hundley noted defining the boundaries of Downtown is important for retail businesses. She said she is often asked as a member of the Keene Downtown group where the line is for people to participate in certain events. It is unclear to many people and often falls to whomever is there making the decision. She said she is inclined to include more area in Downtown than less.

Mayor Lane noted this project will take place in two parts:

1. This Committee will define Downtown and issues within those boundaries that need to be addressed; complete by approximately summer 2017
2. Determine how to address the issues identified Downtown

Mayor Lane continued that clearly defining those boundaries will assist in identifying clear solutions. He said this is looking at a much broader picture than just the next parking garage, for example.

The City Manager added that even zoning and maintenance are different Downtown than in other parts of the City; this means there are many latent factors to consider. The City Manager continued that Ms. Landry will represent the City Manager at subsequent meetings when he is not present, but she is not a traditional staff member for this Committee because the Committee should be doing most of the work. He said as the Committee defines Downtown issues at upcoming meetings, he and Ms. Landry will invite guests from the relevant City departments to address the issues at the subsequent meeting.

Councilor Jacobs noted that Downtown has a significant impact on City flooding; he said infrastructure will be important in these discussions as well. Mayor Lane agreed noting the two primary flooding issues Downtown:

1. A drainage problem coming down Court Street where storm drains are undersized for the volume of water they accommodate. While the flooding Downtown is not as severe as it used to be, at some point those lines will have to be rebuilt but that will require substantial construction in Central Square.
2. Town Brook runs through Downtown under Main Street and empties into Beaver Brook. Town Brook is dry most of the year and is enclosed with brick work from the late 1800s. Mayor Lane said a lot of Downtown drainage is impacted by that brook.

Mr. Dremel said Downtown is perfectly set up for events like music festivals; there is ample space that multiple events can take place simultaneously without interference. He also noted the importance of the historic buildings Downtown. Mayor Lane agreed and noted an effort to demolish most historic buildings Downtown in the 1970s to create an enclosed mall. He said that is when the first wave of effort to preserve Downtown began. Ms. Sutherland said she thinks what exists Downtown should be preserved and repurposed as much as possible. She added in her experience, new construction Downtown is a significant challenge due to the underground infrastructure. Mayor Lane agreed and added the very high water table is a challenge as well.

Councilor Greenwald noted he was in Keene for the past Downtown renovations and made two suggestions:

1. Keep track of the problems we list along the way
2. Active communication with property owners because they are the ones who will need to buy-in to what this Committee proposes

Councilor Greenwald continued that in defining the boundaries of Downtown, the Committee should look beyond just Main Street and support the surrounding developing streets (Roxbury, West, Cyprus, etc.) as more new businesses establish there. He said our Downtown is not bad and this is less of a structural rebuilding than was needed in the 1980s. Mayor Lane added that no one foresaw the huge demand for outdoor restaurants Downtown which are largely successful because of the abundance of shade trees.

Ms. Landry asked the scope of the Downtown revitalization consultant so that efforts can be synchronized. The City Manager replied the consultants are responsible for public participation and meetings with this Committee to better define the boundary of Downtown as well as survey work on what citizens perceive as the future needs of Downtown. A lot of stakeholder input will be solicited; there are plans to open a vacant store front on Main Street as a temporary outreach center. The City Manager added that this Committee's member should also be soliciting ideas from the diverse demographics and stakeholders (restaurant, businesses, residences, offices, specialty shops, retail, etc.). He added this is also pertinent in parking discussions because most Downtown maintenance comes from the parking fund.

Ms. Landry suggested that as the Committee identifies problems, they also identify assumptions and test them – e.g. we assume we need parking minimums but that trend is changing to parking maximums so it is good to test that assumption. Mayor Lane added there is increasing interest in living Downtown to minimize need for personal vehicle use. With 140 housing units behind the middle school and more than 90 units forthcoming at Colony Mill, that ability to live Downtown is increasing.

Mr. Gormley said it is obvious there are many functions being performed Downtown and those most critical need to be identified. He said Downtown is not in a bad condition, so perhaps the conversation should be more about areas of opportunity the City would like; to think more outside the box, like WiFi for everyone Downtown. He also noted the importance of attracting and retaining a young workforce environment; Mayor Lane agreed. Ms. Hundley added the Hanna Grimes Board is following a Main Street 2.0 theme this year and has brainstormed diverse ideas such as heated sidewalks and WiFi. The Board compiled a report with the suggestions she will share with this Committee.

Mr. Gormley added that it would be good to incorporate Keene's environmental commitment. Ms. Hundley agreed, noting that recycling Downtown is an area for improvement and few landlords in the area recycle. Ms. Landry agreed it is good to showcase what puts Keene on the map, like energy initiatives, and use them as opportunities to grow more.

Mayor Lane suggested thinking about KSC students when looking at activities taking place Downtown – how many of those activities are a direct function of the college and students? He said the college provides the market that Downtown has developed around. Downtown has evolved and will continue, and to be successful we need to understand the market Downtown is attractive to.

6) Confirm Meeting Schedule & Next Meeting Date

Steps for next meeting:

1. Review a GIS map of Downtown
 - a. Currently defined as Rt 101-Mechanic Street and Beaver Brook-Ashuelot River; the City Manager will overlay zoning districts and things like infrastructure, storm drainage, etc. where possible.
2. Discuss defining Downtown
3. Discuss strengths and challenges downtown faces
4. Discuss additional stakeholders who should be included
 - a. Suggestions:
 - i. A large company or employer (like Banks)
 - ii. Representatives of various generations
 - iii. Representatives of the colleges
 - iv. MGM or Clarke-Mortensen
 - v. Whitney Brothers
 - vi. A Start-Up (Ms. Hundley will share ideas from Hanna Grimes with the Mayor)
 - vii. Residents living Downtown
 - viii. Churches

Mayor Lane noted that a City Councilor has asked the Council to reconsider approval of the Downtown revitalization consultant, MacFarland Johnson. He asked Councilors Jacobs and Greenwald to be prepared to defend if the consultant is valuable and if so, how to respond to the attempt to block approval.

Mr. Gormley asked if it is feasible to make Downtown a pedestrian mall. Councilor Greenwald noted that was proposed in the 70s. Ms. Landry suggested perhaps just weekends or once per month; Ms. Sutherland supported the idea of testing it on a weekend. Mr. Dremel suggested shutting down Main Street on a Sunday for a festival to see how it goes; Ms. Landry added the festival concept brings people together around a community purpose.

Issues Downtown identified at this meeting:

- Underground infrastructure; drainage problems and challenge to new construction
- Recycling
- Outdoor recreation space for families living Downtown
- Old or diseased trees that will need to be removed and replaced

Ideas for Downtown identified at this meeting:

- Free WiFi Downtown
- Solar powered street lights
- Sidewalks that generate electricity
- Focus on Complete Streets compliance
- A pedestrian mall – full time or part time
- Preserve history

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- Support developing streets around Main
- Focus on the Market Downtown attracts

The next meeting will take place Wednesday, March 29th at 4:00 PM.

7) Adjournment

Hearing no further business, Mayor Lane adjourned the meeting at 5:13 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katie Kibler, Minute Taker