

FINAL

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION &
DOWNTOWN TIF ADVISORY BOARD
JOINT MEETING
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2022 – 4:00PM
City Hall – Council Chambers
51 North Park Street, Lebanon**

MINUTES

EDC MEMBERS PRESENT: William Dunn (Chair), Dan Nash, Andrew Key, Chip Brown, Johanna Cicotte, Councilor Karen Liot Hill (Vice Chair), Councilor Doug Whittlesey, Kevin Purcell, David Newlove, Tracy Hutchins (Upper Valley Business Alliance, remote)

MEMBERS ABSENT:

TIF MEMBERS PRESENT: Barry Schuster (Chair), Victoria Smith

STAFF PRESENT: Planning and Development Director David Brooks

1. CALL TO ORDER:

- The February 23, 2022 Economic Development Commission meeting was called to order at 4:03 PM

It was noted that members of the Downtown TIF Advisory Board were present, but not enough to constitute a quorum.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES: None

3. NEW BUSINESS:

A. Discussion: Redevelopment of the lower parking lots

Chair Dunn explained that the discussion on this topic has focused on brainstorming a number of ideas. There seems to be a strong consensus for doing more with the river and making it into a focal point of the area. The group reviewed an aerial photo of the location to spark more discussion. He also noted an interest in inviting other stakeholders to the conversation, such as the Ped/Bike Committee, the Lebanon Tree Advisory Board, the Conservation Commission, the Arts and Culture Commission, etc.

Chair Schuster stated that other stakeholders should be invited in to comment one at a time, to keep things orderly. When considering what to do with the river, he would like for the groups to also think of the Taylor Street and Hanover Street side. He suggested that river crossings may be useful in this project. He noted interest in making the interplay of vehicles moving outward from Emerson Place more effective, increasing green space along the river, and making sure there is adequate parking available for the downtown. He believes making the river a focal point of the area will enhance the developability of and incentive to develop/redevelop properties in the vicinity.

Chair Dunn explained that there could be a roadway reconfiguration from the Taylor Street parking lot toward the bike path, allowing for much of the area to become green and creating a longer, meandering stroll along the river.

Ms. Cicotte asked whose goal and vision this plan reflects. She stated that the area, as it currently exists, has a bizarre layout with a lot of wasted space.

Tracy Hutchins entered the meeting at 4:12pm.

Chair Schuster explained that these discussions are being held to build momentum to get broad acceptance that the proposed plan will be beneficial to the community at large.

Chair Dunn agreed that the current layout of the area is confusing. The concept of this project is that these lots provide the City with an opportunity to develop the area with no stated goal, per say. Everyone in the group likely has different goals for the area, and this discussion is to put forth all of the possible ideas.

Ms. Cicotte suggested that a consultant be hired to examine what can be done with these lots and then these options presented to the group.

Councilor Whittlesey stated that there are fundamental questions that need to be answered and discussions had before someone can be chosen to layout the potential options for this project. The groups first need to discuss what is the best usage of this area for the City.

Mr. Purcell agreed that the groups may not recognize the best potential design until these baseline discussions are had.

Mr. Brown noted that the Master Plan and 2016 Visioning Study both mention a need for housing and parks. This project looks to make the downtown area front and center to display that Lebanon is a great place to live, work, and play. He stated that he would like to see more downtown cultural events. He noted that the 2016 Visioning Study surveys were completed by 500+ people.

Ms. Cicotte reiterated that she would like to see someone hired to come up with design options for the area for the groups to review.

Ms. Smith noted that she is also somewhat confused by the goal of the project, as the initial discussions revolved around parking.

Mr. Brooks explained that the larger goal was to stimulate this type of discussion over what to do with the opportunity presented by this space. A request for interest (RFI) would explore interest for this project in the market and then see if the presented options align with the ideas laid out in these discussions. The groups could consider laying out the key components they would like to see, such as making the river into a focal point, and then create an RFI to determine what is actually possible with the space. The next step forward could be engaging a larger section of the public and additional stakeholders in this process. He explained that one option to look at might be making the area between Village Pizza and the Charter School a bricked space and closing it at certain times to make it more of a pedestrian space.

Councilor Doug Whittlesey left the meeting at 4:30pm.

Chair Dunn stated that, if the lower lot is developed as green space, it may encourage homes across the river to consider bridges or right of ways to make connections.

Councilor Liot Hill arrived at 4:33pm.

Ms. Cicotte stated that people would need to drive to reach this area if it was transformed into a green space, and then it is also not close enough to walk into the downtown area. She questioned if these proposals might fit better in a different space and if this project makes sense for the long-term.

Mr. Purcell asked if there is a reason for the groups to be meeting jointly twice a month if there is no urgency to complete this project. He explained that he feels as though this project is being rushed.

Chair Schuster explained that he had originally asked for there to be a hard stop date on discussing this project.

Councilor Liot Hill noted that the tunnel study was completed 5 years ago and thus this does not feel like a rushed project. The City Council also endorsed the idea of the EDC and TIF exploring an RFP for this project. She believes great conversations have been had and that there appears to be some consensus at least regarding the river area.

Mr. Brown stated that the EDC's job is to create value and vibrancy for the City, while considering its economic vitality. He explained that creating the proposed amenities creates value.

Chair Schuster suggested that the groups work toward identifying 5-6 key components for this project, and that Mr. Brooks can then seek design consultants for potential proposals.

Mr. Newlove noted that this river area could also be used as access to the Mascoma River for recreational purposes.

Mr. Purcell stated that he would like to think about how to connect this area to West Lebanon, as this would create true economic drivers. He would like to see the lower parking lot become an arts and culture center, along with a greenway.

Ms. Smith agreed with looking at keeping this area green.

Chair Schuster stated that he is a proponent of redeveloping the lower lot as a park with river access or viewing points. This could connect to the rail trail and be an anchoring amenity for future points. Connectivity to the river is important for Lebanon to create economic value.

Ms. Cicotte stated that she does not know the best use of the area yet. She agrees that green space is important but making this a destination location will be a place people have to drive to. There could be a higher value location for this around the City elsewhere. She would like to see a professional create options for the groups to review.

Mr. Nash stated that the groups need to be careful that the proposal does not leave the City with a shortage in parking.

Mr. Key stated that he believes there should be a green connection between the rail trail, Greenway, and out to West Lebanon. He also does not want to lose sight of the parking component, as mentioned by Mr. Nash. He noted that the upper lots could then be redeveloped for mixed use.

Councilor Liot Hill stated that expanding the lower lot's green space along the river is a good idea but expanding green space through the entire lower lot may not be necessary, as part of it may be more appropriate for more intensive or mixed-use development. She echoed the idea of expanding the area to the rail trail and Greenway.

Chet Clem agreed with the importance of connecting this area to West Lebanon with the Greenway. He is happy to provide information regarding greenways as economic development drivers. He noted that green space and development do not need to be mutually exclusive. A thoughtful plan would balance both to create economic sustainability.

Clifton Below suggested a site visit to this area at a future date. He has advocated for improving the connection along the river. The process could look into opening up some views along the river. Parking helps downtown vitality, and much of the commercial space downtown is currently underutilized.

Chair Schuster asked if Mr. Brooks could look into more information regarding RFIs to report back at the next meeting.

Chair Schuster and Ms. Smith left the meeting at 5:08pm.

B. Discussion: Reinitiate Business Listening Tours

Ms. Hutchins stated that the UVBA was recently granted a \$46,000 NH Travel and Tourism Grant to do marketing and promotion of tourism assets in the region. As for the Business Retention/Expansion, an MOU has been formalized with the UNH Cooperative Extension and the decision has been made to hold 5 business roundtables. These will occur in the warmer months.

She explained that a new private school is proposed to be located in downtown Lebanon, with a focus on the arts. There will be a building, but downtown establishments will be used for certain classes. Mr. Brooks noted that the NE School of the Arts will be in front of the Planning Board for a conditional use permit on March 14, 2022. The proposal is to place the school at 9 Hanover Street.

C. Public Comment – this was previously addressed.

4. FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS:

Councilor Liot Hill noted that West Lebanon items could be discussed at a future meeting, including the recently submitted report to the City Council. One of the recommendations was to create the West Lebanon Committee. Mr. Clem stated that he would like a presentation on the action plan to be made to the groups. It was noted that this could occur on March 23, 2022.

5. NEXT MEETING DATE: March 16, 2022 and March 23, 2022

6. OTHER BUSINESS

7. ADJOURNMENT.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:21 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Kristan Patenaude