

FINAL

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION
JOINT MEETING WITH
DOWNTOWN LEBANON TIF ADVISORY BOARD
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2024 – 4:00PM
Council Chambers – City Hall – or remote via Virtual Platform
MINUTES**

EDC MEMBERS PRESENT: David Newlove (Chair), Dan Nash, Chip Brown, Andrew Key, Councilor Karen Liot Hill (Vice Chair) [4:45pm], Dean Cashman, Tracy Hutchins (Upper Valley Business Alliance) (remote)

EDC MEMBERS ABSENT: Councilor Doug Whittlesey

TIF MEMBERS PRESENT: Barry Schuster (Chair), George Sykes, Chris Haidari [4:35], Peter Owens [4:10], Tracy Hutchins (Upper Valley Business Alliance) (remote), Victoria Smith

STAFF PRESENT: Deputy City Manager David Brooks

1. CALL TO ORDER:

- The September 25, 2024, Joint Economic Development Commission and Downtown Lebanon TIF Advisory Board meeting was called to order at 4:00pm.

It was noted that the TIF Advisory Board meeting was not yet called to order as it was awaiting a quorum.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

- A. August 28, 2024 (Economic Development Commission)

Motion by Dan Nash to approve the minutes of August 28, 2024, as presented.

Second by Chip Brown.

**** The Vote on the MOTION was approved (5-0-0).***

3. NEW BUSINESS:

- A. Update and Presentation on Downtown Parking Lot Redevelopment Study

Mr. Brooks explained that the Economic Development Commission and the Downtown TIF Advisory Board met in June at the kickoff of the Downtown Parking Lot Redevelopment Study project. Since then, there has been an online survey, paper surveys and comment cards received through local businesses, and an afternoon at the Farmer's Market to meet with people to discuss the project. The consultant team spent August synthesizing the information and will now present on that.

Peter Owens arrived at 4:10pm which formed a quorum for the TIF Advisory Board, and the Board was called to order by Chair Schuster.

Chris Haidari arrived at 4:35pm. Karen Liot Hill arrived at 4:45pm.

Josh Lacasse, Placework, explained that this project is reviewing the parking lots between City Hall and the Mascoma River which represents approximately 333 parking spaces and approximately 400' of frontage along the river. The goals that have been stated from the outset of the project include strengthening the Downtown experience, increasing visual access and potentially other kinds of access to the Mascoma River, demonstrating economic viability of any of the planning proposals that come out of this project, increasing housing, and enhancing bike and pedestrian connectivity in downtown Lebanon. The project will not result in any single planning proposal, but likely at least 4 scenarios. Scenario #1 looks to leave the parking area mostly as it is and make any necessary upgrades. Scenario #2 is focused on the development of a riverfront park along the River. Scenario #3 is an intermediate redevelopment scenario that may consider a mix of different uses and open spaces combined. Scenario #4 tries to maximize development within the study area.

The key findings thus far have been divided into three thematic groups: site ecology/history/water/land; physical infrastructure extending beyond the site/regulatory conditions within the site/general connectivity; and community demographics/feedback from the public/market conditions in Lebanon.

The key findings for the site ecology/history/water/land include that the site formerly had a train line passing through it and there may still be an easement that remains related to that train line. There is some history regarding the property's survey that needs to be verified. The River is virtually invisible from the parking lot. This is contrasted with the historic condition in Lebanon, that this was a working riverfront. The lower parking lot is within the 100-year flood plain. Several eras in history have been removed or destroyed. All of the stormwater discharges from this area directly into the River.

The key findings for the physical infrastructure extending beyond the site/regulatory conditions within the site/general connectivity include that there was concern expressed over parking availability and management. Also, pedestrian connectivity and accessibility is limited by the parking lot and grade changes. The site has been heavily engineered. There are some retaining walls that are in relative disrepair. The site is just outside of the City's Historic District. Due to the industry on the site, the soil bearing capacity and quality is anticipated to be poor. There is also a nest of utilities under the site. The 333 spaces on the site vary in terms of their regulation and control. The study looked at two days with hourly drone flights to count the utilization of these parking lots. The usage varied dramatically between the different types of parking spaces. The all day spaces generally tended to be more utilized than the two hour or one hour spaces. The area as a whole peaked at 64% occupancy, generally, during the Farmers Market period. The 64% maximum observed utilization equates to 212 spaces. Vacancies at surrounding properties were considered. The project would like to also account for future downtown development, but how best to do this is yet to be determined. This will all work toward a baseline demand that can then be factored into the different scenarios.

Mr. Brooks explained that, through the urban renewal process, a lot of the land on this site was acquired by the Lebanon Housing Authority and then reconveyed back out to the City or to abutting properties. With respect to the section where the rail was located, the City acquired the underlying ground from the B&M Railroad. There's a deed from 1969 that B&M conveyed to the City to help facilitate redeveloping that area for parking. They retained the right to continue to operate a railroad through the area because it was 1969 and the railroad was still operating. The question that is unclear is that, when the tracks and ties were removed, was the easement eliminated? In addition, when the State acquired B&M's holdings, it is not immediately obvious whether the State acquired the right to operate a railroad. The State did not acquire the strip of land, as B&M had already conveyed it to the City. The process to make these determinations is underway. The title company and surveyor will be reengaged to determine all of this in the fall.

Mr. Lacasse continued that the key findings for the community demographics/feedback from the public/market condition include that median prices in the City have doubled in the last ten years, similar to other places. Events drive much of downtown business. Market rate housing and commercial use, specifically food focused, drive demand. Build-to-suit office space was not seen to be a high driver in Downtown. There are over 500 planned new downtown residential units, versus the estimated demand of 1,250 in Lebanon. TIF revenue is a possible funding/subsidy source for redevelopment downtown. Regarding public feedback, there was widespread support for a riverfront park scenario, and access to the river.

Themes around public feedback included parking, accessibility of the river, green space, business considerations, and connectivity. Regarding accessibility of the river space, 1/3 of the public feedback intended visual access only. There was a strong contingent interested in an idea for a river walk or promenade along the river. There was a small percentage that were interested in physically accessing the river. Regarding recent development, there was a strong demand for market rate housing, ownership opportunities, and smaller household sizes. The demand for office space is fairly weak downtown. Any office activity may be better suited in other locations. However, there is a strong demand for commercial uses related to food, and events are a major driver.

From the findings, eight guiding principles were developed. The first is improved circulation which deals with controlling the flow of vehicular, pedestrian, bicycle traffic to maximize safety and allow wayfinding of the site. The second is ease of parking. The next three revolve around connection to the River, opportunities for recreation, and supply of housing. The last category includes feasibility without subsidies, site sustainability, and economic benefits/direct tax spinoffs.

Chair Schuster noted that the two levels of parking that are available may make the upper area far more developable and the lower area by the river would be more appropriate for non-development without having to worry about infrastructure.

Mr. Lacasse explained that development considerations for the site include ownership questions, parking, soil quality, taxes, and maintainability.

The Board and Commission were given a chance to take the public survey and give additional input on the proposed guiding principles and scenarios.

Information on each of the scenarios and what they could include was shared. Parking lot repair could include additional plantings, shade, and amenities while making pedestrian and bicycle activity safer. There could also be some measure of sidewalk repair. Regarding the riverfront park scenario, this could include a riverwalk, an area for food trucks, lawns, plazas, waterfront area, stages for outdoor performances, and/or other programmable outdoor spaces. This would include some parking at a baseline level, while accommodating any additional parking demands, but would focus on the park aspect. Regarding the intermediate redevelopment scenario, this includes some portion of park and river access, some parking, and some lower density commercial development with the possibility of some less dense housing. The public realm could include dining and social areas along the riverfront as well as in-between buildings. Regarding the full redevelopment scenario, this would include more urban public spaces between buildings, medium density commercial, denser housing, and potentially mixed-use development. This scenario could also consider a parking garage and/or a riverfront park.

Chair Schuster stated that the drawback of the full development scenario is that it does not appear to be child-friendly, with enough open space to engage with the river.

There was discussion regarding the potential of a pedestrian bridge across the river to help enhance the other side as well.

Mr. Brooks stated that, regarding future downtown buildout, there is a question as to how to capture future development that may impact the demand on these parking lots. Mr. Nash stated that he previously gave the City two alternate proposals that could replace some of the parking. One includes building a parking deck behind the mall which could double the number of spaces. The other was a public private partnership across the street from the Whitman Building, including four stories of parking which could add approximately 400 spaces there.

There was discussion regarding the proposed flow of traffic with any proposed increase in traffic. Mr. Brooks stated that VHB is studying this.

4. FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS:

It was noted that representatives will be available at the next meeting to discuss small businesses items.

5. NEXT MEETING DATE:

A. Wednesday, October 16, 2024 (Economic Development Commission)

6. OTHER BUSINESS

None at this time.

7. ADJOURNMENT.

The meeting was adjourned at 6:33PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Kristan Patenaude