

Mill Creek Master Plan Draft Workshop Minutes

February 26, 2015

Sessions at 4 & 6 PM, City Hall Council Chambers

In Attendance: Tex Haeuser, Mark Eyerman, Robert Foster, Pat Doucette, Craig Gorris, Councilor Maxine Beecher, Kathleen Philips, Stephanie Carver, Libby Reynolds, Milan Nevajda, Peter Stanton

1. Welcome and Introductions

Craig Gorris, Vice Chair of Comprehensive Plan Implementation Committee, introduced committee members and gave a brief overview of the committee's past work.

2. Purpose of the Workshop

Tex Haeuser, Planning & Development Director for the city, gave the history of ideas for the area, beginning with the community design workshop to help facilitate brainstorming for the Knightville/Mill Creek area in 2005 and moving to the 2012 grant through Sustain Southern Maine for a pilot project for Mill Creek.

The current committee looked back at the design workshop and pilot study and incorporated those ideas into this Plan Draft. Zoning in Mill Creek is 60 years old and out of date. This plan is an in-between step between recommendations of the city's Comprehensive Plan and eventual new zoning, new capital improvements, and new partnerships with businesses in the area to bring about change.

3. Overview of the Draft Master Plan

Mark Eyerman of Planning Solutions gave an overview of the Master Plan Draft and purpose of the workshop.

- The committee put together a working draft to float ideas.
- Tonight's purpose is to listen to/answer attendees' questions, comments, concerns and for the committee to get feedback.
- Committee will take all input and think about how things may need to change.

He then went through the PowerPoint presentation of the Plan Draft, outlining:

Purpose Focuses on public investment, revisiting the zoning, working with residents and developers

Vision What we want Mill Creek to be; what will Mill Creek be in 10, 15, 20 Years...

- What the city needs to do, how to move Mill Creek toward the vision
- Key words: Sustainable, urban downtown, green and livable place, pedestrian focused, community commercial center, value, mixed use buildings, distinct identity, city works cooperatively.
- Value in Mill Creek should increase and grow tax base

Objectives What the city needs to do, how it will move Mill Creek forward

- Key words: Pedestrian focused, clear identity, green & sustainable, diverse & active, good neighbor, resilient

Action Plan Three time frames:

1. Short: 2-3 years
2. Mid term: 5+ years
3. Development driven

Specifications

Key City investments:

- Broadway Intersections (Cottage, Ocean, Waterman)
- Create attractive gateways, consider a Broadway pedestrian bridge
- Improved sidewalk network
- Improve Erskine Drive & the bridge approach
- Add trees & landscaping/flower programs
- Convert Waterman Drive into a “city street”/opportunity for landscaping, pedestrian improvement, on-street parking to serve area
- Address the potential for increased flooding

Developer driven action: Much of this came from other places, i.e. the 2012 plan

- Complete sidewalk network
- Connect Waterman to Q
- Connect Q to Ocean
- Connect Market to Broadway
- Reimagine Q Street

Regulation

Recommended Regulatory Changes:

- Parking requirement (reduced to maximize use of on street parking, improving shared use parking)
- Green development (encouraged)
- Explained 3 character areas: Currently, most of mill creek is zoned local business (suburban shopping center)
 - Village Extension (VE)
 - Broadway Corridor (BC)
 - Neighborhood Core (NC)

Mark showed photos and concepts of each area. Concepts envisioned the following:

- VE: Extension of VC district, taller & more intense development, updated standards
- BC: Allows auto dependent uses, requires redevelopment to frame Broadway, mix of multi-story uses
- NC:
 - Set standards: Adopted to achieve goals for Mill Creek, developer creates a development plan to meet standards
 - Flexible planned development: Developer creates a plan for mixed-use project, city verifies plan meets goals for Mill Creek, city provides a flexible regulatory approach

- Downtown TIF offers some funding (\$90,000/yr) for the area, balances public and private interests

4. Discussion and Feedback on the Draft

General Comments

- Positive comments on the gateways, median plantings, traffic calming measures.
- Excited about seeing changes to entrances to city and neighborhood; making it aesthetically pleasing. Likes potential on Erskine Drive and changes on Waterman. There are extending issues, but as long as we're looking at the larger picture we can come up with solutions.
- The report was great with illustrations of what might be. The plan's proposals to property owners shows them how much better they can utilize the land they own. Thinks it's a shame that new development has been single story ranches. This gives a vision of something better.
- Wants Mill Creek to thrive, likes the mixed use idea, thinks of it as almost extending Knightville. This could bring in residents who are also a customer base. Appreciates the work gone into the plan and thinks a lot of legwork is done for developers so that they can see examples.
- Would be nice for South Portland to have a downtown, but be careful to not ruin residential.
- Mill Creek in its current state is unattractive.
- Like the idea of mixed uses in Mill Creek and cleaning up buildings that are not cared for.
- Would like more boutique stores – pedestrians love those types of shops.
- Mill Creek Park: Park and pond will not be affected. That being said, there isn't much reference to park—it's an asset to the neighborhood and should be leveraged in this plan.

Development

- How do you work with existing property owners who do not want to conform?
 - Current property owners will continue to own and do what they want within the existing structures for as long as they want. Any redevelopment that occurs will occur because the property owner/developer want to.
 - The way change will occur is to make it more financially valuable for the property owner to do something else with the property than what they're doing with it now.
- How will this be paid for?
 - Public improvements are paid for by the city and community through TIF revenues (already accumulating from development occurred) or from property taxes, grants, state money, etc.
 - In regard to the downtown tax district, it can be a virtuous cycle if we're careful. If we can attract investments and it happens in a smart way with appropriate zoning and good design standards, is financially feasible to support existing business, some of that money is captured by the TIF, meaning the city has more money to do some of these improvements.
 - Interesting to think of what you could do with \$90,000 (TIF) a year. Think strategically on how to use it – make small incremental changes – landscaping, trees, flowers, etc.
- Is there an approach of, "If you build it, they will come"? Look at the office building and the condos. They were built and are not doing well.
 - There is an element of "if you build it they will come." If the city does things like gateway improvements, adopts new zoning with good design standards, then they will have made it easier for property owners to make an improvement. Additionally, there's big demand for multi-family housing and a shortage in this area.

- Won't that make development happen piece by piece? Will it be unorganized?
 - "Things are going to change anyway, so you might as well have a plan." This plan plants the seeds and gives a vision. He noted that the city has been talking with Yankee Ford and Finard. They are trying to get word out, but they're not trying to force anyone to do anything. There's big potential for things that could happen here. It's a win-win and partnership: property owners can do better and this could bring in more residents who can help support shops.
- Is there an interest in the community in seeing more incentives for existing property owners to improve facades?
 - Residents aren't sure see how this can be done without cooperation from existing businesses.
 - Talks with existing businesses is already happening. The bottom line is that when someone sells and someone new wants to come in, there's a plan and something to look at. That will help keep it neighborhood, people, and business-friendly. The idea is to have a draft for developers to use. South Portland is moving towards sustainability.
 - For example, part of the Pratt Abbott building could include dry cleaning – business on the bottom and living space on the top. The idea is to incorporate existing business into new buildings.
- Drive up facilities are important to the bank. Will redevelopment would allow for drive-up facilities in the Shaw's area?
 - Yes, the idea is that existing businesses would find a place within the new buildings.
 - Not trying to move people out; trying to incorporate them.

Zoning

- Incorporate new zoning now to set standards of how we want things to look and have some control over it. It's important to push changes forward so that as developments happen it's in a controlled way.
- When CVS was built 3-4 years ago, it conformed to city requirements. It didn't need to go through the Planning Board since they were using the existing building for the same purpose. It conformed to zoning. All of the development/reinvestment recently has been auto-oriented, facilitated by current zoning. The first step in the process is to make sure that any reinvestment does not compound the existing problem. The Appendix of the draft (handed out and available on the city's website) shows there are people in real estate that are making the kinds of decisions outlined in the draft—it's the direction real estate investment is moving in.
 - Too bad that when CVS moved, we couldn't influence them to do better than maintain current building. Changing zoning perhaps opens up that opportunity.
 - Challenges the committee to be more aggressive in getting this implemented. Since the 2005 plan, there hasn't been a lot of development in this area. Would like something more on the scale of what Falmouth has done, or like Portland by putting out a bond out to put investment out front to make area attractive. Can points be added to the plan about how the city could aggressively make this plan reality?
 - Currently walking from CVS to Shaw's, there's no sidewalk. You need to walk through the bushes.

Pedestrian Focused & Greening

- Suggested using Burlington, VT/Church Street as an example. Streets don't need to be available to just cars—maybe just pedestrians and bikes, and allow for deliveries but not through traffic.
- Possibility of making Q Street into a pedestrian way instead of a street.

- There is an opportunity here to attract younger people and people more willing and able to walk places.
- Would like to see walk lights longer.
- Pedestrian bridge is a great idea. Is this attainable?
 - Their key concern is that it goes under high power transmission. They have worked with the city's engineering firm and CMP and in a preliminary determination it is feasible to go high enough over the road but low enough under the power line.
 - It is a big ticket item but because of the downtown TIF, there is potential for these items if we're successful in bringing in additional investment. Revenue will be captured by the TIF. Falmouth is utilizing this now and depressing the utility lines along Route 1.
 - Make sure it allows bicycle traffic.
 - Would like to see a bridge crossing Broadway too -- crossing Broadway near Mahoney Middle School to access church, library, schools, park is dangerous.
- How does making more roads through Shaw's/making Q Street into a road make this pedestrian friendly and green?
 - All of the precipitation that falls on Knightville/Mill Creek currently goes into the river as untreated stormwater runoff. Redevelopment will aid in the collection and treatment of stormwater. In the green sense, having development—even if it's paved—creates the potential for environmental betterment. There's the new opportunity for more green space, landscaping, and adding pedestrian roads/bike lanes and sidewalks along roads.
- There's a need for more trees around sewer treatment plant.
- Attention called to concept with the green roof.
- Where did we get the information on coastal surge? We need to invest strategically.
 - There is opportunity to work with Portland.

Traffic

- Would a traffic study be done before this begins? Would like another study after the one in Knightville is done.
 - This is just an idea and when someone comes to talk to the city about redevelopment, the city will ask for traffic studies.
 - Yes, in addition – Jon Jennings has talked in current traffic study to look ahead and address it. When this draft master plan goes to the traffic engineer, they will look at and address it.
- Broadway is problematic; hopes the city will think about how to ease traffic and make it easier for people to get around.
- How will the armory fit into this project in regards to getting in and out of the gas station? What will it do to already congested traffic in that area, especially with the fire station close by?
 - The armory is a short term project – there is already an applicant who is submitted application for a zone change. That problem is being addressed.
- Waterman is so wide, develop parking on Waterman.
 - Currently, there are unnecessary left turn lanes there.
- This area has been perceived as a way to drive through to get to Portland – traffic goes very fast.
 - Yes, goal is to drive slowly so people can cross the street.
- On the bridge left-hand turn onto Erskine Drive: Can the lane be made longer? With people driving fast on the bridge, it feels like someone will rear-end you here.
 - There's nothing in the plans for this but it can be looked in to.
- The timing of traffic lights on Broadway/Cottage makes traffic back up; the free right turns are dangerous. *(Brought up during Parkside discussion.)*

- The committee has talked about eliminating free right turns there.
- Hinckley / Broadway issues with light. (*Brought up during Parkside discussion.*)

Parking & Transit

- Didn't see much about transit hub. Encouraged committee to think strategically about where parking will go and how it will evolve with transit being built. Need to address parking reduction versus public transit.
- Concern is over parking—most people hop in their car to go to Mill Creek. Need lots of parking—fears that not focusing on parking lots could bring up the same issue that they currently have in Knightville.
- In Portland if you can't find parking, you expect to park wherever you can find a spot and walk to where you need to go. When does not enough parking equate to a loss of business.
 - In Portland it's a park once mentality; in South Portland you park twice if you're going two different places in the same area. It's not a walking environment. Need to think about a park once strategy.
- It's an auto centric environment.
- There's something about Mill Creek where you think you need to take your car. It's busy, cars are turning every which way, so it's unsafe to walk.
- Suggests having a central parking area with attractive, safe walkways.
- Close Market Street off and make it a parking place; then walk everywhere.

Building Structures & Height

- As Mill Creek is redeveloped, you need a strong design review planning as part of it. There's importance in the sense of scale, history, and materials developers will use.
- Would like building structures to conform.
 - Mentioned the new Hyatt on Fore Street in Portland as poor oversight.
 - Mentioned a historic look or something like Freeport where everything goes together.
- Would like the city to encourage historic preservation: Legion Square masonic building, City Hall, Post Office, Glenice's Hair.
- Design standards outlined in the report. The intention is not to make it all look alike but in "good character."
- Concerned about height; worried about skyscrapers.
 - In the Village Extension, there's a max of five stories. In Village Core, there's a max of five over any structural parking. There's a caveat for south side E street – E street could be 2 stories.
 - Five stories seems too high
- Would like to see affordable housing/keeping elderly people in affordable homes; dwelling units on one floor would be nice.
 - Committee asked for clarification; is it one floor apartments in a three story building? If so, from a financial standpoint, that becomes more expensive because of an elevator.

Parkside Terrace

- Parkside residents are not in favor of redeveloping Pratt Abbott. The residents will organize a citizen group to challenge any plan that adds density to this area. Just because Pratt Abbott is buying up buildings doesn't mean they can change the neighborhood.
- Against turning Cottage Rd into two-way street.
- The area is already congested, especially at rush hour when two lanes of traffic block the street
- Concerned adding a high rise would create more traffic

- Walking in the area, particularly the crosswalk, is challenging and unsafe
- The street is not visible; hedges make it difficult to see
- Asked residents – if something happened to Pratt Abbott and the two houses on Cottage, what would you like?
 - Residential, but not apartments. They don't want parking lots that close.
 - They like residential but single use. Density is a bad idea in Parkside
- The problem isn't residential, but using the street as an entrance.

Next Steps

All comments and concerns will come back to the committee. Once that is worked through, everything begins again with City Council (workshop). The goal is that City Council would adopt the plan and then the committee can move forward with zoning ordinance changes.

Signing up on the sign in sheet and giving your contact information will ensure you are kept informed on what's happening.

The meeting was recorded. If someone missed the meeting, watch for it on Channel 2. The committee wants to hear from residents and business owners.