



Committee on Community Resources and the Northampton City Council

Committee Members:

Councilor Dennis P. Bidwell

Councilor Maureen T. Carney

Councilor Alisa F. Klein

Councilor Gina-Louise Sciarra

Meeting Minutes

Date: May 3, 2016

Time: 5:30 p.m.

**Location: City Council Chambers
212 Main St., Northampton, Massachusetts**

1. Meeting Called to Order and Roll Call: At 5:30 p.m. Councilor Sciarra called the meeting to order. Present at the meeting were Councilor Bidwell, Carney, Klein and Sciarra. No other City Councilors were present.

2. Public Comment: None

3. Approve Minutes of the April 12, 2016 meeting: Councilor Carney moved to approve the minutes; Councilor Klein seconded the motion. The minutes were approved on a voice vote of 4 Yes, 0 No.

4. Report from Planning and Sustainability Director Wayne Feiden on information relative and in comparison to Northampton's downtown economy:

Councilor Sciarra started the discussion with a review of what the Committee has done to date. The Committee has been tasked with taking a very broad look at the downtown economy in Northampton and Florence. So far the Committee has received reports and/or data from the Greater Northampton Chamber of Commerce, the Pioneer Valley Worker's Center, and the UMASS Labor Center, and from the City's Economic Development Director Terry Masterson. The Committee is about to hold four public forums over the next three months. Each forum will be centered on a certain sector of the economy, including Business Owners, Downtown Workers and Residents, Downtown Workers only, and Property Owners, Leasing, Arts and Tourism.

Director Feiden is the City's Planning & Sustainability Director. He has been with the City for the past 28 years. He is also involved in other pro bono projects and design teams in other communities and around the country. He has done four fellowships in seven different countries focusing on "city revitalization".

Director Feiden commented that the downtown Northampton community is the envy of non-coastal cities. There are no other communities of our size that are as vibrant as Northampton. Even some of the things about Northampton that can be thought about as "negatives" are simply the result of success. People buy buildings in Northampton because they see them as long term investments whereby the investment

won't lose money. Florence is also considered a vibrant area; however, it serves Northampton in a totally different way. Residents of Ward 6, for example, will proudly boast that they never go to downtown Northampton, but they do go to downtown Florence. Rents are a lot less in Florence.

There has been a steady decline of bricks and mortar retail. Cities have become a more specialized area for retail shopping. There used to be a hardware stores in the downtown area, however, they don't exist in downtowns anymore. The downtowns have never fully recovered as a general shopping area since the birth of malls and other shopping concepts. The trend is that the retail business is more specialized; consumers might buy a sports jacket from a specialty store downtown but will only purchase shirts from a bigger retail chain. Director Feiden believes that the trend regarding retail stores in downtown areas has declined in the past 28 years. The decline has been hidden by the fact that restaurant and other service providers has grown. Having vacancies is not all that bad. To stop high rents, you must decrease the demand for space. Director Feiden commented that the properties that Eric Suher owns, while the properties may remain vacant, this could be part of Mr. Suher's overall investment strategy. He could be looking for higher rents because he believes that this is better than settling for lower rents. Even with vacancies, people will drive 50 miles to visit downtown Northampton for its vibrancy and for whatever else the City has to offer. People won't drive up from Hartford to go to a downtown hardware store. They will drive to Northampton to visit restaurants, take in a show, etc. Director Feiden explained that people are worried about certain types of specializations getting too expensive and they worry about chain stores. A city's approach to a lot of City Councils is to insure that the city protects and expands low rent areas. Starting businesses, for example like Beehive Sewing, may need lower rents in their first years of business. This is different than trying to exclude a national chain, like Starbucks. The City has increased the size of the business district; Director Feiden states that it is now about twice the size it was when he started working for the City. Regarding the question about whether there were more zoning changes that the City could consider, Director Feiden explains that there is not much more that can be done. The Planning and Sustainability Department has made necessary changes to the zoning ordinances and continues to work on the ordinance to clean up language and to provide clarity to the existing requirements. A big opportunity for Northampton is how to extend the business district even further, perhaps down by Holyoke Street up to the new roundabout. The benefit will be to continue with a low rent district to encourage new business. The City has also looked at bricks & mortar changes, such as changing Cracker Barrel Alley to a foot-traffic only area to, perhaps, accommodate outdoor dining. The City has also looked at Kirkwood Avenue as a possibility for foot-traffic only. Internet retail is also driving the retail business, but other things are driving it as well. The trends in retail seem to focus on businesses knowing that customers can be located anywhere they want. How you attract them for a downtown business area is important and the experience needs to be unique. Events help to drive this, like Sidewalk Sale Days, the former Taste of Northampton, etc. A really important part of the downtown effort will require supporting people to live within walking distance of the downtown area. People who live downtown or live very close are likely to spend their money here. Housing starts within walking distance have been as successful as they could possibly be. In the Hospital Hill area alone, there will be a total of 350 living units. The zoning changes that the Council approved two years ago has also created a significant number of housing starts. While the housing units have increased, the number of people living in those units has decreased over the past twenty years. In the World War II era, there were 4.5 people in a dwelling unit. Now there are 2.14 people per dwelling unit. Another way to get people downtown is to change the perception regarding the distance to downtown. New way-finding signs will be erected around the downtown area that tells the distance to various places around the City. Most people will walk if their destination is 0.4 of a mile or less; most people won't walk beyond that. Often Director Feiden will give his students an assignment to walk two different routes. He won't tell them that the distance is the same for both routes, but he will ask them which way they believe is longer. Usually the more boring route, without interesting surroundings, seems longer. In terms of challenges for the City, certainly declining retail is a consideration. Sense of place is considered a strength for Northampton. Thirty five years ago the City received grants to re-do all of Main Street. Twenty five years ago the City re-did Strong Avenue and Pearl Street. Since then the infrastructure has not been updated. The age of the concrete itself is a sign of aging. Over the years some of the concrete has been patched with asphalt. Trees on Main Street often have a limited life span. There are signs that the trees have been abused and constrained. A donor has approached the City and is willing to donate gates for around the trees. One problem is that as the trees grow, the gates need to be moved. The DPW is not sure that the City has the

ability to move them. Director Feiden notes that at the end of the bike path off of Main Street there is a set of stairs; at the bottom of the stairs there was a tripping hazard due to missing treads. There was also an exposed piece of metal from the rail. These hazards were left unattended for eight years. The City needs to do a better job at those types of maintenance issues to send a message that it matters. Small infrastructures improvements have been done, but only as required. Most of what is out there now in terms of infrastructure is at the end of its life span. Millions of dollars were spent on streetscapes in Holyoke and Turners Falls; however, streetscapes alone don't bring back a dead community. There are plans for Main Street in Northampton; however, it is an eight year plan. The plan is to re-build Main Street. The planning phase begins this year to think about what Main Street should be like programmatically. Once the programmatic money is done, then the next phase will be to start an engineering design. Regarding the potential for re-designing Main Street, through work of the consultant, the City has realized that it could drop one travel lane and create turn lanes. This would free up 15 feet. But the problem is, what would we do with the fifteen additional feet? The tree people want more trees, the bicycle people want more bike lanes, the parking people want more parking spots, the pedestrian people want more pylons in the middle, etc. Once the City figures out its values, then the engineering firm can help design a streetscape that matches those values. Underneath the railroad tracks its dark, there is often water dripping one pedestrians, there might be homeless people hanging out in this area. This discourages people, especially women from walking in certain parts of downtown. Part of what is seen in downtown is a generational shift in businesses. You can make a living at retail if you work hard enough, but it is not an incredibly valuable asset. Some businesses might be closing due to retirement, like Western Village Sports. There does not seem to be interest in someone taking over this business. This is not the case when Judith Fine chose to retire; someone was willing to take over her business. And it is important to note that not all generational change is bad. Northampton boomed, in part because downtown Hartford and downtown Springfield had not been that successful. Director Feiden notes that he is not at all worried about the casino per say; he is more worried about the entertainment. There is some threat in this area. A lot of casinos are so totally inwardly focused that they have almost no effect on surrounding communities. Director Feiden worries a little bit about the restaurant business. He worries a lot more about entertainment. However, bands that appear @ the Iron Horse or the Calvin, probably won't appear at a casino. Bigger events are the ones that are the greater risk. It will be really bad if the city rests on its laurels—not just City government, but property owners as well. Young artists in Easthampton and the "Square One" building in Holyoke might pose a bigger threat. Northampton also has some weaknesses on its edges. Pleasant Street is just one area that needs to be cleaned up. The City tried unsuccessfully to obtain a two million dollar grant to clean up Pleasant Street. The City will be applying again this year. Director Feiden thinks that the City needs to pay attention to Pleasant Street, and the southern part of King Street. The roundabout will be really important from a transportation standpoint. This will mark the "edge" of the business district. There are exciting opportunities that new development will present. The Northampton Lumber Yard, the Shaw's Motel, the Northampton Lodging expansion will bring more people within walking distance of downtown. Click Workspace is a draw for the twenty-something generation. The church on Hawley St. across from the Arts Trust will offer more living units with a restaurant.

Regarding parking, Director Feiden feels that people would be willing to pay more to park versus getting a parking ticket after visiting the City and having dinner in a downtown restaurant. Councilor Klein asked about parking for people who work in the downtown restaurants and shops. Some people come from surrounding communities to work downtown. Director Feiden realizes that we do need to accommodate them; however, we don't want to make their life too easy. We would like to have workers make use of public transportation systems, such as busses. Smith College parking garage is a five minute walk from downtown, and it's free from five o'clock on. How do we get more people to drive only when they need to and to utilize other parking opportunities rather than in the downtown parking spaces? We don't want the downtown worker to be competing with those customers who are spending money in downtown restaurants. We need to make sure that we have options for workers and residents in the downtown area. The goal for visitors should be to park once and then walk to perhaps multiple destinations: restaurants, theaters, etc. In most cities, you may not need a parking garage, but perhaps you need to think about parking differently. When thinking about parking, it is important to think about the City's needs into the future. Will there be self-driving vehicles, and if so, what style of parking garage would better suit this vehicle type? Most people want to park within 500 feet of where they are going. People like the

shorter distances, especially in communities. Councilor Klein asked about the potential use of a trolley for downtown. Director Feiden explained that the use of trolleys works well in rich communities. Aspen and Vale, Colorado have shuttles for their workers. We have parking areas within walking distance here in Northampton, however, most workers would rather feed the meter than walk 500 feet for a less expensive parking alternative. Unless you make the conditions miserable to park near where you work, employing a commuter shuttle service won't work. UMASS has a shuttle service that works because students can't get parking on campus, and if they can, it is incredibly expensive. There, students will park in a satellite parking lot and take the shuttle to their car. Councilor Klein asked about trolleys for tourists. Director Feiden believes that it would have to be a really good experience for people to want to use the trolley service. Tampa, Florida has a wonderful trolley experience that goes from downtown Tampa out to about a mile and a half. It shuts down at 8 pm. It works there because it is mostly used by tourists. However, even for tourists, parking downtown is still more desirable. Day-to-day most people won't use a shuttle system unless the shuttle system is subsidized by the City. Councilor Klein reported that Alexandria, Virginia has a shuttle system that travels in a straight line for about 1-1/2 miles. It is free and people use it all the time. Director Feiden states that it is an idea that shouldn't be completely dropped and a trolley type system may make sense at some point. Hadley has begun a road expansion project to increase the amount of lanes on Route 9 to four lanes. Letters were written to the state asking that the project consider bus transit in its expansion plans, and perhaps include dedicated bus ways. Boston, for example, has dedicated bus ways. The state agreed to conduct a BRT (bus rapid transit) study, but is still moving forward with the initial construction project.

T.I.F.s (Tax Increment Financing) could be a way to bring businesses into the community; however, Director Feiden notes that this approach should only be used if a project could not be gotten otherwise. So, for example, Director Feiden doesn't believe that retail businesses on Main Street should not be considered for T.I.F.s, however, industry within the City should be considered. A lot of businesses don't want to be in the downtown area due to the additional costs of locating in the downtown area. Check Writers, which is locating up on the former Clark School property, looked at a couple sites downtown, however, they wanted free parking for their employees. Due to this higher cost, they decided on another location a little bit outside of downtown.

The Arts Council is taking the lead on a few little projects that add to the vibrancy of downtown—the benches, which were painted by the Youth Commission, is just one example. There was also the repainting of an electric transformer at the park on Pleasant Street. The Arts Council is also thinking about pop-up spaces for artists. Pop-up spaces give a sense of vibrancy in the downtown area. Councilor Bidwell asked about using the pop-up artist concept in vacant retail spaces. Director Feiden noted that having vacant space is not the only consideration. Things like building safety code issues need to be considered as well as set-ups and clean-ups. Director Feiden notes that it is expensive to do set-ups and clean-ups after the fact. There is also the question of who will organize these necessary functions. The Arts Council is considering ways to make the pop-up tenant concept more desirable to landlords by asking can we make this happen if someone else does the set-up or clean-up?

The City recently had a team of American Student Architects look at climate change issues and the Tuesday (farmer's) Market. They were asked to consider if the season could be extended, say, by three weeks. Use of a building space is incredibly expensive; however, it does seem to work when there is "leftover space" in a building. Could these markets be extended if a canopy or some other protection from the elements could be obtained? The City has been very protective about food carts. However, food carts add to the vibrancy, and Director Feiden wonders if there is a middle ground between protecting downtown restaurants and allowing any food cart to set up anywhere. Food carts are allowed on private property. In a lot of other cities, operating a food cart is a gateway for business owners to open up their own storefront. Councilor Sciarra stated that she has heard that food carts actually help restaurants and she wondered if Director Feiden thought so as well. Director Feiden noted that the cities that have the best food carts are in Austin, Texas and Portland, Oregon. Director Feiden believes that Northampton is a marginal community for the luncheon trade, and he worries about that aspect. He wonders if there is a way to do this without a threat to restaurants. Establishing a food court can be one way to add this feature to the City where a limited number of food truck licenses would be issued. The question is, where? Crackerbarrel Alley is one alternative.

Councilor Bidwell stated that acknowledging that importance of “incubator” businesses in the form of food trucks is important because the restaurant business requires a huge capital investment. To develop a menu along with a following is helpful when capital is lacking.

Councilor Klein asked about the possibility of closing off a portion of Main Street and turning it into a kind of mall, like Burlington, Vermont. Director Feiden is opposed to such a concept on Main Street. This type of community works in Europe for two reasons: European communities are much more downtown focused for both employment and housing; other communities have downtowns with a guaranteed anchor businesses. Secondly, you don’t want to take away the ability to park and drive downtown. “Daylight cities” are those that are vibrant from nine to five and then after five p.m., the downtown dies. If there were more housing, the concept might work, however, Northampton is not currently there. That said, there are opportunities to create these spaces on a smaller scale: on Masonic Street; down Crackerbarrel Alley; and Center Street. Each parking spot in the front of a business adds \$50,000 - \$100,000 of revenue per year. Off street parking is a lot less. Creating the type of downtown “mall” would eliminate the parking spaces and thus the revenue. Councilor Sciarra noted that in Burlington, most of the stores are chain stores which are very different than what we have in Northampton.

To make the sidewalks really vibrant, Director Feiden suggests that sidewalks should be as wide as possible to allow for buskers, beggars, shoppers, etc. In European cities, streets are made vibrant by crowded streets with a medieval feel. The City of Boston tackled the issue of how deliveries are handled to make the streets cleaner and not cluttered by such activity.

Andy Smith is a planner in the City of Holyoke, but lives in Northampton. At night he plays in a band. Mr. Smith agrees that the idea of closing Crackerbarrel Alley would help to create a gathering place to accommodate such things as an outdoor music event or dining.

Councilor Bidwell asked about the regulatory climate in Northampton and how developers and businesses perceive this compared to what they might face in other communities. Director Feiden commented that in downtown, zoning is hardly ever a big issue. Five-foot tall structures are allowed, but, the market does not support buildings over five or six feet tall. There are not parking requirements or set-back requirements. There are strict Central Business Architecture standards, but even here people are given two choices: you can stick with a pre-designed look, which is a guaranteed permit route, or, you get creative about the design. Regarding the building code, the constraints are built around state law. Zoning within the central business area is more predictable than it was in years past. A developer can go before the Zoning and the Central Business Architecture committee in one night. Director Feiden feels that if developers need to ask for permission, they won’t bother. Some developers have experienced firsthand the difficulties of asking for something that is beyond the scope of what is allowed by code. Valley CDC does a lot of affordable housing. A neighbor held up a Florence project for affordable housing for a couple of years. The Lumber Yard project was held up in court for six months. They will no longer pursue projects that require special permit. They now know that someone can appeal a special permit and slow a project down for three or more years.

The City received a \$25,000 from the State last year. With that money the City did a number of things, and one of those things was to hold public forums with developers to send the message that the City was looking for projects for the City, whether retail, housing, etc. The second goal was to understand what the developer’s concerns were. One thing that was not allowed was if a developer wanted a project that involved retail on the first floor, then there could not be residential on that floor. This is what will be happening at Valley CDC and HAP projects.

Councilor Sciarra asked whether there was one or more things that Director Feiden thought the Council could do to have a positive impact on the downtown economy. Director Feiden pointed out that the City Council could be more invested in City Projects to help promote events and ideas that come forward. Director Feiden loves what the Youth Commission has done with the benches; however, he believes that a better job could have been done at telling the story about how these things fit into the overall City plan. Director Feiden believes that the City is losing some middle-class clientele who are afraid to go to some

downtown businesses. The challenge will be to create a downtown that's vibrant while creating a magnet somewhere else for "undesirable" elements. How do we create more spaces that are more inclusive while supporting businesses when they say that people are afraid to come inside when they have to pass by people hanging around outside? As a first step, perhaps the Committee can continue with the forums and take in more information and then develop a vision statement based upon what they have heard. The statement is carried forward as a plan of action. In the past there have been plans that have gone stale or outdated over time.

Councilor Klein pointed out that the Vibrant Sidewalk Resolution was more philosophical piece whereas a vision would pinpoint what we want in place. Director Feiden points out that, yes, you can start with a vision, but the vision can also be used as an evaluation tool. Councilor Klein pointed out that the Stainable Northampton program works this way. It has existed for so long, but if you look at the points, many of the initiatives are still being worked on or have been completed.

Councilor Klein asked about the desire to expand the Central Business District and the amount of distance that people are willing to walk to get to their destination. How do you create the area so that it is perceived as a comprehensive downtown? Director Feiden states that he thinks it is okay if there is a gap. And while we want to try to fill in the gaps, it isn't horrible. What is not good is death in between, such as on King Street where there are enormous parking lots along the way. Councilor Klein points out that Market Street has its own personality and areas like this become destination locations.

5. Possible Research Topics for Intern Jonathan Goldman

Councilor Sciarra has had an opportunity to meet with Jonathan Goldman. Currently he is still finishing up his final exams at college; but he should coming back within the next week and a half. She will have him visit stores with flyers to invite people to come to the meetings. He is also willing to do additional in-depth research.

Councilor Klein would like to know what the current percentages are for on-line sales and what factors affect local buyers to turn to the on-line alternative. She would also like to know if there are any examples of ways in which internet business could be combated, and what techniques, if any, other cities have done to help buyers focus on local businesses.

If Councilors think of any additional ideas, they should send them to Councilor Sciarra.

Councilor Klein suggested that perhaps Mr. Goldman could look at and identify models and examples in other cities that have been developed for gathering space. She recalls that approx. two year ago she attended a forum, "Livable Cities", where different ideas were discussed.

Councilor Carney suggested reviving the plan that was done a few years ago showing Northampton with a different streetscape.

Councilor Bidwell asked if it might be possible to understand from restaurants what they would do with additional sidewalk space.

Councilor Sciarra asked if it might be useful to create a questionnaire that Mr. Goldman could use when visiting downtown businesses.

Councilor Bidwell wondered about the operating costs for businesses in the downtown area, and whether that information could be collected in some way.

6. New Business: Councilor Sciarra has been trying to get the word out about the public forums. She has reached out to the Center for New Americans and to the International Language Institute for help with

translation services. To date she has not been successful in reaching someone who might be willing and able translate the flyer. Councilor Klein indicated that she may have a source for Councilor Sciarra.

Councilor Klein would be willing to have flyers distributed in Florence. Councilor Sciarra has been e-mailing businesses and inviting them to come. She has also reached out to individuals for help and also to invite them to participate in the forums.

Councilor Bidwell asked whether the meetings needed to be scheduled at 5:00 p.m. to conduct other Committee business. Councilor Sciarra indicated that nothing had been referred to the committee and doesn't see the need to meet at 5:00 p.m. on the night of the first forum.

7. Adjourn: Councilor Klein moved to adjourn the meeting at 6:40 p.m.; Councilor Bidwell seconded the motion. The motion was approved on a voice vote of 4 Yes, 0 No.

Prepared By:

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