



Committee on Community Resources and the Northampton City Council

Committee Members:

Chair: Councilor Garrick Perry

Vice Chair: Councilor Marissa Elkins

Councilor Alex Jarrett

Councilor Rachel Maiore

Meeting Agenda

Meeting Date: June 27, 2022

Time: 5:30 p.m.

Virtual Meeting

The June 27, 2022 Community Resources Committee meeting was held as a hybrid meeting. Three members of the committee met in City Council Chambers while the public and presenters followed the committee's deliberations by joining the virtual meeting by phone or computer. The meeting was recorded for later broadcast.

"Jurisdiction. Matters affecting the community including economic development, local business, tourism, the environment, the arts, planning, zoning, sustainability, land use, housing and affordability, among others"

1. Meeting Called to Order and Roll Call: Chair Garrick Perry called the meeting to order at 5:37 pm. On a roll call vote by City Clerk Pamela L. Powers the following committee members were present: (Garrick Perry, Marissa Elkins, Alex Jarrett, and Rachel Maiore.) Perry, Elkins & Maiore were in person and Jarrett participated by remote participation.
2. Announcement re: Audio/Video Recording: Councilor Perry announced that the meeting was being recorded.
3. Public Comment: None
4. Approve Minutes of April 25, 2022: A motion to approve the minutes of April 25, 2022 was made by Councilor Elkins and seconded by Councilor Jarrett. The motion was approved on a roll call vote of 4 Yes (Elkins, Jarrett, Maiore, Perry), 0 No.
5. Updates and Announcements from Committee Members:
 - a. Councilor Jarrett announced that the Ordinance to Rezone 130 Pine Street from URB to Office Industrial (Item #22.110) will be on the agenda for Legislative Matters which is scheduled for Monday, Jul 11, 2022 at 5:30 pm.
6. Presentations - Trains in the Valley - Presentation by Zane Lumelsky & Ben Heckscher

Zane Lumelsky notes that this is a seminal time for rail nation wide. For many years elected officials and many others have been working behind the scenes to put things in place for a robust railway system for when money is available. Money is now available and it is time to act.

Ben Heckscher presented slides to the committee to give an overview of rail service in the area, primarily focusing on railway service that runs through the city of Northampton. In Dec. 2014 the Vermonter line returned from Washington DC to Northampton carrying several dignitaries, including then Governor Duval Patrick.

Trains in the Valley is an organization founded by Ben Heckscher and Zane Lumelsky in April 2016. Their mission is to advocate for improved and expanded passenger and freight rail service in the Pioneer Valley region of western Massachusetts. Their website, TrainsInTheValley.org contains an abundance of information about what is happening in the rail industry. They also maintain a Facebook page to further advance the advocacy of rail service. Heckscher & Lumelsky are founding members of the Western Mass Rail Coalition which is made up of four rail advocacy groups working together to expand the use of rail passenger service. The Coalition does things that other people can't, won't or don't want to do related to rail service. They work to fill gaps between different agencies who have limited responsibilities within their specific jurisdiction. Mass Dot, Amtrak, and the City of Northampton all work to keep rail service in Northampton up and running. However, there is not a lot of overlap between these agencies and when there are gaps, then the coalition works to get these issues resolved. An example of this happened a year ago when the trash cans at the Amtrak station were overflowing. The coalition worked to resolve this issue.

The only rail service available today in Northampton is the north-south line owned by MassDot and operated by Amtrak. The Vermonter service line runs one southbound and one northbound train daily. Valley Flyer service line runs southbound in the morning and northbound in the evening.

Since Amtrak does not provide a schedule of when the trains run, Trains in the Valley provides this information on their website. These schedules are also posted at the Amtrak station platform.

Regarding the train station in Northampton, the platform and tracks are owned by MassDot and the surface parking lots are owned by Harmonic Rock Realty, LLC (Union Station).

Prior to COVID, the ridership had been increasing 10 - 12% per year. During COVID the train service was suspended, but the trains are now up and running again.

Trains in the Valley are advocating for an improved train schedule - right now the Valley Flyer arrives late in the evening and too early in the morning. They are also advocating for track improvements in Springfield by way of elimination of the reverse move in and out of the station. Finally, they are advocating for a "fair" fare structure for regional travel on the Valley Flyer. Valley Flyer fares are nearly 3x higher than fares on the Hartford Line.

In the next few years a direct line from Northampton to Montreal is planned providing for potential new ridership. This is the number one priority for the Vermont DOT. The issues right now are in Canada; track improvements are needed between the border and Montreal, and facility upgrades are needed for customs and immigration clearance.

Why is passenger rail so important for Northampton?:

- Passengers can travel longer distances without the need to drive a personal vehicle;
- Provides for access to major cities, such as New York City, Montreal, & Boston;
- It is more climate friendly means to travel;
- It provides a public transit option for travel to/from Bradley Airport.

Zane Lumelsky notes that it is likely that people will ride the trains more in the upcoming years and that many people conduct work while riding on the train.

Councilor Jarrett wondered if there was a move for a commuter type service north of Springfield. Mr. Heckscher reflected that there has been talk about doing this, but no real action yet. Representative Sabadosa has been the point person with MassDot working on this very issue. The discussion has centered around transit from Hartford to Greenfield; however the fare structure needs to be addressed. It is really a social justice issue. On the Hartford line, fares are acceptable to a large percentage of the population. The fares north of Springfield are out of reach for a lot of people.

Councilor Jarrett notes that there is long term parking in the EJGare Garage and wondered what information was available to riders about the use of this facility. Trains in the Valley has this information posted to the Northampton portion of their website.

Councilor Perry wondered why Amtrak is setting the fares north of Springfield. The answer is that the service north of Springfield is managed by MassDot and they work with Amtrak to set the fares. The service south of Springfield is contracted by both MassDot and ConnDot, but primarily ConnDot sets the fares agreeable for a broad set of the population.

Mr. Lumelsky notes that there has been a change of leadership at MassDot and the local politicians are aware of this. When the service becomes permanent there are likely to be changes. Congressman Neal is an advocate for rail and is thought to be the point person on the east-west rail.

7. Items Referred to Committee

22.110 An Ordinance to Rezone 130 Pine Street from URB to Office Industrial, referred to Planning Board, Community Resources and Legislative Matters - 5/19/2022

History:

- Referred to Planning Board, Community Resources Committee and Legislative Matters - 5/19/2022
- Planning Board (PB) hearing held - 6/9/2022
- Positive recommendation, PB, with request that Bombyx meet with abutters to discuss operating conditions/restrictions - 6/9/2022.

Assistant Planning & Sustainability Director Carolyn Misch advises that the map provided shows that the area under consideration lies just south of Florence Center. The request is to change the parcel at 130 Pine Street from URB to Office Industrial. This will help to facilitate the reuse and future viability of the structure by allowing an expanded set of uses for the property. The City Council may recall that this is the same process used for the Florence Grammar School located right next to this property. This will attract reinvestment in to the area while maintaining the historic integrity of that corner. The process here is analogous to the process used for Clark School. Adding uses will help create a revenue stream not currently available because of zoning. This revenue stream can help to preserve the historic relevance of the structure. A development agreement would stipulate that a historic preservation restriction be put in place within so many days or weeks after adoption by City Council. This is not something new, but it does provide for outcomes that the city is interested in realizing.

An Office Industrial Zone allows “entertainment functions” not currently allowed under URB zoning. OI also allows other back office uses and research and development. This particular parcel abuts two OI parcels, so it makes sense to expand to include this particular parcel with the caveat that the structure remain intact. There are currently religious uses of the building today that aren’t going away. The development agreement is unique to this agreement because historic preservation restrictions are not currently part of OI zones. Bombyx agrees to a 30 year agreement of this restriction.

Councilor Maiore and Councilor Jarrett have met with residents and Bombyx. She notes that residents are concerned about noise and parking. Councilor Jarrett reports that Bombyx has been proactive in putting up signs to prevent parking in certain areas and to take sound measurements to determine if there are any issues. They have also made arrangements with Florence Comm. Center to use their parking spots behind Florence Grammar School. In order for Bombyx to use the building for entertainment or to serve alcohol, they must obtain a license from the Mayor’s Office and or the License Commission. This provides an opportunity for granting discretion if problems do arise. Councilor Jarrett wonders what should go into a development agreement vs. what should remain at the discretion of the Mayor’s Office or the License Commission. Carolyn Misch states that theoretically anything can go into a development agreement, however, the more overlap that there is, the more complicated it become regarding jurisdiction pertaining to enforce. The LC and Mayor’s Office have more discretion than the Zoning Board to stop an activity from taking place. Development agreements get passed on to subsequent owners, so you want to be careful not to put constraints in an agreement that are not viable for the future of the property.

Cassandra Holden of Bombyx reports that her company, has entered into a 6-½ year lease to own agreement with the current property owner. Key to the agreement is that FCC will have a 99-year lease to remain on the site. The current owners wish to remain in place, as do the tenants, Cloverdale Preschool and Beit Ahavah. The lease holders are renovating the space to add a commercial kitchen, The venue can be use for rehearsal and meeting space as well which will help to generate revenue to help with property upkeep. Bringing arts & a commercial kitchen means that there will be three sources of revenue for the building which helps to make their business model more viable. The rezoning is critical to their vision. They have met with the neighbors on two occasions and their feedback has helped to deploy signage during the shows to instruct people how to park. There is an agreement in place with Florence Grammar School for event parking. They have also adjusted the time of the programming to end earlier so that it is less disruptive in the neighborhood.

Councilor Maiore is impressed with Cassandra & Kyle’s commitment to go above and beyond to address the needs of the neighbors. There are noise ordinances in place; however, the nature of having a business near where you live with chronic unresolved issues, such as noise complaints, can be daunting. She notes that the commercial kitchen is a critical component of their viability, so the zoning change must happen. Looking ahead, Florence Night Out as well as local food truck events can benefit from having a commercial kitchen in the neighborhood. She asked whether the zoning change would make it more difficult to have neighbor concerns addressed; however, her impression is “no”. Carolyn Misch states that the zoning already has a noise ordinance provision. No matter where you are in the city, you can’t exceed that standard. Retail is not allowed in OI, and she feels that OI is the proper zoning for this parcel.

Councilor Maiore asked about the status of the development agreement. Carolyn Misch states that this is still a work in progress.

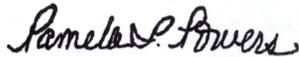
Councilor Perry notes that as an Arts & Entertainment city, there are few venues available and adding this venue in Florence makes sense. He is excited about Bombyx's mission, including the addition of a commercial kitchen. He is in favor of supporting more arts for the city.

Councilor Jarrett made a positive recommendation back to City Council; Councilor Elkins seconded the motion.

Councilor Jarrett notes that the development agreement is still on-going. There is an avenue via the License Commission to address concerns should they develop in the neighborhood. He will be continuing the process of working with the neighborhood to make sure all the voices are heard.

On a roll call vote the motion passed 4 Yes (Jarrett, Maiore, Perry, Elkins).

8. New Business: None
9. Adjourn: At 6:40 pm Councilor Elkins moved to adjourn the meeting; Councilor Maiore seconded the motion. The motion was approved on a roll call vote of 4 Yes (Maiore, Perry, Elkins, Jarrett), 0 No.



Attest: _____

Pamela L. Powers, City Clerk