

CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
Pedestrian Pilot Program

April 7, 2003 – 6:30 p.m.

Council Chambers

Council Present: Mayor Sirrell, Assistant Mayor Hanson, Councilors Grasso, Lown, Hynes, Whitehouse, Marconi, and St. Laurent

Council Absent: Councilor Pantelakos

Staff Present: John Bohenko, City Manager; Robert Sullivan, City Attorney; Steve Parkinson, Public Works Director; David Holden, Planning Director; John Burke, Planning & Transportation Director; Nancy Carmer, Community Development Department; Michael Magnant, Police Chief; Christopher LeClaire, Fire Chief; and Kelli L. Barnaby, City Clerk

I. Call to Order

Mayor Sirrell called the work session to order at 6:35 p.m. She said that the City Council sent over 100 notices to various businesses and individuals advising them of this meeting.

II. Introduction

City Manager Bohenko said that Paul Sorli owner of the Gas Light Restaurant brought this proposal forward to the City Council last year. He said that various members of the staff have reviewed this proposal and the City Council requested a work session to discuss this proposal further.

III. Presentation – John Burke, Parking & Transportation Director

John Burke provided a presentation on the transportation impact assessment regarding the proposed pedestrian pilot program. He said that the program would be implemented for July & August on Saturday evening from 6:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. He reported that there are two proposals one is the Market Street closure proposed by Paul Sorli and the City staff is recommending an alternate proposal for the closure of Pleasant Street. He reviewed the transportation impacts relative to Market Street which included vehicle access, buses, taxis, pedestrians, parking, traffic and circulation and traffic control measures. He also provided an impact comparison between Market Street versus Pleasant Street. The traffic volume is higher on Market Street and would require the relocation of the bus stop, taxi stands, and loading zones. There is also the loss of 29 metered spaces from the Market Street proposal versus the 13 metered spaces from the Pleasant Street proposal.

Police Chief Magnant reported that there would be a need for 5 to 6 officers with the Market Street proposal and only 1 for the Pleasant Street proposal.

Fire Chief LeClaire expressed concern regarding the access to buildings and getting needed apparatus to the scene if needed.

City Manager Bohenko said we as a staff reviewed this matter very carefully and the staff feels more comfortable with the Pleasant Street proposal. He said that this would have a limited amount of impact and would draw people out to a destination point where they could disperse to other places. He said if there is entertainment music it would have to be highly regulated. He recommended that the City Council consider the Pleasant Street location if they decide to move forward with a pedestrian pilot program.

IV. Questions & Discussion

Mayor Sirrell opened the work session up to comments from the public regarding the proposals.

Paul Sorli, Gas Light Restaurant, provided a handout to the City Council prepared by him and Peter Egleston relative to the Market Street proposal. He reviewed the specific goals of the proposal with the City Council. He said the objective is to make the downtown more pedestrian friendly, which will have a positive impact throughout the downtown. He suggested rerouting traffic from Market Street down Penhallow Street as well as reverse the traffic pattern. He said that there is a 25% vacancy rate in the downtown and we need to refocus our involvement in the City and schedule community events.

Peter Egleston, Portsmouth Brewery, said that both plans for Market Street and Pleasant Street have their merits but each are unique to their own circumstance. He said that people congregate on Market Street not Pleasant Street and that Pleasant Street is not the best choice for closure on a Saturday evening. He suggested conducting a survey of visitors to find out what brings them downtown and receive input from the merchants to find out which proposal they would be in favor of. He urged the City Council not to make this an either or decision between the two proposals.

Peter Hamelin, President Chamber of Commerce, said that the Chamber of Commerce is in favor of the Market Street proposal. This would bring residents back into the downtown and would be beneficial to all involved. He said there are many concerns regarding the logistics involved in the closure of streets. He also urged the City Council to stay ahead of the curve and to be open to new ideas. He offered the Chambers assistance to work with the City on this matter.

Sam Jarvis, The Metro Restaurant, said that the downtown has changed and it is a new environment. He said that change is very important and people make the City what it is. He said that the Pleasant Street proposal seems more visible and acceptable. He said that there needs to be an alternate that is fair to all in the downtown. He said serious consideration needs to be given on the location of the program.

Bob Hassold, Tug Boat Alley, said that Pleasant Street appears to be the best place for the pilot program based on the presentation. He advised the City Council that not all of the downtown business association members are in favor of closing Market Street. He suggested possibly holding the Farmers' Market down on Pleasant Street. He also asked the City Council to consider closing Pleasant Street from 6:00 p.m. on Saturday until 12:00 a.m. on Sunday.

Barbara Massar, Pro Portsmouth, said that Pro Portsmouth closed Pleasant Street for Children's Day last year and it worked out very well. She asked that the City Council also give the Market Street proposal a chance and not limit themselves to one location.

Lee Burns, Celtic Crossing, said he is in favor of making the arts part of the downtown area. He said that he does not agree that Market Street is the best location for a pedestrian pilot program. He said that the downtown is an entity and if you close Market Street you would be putting all the attention on one area. He spoke in favor of the Pleasant Street proposal because it is more centrally located and the Market Street proposal would take away from the other businesses in the downtown.

Donald Coker, Portsmouth resident, said that there are a number of people that live in the downtown and they need to be considered during the decision process. He said that he is interested in the costs associated with this plan and that the City does not allow any amplified music. There should also be at a minimum two police officers downtown to protect the residents. The costs associated with this plan should be borne solely by the businesses and not the taxpayers. He also expressed concern that the hours being limited to 11:00 p.m. He urged the City Council to consider the residents and their interests when making a decision.

Cindy Williamson, Eagle Photo, said that the downtown is a business district first and residents second. She said that it has been difficult financially for the businesses in the downtown over the last couple of years. She said that we need to try different things and asked that the City Council consider trying both proposals and possibly closing Congress Street as well. She said that the Pleasant Street proposal could accommodate the pedestrian better because of the size of the sidewalks. She urged the City Council to consider both options because there is a need to attract people back into the downtown.

Paula Glynn, Portsmouth resident, discussed the success of the pedestrian pilot program in Burlington, Vermont. She urged the City Council to look at other communities to get ideas for this program.

Richard Ward, Portsmouth resident, said he does not have a problem with change in the City. He said that there will be impacts from the closure of streets and the City Council should review this matter further before making a decision. He suggested implementing a pedestrian pilot program in the Vaughan Mall.

Joshua Cyr, Portsmouth resident, said that the price should not be the ultimate factor in deciding whether or not to have this program. He said that the City Council needs to keep in mind that the downtown merchants pay a great deal in taxes and contribute to the City. He said that the safety and security needs of everyone need to be considered, but it should not defer us from pursuing this matter further. He also suggested that the City Council consider the Vaughan Mall as a location for this program as well.

Natalie Hassold, Tug Boat Alley, said that we need to bring something new into the downtown and maybe the City Council should consider closing Penhallow Street for this program. She said that people want to have a pedestrian friendly downtown. She spoke in favor of the Pleasant Street proposal because it would not have a high impact on traffic or the residents.

Peter Bresciano, Portsmouth resident, said that he would like to receive more information on this issue and the City Council should hold a public hearing on the matter before making a decision. He said that there are many issues that need to be looked at before a decision is made. He also expressed concern with the costs involved in having this program.

Shealea Dyson, Chaise Lounge, said that these proposals are great and this is what the City needs. She urged the City Council to consider all options and alternatives for both areas.

Robert Sevigny, The Paper Patch, said that the Pleasant Street proposal is the least risky. He said that he does not see a benefit in closing Market Street and he does not know why we need to close any streets.

Jay McSherry, Portsmouth resident, said that the City needs to offer more for the downtown. He said that both proposals are great and we need to stay ahead of the curve. He urged the City Council to remember that this is a pilot program to see if it will work and we need to at least try it.

John Bailey, Portsmouth resident, said that the downtown is for everyone to enjoy and we should try the program to see if it will work.

Donald Coker, Portsmouth resident, asked if the City has an idea of the costs for these programs.

City Manager Bohenko said we need to determine which proposal is going to be implemented in order to determine the costs. He said that this meeting was for information purposes only and costs would be provided when the City Council is ready to make a decision.

Mayor Sirrell thanked everyone who attended the meeting and those who provided their thoughts on this matter. She said that the City Council would consider this matter further.

V. Adjournment

At 8:00 p.m., Mayor Sirrell closed the meeting.

Respectfully submitted by:

Kelli L. Barnaby, City Clerk