

MINUTES

**PLANNING BOARD
PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE**

CITY HALL, MUNICIPAL COMPLEX, 1 JUNKINS AVENUE

6:30 P.M.

MARCH 12, 2015

MEMBERS PRESENT: John Ricci, Chairman; Elizabeth Moreau, Vice Chairman; Jack Thorsen, City Council Representative; David Allen, Deputy City Manager; William Gladhill; Colby Gamester; Michael Barker; and Justin Finn, Alternate

MEMBERS EXCUSED: Jay Leduc and Robert Marsilia, Building Inspector;

ALSO PRESENT: Rick Taintor, Planning Director

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I. WORK SESSION

A. Master Plan Kick Off

Chairman Ricci welcomed everyone. He stated that there will be no public input allowed this evening but there will be plenty of opportunity for public input at future meetings. The decision to have NBBJ as the consultant for the new Master Plan was unanimous. He stated that the Master Plan completed 10 years ago was a terrific foundation. He then turned the floor over to Mr. Taintor.

Mr. Taintor stated that before getting underway with the Master Plan Kickoff, he wanted to mention a few items with regard to the Harborcorp packets that all members picked up this evening. He stated that this application will take at least three months for the Planning Board to work through. He recommended they spend the first meeting on the Site Plan. At the April meeting, they can look at Traffic and Parking. It would be too much to go through both of these items in one meeting. In April, they will be looking to HDC for the Conditional Use Permit for building height. In early May, HDC will be considering approval. At that point, the Planning Board may be able to vote on the Site Plan -- the earliest date the Planning Board could vote being May 21st, 2015. This application has had a lot of review by TAC. He asked that members go over the site civil parts and then move on to the public hearing to review that part of the application. The question was posed about a way to specify more detail in the public notices in order to invite more public comment. Mr. Taintor stated that the notice had already been published but they could certainly get the word out in the paper.

Mr. Taintor introduced Alan Mountjoy, Principal with NBBJ, and lead consultant for the Master Plan process. Alex Krieger, Principal with NBBJ, was also present. Mr. Mountjoy provided an introduction to NBBJ followed by a summary of the project. He would then open the session up to a question and answer session with the Committee. NBBJ is a Boston based firm, but they have worked all around the country in places where the processes are highly charged. They are prepared for this with the City of

Portsmouth. They have worked quite a bit with waterfront cities. They have also worked on international plans. One of their current projects is the Boston Green Links project. The purpose is to link neighborhoods that have been shut out of the regional park system and determine how those neighborhoods can connect to those regional greenways. Another project they are currently working on is in Kent Ohio; a parking project that is a gateway to the campus as well as an anchor for a hotel. Mr. Mountjoy stated that Portsmouth is a great city and they are thrilled to be working with the Committee in this capacity. He stated that the City is so much more than just the downtown. There are those areas of the City that suffer from sprawl typical of cities, but the City has done a great job with planning in the downtown area. He encouraged the Committee to think about other areas of the City in need of attention, the areas of sprawl, the peripheral areas of the City. They have attended a Portsmouth Listens session, they will look forward to getting that segment more involved and will seek their input at the appropriate time. Mr. Krieger stated that there are other consultants involved in the project. Nitch Engineering is one such consultant on the project. They work on sustainability and environmental issues such as stormwater treatment and traffic and transportation. The other consultants on the project will be brought into the project as needed. Mr. Mountjoy spoke to the project timeline. The plan was to start the project in January, but it has taken a few months to get things underway. They will work to finish by April 2016. There will be a July/August 2015 down period (for the public). They will have an outreach period after they've done some initial research in April/May of 2015 and then will pick up in the fall of this year with a more detailed process. The four issues they were asked to address are: Housing, Transportation, Land Use Zoning, and Resilience. They will also address how these issues are integrated. Mr. Mountjoy spent some time on how they would address each of the 4 issue areas but also emphasized that there is so much more to consider than just those 4 areas such as coastal management, natural resources, natural hazards, cultural and archeological as well as regional concerns and energy.

1) Transportation - Mr. Mountjoy complimented the Planning Board on the excellent job they have done with Planning in the City. He hopes that a lot of the parking issues will be resolved as this project gets underway.

2) Housing – Mr. Mountjoy stated that affordability needs to be addressed for Portsmouth. The City has created an issue for itself by not being an affordable place to live. There is a jobs/housing imbalance and naturally, there are issues that go with this. The good part of this though is that there is a strong jobs base. However, this increases the traffic burden through people having to drive into the City. He showed a picture of a house available in Portsmouth for \$239,000. That price did not include the house, just the lot. The plan is to make change more desirable and demonstrate that the changes can be esthetically acceptable. Some of the areas (neighborhoods) do not allow for much transformation. He inquired rhetorically whether the neighborhoods prefer it that way so that things do not change. The Gateway Corridors are a great opportunity for transformation of neighborhoods. They are more distant from downtown, but they can be combined mixed use yet include the appeal of downtown thereby bringing the neighborhoods together with a desirable place to live, work and interact in the community. They looked at the zoning in place for the Gateway District and concluded that the allowed density may not be enough to incentivize transformation and prompted them to ask the question about what the City needs to do in order to invoke the need for transformation. Many cities deal with this issue and they will address this. He stated that many things in the City do not conform to each other. Through design guidelines, smaller housing (not micro units) for small families can be acceptable, thereby making the City a more affordable one to live. The consultant's job, as they see it, is to make these types of choices more desirable. They also looked at the business areas. They looked at district visioning and alternative visions with varying scenarios.

4) Resilience – Mr. Mountjoy stated that this issue is current in Boston particularly with the near miss from Tropical Storm Sandy. Portsmouth has done some vulnerability assessments for areas that are susceptible to flooding. Looking at infrastructure in relation to this issue is important. They looked at districts that are susceptible to inundation by water and what options there may be to address this. Some cities, such as Philadelphia handle this in part by a rainwater/stormwater tax. Philadelphia has a Stormwater Utility. They take 50% of the water that needs to be removed and move it to a recreation/green area that can handle the water.

Mr. Gladhill noted that in a state that doesn't have an income or sales tax, it is natural and beneficial for property to be valued higher to raise revenue. However, assessment rates are going up and people are having a hard time with lack of affordability. He inquired about ideas to bring back affordable housing.

Mr. Mountjoy stated that Boston has the same problem. He doesn't know yet statutorily what can be done. He doesn't know if developers in the Portsmouth area can be required to provide a certain amount of affordable housing. Regardless, he feels that it can be incentivized. Density and size can contribute to more affordability but they will also look at what can be done statutorily to make housing more affordable. He acknowledged that they need to learn more about the issue in this area.

Mr. Krieger stated that he knows density may go against what many Americans feel they want, but they need to find ways to make it more acceptable and appealing, which he acknowledges is difficult.. Density and congestion are not necessarily one in the same but acknowledges that people often think they are. Multiple family homes can help in this regard. Reliance on cars for all transportation can also be changed. They may have to reintroduce these concepts.

Councilor Thorsen stated that he has a concern about trends that lead to decay. If we are not an affordable city, then people won't live here. This has a debilitating effect on the culture of the city. What kind of targeting for types of housing in order to keep a robust housing market does the city need to do. Also, we need to understand how growth can be of benefit to a city and what types of housing options there are in order to keep a robust housing market in the city. He wondered about a way to inject the kind of wisdom needed to balance overdevelopment with underdevelopment, particularly with Portsmouth being of limited size.

Mr. Mountjoy stated that the Portsmouth is already built up, and that this is an advantage because the leapfrog effect will not be occurring (like there is in Boston and L.A). This effect is when one area is built up, such as the south end in Boston. Everyone loves that area until somewhere like Back Bay is discovered, that area is then built up and becomes desirable leaving the south end to decay. The advantage in Portsmouth is that there is not that much space left to develop. Development may feel fast in Portsmouth, but it is not. Mr. Mountjoy feels that the City will not risk overdevelopment due to this factor.

Mr. Krieger stated that this is a very complicated issue and that the current interest in cities is not a passing fad. Across a much longer current lifespan, the amount of time dedicated to family and childrearing is much less than it was years ago when half of a shorter lifespan was dedicated to all things around childrearing. Today, people live longer and are interested in such things as good food in a place like Portsmouth, cultural events, access to good healthcare coupled with less of a desire to

maintain a lawn and so forth. For these and many more factors, cities are becoming and will remain a more desirable place; particularly a place like Portsmouth with good food and a coastal orientation. It will become only more desirable as time goes by if processes such as this one are done right. We are, and will continue to experience a pull back out of the suburbs. The vast majority of our lifetime will not be dedicated to what we've thought of in the past as the American Dream. That means over time you must adjust to expectations, adjust zoning or accommodate more density and use peripheral areas more efficiently.

Deputy City Manager Allen stated that members of the Portsmouth Listens group were in attendance tonight. They are gearing up to participate in this process. He asked the consultant to speak to public input.

Mr. Mountjoy stated that they are just at the beginning of the conversation regarding public input. They attended the Portsmouth Listens session and are already engaging with them about the larger issues that need to be addressed. They will step up public engagement once the process is well underway and they will look to Portsmouth Listens at that time to provide input.

Deputy City Manager Allen would like to ensure the word gets out that there will be time for the public process.

Mr. Krieger stated that these processes can tend to focus on those most engaged. Where newer technologies will come in (not everyone wants to come to a public meeting or feels comfortable speaking in a public meeting, etc.) is giving people a voice, a chance to give input through these networks.

Mr. Taintor stated that Portsmouth is a very engaged community and he finds that the more they do, the more they put on the website, the more input they receive. They are also hearing a lot of interest in the Facebook page and Twitter. Portsmouth Listens is helping with developing an inclination for civic involvement. The City public relations staff can also help with the process to inform the public. He pointed out that the Master Plan process was not as structured last time.

Mr. Mountjoy stated that a process such as this tends to bring in voices that are inclined to be part of a very public process. They will also work to bring in parties that may be more locally minded, not as vocal. For example, there may be those in a specific geographic area in Portsmouth who may not be interested in larger issues such as sea level rise, but their valuable input could be obtained by holding local sessions focused on their neighborhood. They will be working in this input throughout the middle of the process rather than as part of the visioning process in the beginning.

Councilor Thorsen inquired about ways to improve public discourse. In Portsmouth, they are grappling with a need to obtain more public input. He inquired about the best structure for this. They feed into the process for the Master Plan.

Mr. Krieger stated that one of the problems with the American land use system is the inflexibility in zoning processes, and the amendment process is messy. Things change much more quickly now than they have in the past. So the question becomes how the processes can be made more flexible to accommodate needed change.

Mr. Mountjoy stated that evaluating the process at certain points (benchmarks established early in the process) throughout the next ten years will be helpful. He encouraged thinking about benchmarks early in the process.

Councilor Thorsen inquired about how to make things more flexible and trends that they should be addressing.

Mr. Krieger referred to “Uber” as an example of flexibility. It is a revolutionary change to the way in which we transport ourselves. It is a way that transportation can evolve to meet new needs and expectations. We may also see driverless cars in our lifetime. Already things are adjusting themselves, and this happens sooner than every 10 years, but this warrants thinking about flexibility and how to incorporate this into the Master Plan/Planning in Portsmouth.

Mr. Barker stated that he continues to hear about the previous Master Plan and that they are not following it. He inquired about how to measure/track success over the next 10 years in some very concrete ways. He stated that the City did well on the “Walkability Score”.

Mr. Krieger asked the Committee to provide examples of how the Master Plan is not being followed.

Mr. Barker stated that the North End is one example. A resident may stand up at a meeting and state that whatever they are discussing at the time is “not in keeping with our Master Plan.” He inquired whether this process can be made more objective.

Mr. Taintor stated that writing down goals is one thing, but illustrating them can help tremendously. A definition of something in the plan can be made clear by illustrating it graphically. In this way, it would be subject to less variation in interpretation. Everyone can interpret words differently, but a picture is worth a 1,000 (clear) words.

Chairman Ricci stated that everyone will be impressed by the graphical nature of NBBJ’s presentation of the material.

Mr. Gladhill inquired about ideas on how to encourage developers/residents to follow concepts in the Master Plan. The concepts in the Master Plan (are not required zoning ordinances) do not have to be followed.

Mr. Mountjoy stated the Master Plan will inform future zoning decisions the City will make. For example, issues are identified, then community input is sought, and finally in areas where the zoning doesn’t fit the need or expectations, or areas where it will create problems reaching the goals outlined in the Master Plan, zoning is changed.

Mr. Krieger stated that this process is important and complicated but the Master Plan basically should inform any zoning adjustments that need to be made. The way states allow cities to zone is a consequence of the way the Master Plan has been done. He felt that they have lost sight of this to a certain degree.

Mr. Finn felt that it is more about community. There is a lot of pride in Portsmouth. There has been a tremendous investment in building growth even though the population hasn't grown much in the past 10 years. He asked Mr. Mountjoy and Mr. Krieger to speak to the possibility of losing what we know as Portsmouth today as we move through this process and consider putting energy into the peripheral areas that need to change.

Mr. Mountjoy stated that while he lives in a neighborhood, he works in the city and is part of both. He goes to the theater in the city, but also goes to the bakery at the end of his street and ends up being part of the whole and part of the larger city. He stated that cities need to be diverse in their makeup.

Mr. Taintor asked the Committee if there was anything that would have helped in reviewing Site Plans, etc.; a policy or similar that would've made it easier for them to evaluate the project, thereby making the end result (the project) better. He pointed out that with certain projects such as Route 1 (Yokens, Service Credit Union, Taco Bell, the former Bournival Jeep site) there may have been Committee members that didn't like the project itself, or another project, but since it met all the requirements, they felt compelled to approve it. He inquired about tools or concepts that may currently be missing that could help them do their jobs.

Mr. Ricci stated that although many don't like the Service Credit Union building on Route 1, the site itself is beautiful. He has looked at projects that he felt were going to be terrific but in looking at them after the fact, felt that they missed the mark a bit. Working on the greenery piece, stormwater, reducing our footprint is something he struggles with. His hope is that through this process, they will think of things they had not previously thought of.

Mr. Gladhill is the Planning Board representative to the Historic District Commission, and as such deals with design esthetics and review. He inquired about how to regulate design esthetics. New homeowners state that they love the quaintness and the historic buildings and that is why they come to Portsmouth, but these homeowners will get frustrated when told they cannot do something on their own property (for which they paid a lot of money) and may not want to conform to the area as a result of this. He inquired about how they can work with this population segment.

Mr. Krieger encouraged more informal processes to get people involved. It will be useful even if it is informal rather than statutory. This process can be quite informative and has worked well in other cities.

Mr. Gamester stated that we need to promote innovation of use and design and connectivity of neighborhoods outside of downtown so that more options can be made available. If there are pockets of neighborhoods where smaller stores can stay open and make money, it would be great but Portsmouth doesn't necessarily have the density for each of those peripheral areas to have those things. He stated that density doesn't always mean greater impact and that Portsmouth needs to encourage more density.

Mr. Taintor stated that the City must tell the development community what they want to see in terms of density. This can be demonstrated well through graphics/pictures.

Mr. Mountjoy stated that these are opportunities that need to be thought about in ways that they have not been thought about before. This is a way to get to recommendations that are more robust and have fewer lost opportunities.

Chairman Ricci thanked Mr. Mountjoy and Mr. Krieger for joining them and facilitating this process. He stated that he looks forward to working on the Master Plan and a promising future for Portsmouth.

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II. ADJOURNMENT

A motion to adjourn at 7:59 pm was made and seconded and passed unanimously.

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Respectfully submitted,

Toni McLellan
Acting Secretary for the Planning Board

These minutes were approved at the April 16, 2015 Planning Board Meeting.