

Meeting Minutes

City Plan Commission

Thursday, June 12, 2008 PRESENT: Chm. Mayor Halverson; Karen Aldinger; Lois Feldman; Ann Shannon; Ald. Jerry Moore; Tony Patton; Fred Steffen

ALSO PRESENT: Comm. Dev. Dir. John Gardner; Parks & Rec. Dir. Tom Schrader; Ald. Myers, Hanson, Trzebiatowski, Molski and Stroik; Jeff Rainwater and Larry Witzling of PDI; Jack Curtis; Mary Jo Monday, Po. Co. Bus. Council; Joan Ouellette; Bonnie Brown; Ken & Debbie Werra; Sarah Robinson, ADB; Katy Matthai, Children's Museum; Jim Laabs; Robert Sell; Chris Walkoe; John & Barbara Munson; Bill & Bonnie Maher; Bob Stack, Po. Co. Library; George Rogers; Chris Northwood; Mary Ann Laszewski; Cathy Dugan; Bill Yudchitz; Reid Rocheleau
See the Downtown Redevelopment Plan (Acrobat). 5 MB pdf File Requires Acrobat or Free Adobe Acrobat Reader.

1. Adoption of Downtown Redevelopment Plan

Larry Witzling, Planning & Design Institute introduced the Downtown Development Plan and identified six major project opportunities: 1) Waterfront, 2) Centerpoint Boulevard (west garden, landscaped medians, east garden), 3) Mall Redevelopment: short term alternative (renovation of existing Penney's & Dunham, public plaza, new retail uses, surface parking, and through-street linkage), and Mall Redevelopment: long-term high density alternative (parking structure, new retail/commercial and restaurant uses, 4) North Gate (neighborhood green, mixed use redevelopment, surface parking), 5) Main Street (public market renovation, north-south pedestrian & vehicular improvements, structured parking.), and 6) Downtown South/Civic Center (riverfront improvements, expanded Justice Center, parking structure, two-way traffic flow on Main St.) The Streets and Blocks drawing is one they care about the most because it is the basic anatomy of movement and circulation through the downtown. The Surface and Structured Parking drawing shows surface parking lots and possible parking structures. The Public Places drawing is the next most important concept. He further reviewed the implementation steps once the plan is adopted. As the plan moves forward, it will require more meetings and discussion.

He provided copies of Draft Development Guidelines for Riverside Housing which deals with use/activity (apartments, condominium and/or town houses), critical urban design expectations (building footprints, circulation and site design), critical architectural design expectations (elevations, materials, screening, terraces/balconies), and parking. The connection to the river is key to enhancing and emphasizing the identity of the downtown.

This plan emerged as we spoke to people and is very much dependent not just on the physical context of what is there now, but also on the social and economic context of all the people and organizations that we spoke to. As projects emerge, you have to modify the plan.

Karen Aldinger asked about the road alignment going west across the bridge; will it be safe for semis?

Larry Witzling responded the turning movement is sharper but he is sure it is possible for a semi to make it and will be included in the next discussions with D.O.T. and others.

Tony Patton questioned the parking structure by the library. How will this plan come together, one section at a time? What about the historic buildings downtown.

Larry Witzling responded all parking structures that we identify are ballparked at between 200-350 cars. This structure would probably be closer to 180. If you have a developer who needs the parking, you need match the timing for the parking demand with construction. The first development project is more difficult and the subsequent will be smoother. We left Main St. pretty much as it is because it is an incredible street. It could be stronger and healthier by including more residential.

Ann Shannon noted with these types of development plans you need to have the ability to go out and court the developers. Other than TIF monies, is the city in a position to put funds together to solicit developers, develop the marketing and public relations pieces?

Chm. Halverson responded we don't have the ability to hire staff, but we do have the ability to contract with individuals that would help us do that. Currently, our Community Development Authority is in a very strong cash position and we have much more flexibility in using those funds than we do out of the city treasury. There are already local developers that are expressing interest.

John Gardner noted one of the reasons that we selected PDI is because they bring with them some connections in the developer field. We have talked about whether we would do our RFPs from developers, whether PDI would use their contacts and actually bring people here and tour with them, or whether we would hire them to market this project around the state.

Karen Aldinger questioned if the mall would be dismantled before or after you have someone willing to develop in that area.

Chm. Halverson responded we don't own the mall. There may be an opportunity to deal with the current owner if they are reasonable about their own redevelopment and their expectations from the city. The great thing about this plan layout is that the pods allow you to focus wherever you want. We could redevelop right around the mall.

Bonnie Maher, 1100 Brawley St., questioned why the plan area ends at Arlington Place and not to the boundary of the Association of Downtown Businesses at Brawley Street. She expressed concern with safety issues regarding the existing jail and squad cars exiting onto Elk St., and protecting historic buildings.

Larry Witzling responded the relationship of the downtown to all of the surrounding areas is pretty important. We only extended the line down to Arlington in the past few weeks.

Bob Stack, Portage County Library, expressed concern with the building proposed for the parking lot in front of the library. He believes the proposed building will have a very negative impact on library use. We have school buses that come several times a week. We have 22,000 visitors a month and some of them feed onto Main St. We have mothers with children driving around the existing lot trying to find a parking spot to come to the library. He feels there wouldn't be as much of a problem if there were consistent enforcement and timed enforcement of the existing lot. If our use gets cut, Main Streets use gets cut.

Larry Witzling suggested shifting the proposed building and the proposed parking structure might improve the library parking situation. That is a good issue to look at.

Chris Walkoe, 1761 Church St., felt the civic center should be moved out of the downtown toward the freeway. You don't necessarily need ShopKo or Penney's as anchors. The open air concept with surface and structured parking would work great and businesses will flock.

John Munson, 1101 Brawley St., applauded the city for taking the time to do a long term plan. He feels the proposed high-end condo concept

located north of the bridge should also be carried south of the bridge. He expressed concern with parking for the senior citizens center and the justice center (300-bed major prison). His property value will probably go down because he is within 1 ½ blocks of a major prison. He is concerned about traffic patterns and the squad cars getting to where they need to go.

Larry Witzling noted there are other possibilities for the road configurations and they need to be studied more.

Robert Sell, 1205 Division St., feels it seems like Field of Dreams. He would love to see something like this happen but wonders who is going to come flocking to the downtown.

Larry Witzling responded it depends on who the developers are and where they see an opportunity. Assets of the downtown to draw developers are the riverfront, Main St., the restaurants, and the proximity of UWSP.

Chm. Halverson noted we are starting with the children's museum which will be a unique draw. You need a mix of cultural/entertainment/restaurant/residential to make it work.

George Rogers, 1032 Ridge Rd., noted he is President of the Library Foundation Board and endorses what Bob Stack said about the library and parking. The library was located downtown to attract people to the downtown area and because of the close-in parking behind the library.

Chm. Halverson noted the city's intent is to bolster the library. Our goal was to help and increase the parking in that lot and maybe it was perceived in the wrong way.

Mary McComb stated she recently started a new business downtown and is pleased with the plan. We have a lot of specialty shops and restaurants. She is in favor of the justice center downtown and likes parking structures. Parking structures can be wonderful and useful in place of surface parking.

Sarah Robinson, Director of ADB, stated the Board of the Association of Downtown Businesses has unanimously endorsed the PDI plan.

Mary Ann Laszewski, 1209 Wisconsin St., noted our community has recently experienced a concern with being over saturated with multiple family development and now we are looking at 4-story apartment buildings.

Larry Witzling responded this plan is market driven because the whole idea is to not build anything unless there is a market for it. The issue of housing is the quality of the housing and if it is serving community needs. He also said that competition can result in improvements to rental properties.

Bill Yudchitz, 1301 DuBay Ave., noted he doesn't agree with every aspect but commends the plan. We have the option to critique it at different levels. The community has always wanted the downtown and riverfront to come together. He would like to see a pedestrian bridge bringing the downtown to the riverfront during festivals. We need to balance the public greenery and development. Taller and thinner buildings along the River would work better to allow view of the river. We can do little things to beautify.

Cathy Dugan, 615 Sommers St., stated she is pleased with the plan. The waterfront ideas are excellent because they expand the public green space and still allow for waterfront residential property. We have some art elements and could have more. She is concerned that redevelopment of the large buildings will diminish the two-story historic buildings.

Larry Witzling stated they have thought about it and we will need to strike a balance with sizes of buildings. He envisions 3 to 4 story buildings depending on their location.

Chris Northwood, 1316 Okray Dr., noted when this is adopted, there will have to be changes to the Official Street Map. Extending College Ave. will affect the Journal building, his building, and those south of Penney's.

Chm. Halverson responded if we establish the College Ave. concept, several steps would be required. We would need to address the backs of buildings, streets, and utilities. If we were to do that, he would envision leveraging the borrowing capacity of the TIF district to reinvest in the renovations of those particular buildings done through a very low interest and or no interest loan program back to those properties.

Tony Patton moved, seconded by Jerry Moore, to recommend adopting the Downtown Redevelopment Plan as presented.

Ann Shannon noted a big plan like this will take dedication from the citizens, particularly in the non-profit arena. The non-profit segment will be really important for the success of this.

Ayes all; Nays none; Motion carried.

Meeting adjourned at 8:00 p.m.

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