

Capital Improvements Committee Meeting Minutes

Meeting held via Zoom

January 5, 2022

Roll Call was used for all votes taken due to remote meeting format.

Attendees: CIC members: Greg Garrison, Steve Ellis, Fred Bowman, Jason Burbank, John Martineau. Town Planner, Walter Ramsey. Members of the public.

Meeting called to order at 3:00pm.

1. Approval of Meeting Minutes

Members reviewed and approved meeting minutes of:

- October 20, 2021
- November 3, 2021
- November 17, 2021
- December 8, 2021

Moved by Mr. Bowman to accept all minutes as presented. Seconded by Mr. Ellis. Motion passes 5-0.

2. Summary of Capital Articles

Mr. Ellis reported that an updated list of capital special article requests remains in development and will be provided at the next meeting.

3. Evaluate "500 Avenue A" RFP proposals

Mr. Ramsey outlined the goals for the day and oriented all attendees to the RFP process associated with disposition of the Town property at 500 Avenue A in Turners Falls, which was formerly the site of the Montague Highway Department/DPW. The building is approximately 11,250 ft². Reinforced that this procurement process is not to be awarded to the highest bidder, the price was set at \$75,000. The CIC was authorized by the Selectboard to review and issue the board a recommendation for award based on their evaluation of any and all eligible proposals.

The Town received four proposals and all four were vetted by the Town Planner and found to be eligible for consideration. The Town identified six criteria for evaluation, which were known to all bidders through the RFP document. Members are to rate each proposal, assigning a rating

of “highly advantageous”, “advantageous” or “not advantageous” relative to each of the six criteria. These criteria included:

- Applicant Qualifications
- Property Re-Use Plan
- Investment Strategy
- Economic Benefits
- Neighborhood Benefits
- Evidence of Financial Ability

It was noted that members are not necessarily expected to submit ratings and make a recommendation at this meeting, but that they would have the chance to share any preliminary thoughts or ratings about each of the proposals in hand. It was noted that all four proposers have shown success in business endeavors, with operations in Montague. With that, discussion of proposals commenced:

Couture Brothers (Chris Couture)

Mr. Garrison began by describing the proposal, running through the content for the public record. Share his sentiment that although the proposer is a knowledgeable commercial real estate owner, the proposal did not provide enough information to support the rating process, as was the proposer’s obligation. Mr. Ellis affirmed the concern that there simply is not enough information to understand what the proposer intends to do with the property. This led Mr. Garrison to offer preliminary ratings of Not Advantageous on four measures, while Mr. Ellis deemed not to rate them because no information was provided. Others signaled they were not prepared to offer specific ratings in response to this or other proposals at this meeting, but the sentiment that the proposal offered insufficient detail was widely shared.

New England Wound Care (Sohail Waian)

Mr. Garrison described the proposal, which articulates a clear plan for medical office space, a medical distribution space, and an indoor farming operation. He intends to incorporate solar into the project and took care to clarify the indoor “micro-greens” farming would not include cannabis, which would be outside of the allowable zoning. It was noted that he appears to have secured \$6M for redevelopment of the 38 Avenue A site and that the proposer, Sohail Waian understood to have a credible and growing medical business. He considers the proposal Highly Advantageous overall. Mr. Bowman commented that he is pleased to see financing is in place for 38 Avenue A. Mr. Ellis considers the proposal Highly Advantageous, but would like to see the committee follow up with Mr. Waian to get clarity on how the addition of this project might affect his schedule for 38 Avenue A, if at all.

There was some discussion of the nature of the businesses involved, which were very distinct and phased, with office space an initial use that would transfer to 38 Avenue A, as planned; leaving the space more focused on indoor farming and medical supply distribution over time.

Nova Real Estate LLC (Peter Chilton)

Mr. Garrison described the proposal, which he considered the most complete proposal to be received and assessed overall as Highly Advantageous.” The proposal was detailed and purposeful in its statement of plan. It included several letters of commitment from small business owners interested in renting space in the building, some of whom were turned away from Nova’s Second Street property due to a lack of available space. Among them were functioning businesses that perform media blasting and powder coating, and artisans specializing in photography and welding-based sculpture. A goal is to attract an auto repair shop, a business type that was displaced when Nova Motorcycle bought the Second Street property.

This proposal stood out to members because it included those letters, but also a preliminary visual design concept, a conditional letter of interest in findings from a local bank, as well as two private investors pledging to invest \$75,000 each, and a letter from Mass Development pledging to assist Nova with its referenced “PACE” program application for energy efficient upgrades to the facility. It was noted that this developer has plans – though not as far along as New England Wound Care’s – to develop another site in Turners Falls. The same concern was expressed about how this project would affect that plan.

Mr. Ellis noted that Nova Motorcycles and its related businesses has “re-activated” the Second Street area near Unity Park and that its owners were central to bringing the “Soapbox Derby” back to Turners Falls in 2021. Mr. Garrison noted there would likely be some churn among their tenants and perhaps some of them would grow and move to more prominent locations in the central business district.

Power Town Properties (David LaRue)

Mr. Garrison described Mr. LaRue’s apparent success with redevelopment of the former Chick’s Garage, which is now home to the Pioneer Brewery, a lively entertainment venue. The proposal is very detailed, although the details are sometimes more distracting than informative relative to some criteria, leading Mr. Garrison to describe it as less clear than the previous two proposals. There are thoughtful ideas and an interest in building it out well and connecting the property with the state Rail Trail/bike path. Employment prospects seem limited due to nature of business interest. Overall, he viewed it as Advantageous.

Mr. Ellis commented that, like the other proposers, Mr. LaRue is known and there is reason to believe he is a credible developer, including redevelopment of the former Chick’s garage, as well as a claimed ownership of 19 rental units. Likes the connection to the bike path and sees value in the opportunity for coffee roasting facility (not a café), and energy that proposed car shows might have. Perhaps the proposed classic car “auto museum” as well. Unfortunately, it appears to have more seasonal nature and not represent full economic utilization of the building. Also feels it is a good proposal that Advantageous but not highly so.

The CIC discussed next steps in the process which includes all members completing individual rankings and submitting them to Mr. Ramsey, who will compile them for the discussion at the following week's meeting. The board will meet on January 12 to see and discuss these ratings. In the interim the board requests that Mr. Ramsey get additional information from the two proposals that committee members felt were most advantageous based on initial review and discussion. These include the New England Wound Care and Nova Properties proposals.

There was discussion of the specific questions to be asked, as well as whether to request in-person interviews or written responses. As the specifics multiplied, Mr. Ellis moved to authorize Mr. Garrison and Mr. Ramsey to work through the final content of questions and decide whether to administer them in writing or in-person. Mr. Burbank seconds and members approve the motion 5-0.

4. Review and Set Upcoming Meeting Schedule

Discussion of tentative schedule results in the following plan, subject to availability of some prospective meeting participants:

- January 12: Avenue A RFP follow up
- January 19: Gill Montague Regional School capital article submissions
- January 26: Montague Public Library capital article submissions

It was noted that there may be need to check in with other requestors in the following weeks, including the Town Administrator once he has firmer roof estimates, and the DPW/WPCF regarding the vector truck and screw pumps.

5. Adjournment

Mr. Bowman moves to adjourn. Mr. Burbank seconds. Motion passes 5-0