

Montague Planning Board

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MEETING MINUTES

September 28, 2021 6:30 PM

Meeting held at Montague Town Hall One Avenue A with a remote participation option.

Members: Ron Sicard (chair) Elizabeth Irving, Fred Bowman, Matt Lord (zoom), Bob Obear (zoom).

Absent: George Cooke.

Staff: Walter Ramsey- Town Planner

Present: Dan Hodge (Hodge Economic Associates), Jeff Singleton, Suzette Snow-Cobb

6:30pm: Downtown Turners Falls [Local Rapid Recovery Plan](#) Presentation and Public Feedback.

Planner gives an overview of this State initiative for COVID recovery which asks communities to list a set of actionable projects. 125 communities in the State participated. Dan Hodge of Hodge Economic Associates was the Montague Consultant. The final report will be available on the Town website.

Dan Hodge shows a map of the downtown Turners Falls work area which included Unity Park and the Canal District. Our list of projects will set the Town up for expected State and Federal recovery funding.

Dan Hodge discusses his work the Planning Department which began in March of 2021. There was a high-engagement business survey in the early spring. 42 businesses participated. Additionally, there were three focus groups and a summer survey which asked residents and business owners to rank 12 possible projects in categories assigned by the State. Final Projects include:

Signage and wayfinding downtown including parking and on the bike path. The process of designing comprehensive wayfinding will include enlisting a designer to develop a plan which could eventually be used throughout the villages.

Suzette Snow-Cobb asks if this new signage would replace current wayfinding. Planner responds that it would replace previous attempts. North Adams is shown as an example of branding.

The Town Planner discusses the second project, which is **activating the Town Annex** building as a multi-purpose exhibit, performance, and meeting space. Possible occupants include MCTV and RiverCulture. The building is in good shape and has a new roof. Steps would include public discussion with the Select Board and the hiring of an architect to explore feasibility.

The third project is identified as the **acceleration of streetscape improvements**. The Town has been accomplishing this work as outlined in the 2013 Downtown Livability Plan, but the community would like improvements happen more quickly and on a comprehensive scale. Most streetscape improvement are planned and dig-ready if funding becomes available.

Town Administrator asks about the three categories of funding for these projects.

Dan Hodge responds that the categories were issued by the State, but notes regarding the estimated cost of each project will be included in the final plan.

The fourth project is identified as **advancing a master plan for the Canal District**, which would include the physical layout, engineering, environmental consideration and the feasibility of residential and commercial uses. The redevelopment of the Canal District and new, vibrant uses for its buildings is critical for downtown Turners Falls. The MassWorks grant will improve the tricky overall site considerably.

The Town Planner notes that millions of dollars are being invested in the canal district through MassWorks, the cleanup of the Railroad Salvage site, the Mass DOT Sixth Street Bridge, and the private rehab of Southworth. An application with the State is pending for a master plan.

Matt Lord asks if there are priorities among the twelve projects. Is it a mix of funding pipelines? The Town Planner responds that we're advocating for a variety of projects of different scale and with different price tags, so we can be nimble no matter what funding criteria is announced. However, the list is the rough priority, but the Town Planner is looking for input.

The Town Planner discusses **high visibility place-making**; a point of interest that brings people to Turners Falls. The activation of the Indeck Site coal silo was proposed in the 2013 Downtown Livability Plan. A local resident has shown interest in creating an evening lighting show on the silo for about an hour at dusk. Programming of the lights could be done local or international.

Dan Hodge talks about **boosting the capacity of a downtown entity and/ or RiverCulture**. One idea is for RiverCulture to apply as a 501c3 non-profit, which would allow it to apply for more grants. RiverCulture would still be closely aligned with the Town, but with an independent non-profit wing. Some examples include Easthampton City- Arts.

The **development of a comprehensive parking plan** has been advanced as a project. The goal is to establish policies and practices to optimizing the availability of parking. A consultant would be hired through an RFP. Winter parking will also be considered.

Steve Ellis believes that the parking project will “unlock the key to residential life and potential of the downtown, as well as the economic development and cultural potential.” It has benefits on three levels: residents, property owners and the economic concerns of the community. Town Planner notes that this could be a rapid project to implement.

The Town Planner discusses **access to the Connecticut River**, as a strongly identified priority in community surveys. Access to the river (above and below the dam) is already underway through FirstLight relicensing negotiations. Uses would include viewing of the falls, rafting, kayaking and canoeing. The project is expensive and the Town hopes to supplement some of the work with upcoming COVID Recovery funds from the State.

In recent years, Peskeompskut Park has received more active use. This project will **improve the park and its bandshell**, particularly with regards to traffic noise and activity. Improved wayfinding, awnings, drainage and lighting in the bandshell will also be considered, as well as the purchase of high quality AV equipment. Fast Lights has provided a \$3K match to start the project.

With the completion of a one- million dollar EPA clean-up of Railroad Salvage, and new Sixth Street bridge slated for 2026, **advancing the development infill buildings** is a high priority for the Town. Up to 76 housing units with below-ground parking could be built on the Railroad Salvage site. The First Street lot behind the Shady Glen could potentially have 12 garden-style units and help meet the demand for housing.

As the Town Planner explains, everyone loves the architecture downtown but we have relied on the good- will of people to build nice looking buildings. Adopting **Form Based Code** as a project would put building restrictions including include appearances, height, historic features and setbacks into building code. This project would start the conversation about what this guidelines should be.

Business Development is the final project. A MassDevelopment “Transformative Development Initiative” pilot project could work with toward economic development and business engagement with business owners.

Questions and Comments:

James Mussoni from EDIC asks about signage to promote the Shea. Planner response that the Shea would be part of a comprehensive wayfinding plan Mussoni asks if the lot on First Street can be utilized better for Shea patrons especially in the winter. (Yes)

Suzette Snow-Cobb asks how the arts position and the business development position would work outside of Turners Falls (Montague-wide).

Town Planner responds the RiverCulture is town-wide, and would make the case that there needs to be additional arts capacity downtown. As for the business coordinator, the description of the job could focus on the downtown focus group although it hasn't been decided.

Dan Hodge continues that the State understands the capacity issue between focus districts and towns, and there may be room to organize it differently.

Ariel comments that she is grateful to everyone contributed to the plan. She supports the "variety" approach to the projects. She does not like the fence being considered for the Peskeompskut Park because it blocks the view of the performances.

Planner responds that there will be a buffer but there is lots of time to decide what that might be.

Rick Martin (FCTS) appreciates the presentation. The tech school is willing and available to help with these projects.

The plan will be on-line and written comments to the Planner in the next week are appreciated.

The presentation concludes at 7:37pm

Planner's Report

Zoning Workshop: MGL 40R zoning to encourage infill housing development in downtown

The big incentive of 40R is the upfront payment from the State and \$3000 per unit when they are built. Housing is inevitable; the Town might as well identify those areas. Planner met with the Department of Housing and Community Development and went over the boundaries of the district. They confirmed that it would be a one district project with two sub districts (Griswold Mill and First Street) Minimum affordability should be 25% rather than 20%. The goal is to get the Town at 10% deed restricted housing. Montague is currently about 30 units shy of the goal. Planner learned from DHCD that the Town may not get the upfront payment until the properties are declared surplus and available for sale. We could still proceed with 40R. Design standards can be adopted after the bylaws. The Department of Housing and Community Development did discuss an alternative strategy: the Town could release an RFP for a friendly 40B so they can work outside of zoning. It could be mixed income as a condition of the RFP. In that case the Town would not get the incentive payments.

Elizabeth Irving suggests that Town meeting be given the choice to vote for housing with or without 40R.

Matt Lord asks about the timing for the First Street property. Spring of 2022?

Planner responds that there is a process to get the lot deemed surplus. It could happen faster than the RR site and be incorporated into the Town Hall Study. Potential parties are interested in developing Town House style units. Habitat for Humanity are interested in developing about 6 units.

Fred Bowman asks about the abutting lot on First Street. (Planner: It's privately owned, but can be part of the district)

Matt Lord asks if Habitat for Humanity is interested in the kind of density we are looking for.

Planner comments that their model is standalone single family homes. There are two similar homes already on L Street built in 2007. Planner will ask Habitat for Humanity if they are willing to participate in a friendly 40B.

Approval of Minutes

MOTION by Ron Sicard to approve the minutes of 8/24/21. Seconded by E.Irving. VOTE: R. Sicard (AYE), B. Obear (AYE), E. Irving (AYE), F. Bowman (AYE) Matt Lord (AYE) MOTION PASSES 7:54pm

MOTION by to ADJOURN by E.Irving. VOTE: Unanimous. MOTION PASSES. Unanimous. **7:55pm**

Approved by: _____ Date: _____