

City of Keene
New Hampshire

WINCHESTER STREET IMPROVEMENT PROJECT
MEETING MINUTES

Tuesday, August 2, 2016

6:00 PM

2nd Floor Conference Room
City Hall

Members Present:

Thomas Powers, Chair
Gary Spykman, Vice Chair
April Buzby
Tom Bogar
David Souther
William Hope

Members Not Present:

Frank Mazolla
Kate Jennings
Joseph Bendzinski

Staff Present:

Don Lussier, PE, City Engineer
Kürt Blomquist, Public Works Director

Others Present:

Gene McCarthy, MacFarland Johnson
Jennifer Zorn, MacFarland Johnson
Ryan Colburn, MacFarland Johnson
Don Minnery, Saratoga Associates
Emily Gardner, Saratoga Associates

1) Opening and Introductions

At 6:00 PM, Mr. Lussier welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced himself as the designated City staff for this committee. The Committee members present introduced themselves.

2) Project Overview

Mr. Lussier presented the meeting agenda and explained the background of the project. This project extends from the roundabout on Winchester Street to the intersection of Island, Pearl, and Winchester Streets. This project has been identified as a part of the State's overall bypass project. The New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) once a larger plan for this project that fell through so now the City needs to decide how to proceed with this gateway to the City. The project ends at the approximately 40 year old Island Street Bridge and part of the project scope is to fix/replace that bridge. The project focuses heavily on the Key Road intersection.

3) Formalities

Mr. Lussier explained that there are rules of procedure for committees formed by City Council. He provided a copy of these rules for each member and briefly explained the rules.

Meetings are public and require 24 hours' notice (completed by City staff). There must be a minimum of three meetings each calendar year. There will be three meetings before the end of this calendar year and next year there will either be three meetings or the Committee will have completed their charge and disbanded. Minutes are recorded at each meeting and these minutes are published publically on the City website. It is the responsibility of the Committee to review and approve the minutes of each meeting.

Quorum is required for any official meeting; for this Committee, quorum is five members. If quorum is not reached, no official business can be conducted. At the first meeting of each calendar year, the Committee shall elect a Chair and Vice Chair; Mr. Lussier indicated the Committee would conduct that election later in the meeting. The Chair is the presiding officer and if he or she is not present, the Vice Chair is the presiding officer. If neither the Chair nor Vice Chair is present, the quorum votes on a temporary Chair. The Chair controls the meeting and acts on all proper motions. A motion to "call the question" (end debate and vote immediately on a motion) requires a 2/3 majority vote to move forward.

At each meeting the order of business is as follows: call to order, roll call, minute approval, business on the agenda, new business, and adjournment. Meeting agendas are developed by the City staff and published five days before the meeting. All Committee business must be conducted in the form of a public meeting; no official Committee business can take place via email, etc. The Chair can proclaim something out of order and if anyone objects there will be a vote. When required, the Committee will issue a report for presentation to City Council; this will be the last task of the Committee. In the case of a tied vote, a motion is deemed defeated. If any Committee member has a conflict of interest on a matter, they must recuse themselves. If the Committee feels it necessary they can vote for a non-public hearing; Mr. Lussier said this is highly unlikely for this Committee. These rules of procedure can be suspended by a 2/3 majority vote but rules cannot be amended unless properly noticed.

Mr. Lussier acted as Chair to receive a motion to adopt the rules of procedure. Mr. Spykman made a motion to adopt the rules of procedure, which was seconded by Ms. Buzby and carried unanimously.

Mr. Lussier indicated the next order of business was to elect a Chair and Vice Chair. Mr. Lussier nominated Councilor Powers as Chair, which was seconded by Mr. Spykman and carried unanimously.

Chair Powers nominated Mr. Spykman as Vice Chair, which was seconded by Ms. Buzby and carried unanimously.

Mr. Lussier conducted roll call and the meeting continued with quorum.

Chair Powers noted that Mr. Lussier is the point of contact for this Committee and should be contacted with questions or agenda items. Mr. Lussier restated that no official business can take place via email. Committee members should feel free to contact him for

administrative matters (i.e., adding an item to the agenda, coordinating meeting dates & times, etc.)

4) Role of the Steering Committee

Mr. Lussier indicated that the Committee's primary role is to act as a conduit between stakeholders and the consultant. The Committee is purposefully representative of the community including residents, Councilors, business owners, the Planning Board, Keene State College, and the Keene Housing Authority. He hopes the Committee members will reach out to their peers, neighbors, and other business owners to best inform the consultants. The earlier the needs and wants of the community are known in the process, the better.

The Committee will help develop project goals, build consensus within the community, and recommend a preferred alternative to City Council. The goal is to build consensus for the eventual project early so there are no setbacks when construction begins. The task of Mr. McCarthy, the consultant, is to develop alternatives for this corridor.

5) Committee Charge

Mr. Lussier explained the Committee charge:

The charge of the Committee is to guide and give direction to the design team, to balance the interests of all stakeholders, to bring stakeholder information to the consultants, and to eventually present a recommendation of a preferred alternative to the City Council for adoption.

6) Project Team

Mr. Lussier indicated the Committee and Staff work for the Mayor and City Council. Formally, the Mayor nominated everyone for the Committee. Mr. Lussier is the staff liaison. The consulting team from MacFarland Johnson was chosen through a qualifications based process because they have a broad spectrum team to develop the project.

Mr. Blomquist added that the project is estimated at \$5 million, 80% from the State and 20% from the City. With that, there are certain processes required and the ultimate goal is an opportunity to take this corridor and potentially create a gateway for Keene. It will be one of Keene's larger construction projects, comparable in scale to the Washington Street improvement.

7) Study Tasks/Status

Mr. McCarthy outlined the study tasks and status. This engineering study is to determine what the preferred alternative is by reaching out to the community. They have been working on this for a few months and now is the time to get Committee input.

The first task in the study was information gathering. They have gathered base maps of the project scope, extensive traffic counts, substantial utility information, local and state crash data, and property deeds for those that may be impacted. They have an aerial map provided by the City. The comprehensive traffic data will be used to compare the effectiveness of various alternatives.

The second task was a detailed survey of the project area including things like utilities, curbs, pavement markings, etc. They began this last year and completed it this year. The design will be conducted from this high end survey to understand the high end impacts.

The third task was resource identification. Mr. McCarthy welcomed Ms. Zorn, lead environmental consultant, to explain what has taken place to date. Ms. Zorn explained that two primary issues to consider in the project scope are the Ahsuelot River and the 100 year flood plain. Additionally there are some wetland areas to consider which have been surveyed. They will have to be cognizant of the town wetland buffer Ordinances and apply for a State permit if they impact a wetland or buffer. She noted the resource of particular consideration is the Daniel Goodnow historic structure built in 1978 which is eligible for the National Register. The consultants are working with the Department of Historic Resources in Concord who will look at the design once the City has vetted it to determine if the house is impacted in any way. She noted the goal is not to impact the structure. Other work already completed includes looking at noise quality, air quality, minorities, and low income demographics. Mr. McCarthy noted the Goodnow house is right on the current roadway and will be a challenge. Ms. Zorn also noted the desire not to impact the Hickey Desilets Park but that construction easements may be needed to impact parts of its perimeter.

Mr. McCarthy continued that the fourth task is project definition. He noted one of the key aspects of the Committee is a "purpose and needs statement." That statement is important in evaluations and decisions of alternatives at a later date. Because this project receives federal and state funding, they must follow this NEPA guideline. Creating this statement will also be discussed at the first public session.

The fifth task is alternatives development. The consultants will take the traffic information, analyze it, find the best solutions, develop models, and present them to the Committee for input on performance and character. There are three likely alternatives: 1) they will determine what the corridor will look like in the future if no action is taken (No Build); 2) an alternative that involves traffic signals; and 3) an alternative that involves a roundabout. Mr. McCarthy noted the participation of Saratoga Associates who work to determine the community vision for the future of the roadway. Together MacFarland Johnson and Saratoga Associates will develop different options for what the corridor will look like.

The sixth task is structure studies. This includes the Island Street Bridge. The consultants will conduct a formal study of the crossing and different possible alternatives. They are looking at it from a geotechnical and hydraulics standpoint. They have

conducted some hydraulic studies already. They have not yet conducted a bridge type study because they have not built alternatives. The goal is to stay out of the river and maintain the large abutment walls to avoid permitting issues.

The seventh task is public involvement, a significant portion of the project. The consultants want to hear as much as possible from the public and from the Committee as representatives of the public. The first public listening session will take place September 13 to hear from the public about the issues, what needs to be fixed, and the community vision. Once alternatives have been developed there will be a public alternatives workshop to present them to the public for input. Once alternatives have been selected by the Committee, they will be presented to the public at another information session before presenting the Committee recommendation to City Council. Consultants will also meet with potentially impacted property owners throughout the process. A specific website has been developed for the project that will be modeled after and available through the City website. Ms. Zorn added that they will also utilize social media as much as possible.

The final task is utility coordination. Mr. McCarthy indicated that there are opportunities for utility management and improvement during construction. The engineer will present this in the study report. That report will be presented to City Council to close this phase of the project knowing the community is behind a particular alternative which can be implemented more expeditiously.

Mr. McCarthy noted a lot of the groundwork has taken place, now they need to hear the goals of the City for the corridor.

8) Discussion

Mr. McCarthy indicated this is the same conversation they will have at the public listening session. The challenges and opportunities discussed will be the basis for the purpose and needs statement.

Mr. Blomquist requested basic traffic information for the corridor. He indicated he knows there are approximately 21,000 cars per day on average. Mr. McCarthy stated it is a short corridor with three significant intersections and part of the problem is the significant amount of traffic that wants to pass through the corridor to access the roundabout. He indicated he would like to refrain from getting into traffic details at this point and hear the opinions of the community. He knows the Key Road intersection has a lot of congestion and that it will get worse in the future based on their 20 year projections. The goal is to accommodate those future needs.

Mr. Lussier added that the goal of the project is to address not just traffic but also pedestrians, non-motorized users, aesthetics, etc.

a) Problems and Challenges on Winchester Street

Mr. Bogar indicated a primary problem is safety and backup at the intersection of Winchester, Pearl, and Island Streets. He said it is not a problem accessing Pearl and Island Streets from Winchester Street but the difficulty is accessing Winchester Street from Pearl and Island. Mr. Bogar continued that the Key Road intersection is a sheer volume issue compounded by the amount of pedestrian traffic. He noted that cyclists are now using the pedestrian change signals to pass through the intersection rather than following traffic patterns. Consequently, he said, there is a backup of traffic because each time those change buttons are used, the time vehicles are stopped at the light extends. He continued that a primary problem is the time it takes to pass through the left turn light onto Key Road. He added that locals know how to navigate that corridor but non-locals are unaware of the inability to make left turns into the fast food establishments.

Mr. Spykman elaborated on the pedestrian issue noting that the sidewalks have no separation from the street. He said it is a safety issue and also an aesthetic issue. He would like to see a green strip between the street and sidewalk. He knows that is difficult because of the Goodnow house. He added that it would be nice to have bike lanes for safety, to alleviate the traffic button issue, and to keep cyclists from using the sidewalks. Mr. McCarthy commented that it seems high pedestrian and bike traffic is a challenge.

Ms. Buzby indicated another issue is that there are only crosswalks at the light which results in pedestrians dodging traffic a lot. She continued explaining that she has approximately 100 affordable housing units at the intersection of Pearl Street and Ivy Drive, just outside of the project scope. She said that is where a large portion of the pedestrian traffic comes from as Walmart is the only walkable place to purchase groceries. Mr. McCarthy noted that there are not enough pedestrian crossings on Winchester for the demand. Mr. Hope added the same situation occurs with KSC students crossing the street in the opposite direction. Mr. McCarthy noted that access to the KSC parking lot is an issue and they want to improve that, especially at the intersection. Ms. Buzby added that the corridor is not an aesthetically pleasing gateway until you arrive at the park.

Mr. Spykman added that because of access problems at Key Road, people cut through the fast food parking lots, which is a safety issue. Mr. Bogar indicated the Keene Police Department has been working on this issue.

Mr. Minnery questioned what an ideal “gateway” means to the community. Mr. Spykman indicated the green strips between the street and sidewalks are an example as well as additional greenery in the corridor in general. When Mr. Spykman thinks of a gateway into Keene, he thinks of Main Street. Chair Powers indicated he envisions a gateway into the community having underground utilities.

Ms. Buzby added that one of the greatest problems with this corridor is that it is the fastest route from that part of town to West Street. Mr. McCarthy indicated that will continue to be a difficulty but that fixing the Winchester/Pearl/Island intersection could help. Mr. Bogar indicated a solution discussed in the past was reopening Key Road;

while he does not think it is feasible, it could alleviate many of these issues. It would require technical information of how traffic would be relieved and it would be a hot button issues with the public. Chair Powers indicated Key Road has been closed more than 30 years but there is historical data on that. Mr. Blomquist offered to get that information to Mr. McCarthy.

b) Opportunities on Winchester Street

Mr. McCarthy noted that while expensive, underground utilities are worth exploring.

Chair Powers indicated that while a peripheral issue, public transportation can help with traffic. The City has some public transportation but not enough. He suggested at least planning additional public transportation stops into the corridor.

Mr. McCarthy and Mr. Spykman spoke of the need for more pedestrian crossings and separation of pedestrians from vehicle traffic.

Chair Powers stated the need for better access from the Rail Trail to Winchester Street. The bridge will be completed soon and there will be more activity from the south. Working in better access will be important.

Mr. McCarthy returned to the gateway topic. He indicated the other gateways into the City are different environments while Winchester Street is a commercial zone. It is not possible to change the face of what the zone is. However, improving aesthetics of that commercial zone is possible. He indicated, however, there is not a lot of space to work with for greening without encroaching on businesses because the street cannot be narrower. Mr. Blomquist suggested thinking of it more as a transitional gateway and not how to make it an idyllic gateway, but how to soften its appearance.

Mr. Spykman indicated he only hopes for some additional greenspace and trees but knows the Goodnow house impedes that currently. He questioned if that house can be relocated to open up opportunities and space. Mr. Bogar agreed. Mr. McCarthy indicated the house is owned by KSC and they currently use it for storage but it is well cared for and historic. He indicated moving a historic building is possible but the permitting could be significant. He said it is something to consider in the alternatives. Mr. Hope added that if the function of the building is storage, the location is not as important. Mr. Bogar indicated the building would not need to be entirely relocated, perhaps just repositioned on the property to free more space. Mr. Spykman added that they will need to prove they are improving the resource, not just impacting or affecting it, and perhaps its use can be improved in a better location.

Mr Bogar questioned if the green space in front of Aspen Dental is State owned. Mr. McCarthy replied yes, so it is available for use.

Mr. Spykman indicated it would be nice to clean up Pearl Street and Island Street as well. Mr. Bogar agreed indicating that intersection actually functions as two intersections. Mr. Spykman noted the discussion of a rotary there.

Chair Powers noted the need to accommodate bikes and pedestrians on Island Street because the bridge is narrow and many buildings are just adjacent to the road. Many cyclists used Island Street to get from the bike path to the Winchester Street businesses. Mr. Lussier added that the City has a Complete Streets policy so he believes an opportunity of this project is to comply with that. The policy indicates that right of way should be accessible for all users, including bikes and pedestrians. Mr. Blomquist indicated the City Council adopted that policy last fall. He added that it is something to consider as well as benches and simple gathering spaces along the corridor, particularly along the park.

Mr. McCarthy indicated there is State purchased land that provides opportunities but the historic home remains an issue. However, next to the home there are two secured lots which can be utilized.

Ms. Buzby returned to the issue of the park. She said it is underutilized because there is no parking and it is not easily accessible. She said opening access to the park is an opportunity of this project.

Mr. Minnery indicated the opportunity to improve the aesthetics of Island Street when replacing the bridge. Mr. Blomquist noted that he hopes the original wooden bridge can be emulated when it is replaced. Mr. Bogar asked the weight limit on that bridge. Mr. Blomquist replied six tons. Chair Powers added that while we want to improve aesthetics, they do not want to encourage more traffic on the bridge.

Ms. Buzby indicated another opportunity is Key Road itself. She said a lot of the businesses on Key Road are struggling. If the area itself can work better, maybe Key Road can be revitalized. Mr. Bogar agreed and noted that accessing Key Road during the holidays is difficult. Mr. Blomquist added that signage directing patrons to the businesses on Key Road will be helpful. Mr. McCarthy agreed that these are important points because maintaining economic viability of the zone is key for the project. Chair Powers agreed noting that already 50% of retail business in the country is online. Maintaining the economic viability of that area is critical.

Mr. McCarthy indicated he hopes this discussion will continue at the public listening session to start to build this project. Mr. Lussier added that a key task of the Committee is to reach out to contacts, neighbors, businesses, etc. over the next month to get more opinions and invite stakeholders to the public meeting. They hope to have 50-60 people in attendance and the plan is to break into smaller brainstorming work groups.

9) Project Schedule

Mr. Lussier reviewed the project work schedule:

- October 2015- Survey
- Spring 2016- Resource Identification and Traffic
- August 2, 2016- Steering Committee Kickoff
- September 2016- Public Listening Session (Tentatively September 13)
- September/October 2016- Alternatives Development
- November 2016- Alternatives workshop during which the Committee will review the alternatives and provide feedback to the consultants
- November 2016- January 2017- Consultants refine alternatives to address concerns and comments
- January 2017- Public information meeting to present the refined alternatives
- January/February 2017- The Committee will formally adopt an alternatives recommendation
- February 2017- Presentation of recommended alternative to City Council

Chair Powers questioned if the recommendation goes to the City Council before the MSFI Committee, or directly to the MSFI Committee. Mr. Blomquist replied he is unsure and they will need to discuss that.

Chair Powers asked when this is expected to go to bid. Mr. Blomquist replied that unfortunately in the current State 10-year plan, construction has been pushed to FY 2019. He hopes this fall they will have support to bring it back to FY 2018. The design funding is already available and they have the money to create contract documents but as of right now, they will not be able to begin construction until FY 2019.

10) Next Step: Public Listening Session 9/13/16 (tentative)

All members of the Committee present agreed on September 13 for the public listening session. It will likely begin with an open house at 5:30 PM and formally begin at 6:00 PM. Heberton Hall at the Keene Public Library is reserved for the meeting. Mr. Spykman questioned if Heberton Hall is the best location for the meeting. He suggested finding a location closer to the project so people without transportation can attend or arranging public transportation for those people. Mr. Blomquist and Mr. Lussier agreed to look into a different location. Mr. Lussier will discuss Committee roles at the public information meeting with Chair Powers and Mr. Spykman.

11) Question and Answer

12) Adjourn

Hearing no further business, Chair Powers adjourned the meeting at 7:36 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katie Kibler, Minute Taker