

FINAL MINUTES
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIC PLAN
PORTSMOUTH AVENUE AREA-PUBLIC INPUT SESSION
MAY 4, 2016

1. Call to Order:

The input session was called to order at 6:05 pm by Darren Winham, Economic Development Director.

Handouts: Agenda for this session and EDSP Focus Area Fact Sheet

2. Staff members and Officials Present:

Present were Darren Winham-Economic Development Director, Don Clement-Selectman, and David Pancoast, Recording Secretary. Members of the public were also present and contributed.

3. Introduction by Mr. Winham and Potential Development Parcels:

Mr. Winham reviewed the Fact Sheet for this focus area of Exeter. There are some other competing events in Exeter tonight and other focus areas have more residential components, so there is more interest from homeowners there. This is the fourth of six public input sessions. This one is about Portsmouth Ave, which is mostly built out so probably more about redevelopment than development. It's about a mile of roadway length from downtown to the Stratham line. This area has municipal sewer and water its entire length and it is a very high traffic area. We will follow the agenda and talk about the corridor itself, as to changes and such. If there are to be any improvements to the road, the State would have to be involved as well. It's a major gateway to Exeter. If Stratham had approved water and sewer along their stretch of the same road, this session would likely be a different conversation. He would like to have input

Mr. Clement offered that it is the highest traveled gateway into Exeter by far the busiest. There has been a transition along it from farmland to development and now probably redevelopment. We would need to look at Zoning along there to encourage redevelopment. The Hampton Inn project was originally controversial due to its height of four stories. Now it's not thought of that way. Some folks look at four stories, increases in height and density and want to still keep the area more or less as it is. It's a narrow strip along there. There are some residential neighborhoods on the west side of it.

4. Should further development on Portsmouth Avenue be encouraged?

What would have to change to allow such development? (Building height, maximum density, etc.):

Mr. Winham: Mr. Clement was talking earlier about the transition zone. Walgreen's into town is Zone C-1, and Walgreen's out to Stratham is Zone C-2. The allowed height of buildings is 35 feet in C-2 but can get up to 50 feet with a Special Exception. Should we increase the height allowance? Should we change it so 50 feet does not need a special exception?

Business-owner: What you should do is: whatever businesses want to go into there should be allowed to, don't try to force it or dictate it, let it happen. You don't have the depth off Portsmouth Ave for larger area businesses. Those are small package footprints there, you can't get a mall in there. Developers would buy and redevelop what's there. Height allowance should be the more the better. If the buildings are long, the height doesn't really appear too tall. There was talk about Sylvania's frontage being bought for another purpose but it has limited space due to layout. We don't have large scale margins in the land along there.

A resident asked if there are certain types of developments that are desirable to Exeter. Mr. Winham replied that is exactly what we are trying to figure out. The Murphy Parcel (former Getty Station site) is 0.6 acres, and one developer wanted to go there but he needed a traffic light for his business, so couldn't use it. The companies Exeter is looking at for that parcel is something like Krispy Kreme, Dairy Queen and TGI Friday's, one of which might be good.

Another Resident stated that the first two of those don't seem best for Exeter. It's not really healthy food, I'd want to see something better there. [Discussion on historic district issues-the High St Historic District and the Downtown Historic District meet and touch some of the parcels along Portsmouth Ave at or near the intersection end of it at High St. It was pointed out that near NH Rte. 101 intersection there is a lane divider that affects development there. Mr. Clement agreed that there is no good depth of parcels along Portsmouth Ave. Businesses want to be visible and that's hard, so more likely retail or the types of places that were just mentioned. It was then discussed as to how you look at parking vis-à-vis business visibility, maybe you have to put it behind the stores?

Mr. Winham stated that Murphy Brothers had a proposed building plan for their site for retail on ground floor, offices on second floor and residential units on the third floor. But residential was disallowed there due to the Getty Gas Station history. Mr. Clement added that some residents were concerned about height there on that project too. Now the Murphy's want to do a land-lease. Medical offices have been discussed due to proximity to Exeter Hospital. The yellow house next to Hampton Inn and Suites could not accommodate an Aroma Joes

5. Traffic design, flow and constraints:

Mr. Winham identified the issue of traffic pattern as the next issue for discussion. The traffic pattern along Portsmouth Ave is that it goes from 9 lanes at Rte. 101, down to 3 lanes at High Street and wanted to know if folks that that was an issue? It's laid out purposefully. Mr. Clement responded that the 9 lane area is a state controlled matter for highway access and exiting. As one moves down the avenue toward downtown, it's 4 lanes then narrows to 2 lanes right at High Street. On the west side of Portsmouth Ave., there are about 25 curb cuts for driveways. And there are about 18 on the east side. All those curb cuts are an issue today. Double lanes work well there for that reason.

A resident added that Portsmouth Ave is a funnel that narrows down as you go south. The present Holland Way development will increase the traffic. Certain times of day, drivers have to jockey

for position, not enough width or depth. Don't see what changes can be made to fix that. Going to be congested no matter what. Small buildings can only become small office space. Where to park will be important. If people don't see cars out in front, they think the business is not open. You need depth for front-side parking for it to work. The size of the lots is a constraining issue.

Mr. Winham stated that the former planner had looked at form-based code, but it's not as practical. The "funnel" issue can't be changed. At High St, only one lane in each direction is going to work. I don't know any other way to do it there. Holland Way build-out is an issue. There is no water or sewer there.

Same resident: more activity will affect that bottleneck. If can build out house lots then that might help. Need people here for the town to survive. On outskirts of Portsmouth Ave, it works fine to have no residential, but the rest is a very difficult area.

Mr. Winham added that an issue is the intersection at Rte. 101, with drivers making U-turns there, as there is no way to turn around and they have to go up into Stratham to turn around.

Mr. Clement stated that form-based code changed things. It was an attempt to do zoning for what buildings should look like. There is a difference between C-2 and C-1, there are lots of home owners with commercial aspects to their businesses, and form-based code scared them. But it may still be worthwhile to look at it. The C-1 area is still a pedestrian use area. Many PEA kids walk there. He added that for street-scaping, we need better sidewalks there. The Strategic Plan should call for that.

Mr. Winham turned the discussion to way-finder signs. One resident thought that due to hotels there are people that frequent Portsmouth Ave, but they don't go downtown. A way-finder system to get them to Downtown would help. Mr. Clement agreed there is a lot of potential there for visitors to walk downtown, especially from Hampton Inn-it's a nice pleasant reasonable walk downtown. They can get to Swasey Parkway. Signs could direct them downtown if they want to walk down for dinner

Mr. Winham added that the Board of Selectmen goals session was to get folks to get to downtown. A resident added that in this age of technology, is there anything on website to direct folks downtown rather than town putting up signs everywhere? Mr. Clement said that it's been talked about to take advantage of social media. Website approach is somewhat "old school" now. We need to explore how to get better use and get our message out better. The resident suggested that Mr. Winham talk to businesses to suggest they get their websites up to date. Mr. Winham replied that he had delved into that quite a bit. There could be signs for biking as well, we might be able to improve on the approach.

A resident said that the traffic along there is heavy and cars pass on turn lanes to get ahead of other drivers-very dangerous. The current detour downtown is an issue. She said she doesn't use Portsmouth Ave if she can avoid it. It's a way to get somewhere other than downtown, folks aren't going downtown. Behaviors need to change. Back entrances to downtown are helpful.

Another resident said it took him a year to figure out he didn't need to go downtown to get everywhere in Exeter.

A resident asked about the hospital. Would it expand, could they use these parcels for that? Mr. Winham said that if they are operating in a successful manner, they would likely expand. It would be a fantastic spot for them there, but they haven't said anything yet about it.

6. Other items

Mr. Winham said we've talked about everything on my agenda for this session, but I want to ask you what types of businesses I should go after for this area or any other. A resident stated that she had nothing specific in mind, but doesn't think the town needs another donut shop. We have local ice cream businesses, don't want to take away from them. We need more parking for all this. Mr. Winham said the Planning Board will have this matter on its agenda and that will engender more public input. Please do the survey on this. Mr. Clement said he misses the family restaurants like Friendly's and that Olympia Sports is small and so fits its location there and meets that demand. That size of retail is what we need. Discussion on family restaurants ensued. Dairy Queen has a new operating model, more restaurant than ice cream only, so that also seems to fit. Any interested businesses have to feel it's a fit.

Another resident stated that for clothing purchases everyone needs to go to Newington, etc. Niche markets needed here would be best. Mr. Winham said we've talked to a retail consultant, haven't hired him but this plan likely to recommend we hire someone like that to get certain businesses in here. Interesting demographics re: the downtown's 4.4 % vacancy rate is phenomenally good since it's so low.

A resident then added that they thought that good things will come here. Would like to have some things that neighboring towns don't have. Krispy Kreme might be good-not many around yet. Makes no sense to do same thing as nearby towns. Mr. Clement said that people want Rogan's Bakery back. Breakfast places would be good. A resident spoke about a music venue? Tupelo Music Hall in Londonderry: small venue with small restaurant. Very small. Similar to stuff like at Prescott Park. Not much traffic but brings folks in. Small size is best. Mr. Winham said that was very interesting and he'd look into it.

7. Streetscape along the corridor:

A resident emphasized that street-scaping is important. Businesses want their parking between street and business building. Need visual screens between street and businesses. Stratham attempting to do it now. Could break up visuals, for instance along the Margarita's Restaurant area. Mr. Winham responded that in the past, trees not well received by businesses. Cost of trees is high and vitality of them is complex. Mr. Clement said we can do some things that make it more attractive with landscaping. Can't have complete visibility of businesses. Bank and hotels did some landscaping along there. Want developers do be aware of it. Many will do landscaping

as part of their projects, and are open to it. A resident said that signage is an issue, but that a uniform approach might work.

Mr. Winham spoke about events downtown at the park. A resident stated that we have Rayne's Farm, can we use that as an asset, maybe for a festival or Boy Scout Jamboree? Mr. Clement clarified that it has very limited uses based on purchase money and parking is a big issue there. Large scale events are very tricky. Need to consult with Conservation Commission. Entire agricultural field area is active agriculture and preserved as such. Mr. Winham asked about a community garden or perhaps a dog park? Mr. Clement said there is no town water there, and no clear way to get it. It's leased to agricultural farming business, so you can't interfere, so how would you carve out that new use?

Swasey Park is not used very much. Mr. Clement suggested that Town House Common would be a great music venue. A resident suggested hosting barbecues. Certain nights could take advantage of music programs and such. [There was discussion on those and related possibilities.] A portable stage for music uses was discussed.

8. Adjournment:

There being no further business nor discussion, Mr. Winham adjourned the session at 7:16 pm.

Respectfully submitted by David Pancoast, Recording Secretary.