

City of Warwick Planning Board

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, May 10, 2017

Members Present: Valerie Bataille

Benny Bergantino

Steven Catalano

James Desmarais

Cynthia Gerlach

Steve Horowitz

Philip Slocum

Sue Stenhouse

Member Absent: Vincent Gambardella

Also in attendance: William DePasquale, Jr., AICP, Planning Director

Dan Geagan, Principal Planner

Sue Baker, Business Development Planner

Geoffrey M. Morrison-Logan, Principal, New England Regional

Director, Planning, Urban Design & Landscape Architecture at VHB

Chairman Slocum called the meeting to order at 6:05 pm.

Public Meeting

City of Warwick

City Centre Warwick Design Manual

Mr. Slocum informed those present that the meeting was to consider and vote on adoption of the City Centre Warwick Design Manual, a guidance document for all areas within City Centre Warwick (formerly known as the Warwick Station Development District). On April 20, at an informational public meeting, the Board was presented with the draft Manual for review and comments.

Mr. DePasquale explained that the tenets of design within City Centre Warwick have already been approved by the City Council and the Planning Board through the approval of both the District Zoning Ordinance and Master Plan. The Design Manual does not add new standards or requirements; it is an illustrative, easy “how-to” document that graphically explains the vision for what the district will look like in the future.

Since last month’s Board meeting and a public Open House, all comments from the Board, the public, other City Centre Warwick stakeholders, and City staff have been catalogued and reviewed, with notations relative to whether comments have been incorporated or were already addressed. Mr. DePasquale noted that City Centre Warwick, by capitalizing on the \$273 million investment in transit infrastructure, gives the City the opportunity to reinvent itself by revitalizing the area, creating new housing and mixed-use options, and offering attractive housing options for the Millennial generation.

Mr. Geagan made a PowerPoint presentation that showed progress in the area, from a neighborhood in the late 1990s characterized by an abandoned mill complex, old asphalt plant, a contaminated brownfield site, and a chemical plant littered with old, toxic containers, to a district that's being transformed, through such efforts as a new, thriving restaurant and hotel on the remediated brownfield site; reuse of the mill property; construction of a \$267 million multi-modal facility and grassy, tree-lined area where the chemical plant once stood; ongoing construction of a \$20-million Hyatt on the site of the former asphalt plant; and the purchase and transformation of a residential area that had been boxed in by commercial development. The Coronado Road project is making the area more pedestrian-friendly and attractive, a Tax Stabilization Agreement has been approved by the City, and ongoing marketing and placemaking efforts are bringing attention to City Centre Warwick and attracting the interest of investors and developers.

Mr. Morrison-Logan then led a presentation of the Manual, and explained that, since the draft was presented to the Board last month, further improvements and additions have been made. The overall structure, of four sections – Character Areas and Building Standards, Block Structure and Massing, Street Types and Framework, and Retrofitting Buildings and National Chains – has remained. All sections, with their individual elements – from the definition of the three unique character areas and architectural design standards, to building placement, massing, parking, and lot assembly, to street

types, special roadways, transit nodes, palette of materials and sustainability, to the improvement of existing buildings – together will affect the overall character of the area, transforming it from industrial to a vibrant, mixed use neighborhood.

The Manual's format and design, Mr. Morrison-Logan said, are meant to make it easy for developers, investors, and present property owners to know how to make the area architecturally come to life into a walkable, cohesive district. Chapter overviews explain why the specific features and standards of each element are important, and rich photographs showing Do's and Don'ts to explain these standards make the Manual graphically easy to understand and very intuitive. Mr. Slocum also noted the color coding of each section with a corresponding icon that are used throughout the Manual is something the manual steering committee and the consultants put a great deal of time and effort into, resulting in a major component of the document that pulls all the elements together and make it a truly usable resource.

Among the main updates made to the draft Manual since the April meeting, Mr. Morrison-Logan explained, are more dynamic, legible maps that now also highlight the northeast rail corridor; an extensive expansion of the Sign section, which has tripled in length, with placeholders for additional photos and texts; the addition of page numbers to the table of contents; and about a half dozen pages of line-by-line edits related to formatting, consistency, and grammar.

A significant addition has been the inclusion of a local Case Study in the Retrofitting and National Chains sections. This calls out key improvements that can be made simply but will give a building more architectural significance through such steps as painting, addition of awnings, and landscaping.

Mr. DePasquale noted that the Case Study was an excellent example of how these improvements show that, if everyone within the District has a minimum level of investment, the overall neighborhood will continue to develop the unique character envisioned for City Centre.

Questions from the Board were taken.

Ms. Bataille inquired as to whether parking garages would be entertained. Mr. Morrison-Logan explained that the Manual shows the type of creative structures that would enhance the district, with articulated facades, for example, and retail or other uses on the ground level. Mr. DePasquale noted that as projects like parking garages are developed, the Manual will significantly help the Planning Department, and the Planning Board, since the Design Manual contains specific standards and examples that can be presented to the Board as findings when projects come before them.

Ms. Bataille asked what would happen if a developer felt the concepts in the Manual were too expensive for the project budget and were interpreted only as suggestions that did not have to be followed. Mr.

DePasquale explained that every facet of the Manual is based on City Centre Warwick Zoning Ordinance and Master Plan, which were approved by both the Planning Board and the City Council. The Manual gives one options and ideas as to how to implement the approved standards for development and redevelopment.

Ms. Bataille inquired as to how the Planning Department gets existing owners to make improvements; Mr. DePasquale explained that the Zoning Ordinance contains a provision that speaks to pre-existing, non-conforming uses. Those uses may continue, but if there is a new use for a building, minor upgrades would be required. As was the case with the Case Study property featured in Section 4, the Department would work with the new owners as they make improvements.

Discussion ensued relative to the Checklist, which must be used in conjunction with developing a project and completed by an architect and landscape architect, and will be included as an Appendix to the Manual. Mr. Geagan explained that Ms. Bataille's suggestion to reference Zoning requirements has been included both in the beginning pages of the Manual itself, and the more relevant Zoning standards have been included in the first page of the Checklist, with additional references. At Ms. Bataille's request, a reference to the Master Plan will also be added to the Checklist; the Master Plan is also already referenced within the Manual itself.

Ms. Bataille suggested that checkmarks be moved to the left-hand side of the Checklist. Mr. DePasquale explained that many of the answers require more than a simple yes or no answer. Ms. Stenhouse thought the format as presented is excellent, as it gives people a chance to make notes. The Checklist, she said, is another communications tool that will help with the process.

Mr. DePasquale agreed that it helps both developers and Planning staff alike to readily see what components are missing in a proposed project as the development process moves forward. Mr. Slocum said the Manual and the Checklist will help developers and property owners to grasp the big picture of the vision for City Centre Warwick, something that has been a challenge for both the Planning Department and Planning Board over the past several years.

There being no further questions from the Board, the meeting was opened to invite public comment. Ms. Andrea Ferriera asked when a full-build out might happen and properties taken. Both Mr. Slocum and Mr. DePasquale said that would be difficult to estimate as value is driven by the market. Mr. DePasquale said the City's hope is that there will be some advantage through "soft zoning" incentives. There is value in rezoning, as well, to make it more attractive for potential buyers. Mr. Slocum noted that there are no local, state or federal funds to be used for eminent domain. Mr. DePasquale said the City would be available to facilitate, but the ultimate decision is between an existing property owner and potential buyer.

Ms. Geraldine Winn of Jefferson Boulevard expressed concern about rodents in the neighborhood, especially since the recent demolition of a nearby residence. While this issue is not specific to the Manual, Ms. Winn's comments are appreciated and the City's Property Maintenance Office would be informed of her concern.

With no further comments or questions to be made, the public comment period closed.

Mr. Slocum called for a motion for a vote on the adoption of the City Centre Warwick Design Manual. He informed the Board that the vote would still allow staff the flexibility to make minor, non-substantive changes, such as inclusion of photos, clarification of language, grammatical corrections, and the like.

Ms. Stenhouse made a motion to adopt the City Centre Warwick Design Manual, with the stipulation. Mr. Desmarais seconded the motion. All voted in favor, none opposed.

There being no further business, Ms. Stenhouse made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Mr. Horowitz. All voted in favor; none opposed.

The meeting adjourned at 7:14 p.m.