

City of Woonsocket
Woonsocket Main Street Livability Plan Steering Committee Meeting Minutes
2nd Floor Conference Room, Woonsocket City Hall, 169 Main Street
Wednesday, August 15, 2012
6:00 PM

Present: Jennifer M. Siciliano, City Planner/Deputy Director of Community Planning
George Sargent, Woonsocket Planning Board
Rebekah Speck, RiverzEdge Arts Project
Megan DiPrete, Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission
Matt Wojcik, City of Woonsocket DED/DHS
Marie Deschenes, Le Moulin
Connie Anderson, Stage Right Studio
Chris Carcifero, Woonsocket Planning Board
Joseph Garlick, NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley

Absent: Hannah Garrison, Garrison Design
Meghan Grady, Northern Rhode Island YWCA
Gina Savini, Ciro's Restaurant
Carrie Zaslowsky, Rhode Island Local Initiatives Support Corporation

Guests: Jeff Emidy, Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission
Tom Sprague, Museum of Broadcast Technology
Edward Brown, RIPTA
Joan LeFrancois, Woonsocket Resident
Lambri Zerva, RI Department of Transportation
Thomas Queenan, RI Department of Transportation
Steven Cecil, The Cecil Group
Eunice Kim, The Cecil Group
Chelsea Siefert, RI Statewide Planning

1. Call to Order:

Meeting was called to order.

2. Attendance Review:

See above for attendance. Quorum was established

3. Approval of Minutes:

MOTION by Mr. Sargent, seconded by Ms. Deschenes to accept meeting minutes for the June 7, 2012 and July 16, 2012 meeting of the Woonsocket Main Street Livability Plan Steering Committee. The MOTION was unanimously approved.

4. The Cecil Group Progress to Date:

Mr. Cecil presented the progress to date on the Plan. He stated that the Cecil Group was gathering census, demographic and zoning information.

Additional people entered the meeting and there was a round of introductions.

Mr. Cecil stated that the Livability Plan focuses on land use, zoning, vehicle traffic, parking, and other modes of transportation to create a healthy, revitalized Main Street Area. The Cecil Group is working with Fitzgerald & Halliday (FHI) and Alta Planning and Design. These consultants will attend different meetings. FHI is committed to create sustainable traffic planning. Alta is known for their pedestrian and bike environments. On Friday, they are kicking off their traffic and circulation meetings with the City. There are also two partners, RiverzEdge Arts Project and the YWCA, who will provide additional assistance in creation of the Plan. The Cecil Group will be teaching the students at RiverzEdge how to do parking inventory surveys.

Mr. Cecil went over the existing conditions in Woonsocket. He stated that not unlike many industrial manufacturing communities, the City has declined in population. In 1950, Woonsocket had 50,211 people and in 2010, it had 41,186. The average household size has gotten smaller. The amount of autos per person has gone up and peaked about 5 years ago. There are 1.1 cars per driver. There has been an increase in diverse populations including Asian, Hispanic and African American populations.

There has been a decline in manufacturing jobs and rise in service jobs mirroring the rest of the country and New England. There are relatively low incomes in Woonsocket. The incomes are about 75% of the State's average median household income. Since this is the case, there is a decline in disposable income. In this country, there has been a significant shift in retail. Back 25 to 30 years ago, 1/3 of retail was major chains, 1/3 was regional operations and 1/3 was mom and pop stores. Today, 80% are national chains, there are almost no regional chains and 20% are mom and pop stores. In the past, Downtown Woonsocket was filled with a few nationals (like a Woolworths), but most were regional shops and a few mom and pop shops. Mr. Cecil said that we need to think about this when we think about how we are going to fill the vacancies on Main Street. The ability to fill up these spaces is dramatically decreased unless you pick up a special niche.

The mix of rental housing verses home ownership (which is used to see how stable a community is) is not a dramatically rental in the City. The City has significant home ownership. Ms. Speck asked how the Woonsocket ratio compares to other communities in Rhode Island. Mr. Cecil that is something he can check on. There is no study that shows what the perfect percentage should be, but if you ask people involved in community revitalizations, they say a 50/50 mix is a perfectly good mix. There are advantages to having rental housing and it is possible to have too little. Woonsocket has a little more rental housing than home ownership at 60%. It isn't dramatic. It depends where that rental housing is situated whether it is located throughout a community or is it all on one side and all on another.

Mr. Cecil presented a map showing the Main Street area under study. It includes the traditional downtown area and some of the residential district nearby. Mr. Cecil stated that when they study traffic and circulation, they will include the nearby streets to the study area. The land use analysis will use the outlined Main Street area. The outlined area was chosen due to the current zoning areas already existing. In the study area, there is mixed-use and quite a few parking lots and vacant areas. The housing types are varied and not uniform. There can be a single-family house next to a two-family next to a four family. There are some outstanding historic properties. There are the run-of-the-mill old mill properties. There are mills converted into residential use. The City owns a significant amount of properties in the downtown. This can provide for future development and redevelopment.

One goal for the consultant team is to examine the quality of the “urban fabric”. There needs to be lots of connections and interactions between different parts. As you start losing the urban fabric (missing teeth), it no longer functions and it pulls apart. Much of the urban fabric in Downtown Woonsocket is still intact and that is valuable. There are relatively few new buildings. The KFC is one exception with its auto oriented national coming into the downtown that looks nothing like the rest of the downtown. More of this can lead to a shift in type and fabric. Mr. Cecil stated, as you think about redevelopment, think about maintaining the existing urban fabric.

The Main Street parking supply is relatively under occupied. The consultants will study if there is really a parking problem or is there a problem with people not being able to park exactly where they want to park. They will study actual parking demand versus supply. Mr. Cecil stated that Main Street area has a fair amount of on-street parking. The Main Street area has diverse opportunities for parking. Downtowns that have more choices of different types of parking are most successful than having a single concentrated place.

Regarding traffic in the Main Street area, it has significant amounts of lanes moving north-south, and the City has closely spaced bridges. The consultants will examine whether the City needs all these lanes. The consultants looked over the Court Street Bridge at 6 PM and there was no one on it (Mr. Cecil showed a photograph). Mr. Cecil stated that at 5 PM there probably were more cars. Main Street is a local road and not a pass-through to another destination. There is very little cut through traffic. In the area, there are many one way streets that have a negative impact on Main Street. The consultants will be looking to understand the two-ways roads on Main Street. In regard to streetscape, the consultants will examine the width of sidewalks in relation to creating a pedestrian-friendly environment. The Main Street area has no fundamental deficiency; there are no missing sidewalks. The widths don't seem to be problematic.

The Main Street is very defined and intact so much so that the parking lots stick out like soar thumbs. Mr. Cecil stated that there is a very significant degree change between the River and Main Street. This is not that unusual in New England or Rhode Island. The mills were trying to be as close to the River as they could and the Main Street didn't want to be right on top of the mills; they were separated. What has happened was that the connector road (Truman Drive)

has really reinforced the spilt. It can be a real barrier to create a pedestrian-friendly area with significant grade change. The Market Square fabric is very good and Monument Square a little less clear how it comes together. The neighbor fabric is quiet charming with its steep streets and slight bends in the roads. There are some outstanding historic buildings mixed in. If this were sitting in the middle of Marblehead, tourists would be walking around taking pictures and thinking they want this for their town. Newly designed towns are trying to find out how they can make their community look like this.

The zoning on Main Street is broken into five (5) different districts. The largest district is C-1. The consultants will examine the intention of these districts. Do the boundaries of these districts make sense for the future vision of the downtown? Traditional Euclidean zoning stated you don't want certain uses next to another. You don't want horse rendering next to single-family homes. Sometime you do want certain uses next to others in the downtown. This is why you need a vision for the downtown to image what you want in the Main Street area.

Mr. Cecil asked if anyone had any comments or questions.

Ms. DiPrete asked if the consultant have levels of service within the study area. Do you know of any choke points? Whether it is C or D? Mr. Cecil stated that they don't have that information. They haven't started traffic study and under the scope of services, they won't be able to build a complete model. Mr. Cecil said he didn't observe anything that is problematic in terms of traffic engineering. Traffic engineers typically use an hour long period for levels of service and he only sees congestion for 5 or 10 minutes. So congestion won't be captured in hour-long chunks. The consultants will do some basic traffic counts. It looks like the amount of cars isn't that great.

Ms. Speck asked how will you capture pedestrian hazard problems. Mr. Cecil said they would use direct observation, sight lines, and where crosswalks are configured. Ms. Speck talked about possibly getting a camera to see the interaction between pedestrian and cars. She said there are issues with snow on the sidewalks in the winter. Mr. Cecil said that we have to think about standards and where there might be issues. Woonsocket Main Street has adequate width in most cases, but there are issues with crosswalks.

Ms. Siciliano stated that she should send drawing of where the future bikeway and sharrows are going.

Mr. Cecil discussed vision statement that has been crafted previously. He fills it needs more detail of what the vision should be and it is realistically achievable. There are important choices to be made which will drive streetscape and zoning. We need a clear vision to move ahead.

Ms. Siciliano said the vision came from Ms. Morisseau and asked Ms. Speck to explain. Ms. Speck said that Ms. Morisseau and Mr. Fesmire put a vision statement together about two (2) years ago when working with the Main Street Riverfront Initiation and Woonsocket Advisory Group (part of the Northern Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce) and other stakeholders. It

was complete with the Wayfinding Master Plan process. Mr. Cecil said it was a very good statement and let's take it to the next level. We might find that the community does have a common vision.

Mr. Cecil provided examples of various municipalities and their strategies for revitalization. Case studies were discussed about Providence, RI, Pawtucket, RI, Portsmouth, NH, Lowell, MA, Salem, MA, Waltham, MA, New Bedford, MA and Holyoke, MA.

5. Observation of Key Main Street Issues:

Discussion included the positive business atmosphere in Market Square since the development of River Falls Restaurant 3 years ago, trying to encourage indigenous art in the City, bringing a university or a university annex to Woonsocket, issues with parking during theater events or for Chan's shows, and problems with the rooming houses and criminal activity on Arnold Street.

6. Pedestrian Advisory Council (PAC):

No one discussed this topic due to Megan Grady's absence.

7. Planning Upcoming Workshops

The workshop was determined to be on September 19th, 2012 from 6 to 8:30 PM possibly at RiverzEdge Arts Project. Mr. Garlick from NeighborWorks offered to provide food for the event.

8. Agenda for Next Meeting

The next meeting will discuss the results of the September 19th workshop and how the plan will progress.

9. Adjournment

MOTION by Mr. Sargent, seconded by Ms. Anderson to adjourn the meeting. The MOTION was unanimously approved. The meeting adjourned at 8:05 PM.