

Mill Site Study Committee

Meeting minutes - October 14, 2009

Present: **Committee Members:** Stephanie Cronin, Albert Harris, Roger Goscombe, Joan Ladik, Ken Morgan, Matt Nesbit, Georgette Rogers, Jeff Sauer, Joseph Sergi, and Stephen Themelis
Members absent: Kurt Amidon, Ronald Karr, and Sharon Santy
Also present: Geoffrey Morrison-Logan of VHB, Russ Burke of BCS, Don Eriksson

Mr. Sergi called the meeting to order at 7:12pm. Mr. Burke joined the meeting at 7:25.

VBH Presentation: Mr Morrison-Logan reviewed the presentation from the last meeting, highlighting the regulatory and zoning constraints of the Mill Site. This was followed by a presentation on how VHB would move forward with Mill Site planning, beginning with certain assumptions that would otherwise be outside the scope of the analysis:

- 1) Underground pipes and channels will be appropriately filled or removed.
- 2) Soil will be managed appropriately and any necessary clean-up work will be done to whatever level is needed for the type of development proposed.
- 3) Sewer and electrical easements will be maintained and the railroad easements will be abandoned.
- 4) There will be no further encroachment into the existing undisturbed riverfront.
- 5) The FEMA Flood Plain boundary is assumed to be based on existing conditions.
- 6) There will be no filling of wetlands (Mr. Morrison-Logan noted that the entire site is in an ACEC, or Area of Critical Environmental Concern) and that there are no unknown wetlands on the site.
- 7) Species habitat is unknown and is assumed to have no impact on development.

Mr. Morrison-Logan said that these assumptions will, in part, dictate the buildable area of the site. Ms Ladik asked what the total site area after accounting for these assumptions. Mr. Morrison-Logan said he didn't have that figure yet, but assumed it would be reduce the buildable area to 80-90% of the total site area. He said he will have the figure by the next meeting. He went on to discuss some of the specific site constraints:

- 1) Limited frontage: There is very little Main St. frontage to the site and that is a drawback for many retailers. Mr. Sergi added that a couple of nationally known retailers have looked at the site and walked away due to the limited frontage. Mr. Morrison-Logan asked rhetorically "what are the views looking at the site?" "How could the site be connected to Railroad Sq and rail trail?" Mr. Morrison-Logan suggested that, for development analysis purposes, the entire Mill Site should be thought of as three separated parcels: 1) the portion of the site that is viewable from Main St., 2) the core of the site in the middle section of the property, and 3) the back parcel that is separated from the rest of the site by a drainage culvert for Varnum Brook and Mass Electric power easements. Mr. Morrison-Logan suggested that a development goal would be to improve the first 100 feet from Main St. to the best extent possible.
- 2) One-third of Town's sewer management goes through the site and that may affect foundation placement.
- 3) Traffic: While a dedicated traffic study is beyond the scope of work for which VHB was hired, the firm did monitor traffic visually. Mr. Morrison-Logan said the company found a large volume of traffic going by the Main St. entrance to the site at an average speed of 20-25 MPH. That speed seemed appropriate, but should be enforced, particularly due to the Mill St./Main St. intersection just passed the Mill Site. Given the volume of traffic, the existing site driveway will probably not to be recommended in the final development

analysis. Although, limited access to the site could use that exiting drive on a right in/right out limited access basis. The Mill/Main intersection needs better operations. Left turns from Mill St. onto Main St. are a danger. Mr. Morrison-Logan said that more study of the traffic patterns is necessary and that he will talk more about traffic at the next meeting. Mr. Sauer noted that the covered bridge construction and the closure of Groton St between Railroad Sq. and Mill St. has caused a lot of extra traffic through that Mill/Main intersection and that the volume should decrease dramatically once the new bridge is constructed and Groton St. is open for traffic again some time within the next 2-3 months. Mr. Morrison-Logan said that they would re-visit the traffic analysis with that in mind.

Mr. Morrison-Logan then began a discussion to generate three development scenarios for the Mill Site:

- 1) Scenario 1 would be based on Bartram & Cochran Market Study Findings with a total of 105,500– 134,500 sq. ft. of mixed-used commercial, retail, and residential development.
- 2) Scenario 2 and Scenario 3 would range from a more modest version of Scenario 1, with smaller scale development and more open space to an “outside the box” development that might include an indoor or outdoor theater, recreation space, accompanying commercial and retail, a riverwalk, a trail connection.

A discussion followed of the various alternatives.

Mr. Themelis asked what would happen if we didn't meet 43D goals given that 43D grant money is being used to do this development analysis. Mr. Sergi said that Scenarios 1 and 2 are in the spirit of 43D, so talking about a third scenario option with much less development would be fine and that there should be no penalty to the town. He suggested that the State is more likely to simply want the site cleaned up in whatever way is most practicable. Ms. Rogers discussed a Boston Globe article about cottage communities and cluster zoning. Mr. Goscombe says the cottage community terminology is futuristic, but may become more common given that there is a need for smaller cottage style dwellings for seniors and younger people in the wake of 20 years of large “McMansion” style building in the area. Mr. Goscombe agreed that this type of residential might be an excellent direction to go in, noting that it's a little out of the box because it's not typical Massachusetts development. Ms Ladik agreed smaller scale residential makes sense.

Ms. Cronin offered a 4th Scenario where the Town would buy the Mill Site and it turn it into open space. Mr. Sergi noted that at this time the Town must be thinking first about its operation budget and the likely budget shortfall. Mr. Goscombe suggested that an appraisal of the site value would be helpful so that we know the type of money it would take to purchase it, suggesting that it may have less open market value than is being suggested.

Mr. Sergi encouraged the discussion to return to the development scenarios, suggesting that we might view them as Scenario 1 being a developer-led option, Scenario 2 being a developer plus Town partnership, and Scenario 3 being a town led project. Mr Morgan suggested that a developer would be looking for bang for the buck and that means high residential. He would prefer a more middle of the road development and asked what the Town could do to help control the process. Mr. Sergi said that the Town could theoretically enter into a conditional P&S that required the current owner do any necessary environmental clean up, then either find a developer willing to work under the Town's desired parameters for the site or potentially sell off part of the site to fund the overall purchase. Mr. Burke said that the development analysis would do the due diligence on the site and that having a report supported by the Town would take the uncertainty out of it for a potential developer. He further suggested that Scenario 1 is more than possible on the site physically. Open space might be preferable, he said, but at what fiscal impact? He noted that open space doesn't come without costs, such as mowing, plowing, police monitoring and liability for skateboarding, kids hanging-out, etc.

Mr. Goscombe noted that there are really no options for off-site parking near the site for any potentially large-scale municipal town field type usage and that all parking for whatever happens there would need to be onsite. As a real estate professional, he said he can't sell it without parking. Ms. Ladik asked about underground development or underground parking. Mr. Morrison-Logan said that VHB assumes that would not be possible due to underground water levels and other constraints.

Mr. Nesbit asked which residential square footage number from the Market Study was being considered for Scenario 1: 47,000, 61,500, or 76,000? Mr. Morrison-Logan said that was part of the discussion.

Mr. Sergi said that an indoor theater could show B movies and that some other towns have had successes with such theaters. An outdoor theater might be used for a concert series by the river, supplemented with associated retail. Mr. Morrison-Logan said that maybe what falls off moving from Scenario 1 to 2 is the residential component.

The discussion then focused to the possible entertainment component and whether a theater, rink, park would get enough use. Mr. Burke suggested using the term "arts & cultural" instead of entertainment, noting both that that is the trend in the vernacular and that there are broader possibilities. Several committee members discussed arts & cultural components combined with appropriate retail or commercial space, thus blending the concepts of Scenario 2 and Scenario 3.

In preparation for the First Public Meeting on November 18, the Committee reaffirmed the presentation of three possible development scenarios for public discussion.

- 1) Scenario 1 would follow the recommendations of the Market Study (as above)
- 2) Scenario 2 would center around arts & culture, possibly with an indoor or outdoor theater with supporting retail and food service establishments.
- 3) Scenario 3 would focus more on open space and possible civic uses. Although the Committee will continue refine Scenario 3 at the November 5 meeting and prior to the Public Meeting on November 18. In order to develop the side "outside the box" Mr Burke suggests the history of the site with 21st century mill housing clean industry. Mr Goscombe agrees that we've considered that and if it works, great, but if not we're back where we started. Mr. Sergi notes that it would close off the riverfront.

Approval of Minutes from October 1, 2009: On a motion from Mr. Nesbit, seconded by Ms. Ladik, the minutes from the October 1 meeting were approved unanimously as drafted.

Action Items:

Item #1 – Public Meeting: Mr. Sergi will confirm the availability of the Senior Center for the November 18 public meeting

Item #2 – Flyers: Ms Rogers will create a flyer to be handed out at the Special Town Meeting on October 26 to encourage citizens to attend the public meeting. Mr. Sergi and Marketing Sub-Committee will work with Ms. Rogers to confirm the wording of the flyer.

Next Meeting: Thursday, November 5, 2009, at 7:00pm.

Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 9:38pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeff Sauer, Mill Site Study Committee Secretary