



CITY OF NORTH ADAMS, MASSACHUSETTS

Redevelopment Authority

REGULAR MEETING

MINUTES

December 9, 2019

Members present Chairman Paul Hopkins, David Bond, Kyle Hanlon, and Michael Leary

Members absent

Others present William Meranti, Building Inspector, and Zac Feury, Project Coordinator

Call to order 5:30 pm

Public hearings new business

- **Office of Community Development description of URP expiration and 2016 assessment**

Chairman Paul Hopkins opened the public hearing to Zac Feury. Mr. Feury explained the plan of the Western Gateway Urban Heritage State Park Urban Renewal Project and the plan that goes with it that makes up the URP zoning district. The plan was adopted in 1981 and set to expire in July 2021. One of the benefits of having an Urban Renewal Plan is that as a municipality, we receive an exemption from Chapter 30B procurement laws; the acquisition and disposition of real property. When the plan expires, that exemption also expires. In 2016, looking ahead, the city worked with DSE Group to do an assessment of the project area and the plan. The assessment of the area found that the underlying conditions for the designated open space were still largely in effect. Those underlying conditions include lack of connectivity in downtown; irregular lot shapes; presence of natural and manmade barriers of the Hoosic River; railroad tracks; the Hadley Overpass; underutilized buildings that do not conform to modern business requirements; poor visibility from nearby amenities and public rights of way; as well as a number of needed infrastructure improvements including the footbridge, the vehicular bridge over Christopher Columbus Drive and other pedestrian enhancements.

Based on the fact that the underlying conditions that were present in 1981 were still present at the time of the assessment in 2016 and the potential loss of the Chapter 30B exemption, the DSE assessment recommended that the city seek to extend the duration of the plan from 2021 to 2031 as well as extend the project area boundaries and update the plan's vision for Heritage State Park. If you look at the map provided that shows the current boundaries of the project area – extending West Main Street at the northern tip, and High Street all the way to the left. It incorporates the properties off of High Street and Furnace Street as well as Heritage State Park, the Sons of Italy parcel and then another chunk to the south and down State Street. That is the existing project area and the current UR-2 zoning district. The DSE recommended that in the next phase, the boundaries be extended to include parcels that are already owned by the Redevelopment Authority. There are two parcels; they're called the Northern Node, just off the Northern Node of the project area. The DSE suggests incorporating all of parcel 151-059 in between the river, the railroad, and the southern end of the boundaries. They also recommend extending it over to incorporate the parcels along American Legion Drive below the Holiday Inn.

Mr. Feury stated that he wanted to explain what's involved by amending the plan per the recommendations of the assessment. An extension of boundaries of an urban renewal project constitutes a major plan change according to

the regulations that govern urban renewal. A major plan change request requires that a large document of 13 elements be submitted to the Department of Housing and Community Development. Some of the elements to be included are: an executive summary; description of characteristics of the area; objectives of extending the boundaries; any acquisitions, if any; plan for relocation; site preparation involved; public improvements; parcel disposal; redevelopers obligation timeframe; evidence of citizen participation; and various municipal improvements.

The citizen participation piece requires evidence of public outreach, evidence of a public hearing, a Planning Board determination of alignment with community plans that extending these boundaries fits in with the city's comprehensive plan or other municipal plan and then finally, City Council approval.

- **NARA/OCD discussion of URP**

Mr. Feury explained that since this is going to expire, he wanted to get an idea on what the Redevelopment Authority's take on the potential extension of duration and extension of boundaries.

Chairman Hopkins requested questions from the board. Mr. Leary stated that he remembered the original plan going back to the Alcombright administration was originally to allow the URP to expire and that everything would be placed in the auspices of the city and the Planning Board. Mr. Feury stated that allowing the project area plan to expire needs to be a carefully considered decision because a lot can be lost. Because much of what is in the project area is owned either by the Redevelopment Authority or the city, losing the Chapter 30B exemption can make disposing/transferring/selling of those properties to another developer much more difficult as there is a lot more involved when procurement law applies and it could put the city at a future disadvantage.

Mr. Bond inquired about what would be gained by adding parcels. Mr. Feury explained that if the parcel is owned by the city or the Redevelopment Authority, the gain would be the Chapter 30B exemption so that way the parcel can be sold in an expedited fashion and doesn't have to go through the entire 30B process with RFP's – it can be negotiated. And possibly when you have the URP designation you can open further opportunities for grants etc., although that is not guaranteed.

Mr. Bond stated that a few of these parcels are currently privately owned and inquired about whether there are there any benefits to the property owners being in this entity as opposed to not being in this entity. Mr. Feury stated that there were not any benefits to his knowledge. Chairman Hopkins inquired about disadvantages to the private owners. Mr. Feury stated that yes; there could be disadvantages to a private property owner having their property in an urban renewal area. The property would have to be declared decadent.

Mr. Bond inquired about whether their property values would be affected. Mr. Feury stated that he didn't think so but he couldn't say. Being in an urban renewal area does allow a governmental body to acquire the parcel more easily. There can be disadvantages but there doesn't have to be. He is not entirely sure what the recommendation is for including those parcels on American Legion Drive as it wasn't explained in the assessment.

Mr. Bond stated that there is one parcel owned by the city that is sandwiched between privately owned parcels. If he were a private business owner, he's not sure he would be in favor.

Mr. Leary inquired about whether the business owners were made aware of this information in 2016 when the assessment was done. Mr. Feury stated that he couldn't say because that was before he started.

Mr. Feury explained that the first consideration should be whether the plan should be extended. If the answer to that question is yes, the next consideration should be whether the boundaries should be extended. If the answer to that question is yes, then the next question should be *how* should the boundaries be extended. Mr. Feury explained that he thought it would make sense to stay on the west side of the railroad tracks and not incorporate private property. Mr. Bond agreed and inquired whether retaining this entity with the parcels that are currently in its jurisdiction have the potential of doing better than not. Mr. Feury stated that anything that expedites the process to move properties from city control to private control/having the ability to do that in an expedited fashion is an advantage to the city and the Redevelopment Authority. Mr. Bond agreed.

Chairman Hopkins requested a timeline of the things they need to be aware of. Mr. Feury stated that the request for major plan changes would need to be submitted prior to the expiration date of July 2021. He stated that this would be an ongoing project for the Office of Community Development. It would require a lot of coordination with the property owners and the community, etc.

Mr. Bond inquired about what the scope would be to retain the current boundaries and extend the timeframe. Mr. Feury stated that it would be significantly less.

Chairman Hopkins inquired about what happens at the state level after local boards and City Council approve. Mr. Feury stated that he was not sure. Chairman Hopkins stated that he didn't know if it had to go through a legislative process. Mr. Feury stated that it did not; it would be submitted to the Department of Housing and Community Development for their approval.

Chairman Hopkins requested questions from members of the gallery. Colleen Taylor inquired about whether we could apply before the expiration date. Mr. Feury stated that yes, the plan would be to apply before the plan expires. Ms. Taylor inquired about what the cost would be. Mr. Feury stated that the only investment would be staff time, no additional consultant investment.

Chairman Hopkins requested any other questions from the board. No further questions.

- **NARA vote on recommendation to amend URP**

Chairman Hopkins inquired about the decision timeline and whether it would be okay to give a decision at the next meeting in January. Mr. Feury confirmed that that would be amenable. Chairman Hopkins confirmed with the board and stated that there are no motions on the floor and requested any other questions.

Mr. Bond inquired about what would happen at the next meeting in terms of a decision of boundaries, etc. Mr. Leary and Mr. Feury clarified that the board would be making a recommendation at the next meeting.

Adjournment Chairman Hopkins requested a motion to adjourn. Member Hanlon made a motion to adjourn. Member Leary seconded the motion. Meeting adjourned at 5:49 pm.

Respectfully submitted,



Michelle Ells
Redevelopment Authority Secretary