



Town of Manchester Sustainability Commission

Wednesday, February 21st, 2024

6:30 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

Location: Zoom Virtual Meeting

MINUTES

Attendees: Gene DeJoannis (Co-Chair), Geoff King (New Member), Oksan Bayulgen, Terry Robinson, William Chudzik, Jeffrey Schegelmilch, Patrick McKee, Rebecca Fowler (New Member), Shannon Baldassario, Victoria McBrien (New Member)

Absent: Peg Hackett (Chair), Zachary DelGaizo, Paris Bazemore

Attendees (Other): Austin Murray, Rachel Schnabel, Emma Petersen, Jeff LaMalva, Dr. Maria Cruz

1. Introductions

a. Call to Order

Co-Chair Gene DeJoannis called the meeting to order at 6:35pm.

b. Public Comment

None.

c. Communications

None.

d. Adoption of the January Meeting Minutes [Town of Manchester, CT Public Documents \(ecode360.com\)](#)

Oksan Bayulgen moved to approve the January meeting minutes.

Seconded by Shannon Baldassario.

In Favor: Oksan Bayulgen, Terry Robinson, William Chudzik, Jeffrey Schegelmilch, Patrick McKee, Shannon Baldassario

Opposed: None.

Abstain: None.

The motion passed.

2. Swearing In of Commission Members

Town Clerk Dr. Maria Cruz was in attendance to swear in three new Commissioners and any other Commissioner who had not recently taken the Oath of Office. Those taking the oath were:

- Geoff King
- Rebecca Fowler
- Victoria McBrien
- Patrick McKee

The oath was administered to the four Commissioners listed above.

Gene DeJoannis informed the Commission that another potential new member—Edwina Mik-Lumor—may be joining the Commission next month. Dr. Cruz instructed Austin Murray to direct Edwina to the Town Clerk’s office or to call in, as the oath can also be administered over the phone or via video conference call if needed.

3. Downtown Manchester Improvements Project Presentation & Discussion

Emma Petersen, the Town’s Principal Comprehensive Planner, and Jeff LaMalva, the Town Engineer, were both in attendance to give a presentation on some of the features of the Downtown Manchester Improvements Project. The Commission was asked to provide feedback to the concepts presented to them.

Emma presented the high-level goals that the streetscape enhancements are aiming to achieve, and explained the timeline and how currently the Town is in a period of public engagement, with multiple meetings and open houses for business owners and the general public scheduled in the coming weeks.

Project goals included: safety improvements (Main Street being a high crash corridor), connectivity and accessibility (adhering to the Town’s Complete Streets policy), a modernization of the infrastructure downtown (traffic signals, etc.), and enhancing economic vitality (increasing foot traffic, etc.).

Emma also explained two direct connections to the Sustainability that appear in the plan: first, the planting of native species of trees to replace the existing street trees, which are inappropriate species for the area and are overgrown. Also, there may be a place for concepts like rain gardens which can help with stormwater management. She also explained how the Complete Streets policy can encourage the reduction of vehicle miles traveled and therefore less greenhouse gas emissions produced. Before Jeff presented the specifics of the plan, Emma encouraged the Commission to consider the follow questions: how can the project best achieve the goals outlined above, what amenities would Commissioners like to see more of downtown, and how can the Town better communicate its messaging and continue a dialogue on this project and these issues moving forward?

Town Engineer Jeff LaMalva gave a presentation of a conceptual plan for downtown that is purposefully generic until a more concrete vision emerges. Jeff first discussed the roundabouts, which are proposed to improve road safety, as CROG did rate this corridor as the number one crash corridor in the region. In a separate statewide survey, the intersections being considered were both in the top 3% for crashes. Jeff further explained that roundabouts reduce the number of collision points (32 in a four-way standard intersection, 8 in a roundabout), change the types of collisions happening so that they are less likely to cause injury or fatality, and reduce the speed while improving flow, since as drivers approach a roundabout, their speed reduces to approximately 15-20 miles per hour. Jeff also clarified that the proposed roundabouts for Main Street will be 20% larger than the ones in Glastonbury, and will be designed for 67-foot-long tractor trailers and any emergency vehicle that may require access.

Gene DeJoannis inquired about the installation of strobe lighting to make pedestrians attempting to cross or navigate the roundabout safer, to which Jeff LaMalva responded that they would be proposing those types of crossings, although they are not required.

Jeff LaMalva then explained the concept of a “road diet”, which in this instance would mean taking Main Street from the existing four lanes and reducing it to three lanes. This will improve safety by adding

dedicated turning lanes for access to side streets, which eliminates the weaving that is often conducted at the moment. New traffic signals (“adaptive signals”) would also be included in the plan, that would have traffic moving slower but more smoothly, thereby also reducing emissions.

Parking was discussed, and Jeff LaMalva explained that there had been public misconceptions about the number of parking spaces included in the plan. The proposal shown to the Commission did not result in a net loss of parking. There is an option for parallel parking to be included in the improvements, which would include the benefit of an additional 12 feet of “flex area” in front of businesses, that could be used for outdoor dining, retail, benches, etc. With that change there would be a loss of parking, of roughly 20%. However, there would still be over 1,000 public parking spaces downtown. Terry Robinson asked Jeff if the switch to parallel parking was an “all or nothing” proposition, or if certain blocks and business owners could opt in or out of the proposed changes. Jeff answered that the configuration could change on a block-by-block basis. Based on the open houses conducted so far, Jeff has heard that most would like the angled parking. Terry Robinson added that he would like the Town to maximize the potential for green space downtown but understands the concerns of businesses. He asked if there was a process to decide the balance between those two ideas. Jeff responded and said that businesses were the “primary” stakeholders, but input from the public is also very important.

Jeff LaMalva then spoke about bike lanes, and how there is currently no real safe way to bike on Main Street. The plan for downtown proposes a “cycle track”, which is a ten-foot wide bike lane, very similar to the Charter Oak Greenway, located off road between the sidewalk and road, primarily on the west side, where there aren't as many conflicts with parking vehicles and pedestrians.

Jeff LaMalva also discussed the anticipated impacts to the annual Road Race and Cruisin’ on Main event. He explained that some of the splitter islands could be removable near the roundabout that is at the start of the race, as with the dividers between the cycle track and intersections. He also explained that the road will still be wide enough to accommodate Cruisin’ on Main, with three 11 ft lanes, a two-foot shoulder, plus a five foot shoulder on the side with the angled parking.

Oksan Bayulgen asked if there were any anticipated changes to the rules governing the use of the space outside of businesses on Main Street as a result of this project—for outdoor dining or other incentives? Emma Petersen responded that those conversation would happen should there be additional sidewalk space incorporated. Emma also added that the reason so much of this discussion has been focused on the business perspective is a result of the timeline, but two upcoming open houses on March 7th and 12th will be embers of the public for additional feedback.

Gene DeJoannis asked if there was any thought given to diverting through traffic down side streets like Spruce Street. Jeff LaMalva responded that there had been discussions about that, but because they are residential areas there was little appetite for that type of diversion. He reiterated that with the road diet and adaptive signals traffic will still flow smoothly.

Gene DeJoannis commented that it would be great to see more seating options and other amenities. Emma Petersen responded that they are actively soliciting feedback on amenities such as seating, public art, lighting, etc.

Jeff LaMalva also made the point that much of the infrastructure downtown was older and last improved in the 1990s. Many of those things (streetlights, signals, sidewalks, etc.) will need to be replaced in the coming years anyway, so why not make it one large project and utilize as much federal and other outside funding as possible along the way. Also, most of the work will be above ground, which will minimize disruptions to businesses.

Gene DeJoannis suggested communicating with the Historical Society on ways to highlight the significance of downtown generally and at specific locations.

Rebecca Fowler suggested signage that could highlight the rationale or sustainability-related elements of some of the improvements to the area, such as signs on new trees that were planted to replace non-native species. Rebecca also asked if there were plans for bike lights/crossing signals where the lanes intersected with the road. Jeff LaMalva answered that the plan will most likely incorporate something to that effect.

Rebecca also asked about EV charging infrastructure, to which Jeff responded that there would definitely be space made for those installations as part of the plan.

Victoria McBrien asked if other sustainability improvements were being considered as part of this large-scale plan, and if this could be viewed as an opportunity to make improvements to other elements of downtown, such as energy efficient lighting. Jeff LaMalva answered that all lights will be replaced with more modern LEDs, and there have been discussions around things like solar panels on bus shelters. Victoria also added that the parking lot behind the Army Navy Club could be used for solar in some capacity. She also suggested highlighting that the improvements will help improve air quality via less idling and additional green space—helping people connect those things to the wider environment is important.

Gene DeJoannis asked if there was any consideration given to using “smarter” LED lighting as part of the project—lights that can detect movement or traffic and respond with turning on or brightening/dimming the wattage as needed. Jeff LaMalva responded that many of the LEDs in use now have the ability to change the levels of lighting.

Oksan Bayulgen asked about the anticipated budget for the project, and where the funds would be coming from. Jeff LaMalva responded that it was difficult to budget, as there isn't yet clarity on which of the proposed elements of the plan are going to move forward. Current estimates are between \$15 – 20 million, with \$7.5 million from the State via the Community Investment Fund, and Emma Petersen also added that other grants will be pursued.

William Chudzik asked if, due to downtown becoming a more desirable area in the coming years, there was any thought given to planning for a parking garage or similar structure. Jeff LaMalva responded that because there were already 1,000 existing spaces that was currently not in the plan, but there are Town-owned lots (south side of Bennett) that could be turned into a 38 or 68-space parking.

Victoria McBrien asked if the group ever considered limiting the construction of new parking in order to encourage the use of buses and other modal shift, or to reroute buses from major apartment buildings to downtown, or to have a shuttle from the Mills, etc. Emma Petersen responded that the Town was in contact with CT Transit so efforts will be coordinated, and clarified that there were no plans for a parking garage at this time.

Geoff King asked if there had been a census conducted on the East Coast Greenway or any projections from expansion. Jeff LaMalva answered that the Town does have counts from the ECG and the Hop River Trail. Geoff suggested improving the trail connectivity by connecting Center Springs, to which Jeff responded that such a connection would likely go through CSP because the town hall parking lot project will bring it up to the Center Street/Trotter Street intersection. So cyclists or pedestrians would cross Center Street at Linden Street and then the Town could connect the proposed cycle track either along the front edge of Center Street or through Center Park. In addition, at some point the Town could use Forest Street as well. Those connections would likely be a separate project.

Terry Robinson suggested adding music or other noise that would be audible after the reduction of traffic speeds and congestion. Jeff LaMalva added that part of the process will be putting the infrastructure and green space in place so that the Recreation Department can coordinate music, events, and other activities downtown in the future.

Oksan Bayulgen informed Emma that the Commission has worked with students at Manchester High School in the past, and recommended that younger voices be heard for this project as well as the regular open houses on March 7th and March 12th. Oksan also noted that with Earth Day coming up in April it may be a good time to do some imagining with younger residents now that there is something more concrete they can picture and work with for downtown.

4. Unfinished Business

a. ARPA Sustainability Grant Program

Austin Murray provided an update to the Commission that Round 2 of the grant program will be open the following day—February 22nd until March 8th. Austin reminded the Commission that

there is roughly \$80,000 remaining in unspent funds. Austin will also coordinate a Q&A/webinar for applicants with Jeff Schegelmilch to provide areas for improvement for previous applicants and to answer questions for new applicants. The majority of funded organizations from Round 1 have submitted signed MOUs and will begin work on their projects.

b. Eversource Community Partnership Initiative & Potential Outreach Workshop(s)

Austin Murray reminded the Commission that the partnership is a \$10,000 grant for outreach to help popularize two Eversource programs: the Home Energy Solutions—Income Eligible program and the Multifamily Initiative. The plan is to do targeted mailings and outreach with assistance from Communications and Senior, Adult, and Family Services, to try to bolster the Town’s participation rates in these programs.

Austin also asked if there were any Commissioners willing to participate in a working group on the Eversource CPI. Oksan and Gene volunteered to participate in the planning workshops and report back to the Commission.

c. ISO Guidance Document Purchase & Potential Planning Workshop(s)

Austin updated the Commission that Maureen Goulet did not find a way to purchase the ISO document regionally, so the Town will use its sustainability funds to purchase a shared copy of the document.

Austin suggested another working group to meet to discuss long-term planning, utilizing the following documents:

- Sustainable CT
- *Manchester NEXT*
- ISO 37101:2016 Management System for Sustainable Development
- CRCOG’s Regional Climate Action Plan

Terry and Bill volunteered to participate in the planning working group once the ISO document had been purchased.

5. Community Solar Discussion

Gene DeJoannis reminded the Commission about the presentation made at a previous meeting by Adam Teff from Titan Energy, and how it came up that Connecticut does not have a Community Solar program (the closest is the SCEF program) like the ones that exist in other States like New York or Massachusetts. Gene would like to see programs that enable local residents to either purchase a share of a solar farm or otherwise subscribe to the benefits of solar arrays in their areas.

Gene recommended that the Commission ask the Board of Directors to send a letter to the CT General Assembly stating Manchester’s support for the creation of a community solar law in Connecticut. Gene put together an outline of a letter/proposal that if enacted, would permit towns to work with solar developers to build community solar parks on public or private land within their borders and enable any of their residents to subscribe to the generated power at discounted rates. Gene’s proposal also included the idea that residential roof-mounted solar could be owned by the CT Green Bank and then aggregated into a virtual community solar “farm” that residents could subscribe to.

Gene agreed to circulate his letter to the other Commissioners for comments and questions. Terry Robinson recommended that the Commission attempt to gather additional support from other sustainability organizations in the area like Sustainable CT or PACE.

Geoff King asked Gene to clarify if his proposal would be aimed at small or large commercial solar projects, since those are slightly different than rooftop installations. Geoff explained that often, once a solar array is proposed, the Town often loses control over them, and he fears that it would be the same for the types of community solar project that Gene is advocating for, assuming the arrays would be large enough. If developers go through the CT Siting Council, the Town can lose its ability to comment and propose

changes or raise concerns. Gene's hope would be that the Town would take the opportunity to steer developers to certain tracts.

Victoria Brien requested that the Commission entertain a presentation from PACE or another organization who is already doing this type of advocacy work so that the Commission can become more informed on the current state of community solar in Connecticut. Austin agreed to reach out to PACE and others to see if there can be more information gathered at the April meeting.

6. New Business/Items for Future Agenda

Oksan reminded the Commission that Earth Day is approaching in April, and suggested that the Commission begin thinking about how it wants to utilize that day for outreach or other ends. She suggested potentially coordinating with the Conservation Commission as in the past on an Earth Day event of some kind.

Geoff King suggested that there be a permanent agenda item for updates and information sharing between the Conservation Commission and the Sustainability Commission, and he informed the Commission that there have already been conversations started about Earth Day and Arbor Day.

Gene DeJoannis informed the Commission that there is a webinar for the Energy Storage Solution program tomorrow night at 6:30pm, which will cover the change in incentives for that solar plus battery storage program.

7. Next Meeting – March 20th, 2024

Austin Murray reminded the Commission that the March meeting will be a hybrid meeting—both in-person and virtual for those who cannot make it.

8. Adjournment

Oksan Bayulgen moved to adjourn the meeting.

Seconded by Terry Robinson.

In Favor: Geoff King, Oksan Bayulgen, Terry Robinson, William Chudzik, Jeffrey Schegelmilch, Patrick McKee, Rebecca Fowler, Shannon Baldassario, Victoria McBrien

Opposed: None.

Abstain: None.

The motion passed unanimously.