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Comments on the Draft Comprehensive Plan

6/17/2014

The Draft Comprehensive Plan provides a compelling vision for the revitalization of the Arsenal Street corridor. Watertown's Community Development and Planning Department and its consultants deserve kudos for the excellent work that has gone into the Plan, and for a very inclusive public process. I appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Draft Plan. These comments focus on next steps in implementing the Plan for the Arsenal Street Corridor.

For the vision to be achieved effectively, I believe the Town will need to develop a more detailed Vision or conceptual Master Plan for the Arsenal corridor. A more detailed vision for the corridor is needed before we can develop appropriate zoning ordinance changes and determine what other actions are needed to implement the Plan. Given the rapid pace of planned development along Arsenal Street, it is imperative that we start as soon as possible to develop this conceptual Master Plan, and then move quickly to revise zoning provisions consistent with the plan.

I am using the term "Master Plan" to describe this proposed next step. I am not suggesting a very formal, long and drawn-out process, but rather a short-term effort to develop a shared vision for the corridor and to identify opportunities for coordinated investments.¹ Ideally, this would be a three- or four-month process, with perhaps three or four public meetings. Two things are critical, though: (1) that we take enough time to develop a coordinated vision for the corridor, which knits together the related pieces, and (2) that we do this before any more major developments are approved. If this requires imposing a moratorium on development while we go through the process, I believe the moratorium would be a good investment in a better long-term result for Arsenal Street. Of course, the moratorium should be no longer than necessary, to avoid losing the momentum and energy now encouraging redevelopment along Arsenal Street.

Why is a further planning step needed? There are three reasons:

First, it is very unlikely that we will get the results we envision in the Comprehensive Plan if implementation occurs development project-by-development project. It is hard, for example, to plan for a coherent pedestrian-and-bike path on a piecemeal basis. It is hard to develop a creative plan for traffic management one parcel at a time. A Master Plan which draws on previous planning efforts (the Pedestrian/Bike Path report, the Economic Development Report), fills in gaps (e.g. with additional thinking about traffic management), and looks at all the plan elements in a cohesive manner will significantly improve our ability to promote a vibrant Arsenal Corridor.

Second, there are areas where investments may be needed by the Town – for example, in changes to the design of streets and sidewalks, negotiating for the burial of utility lines, preserving some parcels for pocket parks and other open space, corridor-wide improvements in public transit and traffic management, and perhaps even new through streets. With a plan for these public investments in place,

¹ The process Somerville is using to develop a vision for its Green Line Station Areas might be a good model (<http://www.somervillebydesign.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/October-16-2012-'Somerville-by-Design'-city-seeks-community-input.pdf>). This is similar to the process Watertown has used to develop the Comprehensive Plan, but expedited.

we can ask developers to contribute funding or encourage other kinds of public-private partnerships. We should evaluate whether a Business Improvement District makes sense for the Arsenal corridor, for example. But we can't effectively engage the developers, business community and local residents in these investments, or seek grants and other kinds of funding, if the Town hasn't determined where such investments are warranted, and developed some specific plans.

Third, approval of plans and permitting is likely to go much more smoothly if the public feels that its views have been incorporated in the overall plan. A thorough discussion on traffic, road design, pedestrian-bike path routes, etc. that is independent of the review of any specific site would provide a very useful forum for public input, and potentially reduce public opposition to specific projects. It would also give developers a better feel for how their project designs are likely to be received earlier in the design process. Of course, no amount of prior discussion will result in complete public consensus about how the corridor should be developed, and each project will no doubt face some public criticism. However, I think the public conversation involved in developing a conceptual Master Plan would promote more thoughtful and consistent public input going forward.

Suggested additions:

The Draft Comprehensive Plan (pp. 17-22) describes a number of goals and next steps for the Arsenal Street Corridor. I suggest the following additions to the Plan to provide for an Arsenal Corridor Conceptual Master Plan, in order to achieve these goals:

Add the following goal in Chapter 1 (Vision and Land Use):

Develop a Conceptual Master Plan for the Arsenal Street Corridor, to guide revision of zoning, transportation planning, investments in public space and amenities, infrastructure planning (including sewers, storm drains, and street and sidewalk design), promotion of economic development, building design standards, and integration with adjacent neighborhoods, resulting in a comprehensive vision for the corridor.

Add to the Implementation Matrix (Table 10-1):

Develop a Conceptual Master Plan for the Arsenal Street Corridor [time period 1-2 years; responsible party **CDP**, PB, new Economic Development Commission [if formed in time], DPW, HC, Traf, B&P, MBTA, B&P]

Incorporate into this planning/visioning process other Recommendations as they relate to the Arsenal Street Corridor, including but not limited to:

- Land Use Recommendations 2C, 3A, 3B, 3D, 5D, 5E,
- Transportation Recommendations 1A, 2A, 2B, 2C, 2D, 2E, 3A1, 3A2, 3A3, 3A6, 3A7, 3A10, 3B1-8, 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, 4E, 4G, 5A-C, 5F, 5G, 5H, 6C, 6D, 6F, 6G, 6H,
- Economic Development Recommendations 3E, 5B,
- Open Space and Recreation Recommendations 1A, 3A, 4A, 4B
- Natural Resources Recommendations 2A, 2B,
- Historic and Cultural Resources Recommendations 1A, 3C, 6A, 6B.

Note that many of the Recommendations in Table 10-1 seem to overlap or are too detailed, especially in the Transportation Chapter. Moreover, recommendations in different categories (e.g. Transportation and Economic Development) are inter-related in many cases. Taking a comprehensive approach to

implementation with a focus on the Arsenal Street Corridor will reveal these interconnections and provide a very useful first step for implementing the Comprehensive Plan recommendations town-wide.