NEEDHAM PLANNING BOARD MINUTES

November 18, 2020

The virtual joint meeting of Needham Planning Board, Select Board and Finance Committee using Zoom was remotely called to order by Jeanne McKnight, Chairman, on Wednesday, November 18, 2020, at 8:00 a.m. with Messrs. Jacobs, Alpert, Owens and Block, as well as Planning Director, Ms. Newman and Assistant Planner, Ms. Clee, Select Board members Moe Handel, Chairman, Messrs. Matthews, Bulian and Ms. Cooley, and Finance Committee members Carol Smith-Fachetti, Chairman, Messrs. Coffman, Connolly, Levy and Reilly and Ms. Miller, Town Manager Kate Fitzpatrick, Town Engineer Anthony DelGaizo, Public Information Officer Cyndi Roy Gonzalez and Assistant Town Manager Katie King.

Ms. McKnight took a roll call attendance of people expected to be at the meeting. She noted this is an open meeting that is being held remotely because of Governor Baker's executive order on March 12, 2020 due to the COVID Virus. All attendees are present by video conference. She reviewed the rules of conduct for zoom meetings. She noted if any votes are taken at the meeting the vote will be conducted by roll call.

Ms. McKnight noted a working group was formed in May to study the proposed rezoning of the Muzi Motors and Channel 5 properties at Highland Avenue and Gould Street. This property is in the Industrial 1 Zoning District. The Town has engaged Greenman-Pederson Inc. (GPI) to do a build out of the site. Select Board member Marianne Cooley chairs the working group. Ms. Cooley thanked the working group. She noted there was collective agreement the Town would benefit by the potential rezoning of this parcel. The concern heard was largely around traffic; then the pandemic happened and traffic counts became hard to measure. The Town needed to see how to get the study done.

Rebecca Brown, of GPI, walked through the traffic study. The site has just under 870,000 square feet of space. There could be 370,000 square feet of corporate office, 370,000 research and development space and 130,000 ancillary retail uses. This has been designed for office and research and development space to enhance the property. During the design the intersections looked at were along Central Avenue at Gould, Hampton and River Park and along Gould at Ellis, Kearney, the 2 site drives and Highland and Hunting. New counts were not able to be collected but a former study was done in 2015 by Beta Engineering which included all these same intersections. That study was done for a previous rezoning effort for this property.

Ms. Brown noted more updated counts were done in 2019 by McMann Associates following the widening of 128 to add a lane. This included counts for Highland at Gould and Gould at Central. She compared the 2015 and the 2019 counts and found a decrease in traffic. A large portion of that decrease was the left turn from Highland to Hunting and the right from Hunting onto Highland. That decrease may be a result of detours that had been going on during construction on 128. She used the 2015 traffic volumes for areas where there was no new data and used the 2019 data for the 2 intersections done then. She also did a review of the collision history. The majority of intersections have crash rates well below state and districtwide figures. The intersection of Highland Avenue with Hunting and Gould had 46 crashes, but she feels that was high due to the Add-a-Lane construction. She anticipates that figure will be reduced when construction is completed.

Ms. Brown noted there is a bike and pedestrian improvement project which is adding bike lanes and updating pedestrian crossings and signal timings. This is not a capacity improvement project. The only real improvement is the retiming of the intersection of Highland Avenue with Hunting and Gould. She looked at how much traffic would actually be generated by this project on a daily basis at the a.m. and p.m. peaks. The retail uses are really ancillary for offices with no large volume of new traffic. She looked at new external trips and pass-by traffic. Based on ITE data, 26% to 34% of retail use is generally pass-by traffic. The existing uses have been subtracted out based on the 2015 counts for traffic generated by the existing uses of the site. Newly generated traffic is estimated to be 620 in the a.m. and 870 in the p.m. An alternative condition would include 226 residential units. Daily this would generate just under 2,000 trips less than office and research and development. The peak traffic would be less with 130 in the a.m. and 240 in the p.m.

Ms. Brown stated she looked at traffic distributed over the roadways. She looked at where people were coming from, journeys to work or place of residency and building density model within a 30 minute driving radius of the site. Trip distribution came out similar with each of the noted categories. She noted 15% comes from each direction along Central, 10% west on Highland, 20% south on Hunting and 40% east on Highland. The intersection of Highland Avenue with Hunting and Gould has a substantial increase particularly for the left turn off Gould and right onto Gould. She reviewed the Capacity and Cue Analysis and showed the impact at each intersection. There are 3 intersections with significant issues and they looked at how to improve them. These intersections include Central at Gould, site driveway traffic trying to get out, and the Highland and Gould intersection. At Central and Gould, she did a Signal Warrant Analysis as the existing traffic already met the requirements for a traffic signal. She showed a dedicated left lane and a through lane. This would require a widening of the radius and would need easements. The other area is the intersection at Highland through the 2 site driveways. The northerly site drive does not meet the requirement for a signal but would require separate right and left turn lanes and a left turn to enter. At the southerly site drive a traffic signal is warranted. There should be 2 left turn lanes exiting the site. This would require 2 receiving lanes on Gould and 2 travel lanes with a dedicated right turn lane to accommodate a.m. traffic. The Highland and Hunting intersection would need 2 dedicated left turn lanes onto Highland, a dedicated through lane to Hunting and a dedicated right turn onto Highland. There would also need to be a dedicated right onto Gould. The current garden at the corner of Highland and Gould would be eliminated.

Ms. Brown noted this assumes no fee property takings and minimal easement takings. On the westerly side of Gould any widening would be done toward the site itself. She looked at a secondary alternative by the consolidation of the 2 drives into one and only allowing a right turn out at the north drive. This does not change operations at Highland and Hunting. A single travel lane southbound could be provided which eliminates the widening issue. There would be significantly less impact. She discussed the impacts with implementing all the traffic measures. It is comparable to no build conditions at most intersections. At Central and Gould there are still issues in the a.m. but it improves the rest of the time. All intersections are at Level D or better. Highland and Hunting will still have some movement issues but they are minimizing the total queue and delays at that intersection.

Finance Committee member Ms. Smith-Fachetti asked if the proposed modification in traffic will still have some areas at Level E and F and, if so, what it would take to improve that. Ms. Brown noted at Central and Gould it would require the addition of a lane on Gould, which would require a property taking on one or both corners. The Highland, Hunting and Gould intersection would also need a taking. Some of the issue is the signal cycle is so long. The greatest need is Hunting northbound approaching the intersection. This should be 3 lanes with a dedicated right, a dedicated left and a through lane but that would require substantial takings. Ms. Smith-Fachetti feels if they are going to do this zoning they need to do better than the current.

Select Board member Mr. Bulian noted he travels north on Hunting regularly. He stated there will be more traffic exiting off Exit 18 flowing up to Hunting. He feels there is an underestimate of traffic on Hunting going straight to the Muzi site. It looks like it jogs to the right to go straight, which will be an issue. He believes it would be necessary to have right, straight and left lanes on Hunting to manage the traffic on Hunting. He noted Christina Street at Oak was just straightened in Newton to make it more even with each other. This should be looked at for Highland, Hunting and Gould with any redesign. Select Board Chair Moe Handel asked if the Planning Board would require a traffic mitigation levy on any site development. He noted there is a large fluctuation in terms of work patterns at this point. He feels the Town should concentrate on how the site will be used and managing traffic in and out of the site. Residential use reduces traffic substantially in and out of the site. Ms. Brown stated traffic is about the same now but more spread out throughout the day. Ms. Newman had asked GPI to look at a residential component. Residential was not recommended by the Planning Board or the Select Board as this is not a Transit Oriented site.

Finance Committee member Mr. Levy noted the Central and Gould intersection. In the morning at times the traffic at Eliot Street in Newton backs up to this intersection. He asked if the traffic would back up even further. Ms. Brown noted the eastbound queue in the morning is 870 feet. This project would need a dedicated right turn lane onto Gould and property takings to cut this queue in about half. Installing a signal brings it back to no build

conditions. Ms. McKnight stated, in response to Mr. Handel, that the Planning Board would require traffic mitigation by the developer. The property owner would be expected to pay for improvements. Mr. Alpert stated all these improvements sound necessary but very expensive. No one has talked about costs. The developer could say it is too expensive to be economically viable. He would like to see how much money this would be. Post epidemic he has no idea what this would be like but in his experience it takes years to get a traffic light approved and built.

Select Board member Dan Matthews asked what the proposed path for this initiative is and what are the next steps. He asked if the members support this and if the aim is the May Town Meeting. Ms. Cooley stated she wanted this information to inform the decision. She believes the path was to May but asked if this information changed that path. Redevelopment under the current zoning is not a benefit to the Town. Ms. Newman stated this is doable by May Town Meeting but there would need to be collective satisfaction to proceed at that density profile. Mr. Handel stated to rezone does not mean a mandate. It creates an envelope to manage. He feels it makes sense to proceed as this creates an opportunity for a higher and better use of this site. He noted the question is, if certain expenses come to the Town beyond those imposed for the developer, would the increase in taxes offset that to an advantageous benefit to the residents of the town. Ms. McKnight noted life sciences businesses are expanding to the north and south of Needham. She would encourage zoning that allows that. Mr. Alpert feels they should go forward with the rezoning with a Spring Town Meeting. Mr. Reilly stated he is concerned with putting too rigid an envelope on what can be done at this site. He asked if there is enough flexibility for a variety of uses. Mr. Handel stated he would not preclude housing here. Conditions could be set for the housing and to mitigate traffic as well. Mr. Bulian agrees he would not preclude housing. He would also consider a sports complex similar to Wellesley's on Route 9.

Ms. Newman stated she wants a foundational agreement for a build out of about a 1.35 FAR. The platform for zoning would be to take 1.35 and use it for the build out for this property. All agree. Mr. Connelly asked what the ability is to have any developer pay for work at the Central and Gould intersection that far away from their property. He also asked if the Town could add that project to its list of priorities. Town Manager Kate Fitzpatrick will look at this.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Block, and seconded by Mr. Alpert, it was by a roll call vote of the three members present unanimously:
VOTED: to adjourn the meeting at 9:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Donna J. Kalinowski, Notetaker

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Paul Alpert, Vice-Chairman and Clerk