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# MEMORANDUM

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**TO:** Jared Eigerman, Chair  
Ad Hoc Committee on Waterfront West

**FROM:** Rick Taintor *RT.*

**DATE:** 5 December 2018

**RE:** Waterfront West Overlay District – Vision

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The Ad Hoc Committee's focus over the past four weeks has been to consider potential changes to the existing Waterfront West Overlay District zoning. These discussions of zoning standards have implied aspects of the kind and scale of development that individual members of the Committee would find acceptable, but there has not yet been an explicit vision enunciated for the Waterfront West area.

The last time that the City set forth a vision for the future of this area was in 2003 with the Waterfront Strategic Plan prepared by Goody Clancy & Associates. The Strategic Plan was developed through a public process that included several community meetings, and was guided by four interrelated goals that are still valid:

1. Support the working waterfront and enhance facilities for recreational and commercial maritime uses.
2. Reinforce and extend the historic downtown to the waterfront with a new mixed-use neighborhood.
3. Dramatically improve public access to the waterfront while linking the North End and South End to the downtown.
4. Enhance and expand public parks and civic spaces along the harbor.

With respect to the Waterfront West focus area, the Strategic Plan set forth a number of guiding principles organized under five headings: land uses; public streets and walks; zoning and municipal regulations; design guidelines; and parking. The plan illustrated its vision with a concept plan and a series of street cross-sections.

The specific type and scale of development that the Waterfront Strategic Plan envisioned for the Waterfront West area is not feasible today for a number of reasons. Changes to flood insurance regulations and our growing understanding of the effects of climate change have combined to make development in the Waterfront West floodplain complex and challenging. In addition, the current landowner, New England Development, is not able to finance the private parking structure that was envisioned to serve the overall development, and instead intends to provide parking in phases as development proceeds.

But the fact that the site cannot be developed exactly as envisioned in the 2003 Strategic Plan does not mean that the key principles laid out in that plan should be discarded. These principles continue to have meaning and value, and can help guide planning that will provide long-term benefits for the City and for the future residents of Waterfront West.

I propose that an updated vision for Waterfront West incorporate the following four principles:

- (1) Redevelopment should create a new street that includes a continuous, high-quality pedestrian and bicycle route between Michael's Harborside and the Central Waterfront area. This street, identified in the Strategic Plan as "Wharf Street", would maintain and enhance the existing link from the North End to the downtown that so many residents currently use, and it would also ensure the continued vitality of the shops and restaurants along the street.

A boardwalk winding along the river around the perimeter of the site could be a nice additional amenity, but would not substitute for this primary route along the street.

- (2) Active retail and restaurant uses should be provided along both Merrimac Street and "Wharf Street". The precise amount of floor area is not important. What is important is that these commercial spaces should provide continuous active storefronts that are attractive to and easily accessible by those passing by. These uses will not necessarily be new destinations competing with the downtown (and the site will never accommodate an amount of commercial space that would significantly draw business from the existing downtown), but will be important for adding interest and vitality along the way.
- (3) Development should occur primarily on the south (landward) side of Wharf Street, leaving the waterfront largely open. One or two small buildings similar in scale to the existing ones could be retained on the waterfront side of the street, but there should not be a significant increase in either height or footprint. If there is sufficient activity and vitality along the south side of the street, the open waterfront will be very different from the wide-open central waterfront area.
- (4) The site should not include any parking directly on the waterfront. Parked vehicles (and vehicles backing out from parking spaces) would impact on the public's comfort and enjoyment of this resource.

During the Ad Hoc Committee's meetings there has been discussion of the area along the river as becoming a "piazza". However, the word "piazza" suggests the type of European public square that is typically surrounded and defined by buildings. In contrast, the principles that I have suggested above represent a space that is linear and open to the river, with buildings primarily on one side. In this way, it is more similar to typical traditional streets along canals, rivers and harbors in the Netherlands. These waterfront places often have names that translate to "quay" or "wharf", which is similar to the Strategic Plan's proposal for a "Wharf Street."

Because it is not always easy to translate a set of principles into a vision, I have looked at developments in other places that include some of the above concepts. These include both traditional European models as well as a recent American example. In considering these

examples, it is important not to focus on details such as building heights and styles or street designs – these are details that can be worked out in application to the site. Rather, these examples illustrate how some design elements can create human-scaled development with active street frontages and sensitive relationships to the water bodies on which they front.

My first set of examples is from the Netherlands, where there are numerous examples of traditional town design along waterfronts, including rivers, canals and harbors. All of these examples have active uses on the landward side of the street with the water side open and available for public use.



The photos on the left show a road along the harbor in the town of Veere. Motor vehicles and bicycles share the roadway along the building frontages, while pedestrians are accommodated on a plaza along the wharf. These two areas are distinguished by different paving materials, a slight grade change, and elements such as trees, bike racks, bollards, and trash containers.







A similar pattern is shown in the photo on the left, from the town of Enkhuizen. Again, a row of businesses and residences lines the landward side of the street, which is shared by motor vehicles and bicycles. Trees and other vertical elements separate the street from the open waterfront, which can even accommodate café tables.

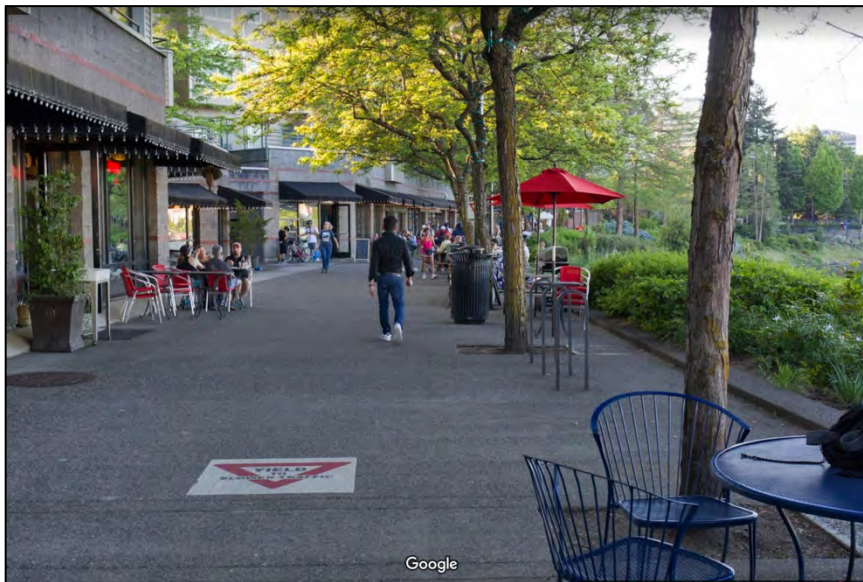


The image on the lower left, from the much larger city of Maastricht, shows a more urban setting with a wider street, a separate sidewalk along the building fronts, and a raised plaza area with café seating along the river (just outside the frame of the photo). Buildings here are 3-1/2 to 4 stories.

It is important to stress that these Dutch examples are not meant to present a proposal for the specific form and scale of development in Waterfront West. Instead, they are meant to illustrate how the sensitive application of the principles outlined above can create a vibrant and attractive waterfront space that serves all users.



A somewhat different development pattern that also has applicability for the Waterfront West area is demonstrated by a recent development in Portland, Oregon, shown in these photos. In this case, pedestrians and bicyclists are completely separated from motor vehicle traffic, which accesses the businesses and residences from behind the buildings.



Building heights in this development are up to four stories, but the visual impact is softened by stepbacks above the first floor as well as by a wide open riverbank.

The above illustrations are just a few examples of the ways that vibrant and attractive mixed-use waterfront developments can incorporate visual and physical access to the water for members of the public. In the case of Waterfront West, there are additional challenges relating to floodplain regulations and sea level rise that must also be taken into consideration in any future plan. Given the great potential and importance of this site for downtown Newburyport, it is essential to agree on a clear vision of the kind of development we want, and to take care that any zoning for the area ensures that the key elements of such a vision are implemented.