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PROJECT NARRATIVE

To: Planning Board Members
From: Kim Turner, Manager of Special Projects
CC: Katelyn Sullivan, Planner
Jon Eric White, City Engineer
Wayne Amaral, Director of DPS
RE: Lower Atkinson Common Site Plan Review
Date: November 30, 2023

This project narrative provides an overview, context and information regarding the Lower Atkinson Common parking expansion project that requires Site Plan Review by the Planning Board. This narrative is updated from the prior version that was submitted to the Planning Board on July 17, 2023 and includes a list of design changes since that time.

Project Overview:

Lower Atkinson Common is a heavily used park located on Merrimac St between Plummer Ave and Moulton St. For decades, the Pioneer League has used this park as a home for their baseball leagues, but it is also a beloved City park that is used by many residents, visitors and the neighboring Community Action School on the corner of Plummer and Merrimac. The Park consists of 3 baseball diamonds, a small clubhouse that serves as a snack shack and storage shed, a playground and a basketball court. During baseball season, and especially during tournaments, parking becomes challenging as families bring their players to the fields. Parking is limited at the park: within a small gravel lot that provides roughly 22 spaces and angled parking along Merrimac St that requires backing out onto a major thoroughfare. Because the park only contains approximately 55 spaces, with no safe queueing or drop-off, cars are often seen parked along both sides of Merrimac, Plummer and Moulton, creating impacts on these adjacent neighborhoods, and traffic and pedestrian safety concerns near the park.

In 2020, the Parks Commission worked to create a master plan to start to remedy some of the pressures at the park. Last year, after several meetings with the Pioneer League, Community Action School, DPS, and neighborhood, a master plan was created that addressed drainage and parking at the Park. The plan proposes an expanded gravel parking lot behind Founders Field with 48 spaces, elimination of the angled street parking to the west of the clubhouse (with continuation of the City sidewalk and a new bus drop off), and an expanded asphalt parking lot to the east of the clubhouse with 24 spaces that is entirely internal to the park, and utilizes a one-way vehicular circulation pattern including queueing for approximately 7 cars. The asphalt parking lot contains 4 handicap parking spaces. The total number of

proposed parking spaces increases from approximately 55 to 72, plus queueing/drop off for 7 additional cars and 1 bus.

Landscape Buffer:

There are 16 trees behind Founders Field that will need to be removed in order to accommodate the expanded gravel parking. These trees are in moderate to poor health and consist of primarily Norway Maple, Red Maple and Ash. Consideration was given early in the design to identify and protect some mature Red Maples, and shift the stormwater wetland and gravel parking in order to prevent impact to these trees. Additionally, 2 other shade trees are proposed to be removed within the park—one severely declining Norway Maple near Merrimac St and one declining Ash near the clubhouse that is also creating a stormwater issue due to its elevated crown. The arborvitae along the east of the clubhouse will also be removed to make space for the parking in front of Founder's field.

As a mitigation measure, 8 Red Oak, 6 White Oak, 5 River Birch, 10 Red Maple, and 7 Tuliptree are proposed to be installed within the park to reintroduce canopy, shade and habitat along the park edges, streetscape, and central walkway. Additionally, 16 new Arborvitae are proposed to buffer the new parking area from the street and closest abutters. Similarly, a combination of native understory shrubs including Viburnum, Winterberry, and Summersweet are proposed along the rear woodland edge behind Founders Field.

Finally, a new stormwater wetland is being proposed behind the gravel parking lot in which many native wetland plants are being proposed including Lowbush Blueberry, Summersweet, Sweetfern, Flag Iris, Cardinal Flower, Bulrush and Sweetflag.

In total, 18 trees plus a row of Arborvitae are being removed and 36 trees plus 16 Arborvitae are being proposed.

Traffic and Public Access:

In 2021, the City Council approved a Safety Zone for this area of the City. The Safety Zone consists of a reduced speed zone of 20 MPH along Merrimac Street in front of the park as well as Plummer Ave from Merrimac toward Christopher St, which is identified with signage. Similarly, during the paving work that was completed on Merrimac St last year, and Plummer Ave this year, special consideration was given to striping, parking restrictions, and crosswalks with bump-outs in order to help reduce traffic speeds and increase visibility. The work at Lower Atkinson Common is seen as an extension of this traffic safety initiative and the City is proposing the elimination of on-street parking on both sides of Merrimac St immediately in front of the park, pending City Council approval.

A traffic report was completed by the Police Department in May of this year which showed that approximately 7% of vehicles (or just under 300 vehicles per day) exceeded 35 MPH at any given time. This portion of Merrimac St sees an average of approximately 4,100 vehicles a day. The maximum speed that was recorded during the 7-day study was 54 MPH, with an average speed of approximately 28 MPH. Feedback from neighbors indicates that there is increasing concern for the safety of pedestrians in this area, and any efforts to improve pedestrian safety are welcomed. This proposal will eliminate the vast majority, if not all, on-street parking that is associated with the park. It will also eliminate all angled street parking and remove the risk created by cars backing into Merrimac Street.

The proposal will provide a safe passage for pedestrians accessing the park by proposing an extension of the sidewalk to the west of the clubhouse from Moulton to Plummer, and extending behind the new

asphalt parking area. A walkway connection is also proposed between the gravel lot and the new playground, Pepe and Hawkes-Lapre Fields. Finally, new bike racks are proposed behind the clubhouse for those accessing the park via bicycle.

Parking:

The Pioneer League provided a count of vehicles during 30-minute increments during the baseball season. A table of vehicle counts is below. The League is requesting 82 parking spaces, and the plan is accommodating 72, however, the only time that parking should exceed capacity is between 4:30-5:30 pm, based upon the League’s present-day counts. From 4:30-5:00, there is only a need for 4 additional spaces and from 5:00-5:30 there is a need for 22 additional spaces, which would not be available on-site under any circumstance. During this 1-hour block, it is anticipated cars will either park in the upper Atkinson lot off of Plummer Ave or along the street.

	3:30-4:00	4:00-4:30	4:30-5:00	5:00-5:30	5:30-6:00	6:00-6:30	6:30-7:00	7:00-7:30	7:30-8:00
Vehicles	40	58	76	94	54	54	54	54	18
Busses	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Parking Accommodated?	Yes	Yes	No (4)	No (22)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

It is understood that there are three variables that may require more parking. The first is that the installation of a new universally-accessible playground at the park will attract new visitors. This is why the addition of 4 ADA accessible parking spaces is so critical in the proposed design. The second variable is the growth of the Pioneer League, who has seen an uptick in registrations (562 children are currently registered) which may create more pressures on the park. The third variable is the potential future renovation of the sport court, which is currently in poor condition, and may attract more visitors once it is renovated.

Lighting and Architectural Style:

There is no lighting and no new structure proposed as part of this project.

Stormwater & Soils:

The existing stormwater surface runoff flows off the hill behind the ballfields in a northerly direction towards Merrimac Street. The portion of Merrimac Street adjacent to Pioneer Park is relatively flat and stormwater is picked up by a series of catch basins in the street and emptied to the City of Newburyport’s drainage system. There is a small isolated wetland area in the southeast corner of the project limits. This wetland empties into a small pool which discharges into the catch basin at the entrance of the gravel parking lot on Merrimac Street.

According to the USDA Soil Survey, the on-site soils consist of Udorthents, smoothed, Deerfield loamy fine sand with 0 to 3 percent slopes and Merrimac fine sandy loam with 15 to 25 percent slopes. These soils are in the hydrologic A. Type A soils have a high infiltration rate, meaning low runoff rate consisting of deep, well drained to excessively drained sands or gravely sands.

A test pit was dug behind the ball fields in the area of the proposed constructed wetland. This pit revealed 20” of topsoil with fine silty sand to 36”. At 30”, weeping occurred and molting was encountered at 36”.

It is estimated seasonal high groundwater to be approximately two and a half feet below the surface.

The proposed project will collect stormwater runoff into numerous proposed catch basins in both the proposed paved parking lot and gravel lot. The stormwater will then enter manholes and be dispersed into the City's existing stormwater drainage system. A grassed drainage swale is proposed along the entire length of the northern perimeter of the gravel parking lot and across the park to Pepe and Hawkes-Lapre Fields, to capture any potential surface overflow from the lot and runoff from the ball fields. This will be tied into the manhole in the gravel lot.

Environmental Impact:

Currently at the site, runoff from portions of the fields and the general area collects in a depression that has formed an isolated wetland that essentially acts as ad-hoc stormwater management. This area contains a mix of native and invasive vegetation and, while it technically meets the definition of an isolated wetland under the Newburyport Ordinance, discharges into the City stormwater system on Merrimac Street.

The project will replace this wetland with a stormwater wetland that will be vegetated with native plants and serve the same function with improved stormwater treatment. The result will be an improvement in the onsite water quality treatment as well as a general improvement in water quality entering the stormwater system. By creating a stormwater wetland that is free of invasive plants, the new wetland will serve to improve area ecology in addition to the added stormwater management.

Waivers Requested:

We respectfully request the following waivers as part of this application which are listed below along with explanations:

1. Planting islands within parking lot: We request a waiver from the requirement to plant 1 shade tree per 10 parking spaces within a parking lot consisting of greater than 20 parking spaces. The entire rear of the gravel parking lot is existing woodland and therefore eliminating parking spaces in order to create redundant canopy seems inefficient. We are meeting the requirement for planting islands within the asphalt lot. Our contention is that the number of new evergreen and shade trees being planted adjacent to the gravel parking area will satisfy the desire to introduce shading, provide buffer, and reduce wind exposure within the park.
2. Stormwater report: We request a waiver from providing a full stormwater report. Our City Engineer has provided a stormwater memo describing the work, which is being done in-house and will not require review by the Planning Board's engineering consultant.
3. Traffic study: We request a waiver from a traffic study for the project. The project will not change the volume of traffic to the site and it is our contention that the traffic flow will be improved because we are concentrating vehicles at two access points and providing ample queuing of vehicles. Today, the flow of traffic is haphazard with cars parking all along the adjacent roadways as well as at the two access points.
4. Surface and groundwater report: We request a waiver from a formal surface and groundwater report and include the above narrative regarding the existing soils and results from the test pit.
5. Environmental and community impact analysis: We request a waiver from a formal environmental and community impact analysis and include the above narrative regarding how the proposal will improve the site.

6. Existing conditions of the entire site: We request a waiver from an existing conditions plan for the entirety of Atkinson Common, which extends up to High Street. We have included an existing conditions plan for Lower Atkinson, highlighting the impacted area. An aerial photograph of the entire property with the existing conditions overlaid is attached for reference.

Design changes from the July 6 plan:

The City received several public comments regarding this project both before and after the scheduled site walk on August 29. We also received feedback from the Planning Board and have incorporated many design changes to reflect the comments from various stakeholders, as described below:

1. The number of parking spaces within the gravel lot was reduced from 56 to 48 and the number of parking spaces within the asphalt lot was reduced from 32 to 24.
2. The number of trees to be removed was reduced from 22 to 16. Of the trees to be removed, the vast majority are Norway Maple and Ash.
3. Planting islands were incorporated into the asphalt lot along Merrimac St to introduce a streetscape canopy.
4. The angled parking was swapped to the Merrimac St side of the asphalt lot to allow queueing to occur on the park side of the lot.
5. The 4 ADA parking spaces were pushed further into the park, to keep a clear drive aisle within the asphalt lot.
6. A bus drop-off was added along the west side of the clubhouse. No arborvitae will be removed for this addition.
7. Drainage swales were extended past the gravel lot and over to the area between Pepe and Hawkes-Lapre Fields to improve the drainage in the park.
8. More trees are proposed within the park to offset the trees to be removed.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require additional information or clarification regarding the project.