

Joint Meeting of the NRA and City Council
Newburyport High School Library
September 30, 2014

1. Call to Order

A joint discussion on the central waterfront was called to order at 7:00 p.m. In attendance were NRA members Tom Salemi, Andy Sidford, Leslie Eckholdt, Bob Uhlig and Adam Guild; City officials Mayor Donna Holaday, Geordie Vining, Andy Port and Peter Lombardi and City Councilors Ed Cameron, Allison Heartquist, Tom O'Brien, Jared Eigerman, Bruce Vogel, Charlie Tontar, Bob Cronin, Ari Herzog, Meghan Kinsey, Larry Guinta and Barry Connell.

2. Discussion

Tom Salemi said the NRA is at the beginning of a long process to explore broad concepts for the waterfront and discover revenue sources. The group is planning to purchase movable furniture to activate some small, underutilized areas of its property. Visits to successful waterfronts will take place in the spring. He said the waterfront is a valuable space and the goal is to move cars off of it.

Andy Port discussed the areas of consensus that were revealed at the charrette. Participants agreed there should be a significant expansion of the park, public ways and access should be maintained, the east-west rail trail connection should be established, a Harbormaster's and visiting boaters' facility should be developed and a visitor center with public restrooms should be added. Another common goal was the reduction in parking on the central waterfront, accompanied by the construction of a parking garage on Titcomb Street.

Bob Uhlig said he analyzed prior planning efforts in search of a common ground. The commonalities between the plans of the Cecil Group, the NRA and the Committee for an Open Waterfront were an expansion of green space from the center of the park and the boardwalk and the consolidation of parking near the Custom House and along Merrimac Street. The NRA has an interim plan to expand the park by reducing the amount of parking and adding movable furniture to activate some underutilized areas of its property.

Mayor Holaday spoke about a \$5 million transportation bill bond that might be available to develop a parking garage. New England Development now plans to construct its hotel on the waterfront, which would free up the Fitness Factory site for the development of an intermodal facility.

Charlie Tontar said he would be in favor of an interim expansion of the park. He would be hesitant about using CPA funds for the waterfront. He said any CPA monies used should be matched by private funds.

Bruce Vogel said he supports the phased approach to the expansion of the park. He would like the transfer of development rights to be considered. He would be opposed to the addition of buildings to the waterfront.

Meghan Kinsey said she likes the phased approach because it indicates forward momentum. She would wish to see an outline of the steps that are to be taken.

Jared Eigerman said he supports the concept of adding green space to the edges of the park.

Bob Cronin said the parking must be replicated elsewhere, so at first the focus should be on the garage.

Tom O'Brien said the residents of his ward do not support the garage because of the amount it would cost the City. He supports the idea of moving the parking on the east lot away from the park and towards the Custom House.

Ari Herzog said he was opposed to the 11 designs from the charrette being summarized into a few concepts. He said reducing the amount of parking would increase demand on the Waterfront Trust lots and that group should be included in the conversation. He asked why the NRA is seeking additional revenue. Tom Salemi responded that the NRA wishes to expand the park. He would like the City to contribute to the expansion and maintenance, but he is concerned about the impact this would have on taxes. For this reason, the NRA would be seeking revenue from additional sources. Bob Uhlig added that a commitment of funds from one source would be useful to attract other grant monies.

Geordie Vining said with the exception of large events, the east lot is usually half empty, so the NRA should not have to wait for a garage to be completed before moving forward with plans to reduce parking.

Barry Connell said the character of the community has changed. Residents have been squeezed out due to gentrification and he is concerned about creating an additional tax burden. The NRA should look to the waterfront for income generation and find ways to expand the park without burdening taxpayers.

Ed Cameron said generating revenues by adding buildings to the NRA property should not be considered. New England Development will be adding density on both sides of the central waterfront. A parking garage and hotel themselves would generate income.

Adam Guild asked if New England Development has been asked to help fund an expansion of the park.

Andy Sidford the first step should be the development of a plan that would be agreeable to all sides. A way to implement the plan would be the next step. In the interim small changes should be made.

Larry Guinta said he supports the phased approach and he would like to learn more about transferring development rights.

Leslie Eckholdt said most visitors to Portsmouth are attracted by Prescott Park. She would like to activate the waterfront by adding gardens.

Allison Heartquist asked if the NRA would be abolished. Mayor Holaday responded that it would not happen for several years.

Andy Port said raising the elevation of the lots could add a layer of separation from the contaminated soils.

Geordie Vining said the transfer of development rights is a complicated planning tool that has not been successful in Massachusetts. He does not believe it would be applicable in this situation.

3. Next Steps

Tom Salemi said the NRA is in the fact-finding stage and would be moving forward with incrementally increasing the amount of public space on the waterfront. The group plans to begin by removing some parking from at least one lot. He said he would like to know what role the City would be willing to play, but the NRA would move ahead on its own if necessary. Mayor Holaday said it would be important for the NRA, the City Council and the Planning Office to work together.

Bob Uhlig said the NRA members hope to make the public comfortable with the ideal of using portions of the property for something other than parking. They plan to expand the park into some small areas as a test. Nothing would be permanent and could be moved if not successful. The NRA plans to implement this incremental approach at the same time as moving forward with a larger plan.

4. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 8:45 p.m.