

**MINUTES OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE
PLANNING BOARD OF THE CITY OF WORCESTER**

March 8, 2021

Pursuant to Governor Baker’s March 12, 2020 Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, §18, and the Governor’s March 23, 2020 Order, as amended, imposing strict limitation on the number of people that may gather in one place, this meeting was conducted through remote participation. The meeting was livestreamed from the City of Worcester website and via the local cable access channel and is available for streaming online. Public participation was facilitated through a call-in number, 415-655-0001 (Access Code: 1601714991), which was publicized on the posted meeting agenda and during the video broadcast.

Planning Board Members Participating: Albert LaValley, Chair
Paul DePalo, Vice-Chair
Eleanor Gilmore, Clerk
Toni Molinari
Edward Moynihan

Planning Board Members Not Participating: None

Staff present: Stephen Rolle, Division of Planning & Regulatory Services
Michelle Smith, Division of Planning & Regulatory Services
Marisa Lau, Division of Planning & Regulatory Services
Stephen Cary, Division of Planning & Regulatory Services

Call to Order – Mr. LaValley called the meeting to order at 5:31pm.

Other Business

Mr. LaValley stated that there were no applications before the Board tonight. Rather, the Board was meeting to have a broader discussion with Planning Division staff about long-range planning topics and the Board’s role in the planning process. Mr. Rolle and Ms. Smith went over the meeting agenda and presented an overview of each topic to kick-off discussion.

1. Discussion of Long-Range Planning Topics

a. Citywide long-range plan

Mr. Rolle stated the citywide long-range plan will be launched this spring. Ms. Smith described the purpose of long-range planning as a guide for the City’s physical development providing a comprehensive analysis of where we are today, as a community. The plan will articulate a vision for the City and identify goals, challenges, and strategies for achieving this. The plan will also be a snapshot of the City at this moment in its development, and will utilize scenario-based planning to consider different planning actions for the future. The plan will address different thematic areas and serve as an overall framework for future planning projects and policies.

- Mr. LaValley asked how detailed recommendations in the plan would be. Mr. Rolle answered that will be determined later when a consultant has been identified.
- Ms. Gilmore asked if the City has done a Comprehensive Plan before. Mr. Rolle replied that last plan was completed in 1987; the City has completed plans on more focused topics since then.

Ms. Smith emphasized that the completed plan will help manage growth and change in physical (re)development of the City; set capital improvement priorities in alignment with the Community's vision for the future; coordinate municipal actions both concurrently and through time; create a framework for future decisions for development projects and policies that can be continuously updated going forward (i.e. a "living" document); and encourage community participation in planning.

- Mr. DePalo asked if the staff could speak to whether the previous plan had influenced the City's growth and development. Mr. Rolle replied that the question was interesting, but due to the length of time that elapsed to some extent we have to guess what the impact was. One lesson learned from historical efforts is that a long-range plan requires ongoing updates and revisions to address changing conditions and allow for course corrections (i.e. a long-range planning program).
- Ms. Gilmore asked if the plan would be a priority of the City. Mr. Rolle confirmed broad support for this effort, noting that a documented, public process like this is critical for keeping the momentum of the planning process going. He stated that the plan will also serve to get municipal partners and other stakeholders on the same page during the process and once completed, coordinate implementation actions over time.
 - Ms. Smith stated that this process will allow for the City to identify needs for and put in place new systems to help with accountability and implementation
- Ms. Gilmore and Mr. Rolle discussed department-specific planning efforts in recent years, concluding that an overall framework to coordinate efforts is needed.
- Mr. LaValley asked how the plan will relate to any efforts to update the Zoning Ordinance, noting it was passed a few years after the previous master plan. Mr. Rolle agreed that a key outcome of the master plan will likely be recommendations for modernizing and updating the Ordinance.
- Mr. Moynihan stated that the City has addressed urban re/development through a piecemeal approach in the past. He agreed that a planning document that looks 10-15 years into the future is necessary to create a roadmap for how to get there. He stated he is glad the Board is involved in this effort.

Ms. Smith described the thematic areas ("elements") required by state law to be included in the plan, noting that these themes can be expanded and the list can be added to. Examples of long-range plans from other communities demonstrate flexibility in these areas. Possible themes to incorporate include: social equity and inclusion; climate action/resilience/sustainability; smart growth; public health; and education. Mr. Rolle provided a brief overview of the process to hire a consultant through a competitive bidding process, making the point that there will be several opportunities early on for stakeholders to shape what topics are covered in the plan. He also noted that one question to be addressed by the planning process is how to organize the plan in a way that reflects overarching themes, like those listed above, need to be considered across all elements in the plan.

- Ms. Gilmore stated that this approach seemed correct to her. She noted that social equity and inclusion has to be central to the process given the damage done to communities that have been traditionally excluded from planning in the past.

- Ms. Molinari asked for details on community engagement and adoption/approval of the plan. Mr. Rolle stated that consultants will propose engagement ideas in their bids, emphasizing the need for creative and varied approaches to get robust engagement. Per state law, the Planning Board is responsible for development of the plan and would adopt the plan through a majority vote. City Council will be addressed at various stages of the process.
- Ms. Gilmore stated that young people are often overlooked in the planning process and wanted to make sure that they will be involved in outreach efforts.
- Mr. Moynihan indicated that the Community Development Block Grant program, which has planning requirements including a 5-year consolidated plan, may provide models for youth outreach. He noted that soliciting input and feedback from community members has to take into account changing methods of communication and trends like the decline of mass media, but with consultant assistance it will be possible.

Ms. Smith described next steps in the planning timeline. She thanked the Board for their suggestions on the product and outreach process, stressing that engagement is key and the process will aim to meet people where there are. She reiterated that both a plan and ongoing planning process will result from this project. Mr. Rolle added that the Division is excited for the launch of the long-range plan this spring.

- Ms. Molinari asked how the long-range plan will interact with the more focused plans completed to date. Mr. Rolle and Ms. Smith discussed the benefits of long-range planning to existing planning documents, particularly by strengthening recommendations that had been made and developing new strategies for their implementation.

b. Sustainability and resiliency - alignment with the Green Worcester Plan

Ms. Smith went over development review standards in the Zoning Ordinance that pertain to sustainability/resiliency (landscaping requirements, EV infrastructure, bike parking, stormwater management, cluster development) noting that the Board frequently addresses these when applications come before it. The draft Green Worcester Plan (GWP), which is pending adoption, provides a jumping off point for the Board to consider specific changes to the Ordinance proposed in the plan, and what broader changes to review standards the Board would like to see as the long-range plan launches and zoning reform begins to be discussed. GWP is a good opportunity to build off of the conversations the Board has been having and create a framework for how to go about making changes in these areas. She also noted there was extensive GWP community outreach, indicating strong buy-in from community members in the plan recommendations.

- Mr. Moynihan noted that these combined efforts are starting to make a difference and developers are aware that sustainability and resiliency concerns are a priority moving forward for the City. The more discussion that happens to raise the profile of these important issues, the better.

c. Parking requirements

Mr. Rolle stated that staff is ready to take a deeper look at parking requirements that the Board has expressed concern about in the past. He gave a quick overview of current zoning provisions

for parking in the Ordinance. These include traditional minimum parking requirements based on various factors (i.e. lot size, building size, number of employees). In some cases these requirements make sense, but it's also clear there are negative factors associated with parking minimums as well. In the past, the City began to address this by introducing maximum parking requirements in the CCOD zoning district, which have become much more common practice since the City adopted the provision. State requirements for parking have likewise relaxed and evolved. The Ordinance regulates parking lot design, which many communities have chosen to update by adopting new regulations, specifically through form-based codes. The Ordinance distinguishes between different types of parking as a use, and in some cases the lines between these uses are blurred (i.e. display lots vs. non-accessory parking). There are a number of other considerations that should be taken into account, beyond what is currently reflected in the Ordinance, for parking provisions. These include but are not limited to shared parking arrangements, flexibility in meeting access needs and recognizing that off-street parking is only one component of accessibility, and aligning provisions/policies for parking with other community objectives (including fostering multi-modal accessibility) and public initiatives. By thinking broadly about what type of urban environment we want as a community, we can align parking provisions with that vision.

- Mr. LaValley thanked staff for the presentations/overviews and accommodating the Board request for this meeting. He is looking forward to future involvement in the long-range plan.
- Mr. Rolle responded to a question from Mr. Moynihan about providing feedback on the long-range plan going forward. He advised members to contact staff, who will be able to do some synthesis of comments and present the feedback formally to the Board at public meetings.

Adjournment

On a motion by Ms. Gilmore and seconded by Mr. DePalo, the Board voted to adjourn at 7:08 pm.