

Hull Times 3/23/2023

HRA members acknowledge public's desire for open space, affordable housing in plan

By Dolores Sauca Lorusso

Many participants in the Hull Redevelopment Authority's most recent workshop on its draft Urban Renewal Plan reiterated their preference for open space on the 13-acre property. **HRA** members and consultants told the 59 attendees in the Zoom meeting on March 16 that adjustments are being made to the plan in response to the feedback, including eliminating some residential units near Monument Square.

"The board felt it was important to let people know we are listening, and are going to take that off the table right out of the gate," **HRA** Chair Bartley Kelly said. "Based on input, we took the 24 units of residential housing on Parcel 1 off the table. It will open the view corridors as you come into town."

Kelly reiterated his belief in the importance of the public meeting forum to gain all types of community feedback, which considers what will work on the **HRA** land and how it "best fits within the community."

"The overall process is a lot more responsive to what the community wants as opposed to what a particular proposer might want to happen," added consultant Steven Cecil, contrasting the Urban Renewal Plan with the request for proposal process, in which a developer would suggest a project based on its own preferences. According to Cecil, the key topics to those in attendance at the first set of meetings in February were increasing open space, vulnerability of the land to flooding and storm surge, maintaining views from bay to the sea, providing affordable housing, balance of commercial space, adequate parking, traffic flow, environmental stewardship, and understanding economic costs and benefits.

Moving ahead with what has become known as Option 2 as the plan direction is a response to community comments regarding additional open space and being sensitive to the proximity to nearby homes.

One presentation slide highlighting open space as a priority illustrated the removal of townhouse units along Hull Shore Drive to preserve an open view corridor from bay to the ocean, and additional pedestrian connections across Parcel 3, near the center of the property.

"We understand the importance of open space as a priority," to the people of Hull and their desire to "place emphasis on creating public open space for use," Cecil said. Resident Helen Gould suggested a community building to hold festivals, farmers' markets, and house historical information about the town. Kelly agreed with Gould that a "central building or refuge, so to speak, should be something considered and put into the plan."

However, in response to those within the community who desire "no development" on the **HRA** land, Kelly emphasized "it is a redevelopment authority, not a 'no-development authority'...the highest and best use of the land is residential; that is the thing that sells, brings in people, and brings money."

Hull Village resident Patrick Finn read into record former **HRA** Chairman Charles E. Gould's letter to the editor from the Feb. 16 edition of The Hull Times, which said, "some attendees want no development in the area...They seem to care less about the

sacrifices, work, and effort that went into the program and the promise given to the original property owners that the area would be redeveloped.”

Stephen Applebaum of Edgewater Road replied to that sentiment.

“A lot has changed in the past 60 years, the environment, not the least of which is one of those things,” Applebaum said. “Hate to think we are blindly trying to fulfill a promise that maybe is not the best thing to do at this time.”

During the presentation portion of the meeting, Michael Wang, Architect and Urban Planner at Form + Place, showed illustrations and diagrams to “solicit feedback” and “stimulate thoughts” regarding the open space design.

“If you are for open space, and I am,” said C. Anne Murray, of Summit Avenue, “[there] needs to be enough money to create it, but also a maintenance fund to keep it up. Need some basis for financials before we commit to any plan.”

According to the board and consultants, financial evaluations will be prepared, including a summary of estimated costs, revenues, and benefits based on the updated draft plan components that will continue to be refined through the planning process.

The **HRA** has hired Keller Williams Realty to do a “review to derive costs and value of development.” Kelly said the \$18,000 financial analysis is for a study of the “overall impacts of the development,” adding that as the board continues to seek public input, members will “look at revenue analysis to provide a baseline...after these meetings we are hoping to refine the plan a little bit more based on the public input, to say this is what we think works, this is what we don’t think works, this is what we think is the sweet spot.”

Gisela Voss of Hampton Circle said she “dreams of a possibility where Parcel 3 and 4 [at the southern end of the site] are open ... all stuff moved to where there is no bay-to-ocean view.” She said that “development need not mean cement building construction.”

Liz Kay, also of Hampton Circle, said she “so appreciates all the work for all the years the **HRA** has been doing it;” however, her sense is it has “been done in isolation of an entire peninsula. The impact on a vulnerable peninsula, one way in one way out, is really tough to swallow...The project does not live unto itself, but lives in connection to an entire peninsula.”

HRA member Dennis Zaia said that a year ago, he reached out to the Trustees of Reservations about preservation options, but didn’t bring it to the **HRA** board because the conversation did not go further. He discussed the land’s location near World’s End in Hingham, suggesting a place where people take out kayaks in the bay. Zaia explained at the time, the Trustees felt it was “too small because they would need a place for parking and a spot for a hospitality center for the rangers. They wanted the whole property.” Although he didn’t think it would work then, he stated “maybe now with all the feedback, it could work.”

Zaia urged all participants to continue offering comments and ideas coming.

“Keep doing what you are doing,” he said. “We will keep giving you the answers that we have, and the answers that we don’t have we will dig them up... eventually we will get closer to where we want to be.”

The next in-person meeting has been rescheduled to March 27 at 7 p.m. at the High School. It is set to take place in the auditorium for the formal presentation, and participants will then use the cafeteria for breakout groups and discussion.

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