



City of Harrisonburg, Virginia

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TO THE MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL CITY OF HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA

SUBJECT: Public hearing to consider adopting the City of Harrisonburg Downtown Streetscape Plan. The plan's goal is to present an easily communicable, comprehensive vision for the public streetscape in Downtown Harrisonburg that can be utilized by public and private agencies to further develop and sustain a vibrant downtown.

EXTRACT FROM MINUTES OF HARRISONBURG PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING HELD ON: June 11, 2014.

Chair Fitzgerald read the request and asked staff to review.

Mr. Brad Reed, Transportation Planner with the Department of Public Works, said I am before you this evening to talk about the Downtown Streetscape Plan, reiterate what the goals are, and what has happened since our previous meeting with you. We are bringing it before Planning Commission this evening to ask for your favorable recommendation for City Council to adopt this document as a City plan.

The objective of this plan is to bring together a unified vision for the public streetscape downtown. By doing this we are trying to create a more vibrant downtown, create a consistent look with its sidewalks and other facilities. This document is proposing to synthesize many older, existing documents into a single plan and also build on the 2005 Downtown Streetscape Plan, which is fairly limited in scope. With this plan we are trying to broaden out into many of the side streets within the downtown core as well as areas that we believe will soon become part of the downtown core. Also involved in this is the streamlining of improvement projects and trying to reference these design elements when we have developers come in, or when we have public projects, so that we know what type of facilities belong on that frontage of those parcels.

Timeline for this project as you may recall, in January we were before this body and you requested that we return to the two committees that were involved with the development of this plan; the Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance Landscape Committee and the Downtown Streetscape Advisory Committee. We did go back to those committees and got their comments on some of the changes that had occurred to the document since the public hearing in June 2013. After the meetings with the two committees, staff edited the plan per the comments and added in some of staff's recommended changes to try and bolster some of the ideas that came out of the committee meetings. We sent that revised document out to the two committees again so that they could review and have a final word on what the proposed document would be, prior to coming before Planning Commission.

Just to briefly go over some of the document changes; by far the most significant change has been clarifying the scope of the plan. When we were before you previously there was some confusion as to whether the scope was focused on the public rights-of-way or public spaces. We tried to really get into the goal statement and clarify this as the name implies, it is focused on the public rights-of-way that are used to transport people. All the changes were agreed upon by the committees and staff agreed to a number of other small edits. There were no comments received from the general public during this period.

After tonight's meeting we hope to go before City Council to request their adoption of the plan. Following that, there are some proposals in the plan that would require modifications to the Design and Construction Standards Manual, the Comprehensive Plan, and the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan; therefore, after City Council adoption we would move forward to get those plans modified in order to match and reference the Downtown Streetscape Plan as the standard.

That is all I have to present and I would be happy to answer any questions.

Chair Fitzgerald said are there any questions for Mr. Reed.

Mr. Da'Mes asked how "Downtown" is defined.

Mr. Reed said we have two study areas. One is the downtown core, which is defined as the B-1 and B-1 Conditional zoning district. We also have the transition area, which we define as properties that are either identified in the Comprehensive Plan as future B-1 areas or areas that are logical extensions of the B-1. Therefore, some areas that have the potential to mesh into the downtown area might be appropriate to include in the study area because of logical extensions of transportation enhancements.

Mr. Fletcher said on page 13 of the Downtown Streetscape Plan is a map of the areas.

Chair Fitzgerald said I have been following this closely, in part because I was on the Founding Board of Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance back in the day, but I have remained interested for a lot of reasons. I had looked back at notes from the public input from last year and I noticed there were a lot of things in the implementation strategies that have disappeared. However, I believe a lot of my questions regarding that were answered by your clarification of public spaces and public streetscapes. One question I do have is much of the stuff that is gone, and I understand it is because of a narrowing of the focus, are really good ideas. In particular in Goal 7G from the old plan talked about developing a formal plan for the Municipal Center Area, I realize this may belong in a plan for public spaces instead of a streetscape plan; but there are some good ideas here. Another was encouraging incorporation of green spaces on redevelopment plans, which is Goal 8D from the old plan. So my question is – these are really good ideas, what happens to them now?

Mr. Reed said that is an excellent question. With regard to the green spaces; we do have another recommendation within the plan that it was actually redundant too, where it recommends that green spaces be considered on developing or redeveloping properties. It also recommended for the creation of a landscape plan in order to define what those concepts would look like, if Planning Commission and City Council so desired. These were beyond the scope of defining what belonged in the public streetscape and that is why we tried to turn that back a bit.

Chair Fitzgerald said some of these ideas that got pushed to the side in the narrowing of the focus, I understand, but are they going anywhere with those ideas?

Mr. Reed replied as far as those we removed, absolutely. One of the ideas that was actually put forth by one of the Planning Commission members during the January meeting was to have a section of the

Comprehensive Plan dedicated to the Downtown Area which would be a more appropriate location for ideas like that to cover broader concepts for public spaces beyond just the streetscape.

Chair Fitzgerald said hopefully some of the ideas that are removed are being collected for future use, because there were some really good ideas. In the old plan, again, Goal 2C the language read to formalize a truck route and complete necessary intersection improvements. That is streetscape, so it is still in the plan. The language changed considerably, it softened to “encourage”, is there a reason for that?

Mr. Reed said yes, we recognize that any kind of formalization of a truck route would really be a City Council decision and Council directive. For us to direct them to do something of that sort would really be beyond the scope of the plan. Encouraging a truck route indicates there is a desire to have these larger, geometrically challenging vehicles to be directed to appropriate locations around downtown; it is really just an encouragement.

Dr. Dilts said what interested me, which does not have anything to do with the streetscape, has to do with the buildings. In the introduction it says the plan does not attempt to establish physical design standards for private structures; although the exploration of this option is a strategy in the City’s 2011 Comprehensive Plan. On page 40 of the Downtown Streetscape Plan it talks about the Downtown Historic District provides State and Federal tax credits for approved renovation and restoration of qualifying historic buildings at least 50 years old; so to me, part of the streetscape is what the buildings look like. There are facades on a number of the buildings downtown that take away from their ultimate historic nature. Is that something that was thought about? Perhaps encouraging people to think about redoing the facades of those buildings to make the downtown appear as the historic downtown it is.

Mr. Reed replied we provided ideas for how to move forward if that was desired; however, we do qualify streetscape by stating it is public streetscape. Any recommendations for private property have been taken out of the plan, if any did exist before. For instance we had an idea about removing billboards downtown and that was removed because it was private property. We really tried to stay within that public realm, and things that we could control within the streetscape. Ideas for the frontage of buildings are one of the ideas that we did not have any push from anyone to include it in the plan, it is private property; therefore, we decided it might not be desirable.

Mr. Way said I think it is great that this exists and it is out there to inform people of the process for investing in the downtown public realm. It is very important and there are great ideas within the plan. I know street trees are mentioned intermittently throughout the plan; was there ever any consideration to have a more assertive policy statement on street trees requirements and maintenance?

Mr. Fletcher said this is a plan for public property and we do not really have requirements on ourselves for planting trees on the public right-of-way; we do them as aesthetically as we think they should be located. What I think you are really speaking to is the private development street tree planting.

Mr. Way said yes, I know we have the landscape ordinance; but why shouldn’t the City have some type of requirements on itself to plant trees where appropriate, or where the sidewalk is more than nine feet wide?

Mr. Fletcher said this plan does kind of answer some of those questions about where and how we could design those things. The landscaping regulations do require street trees, they are along the street, but it is when the parking lots are adjacent to the street. Of course in B-1 if you want to build to the zero lot line and there is no location to put trees. We do not want to put forth new regulations for those things because you are affecting B-1 property and you want B-1 property to be compact and right up on the

street. With street trees you would be pushing the buildings back further, which is why this is focused solely on the aesthetics of the pocket locations where we can put trees.

Mr. Way said is there a case to be made for encouraging the City itself to invest in “urban” trees by prioritizing the maintenance of City trees where appropriate.

Mr. Fletcher replied we do have a City Tree Committee, so there is a process.

Mr. Way said the spirit of this document is to try and improve the public realm downtown Harrisonburg, sometimes in specific ways, but also generally with things to emphasize and prioritize and strategies to deliver some of the bigger picture things in a more general sense. So it seems like we would want to pursue street trees and the maintenance of street trees at some point. Maybe it should happen at the Comprehensive Plan level.

Mr. Reed said one of the reasons we stayed away from the really detailed specifics is it becomes far too specific for us to dictate the types of landscaping and the locations of landscaping. The ability for us to project out and see exactly how much right-of-way will be available along the frontage of a particular parcel is really going to be on a case-by-case basis.

Mr. Way said you have some street sections for typical streets, local streets, arterial and so forth. Is there any reason why the lane width was 12-feet rather than anything smaller for those streets? In a downtown area you could probably get away with 10-feet. What is the reason that 12 was chosen?

Mr. Reed replied the reason for that is the need to recognize the arterial streets; those that include Route 11 (Main Street) and Route 33 (Market Street) which are State designated arterial thru routes. We still need to maintain the capability of supporting larger vehicles on these routes. Where we have opportunities to narrow from the 12-feet, along some of the local streets, we do so; for example along Water Street.

Chair Fitzgerald said in the implementation strategies, Objective 3 talks about expanding parking opportunities. In the previous plan there was a strategy to replace the Water Street parking deck; did that get cut because of the public space versus public right-of-way?

Mr. Reed replied that it got cut because City Council has not yet determined the appropriate location for a new parking deck. We are specifically talking about replacing the parking deck with new infrastructure that accommodates retail uses and further expands parking opportunities. We kept that section in about trying to accommodate a mixed use feel of the new parking deck; we just did not specifically say which parking deck.

Chair Fitzgerald said if there are no further questions I will open the public hearing and ask if there is anyone wishing to speak regarding the proposed Downtown Streetscape Plan. Seeing no one, I will close the public hearing. What is being asked of Planning Commission is to recommend this document be moved forward to City Council for approval.

Mr. Fletcher said this is your official opportunity to vote to move this forward, need further revisions, whatever is your pleasure.

Mr. Heatwole said overall I like this plan, the idea and the concept behind the plan. A lot of work has gone into this and I think it is great. I do have one question. How might something like this go forward? It was mentioned that it would be adopted into several different documents if it is adopted by City Council. What happens next?

Chair Fitzgerald said to what extent is this aspirational and to what extent is it a practical guide for a series of next steps that show actual results?

Mr. Reed said there was a slide in our January meeting that discussed implementation. This is a visioning document, much like the Comprehensive Plan, essentially extending forward with a 30-year planning window of what we want the downtown area to look like. It would then be up to City Council to recommend for capital improvement requests using this plan.

Mr. Colman said so enforcement of this would be on a case-by-case basis.

Mr. Reed said that is correct. If we do have developments that are occurring along the frontage of streets on which improvements are called for within the document, we would then seek to make those improvements along that frontage.

Chair Fitzgerald said those improvements would be consistent with the vision that is expressed in the document.

Mr. Reed said yes, that is correct. The same would hold true with public projects as well.

Dr. Dilts said did you say 30-year plan?

Mr. Reed replied yes, this is intended to be a living document with regular updates as needed.

Chair Fitzgerald said very much like the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan and other visioning documents that we have.

Mr. Da'Mes asked was it within the 2005 plan that we began getting the blue and yellow identification signs.

Mr. Reed said yes.

Mr. Da'Mes said was that the first streetscape plan?

Mr. Reed replied yes.

Mr. Da'Mes said in nine years we have developed an updated version.

Dr. Dilts said it is not called out like the Comprehensive Plan to be updated every five years or so?

Mr. Reed said it would be updated on an as needed basis.

Dr. Dilts said I was just thinking maybe we should suggest this be looked at on a regular basis.

Mr. Heatwole moved to recommend approval of the Downtown Streetscape Plan as written with the recommendation from Planning Commission that there is a review of the document within every ten years.

Dr. Dilts seconded.

Chair Fitzgerald called for a voice vote on the motion.

All voted in favor (7-0) of the motion to recommend approval with the review recommendation.

Chair Fitzgerald said this will go before City Council on July 8th.

Respectfully Submitted,

Alison Banks
Senior Planner