



FACILITATION REPORT: THE LINK DISCUSSION

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Background and Context for the Facilitation

On Tuesday, August 12, 2025 Harrisonburg City Council considered a request to rezone 435, 445, 457, 473, 483 & 495 South Main Street and 282, 288, 294 & 298 South Liberty St from R-3 to B-1C, which would allow Timberwolf Capital Partners LLC (hereafter referred to as “The Developer”) to construct a six-story apartment building, called The Link, on the site of the existing Lindsey Funeral Home. City staff and Planning Commission (6-0) had recommended approval of the request. This proposed rezoning drew a large number of people to the council meeting (many attendees were unable to enter due to insufficient room capacity) with around 60 attendees providing public comment. Some key points from the public comment included concerns about The Link's aesthetic/appearance, size, location, and the potential impact on downtown traffic and parking. Additional concerns regarding the proposal included the mix of unit types (specifically the number of units and the proportion of 4-bedroom units designed for student occupancy), the amount of retail space available, and the six story height of the building.

Prior to the August 12th City Council meeting, The Developer had created a series of voluntary proposals to change The Link development (proffers) in response to these concerns. According to Todd Rhea, local attorney for The Developer, these proffers were unable to be brought before City Council at the August 12th meeting for technical/legal reasons.

In response to the extensive public comments, City Council voted unanimously to table this rezoning request and “direct[ed] staff to facilitate a process in engaging the developer and residents for discussion of this project” (August 12, 2025 City Council Meeting Minutes). After the August 12th City Council meeting, The Developer began looking for local facilitators to help lead a discussion regarding the proposed Link development, eventually enlisting a facilitation team composed of Eric Schmucker, Amy Knorr, and Jess Cochran.

Facilitation Scope and Framing

Roles

Defining the scope and framing of the discussion was complicated as it was initially unclear what roles the various parties (City Staff, City Council, Developer, etc.) were assuming. Ultimately, it was determined that The Developer was to be the convener, responsible for organizing and funding a discussion involving community representatives. Members of City Council declined to be involved in the planning process, or participate in the discussion (it is worth noting that some discussion participants requested that a member of City Council come as an observer). City staff did not participate in the discussion; however, they assisted the discussion through logistical support (providing meeting space, a staff member to address logistical issues during the discussion, and staff for pre-discussion set-up and technical support).

Given the atmosphere of distrust and the emotional nature of the issue, the developer as convener generated some suspicion among groups opposed to the development. Some worried that the facilitation was just a formality, that their concerns would not be addressed. As facilitators, we worked to create an authentic process to give people the opportunity to share concerns, hear one another, and ideate together.

Nature of the Discussion

Initially there were different understandings and expectations among interested civic groups regarding the nature of the discussion. These varied from visions of open conversations to opportunities to debate the issue to direct mediation between specific civic groups and The Developer. Part of this confusion likely stemmed from some parties interchangeably using the words discussion and mediation when initially calling for and describing the process. To clarify the nature of the discussion we utilized the below chart from the newDemocracy Foundation to introduce the conversation as, what the chart describes as, dialogue.

Debate	Dialogue	Deliberation
Compete Argue Promote opinion Seek majority Persuade Dig in Tight structure Express Usually fast Clarifies Win/lose	Exchange Discuss Build relationships Understand Seek understanding Reach across Loose structure Listen Usually slow Clarifies No decision	Weigh Choose Make choices Seek overlap Seek common ground Framed to make choices Flexible structure Learn Usually slow Clarifies Common ground

This discussion (described as dialogue above) was not about arguing for or against competing perspectives, nor was it about making definitive decisions; it was about exchanging ideas and perspectives, seeking understanding, and listening across groups in response to the proffers.

Framing

With The Developer as the convener of the discussion, the scope and focus centered on reviewing the proffers The Developer created using the initial guiding question: *Thinking of yourself, your neighbors, and the city: If there were to be a six-story apartment building in this space, how could it best meet our needs and maintain quality of life? What are some important considerations?*

Facilitation Report: The Link Discussion

The specific proffers and community concerns discussed included

1. Appearance and design of the building
2. Paul St. safety and traffic
3. Parking availability and impacts

Some proffers and concerns (below) were not included in the discussion as economic and design parameters limited further changes.

1. The mix of units
 - a. Maximum Number of 4-bedroom Units reduced from 40% to 33%
 - b. Increased the Minimum number of One-Bedroom/Efficiency Units from 25% to 40%
2. The amount of retail space available
 - a. Increased the commercial space from 2,000 square feet to a maximum of 5,000 square feet and prohibited tobacco, smoke, vape businesses in the commercial spaces.
3. The six story height of the building necessitating a rezoning to B-1 [though not a universal concern among representatives of interested civic groups]

Additional Discussion Possibilities

The Link development and proposed rezoning brought up many different underlying resident concerns and important discussion possibilities that the Harrisonburg community could have. Our initial meetings revealed that some opposed groups felt concerned with the way the proposed development had been processed by City Staff, and were distrustful of City Council. For many groups and people, The Link was important because it embodied people's hopes, fears, and concerns for the future of the city. Potential discussions that would be appropriate to be convened by City Staff or City Council, not a developer, were surfaced in focus group meetings, including:

Concerns about growing sustainably and responsibly while safeguarding identity

How does the city continue to meet changing needs and plan for the future? How do we, as a community, want to grow while maintaining what is important and unique about us? What is the Harrisonburg we want to see? What policies/codes/procedures do we need as a city to achieve this?

Concerns about transparency in city processes, trust, and accountability

How can we build public engagement and participation earlier into city processes so that residents have a voice while also recognizing the technical expertise of City Staff? What standards do we want to maintain? How can we best disseminate information and solicit input? How can we make city processes more conducive to mutual listening?

Concerns about the externalities of being a university town

How do we see local university students as members of the community during their time in school and afterwards? How should the city and local universities ideally grow together?

Statement of Facilitation Purpose

Through this conversation, concerned civic groups in Harrisonburg will have an opportunity to learn about and provide feedback on the proffers The Developer has offered on The Link development. Participants will be able to share together as a community, hear different perspectives, and ideate together in response to the proffers.

Methodology

As a facilitation team we began by convening small focus groups—meeting with representatives of interested civic groups individually—and then built towards a larger conversation between group representatives together. Focus group meetings started on October 1, 2025 and wrapped up on November 11, 2025.

Focus Group Meetings

Interested Civic Groups that we met with included:

- No to B1-C
- Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance
- Liveable Harrisonburg
- Shenandoah Valley Bicycle Coalition
- Harrisonburg Baptist Church
- Build Our Park
- Northeast Neighborhood Association
- Harrisonburg Farmers Market
- Chabad of The Shenandoah Valley

These groups were selected for being representatives of the most vocal groups during the August 12 City Council meeting, those with connections to downtown or representing downtown interests, proximity to the proposed development, or for being representative of an important city interest group. A facilitation team member met with Vice Mayor Dany Fleming to provide a general overview of the process, identify goals, and answer questions. Additionally the team met with a past City Council member, a previous Planning Commission member, and a local community organizer.

Our goals in these meetings were first and foremost to listen and learn from the groups, and then to clarify expectations for the multi-group conversation we were going to have together. We wanted to be very transparent with the groups about who we were and what the facilitation would be (ie not a mediation).

Larger Conversation Between Group Representatives

Each of the interested civic groups were invited to send representatives to a larger conversation which happened on November 13, 2025 from 5:30 - 8:45pm in the Harrisonburg City Public Works building. Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance sent information regarding the conversation to downtown business owners inviting any to join.

Attendees

Eric Schmucker Amy Knorr Jess Cochran Lori Britt Jamila Gaskins	Facilitation Team
Caleb Christen	Support for logistics and participants
John T. Hoover <i>(Founder of the development company)</i> Todd Rhea <i>(Attorney for the developer)</i> Seth Roderick <i>(Monteverde Engineering and Design Studios)</i> Salem "Sal" Richard LaHood <i>(Architect with QPK Design)</i> Michael P. O'Shea <i>(Architect with QPK Design)</i>	Development Team
Representatives of the following interested civic groups (25 total representatives)	
Old Town Residents	Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance
Liveable Harrisonburg	Shenandoah Valley Bicycle Coalition
Build Our Park	Harrisonburg Baptist Church
Downtown Businesses	Northeast Neighborhood Association
Harrisonburg Farmers Market	Past Planning Commission Member

Members of No to B1-C, a group opposed to the development as proposed, were frustrated and concerned by the specificity of the discussion scope (not including a discussion of the height of the building and the rezoning). Members of No to B1-C felt that, due to the scope of the discussion and their position against the specific rezoning, which allows for a six-story building, participating in the discussion would be seen as implicitly supporting the six-story development, which they do not. Instead, relevant attendees participated as Old Town Residents, not representing the No to B1-C group.

Discussion Design

Participants were pre-organized into four small table groups, each with a professional facilitator. Members of the various interested civic groups were dispersed among the tables to provide a diversity of perspective. Table facilitators guided small group discussions and activities, and a lead facilitator guided full group reporting and discussion. Development team members were situated at their own table to listen and learn, and were available to answer technical questions if a group became stuck on specifics during the discussion. One half of the room was dedicated to table groups, the other half was filled with large renderings of The Link with the updated architecture.

This conversation progressed as follows:

(1) Welcome, Introductions, Purpose

After introductions, John, the developer, gave a brief welcome that clarified his role and the role of the members of the development team was to listen, learn, and answer any technical questions preventing groups from moving forward in discussion. We then reviewed the purpose and framing of the discussion.

(2) Surfacing group ideals for development

In an effort to ground and frame our conversation, we had a discussion around the priorities and values that were important to keep in mind when considering development in downtown Harrisonburg. These values and priorities, generated by the group, were the scaffolding within which participants were invited to reflect on the questions in subsequent rounds and respond to the developer's proffers.

- *Thinking of yourself, your neighbors, and the city: If there were to be a 6 story apartment building in this space, how could it best meet our needs and maintain quality of life? What are some important considerations?*
- *What are the priorities or values that are important to us as a group when we think about development in Harrisonburg?*



(3) Discussion of the updated architecture / Presentation by Salem “Sal” Richard LaHood

Architect Salem “Sal” Richard LaHood presented the updated architecture, using 12 large renderings depicting the building at different angles. After the presentation and a brief question and answer time, participants were invited to move around and react to the new designs, followed by table group discussions.

- *What are some of your initial reactions to these images?*
- *What comes up for you when you view these images, considering what we identified as important to us?*
- *What do you like, what’s missing, what could be possible changes be?*
- *This is one vision, what is your vision?*



(4) Discussion of Parking and Paul St. Traffic/Safety concerns and proffers

This section began with a presentation from Seth Roderick on the traffic study that was conducted. Tables were then divided between those that would discuss Parking concerns and proffers, and those that would discuss Paul St. Traffic/Safety concerns and proffers. Participants were invited to select the issue they were most concerned about and move to that table for a discussion.

- *How does this proffer align with, or not, our list of priorities and values?*
- *What possible solutions can you imagine to address our concerns?*

Key Items and Themes from the Discussion

Surfacing group ideals for development

Framework Created Through Full Group Discussion

These points formed the group framework through which we discussed the proffers

- Any building in that space must encourage outward involvement, be inviting, and connect the community. A building in that space must create and add to the community not colonize it or exist as an island within it. [**This was a key point from numerous tables**] Ex. A through corridor; a way to walk through from Liberty St. to Main St.
- Given the importance of the specific property (represents “the gateway” to downtown) the amount of investment in the property must match the community value of the property.
- The architecture needs to fit in with current downtown architecture and match who we are and what we value as a community. The building should integrate well with downtown, while also emphasizing elements unique to us.
- Need to think about how light and shadow from the building will affect the surrounding community
- A building should have room for green space for people and for nature (ex. space for people off of the road and a Pollinator Corridor)
- A building shouldn't have a net negative impact on the city
- There should be onsite management of the building
- Anchor residents or businesses should be selected with intentionality

Table Group Discussion Themes

Responses prioritized development that is integrated, inclusive, sustainable, and supportive of downtown vibrancy, valuing a building that strengthens the neighborhood (economically, socially, and aesthetically) while mitigating strain on infrastructure, maintaining the character, and supporting the livability of Harrisonburg.

1. Community-Serving Businesses and Economic Vitality in the Commercial Space

- Desire for unique, non-duplicated businesses that add something new.
- Businesses should attract people downtown and address unmet needs.
- Retail should complement residential spaces and create a reason to live or visit downtown.
- Development should support existing businesses, not compete harmfully with them.

2. Architectural Integration and Aesthetics

- The building should fit Harrisonburg's character and "age gracefully."
- Visual cohesion with surrounding areas and avoiding jarring changes to the landscape.
- Thoughtful façade, sun/shade analysis, and long-term durability.
- As a gateway property, it must "be done right" and reflect community values.

3. Public Realm, Outdoor Space and Walkability

- Wide sidewalks, benches, outdoor seating, sidewalk planters.
- Spaces that encourage outdoor engagement and a sense of community.
- Inclusion of green space, especially for families and children.
- Creation of 3rd spaces (informal gathering areas).
- Designing for flow and connectivity—movement through and around the building.

4. Housing Needs and Resident Mix

- Housing should reflect community needs, including affordable options.
- Desire for age and socioeconomic diversity.
- Preference for long-term, invested residents rather than transient populations.
- Concern about an influx of students shifting downtown culture

5. Parking, Transportation and Mobility

- Balance needed between sufficient but not excessive parking.
- Interest in underground parking to reduce visual impact.
- Reduce car trips to campus; promote biking, walking, and public transit.
- Integration with existing transportation systems and bike lanes.
- Concern about traffic impacts, safety, and enforcement.

6. Environmental Sustainability and Infrastructure Capacity

- Managing stormwater runoff, waste, noise, and greenspace impacts.
- Interest in sustainable systems (composting, waste management).
- Avoiding added stress on utilities and city infrastructure (water, sewer, emergency services).
- Desire for no net negative impact on city systems.

7. Community Cohesion and Social Integration

- Building should create community, not isolate residents.
- Publicly accessible spaces that signal "community welcome."
- Should serve as a bridge between campus and the wider community.
- Support and strengthen existing initiatives, e.g., Farmers Market.

8. Safety, Enforcement and Quality of Life

- Noise restrictions and maintaining a family-friendly environment.
- Safety considerations: traffic, bike lanes, liability (e.g., pool), sufficient lighting.
- Need for effective parking, safety, and noise enforcement.
- Concern about how increased activity will affect neighbors.

9. Planning, Collaboration and Long-Term Vision

- Collaboration needed with city, county, JMU, and local businesses.
- Coordinated comprehensive planning around development, traffic, and parking.
- Need clarity on funding for spillover costs (parking, bike lanes, infrastructure).
- Development should serve as a model of intentional, well-planned growth.

Discussion on Updated Architecture

Group feedback reflected a desire for architecture that is contextual, inclusive, and deeply integrated into Harrisonburg's cultural and physical fabric. While many aspects of the revised design received strong positive feedback, concerns remain regarding public realm integration, greenspace, and accurate representation.



Table Group Discussion Themes

1. Positive Architectural Feedback

Groups identified numerous improvements compared to earlier designs. Highlights included a stronger alignment with the Harrisonburg aesthetic, greater integration with bicycle and pedestrian networks, attractive treatment of the parking deck (including public art), and a less imposing appearance from several vantage points. Elements such as the marquee-style sign, improved spacing between buildings, and enhanced ground-level programming were well received.

2. Inclusivity and Social Signaling

Overall, there is a desire for architectural choices that communicate inclusivity, diversity, and a stronger relationship to the city center, including façade treatments, public entrances, and orientation conveying openness and integration with downtown.

3. Public Cost and Infrastructure Impacts Reflected in Design

A number of comments expressed concerns about who will bear the cost for streetscape elements, including lighting, traffic-calming devices, and signage. Some concerns about public safety, noise, and the limited capacity of existing streets, especially Paul Street. There was a desire to minimize burden on public infrastructure and incorporate clear strategies for safe circulation, and noise mitigation.

4. Scale, Massing, and Accuracy of Visual Representations

Group members at several tables noted that the scale depicted in the renderings did not seem accurate. Some participants expressed a preference for a building height of 4–5 stories instead of six.

5. Desire for Additional Greenspace and Setbacks

Many comments emphasized the desire for more green infrastructure. Participants noted a lack of dog space, shade trees, mature landscaping, and outdoor seating. One comment preferred recessed balconies instead of protruding ones, as well as upper-floor setbacks to lighten the building's presence.

6. Architectural Style, Character, and Fit with Harrisonburg

Another major theme was the building's stylistic relationship to downtown and the broader Harrisonburg identity. Requests included incorporating more historical detailing, using bluestone or other local materials, adding ornamentation at rooflines, and breaking up the façade to appear as several smaller connected structures. Participants wanted the building to reflect the value of its prime location.

7. Street-Level Activation and Public Space Integration

Comments frequently addressed how the building meets the ground and interacts with public space. Participants valued the bike lanes, sidewalks, benches, and trees but requested more gathering areas along Main Street, wider sidewalks, and additional street trees. Several asked for clearer visuals of how the parking garage will appear from key community sites, especially the Farmer's Market and Turner Pavilion. There was also concern that the building could become inward-facing, limiting public engagement or community building.

Specific Responses

Positives

- Great improvements in design
- Like the bike lane, sidewalks, benches and trees
- Doesn't look so close to/imposing on city hall (this is an improvement if accurate)
- Love the artwork/mural on the parking deck. Makes it feel not like a parking garage.
- Like the marquee style sign to match others and distinguish downtown
- Trees between the property and the church are an improvement
- There appears to be plenty of space between the church and The Link
- Like the ability to traverse the corner
- Love the integration of the park and garage and building

Would still like

- Even more nods to the historical downtown
- More ornamental details at the very top similar to other downtown buildings (several mentioned this)
- Can it look less like one big building and look like several connected buildings (like Urban Exchange)
- Ensure that Gig and RideShare volume of a student-centric community can be supported without impacts on traffic flow.
- Incorporate Bluestone in design
- More vertical differentiation (row-house like)
- Need a grocery store (even a small one) in retail space
- More shade trees around outdoor seating
- Could there be more gathering areas on Main Street (greater width of sidewalk?)
- Plant trees in the median between cars and bikes
- Materials and design do not reflect "investment" or "value" in prime real estate
- Paul Street extension needs a bike lane
- Can we prevent cars from turning left off Liberty onto the Paul Street extension?

Discussion Paul St. Traffic/Safety Concerns and Proffers

Previously Identified Concerns Prior to the Discussion

- There is a desire to decrease car traffic downtown and there is a concern that The Link will increase traffic
- Safety concerns about how traffic will be routed
- Paul St. has been cited as an already dangerous road because cars drive very fast over the hill and lose control
- Not all of the neighboring roads have sidewalks for pedestrians making increased traffic potentially dangerous

Discussed Proffer

Added funding for Paul Street safety and traffic improvements. Provides resources to implement future improvements which meet City Public Works parameters in coordination with neighborhood residents.

Discussion Summary

- Need to be realistic about the traffic impact and the number of cars this will add
- Block off Paul Street with a bollard or make it one way
- Be realistic about the impacts on Paul Street, Franklin and Ott which may have trickle down impacts on school buses that traverse through this area (as buses are shared across elementary, middle and high school and already have trouble staying on schedule and serving all of these needs. Additional traffic in this neighborhood will make this worse,)
- As a city we need to be moving away from cars
- Install traffic cameras which will be a bigger deterrent than other traffic calming measures (although admittedly will have negative impacts on immigrant communities whose license plates may be tracked by cameras)
- Need a traffic impact analysis based on the number of “beds”
- The traffic analysis presented was done in the summer – needs to be done while school is in session.
- Add blinking pedestrian lights and raised pedestrian crosswalks on Paul St.

Note: This group suggested that all proffers be run through VPS – Virginia Proffer Solutions – to make them legally binding.

Discussion of Parking Concerns and Proffers

Note—this was the issue that most participants chose to discuss when moving to the topic specific tables.

Previously Identified Concerns Prior to the Discussion

- There won't be enough parking—concern that Link residents may fill up street parking
 - For current city residents or visitors to downtown
 - For neighboring institutions (ex. Harrisonburg Baptist Church needs spots for congregation and visitors- don't want to be the church that tows! Wants to "be a good neighbor")
- There aren't enough spaces for bike parking for encouraging more non-motorized modes of transportation especially with the installation of the Liberty Street cycle lane project

Discussed Proffers

Increased parking garage capacity from 425 designed (Minimum 400 Proffered) to 500 designed (Minimum 480 Proffered). The garage is designed in concept for the higher spaces, the slightly lower proffered numbers intended to provide final design flexibility.

- Respond to concerns received regarding sufficient parking for residents and provides an opportunity to increase future public parking in the south downtown area.

Increased secure bike parking from 90 to 120 spaces and outdoor bike parking from 8 to 16 spaces.

- Respond to Stakeholder and Citizen feedback to increase and encourage cycling resources at the property and encourage non-motorized modes of transportation with the installation of the Liberty Street cycle lane project.

Discussion Summary

Concerns

- Parking study done in 2021—Outdated? Still relevant?
- Garage capacity
 - Not addressing parking overflow into surrounding area
 - Does it take into consideration visitors to residents?
- Concerns for the City to address
 - The parking garage will have a large number of spaces designated for city employees—why can't city employees use other, underutilized existing parking structures?
 - How will the city monitor and protect ground level parking for city staff & public use?
- Concerns about uber-eats, delivery drop offs blocking traffic (and the impact on the church next door)—need sufficient off-street access for deliveries and ride sharing.

Suggestions

- The added proffers were helpful for parking spaces
- Suggesting a Community Board online for residents to offer ride shares or car pool
- Creating a transportation demand management plan
- Distributing parking information to new residents
- Consider offering a shuttle for students to JMU
- Lower price point parking for lower income residents
- Preserving existing municipal spots surrounding the Link
- Adding time limits on street parking?
- Increasing parking enforcement- \$\$ talks!
- Increasing public transportation: Ex putting a bus stop in front of the building to encourage public transit (in talking to the table, John, the developer, mentioned it might be possible to add a bus stop next to/near the building)

Conclusion

The facilitated process provided an opportunity for interested civic groups to engage directly with the developer's updated proffers and design revisions. The discussion generated meaningful insights into community priorities and specific improvements related to architecture, and traffic / parking issues. The discussion atmosphere was positive and constructive.

The themes identified reflect a collective desire for intentional, integrated, community-serving development that strengthens downtown Harrisonburg, minimizes negative impacts, and reflects the values and identity of the city. The process also highlighted the need for future city-led conversations about growth, policies, and procedures.

Acknowledgements

To host a conversation with many interested civic groups is no small feat. We are profoundly grateful to all who participated in the many aspects leading up to the larger facilitated conversation. We recognize all the individuals and community groups (mentioned specifically above) who engaged in preliminary conversations and brainstorming of what might be possible. We are grateful to the Harrisonburg City Staff who assisted with the logistics of where to host the meeting and those who stayed late until the large meeting ended.

With deep gratitude,

Jess, Eric, and Amy