

Subcommittee issues third report to Mayor, Council

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(Biddeford, Maine) The Downtown Task Force Subcommittee recently submitted a report to Biddeford City Manager Jim Bennett, after studying the issue of parking in downtown Biddeford for several months.

Copies of the report are available by contacting the City Manager's office at 207-284-9313, and the report's Executive Summary is appended to this press release. Bennett has submitted the report to the City Council and to Mayor Alan Casavant. The Subcommittee used a sophisticated process of data visualization and data analytics to study six possible areas downtown where a parking garage might be built. After collecting and analyzing its data, the Subcommittee made three recommendations:

1. Build a parking facility downtown;
2. Finance the facility in such a manner that facility users pay all costs, not the taxpayers;
3. Build the facility in one of two locations, either on city-owned land at 3 Lincoln Street, or just off Lincoln Street behind the Lincoln Mill (closer to Main Street than the 3 Lincoln street site.)

The chair of the Subcommittee, Bruce Benway, said a couple of key considerations guided the group's research and analysis.

"First, we couldn't make a decision based on what happened yesterday or what's happening today," Benway said. "It was imperative that we think two and three years down the road, at least, and think about the implications of downtown growth that is already in the planning stages. We also recognized that access to the Saco River is opening up dramatically, and that's going to have a direct influence on pedestrian flow and other very important considerations. That river and its falls will be a prominent symbol of an economically revitalized Biddeford."

The Subcommittee had previously issued two reports to city officials in recent months, one on the proposed RiverWalk along the Saco River, and another on the city's efforts to communicate to its citizens and to the media. Benway said the topic of communications has received a lot of attention in committee.

"If there's one area in which we've been most critical of the city, that's probably it. There's clearly a need to keep the public better informed as policy makers tackle these long-term strategic decisions, like the parking shortage, and the overall design of a revitalized downtown.

"Closure of the incinerator a few years ago is driving a rebound that is being noticed throughout the region, but an information gap definitely exists. In our view, the city needs to illustrate cause and effect more effectively, so that residents can understand the critical link between wise strategic planning decisions that need to be made now, and future prosperity that those decisions will drive."

(END)

Executive Summary

Downtowns are important in many ways. They are the heart of a community, and serve as centers for services, employment, and civic interaction. They symbolize a community to its residents, and to people throughout the region.

Community pride is not isolated to the impact of a downtown, but a downtown is clearly a cornerstone of that pride. Long-time Biddeford residents are acutely sensitive to this reality, and still lament an article that appeared on the front page of the Maine Sunday Telegram on February 27, 2000. Written by reporter Kelley Bouchard, the article was entitled "MERC: A Point of Reckoning for 'Trash Town USA.'" Unfortunately, the article led a number of media stories in the subsequent decade that perpetuated that unfortunate label.

Then, however, the tide turned dramatically. Tangible, significant and historic changes have occurred in Biddeford since the community made the strategic decision in 2012 to remove a trash-to-energy facility from its downtown. That positive momentum should continue.

The Downtown Task Force Subcommittee is charged with making recommendations to the Mayor and the City Council to help improve the downtown, and thus help improve what symbolizes Biddeford, a City that is diligently revitalizing itself with energy and imagination. As its mission applies to downtown parking, the Subcommittee has recognized that highly qualified experts have studied that issue in particular detail. Those experts have concluded that continuing the positive trends in downtown Biddeford depends on addressing a documented shortage of parking in the City's downtown district.

The Subcommittee concurs. It reviewed the parking challenges intensely, as outlined in this report, and it used a detailed process to arrive at its recommendations. Throughout the Subcommittee's process, it viewed the Mill District as an integral part of the Biddeford's downtown, not as a distinct and separate area. Together, the downtown and Mill District make up a single vibrant neighborhood, the future of which increasingly depends on its supply of parking.