

Minutes of Joint Meeting of:

**MBTA Task Force Communication and Outreach Subcommittee and
Downtown Improvement Project Committee**

January 8, 2024, 11:00 a.m., Room 5 and virtual

MEMBERS PRESENT (MBTA): Sandy Bodmer-Turner, Gar Morse, Chris Olney, Susan Philbrick, Richard Smith

MEMBERS PRESENT (DIP): Steve Carhart, Linda Crosby, Marlene Dolan, Gar Morse, Kurt Svetaka

STAFF PRESENT: Gail Hunter, MBTA Task Force Administrator; Tiffany Marletta, Director of Communications

Call to Order: The meeting was called to order at 11:00 a.m.

Mr. Carhart led a discussion of current perceptions of the possible impact of the MBTA Zoning Law on Manchester's downtown. He described impressions ranging from "benign outcomes" to "worst case scenarios." Explaining how zoning changes can encourage positive outcomes and prevent the "worst case" scenario is essential. He defined positive outcomes as: protect existing multifamily properties, prevent poor design, preserve current commercial space and variety of uses, prevent oversized projects, expand density in remote areas and "fringes." He defined the worst case as: widespread teardowns of existing buildings in the downtown, the consolidation of current residences into large apartment buildings, incompatible design, and loss of current commercial space and uses.

To correct misperceptions and to allay fears, the Task Force, through its outreach, should: explain zoning changes in an understandable way, implement follow-through mechanism to monitor and evaluate change as a result of amended zoning; remind stakeholders that zoning is not case in stone and can be amended as long as it does not violate the Law; monitor and evaluate the result of zoning amendments in the other MBTA communities that have already complied with the Law.

Mr. Smith agreed that it was important to "embrace" a frank discussion of the worst-case scenario and to continue to work to prevent that from occurring through the Task Force's work in identifying possible MBTA overlay districts and in crafting proposed zoning amendments.

Ms. Bodmer-Turner stressed that it was crucial to also present a vision for the best-case scenario. How can Manchester take advantage of this opportunity to improve zoning, particularly in the downtown and commercial district?

Mr. Carhart discussed current priorities of DIP: infrastructure renewal, a way-finding plan, signage amenities, improve parking so that it more carefully aligns with the needs of the community.

Ms. Dolan asked for clarification on what role the Task Force saw for DIP. She suggested a survey of stakeholders: business owners, property owners, downtown tenants of residential and commercial spaces.

Mr. Olney explained that the Task Force cannot operate successfully in a vacuum. The Task Force needs input from DIP and the downtown stakeholders. Mr. Smith reiterated that the Task Force wants to hear the major concerns of DIP and the downtown stakeholders.

Ms. Philbrick explained the Task Force's idea of a public forum to explain the Law and how the current zoning currently impacts downtown. Mr. Morse reiterated the importance of "sticking to the facts" when discussing the MBTA Zoning Law and its potential impact.

Ms. Crosby agreed with a forum but suggested that it be followed up with a survey. Both committees agreed to host a forum. The proposed January 18th date was seen as premature. DIP will contact the stakeholders for input. Two forums were discussed: one during the day, and one in the evening.

Mr. Svetaka noted that DIP's discussions have centered on parking. He advised that the forum should explain zoning changes in a way that explains higher density and includes protection and preservation.

Mr. Olney explained the concept of design standards.

Mr. Carhart agreed that DIP would think about a wish-list for downtown.

Ms. Dolan stated that residents don't really consult the Town's website for information. She observed that the FAQs are an excellent resource and recommended getting the facts on the Town's social media and through the Cricket. Stakeholders should know where we are in the process and how we can implement guardrails for developers.

Ms. Marletta suggested a "Question of the Week."

DIP will discuss at their next meeting.

Ms. Bodmer-Turner stated DIP can help the Task Force understand: 1. what are the reactions of the Town's business community to increased residential density in the downtown, and 2. would the business community support a change in zoning to encourage and/or preserve mixed-use properties in the downtown.

Mr. Smith expressed concern about downtown rents.

Public Comment:

Mr. Gary Gilbert recommended design guidelines should be included in zoning amendments. He noted that the Town has never had them, and they should be thorough and easy to understand and follow.

Ms. Sarah Pierce agreed with Mr. Gilbert and noted the MIT presentation. She asked if most businesses in Town own their space or rent and noted that property owners might have different interest than their tenants. Mr. Carhart responded that most are rented but the forum and survey would help answer that.

Adjourn: Ms. Bodmer-Turner moved to adjourn, and Mr. Carhart seconded. Motion passed unanimously.