



SUSTAIN SOUTHERN MAINE

Partnering to strengthen our economy, environment and community

South Portland Mill Creek Pilot Center Technical Workshop January 16, 2013

Summary of Morning Session

After the initial opening of the session by Evan Richert and the introductions, the floor was turned over to Tex Haeuser, South Portland Planning Director to give the group background on the area.

Mill Creek is the primary study area and it is bounded by the Casco Bay Bridge approach road on the west, Ocean Street on the east, the greenbelt path to the south and E Street to the north. Knightville is a predominantly residential neighborhood directly abutting Mill Creek to the north. It is not technically part of the study area but it is important to consider the two areas' relationships in this planning process.

In the last 10 - 20 years, Mill Creek has been zoned for denser and denser development. It is now zoned for 12-24 units per acre. In this time parking requirements have also been lowered. Mill Creek is currently zoned Limited Business and Knightville is predominantly zoned Village Residential and Village Commercial. The area is covered by a TIF district that is used to finance infrastructure improvements.

In 2005 the city conducted a public design workshop for the area. Public input expressed a desire for more pedestrian friendliness, improved aesthetics (including visual gateways), as well as increased density and building heights. The 2012 South Portland Comprehensive plan included these desires with particular focus on studying the potential for increased density and building heights.

Recently the city has used the TIF money to help fund road and sewer improvements along Ocean Street. Improvements to the neighboring Mill Creek Park have also been recently completed. The city has looked into burying the high-tension electrical wires that run through Mill Creek but has determined that to be too costly.

The floor was turned over to a representative of the owners of the Shaw's Plaza.

She noted that in the short and medium term, new development or major redevelopment on their property is restricted by a number of factors. Many of the tenants have long-term leases

(12-15 years for the smaller stores, longer for Shaw's). In some cases these leases include minimum amounts of parking and/or prohibit the blocking of the view of their storefront from the road. Shaw's lease also prohibits a restaurant from leasing space facing the Shaw's storefront. The high-tension electrical lines are on an easement and there are restrictions on how close to the lines buildings can be constructed. The Shaw's portion of the plaza as well as the out-parcel buildings are not owned by the property owner and so they cannot make changes to the buildings.

There are currently two vacancies in the plaza totaling ~12,000sqft. They have been kept empty not by lack of demand but by the poor economic times, with prospective tenants specifically citing a lack of funds as their reason for not leasing the space.

The floor was then given to a representative of the Mill Creek Plaza property owners.

He explained that new development or major redevelopment is restricted by long term leases here as well. Leases also restrict the types of businesses that can lease space, mostly prohibiting additional food and coffee establishments. Currently there is one vacancy where CVS used to be. It is felt that the area suffers from its proximity to the Maine Mall because national credit tenants have expressed that they only need one store in the area and that they would prefer it to be in the mall area. The recent opening of the Bull Moose store in the Mill Creek area is seen as a good argument against this mindset.

A question was asked about whether they see the drive through area for Bank of America as being open for repurposing anytime soon. It was explained that this is not the case due to the investment in the pneumatic tube system that serves the drive through.

There was general agreement that the area suffers from a less than good image and reputation. Primary factors contributing to this were seen to be: the mental exaggeration of the bridge as a barrier from Portland, the area's old infrastructure and appearance, and the car-oriented nature of the businesses and infrastructure.

Evan presented some examples of similar redevelopment projects that had been tried or proposed in other areas. He drew attention to some common themes: the "main street" where the development creates a central access point on which buildings front, the creation of "hard edges" to the streets, and complementary mixed uses. He also noted the challenge of increasing activity and useable space while maintaining a balance of parking. With that in mind he noted the trends towards a less car centric society. He stressed the need for phasing and adaptability so as to make the plan as robust as possible. Some small changes can lead the way for larger ones in the future. He particularly noted the need for connections as a base to build future development on.

Before sending the group into two workgroups Evan reviewed the Design Charge. He drew attention to the need for the inclusion of affordable housing; both because it is an important part of a vibrant neighborhood and as a requirement by the HUD grant funding this study.

At this point the group split up into two smaller groups to work on their ideas and visions for the area. The results of those two discussions are captured in the Lessons Learned document, and will be further refined and illustrated in order to be presented to the public in late February or March.

Attendees:

Tex Haeuser	City of South Portland
Steve Puleo	City of South Portland
Rich Towle	City of South Portland
Greg L'Heureux	City of South Portland
Jim Gailey	City of South Portland
Caroline Hendry	Resident / South Portland Planning Board Member
Barbara Psichos	Resident
Deb Fuller	Finard Properties
Eric Urbanek	Mill Creek Shopping Center
Paul Stevens	SMRT Architects and Engineers
Mark Johnson	SMRT Architects and Engineers
Richard Berman	Developer Collaborative
Josh Benthien	Northland
Bob O'Brien	South Portland Waterfront Market Association
Steph Carver	GPCOG
Evan Richert	Richert Planning
Carol Morris	Morris Communications
Scott Hastings	Morris Communications
Molly Just	City of Westbrook
Aaron Kaplan	
Hannah Kitchel	