Portland Pilot Community Technical Workshop
April 30th, 2013

Summary of Opening Session

Evan Richert of Sustain Southern Maine(SSM), opened the session and reviewed the concept of the Pilot Communities. He gave a brief review of the work that had been done to date on the India St. pilot and explained the roles that the designers and developers that SSM invited would play in the workshop. Everyone was asked to introduce themselves.

Carol Morris, from SSM, took the floor and gave some background on the Sustain Southern Maine grant, reviewing the major partners involved and the broad scope of the project. She then reviewed the reasoning behind the pilot community's portion of SSM and explained how India St. was chosen to participate. Finally she reviewed the process going forward and what the end product would be.

Evan returned to the floor to review the agenda for the day and to explain the goals for the workshop.

Scott Hastings, from SSM, was asked to talk about the open house that SSM had put on to gather initial public feedback about the neighborhood. He explained the set up and reviewed the questions that were asked that day. He then went over the data collected and presented the results.

At this point Bill Needelman , from the City of Portland's Planning and Urban Development Department, took the floor to provide some context for planning in the India St. neighborhood. He defined India St. as a "downtown adjacent" neighborhood.   In this role it has been near many plans but hos not been the focus of any until recently. Portions of the neighborhood were included in a 1900's downtown vision plan that is still used in the present day to set much of the downtown's zoning. In 2000 the Eastern Waterfront Plan was started with the removal of Bath Ironworks from what is now the Gateway Terminal. This plan moved the ferry terminal to its current location. Again while the plan included the southern portion of the neighborhood it did not address it as a whole. Since then a number of things have occurred to bring attention to the India St. Neighborhood. The formation of the India St. neighborhood association and the work a few motivated residents has done a lot to raise the profile of the neighborhood as a separate entity. The city was currently working on a historic structures inventory and he pointed out the neighborhood had a compelling story to tell as the oldest part of the city. The city's goal was to start project that would result in an actionable and implementable plan that

would provide land use/zoning recommendations for the neighborhood.   That project would be informed by the SSM Pilot effort and another project the city is undertaking partnered with a Oregon College.

Hugh Nazor was asked to speak on behalf of the India St. neighborhood association.   He reiterated that as a downtown adjacent neighborhood it had been overlooked while plans were done around it. He also pointed to the expansion of Franklin Arterial in the 60's to cutting off and reducing the neighborhood. He talked about how while the neighborhood is active during the day with shops and restaurants it is lacking residential uses and so is empty at night. A desire for small, affordable units was expressed to up the density in the neighborhood.

At this point the attendees of the workshop were asked to express any thoughts and questions they had about the neighborhood or the workshop.

A participant said that he agreed that neighborhood has been isolated. They were not interested in very high density, high rises, but instead a walkable, human scale neighborhood. A concern was expressed that restrictions could become too ridged and thus restrict what could be done in the area. In particular they were leery of the historic district designation. They did feel that some design standards would be needed though.

 Another participant agreed that too ridged restrictions would be bad and advocated for a form based code of some kind. He mentioned that he liked the "total site plan" review that Jeff Lavine, head of the city's Planning and Urban Development Department, had discussed in the past. They felt that the city should be able to tell developers what they wanted rather than wait for a developer to propose something and ask for exceptions.

A participant talked about the form based code that Yarmouth was looking to implement on Route 1 and mentioned that the India St. neighborhood could serve a similar role as a testing ground for form based codes in Portland. They felt that form based codes gave municipalities an opportunity to set aside their large, technical zoning ordinances and start fresh. They advocated undertaking an intensive public involvement effort to determine what is wanted and then create a form based code around that.

Another participant said that as a property owner looking to develop their land they agreed that they were worried about making restrictions too rigid and in particular they didn't want the height restrictions changed. They felt that eh parking garage was an asset to the community and that more business in the area would be good. They also said that the existing ordinances had a lot of red tape that made it tough to move projects forward.

A participant agreed with many of the thoughts put forth by the others and said that people seemed to like the smaller, historic nature of the existing buildings. They said that as a developer they had used historic tax credits in some work in the past but at the same time having a historic district does put restrictions on things. Smaller buildings don't involve enough funds to really make use of the historic tax credit. They felt that a historic district should be

looked at very carefully before it is enacted to make sure that it would in fact be good for the neighborhood. Similarly they felt a form based code should be approached carefully as they can make it very hard to do rehabs of existing properties that do not fit the code.

Deb Andrews, Historic Preservation Program manager for the City of Portland, commented that buildings designated as historic are offered wavers and exemptions for city codes so a historical designation would help in that regard.

A participant noted that transportation as an important part of any land use plan and noted that the franklin redesign would be critical to the neighborhood. They went on to note that attendees to the open house had seemed to favor rail coming to the neighborhood and an improved transportation network to access that rail would be important. All modes of transportation need to be considered and included. They also felt that creating a unique and desirable sense of place was key to building the neighborhood up economically.

Another participant noted that they appreciated the mention of small, affordable units and was happy to see affordability as key point of the design charge. They felt that there is an increasing number of individuals choosing to live car free and that the India St neighborhood would be perfect for that. A residential base for the neighborhood was felt to an important part of supporting smaller local business there.

A participant represent Portland Trails stressed the importance of edges and nodes and asked the group to keep in mind how and where people get into and out of the neighborhood. They felt it would be important to push through the edges to provide better access. It was agreed that the franklin redesign would be important for this neighborhood and that the connection of Federal St. across Franklin would be desirable.   Similarly they pointed to Munjoy South as an edge and felt that city should look at how to make it more permeable. They were also concerned about there being too many "mega-projects" that would squeeze out the smaller properties and developers. These smaller properties were seen as a resource to add character and variation to the area.

A representative of Portland Landmarks agreed that the variation in architecture and uses was what made the neighborhood such an interesting place. They felt that the neighborhood really showed the evolution of Portland and felt it should be preserved.

A participant said that they were there representing the older residents and mentioned the large populations of retirees in and around the area. They had concerns about safety and walkability, particularly in regards to parking garages. They also wanted to avoid any large unbroken walls that do not have street access. It was felt to be safer to have better permeability and interaction with the street. Related to this better lighting was requested. Also having more activity at all times would make the area feel safer.

Evan was asked to review the definition of form based codes for the group. He explained that in contrast to the standard, "Euclidian", zoning form based codes are not concerned so much

with what uses are conducted on a property. Rather it regulates the look and function of a property and how it relates to other properties. It also dictates the form of the public right of way. Form based codes try and create an enduring look and feel that can continue even as the uses change.

Alex Jaegerman, of the Portland Planning and Urban Development Department, added that the City of Portland has been using some elements of form based codes already. He pointed to the bayside building requirements that restrict the building envelope. He noted that a true form based code categorizes streets into a hierarchy with each category having its on form. The India St. neighborhood currently contained a number of different zones and he felt that if the group could disregard the use restrictions and look at how future buildings should look then they would have the basis for a form based code. Finally he noted that the nature of form based codes could help to streamline the permitting process.

A participant agreed that form based codes would be a good approach for the neighborhood. It would allow residents to put together something that expressly represented their interests.

Bill Needelman asked that the group not get too bogged down in the specifics of the code but instead look at the bigger picture. This is an early step and the vision would be the important part.

At this point Evan reviewed the design charge. He also clarified that this was not a master plan. It was a brief workshop doing some visioning that could inform a future, larger planning process.

At this point the group broke up into three smaller groups. The work of the groups is reflected in the lessons learned document and the posters presented at the public meeting.