

**JOINT MEETING  
AMHERST PLANNING BOARD  
AND  
DOWNTOWN PARKING WORKING GROUP**

**Tuesday, February 28, 2017, 7:00 PM  
Town Room, Town Hall  
MINUTES**

**PLANNING BOARD:**

**PRESENT:** Stephen Schreiber, Chair, Christine Gray-Mullen, Robert Crowner, Michael Birtwistle, Jack Jemsek, Maria Chao, Greg Stutsman, Richard Roznoy

**ABSENT:** Pari Riahi

**DOWNTOWN PARKING WORKING GROUP:**

**PRESENT:** Christine Gray-Mullen, Chair, Richard Roznoy, Connie Kruger, Wendy Jones Boisseau

**ABSENT:** Rabib Rafiq, Matthew Yee

**STAFF:** Christine Brestrup, Planning Director  
Nate Malloy, Senior Planner  
Steven McCarthy, Administrative Assistant

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Mr. Schreiber opened the meeting at 7:03 PM.

**I. Municipal Parking District**

Ms. Brestrup gave a presentation on the history and context of the Municipal Parking District, which includes all of the B-G zone, the abutting B-L zones, and areas of the R-G district that abut downtown. Some uses within the MPD are not required to provide parking on-site. These include all residential uses, retail and consumer-oriented commercial uses, and research uses. Dormitories, hotels and inns, churches, libraries, and museums are required to provide parking. The MPD was formed around 1960 to encourage density and pedestrian access in the downtown area. In 1988 the residential exemption was added; in 2009, the area was expanded from its previous northern boundary of Kellogg Avenue to its current borders.

In 2014-15 a series of public parking forums were held, which were used to produce a parking report. The report included many strategies and recommendations for improving parking service downtown, many of which have already been accomplished by the Town or are underway. Nelson\Nygaard was hired as a parking consultant and produced a professional report on the condition of downtown parking.

**II. Zoning and III. Other Parking Tools and Regulations**

According to the Nelson\Nygaard report, in the medium term, a parking garage may not be required; it is possible to manage the current stock of public and private parking in such a way to meet demand. Public parking can be in high demand at peak times; however, 2/3 of the parking downtown is private. Nelson\Nygaard recommended the expanded use of private lots, whether through private-to-private leasing or sharing arrangements, or through municipal involvement. Their data indicated that low meter rates downtown did not encourage turnover in peak locations. Oftentimes, employees of downtown businesses will park for eight hours at a time in prime spots. Different management strategies could be used for at least two to three years to effectively manage the public parking supply as it stands. While certain peak times can be difficult, overall the supply is adequate for the medium term.

Mr. Birtwistle asked what the impact of changing the pricing structure has been in other municipalities.

Mr. Malloy emphasized the importance of a balanced price structure. The price of prime centrally-located spots should be higher to encourage frequent turnover; conversely, this could be paired with reduced-price parking around the periphery for longer-term parkers.

Mr. Stutsman said that this meeting had its origin in the ZSC's discussion of increased residential development downtown, and about whether in the long term some kind of new parking structure or shared parking arrangement would be needed in the MPD. The ZSC thought it was worth exploring changing the Zoning Bylaw to increase parking requirements in the MPD – these requirements can be waived or modified during the Special Permit/Site Plan Review process, but if there is no zoning requirement it is not possible to require any development to have parking. The MPD could have reduced parking requirements compared to other areas, and could also implement a payment in lieu system - whereby developers can pay the Town a fee instead of providing parking - but adding some kind of requirement gives planners more flexibility.

Ms. Brestrup noted an evolution in parking proposals for recent new buildings. The zoning requirement for multi-unit residential developments outside of the MPD is two spaces for every unit; Kendrick Place has a total of four parking spaces for 36 units, One East Pleasant Street has around one space per four units, and the newly proposed Spring Street building has around one space per two units.

Mr. Schreiber said a weakness in the Bylaw as it stands for areas not in the MPD is that it mandates that parking must be provided, but it does not say for whom; it is unclear whether spaces should be provided to tenants, retail customers, leased out to members of the public, or used otherwise. He was struck by the Beacon project in North Amherst – their equity partners would only invest if they thought the project would work with the parking provided in the plan.

Ms. Gray-Mullen said the DPWG is exploring models and examples of payment in lieu, and is not close to the point of being able to make a recommendation. They have learned so far that the revenue of payment in lieu systems does not usually end up amounting to a significant amount of money in reality – certainly not enough to build a parking garage, which usually cost up to \$25,000/space. However these funds could benefit other parking/transportation elements of downtown, such as beautification, or improvements to intermodal transport systems. On the flipside, the Town wants development to happen, and a balance must be struck – if fees are too high, they will turn away developers. Mr. Malloy looked at Northampton's payment-in-lieu program; it was in place for a number of years, but they ended up discontinuing it because it generated such a small amount of money and was a detriment to development. She suggested staff, the DPWG, or the Board should do a follow-up study on municipalities that have implemented these programs and see how they have fared.

Mr. Roznoy noted that when Northampton discontinued their payment in lieu program, they saw that developers would provide parking if they thought they needed it – even if there was no requirement. Ms. Gray-Mullen added that developers look at end users. They consider different options depending on what is needed to sell their condos, rent their apartments, or support their retail tenants.

Ms. Kruger said she was on the fence about the issue. There are many circumstances in which it could be economically viable for a developer to not provide much or any parking on their site, but the development adds pressure to the overall parking system. Other users are affected because of more residential activity downtown. There are more visitors to residences, and residents who hold distant parking spaces park may closer to home during off hours, and this increase in traffic could make it harder for retail customers to park downtown even if the development is viable for the developer. Beacon had to create parking in North Amherst because there was no other parking nearby – a downtown developer can assume that the rest of the system will absorb the need.

Mr. Schreiber recalled when the Planning Board met with Beacon and they asked about the possibility of street parking on Cowles Road. He said there is not a good mechanism for pooled parking – private parking lots shared by multiple businesses. Payment in lieu gives a mechanism to build on small lots while still contributing to the common good. Many properties in downtown would not be developable were there to be any kind of parking requirement.

Ms. Gray-Mullen said that there is a need for this to be further explored, and data to be compiled; the ZSC and the DPWG should make sure they don't duplicate effort. The DPWG has a lot to study at this time—would the ZSC want to take this issue on?

Mr. Stutsman said they would like to do that, and hopefully will get further input from the DPWG.

Mr. Malloy suggested that payment in lieu revenue could go towards incentivizing shared parking—leases or other arrangements between private parties to share use of a lot. It is also worth reviewing the basis of the zoning parking requirements; the current standard of two spaces per unit is arbitrary. Some communities mandate traffic studies and base fees and requirements on the results. Payment in lieu fees could be collected all at once, or amortized over a number of years.

Ms. Gray-Mullen said that a suggestion in the DPWG had been to make a matrix of different municipalities that have tried payment in lieu, and compare their different systems, requirements, whether or not the system is working, and what they want to change.

Mr. Schreiber said that a great model of successful private shared parking is the area behind the Lumber Yard restaurant—they did not have any on-site parking and were able to lease the use of an abutting office building's parking lot in the evenings.

Ms. Gray-Mullen said that she and Ms. Kruger were skeptical of the Nelson\Nygaard report's claim that there were empty spaces during prime-time hours, and that they went around downtown between 10:00 AM and noon on a weekday during the semester. They were shocked at how empty some areas were. Some of the empty spots were privately owned, and some were public. The biggest factor in occupancy rates seemed to be location, not public/private status.

Mr. Malloy mentioned that Nelson\Nygaard had done a time of day study, and they similarly found that there were some public and private lots that are almost always full, and some that were mostly empty.

Mr. Birtwistle asked how shared parking could be negotiated in such a way that the private owner gets the benefit he needs, while still offering some spaces for public use.

Ms. Gray-Mullen recalled that the Unitarian Church parking lot used to be bigger- they would lease it to the Town for public use and received a lot of money. Broadly speaking, parking lot owners should be open to making some money.

Mr. Birtwistle asked about the several 12-20 space private lots on the west side of North Pleasant Street north of St. Brigid's Church. How would enforcement be done on these if some space was offered to the public? Would spaces have meters that the private owners wouldn't have to use?

Ms. Gray-Mullen said that in a lot like that, not all spots would need to be metered - it could be a split lot. Town parking enforcement could then look at the public sections.

Mr. Birtwistle noted that some private lots are full at particular times of the day, but are usually pretty empty. A successful shared lot system would need to find a way to allow customers to park at the businesses when there is high demand, and allow the public to park for a fee at other times.

Ms. Gray-Mullen said that the DPWG has been working on lot sharing mechanisms to let that work. The simplest mechanism is to have a night/day split to allow residential nighttime parking.

Mr. Malloy added that there could be a public/private split, or private-to-private agreements. For example, there could be a lot that local offices use during the day and that nearby residents use at night. If necessary, the Town could help with enforcement.

Mr. Crowner said that people generally mean two different things when talking about the downtown parking problem. One is the increase in residential development on the north side of downtown that has and will continue to cause increased demand for parking, especially at night. Others talk about high-demand parking serving retail generally on the south side of downtown. These seem like two totally different problems. All the existing outlying parking can absorb the increased residential development, and it seems like increasing the supply of residential parking in the north part of downtown would not affect the parking crunch in the south part. The discussion about requiring parking for new development, as well as using payment in lieu, should separate residential and commercial uses.

Ms. Gray-Mullen noted that a payment in lieu system doesn't fix the parking problem – it just generates money if developers don't build spots.

Mr. Crowner said that if the Town requires parking to be provided in the MPD, they should have payment in lieu as an option.

Ms. Kruger said that another part of the system is the residential parking permit program. It allows downtown residents to park in certain spots downtown. Using that program, there are ways to relieve some pressure - maybe even increasing the area for the permit parking system. The Board and the DPWG should look at other ways to make street parking work better.

Mr. Birtwistle asked about how many parking permits had been issued for Kendrick Place, and if there was any evidence as to where the residents actually parked.

Mr. Malloy said that there are around 600 permits issued in the downtown district, but it is not possible to know where permit-holders park. They are allowed to park anywhere that permit parking is allowed throughout the district.

Mr. Schreiber said that in Cambridge, one can only get a residential parking permit if their car is registered in Cambridge. He asked if it would be possible for Amherst to do that, as the Town loses out on the excise tax of those vehicles that park here but are not registered here; this excise tax income could be used for further parking developments.

Ms. Gray-Mullen pointed out that currently, employees of downtown businesses as well as residents can get these permits. Mr. Schreiber asked about a multi-permit system, breaking down residents and employees; Ms. Gray-Mullen said that had been suggested, as well as possibly other permit types.

Ms. Jones Boisseau said that from her experience working on Pray Street, the Pray Street metered lot is usually full all night long with very low turnover. The cars appear to be from Kendrick Place. Each of those units have multiple bedrooms. Jones Realty has had to tow many Kendrick Place tenants' cars from their lot.

Ms. Gray-Mullen said that she and Ms. Kruger had looked on Pray Street during their tour – one whole side of the street was filled with snowed-in cars, which had clearly been parking overnight. That arrangement is not sustainable.

Mr. Stutsman said that recent figures show 37 residential permits and 26 MassMutual employee parking permits have sold for Kendrick Place. He asked if it was possible to use technology to vary rates based on the amount of use or the capacity of a lot, or possibly to allow for the validation of parking by businesses or restaurants. Ms. Gray-Mullen said that it is possible to validate using ParkMobile.

Mr. Stutsman said that if rates are set high enough in prime lots to reduce demand, people wishing to park for longer could park further away from the core and pay less. Ms. Gray-Mullen agreed it was important to get cars out of the core and push them towards outer ring parking areas.

Mr. Malloy said that the Nelson\Nygaard report assumes that the Town can make private parking lot owners accept alternative management strategies. There is heavy demand on public lots, but some lots are more out of the way and underutilized. If all parking spaces downtown were used most efficiently, it would be possible to build 400+ new residential units and 100,000 sq.ft. of retail space using the current supply. However, not all private spaces downtown can be shared. A major variable is how available these private spaces are – some may be leased already or in other long term arrangements. Mr. Malloy noted that Greenfield is currently changing their parking scheme and building a large garage downtown; however, they may still have trouble with debt service.

Ms. Gray-Mullen added that it is important to encourage other methods of traveling downtown.

Sarah la Cour, Executive Director of the BID, said that the original intent of the MPD was to allow the densely packed urban properties downtown to be usable even though there is no room for parking. Restaurants cannot build parking for their restaurant, and residential developments can often not build parking for their units because of the size of the properties. Downtown parking is a common good, and the Town needs to help. A major flaw of the Nelson\Nygaard study is that many of the private spaces have long-term leases with tenants who require long-term parking. Some analysis including these spaces as potentially

usable might have been overly optimistic. While a new parking structure is a big step, public parking downtown is a common good for all. She said it was important not to rule anything out at this point, but decision-makers should consider private spaces as private for now.

Ms. Jones Boisseau pointed out that the Master Plan heavily encouraged dense development in the downtown area, and is written in a way that assumes that the Town would provide a parking structure for new developments. In the future, cars will still exist, and it is critical to have downtown density to bring people in from afar.

Mr. Schreiber noted that one big project could wipe out a lot of the existing private parking spaces. An interesting idea is to conserve private parking like wetlands are conserved - if a private parking space is removed via development, the developer must replace an equal amount of parking later.

Ms. Kruger said that she had been hearing discussion about the town not holding up its end of the bargain, and said it is not useful or accurate to talk that. The Town is a complex organism of different interests, very unlike a private corporation that can negotiate with a singular mind towards a goal. Often, to deliver on promises it requires negotiating ever-changing political considerations, such as votes at Town Meetings.

Ms. Gray-Mullen added that a potential garage is a major capital project, and there are many other projects in need across the town, such as the DPW and the Central Fire Station.

Ms. Brestrup asked Carol Johnson, an audience member who is the Executive Director of the Amherst Cinema, about their parking situation. Ms. Johnson said that when the Cinema was built, they arranged easements with the abutting Bank of America to allow for a walkway through the Cinema area in exchange for giving cinema patrons the right to park at the bank when it is not open. The bank pays for a parking attendant to enforce the proper use of its parking lot during the day. She shared the concern about private spaces being so heavily relied upon in the study – she knows the bank heavily utilizes their spaces already. She said a big concern for the Cinema is off-hours parking – there are a lot of guests on evenings and weekends, and some people come from far away and cannot find parking. They sell about 2000 tickets per week, and most patrons are not taking buses. Their membership base is spread out across a 25 mile radius, and many of these people are not very familiar with the downtown and struggle to find parking once the core spots are taken. It is important to think long term about what will ensure the health of the downtown, and bring people in from afar to walk around and patronize businesses. Better signage and directions would be very helpful. For a vibrant downtown, we want people to be able to park for hours and enjoy the area and not worry about getting a ticket. Getting a ticket makes people not want to come back.

Ms. Gray-Mullen pointed out that a lot of the meters have a two hour limit; she asked if it would relieve pressure if there was no time limit.

Ms. Johnson said short time limits are a problem, as most movies are over two hours. The lot next door is a huge boon, and she offered her thanks for recent improvements to the lot. Many patrons don't know there are places downtown to park for longer than two hours, and non-natives have a hard time finding parking.

Ms. Kruger asked if there is a link to parking directions on the Amherst Cinema website. Ms. Johnson replied that there is, as well as a number of signs in the building; however, a lot of people won't read signs or research online. She recalled that once the Cinema had a handicapped customer drive from Williamstown come to see a movie; she could not find parking anywhere and had to go home. Ms. Johnson said she was happy to see how vibrant downtown has become, and that it looks better than it once did; but she was very jealous of the Northampton garage where the first hour is free, you never get a ticket, and can always find a place to park.

Ms. Gray-Mullen asked what specific issues the ZSC would like to tackle. Mr. Stutsman said the central narrative of the project was still unclear. He asked if a study was ongoing. Ms. Gray-Mullen said that three tasks were described in a proposal from Nelson\Nygaard, but the Town has not yet set money aside for two of the tasks. A major point of review is the MPD overlay and zoning within it, including a payment in lieu option.

Mr. Stutsman said that a payment in lieu system is not useful without imposing a parking requirement. Two parking spaces per residential unit is the current zoning standard outside of the MPD, but that strikes him as

high – in many apartment complexes across town the parking seems excessive. The ZSC was considering a one space per unit requirement coupled with a payment in lieu option in the MPD. His sense during the meeting was that there are a lot of other alternatives that may make zoning changes unnecessary.

Mr. Crowner said that he was not inclined to recommend requiring parking at this point, but if the requirement was introduced, he would couple it with an easily satisfied payment in lieu requirement.

Ms. Chao agreed with Mr. Crowner – payment in lieu will never pay for a parking garage, but any additional revenue moves the effort forward. More solid metrics from further study would be helpful.

Mr. Stutsman said that one of the initiatives he found most exciting is the potential for more advanced software systems to manage parking with adjusted rates and time limits depending on demand and time of day. He asked if there were things the group thought were more suited to Planning Board attention.

Mr. Crowner said that one thing the Planning Board has discussed is changing permitting standards for the construction of lots and parking structures. There is a fairly high permitting standard to meet to create a commercial parking lot. An idea could be to try to reduce that barrier.

Ms. Kruger agreed that reducing the permitting standard was something to explore, and said she liked the payment in lieu idea because there is a perception the Town does not ask enough of new developments. If the Town wants to continue encouraging development, it should try to encourage more contribution to the public good. The DPWG could add to their roster an effort to get more information about private lots downtown, a better database of who owns them, what is the leasing situation, are the owners open to shared parking or not, etc. Using this information, the DPWG can delve down into the Nelson\Nygaard discussions, and the DPWG would be able to get this information themselves without using a consultant.

Ms. Brestrup added that if the Town decided to pursue the use of private lots for public parking, there is a section in the ZBL on shared parking – it could be revised to be made more flexible.

Mr. Malloy said that even if the ZSC doesn't bring a new parking standard to the forefront, some of the DPWG's recommendations will be to change behavior; however at some point the Town will hit a problem threshold where further management changes won't be able to help. We could rely on the ZBL or look into other standards. Ms. Gray-Mullen's matrix idea is good, whether it is done by staff or one of the committees. Reports suggest we don't have a big problem at present, but at some point we will hit that problem threshold, possibly from just one more development. There is a need to start addressing this threat now and obtain information.

Mr. Roznoy asked Ms. Johnson about her assertion that a garage is ultimately needed. He said that three hour parking is not sufficient for people to enjoy a dinner and a movie, or a movie and some shopping. He asked if there was anything that could be done in the short term to alleviate the situation at the Cinema, such as perhaps designating a street for cinema parking. He also mentioned the Transportation Advisory Committee, which is empowered to make recommendations to the Select Board.

Ms. Johnson said that some patrons have dinner at downtown restaurants and then come to the Cinema, and park all over downtown, so cinema only parking would not make too much sense. A garage would be wonderful. More spaces to park for 3-4 hours would be very helpful, and putting some of those longer-term metered spaces near the Cinema would be a short term fix.

Ms. Gray-Mullen asked if shutting off meters earlier in the day near the Cinema would help. Ms. Johnson said they do business all throughout the day, so that would not be all that helpful. She said that consistency across the area helps, and being able to park and not worry about getting a ticket would be great. She said she believed there were two issues for patrons– being able to find a parking space, and worrying about timing, meters expiring, and potentially getting a ticket.

Mr. Malloy said the DPWG had talked about making things consistent. Amherst has time limits on meters, but doesn't chalk tires, so people can feed the meter all day long. Consistency would help a lot.

Ms. Kruger said the two hour limit is starting to not work. It was supposed to discourage meter feeding, but it is not enforced and is known to not be enforced. At present it doesn't accomplish much besides getting people who don't feed the meter upset. Inconsistent shut-off times are also a problem.

Ms. Johnson said for her customers, having predictability and not having to worry about getting a ticket is really important. They like to know they can stay for a long time without watching the clock.

Barry Roberts, a local property owner, said that in a lot of previous conversations about downtown parking, the issue of student parking has come up; he said it was important not to design the system so that it becomes less expensive for commuter students to park downtown and walk or take the bus to UMass rather than parking on campus. He also noted how the downtown has changed significantly. Lunch is no longer the primetime – dinnertime is. People often drive around and around to find a spot, can't find one, and leave and eat at establishments along Route 9. He said the consultants' study was flawed in concluding a garage was unnecessary, because many private spaces are under long-term lease and not available. Above all, though, a parking garage is a convenience. People can park there, find a spot, and stay as long as they want. None of the lots in town are pay as you leave, like the Northampton garage is. He said that current parking policy is inconvenient and does not allow people to fully enjoy the downtown.

Ms. Gray-Mullen said that the topic of a garage keeps coming up. As said earlier, there are two main problems with downtown parking – a residential buildup on the north side, and a commercial crunch in the core to the south. She asked if there is a good spot to build a garage that would solve one or both of those needs.

Mr. Roberts said that the town looked at the CVS lot 20 years ago, and voted at Town Meeting to take that land to build a garage.

Ms. Gray-Mullen noted that CVS just signed a 99 year lease for that property.

Mr. Roberts said that situations like that are what eminent domain is for. CVS would be well served with something changing, as a lot of their parking is frequently taken by non-customers. The BID thinks that that is the perfect spot for a garage, and it would serve the Cinema, the library, and the downtown core very well.

Ms. Johnson agreed with everything Mr. Roberts said. The CVS lot would be a great space for a parking garage and would serve the cinema, library, and other businesses very well. It could be done in tasteful way and should definitely be on the table.

Mr. Stutsman recalled that the last parking forum showed a lot of support for the garage; the consultants' study said it is not necessary but there should be more follow up.

Mr. Crowner questioned whether a parking garage in the CVS lot would alleviate concerns about residential development on the north end of downtown. He also asked if the Town was to build a garage, how big it would have to be.

Mr. Malloy said that a potential CVS garage was engineered in 1996, and plans are still available. It was a 300 spot garage.

Ms. Kruger said that there had been some really good points raised. As Mr. Roberts said, there is a need to balance what the Town is doing with what UMass is doing, and students possibly using the downtown as a park-and-ride lot. UMass meters charge 25 cents for 10 minutes.

Ms. Gray-Mullen added that students pay those high rates and ParkMobile service fees on top of that.

Ms. la Cour said that the CVS/municipal lot is not zoned for a parking structure. It would be forward thinking for the ZSC/Planning Board to rezone that spot. It could be an interesting idea to lease that land long-term to a private parking garage developer. In 1996 a couple of other sites were looked at- the Bank of America lot on South Prospect Street was one of them.

Mr. Stutsman pointed out that tonight's meeting is a precursor to planned downtown forums the Planning Board will be holding. This was a very productive meeting, and the ZSC will take into account zoning issues related to parking requirements and will work with staff on the matrix idea. Variable rate parking is also a promising idea.

#### **IV. Topics not reasonably anticipated 48 hours prior to the meeting**

None.

**V. Adjournment**

Meeting was adjourned at 9:20 PM.

Respectfully submitted:

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Steven McCarthy  
Administrative Assistant

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Stephen Schreiber, Chair

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_