

Town of



AMHERST *Massachusetts*

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AMITY SITE PARKING - A SUMMARY

The Amity site consists of four properties situated at and around the corner of Amity and South Prospect Streets. Three of the properties are parking lots--one public and two private. The fourth is a privately-owned apartment building on South Prospect Street.

Historical Issues

All four properties in the Amity site are within the Central Business District (CBD) National Historic Register District, including two "contributing properties," that warrant a brief description:

1814-1868 - Amherst Academy - The Town parking lot next to the Amherst Cinema is the site of the former Amherst Academy, founded in 1814 by Noah Webster (lexicographer and state legislator), Dr. David Parsons (First Congregational Church minister), Samuel Fowler Dickinson (lawyer, farmer and Emily Dickinson's grandfather), Calvin Merrill (Selectman and local Mason) and Hezekiah Wright Strong (merchant, postmaster and grandson of the builder of the Strong House).

Some Academy students would later achieve prominence--poet Emily Dickinson, Helen Hunt Jackson (writer, early champion of Native American rights), Mary Lyons (founder of the Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary--now Mt. Holyoke College) and Sylvester Graham (early health food advocate and namesake of the Graham Cracker).

After the Academy closed in 1860, it was sometimes used for African American religious services and community meetings--abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglas spoke there. The Academy building was sold to the Town in 1868 and demolished. In 1869, the Amity Street School (a public elementary school) was built in its place.

Parsons House - The private parking lot at the corner of Amity and South Prospect Streets is the former site of the home of Dr. David Parsons, the local minister who donated the land for the Amherst Academy. In 1973, his former home was purchased and moved to the southwest corner of North Maple Street and Laurana Lane in Hadley.

The parking history of these properties, however, begins in this century:

March 1967 - Town Meeting appropriates \$4,400 for the demolition of the Amity Street School and determines that the premises be used for parking until some other disposition is made (the Amherst Academy Trustees sold the property to the Town for school use).

February 1968 - Town Meeting appropriates \$3,000 to construct a parking lot on the former Amity Street School site. A granite memorial to the Amherst Academy is erected in a planting bed along the Amity Street sidewalk.

1977 - Parking Report (Office of the Town Planner) - Recommends that the Town "explore the possibility of one or more parking decks (1-2 stories) at these potential locations: behind Louis' Foods, the lot behind Town Hall and the Amherst Savings Bank lot off S. Prospect St. [Amity site]." This is the current Fleet Bank parking lot, which stretches across the southern end of the site from South Prospect Street to the rear of the Amherst Cinema.

1978 - Parking in the Central Business District (Chamber of Commerce) - Recommends encouraging "all-day parkers to use the currently under-used Amity Street lot" to relieve other, more central areas of the downtown of all-day parkers.

March 1980 - Parking Committee Report - The Select Board approves a variety of short-term parking improvements recommended by the Klein Study, including converting the Amity Street lot from 5 hour meters (the "all-day" parking) to 2 hour meters.

1983 - Academy Square Project - Local architect/developer David Williams proposes "Academy Square." This comprehensive, multi-use project includes a four-story office building next to the Amherst Cinema, retail stores along Amity Street, and 28 townhouse apartments (some over stores) along Amity Street and along South Prospect Street--all connected to an internal, 201 space parking garage.

The two private property owners (D.H. Jones and Heritage Bank) participate in the project. Town Meeting is asked to approve sale or lease of the Town's parking lot property and change the zoning from Limited Business (B-L) to General Business (B-G), to allow increased density on the site.

The Planning Board and Finance Committee support the project. The Select Board does not endorse (or oppose) the project. Federal Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) funds are available to pay the estimated \$900,000 cost of the garage.

Academy Square (cont.)

A "Downtown Coalition" including South Prospect and Gaylord Street residents forms to oppose the project--they object to the size and intensity of the project, predict increased traffic, and oppose the sale or lease of an historic Town site. Other citizens say the land should be saved for future public uses like a new police station. Still others declare that the project is not big enough or comprehensive enough.

The November 1, 1983 Town Meeting defeats the proposed zoning change (Y-53; N-101) and dismisses an article authorizing long-term lease of the land.

1986 - Report on Downtown Parking Facilities, Downtown Subcommittee, Amherst Planning Board - Trying to spur action on a 1984 Town Center Task Force, Final Report recommendation that the Town should "proceed with all deliberate speed to plan and construct central parking structure(s) in the CBD," the Downtown Subcommittee of the Planning Board reviews the status of previous Town parking recommendations, and makes its own. The Subcommittee's report includes the following:

"Parking needs should be met by the development of appropriately sited and constructed parking facilities which provide more parking in less space - parking decks and garages."

"The most appropriate sites for such parking facilities have already been identified in previous parking studies and are well known: [Boltwood Walk, Amity site, the former Louis' lot, Pray Street lot and Town Hall lot are then listed.]"

"- The Amherst Academy site at the corner of Amity Street and South Prospect Street, the **Amity** site. . . .

Parking facilities will be needed on each of these sites to meet the current parking deficit and future parking demands. Since it will not be feasible to develop them all simultaneously, they must be assigned priority and sequence based on their characteristics - size (potential net gain in spaces), location (proximity to stores and services), and development pressure."

"The three largest sites should be developed in the following priority and sequence - Boltwood, **Amity** and Louis'". The Louis' lot is the largest and arguably the easiest to develop but, as a result of the Town meeting action [to authorize eminent domain on the site], it is not under significant private development pressure. It is unlikely to be lost as an opportunity for public parking. This is not the case for the other two sites."

1986-90 - Parking Task Force - The Parking Task Force is created by the Select Board in October 1986, in response to the May 1986 Downtown Subcommittee report and recommendations from the Finance Director and Town Manager. The Task Force is charged "to recommend for action: 1) suitable site(s) for parking facilities; 2) the physical features of such facility or facilities; 3) the best form of ownership; and 4) financing."

Parking Task Force (cont.)

The Task Force works with the Planning Department, interviews New England area parking professionals about downtown parking garage issues, and hires Arrowstreet, Inc. of Somerville, Massachusetts, to head a team of traffic, parking, architecture, landscape design and financial feasibility consultants.

September 1987 - The Jones Library Board of Trustees send a letter to the Task Force, advocating the CVS site and expressing the following objection to the Amity site:

"We are vehemently opposed to the construction of a parking garage on the Amity Street lot, from the point of view of aesthetics as well as from the problem of traffic control. . . . we feel such a structure should not face the front door of the Jones Library, a building which most feel is an architectural delight."

November 1988 - The Task Force holds a major public design exercise (charrette) to identify potential problems and opportunities for parking structures at each of the three largest downtown sites--CVS, Boltwood and Amity.

January 1989 - Amherst Parking Study, Report: Phase 1 - Arrowstreet submits its initial report evaluating the three sites, assessing the downtown parking system, and examining the financial feasibility of a parking garage.

August 1989 - Preliminary Report & Recommendations to the Select Board - After review of the Phase 1 report and further analysis, the Task Force submits its own preliminary report. That report recommends the CVS site as the preferred site for the first downtown parking facility, and includes the following abbreviated assessment of the Amity site:

"Amity--best vehicular access, serious use conflicts, most expensive acquisition costs, least central (for pedestrians), most visible and would require a mixed-used (retail/office) facade along Amity Street, thereby complicating the project."

September 1989 - Select Board Meetings - The Task Force and consultant present their findings to the Select Board at meetings on September 11 and 18, 1989. The minutes of the meeting of the 18th include the following:

"Mr. Rice stated that he felt the Parking Task Force should not go on to the next step [preliminary designs], noting that the CVS lot will become 'the' plan to use, and staff and the Parking Task Force will not consider any other site. He further commented that he felt the Town should approach the owners of the other two sites (Amity Street and Boltwood Walk) and express an interest in them as they can disappear. VOTED 4-1-0 (Rice opposed) to recommend that the Parking Task Force proceed to the next step of its charge. VOTED unanimously to encourage the manager to seek ways to explore the feasibility of developing the Amity Street lot as a high priority without spending additional funds."

Parking Task Force (cont.)

January 29, 1990 - Amherst Parking Facilities Study, Final Report - Arrowstreet submits a preliminary design and cost estimate for a parking garage on the CVS site. The preliminary design would provide a total of 268 parking spaces (251 spaces in the garage, 17 on site)--a net gain of 151 parking spaces. Construction costs are estimated at slightly over \$2.9 million (not counting remaining land acquisition).

No state or federal funding is available to underwrite garage construction, so the Town does not proceed to "design development"--designer selection, final engineering, construction and site plans, and construction bid documents. The preliminary design is filed until funding can be obtained.

August 1993 - Parking Commission Created - Responding to 1992 Downtown Action Plan recommendations, the Select Board creates the Parking Commission to advise on "the planning, operation and management of the downtown on-street and off-street parking system."

Spring 1996 - Parking Commission - The Parking Commission urges the Town to proceed as quickly as possible to obtain funding, design and construct an off-street parking garage in the downtown. The Commission Chair communicates this recommendation to the Town Manager, who in turn requests assistance from Senator Stanley Rosenberg, Chair of the Massachusetts Senate Ways and Means Committee.

July 1996 - State Funds Become Available - Senator Rosenberg includes potential authorization for \$3 million for an Amherst parking garage in a state transportation bond. The Town must provide a 25% match to the funding, prepare plans and submit an application for funds to the state's Off-Street Parking Program.

September 1996 - Property on Amity Street at the corner with South Prospect Street purchased by D.H. Jones for \$235,000, as part of the purchase of the former First National Bank building.

October 1996 - Town Meeting authorizes \$15,000 to update design and cost estimates for a downtown parking garage. Discussions include desire to review site selection and assess parking demand.

Amherst Planning Department
Pros & Cons of the Amity Street Site for Parking Structure*

PROS

- located close to main intersection
 - close to many shops & services at southern end of downtown
 - serves the Jones Library
- good vehicular access
 - access from Amity Street
 - two options for exiting (Amity & S. Prospect)
 - avoids entrance/exit onto main thorough fare (N.Pleasant St.)
- few use conflicts
 - primarily compatible adjacent uses
 - minimal internal pedestrian/vehicular conflicts
- site suitable for construction
 - anticipate standard costs
- possible tie-in to Amherst Cinema rehabilitation/redevelopment

CONS

- greatest walking distance from North Pleasant Street stores & services
- traffic impacts
 - increased traffic flow on S. Prospect, Gaylord & Sellen
 - increased traffic entering garage near congested intersection with existing vehicular stacking and turning lane conflicts
 - some vehicular/pedestrian conflict at entrance
- visual conflicts
 - highly visible street front location
 - visual impact on Jones Library and Amherst History Museum
- complexity of project
 - street front location and visibility issues promote need to develop commercial space (mixed-use) along Amity Street
- land costs
 - recent transaction indicates high land values
- other issues
 - site is in a national historic register district

* Sources: Reports listed in the Town Center Parking Report, 1996, Amherst Planning Department; overview of reports and events pertaining to parking in the Amherst Town Center; planning staff review of sites; and issues raised in public meetings in 1996.