Community Preservation Act Committee
Proposal Request Form for FY 2016
Date: June 30, 2015

Submitting Entity:
Contact Person: Dave Ziomek, Assistant Town Manager

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Overview of Proposal: – Please describe your project and your feasibility analysis

This proposal requests funds to help with the historic rehabilitation of the North Common to provide the community with a more flexible, programmable space that continues to respect the historic integrity of a landscape that is central to the civic and social activity of Amherst's downtown. The proposal requests funds to hire a professional consultant(s) to complete a revitalized design of the North Common as well as funds for construction to implement the design and improvements.

Rehabilitation of the North Common will follow the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Treatment of Cultural Landscapes, which defines Rehabilitation as standards that that acknowledge the need to alter or add to a cultural landscape to meet continuing or new uses while retaining the landscape's historic character.

Describe how your request meets the CPA criteria:

1. Description of funding needed including:

a. Documentation of cost estimates

Based on a detailed analysis completed by the engineering staff at the Department of Public Works (DPW), the estimated cost of the project is approximately $500,000—$550,000. The costs include design and engineering, drafting of plans, construction oversight and the cost of construction with prevailing wage.

b. Other sources of funding, e.g., grants, self-funding, fund-raising

The Town plans to submit a Parkland Acquisition and Renovation for Communities (PARC) grant in July 2015 to the Massachusetts Department of Conservation Services (DCS). The grant reimburses seventy percent (70%) of the total project cost, so that the final expenditure by the Town would be 30% of the budget.

c. Timeline on how CPA funds, if awarded, would be spent, including over multiple years

CPA funds would be spent over two fiscal years, with a specific amount for design the first year and the remaining balance for construction during the second year.
Phase I Design: December 2015 - June 30, 2016
Phase II Construction: July 1, 2016 –June 30, 2017

2. Urgency of the Project, if any

The North Common is no longer safe for pedestrians, it is not ADA accessible, and the trees and landscape are severely impacted from erosion, compaction and poor drainage. The two tree boxes in the center of the space are failing and pose a danger to families and children. The historic WTCU Fountain remains covered because it is broken. As the central gathering place for formal and informal events and a place that has a high volume of pedestrian use every day, it is critical to address the conditions of the North Common.

The Town is requesting funds now because the PARC grant program requires a Town Meeting vote allocating funding for the project this calendar year, by December 31, 2015.

3. Estimated timeline from receipt of funds to Project completion

The project will take two years to complete, corresponding with the PARC grant program that requires design during the first year and construction during the second year. Phase I Design will be completed by June 30, 2016 and construction will be completed by June 30, 2017.

4. Acquisition or preservation of threatened resources

The Town Common is as old as Amherst, having been laid out before the Town was incorporated. It remains part of the public way and it is not a piece of property. The North Common is a historically significant landscape recognized by the state as a contributing landscape in the Town's Central Business National Historic Register District, such that the restoration would need to be reviewed and approved by the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC).

As part of the PARC grant requirement, the North Common will be additionally protected as open space under Article 97 of the Amendments to the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, dedicated to historic preservation and recreation use. CPA funds will also result in a Historic Preservation Restriction on the North Common to ensure its preservation and continuation as a civic space with historic significance.

5. Population(s) to be served by the Project

The North Common is a resource for residents and visitors alike and will provide a public, open space for generations to come. The Common is heavily used every day by pedestrians and is also used dozens of times each year for special events such as lighting of the Merry Maple, the weekly peace vigil, and other celebrations.

6. How will the CPA investment in your property, facility or project be maintained over time?

The North Common will be maintained by the Town and DPW as part of their ongoing maintenance schedule.

7. How the Project is prioritized by requesting Town committees or commissions?

The Town, through the Historical Commission and Leisure Services and Supplemental

Education (LSSE) Commission, has held three public forums over two years to receive public comments and input to inform the goals and guidelines for the restoration of the North Common. Both commissions support the project and will become more involved should the Town be awarded a PARC grant and move forward with design and implementation.

8. **Other information regarding the Project deemed necessary for CPAC**

Description and History of North Common

Amherst has three Town Commons located within the more densely settled areas of the Town Center, East Village, and South Amherst Village Center that were formally recognized and dedicated as commons in 1788 from land in the old highways. The Town Center Common in the downtown is comprised of nearly 3.5 acres of open green space separated into three distinct sections: the South (managed by Amherst College), the Main (the largest section used most frequently for programming and large events) and the North Common. The North Common, which retains the more urban park-like setting with paved pathways, shade trees, benches, sculptural planters, WTCU Fountain, and sitting walls/tree planting boxes, is the focus of this funding request. The North Common is also in closer proximity to the downtown cafés, restaurants and shops, experiencing heavy use from pedestrians and passer byes, picnicking, tourism and sightseeing, special events, and limited passive recreation.

The commercial activity, variety of nearby housing options and extensive public transit service has helped the Town Common thrive. Because of the University and colleges, Amherst is a regional center for employment, services, and educational resources. In addition to the traditional level of visitation generated by the academic institutions and seasonal leaf-peeper 'tourism', Amherst is also becoming an increasingly important destination for cultural and historical tourism. The Town Center Common is a contributing landscape in the Central Business National Historic Register District, and although it has undergone various changes, its character and function has remained consistent throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Attractions such as the Emily Dickinson Museum; the Museum of Natural History and Meade Art Museum at Amherst College; the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art; and the National Yiddish Book Center, have become increasingly popular destinations for people of all ages—with many of these visitors drawn to the Common for its character and social and civic activity.

As Amherst Center has grown and expanded, the Town Common has been the dominant landscape feature, evolving from a swampy hayfield in the early 19th century to an open green lawn on the Main Common and an urban park on the North Common that includes a parking lot, paved walkways, formal seating and shade trees. The parking lot was a mid 20th century addition to accommodate the increased traffic and visitation in the downtown.

Plans for Improvement

The purpose of improving the North Common is to provide the community with a more

flexible, programmable space that continues to respect the historic integrity of a landscape that is central to the civic and social activity of Amherst's downtown.

Change is nothing new to the Common, in fact, it has been altered throughout its history to adapt to community needs, cultural trends and civic pride. The Amherst Ornamental Tree Association, formed in 1867, sought to improve the town's public spaces including major changes to the utilitarian Common, which had been used for military exercises, raising hay and grazing, and it contained a pond. The Association believed the Common should be a landscape of distinction, such that they drained and filled the pond, added pedestrian pathways, seating, water fountains and gas-fueled lights, and edged it with decorative fencing and shade trees. The domesticated look of the Common that remains to this day can be attributed to the work of the Ornamental Tree Association. Their improvements made it possible for the Common to serve as a site for community activities, including fairs, rallies, and a farmer's market, and has become one of the town's most beloved green spaces. During the "City Beautiful" movement the Common continued to change as the Town hired renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted to create a design for improving the central common. His plan, while never fully implemented, proposed a revised pattern of roadways, tree plantings, new pedestrian paths, and a formal "music stand" (bandstand).

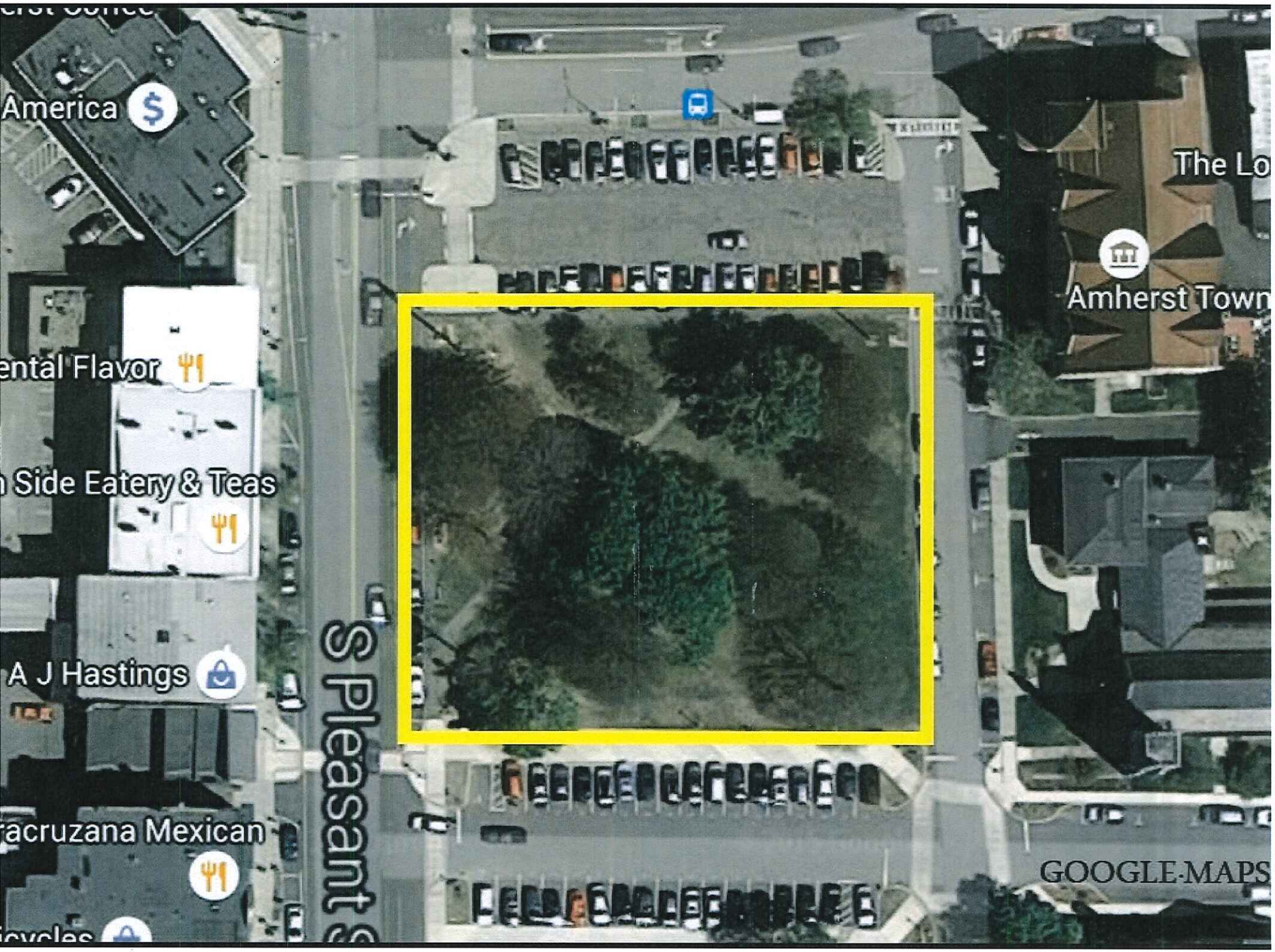
The Amherst Preservation Plan (2005) emphasized that physical improvements to the Common should be a major short-term goal of the Historical Commission and community, to help fulfill past designs and meets the needs of the community. Recent improvements to the Main Common include burying utility lines, increased accessibility with new 14' wide sidewalks that also provide more opportunities for vendors and programming, additional seating and historic lights. These efforts were fully supported by the community and were the first steps to adapt the Town Center Common to the 21st century and to achieve goals of the Master Pan and Economic Development plan that call for:

- ~ Increasing vibrancy of the downtown with improved amenities, higher density mixed use housing, expanded services and more commercial activity,
- ~ Encouraging community events and activities that draw people to the downtown, and
- ~ Preserving and enhancing Amherst's historic, cultural, and recreational resources

Improvements to the North Common are the next step in this process to meet the community's need for more flexible space in the Town Center that can accommodate small events, seasonal celebrations, and the increased daily activity of the downtown. The Town is applying for a two year design/build PARC grant to hire a professional designer that will prepare appropriate plans. The first year of design will allow for extensive public outreach, involvement of the Historical Commission, LSSE Commission and other boards/committees, and it will involve the business community, including the Business Improvement District (BID), the Chamber of Commerce, the Amherst Rotary Club, and other local organizations.

The conceptual design included in this proposal shows the North Common as an

accessible space with wide generous sidewalks, small plazas for special events (bicycle week, lighting of the holiday maple) and as informal gathering spaces for families, possibly with moveable tables and chairs, substantial bench seating to encourage more picnicking and socializing for visitors, students and business patrons, and an interpretive plaza around the WTCU fountain. This design provides significantly more space and amenities to utilize the common as an integral outdoor space in the downtown. To ensure that the common will withstand additional foot traffic and use, the plan addresses site drainage, root compaction, durable turf and use of groundcover, planting of new shade trees in anticipation of future need, and interpretive plaques that show the public the evolution of the common.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NORTH COMMON—EXISTING CONDITIONS

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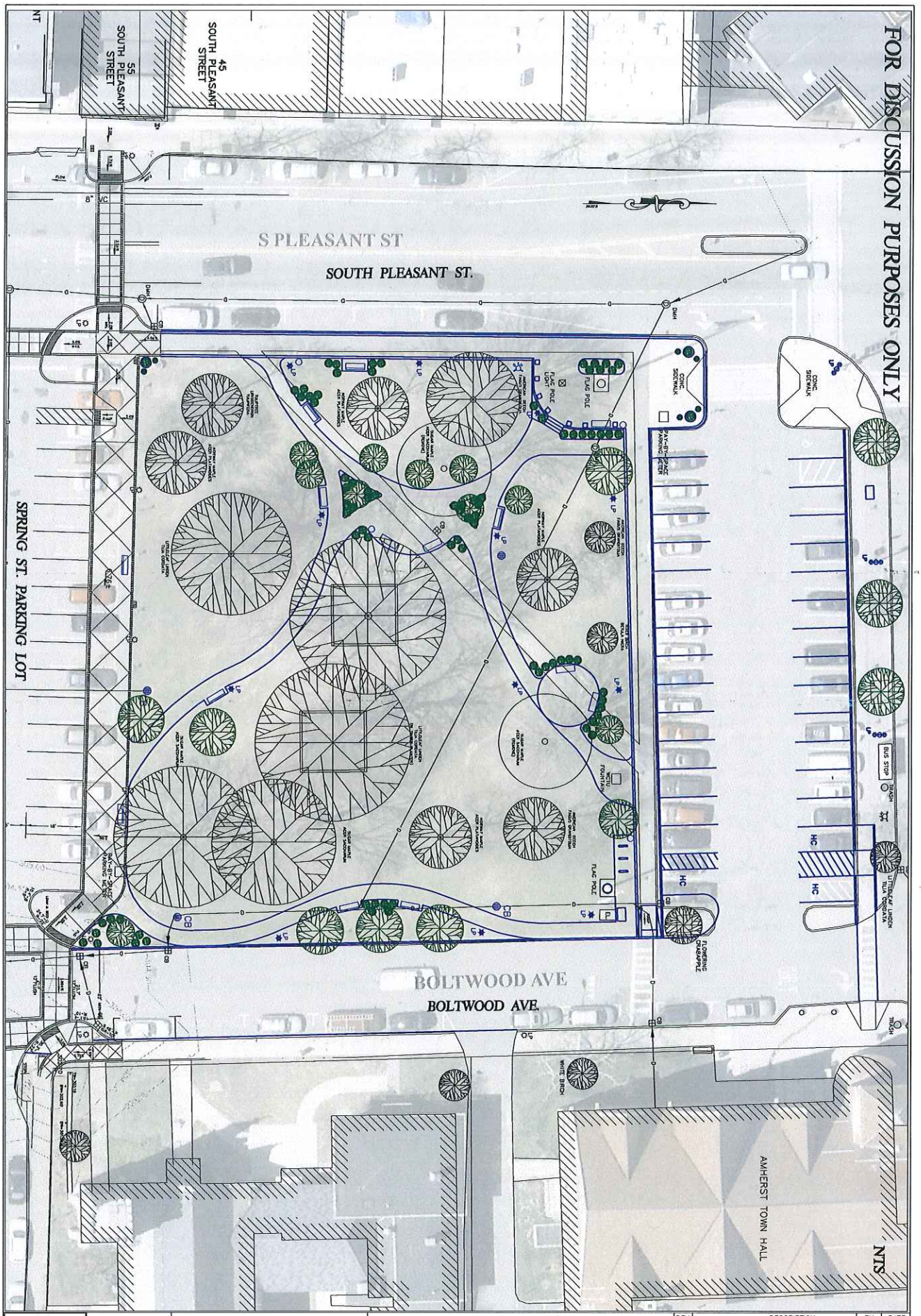

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