

MEMORANDUM

To: Town Council

From: Evan Ross, District 4 Councilor; George Ryan, District 3 Councilor; Dorothy Pam, District 3 Councilor

Date: 5-24-2021

RE: Rezone parcel 14A-33 from RG to BG

SUMMARY

We are proposing to rezone parcel 14A-33 on North Prospect St., currently used as a municipal parking lot, from RG to BG. This will open the opportunity for the development of a new parking structure on that lot. This rezoning does not mean that lot *will* become a parking structure, but creates the opportunity for such use should the Town decide to pursue that option.

A PARKING STRUCTURE IN AMHERST

The final report from the Downtown Parking Working Group established that while parking supply is, at most times, sufficient in Amherst, there is a perception that Amherst has a parking problem. That perception can deter tourism and visitor traffic downtown to our local businesses, impeding local economic activity. The report highlighted that while there is often abundant parking downtown at peak hours, poor signage and the location of that parking on side streets means that that available parking is underutilized. While the report presented several low-cost options to improve downtown parking, it also included:

Goal 8B: Add new parking facilities via public-private partnerships, dedicated private investment, or municipal investment

A parking structure in downtown Amherst could provide a centralized location for the provision of parking that is easy for visitors to locate and access. The high-profile nature of a parking structure can alleviate Amherst's parking perception problem, take pressure off other parking areas that often reach capacity at peak hours, and take pressure off downtown-adjacent residential streets. Many businesses in Amherst identify a parking structure as a priority to solve Amherst's parking perception problem and draw visitors to downtown. A new parking structure also has the potential to provide parking opportunities beyond visitor parking. Parking in the structure could be made available to people employed by downtown businesses to reduce the use of metered on-street parking by downtown workers.

While parking pressures may not, at current, reach a level where the Downtown Parking Working Group identified a new parking structure as a priority, expected increased demand due to new downtown developments could increase parking pressures on Amherst and the Town should be prepared to meet that demand. Further, as we invest in our local business community during our recovery from COVID, we must ensure that new businesses are set up to succeed

by reducing the perception that parking is a problem in Amherst. A new parking structure may be viewed as part of our economic COVID recovery by creating essential downtown parking infrastructure to support a resurgent economy.

THE 'CVS LOT'

In February 2020 the Town, in collaboration with the Business Improvement District, presented the 'Destination Amherst' plan, which included four capital investments in our downtown to support our local economy and the vibrancy of our downtown. One of these projects, the Kendrick Park playground, is currently in progress. Another, the renovation of the North Common, is moving forward following Council approval. A third project proposed as part of this plan was a new parking structure located on the current North Prospect St. municipal parking lot often termed the 'CVS lot'. A parking structure is expensive, and prohibitively expensive for the Town to build using public funds and bonding, especially as the Town pursues other major capital projects. The 'Destination Amherst' plan proposed a public-private partnership wherein a private developer would lease the land from the town at low or no cost and build and operate the parking structure. This is a win-win. The developer avoids the cost of purchasing land and the Town avoids the cost of building and managing the structure. This would allow the Town to have a parking structure without the Town funding its construction or being responsible for its operation or maintenance. The 'CVS lot' was identified as the ideal location due to its size, its location in the center of downtown, and the current underutilization of that lot.

WHY REZONE?

The current parking lot rests on a parcel that is zoned General Residence (RG). According to our Zoning Bylaw Section 3.384, neither a "commercial or public parking lot" or parking garage are allowed in the RG. The current lot is nonconforming with existing zoning. While the lot could be redeveloped as another parking lot, per Zoning Bylaw Section 9.2 (which permits land uses that are nonconforming at the time of adoption of the Zoning Bylaw to continue), a parking structure is likely too different for Section 9.2 to permit that use on that parcel. To allow for the construction of a parking structure there the lot needs to be rezoned.

WHY BG?

Our Zoning Bylaw permits commercial parking garages by Special Permit in four zoning districts: Limited Business (BL), General Business (BG), Village Center Business (BVC), and Commercial (COM). Theoretically, rezoning the parcel to any of those districts would permit a parking garage. However, dimensional regulations make a parking structure infeasible if the parcel is not zoned BG. The lot is large enough to support a small parking structure, but it is not that large (0.68 acres). As a result, for a parking structure to be feasible it will need to consume the entire lot. The dimensional regulations of the BL, BVC, and COM districts, specifically Maximum Lot Coverage and required setbacks, would restrict construction to a smaller portion of the lot than would be necessary to build the structure. The dimensional regulations of the BG, which permit 95% lot coverage (modifiable under footnote *a*) and 0ft setbacks, are the only

dimensional regulations that would allow a parking structure on that parcel. The lot must be zoned BG for a parking structure to be built. Note that of the three abutting parcels two are BG and one is RG.

DOES THIS COMMIT US TO BUILD A GARAGE?

No. The rezoning simply creates an opportunity by zoning the parcel so that it could host a parking structure. But the rezoning itself won't authorize a parking structure. If the Town decides it wants a parking structure the Town Council would have to authorize the Town Manager to execute an RFP for that purpose. This is just the first step to create the opportunity.

COULD THIS RESULT IN A LARGE BUILDING ON THE LOT?

Changing the zoning from RG to BG does dramatically alter what can be built on that lot and how large. However, the Town retains ownership of the land. Nothing can be built on that parcel unless the Town either builds it or goes through the procurement process for a private developer to build it. As long as the Town retains ownership the Town is the decision-maker as to what is built on that lot.

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT OUR CLIMATE ACTION GOALS?

Meeting our climate action goals will require, in part, reducing reliance on personal automobiles and investing in reliable public transit. However, for the foreseeable future visitors to Amherst will mostly arrive via car, which will require available parking. A parking structure is a more sustainable way of providing that parking as it increases the density of parking at a given site. A parking structure can help reduce the demand for additional surface lots, creating more opportunities for green space. Concentrating new parking at this site can also reduce demand for street parking, which creates opportunities for better and safer bike lanes. A parking structure can also have sustainable features, such as electric charging stations and areas for bike parking. As long as parking for cars is necessary, a parking structure is a more environmentally sustainable way to provide that parking and prevent parking sprawl.

RECOMMENDATION

I recommend the Town Council adopt the following motion:

MOVED: To rezone parcel number 14A-33 from General Residence (RG) to General Business (BG).