

## Comments on proposed Prospect Street Garage

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To: Planning Department Email <planning@amherstma.gov>

To:

Amherst Town Council

Planning Board, Amherst MA

Town Manager

My husband and I moved to North Prospect Street one week ago. We bought the house knowing we would be effectively in downtown Amherst, and also because of the protections that we expected would be offered to this beautiful and historic neighborhood. The Amherst Master Plan speaks of a sustainable, walkable, green place – goals that we support.

We learned of the proposed garage from a neighbor and asked the sellers about it. They told us the garage idea had been discussed for over 30 years and nothing was ever done, so we did not consider it a serious possibility, especially since it is contrary to the green goals espoused in the Master Plan. However, we learned quickly that meetings were being held and I participated in those. During the last few months I have spoken with several residents, some in support of and some opposing the proposed garage, across from our new home.

We are directly in the pathway of projected traffic from the proposed garage. As a historic home, we are not able to take steps such as putting up high fences to shield ourselves from the light, noise and air pollution those cars will emit in our front yards and into our homes. And, for what? As far as I can tell, it is to increase parking options in a space where parking has been consistently on the decline since 2015, and to do so with no articulated public interest, and without any of the standard analyses such as environmental and social impact assessments.

### **Overlay Idea**

At first, I found this option compelling because it was presented as an effort by the Town to respond to resident concerns. However, it appears that this is basically a technical way to bypass existing rules such as setback requirements that are in place for good reason, and to ensure that nothing other than a parking lot can be placed in this location. When the initial effort to rezone looked like it would not succeed and was withdrawn, it appears that an effort has been made to bypass all rules by using the Overlay mechanism. Such an exception to zoning rules may be sensible when there is an overwhelming public interest.

In this case, there is no shortage of parking in town, as determined by studies in 2016, 2018 and 2019. In addition, the only data on parking shows that this particular lot has seen a reduction in use since 2015. So this is not a good area to focus on for parking even if it made sense that more parking is required in general. Some easier steps to consider would be small “P” signs in blue that are widely recognized by drivers, and a simple App that tells a visitor where they can find the nearest parking. These small steps should address perceptions of insufficient parking.

If this process continues to move forward as it has despite resident objections, due diligence would require that independently led studies be conducted to determine the need, address the requisite road conditions, and assess the potential economic, environmental and social impacts. Such assessments are not unusual, and in this context where there is considerable division of opinion among the various stakeholders, hard data that demonstrate need and potential impact will be crucial to any decision to move forward.

### **Development for Free?**

The view that this initiative is somehow “free” relinquishes all governmental responsibility to a private actor. The work the Planning Department has done in preparing the Overlay proposal is one example of a cost already incurred by taxpayers. In addition, proper preparation, administration and evaluation of an RFP and subsequent monitoring of the Project all involve costs to us, the taxpayers. Non-financial costs include exposure to increased noise, dust and light pollution (all associated with documented health risks) for those of us living alongside the garage.

If in the not too distant future, people seek a less car-intensive, more green place as their destination, what then?

### **Measuring Potential Impacts**

Many residents have questioned the rationale for a garage where parking usage has continuously declined since 2015. Our Master Plan indicates commitment to a green future. How is that achieved by intensifying traffic on small streets and building a large garage in a residential area?

The idea proposed is that it will serve expected increased visitors (no studies or numbers available for this) to the Drake (which has not even raised half the funds needed to get started), the new library (not yet approved) and the Amherst Cinema (access to which can be on the spot if the focus of expansion is at Amity Street). Why is the Amity Street location not being considered? It is already on a main road and more directly next to all three venues that are presumed to bring in a flood of traffic. Why the rush to approve this one controversial location?

The benefit of public-private partnerships occurs at the intersection of shared public and private interests. There is no such overlap here. There is no public interest, so we should move on.

### **Transparency**

Finally, the process for the garage development has been unclear during my engagement in the discussions, which began in July. Each discussion produces no decision and yet, the process moves forward. Supporters of the garage have simply pushed on regardless of public input. It's very disappointing to move to a city with such a powerful Master Plan and a reputation for progressiveness only to find that one is in a world where facts don't matter and questions posed to proponents of this initiative are simply not answered; and yet things move forward.

At a minimum, please conduct independent economic, social and environmental impact assessments. Make those public and hold discussions before taking a decision. Let's take a pause and give this proposal the thorough review it requires.

Finally, I wish to add that I am not opposed to development. I am a business owner who supports local economic development, but let the direction of development be based on facts and rigorous analysis. Let the development lead to a sustainable town in the long-term that takes into consideration potential changes in transportation technologies, demography and climate. This is an idea that was relevant in the 70s. It's time to move on. Let's work on a city of the future, not the past.

Thank you,

Rani Parker