

Amherst's Own "Phantom Tollbooth"
Kenneth Rosenthal – November 28, 2021

Norton Juster, Amherst's late, great author, is famous for his fantastic story, *The Phantom Tollbooth*. It would amuse him to know that now Amherst has its own phantom tollbooth. Well, not exactly a tollbooth. It's a phantom parking garage.

This North Prospect Street garage does not exist in real life. Nelson/Nygaard, the planners whom the town paid to study Amherst's parking needs, didn't see it. Their 2016 report of more than 90 pages concluded that Amherst has sufficient parking, just lacks good public messaging to let people know where to find it. They said Amherst "**actually has a surplus of 1,200 spaces** at peak demand". (Emphasis is theirs.)

The Downtown Parking Working Group didn't see a parking garage, either. They were so pleased with Nelson/Nygaard that in January 2019 they asked the firm to continue working on a parking management plan for Amherst. The DPWG's November 2019 report based on N/N's Parking Implementation Strategy never mentioned a parking garage in its parking recommendations to the Town.

A new parking garage does exist in virtual reality, in the minds of a couple of expiring Town Councilors, recently voted out of office. Actually, at first they would not admit to seeing it either, asking for the rezoning of a single plot of land just in case. They never asked for a study to determine if a garage were needed and where in Amherst would be the best place for it. But then they had a vision and now see it on North Prospect Street, fronting a neighborhood of historic residences.

The Amherst Planning Department didn't have a new garage in its sights, either, when the year began. Now, pressed by the Councilors, it seems to suggest that a parking garage on North Prospect Street might be okay, but admits it never studied the matter. The Minutes of the Town Council's Community Resources Meeting on October 26, 2021 show that, when asked what sites for a parking garage the Planning Department considered, Senior Planner Nathaniel Malloy said "looking at other sites is not what [the Town's planners] were asked to do".

The two Town Councilors whose proposed rezoning led to their election defeat want the lame duck Council to rush rezoning before the new Council takes office in January. But there's no evidence to support their proposal, and certainly no hurry to do so.

Norton Juster's phantom tollbooth is a gateway to the imagination and to endless possibilities. Our Councilors' phantom garage will only lead us to traffic congestion and the deterioration of a valuable neighborhood. The fate of Amherst's phantom garage may be resolved before Christmas.

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