

Canalwalk Meeting Minutes: April 18, 2012

Introduction and opening comments from Nancy Sachs: Acknowledgement of Carlos Vega and his valuable contribution to the FOC group. Brief background of the Canalwalk project, the formation of the Friends group and recap of the latest postponement of the project. Introduction of presenters: Karen Mendrala, Chuck Murphy-Romboletti and Laura Silmani from the Holyoke Office Planning and Development, Mayoral Aide Nilka Ortiz and Jeff Fasser of the design firm Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc.

Karen Mendrala of the Planning Dept. addresses the cause of the postponement as due to a delay in MassDOT 's evaluation of the pedestrian bridge (we know of this eight-month delay from information previously attained from Kathy Anderson. See previous blog posts.) Karen cites challenge that the city has with DOT offices in Boston because of a large number of projects 'in design' in the state (approx. 240 projects.) Reassures group that Knapik and Reps are sincerely involved in the Canalwalk project. Also states that the fixity of TIP schedule is not big an issue.

Current state of Phase II design plan: All comments from the bridge group and environmental division have been received but await final 25% approval from MassDOT. Implication from the Planning Dept & VHB is that this approval is imminent and that about a week from today the Planning Dept. will begin urging the DOT to schedule the public hearing. From there the DOT usually takes about a month to publicize the meeting. Following the public hearing the 75% review phase will begin. Jeff of VHB emphasizes that the bulk of the project design work occurs within the first 25%.

Questions raised regarding possible design alterations or code impediments that could cause future delays. Jeff of VHB assures that all known considerations have been addressed including truck clearance and width of walkway which the DOT has granted an exception. Question regarding whether public input would impede process, example cited, the issue of suggesting that real brick be used instead of stamped brick triggered the following responses: It would definitely be a cost issue due to the expense of brick vs. concrete. It also raises continuity issues with Phase I of the canalwalk. Possible alternatives could be color enhancements to the concrete as well as shifts in paving materials that would tie in with Phase I but allow some variation in phase II. VHB also open to input regarding the design of the railings along the canalwalk.

Question regarding HGE involvement: first, whether removal of the poles and wires along Race Street is something that could be done earlier and second, whether this portion of the project is connected with the computing center as it had been previously proposed. Answers: As to when it will be done is unclear. Second, it is no longer a part of the computing center plan. The process will involve moving the utility line to either Main street or along the alley between Race and Main and the work will be done using canalwalk funding only. Funding discussed: total earmark 4.6 million but what remains is around 3million(?) Answer was not definite, need to get confirmation from Karen. Question as to parameters of Phase II: Answer: Phase II includes canalwalk along Race Street between Dwight and Appleton, pedestrian bridge across canal, walkways along the Dwight and Appleton connectors.

Discussion turns to removal of 600-volt transformers from David Scher's side of the ped bridge. Several comments on historic and aesthetic value of the objects. David Scher inquires into how costs will be covered when the voltage conversion financially impacts his building? Will HGE offer similar no interest loans to cover his expenses? The Planning Dept mentions that they will look into this.

Conversation turns to public involvement in landscaping along the canalwalk. Question raised as to whether property owners and citizens can add plants to the Canalwalk landscaping/planter boxes. Planning Dept indicated they would definitely consider that, overall the response was encouraging.

Questions raised about whether the FOC can be more involved in the process of moving the canalwalk project forward. Can we get a list of names of those directly involved in each phase of the project? Planning Dept and VHB responded that our direct involvement with project mgt, especially DOT might actually be perceived as problematic and have a negative effect. They may push back and thereby cause further delays. This is followed by grumbling from some group members.

Discussion moves to future stages of the Phase II design plan and construction schedule: John Aubin stresses the importance of having some target dates for when things will happen with a full understanding that these dates are not definite and are subject to change.

The following proposed timeline is only an estimation of when and how the design-to-construction process could unfold provided there are no unforeseen problems and delays:

- Possible scheduling for the public hearing: early June 2012
- Submission of 75% of Phase II design plan by City/VHB to DOT: early August 2012
- DOT will resend comments on 75% plan to City/VHB: End of September 2012
- Submission of 100% of Phase II design plan by City/VHB to DOT: early November 2012
- Begin bidding cycle: end of 2012 (At 100% stage Mass HWY takes over the entire project.)
- Bidding and contracting period usually takes 90 days: Winter 2013
- Begin Phase II construction: Spring 2013
- Phase II completion: Fall 2013

Question raised about HGE: Can they be encouraged to do more? Comment made regarding the fact that Holyoke Water Power was taken over by HGE and originally HWP had a responsibility to assist in the economic development of the city, so why not HGE? (Many nods.)

Question: Is there funding for future phases of the canalwalk? Answer: there is no federal money earmarked for future phases and all of the money for future phases will have to be raised.

Question raised about the pedestrian bridge: the ped bridge over the canal, which will become a publicly owned property, has paint containing lead on it and it must be removed according to specific code requirements. Has this issue been addressed? Jeff at VHB assures that these considerations have or will be made.

Question: Are concerns regarding the rare mussel that populates the canal floor seen as an impediment to the project? Answer: No, there are specific permitting requirements but they should not impede the project. They are also addressed during construction and are not a part of attaining the 100% design plan.

Canalwalk discussion is wrapped up and followed by a presentation from Planning Dept intern and UMASS Planning and Dev. Grad. Laura Silmani on Arts and Culture programming on the canalwalk.

Intro: Brief background of Riverscaping project's history and local initiatives. (<http://riverscaping.org>) Emphasis on branding the canalwalk as a vibrant center for cultural and economic activity.

Some ideas for programming and branding the canalwalk as developed and presented by UMASS students in the following proposals:

Proposal 1: "The Paper City Festival"

Annual weekend event involving art exhibitions, tradeshow, costuming, crafts based on the theme of 'Paper'. Could also include citywide clean up.

Proposal 2: Canal Creature Project

Ongoing themed project that involves developing a canal creature mythology through outdoor sculpture and site-specific installations.

Proposal 3: "Pulse"

Night events inspired by Providence's Waterfire project. Theme for "Pulse" surrounds rhythmic, water-related performance and music events that would take place evenings throughout the summer.

Proposal 4: "Migration Mayhem"

Based on a fish theme, this would be a one-time event occurring during the height of upstream migration. A sculptural presentation of fish sculptures created by local artists, examples in other cities: the NYC Cow Parade, Easthampton Bearfest, etc.

Presentation followed by mention of a new Riverscaping project involving local artist Lee Hutt. Lee will create a sculpture for installation on the corner of Phase I of the Canalwalk and Appleton Street.

Meeting concluded.