



Downtown Waterfront Municipal Harbor Planning Advisory Committee Meeting

Wednesday, December 17, 2014
Atlantic Wharf, 290 Congress Street

Attendees

Advisory Committee: Sydney Asbury, Tom Wooters, Susanne Lavoie, Greg Vasil, Bud Ris, Vivien Li, Meredith Rosenberg, Jesse Brackenbury, Bruce Berman, Lois Siegelman, Nigella Hillgarth, Phil Griffiths, Rick Dimino, Louis Elisa, Bud Ris, Marianne Connolly

City of Boston: Richard McGuinness, BRA; Chris Busch, BRA

Consultant Team: Matthew Littell, Utile; Meera Deean, Utile; Tom Skinner, Durand & Anastas; Steve Mague, Durand & Anastas

Government Representatives: Valerie Gingrich, all CZM; Andrew Langhauser, MassDEP

Members of the Public: Chris Fincham, Rita Advani, Ramesh Advani, Hugh Shaffer, Todd Lee, Bob Faoire, Heidi Wolf, Michael Yasutomi, Elizabeth Smith, Jinqwei Zhang, Mike Freedberg, George Thrush, Rick Moore, Sy Mintz, Jim Cravens, Linda Cravens, Steve Weikal, Marcella Willock, Charles Norris, Bill Zielinski, Rich Koch, Julie Maurano, Iris Taymore Schnitzer, Will Adams, Steve Hollinger, Thomas Nally, Valerie Burns, Gabor Korodi, Erick Krauss, C. Mariano, Al Raine, Wes Stimson, Tom Walsh

Meeting Summary

Sydney Asbury, Committee Chair, opened the meeting and noted the session would serve as an in depth conversation among the Committee members on the planning process and that BRA staff and the consultant team are present to assist in the discussion and answer any questions. She specified the meeting would first be a forum for the Committee members and that there would be an opportunity for public comments and questions towards the end of the meeting. She also welcomed Jesse Brackenbury, Executive Director of the Greenway Conservancy, as the Conservancy's new representative to the Advisory Committee.

To start the discussion Sydney raised the topic of the prioritization of public benefits which was reviewed in the presentation at the last Committee meeting.

Tom Wooters, MHPAC Member, raised the issue of how to quantify the substitute provisions and offsets and whether there is some absolute limit or standard that applies and if there was reasonable discretion for changes to the performance standards in the Waterways Regulations. Richard McGuinness, BRA, responded by stating that the harbor plan will set the limits and maximum substitute provisions and that the City is looking for guidance from the Committee on those limits. He also noted there will be more analysis provided when the plan is drafted that the Committee will have the opportunity to react with more specificity. He referenced the equal or better standard that needs to be met with regard to offsetting measures for impacts associated with development programs and noted that there may be levels of impacts associated with building height or lot coverage that the Committee may feel is too great to be offset.

Sydney referenced Long Wharf and shadow impacts on the open space areas of the wharf and asked what the Committee's reaction is to the prior suggestion of making Long Wharf a shadow protection area. Bruce Berman, MHPAC Member, remarked that he has spent a substantial amount of time in the Long Wharf area and observed that in the summer months people on the north-side actually gravitate toward the shadows caused by the hotel to keep cool while they wait for vessels. He mentioned that shadow isn't the big problem in the area during the warmer months, rather it is the amount of available space, so his comments have less to do with shadow and to do with the proposed expansion of the hotel and how that may further limit and constrict access.

Bud Ris, MHPAC Member, stated that for historical reasons Long Wharf should be considered sacred. He indicated that the shadow impacts are in some way a red herring, although necessary for measuring height impacts related to the Chapter 91 performance standards, and noted that the heights and FAR's of the buildings in and around the planning area provided in the prior meeting's presentation were far more useful for understanding the area's context and determining what will and will not fit in the district. He also referred to the prior meeting's presentation and the comment made regarding the size and massing of the proposed Harbor Garage project as being exceptional for the area, and how that term could be interpreted to mean that buildings of that size should not be there, or if allowed that there should be exceptional offsets to justify the project impacts, and there is the question of what is the order of magnitude of offsets for such a project. Bruce Berman noted that there are different parcel and boundary delineations that can be made for purposes of context and the measures of height and massing such as FAR can differ from parcel to parcel and that there are a number of tools to measure height, massing and related impacts. He indicated that he doesn't have an issue with height and everyone wants to see something that will make the area better and that ground floor uses will be key.

Sydney mentioned that there had been several comments on the Marriott Long Wharf proposal and asked if any of the Committee members had specific issues to raise. Bud Ris stated that if the hotel is to expand the proposal should be linked to a significant transformation of the BRA's Chart House parking lot adjacent to the hotel. Phil Griffiths, MHPAC Member, noted that the whole area around the Long Wharf Marriott needs to be looked at to alleviate pinch points and facilitate access. Bruce Berman asked Phil what was considered a busy day for the Island Alliance and if they anticipate doubling that number in the future. Phil noted that the busy days have about 4,000 people getting out to the islands and the aspiration is to increase that number, but all of that would not be embarking from the Long Wharf terminal. Phil mentioned that he believed that there is enough space to accommodate the numbers of people but the whole Long Wharf area needs to be looked at comprehensively with how visitor flows are managed. Suzanne Lavoie, MHPAC Member, asked Phil if he knew where the visitors were coming from and how they were getting to the waterfront. Phil noted that about 70% of the visitation comes from around the Boston area and people use a mix of modes to get to the waterfront, and that there is no easy location for bus drop off access. Suzanne also noted that bus and trolley congestion is a substantial issue during the summer months and management of these vehicles should be part of the activation planning for the area.

Rich McGuinness, referenced Bud Ris' earlier comment on the Marriott utilizing the Chart House parking lot as an offset and noted that we need to be careful associating a specific benefit with a project as we may want to prioritize benefits regardless of which project proceeds first. He mentioned that at the beginning of the New Year the BRA would like to provide a hierarchy of public benefits and a prioritization scheme and an implementation strategy. Bud also noted the parking needs associated with the property and raised the possibility of a level of parking beneath a new park at the property.

Rick Dimino, MHPAC Member, referenced prior Greenway Corridor planning effort and the important historical relationship between Long Wharf, Central Wharf and the Custom House Tower and how the area functions as a cluster with the Greenway. He noted that the substitution and offset discussion should look for ways to optimize this important area of the public realm and getting all these areas into one coherent approach.

Bruce Berman mentioned water transportation as an important component of the Downtown Waterfront and the need to have a higher level of public sector involvement in the management and ownership of water transportation infrastructure and service. He noted that there is a need for a water transportation oversight entity, a management plan and funds to support it so there is seamless service and access. Lois Siegelman, MHPAC Member, also referenced water transportation as a primary means of getting people to the Downtown area which could alleviate some of the bus and trolley issues. Rich McGuinness noted that ten years ago the MBTA decided to get out of the water transportation business and now there is a fragmented mix of operators and service. Water transportation subsidies have been required of prior projects subject to MHP's however these funds have limited time frames and subsidies can be drawn down quickly, so a more sustainable operating model is needed and will be part of the current MHP. Bruce noted options to incentivize water transit over bus and vehicular modes. Louis Elisa, MHPAC Member, mentioned that there is a need to look comprehensively at water transportation and reach out to adjoining communities and state agencies. Bud Ris mentioned that the MHP cannot remedy all the issues with water transportation overnight, but we can create an anchor in the Downtown Waterfront to assist in making the transition to a more seamless, centralized and organized system, as well as how much it will cost and requirements to facilitate needed improvements such as, more or better docks, signage, vessels, waiting areas, information and wayfinding. Rich McGuinness responded that the state will require a formulaic approach for offsetting provisions, which will necessitate a review of the costs of the offset as they relate to impacts.

Rick Dimino, noted that the MPH should rationalize the water transportation approach for the area and outline all the investments that need to be made to make it work and private development should be leveraged to make it happen. There are still going to be operational questions with how to fund and subsidize service, but we need the basic infrastructure to start and the plan should address this issue. Rich McGuinness noted the state's Ferry Compact and the recent round of grants for ferry infrastructure and that it is something that will need to be raised with the next administration. Marianne Connolly, MHPAC Member, mentioned the need to coordinate the water transportation discussion on a harbor wide level and involve all parties that have a stake in water transportation and related infrastructure. Rick Dimino, also discussed the various markets and scales of water transportation in and around Boston Harbor, and the current plan provides an opportunity to frame out the necessary infrastructure to make the area a water transit hub.

Rick Dimino, indicated the area is significant to pedestrian use and access and needs improvement with regard to crossings, visibility, safety, public amenities, wayfinding and relationship to subdistricts. The public realm strategy needs to deal with coherence and characteristics of the pedestrian experience and make place making more substantive. Bud Ris noted that the public realm-public space subject is the second biggest category and that we know what needs to be prioritized and improved, including the bottlenecks at Hook Lobster, stumbling block areas behind 400 Atlantic, greater clarity through Harbor Towers, the space east of Harbor Garage, the Aquarium Harborwalk on the north-side, Central Wharf

plaza and the Chart House Lot, as well as the east-west links from the Greenway to the waterfront. Lois Siegelman, also noted the need to make many areas within the planning area universally accessible.

Bruce Berman mentioned the need to be flexible with regard to how the Northern Avenue Bridge is viewed and opportunities as to what the bridge could be in the future and the need to consider “if this, than that” planning to look at a number of viable offset options that could relate to a variety of outcomes related to the bridge’s rehabilitation. Vivien Li, MHPAC Member, referenced TBHA’s Harbor Gardens planters on the bridge and similar interventions that are temporary in nature, where offsets should be permanent enhancements, and for planning purposes we have to expect vehicular traffic on the bridge. Rick Dimino referenced the importance of the apron leading up to the bridge and related walkways and Harborwalk and their relationship to the Greenway and the South Boston Waterfront and that the area requires careful thinking about the urban design strategy. He also emphasized the importance of watersheet activation and connections to the water.

Jesse Brackenbury, MHPAC Member, referenced the Northern Avenue and Moakley Bridge areas and the related pedestrian challenges due to the roadway and ramp configurations and that it would be further complicated by vehicular traffic on the Northern Avenue Bridge. He also mentioned the ramp parcel study and the opportunity to think comprehensively about pedestrian access, connectivity and a gateway experience at the bridge.

Tom Wooters, made the distinction between water dependent uses and additional traffic related to new congestion associated with new non-water dependent uses, which may impede access to the waterfront.

Bruce Berman, noted the importance of getting down to the water, and referenced the fishing, fouling and navigation priorities protected under Chapter 91, and the need for facilities that accommodate fishing along the Downtown Waterfront, along with the need to strengthen access for vessels and support for the area marinas.

Rick Dimino, referenced a number of successful public open spaces in the Downtown and waterfront areas and mentioned the importance of programming, activation and maintenance to make the public realm successful. He noted he would like to see programming, maintenance and operation funding for Christopher Columbus Park and the Wharf District Greenway parcels as part of the offset mitigation.

Vivien Li, brought up the importance of activating the end of Long Wharf and the Compass Rose area, as well as looking at Sargent’s Wharf in the North End if additional open space offsets are needed.

Jesse Brackenbury, stated that there are a number of open spaces in the planning area that don’t relate well to each other and adjacent parcels, and could function better in total, and there are opportunities to think comprehensively about the whole area so everything works well together.

Suzanne Lavoie, mentioned the need to consider the residents and employees in the area and the importance to incorporate their needs into the plan.

Phil Griffiths, noted that one of the largest open space resources in the area is the Harbor Islands and the challenge is to how to make it an accessible neighborhood resource so it is easier to access so it does function as a neighborhood park.

Bruce Berman, referenced the end of Long Wharf and the opportunities it presents for historic interpretation and programming and integrating the area into the new open space behind the Chart House, and how the public realm plan can strengthen the area.

Bud Ris, noted that in the absence of an itemized cost estimate he would argue against spending offset money on the Greenway and the Harbor Islands and focus the resources on the specific planning area and connections to those areas.

Andrew Grace, referenced the importance of first categorizing and prioritizing the improvements and then deciding where those improvement should occur in the planning area.

Jesse Brackenbury, impressed upon the importance of east west connections to and through the planning area, and the need for maintenance and operations funds for open space and that the focus cannot be solely on the capital expenditures.

Meredith Rosenberg, MHPAC Member, also referenced the need for long term investments to sustain improvements to the area and the need for continuing obligation after the initial investment. She expressed concern that the prioritization discussion has begun in advance of the Committee's review of what is acceptable in the way of new development, and that conversation is necessary before decisions on improvements and mitigation can be made.

Rick Dimino stated that climate resiliency should be an aspect of the plan that applies throughout the planning area. He referenced the City's draft Climate Action Plan and a new cultural resources plan which should both be integrated into the MHP.

Sydney Asbury, Committee Chair, then opened the meeting to public comments and questions.

Steve Hollinger, Fort Point Resident, stated ground floor uses and areas are key to interacting with the public realm, both the interior and exterior of buildings, and noted there are a number of public spaces established through prior harbor plans such as ferry terminals and meeting space, but there is a lack of cultural uses such as black box theaters, performance spaces and rehearsal areas. He indicated that those that are connected to the MHP process have first access to these spaces, and the civic and cultural community in the City does not have access. He urged greater interaction with civic and cultural leaders, and referenced Secretary Robert Durand's decision on the South Boston MHP which required the City to establish a civic and cultural plan for the waterfront.

Sy Mintz, Broad Street Resident, referenced the Custom House Tower and the adjacent district and how the area links to Long Wharf and Central Wharf. He noted the area behind the Chart House is an important location that could function as a true ferry terminal and such a facility should take priority over new open space in that area. He emphasized the connection from State Street to Central Wharf and that mitigation efforts should be focused on this area.

George Thrush, Architect, Harbor Towers, stated that shadows cast by new buildings should not be the only determining factor in the size and scale of future developments and emphasized the importance of pedestrian level views as the best guides as to what should come next. How the City connects visually from the landside and waterside is extremely important.

Ramesh Advani, Harbor Towers Resident, noted that nobody considers of the Downtown Waterfront as a neighborhood and that planning and developers should think more about the area as a residential neighborhood and that those living in the area are the primary users of the public realm. He indicated that offsets should be focused on the area of impact related to any future development.

Todd Lee, Architect and Harbor Towers Resident, raised concern with impacts related to climate change and the need to consider long range strategies to contend with future sea level rise.

Valerie Burns, Fort Point Resident, commented on the Hook Lobster property and referenced the South Boston Waterfront Transportation Plan and the implications and recommendations for the Northern Avenue Bridge and how the Hook site relates to the surrounding streets, bridges and Harborwalk. She urged the Committee to review the new transportation plan with a focus on Hook Lobster area.

Chris Fincham, Harbor Towers Resident, asked if there was any limit to any proposals that exceed the performance standards under Chapter 91. Rich McGuinness, stated the City has not made any formal recommendations on substitute provisions but will come forth with proposed substitutions in the New Year for the Committees review, which will also include an offsetting strategy.

Tom Palmer, Harbor Towers, noted that there should also be a thorough discussion of the substitution provisions related to offsets.

Marcella Willock, Harbor Towers Resident, noted several improvements that have been made to the Harbor Towers property and the public easement along the waterfront granted by Harbor Towers. She also stated that the residents are committed to working towards future development that contributes to the neighborhood and benefits the Downtown Waterfront and Boston.

Meeting adjourned at 5:00 PM.