

York Village Study Committee
Final Report to the Board of Selectmen

September 8, 2016

Introduction

For most of the last century, the Town of York has talked about improving York Village. One of the most notable of these moments resulted in a plan developed at the request of the York Garden Club in 1946. The following quote from renowned Town Planner Arthur C. Comey's *Report on the Development of York Village, Maine* shows how persistent the need has been:

York Village center was once convenient, charming if not beautiful, and safe. Today it is inconvenient, ugly and to a degree dangerous. Are we of this generation, with all our "progress" and technical inventions to admit that we cannot contrive so simple an area as this village center? Why have we not done so?

Sixty-five years later, the Town Manager and York's Board of Selectmen decided it was time to do something about the state of the Village center. They created the Village Study Committee (VSC). Many documents and records created since the committee was established are archived at the VSC website — www.yorkvillage.org.

The Village Study Committee

At the end of May 2011, the York Board of Selectmen appointed a nine member committee to study and make recommendations about the future of York Village. The original members of the VSC were: Mary Andrews, **Stuart Dawson**, **Antonia DeSoto**, **Gloria Gustafson**, Steve Pelletier, Jennifer Smith, **Scott Stevens**, **Lew Stowe** and **Ron McAllister** (who was designated Chair by the Town Manager).¹ Rob Yandow and Christine Grimando also attended many meetings of the VSC as *ex officio* members.

In the years since its creation, the composition of the committee changed as individuals resigned and were replaced or as other members were added. Other community members serving on the committee are Dawn Fernald, **Chris Hartwell**, **Joel Lefever**, **Dean Lessard**, Jody Merrill, Ron Nowell, **Robert Palmer**, **Dylan Smith** and **Peter Smith**.

The VSC held its first meeting in July 2011. One of its first tasks was to clarify its mission. After considerable discussion, the following statement was adapted as the committee's formal mission statement:

To establish a framework that will promote the vitality and beauty of York Village as a dynamic, safe, and sustainable town center reflecting the history of a community that is both welcoming to visitors and supportive of local businesses.

¹ Names in **bold** indicate current members of the VSC.

Critical Issues First Identified

Once the mission was made clear, the committee turned to its strategic work. This began by focusing on what people in the community meant when they thought about York Village. The concepts of the 2-minute, 5-minute and 10-minute villages were developed. Most of what followed over the next five years has focused on the area within the 5-minute village — extending roughly 1/4 mile from the monument.

Three temporary sub-committees were created during the VSC's first year. These drilled down into the committee's three major areas of concern: traffic and pedestrian issues (e.g., parking), focal points (e.g., the monument), and land use (e.g., zoning). Over the next eighteen months, the VSC developed a series of 26 recommendations on parking, sidewalks, traffic, streetscaping, planning, zoning, public/private properties and the Village's visual identity.

Options for Village Revitalization

As the work of the committee progressed, they developed a series of design options. At least five alternatives were developed for improving traffic flow in and through the monument area. These were whittled down by the committee to the three most feasible options based on the historic character of the village and the VSC's stated charge to revitalize York Village for residents, visitors and businesses alike. These three options were referred to as the Monument Garden Option, the Village Park Option, and the Town Common Option. Each of these alternatives was based on the assumption that the monument would remain in its existing location.

The Committee also developed an outreach strategy centered on open public forums and on separate meetings with identified stakeholder groups (business owners, residents, and public safety/infrastructure agencies). Major stakeholder group meetings, open forums and numerous conversations with members of the public-at-large (many gathered at MarketFest) resulted in identification of a series of "most favored" and "least favored" features of a potentially revitalized York Village. These inputs helped the committee understand what people wanted by way of village improvements: better crosswalks, sidewalks, and more green space, safer parking options, bicycle lanes, etc.

At that point (Spring/Summer 2014), the committee recognized that it needed technical expertise in various disciplines and a request for qualifications (RFQ) was developed and presented to the Board of Selectmen. The decision to draw in outside experts who could bring skills and expertise largely beyond the scope of the committee was a crucial turning point. It led eventually to contracting with The Downtown Revitalization Collaborative (TDRC) — one of six firms responding to the RFQ. TDRC was hired by the BOS after an extensive vetting and interview process. TDRC was charged to develop a Master Plan built on the work previously completed by the VSC but going well beyond it.

The Master Plan

TDRC's commitment to a public process was what made the difference for the VSC in its decision to recommend the collaborative to the BOS. True to their word, Denis Lachman and his colleagues from TDRC spent the next year hosting multiple hands-on design workshops that attracted a large number of people to discuss in small groups their ideas about York Village. These workshops and a series of empirical studies conducted by TDRC led to the writing of "*The York Village Master Plan: A Revitalization Framework to Put the Village Back in York Village.*"

Parking

From the outset, the VSC had been aware of the importance of parking which had featured in the committees own internal studies from 2011. Parking was also among the most important issues raised by the public at every turn. TDRC's Master Plan also dealt with parking in great detail. Traffic and parking studies were central to TDRC's empirical work. Below is an excerpt from Chapter 3 of the Master Plan "Curb-side and Off-street Parking" which summarizes the existing parking analysis:

Availability of parking is a key necessity for attracting customers to the downtown, and the most highly valued spaces are the most convenient on-street spots. York Village currently has 57 marked curbside spaces within the central business area. Curbside parking is free with no time restrictions. Parking inventory data showed an average occupancy rate of 44% weekday and 37% weekend during the late August peak-season. The weekday, mid-December off-peak occupancy rate was 37%. Our data revealed that when parking use was highest during weekday, occupancy was 68% during summer season and 55% off-season. Observed higher occupancies were generally during business hours (9am-5pm) when weekday occupancy rates were an average of 56.5% in the summer and 44.8% in the winter.

To better understand these figures, we also analyzed the duration of parking. On average, vehicles parked 2.6 hours on peak season weekdays, 1.8 hours on off-peak season weekdays, and 1.3 hours on peak season weekends. A closer examination of the duration and occupancy data showed that approximately a quarter of the curbside parking is used for periods of four hours or more. For example, during normal weekday business hours in peak season, approximately 14 curbside spaces on average are being used for long-term parking. For the time examined, nearly 50% of these were being used for 8 hours or more. If long-term parking was shifted to off-street lots, the average occupancy of curbside parking would be significantly reduced. When we adjusted our calculations to remove long-term use of these spaces, the average occupancy during peak season business hours fell from 56.5% to under 25% with a peak hour maximum of 39.7% compared to the 68% observed rate. This suggests that a minimum of 27 curbside spaces are needed to meet peak hour parking demand and to ensure that there is always an adequate number of available spaces (typically 15%).

The parking study focused largely on parking in the public domain - on-street parking - but there also was some discussion of long-term solutions involving off-street parking. In a section of the Master Plan called "Beyond the Master Plan," TDRC imagined how the village might look going forward. Off-street parking opportunities including the Hodgkin Lot (behind Bank of America) which the VSC recommended the town should buy, and the area on the North side of York Street (e.g, behind the York Realty building) offer reasonable options for meeting future demands for parking in the Village. In addition, a parking management strategy is included in this chapter of the Master Plan as a vital element of this discussion. See the Master Plan's Section 3.3 for its recommendations.

The Master Plan's Conceptual Design

Submission of the York Village Master Plan to the Board of Selectmen was the signature event of 2015. This three volume plan was completed, delivered and distributed to the BOS in April 2015. The Master Plan provided the conceptual basis for everything that has happened since its delivery.

The consulting team from TDRC came up with numerous creative solutions for revitalizing the village. They realized that if the Civil War monument could be moved just a few feet, then a number of better options for re-routing traffic through the center would be feasible, yet still keep the monument as the the Village focal point.

Ultimately, after a variety of engineering studies were completed, TDRC recommended one best option from among its own alternative designs. This came to be known as the "York Street Tee." People attending the February 2015 workshop strongly favored this option to bring traffic coming down Long Sands Road to a 90 degree connection with York Street. Computer modeling of the alternatives also supported this option as the best for minimizing traffic back-ups in the Village. In addition to improved traffic flow, the audience was also enthused about the sense of open space and creating a great place for people to congregate around the monument, at the heart of the Village. This option was recommended to the BOS.

Following receipt of the Master Plan, the BOS extended its commitment to the project by challenging the consultant team to create a schematic design for the York Street Tee.

Schematic Design/Design Development

In July 2015, the Board offered a contract to a consulting team led by one of TDRC's principals, landscape architect Regina Leonard now with Milone and MacBroom. The full team of associated consultants includes specialists in survey and civil engineering, traffic engineering, geo-technical services and a variety of associated disciplines.

The proposal to fund this phase of the work passed the BOS with a 3-2 vote which was later rescinded following the VSC's submission of "A White Paper on the Scope of Services." The revised motion (minus a signage element²) was passed by a 4-0 vote of

²Signage remains one of the future issues that will need to be addressed at some point. See **Remaining Issues** section below.

the BOS which committed \$272,660 to fund the work. This design development phase has been underway for the last year.

Support for the Project

In November 2015, an amendment to the Town's Comprehensive Plan, incorporating the York Village Master Plan into it, was approved by a referendum vote of 1,751 to 978. The committee was encouraged by this strong show of support. The real test came in May 2016 when voters were asked to authorize municipal bonding to finance the local portion of the construction expenses.

On May 21, voters approved funding of \$400,000 (a 10% match to available federal and state funding) which would allow the project to go forward. The vote in May was closer - 1970 YES to 1658 NO. The success of this initiative was due in no small part to the efforts of a group of citizens organized as the Friends of York Village and dedicated to the VSC's Village revitalization plan. This group raised funds from private donors allowing them to design and place "YES ON 60" signs all over town, purchase ads in local newspapers and otherwise promote the successful campaign. The VSC is very grateful to the citizens who took on the task on behalf of the VSC and to the York Village Association (formerly known as the York Village Business Association) which contributed \$1,000 in support of Village revitalization.

With the voters' acceptance of the plan and approval of local funding, the work of the Village Study Committee has come to an end. The work of revitalization is not over, however. Thus we are grateful to the BOS for establishing a follow-on committee to work with the DPW and other parties to bring the project to completion.

This report would be incomplete if it did not acknowledge the existence of some opposition to the plan. In particular, a small group of merchants has spearheaded a campaign of resistance. This resulted in the Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) calling an additional meeting for abutters to the principal intersection in order to hear for themselves what people think of the plan and of the process by which it was generated. This meeting was held on July 13, 2016 bringing together representatives from the MDOT, Town officials, the abutters and the team of consultants.

Funding the Project

A variety of ways to fund the project were considered; both in the development of the Master Plan and since its completion. It was decided that the leading sources of external money to support implementation of the project are federal and state governments through the Kittery Area Comprehensive Transportation System (KACTS), a committee responsible for distributing federal and state funds for projects like this one.

KACTS has made York Village revitalization a top priority and for FY18 has allocated \$545,107 to the effort with the understanding that 10% of that amount will be contributed by the Town of York. It is our expectation that funding for FY19 and beyond also will be made available through KACTS in an amount which will ultimately total approximately \$3.6 million (including the 10% match from the Town mentioned above).

Because of the decision to pursue federal funding, the Maine Department of Transportation has an essential role to play. Had it been determined that the Town of York could successfully self-fund the project, management of the project by MDOT would not have been necessary. But because there are federal funds involved, close oversight of the expenditure of these funds must be provided by the State. A \$38,000 contract for these services was signed in mid-August by the Town and by the MDOT, clearing the way for our consultants to resume work on the schematic design/design development phase of the project.

Five Outstanding Issues

As noted in our last periodic report (March 17, 2016) several major issues remain. Among them are these:

- **Parking Management.** As noted above, parking is an area of persistent concern for the Village. This is an issue which must be addressed. See the Master Plan's Section 3.3 for its recommendations on solving the parking problems.
- **Relocation of above-ground utility wires.** The VSC considers the relocation of utility lines and poles in the central area of the Village a notable feature of the Master Plan. We anticipate that voters will be asked to consider future funding for relocating the existing wires and poles.
- **Additional external funding.** Someone should pursue additional funds for supplementary tree planting, landscaping, lighting, street furnishings, etc. The KACTS matching funds may make possible some of this work, but local, state and national grants and private funds should be pursued as well.
- **Signage.** The Master Plan did not specify the style, size or design of any elements of public signage. The consulting team did suggest that a comprehensive program of informational, directional and regulatory signs be developed. The committee believes this should be done in order to assure the preservation of the village's historic character while also being mindful of the benefits of coherent signage to businesses, public safety and convenience.
- **Economic development.** While the VSC felt that this was outside its charge, we believe economic development is vitally important to the Village. As a resource for Town leaders, the April 2015 Master Plan includes discussion and recommendations by the consulting team with regard to the potential for developing a program to encourage and support Village businesses.

Conclusion

The Village Study Committee's charge has been brought to a successful conclusion. Everyone involved should realize that the plan approved by the Town, whatever details it may contain, is still a conceptual plan. Everything is subject to change as various federal, state and local agencies deal with the realities on the ground.

Members of the Village Study Committee are grateful for the opportunity to be of service to the Board of Selectmen and to the voters of the Town of York. It has been a wonderful project to work on. We are confident that members of the Village Revitalization Steering Committee will come to feel the same.