

York Village Study Committee:

Progress Report #1

2 January 2012

Introduction

At the end of May 2011, the York Board of Selectmen appointed a nine member committee to study and make recommendations with regard to the future of York Village. Members of the Village Study Committee (VSC) include: 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). Rob Yandow and Christine Grimando also have met regularly with the VSC. The VSC began to meet in July. One of the first tasks of the committee was to understand its mission. After considerable discussion, the following statement was adapted as the committee's formal statement of its mission:

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.

This sentence has appeared on each of the committee's agendas and has been used as a reference point for all the work of the committee.

Different Concepts of York Village

Once the mission of the committee was agreed upon, the next task was to determine the study area. People often use the term "York Village" without necessarily clarifying just what they understand by the term. The VSC discussed the meaning of "the village" and decided that there were at least three different common conceptions, all of which are geographic. For planning purposes, we decided to adopt a model of concentric rings to define York Village. Using the Civil War monument as a central point of reference, we defined three villages in terms of how long it might take a pedestrian to walk from the center to the periphery of each zone. Thus, we began to think in these terms:

- The 2-minute village -- extending roughly 1/8 mile from the monument
- The 5-minute village -- extending roughly 1/4 mile from the monument
- The 10-minute village -- extending roughly 1/2 mile from the monument

For a schematic diagram of the different conceptual areas making up York Village, see the map included as Appendix I.

Issues Within the 2-Minute Village

The committee decided to focus its attention on the 2-minute village. Once it had done that, individual members of the group surveyed the area with cameras in hand. Their task was to photograph up to ten features of the village which were seen as either opportunities or problems they would like to address. The group reviewed all the photos and a list of features contained in them was prepared and discussed. We talked about what changes might improve the village and what features must not be changed if the village is to be protected.

The list (See Appendix II) was divided into three categories and assigned to one of three subcommittees. These following subcommittees were identified:

- Group A - Focal Points
- Group B - Traffic and Pedestrian
- Group C - Land Use

Once the subcommittees began meeting, bi-weekly meetings of the Study Committee became monthly meetings. Subcommittees began to meet at least monthly as well. It was agreed that subcommittees could bring on additional people to facilitate the work of the VSC, though these subcommittee members would not be considered members of the larger VSC.

Focal Points Subcommittee (Group A)

As a group, the VSC decided that the Island on which the Civil War monument sits should be emphasized by this subcommittee. The VSC also recommended that “the character of the village” was important and should be emphasized in this first group’s work. Other issues for this group were the specific opportunities presented by particular buildings within the 2-minute village: the Bank of America, the Berger Building, Cumberland Farms, the Fairpoint Building, the former Methodist Church (now owned by York Hospital), and the Ott property. Some publically-owned buildings also were seen by the VSC as being of particular importance to the future of the village, viz., the Fire Station and its land, the York Public Library and environs, and Town Hall.

The Focal Points subcommittee decided it wanted to begin by directing its attention to the concept of the Village Green and to see what could be done to foster York as a “quaint, historic New England Village.” Geographically, this meant that the group would concentrate initially on the area between the Parish House/Remick Barn property and the monument. The subcommittee made outreach to three individuals who will be meeting with the subcommittee: Mary-Anne Szeniawski (Town Clerk), Bim Schoff (the Historic District Commission) and Jeff McConnell (First Parish Church). Issues about signage and a symbolic “gateway” into Town also will be addressed by this group.

Traffic and Pedestrian Subcommittee (Group B)

From the outset, it was clear to everyone on the VSC that parking is a major issue for the village. The VSC at large recommended that this second subcommittee direct its attention to addressing parking -- its quantity, location and configuration. Other issues of importance to the VSC were the conflicts between vehicles and pedestrians, the poor flow of traffic through the village and the lack of connecting pedestrian walkways.

At its first meeting, this subcommittee met with York’s Public Works Director, Dean Lessard. The group subsequently had an opportunity to review the CLD study of traffic in the village. It has since focused its attention on three frames of reference: 1) immediate, can-do improvements (e.g., the Lindsay Road intersection at York Street); 2) ultimate improvements (e.g., additional “parking garden” facilities); and 3) interim improvements (e.g., capturing additional spaces in and proximate to the village). A walking tour of the Coventry Hall property was undertaken by this group in order to develop a better sense of what land might be available to address the parking problem. The group also has concerned itself with “broadwalks” where pedestrians would have dominion (e.g., particularly between Old York and the former Methodist Church). Signage, lighting and trees were identified by this group as important to consider, too.

Presently, this group is spearheading outreach to other communities (notably, Kennebunk, Kittery and Portsmouth) having recent experience with revitalization efforts in order to better understand how they proceeded and what obstacles they encountered. The group also is planning to coordinate with other local authorities including the water and sewer districts.

Land Use Issues Subcommittee (Group C)

The VSC zeroed in on the importance of distinguishing between public and private properties as well as the boundaries of public rights-of-way. A bound volume of property deeds and right-of-way information is being assembled by this third subcommittee. The existence of unsightly overhead utility lines and the general visual clutter within the 2-minute village also were seen to be significant issues for the Land Use Subcommittee. The subcommittee affirmed these issues as appropriate top priorities.

This subcommittee quickly went to work reviewing all properties within the 2-minute village. They identified forty-eight separate properties in this area (and more beyond it), noting that coming into the village from the West, a small number of owners have title to a majority of the property. In pursuit of their work, this subcommittee met with Rick Mace and Brett Horr of Town Hall, with JoAnn Fryer of CLD and with Dean Lessard, Director of Public Works for the Town of York. Lessard provided the subcommittee with insights into the Town's rights with regard to the construction of roads, sidewalks, etc. The group will be meeting with property owners including Bank of America, Ellis Insurance, and First Parish. This subcommittee is also looking into developing a 3-D model of the village as a communication tool to help focus public interest and involvement with the project.

Village Stakeholders

The VSC is well aware that there are a variety of stakeholders within the 2-minute village. None is more prominent than the business owners whose livelihood depends on a base of customers coming into the village. The VSC has scheduled its first public meeting on the Village Study Committee's work in order to dialogue with members of this group. All commercial property owners and all business owners within the 2-minute village have been invited to attend this meeting which will be held January 17 at 7:00 p.m. at the York Public Library. It is anticipated that this meeting will be telecast on CATV.

Other stakeholders will be invited to future meetings. At this point, the VSC has identified the following stakeholder groups: Residential Property Owners, Public Safety Stakeholders (including police, fire and ambulance services), the Schools (as well as other identified village user groups), Public Works Stakeholders (including the Water District, the Sewer District, Public Works Department, CMP and Maine DOT), Nonprofit Stakeholders (including York Hospital, Old York and the Historic District Commission) and a residual group to include the General Public. The VSC hopes to be able to meet with representatives of these groups over the course of the next six months.

Recommendations

While the VSC is still in the early stages of its work, it is clear to the group that a few recommendations are in order now. Commitment to the following actions would be very helpful to facilitate the work of the committee at this point:

- **Recommendation #1:** The six acres of Town owned property adjacent to Coventry Hall should be retained by the Town for possible development as a parking facility.
- **Recommendation #2:** The Town should commit to preliminary engineering studies addressing the size, configuration, access, costs and phasing of a parking facility to be constructed on land referred to in Recommendation #1.
- **Recommendation #3:** A visioning session should be scheduled with targeted stakeholders so that consensus might be developed concerning long-term planning for the Village

The Work Ahead

To date, the VSC has focused almost exclusively on the 2-minute village and how to make it better. The group is well aware that there are significant issues at great distances from the monument of equal importance to those at the center. The group plans to direct its attention to these wider areas once work on the 2-minute village has been completed. The matrix below summarizes what we see as the work ahead. Right now, the VSC is focusing its attention on cells 1, 2 and 3 of this matrix with special attention to Cell 1 -- those things that can be done relatively quickly and at minimal expense -- but the committee anticipates moving through the matrix as its focus shifts in time and in scope.

Timeframe for Subcommittee Objectives			
Distance	Short-term: 1-2 years	Medium Term: 2-10 years	Long-term: 10-20 years
2-minute village	1	2	3
5-minute village	4	5	6
10-minute village	7	8	9

Conclusion

The entire committee believes that some issues can be solved rather easily and quickly (and for little money). Lane painting and signage, for example, are relatively “low hanging fruit” for making significant changes in village life. Other issues will take more time and more money to resolve. The Village Study Committee is encouraged by the unanimity we have seen in defining some of the important issues: removing ugly utility lines, creating safe pedestrian zones, finding more parking, etc. We also are encouraged that the VSC can make a difference in the short run and that it can come up with ideas for improving the village in the long run. We look forward to

our continuing work in partnership with the Board of Selectmen, other Town authorities and the full range of stakeholder groups.

Appendix

York Village Conceptual Areas by Walking Distance



I

Appendix II
Thematic Elements within the 2-Minute Village

GROUP A

Focal Points Subcommittee

- Monument Island
 - Size and Shape
 - Landscaping
 - Destination: Mini-park
- Village Greens
 - Character of the Village
 - The Feel of the Place
 - Areas of Rest/Gathering Places
 - Greenery-Pavement Balance
 - Types and Textures of Paving
 - Crosswalks
 - Pedestrian Conversion
 - Visual Pathways
 - Reclaiming Spaces
- Specific Opportunities
 - Private Buildings
 - Bank of America
 - Berger Building
 - Cumberland Farms
 - Fairpoint Building
 - Former Methodist Church (YH)
 - Ott Property
 - Public Buildings
 - Fire Station and Property
 - Public Library (Environs/Access)
 - Town Hall

GROUP B

Traffic & Pedestrian Subcommittee

- Motor Vehicles
 - Parking
 - Quantity, Location and Configuration
 - Town-owned Property
 - Coventry Hall
 - Fire Station
 - Private Property
 - Hospital
 - Other
 - Rights of Way
 - Flow
 - Safety
 - Long Sands Road-York Street Intersection
- Pedestrians and Bicycles
 - Access and Linkages
 - Clarity/Continuity of Sidewalks/Bike Lanes
 - Safety
 - Broad Walks

GROUP C

Land Use Subcommittee

- Zoning
 - Design Standards
 - Dimensional Considerations
 - Mix of Uses
- Distinguishing Private & Public Property
 - Ownership Survey/Deed Research
- Preservation Issues
 - What Must be Kept and Built Upon
 - First Parish Properties
 - Old York Properties
 - What Might be Given Up
 - Historic District Boundaries
- Beautification
 - Lighting Standards
 - Trees
 - Signage
 - Branding
 - Overhead Utilities (e.g., Pole #2)