



Minutes Council Mill and Lake District Committee May 20, 2010

Minutes of the meeting of the Council Mill and Lake District Committee held on Thursday, May 20, 2010, 6:30 p.m., in the City Council Chamber, 31 East Fifth Street, Tempe, Arizona.

Committee Members Present:

Mayor Hugh Hallman

Councilmember P. Ben Arredondo

Councilmember Joel Navarro

Councilmember Corey D. Woods

Vice-Mayor Shana Ellis

Councilmember Mark W. Mitchell

Councilmember Onnie Shekerjian

Mayor Hallman called the meeting to order at 6:31 p.m.

Agenda Item 1 – Public Appearances

None.

Agenda Item 2 – Streetscape Guidelines

Mark Vinson reported that staff took a cross-departmental team, multi-disciplinary approach to studying and creating streetscape guidelines, including involvement from Arizona State University (ASU). Investigating existing codes and conditions was a component of this analysis. Defining character zones has been discussed, which would mean there would be different treatments on different streets. Should the modern streetcar project be undertaken, it would have a dramatic impact upon the streetscape.

Replacing the dying ficus trees along Mill Avenue was part of the impetus to embarking upon this streetscape project. When looking at the types of trees that exist in downtown, it was determined that there are Oak, Evergreen Elm, Date Palms, Ash, Mesquite and a variety of other types of trees. There are different types of planters, some of which have plants and some that do not. Brick sidewalks have differing accents.

Outdoor dining consists of different types of spaces with benches, seating areas, some of which are confining. The code on outdoor dining and safety issues is being studied. Waste receptacles vary in type. Incorporating recycling into the downtown is also being considered.

Other visual aspects of note were the different types of shelters, lighting, bike racks, public art, utility boxes, news racks, on-street parking and types of parking, building heights, awnings, marquees, outdoor merchandising, street furnishings, signage, etc. Another consideration is the possibility that the streetscape guidelines could be merged with the existing downtown design principles. There is an emphasis on visibility, livability and memorability.

Staff has studied other jurisdictions that have used distinctive design techniques to promote certain spaces using landscaping and architecture. Mr. Vinson showed some slides of how these design elements transform spaces into interesting places.

A local landscape architect has explored the concept of using 7th Street as being a linear pedestrian court that would remain open to slow paced traffic and include on-street parking. Mr. Vinson showed an example of the 16th Street Mall in Denver that used to be dedicated to pedestrians; however they have since allowed some transit options.

Phase 1 was data collection. Phase II will be the guidelines development portion of this project. Staff is proposing that this begin with a public forum to generate streetscape ideas. After that exercise, staff will develop draft guidelines and return to a public forum setting to get comments and feedback. Draft guidelines will also be posted on-line for comment. Staff will then refine the guidelines in preparation for a Council presentation to be scheduled in the fall.

Councilmember Woods asked about the proliferation of birds in the downtown. Nancy Hormann, Downtown Tempe Inc. (DTC) responded that the reason that birds are attracted to the downtown is because it is an urban area where there are a limited amount of predators. The sidewalks are power washed every day. In September, the DTC will be launching a Bird Be Gone Program, which has been successful in other urban areas in reducing the proliferation of birds. Councilmember Woods commented his intent was not to harm the birds, but that it would make the downtown a much more pleasant experience for visitors if the noise and bird litter were substantially reduced or eliminated.

Councilmember Arredondo suggested that the parking be configured to be more uniform. Parking signage also needs to be improved. Right now there is a perception that there is a lack of available parking downtown. Mayor Hallman agreed that the signage directing the public to available parking in the downtown is inadequate. Councilmember Arredondo added that signs directing patrons to shaded parking would also be important to some visitors.

Councilmember Navarro thanked Mr. Vinson for the presentation and voiced his enthusiasm for achieving a downtown that is attractable, memorable and accessible to everyone and asked for clarification on what the next step will be. Mr. Vinson explained that staff is prepared to solicit public comment prior to drafting the guidelines so that those ideas could be developed based on Council and public feedback. Councilmember Navarro asked Mr. Vinson who will be involved in the public comment. Mr. Vinson replied that no one will be excluded; however staff will be seeking input from DTC, downtown residents, nearby neighborhood residents, property and business owners. Councilmember Navarro encouraged city-wide involvement during this public involvement phase. Using the water bill to get this word out might be a good way to let the public know about this process. How shade and water features are incorporated into these guidelines is important. Downtown has a lot of potential. Unique structures and art attract and draw people to spaces. The plan, as it relates to vibrancy, is crucial.

Councilmember Mitchell thanked Mr. Vinson for the presentation and voiced his desire to move this project forward as quickly as possible. When looking at the vegetation downtown, it is disturbing. There is grass growing through the planters and there is no theme among the types of trees. The birds are also disruptive. The upkeep in landscaping is lacking. Existing codes should be enforced and property maintenance needs to be kept in the forefront. There are planters that are empty that have weeds. These are things that could be addressed immediately to improve the appearance of downtown. When visitors come to the downtown, it should reflect pride.

Councilmember Shekerjian asked Mr. Vinson if staff looked at the past downtown studies, whether or not they had any value in this process, and if staff found any common messages. Mr. Vinson replied yes, there is an interface team that reviewed those documents. There was also a Codes and Standards Committee that also looked at the ordinances that were enacted as a result of those studies and outcomes. Engineering right-of-way standards were also analyzed.

Councilmember Shekerjian followed up by asking Mr. Vinson how long it would take to implement the guidelines, once they are agreed upon. Mr. Vinson stated that guidelines can only set the tone. After that project phase, then funding and financing will need to come into play. Councilmember Shekerjian asked if there will be a timeline for implementation once the guidelines have been approved. Mayor Hallman stated that this process is more about Council positioning the downtown and the rest of the City and eventually the private sector will need to be involved in the implementation phase of this project. Councilmember Shekerjian acknowledged this and added that staff needs to work with the DTC to address some of the more immediate problems occurring in the downtown. Once Phase II is completed, Councilmember Shekerjian asked Mr. Vinson if staff will have a timeline on when the guidelines can be instituted at least partially – meaning the phasing in of new landscaping and how that will happen.

Councilmember Arredondo agreed that the upkeep of the downtown has deteriorated and needs immediate attention.

Councilmember Arredondo voiced the importance of not leaving out residents from the farthest ends of the City in this process. Local developers should also be asked to participate.

Mayor Hallman stated that the goal is to begin a process in creating streetscape guidelines, which should not be rushed – it should be done well and right. The City should continue to move forward to create a master plan. A separate issue is the maintenance and upkeep of the current downtown streetscape. For the next agenda, it might be appropriate to schedule a discussion of downtown maintenance and upkeep.

Mayor Hallman commended Diana Kaminski for her assessment of each of the main project plans that have already been completed. The next opportunity should be pulling all that information together, the community discussion, and then finalizing the guidelines at the Council level. As an example, this assessment includes a description of the General Plan 2030, ASU/Tempe campus design concepts, the Tempe multi-use path system, the Rio Salado landscape master plan, the Hayden Ferry Lakeside design guidelines, the urban open space plans, etc.

The Project for Public Spaces focuses on public spaces and assists in the analysis needed to determine what does and does not work. In 2007, the Project for Public Spaces gave an analysis of the downtown and the surrounding areas to look at connectivity and how to make them active spaces. Mayor Hallman recognized the value of looking at other successful areas where the climate is vastly different than Arizona. However, it is vitally important to look at what is successful in this arid climate and what elements attract people to certain spaces – what makes those spaces unique that they are active and dynamic. There are different spaces along Mill Avenue that attract different kinds of people for different reasons, so the notion that there should be only one kind of bench, tree, brick format, etc., might result in a bland atmosphere. Budgets are tight and it is important to proceed with caution when implementing these guidelines.

Mayor Hallman thanked Councilmember Mitchell for submitting pictures of downtown areas in need of maintenance. Although some people may consider the media news racks, sometimes referred to as 'gang boxes', visual blight, others consider these racks as colorful and good. The Project for Public Spaces video made a point of stating that homeless folks are not much of a problem when the issue is analyzed properly. The homeless population does not chase many people away – they just happen to be attracted to certain spaces, just as people that have a home. Using the water bill as a means to invite input in this process and seek ideas on what works in public spaces would be ideal. Capitalizing on what works is the key to success.

Vice-Mayor Ellis stated that the streetcar element can create opportunities in directing and diverting traffic, impact landscaping options and create a friendlier pedestrian environment. Streetcars will undoubtedly change the streetscape of the downtown and have an impact upon the guidelines.

Councilmember Navarro stated that the outcome of this project needs to be a timeless blueprint. It needs to be well thought out and done smart.

Councilmember Woods stated that there is a sense of frustration that there is no timeline to refer to on when things are expected to happen. Mayor Hallman stated that this project was launched in December. Staff has done the data collection and is getting ready to begin the next phase of this project. The other issue is the immediate deterioration of Mill Avenue in general, which should be discussed at an upcoming Issue Review Session. At that time, staff should be prepared to discuss how the budgets have been cut with respect to landscape maintenance, what is the DTC's role in landscape maintenance. Based upon that information, Council should be prepared to allocate resources accordingly. It would also be helpful to know which portions of the code are not being enforced and why that is happening - what resources exist and how they are being deployed.

Mayor Hallman stated that the goal of this project is to establish guidelines so that when the private sector re-engages, each of the segments of the downtown may be built out. One significant portion of the plan is the landscape and hardscape plan that identifies landscaping materials, street by street, in three block sections. Mayor Hallman encouraged staff to use this type of approach for each design element of the plan during the remainder of this project.

Councilmember Mitchell voiced his support for the plan presented and stated that in order for things to move forward, it is important to continue to take care of what exists and not neglect the downtown.

Councilmember Shekerjian stated that she is interested in knowing the timeline for how staff proposes to phase in portions of the project that pertain to DTC and the City as opposed to new development, given the budget constraints. Not only has the City cut its budget back, so has the DTC. It would be helpful to see how staff proposes that the implementation phase between the City and DTC will occur in terms of limited available funds for this project. For instance, if Council decides new trash receptacles are part of the implementation, when those would be slated to purchase.

Councilmember Navarro asked if staff intends to continue planting trees during this project, or put a hold on that activity until after the guidelines have been approved. Mayor Hallman stated that he would prefer to wait until the guidelines have been completed than to have staff plant trees that might not be the final choice of landscaping or design.

Mayor Hallman pointed out the amenities section of the Street Progress Report where it states "...overall there is an eclectic feel for our downtown. The pedestrian amenity experience is markedly different depending upon the block and location...." Mayor Hallman stated that his perception of these thoughts was that it is an advantage to have diversity in this community – it is useful and good.

Mayor Hallman asked staff to incorporate photographs into the code section of the document so that it is easier to understand.

In terms of shade structures, it might be useful to create minimum design standards for things like awnings or shade structures so that customers do not have to hire a lawyer and/or architect to apply for a code variance. Serious consideration should also be given to incorporating shade structures that not only provide for shade; they protect pedestrians from bird droppings and some even have misters. These are the types of amenities that attract people to various public or private spaces.

Mayor Hallman pointed out that Ash Avenue originally served as Tempe's main street of activity. Not until the old Ash Avenue Bridge was closed did Mill Avenue become the main arterial where activity took place. This illustrates the important role that transportation plays in attracting people to spaces.

Mayor Hallman stated that 5th Street is being described as a 'major collector' street. However, it does have the potential to be a signature street.

Consensus:

- Continue forward on a plan that will result in developing downtown development principles
- Prepare a timeline of implementation for project aspects that involve the city and DTC
- Downtown maintenance discussion to be scheduled for an upcoming Issue Review Session

Agenda Item 3 – Downtown Parking Study Update

Nancy Hormann stated that DTC is working with city staff to develop a downtown parking model for the downtown. The guiding principles for this study is to look at parking as an overall program of economic development for the downtown. Parking is necessary and the use of it needs to be maximized in order to spur new development.

Parking is a component of the larger, overall parking system – it encompasses light rail, bicycles, and all transportation modes that occur. The goal is to have an effective parking resource management system. That could include parking meters that accept credit cards, which could make these units more user friendly.

Defining parking adequacy is another program element. ASU is incorporating a Zip Car Program into their transportation system, which gives people flexibility on transportation options. There is also a development parking assessment tool that analyzes existing available parking and projects how much parking will be needed and when.

A shared parking model is included in the Best Practices principles in terms of return on parking investment. Integrating planning into parking will be instituted into development planning and strategies. Parking strategies must include business strategies. Parking in downtown will be self sustaining, which is the eventual goal – that includes building the parking.

This model is built on a 5 to 1 return on investment ratio for parking. In this study, the downtown has been split into blocks and in each block the study contains: the demand by hour, the supply, parking rates, the adjacent parking supply, etc. This model analyzes demand peaks/valleys, square footage of building and its usage and will estimate how much, if any, new parking will be required for a new development. This tool measures parking demand hour by hour and whether or not time limits should be adjusted in order to increase parking demand. The parking distribution between public and private is another aspect of how this tool measures inventory. A walking ratio from each of the parking location is also included in the data.

The next step in this process is to prepare a development checklist that focuses on parking as well as what Community Development uses now when evaluating new development criteria. This process is being conveyed to the development community to get their input on what criteria should be included in measuring the effectiveness of this tool.

Other areas of study are multi-space meters, credit card meters, parking enforcement practices, traffic circulation during special events, street closure impacts, and traffic diversions. Sending traffic away from Mill Avenue after an ASU game is not maximizing the use of downtown.

Councilmember Shekerjian thanked Ms. Hormann for the systematic approach to analyzing parking and how to maximize this amenity.

Ms. Hormann stated that the first phase of this process will be completed in approximately three weeks, at which time DTC anticipates they will be ready to give Council an update on this program.

Mayor Hallman thanked Ms. Hormann for the impressive work and noted that parking has been a historical point of concern in this community.

Agenda Item 4 – Future Agenda Items

Discussion of downtown landscaping

Agenda Item 5 – Future Meeting Date(s)

Mayor Hallman stated that this committee will not meet until after the new Council takes office.

Agenda Item 10 – Announcements

None.

Meeting adjourned at 7:45 p.m.

Prepared by: Kay Savard

Reviewed by: Jan Hort

Jan Hort
City Clerk