



Claremont City Center Project Focus Group Summary

Emergency and City Services

January 24, 2012

9:00 AM – 10:00 AM

Claremont Visitors Center, Claremont, NH

DRAFT



Summary notes prepared by UVLSRPC

Narrative Summary

Introduction of the City Center Project and overview of project was provided by members of the Steering Committee. The purpose of this Focus Group is to look at public safety and infrastructure and how it is part of the City Center. Part of the focus of the City Center Project is to assess and find improvements to: building codes and enforcement, zoning in the city center, and infrastructure.

This session will help the Project Steering Committee understand shortcomings (barriers) and solutions to the topics of public safety and infrastructure in the city center. The following summary notes are organized by topic and cover all information shared in the session. The Focus Group Notes are the transcribed notes recorded during the meeting.

CONDITION OF EXISTING BUILDINGS

Vacant buildings pose a significant public safety risk:

- Vagrants entering the buildings
- Children playing in the buildings
- Homeless occupying and building fires (proximity of buildings within the city center presents a particularly fire safety risk)
- Within the last 5-6 years, vacant buildings have been an increasing issue for Police – copper theft and related break-ins-issues.

Distribution of vacant buildings is generally even throughout city center with not particular concentration anywhere. The number of buildings has increased and many associated with foreclosures. Due to the increased issues with break-ins and material theft, the Police have found the owners have been notifying them of the vacancy more often.

Occupancy of existing structures is sometimes not accurately represented on the City tax cards – referred to as a ‘creeping building occupancy’ where new units are added, but not recorded at the City. This has an impact on many aspects of safety and infrastructure:

- Undocumented apartments result in higher water usage and potentially illegal connections to the City water system.
- Increasing apartments result in excessive parking demands, particularly buildings along the smaller streets in the City center. These high-demand parking issues sometimes result in vehicles blocking the street or the sidewalk making snow removal or pedestrian access difficult. DPW reports the issue to the Police if such a situation is observed.
- Fire Dept. conducts fire safety inspections on 3+ - family buildings on a 4-yr rotation. This program was developed 10+ years ago when the Fire Dept was becoming aware of the trend that a high proportion of fires – some fatal fires – were in multi-family structures. The Dept. decided to take a proactive step toward public safety and have had success increasing city-wide fire safety.
- Fire Dept. has interaction with City Planning and Development department when undocumented living units identified.

Complying with the IBC or the NFPA codes (enacted by the State and enforced by the City) can become costly for property owners. If a property owner decides to develop or maintain a multi-family structure in the city center, they can be confronted with significant renovation costs to meet the building and fire safety codes. Some have decided to abandon a project due to costs. The City is working to more effectively implement Fire Safety and Building Codes and adopt codes that are up to date and address building renovation and existing building circumstances.

Multi-family structures present a challenge to public safety response

- Larger apartment complexes are difficult for a limited staff to clear a building and
- Older houses have tight hallways and staircases, which make it difficult to maneuver with a stretcher.
- Getting to the sides and backs of the structures in the city center is challenging.

Access/identifying buildings:

- Sector 5, for example, presents a difficult situation for properly identified buildings (addresses, displayed street numbers, etc.)
- When the Police make a call to a building, they sometimes identify undocumented apartments, but there is no mechanism to check this information among departments in the City.

INFRASTRUCTURE – ROADS AND SIDEWALKS

The City DPW has been conducting improvement projects to the infrastructure (both surface and underground infrastructure) in recent years including streets. Examples include the Water Street improvements and combined sewer overflow separation work along Pleasant Street. There is a recognized need for more improvements to the streets and sidewalks. Many projects have been designed and are “sitting on the shelf” waiting for the funds to become available to get the projects done. Some examples:

- Elk’s Club to Mulberry.
- Around the park and Claremont Glassworks – streetscape and underground work [Sector 2].
- Paving in Bluff Area, sidewalk widening – 2012 paving program to cover some of the needed surface conditions.

DPW will spend the funding that is available.

Existing street conditions (narrow streets) are particularly problematic for Fire Department response during the winter months. The condition of the narrow streets, considering snow banks and parking, restrict operating some equipment on an emergency call. This, combined with a reduced budget and personnel at the DPW, result in slower road and sidewalk snow removal, which could have an effect on emergency response times. Map sectors 4 and 5 are likely to be most problematic. Additionally, on-street parking may restrict access to a building and managing traffic around the emergency vehicles are considerations for emergency response to any site.

Safe pedestrian access to sidewalks is not necessarily an issue or concern for public safety, except under circumstances when the sidewalks are blocked or impassable:

- Police have observed pedestrians or handicap individuals choosing to travel in the roadway rather than using the sidewalks due to conditions.
- There have been accidents in the past involving pedestrians walking in the road because the sidewalks are impassable.
- This is generally understood to be more function of available resources rather than lack of service from the DPW.

Recent truck route study addresses an aspect of city center traffic volume and safety.

INFRASTRUCTURE – WATER DISTRIBUTION

Water and sewer projects depend on state and federal funding programs. Most projects do not happen without financial assistance from state or federal entities. The City does not have the fiscal resources through the water and sewer enterprise funds to do the work.

Vacant buildings pose a minor issue for the City water system due to potential water breaks, theft of copper or illegal use of water on the property. This has happened and resulted in a flooded building in the city center.

Increased building occupancy or density can result in issues for water distribution – increased density of a building or of a neighborhood has substantial impacts on the city-wide water supply:

- A structure may need a new or replacement water service to the existing and new units.
- A portion of the water distribution system may be very old with a constricted water main. This, along with increased demand on the system, can cause substantial drops in volume and pressure for a water supply line.

DPW has concerns about the condition and operations for water distribution. Safety for the City, including the condition of aging hydrants and whether they will provide sufficient flows when needed.

CITY CENTER STREETScape AND BIKE/PED TOPICS

The city center businesses are sensitive to the condition and maintenance of sidewalks and streetlights in the city center area. The lighting is an issue for utilizing the parking garage near city center – the gaps in lighting lend to an unsafe feeling for pedestrians after dark. Lighting problem areas include: dark areas along Main St south of Opera House Square, Clay Hill, Myrtle.

Challenges to improving lighting in the city center (City-wide):

- There is a formal process working with PSNH, the local utility company who manages street lights – initial contact for requested service can take weeks (including formal confirmation from City Manager that requesting individual is authorized to make the request).

- If the light is to be mounted on a utility pole, PSNH conducts a site visit to assess ownership of the pole (in Claremont, many of the poles are owned by Verizon). If the pole is not owned by PSNH, the other company charges a fee to mount a light onto the pole (i.e. Verizon charges \$650). Typical costs could be \$1,000-\$1,500 per light fixture.
- The utility companies do not act expediently when City requests movement or relocation of utility poles for infrastructure projects. Example: A sidewalk project has been on hold waiting for Verizon to relocate poles with no success – the project will proceed with the poles obstructing the sidewalk because of the need to resurface the sidewalk.
- City center ‘architectural’ light poles change and are discontinued – they are difficult and expensive to replace. Accidental collisions and damage to the light poles are expensive to fix and often a City cost.
- Due to the effort in fixing street lamps, the City waits until 5 or 6 lamps are broken before making a repair request (to make it worthwhile for PSNH). PSNH also conducts regular maintenance (approx. every 5 yrs) – which was recently completed.

Trees represent a difficulty for the City – a replacement program is a question. The periodic loss of trees due to storms and other reasons result in an aesthetic impact on the streetscape. There are unique tree laws regarding who can take trees down, ownership, maintenance. Funding sources and legal issues affect maintenance and replacement of street trees.

Claremont City Center Project
Public Safety and Building Codes
Focus Group Notes: January 24, 2012

The following notes have been transcribed from hand-written tablet pages. The following statements, concepts, and ideas were generated during a facilitated focus group interview with participants on this topic.

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Paving

Bluff needs sidewalks

2012 – 03/12

Attention to some areas

H₂O + Sewer hinges on state funding

Filling storefronts

Lack of upkeep of greenspace and amenities

Emergency Response Problems?

Narrow streets (sectors 5,4) – w/parkin + snow presents a problem

Reduced budgets – longer snow removal

Accidents due to sidewalk maint.

Scooter/ped vs vehicles

Vacant buildings:

Vagrants, children – danger of fires – more rapid close structures

Scattered through city center

Water – copper theft then turn buck on themselves

Multi-family conversions:

Parking w/no street parking in winter

Creep over occupancy

3+ units inspected in 4-yr rotation on fire code. New units forwarded to P+D, 5310A
smokes + cmonox

In past 15 yrs of enforcing fire code

Decline in m-fam fires

Stats on results – m. alarm in m. fam

Report for committee

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Mult fam cont'd:

- Expensive IBC + NFPA upgrades – fire escapes etc.
- Characteristic conversions in City Center

Challenges to Response:

- Larger facilities – more difficult – e.g - apt bldgs. (100+ units)
- Older structures – 90 deg angles w/stairs etc., Problem stretcher maneuverability, Narrow driveways and streets
- Access on sides of bldgs. – density and building separation – historic layout

Increases in density:

- PW desires infill for customer base, however further out more draw on improper pipe can water be provided to emergency services
- Volume okay – distribution system okay – modeled.
- Hanover/Elm – not so much, Main/River lots
- Nelmar (sectors 8,9) critical low flows

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General discussion

Markings on buildings: street numbers, etc.

- Enforcement of code
- Sector 5 – daily battle for addressed (Tremont, etc)

Lighting: Citywide effort?

- Dark areas (main so of OHQ)
- Clay hill-myrtle-pole problems
- PSNH Process – budget constraints – discontinued lt pole problems

PD no mechanism for discovery/reporting of density and other problems.

Water: Some areas of old pipes (430+ hydrants)

Open Space:

- Trees – replacement? – wind storms – streetscapes
- FEMA \$ to replace not just take down, etc.

Truck Routes: Safety in city center

PD: Different problems each season

5- FD bldgs. Not code compliant – making way through
New 101 – helpful for existing