

**TOWN OF CHELMSFORD
VINAL SQUARE STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN
COMMITTEE**

Approved June 1, 2022

MEETING MINUTES

March 10, 2022

7:00 P.M. CALL TO ORDER VIA ZOOM

Members Present: Joe Tierney, Laura Lee, Bill Gilet, Brian Creamer, Janet Murphy
Mike Walsh, Dan Rokas

Others Present: Christina Papadopoulos, Town Engineer
Paul Cohen, Town Manager
Evan Belansky, Community Development Director
Gary Persichetti, Director of DPW
Steve Callaghan, Parks and Playground Coordinator
LauraLynne Morey, North Congregational Church

Mr. Tierney called the meeting to order at 7:06 p.m. via Zoom

Update on Proposed North Village Improvements

Ms. Papadopoulos provided an update from the last meeting on the Howard Stein Hudson proposal as follows, in response to questions from the committee to HSH:

1. They will try to find a way to maximize parking in Vinal Square.
2. They will continue to pursue a connection from the municipal lot to Wotton Street. More information may be needed.
3. Will ask Mass. DOT to include a sidewalk from on Tyngsboro Road from the Square to Wellman Avenue in the construction project.
4. Will explore moving utilities underground. The Town would be responsible for funding, may be cost prohibitive.
5. The Vinal Square Committee will be involved in implementation of all initiatives in the project.
6. Traffic turning movements and locations will be addressed.

Other information put forth from HSH includes:

- Work for the Wotton Street connection will require a land survey.
- Route 3A can include a bike lane.

- Bike access should be considered for all roadways, need to determine where needed most.
- Is there any other parking available for the apartments on the corner of Groton and Dunstable Roads.
- HSH wants a meeting with the Committee. How soon can this be scheduled.

It was felt that HSH should meet with the subcommittee in the coming weeks.

Ms. Papadopoulos announced she is leaving the Town for another job on March 18. Mr. Persichetti will pick up the project.

Mr. Tierney noted that the subcommittee consists of Mr. Gilet, Mr. Walsh, Mr. Creamer and himself. There has been no interest from business owners to participate. It is hoped that Mr. Garavanian will reach out as to the status of the property he owns behind 40 Vinal Square, which is being considered for a housing project to be built. Mr. Rokas said he had been in touch Mr. Garavanian.

West Campus Property

A Special Town Meeting was held on February 24, 2022 to consider rezoning of the West Campus property to allow a large housing development to be built there. The rezoning was approved. It was noted that the proposal has received wide support from the neighborhood closest to the property. Mr. Walsh stated that the project will come to the Planning Board for a series of public hearings. There will be ample opportunity for public input.

Varney Playground

Mr. Tierney opened the discussion, and announced that a number of visitors had joined the meeting to participate in this agenda item. A lengthy exchange ensued, with the main focus being the dissatisfaction among many parents in the community (which did not include the neighborhood residents who had been involved and provided feedback), who felt there was little if any notification of committee meetings to receive input on the type of playground to be built and that due to the lack of communication, a plan had been devised without their input or approval.

The group, led by David Drayton, and his wife Lizzy Fei Drayton of 5 Newtowne Way, had circulated a petition, and received 300 signatures, expressing their disappointment and attempting to halt the playground proposal.

Mr. Tierney, along with several other members, responded that the playground proposal had been a topic of numerous committee meetings since 2019, all of which were posted as required on our agendas on the Town website and through various social media outlets. The group responded that there was insufficient outreach and notification for them in particular, and had they been aware of such discussions they would have attended meetings, and told the committee what they wanted and to build it. The residents stated they belong to several parenting groups who learned in an off hand way about the Varney Playground proposal, and decided they would step in. Mr. Drayton, who is a Town Meeting Representative in Precinct 6, voted against the Varney Playground funding proposal at Town Meeting, but had not reached out to this committee during the design phase. This caused frustration among members as to

the reasons for his late intervention at this point, when he did not support it initially. The parents who spoke want a different type of playground than was proposed. They also cite the proposal's lack of ADA accessibility, especially for children who are neurodivergent. They described details as to the type of playground they want, with particular emphasis on the layout, type of equipment and such, that makes for a positive playground experience for children with disabilities. This proposal is lacking and should not go forward unless this criteria can be met, they said.

Mr. Creamer, who has been active in the playground design process, stated that the equipment and design was chosen as a result of neighbor input and that it is ADA compliant in terms of disabilities, and current practices and standards. It is also consistent with the playground style that was built at Friendship Park and at the public schools. The age range for use is two to twelve years old in two sections; the first section suitable for children ages 2 - 5 years old, and a second section for children ages 5 – 12 years old. He added that there is a nearby stormwater run-off and erosion issue on the slope between the bathhouse and the playground, and at the stone wall at the beach.

Mr. Creamer emphasized that the Varney playground is in disrepair and needs replacement soon. Certainly had the wishes of these residents been known, their concerns could have been addressed, and revisions made, before the project put to bid. The group maintained its position that they were not informed or included in any discussion for the playground until it was too late, and continued to lay blame and criticize the committee for their lack of communication and inclusion to the entire community of Chelmsford in the project.

Mr. Tierney responded that everything that could have been done to communicate the project, even during the pandemic, when zoom meetings were held. There was also criticism that this committee failed to reach out through fundraising such as had been done at Friendship Park to build their playground. Mr. Tierney said the committee did not feel it was proper to ask people for money during the difficult days of the pandemic which spanned close to two years, when so many were without work and struggling in their lives. Mr. Gilet asked why Mr. Drayton, as a Town Meeting Representative, did not follow up with this committee, having taken part in the vote and knowing the project was approved by the majority of Town Meeting, especially given there were multiple committee meetings over a lengthy period of time. He further commented this type of follow up should be considered a fiduciary responsibility of being an elected official, to his constituents who asked him to vote the project down.

Mr. Callaghan stated that the Town had signed a contract for \$207,000 for the playground equipment. The installation cost is over \$100,000. Drainage work is needed before any installation can take place. He stressed the urgency of the project due to the poor condition of the current equipment. Mr. Cohen said if the community wishes, he will pull the order for the equipment, adding that the playground can and will be closed for safety reasons. He added that it is the Town's job to keep the playground safe for everyone. Mr. Persichetti further noted that if the order were pulled, there would be a strong chance costs could rise with today's inflation to a point this phase was cost prohibitive, as well as extending the timeline of the project given the current supply chain issues.

The possibility of a "phase 2" type of approach was suggested. Perhaps fundraising for this could be done. Adjustments to the proposal are possible, with the help of the residents who attended and want a different design.

Discussion followed as to whether to cancel the equipment order or proceed with the playground as planned. The consensus was to proceed with the current playground proposal and to solicit information for a phase 2, to follow, for future consideration. The following motion was made by Mr. Gilet:

I move to move forward the playground proposal as set forth for Varney Park.

Ms. Lee seconded the motion.

Vote: Unanimous.

Members of the community were invited to submit their thoughts for a phase 2 building. All were urged to work together. Mr. Creamer provided his email for a future meeting of the Playground Sub Committee.

Meeting Minutes Approval

Approval of the February 10 draft meeting minutes was deferred to the next meeting, pending a needed correction.

Next Meeting Date

A date for the next meeting will be determined.

There being no further business, Ms. Lee moved to adjourn, seconded by Mr. Gilet. Unanimous. Meeting adjourned 9:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Janet Murphy