

# City of Worcester, Massachusetts

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## WORCESTER REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

Thursday, February 26, 2015

5:30 P.M.

Levi Lincoln Chamber  
Worcester, MA 01608

### **Public Hearing M.G.L. C 121B: Housing and Urban Renewal 760 CMR 12.00 Urban Renewal Regulations for the purposes of discussing the development of a proposed urban renewal plan for the Theatre District and surrounding area**

*Worcester Redevelopment Authority Board*

Vincent A. Pedone, Chair  
Steven Rothschild  
David Minasian

Chair Pedone opened the meeting by stating that the Worcester Redevelopment Authority (WRA) is holding a Public Hearing for the purposes of discussing the development of a proposed urban renewal plan for the Theatre District and surrounding area. Mr. Pedone introduced WRA Board Members, David Minasian and Steven Rothschild. He then advised the attendees that the meeting was an official meeting of the WRA and that it was being recorded but not televised so that it could be considered as part of the official public record for urban renewal plan purposes. Chair Pedone advised that the meeting would include a presentation from staff and The BSC Group, the consultant working with the WRA on the plan. Chair Pedone continued saying the purpose of the public hearing is to receive testimony from those impacted or having an interest in the urban renewal zone being created. The parameters of the zone are still in development, input will help to develop the zone and proceed with a plan. He said there would be a presentation, and after the presentation comments would be heard and questions would be answered.

Chair Pedone introduced Michael Traynor, Chief Development Officer for the city and Chief Executive Officer of the WRA, who provided a brief overview of the WRA and the role of the Citizens' Advisory Committee (CAC). Mr. Traynor explained the WRA was established by M.G.L. Chapter 121B, and that one function of the WRA is to undertake urban renewal. He explained that there would be a series of hearings at the local level, and that the urban renewal plan must be approved by the WRA, the Planning Board and the City Council. Once local approvals occur, the Urban Renewal Plan (URP) would be submitted to DHCD at the State level for approval. Mr. Traynor explained that one requirement for this process is "meaningful public input." The CAC is composed of stakeholders/ residents in the area, who will be a sounding

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board for WRA, and will help to solicit input from public at large. The WRA will look to CAC for as much public input/participation as possible.

Mr. Traynor turned the meeting over to Jef Fasser, BSC Group. Mr. Fasser stated he is working with Russ Burke (also in attendance), on the development of the urban renewal plan. Mr. Fasser provided an introduction about urban renewal, stating that it is no longer mass clearing of large blocks of land. He explained that the State has a number of urban renewal plans in different communities, and they typically go in and target properties that are vacant and underperforming, working with property owners and providing assistance to turn properties ?. Mr. Fasser explained the benefits of an urban renewal plan, stating that it defines actions to take place at a certain cost in a certain time to move an area forward from an economic development perspective. An URP sets forth a vision for an area and is a tool to attract private investment in the area while allowing the redevelopment authority to act like a private developer to negotiate with private property owners. An URP will also outline public investments that may be made in an area.

Mr. Fasser reviewed all that goes into an urban renewal plan – community involvement; inventory of properties/existing conditions study; zoning and land use. He continued by saying they would pull all the existing information that the State requires into the plan, and then look into strategies to move the area forward - identifying public and private investments that may be necessary and developing a budget for real improvements with real costs and identifying funding.

Heather Gould, Chief of Staff for the city’s Executive Office of Economic Development presented information on the Theatre District Master Plan, explaining its significance as the basis for the development of the URP. Ms. Gould explained that the Theatre District Master Plan is a 30 acre area that encompasses the Hanover Theater and immediate blocks surrounding the Worcester Common and City Hall; that the goal is to create a district identity, drive growth, and spur private investment by leveraging public improvements (streetscape) with the outcome of activating the street life throughout the District; that the vision is an active, mixed-use 18 hour district to attract residents, particularly young professionals/empty nesters, businesses, and visitors to the Downtown. Ms. Gould continued her presentation, explaining the action agenda of the Theatre District Master Plan and reviewing the primary development opportunities within the proposed plan area.

Jef Fasser walked through the next steps of the URP process. Mr. Fasser reiterated that an urban renewal plan will be an implementation strategy for the Theatre District and adjacent areas, prepared with public input and ultimately approved by DHCD. Mr. Fasser reviewed original maps of the proposed URP area from 1897 – 2005, showing how the density and development has changed over time. Mr. Fasser provided a brief description of the proposed urban renewal area boundary, and explained that at the next public meeting BSC will provide more analysis for the plan, zoning, land use, development, goals/actions/recommendations for the URP area. Mr. Fasser stated that the process would continue through the spring and summer with anticipated plan approvals in the fall and early winter.

Mr. Pedone introduced members of the CAC that were present - John Brissette, Paul Demoga, Jill Dagilis, Frank Carroll, Jack Donahue, and also recognized State Representative Mary Keefe. The meeting was opened up for public comment.

Allen Fletcher – citizen of Worcester, resident of Canal District, very interested in the process and hopes that downtown will become increasingly vibrant. Mr. Fletcher expressed a curiosity about the boundaries - a little worried about the railroad and the urban terrain – and wondered why the boundaries cross over from the Downtown into the Canal District. What is the advantage of having part of what seems to naturally be the Canal District (Wyman Gordon) included in the Theatre District?

Chair Pedone gives technical reasons why the Wyman Gordon parcels were included – He explained that over the course of the past year, one of the things the WRA has tried to do is work closely with the City Council and the City Administration to be more open, more

transparent, and have more communication. Policymakers at the city level have expressed a desire to see something done at the site, and that incorporating it into the URP provides an opportunity to do that. Chair Pedone also stated that he recognizes that a barrier with the railroad does exist, but that for purposes of an urban renewal plan, an area has to be contiguous.

Mr. Fasser also acknowledged that while the railroad does create a natural boundary, if we are able to better link the downtown to Wyman Gordon, there is the potential they can support each other and feed off each other – so that Wyman Gordon doesn't continue to be a barrier for economic development purposes, and we are able to help revitalize a larger area here. Mr. Fasser points out that Wyman Gordon is within walking distance of the Hanover Theater and that there is opportunity to develop a lot of vacant land.

Russ Burke from BSC, stated that one of the criteria for urban renewal eligibility is “if not for” – Wyman Gordon property has been sitting there and has not on its own been able to get the momentum going to see something happen and the urban renewal process does provide an opportunity where there may be some public initiative or incentives or push to get the ball rolling. The other factor in including the Wyman Gordon properties is that it might prove to be a very interesting linkage between the downtown and Canal District, creating greater connectivity and an overall vibrancy within the City. We felt it was worthwhile to look at it given the opportunity urban renewal presents, if not for, public action through the urban renewal plan, Wyman Gordon may just continue to sit there.

Mr. Traynor explained there was a meeting with representatives from the State's Department of Housing and Community Development and there were preliminary conversations about the railroad tracks as a boundary and extending the urban renewal area down to the Wyman Gordon site. The State thought it made sense to enlarge the district and encouraged the concept. A phased approach - the Theater District, the core downtown, is what we will concentrate on first, and then in a later phase focus on Wyman Gordon. Creating this urban renewal area is not going to lose the identity of the Canal District. No one is going to refer to the Wyman Gordon area as the Downtown Urban Renewal Area, the intent of the urban renewal plan is not to take away from the Canal District. Mr. Fletcher requested a representative from the Canal District be added to the Citizens Advisory Committee.

Bruce Lucier – works for Alpine Management, Manager of Federal Square Condominium Buildings. Commented about parking and alternative options to car ownership/use – zip car, bike rentals (hubway pikes), the need for infrastructure to support those who live in the area - for instance, grocery store.

Jake Sanders, on behalf of Worcester Public Library – looking forward to working closely with you on the plan and finding solutions and outcomes that are beneficial both to the City as a whole as well as the thousands of people that walk into the Library every day.

Shyla Matthews, Community Development Officer for MassDevelopment – Theatre District Master Plan chosen as a Transformative Development Initiative. MassDevelopment through the TDI will seek to utilize additional existing finance products and coordinate with its public-sector partners to leverage activity by private landowners, enterprises, and investors. Ms. Matthews thanked the WRA for engaging in the urban renewal process.

Representative Mary Keefe is excited about the process ongoing in her district – An important part of urban renewal always has to include the idea of community development as well. Rep. Keefe understands the focus to attract new students/residents to the downtown but also urges folks to keep the people that actually live here in mind and consider what their needs are.

Question from the Audience – how fixed is the boundary? Chair Pedone – it is not fixed we are still working on setting the boundary. Is Lamartine Street included in project? Mr. Fasser replies, yes the portion that includes the Wyman Gordon property.

Dick Perry and wife, lifelong residents of Worcester – Comments about how Worcester should be more like Burlington, VT – very vibrant downtown area. Mr. Perry talks about

attracting colleges and students to come downtown and suggests Worcester explore parking solutions such as the methods Burlington uses.

Mauro DePasquale – Executive Director at WCCA TV, 415 Main Street, a public access community media center/TV station. WCCA efforts fit perfectly with the plans for the city/WRA efforts. Mr. DePasquale asks how he can help, he wants to be more engaged in the process.

Tim McCann, member of Worcester Historical Commission – interested in urban renewal project and historic preservation. Mr. McCann is glad to hear the scorched earth policy of the 1960 and 1970s is not being considered, and that he and other members of the Historical Commission would like to have some input to this process specifically regarding the historic buildings. Mr. McCann wants to spread resources over a larger area and cluster entertainment uses within a district to feed off each other. He also questions how this plan will be marketed, and believes there is a stigma in the downtown; recommended streetscape improvements, more specifically lighting, murals, and a visible police presence to help people feel safer and blunt stigma that exists.

Jef Fasser commented about historic resources on north side of lower Pleasant Street, significant properties that they recommended be included because of valuable architectural facades and elements to those buildings.

Jo Hart, resident of Worcester, asks about more meetings being held – was late and missed the presentation – but generally alarmed about WRA existing, worried about demolition, not totally opposed but wished she knew more about it.

Chair Pedone responded to Mr. McCann’s comments – Tax incentives, marketing, safety –there has to be a better effort to tie all of this together and he agrees the streets need to be more pedestrian-friendly and better lighted to make people feel safe. Those three points are well taken and the last point you made which is making sure there is more than one anchor project.

Nicole Apostola, serves on Board of the Friends of the Worcester Public Library – but here representing her own opinion as a resident. Ms. Apostola is not opposed to redevelopment of the library parking lot but anything that goes into that lot really needs to have an understanding of urban design and work with the Worcester Public Library and its staff and patrons. Many patrons of the Library have limited mobility or young children, parking needs to be in close proximity. Main entrance to library needs to be placed in a way that helps library patrons naturally move around downtown - it would benefit the downtown and the whole district.

John Giangregorio, representing Canal District Alliance – Mr. Giangregorio was glad to hear about the connectivity from downtown to the Canal District being a focus. He also recommended Canal District representation on the CAC board, and encouraged continued public participation in the process. He and others have worked very hard and getting the message out of what the vision is in the Canal District. An urban renewal plan, well thought out, will hopefully frame the future with growth. Mr. Giangregorio mentioned Canal District efforts in trying to build a Canal to attract people and spur economic development; he embraces this connectivity with the downtown and thinks we need to clean up those bridges to encourage pedestrian activity.

Jo Hart – Canal District was bottom up approach which is why it works. This is top down. People in the street are what make society - what makes a city. And of course everyone in the city just stays in their car. So instead of talking about the parking you should talk about how to get people out of their cars and into the street because that’s what creates safety, don’t need police – there is strength in numbers, strength in community, which Worcester does not have, and to control the cars you really do need a better traffic system, streetscape is a nightmare, please work at it.

Robert Branca – area real estate developer with property in the district. Mr. Branca states he has tried to make some deals in the area and has had obstacles - properties overpriced, for sale but not really for sale except in a windfall. If there is public incentive for private enterprises, we may be able to solve that problem. The property owner could get what the property owner needs and the area could get developed. Mr. Branca also suggests looking at the area just beyond the

URP boundary – where Mass College of Pharmacy has invested and look at getting some of that activity back into the district.

Russ Burke offered sticky notes to get additional insight/feedback by attendees uncomfortable with public speaking.

Chair Pedone asked audience to make sure they signed in and provided an email address to receive information and updates about the process. He mentions WRA meeting agendas and minutes are posted on line, and recognizes one last speaker – George Opoku. Mr. Opoku is a resident in downtown and a business owner. Mr. Opoku's comment is that if we are looking to improve the city we should also look to the people that are already here doing something to grow first, and then we look to bring in new people to come and help out. Chair Pedone - We also understand your concerns and we are very aware of the impact that this will have on the businesses in the zone. Within the list of folks that are on the CAC are business owners, small and large within this proposed zone. Opens the floor to other WRA board members.

Steve Rothschild – Thank you for attending and your input. This type of turnout is really what we want to be seeing and it's a great kickoff for the Citizens Advisory Committee. Mr. Rothschild stated he'd like to see one or two representatives from the Canal District on the CAC, and that the WRA is not looking to bulldoze anything – important to keep the character and historical elements. He appreciated the feedback and encouraged future participation, wants this process to be inclusive, not divisive.

David Minasian – This process is going to be much better for the City of Worcester if all of you continue to be a participant in this process. Economic development is a quality of life issue - it's just not putting up a building and including private development investment. Mr. Minasian says he looks forward to hopefully creating a lot of new jobs, making a city that's a lot more walkable, and more entertaining; but also raises those up who are living here as well. He appreciates all the comments and input and looks forward to them in the future.

Chair Pedone entertained a motion to adjourn the WRA meeting; Mr. Minasian motioned to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Mr. Rothschild.

The meeting adjourned at 6:55 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael E. Traynor,  
Chief Executive Officer