

OCL *Rethinking I-81* Study
Steering Committee Meeting Minutes
University College
November 12, 2008

Present: Phil Bousquet, Emanuel Carter, Chris Capella-Peters, Megan Costa, Dennis Connors, Carol Dwyer, Bill Egloff, John Felleman, Rich Landerkin, Rebecca Livengood, Mike Smithson, Van Robinson, Donna O'Mahoney Rohde, Doug Sutherland, Sandra Barrett, Rachel Pollack

Guests: Richard Sykes of RHS Holdings, Nick Petraganani of Community Preservation Corporation, Joe Lewis of Sutton Company

Mention of the previous week's ESF meeting. The four students showed their preliminary designs. There was press coverage. Final presentation scheduled for Dec. 10 at ESF.

"Physical Condition of the Corridor" presentation by Chris Capella-Peters using Pictometry, aerial photography software.

- We must look closely at the quality of the corridor's physical environment now, and the quality that we could have at the end of whatever option is ultimately implemented.
- Mention of article "Shifting Urban Priorities: Removal of Urban Freeways in the United States" (emailed, and posted to study website) in which authors' analysis suggested that freeway removal will take place only when "the value of mobility is lower than that of economic development," and "those in power value other benefits more than they value the benefits associated with freeway infrastructure."
- One of our chief values should be the quality of the corridor's physical environment.
- Using an aerial photograph of the corridor, Capella-Peters showed how the construction of the highway "cut" the city into sectors. She pointed to the spaces under the highway, and on either side of it, as "lost" space. The shapes and arrangements of blocks, with the highway there, don't lend themselves to development, beyond things such as parking garages. She pointed to the recent construction of the parking garage by Upstate at cross streets Almond, Harrison and Adams, Sarah Loguen Streets, which is essentially "turning its back" to the site. Because of the physical conditions, she says, a parking garage seems logical for that site; no one would suggest housing, for instance.
- Will a rebuilding of the highway lead to "more of the same?" If the highway, designed to current standards, demands a larger footprint, will it impact historic buildings near the interchange such as the Hyman Smith Building (Smith Restaurant Supply) and other historic buildings on Townsend.
- The divide created by the highway permeates more than a block deep on either side of the highway. This occurs in the neighborhoods to the South as well and along the "ravine" that divides Little Italy and Franklin Square.

Comment by Emanuel Carter that these issues are being explored by students; student research supports the idea that an area two blocks deep on either side of the highway has development potential affected by the viaduct.

Presentation by Doug Sutherland for guests on Milwaukee economic development after removal of the Park East Freeway, and land use concepts for an Almond Street Blvd possibility suggested by the Edward and Kelcey University Hill Transportation Study done for SMTC (<http://smtcmpo.org>).

Commentary by guests and committee:

- Area has great development potential. Buildings near interchanges have noise pollution right next to their windows. Presidential Plaza, East Genesee Street, has mostly medical office space that goes at low rent, primarily because of its location next to the highway. With a boulevard there, rents might go up.

- Other buildings that could be affected include the building kitty corner to the Snowden, the old train station; these buildings have redevelopment potential.
- If the decision were made to create a boulevard, we would need to make sure we were not making things worse in the interim. Milwaukee was foresighted in developing design standards; planning in Syracuse would be for ten years down the road.
- Need for "synergy" between existing institutions and private developers. (i.e. retail and housing next to medical offices.)
- Spillover effects could be tremendous to areas like Little Italy and Hawley Green.
- Who are the people who do the planning to avoid another Ronald McDonald House fiasco?
- The city is in the middle of rewriting their city land use plan right now, intention to make sure that this becomes a part of the plan; that this is an important corridor that cannot be let slip in the short term because of the potential opportunity in the long term.
- Need to develop a strategic plan in vein of University Hill Plan (Wallace, Roberts and Todd Alta Planning and Design.)
- Would Almond Boulevard be the new main street? Will this affect the core of town? No, the commercial development on corridor would be complementary. Salina Street developments will go forward first. The residential/retail uses that could be put into play in the I-81 corridor are directed far more toward the Hill. Also this is a much longer term project – 10 years out. If this were to happen it would add to momentum downtown.
- Upstate has its computer group/10,000 square feet of office space at Widewaters Parkway; if the corridor were to change, this group could be brought back to the city. There are many other examples like this.
- Discussion of Renaissance Hotel and the park nearby, how that area has been affected by being on the "wrong side" of the divide from downtown.
- In terms of the decision making process, we need to inform those who will have influence on the governor, others who will be involved in the ultimate decision-making process. There are many communities that will be affected, and these communities need to be informed as to what the alternatives are.
- There are politicians sympathetic to the idea of freeway removal but they will not act without the will of the community.
- Federal provision exists that any long-range plan for the region be fiscally constrained; it is important to convey to the various communities that there are other bridge projects out there in our region that are not being funded and won't be funded because of the cost to maintain I-81 viaduct, e.g. other deficient bridges in CNY. But funding mechanism exists that only NHS money can be used on NHS systems; we don't know what monies will be available coming up.
- For those who fear gentrification, loss of public housing, there should be awareness that there a formulas instituted across the country to make subsidized units available within general development.

NEXT MEETING: Wednesday, December 3, 2008, 3:30 – 5 PM, 307 University College.