

Report of The Farmington Village Center/Parson's Property Ad-Hoc Committee
February 9, 2021

Ad-hoc Committee members:

C.J. Thomas, Town Council Chair

Brian Connolly, Town Council member

Peter Mastrobattista, Town Council member

Kathleen Blonski, Town Manager

Russ Arnold, Director of Public Works/Town Engineer

Rose Ponte, Economic Development Director

Background Summary

In 2015, The State of Connecticut DOT, started a long-awaited safety project to improve traffic flow and minimize traffic accidents on Route 4 in the vicinity of Farmington Village Center. As part of this project, the CT DOT purchased the Parson's Property, to use it as a construction staging area. Once the project was completed, the State's plan was to sell the property.

As a result of this project, the Town determined that it was important to engage the community and develop a plan and vision for the future use of this important Gateway. The Town Council appointed the Gateway Committee to study the Town's various gateways and the committee chose Farmington Village Center as the first Gateway to study. The town hired Dodson & Flinker to facilitate a 3-day workshop that included a SWOT analysis, a walking tour of the area, and a morning session for residents to develop their vision for the future of this area. The Farmington Center Masterplan was developed from the results of these three workshops.

The Farmington Center Masterplan listed the Parson's property as a signature site in the Village center. In the Masterplan, Dodson & Flinker, recommended that the Parsons property be obtained from the state, and developer proposals should be requested for development options. The consultants recommended that the project should include mixed uses, including residential, commercial and office uses.

When the Masterplan was presented, all agreed that it was imperative that the Town retain control of this important parcel, but many residents voiced their concerns about the environmental liability associated with the purchase of the Parson's Property. It was determined that before acquiring the Parson's property, additional studies would need to be undertaken as part of the town's due diligence.

In 2016, the Gateway Committee hired BL Companies to conduct a Phase 1 environmental assessment, a market study, and a traffic and parking analysis, of the Parson's Property. Using the results of the various studies, BL Companies, developed a concept plan for the future use of the property.

Farmington Village Center Committee

On July 10, 2018, the Town Council appointed the Farmington Village Center Committee. A summary of the committee’s charges are listed below:

Charge 1 & 2	<i>To develop recommendations to the Town Council regarding the future use of the Parson’s property including ownership, control and use</i>	✓ <i>Charge Completed</i>
<p>Summary: The Committee recommended that it was in the best interest of the Town to own the Parson’s property but not to take ownership until all environmental due diligence was complete. Town Council approved the recommendation.</p> <p>In August 2018, the Town hired Tighe & Bond as their Environmental Consultant to complete an environmental review of the former Parson’s property and determine if any environmental liability was associated with the property. In August 2020, Tighe & Bond completed their environmental studies and determined that the Parson’s Property was environmentally clean.</p>		

Charge 3	<i>If the property were transferred to the Town of Farmington, the Committee would listen to the community to understand the types of uses for the Parsons property which would enhance the Village.</i>	✓ <i>Charge Completed</i>
<p>Summary: The Farmington Gateways Committee and the subsequent Farmington Village Center Committee worked with consultants to develop the community’s vision for the future development of the study area. The consultants conducted a traffic and parking analysis, a market study, and an environmental assessment report. Both committees encouraged public participation during all their scheduled meetings. During the meetings, the community expressed their vision for the area with the following goals:</p> <p>The Project should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not negatively contribute to traffic • improve pedestrian connectivity • increase public parking options • include open space • attract small retail offerings, such as restaurants, ice cream shops, and unique retailers • allow low density high-end housing options • preserves the historic town center character- i.e., Farmington’s brand <p>Given the community’s vision and goals for the project, in addition to a private easement through 30% of the property, the Committee felt that in order for the project to be economically feasible; it would be likely that the town would have to subsidize or provide incentives to the developer.</p>		

Charge 4	<i>Based on those findings and direction from the Town Council, the Committee would conduct a process to identify a preferred developer to partner with the Town to secure and develop the Parsons property in a manner which complements the historic buildings and the historic district and defines the most prominent entry into Farmington as a place of high quality, beauty, and character and recommend that Developer to the Town Council.</i>	✓ Charge Completed
<p>Summary: On January 1, 2020, the Committee solicited an RFP to re-develop the former Parson's lot.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The respondents would develop and present a concept plan, with an appropriately scaled mixed use residential and commercial development that provided vitality to the Village Center and reflected Farmington's brand. • The respondent would demonstrate an ability to implement the desired development, • The Town would negotiate a financial partnership with the developer that submitted the preferred development concept. <p>The Town did not receive any responses to the RFP by the deadline date of January 31, 2020.</p>		
Charge 5	<i>The Committee will recommend the preferred Developer to the Town Council for approval. Based on that approval the preferred Developer will work with the Committee on the Proposal which would then proceed through the Town Plan and Zoning process and subsequently be approved by the Town Plan and Zoning Commission.</i>	Since developers did not respond to the RFP, these items are no longer applicable

<p>Quality of Life Enhancements Charge</p>	<p><i>The Committee was also charged with recommending quality of life enhancements (sidewalks, street trees, landscaping, street furniture, historic markers, way finder signage and universal design improvements.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">✓ Charge Completed</p>
<p>Summary: On January 11, 2019, the Committee hired BSC Group to provide professional planning, landscape architecture, and engineering services in support of the Town of Farmington's Village Center Streetscape Improvement project.</p> <p>On June 13, 2019, the BSC Group presented Streetscape Master Plan to the Farmington Village Committee. This Streetscape Masterplan is the roadmap for implementing the community's vision for a universally accessible, greener, safer, and welcoming Farmington Village Center. To help foster a coherent vision for the Route 4 and Route 10 corridors, this plan organized the recommended improvements in defined categories of elements, which when implemented together will result in a cohesive aesthetic that preserves the historic town center character of the Farmington Village study area for residents and visitors. The character defining elements described in the report included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sidewalk and crosswalk treatment options, • enhanced streetscape plantings • decorative pedestrian lighting and • signage options, • benches, • specialty features, • fences and walls, • gateway treatment <p>The Farmington Village Committee approved the report and recommended the Town Council approve the report. On July 9, 2019, the Town Council approved the report.</p>		

Town Council Ad-hoc Committee

On July 24, 2020 the Town Council appointed an ad-hoc committee to work with Town staff to make recommendations to the Town Council on the following:

- 1 The future use of Parson’s Property,
- 2 The environmental liability associated with the ownership of the Parson’s property,
- 3 The phasing portion of the BSC Streetscape Improvement Plan,
- 4 The selection of a preferred developer for the development of the Parson Property.

Below is a summary of the Ad-Hoc Committee’s goals and the committee’s recommendations to Town Council:

Ad Hoc Committee Goal # 1	The future use of Parson’s Property
<p>For the past 5 years, residents and town staff have been defining their vision for Farmington Center’s primary gateway. The former Parson’s lot is a visible and important parcel to the Village Center neighborhood, but it has limited development potential. Factors that negatively impact the market potential of this parcel include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is less than 3 acres in size • An easement runs through 30% of the property • Public parking is needed in this area • The community desires low-density development • The community does not want to increase traffic • The CT DOT appraisal of this property is \$2 million <p>Given the limitation listed above, the Committee concurred with prior committees that for the project to be economically feasible; it was likely that the town would have to subsidize or provide incentives to the developer.</p> <p>Given these factors, plus the lack of developer’s interest, and current market uncertainty brought on by the COVID pandemic, the Ad-hoc Committee reached out to the DOT to explore if the State would be willing to convey the property for a nominal fee to the Town as modified open space. The State agreed to convey the property to the Town for \$1000 for such uses as a Welcome Gateway into the Historic Village Center, increased public parking, with access to the planned Historical Society Welcome Center, and the potential for the relocation of a historic structure.</p> <p>Based on these conversations with the DOT, we recommend that the Town and DOT finalize the specific details of the modified open space concept as described above. It should be noted that that this does not preclude the Town from renegotiating a new value with the State of Connecticut if the Town determines the property will be used for economic development</p>	

Although the Committee’s recommendation differs from what has been discussed over the last several years, we believe that acquiring this parcel at a nominal fee with the listed uses, will benefit the commercial potential of the entire gateway area. We anticipate that the redevelopment of the former Parson’s parcel as a modified open space concept, will trigger commercial development of adjacent commercial parcels and allow us to accomplish the goals originally stated by the community which included the following:

The Project should:

- not negatively contribute to traffic
- improve pedestrian connectivity
- increase public parking options
- include open space
- attract small retail offerings, such as restaurants, ice cream shops, and unique retailers
- allow low density high-end housing options

If the Town Council agrees with our recommendation, we are recommending hosting a public informational meeting with the community to receive public comment on our modified open space concept for the former Parson’s property.

Ad Hoc Committee Goal # 2	The environmental liability associated with the ownership of the Parson’s property	✓ <i>Charge Completed</i>
Additional environmental tests were conducted in August 2020, our environmental consultant, Tighe & Bond, determined that the site was clean as state by DOT.		

Ad Hoc Committee Goal # 3	The phasing portion of the BSC Streetscape Improvement Plan	✓ <i>Phase 1 Implementation Plan Determined</i>
<p>The Town of Farmington has \$2,000,000 on hand for the Main Street Sidewalk project. The committee members toured the area and determined Phase 1 of the project. On October 24, 2020 a community informational meeting was held to discuss the Phase 1 of the project and solicit comments regarding the Phase 1 components.</p> <p>On November 10, 2020, the Town Council approved a \$2 million-dollar, Phase 1 of the implantation plan which includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Concrete sidewalks on both the east and west side of Main Street. ○ The project will start at Route 4 and proceed to Highland Park Market Plaza on the West Side and to the Main Gate subdivision on the east side, this includes a segment of new sidewalk ○ Existing crosswalks shall be stamped concrete with reflective white stripes and tactile warning signs ○ Every effort will be made to preserve the trees on Main Street 		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Grass borders will be continued whenever possible ○ The replacement sidewalks shall meet ADA requirements wherever possible with a width of at least 5 feet. <p>The Main Street sidewalk project is going out to bid this winter (2021) will construction to begin in the Spring of 2021.</p>
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Ad Hoc Committee Goal # 4	The selection of a preferred developer for the development of the Parson Property.
This goal is no longer required, if the Town Council agrees with the Ad Hoc Committee's recommendation to the modified open space concept, as described in the summary table for Goal # 1.	

Additional Recommendations and Next Steps:

1. Colton-Carrington Intersection Realignment

Over the years the Town of Farmington received some concerns from a resident that this intersection was dangerous for both vehicles and pedestrians and have asked the Town to improve the intersection.

As a result, the Town's traffic review board has reviewed this intersection, based on the resident's concern, and included the sidewalks, the pedestrian access as well as the safety and traffic concerns for the entire Main Street area.

The Ad-hoc Committee discussed that if this intersection needed to be modified the best time to make the modifications would be when the sidewalk project was taking place.

According to data recently received from the Town's Traffic Review Board, over the past three years there has been only one traffic accident, and it was determined that the accident was caused by driver error rather than by the configuration of this intersection.

There does not seem to be a substantial outcry from the community or neighborhood to change this intersection, but the Town has not had any formal public information meetings on this intersection. That said, recently the Town Manager's office has received various calls from the neighborhood expressing concern on changing the intersection and the need for the change.

The Committee has concluded that the data does not indicate a safety issue at the intersection and believes that changing this intersection could

potentially alter the existing historic character of the area. Another factor the Committee considered was the cost. Realigning the intersection is costly and the data does not support a safety issue. For those reasons, the Ad-hoc Committee recommendation is that the intersection be left in its current state.

2. To Discharge the Farmington Village Center Committee

The Farmington Village Center Committee completed the Charge of the Committee as approved by the Town Council on July 10, 2018. Therefore, it is the recommendation of the Ad Hoc Committee that the Farmington Village Center Committee be formally discharged.

3. To Create a new Committee-

With the expected redevelopment of the Parson's property to the open space concept, the Ad-Hoc Committee recommends that when the Parson's Property is conveyed from DOT to the Town of Farmington, that the Town Council appoint a new committee, with a charge to help design the redevelopment of the Parson's property and work on phase 2 of Streetscape Improvement Masterplan. The Committee should be comprised primarily of members of the community that live and work in the Village.

Summary of Ad- Hoc Committee Recommendations:

- That the Town and DOT finalize the specific details of the modified open space concept.
- Host a public informational meeting with the community to receive public comment on the modified open space concept for the former Parson's property.
- That the Colton-Carrington Intersection be left in its current state.
- That the Farmington Village Center Committee be thanked for their work and formally discharged.
- That a new committee be appointed with a charge to help design the redevelopment of the Parson's property and work on phase 2 of Streetscape Improvement Masterplan, once the property is conveyed by the State of Connecticut.

The Ad-hoc Committee and members of staff will be available to answer any questions that the Town Council may have.