

**PLANNING BOARD
SPECIAL REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES**

FEBRUARY 08, 2022

**CALL TO
ORDER**

The special meeting was called to order at 7:05p.m.

Via ZOOM Teleconference Link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/7373206419?pwd=STZFRIBTRUVqTFk5MEp5Y1BhV2c0QT09>

Meeting ID: 737 320 6419

Password: 922644

Adequate notice of this meeting, as required by the New Jersey Open Public Meetings Act, also known as the Sunshine Law, has been provided by an Annual Notice sent to the City's official newspaper NJ Star Ledger on January 26th, 2022 and posted on the bulletin board of the Municipal Complex, posted on the City website, and filed with the Clerk of the City.

FLAG SALUTE

The Board will then salute the flag.

ROLL CALL

On a call of the roll, the following Board Members and Officials should be present:

BOARD

Mr. Raymond Giacobbe, Mayor; or,
Mr. Eric Miles, Mayor's Designee
Mr. Jeremy Mojica, Commissioner
Mr. Frank Spallone, Commissioner
Mr. Robert Simon, Commissioner
Mr. Thomas O'Reilly, Commissioner
Mr. Alexander Shipley, Commissioner
Mr. William Cladek, 1st Alternate Commissioner
Mr. Christopher Brown, 2nd Alternate Commissioner
Mr. William Hering, Commissioner Vice Chairman
Mr. Jeffrey Robinson, Commissioner Chairman
Mr. Karl P. Kemm, Esq, Board Attorney
Ms. Jacqueline Dirmann, Board Engineer
Ms. Leigh Fleming, Board Planner
Mr. Steven Decker, Board Secretary

Absent from this meeting: Commissioners Mojica, O'Reilly, and Simon

**PLANNING BOARD
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PAGE TWO

Meeting to Review the Master Plan and Discuss an Amendment Adopting the Rahway Downtown Strategic Plan.

There was a technical difficulty with the internet connection and the zoom recording of this meeting was incomplete.

Chairman Robinson opened the meeting and explained that this meeting will be conducted to hear about the Rahway Downtown Strategic Plan.

Attorney Karl Kemm explained that the purpose of the meeting is to consider an amendment to the master plan. Every 10 years there is a reexamination of the entire master plan. This is just for an amendment to the master plan. The amendment is a statement of policy and direction. If it is adopted, the mayor and council will review the amendment and can add ordinances to implement the guidance of the master plan.

Board Planner Leigh Fleming presented on the plan to give an overview and explain the plan. The purpose of the document is to take stock of what is downtown today and how to move forward with the downtown area. She first did a review of the existing conditions of the town. She also conducted surveys of residents and interviews of residents and investors in the downtown. A SWOT analysis was done. Ms. Fleming showed an exhibit of the existing zoning and the districts within the downtown. She explained that the river and the flood zone do impact the downtown. Strengths are the walkability of the downtown and Rahway itself, the train station and the historical identity of the downtown. Weaknesses are a lack of greenness, underused properties, and lack of diversity in uses and amenities available. She shared the vision statement of the downtown. To use the arts as a theme to build upon and create a balance of uses and amenities downtown. The uses and physical landscape of the city should be diverse.

Ms. Fleming discussed the goals and objectives of the plan. Land use, urban design, economics, connectivity and transportation, sustainability, and health & equity. The presentation will include the recommended projects and strategies for implementation. One of the current missing uses of the downtown are places for artists. The City would like to build upon the art community. The plan recommends an incubator space for artists. More options for live/work spaces, and the possibility of rent & ownership models for these buildings (i.e.- co-ops, city leases). Another missing use is a place for teens/youth. Board Planner Fleming identified potential sites to use as a youth center for teens to go. It will be important to have access from schools to the youth center and possibly partnering with community groups would be beneficial. There could also be an opportunity to have job fairs to help local businesses and students alike. There is also a need for grocery and food stores downtown. The city should look for urban type markets with a smaller footprint and less parking requirements. Pharmacies are a needed and important amenity for downtown. Residents need accessibility in this area and the ability to walk to a pharmacy. Doctors, dentists, and medical offices is another type of business the city should try to bring downtown. Attracting small to mid-sized businesses and professional offices would benefit the city and help increase the daytime population of the city.

In the survey, shopping was the #1 answer for missing components downtown. With the increase in online shopping the ideal shopping stores would be small boutiques and stores that sell unique items. Popup markets could be an option to help add shopping to the downtown. Also adding more recreation opportunities to the downtown and nightlife in the area is a need. These businesses can be clustered to help keep people within the city. There is a desire for more family friendly opportunities in the area.

Next Board Planner Leigh Fleming talked about possible opportunity sites.

1. Block 226 Lot 1. Could be used as a small commercial space.
2. The Gallery Space- Public space or art installations to enhance gateway to the city
3. St. Marks Church site
4. Elizabethtown Gas building- This is a city owned building and is close to both theaters. It could serve as an incubator space or teen center.
5. Five-Point intersection- Reconfigure the space to increase safety in the downtown area.
6. Block 158 Union County College- Could be a mixed-use space. If zones are changed to be able to increase the height of the building it would allow a lot of options.
7. Esterbrook Area- Could be used for residential use, maybe more senior citizen housing. It would fit the area and close access to the senior center.
8. East side of West Main between the railroad and Elizabeth Ave. This may be best used as a waterfront park due to the flood hazard. The existing building can be used as accessories to a riverfront park.
9. South Side of Elizabeth Ave. between West Main Street and the Brownstones project- Utilizing this space can connect the Brownstones to the downtown area and also capitalize on the park space across the street.
10. RSI Bank property & Parking Lot- This is a very large space with parking, it can serve as an City Anchor nonresidential development- Possibly a Grocery store or healthcare services
11. Bridgeview site- Currently automotive uses and PSE&G. The proximity of the site to the Bridge Street pedestrian bridge, the Downtown and Merck make it an attractive location for a potential mixed-use development
12. East Milton Ave. Properties
13. Mangos Site
14. Main Street & East Milton Properties

All three of these sites could create a gateway to the city. A mixed use property and open space could be options for this site. These are very close to the train station and accessible.

Planner Fleming showed all of the different transportation that comes into the city with the 2 train lines and a bus line. She displayed how walkable the downtown is, and its proximity to the public transportation. One recommendation is the city makes a map with existing parking lots, time and fee information. There needs to be more clarity to parking, which will help encourage people to come to the city. They want to promote parking for the downtown and working with businesses to promote this. Businesses can put these maps on their website.

Ms. Fleming also discussed all of the advantages of promoting bike use in the city. They also believe that it would be a good feature to add bike lanes and paths to the city. Bikes will take up less space than parking cars, and help the green sustainability of the city to cut carbon.

The next discussion was regarding streetscapes, gateways and wayfinding. This helps visitors identify where they are, and by really highlighting the gateways to downtown. There can be signage that aides walking pedestrians find their way around the city and directs them to different sites. Having this for when people get off the train would be beneficial. It was also discussed having more defined downtown area, this way people realize when they have entered the downtown area of Rahway. Things like uniformed sidewalk designs, street trees, and trash cans can be used to accomplish this. Ms. Fleming recommends having a consistent and uniform look to the street scape to create continuity. The Planner recommends the city create a set of design standards for all buildings and sites to be incorporated in all plans.

Parks and open spaces. There should be a focus on making the public spaces more welcoming. There were also 4 properties identified that can add some public spaces.

Sustainability/ resiliency and infrastructure. The city should encourage green buildings, or at least adding green elements to the buildings. Rooftop gardens and green roofs could be an example of possible additions to structures. Also, there is an opportunity to improve the aesthetics of the train trestle. This is somewhat difficult because the city would have to work with Amtrak on this. However, just adding art and lighting underneath can help improve the look and feeling.

The city should continue to build upon the arts and cultures. There should be more wayfinding that fits all users.

Next Board Planner Fleming recommended changes to Land Use and Zoning:

Central Business District-

- Reevaluate uses permitted. Personal service uses are not permitted within 1000 ft of each other. She recommends to lift this restriction and a restriction that does not allow personal services on the ground floor of building space. With the decrease in retail and the increase in personal services this will allow the city to utilize more storefronts and help prevent empty store fronts. Also allowing personal services on the ground floor of building space will create more opportunities for these businesses.

Board Planner Fleming also believes that changing the following previously non permitted uses to permitted will help attract more business and people to the city.

- Liquor stores- Currently only permitted in 1 small area.
- Tattoo parlors- Currently are not permitted in the downtown.
- Thrift stores and consignment shops
- Health spas
- Amendment and accessory use requirements

All of these uses could be beneficial to attracting more businesses and people to the downtown area.

Another Ordinance that can be changed are the parking requirements. Currently there are Residential requirements that require 1.25 parking spaces per residential unit and 1 space provided on site. The city can require all parking spaces be provided onsite, or increasing to 1.5 spaces in order to create more parking availability downtown.

For Commercial parking, it is recommended that the city eliminate parking requirements for commercial uses or expansions under a certain threshold. It is also recommended to make a specific parking standard for the downtown area. It is important that the same parking standards for commercial use in the downtown area differ from the other areas of Rahway that have more space. Currently the ordinance applies to the entire city.

Fleming advised to revise the change of use ordinance so businesses will not have to go before the planning board if the use is permitted in the zone. This will help promote business downtown and speed up the process.

Design standards- Architectural standards are currently recommended, but not required. They should be required. If the city would like to have regulation for facade material it could be implemented as an ordinance to have a uniformed look to buildings.

Planner Fleming opened the meeting to questions from the board members.

Commissioner Shipley asked about page 91 of the plan. He spoke about potential partnerships with the city. He would like to add the historical community to the plan. There is a lot of history in the downtown which makes Rahway unique. He believes that there should be input and consultation with the historical group.

Commissioner Robinson believes that would be a very beneficial partnership. He also recommended partnering with the Rahway River Watershed Association, who does a lot with the river in the downtown area.

Karl Kemm suggested the Rahway River Watershed Association should also partner with the city regarding this. It is spotlighted on page 50 of the plan. They should be listed as a potential partner.

Leigh Fleming is concerned about leaving any associations out. She will add environmental groups including the Rahway River Watershed Association.

Mr. Shipley gave an example of work being done on the Irving Street Bridge. He believes the design of the new bridge should be designed with historical interest.

Karl Kemm will add both of these recommendations to the resolution.

Commissioner Brown addressed the board about his concerns with the plan. He stated that there was a lot about the commuter traffic and losing individuals downtown during the daytime. Commissioner Brown believes the city is trying to do too much and adding too much at one time, and should instead focus on 1 or things. He also wanted to know what kind of demographics the city is trying to cater to. He does not like the idea of tattoo shops in the downtown area. Rahway already has a tattoo shop, and he doesn't think there is a need for more downtown.

Planner Fleming discussed how this is an overall vision with a diversity of uses being promoted. Multiple use types will help the city be more resilient to market changes. All of the components of this plan interconnect. Everything in the document does not need to be done at one time. A lot of these are recommendations of ideas and opportunities that may be available in time.

Karl Kemm commented that if the plan is adopted there will still be another level of detail and ordinances added by the City Council. This plan allows them flexibility to put more detail into the ordinances and vision for the downtown.

Vice Chairman Hering commented that this is an overall footprint so the city can start allowing and working on different ideas. He believes it needs to be voted in so the City Council can work on improving the downtown. He stated that, we the Planning Board will make the footprint that can be followed up on.

Commissioner Miles had the same thoughts as Commissioner Brown. He is alarmed about certain types of businesses being added to the downtown. He also wanted to know if there could there be a shuttle service added for the downtown. He knows it was mentioned for the school to teen center, but was curious if this could be expanded.

Fleming said shuttles are usually not operated by ordinance. There may be an opportunity to explore shuttle services for other groups.

Chairman Robinson will be presenting this plan to the environmental commission. He believes they will be pleased that there is a lot in the plan regarding access to the waterfront, adding trees, parks, open spaces.

The meeting was opened to the public 8:35.

Jennifer Treuppa-Cocuzza, lives on 273 Orchard Street. She believes there is too much being implemented which can create chaos. She likes the old Rahway, when there were more shops and shoe stores. She would like to see Rahway like this again. She thinks there may be too much too soon with this plan.

Marlene Hamm, 286 West Inman Ave.- 7 year resident. She believes it is a package just to add more buildings downtown. A lot of talk about the arts district. The plan doesn't focus on what is needed or prioritized. She stated UPAC and Hamilton Stage are currently uninhabitable because of the flooding. There is currently a bridge out because of hurricane ida. She thinks the gallery space needs infrastructure added to it at the current time. The infrastructure of the building is crumbling and the town is addressing other plans instead of fixing what is here. She doesn't want to spend more money downtown if there aren't going to be more people downtown. Flooding is a huge issue and there shouldn't be more development especially with the pandemic going on, she doesn't believe it will be utilized.

Karl Kemm, asked the members of the public to not to use the chat.

Annelise Soares, 427 Orchard Street had added to the chat that she would like there to be a project plan beforehand. After seeing the chat message, she was called on to speak. She agrees with Chris Brown, that there isn't a proper structure to how everything was presented. Believes there should be a priority list. The plan doesn't give an idea on small things. Believes there should be a more targeted approach to fix smaller things first.

Karl Kemm explained that this is just a plan. Any building or changes that will be made to the city will have to be presented before anything is actually done.

Ms. Fleming responded that she appreciates the comment. Explained that the master plans are enabling documents. This is for making steps to allow things to exist or not exist. The private market still exists. As projects come into the city, this allows the city to negotiate and work with the contractors, and will create more opportunities.

Ms. Fleming also commented the changes to the zoning are to allow more diverse and different types of businesses to come to Rahway.

Ms. Soares thought some of the examples were too specific and outdated.

Mr. Michael Smanko, 1015 Richard Blvd near the Rahway High School. He is a retired theatrical designer and an artist. Mr. Smanko has been part of Rahway in many planning phases since the 90's. Many of the things they were trying to do at that time are included in this plan. He wants to know how many live-work artist housing the city currently has. Would also like to know about the former Elizabethtown Gas land (Willows). How many artists live there. He thinks the city should prioritize what might be able to be done.

Leigh Fleming does not know how many live-work uses are currently in Rahway. The current Zoning uses in the city create a lot of issues to create more live work artist space. Through interviews and surveys she learned that a lot of the hours of operation and space sizes currently available are not conducive for some of the art spaces. She doesn't have specific numbers on this data though.

He also had a question about the proposed roundabout at the five points intersection. He doesn't believe there is space for that without taking down the building, or relocating the historic horse trough.

Fleming stated there are limitations to what can be done at that intersection. It is recommended the city look at the intersection and see if there is a way to fix it. This is to be done with a traffic study.

Smanko also agrees with Commissioner Shipley's comments about the Irving Street Bridge. He thinks it should be restored properly and historically. Also stated that there was an art center at the old St. Marys space, and knows that people used to paint that area of town.

Shiloh Sonatore, believes there is a lot to be optimistic about in the plan. She works in downtown Rahway. Believes a lot of the plans are very promising for the downtown. Especially working on the train trestle. She doesn't think we should have the higher end boutique shops. Believes we should try to uplift the people who are already in the city. She stated that the Watt hotel sat empty for a long time, and it took a long time to see the turnaround. The plan should support and uplift the community already here. Thinks some of the community will be priced out of these amenities. She wants to uplift the town and make it better but help the people in town first.

Andrew Garcia Phillips, would not state address, believes there were 300 people in the public that responded to the survey. He does not believe the residents had proper access to the plans. Does not think public had access to the or input in making the plan. Would like more green spaces, and does not believe there is proper green space in the plan. He said there were not room for large open spaces, but there is space for a 12 story tower.

Leigh Fleming stated that the survey had 500 responses. She said that the plan was properly noticed and available to the public per the MLUL. She stated that in the plan there were many pocket parks. The City doesn't have larger swaths of land available downtown for larger parks. She stated that there may be other spaces that could be available for parks, this was just an example. The plan is recommending that buildings replace existing buildings because these are not the City's projects. She said it is very rare for developers to take existing buildings to make into parks. The plan is flexible and fluid because different properties will become available at different times.

Debbie Probas Pock, a resident for 57 years commented. She believes there are too many things in the plan. Thinks the bridge should be restored historically correct. She likes the history of the city, and does not want it taken down. She believes there is no room for bike lanes, and thinks it could be dangerous. She used to shop downtown on Cherry Street and bakeries downtown. Who is the plan to help prosper? She believes it is for outsiders and conglomerates. She would like to support mom and pop shops.

Jennifer Cocuzza, 1st speaker is a lifetimes resident. She was speaking about how great the downtown was. She would like to see the water issue and flooding addressed before the plan is

put in place. She wants to see the infrastructure fixed, and the future generations grow up with what she did.

The public portion of the meeting was closed 9:20

Chairman Robinson asked if any commissioners had any more comments. If they would like to vote or hold off.

Vice Chairman Hering commented that he is a lifetime resident and listened to everyone. He thinks everything that needed to be addresses was and we need to move forward and turn it over to city council.

Karl Kemm explained that the public will be able to comment at the city council meeting. He is adding language to the resolution to change the list of potential partners (community groups) to add community groups and historical societies and environmental groups including the Rahway River Watershed Association, and allow for other community groups that are interested in being included.

Vice Chairman Hering said there will be more chances to help shape the specifics and alter what can be done with the downtown strategic plan moving forward. He believes it will be beneficial to Rahway to be able to change some of the ordinances in a positive way.

Vice Chairman Hering made motion to adopt the Rahway Downtown Strategic Plan into the Master Plan.

Mr. Hering asked Attorney Karl Kemm if the motion should be to vote and memorialize the application at the same time.

Attorney Kemm advised that it would be held as 2 separate votes if the board does decide to adopt the amendment.

Commissioner Miles wanted to add that his vision of Rahway growing up on Essex Street is seeing a burnt out diner and liquor stores. He thinks this Downtown Strategic Plan is a change that is taking place and ultimately moving Rahway forward. It is a living document and will change as we move forward.

Chairman Robinson added that this is just a plan. Any parts that will be implemented, there will be opportunities for public input. This is not something that is just put into place.

**PLANNING BOARD
SPECIAL REGULAR MEETING
February 8, 2022**

PAGE TEN

Commissioner Brown supports the motion, he believes to get to the “meat and potatoes” details of the plan we have to push this strategic plan forward. Then the board and community can go back to the details and modifying elements in it.

**Motion: Commissioner Hering Second: Commissioner Cladek
Yes: Commissioners Miles, Spallone, Shipley, Cladek, Brown, Hering and Robinson
No: none
Abstain:
Absent: Commissioners Mojica, O’Reilly, Simon**

Motion Passed

Memorialization:

A Resolution of the Planning Board of the City of Rahway Memorializing the Planning Board’s Master Review of, and Adopting the Rahway Downtown Strategic Plan

**Motion: Commissioner Hering Second: Commissioner Shipley
Yes: Commissioners Miles, Spallone, Shipley, Cladek, Brown, Hering and Robinson
No: none
Abstain:**

Absent: Commissioners Mojica, O’Reilly, Simon

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting

**Motion: Commissioner Miles Second: Commissioner Cladek
Yes: Commissioners Miles, Spallone, Shipley, Cladek, Brown, Hering and Robinson
No: none
Abstain:
Absent: Commissioners Mojica, O’Reilly, Simon**

Meeting adjourned at 9:39 pm.