

## **Parking Garage, Hotel and Other Updates**

By William Fraser, City Manager

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The recent snow and frigid cold have certainly caused a lot of attention. DPW crews have been working around the clock and many residents have sore backs from shoveling and snow removal. I'll remind people to pay attention to winter parking bans through VT-Alerts or the city's facebook page, front porch forum or calling the winter parking line at 802-262-6200.

**Budget:** Next month's *Bridge* edition will contain a full budget summary. The City Council is completing their budget discussion this Thursday, the 24<sup>th</sup>. As of their last meeting, the city portion of the budget represents a property tax increase of 3.4% or 3.7 cents.

**Annual Voting:** The City Meeting election is on March 5<sup>th</sup>. Early voting begins in February. The deadline for petitioned ballot articles is this Thursday the 24<sup>th</sup> and the deadline for candidates filing is Thursday, January 31<sup>st</sup>. Public hearings on the ballot, budget and proposed charter changes will be held on January 24<sup>th</sup>.

**One Taylor Street:** This project is actively under construction. It includes the Transit Center, 30 units of housing, an alternate transportation (i.e. bike) path along the river bank from Taylor Street to Main Street, a new bike/pedestrian bridge over the North Branch and a "to be determined" reconfiguration of the area where Montpelier Beverage and the Association for the Blind were recently housed. This also includes creation of an area for the future confluence park. Taylor Street itself will also be reconstructed and designed in a separate project to be done within the same time frame.

**Parking Garage/Hotel:** This major development project has been the source of much discussion. Voters passed a \$10.5 million dollar bond in November for the construction of a public parking garage. The garage will serve the general public as well as making a neighboring private Hampton Inn hotel to be constructed by the Capitol Plaza possible.

*Project Status* – Both the hotel and garage received local Development Review Board permits. A group of 18 individuals appealed the DRB permits to the Environmental Court. The city has not yet seen their stated concerns, objections or legal issues. Although the hotel permit was not appealed the impact is the same on both projects.

An Act 250 hearing on both projects was held on January 16<sup>th</sup>. The District Commission will issue a recess order detailing remaining information needed. Parties will have 30 days to respond and then another 15 days to comment on any provided information. The Commission will then determine whether another hearing is necessary. Once evidence is closed, the Commission has 15 days to make a decision. All Act 250 documents related to these projects can be viewed at <https://anrweb.vt.gov/ANR/vtANR/Act250SearchResults.aspx?Num=5W1591>

The city and hotel are actively working with Department of Environmental Conservation on soils testing, remediation and a corrective action plan (CAP). Once drafted the CAP will be on public notice for 30 days. The final version will be a condition of an Act 250 approval. Funds for environmental work are included in the construction budget.

The city and Capitol Plaza are prepared to proceed with construction upon receipt of all permits.

That is currently estimated for April. Appeals may create delay, uncertainty and additional costs.

*Petition:* A petition is circulating for the Annual Meeting vote which calls for the City Council to “withhold spending of the \$10.5 Million as authorized in Article 1 of the November 6, 2018 Ballot” until certain conditions are met. The City considers this a non-binding advisory item because it is past the legal deadline for reconsideration of the November bond vote, it seeks to create after the fact conditions on a bond authorization and the conditions suggested are the purview of the Council/Manager and beyond the scope of town meeting authority.

Notwithstanding the non-binding nature of the petition, the issues raised are all being addressed by the city.

1. “That, for the benefit of downtown merchants and other businesses, there is a written commitment to provide sufficient remote parking spaces and transportation services to the downtown during the construction phase.” The City is in active discussions with private landowners for possible additional interim parking. Thus far there has been no agreement reached. The first shuttle route we proposed would have cost \$300,000 so we are seeking other options. We welcome any suggestions for locations and services.
2. “That it is clearly shown that there will be safe continuous public sidewalks and bike lanes along the road leading to and from the entrance of the garage from State Street.” The approved site plan includes a sidewalk which has been reviewed by the Police department, Fire Department and Public Works department for functionality, safety and consistency with regulations. There is no requirement or existing plan for bike lanes in this location with or without this project. There are, however, two connections to the new bike path which will be created by this project which will not otherwise exist.
3. “That the comprehensive traffic study required by the Development Review Board in its December 13, 2018 decision is completed immediately, not one year later”. Three separate analyses of traffic in this location considering the hotel, the garage and the One Taylor project have been completed. All have concluded that there will be no significant traffic impacts. The city commissioned additional work beyond that which is required by Vtrans and others. The point of the DRB decision is to study traffic a year after the projects are completed to determine whether projections were correct and, if not, what mitigation might be needed.
4. “That soil remediation on the site is completed and the findings and cost of this work be made public.” The CAP is discussed above. All work and costs are public record.
5. “That the bid process is completed with the costs of the successful bid being within the bond limits”. The City can’t proceed without adequate funding.
6. “That all State and municipal permits and sub-permits, including water quality permits if required, have been issued and any appeals resolved.” The City can’t proceed without permits in hand.
7. “That a public report projecting operating costs and revenues over the expected life of the garage, including pay down of the bond, is completed by an independent accountant who has experience in parking garage operations.” The city’s detailed public pro forma financial projection was prepared by White & Burke, an independent development consulting firm who specializes in financial analysis. W & B worked in consultation

with Desman, a parking garage specialist, to create the information.

*Misconceptions:* Discussions of the project in the public realm indicate some misconceptions being communicated.

- The garage does NOT block access to the new One Taylor Street bike path. As the path is being constructed now, there is no connection to the path from State Street. The garage will create two new connections.
- These projects do NOT place the Taylor Street Bridge at risk of replacement. All traffic analysis has been done using the current bridge dimensions. In 2004, the City committed to maintaining the historic bridge.
- The projects do NOT denigrate water quality. Project treatment systems improve the existing untreated and open asphalt parking lot discharge.
- The garage is NOT solely for the hotel. It will create new long and short term public parking. The garage and hotel make each other financially viable and are each economic development initiatives for downtown.
- The garage does NOT promote car use. It manages vehicles once they are in the city. People commutnig from nearby communities or visiting from out of state still need to park cars. Montpelier has invested heavily in Transit and bicycling alternatives. The garage's proximity to the Transit Center will allow more locals to easily travel by bus to distant locations and more visitors to take the bus to stay at the hotel. If a hotel locates in Berlin, people will drive cars three and then into our downtown.
- The garage does NOT block access to the river. The new bike path is being constructed along the river's edge. The potential new confluence park will accent the river and will be accessible from State Street using the new connections created by the garage.
- The city is NOT trying to avoid Act 250 review. Act 250 has an expedited review process – section 6068 (b) – for officially designated downtowns like Montpelier. The city filed its application through this process.
- The parking garage does NOT tower over State Street. Its height and dimensions fit in with other buildings in its area. (see image with garage behind Christ Church, other images on city's web site)



*At risk:* Any appeal creates a risk of a project continuing. This can be through an overturned decision, an unacceptable delay for developers or costs rising so that a project is no longer financially feasible. Should this occur with the parking garage, there will be certain local consequences as a result.

- No hotel. The hotel needs the parking garage to proceed.
- No additional public parking.
- No water quality improvement. The project results in much cleaner storm water discharge than currently exists.
- No soils remediation. The project creates the opportunity to improve and manage contaminated soils in downtown.
- No State Street connection to bike path. Without the garage, the new bike path will have a large retaining wall facing State Street. It will only be accessible from Main or Taylor. The garage makes two new connections. These connections are not full bike paths but allow access onto the path.
- Smaller confluence park. Six parking spaces from One Taylor were re-allocated to enlarge the confluence park. This was done in anticipation of a parking structure.
- Reduced options for discussion of green space near Shaw's. This area was initially designated for development and parking. The creation of a parking structure opened up conversations about expanding green space in this area.
- Reduced options for implementing the Montpelier in Motion plan. Planning efforts to create safe biking lanes throughout downtown call for removal of many parking spaces in order to enlarge travel surfaces. This may only be feasible if additional parking in the garage were available.
- Less public art. The garage plans call for very large art installations on the river side of the structure. These will be highly visible from entryways into the city. The current view of the backs of buildings and open parking lots will remain.

Obviously these are projects which have generated strong feelings. People certainly have good reasons to support or oppose these buildings. It's important to consider all information and accurate information when reaching a conclusion. I am certainly happy to discuss this with anyone who is interested.

Budget and parking garage/hotel project documents are posted on the city's website [www.montpelier-vt.org](http://www.montpelier-vt.org) As always, thank you for reading this article and for your interest in Montpelier city government. Please contact me at [wfraser@montpelier-vt.org](mailto:wfraser@montpelier-vt.org) or 802-223-9502 with any questions, comments or concerns.