

**Ballston Spa  
Comprehensive Master Plan Steering Committee  
February 3, 2022**

Present in Person: John Cromie and Jackie Pelliccia

Present by Zoom: Carrie Chapman, Monique Cohen, Mathew Ercoline, Josh Frederick, John Hearn, Jared Iacolucci, Ellen Mottola, Marilyn Stephenson

Excused: Scott Burlingame, Nafeesa Koslik, Karen Martel, Jon Taisey

Others Present by Zoom: Ben Baskin, Stephanie Duell, Liz Kormos, Kamran Parwana, Renee, Kim Slocum, Bernadette VanDenise

Meeting was opened by John Cromie at the request of Chair Karen Martell, who was ill. Minutes of the last meeting were reviewed. John Hearn moved to approve the minutes, Mat Ercoline seconded; passed.

The items listed on the committee's monthly schedule for consideration during this month's study of the built environment were read.

John Hearn and John Cromie put together a discussion guide for tonight's meeting. Members were asked if additional subjects should be added to the guide. None were offered. The first section of the guide was read for non-members watching.

Buildings are the primary components of streetscapes. People make judgments based on what they see. What do people see when entering and going through/around Ballston Spa?

1. Almost no two buildings are similar to each other (except in the several developments). If they were once, they are not now, having been treated differently by a progression of owners.

2. Architecture from late 1700s to almost the present. The varied housing styles have grown into each other over time. Little in the village is jarringly different. There are significant exceptions.

3. Buildings are generally maintained, but not picture perfect.

4. Except for churches and factories, there are no tall buildings.

5. In the older sections of the village, streets have buildings with very different uses. Defies Euclidian Zoning. Reflects the way the village has evolved over time.

6. Store fronts in downtown are full, and there is activity in downtown.

It was noted no standards exist to ensure new buildings conform to the height and size of surrounding buildings, except in the historic district.

Because height can be relative there is a question as to how tall is tall. It was explained tall would be over three, certainly 5 to 6 stories.

A concern was expressed over visual inconsistencies between treatments of first floor facades and upper stories of commercial buildings. The committee should explore requiring architectural standards in areas other than the historic district.

The built environment must be considered with green space and trees and vegetation within it. Greenery is a positive attribute that makes the village inviting.

The second portion of the discussion guide was read:

Four streets serve as Ballston Spa's front yard to motorists as they drive through the village: West High Street, Church Ave., Milton Avenue, and Doubleday Ave. The buildings on these streets create the image of the village in the minds of non-residents.

The 2021 existing conditions report states there are 15,000 trips per day on Church Ave. and 8,000 trips per day on West High Street. It gives no figures for Milton or Doubleday Aves.

West High: Churches, government buildings, professional offices, and large to modest residences ranging in age from the 1812 John Taylor Home to 1960s ranches.

Church Street: The business strip in the Town of Ballston ends immediately at the village sign and turns into primarily single-family homes that also vary in age and size. At the intersection with Milton Ave. are commercial businesses and large houses converted to business uses.

Milton Ave.: A block of significant residential structures leads to late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century business buildings. Stores below and residences on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> floors. After it crosses the Gordon Creek the street becomes a mix of residential structures, churches, and businesses.

Doubleday Ave.: Sort of like a strip, but with substantial amounts of green space along the highway. What is built on the Rickett's lot will greatly affect the appearance of the northern entrance to the village.

A fifth very publicly oriented street is Front Street, which begins with mainly 19<sup>th</sup> century commercial buildings from the east end to its middle, encompassing Wiswall Park, followed by early 19<sup>th</sup> century residences and commercial structures, terminating in the Iron Spring Park and Brookside. It is the most walkable of streets and perhaps with the most pedestrians.

What are the images created by the above streets that people driving through Ballston Spa will take away with them?

Front Street's draw for visitors needs to be extended beyond Bath Street. Retail businesses on Front beyond Bath work

to bring the visitor to their doors. A greater draw is needed to entice visitors to walk to Iron Spring Park and Brookside.

One structure which is totally out of context in downtown is Cumberland Farms. It comes across as not belonging.

People driving through the village see storefronts along Milton Avenue which attract their interest, causing them to come back later and visit the store.

The committee should be considering how inviting Rte. 50 appears. The area on the "Flats" between the Elks and Prospect Street seems to have a good number of pedestrians and is welcoming. However, Front Street entices visitors to walk and it is difficult to have them stroll along Milton Ave.

There was a difference of opinion concerning congestion. On one hand traffic congestion frustrates people and can be a reason for them not viewing the village in a positive manner. Diagonal parking near the corner at Front and Milton worsens the situation when there is a lot of traffic. It is also difficult to find parking at certain times of the day. The opposing view is congestion is good because it creates activity, noise, liveliness, and the feeling that this is the place to be. It might be frustrating for the resident, but it is a positive for visitors. More people driving through Ballston Spa will require more obvious parking spaces, so they will stop and make a purchase.

Another image people will take away is that there are very few national or regional store in the village. Its business district is composed mainly of small proprietor-owned shops, which give the village its *je ne sais quoi*.

The next two items set for discussion:

How does the built environment affect decisions to invest in the village?

1. Discourages those who look at exterior details as added expense which provide no return and will rather invest in a vanilla box.
2. Attracts those who willing to bet that village properties will appreciate faster than other real estate investments and look for long-term profit.

How does the built environment affect decisions to visit and shop in the village?

1. Look at village as an interesting place to explore
2. Neighborhoods are generally inviting with interesting houses
3. Downtown looks like a cohesive comfortable space.

Ron Murphy of High Rock Development was asked why he decided to invest in the village. His response was read:

"What brought me to the village was the untapped potential. I saw a quaint little town close to Saratoga and the Northway that I felt it could go nowhere but up. The character of the old buildings and hometown feel intrigued me. What has kept me here over the years is the willingness of the village to work with me to get my projects done without a lot of politics. I tend to get very frustrated with the politics and red tape of development projects. That seems to be changing in the last couple of months, but we will see how it goes."

It was noted Ron's statement goes beyond the built environment but also into the community, which the built environment should encourage. Ballston Spa's neighborhoods have an attraction because of their environment, but also because of their approachable friendliness. While some people want to live in cities and around big buildings, Ballston Spa is for those who want to be around kids, schools, playgrounds, green spaces and downtown businesses. The appealing small-town feel is encapsulated in the view one has by the library, when driving into the village from the south.

The village has charm, even if more investment is needed in certain properties to realize the full potential of that charm or *je ne sais quoi*. It is a priority that all entrances of the village provide a welcoming sight. For example, the Ricketts property is apt to scare people away from living here or investing.

The village is fortunate due to its location in the Capital Region, with Rte. 50 running through it, and its proximity to Saratoga Springs. Saratoga has taken the course of erecting tall buildings and catering to chain stores. Some people like that, but it is sending others to Ballston Spa. Ballston Spa is what Saratoga was like 30 or 40 years ago, to Ballston Spa's benefit.

The village has attracted investors who take the older buildings, fix them up, and repurpose them like Ron Murphy, the Elliotts, and Spencer Tacy. (It was noted Spencer had read Ron's statement and agreed 100%.) The village is fortunate to attract people who become part of the fabric of the community.

Washington Street is developing into a retail street and can draw visitors to Bath Street where the bowling alley and Angelica Buildings sit empty. These two properties are opportunities to expand the business district.

Our built environment is supported by being an overflow for Saratoga Springs. People who are stymied by long wait times at Saratoga Restaurants are directed to Ballston Spa. Just as

Saratoga Springs is looked on as a stopping off place for people traveling between NYC and Montreal, Ballston Spa can also.

At this point, there is no such thing as too much tourism for Ballston Spa. We are attempting to attract foot traffic. Should Ballston Spa be successful, then it can discuss the management of that foot traffic.

Village businesses may draw primarily from a 20-25 mile radius, but the specialty shops have to draw from at least a 90 mile radius. Ballston Spa fares well on social media and is known to draw people from Central New York, Washington D.C., and other distant locales.

The next question for the night was

How does the built environment affect decisions to buy or rent housing and live in the village?

1. Discourages those who look at residences as commodities with predicable values due to sales of similar houses in the neighborhood
2. Attracts those who want a unique home
3. Attracts those who wish to raise a family in a "small town" community

The village is configured in such a way as green spaces and downtown are in walking distance. In many other communities there isn't the range of places for coffee or a bite to eat. It is like having the conveniences of a small city and being able to walk to them without crowds, congestion (except on 50), or fear. Our built environment allows this to happen and draws families to live here.

Ballston Spa is being successful and success breeds success. But the village could do better by encouraging property owners to keep up their properties better than they do. Property maintenance codes can be better enforced. Garbage does not have to be on front lawns. People may be able to work together to address long-term delayed maintenance.

Ballston Spa has a lot of homes over 100 years old and it takes a special type of person to take the structures on and special types of people to work on them. To be successful, owners need to be given some slack. It shouldn't be so difficult to maintain these structures that the buildings will be looked at as hindrances to be torn down.

Property maintenance codes should be enforced. There is no reason for cars or debris on front lawns. It will be good if

the village makes good on its threat to enforce that snow be shoveled from sidewalks.

The last question in the discussion guide dealt with threats:

#### Threats to the village's attractiveness

1. Too much success invites greed which cannot be well controlled.
2. Unfettered teardowns not constrained by site-plan oversight by planning board or protective regulation (e.g. limit residential rebuild to size of original structure.)

#### Solutions:

- a) Some sites can be improved by rebuilding
- b) Replacement buildings go through site plan review require replaced residence have same mass as original other buildings contribute to village image

#### Develop inventory of contributing structures

3. Large overpowering projects, where control of mass, scale & fenestration are not regulated and are four or more stories in CBD and three stories elsewhere.
4. Enforcement of a generalized (ham-handed) zoning code where provisions haven't been written to encourage "harmonious variety." Zoning should not discourage use of current architectural styles.

Item three was looked at the primary threat, especially coupled with possible destruction of green space, trees, buffers, and vegetation and development that conflicts with the historical character of the village.

This item was not fully discussed due to the time.

Proposals were received from Bergmann and Behan Planning and Design wishing to prepare the formal comprehensive plan. Monique, Marilyn, and Jared will study and review the proposals on Monday by Zoom and report back to the committee. As a review of a contract proposal discussions for negotiations will not be subject to open meeting requirements. Meeting was adjourned at 8:15.

John Cromie, Secretary