

## **Update on Town Square Project**

A little over one month ago, plans for the new Town Square were unveiled to the public. Over 80 people attended the February meeting with many more interested citizens reading articles and viewing the concept drawings in the Watertown Daily Times and on Facebook.

Recently, we visited with Kristen Fish-Peterson, Watertown RDA Executive Director, to ask her some questions that have been raised on social media and through conversations.

### **Is Water Street being closed?**

Water Street will not be permanently closed. Traffic will still move in both directions. When a festival, event with the Library, or other activity is held, the street can be temporarily closed if needed. The design calls for a curb-less street, which means the sidewalk and road will be on the same level.

### **Will there be public restrooms on the town square?**

The town square itself will not have permanent public restrooms. The Watertown Public Library has agreed to allow the public access to restrooms inside the Library. If a large event is held at the town square, event organizers will be required to provide portable restrooms to serve the attendees.

### **Where are people to park their cars?**

Additional parking will not be created to serve town square events. Existing street parking and surface lot parking south of the Public Library should accommodate daily use. For large events, attendees may need to park further away. There will be a drop-off site near the town square entrance for those with disabilities or mobility issues.

### **Will the town square be handicapped accessible?**

Yes! The best feature of the design chosen by the Town Square Steering Committee is the accessibility it provides for wheelchairs, strollers, walkers, and people of all abilities.

### **Can I launch a kayak from the town square?**

Launching a kayak from the town square will be discouraged. A public kayak launch (with plenty of parking) is available up river. Kayakers will be encouraged to dock at the town square dock, which is designed especially for kayak docking.

### **Will the town square close at night? Will dogs be allowed?**

The town square will be part of the Watertown Park system. Guidelines for usage will be determined by the Watertown Park, Recreation & Forestry Department. Current rules governing parks in Watertown can be found on the City website under General Park Information.

### **Will the town square have 24/7 surveillance cameras and lighting for safety?**

The Town Square Steering Committee will be working with the Parks, Recreation & Forestry Department and the Watertown Police to address safety issues at the town square. Installing surveillance cameras and lighting the park at night will be options considered to ensure the town square remains safe for all visitors.

### **Will the town square host events 12 months of the year?**

The town square was designed to accommodate events year 'round. Festivals, Santa's House, possible ice skating, ice sculptures, farmers markets, concerts, Library events, picnics, and alike will offer year 'round activities for Watertown residents and tourists. The interactive fountain, designed at grade, will attract children during the hot summers. The fountain will be turned off during colder months and during events requiring extra space.

### **Will the plaza extend to the Globe apartments?**

The town square is to be constructed on the 100 block of W. Main Street, formerly occupied by buildings. The City is currently looking for a development partner to build a hotel, office building, or apartments on the surface parking lot south of the town square.

### **Will there be a hotel next to the town square?**

The original plan did include a hotel to the south of the town square. The RDA secured an independent hotel development for the site. The developer was not able to secure financing so the parcel is back on the market. The RDA believes the best use for this site would be a hotel, office building, mixed use building, or market rate apartments. The RDA is working to attract a development to this site.

### **Will there be food trucks on the town square?**

The town square design does accommodate food truck parking along Water Street and on the hardscape of the town square at the west end of the block.

### **Will there be public WiFi?**

WiFi would be a fantastic addition to the town square. The Town Square Steering Committee will work hard to make that a reality.

### **Has any thought been given to honoring the history of the 100 block in the town square?**

The Town Square Steering Committee is considering a few options to honor the past. One idea, suggested by a Watertown resident, is to make a time capsule. Other ideas are welcome and all will be considered.

### **What is being done about displaced businesses?**

Businesses formerly located on the 100 block of W. Main Street were compensated for their properties as well as paid relocation benefits. The RDA spent \$1.6 million to acquire the buildings and another \$1 million to relocate the businesses and apartment residents. One business made the decision to close permanently. They were still given a significant cash relocation package. The remainder of the businesses have relocated to new locations in Watertown.

### **Who is paying for this? Taxpayers?**

The money spent to acquire and relocate businesses and residents from the 100 block of W. Main Street came from the Walmart Tax Increment District. These collected taxes were not needed to pay off debt in TID #3. Tax Increment Financing (TIF) dollars can only be used for certain projects. The RDA received these funds to redevelop downtown Watertown. The RDA is paying for the demolition and design of the town square with its own funds. The construction of the town square will be funded in part by the RDA, the City, and through grants and fundraising.

### **What's happening elsewhere downtown?**

As Main Street Watertown reported in early March, in 2019 alone, six buildings in downtown Watertown were purchased and are now in the process of being renovated. At least three of these buildings have been vacant for a decade. Out of 85 buildings on Main Street, there are only two properties with commercial vacancies that are actively for sale or lease.

Much of the increased interest and activity in Watertown's downtown area has been attributed to the reinvestment made by the City of Watertown, the Main Street Program, and the RDA. Investors see opportunity and are attracted to a growing and revitalized area.

### **The Town Square Progress**

*Excerpts from the Redevelopment District #2, Amendment No. 1, Public Hearing Draft: October 28, 2015*

In 2014, Watertown's Common Council accepted the recommendations of the Watertown Riverfront/Downtown Redevelopment Initiative as well as other relevant plans for the general area dating back to 2004. This redevelopment plan was consistent with the City's ongoing master planning and economic development efforts.

One of the objectives of this plan was to create a physically and economically vital riverfront and downtown area by eliminating blight, ensuring appropriate land uses specifically, but not restricted to, the establishment of a comprehensive riverfront walking/biking pathway system with accompanying seawall and river edge improvements, redevelopment of the manufacturing and distribution properties into uses that are more conducive to revitalization of the downtown, improving both vehicular and pedestrian traffic and enhancing the environmental attributes and historical character of the Riverfront and Downtown.

Specific goals included developing a centralized, multi-use public space (art festivals, dances, beer-n-brats, farmers' market) in the form of a town square on the south side of the 100 block of West Main Street. More specifically, the creation of a town square and development of riverbank amenities including an amphitheater in conjunction with a library expansion and commercial development which would add significantly to the vitality of the downtown and riverfront.

Up until 2019, most of the work has been done behind the scenes. The final building purchase in the 100 block of West Main Street took place in 2019. Demolition started in early 2020. Currently, there are two buildings standing. During the inspection, a 500 gallon underground tank was discovered as well as possible soil contamination around the newspaper building. The RDA is working with the DNR and applying for grants to cover the costs of remediation and tank removal. Once the buildings are removed, the area will be filled to grade and seeded for the interim.

The Town Square Steering Committee will be reconvening to finalize the selection of a contractor, town square amenities, and provide direction on raising funds.

This has been a long process to get to where we are today. On behalf of the City, the RDA, and the Town Square Steering Committee, we thank the citizens of Watertown for their support, ideas, patience, and encouragement. As of now, the town square is set to open in the Fall of 2021.

If you have questions, please e-mail Kristen Fish-Peterson at [KFish@CityofWatertown.org](mailto:KFish@CityofWatertown.org). For additional information please visit the RDA website at [watertownredevelopment.org](http://watertownredevelopment.org).