

# **Manchester TOD Plan Stakeholder Interview Summary Report**

Interviews conducted include:

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Mike Skelton, Manchester Chamber of Commerce

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Amy Chomm, Developer

Dick Anagnost, Developer

Robynne Alexander, Developer

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Kari Thurman, Office of Congressman Chris Pappas

Additional interviews are ongoing due to stakeholder availability.

Interviews were conducted in-person and on the phone, generally for 45 minutes to an hour, by Goody Clancy staff and additional subject-matter experts of the Manchester TOD Plan consultant team as appropriate. While many stakeholders provided more detailed comments, this report focuses on key takeaways and common themes relevant to the Manchester TOD Plan.

## **Key Stakeholder Takeaways**

This section addresses common themes and major issues of discussion across a broad range of stakeholder interviews. Additional comments on more specific topics, or additional detail on these major themes, follow.

**The Elm Street corridor will likely continue to see development both in the study area and to the north of downtown. There is significant near-term development opportunity adjacent to the core study area in the Willow Street corridor. Stakeholders also identified the Gaslight District as having potential for repositioning and reinvestment as an entertainment center.**

Many interviewees commented on the success of downtown revitalization and the momentum of investment in the district, particularly regarding housing and dining uses along the Elm Street corridor. They reflected that downtown was becoming a strong amenity again for office-workers, residents, and the whole community, although they still sought more opportunities to fulfill daily needs in downtown. Many cited that the most innovative projects rely in developer willpower to navigate the entitlement and permitting process, and that it would be good to develop incentives to support such projects. Similarly, a few interviewees identified that medical office development was unlikely to move forward near the Elliot Hospital in the near-term because of competition across the region and the preferences of key decision makers.

As a legacy industrial corridor along the abandoned rail line, the Willow Street area already has Redevelopment zoning in place. A major catalytic project is moving forward at 252 Willow Street that will include apartments, live/work spaces, commercial space, and significant site work. The rail bed is envisioned for conversion to a trail, providing a critical connective link and amenity for the area. Larger industrial parcels and favorable grades and access ease redevelopment. Planning for this area could reinforce the need to invest in the trail and provide clarity in the site plan regulations about how to take advantage of trail access as a part of redevelopment.

Finally, many reflected on the limited success of the Gaslight District. While all enjoyed the Fishercats games and saw them as an important, family-friendly draw to downtown, they did not see much evidence of spillover from the stadium to the Gaslight District or greater downtown in terms of activity and vibrancy. Interviewees encouraged a bold vision for the Gaslight District that would help address the need for more after-work entertainment and recreation options. Interviewees identified strategies to address deferred maintenance and to better link downtown and the Gaslight District together as important.

**There are approximately 200 multi-family residential units in the near-term development pipeline in the study area and downtown, a reflection of the strong demand for multi-family housing, but developers have some concern about the feasibility of larger-scale development going forward due to high land costs and high construction costs.**

There is broad consensus that there is significant demand for housing across a range of multi-family housing types. Since 2015, there have been almost 250 housing units developed in downtown in adaptive reuse of the upper floors of buildings and innovative projects including microunits. Projects currently in the pipeline include a variety of develop program and construction types, including mixed-use adaptive reuse of historic buildings, redevelopment with new construction, and renovation of existing residential properties. Looking forward, the stakeholders identified a lack of development-ready sites because of the cost of land acquisition and difficulty of providing needed infrastructure.

Existing property owners in the area, many of which contain uses or structures that would need to be fully redeveloped to fulfill a vision of transit-oriented development and the highest and best use of the property, are asking for prices too high to pursue redevelopment. The cost of providing adequate parking while also achieving feasible density, particularly on smaller sites, continues to be a concern for development. Projects that include their own parking on-site or immediately accessible are more likely to move forward. More generally, the cost of construction has been rising in the area, leading to some hesitancy to pursue more complex and expensive construction typologies.

At the neighborhood level, it has been a priority to increase the downtown's population of workers, residents, and visitors to better support cultural amenities, a safe environment with people walking on the sidewalks throughout the day and evening, and spur support services beyond restaurants. There is a sense that the downtown market may be approaching a threshold where it can support more services and amenities. There are opportunities to create incentives – whether density bonuses or parking allowances – within the regulations to help continue to support this growth. Many Manchester residents are concerned about the growing cost of housing.

**District-scale parking and transit are a prerequisite for higher-value development. There is a need to invest in projects that provide additional multi-modal access and connectivity to address parking in the Millyard, cross the railroad tracks with more streets and/or paths, and complete the bike trail envisioned in BUILD grant application.**

The Millyard mailing address has cachet and market positioning, but it is running out of space for tenants that need 10,000 square feet or more in the 15-20 employee range. Stakeholders immediately identified parking as the limiting factor to achieving the full potential of the Millyard and continuing to grow the innovation economy into the study area. Businesses that consider the Millyard but ultimately choose to locate elsewhere tend to go to either the office towers on Elm Street or out of Manchester to office parks in Londonderry or Bedford.

While all reflected that this limitation has been a topic of ongoing civic conversation and concern, the concern is becoming more critical and all identified this planning process as an opportunity. There were a broad range of viewpoints on the best strategy to address parking, connectivity, and transit needs, including a public parking garage, incentives for a private garage, a privately funded shuttle from remote parking, and significant investment in transit upgrades. While these ideas can all be explored as part of the TOD scenarios, identifying a common vision for the infrastructure investment that will unlock the potential of the Millyard is a key step in becoming rail-ready and promoting transit-oriented development in Manchester. As one stakeholder expressed, one of the most important things an effort like the Manchester TOD Plan can do is put the city and the community on the record for what we collectively want to see. The lack of specificity or consensus in vision can be an obstacle to having everyone pulling in the same direction.

There was ample support for building the trail connection along the old railroad right-of-way paralleling Willow Street, although many questions about how the trail would tie into the riverfront, Millyard, and eventual rail station. Similarly, stakeholders saw the need to pursue the new crossing of the railroad tracks and improve connectivity and circulation within the study area as major priorities.

**The bus system needs to be prioritized to support transit-oriented development in Manchester and the region.**

A key factor for Manchester bus service is the role of frequency in affecting ridership and route planning. Currently, the bus routes all have hourly service, so all the routes must come to central transfer point downtown at the same time – known as a pulse – to allow riders to transfer successfully. Hourly service is considered bare bones public transit service because of the long wait and overall travel times. Stakeholders commented that as a result, existing public transit service in Manchester currently struggles to attract riders who have the means to drive instead.

The success of the existing downtown to downtown bus service between Manchester and Concord, as well as daily service to Nashua, will continue to help develop the travel patterns for inter-city rail service. Planning for rail service should include planning for intermodal transfers and investments in the frequency of bus service throughout the city.

### **Selected comments on more specific topic or additional details:**

#### **Infrastructure Improvements**

- Constructing an extension of Commercial Street east across the railroad and towards Elm and Willow Streets was a part of the BUILD grant. The Board supported it and the City is committed to moving it forward.
- The trail is highlighted as a future connection in planning documents and is important to the overall network, but not part of current capital budget.
- The area needs better services, including parking, streetlighting, sidewalks, public transportation. Better lighting for trails and sidewalks as particularly important.
- Seasonal concerns: more and more employees bike, but there is a seasonality. Snow removal from sidewalks and paths is a concern and necessary to enable more wintertime walking and biking.

#### **Transportation Services**

- Leasing off-site parking can be difficult and running a shuttle system is expensive in terms of cost and hard on employee morale.
- Accommodating additional staff means getting beyond a 1:1 ratio of employee to parking spot, so need to encourage biking, walking, transit, and flex schedule options. Parking and transportation issues in the Millyard are driving location and growth decisions.
- Concerned with building a multi-modal hub; MTA feels strongly that should not delay improving the bus station for future rail service.
- Over last decade, there has been significant expansion in regional service to surrounding areas. Intercity bus service to Concord and Nashua all breakeven or generates revenue. Nashua ridership is more people shopping, Concord ridership is folks who need to access state agencies.
- Increasing frequency is a main goal – all bus lines currently have 60 min service with a pulse. Currently have all transit-dependent riders but want to attract choice riders by providing greater service frequency.
- There are five significant routes in terms of ridership: the 8 on S Willow is the busiest, connects low income census tracts to jobs; 8, 10, 12: Mall of NH, commercial corridors, low

income housing; 5, 11: students to SNHU and NH Community College. Work hard to serve transit-dependent populations.

- The Green Dash, a downtown circulator, operates on a 30 min loop and goes past Manchester Community Health Center and to the Market Basket. Some feel the loop is convoluted, slow, and hard to understand, so do not end up using it.
- Do public-public and public-private partnerships for additional service; have struggled with sustaining because ridership spikes during the recession but there is no local match funding available then, and less ridership during economic expansion. UNH in the Millyard pays for extending service hours to 9:30 pm, as an example.
- See an opportunity for mobility hubs with car share and bike share near major bus corridors.
- Need examples of how one-car households work so we can have a better sense of it.
- There is not a large TNC/Uber/Lyft presence in Manchester.
- Young professionals are by far the most supportive group of passenger rail service to Boston – their social lives are tied to Boston, in addition to work.

### **Redevelopment, Positioning, and Development Feasibility**

- The Second Street corridor west of the Merrimack has a significant number of properties under common ownership but is unlikely to change from its current residential use in the near future. The island is in the floodplain and floodway in parts, and so also a harder site for future development.
- TIF as a strategy is difficult because of the City's statutory revenue cap; Concord's transformation of Main Street was done through TIF and a significant TIGER grant.
- Have looked at developing open space on the City-owned parcel near Elliot Hospital along the river, but providing access is a challenge, including crossing the Sundial property.
- Manchester Development Corp has handled significant projects, including the Rex Theatre and the building at Bridge and Elm Street.
- Over the long-term, the plan should not discount potential for changes to the Market Basket site. They were part of discussions about railroad crossing for the BUILD grant.
- Mayoral priorities for redevelopment include affordable housing, public art, and access to the river. Should ensure that the project aligns with Master Plan process for combined impact.
- Young professionals identify housing as a primary concern – running out of quality market-rate housing in downtown and single-family homes can be prohibitively expensive. It is not uncommon for people to move back in with their parents to save up to buy a house/property.

## CoUrbanize Map Comments Summary

In addition to the stakeholder interviews, the project maintains an interactive CoUrbanize website. The following is a summary of comments left on the interactive project map in response to the questions: My Vision for Here, Can Be Improved, What Works Well?

- Intersection of Granite and Elm – more pedestrian friendly
- Canal St into one way each way – Canal and Granite St intersection
- Noting streetscape rebuilds in Concord and Nashua as example
- Greenspace on Granite at Canal (Gateway Park) – Prescott Park in Portsmouth as example
- Ped Bridge at intersection- need for traffic control during baseball games
- Improve the walkway that connects Canal St to Commercial St – lighting, visibility, cleanliness
- Kayak access point to river
- Connect rail trail to Heritage Trail in Bedford. Granite crossing is hard.
- Clear access/parking to get to the Hands Across bridge
- Rail Trail to the market basket or Valley St on bike
- Riverfront greenspace
- Queen City Ave bridge more bike and ped friendly
- Intersection of Second and Queen City Ave bridge hard as a pedestrian, Queen City and Brown Ave might need signal
- Streetscape improvements: burying utilities, trees on each side of road, one lane of traffic
- More frequent bus routes – great that high schoolers can now ride free, don't have to be carless for buses to be useful
- Wide sidewalks on S Elm are great – but need more surfacing to be more wheelchair and disability-friendly. Big wish list is design that helps keep them clear in winter.
- Bike lanes are visible, but not safe. Consider integrating into sidewalk, safer navigation into turn lane
- N/S Elm St bus line
- Connect through to South Elm after Hayward St, no connections from Willow to S Elm
- Electric buses/opportunity for solar arrays at transit yard
- Important to serve homeless and community members relying on walking/biking/transit
- Beautification on S Elm
- Need to invest in maintenance of 2<sup>nd</sup> St neighborhood, be careful about displacement
- Bass Island Park/dog park
- Opportunity for pet-friendly development near the dog park?
- Connect Gaslight with S Elm and Millyard, design elements, uncover cobblestones?
- Walls for murals west side of Elm St, great businesses like Van Otis chocolates
- Cemetery is pretty, enjoyable to walk and ride through, does need more eyes on the street because of other activities within
- Desire for protected bike lanes on Elm Street