

Message from the Mayor: The Future has arrived

In the spring of 2001, I had recently sold my business and found that I had some free time on my hands. I was considering a run for the city council seat representing ward two. I had always followed Westfield politics since I was a child when I would accompany my father on his weekend missions in the fall to put up lawn signs. In fact, my first sign that I helped install belonged to my friend, former mayor Garreth Lynch.

So I decided to learn more about what was going on with my city and I made an appointment to meet with former mayor Richard Sullivan. When I met with him he talked of plans that were being drawn up for projects named; “Great River Bridge,” “Columbia Greenway Rail Trail,” “Old Towne Phase I and II,” “Gas Light District”, “Elm Street Intermodal Project,” and “Main/Broad Street and Park Square Green Reconstruction.” And as I learned, all of these projects at the time were destined for ward two. Now they encompass wards two, three and one.

Well, that day my mind was made up. Our city had a chance to make itself over in a bold way. I knew I wanted to help make it happen so I got involved. In the fall of 2001, I won the ward two seat on the city council. Through the years, I voted steadily in favor of these projects to reshape our city for the 21st century. From 2002 – 2009, I voted for Old Towne 1, Elm Street Intermodal Project, Great River Bridge and Main/Broad Street.

Along the way, a few projects were stalled for various reasons. I am very happy to say, with the support of the city council, we have restarted design phases for the Gas Light District, Old Towne 2, and The Columbia Greenway all phases. Soon we will announce the restart of the Elm Street Intermodal Project. But today I write to you to give you some insight into the debate about the Park Square Green Project. This project was drawn up nearly 10 years ago. It surely isn't my project as I have heard a few people say. And at that time, it was incredibly ambitious in scope and cost.

Over the years, MA DOT shied away from 100% funding the Park Square Green Project and basically said to the city, “...we'll give you a green space, sidewalks, some lamping, a refurbished fountain and trees that ring the green edge. That's it. If you want the project as originally proposed the city will need to pay for it.” That conversation was had nearly two years ago with former Mayor Boulanger and MA DOT. So for sometime we've know that if we want something more, we'd need to pay for it.

And for those that said there has been little or no public input along the way on this project, the answer to that is they're simply wrong. This project was conceived by a working group of citizens nearly a decade ago. And the city has been diligently working it through the MADOT design process in that time. For those of us who have been working on downtown revitalization over the years, we've been to all the previous public hearings, citizen meetings and board and commission meetings to hear about the project as it took shape. Much public input was received then and changes were made along the way including the most controversial issue, the potential change in location of the General Shepard Monument. He is staying put.

What I would say to those that have said there has been no public input, is simply, “Where have you been?” Clearly I haven't seen you over the years working with the volunteer groups for a better downtown or at the hearings and meetings that were held over the previous 10 years. There are hundreds of people who have seen this project and its cost and wholeheartedly support it. And the organizations who make downtown special, like the Business Improvement District and Westfield on Weekends, have been a huge part of this process. Their collective effort brings thousands of people to the downtown every year. The recent votes in support of the project by their respective board of directors, including the Chamber of Commerce Board, speaks volumes about this project's importance to our city.

In 2009, Mayor Boulanger and members of the city council (which I was one) had reduced the project cost significantly by deleting other enhancements that were originally proposed earlier this decade. This was all done at meetings open to the public. On June 14th the latest debate about the future of Westfield's beloved Park Square Green began when I hosted a public meeting at the South Middle School. Well over 200 people attended that meeting to hear about the plans for Westfield's Green. At that time the project cost was projected to be 2.6 million dollars for what was called the Platinum Option. There was no hiding that cost as I have heard some say. In the platinum configuration, there are granite walls rimming the outside of the Green, an elevated lawn, a nearly 1000 square foot all season pavilion (or gazebo as it has been called), a monument walk, a new plaza in front of the Athenaeum, and a reflecting pool in front of General Shepard. Options ranged downward from there through Gold, Silver and the MA DOT option Bronze. The big difference typically between Platinum and the Gold and Silver are that granite features are replaced with concrete and other amenities like the reflecting pool, pavilion and plaza are taken out. Well, after a long meeting, a city councilor asked to take a straw poll.

Overwhelmingly the crowd of over 200 people raised their hands for the Platinum option proposed that night at 2.6 million dollars. The citizen's were well aware of the proposed cost. The most common comments heard were to make this a grand Green for the next century as we won't have this opportunity again. Certainly, a concern about the price was voiced. I committed to the audience that night to work over the summer with our consultant Landworks Collaborative, the city engineer, Mark Cressotti, the city council and interested members of the public to get a project that was under 2 million dollars and would keep the spirit of the Platinum option.

Since that time I have met in public forums with at least 400 more citizens at various functions and again they reiterated their support and each time I was able to close the funding gap. By late summer, I thought I had the elements for the plan that I needed, and the costs, to put a plan together for the city council to consider. One last detail was to meet with Cynthia Hartedgen and Agma Sweeney and the members of the city council.

Compromises were made along the way and the costs continued to be lowered. We agreed to provide more tree box space for the trees along the sidewalks and I committed to developing a tree planting plan on the Green when it was finished so that future trees could be planted in a way that made sense. I took out the reflecting pool and we scaled back some plantings. We also met with the forest health warden from the State of Massachusetts Department of Conservation to ensure that we had guidance along the way on our new tree planting scheme.

Lastly though, because I previously served on the city council, I knew they have the really tough job of taking the vote to finance the project. So I proceeded to meet in person or speak with the members over the phone during the month of September. Basically, I asked them what they felt comfortable with voting for and if they had any technical questions, follow them up with the Engineer. I also knew in speaking with them the pavilion option was a tough sell. Some asked to see other options, so I obtained a schematic of a proposed site built pavilion made of wood. I told each one that I would keep an informal poll of what they told me they wanted for the pavilion. I also told them that when done, and if the informal poll vote was close or even, and if I could get all of the project with the original pavilion plan under 2 million dollars (as that was the number most members were comfortable with), I would submit as is. Well when the votes were counted, they split nearly equal in support of the pavilion. Faced with that outcome, I submitted a scaled back platinum plan, more along the lines of the gold option. The reflecting pool was taken out, as were some plantings. In the end, I submitted to them a project with the Pavilion well under 2 million dollars.

So now they have taken two roll call votes in support of the bond authorization to move the project forward. And due to a rarely used parliamentary maneuver called minority reconsideration at the last meeting, they will need to vote again for the third time at the next meeting scheduled for December 16 at 7:30PM.

One thing I know for sure sitting where I sit, is this project will be more expensive in the future. It will likely cost us 20-30% less than we propose because of a very competitive bidding environment. And if we leave something off the project because we think we will do it another day when things are better, my experience tells me we won't. If you would like to weigh in, call me or your council members soon. Remember, this is a once in a 100 year project. It's our legacy to leave for our children and grandchildren. As always if you have any questions call or email me at 413.572.6201 or mayor@cityofwestfield.org.

Respectfully,

Dan Knapik