

**Report on Community Input regarding
Redevelopment Areas 2A & 3 A**

October 7, 2019

East Brunswick Redevelopment Advisory Committee

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Mayor Brad J. Cohen

Councilman James Wendell, East Brunswick Redevelopment Agency Chairman

Michael Hughes, East Brunswick Redevelopment Agency Executive Director

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is presented to the East Brunswick Township Council and the East Brunswick Redevelopment Agency by the East Brunswick Redevelopment Advisory Committee. This report summarizes community feedback about the redevelopment of Areas 2A & 3A, as proposed in the Redevelopment Plan and in response to the concept plans proposed by the conditionally-designated redeveloper, River Development Equities. The Redevelopment Advisory Committee appreciates this opportunity to be of service to the East Brunswick Township Council, East Brunswick Redevelopment Agency, and the East Brunswick community.

BACKGROUND

The East Brunswick Redevelopment Advisory Committee (RAC) was first established by East Brunswick Mayor Brad Cohen in December 2017 as an ad hoc committee of community members with an interest in the redevelopment of properties designated as areas in need of redevelopment. The purpose of the committee is to support redevelopment efforts in the township, listen to the pulse of the community regarding redevelopment, facilitate community engagement in the redevelopment plans, educate the public about the redevelopment effort, and provide recommendations and support to the East Brunswick Redevelopment Agency. The East Brunswick community-at-large continues to be engaged throughout the redevelopment process, including commercial, industrial, and residential stakeholders in East Brunswick, as well as those of surrounding communities who interact with or utilize East Brunswick services.

The RAC consists of a broad cross-section of East Brunswick community members who expressed an interest in redevelopment or were invited by the Mayor to lend their voice to the redevelopment effort. The committee is comprised of the following members, many of whom joined in 2019: Troy Bailey, Wesam Berjaoui, Raoul Bhatta, Adam Birnbaum, David Blivaiss, Susanna Chiu, Rachel Cohen, Liliana Dos Santos, Cindy Furgang, Joe Gialanella, Kari Grove, Harry Huang, Irina Katsnelson, Marc Leber, Sarah Levin, Erica Mastruzzo, Mary Pan, Sarah Rubenstein, Dave Seiden, Judi Stein, Councilwoman Sharon Sullivan, and Jonathan Roy Varghese. The committee staff contact is Amy Denholtz Lewandowski, Economic Development Officer. Mayor Brad Cohen attended all committee meetings and was often accompanied by East Brunswick Redevelopment Agency Chairman James Wendell and East Brunswick Redevelopment Agency Executive Director Michael Hughes.

COMMUNITY INPUT

The RAC met almost every month in 2019, which provided committee members a chance to offer direct feedback to the Township and Redevelopment Agency leadership in response to requests for ideas and considerations proposed in the concept plan for Redevelopment Areas 2A & 3A. Additionally, the RAC staffed the February 6, 2018 Public Strategy Session, the June 6, 2019 Redevelopment Public Workshop, and a table at East Brunswick Day, September 22, 2019. In addition, Mayor Cohen led six in-person and conducted one Facebook Live Town Hall meetings, at various locations throughout the Township at different times on various days over four months,

to explain the plans for the Redevelopment Areas and receive community input. These open and public meetings were widely advertised on the Township website and Facebook page, through the EBTV bulletin, and through the local press. Furthermore, the RAC designed a survey to widen the availability of means of community input and seek additional feedback. The survey was publicized and available on the Township website and Facebook page, with paper copies available at select municipal venues.

Hundreds of people attended the various sessions, workshops, town halls and responded to the survey and commented on Facebook. The voluminous feedback from the East Brunswick community-at-large and the high level of engagement is demonstrative of the desire to see the East Brunswick community transform to a place where people can do more in town, from dining to entertainment, and be a place that meets community members' needs now and far into the future, from parks and recreational spaces to technology and sustainable components. Some feedback received is immaterial to the redevelopment effort and omitted; however, the RAC recommends that this omitted feedback be reviewed by appropriate Township officials as it is relevant to the Township in general or outside the Redevelopment Areas. Feedback suggesting a specific store, restaurant, or other corporate-named facility is also omitted.

The following subject headings summarize the relevant suggestions and other information obtained by the RAC through the various sources of community input.

Overall Development

Respondents consistently expressed their desire for the Redevelopment Area to be a "Town Square" or "Main Street" with a distinct character and vibe that provides a walkable, safe place for people to be and gather. Community members acknowledged their appreciation for an appealing aesthetic and varied pedestrian street view, with structures that are not towering or overbearing. There is extensive interest in the Redevelopment Area reflecting the latest in energy efficient and sustainable technology, with parking for electric vehicles and green components incorporated throughout the area. Emphasis was placed on creating green spaces and parks with landscaped gardens, fountains, and artwork, and cultivating gathering areas with amenities, including playgrounds and outdoor dining, with something for every age group. Notably, while generations and age groups are attracted to different amenities, all respondents expressed a significant interest in space to gather or "hang-out," and overwhelmingly desire more independent restaurants. Many respondents requested walking and bike paths to be included throughout the area. It was also suggested that the "look" of Route 18 needs to be addressed to attract businesses and consumers to the Redevelopment Area.

Housing

As might be expected, there are strong opinions about the housing needs of the community and affordability. The township's Affordable Housing obligation, required pursuant to court settlement and the Housing Element and Fair Share Plan 1999-2025, requires 115 affordable units to be available through the redevelopment areas (inclusive of Areas 2A & 3A). Community opinion is wide-ranging as it relates to the expansion of housing opportunities and what forms of housing should be made available. There appeared to be no consensus regarding the need for, and the impact on the township, of rental units versus ownership opportunities. Specific housing target markets were suggested, including millennials (attracted to extensive amenities and property

features), college graduate students, adult 55+ (with necessary adaptive and support capabilities), and special-needs adult group homes (facilitating employment within the Redevelopment Area).

Transportation

Respondents are interested in additional commuter parking and commuter bus access from the Redevelopment Area. There is notable interest in a shuttle bus service connecting the Redevelopment Areas 2A & 3A with the Route 18 “retail strip” and the rest of the Community. Other suggestions include making safer pedestrian crossings along Route 18 to make it easier for people east of the roadway to walk or bike to the Redevelopment Area, perhaps with an additional overhead crosswalk. A great deal of concern exists that there be enough vehicular parking in the Redevelopment Area for residents, employees, and visitors. There were both positive and negative responses regarding whether there should be a charge for parking throughout the retail and commercial portion of the Redevelopment Area, without a clear majority opinion.

Arts and Culture

Extraordinary emphasis is placed on incorporating public art throughout the Redevelopment Area and creating outdoor entertainment space to facilitate live performances, such as theatrical shows, concerts, and other similar activities. While some responses specifically opposed moving the East Brunswick Public Library from its current location, there were equally passionate respondents advocating for the library to be in a downtown area; notably, overtime support grew for a library branch to open in the Redevelopment Area, and some support for moving other municipal services, including the East Brunswick Senior Center, to Redevelopment Areas 2A & 3A.

Commercial and Retail Facilities

Undeniably, major interest centers on attracting a variety of new dining establishments to the Redevelopment Area. A recurring theme was bringing “fine dining” and “independent” restaurants, and fewer “chain” restaurants. There is significant interest in attracting “high-end” and specialty retailers, including grocery stores, clothing stores, and boutiques. Other recommendations focus on attracting unique retailers such as art galleries, pottery shops, sewing shops, etc. that will also offer educational classes. Additional expressions of interest highlighted community or shared meeting/party spaces with rental kitchen access, co-working (desk) and shared-workplace space, and a food and beverage commercial shared maker-space (e.g., business incubator facility).

Recreation and Sports

Recreational and sporting facilities garnered the largest amount of community input, indicating a compelling need for more outdoor and indoor sports activity space. The most frequent requests are for an indoor swimming pool, ice-skating rinks, game rooms, a multi-purpose sports center, and outdoor and indoor basketball courts. Other repeated suggestions include tennis courts, volleyball courts, and pickleball courts.

Next Generation Trends

Looking exclusively at the survey data from the 26 respondents aged 29 and younger illustrates a sample of what’s hot and where trends are going. This population believes the most important priority in redeveloping the Rt. 18 corridor is better aesthetics, and overwhelmingly wants more small-restaurant options in the Redevelopment Area. This younger cohort resoundingly prefers

“green” components like solar-covered parking and rooftops, more bicycle and pedestrian connectivity, and space to socialize recreationally, from an indoor sports center or a community center to parks and open space.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Redevelopment Advisory Committee recommends that the East Brunswick Township Council and the East Brunswick Redevelopment Agency work with River Development Equities to continue enhancing the Redevelopment Area concept plan to incorporate feedback from the East Brunswick community. The community expressly desires to have a walkable, accessible, downtown that is a place people want to be: a transit-oriented development with artistic and sustainable components, independent small businesses, high-quality and specialty retailers, recreational opportunities, and purposeful outdoor public spaces, i.e., a live-work-play space.

Other themes expressed by the community reveal the drive for innovation, sustaining entrepreneurship and empowering the creative and technological class, implementing smart growth strategies, and supporting independent and customer-focused retail and dining. Consideration should be provided for implementing green components or attaining LEED certification, supporting non-vehicular transportation, establishing community services in the Redevelopment Area such as recreational space (e.g., community center or indoor swimming pool) or a branch library space, offering co-working space, and developing technology and small business incubator space. Further consideration should also include formula-business restrictions, which would limit corporate owned and managed businesses and lead to the creation of unique spaces and diverse tenancy that fosters and accompanies neighborhood character.

More detailed information, such as survey response data and written feedback, is available upon request.