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James Freas, AICP
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MEMORANDUM

DATE: April 16, 2021

TO: Select Board
Planning Board

FROM: James Freas, Director of Community & Economic Development

RE: Golden Triangle Program Approval

Meeting Date: April 21, 2021

The Golden Triangle Implementation and Recovery Strategy will advance recommendations of Natick 2030+ and the Golden Triangle Study with the objective of supporting the long-term success of the district while addressing immediate economic recovery needs the COVID 19 pandemic. This project will focus primarily on amending zoning and creating a plan for near-term achievable transportation and other infrastructure investments, all with attention to issues of equity and climate change as well as the particular challenges revealed by the pandemic. As with the Golden Triangle Study itself, this project will seek the collaborative involvement of property owners, businesses, residents, and other key stakeholders as well as working closely with the City of Framingham. Staff is seeking the approval of the Select Board and Planning Board for the work program described below.

Project Deliverables

The Golden Triangle Implementation and Recovery Strategy is intended to address two of the primary issues from the Golden Triangle study – improving the district’s zoning and investing in transportation, open space, and other infrastructure improvements. Addressing these issues is critical to business recovery and the long-term success of the district as the Town and district stakeholders work to allow for greater flexibility and choice so that the District can be responsive to future events and ongoing changes in the retail and office sectors. A map of the study area is attached.

Zoning

The Golden Triangle study envisioned a future for the district that would feature expanded office and residential supported by retail and restaurants in an area that would be walkable with new open spaces and readily accessible by car, bike, and transit. The ideas here are consistent with national trends as shopping mall and office park dominated areas are maturing into these types of mixed-use innovation districts. The Golden Triangle Study itself notes one of the most prominent examples of this transition nationally in the Tyson’s Corner area of Virginia, but there are many others. In the Boston area aspects

of this market transformation can be seen at Assembly Square, Chestnut Hill, and Watertown. Burlington, MA recently announced the start of a planning process to envision the transformation of that Town's office and mall area. As noted in the Golden Triangle study, adopting new zoning will put Natick in the strongest position to shape and define the desired outcomes for the district.

The proposed zoning would focus on creating a set of rules that define the allowable future buildings and public spaces, essentially creating the DNA of the district so that, as properties redevelop, the vision of Natick's 2030 plan and the Golden Triangle study emerges. At the same time, the basics of the zoning – the defined uses allowed, permitting processes, and other zoning attributes will be modernized to promote flexibility while protecting the Town's interests. This work will be able to serve as a model for how other zoning districts in Town might be constructed, with the rules tailored to the desired outcomes for those particular locations.

Infrastructure Planning

This project will also include a "capital improvement plan" (CIP) for the district, in particular looking for transportation, open space, and other infrastructure or public improvements within the capacity of the Town to invest in. The project may also identify other needed projects that are either larger or with a longer implementation timeframe with financing, advocacy, and/or organizational strategies for realizing these investments.

A necessary component of this aspect of the project will be transportation system analysis that connects the zoning/land use aspect of this project to the transportation infrastructure aspect. This analysis will serve to help prioritize transportation system investments, allow consideration of development phasing, and identify zoning provisions and/or transportation strategies that should be considered.

Strategies & Impact Assessments

Other strategic actions that the Town might take to support realization of the Golden Triangle vision that do not fit into either the zoning or the CIP deliverables above will be captured in a separate report. Another important aspect of this work will be fiscal and economic impact assessments that help to answer key questions like, will tax revenue exceed municipal operations and infrastructure costs.

Process

The deliverables of the Golden Triangle Economic Recovery and Development Strategy will be the product of a locally driven planning process. This process will feature engagement with property owners, businesses, residents, Town officials, and others whose contributions will inform the best possible outcomes for Natick. Broadly, this process can be understood as consisting of three phases – listening and learning; drafting; and finalizing. The project will likely take approximately a year from initiation to Town Meeting action.

Listening & Learning

Any planning project must begin with a clear understanding of the place including its physical attributes, the vision for the future, and the concerns and aspirations of the people. Therefore, this project begins with careful review of existing documents and plans, interviews with key property owners, and the establishment of community engagement program described below. This phase will also include further refinement of the design illustrations in the Golden Triangle study as the consultant team uses the process of drawing and testing designs to “learn the place”.

Drafting

The Drafting phase of the work gets into the deliverables of the project. Based on the information gathered in phase 1, the consultant team will produce first drafts of the zoning, CIP, and other strategies. Town working groups and the public will provide feedback on these and each will be refined.

Finalizing

The final phase of the work is delivery of zoning amendments ready for the Select Board and Planning Board to submit to Town Meeting, a list of projects for inclusion on the CIP with proposed investment year and estimated cost, and a set of related reports and assessments that support adoption of these items and identify further actions to be taken by the Town.

Community Engagement

There are five primary components to the project’s community engagement program, described below. It is envisioned that the Select Board and Planning Board will take a leadership role in hosting events and selecting members to serve as co-chairs of the working group.

1. Website and online engagement tools – The project website will be the central information hub for the project, allowing people to track progress, gather project information, and share their opinions.
2. Public Meetings – There will be three general public meetings, each corresponding to one of the phases described above.
3. Stakeholder Meetings – The project team will meet with individuals and/or representative groups such as significant property owners, businesses, area residents, the Metrowest RTA, Mass DOT, and others.
4. Working Group(s) – The project will have a diverse working group representing the range of project stakeholders.
5. Select Board / Planning Board Leadership – The two boards will receive regular updates, independently or jointly, on the project and meet jointly to vote on the finalized package of Town Meeting warrant articles.

Recommendations and Requested Actions

The Golden Triangle Implementation and Recovery Strategy is an essential step in protecting the viability and success of this district as both an important part of Natick’s economic vitality and a critical

component of the Town's tax revenue. Significant changes in the retail and office market have been impacting the Golden Triangle District, with property owners reporting increasing difficulty in filling vacant spaces. The pandemic is widely recognized to have accelerated these trends. The Golden Triangle Study identified evolving the district to promote a wider range of integrated commercial and residential uses, walkability, engaging public spaces, and promoting access through a variety of transportation options and this project lays the foundation for that future.

This work program requires support from an experienced professional consultant team representing some of the leading voices in the retrofit of suburban districts like the Golden Triangle area. Hiring in the expertise will allow the Town to move more quickly and efficiently. CED is recommending the Town engage David Dixon, FAIA of Stantec to lead the team described below (biographies are attached). The total project cost is approximately \$300,000 including the entire engagement process above and all proposed deliverables.

- Stantec – Stantec will be responsible for developing the zoning content, the CIP program, and the accompanying strategy report. Stantec will be operating under the leadership of David Dixon, FAIA.
- Code Studio – Code Studio will take the product of Stantec's work and draft it into zoning bylaw language.
- Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) – MAPC will design and manage the community engagement program and will contribute their expertise in the resources, opportunities, and constraints of greater Boston and Massachusetts.

With the approval of the Select Board and Planning Board of the project as outlined above, staff would recommend the following steps:

1. Through the Select Board, send a letter to the City of Framingham inviting them to join the project, either as joint sponsors (meaning that the project would expand to include Framingham's portion of the Golden Triangle) or as participants.
2. Identify the project representatives from each Board.
3. Staff would finalize a funding plan utilizing Town funds and grants.
4. Staff would create the necessary consultant contracts for Select Board approval.

Background on the Golden Triangle Study

The Golden Triangle Study was a joint project of Framingham and Natick in 2018 to study land use and transportation in the Golden Triangle district. The district is considered to span the area from Lake Cochituate to approximately the intersection of routes 30 and 9, thus encompassing a "triangle shaped" area of largely commercial development. Looking nationally and regionally at trends for these types of areas and disruptions in the retail and office markets, the study concluded that the two communities needed to plan for the evolution of this area towards a more mixed use and walkable environment, including changes to zoning and investments in transportation and open space/parks. The central recommendations of the study were incorporated into the Natick 2030+ Comprehensive Plan when the Planning Board adopted the plan in February 2019.