

A Meeting for the Neighbors in the area of the Riverwalk Extension Feasibility Study was called on Tuesday, January 28, 2025, for the purpose of sharing updates on the concept plans, answer questions, and to receive feedback.

CITY STAFF PRESENT

Marc Meyers, City Manager

Jenn Curtis, City Planner

Misty Parker, Director of Economic and Community Development

Rod Melanson, Director of Sustainability and Environment

CONSULTANTS PRESENT:

Jared Winchenbach, PE, Gorrill Palmer

Don Ettinger, Gorrill Palmer

City Manager Marc Meyers began the meeting by introducing himself, welcoming and thanking the public for their participation. Mr. Meyers explained the purpose of the meeting: to assess risk, feasibility, and opportunities, specifically for project neighbors. He noted that the meeting is a follow-up to an initial meeting, held on August 1, 2024. The next step following the January meeting will be to schedule a broader public meeting in order to accept all additional public comments.

Mr. Meyers went on to introduce City Staff: Jenn Curtis, City Planner; Misty Parker, Director of Economic and Community Development; and Rod Melanson, Director of Sustainability and Environment, as well as Jared Winchenbach and Don Ettinger of Gorrill Palmer, and Seth Kimball, Architect.

Mr. Meyers gave a brief overview of the riverwalk project, which began in 2009 but has much deeper roots in Maine's history which began with improvements to the water quality of the Kennebec River. He mentioned other communities on the Kennebec River with riverwalks – Gardiner, Hallowell, Augusta, Waterville, Skowhegan.

Ms. Curtis then presented the history of planning for the riverwalk, which started in 1999 by gaining public input through studies including public hearings and comprehensive planning. She noted that all studies conducted on the project are available for review online. Ms. Curtis explained that the riverwalk provides a vast array of benefits including recreation (both physical and mental), environmental benefits, public safety, and community connectivity. She noted the importance of community access without cost and the benefits the project will have on property values throughout the city based on similar projects throughout the watershed.

Ms. Curtis noted that the neighborhood study is a part of the process, which will include a public meeting and City Council approval prior to construction and encouraged questions and comments from the community, and asked that they be held until the end.

Mr. Winchenbach presented a technical review of the riverwalk area, beginning with a highlight of areas to improve (such as the intersection of Front Street and Commercial Street), noting that

the goal is to develop a contiguous walking area. He identified the location of the project on a map of the city, which will cover approximately one mile. The proposed project will include improvements to streets and existing infrastructure. The study area has no high crash locations.

Mr. Winchenbach presented an aerial overview of the project area with boundary lines and rights of way identified, as well as bicycle and pedestrian routes that may impact the project. He then presented a concept to convert Front Street to a one way street, with traffic south of Holly Street directed south, and traffic north of Holly Street to be northbound only. He then presented cross sections of road to explain that the project will require significant improvements to infrastructure.

Kristi Nygaard challenged the representation of a right of way located at the Kennebec Tavern as presented on the map and suggested that the City may not be accurately representing this area.

Mr. Winchenbach stated that this is a concept plan to include a boardwalk path along the waterfront, and in such the plan would be to circumvent gas pumps and the marina area utilizing grassy areas surrounding the marina. He acknowledged the importance of access to dock storage areas. Mr. Winchenbach explained that the current concept plan would place the path at the top of the rip rap, with fencing for safety and access gates to maintain privacy at the Kennebec Riverwalk property for residents of the condominiums. Ms. Curtis added that the City has had recent conversations with the owners of Kennebec Riverwalk, Inc., to secure waterfront access and potentially connect to the riverwalk in the future.

Mr. Winchenbach continued to present additional plans, noting that these could easily be divided into project phases. These include improvements to Front Street, Bowery Street, and Town Landing Road. Improvements to Front Street would include the installation of 8' sidewalks, while still maintaining parking and green space. He then identified crosswalks in need of improvement for pedestrians.

A resident asked about current sidewalks to the east on Commercial St and why new sidewalks would not be connected. Mr. Winchenbach clarified that there are sidewalks on both sides of the street, but there is a better right of way on the west side. He then clarified that the back of the sidewalk will match what is currently in place and will be extended to the east (into the current street area).

Mr. Winchenbach noted that drainage improvements will need to be made throughout the project area, identifying specific areas with known issues.

Mr. Winchenbach went on to clarify that on-street parking north of Holly Street would be eliminated. Bowery Street would be widened slightly to allow the sidewalk to be on the east side up to Town Landing Road.

He added that it would also be worthwhile to extend the proposed improvements to the end of Bowery Street.

Mr. Winchenbach presented a concept of improvements to the town landing with additional green space and improved access. He then explained that pedestrian access would be added to the eastern side of Bowery Street, with the potential for a scenic overlook to be added. Mr. Winchenbach then concluded his presentation by detailing a timeline, which includes an additional Public meeting in May for any member of the public wishing to comment on the proposed project, a draft report of findings to be released in June or July, and a final report to be released in August.

Mike Sullivan of Front Street asked what the estimated cost of the project would be, or if there was even a range for the cost. Mr. Winchenbach stated that costs have yet to be estimated pending public input to assess the public's interest and needs. He then recalled that the project could be built in phases or abridged to a smaller project to alleviate costs.

Ms. Nygaard stated that the City threatened her with eminent domain. She spoke to smoking within close proximity to the restaurant and security issues, as well as the impact this project would have on her insurance rates and other business expenses. Ms. Nygaard stated that the proposal would eliminate parking, which there is an easement for. She then testified to the current impact of pedestrian traffic on her parking area, which would be exacerbated by the proposed project, as well as concerns regarding the gas lines the run under the proposed location of the boardwalk. She concluded by voicing her opposition to the project.

Mr. Meyers stated that the City believes that they have easement rights to both the site of the tavern and condominiums. City Staff is in the process of drafting language, which has not yet been provided to property owners. He then stressed the City's desire to work with the property owners to find a solution that is mutually beneficial.

Ms. Nygaard spoke to the difficulties of running a restaurant and accused the City of not being a good neighbor.

A resident expressed concern that the costs of the project were not laid out prior to presentation, and asked how the project would be funded. Mr. Winchenbach stated that there are grants for projects such as this, as well as various funding sources. Ms. Curtis acknowledged the significant cost of the proposed project and explained that there will be a section-by-section cost analysis.

The resident then expressed concerns regarding flooding, which not only brings debris during storms, but also with post-storm tidal surges. She asked if there is a new flood plain forthcoming. Ms. Curtis confirmed that the 2016 flood maps accounted for trending increases and are highly accurate. The City is proposing to building off of these maps moving forward.

Ms. Nygaard added that ice coming off of the river is equally dangerous and damaging to property. Ms. Curtis assured the public that resiliency is a priority in any project the City takes on moving forward.

Lilly Ellis asked what portion of this project is considered to be the priority. Ms. Curtis stated that feedback from this and other public meetings will drive project priorities. Ms. Ellis then noted the width of the existing riverwalk and asked how the City considers this to be multi-use. Mr.

Winchenbach explained that not all areas of the project would allow for multi-use, but the width of the riverwalk would be approximately 8'-10'.

Ms. Ellis then spoke as a member of the Kennebec Riverwalk Inc and explained the concept meadow that the group seeks to create, which would be a complimentary area to balance the recreation by providing a "quiet park" for residents to sit and enjoy nature.

Mandy Reynolds thanked the City for moving forward with the project, reiterating that the goal is to create public access, and encourage health and wellness, and community connectivity. They then expressed their support for the project.

Another representative of Kennebec Riverwalk Inc elaborated on the concept of the quiet park, which will be handicapped accessible. The group is proud to provide this project for public use, which will require significant effort and financial resources.

A member of the public described the proposed boardwalk as a gated prison, obstructing the view for condo residents. He encouraged the city to utilize sidewalks as a better use of funding.

A resident spoke in support of the Front Street one-way traffic configurations, which garnered a round of applause from the auditorium. Another resident suggested that the intersection of Front Street and Commercial Street be made into a four-way stop, to which the auditorium responded with more applause. Mr. Winchenbach credited the proposal to make Front Street one-way as a solution recommended by the public in a previous meeting.

A resident asked if there was discussion on whether to make Bowery Street one-way as well. Mr. Winchenbach explained that this would create difficulties for vehicles accessing the pump station and water treatment facilities.

A member of the public commented on the difficulty of boat access on Bowery Street. He then complimented the one-way design of Front Street, adding that the view of the river is obstructed for three of four seasons. Mr. Winchenbach agreed that the Bowery Street improvements were more so for connectivity than for the view.

A resident complimented the additional sidewalks, which she suggested would significantly improve the area.

City Councilor Roo Dunn of Green Street commented that much of the project includes improvements to sidewalks and traffic flow. He spoke in favor of building connectivity, noting that this may extend visitor stays and provide financial benefits as well.

Ms. Nygaard agreed that the restaurant is utilized for its view as much as the food and spoke to the impact that closing the restaurant would have on the City.

Christopher Sewall asked for clarification on the benefits of making Holly Street one-way. Mr. Winchenbach agreed that it may not be necessary.

Mr. Sewall then addressed a potential trail formerly laid out on an easement on land owned by his family. He complimented the City on improvements to streets and sidewalks. He then explained that the green space owned by the Sewall Family for generations, and that there are no signs discouraging trespassing, he expressed concern that the City did not approach him prior to the first neighbors meeting regarding access. Mr. Sewall described the original family homestead located on the property and its historical value.

Mr. Sullivan spoke to the benefits of accessing the riverwalk from Front Street and not through the meadow.

A resident spoke in support of the walkway connecting residents to the center of town but expressed concern about flooding.

Another resident asked about re-paving Commercial Street. Ms. Curtis confirmed that this project was planned as part of the Public Improvement Plan but has been delayed two years in order to allow for more urgent infrastructure improvements.

A resident asked who would make the final decision on this proposal. Ms. Curtis explained that the City will take into account feedback from the public made both at public meetings and also directly to City Staff. Ultimately, the project would lie in the hands of the City Council who would vote on how to move forward.

Ms. Curtis thanked the public for their participation and input.

The meeting concluded at 7:36 pm.

Riverwalk Extension & Neighborhood Connectivity Study
January 28, 2025

Minutes prepared by Karly Perry, Recording Secretary