



Diane Nichols Tradd
Assistant City Manager/DPD Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Eileen M. Donoghue, City Manager *EMD*

FROM: Diane N. Tradd, Assistant City Manager/DD Director

SUBJECT: MOTION OF 6/12/18 BY COUNCILOR CIRILLO
REQUEST CITY MANAGER INSTRUCT DPD TO PROVIDE A REPORT AND PROPOSAL
REGARDING A PLAN AUTHORED BY FORMER LHS HEADMASTER, PETER STAMAS, ENTITLED
“LOWELL-THE FLOWERING CITY”

The “Lowell: The Flowering City” report, written in 1996 was a summary of the Project Anthopolis Charrette conducted on April 19-21, 1996, at Lowell High School. The Human Services Corporation sponsored this intensive two and one-half day planning and design workshop. Lowell residents from all walks of life and professional consultants worked together to create a vision for Lowell’s future.”¹

This 20 years old report is a wonderful example of how planning processes with many voices can result in impressive outcomes. There were many suggestions within the report that have been seen through completion, and many others that are still being discussed and implemented. The Flowering City Report was broken out into five areas of focus: Thematic/Cultural Gardens, Greenways, Blueways, Environmental Ways (E-Ways) and System Concept. Each of these areas of focus had several recommendations.

Thematic/Cultural Gardens:

The Flowering City plan garden study team explored the idea of creating neighborhood gardens (memorials or places of leisure, recreation and celebrations) or community gardens (for growing food for consumption).

Since the Flowering City plan was completed the City has established a Community Garden Program. At this time the program consists of nine community gardens:

1. 5 Whiting Street —operated by the Coalition for a Better Acre
2. 20 Franklin Court N —operated by the Lowell Alliance
3. 134 Smith Street—operated by Mill City Grows
4. 136 Smith Street—operated by Mill City Grows
5. 77 West 3rd Street—operated by Mill City Grows
6. Rotary Park—operated by Mill City Grows
7. North Common—operated by Mill City Grows
8. Keenan (Eagle) Park—operated by Mill City Grows
9. 16 Hampshire Street—operated by Mill City Grows

The Community Garden Program has been a very popular program and has provided City residents the opportunity to grow culturally appropriate food they may not be able to easily find in local grocery stores. Waiting lists at several gardens indicate a continued level of interest from local residents in the program.

¹ Human Services Corporation, “Lowell: The flowering City. A Report From the Project Anthopolis Charrette.”

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These community gardens have created a wonderful sense of community amongst gardeners and have helped the City address ongoing maintenance problems at several locations. Community gardens have had a transformative effect on their surrounding areas, and the City anticipates continuing to expand the program as opportunities present themselves.

In addition to the community gardens there are several school gardens across the City and gardens established at local churches and on privately owned property. These gardens have robust educational components and provide gardeners many opportunities to learn while growing food.

Another concept discussed in the Flowering City plan was the idea of a community greenhouse. This year a wonderful collaboration between UMass Lowell and Mill City Grows launched with the opening of a new 1,800 square-foot Urban Agriculture Greenhouse on the University’s East Campus. This new greenhouse is a testing ground where university researchers and students, along with members of the community, can develop new and efficient ways to use water and energy to grow sustainable crops year-round. As part of the new greenhouse project, the community garden formerly at the site has moved to a University owned parcel of land on Dane Street. The new community garden features a half-dozen raised beds available to students, faculty and staff, as well as residents of the Acre neighborhood.²

Greenways:

The greenways study group established three goals:

1. Restore and preserve existing parks
2. Expand the National Historical Park system
3. Create a unified park system that connects neighborhood and links the City to the region

Since the plan was written the City has made improvements to all existing City parks and open spaces. Some work included expansion and improvements to the location while other parks have seen substantial improvements and upgrades. In the years since the Flowering City plan was completed the City has created 18 new parks and open spaces. The City continues to implement long term park improvement plans such as phased improvements made to Cawley Stadium and South Common Parks in recent years.

The City is currently working on the Open Space and Recreation Plan and has heard feedback from residents that they too agree the preservation of open space is important. The City will continue to preserve and expand parks and open spaces when opportunities arise.

The City is continuing to work on expanding the network of bike lanes in existence in in order to help improve transit options for residents and provide citywide connections between neighborhoods. Regional rail trail connection work is still a work in progress; the Concord River Greenway project is ongoing and an important component to connecting Lowell to the Bruce Freeman trail.

In 2010, the Lowell National Historical Park amended their General Management Plan as part of the cooperative effort to re-envision the Hamilton Canal Innovation District. This amendment included the eventual creation of additional visitor orientation venues, that might be staffed or unstaffed, and contain information for visitors and residents. In addition to the expansion of their plans, they expanded the National Park boundaries to include additional parcels for access to the planned Upper Pawtucket Canalway.

Finally, Lowell National Historical Park has expanded their programming with several initiatives, including:

- “Meet me on the Merrimack,” a twice-weekly summer event in which visitors to the Vandenberg Esplanade can ride their new Riverboat for free and learn about the National Park and the Merrimack River
- “Pop-Up Museum”, regular cultural and historical programming in tents at events across the City
- A Lowell National Historical Park alternative-fuel bus that expands programming to the outer neighborhoods

Blueways:

The blueways team looked into how the City might build on efforts by the National Park and Heritage State Park to utilize water resources (canals and river and important watersheds). The blueways study team did an immense amount of work and recognized the importance of Lowell’s many waterways. The group made several specific recommendations to improve the existing waterways systems.

² University of Massachusetts Lowell, Urban Agriculture Greenhouse Sprouts on East Campus. Ed Brennen, September 2017.

Several of the study team’s recommendations for the improvement of our waterways systems have been completed or are ongoing. Below is an update on the status of the goals laid out in the plan:

1. The City, State and National Park have all recognized the importance of the water connections throughout the City. All parties have spent considerable time, energy and funding to improve the existing waterways, and plan for continued improvements.
2. Lowell National Historical Park has begun the process of procuring new signage to rebrand the Canalway system, and has partnered with the City utilizing Federal Lands Access Program to develop special crosswalks to draw further attention to the Canalway as an identified, unified system. Both projects are expected to advance in 2018-2019. In addition to these public projects, the Lowell Waterways Vitality Project has selected several areas of focus along the Canal system to advocate and advance private and public events, such as “Light up the Locks” and the “Points of Light Lantern Celebration”.
3. The City and Lowell National Historical Park came together in the early 2000s to develop the final stages of the Western Canal Walk between Market Street and Father Morissette Boulevard. The City and Lowell National Historical Park have also been working together to advance Canal Walks on both the Lower Pawtucket and Upper Pawtucket Canals. This includes the City providing appropriate access to the Lower Pawtucket Canal from Pevey Street, and the National Park procuring funding for engineering expected to advance in 2020. The City has utilized Federal Lands Access Program funding to develop designs for a Canal Walk that would extend from Utopian Park along the canal and behind the planned Hamilton Canal Innovation District garage, tying into the larger system downtown.
4. The City, Lowell National Historical Park, and Lowell Parks and Conservation Trust developed a small park near the Spalding House that connects the Northern Canal Walk to Francis Gate Park, the state-owned Canal Walk between Pawtucket and Broadway Streets. Coalition for a Better Acre has undertaken planning to enhance the walkway behind the Franco-American school near “the Grotto”, further strengthening this connection. Finally, the City, University of Massachusetts Lowell, and other partners have also continued to discuss ways to enhance the bicycle and pedestrian experience along Pawtucket in this stretch of land.
5. The City has been leading a project to expand the Vandenberg Esplanade through state-owned land to School Street. This project, known as “Pawtucket Falls Overlook,” is being designed with National Park funding, and is expected to be constructed with MassDOT funding in 2020. The state has signed a letter agreeing to maintain this new project. This leaves a final gap in the system between School Street and Beaver Brook, and the City has applied for a \$100,000 Recreational Trails Program grant at the request of the State to advance planning and design for this gap, along with enhancements to the Centralville Riverwalk and expanding the Riverwalk on the North side to Lowell’s borders.
6. The Concord River Greenway project has been a priority project for the City and State for several years. Two phases of the Greenway have been completed and planning and design work is ongoing for Phase II. The City has secured over \$1M in grant funds to complete the next phase of the project.
7. Although Pawtucket Falls has been altered with the addition of the bladder dam, it still offers a striking view. Two viewing nodes are being designed as part of the Pawtucket Falls Overlook.
8. The Lowell Waterways Vitality group has been working with Lowell National Historical Park, the State, the City, Enel Green Power, Lowell Parks and Conservation Trust, and many other partners to determine how recreational craft may utilize the canal system and its connections with the Merrimack and Concord Rivers.
9. In addition to work being done via the Waterways Vitality group, the City is currently facilitating a coalition of public and private partners to enact a maintenance plan for the canal between Broadway and Father Morissette. If successful, this model could be replicated for other blueways that don’t currently have a maintenance plan. In the meantime, the City and Lowell National Historical Park are developing an inventory of the facilities and maintenance responsibilities for shared blueways throughout the City.

Many of the thoughts and ideas generated in the Flowering City are still relevant today and have inspired some of the newest and most exciting recent efforts in the City. The Lowell Heritage Partnership and City of Lowell announced a new initiative in 2016: the Lowell Waterways Vitality Initiative. This is a unique partnership between many public and private agencies that can carry the spirit of the Flowering City forward, specifically around Lowell’s canals and river crossings. The mission of the Lowell Waterways Vitality Initiative is to enhance the everyday experience of people in Lowell by making the City’s historic waterways more accessible, active, and vibrant³.

As a kick off, the City of Lowell first lit permanent, new colorful LED lights along the Merrimack Canal at Lucy Larcom Park at Winterfest 2016. A pilot event held in September of 2016 drew hundreds of people to the Hamilton Canal Innovation District to the “Light Up the Locks” event where LED lights were temporary installed to light up the Swamp Locks. In 2017, after a year-long community process including dozens of meetings with community leaders and the public, the Lowell Heritage

³ Lowell Waterways Vitality Initiative Action Plan, A report of the Lowell Heritage Partnership Fund and City of Lowell.

Partnership and City of Lowell released the Lowell Waterways Vitality Initiative Action Plan, including recommendations for five key nodes along the blueways. The Lowell Waterways Initiative raised over \$1 million of private funds to date and recently celebrated another successful lighting event with the Cox Bridge lighting project on May 5, 2018. They have also facilitated the private purchase of new architectural lighting for many key architectural treasures in downtown Lowell. The Waterways Vitality Initiative work continues as ongoing planning and conversations about next steps and future projects move forward.

Environmental Ways (E-Ways):

This was a focus on long term plans to link environmental and cultural resources within the City and within the Greater Lowell Region. The City continues to implement the construction of the Concord River Greenway. During the fall of 2009, two sections of the Greenway were completed, including the Davidson and Lawrence Street sections. With the completion of these two sections, there have been 2,700 linear feet of path constructed as part of the Greenway so far. As part of this construction, 53,300 square feet of green space has been created or refurbished. In 2015 the section of the Greenway between Jollene Dubner Park and the Centennial Island Apartments was built. This involved extensive clean-up of debris on the river bank and the building of a coffer dam. The City of Lowell, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the design team at Brown, Richardson and Rowe, and the Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust are coordinating efforts to get the remaining sections of the Greenway completed.⁴

Swamp Locks, the Western Canal Walk, and the Upper Pawtucket Canal Walk were all mentioned as ways to link communities to the environment, and previous successes and current plans for those walkways were discussed in the Blueways section. Coalition for a Better Acre and Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust both lead biannual cleanups in those areas. Lord Overpass plans include stronger connections from Gallagher Terminal to the Canalway system, including the future Upper Pawtucket Canal Walk. The City also recently applied to several grants to extend the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail underneath the Lowell Connector, with the ultimate goal of connecting the trail and the Concord River Greenway, providing enhanced pedestrian and bicycle access from the Highlands and South Lowell to the entire system of paths and parks identified as “Environmental Ways”.

Welcome-Ways and Thoroughfares:

The Flowering City Plan mentioned the importance of identifying and developing major point of entry within Lowell and making them appealing and inviting. Projects like the Lowell Waterways Vitality lighting of Cox Bridge have enhanced a main thoroughfare in the City. In the last several years the City has installed banners in the Lower Highlands and throughout downtown in order to add to the visual interest of these neighborhoods and give visitors an idea about where they are in the City. Lots of work has also been done to pedestrian scale signage including regularly updated informational kiosks in downtown and the installation of historical markers on buildings around downtown. The City also secured \$50,000 in Federal Lands Access Program funding to create a Pedestrian Wayfinding signage system throughout downtown and portions of the Acre and Back Central, to create a feeling of welcoming and safety for visitors and residents alike. CDBG funds will implement an approximately 10-sign pilot, expected in 2019, with additional signs to be installed as components of other projects.

Outside of Downtown, two major neighborhood business corridors have seen significant improvements. The City invested Chapter 90 and CDBG funds into the Cupples Square and Bridge Street Corridor business districts. Updates to both areas included improved paving, street striping, improved parking organization, pedestrian enhancements such as sidewalk bump outs to improve drivers ability to see pedestrians and decrease the distance they need to cross. The City has invested in improving bike and pedestrian amenities and continues planning efforts to further enhance multimodal access across the City under our Complete Streets Ordinance. Improvements such as the multimodal path recently competed at the South Common and improved tree plantings on Bridge Street are an example of these ongoing efforts.

Substantial infrastructure projects are upcoming that will impact several main thoroughfares in the City including the redesign of the Lord Overpass and the TIGER Bridge Project, which will repair or reconstruct seven of the City’s canal bridges in various states of disrepair. The Thorndike Street Widening has been specifically developed as a welcoming gateway to downtown from the Lowell Connector, with enhanced light posts and proposed signage.

DNT/ns

7/3/18

cc: Yovani Baez-Rose, Assistant Planner
Chris Hayes, Transportation Project Manager

⁴ Lowell Parks and Conservation Trust website, 2018.