

# Parking expansion will help Birmingham's future



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Much like our own properties that eventually require some reinvestment due to an aging roof, failing furnace or crumbling driveway, cities also share in the need for reinvestment due to aging infrastructure and facility needs.

One such project is the planned parking expansion of the North Old Woodward parking structure and related site development along an extension of Bates Street. It is no surprise that parking in the downtown has been a hot topic over the past few years, but the reality is the North Old Woodward parking structure is over 50 years old and the costs to maintain and meet safety standards are escalating.

The need to proceed with addressing this parking structure is growing and efforts to plan for its replacement while incorporate elements of the downtown master plan for this site development have been ongoing for the past few years.

Some might suggest that the city delay this project and wait to include this site in the upcoming citywide master plan update. The current citywide master plan was completed in 1980 and has been updated over the years with the inclusion of subarea plans for the Downtown, Triangle and Rail Districts, just to name a few. The N. Old Woodward / Bates Street site is already included in the subarea plan for the downtown district and is the final component to be implemented under this existing downtown plan.

What has not been addressed since 1980, and is the focus and scope of the citywide master plan update, is identifying the needs for the city's residential neighborhoods rather than its commercial districts.

It has also been suggested by some

that this project had a flawed process. In fact, the city initiated a specific process for this project with the intent of increasing parking and incorporating key elements of its downtown master plan. This process started with a parking demand study to assess future parking needs, then was supplemented by a massing study to assess how big of a development should be built on the site along with the incorporation of key elements in the downtown master plan that matched existing building heights in the area.

These elements included the extension of Bates Street along with residential and mixed-use buildings adjoining the new street. A pedestrian connection to Booth Park was also identified as a key site improvement for the project.

When the initial massing and design work began, a Request for Proposals (RFP) was issued with the provision that the firm selected to do this work could not be involved in the subsequent development stage of the project. The city received no proposals from this RFP. Following a review of this issue, this provision was removed in order to solicit qualified firms to work with the city in identifying design alternatives for this site. Three firms responded to the revised RFP. One firm was selected and the initial design concepts were created and adopted for use in a subsequent selection process.

The city intentionally conducted a process that was driven by a preliminary design concept based on prior studies in order to meet key objectives for both parking and density rather than allowing developers to propose an open-ended development plan for this site.

The solicitation process for development proposals began in May 2016 to identify developer teams that had experience and sufficient financial strength to execute the project as envisioned in its RFP. Four developer teams submitted their qualifications. In September 2017,

an RFP was issued to those four teams to participate. In January 2018, three development proposals were received for consideration. One of the teams withdrew their proposal during the evaluation process. The two remaining development teams presented very different approaches in their proposals.

Of the two development proposals that were considered, one matched the concept, objectives and terms of the city's RFP and one did not. The unsuccessful bidder has since sued the city. While an unfortunate outcome, the city stands behind its process and ensuring the fundamental objectives of the RFP are met.

## In January 2018, three development proposals were received for consideration.

The city has initiated discussions with the selected development team with assistance from outside counsel at Miller Canfield specializing in real estate and public private partnership deals and with Jones Lang LaSalle to review and validate proposed budgets, underlying assumptions, and assess market demand for the project to support the on-going negotiations.

It has been suggested by some that this site is the wrong location for increasing parking capacity. The selection of the North Old Woodward site to accommodate increased parking capacity resulted from a couple of factors.

First, this site was originally designed to accommodate the North Old Woodward parking structure and a sister structure that would accompany it on the surface parking lot to the west. The second structure was never built and the adjacent site remained a surface parking lot.

Second, following a review by a city study committee of the opportunities to

expand parking in the downtown, it was determined the North Old Woodward site provided the greatest opportunity to increase downtown parking and could be done in a way that was context sensitive and didn't impose itself on the downtown.

Additionally, it could be hidden on the current site with surrounding liner buildings that would complement the downtown and promote walkability — meeting fundamental objectives of the downtown master plan.

It has been suggested by some that this project will not provide sufficient additional parking. The additional parking number identified in the parking demand studies represented a need for 278 spaces north of Maple. This number was developed while contemplating potential future growth in the downtown based on the Downtown Overlay Zoning Ordinance, which allows for increased density in the downtown. Because the city has a parking assessment district in the downtown, commercial properties are not required to provide parking on-site but can use the city's parking system to support their parking needs. These additional spaces would increase capacity from the existing 745 spaces that exist with the current parking structure and surface lot to 1,023 spaces at this site. The city increased this number to 1,150 when it issued its RFP for the project to further increase capacity. The current parking proposal for this site is roughly 1,260 spaces, subject to final design of the structure.

While some will try to tell you what to believe and how to vote on the funding of the parking structure expansion and related improvements, it is important that everyone clearly understands the facts about this project and can make informed decisions accordingly. To assist in this effort, the City has created an FAQ page on its website at [www.bhamgov.org/noldwoodwardparking](http://www.bhamgov.org/noldwoodwardparking).

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