

GEIS Public Scoping Meeting Meeting Notes

June 4, 2019

**Approximate # of
Public Attendees:**

11

Staff Present:

Brian Kulpa (Supervisor), Dan Howard, Brian Andrzejewski, Kim Amplement (Planning Department)

The meeting began at 7:03 pm.

Dan Howard started the meeting by introducing the Town Supervisor, Brian Kulpa, and members of the Town staff.

Brian Kulpa started with an overview presentation of what events and projects led the Town to pursue a Generic Environmental Impact Statement (GEIS) for the Opportunity Zone.

- Large size and changing demographics of the Town
- Current conditions – University Campuses
- Various plans and projects are being pursued that feed into an update of the Town’s Comprehensive Plan
- One of these Town projects includes plans for the Town’s designated Opportunity Zone
 - Opportunity Zones were qualified and designated by the Federal Government
 - Investors can pool opportunity funds together to pursue development projects to enhance and encourage investment in lower income census tracts to revitalize these areas
 - Census Tract 92 in the Town was the only designated Opportunity Zone that qualified based on various criteria
 - It is bounded by Niagara Falls Boulevard on the west, Sheridan Drive on the south, and the I-290 on the north and east
 - The goal is to encourage mixed-use projects and provide various housing options
 - The Town is aware of two projects that have solid footing with opportunity funds – the Ridge Lea Campus owned by Benderson and the Boulevard Mall site which was just recently sold and purchased by a partnership between RMS Development, Douglas Development, and Sinatra & Company.
 - The Town has been working on new mixed-use zoning districts that will be implemented in the Opportunity Zone. These replace existing districts to encourage mixed-use, an emphasis on building form and design, and creating a better pedestrian experience.
 - Infill Districts which are in more historic, “traditional” places of Town with an existing character that should be replicated
 - Retrofit Districts for more “suburban” areas of Town with larger parcels, along major roadways, and with a lack of place identity. These will be redeveloped with new street networks, better access management, and a more traditional form to encourage walkability.

- With the new zoning districts encouraging more mixed-use and density, improving existing infrastructure and planning for new infrastructure to support this new development is imperative – includes sewer, water, roadways, etc.
- The Town needs to figure out the costs for the new infrastructure and figure out how to pay for them to accommodate the new development and to mitigate the impacts that may come from it such as more traffic, environmental effects, etc.
- This is where the GEIS comes into play

Brian Andrzejewski described the GEIS and the Scoping Process

- The purpose of this meeting is to elicit public comments on the Draft Scope for development of a GEIS that would apply to the entire Opportunity Zone plus some parcels on the south side of Sheridan Drive
- A GEIS is an environmental analysis prepared under the State Environmental Quality Review (SEQR) process which identifies environmental impacts from future large scale projects and corresponding mitigation measures
 - Because the Opportunity Zone is so large and will include large areas of development in the future, it has been determined to be a SEQR Type 1 Action and has a Positive Declaration – this means the EIS Process needs to be completed
- Typically an EIS is done on a specific site or for a specific project which focuses only on the corresponding impacts to the immediately adjacent areas
- The Town's GEIS will look at the cumulative impacts of growth of various projects in a much larger area and how the impacts of all projects relate to one another to effect the Town and the region
 - Future development projects proposed for this area must be consistent with the GEIS Findings, otherwise they may be required to submit supplemental information or studies
- To establish this GEIS, assumptions are made regarding future land uses, corresponding zoning districts, and development projections phased over a 20 year planning period (until 2040) – these become one of a few Redevelopment Alternatives for the Town
 - Alternatives are analyzed and revised to create a Preferred Alternative
- The Preferred Redevelopment Alternative is analyzed and associated cumulative impacts to community services, infrastructure, and the environment are identified
- Mitigation measures are then identified based on the impacts and a fee schedule is developed to pay for the mitigation to avoid significant adverse impacts to the environment and the community – spreads the cost around
- The GEIS and the Preferred Redevelopment Alternative will communicate to future developers and the region the Town's comprehensive future vision for this area
- There are 3 Phases to complete the GEIS
 - Phase 1 – Scoping (where we are now). This identifies what environmental factors should be studied in Phase 2 in order to create the GEIS and Findings Statement in Phase 3.
 - The Town has already been identified as SEQR Lead Agency, the Town Board issued a Positive Declaration, and the Draft Scoping Document was released for public review

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- The Town is looking for comments on the Draft Scoping Document. The public comment period ends on June 14th and the Town Board will likely adopt the Final Scoping Document on June 17th, setting the scope of the GEIS Phase 2 Study
- Comments can be sent to the Town Planning Department (5583 Main Street, Williamsville 14221) or via email to bandrzejewski@amherst.ny.us
- Comments are compiled and incorporated, when appropriate, into the Final Scoping Document
- Phase 2 produces a Draft GEIS – this takes the scope and analyzes Town data to identify environmental impacts and mitigation fees to be collected by individual developers in order to pay for the impacts to infrastructure from the new development (based on the Town’s Preferred Alternative)
- Phase 3 takes public comments from the DGEIS and incorporates them, when appropriate to complete the Final GEIS and the Findings Statement.
- The goal is to have the GEIS in place in the Opportunity Zone by the end of 2019

Public Comments & Questions:

- 1: Are many University at Buffalo students expected to live in the Opportunity Zone with the anticipated future development?

It is anticipated that there will be students living in the area. The Town currently has single-family homes that students are either occupying or buying, and student housing projects are being developed off campus spreading along Sweet Home Road and Audubon Parkway. New student housing projects are seeing very expensive rents and a more mixed-use form, with student amenities located directly on the site or in the same building. New housing in the Opportunity Zone is likely to include various forms and price ranges, but many students will likely live in market rate apartments geared more at upperclassmen and graduate students who live off campus but could have young families. There are incentives for development in the Opportunity Zone and incentives for students to live there if there is more mixed-use, walkability, and a sense of place.

- 2: Where are people who are lower income going to live?

People with lower incomes do not have to live in the Opportunity Zone, although some affordable housing may be included in new development projects. There is a benefit to having mixed housing with various socio-economic statuses because it doesn’t focus poverty into one area of the Town.

- 3: How will all of the new infrastructure needed in this area be funded?

Likely there will be Federal or State money/grants involved but it is not a guarantee. One of the outcomes of the GEIS will be mitigation fees that will be charged to developers based on the infrastructure needed to mitigate the fees.

- 4: Where is the future vision of the Town coming from?

The Town will use various sources of information to come up with the various alternatives and eventually the Preferred Alternative. The Town had an Economic Study done in 2016 which points to future economics and development, there have been cultural and social movements across the country regarding shopping, retail preferences, walkability, and transportation options. Demographic shifts can also be seen by using available data. More data and analysis will be done in Phase 2.

- 5: Is the schedule for this process accelerated and is it set in stone?

There are a lot of things that have influenced the schedule. One includes the timeline for the DRI Grant, which will likely be awarded in the fall, making funds available for new infrastructure in the Opportunity Zone if the Town successfully secures the grant. The Opportunity Zone funds also are being formed this year, and potential projects need to be identified by the end of the year. This GEIS project is meant to inspire change for the Town, and with the coming changes the Town is trying to get in front of new development in order to plan for it and influence it. Instead of dealing with development on a piecemeal basis, this project tries to account for the cumulative development and effects of it to make sure that the impacts are addressed. Development should be focused in this area so that other areas will remain unchanged and conserve their existing character. Having this GEIS completed by the end of the year ensures that new development does not outpace the Town.

- 6: How are the people living in the Town who may be effected by this going to be informed?

This is the beginning of the GEIS process – this is the first public meeting. Within the scope there will be various changes for public input and requirements for public hearings. That is the time for people to comment and make their opinions known. We are looking for comments now on the Draft Scoping Document and if there needs to be more public outreach or involvement, the Town should be made aware during this phase.

- 7: How did this project arise?

The Town currently has problems with sanitary sewer capacity on the west side of Town. Because of this, the Town is currently involved with sewer modeling to be more informed of the issues. Then the Town got a designated Opportunity Zone which encourages redevelopment. Within the Opportunity Zone, the Town has been made aware of several projects that may be utilizing opportunity funds and looking to redevelop – the Ridge Lea Campus and the Boulevard Mall. The Town also has the new mixed-use zoning districts that encourage more mixed-use and would allow for increased density in this area. The Town wanted to be able to deal with the current issues while being able to encourage and implement future projects. The Town researched ways to do this, and

came across the GEIS for the Town of Colonie, NY last fall and ever since have been working to pursue a GEIS for the Town's Opportunity Zone.

- 8: What impact with this new development have on the single-family homes in the area?

We can't know for sure right now, but we will get a better idea once the Phase 2 study begins. The Town of Colonie, NY saw increased values. The Sweet Home School District has a homestead rule which means their taxes are based on commercial areas located in the district. If new development occurs, likely commercial property values will rise, causing increased taxes and revenue in the area, which will make it more desirable to live. It is possible that the single-family home values could increase.

- 9: Will the Boulevard Mall be razed completely?

The mall was just recently sold, so likely there will be redevelopment occurring there in the next 10 years. Malls are a failing model of retail in today's market and this can be seen by its rapidly decreasing property value and tax assessment. Because there are leases still in place, likely the mall itself will be removed in a phased approach. With the GEIS and the new zoning, we can get ahead of the future redevelopment and help it better suit the Town's needs and desires.

- 10: Are parking ratios being reduced in the area? Traffic issues are already a problem.

The parking ratios in the Town are already too high, because they are planned based on a "black Friday" day. There is an excess of parking already. With the new development being encouraged by the new zoning, this area will be more mixed-use which decreases travel and vehicular trips and encourages more biking and walking. There will also be new streets with on-street parking, lots behind buildings, and shared parking opportunities. There are new models of how to build "big box" stores with smaller footprints and two or three stories, so it can free up developable land that we do not want to fill with large lots of parking. With a Design Advisory Board, the Town will be able to influence building form and design and will demand a newer model of development.

- 11: Will there be height limits in the area?

There will be different heights allowed in different areas depending on the surrounding context. Heights could be up to 8 stories in specific areas such as near the I-290 such as portions of Ridge Lea, the Golden Triangle, and the Boulevard Mall. Most of the new development will be allowed up to 5 stories, with very stringent rules on transitions and setbacks to residential areas. Some commercial areas will only be allowed to be up to 2.5 stories because of their direct adjacency to residential.

The meeting ended at 8:22 p.m.