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Weymouth sees planning & infrastructure as key to creating an active, vibrant and healthy community - by Mayor Hedlund

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Mator Robert Hedlund

Although the COVID-19 pandemic affected every community in the state and has changed the way things are done for the present, Weymouth has viewed this period as an opportunity to up its game. And through it all, we have confirmed that everything we were doing was putting us on the right path for the future. Infrastructure has been critically important and the town has completed several projects with several more in the middle of design. In addition, the pandemic has not slowed our planning department that embarked on a number of studies to determine the next best steps for enhancing and preparing our historic village squares for the future.

Related to infrastructure, the MassDOT Rte. 18 widening project has continued throughout the pandemic. The rebuild will create four lanes with sidewalks and shoulders to accommodate bikes providing better access from the Union Point area to Rte. 3. We expect that project to be close to completion late this year. Complete Streets projects have been implemented since 2017 including traffic calming actions, enhanced street crossings and new ADA ramps - taking advantage of several MassDOT grants. Significant work in the Landing over the past several years to enhance the major economic growth has been underway near the rail station – something we worked closely with the town of Braintree to advance.

Columbian Sq. is our most historic square located near Rte. 18 with businesses, nearby neighborhoods and the South Shore Hospital medical complex. In 2017, we retained Green International Affiliates to help us reexamine the square and its needs and more importantly, bring the business and resident communities together on a plan that would move the square into today's thinking - i.e. be walkable, have spots to sit down, relax and enjoy the area – and move traffic but in a safe manner that first and foremost, respects pedestrians and bicyclists. That project is now ready to move into final design and we hope to be ready to advertise for construction later this year.

Last fall we took advantage of the MassDOT Shared Streets and Spaces program to secure a small grant, again with the help of Green, to help several restaurants in Columbian Sq. with a temporary outside eating area. While it was a “new” thing for us as a town, it proved enjoyable and successful for the short time it was in place. It provided us with a test for the future of the square as well. This past winter, the planning department engaged Green for an examination of on-street bike accommodation along our major roads with the purpose of safely connecting the four town squares with safe biking for all. The results of the study that included the several virtual public meetings has generated a lot of excitement and interest from the general public, the biking community as well as the school department given not only the continued COVID-19 effect on school bus travel but also we are a Safe Routes to School community. With a new MassDOT Shared Winter Streets grant award, we are planning to demonstrate how to enhance safe bike movement between Columbian Sq. and Jackson Sq.

The planning department also invited the Urban Land Institute to town and provide a valuable look at Bicknell Sq. and the Bridge St. corridor. A series of recommendations resulted which we are now

contemplating. The Bridge St. corridor is another critical north-south route for the town with a significant amount of potential for the community to build off the success in the other areas. It is near our ocean waterfront and two state parks. MassDOT has agreed to conduct a major design project along that entire corridor to determine the best course of action. We would like to stress a multi-modal approach with new sidewalks, ADA compliance, safe crossings, accommodate bike travel and overall, create a pleasant environment along that corridor that will enhance the economic viability of the current and invite new businesses that want to locate in the corridor.

Lastly is Jackson Sq. Again, while we were in the pandemic shutdown, the planning department advanced a zoning study for the square to evaluate the changes needed to allow for a more viable future for the square and encourage private investment while still respecting the residential community that exists in close proximity to the square. There has been much private interest for redeveloping properties in the square and we are committed to developing the right tools to accommodate that while balancing its effect. This square is served directly by the East Weymouth MBTA train station.

In closing, I would like to say Weymouth is excited for the future. While a mature community, we are open for business and also invite new residents to come to the town. We are preparing great things and are certainly one of the major South Shore communities that one can live, work and play – all within our border.

Robert Hedlund is the mayor of the town of Weymouth, Mass.

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