

Devens Economic Analysis Team (“DEAT”)

Minutes of September 11, 2015 Meeting

7:30 AM

Hildreth House

Paul Green, Secretary

Members Present: Steve Finnegan, Paul Green, Noyan Kinayman, Victor Normand, and Christopher Roy
Members Absent: None.

Victor Normand, Chairman of DEAT, call the meeting to order at 7:40 am.

Old Business

Approval of Minutes

Minutes for the August 14th and August 26th meetings were reviewed and approved by the Committee. Steve Finnegan moved to approve the minutes and Chris Roy 2nd the motion. The vote was unanimous.

Annual Report

Victor gave a brief overview of last night’s Planning Board meeting to the DEAT. The Planning Board has hired a consultant to update Harvard’s Master Plan. The consultant is coming up to speed on Harvard and is using our previous reports as input. Victor has supplied the consultant with the Devens Assessor’s schedule and the 2008 property analysis. These two documents are closely related; one can compare the expected level of development (in the 2008 analysis) to the current level of development (in the property tax schedule). The consultant appreciated the data. Victor noted that the consultant pointed out that resuming jurisdiction is not just a question of ability but also one of capacity; i.e., staffing levels.

Noyan said that Harvard might be able to retain some of the existing staff, which other members agreed was a possibility.

Victor noted that there has already been some transition; Harvard performs education; there is now a regional dispatch service in place; Harvard and Devens use the same property assessment company. He feels that the Devens Utilities Department is an example of staff that we would try to retain; only the Board of Directors would need to change.

Victor said that he would distribute a memo that lists the mandatory elements of the Master Plan. He also felt that hiring a consulting company that was new to Devens was a good move and would give us a fresh set of eyes.

Victor reported that he had invited Lucy Wallace, our liaison on the Harvard Board of Selectmen to attend today's meeting, but that she had a conflict. He will work with her to find a mutually acceptable time.

Victor said that he felt that our methodology (of estimating the costs of running the Harvard portion of Devens by averaging the costs of towns of a similar mix of residential and commercial) was clear and simple enough that anyone could update it each year. They would simply need to get the Devens assessor's schedule each year, and then look up the budgets of the benchmark towns (which are available on the Commonwealth web site).

Our discussion next turned to the question of how to keep the community engaged with the ongoing process of dealing with the future of Harvard and Devens.

Along these lines, Paul described the process that he had used at the Congregational Church to convince the members of the Congregation to renovate their classroom building. He said that it took 9 years from the start of the work until the construction finished. One of his techniques was to ask the Congregation to vote on the next steps at regular intervals, both to keep them engaged and to ensure that they were all willing to proceed. He felt that one of the more difficult tasks was to convince the members that not only were they in favor of the work, but that the other members were also in favor of it. Since people had to voluntarily contribute to the cost, he felt it was important that everyone knew that everyone else was on board; no one was being forced to participate.

Paul felt that that it would not be wise to have just a single up-or-down vote on Devens Disposition. He suggested that the town use 4 milestones: (1) agree on the criteria for initiating the disposition process (e.g., perhaps based on the number of unsold parcels); (2) agree on the process to follow to achieve disposition (he felt this could be decided well ahead of time, and kept on the shelf until needed); (3) implement the disposition process and come up with the recommendations to the Governor and Legislature, as called for in Chapter 498; (4) put the recommendations up for approval by the affected parties.

Victor felt that disposition could be managed using a process that is parallel to the process that was used in 1993 to establish the reuse plan for Devens. The affected parties could agree to establish a Commission comprised of representatives from each group. The Commission would then establish subcommittees and divide up the work, oversee the effort, and compile the final report.

Steve asked how could we make it easy for the Board of Selectmen to continue making progress on Devens? He would like to see the analysis taken to the next level of detail, where, for example, someone could prepare realistic budgets for operating the Harvard portion of Devens.

Victor said that, in his experience, it was hard for elected officials to be proactive. He felt that one way to make progress would be for the Board of Selectmen to charge the Planning Board with the task of developing a process for the disposition of Devens. They could then divide up the work, and either take on various tasks, or delegate them to other town committees. For example, planning for transitioning the responsibility of educating the students living at Devens from Mass Development to the towns could

be the responsibility of the School Committees. Victor also felt that every list of disposition criteria for the last 20 years has started with financials, and that we have now passed that threshold with the work of this committee, and the Town could turn its attention to other issues. He suggested that Harvard should determine the areas to cover in the disposition plan, settle the issue of representation, involve the community along the way, create the disposition plan, and put it to a vote. This would just be a plan for how to do disposition; it would not be disposition itself. So the vote would be to approve the proposed process. Once approved, we can then create a budget and approach the Commonwealth and our representatives for funding. We will need to hire professional consultants.

Steve asked when could we realistically begin the disposition process.

Victor said that MassDevelopment has said that it has a lot more work yet to do, and he agrees with this assessment.

Steve and Paul both said that it could take 5 years to plan for, and execute, the disposition.

Victor noted that as the process unfolds, a body of knowledge would be created and can be shared with, and reviewed by, the public.

Noyan asked why Harvard couldn't work out the details as we went along? Why do we need the study committee? If the finances work, can't we just start the work?

Victor replied that, in his view, a third of the town would agree with you (Noyan). A third would be against the idea. The other third would be in the middle. We would not be able to make progress under those conditions.

Steve reported that people that he knows and respects are concerned about resuming jurisdiction over Devens, and think we should just stay away from it.

Victor felt that the way to keep public officials engaged was to stay with a familiar approach. He felt that public officials understand the Master Plan model and are comfortable with it, and so using a process similar to it would be advisable. He said that he is a strong believer in sun setting. Responding to Paul, he said that it might be a good idea to schedule some votes. He didn't feel it was necessary to ask for a commitment just yet.

Paul said that he wished that the Board of Selectmen would call us in, engage with us, and tell us what they want.

Chris said that following a process should result in a decision. It shouldn't just be a study. We need to make some decisions. There comes a time to decide; we can't keep studying it.

Victor responded that asking the Board of Selectmen to charge the Planning Board and then report back to Town Meeting is a specific act that the Board can do. They might not be able to fix a timeframe, but they can set real milestones.

Steve asked if we should flesh out a plan for the next steps?

Victor said that this is why we need to talk to Lucy, to set up a process and a specific goal.

Steve recalled a statement by Lucy during the 2B process: "We need to know what we are getting and what we are giving up." He feels this is still a relevant point.

Chris asked if we could review the information that we have now (with the town), and then ask for a decision at Town Meeting.

Steve felt that it was the job of the Board of Selectmen to keep the town informed.

Victor said that if government tries to move too fast, the next person may not have all of the information and when they speak out they can cloud the issues. This, in turn, plants a seed of doubt. He feels that 90% of the town is uninformed or marginally informed at this point.

Victor also noted that there was a risk that MassDevelopment could decide for themselves that their work is done, and give the towns only a short period of time to take over; say, only a year. He felt that this would rush the process.

Paul said that such a situation was what he was hoping to avoid by settling the process now. We could agree on it, and then put it on a shelf until it was needed.

Steve asked how we could institutionalize the work on Devens. Victor suggested that the Planning Board could be asked to produce a report each year on Devens.

Noyan asked if we have a good picture of the financials at Devens?

Victor explained our expense model, and that we had to use a model because MassDevelopment lumps traditional governing expenses alongside redevelopment and marketing expenses. Thus, the MassDevelopment spending patterns are not a suitable model for a municipal budget. As one specific example, the MassDevelopment Department of Public Works manages the rental properties at Devens. They will continue to do this work even after disposition. Since MassDevelopment does not track its internal expenses to a level of detail needed to separate municipal expenses from redevelopment expenses, we have no choice but to use another method.

Steve asked what is our next step? Do we need to craft something?

Victor responded that we need to find a way to keep the process moving. He likes the idea of charging the Planning Board. Devens is currently three-quarters of the Master Plan conversation. The Town planner knows a lot more about Devens by now.

Chris said that this is a natural progression. We have shown that the gross finances are viable. Now we move to the next level of detail. How does Devens affect each area of government? He asked who would establish this investigatory structure?

Victor replied that if we give the work to an existing board, this would offset potential concerns that could arise if a special committee was formed; namely, that the members were carefully selected to achieve a specific outcome.

Victor said that he would set a date to talk to Lucy, and let us know. Paul will post the meeting once the date is set.

New Business

None.

Select Future Meeting Dates and Locations

No next meeting date was set during this meeting. Several days later, after Victor spoke with Lucy, the next meeting was set for Friday, September 18, 2015, at Hildreth House, at 8:00 am.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 8:50 am.