

NY Forward – Capital Region - Athens

Subject	MINUTES LPC Meeting #4	Date	Monday, September 15, 2025
Place	Volunteer Firehouse 39 Third St.	Time	6:00-8:00pm
Distribution	<u>Local Planning Committee</u> Amy Serrago, Mayor (co-chair) James Hannahs (co-chair) Tim Albright Todd Bernard Stephan Bradicich Sarah Grinberg <i>Mike Lee (absent)</i> Jim Martino Paul Petramale Carol Pfister Merrill Roth Andrea Smallwood Jeff Strockbine	<u>State Team</u> Matthew Smith, DOS Gina DaBiere-Gibbs, DOS <u>Consultant Team</u> Ian Nicholson, Buro Happold Dan D'Oca, Interboro Laura Lourenco, EDR <u>Public</u> ~35 individuals	

Meeting Summary:

Please see 'AT_LPC Meeting 4_Slides_record' for the presentation shared during the meeting which parallels the discussion summarized below.

Action items are called out in ***bold-italic highlight***

Welcome and Agenda

Matt (DOS) welcomes the group to the fourth NY Forward LPC meeting. He briefly overviews the meeting agenda and reminds the room that these meetings are open to the public, but not intended to be public interactive workshops.

He then briefly overviews the meeting agenda.

Opening Remarks

Mayor Serrago (LPC Co-Chair) thanks everyone for their engagement and participation so far.

Code of Conduct

Matt (DOS) reads the Code of Conduct preamble, and reviews key points from the Code of Conduct that LPC members are expected to abide by. Recusals on file are reviewed and LPC is invited to note any further necessary recusals. Merrill Roth recuses himself from Cultural Center Project (E).

Updates: Planning Process & Engagement

Ian (BH) review of what's been done so far and what is on the horizon (see slides).

Dan (Interboro) provides synopsis of engagement done since LPC-3 meeting, including review of the results of the 2nd Public Workshop, the Sign Campaign, and the Online Projects Review Survey. The full raw data is being made available to the LPC members, and project-specific comments are being shared during the project evaluation section of this meeting. Noted that bulk of negative comments related to an aversion to providing public money to private projects.

Submitted Projects

Ian (BH) reviews the Downtown Vision, Evaluation Criteria, and summary of the projects as received from the Open Call. The map of projects is reviewed and then initial evaluation results are shared.

Each of the submitted projects are reviewed in turn, with Ian (BH) presenting the results of the LPC evaluations and any sponsor updates, and Dan (IB) reviewing the public feedback. The LPC is then invited to provide any additional comments or questions for each project in turn.

A. Create a Riverfront Access Hub

- Concern about impact of docks on river view.
- Confirmed that kayak dock would remain in existing location.
- Agreement that more docks is important.
- Clarification that most items being discussed would be decided during a future design phase.
- **Confirmed that the bulkhead scope will be removed and cost estimate updated accordingly.**

B. Implement Complete Streets for 2nd St.

- Confirmed that a portion of the Trees USA grant (\$75k) is being used as a matching source for this project.
- Concern that the cost seems high for the benefit – confirmed that **consultant team will develop the scope and budget further prior to next meeting.**

C. Improve the Waterfront Intersection

- No comments noted.

D. Develop a Retreat on Water Street

- Discussed how open to the public the site would be – confirmed understanding that the exterior areas would be treated and managed as a public park. **Consultant will ask Sponsor for more details.**
- Discussed the size, nature, and price point of the food service included in the plan – is it a “hot dog stand” or a fancy restaurant? **Consultant will ask Sponsor for more details.**

- Appreciation for the raise in profile of having a world-renowned artist's memorial in the Village and the benefit that would create for tourism.
- Understanding that the objections raised so far are specifically related to providing limited public funds to the project, as the Sponsor is seen as deep-pocketed, and the Project is seen as having been committed to prior to NYF process. Otherwise, the project seems to enjoy strong support, just not using public funds.

E. Revive the Athens Cultural Center

- Discussion of whether the project is "transformative." Emphasizing that the project would activate the 2nd and 3rd floors, which are currently underutilized shell space.
- Discussion about the funding – clarified that NYF is a reimbursement grant, so there would be no risk of "losing" NYF dollars if the project fails to come up with the rest of the money. If the project is awarded funding and then is not completed for whatever reason, that NYF money would be reallocated to a different project recommended for funding in the SIP.

F. Improve Mount Hope Cemetery

- Discussion about how additional resources might be shared with Sponsors of projects that do not move forward. Confirmed that consultant team will be reaching out to all Sponsors to inform them of the results of the meeting – and those that don't move forward will receive links to additional opportunities that may be viable. James (Co-Chair) also offers that the County is eager to assist people and they should reach out to him to have a conversation.
- ***LPC unanimously agrees to discontinue consideration of this project for NYF funding – see final section of these notes for more detail.***

G. Renovate the Mixed-Use Opera House

- Discussion about the housing component – confirmed that there will be a mix of unit types, observed that this is one of only a few proposed projects that add housing, discussed potential affordability of the units. Mayor observes that Athens is a designated pro-housing community and that increasing supply of housing is just as important as affordability.
- Confirmed status of the project which is underway: the 2nd and 3rd floor are basically roughed-in, ready to be fitted out with wallboard, fixtures, finishes, etc.

H. Renovate Athens Studio

- No comments noted.
- ***LPC unanimously agrees to discontinue consideration of this project for NYF funding – see final section of these notes for more detail.***

I. Restore the Barn on N Warren Street

- Brief discussion about the location of the project on the dead end of an alley.
- ***LPC unanimously agrees to discontinue consideration of this project for NYF funding – see final section of these notes for more detail.***

J. Enhance Night School Brewpub

- No comments noted.
- ***Project is being combined with Project G and will no longer be tracked as a separate project.***

K. Repair the Marina Bulkhead

- Discussion about whether propose bulkheads would stop or alleviate flooding – the short answer is “no.” The longer answer is that to address flooding, the Village would need to deploy bulkheads at an infrastructural scale that creates a continuous barrier at a determined flood elevation – cannot be accomplished parcel-by-parcel as any floodwaters would just travel around any discontinuous barriers and backfill behind. Proposed bulkheads would only be effective against soil erosion.
- Observed that the Marina is a private dock with limited options for traveling public. Also noted that Windham Mountain Club is a tenant onsite, which creates additional exclusionary dynamics (WMC operates at a very high price-point).
- ***LPC unanimously agrees to discontinue consideration of this project for NYF funding – see final section of these notes for more detail.***

L. Rehabilitate 9 N Franklin Street

- No specific comments noted.
- ***LPC unanimously agrees to discontinue consideration of this project for NYF funding – see final section of these notes for more detail.***

M. Renovate 13-17 Second Street

- For both Projects L and M (same Sponsor) – discussed the option of asking Sponsor to reduce ask to cover exterior work, and observed that this would place them below the threshold for a standalone NYF project, and would be classic Small Project Fund scopes.
- ***LPC unanimously agrees to discontinue consideration of this project for NYF funding – see final section of these notes for more detail.***

N. Revive 6&8 South Franklin Street

- Confirmed the use of the 2 structures, and observed that it is one of only a few that would bring additional housing units to market.

O. Modernize 18 Second Street

- Observed that submitted project budget is quite low, perhaps even below the threshold for consideration as a standalone project.
- ***LPC unanimously agrees to discontinue consideration of this project for NYF funding – see final section of these notes for more detail.***

P. Create the Esperanza Media Arts Center

- Discussed the Project’s significant distance from the current NYF boundary. Suggestion that if distance is the only problem, that it’s a small Village and this could help expand people’s definition of what “downtown” is. Counterpoint that the Project did not score overwhelmingly well, and there are no other projects proposed near it, so it doesn’t fully create a new center of gravity to overcome the distance.
- Discussed the DRI/NYF program philosophy of concentrating investment in as tight a physical area as possible to create visible transformation that reinforces itself and leads to additional investment. Discussed the likelihood that this project would not score well during State review

for this reason, so continuing to develop it would not be a productive use of the Sponsor's time and resources.

- Shared that NYF Round 2 in Hoosick Falls featured a similar boundary extension that DID result in a funded project, but that was justified by a cluster of multiple projects, one of which received significant public and LPC support and had significant outside investment promised. It's more difficult to justify for a single private project.
- ***LPC unanimously agrees to discontinue consideration of this project for NYF funding – see final section of these notes for more detail.***

Q. Restore 40 Second Street

- Concern that this property is simply addressing what is really deferred maintenance, rather than a true transformation – this could be said of many of the smaller projects proposed. Observed that DRI/NYF guidance explicitly looks unfavorably on deferred maintenance type scopes, and that these projects are much more viable thru the Small Project Fund.
- ***LPC unanimously agrees to discontinue consideration of this project for NYF funding – see final section of these notes for more detail.***

R. Upgrade Stewart House and River Garden

- Discussed the bulkhead scope – **confirmed that it will be removed and the cost estimate updated accordingly, in coordination with the Project sponsor.**

S. Improve the Tenth House Healing Center

- Appreciation for the impact the business has made for the community, and that the proposed project would allow them to expand their hours and programming to be more accessible to a broader range of customers.

T. Redevelop the Trinity Church Building

- Excitement expressed about the potential of this venue operating at full capacity and benefit that would have on visitation to business and restaurants downtown.
- Would not only be weddings, but any appropriate community events, concerts, etc. The Cultural Center has used it before.

U. Enhance 62 Second Street

- No specific comments noted.
- ***LPC unanimously agrees to discontinue consideration of this project for NYF funding – see final section of these notes for more detail.***

V. Restore the Façade at 46 Second Street

- No specific comments noted.
- ***LPC unanimously agrees to discontinue consideration of this project for NYF funding – see final section of these notes for more detail.***

Small Projects

Ian (BH) presents an overview of the small project interest letters as received during the Open Call, and then provides an update on additional letters received since LPC-3 meeting, which added \$146k of demonstrated interest. Also noted the significant amount of individually submitted projects that have scopes and budgets that could be viable for the Small Project Fund, which would bring the demonstrated interest to more than \$1.4m. Clarified that these projects will be counted towards the demonstration of interest, regardless of whether they are included as standalone projects in the slate of projects recommended for funding – in the event that they are recommended but not ultimately awarded, they would still be viable candidates for the SPF.

LPC discussed the SPF and confirms that they are interested in recommending the largest possible version of this, which is \$600k. Aligns with public feedback to focus on exterior portions of various projects. Provides another opportunity to all the smaller submitted projects that are getting removed.

LPC Q&A

Most discussion is noted in the projects rundown above, and/or in the removal notes below.

In general LPC asked to make sure that Sponsor's currently proposing a minimum 25% match are asked whether they can increase their match, in order to fund as many projects as possible with the available \$4.5m while also making room for the large Small Projects Fund.

Public Comment

Recommendation to consider maintenance considerations (for example, snow plowing) when making decisions of which projects to fund.

Concern expressed that the questions asked to evaluate the Projects was "weird" and should have focused more on community impact and job creation, among other things. *[Note: the Evaluation Criteria include both of these considerations, and the public outreach was open-ended and invited comments of any kind.]*

Concern expressed that "nobody visits the riverfront park except to walk their dogs." *[Note: this is contested by multiple people in the room.]* And that the park is only open/usable for 5 months out of the year.

Multiple questions regarding quantification of project impacts, for instance number of people that use the riverfront park, or number of people that use the streets/sidewalks slated for redesign, or tax impacts of property improvements. General answer given that in-depth cost-benefit analysis would be prohibitively time-consuming and expensive to perform within the parameters of the NYF process for 20+ projects at a time, and that given the conceptual nature of most project proposals, a rigorous analysis would be near-impossible. The consultant team relies on the local insights and expertise of the selected LPC members, as well as the gathered feedback from the public in order to make qualitative assessments of project impacts to inform the selection of a slate recommended for funding.

Question about how long the public comments survey will be open – answer that for projects that continue past this meeting, the survey will be open until the next meeting in late October, and additional public feedback is very encouraged. Also confirmed that if projects are discontinued at this meeting, that is a final decision (barring extraordinary circumstances).

Objection to removing bulkheads from consideration, that their prices could be brought down, that they don't require maintenance and can "protect what we have."

Question about whether all facades can comprehensively be addressed – ie, what about if a bunch of facades are cleaned up but then there's a derelict one in the middle, what impact would that have? Answer that the concept of the Small Project Fund is exactly this – to provide a broad impact across that NYF area – however, there can be no mechanism to force property owners to fix their façades, so gaps would inevitably be possible – and that's okay.

For Project D, is the restaurant going to be part of the non-profit owner, ie not paying taxes?

Consultant will include this question in outreach to the Sponsor to confirm.

Objection to using public funds for Project D, followed by extended discussion. First concern is impression that the restaurant will be large and will likely only serve wealthy tourists not locals. Second concern is impression that project is already fully financed, so any NYF or other public funds would simply displace private money rather than lead to additional investment (ie, "negative leverage"). Third concern is impression that Sponsor is extremely wealthy and already receiving tax benefits for the project since it is held in a non-profit entity. Observed that a "Letter of Concern" was received by the consultant team and shared with the LPC, and also that it was shared more broadly by the author. Commentor also shared hard copies of a petition that he had collected signatures for, opposing public money being used towards this project. Ian (BH) invites him to send a digital copy to consultant team for the record. Finally, it was clarified for all that the project evaluations are multi-faceted, based on 17 different criteria, and that the financial considerations of any project are not determinative. It is observed that this project scored "low" on the "cost effectiveness" criteria.

Objection from a Project sponsor that this meeting is the first time they are seeing the comments coming in, so have not had an opportunity to respond to them. Concerned that decisions are being made based on hearsay. Consultant team noted that LPC decisions are not based solely on public feedback and comments – they are reviewing the detailed project applications against the 17 evaluation criteria, and that while the public feedback informs the process, it is not determinative. It is also a large reason why the LPC is composed of local leaders who come equipped with knowledge of the Village and things that are going on.

Objection that the best scoring projects appear to be those with the most well-resourced Sponsors. Consultant team reiterates again that cost effectiveness is 1 of 17 different evaluation criteria that are being used to assess project merit.

Projects to be Removed from Consideration

Due to the competitive response to the Open Call for Projects, and the fact that the well-scoring projects are totaling nearly \$8m when the eventual slate of recommended projects is to target \$6-8m, the LPC agreed that it would make sense to significantly cut lower-scoring projects.

The LPC discussed the issue of the bulkhead scopes and decided to categorically remove these scopes from all relevant projects due to overall poor alignment with NYF goals and relatively high costs.

Therefore, **the budgets of Projects A and R will be re-evaluated**, and **Project K will be removed from consideration**. These sponsors will be directed to participate in the LWRP process, which is the more appropriate avenue to discuss waterfront flooding/resilience infrastructure.

The LPC discussed the issue of extending the boundary and agreed that the extension required to accommodate Project P would be counter to the program guidance from the State to concentrate investment in a compact area, and would therefore be unlikely to receive funding even if recommended, and therefore **Project P will be removed from consideration.**

The LPC discussed the overwhelming interest in a Small Project Fund and decided to categorically eliminate poorly-evaluated projects with relatively small budgets, due to their ability to apply to the future Small Project Fund. Therefore, **Projects F, H, I, L, M, O, Q, and U will be removed from consideration.** The LPC will discuss whether to pursue a larger-than-\$300k Small Projects Fund at the next meeting.

Due to its incorporation into Project G, **Project J will be removed from consideration as a separate project.**

Due to the Project being nearly complete and therefore mostly ineligible for NYF reimbursements, **Project V will be removed from consideration.**

Next steps

Consultant team will reach out to all Project Sponsors to inform them of the results of the meeting and provide them with any questions and requests necessary to complete their project profiles for the next LPC meeting.

END OF SUMMARY