



# **Claremont City Center Project Focus Group Summary**

## **Building Contractors**

**January 30, 2012**

**4:00 PM – 5:00 PM**

**Claremont Visitors Center, Claremont, NH**

DRAFT



Summary notes prepared by UVLSRPC

## **Narrative Summary**

Introduction of the City Center Project and overview of project was provided by members of the Steering Committee. The purpose of this Focus Group is to look at barriers and opportunities to construction and renovation in the City Center based on input from building contractors. Part of the focus of the City Center Project is to assess and find improvements to: building codes and enforcement, zoning in the city center, and infrastructure.

The following summary notes are organized by topic and cover all information shared in the session. The Focus Group Notes are the transcribed notes recorded during the meeting.

### **CONDITION OF EXISTING CITY CENTER BUILDINGS**

Building and renovation quality: past or present work that may not meet a good standard of quality.

- Not only are there older buildings in the city center, but the old buildings that have had potentially poor construction and/or renovation work done on them in the past.
- This substandard work can turn-around and cause greater issues in the future when the owner or future owner wants to renovate and finds the work to be poor quality that requires correction.
- The balance point is the relative pay-off of the renovations to the resulting increased value to the building. If the cost of the work does not get reflected in the increased value of the building, the property owner is unlikely to invest. This is a difficult situation in Claremont, particularly in the present economic conditions.
- A lot of existing buildings in the city center area likely have outdated electrical systems that require improvement to meet current codes. They may also have deteriorating or damage structural members, which may shorten the useful life of the building.

Value of buildings in the city center:

- At present the value of buildings sometimes do not justify the cost of the renovation work. There is a lot of moderate and lower income housing, but the value of the residential structures are too low to do any substantial work.
- Many insurance and refinancing processes require the homeowner to identify condition of the electrical wiring in the house. If the wiring is older (e.g. knob and tube wiring), then there may be a requirement to remove the older wiring, which could translate to a substantial, unanticipated cost.

Lower quality of work, which is less expensive and preferred by property owners, may translate into a long-term issue in future renovation efforts. If there is work done to a lower standard, there is the possibility that the lower standard of construction deteriorates sooner. This can cause a downward spiral of deteriorating buildings, declining property values, and lesser incentive to reinvest in properties.

## IMPACT OF CODES ON BUILDING PROJECTS

Perception of building codes:

- There is a sense among some contractors that the City is making work difficult for them, when the City has taken-on the responsibility of enforcing the state-enacted building and life safety codes.
- The codes can increase the cost of the project and even cause more work to be required to meet the individual codes.
- There is difficulty when considering the cost of a project and how the codes cause that increased cost as compared with neighboring towns that may not have the capacity to enforce building codes.
- There is “sticker shock” of the project cost after the codes are taken into consideration.
- Due to the cost of a project, many building owners may conduct ‘patchwork’ improvements to avoid the cost of the larger work scope.
- Apparently arbitrary application of building codes – examples include: unnecessary multiple bathrooms, ADA-compliant facilities when the front entrance is not ADA compatible, multiple water fountains in a store that sells water and soda.

The City now makes the effort enforcing and following-up on project work, which is good for the overall welfare of properties in the city center and other locations. Unfortunately, there is a backlash from contractors who enjoyed lesser standards at the municipal level as recently as 5 years ago. The increased standards have improved the quality of work in the City.

Types of projects determine the contractor’s scope of work and level of effort in a project.

- Commercial projects are more straight-forward, where the property either meets the minimum standards of the code or not, which is translated to the cost of doing business.
- Residential/apartment buildings are more complicated. The property owner may want to make improvements so they meet building code requirements, but cannot afford the full cost of the improvements.
- A contractor may be asked to make improvements to an older building, but preserve the historic architecture or interior finishes, which makes the work more challenging for the contractor to keep from damaging these features.
- Some contractors that claim to scope a project based on the requirements of the codes can be underbid by other contractors. The implication is that the lower bidding contractor may be cutting corners.

Knowing the Code helps with the project work:

- Being familiar with the codes helps in discussing and negotiating the scope of work for a project. Knowledge of how the project is affected by the codes proves to be a valuable skill that, typically, few contractors and architects have.
- Familiarity with the codes and the construction permit process makes it easier to work with the City. Unfortunately, the typical property owner is not familiar with the codes or the permitting process.

- Many property owners are more comfortable with the project work after meeting with the contractor and the City Building Inspector prior to submitting for a permit, or to review the permit submitted. This helps the owner understand that the scope of work is not arbitrary.

## **BRAINSTORMING SOLUTIONS**

Options for the City to improve code issues and making projects more palatable:

- Phasing a project to spread-out the construction costs in distinct sub-tasks could address the ‘all at once’ circumstances.
- Have City staff meet with property owners to review their project goals and potential project phasing plans.
- Information sheets with outreach information for the homeowners to help them understand the permitting process. Educating the homeowner is an important step.
- Contractors may or may not understand the repercussions of their work and the City currently does a good job helping the contractors understand how certain actions or project work is not acceptable. Further work to aid in educating contractors could be helpful for maintaining quality of work and helping them understand the codes the City enforces.

**Claremont City Center Project**  
**Building Contractors**  
**Focus Group Notes: January 30, 2012**

The following notes have been transcribed from hand-written tablet pages. The following statements, concepts, and ideas were generated during a facilitated focus group interview with participants on this topic.

**PAGE 1**

Problems City center/City Center

Outdated services/wiring (knob+tube) – working around historic features

Problems manifest themselves once you get started

Tenants taking-on units themselves

Buildings sinking in on themselves

Customer shell-shock (decide not to go forward)

Renovations not done properly 20-30 yr ago

Commercial more straight forward than residential piece-meal work

Lower cost repairs to stretch resources

Some contractors don't have proper standards (cut corners, etc.)

ADA an expense (change of use triggers)

IEBC Better

Small code issues that create need for “creative” solutions

**PAGE 2**

Helpful that City will allow some phasing

Residential easier

Temp CO for commercial

Solutions?

Permits general enough to allow problem fixing

New construction more straight forward – just fix it when find problems

Inspector on board helps cont. deal w/balking homeowners

Substandard work now creates a trickle-down problem

Jobsite master plan for phasing to fix-up properties

Backlash from [word] code enforcement coming to fruition

Continued public tradesman education on 'why'

Simplify the code

Factsheets