

Q&A on the Williams Inn Project

Why is a new building needed?

The current one, after 45 years, is failing. Its systems are limping. Eight guest rooms have had to be taken off line. Like most buildings that age, it's very energy inefficient.

Why move the inn to Spring Street?

For many years there's been a strong wish in town for more life on the street. The inn project will take this important center of visitor and community activity and embed it in the heart of town. The move aligns with the town's master plan, which calls for greater density in the town center, and significantly upgrades, in terms of both aesthetics and use, the land at the bottom of the street currently used for storage. The current use detracts from, rather than adds to, the street. The project will also clean up and turn into a public amenity the land around Christmas Brook, which is currently inaccessible.

What will be in the building?

The building's program is based on a full market study conducted by Pinnacle Advisory Group and on a sense of community needs. There'll be 60 guest rooms, a function room for up to 200 people, small meetings rooms, and a restaurant with 35-50 seats and an accompanying bar. There's the possibility of adding, now or in the future, an annex with 40 guest rooms, which would be available at peak times but not need heating, etc., at others. There'll also be a patio and location for a tent.

How does this compare with the current building?

The current building has 116 functional guest rooms, a similarly sized function room, and a somewhat larger restaurant/bar. The goal of the new building is to serve visitors and those of us who live here and who gather at the inn for events such as banquets, chamber breakfasts, weddings, bat mitzvahs, and receptions after memorial services.

Where exactly would the building go?

We've closely studied two locations: where those storage sheds are (see Option A at end of this document) and in front of the public parking lot (Option B). For an accumulation of reasons, it's very likely to be the first. That site handles traffic and parking more smoothly and is better suited to managing rainwater. The building will still have presence on the street. The American Legion building will be moved and its space turned into a public gathering spot (Adirondack chairs, etc.) and a lead-in to a walkway along a revived Christmas Brook.

What will the building look like?

The expensive process of design will begin when we're sure that the business zone has been expanded to enable the project. But we envision that it'll be a traditional New England inn and that there'll be public input to the design process.

How will traffic be handled?

We commissioned the firm Fuss & O'Neill to conduct a traffic study, which measured traffic at the peak periods of mid-summer and October and projected the traffic that'd be added by the building's program. The study's main conclusion is that the effects are manageable. It predicts that in peak hours the added traffic would be on average one trip per minute.

It recommended attending to two areas of traffic flow. One was traffic that would be added travelling north on Hoxsey Street to Main Street. Since the study we've decided to build a continuation of Walden Street as far as Stetson Court that, with proper signage, would actually reduce traffic on Hoxsey below its current level. There's also the possibility of eventually extending Walden Street through to South Street.

The other area was the intersection of Water Street and Main Street. The study pointed out that 1) lines of vehicles waiting to turn onto Main are already undesirably long, 2) they're so long that traffic from the inn wouldn't feel like it was adding much effect, and 3) ways exist to improve the situation. It recommended prominent road painting to make clearer that there are two lanes at the top of Water. There's also the possibility of a roundabout of the kind that has positively transformed Manchester, Vt.

What about parking?

No current parking will be lost. Half of the inn parking will be next to the building. The other half will run along the south end of the public lot (which would shift slightly north). A system of bollards will make this inn parking available for general public use when it's not needed for inn purposes. That's likely to be a considerable amount of time.

What happens to the current inn and the land it's on?

The building will come down. There's a chance that the land could become the proposed site of a new college art facility. It's one of several being considered. If not, we'd put there a playground or some other kind of gathering place. This'd be like a cover crop, holding the land for possible other use sometime in the future.

Isn't the intersection of two state roads a good place for an inn?

It may have been before the invention of the Internet. Few travelers any more head out without knowing where they intend to stay. The previous inn, currently Dodd House, was particularly hidden. And the benefits to Spring Street of moving the inn there are considerable.

What would the net tax effect be?

We estimate that the net effect will be an annual addition of \$60,000 in property tax and another \$50,000 in room tax.

What has the permitting process been?

We're still in the pre-permitting phase. We began talking with the Planning Board more than a year and a half ago. In spring 2015 we called a timeout from those discussions to study the site more closely. We formed an unofficial 10-member group of local residents (representatives of boards, neighbors, merchants) to think through with us the pros and cons of the two proposed sites. And we commissioned three studies: environmental, geotechnical, and traffic and parking.

This February, we re-submitted the Planning Board's proposed amendment to the Select Board, which voted unanimously to endorse it as its own proposal.

This March the Planning Board conducted a public hearing on the merits of the zoning change and voted unanimously to recommend its passage at Annual Town Meeting. Similarly, at its meeting on April 11th, the Select Board voted unanimously to recommend that Town Meeting approve the proposed expansion of the Village Business district.

The next step is a vote at Annual Town Meeting whether to approve the zoning change. That takes place May 17 at 7 p.m. at the elementary school.

What'd happen then?

That actually would be the beginning, rather than the end, of an extensive permitting process. Even with the zone change, the inn would not be permitted as of right. Once the architectural and site plan designs have been completed, the inn will go through at least three rounds of municipal review and permitting. The Zoning Board of Appeal would review our application for a special permit, considering whether the project's benefits to the town outweigh any adverse effects on the neighborhood or the town more broadly. It will review such factors as the project's location and visual consequences, whether there is sufficient access, and whether any special conditions should be required. The ZBA will also conduct development plan review to confirm that the site plans comply with all the town's design standards. The Planning Board also has a role – ensuring that the project's access, drainage, and utilities are equivalent to the requirements of the town's subdivision rules and regulations. Finally, the Conservation Commission will review all impacts within wetlands and riverfront areas for compliance with Massachusetts regulations.

When would it be built?

If the zoning change passes this May, there'd be 12-16 months of design and permitting, followed by a year and a half or so of bidding and construction. So the new inn could be open in the summer of 2019.

To summarize, the project

- replaces a deficient building
- takes this important center of visitor and community activity and embeds it in the heart of town where it will add year-round life to the street
- aligns with the town's master plan
- upgrades significantly the current eye-sore use of that land
- turns the abandoned area around Christmas Brook into an attractive public amenity
- increases parking available for public use during much of the year
- has manageable traffic effects
- and adds to the tax base
- and is unanimously endorsed by the Select Board and Planning Board.

Questions? Contact Jim Kolesar at jkolesar@williams.edu or 597-4233.

Option A Master Site Plan



Option B Master Site Plan



