

Town of Mount Pleasant Shem Creek Task Force

Final Recommendation Report

January 3, 2017

Town of Mount Pleasant

Shem Creek Task Force

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Introduction

Shem Creek is the iconic landmark of the Town of Mount Pleasant. Its history as a community cornerstone and economic driver continues presently, and with the growth occurring in Mount Pleasant, it is important to preserve this area for future generations. It is for this reason that Mayor Page and Town Council established the Shem Creek Task Force.

The purpose of the Shem Creek Task Force was to develop recommendations to preserve and promote the unique history, nature and economy of the Shem Creek Study Area. The Shem Creek Study Area was determined by the Task Force during their initial meetings and is further outlined in this report.

The Shem Creek Task Force was chaired by Cheryll Woods-Flowers and was comprised of 15 total members. The Task Force members represented various occupations, interests and experience with Shem Creek and its surrounding areas.

The Shem Creek Task Force met once a month for six months and discussed numerous topics. Their final report is respectfully submitted below for Town Council's consideration.

Schedule of Task Force Meetings

July 18, 2016

August 16, 2016

September 20, 2016

November 15, 2016

January 3, 2017

Discussion Topics

The Shem Creek Task Force held its first meeting on July 19, 2016. During this meeting, the Task Force members identified the following discussion topics for future meetings. All topics were later organized under general headings as written below.

Visual Impact (Built Environment)

- Visual Corridor (Simmons St. to Lansing Dr. along Coleman Blvd.)
- Land use
- Shem Creek Study Area

Quality of Life

- Greenspace
- Impact of Shem Creek (and Shem Creek Overlay District) on surrounding areas/neighborhoods.
- Infrastructure/infrastructure management
- Adequacy of public access as it relates to boating (pleasure craft and commercial vessels)
- Commercial activity: varying commercial sectors

Public Safety

- Traffic
- Parking
- Public safety

Preservation

- Historical issues
- Water quality/stormwater run-off (the watershed basin)

Task Force Discussion and Considerations

The Shem Creek Task Force's principle recommendation to Mount Pleasant Town Council is to allocate funding and hire a professional consultant to create a master plan for the Shem Creek Study Area. The Task Force believes that significant additional research is needed before any other definitive recommendations can be made. Furthermore, the Task Force believes that a master plan, adopted by Town Council, is the best means to accomplish the goal of preserving, promoting, and protecting the unique history, nature and economy of the Shem Creek Study Area.

With their principle recommendation in mind, the Shem Creek Task Force developed a list of concerns for each discussion topic. The Task Force requests that this list of concerns be provided to the consultant and addressed through a master planning process. The list of items corresponding to each topic and a narrative describing the Task Force's discussion are provided below.

Visual Impact

- Urban Corridor Overlay District building heights and volume (size and number) of structures
- Visual inconsistency with properties in the Shem Creek Study Area
- Preservation of creek as a working creek
- Preservation of recreational abilities in the creek
- Provision of dock space for the shrimping/fishing fleet
- Preservation of operational location for the shrimping/fishing fleet, should the fleet leave Shem Creek
- Protection of cultural icon in the creek when the shrimping/fishing fleet leaves
- Preservation of diversity in the creek: uses, design, etc.
- Provision of adequate parking

Quality of Life

- Preservation of public access to the creek; working waterfront & local seafood
- Provision of adequate parking and resulting impact to surrounding areas
- Protection of ecosystem
- Preservation of creek as a working creek
- Provision of trucking/transport infrastructure to move product
 - Need access points
- Impact of growing tourism industry
- Increased support and awareness for local seafood
- Concerns about access to the boat ramp in terms of the ramp's capacity
- Promotion of boater education
- Provision of secure dock space
- Protection of surrounding residential areas from disorderly conduct and noise originating from nearby commercial areas

Public Safety

- Conflicting uses on the creek
- Explore need for additional enforcement in Shem Creek and surrounding areas regarding alcohol consumption and watercraft operation
- Pedestrians crossing Coleman Boulevard and Mill Street intersection
- Improved functionality and design of the Harry Hallman Jr. Boat Landing
- Insufficient number of parking spaces and failure to meet required parking regulations
- Increasingly unregulated use of public docks for private ventures
- Construction of physical barrier between the Shem Creek Park boardwalk and Coleman Boulevard
- Illegal use of golf carts on Coleman Boulevard
- Safety concerns regarding high level of activity on the creek
 - Commercial vs. recreational; motored crafts vs. non-motorized crafts

Preservation

- Preservation of the commercial character of the creek
- Protection of the view corridor (building heights, building locations, setbacks, etc.) without negatively affecting the developable square footage under the current guidelines
- Encourage visual consistency and architectural styles of what has historically been built in the study area
- Retention of existing commercial square footage
- Preservation of the shrimping/fishing fleet
- Maintain public access: boat launch and other water vehicles
- Maintain the eclectic look of the area; structures should have marine-like design and look as though the structure belongs in the area/fits in with surrounding structures
- Maintain water quality to keep the uses of the creek as they currently exist

Narrative

The Shem Creek Task Force's discussion centered around the topics of Visual Impact, Quality of Life, Public Safety and Preservation. Though there were some unique concerns related to each topic, many of the concerns raised related to most, if not all the discussion topics.

One of the Task Force's principal concerns is the preservation of the character of Shem Creek. The Task Force believes that residents, businesses, and visitors alike all recognize Shem Creek as Mount Pleasant's iconic landmark, representing the culture, history, and identity of the community. For this reason, the Task Force believes that the natural landscape of the marsh and creek, as well as the built environment of the surrounding areas should be carefully planned and maintained.

Furthermore, the surrounding built environment should be designed and constructed to complement the natural landscape of Shem Creek. Special consideration should be given to the selection of building materials so as to preserve and to highlight the character of the creek. Contemporary architecture and designs are not in keeping with the character of the creek and should be discouraged through approved design standards. Structure height and mass should

also be carefully planned so as to maintain the character of the creek. The Task Force expressed serious concerns about structure height and mass and the impact design regulations have on what is constructed. The Task Force unanimously agreed that a line of built structures with flat roofs was not in keeping with the character of the creek. The Task Force understood that structures must abide by all other applicable laws, such as flood regulations, but they also agreed that the built environment in the study area should be varied in height, mass, and other design elements.

In addition to the built environment, the Task Force believes that the uses in and around the creek should be complementary to the creek's character. Shem Creek has historically been a working creek and its status as such should be maintained. The Task Force agreed that the shrimping and fishing fleet's presence in Shem Creek should be preserved. Recreational and business uses in the creek can and should be allowed, but not at the expense of one another. The Task Force believes that Shem Creek should have some type of regulation that prevents overuse of the area and conflict between uses. They urged some type of activity regulation so as to allow for both recreational and business uses to continue.

The Task Force approached the quality of life topics from a variety of different perspectives including: business, residential, recreational, educational and ecological. The group expressed concern over the continuous loss of traditional business ventures, especially seafood industry ventures, in and around the creek. The Task Force also expressed concern that new land uses and businesses in the area were incompatible and sometimes detrimental to existing uses and businesses.

The Task Force recognized the positive financial impact a growing tourism base can have on the area, but also recognized that significant activity without proper infrastructure can yield negative impacts on the creek and its patrons. An increasing number of tourism-based businesses have driven up the number of daily visitors to the creek and surrounding areas. Activity levels in the creek are at a seemingly all-time high. The increased activity on the creek and in the surrounding areas is negatively impacting the quality of life for Shem Creek patrons. The increased number of watercraft, particularly non-motorized watercraft in the creek makes it difficult to navigate the waterways safely. Furthermore, a lack of boater education leads to concern and confusion in the midst of the congested channel.

The creek itself is not the only congested area identified by the Task Force. The Harry Hallman Jr. Boat Landing was also identified as having more activity than is appropriate for the existing infrastructure and surrounding uses. Members of the Task Force expressed serious concerns about the number of businesses regularly operating out of the boat ramp and the lack of regulation of these businesses.

Additionally, the activity level in the creek now may be far beyond its natural capacity, thus causing negative impacts to the ecosystem itself. The Task Force expressed concern about the water quality in Shem Creek and had discussion as to what the appropriate target water quality level should be if the creek is to remain a working creek. This Task Force deferred further discussion about water quality items with the understanding that a separate working group focusing solely on water quality in this area would soon be established. The Task Force expressed their support of this initiative and asked to be kept aware of the progress made by this working group.

Members of the Task Force stated that there is a lack of support and awareness for the local seafood industry and because of this, the community may believe they are supporting the local seafood industry, when in fact they are not. Tourists and residents will visit restaurants along the creek believing they are supporting local seafood purveyors, when that may not be the case. In order for the local seafood industry to survive and thrive, investments in infrastructure, such as dock space and access points to load and transfer product are needed.

The Shem Creek Task Force believes that public safety is of utmost importance to the community, but especially in the Shem Creek Study Area given its high-level of daily activity by residents, businesses and visitors. Some of the public safety concerns identified by the Task Force such as the lack of boater education and conflicting uses on the creek have already been explained, but other concerns exist as well. Members referred to the newly constructed Shem Creek Park and Boardwalk when describing potential safety concerns for young children. Members stated that the area where the boardwalk terminates at Coleman Boulevard should have some type of movable barrier, such as a gate, so children are prevented from running on to Coleman Boulevard.

Another concern expressed by the Task Force is the need to explore additional enforcement of public intoxication both on the water and on the roads nearby. Compounding this concern is the increasing number of pedestrians and golf carts on Coleman Boulevard, the sidewalks and adjacent roadways. The Task Force mentioned that many individuals are starting to use golf carts without understanding the applicable laws such as minimum driver age, restrictions of use and lighting requirements. Additionally, due to the lack of parking for creek patrons, the number of pedestrians has increased without the proper infrastructure to support large numbers of pedestrians. The sidewalk across the Shem Creek Bridge is narrow and unprotected from vehicular traffic. Furthermore, pedestrians are continuing to cross roadways without proper regard for vehicular traffic. Many times pedestrians fail to wait for the designated walk signs at intersections or they cross the road without using the designated crosswalks. Additionally, motorists may not be aware of applicable laws related to pedestrians.

The Task Force also elaborated on the public safety concerns generated by the Harry Hallman Jr. Boat Landing. The group generally recognizes this area as an area-in-transition given that most of the properties immediately adjacent to the boat ramp are commercial in nature. However, some residences do still exist and there are neighborhoods nearby and this should be considered in any future planning of this area. According to the Task Force, the increase in private business ventures operating primarily out of the Harry Hallman Jr. Boat Landing is negatively affecting both quality of life and public safety. The Task Force believes the necessary infrastructure is not available at the boat landing to support the regular high level of activity that occurs in that area. Additional parking for the area is desperately needed as individuals are parking their cars in other businesses' parking lots or on residents' private property. The Task Force did not offer specific comments on this area other than to say that both current and future parking needs must be planned for and provided in order to preserve quality of life and public safety of all citizens.

The final discussion topic for the Shem Creek Task Force regarded preservation. As previously stated, several concerns already listed also relate to preservation, but the concern most discussed for this topic was the preservation of existing commercial square footage on the creek. The Task Force learned that due to changes in federal flood regulations, development guidelines and local ordinances, several of the existing creek-side businesses have non-

conforming structures. In the event of a loss or destruction of the property by 50 percent or more, several of the existing businesses would be unable to rebuild their structures as they currently exist. The Task Force believes that special consideration ought to be given to these businesses, which would allow them to rebuild their existing structures should their businesses become subject to an event or disaster beyond their control. In the event that businesses wished to renovate their properties by 50 percent or more, the Task Force generally agreed that it would be acceptable to require the structures to come into compliance with existing laws at that time.

Preservation of the historically commercial nature of the creek was also discussed at length. Concerns regarding protection of the shrimping/fishing fleet and other traditional water-based businesses was emphasized. The Task Force believes that properties located both on the creek and in the nearby vicinity should be commercial in use, particularly waterfront and maritime uses. Members believe the surrounding land uses directly impact the preservation of the creek's character as a working creek and public asset. The Task Force also stressed that public access to the creek ought to be maintained in perpetuity, but also carefully planned so as not to conflict with the working uses of the creek.

In conclusion, the Shem Creek Task Force recognizes the need to balance uses in and around Shem Creek so as to preserve this natural amenity for future generations. The group generally agreed that the creek and creek-side businesses should remain principally as a working creek. In preserving the area's designation as a working creek, the Task Force believes the Town is simultaneously protecting the history and culture of the Town by retaining its primary uses. The Task Force hopes the community will make it a priority to promote Shem Creek by supporting the local seafood industry and participate in preserving the creek by allowing it to operate the way it has throughout history- which is as a working creek.

Conclusion

After careful consideration and much discussion, the Shem Creek Task Force respectfully requests that Town Council secure appropriate funding and hire a professional consultant to master plan the Shem Creek Study Area. The Task Force also requests that the group remain intact and involved in the master planning process. In anticipation of the master planning process, the Task Force offers its list of concerns and narrative identified in this report and requests that these concerns be both provided to the consultant and serve as the basis for the development of the master plan. The members of the Shem Creek Task Force are grateful to Mayor Page and Mount Pleasant Town Council for convening this group and they remain committed to the goal of preserving, promoting, and protecting the unique history, nature, and economy of the Shem Creek Study Area.