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## **FEASIBILITY STUDY: PHASE 1. RUSSELL LIBRARY/CITY HALL MIDDLETOWN, CT**

### **REPORT SUMMARY**

September 12, 2023

Revised October 19, 2023

#### **Background**

The defects and failings of the existing City Hall and Russell Library facilities and sites were the impetus behind initiating a combined facilities feasibility study. The need to address these inadequacies is long overdue. Ongoing efforts and expense to shore up these facilities feels like “throwing good money after bad.” City Hall and the Library need purpose-built 21-st century places to call home.

Before committing to a full facilities feasibility study, a decision was made to first determine suitably commensurate sites for relocating Middletown’s signature civic institutions. That became the goal of Phase 1. This knits with a broader compelling vision and leadership responsibility to:

- leverage available site assets for municipal and community needs that can spur economic growth and activate adjacent properties, bringing more people together.
- improve the face and identity of Middletown.
- demonstrate the value of living, working, learning, and being in Middletown.
- engage and elevate diverse community voices to inform and support this vision.

After Phase 1, the next step will be to complete full facility feasibility studies that involve community participation, informing specific architectural, engineering, and site designs and cost estimates, particularly for Library facilities. The goal is a fully formed design for a public funding referendum as early as fall 2024.

While City Hall’s current municipal building at 245 DeKoven Drive has undergone numerous renovations and expansions since it was built in 1958, the facility’s infrastructure and floor area are now outdated and undersized by nearly 40%. Further

renovations are impractical. The Russell Library facility has similar issues, which were extensively documented in a 2021 *Facilities Assessment and Space Planning Recommendations* report. In many ways, today's Library facility is on life support. The purpose of Phase 1 was to study and recommend potential sites for these important civic institutions, including investigating a potential shared site for City Hall and the Library.

## **Process and Deliverables**

A dedicated Feasibility Committee of municipal and Library officials was formed to oversee this Phase 1 study. HMA2 Architects, which prepared the 2021 *Library Facilities Assessment* report, was contracted by the City of Middletown in March of 2023, focusing and consulting on high-level site selection options for City Hall and The Library.

Accordingly, from April through August 2023, HMA2 provided the following services and deliverables as part of a process that involved monthly committee meetings, examination of various sites throughout Middletown, and interim consultations with committee members:

1. Met with City and Library officials and became familiar with current services, facilities, and space needs going forward.
2. Worked with City and Library officials who provided an extensive list of potential sites for general consideration.
3. Established agreed-upon criteria for evaluating sites based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Pyramid. Combining practical and psychological aspects, this pyramid portrays ascending site criteria of availability, size, adjacency, prominence, and "feels right" at the apex.
4. Reviewed and evaluated all potential sites and with the committee determined a short list of edited sites that were understood to minimally meet key desirable points of the established criteria.
5. Developed site plan diagrams and massing/layout studies to test fit space and parking needs on the short list of sites.
6. Reviewed site plan and massing studies as a thought exercise with the Committee.
7. Developed expected next steps and cost breakdown for a full Feasibility Study for a new Library, assuming City Hall is advancing its decision (that in part came out of initial work with Phase 1) to acquire and occupy the Citizens Bank building on Main Street.

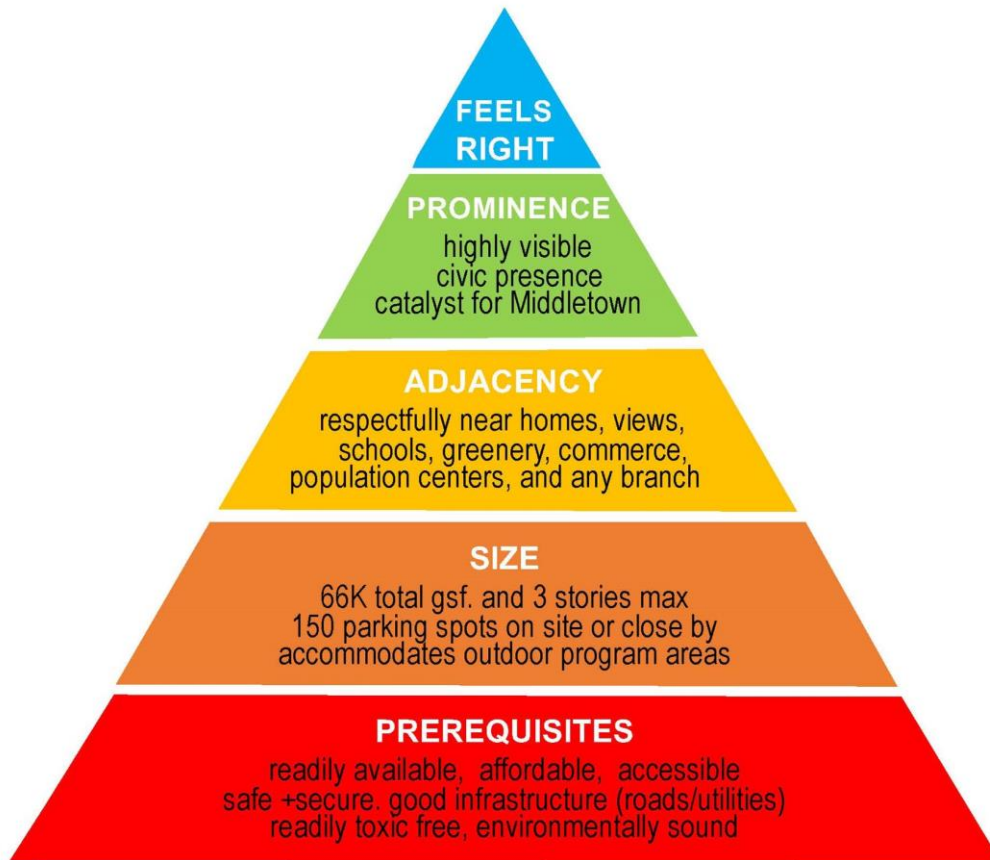


Diagram to inform site selection criteria. Based on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Pyramid.

**Outcomes and Next Steps**

The attached PDF presents the process and outcomes of Phase 1, setting the stage for a full feasibility study and referendum initiative. The outcomes from the last six months of collaboration with the Feasibility Committee can be summarized as follows:

**1. City Hall on Main Street.**

The Citizens Bank site on Main Street is a desirably feasible and prominent site for City Hall’s functional needs and civic presence, but not big enough to accommodate the joint needs of both City Hall and the Library. The historic bank hall appears to be an appropriate size and venue for civic assembly needs, and the connected three-story office building could meet current and future office, service, and access functions. The connecting existing office atrium that fronts Main Street could serve as an accessible, welcoming, and flexible entry space for reception, pre-function, and flexible gathering uses.

## 2. **Library space needs**

The minimum space needs for the Library, as informed by Connecticut State Library Space Planning Guide's standards for Middletown's population going forward were determined to approach 73,000 gross square feet. A planned facility of no more than 2.5 levels provides an optimally efficient and flexible footprint for such a library. Adjacent parking for 150 parking vehicles (knitted with rain garden plantings) and open green space (up to 16,000 sf) for Library program and public uses would meet anticipated public access and uses for everyday and event gatherings. Thus, a site of not less 2.75 acres would ideally meet Library needs as a stand-alone structure with adjacent parking and park space.

## 3. **Potentially viable sites.**

Around twenty properties throughout Middletown had been brought up over the years as potential library sites. Those along the river and in flood zones, or those not remotely available in any foreseen time frame, were immediately eliminated from consideration. Tested against agreed-upon criteria and in conjunction with members of the Feasibility Study Committee, a shorter list of six sites that generally met prerequisite and size criteria are identified and described below. The site addresses that are underlined are sites that have been deemed by the Feasibility Study Committee to be more viable, warranting further review going forward in Phase 2.

- **10 Main Street** (Former Rite Aid). A Prominent Main Street site with relatively new two-story structure has adjacent parking and park (albeit across Main Street). At the same time, this site presents costly and planning challenges to effectively renovate and expand, and would likely involve a third level over the existing structure. Site size is a compact 2.08 acres.
- **245 deKoven Drive** (existing City Hall Site). The intent would be to demolish the existing outdated municipal building and include the adjacent 150 parking spots at Melilli. Opportunities include developing a park between the parking lot and a new library that could nest on split levels, linking the riverfront towards Main Street. Site size is an efficient 2.75 acres, as the building could be built against property lines on at least 3 sides. Some reservations are that this site is too close to the existing library, whose historic core may be maintained as a specific branch library. Questions about the private real estate value of the property challenged whether the library was the best way to leverage this property's real estate value and tax revenue potential next to the river. That said, there appears to be no immediate shortage of available commercial property in the vicinity.

- **195 deKoven Drive**. While this site is too small on paper, it is potentially part of a much larger imagined real estate mixed use development site that might accommodate a small-footprint library at its river front edge. As this real estate development is in a preliminary/proposal phase, it appears premature to consider this site as readily available and viable for the library currently. Site size is less than an acre (0.93 acres), which is smaller in size than Library's existing site (1.04 acres). This site is also very close to the current library facility.
- **Newfield Street/State Route 3** Area on commercial street and future housing developments with nearby high school and other residential neighborhoods is within a growing population center but is outside the urban center of Middletown. Large enough to accommodate a library space, parking and park needs, but immediate strip commerce and distribution center setting could degrade the identity of the library as a civic and cultural center. Views from this site are featureless parking lots and nondescript industrial/commercial. Regardless of any zoning requirements it is advisable to set the library back from property lines, creating landscape buffers, berms, or tree screens, imagining the library setting as a green oasis in an asphalt like jungle. Moreover, Newfield Street gets particularly busy at times with traffic delays in this presently non-pedestrian-friendly city outskirts.
- **Long Lane** This property area owned by Wesleyan University, near its practice football field and sports and maintenance facilities, potentially provides a large enough open landscape area for the library building, parking and park space, but is a remote and inactive area. Whether Wesleyan is even interested in selling or giving the property to the library, the Committee agreed that this is not a desirable location for the Library.
- **123 Broad Street + 139 Broad Street** The existing Russell Library Site was evaluated in the 2021 *Comprehensive Facilities Assessment* report. The opportunities and challenges to repair, renovate or repurpose are described in detail. While the existing site is relatively small, it could expand to include the property of 139 Broad Street, which the Russell Library Company currently also owns, for a total site size of 1.26 acres. Moreover, there is the opportunity to have useful green areas for leisure and events and even potentially make nearby parking free or validated for library users. As Russell Library already owns the site, design and construction could be completed in relatively short order. However, phasing and complexities of knitting historic structures with contemporary expansions and extensive site work could come with premium price tags.

#### 4. Conclusions and next steps

HMA2 test-fitted the Library's needs on the selected sites identified in #3 above

with plan diagrams and 3D aerial views of concept designs. In summary, it was agreed that the four sites identified/underlined above presented the best available options for relocating the library, all with some reservations.

This substantively concludes Phase 1 of the Feasibility Study, recognizing that there appears to be no perfect site choice for a library at this time. However, as perfection can be the enemy of good progress, it may better serve the community, including expectations within the library and municipal leadership community, to move forward the next phases of the full Feasibility Study and capital planning process, which would include finalizing the site selections.

The timing to start these next phases is driven not just by current/future space needs and the ongoing deterioration of the existing facilities, but by the urgency to secure requisite funding. As such, one important goal is to solicit public participation and support through a referendum, scheduled for November 2024, to fund the projects. The City and Library may also be facing short deadlines for bricks-and-mortar grant funding.

The process to prepare for a referendum is a nearly 12-month process. It would include several overlapping tasks, beginning with selecting an architect, engineering, community engagement, and cost estimating to provide a full feasibility study that would include a range of services as follows (a more detailed outline is within the pdf slides):

- A. **Community engagement** in the site selection process. Participants include diverse representation of users and leaders from educational, business, and cultural communities.
- B. **Advancing the initial design** concepts in more detail to elaborate on the opportunities and challenges.
- C. **Confirm library building program requirements.**
- D. **Existing Library site.** Reviewing the viability and economic feasibility of transforming the Library's existing site to preserve and respect the historic portions, reflecting the more costly choice as presented in the 2021 report.

In conclusion, Phase 1 of the Feasibility Study has laid the groundwork for the urgent reimagining of Middletown's City Hall and Library. Recognizing the inadequacy of current facilities, this phase determined the feasibility of relocating City Hall, and established clear criteria for evaluating sites for the Library in order to become future-ready for Middletown. The progress in Phase 1 underscores the commitment to elevating Middletown's identity, value, and community. The forthcoming phases will entail extensive community engagement and meticulous planning, paving the way for Middletown's vibrant future.