

## Editorial:

# A fresh start for possible downtown Northampton project

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*GAZETTE FILE PHOTO*

*Northampton Mayor David J. Narkewicz is seeking proposals for the development of the Round House parking lot behind Pulaski Park.*

Northampton is again seeking to develop the Round House parking lot downtown, but this is no *déjà vu*. Lessons learned from an earlier failed project appear to be shaping this new effort in a good way.

Mayor David Narkewicz is hitting the reset button on development of the city-owned parcel, promising a different planning and review approach that involves greater public participation up front.

The property is behind Pulaski Park. It is named for the round brick building once owned by Northampton Gas Light Co. It is a prime downtown location.

In 2006, the Pioneer Valley Hotel Group arranged to buy the land for \$1 with the promise to build a 112-room hotel and parking garage. The hotel project failed when the developer was unable to secure funding.

The project also generated complaints that the planning process was flawed and that the public was not adequately heard before the nature and scope of the development was set.

In 2006, the city's planning office handled the request for proposals and bid review process. It also held regulatory oversight. Narkiewicz is going a different route. MassDevelopment, the state finance and development agency, will take the lead in initial planning, but it will not be the master developer, as it is at Village Hill, the mixed-use property at the former state hospital.

MassDevelopment will bring in a Boston urban design firm called Utile to study the site, meet with key community leaders, abutters and the public to shape the request for proposals. While there were hearings on the hotel plan, they came after the hotel project was chosen and essentially designed. The mayor wants people to weigh in early before bids are solicited.

There is no cost to the city unless a developer buys the land. MassDevelopment hires Utile and the city only reimburses MassDevelopment \$15,000 when the property sells. The City Council backed the basics of this idea last week.

The new process could produce a bid from a hotel developer, but that is less likely now than it was in 2006. Additional hotel rooms have been added in the region and construction is about to begin on a new 108-room hotel next to the Gazette on Conz Street. More important, the slate for the project is clean. Anything is possible and the mayor is giving residents and the business community a chance to weigh in from the start.

The mayor says he is moving on the project now because he is getting inquiries from developers about the property. He expects requests for proposals to develop the site could go out by late summer. The Round House lot is back in the news, but with a fresh approach and a promise for economic development that could boost tax revenue, create jobs and enhance the attractiveness of downtown.

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