



February 2012

Dear February 2012 Roundtable Workshop Participant,

Thank you for sharing your time and insights about our Bridge Square area with other Northfield residents and urban designer Bill Johnson in his fifth working session with Northfielders. The Roundtable will post all your comments on our website, www.northfieldroundtable.org, and incorporate the workshop's ideas into the ever-evolving Framework Plan, found online and shared throughout the community.

This workshop focused on the greater Bridge Square area that connects the areas between Division and the west side of the river from roughly the 2nd Street bridge to the 5th Street bridge. Bill launched our Friday work session by reminding us that the spirit of our conversation was to think about the future and generate ideas that can be a basis for community dialogue about “what could be” rather than “what should be.” He advised us to plan for the long haul, but to also identify short-term pieces that serve as encouragement or that demand immediate attention, such as the post office building that has recently emerged as a more urgent short-term opportunity than many had expected.

The four working groups presented a rich array of ideas (see website for detailed notes). Some of these ideas could be given immediate or short-term attention, such as the post office, pedestrian crossing of Highway 3, parking, needs of older adults, and more activities in the area. Other ideas were more conceptual or long-term in nature. Bill reminded attendees that specific projects need to be considered within the overall framework.

On Saturday Bill provided the attached sketch as a synthesis of your ideas and comments. Like many of you, Bill sees a broader Bridge Square. Physically, he considers Bridge Square as the entire block south of the open green space. Conceptually, it is not just a green area but also a phenomenon, a mindset, a vibrancy. In planning, we need to think of the whole area that is influenced by Bridge Square, a larger area that runs on both sides of the river and from 2nd to 5th Streets. As illustrated on his sketch, Bill identified the following ideas for the greater Bridge Square area:

- The **centrality of the post office building** affects the entire block. Reuse would be best if used as a place for all; the broader the better. Bill highlighted four aspects to the post office building that emphasize its importance: 1) strategic location, 2) unusual quality, 3) deep community roots, and 4) a “catalyst supreme” for assuring a vibrant center city.
- The considerable **space behind the post office building** could be redeveloped in concert with the nearby properties along South Water Street to extend “park-like fingers” from the river’s edge and Bridge Square, possibly even including a walkway through the middle of the block north of Bridge Square down to the river level to provide greater pedestrian connectivity. Those fingers could create transparency and access to the river from Division Street between 4th and 5th Streets, similar to those on Division between 2nd and 4th Streets (stairways to the Contented Cow and The Measuring Cup) and offer new development opportunities.
- **Bridge Square** itself could be enhanced with a stronger pedestrian identity, raising Water Street to the same level as the park to slow traffic and facilitate pedestrian access to the river’s edge by the dam.

- **Enhanced connectivity from Bridge Square to the Ames Park area** would create a sense that the river is part of the Bridge Square rather than a divider between the sides, e.g., a pedestrian bridge that can be a park and a piece of art.
- More activity and **recreation on the river** would enhance the connectivity, e.g., might include a small tributary into Ames Park that could have a water theme.
- Space in the southwest corner of Ames Park should be saved for an iconic sculpture.
- Both **Ames Park and the area around the current Safety Center** could be used for core activities and events in the park.
- The **bridge theme** could be extended by enhancing the functioning of the auto oriented 4th Street bridge so that it becomes part of the square, e.g., raising it to the level of the sidewalks, lighting it differently, closing for some occasions possibly using it as a stage.
- An urgent matter is the **lack of connectivity in the pedestrian system**, e.g., crossing at Hwy 3 and 3rd Street. Northfield needs to take the issue to MnDOT to work out a solution.
- **“Parking-as-parks”** near the bridges can continue the “greening the commons” effort while encouraging residents and visitors to walk over and along the river to the downtown commercial and arts district. The “greening the commons” needs to attend to maintaining views and not obscuring with hedgerow of trees; “parking-as-parks” potential exists in Ames Park.
- The Water Street area north of Malt-O-Meal (Bill calls the area **the West Landing**) is a key point and needs to have an identity and sense of place.

While the focus of the workshop was on the greater Bridge Square area and not solely on the post office building, it was not surprising based on recent movement on the sale of the building that many participants at the Saturday morning session asked questions and expressed concerns about the future use of the post office building. Bill noted that the building has offered a vital service to many people over several generations. Our community’s challenge now is to imagine and implement ways to extend this building’s key role in our downtown for generations to come. Doing so will benefit the entire area and the residents who live, work, shop and play here. The impact of the post office building’s reincarnation will be felt throughout Northfield for the next 50 years. This is a rare and sizeable opportunity for the community, perhaps through a public and private joint venture, to redevelop a keystone property for the long-term well being of the whole community. Bill and several others noted the urgency to communicate the thoughts that emerged from the workshop and to encourage securing the building in “friendly hands.”

Thank you for your interest and ideas. We look forward to continuing this effort with you to plan well for “what could be” in Northfield.

-- The Northfield Roundtable