WATERTOWN PLANNING BOARD

DATE: June 10, 2026, PLACE: City Council Chamber TIME: 7:00 PM COMMENCED:7:03 PM
PURPOSE OF MEETING: Public Hearing
MEMBERS PRESENT (REMOTELY): Chair Janet Buck; Jason Cohen; Rachael Sack; Sarah Scott
MEMBERS PRESENT IN PERSON: Payson Whitney MEMBERS ABSENT: Abigail Hammett
STAFF PRESENT: Sameena Pirani, Principal Departmental Assistant; Gideon Schreiber, Director of Planning & Zoning (remote); Matthew Neubacher, Planner;

ADMINISTRATIVE BUSINESS

Approval of Minutes:

Jason Cohen moved to approve the Minutes for 5/13. Two members announced abstentions due to their absence. Staff clarified that abstention was not required under the new rules and noted that approval could be postponed if there were not enough members. Minutes were postponed until the next meeting on 7/8

Progress Update: 532/560 Pleasant St

Ted Saraceno, attending remotely, opened the discussion by providing an update on the previously approved life sciences project, noting that challenging market conditions continue to delay its advancement. In response to feedback from the Board at the last meeting, the development team had explored alternative uses for the site, including residential and medical office options. He invited Chris Roller and Steve Majich to describe the alternative concepts.

Chris Roller stated that the development team spent the past six months evaluating alternative redevelopment options for the site, including a mixed-use residential concept of approximately 200-220 units and a medical office development. While residential use was not currently permitted under the site’s zoning and would require rezoning, studies of both alternatives were ongoing.

Chris Roller noted that the life sciences market was starting to show signs of improvement. He also said that there were plans to demolish the vacant Russo’s building, with permit applications expected shortly, subject to approvals.

Ted Saraceno noted that the team was considering landscaping and other site improvements following demolition of the Russo’s building. Steve Majich added that the site had been cleaned up, and a fence scrim installed. The team remained open to appropriate interim uses, although interest to date had been limited to parking shuttle operations.

Jason Cohen expressed sympathy for the petitioner's situation and said that a multifamily redevelopment could be a valuable alternative use for the site, despite the need for rezoning. He clarified the timing of the extension and confirmed the request would run through November 2028, which Saraceno affirmed.

Payson Whitney expressed concern about granting another extension. He said that the project had had multiple delays, life science success was uncertain, and holding out hope was not a sufficient strategy. He also said that any extension should require a clear decision timeline and questioned whether precedent was being set.

City staff explained that the extension request related to planning and permit timing before construction, that ordinance changes now allowed longer timelines (typically three years), and the past extension practices had varied depending on project scale and permitting stage, with some projects not requiring extensions once construction began.

Payson Whitney stated that any extension should include commitments demonstrating active pursuit of alternate plans. The developers said that they would like to keep options open for the already permitted project.

Upon request from Sarah Scott, staff explained how the Pleasant Street Corridor arrived at its current zoning and what the Comprehensive Plan said about the future land uses along the corridor. Staff explained that the corridor evolved from a flexible mixed-use district to a system of subdistricts to preserve commercial and economic development opportunities while managing issues such as former industrial uses and potential contamination.
Staff said that the Comprehensive Plan generally supported the existing zoning framework and did not call for more major changes. However, more recent housing discussions suggest the City should consider additional housing opportunities and affordability goals in the corridor. Sarah Scott said that if the life science extension was granted, the City should use that time to undertake proactive planning for the corridor so there was a clear community vision and zoning direction if the life science project did not move forward.

Rachael Sack and Jason Cohen both supported giving the developer additional time, but wanted the extension tied to a clearer roadmap, interim dates and demonstrated progress rather than simply granting two years and waiting. Staff explained that the Board had flexibility on the extension length but limited authority to impose formal conditions, while the developer agreed to continue providing updates and working collaboratively with the City during any extension period.

Board members debated whether a two-year extension was too long. In the end they agreed that regular six-month check-ins would provide accountability and visibility into the developer's progress.

The Board clarified that the two-year extension would run from the permit's expiration date, while check-ins would begin immediately and occur every six months. Payson Whitney added that the purpose of the check-ins was to ensure steady progress and avoid returning in two years with no clearer direction for the site, a goal the developer agreed with.

Payson Whitney moved to grant a two-year extension, extending the permit to November 25, 2028, with regular progress reports/updates provided to the Board every six-months (the first to be on or before December 10, 2026) regarding the site and project status and direction being considered (existing use for lab/life science, alternative uses or updates on residential/rezoning options). Jason Cohen added a condition requiring continued upkeep and maintenance of the property. Rachael Sack seconded the motion. Motion was approved by roll call vote and approved unanimously (5-0). In Favor (Chair Janet Buck, Jason Cohen, Payson Whiteny, Rachael Sack and Sarah Scott)

The Board deferred officer elections due to the absence of some members. They agreed to revisit them at a future meeting with clearer job descriptions and full participation.

Staff said that the Rules of Practice and Procedure had been finalized but not sent or posted. They would be circulated soon and potentially posted in a standard public location. Members requested it be shared again before the next discussion.

66 Galen ST

Board voted in favor to grant continuance to July 8, 2026. Vote 5-0

Staff Updates

Staff said that the Board's agenda updates were being expanded with added links and information for public transparency, but there were no major items requiring discussion. On Watertown Square Revitalization Plan, staff said there was no confirmed timeline, noting it is still flexible and they will follow up once a schedule is set.

Adjourn

Meeting adjourned 8:12   Meeting Minutes--