

# The Bristol Observer

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## Progress on downtown project picking up steam

Three months have passed since the city inked a deal with Renaissance Downtowns to lead the Depot Square project.

Since then, progress on the project has been building up steam, and excitement.

“I think there is a huge core of people who are excited about downtown revitalization,” said Frank Johnson, chairman of the Bristol Downtown Development Corporation.

In late May, the city signed an agreement with Renaissance Downtowns that made the Long Island based firm the preferred developer for the project. The agreement grants Renaissance Downtowns the sole and exclusive right to prepare a “final concept plan” for the property, which must be finished and approved by the city within two years from the signing of the deal.

The agreement laid out nearly 30 benchmarks for Renaissance Downtowns to meet during the course of the project. Thus far, the firm is coming in ahead of schedule.

“Right now, we’re doing great,” said Ryan Porter, project manager for Renaissance Downtowns, who gave an update on the firm’s progress during the corporation’s Aug. 16 meeting.

Some of the early milestones the firm met were simpler ones, such as setting up an office in the city, and launching a website for the project.

The office is located on the first floor of City Hall, and the website, [www.rdatbristol.com](http://www.rdatbristol.com), is up and running.

The firm has also begun tackling some of the larger planning issues facing the project. Discussions with the McDonalds corporation has yielded a non-binding letter of intent from the city, which agreed to swap the land the store sits on now for land located between the Dunkin’ Donuts and the DFO on the opposite side of the site.

Officials have said McDonalds plans to build amore “upscale” version of its restaurant on the site.

Porter told the corporation that the firm expected to hold a meeting with the owner of the Dunkin’ Donuts last week to discuss future options for the store as part of the development.

McDonalds and Dunkin Donuts sit on land that is considered part of the Depot Square project. But, the land is owned by private owners, and any future development considerations using the land would have to be negotiated.

The owners of the McDonalds and Dunkin Donuts aren’t the only private property owners the firm has reached out to.

Renaissance Downtowns has reached out to private property owners throughout the downtown area to incorporate them into the overall revitalization effort.

Porter said Renaissance Downtowns feels that involving local land owners is key to the project. He said the firm held its first meeting with downtown property owners in late July. He said 70 people were invited to come, and over 20 showed up.

Porter described the meeting’s mood as a little “sheepish” in the beginning, but by the end everyone was excited about the project. He said the property owners that came to meeting were more interested in improving downtown than how they could profit from the project.

A second meeting with property owners will be held on Sept. 14, Porter said, and he’s hoping for a larger turnout.

After Porter discussed what the firm’s been up to lately, he turned his attention to highlighting a couple of upcoming dates on the project’s schedule.

Porter said the firm will host two three-day concept planning workshops, one each in late September and late October. The workshops, he said, will bring together representatives from Renaissance Downtowns, the city, and the corporation to brainstorm relative to the concept plan for the developing the site.

After the second workshop, Porter said, the firm will start to target public hearings. “I want to involve the public and be transparent through the entire process,” said Porter.

John Lodovico, vice chairman of the corporation, said he was impressed with the progress the firm as made. “Let’s just keep it moving,” said Lodovico.

With the planning still in its infancy, officials pointed to a mounting interest from commercial entities in the project.

Johnson said he's been contacted by one potential tenant for the site. Porter added three potential tenants have contacted the firm.