Water Street Project
Debrief Meeting, July 10, 2018, 11 a.m. to noon

In attendance:

- Four business owner/operators on Water Street
- Destination St. John's
- Downtown St. John's
- Canadian Federation of Independent Business
- VOCM
- The Telegram
- City Councillors: Mayor Danny Breen, Councillor at Large Dave Lane, Deputy Mayor Sheilagh O'Leary
- City Staff: Mark White, Victoria Etchegary, Kelly Maguire, Elizabeth Lawrence, Jason Sinyard, Scott Winsor, Kevin Breen
- CBCL – Engineering Consultants

Councillor Lane opened the meeting and thanked everyone for coming. He noted the meeting was a follow up to a commitment made last fall when the first phase of the project was confirmed to get businesses together, especially those in phase 1, to debrief what went well, what was challenging and what the city and others could do to improve for phase 2.
Councillor Lane invited Project Lead Mark White to provide an overview of the project. Mark noted:

- Phase 1 included section between Waldegrave to Bishop's Cove
- Work commenced April 2
- Underground work completed before June 30
- Final Layer of pavement and remaining concrete work completed by July 7
- From the City's perspective, what went well included:
    - Pre-qualifying contractors
    - Contract Bonus/Penalty Set-up
    - Power/Communications outages/delays – Utility standby person for duration monitoring excavation
    - Minimized hydro-excavation (slow productivity) – Utility standby person
    - Delays associated with Archeological findings – Inspector on Site for duration minimized downtime
    - Traffic detours – Maintained access through site – Buses, Deliveries, etc.
    - Extended water/sewer service loss – City crew on site when excavating near live water and sewer – Expedited isolation and repairs as needed
    - Project Liaison on site for duration of project – had been a request of the business community in the fall
- From the city's perspective, what was challenging/tricky included:
    - Additional unknown Electrical/water/sewer infrastructure
    - Unforeseen issues with Watermain lining – Decided to replace it instead
    - Maintaining traffic while completing work
    - Heavy Equipment in confined areas - Simultaneous operations

    - Lost a few days - Wet and cold weather
- Feedback received to date on what was challenging/tricky for the businesses
    - Heavy equipment, dust & noise in high pedestrian area
    - Temporary loss of water services impacting business
    - Fencing and signage for pedestrian detours impacting business and must be improved
    - Long traffic delays – Deep excavations
    - Accessibility challenges

Mark then opened the floor to discussion and Councillor Lane invited comments/suggestions from the group. Below is a list of items raised organized by topic/theme:

Traffic

Question: Would it be better to detour traffic around construction than maintain traffic through the area? There was a discussion about this and the view was that it might work for some but not all.
Someone questioned whether the option of making Water and Duckworth one way could be explored again.

Look and feel of the area

Put in some flowers/trees to spruce up the entry points to the construction area. The look of the construction needs to be improved, better fencing. Cleaner area. Dust was a big concern. Need to keep dust down.

Signage

This was a significant discussion. Better and more signage is needed. The area needs to be more visually appealing to go into, better signage at entry points listing the businesses in the area. Consider variable message signs at the entry points noting expected amount of delay. Signage needs to be more visual and inviting.

Time of day of construction

It was asked whether the construction could take place overnight. It was discussed and noted that there are people who live in the downtown and noise overnight is a significant concern.

Economic impact on business

Comment that business was slow during the construction period. Important that the city not underestimate the impact of the project – when construction is going on, people tend not to want to go where it is happening. One business noted that their sales were down 20 % during this period, even regular customers didn't go but says business is now back to normal. It was noted that even conference goers avoided the area. One person noted the business community in the area is trying to weather a three-month potential downtime – anything that can be done to reduce that time even further? Some asked whether compensation for businesses was an option?

Importance of Downtown

Need to make sure people are aware that Downtown is open for business, there are places to go and places to park. Downtown businesses are the heart of Downtown.

Attitude of construction workers

One person noted that they had challenges with the attitude of certain contracted workers.

Pedestrian Access

It was noted that moving pedestrians around in the space was a challenge at times, it took too long for a person to get the business they were going to and the routes were circuitous.

Communication and advertising

It's important to continue communications and engage media better in getting the message out that downtown is open for business. Media play an important role in helping the public understand the project and how they can still interact with the downtown. Need more advertising. Need partnerships to do this better. It was noted that Downtown St. John's is working on a Marketing Plan.

Managing fear and anxiety

People are feeling anxious further down the street. They know the project needs to be done but noted we need to find ways to mitigate that fear, so businesses stay downtown and thrive in the downtown.

Make it easier for people to get dropped off

A comment was made about having taxi drop off locations outside the construction zone.

Noise

Many commented on the noise in general from the equipment.

Parking

In the construction area, parking meters were bagged. When the work was not being completed they were still bagged.

Timing of project

Someone asked if the project could start even earlier, for example March. Discussion around the timing then turned to discussion about hours of work. Phase one hours were Monday – Saturday, 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Someone asked if more work could be done during the time frame to shorten it more.

Next steps

City staff will review all the technical details of phase 1 as well as feedback including the comments heard in the session. Downtown Stakeholder organizations noted the importance of ongoing communications and engagement. An update on phase 2 will be provided in the fall.