



## OP-ED: Sustainable Montpelier Coalition

### Stays Neutral on Garage

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By Dan Jones and Elizabeth Courtney

Over the past few weeks, we at the Sustainable Montpelier Coalition have been regularly implored to take a stand on “the garage.” People wonder at the public silence regarding the division that has grown within our small city as to the wisdom and costs of this development project. The board and staff, no surprise, reflect those divisions within our community. We offer here a look at our perception of the two sides of this controversy so that you might understand our consciously chosen organizational neutrality.

Most of those urging us to take a stand on the parking garage correctly assume that this project is not reflective of our core mission to build a sustainable downtown for the future. The garage, as an investment in the auto infrastructure and right on the river, is the antithesis of the smart city design that was publicly embraced in the Sustainable Montpelier 2030 Design Competition of two years ago. It also will create 1,000 tons of carbon dioxide pollution just to bake the concrete for its construction, thereby negating the City Council’s recent resolution to be “net zero” in fossil fuel use for city operations. Then there are the questions of financial favoritism in the financing. All together this makes the case for strong opposition.

On the other hand, there are compelling demands supporting the garage. In a city hungry for economic development after a long stagnation, the prospect of an investment in the hotel and garage is overwhelming. Many believe that if the city turns down the garage it will prevent any serious investment downtown for years.

The claim is that Montpelier is so demanding and difficult to work with that no developer wants to waste the money trying to start projects in this environment. The downtown merchants, struggling in a slowly eroding economy, have heard their customers complain about the lack of parking. To them, the combination of new hotel visitors and easier access for current customers is the core to a hoped-for economic renaissance. The city pins its hopes on the long-term economic support through guaranteed parking fees to pay off the bond by commitments that will come from the Capitol Plaza owners. Thus, the local forces of commerce and investment are arrayed in support of the project.

This brings us back to the Sustainable Montpelier Coalition. Our role is to serve as both a builder and a steward of a vision for a future that will provide security and resilience in a world dominated by climate challenge and economic change. While that vision may have been supported by public embrace in the competition, the public voting carried no force of law. We own no property and are supported by modest resources. Our only power is to bring people together in coalition so that we can address the critical challenges and shape our hoped-for future.

And there’s the rub. If we take sides in this controversy we will inevitably negate the work that is our mission: To bring together in coalition the disparate silos of the community. Our opposition to the garage would mean that at least some of the players would see us as

adversaries rather than potential partners. In that case the work we need to do to change the challenge from that of parking to one of transportation would be stymied. Our efforts to help create green and open space downtown would be undermined. In short, we need to work with our whole city, not just a faction of it.

Our goal is to be a continuing force for expression of the best possible future for our city. To do so, we must simply work on building a common vision. On other issues, if we fail to find consensus, we will organizationally abstain. We trust that with the help of the Coalition, the citizens of Montpelier will work out the best response to the challenges we face through their voices, their votes, and their collective good will.

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