

City Planning Department



Memo

To: Cranston City Plan Commission
From: Joshua Berry, AICP - Senior Planner
Date: December 3, 2021
Re: **Ordinance #9-21-01** In Amendment of the 2010 Comprehensive Plan for the City of Cranston, as Amended 2012 (**777 Cranston Street**); *AND*

Ordinance #9-21-02 In Amendment of Chapter 17 of the Code of the City of Cranston, 2005, Entitled "Zoning" (**Change of Zone – 777 Cranston Street**)

For information, analysis and the Planning Department's recommendation on the Trolley Barn Plaza Major Land Development Master Plan proposal, please refer to the staff memo issued specifically on said application available here:

<https://www.cranstonri.gov/city-plan-commission/12/7/21.aspx>

I. Ordinance Summaries

Ordinance #9-21-01 In Amendment of the 2010 Comprehensive Plan for the City of Cranston, as Amended 2012 (**777 Cranston Street**)

The applicant seeks to change the Future Land Use Map designation of AP 7/2 Lot 1 from "Special Redevelopment Area" to "Highway Commercial Services" and delete language recommending mixed-use development at this site and/or identifying it as a Special Redevelopment Area.

Ordinance #9-21-02 In Amendment of Chapter 17 of the Code of the City of Cranston, 2005, Entitled "Zoning" (**Change of Zone – 777 Cranston Street**)

The applicant seeks to change the zone of AP 7/2 Lot 1 from M-2 (General Industry) to C-5 (Heavy Business, Industry) with three conditions:

1. To allow "Warehousing, Commercial" as an allowed use for the portion of the AutoZone that operates as a warehouse and distribution facility;
2. To allow 250 ft² of wall sign area for the AutoZone; and
3. To allow a 20' tall freestanding sign with 160 ft² of area on each of its two faces.

A Major Land Development (MLD) Master Plan proposal has been submitted with the ordinances. The applicant proposes a multi-use commercial project including a bank, gas station/mini-mart, fast food restaurant and a 35,000 ft² AutoZone with both retail and warehousing/distribution components. The bank, mini-mart and fast food restaurant all have drive-thru features.

As stated in red on the top of page 1, there is a detailed memo with analysis and a recommendation on this proposal, which should be reviewed as necessary to understand the total project. This memo will focus only on the aspects and impacts of the project related specifically to the zone change and Comprehensive Plan ordinances.

ZONING MAP

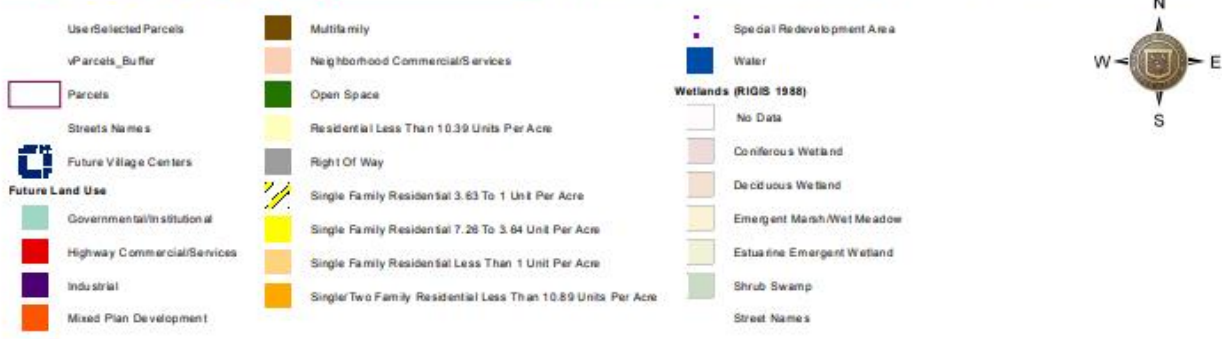
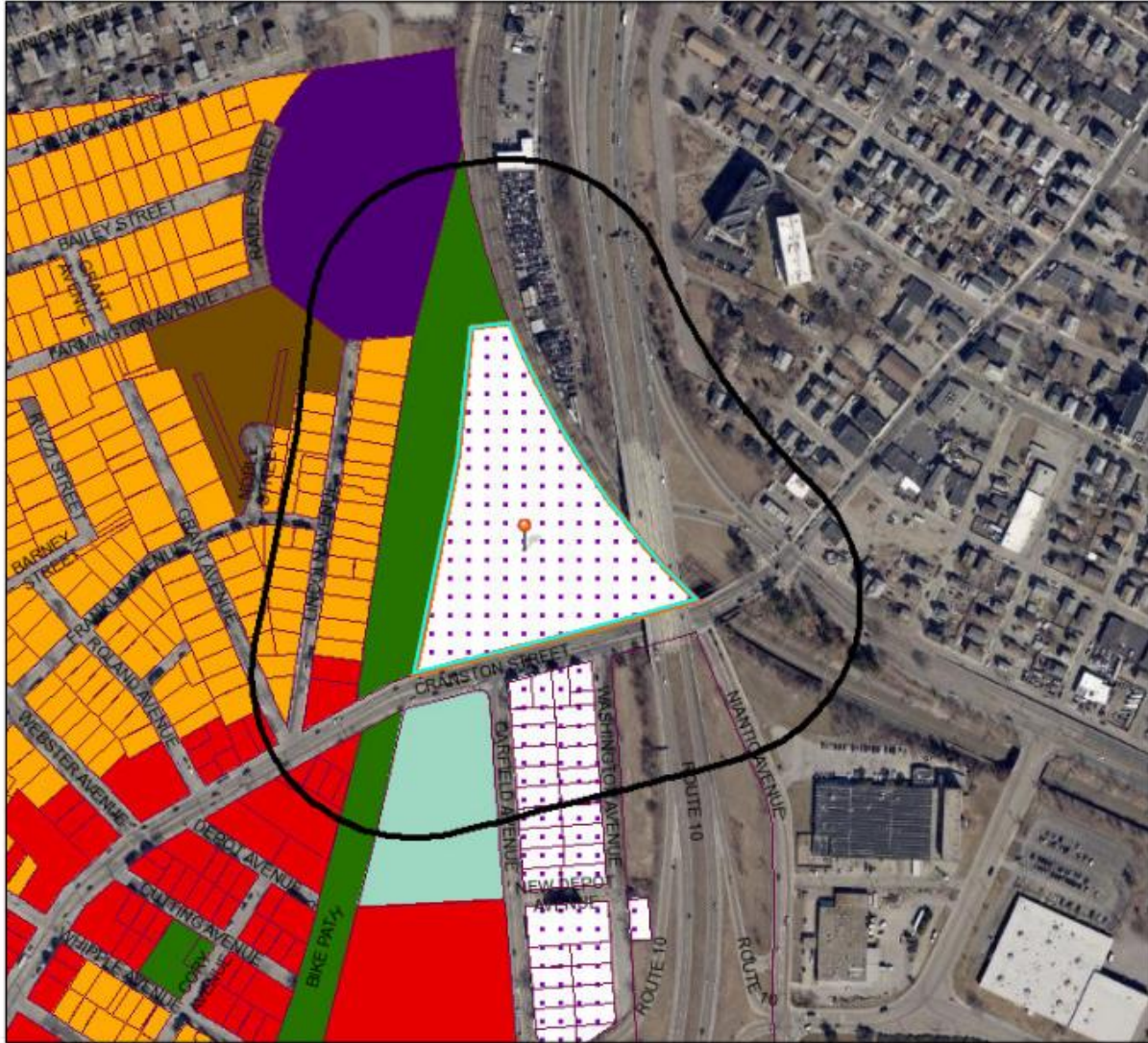


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FUTURE LAND USE MAP



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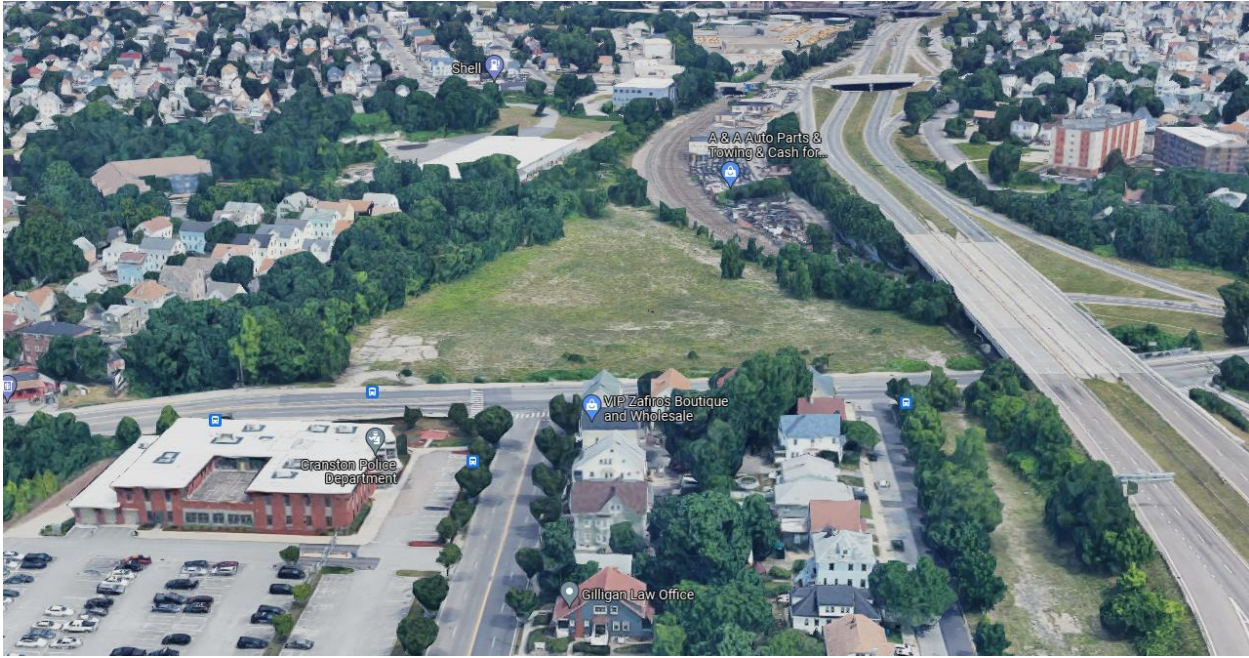


City of Cranston

NEIGHBORHOOD AERIAL
(400 ft. radius in black)



3-D AERIAL (facing north)



3-D AERIAL (facing east)



SITE RENDERING



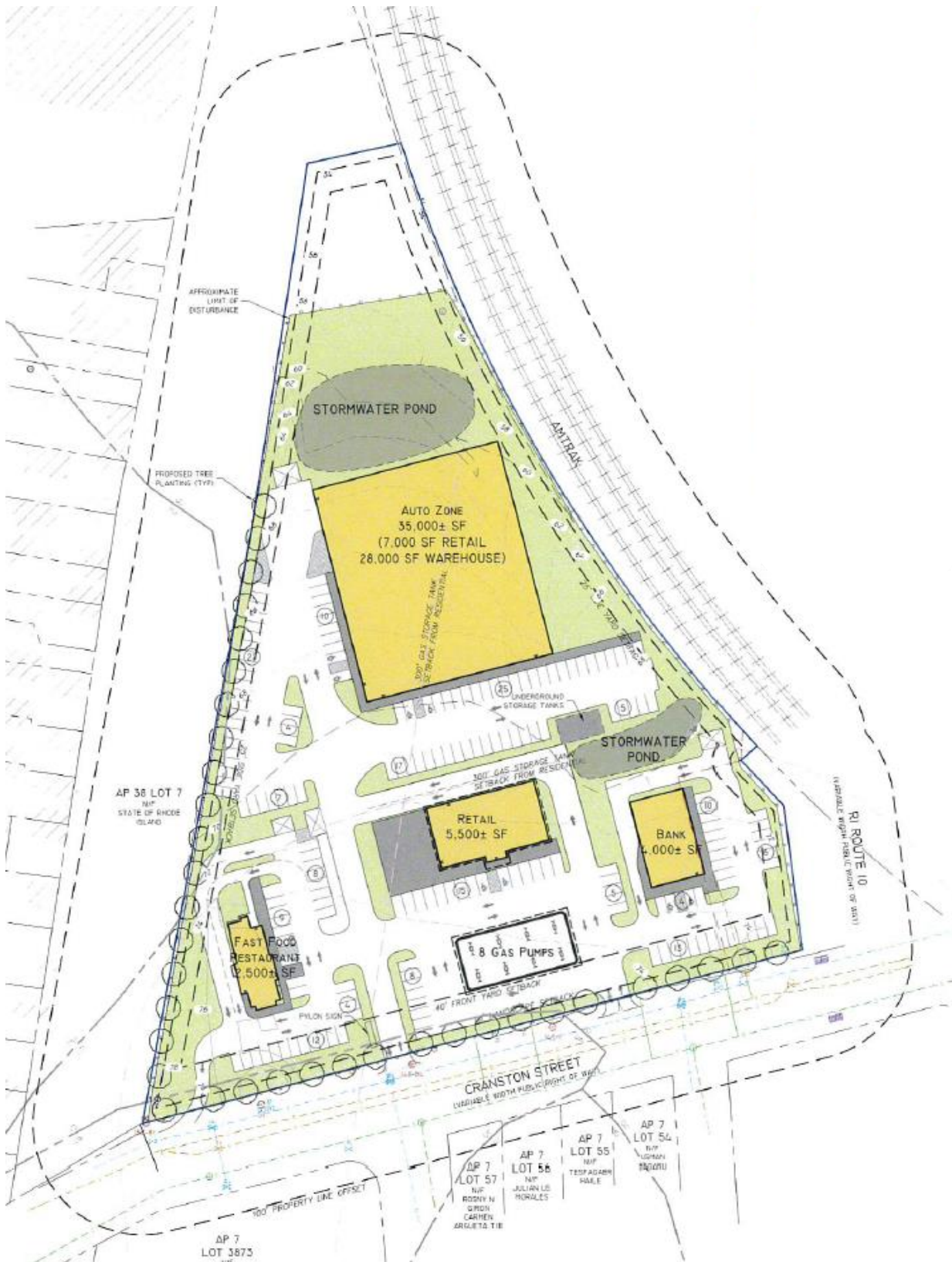
STREET VIEW (Cranston Street facing north)



LANDSCAPE PLAN

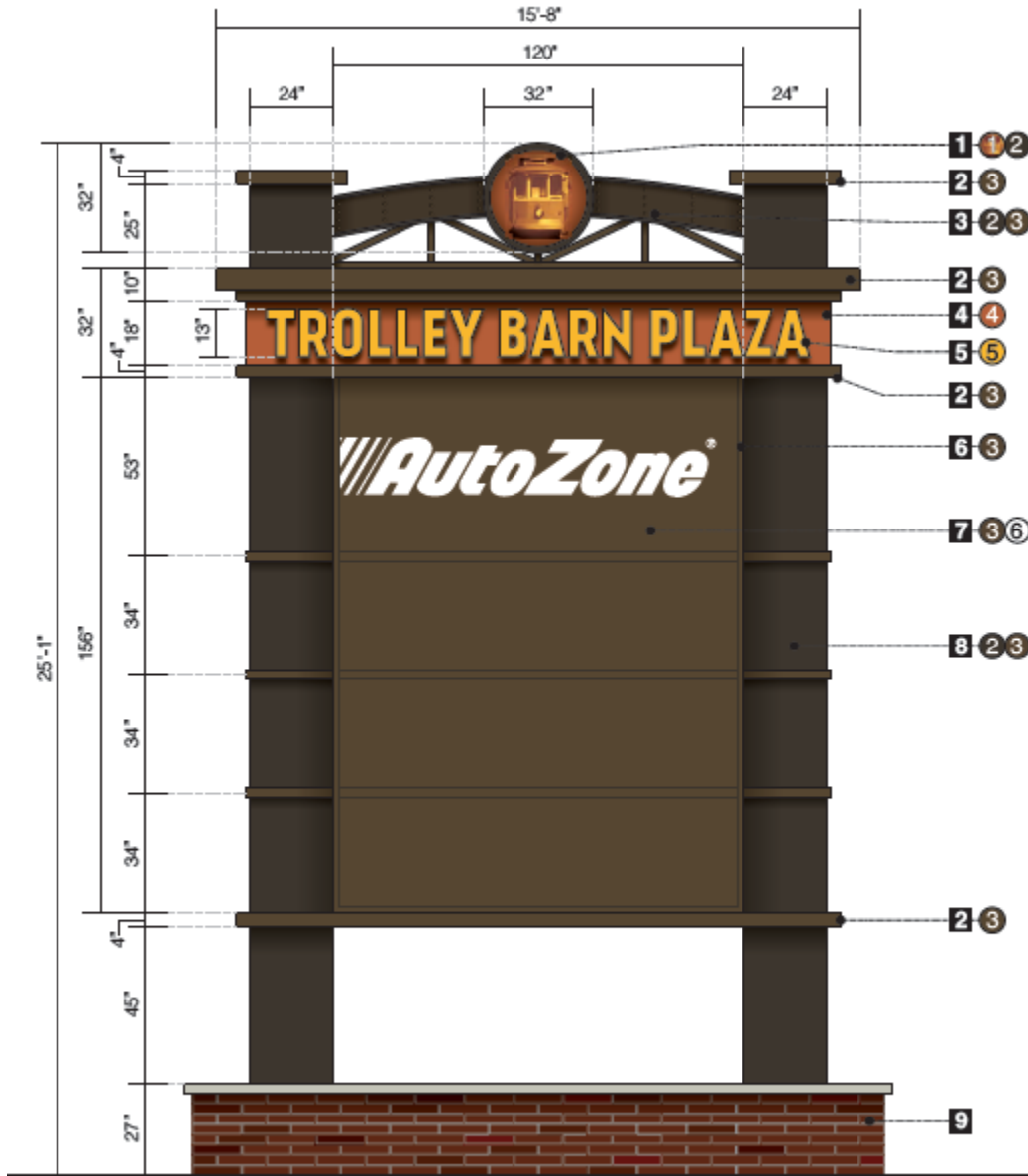


SITE PLAN



FREESTANDING SIGN DETAIL

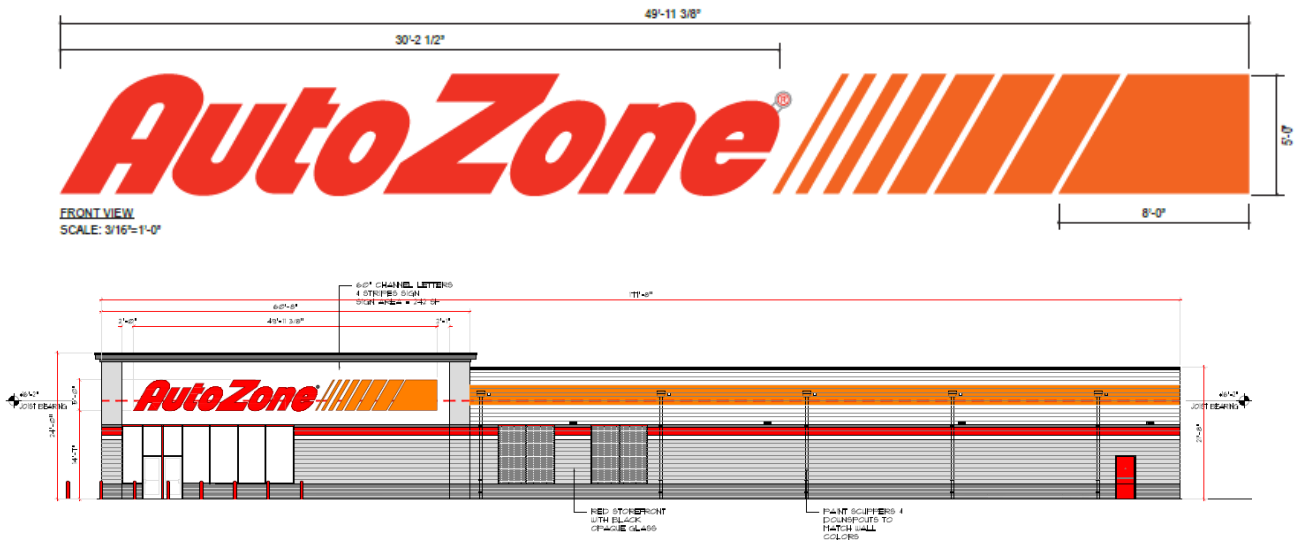
(please note these are outdated as the sign has been revised from 25' to 20' tall)



A Pylon Sign - Face View
Scale: 1/4" = 1'-0"

WALL SIGN DETAIL & RENDERING

(please note these were received on 12/3/21 and have NOT been reviewed by staff)



II. Interests of Others

None to report at this time.

There was a site walk held on 10/28/21. A quorum of the City Council was present but no of the Plan Commission. The site walk had only two members of the public in attendance who conveyed that their main concern was bike path connectivity, but were not opposed to the project.

III. Planning Analysis

The Trolley Barn Plaza proposal is complex project that requires that the city answer the question, ***should the city amend its zoning map and Comprehensive Plan to permit the proposed land uses at this site?***

The project is not a by-right proposal, and the Plan Commission must make the required findings under City Code §17.120.030 (consistency with the Comprehensive Plan and consistency with the purposes of zoning) if it is to forward a positive recommendation to the City Council.

Staff makes the following positive and negative findings/observations on the proposal:

Positive Findings/Observations

1. The AutoZone, bank, and fast food restaurant are generally compatible with the surrounding area. The subject parcel is located in Eastern Cranston in the northernmost point of the city near the border of the City of Providence, with frontage on Cranston Street. The property abuts the Amtrak railroad and Route 10. The surrounding area

contains a variety of land uses including a range of residential uses, commercial uses, a government/institutional uses (police station), and industrial uses;

2. The project has been vacant for over 20 years and the city has not entertained any development proposals in that time. Developing underutilized and vacant sites (not including open space) is consistent with the economic development and land use goals and policies in the city.
3. The proposal is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan Economic Development element via the following:
 - Traditional economic development goals:
 - Increase the tax base with new private investment in commercial and industrial properties;
 - Promote emerging industries to maintain local shares of jobs and businesses;
 - Export new goods and services to regional populations and attract outside money in support of economic development; and
 - Create new and better jobs; (p. 73)
 - EDG-1A Preserve and increase employment opportunities for Cranston residents; (p. 11)
 - EDG-2 Attract capital into the Cranston area and expand the City's economic base; (p. 12)
 - EDG-3 Add to the City's taxable property base by constructing industrial and commercial structures which are properly designed and sited in keeping with environmental, planning and design considerations; (p. 12)
 - EDP-5 Ensure that new and expanded commercial development along major arterials exhibits a high standard of design quality and is compatible with existing roadway functions and adjacent residential neighborhoods; (p. 12)

Staff notes that the design of the project is still in the conceptual phase and will be reviewed in further detail should the project move forward.

4. The AutoZone is projected to have 20 full-time employees with full benefits and also an additional 20 part-time employees. The other three uses would bring jobs and tax revenue to the City, but the applicant does not want to estimate these values until tenants are secured;
5. The traffic impacts have been thoroughly reviewed by the applicant's Traffic Engineer, the City's traffic peer reviewer, the City of Cranston Bureau of Traffic Safety, and the City of Providence. All parties are in agreement that **the traffic impacts anticipated by the project will not significantly impact traffic operations in the study area** upon implementation of appropriate off-site mitigation;
6. The applicant's willingness to grant an easement for the bike path connection, with more details to come at the Preliminary Plan phase, as applicable, is a significant benefit this offered by the proposal;
7. The applicant has worked with staff and has incorporated comments from the Plan Commission in the design of the proposed free-standing sign. The sign pays homage to the history of the site and unifies the signage along the street instead of proposing freestanding signs for each individual use;

8. The applicant proposes to landscape the property in excess of the City's 15% landscape requirement. The landscaping and buffering will be reviewed in greater detail at later phases, as applicable;
9. The applicant has taken the necessary steps regarding environmental assessments at this phase and will be required to comply with all state and local environmental regulations. There are no negative environmental impacts anticipated by the proposal;
10. The city has taken market conditions and context into account when considering other commercial development proposals where the Comprehensive Plan called for mixed-use, for example the Brewery Parkade;
11. The project is consistent with EDG-11 *Target sites for industrial and commercial projects* EDP-11.1 – “A number of sites (i.e. former Trolley Barn site, Route 2 corridor), may support additional retailers seeking entry to the market” (page 13);
12. The project is generally consistent with the Land Use Element strategy to “Provide Opportunities in Eastern Cranston - Underutilized properties and infill development sites could be improved to address current and future land use, transportation, and economic needs in the eastern part of the City. Older or abandoned industrial areas such as the former Trolley Barn site, the Ciba Geigy property and the industrial land adjacent to the Northeast Corridor Railway, are all locations that could change for the better with proper planning” (page 22);
13. The project is generally consistent with Land Use Element language on page 32, “Commercial Development Opportunities on Built and Vacant Land - There are several key parcels and properties throughout Cranston that can accommodate further development. The development of these properties could offer multiple benefits that include improved access, significant property upgrades, and the potential to improve the surrounding area. Properties include the former trolley barn site on Cranston Street near Route 10 . . .”

Negative Findings

1. Ordinance #9-21-02 Condition #2 requests 250 ft² of wall signage for the AutoZone. This area is **833% greater than the 30 ft² permitted under C-5**. The applicant provided sign details and a scaled perspective rendering on the afternoon of 12/3/21, long after the corresponded deadline, not leaving staff any time to review. The applicant had previously indicated that they *may* request to withdraw this condition and address the signage through a separate application to the Zoning Board of Review, but has instead chosen to move forward with the condition as proposed. **Based on the lack of sufficient time to review materials, and believing that wall signage is too large to meet the intent of zoning, staff opposes Ordinance #9-21-02 Condition #2;**
2. The project does not offer a mix of uses that staff believes was the intent of the Comprehensive Plan designation. It is acknowledged that there is an ordinance to amend the call for mixed-use at this site, but staff finds that a mix of uses would be preferred to the uses proposed, particularly as the city is in need of housing and is running out of potential sites to incorporate achieve its housing goals, particularly near

highways, bike paths and bus routes such as this site. Staff finds that the proposed uses do not enhance the quality of the development, nor incorporate 'smart growth principles' as recommended by LUG-2 (page 8) and Land Use Principle 1 (page 34);

3. The gas station is not a compatible use with the residential uses directly across from the fuel pumps on Cranston Street as proposed and designed;
4. The Planning Department, the Bureau of Traffic Safety, and the traffic peer reviewer all note that a different mix of uses could reduce vehicle trips generated, offset the peak hours of generated trips, better utilize off-street parking, and enhance the compatibility of land uses internal to the site;
5. The convenient store for the gas station, the bank and the fast food restaurant all have drive-thru features. Although the applicant has confirmed their willingness to grant an easement for the connection of the bike path and will construct sidewalks, the development is largely auto-oriented;
6. There are no sustainability or green energy aspects of the proposal. Staff is recommending the applicant explore solar and electronic vehicle charging stations, as applicable at future phases.

Conclusion:

Although there are substantial positive and negative findings to be weighed, staff believes that the positives of the project outweigh the negatives, with the exception that staff cannot support the zoning condition proposed for the wall sign, which ultimately forces staff's hand on its recommendation on Ordinance #9-21-02, which otherwise may have been positive.

The City has the opportunity to achieve many of its economic development goals and policies with this proposal. This is not a site that has been generating substantial development pressure, but has been vacant for over twenty years. With the exception of the gas station, staff believes the uses are compatible with the surrounding area. Staff seeks to mitigate the concern with the gas station by exploring the possibility of relocating the fuel pumps interior to the site during the Preliminary Plan phase.

The project is not perfect, but perfect is not the standard of approval. The city should not deny the proposal based on aspirations of uses on the site that have not generated interest from the private sector in decades nor should not approve the proposal based on the grounds that less ideal uses could potentially be conceived. The conceptual Master Plan can and will be improved during the Preliminary Plan phase if the project moves forward. The city has not made a habit of denying proposals that do not exhibit smart growth principles as are *encouraged* by the Comp Plan. Staff encourages the city to make its decision based on the merits of the application with consideration to the codified standards for review.

One last issue to resolve is that staff found two sections in the Comprehensive Plan that should be deleted consistent with the intent of Ordinance #9-21-01, to remove mixed-use recommendation for the Trolley Barn site. The two omissions can be found on page 42 and 179, the respectively. Staff believes these to be honest errors of omission by the applicant and recommends the references to be deleted are included into the ordinance, should it receives approval.

IV. Required Findings per City Code §17.120.030

(A): Consistency with the Cranston Comprehensive Plan 2010:

Ordinances #9-21-01 and #9-21-02 are both found to be consistent with of Comprehensive Plan goals and policies, if and only if Ordinance #9-21-01 is amended as part of the recommendation so that all language referring to mixed-use at the Trolley Barn site is removed.

(B). Recognition and Consideration of the Purposes of Zoning in City Code §17.04.010:

Ordinance #9-21-02 Condition #2 regarding wall signage is inconsistent with the purposes of zoning. Otherwise, Ordinances #9-21-01 and #9-21-02 are both found to be consistent with the purposes of zoning.

V. Recommendations

Ordinance #9-21-01 In Amendment of the 2010 Comprehensive Plan for the City of Cranston, as Amended 2012 (**777 Cranston Street**)

Due to the finding that the amendment to the Future Land Use Map (FLUM) and removal of language recommending mixed-use development at the subject property, as proposed and as supplemented by the condition included herein, is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan goals and policies, and is consistent with the purposes of zoning as detailed in City Code Section §17.04.010, staff recommends that the Plan Commission send a **positive recommendation** on Ordinance #9-21-01 to the City Council, with the following conditions.

Recommended Conditions:

1. The Ordinance shall be amended to include the following language to 1. LAND USE ELEMENT, PART III. Strategies and Actions:

c. Future Land Use Map – Special Redevelopment Areas (Page 42):

DELETE

- and the former Trolley Barn Site

2. The Ordinance shall be amended to include the following language:

3. IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM (Page 179):

Table 9-1 Summary of the Proposed Action, Time Frames, and Responsibilities for This Plan

DELETE

- LU-21 Continue efforts to implement a mixed-use development at the location of the former Trolley Barn site.

Ordinance #9-21-02 In Amendment of Chapter 17 of the Code of the City of Cranston, 2005, Entitled "Zoning" (**Change of Zone – 777 Cranston Street**)

Due to the finding that Condition #2 regarding 250 ft² of wall signage is not consistent with the purposes of zoning, staff recommends that the Plan Commission send a **negative recommendation** on Ordinance #9-21-02 to the City Council.

It should be noted that if the applicant were to withdraw condition #2, staff would recommend that the Plan Commission forward a positive recommendation on Ordinance #9-21-02 to the City Council.