



Downtown Danbury: Issues & Recommendations 2010

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2008, Mayor Mark D. Boughton appointed the Main Street Renaissance Task Force to study downtown Danbury and prepare a report designed to strengthen its social and economic position within the City and surrounding region. This Executive Summary is a synopsis of that report.

The report identified issues and proposed recommendations for the revitalization of downtown Danbury by: fashioning a vision and setting objectives for the future of the downtown; establishing planning principles to guide decision makers; analyzing issues and presenting recommendations to promote and enhance economic development, urban design, historic preservation, and public improvements; and, devising an organizational structure for its implementation.

The study area¹ for the report encompasses the core of the central business district of the City, a walkable area exemplified by concentrated development, historic buildings, and a diversity of uses, including retail stores and services, offices, banks, churches, restaurants and entertainment, public facilities, and housing. The study area also serves as a primary venue for community activities, including the Summer Concert Series, the Taste of Greater Danbury, numerous parades and other festivities.

Although the report provides a vision of what the downtown can become, it should not be considered a final or end-state document, but rather a flexible report that can be revised over time to reflect changing attitudes, conditions and needs.

Nor should one assume that adoption of the report alone will guarantee its ultimate success. For while the report provides a vision of the future and recommendations for action, its ultimate success will depend upon a community-wide commitment without which no single document, no matter how well crafted, can fully succeed. In the end, success requires the confidence to act rather than simply react to change, and summons all of us to express, in our deeds as well as our words, the will and the determination to shape the future of downtown Danbury.

¹ The study area extends along Main Street from the railroad tracks near Garamella Boulevard in the north to the end of Elmwood Park in the south and from Patriot Drive in the east to Kennedy, New, and Foster streets to the west. Consult the full report for detailed maps.

1. Key Issues & Policies

People who have grown up in Danbury remember a time not long ago when the downtown was clearly the focus of community life, the place to work and to shop, to see and be seen. But, like so many other downtowns in America, Main Street has since lost its once preeminent role as the commercial core of the City as suburban shopping and employment centers have spread out to other areas of the City and into surrounding towns. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many established downtown stores closed or moved to new locales. In some cases, older shops were replaced by stores and services catering to a growing Brazilian and Hispanic immigrant population.

Much of the decline of the downtown as the City's commercial center could have been anticipated as it simply did not have the space or the facilities to accommodate the growing consumer appetite of the population, or to meet the demand for more office and industrial space, or to offer the convenience provided by commercial centers closer to suburban housing. The downtown may find renewed economic development by providing 'niche' housing and retail services targeted to specific demographic groups who may find living in the heart of the City appealing, groups which may include, among others, young singles, students, retirees and the elderly.

Vision Statement

Visioning is the process of providing an overall image of what is desired for the downtown and how it will look in the future. This process leads to the creation of a vision statement, the starting point for the creation and implementation of action plans.

The Task Force, after analyzing the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the downtown, fashioned the following vision statement as their expression of the ultimate image desired for the future of the downtown.

VISION STATEMENT

The downtown will be the primary focus of City life, with a diversity of activities and thriving businesses, high quality housing, exceptional urban design, preservation of historic buildings, varied entertainment, and a vibrant street life.

Objectives of Downtown Revitalization

The Task Force identified the following major objectives for a successful downtown revitalization effort:

- encourage market-rate housing for those with disposable incomes who will patronize downtown businesses;
- promote and expand a diversity of quality retail stores, services, offices and restaurants;
- expand entertainment and cultural activities;
- support colleges, churches and medical centers;
- improve nearby residential neighborhoods;
- encourage excellence in urban design and the preservation of historic structures and landmarks;
- enhance pedestrian safety and convenience;
- improve public spaces and facilities, sidewalks and parking;
- coordinate public and private programs of downtown improvement and management;
- bring together established business owners and new immigrant groups to improve and promote the downtown; and,
- foster cooperative actions among businesses, merchants, property owners, developers, city government, and civic, religious and educational institutions.

Downtown Danbury is a unique place deserving of community support and commitment. It is the City's heart and center, a place for business and a place for fun, home for those who live here and cherished by all who value it as the focus of City life. Achieving these objectives will help to preserve and enhance the strength and promise of the downtown for present and future generations.

2. Economic Development

While the downtown may no longer be the retail center of years past, it is still characterized by pedestrian-scaled streets, a wealth of historic buildings, and a diversity of local and regional businesses, community facilities and activities. The basis of any revitalization strategy must be to build upon these strengths and provide incentives for private investment that will energize the downtown. This effort cannot rest upon the hope that a vanished past can be restored. Rather, it must recognize new realities and seize new opportunities for the future.

Revitalization Strategies

Success in this effort begins with maintaining and improving the pedestrian experience of all those who come downtown. This requires the encouragement of a mix of complementary uses and activities that reinforce one another – housing, retail stores, services, offices, restaurants, and entertainment which will attract different people at different times to create a “critical mass” of pedestrian-scale uses.

For downtown Danbury, the diversity of mixed uses which can contribute to the establishment of a critical mass include the following: (1) commercial development (retail stores, services, restaurants, business and professional offices); (2) housing (high-density housing for young singles and couples, students, empty nesters, retirees and the elderly); (3) recreation and entertainment (theaters, museums, sports complexes, art galleries, festivals, concerts); (4) civic uses (public offices, library, community centers); and, (5) institutions (colleges, churches, medical centers). Some of these uses may act as catalysts which will kick-start revitalization efforts by initiating a series of major private investments that will bring significant commercial energy downtown to achieve infill development, private redevelopment, and the reuse and renovation of existing buildings.

Recommendations: Private Efforts

- **Market analysis.** Prepare a market analysis which focuses on several factors of downtown development: (1) an analysis of the downtown trade area, existing downtown retail and office business development, consumer attitudes, and business needs, (2) identification of the mix of retail and office niches best suited for the enhancement of business and real estate opportunities, and (3) the formulation of realistic strategies and recommended programs for business retention and recruitment.
- **Business incubator program.** Prepare a feasibility study for a business incubator program designed to assist start-up entrepreneurial firms by providing inexpensive office space and support services, common shared resources, management training for inexperienced business owners, and positive interaction among tenant businesses.
- **Private development opportunities.** Assuming market demand and adequate financing are available, encourage infill and private redevelopment of vacant or underutilized lots, including, among others, the following sites of high visibility and potential for intensified development: (1) ESCAPE to the Arts at 293 Main Street; (2) 12-18 Crosby Street; (3) Main and State streets; (4) the former O'Faia Restaurant at 195-7 Main Street; (5) Firestone at 99 Railroad Place; (6) the Palace Theater parking lot on Keeler Street; (7) the former Police Department complex at Main and Boughton streets; (8) Redevelopment Parcel 9 at 32 Patriot Drive; (9) Kennedy Place at Kennedy Avenue, Rose and Main streets; and, (10) Elm Street and Tower Place.

- **Palace Theater.** Encourage restoration of the Palace Theater to its former excellence and potential to act as a catalyst for downtown revitalization, to promote historic preservation, and to provide a regional destination for the arts and entertainment.

Recommendations: Public Incentive Package

The City can play an important role in downtown revitalization by providing incentives to encourage private investment for desirable development. The objective is to create a package of incentives which will send a clear message from the City to potential developers that downtown Danbury is the most hospitable environment in the City to do business.

- **Zoning amendments.** Petition the Zoning Commission to amend the Zoning Regulations to create a Downtown Revitalization Zone (DRZ) overlay zone which revises regulations for portions of zoning districts located within the Zone with the following provisions.

Multi-family housing. Change multi-family housing from a special exception to a permitted use in the C-CBD Zoning District. Revise selected area and bulk regulations in the CL-10 and RH-3 zoning districts within the DRZ to emulate those in the C-CBD zoning district.

Residential development. Prohibit new first floor residential units from fronting on Main, White and West streets.

Restaurant sales. Eliminate the restriction that sales of alcoholic beverages cannot exceed forty percent of the total monthly food and beverage sales in restaurants.

Parking. Reduce the amount of required on-site parking for 2-bedroom multi-family units to 1½ spaces per unit; eliminate requirements for on-site visitor parking in RH-3 if public parking is within 500 feet; and, eliminate on-site parking requirements for employees if permit parking is made available by the employer at a public parking garage or lot or by long-term lease from a private lot, regardless of the distance from the use.

- **Deferral of Assessment Increases.** Amend the Code of Ordinances to expand uses eligible for a deferral in the DRZ by including office uses, retail uses, permanent residential uses, information technology, recreation facilities, and transportation facilities, as allowed by the Zoning Regulations.
- **Sewer and water fees.** Reduce connection fees and permit application fees in the DRZ.
- **Sidewalk policy.** Accept responsibility by the City for repairing and replacing sidewalks in the DRZ provided abutting property owners keep them clean, safe and unobstructed at all times.
- **Permits.** Give high priority to processing permit applications for new development in the DRZ by placing them on “top of the pile.”
- **Reduced fees.** Reduce most permit fees by 50%.

Ancillary Support

Ancillary support includes actions which, though not directly involved in promoting economic development, nevertheless contribute to the revitalization of the downtown through a variety of related means.

Recommendations

- **Neighborhood plans.** Because of their proximity to the downtown, nearby medium to high density residential neighborhoods can offer support for downtown development by residents who may find such goods and services within convenient walking distance. Neighborhood plans, prepared in close consultation with local residents, can make these areas more attractive by bringing about significant

and lasting improvements in housing conditions, land use patterns, transportation, community facilities, security, and the environment.

- **Ambassador program.** Establish an “ambassador program” through which WCSU students patrol downtown streets, offering assistance to visitors and a presence that will allay security fears.
- **Noise.** Adopt an ordinance to control excessive noise in the downtown that is reasonable in scope and flexible in application. The ordinance would make it unlawful to create noise deemed to be unreasonable when it disturbs, injures or endangers the peace or health of neighboring persons of ordinary sensibilities or when it endangers the health, safety or welfare of the community.
- **Danbury Cultural Museum.** Prepare a feasibility study for the creation of the Danbury Cultural Museum which will highlight and celebrate the contributions immigrant groups have made to the City throughout its history. The proposed museum would tell the story of their journey, what they found here, their triumphs and frustrations, their hopes and achievements. In return, it would reward visitors with new knowledge of our shared history and a renewed pride in our heritage.

3. Urban Design & Historic Preservation

Urban design strives to improve the spatial character of an area through attention given to all of its constituent elements and their interrelationships. Though related to architecture, it differs in that its chief focus is on the context within which buildings, however attractive by themselves, contribute to the overall visual mosaic of an area.

The special character of the downtown study area is largely determined by its predominant coherence in urban design and the architectural styles of its older buildings. Its strongest elements are typical of major commercial districts dating from the 19th century: wide sidewalks and street trees; buildings with little or no setback from the sidewalk; on-street parking and off-street parking to the rear of buildings; and, a mix of commercial, residential, public and institutional uses.

Recommendations

- **Reverse setbacks.** Petition the Zoning Commission for design controls to require that new buildings be setback no farther than the mean setback of adjacent buildings on the block. First floors of new buildings would have to build on the front property line or within a certain distance to maintain the existing street wall or to better integrate buildings with streets.
- **Rear parking lots.** Petition the Zoning Commission to require new parking lots to be located to the rear of buildings fronting on major streets, wherever feasible. Parking lots along major streets generate little pedestrian interest and break-up the continuity of stores and services which benefit from their close proximity to others.
- **Design guidelines.** Prepare downtown design guidelines for new construction, a clear set of policies backed by enforceable standards and placed within a review process understood by both applicant and reviewer alike. The publication of design guidelines can be used as a vehicle for providing design review boards and private developers with standards by which proposed construction can be evaluated in a fair and consistent manner. Standards typically relate to architecture, site design, signs and historic preservation principles and guidelines.
- **Village Districts or Historic District Commissions.** Consider the creation of a village district or historic district commission to encourage the conversion, conservation and preservation of existing buildings and sites in a manner that maintains the historic or distinctive character of the district.

- **Demolition delay.** Enact a demolition delay ordinance to impose a waiting period of not more than 90 days before granting any permit for the demolition of historic buildings or structures or any part thereof. Although such an ordinance does not have the power of preventing such actions, it does give the City time to negotiate alternative actions with the property owner.

4. Public Improvements

Public improvements play a critical supporting role in downtown revitalization and include parking, streets, transit, sidewalks, parks, public buildings and other facilities. Many downtown plans place considerable emphasis on these elements and assume that their improvement alone will spur downtown development. That, of course, is not the case, for downtown revitalization requires a multi-faceted attack that also includes economic development strategies, sensitive urban design, and the preservation of historic properties. Nevertheless, public improvements are key ingredients in making the downtown more functional, convenient, safe and attractive.

Recommendations

- **Short-term parking improvements.** Add perimeter landscaping or low brick walls along Delay and Liberty streets to screen adjacent public parking lots; connect the lot behind the Hull Building to the Palace Theater parking lot and improve pedestrian access and lighting to Liberty Street; provide regular maintenance for parking lots, including paving and striping of spaces; and, provide directional signs to municipal lots and garages from major streets.
- **Long-range parking study.** Hire a consultant to prepare a future parking plan which would include management options (e.g. changes to regulations, time limits on parking for certain spaces, improved signage), expansion proposals (e.g. new construction, cost assessments, and potential users), recommended fee structures, and enforcement measures.
- **HART trolley service.** Communicate to HART suggestions regarding improved trolley service to better serve the downtown by expanding service from Monday through Saturday at times integrated with other bus schedules and to focus the route on connecting the downtown with WCSU, the Danbury Hospital and the Danbury Fair Mall.
- **Streetscape improvements.** Undertake streetscape improvements for White Street, West Street, Crosby Street, and Lee Hartell Drive, and extend Main Street improvements to South Street. Install enhanced crosswalks to the Danbury Green and at the following Main Street intersections: Kennedy/Crosby and Elm/White streets; Library Place; West/Liberty streets; and, Boughton Street and Wooster Street crosswalks at Elmwood Park.
- **Sidewalk repair/replacement.** Recommend a phased program to improve secondary downtown sidewalks, including Bank, Boughton, Chapel, Elm, Foster, Keeler, Kennedy, Library, New, Park, Rose, State, Terrace, Tower, and Wooster streets. Improvements would be primarily limited to the replacement of sidewalks and curbs but without full streetscape treatment.
- **Kennedy Park.** Undertake landscape improvements to Kennedy Park.
- **Public buildings and infrastructure.** Implement improvements to public buildings and infrastructure in accordance with the City's Capital Improvement Program.

These and other recommendations of the report which require the expenditure of public funds are made with an appreciation of the budgetary limitations facing City government. Not everything can be done at once. Consequently, these recommendations require phased implementation over time in a financially prudent manner as funds become available.

5. Implementation

Far too often, reports similar to this one which contain recommended actions are adopted with much fanfare and then ignored, as if their proposals will implement themselves. Accordingly, this report is not being touted as the end of the process of downtown revitalization, but only the beginning. An organization needs to be established to set priorities, monitor progress, consult with individuals and organizations responsible for implementation, provide a forum for the general public, and promote timely planning, programming and budgeting initiatives.

Recommendations

- **Downtown Revitalization Commission.** Create a Commission to promote the revitalization of the downtown in accordance with the vision, objectives and recommendations of the *Downtown Danbury: Issues & Recommendations* report. Duties would include: (1) preparation each year of an annual program of public and private actions necessary to implement report recommendations; (2) meeting with property owners and merchants on development proposals; (3) consulting with public officials on all proposed downtown plans, programs, regulations and public improvements; (4) monitoring downtown progress, evolving conditions, and needs; (5) entertaining and soliciting public opinions, attitudes and concerns; and, (6) providing leadership in all other ways to make the downtown vision a reality.
- **Economic Development Director.** As funding becomes available, the Economic Development Director should be restored to a full-time position to, among other things, encourage and promote downtown business retention and recruitment efforts.

This report provides both a framework and a set of recommendations for a sustained revitalization effort in downtown Danbury. Its success demands constant resolve and vigilance, not sporadic, timid, or quixotic efforts. It requires both a broad vision and an attention to detail, recognizing that even small improvements can add up to significant results. But, in the final analysis, success also demands an intuitive understanding that you can't have a great city without doing great things.

