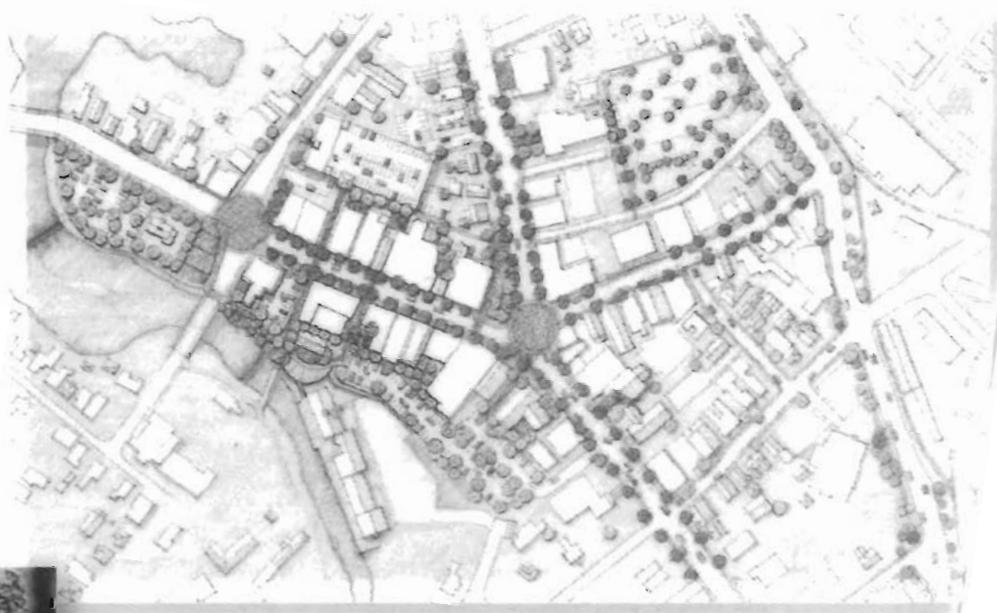


PLAN FOR DOWNTOWN ROCHESTER FINAL REPORT



Submitted to:

City of Rochester

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Downtown

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I. PLAN SUMMARY

The Plan For Downtown Rochester

This is an overview of planning recommendations that can guide the future for Rochester's downtown. The Plan expresses a vision for the downtown, indicates how it could be achieved and suggests specific actions that will lead to success. .

A downtown is the heart of a community. It should have a special vitality and character that express its civic image, drawing residents and visitors alike. It should be an economic resource, providing opportunities for business that provides jobs and generates tax revenues. A downtown should be a great place to live, offering unique spaces within close proximity to many other uses. By combining these diverse qualities and uses, a successful downtown plays a positive and central role in the life of the community. It becomes an active urban place that is densely populated and used by the all citizens, in different ways and at different times.

This plan also addresses the future for two village centers in outlying residential districts, Gonic and East Rochester. At a smaller scale that is appropriate for the clustered neighborhoods around them, a village center can provide an identity and value that contributes to the uses around them and conveys a sense of community.

Unlike the past, Rochester must take deliberate, planned steps if it is to have successful centers that fulfill these roles.

Rochester's historic downtown evolved "naturally", fulfilling an economic and civic role as the dense regional center where manufacturing, housing, stores, banks and other businesses gathered. It was the municipal center, a place for entertainment and gatherings, and a place for special events. It made common sense to create buildings constructed close together on small lots, when people used horses, trolleys, or railroads to move around – and when they walked between destinations, because it was simply the most practical thing to do.

But this was before there were cars, highways, or shopping malls. Most of the traditional downtown remains, inherited by today's citizens. But its vitality has eroded, largely due to changes in economic and transportation patterns. This trend can be reversed if there is both a shared vision and consistent strategy for action. A newly successful downtown will require the joint efforts of the public and private sector, and the active participation of its citizens.

The summary describes the vision for the future, and the goals that must be met within the next ten years in order to accomplish its promise. It describes key clusters of specific recommendations that are contained in the Plan. It then shows how a step-by-step process can be used as a practical approach to implementation.



The Vision...

Working with members of a committee that was assembled to advise the City on the downtown's future, a vision for Rochester's downtown has been framed:

Downtown Rochester should become widely recognized as the attractive and economically successful heart of the city and region that surround it. It should serve Rochester's citizens through the activities, events and uses found there; with a new vitality, it should also draw visitors and patrons from outside the city. The downtown should retain the flavor of a small New Hampshire center that was built through industry and linked to a rural countryside. Densely clustered buildings within the core of historic streets should be filled with a contemporary mix of shops, businesses, residences, cultural, and civic destinations. Open spaces, plazas and parks should celebrate the history and civic heritage of Rochester, and serve as gateways marking the passage to and from the central areas. The changing character of the Cocheco River as it passes through the Downtown should be visible and accessible, providing a unique natural contrast to the urban development along its banks. The edges of the downtown should provide a wide range of uses within sites and along roadways that feature a generous landscape as a common feature. The downtown should be easy to get to, providing a pleasant environment for pedestrians and convenient places to park.

And Specific Goals to be Accomplished...

The City, its businesses and its citizens should work together to accomplish the following goals, so that within ten years the Downtown...

- Supports sufficient concentrations of special stores, restaurants and services to create a destination that attracts both Rochester residents and visitors who will be drawn by the range of activities, continuously filled storefronts and pleasant environment lining the central streets.
- Attracts a concentration of new arts and crafts, restaurants, entertainment and cultural activities that reinforce one another and distinguish the district.
- Adapts underutilized existing buildings to serve as housing or live/work studios in the upper floors of former commercial buildings and expands convenient services and amenities that reinforce the downtown as a great place to live.
- Becomes a more substantial contributor to the City's tax base by virtue of significantly increased property values resulting from rising demand for downtown land, buildings and rental space.
- Celebrates its history by preserving the character and continuity of the historic buildings that are concentrated along North Main, South Main and Hanson Streets and by preserving individual buildings and features that are significant links to Rochester's past.
- Provides a series of plazas, parks and open spaces and special sidewalk areas that are pleasant to see, enjoyable to visit and are excellent venues for special events and festivals by virtue of the well maintained landscape and amenities found there.

- Includes more numerous visual and pedestrian connections to the Cochecho River, so that residents and visitors have opportunities to see and enjoy the changing scenery and dramatic drop of the river as it passes through.
- Initiates new open space, pedestrian and bicycle connections to and from the downtown that provide pleasant, green links to neighboring areas.



- Provides new and expanded programs and events that appeal to the family-oriented character of Rochester and also introduces visitors to the Downtown area.
- Emphasizes the character of a “country city” by featuring high quality landscapes and tree-lined streets.
- Uses the theme of the “Lilac City” as an inspiration for unique plantings, signage and other features.
- Experiences substantive improvements to existing properties and new construction that lifts property values for surrounding areas.
- Enjoys the advantages from substantial roadway intersection and signage improvements designed to calm traffic, enhance convenience for patrons and residents of Downtown, and make pedestrians safe and comfortable.
- Provides adequate convenient parking along streets, near businesses and in common lots that are connected to an excellent pedestrian network.



The Challenges

Rochester's downtown, as defined for planning purposes, consists of several hundred acres of land at the junction of the roads, rail and river networks that serve the city and the region. The downtown has many assets, including handsome historic structures, major investments in civic and municipal facilities, attractive open spaces and a dramatic stretch of the Cocheco River. It has many active businesses, from retail and restaurants to services that are important to the community. Many people live here in homes, apartments and the historic Wyandotte mill along the river's edge. Thousands pass through the city center daily, filling the streets with traffic for much of the day.

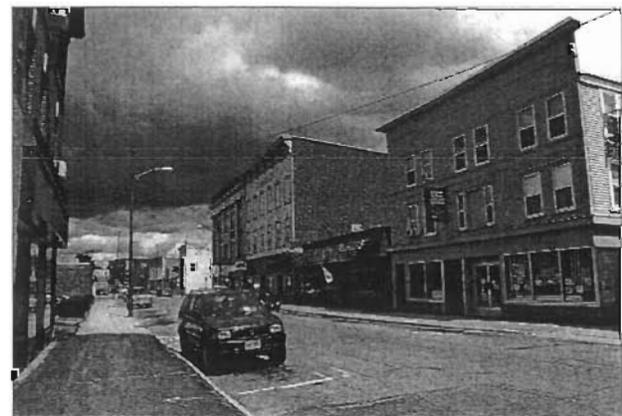
But there are several key challenges for the future, which can best be overcome through coordinated planning and joint public and private actions:

- Downtown as a retail center – The downtown needs to regain the continuity and mix of uses required to maintain a vital retail role, and there are vacant or underutilized ground floor spaces that need to be refilled.
- Downtown as a restaurant/entertainment destination – While there are several restaurants in the downtown and the City-supported Opera House, the downtown as a whole does not draw enough visitors, as a general destination.
- Downtown as a business center – once the center for services, finance and business offices, much of the downtown office space is underutilized and significant floor area is vacant.

- Size of the downtown and economic balance – many of the downtown properties were built or improved to satisfy both local and regional needs during an earlier economic era. With shifts in the economy, the local demand for goods and services simply does not require the full use of the land or buildings in the entire downtown. Buildings and lots lie empty or underused in notable locations.



- Downtown building conditions – Because of the low demand for downtown space, building revenues do not encourage reinvestment or improvements. If it is very difficult to make a profit on building improvements (or even maintenance), the building stock declines in condition, further pulling down their real estate value.



- Image and character – The downtown, despite many excellent public improvements, handsome

buildings and private improvements, suffers from a negative image where there are deteriorated buildings, empty spaces, and inappropriate uses.

- Downtown as a residential district – While it houses many people, the downtown could provide a more consistently pleasant or complete environment for its residents in terms of amenities and services.
- Circulation and parking – Traffic is congested at times, parking is in short supply in key locations, and the pedestrian environment is compromised by the speed and volume of traffic that are channeled through the downtown today.
- Economic contribution – The downtown is an “underperforming asset”. With low demand and low property values, it could contribute substantially more to the City’s tax base. Similarly, contributions to employment and other indirect benefits are low today relative to the downtown’s long term potential.

The Planning Process

Planning Area

The limits of the downtown can be defined in several ways, but for the purposes of this process a planning area was used that concentrated on the areas that flank the major arterials that converge in the center of Rochester. In general, this consists of all of South Main Street north of Columbus Avenue; all of North Main Street from downtown to Stafford Square; all of Wakefield Street from Main Street to the intersection with Columbus Avenue; both sides of Union Street. It also includes all of the side streets between Main Street and Columbus Avenue, as well as the first blocks of Congress Street and the Portland Street extension as they stretch south of Main Street.

While it is adjacent to the downtown, the area east of Columbus Avenue has been considered as a separate sub-area of the City. Similarly, the land flanking South Main Street below Columbus could be considered as an adjacent area to the downtown. These adjacent areas were considered as part of an overall study area in the information gathering phase of the plan, however, so that their influence on the downtown could be understood.



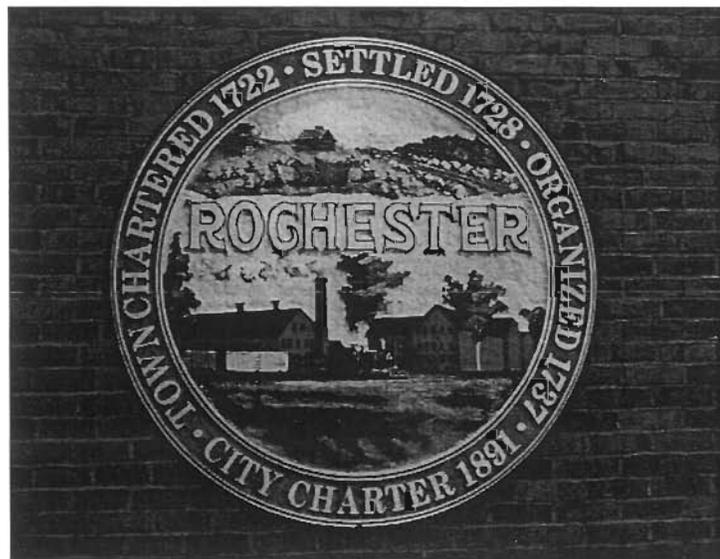
Figure I-1
Overall Study Area

Drafting a Plan: Participants and Process

The City of Rochester, through its Planning Department, has sponsored an extensive community planning process over the past two years. This effort is intended to direct City policies, regulations and actions to best support the goals of its citizens. This study of the downtown (and the centers of Gonic and East Rochester) will become a separate chapter in the comprehensive plan. As an integral part of the process, the City Planning Department is then directing a process to consider improvements to the existing land use regulations – principally zoning ordinances – to better accomplish the priorities developed during the community wide planning discussions. The entire effort has been linked to active community participation. As part of the community participation, a special Downtown Committee was appointed by City Council to provide input and advice to the Planning Board at each step.

To provide specialized expertise and technical assistance, the Planning Department engaged the services of an urban design team led by The Cecil Group, Inc. This firm also provided the skills of planners and landscape architects, and added subconsultant specialists in economic and real estate consulting (Bonz/REA Real Estate Advisors) and traffic and infrastructure planning professionals (Rizzo Associates).

The Plan has been developed through research, interviews, discussions with community residents and the active involvement of the Downtown Committee. Prepared as a draft plan, it will be issued for public review and comment. Once it is revised, it will be reissued for inclusion in the citywide land use plan, and formal approval.



Key Recommendations

A Complete Downtown: Mixed Use Center

The Plan encourages a concerted public and private initiative to expand the range and number of uses within the downtown area, to regain a vitality that is essential to its future.

A healthy downtown is different from any other district in the City because it contains a rich mix of uses that are interwoven within a tightly knit area. It must contain enough amounts of compatible uses to create a “critical mass” of activity and identity. As it stands, today, the mix of uses and the level of activity no longer effectively fill the large downtown area inherited from a previous era. Revitalization must include adding new uses and expanding the success of existing uses.

Like most northeastern cities, Rochester experienced a dramatic economic shift away from the traditional uses that built the downtown in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The virtual disappearance of manufacturing eliminated jobs for numerous residents who once lived and shopped within the downtown’s environs. The dispersion of larger retail and office uses to fresh sites, new buildings and highway-convenient locations further reduced the viability of downtown uses that heavily relied on the foot-traffic created by the constant goings and comings of everyone drawn to the regional center. The railroad, once the principal form of long-distance travel, disappeared as an activity-generator, and the depot was lost.

These trends have shaped the challenges for tomorrow. Many businesses rely on locations within active, attractive places to be successful. But, today, many of the downtown buildings are underutilized, with some storefronts and upstairs areas even vacant. However, if there were more active storefronts and successful businesses and a stronger downtown population, then the negative trend would reverse, and the market forces would once again recognize the downtown as a preferred location for more and more investment.

An economic assessment of the downtown suggests a two-stepped solution to this issue. First, the public and private sectors need to actively recruit and support new businesses that enhance the activity and fill the vacant and underused business spaces within the downtown. This effort should be concentrated, first, within the core areas along North Main Street and the properties surrounding its intersections with Union Street and Wakefield Street. It should focus on restaurants and cafes, arts and entertainment uses, and any other destination retail or special service that could attract residents and visitors. These are called “destination uses”, where the goods and services offered do not compete directly with either “big box” retail outlets or convenience stores for everyday items. Wherever possible, financial incentives or special approaches to meeting regulatory standards should be used to encourage appropriate investment. The business community and the City should jointly sponsor an active recruitment process to identify users, work with property owners and market the opportunities within the downtown.

At the same time and in the same way, residential use of the downtown should be expanded. This should include encouraging the conversion of the upper floors of traditional commercial buildings into residential units, bed and breakfast units, or live/work opportunities that may be in demand.

Through the success of the public/private initiatives, the “pioneering” uses that will reoccupy and revitalize the downtown will help change its image and intensify activity. New uses will wish to locate here, taking advantage of the foot traffic and the image that has been created. During this second step, property values will rise, and market forces will take over the investment process. The downtown will have regained its economic health.

The public facilities in the downtown are also important anchors of activity and a vital part of a mixed use district. The local, state and federal facilities in the downtown need to be retained and improved over time. The location of new facilities, parking lots, pedestrian access, maintenance and enhancements must be all undertaken with an eye towards their positive contribution to the surrounding area.

To summarize, the key recommendations to enhance the mixed-use center include:

- *Revise zoning and regulations to promote addition of new uses that can revitalize the downtown.*
- *Adopt and sponsor a “Main Street” program to support renovation and revitalization of storefront and other downtown improvements.*
- *Create an active business and development recruitment program.*
- *Sponsor or support lot improvement and development initiatives for key underused parcels such as the McDuffee Block.*



Civic Amenities and Civic Life

Rochester’s downtown has many outstanding picturesque features and civic activities that help it fulfill its role as the center of the community. The City has built an outstanding municipal campus, which it is expanding through new investment in its public safety buildings. The triangle park at the corner of Main Street and Wakefield includes mature trees shading a statue of the famous Parson Main. A veterans memorial, seasonal plantings, street trees and benches can be found along the sidewalks. Along the banks of the Cocheco, a riverwalk park provides a high quality vantage point for strollers along this downtown feature. The spring time Lilac festival is an annual community event, while the unique Opera House provides a civic-supported theater program that contributes to the identity and importance of the City center.

The civic quality of a downtown is directly linked to its economic success, as well. An attractive, festive place becomes a more desirable place for shopping or for locating a business. A downtown with safe, interesting parks and pedestrian links enhances the district as a residential neighborhood. For these reasons, the Downtown Plan encourages a steady investment program in civic amenities, activities and special events to accompany private sector redevelopment, and support rising values.

The Downtown Plan recommends a phased program of streetscape and open space improvements in strategic locations that will expand the quality and support redevelopment. This includes decorative paving, lighting, street trees and benches along the Main Street core, within the major intersections, and along the blocks that lead to the core. Sidewalks can also be more than a passageway – they can and should become locations for café seating, artwork or other amenities that make a downtown special. The Plan proposes a combination of public/private landscaping programs at key locations to create attractive gateways. It suggests a rearrangement of land and parking to create a park and plaza along Bridge Street within the Foster’s Block – a place for a small farmer’s market, a stroll to the river, or for an impromptu musical performance. Over time, this area might be expanded to become a large public square and gathering place.

The riverfront walkways and park corridor should be expanded over time. A walkway and viewpoint might be constructed to view the falls and the canal-like stretch along the historic mill edge. Perhaps a pedestrian bridge can eventually be created, reaching across the river and connecting to trails and bikeways that lead to adjacent neighborhoods and along the green corridor that flanks the Cocheco as it flows southward.

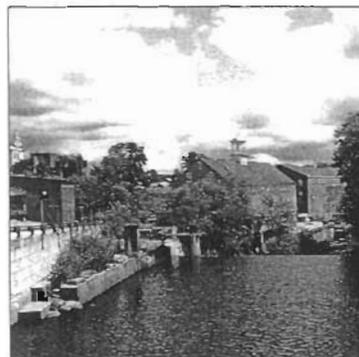
Landscape and signage improvements should welcome visitors to the downtown at gateway locations. Key opportunities for improvements on both public and private land exist at the corners of the downtown triangle formed by Wakefield, Union and North Main Streets. In these and other selected locations along the expanded plazas and park connections, flowering lilacs should be featured, underlining this seasonal link to a symbol of the City.

In terms of civic uses, the Plan supports the retention and future addition of municipal uses in the downtown that serve the public needs; uses such as the library, for example, are vital to a successful downtown.

Finally, the Plan recommends the sponsorship of new events to bring residents and visitors to the downtown. These can start as small events, and then can grow to become annual events and traditions. In addition to their contribution to the civic quality of life, such events are extremely important in introducing newcomers to the downtown, expanding the number of people who will make it a destination in the future.

Specific recommendations for civic amenities and life addressed in the Plan include:

- *Create a master streetscape plan for the downtown, and then construct attractive enhancements in strategic locations.*
- *Create landscape enhancements at gateway locations.*
- *Expand public access along the Cocheco River edge, and extend bikeways and trails into surrounding areas.*
- *Expand existing civic events and sponsor new ones.*



Core, Connections and Edges

The revitalization of the downtown is critically linked to the refilling of the buildings and spaces within the densely developed historic core that lines North Main Street from the bridge over the Cocheco to the edges of the intersection with Wakefield Street. This core area extends along Hanson Street, which once led to the rail depot and retains the architectural character of a well-traveled downtown street.

This recommendation is founded upon the importance of providing a continuously interesting and improved area that can generate the kinds of activity that are vital to a healthy downtown. If the continuity of uses is lost, or if decaying properties influence the values of nearby buildings, a cycle of disinvestments can be started that becomes increasingly difficult to reverse.

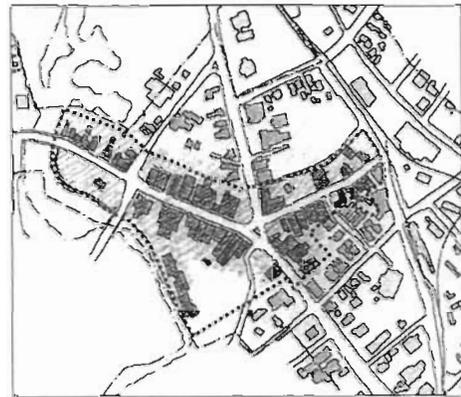
This will require prioritizing public and private initiatives over the next few years to ensure that reinvestment opportunities are supported, and new storefront uses put in place that can benefit the entire district. Streetscape, public space, parking and circulation improvements should be concentrated in this area, to add more support for the reinvestment process.

As the core is stabilized and the reinvestment accelerates, the community should expand its focus and provide similar assistance and investments along the streets and connections that lead to adjacent areas. By enhancing pedestrian connections, providing shared parking opportunities, and expanding attractive streetscape improvements, the value of the initial investments can leverage expanding benefits for property owners, tenants, citizens and the City.

Complementing the initiatives within the core area, the Plan recommends that the City implements new site planning and design guidelines to ensure that future investment in the edges of the downtown is compatible with adjacent uses and contributes to the overall value of the area. Design principles should include the provision of buffering of commercial uses from single-family neighborhoods. These standards should emphasize attractive and practical approaches to siting buildings and parking lots, and provide for landscaping that will steadily enhance the visual quality of the entire district, to everyone's benefit.

In summary, key recommendations for the core and its surroundings include:

- *A core area along North Main Street and immediately adjacent areas should be the priority focus for public space improvements and reinvestment incentives.*
- *The City should subsequently promote expanded improvements in areas that are connected to the core.*
- *In surrounding areas, land use regulations and design standards should be established to support high value reinvestment.*



Preserving the Past

Rochester has a genuinely interesting history as a community and its downtown retains the memory of its evolution in the architecture, industrial infrastructure and monuments that are concentrated here. It is a rich resource for amateur and professional historians, including the members of the Rochester Historical Society which occupies a prominent location on Hanson Street.

But there is also a significant economic value in the historic links to the past; historic preservation is a key economic revitalization strategy, as a result. Part of this is due to the attachments that many people form to traditional architecture as a place to live or work. Although there may be drawbacks to the size of the floors or the cost of reconstruction, it is normally impossible to recreate the quality of construction or special details that were part of historic structures.

The physical organization of the historic downtown is also a key to its success. Mixed-use centers that can sustain retail, restaurant and entertainment activities rely on a tight, continuous frontage that provides the pedestrian with a varied, interesting experience. When this pattern is disrupted (some say by as little as a sixty-foot gap), the pedestrian experience declines, sales drop, and leases are hard to sustain. The side-by-side arrangement of high quality buildings could not be replicated within the economics of today's real estate conditions. Furthermore, the loss of buildings can have major negative impacts on the success of surrounding properties.

As a result, the Downtown Plan includes recommendations to institute a local downtown historic district to help provide long-term stewardship of its historic assets. Such a district should be carefully tailored to meet the needs and interests of Rochester. By redirecting potential demolition towards renovation, the best long-term value for individual properties and of the entire downtown can be achieved. By thoughtfully applying design guidance to new projects and renovations, and by organizing assistance in the renovation of older buildings, the district concept can contribute directly to the economic success and property values for many downtown assets.

In addition, the Plan emphasizes opportunities to provide historic interpretation along the paths and within the parks that will be part of the downtown fabric. The more everyone understands and appreciates the past, the more it will contribute to the future.

In brief, the Plan supports historic preservation, including recommendations to:

- *Create a downtown historic district.*
- *Sponsor a “Main Street” program to help with historic preservation of storefronts and commercial buildings.*
- *Support financial incentives, technical assistance and pursue grants to aid in historic preservation.*
- *Create imaginative interpretive elements in the public spaces of the downtown.*



Circulation and Parking

The circulation patterns, traffic flows and parking supply must be managed to support the City’s downtown revitalization goals. The ability to conveniently move to and from the City center and find reasonably convenient parking is fundamentally linked to its future commercial viability.

Because of the geographic circumstances of the downtown, several major arterials support through-traffic that does not have the city center as a destination. The volume of this traffic had reached such a high level that a one-way loop system has been instituted to facilitate faster, smoother movements for through traffic. In essence, the portions of the downtown function as a kind of triangular “rotary”, with one way traffic circulating northbound along Wakefield Street, southwest along Union Street, and south east along North Main Street. Turning lanes have been instituted to facilitate easy, nearly continuous turning at the corners of this triangle, and traffic moves along at a brisk pace. In essence, the downtown streets have been retrofitted to make them work better as regional arterial.

Unfortunately, the current circulation and intersection system has definite drawbacks for the downtown. The relatively high traffic speeds and concentrated turning movements contradict the goal of providing a pedestrian-friendly environment. At key intersections where pedestrian crossings should be encouraged, for example, traffic flows have virtually no interruption. For many businesses, one way traffic patterns reduce storefront visibility, as motorists pass by more rapidly and less frequently than would occur along traditional two-way streets. For visitors, the circulation patterns can be disorienting, and makes it more difficult to find destinations. Parking can be scarce, and the path to public parking is not well marked today.

The Plan recommends a comprehensive approach to circulation and intersection improvements that would provide traffic calming. Restoration of a simpler pattern would be highly beneficial to the

business environment and property values if it could be accomplished, and should be considered as a very important investment. Studies undertaken during the preparation of the Plan indicate that a return to a two-way (or partial two-way) circulation pattern may be feasible. Extensive traffic planning alternatives and associated recommendations for intersections are contained in the balance of this report. As the next step, detailed technical studies should be undertaken to confirm the feasibility, funding and the benefits associated with recommended circulation changes and enhancements. The Plan also endorses the concept of a future Connector Bridge project for the City, which will route a portion of the traffic around the downtown and relieve congestion.

Reorganization of intersections should be undertaken to provide broader, safer sidewalks and crosswalks at busy intersections. These intersections should also provide for slower, safer traffic movements. New mid-block crosswalks should be created, as well. Investment in improved signal systems should be undertaken, as the intersection improvements occur. Appropriate traffic flows for both vehicles and pedestrians will be aided by the synchronization of traffic signals in the downtown.

As the downtown uses expand in number and are increasingly successful, the demand for parking will grow as well. Eventually, a serious shortage could occur that would block further growth. The center of the “triangle” formed by Union, North Main and Wakefield should eventually be reorganized to provide an efficient parking facility, expandable into a structure deck, if needed.

The key transportation recommendation include:

- *Provide traffic calming to create a better pedestrian environment.*
- *Simplify circulation patterns to make them more convenient, to the extent practical.*
- *Provide for eventual expansion of parking through shared facilities, as the downtown grows.*



Image and Identity

All of the proposed improvements, taken together, are aimed at the steady improvement in the overall image and identity of the downtown. It is important to consider how each future action contributes – or detracts – from the overall image of the downtown as part of the review and approval process.

The City and its citizens can help contribute to the growing positive image of the downtown through directed activities and improvements, as well. One of the simpler suggestions is the creation of a clear and unambiguous signage system that identifies the best routes to and from the downtown for visitors. Such a “wayfinding” system can be graphically attractive, building upon the positive graphic programs already in place. Signage guidelines for businesses and public signage can promote an interesting and attractive image that benefits everyone. Finally, pro-active marketing and public relations efforts should consistently bring the downtown’s assets to the public’s attention.

So the Plan recommends initiatives for improving the image and identity of the downtown that would:

- *Establish an excellent “wayfinding” sign system.*
- *Promote attractive signage.*
- *Promote the downtown uses and activities to citizens and potential visitors.*



Stewardship

One of the fundamental elements needed to ensure a successful downtown is the creation of a clear stewardship group with a clear mission to coordinate and promote this broad program of improvements. This group could take many forms, but it must have adequate resources and official support from the City to get the job done.

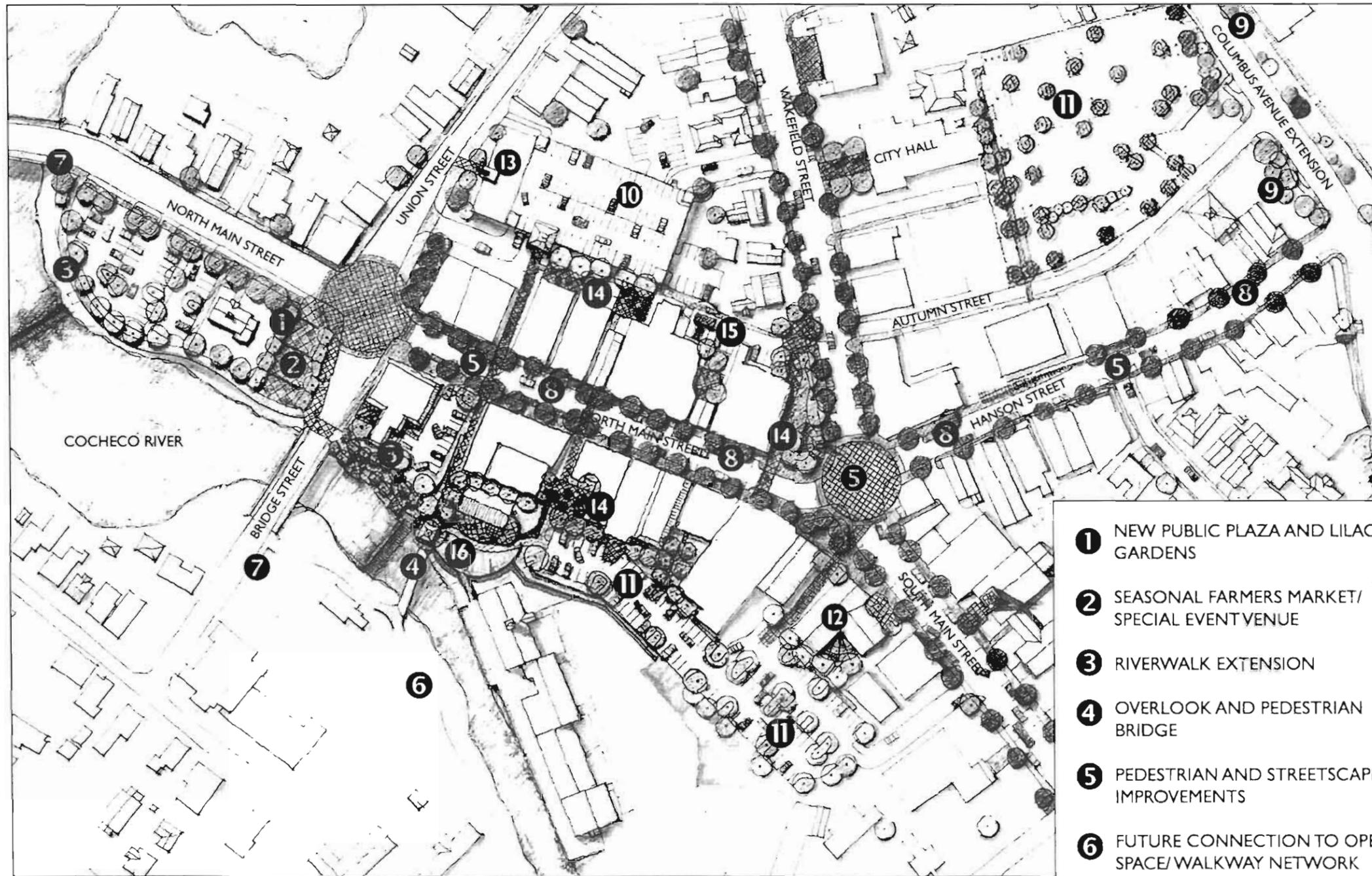
Putting it All Together: An Illustration of the Potential

The following illustration indicates one vision of how many of the recommendations contained in the Master Plan could be translated into “bricks and mortar” and landscaping improvements. It shows how future parking might be expanded to serve a successful downtown, and how new parks and pedestrian connections would link the district together. It imagines new infill development in locations that would contribute to the future vitality of the entire area.

*Figure I-2
Illustration of the Master Plan Recommendations (next page)*

Rochester Downtown Master Plan

Master Plan



- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 NEW PUBLIC PLAZA AND LILAC GARDENS | 9 ARBORETUM PLANTINGS |
| 2 SEASONAL FARMERS MARKET/ SPECIAL EVENT VENUE | 10 NEW PARKING STRUCTURE |
| 3 RIVERWALK EXTENSION | 11 NEW PARKING LOT AND LANDSCAPING |
| 4 OVERLOOK AND PEDESTRIAN BRIDGE | 12 MIXED-USE INFILL |
| 5 PEDESTRIAN AND STREETScape IMPROVEMENTS | 13 NEW COMMERCIAL BUILDING |
| 6 FUTURE CONNECTION TO OPEN SPACE/WALKWAY NETWORK | 14 PEDESTRIAN RELATED AMENITIES AND ENHANCEMENTS |
| 7 IMPROVED SIDEWALK CONNECTION TO SURROUNDING NEIGHBORHOOD | 15 SHARED SERVICE ACCESS |
| 8 FACADE AND SIGNAGE IMPROVEMENTS | 16 REDEVELOPED COURIER BUILDING WITH RESTAURANT OR CAFE USE |

Getting There from Here: Implementing the Plan

This Downtown Plan has been created as an action plan that can be implemented through steady steps, over a ten-year period. The principal stages for action are as follows:

Vision for Year 1

The downtown will have several visible improvements- to open space, streetscape, signage, parking – that make it immediately more inviting and interesting. Simultaneously, a new downtown organization will be up and running to serve as the stewards of the future. Working together with the City, citizens and businesses, this group will help spearhead pro-active funding, financing, staffing and regulatory changes that will set the stage for further revitalization.

Actions

Year 1: Early Steps and Organizing for The Future
<i>Key Organizational and Programmatic Action Steps:</i>
Establish the downtown revitalization organization
Develop a downtown business identification and recruitment plan
Develop a public relations and marketing strategy to help implement the business plan for downtown
Begin the application to become a “Main Street” community, or create a locally-sponsored equivalent
Create public information program on downtown enhancements
Develop web site on downtown revitalization initiatives and festivals to improve community’s access to information
Initiate a semi-annual “state of the downtown” report from the downtown revitalization committee to the City.
<i>Key Landscape and Streetscape Action Steps</i>
Construct a “bricks and mortar” project to create positive momentum
Undertake immediate signage and parking management changes to make the downtown more successful
Prepare a detailed landscape and streetscape improvement plan
Identify opportunities to expand participation in the Adopt-A-Spot program
<i>Key Downtown Restoration Action Steps</i>
Perform an assessment of code enforcement activities and needs
Plan for a new downtown-oriented special event/festival to reinforce downtown identity as center of community activity
Implement zoning and design guideline recommendations to support downtown redevelopment
Reach consensus on best way to implement a downtown historic district
Initiate redevelopment and improvement concepts for key areas: Foster’s block, McDuffee Block, Brooks lot and others
Undertake short-term, low cost traffic and signal improvements to ease traffic flows.
Assess need to expand existing downtown parking supply to meet future demands
Support and help implement private sector initiatives that are consistent with the Downtown Plan (small restaurants, art studios, residential reuse projects, etc.)

Vision for the Mid-Term

Years 2 and 3: Improvements will be concentrated in the core of the downtown, which will show noticeable filling of underutilized spaces with a mix of restaurants, cafés, and small shops on the ground floor and reuse of upper floor spaces for live/work, loft space, and other uses. The stewardship organization, with the City, citizens and businesses will be implementing improvement plans for key parcels, and steady enhancements in landscape, streetscape and parking areas will be underway. Now a historic district, the downtown will be benefiting from the new Main Street program that will be actively assisting in private sector improvement projects. Having concluded what the best circulation scheme should be for the future, steps are underway to enhance access and parking.

Actions

Years 2 and 3: Concentrating on The Core
<i>Key Organizational and Programmatic Steps:</i>
Provide funding and staffing resources for the ongoing operations of the downtown organization; undertake pro-active recruitment of developers and tenants
Initiate business plan
Begin marketing and public relations efforts for downtown businesses, space, and initiatives
Establish a "Main Street" program or its local equivalent, and undertake "Main Street" enhancements
Provide for a regular newsletter, promotional campaigns, and other marketing support
Establish downtown revitalization link to City's web site
Continue the "state of the downtown reports" on a semi-annual basis
<i>Key Landscape and Streetscape Action Steps</i>
Redevelop the Foster's Block to feature a major public open space/park that joins the downtown to the riverfront, provides parking, and is a venue for civic events
Implement a complete "wayfinding" signage system to and from the downtown
Undertake substantial streetscape and landscape improvements fitting the overall plan developed the previous year
Select additional locations and sign up new participants to program
<i>Key Downtown Restoration Action Steps</i>
Fund and implement regular program of code enforcement
Initiate a new downtown-oriented special event
Apply enhanced zoning and design guidelines to guide the reinvestment process
Create the Downtown Historic District
Undertake focused redevelopment and improvement initiatives on large, key projects and areas: Foster's block, McDuffee Block, others
Finalize major decisions about traffic circulation and intersections
Identify and submit applications for State and Federal funding sources to implement parking improvements. Undertake all parking improvements as resources allow
Provide loan and grant incentives for qualifying private sector redevelopment projects, and accelerated project review and approvals

Vision for the Long-Term: Years 4-10

The downtown core is now acknowledged as a regional destination for special restaurants, arts and crafts, specialty stores and special events. Imaginative improvements to the Foster's Block create a beautiful new connection to the river that is actively used for art shows, a farmer's market, and other special events. Through special financing, grants and other means, the stewardship organization and the City have unlocked the redevelopment and landscape potential of the McDuffee Block and the Brooks lot. Easier to get to, the downtown has well-organized and expanded parking in several major lots that combine the resources of public and private land to support the downtown enhancements. Increasing property values are bringing more high quality investment in the areas outside of the core, and public sector investment and the role of the downtown organization has declined as the downtown, now successful, begins to form its own future through market forces.

Actions

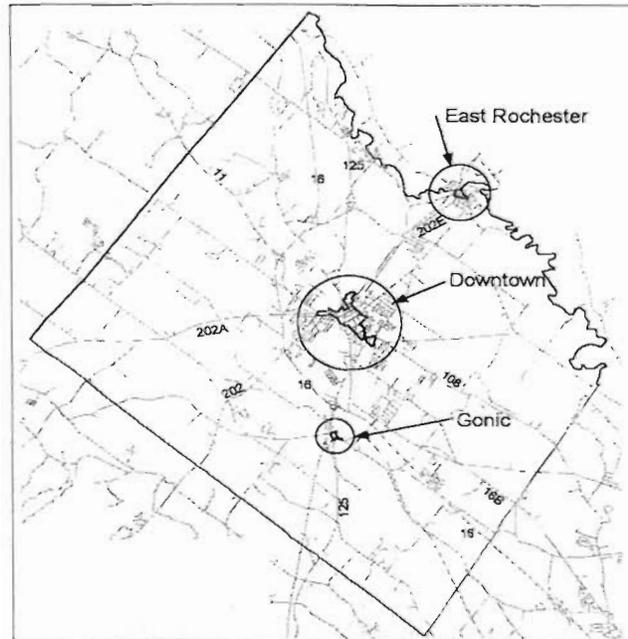
Years 4 – 10: Building and Success
<i>Key Organizational and Programmatic Steps:</i>
Activities of the downtown organization should peak with financing, funding, redevelopment and promotional programs underway
Update business plan as necessary and continue implementation
Update public relations and marketing plan to reflect current needs and strategies and continue implementation
Complete the Main Street program, but continue special revolving loan or grant programs to provide enhancements and expand the benefits to the periphery of the core area
Have a merchant-supported promotion program operating on a regular basis
Update and maintain web site information on downtown revitalization efforts
Continue annual reports on the "state of downtown", and prepare a master plan update at Year 10
<i>Key Landscape and Streetscape Action Steps</i>
Complete an open space network that connects the downtown to the river and open spaces, creating a downtown/neighborhood amenity
Improve the business signage to make the downtown increasingly interesting and more attractive
Expand the scope of streetscape and landscape improvements to the periphery of the core area
Implement beautification program at additional downtown locations
<i>Key Downtown Restoration Action Steps</i>
Maintain on-going downtown code enforcement program
Conduct annual and special events downtown
Revise zoning and design guidelines to take into account lessons learned and changing circumstances to help complete the Plan
Realize the benefits of the Historic District through special grant programs for renovation, design assistance, publicity and attraction of tenants
Complete all large redevelopment projects
Implement agreed-upon traffic and intersection improvements
Undertake all parking improvements as resources allow to provide adequate parking to match downtown reinvestment, including a simple parking structure if required over the long term
Provide loan and grant incentives for qualifying private sector redevelopment projects, and accelerated project review and approvals

Recommendations for Gonic and East Rochester

The village centers in Gonic and East Rochester have many similar characteristics that can be enhanced through a planned approach to the future. In earlier times, both areas were distinct clusters of housing, retail and commercial uses that benefited from the close proximity to one another. They remain identifiable places, but their vitality has faded over time.

In the future, these two centers could be enhanced as historic clusters by ensuring that the zoning provides for an appropriate mix and density of uses, particularly by permitting the development of low-scale multi-family housing, live-work housing, and mixed use commercial and housing uses. This zoning approach should also recognize the value of retaining lower density, lower scale uses in the vicinity and minimizing locations for competing, “sprawling” commercial uses nearby.

The townscape of these village centers should be retained and enhanced. This should be accomplished through site planning controls for private sector uses, and reinvestment in the public portions of the centers.



The use of site planning standards and site plan review processes will serve to enhance the value of the area and, over time, benefit all of the property owners and businesses found there. Site planning controls should be specific to the village centers, and could be accomplished through overlay zoning or special site plan review districts. They could also be subject to special new zoning designations linked to site plan standards. These standards should describe how new or renovated buildings should have setbacks that are consistent with the neighboring buildings, should limit or prohibit surface parking in front of buildings, and should provide for the continuation of the pleasant landscaping that is a feature of Gonic and East Rochester. Architecture that is consistent with the character and materials of the historic areas should be encouraged through the same provisions.

Both areas would benefit substantially from modest improvements in the retail storefronts and signage. Enhanced signage guidelines that limit generic and rear-lit signs, if combined with an incentive program to create better signs, storefronts and awnings, would enhance businesses and values for the areas. In this regard, the mission of the downtown “Main Street” program should also include East Rochester and Gonic as special target areas for inclusion in technical assistance, grants or loan initiatives that will emerge.

The streetscape and landscape within the two areas can be substantially improved to recapture the qualities of a small, historic village center. This should be a balance of streetscape and landscape improvements appropriate for a semi-rural center, rather than an intense downtown environment. Short stretches of sidewalk should be reconstructed and improved, perhaps with brick trim in some locations. Traditional light fixtures should be placed in a few strategic locations, and additional plantings and street trees should be provided to soften hard-edged areas. Crosswalks and simple paving, curbing and striping improvements should be undertaken to help slow traffic at the key intersections.

Figure I-3: Illustration of Potential Enhancements in Gonic Center



As a long-term goal, both areas would greatly benefit from redirecting the overhead utilities either underground or along corridors running behind the principle properties in the areas. The utility “crossroads” in each of the two areas dominate the views and images of the area.

Conclusion

The vision described in this planning report future of downtown Rochester will require persistent reinvestment by the City, its citizens, its businesses and institutions. No single project or program is sufficient, nor can it happen in a short period of time. But steady progress based on visible improvements can and will succeed, as it has in so many similar city centers throughout New England. Each small investment decision must be made in the context of other available choices – to spend city budgets, to pursue grants, to direct staff resources, to invest private and institutional resources. This is why shared vision and a coordinated program are needed, so that the choices to concentrate on revitalization are consistently clear and compelling. Through committed stewardship, the leaders of the community can best guide the choices that will lead to the enormous civic and business benefits of a vital, attractive and economically successful downtown and village centers.

