ENVISIONING CENTRALVILLE

MIT | FALL 2005
department of urban studies and planning

NEIGHBORHOOD NODES AND FABRIC
Neighborhood Fabric & Nodes: 
“Mission Statement”

Protect what works, celebrate what’s worth celebrating, and implement strategies to preserve and enhance it.
Understanding Centralville
Paths, Edges, Districts, Nodes, Landmarks

What is a District?
• Medium to large areas, usually with both residential and commercial or civic uses
• Centered around a node of activity
• Identifiable by both locals and visitors
• Boundaries can blend with other districts

What is a Node?
• A place of interpersonal activity: commercial, social, recreational
• An intersection of paths or streets
• A place for commerce, education, recreation, worship
• A place that holds a neighborhood together
Character Districts

Current zoning establishes a sound framework for codes based on the intrinsic character of the neighborhood.

- Reconcile the conception of character districts as **place-based** with the conception of character districts as **community-based**.

- Consider a participatory process to establish a **vision** for Centralville and definition for the **boundaries** that define the districts.
Overlay Districts

- Establish continuity across the districts as demarcated by zoning.
- Allow for a more comprehensive approach towards issues like traffic and use regulations.
  - Overlay districts as a means to promote compatible infill development.
    - Example: Bridge Street, Reservoir District
  - Overlay districts as a means to protect historic character.
    - Example: Fulton Street Area Cottages and Christian Hill
  - Artist Overlay district to provide live-work opportunities for artists outside downtown Lowell.
- Maintain underlying ‘as-of-right’ zoning.
- Citizen Design Review Board for infill and transition sites.
Upper Bridge Street

Issues:
- Mostly residential with a mix of types (single family transitioning to multi-family closer to Lower Bridge Street).
- Traffic on Bridge Street severely impacts connectivity.
- Zoning (FAR, Lot size, Setbacks)
  - Imposition of a single district.
  - Transition between zoning districts.

Recommended:
- Overlay district to further enhance the continuity of Bridge Street.
- Traffic calming along Bridge Street.
- Limit parking on Bridge Street to one side (between Eleventh Street and Eustis Avenue).
- Widen sidewalks with proper landscaping and paving.
Reservoir District

Importance:
- Local Water supply
- Public open space
- Good views of the river and downtown

Recommendations:
1. Build up connections to the neighborhood through Sixth Street
   - Gate house renovation
   - Set up bulletins for information exchange, introduction, and water resource conservation education
2. Increase accessibility
   - Clarify that it’s a public space
   - Set up jogging/walking track
3. Enhance the safety
   - Repair/replace chain link fence
   - Set up signs for safety warning
4. Improve the physical appearance and visibility
   - Litter removal
   - Outdoor furniture
   - Tree planting/ bird watching/picnic area
5. Overlay district to maintain continuity between the adjacent properties and the park
6. Volunteer residential group
Transfer of Development Rights

- Voluntary, incentive-based process for preserving a community resource for public benefit in limited and controlled application to address open space requirements, parking requirements, etc.

- To protect volatile sites from over-development.

Example: Polish War Veterans Club site

Site Area: 99,000 sq.ft. approx., Building Area: 10,000 sq.ft. approx., Allowable FAR: 1 (Zone: TSF)

Vision - Community facility with recreational open space, day care (for children and seniors), performing arts and craft center, etc.

Recommendation:
- Include TDR option in current zoning
- Establish the following:
  - Definitions of transferable rights (open space, parking, etc.)
  - Locations for donor sites (residential districts) and receiver sites (neighborhood business or mixed-use districts)
  - Maximums for transfer.
Nodes
Centers of pedestrian activity, often with retail, neighborhood, or social service functions. Small pedestrian-oriented neighborhood retail doesn’t confirm to zoning but provides a valuable local service and does not require parking.
Varnum School Node

Recommended:

• Provide **community open spaces**.

• **Traffic** calming along Sixth Street.

• Accommodate **non-conforming uses**. Example: J&M Variety
  
  Zoning code, **Section 4.5.8: Reversion to Nonconformity**:  
  “No nonconforming use shall, if changed to a conforming use, revert to a nonconforming use.”

**Text amendment:**

“Except by special permit for uses under 2500 square feet, restricted to neighborhood retail use and excluding garages, auto services, or drive-through establishments”.

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Gateway Node

- **Traffic** calming and safety enhancement.
  - Limit traffic to two lanes and parking to one side of Bridge Street. Improve connection of Jewett Street and Hampshire Street with Bridge Street.
- **Pedestrian** environment enhancements with landscaping and walkability/accessibility improvements.
- **Signage** for Centralville and Lower Bridge Street business district.
- Community **open space**.
- **Transit** related amenities like a bus shelter.
Looking Ahead at Multifamily

Multifamily issues:
- Ground floor garages
- Blank walls
- Inconsistent fabric

Can current zoning encourage more sensitive development? How can zoning prevent tear-down of historic homes and encourage redevelopment of these properties in multifamily districts?

RECOMMENDATIONS:
- Provide incentives to small-scale multifamily developers like density bonuses, parking requirement waivers, “FastTrack” permitting, etc. to encourage preservation of appropriate single-family homes as multifamily properties?
- Citizen Design Review Board can help ensure consistency with existing built fabric.
Recommendations & Implementation

1. Amendment to zoning maps and text
   - Character districts
   - Overlay districts
   - TDR- transfer of development rights
   - Incentives and streamlining for developers who “do it right”
   - Text amendments to help maintain non-conforming retail uses at nodes

2. Citizen Design Review Board
   - Will focus on issues of size and scale, encouraging appropriate infill development without limiting options for private property owners
   - Helps develop and guide implementation of historic overlay or character districts

3. Consider creating a new group which draws its membership from CNP, CNAG, other neighborhood groups so that it serves both sides of Bridge Street as well as business interests, using the model of Boston Redevelopment Authority
   - Formal representation for a diverse but cohesive set of interests
   - Will facilitate partnerships to leverage capital to invest in streetscape improvements and maintenance
   - Will also help Centralville present a single, strong voice when negotiating for resources with Lowell government and interests
Neighborhood Street
GREENHALSE SCHOOL

ST. LOUIS SCHOOL

ST. LOUIS CHURCH

PENIEL CHURCH

FIRE DEPT.
Vacant Parcel at 84 West Sixth Street
Site Conditions

• Opportunity: Rare Vacant Parcel in Neighborhood

• Blight: Overgrown weeds and litter

• Fiscally distressed: $50K+ owed to city

• Zoning: Traditional Multi-Family
  – Would allow for up to four dwelling units
Recommendations

• City should take control of property

• Special attention to facade treatment in new development

• Possible Innovations
  – Small scale neighborhood retail
  – Condominiumized parking spaces
Monsignor Keenan Playground
Issues & Recommendations

• Litter (Short Term)
  – Install additional trash receptacles
  – Community cleaning days

• Presence (Long Term)
  – Install shorter, wrought iron fence
  – Additional/moved entrances
    • Along West Sixth Street
    • Corner of West Sixth and Hampshire
10 Hampshire Street
former Parks and Rec building

OPPORTUNITY!
Under-used city-owned property
Current Conditions

- Unsafe - piles of material
- Disturbance from use of parking lot and basketball court after dark
- Fear of drug activity in the area
- Parking is difficult
THREE ALTERNATIVES
ALTERNATIVE ONE

POLICE PRECINCT/COMMUNITY SPACE

> Increased police presence thwarts illicit activity
> Initial analysis exists
> Conserves historic building
> All parking on site
> City maintains ownership
> Financial concerns
ALTERNATIVE TWO

RESIDENTIAL REHAB

> 2-4 units housing
> Conserves historic building
> All parking on site
> City sells property with building requirements
Example: 10\textsuperscript{th} Street School

before rehab

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ALTERNATIVE THREE

RESIDENTIAL REHAB w/ POLICE PRECINCT

> Increased police presence thwarts illicit activity
> 2-3 units housing
> Conserves historic building
> All parking on site
> City sells property with building requirements
> New owner rents space to Police Department

(480 Bridge Street = 1,300 sf, $12,000/year)
Plan for the Bridge Street Vision

• Each component makes the others possible
• City and community partnership to implement plan
Economic Development Tool & Strategies

- Support existing businesses
- Create local investment opportunities
- Leverage existing assets
- Adopt local business support model

BRIDGE STREET
Recommendations and Implementation Priorities

- Link business community with local resources
- Assess effectiveness/feasibility of incentive tools
- Launch business community input process to inform business model
Bridge Street Parking and Transportation

- Traffic calming
- Pedestrian improvements

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Residential Parking System Needs Attention

• Cars on sidewalks
• Census data
• Reserved spots in front of homes
  – 1.39 average cars per household
  – 59% have 1 or fewer cars
  – More than 90% have 2 or fewer
• Residential parking permit program
  – Residents have a spot when they need one
  – Limits amount of cars that park on street
  – Price increases with each additional permit
Public Parking on Lower Bridge

- One publicly owned parking lot
- On-street parking
  - Should be available for customers
  - Meters: reinvest revenues in Centralville
- Private parking lots form a barrier
  - Smooth transition from into neighborhoods
  - Make more spaces available to the public
Land Use and Physical Design

Using land use & development regulation to attain the vision

• Opportunities to transform Lower Bridge: vacant/for sale & underused sites

• Zoning code changes:
  – Maintain traditional main street/live-work character
  – Improve parking requirements
  – Height/floor limits increase moving away from water
  – A continuous pedestrian-friendly streetwall
  – Encourage new activity centers:—5-6 th & Bridge / waterfront gateway
Land Use and Physical Design

3 to 5 years: All available lots developed

BRIDGE STREET
Catalyst Project—Bridge and 6th Street

• Need for vibrant development at major cross-roads in Centralville
• Community desire for another restaurant on Lower Bridge Street
• Increase safety by moving access away from Bridge and 6th Intersection
• Open green and community space to be enjoyed by entire community
Catalyst property—Bridge and 6th Street

Catalyst property is on the West side of Bridge and 6th Street and bridges the gap between lower and upper Bridge Street.
i. Context

a. Centralville’s relationship (connection) to Downtown
i. Context

b. Centralville contrasted with Downtown

View of Downtown Lowell from across the Merrimack River.
i. Context

d. Impact of infrastructure on the Riverway
i. Context

e. Goals for the Riverway

“becomes a gathering place for Centralville residents”

(Short- and long-term interventions)

“strengthen Centralville’s visual and physical connections”

“a safe place for many different types of users”

“uses fit the needs and expectations of users”
ii. Analysis/Recommendations
ii. Analysis/Recommendations

a. Developing Centralville’s “Gateway” at Bridge and VFW Parkway:

   Development of “Catalyst” Properties

   Urban Design

   Open Space
ii. Analysis/Recommendations

“Catalyst” Properties
318 Bridge St. (Tavern Parcel)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As of right</th>
<th>Variance Option</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13,177 sq.ft retail</td>
<td>Mixed-use development with same building volume:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Rental apartments</td>
<td>Benefit from cross-use of parking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 Parking places</td>
<td>9 Retail stores on ground floor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No development possible:</strong></td>
<td>Rental apartments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Loss of $1.5 M for the developer)</td>
<td>70 Parking places:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 1 space per 1,000 sqft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 1.5 spaces per dwelling unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Allow for healthy mixed-use gateway</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Break-even for the developer)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**VFW PARKWAY**

**BRIDGE STREET**
ii. Analysis/Recommendations

“Catalyst” Properties

15 First St. (Auto Parts Parcel)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As of right (Recommended)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Sports Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoor multi-sport fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One 180’ x 85 indoor soccer field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two 154’ x 85 multipurpose fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>restaurant serving Sports Club needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 Parking places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth and Adult Leagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhances open space use &amp; activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financially feasible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ii. Analysis/Recommendations

b. Riverway Urban Design/Zoning

  Transitional Zoning

  1. Set backs
  2. Landscaping
  3. Height limit or sloping plane
ii. Analysis/Recommendations

b. Riverway Urban Design/Zoning

Guiding Future Development

**Form:**
- Reintegrate waterfront into Centralville
- Focus on public access
- Strengthen physical links to water
ii. Analysis/Recommendations

b. Riverway Urban Design/Zoning

Guiding Future Development

**Activity:**
- Diversity of activities
- Active uses along ground floor
- Accommodate cultural activities
ii. Analysis/Recommendations

b. Riverway Urban Design/Zoning

Guiding Future Development

Movement:
- Pedestrian: increase ease of movement, enhance sightlines
- Vehicular: maintain flow, minimize conflict
ii. Analysis/Recommendations

c. Traffic/Pedestrian Improvements

- Provide access to open space
- Support connection with downtown
- Increase pedestrian safety
- Promote pedestrian activity
ii. Analysis/Recommendations

d. Reclaiming open space as a public asset

Varnum Park
Coleman Playground
River Path
Waterfront
ii. Analysis/Recommendations

d. Reclaiming open space as a public asset

   Varnum Park
ii. Analysis/Recommendations

d. Reclaiming open space as a public asset

Coleman Playground
iii. Implementation

a. Priorities

1. Open Space
2. Zoning Amendments
3. Traffic Improvements
4. Development of catalyst properties

(Short- and long-term interventions)
iii. Implementation
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SIXTH STREET
BRIDGE STREET

NEIGHBORHOOD
NODES AND FABRIC

RIVERWAY

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Center on Centralville: Event Programming

Celebrating neighborhood identity and bringing the community together around common spaces and neighborhood assets

- Centralville Community-wide Events
- Utilizing Open Space Assets
- Implementation through Partnerships & Connections
1. Centralville Community-wide Events

A. *CentralvilleWorks!*

Volunteer Beautification Days

Possible Locations:
the River, the Reservoir, Moulton Square
1. Centralville Community-wide Events

B. A marked Jack Kerouac Trail with commemorative plaques at Kerouac’s birthplace + other significant locations from his childhood.
2. Utilizing Open Space Assets

A. The River
B. The Reservoir
C. St. Louis Parish
3. Implementation through Partnerships and Connections

A. City-catalyzed community-led process

B. Community Institutions & Potential Partners
   1. Churches
   2. Schools
   3. Mogan Cultural Center

C. Connections to City-wide Events
   1. Lowell Celebrates Kerouac! weekend
   2. Lowell Folk Festival
   3. River festivals
   4. Open studios
THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION.

IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS, PLEASE EMAIL US AT:

11.360@mit.edu