

A Vision for the Upper Merrimack Neighborhood

A plan for preservation and growth

Produced by the Department of Urban Studies and Planning
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

December 2007



Student Authors

Jason Burgess	Catherine Seaborn
Kathryn Emmitt	Julianne Siegel
Michael Kazmierski	Hattie Silberberg
Walker Larsen	Bryant Tan
Cervantes Lee	Kate Thomas
Sophie Martin	Siobhan Watson
Rachel Mercier	Steven Weikal
Luis Montoya	Wencan Tang
Oladimeji Odusote	Beth Williams
Kang Ah Park	

Editors

Jason Burgess	Hattie Silberberg
Kathryn Emmitt	Bryant Tan
Luis Montoya	Beth Williams

Layout and Design

Sophie Martin, Rachel Mercier, Bryant Tan

Teaching Assistant

Steven T. Moga, *PhD Candidate*

Faculty Advisors

Eran Ben-Joseph
*Associate Professor of
Landscape Architecture and Planning*

Terry Szold
*Adjunct Associate Professor of
Land Use Planning*

This plan was created by graduate students in Fall 2007 as part of the MIT Urban Studies and Planning Course 11.360, Community Growth and Land Use Planning. The course focuses on techniques, processes, and professional skills, which are required to effectively manage growth and land use change in urban environments.



Acknowledgements

We thank the people listed for their input and contributions. George Proakis, Chief Planner for the City of Lowell, served as the main city contact and as an additional professional advisor for this project. The MIT students and instructors directly involved in the workshop assume full responsibility for the content of this report.

LOWELL

William F. Martin, Jr.
Mayor

James L. Milinazzo
Vice Mayor

City Council Members

Kevin Broderick
Edward C. Caulfield
Eileen M. Donoghue
Rodney M. Elliot
Rita M. Mercier
Armand P. Mercier
Joseph M. Mendonça

Planning Board

Gerard Frechette
Joseph Clermont
Steve Gendron
Thomas Linnehan
Richard Lockhart

City of Lowell

Bernard F. Lynch
City Manager

Adam Baacke
Assistant City Manager
DPD Director

George Proakis
Chief Planner

Sandy Swaile
Design Planner

Aaron Clausen
Associate Planner

James Errickson
Urban Renewal Project Manager

ORGANIZATIONS

Coalition for a Better Acre (CBA)

Emily Rosenbaum, Executive Director
Madeline Nash, Director of Real Estate Development
Katy Easterly, Senior Project Manager of Real Estate Development
Marianne Gries, Resource Development Coordinator

Lowell Housing Authority

Gary K. Wallace, Executive Director
William Sheehan, Division Director/Public Housing

Lowell Regional Transit Authority

Robert Edie, General Manager
Lauren Giordano, Operations Coordinator

University of Massachusetts – Lowell

Louise Griffin, Vice Chancellor for Administration & Finance
Diana Prideaux-Brune, Vice Chancellor for Facilities
Paul Marion, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Community Outreach
David A. Turcotte, Program Director for Center for Family, Work, and Community

INDIVIDUALS

Peter Aucella, Assistant Superintendent, Lowell National Historical Park (LNHP)
Maribel Aviles, Community resident
Deb Chausse, Board of Directors, House of Hope Housing, Inc.
Dorcas Grigg-Saito, CEO, Lowell Community Health
Mark Goldman, Community resident
Paul Johnson, Community resident
Alan Kazanjian, Local property owner
Patty Kirwin, Catholic Charities
Paul Mayotte, CEO, Jeanne D'Arc Credit Union
Brian McGowan, Local Developer
Elkin Montoya, Mobile Loan Originator, Jeanne D'Arc Credit Union
James Njoroge, Holden Health (owner of St. Joseph's Hospital)
Charles Parrott, Lowell National Historical Park
Janice Pokorski, Staff Member, Community Gardens Greenhouse
Stephen Stowell, Lowell Historic Board
Father James Taggart, St. Patrick's Parish
Diane Waddell, Living Waters, House of Hope
Mike Wurm, Western Canal Stewardship

BUSINESSES

Excel Package Store
Flowers by Albert

Table of Contents

A Plan for Preservation and Growth

Page 1 Executive Summary

Page 2 Introduction

Page 9 Open Space

Page 19 Streetscape

Page 29 Transportation

Page 41 Housing & Community Development

Page 51 Catalyst Properties

Vision for Upper Merrimack

The vision set forth in this plan is for the preservation and growth of the Upper Merrimack neighborhood. This vision includes a focus on:

- *Affordable housing for all ages and backgrounds*
 - *Safe and vibrant streets and public spaces*
- *Better connections to the river, canals and parks*
- *New retail development to serve community needs*
 - *A regional center for public services*
 - *Implementing change through rezoning*



Executive Summary

A Plan for Preservation and Growth

The Upper Merrimack neighborhood has a number of tremendous resources: a diverse and historically rich community of residents, proximity to stunning waterways, and a built environment with a history and character that few places can match. The strategies, alternatives and interventions presented in this report all seek to draw from and build on these local resources. This plan's goal is to create benefits for the current community while motivating and planning for the future. We hope that this plan becomes an effective instrument both in building and in preserving the character and community of Upper Merrimack.

Method

M.I.T. graduate students worked with the City of Lowell, under the guidance of Chief Planner George Proakis and Professors Terry Szold and Eran Ben-Joseph, to create a vision and plan for the Upper Merrimack neighborhood. This plan assesses the existing conditions, creates a vision for improvement, and presents both short- and long-term implementation strategies. The fundamental goal for our team was to create a more livable, vibrant, urban neighborhood for the existing community through five areas of focus: open space, streetscape, transportation, housing & community development, and catalyst properties.

Presentation of Plan

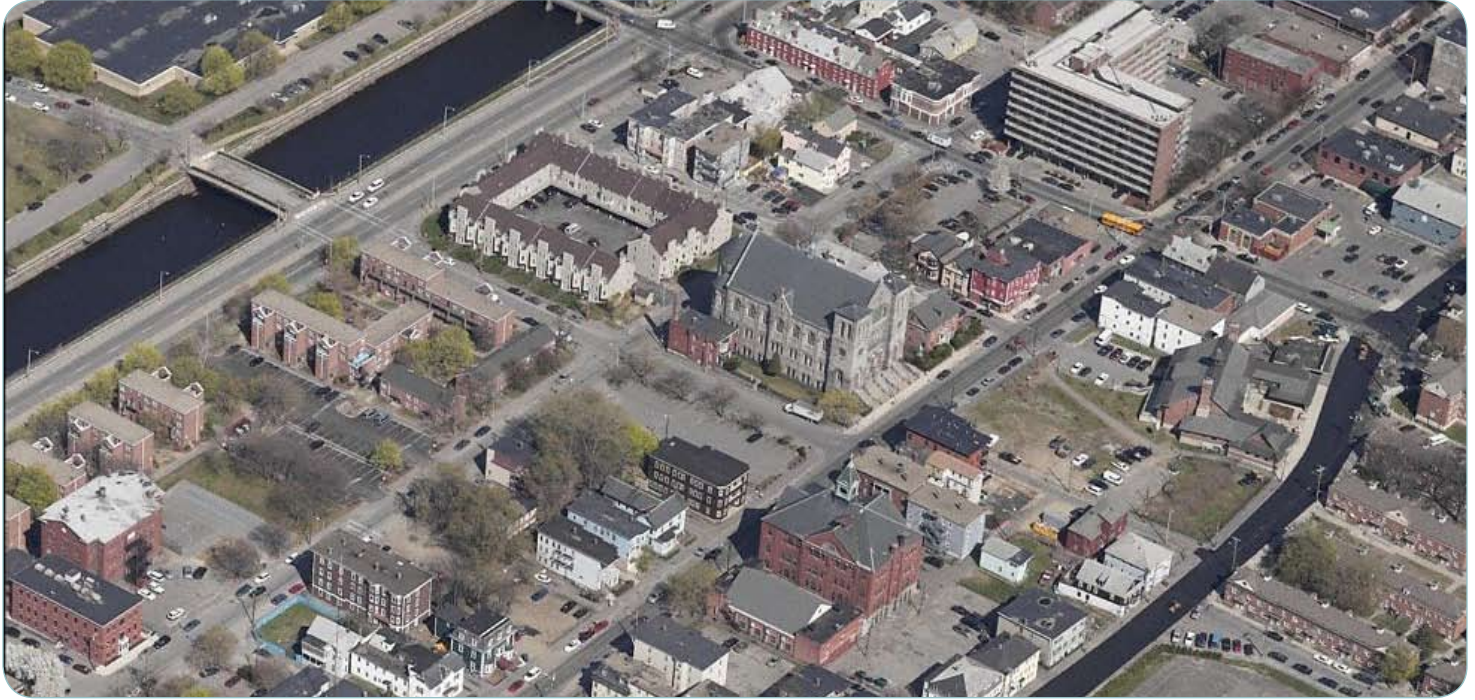
Within this document each category or area of focus includes an initial assessment of existing conditions, goals for improvement, and short-and long-term strategies for change. For most areas of focus a Demonstration Project is suggested. These are readily feasible projects, which the City of Lowell and local leaders can put into action in the near term for no more than \$100,000.

*A plan is only
as effective as
the community
support behind
it, and we
hope that this
plan presents
ideas that the
community will
embrace.*



Introduction

A Plan for Preservation and Growth



In the Fall of 2007, graduate students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) Department of Urban Studies and Planning and the Center for Real Estate joined together to craft a community growth and land use plan for the Upper Merrimack neighborhood in Lowell, MA.

Overview

This plan is meant not only to serve as a catalyst for future planning but also to demonstrate a set of feasible, actionable steps to motivate positive change for the Upper Merrimack neighborhood. We hope that community members can feel pride in this plan and the possibilities it presents for their neighborhood. A plan is only as effective as the community support behind it, and we hope that this plan presents ideas that the community will embrace. This plan is not meant to be a unitary vision or design for change, but is meant to serve as a demonstration of possibilities for the future of the Upper Merrimack neighborhood.

This is a physical planning document; it seeks to provide a foundation for improvements to infrastructure, green space and the city streets of the Upper Merrimack. It is not a comprehensive solution to all of the social and economic issues confronting this community. Rather, it attempts to lay a groundwork for positive physical changes to the neighborhood. We hope that these changes may aid others' efforts to more adequately address issues such as economic development, social inclusion, and diversity.

Local Demographics & Existing Conditions: A Case for Physical Interventions

Between 1990-2000 the population of Lowell grew 1.7%, while population declined in the Upper Merrimack neighborhood by approximately 20%.

Median monthly rent in this neighborhood is \$487, lower than any other neighborhood in Lowell, and significantly below the citywide average monthly rent of \$627. In addition, Upper Merrimack has the second-lowest rate of owner-occupied housing for all of Lowell. This has contributed to some degradation in the local housing stock, and is reflected in the area's low median rents. Inattention by absentee landlords is repeatedly cited as a problem in this community.

(Census data from the 2003 Western Merrimack Planning Study, by the City of Lowell Division of Planning & Development)

Methodology

As graduate student-consultants, we were guided and supported by Professors Terry Szold and Eran Ben-Joseph of M.I.T. The research, outreach and student work presented in this plan were supported by George Proakis and the Lowell Office of City Planning. The City of Lowell has not endorsed this plan in its entirety but has reviewed its content and suggestions, and generally has accepted many of these ideas.

The planning process for this work included historical research, an evaluation of existing conditions, and a needs assessment specifically targeted at five areas for improvement: open space (including parks and greenways); transportation (public transit, parking, and access); housing & community (including small business and community services); streetscapes; and catalyst properties (anchor real estate assets for the neighborhood). Community meetings and personal interviews were primary methods for the needs assessment research; interviews included contact with city employees, business owners, neighborhood residents and community leaders. Other resources that contributed to our understanding of the Upper Merrimack neighborhood included the City of Lowell Master Plan, Zoning Ordinance, Fiscal Action Plans, and the Western Merrimack Planning Study (see inset for details). For an additional perspective we engaged in the daily life of residents through frequent site visits. We also utilized existing best practices in the contemporary urban planning field.

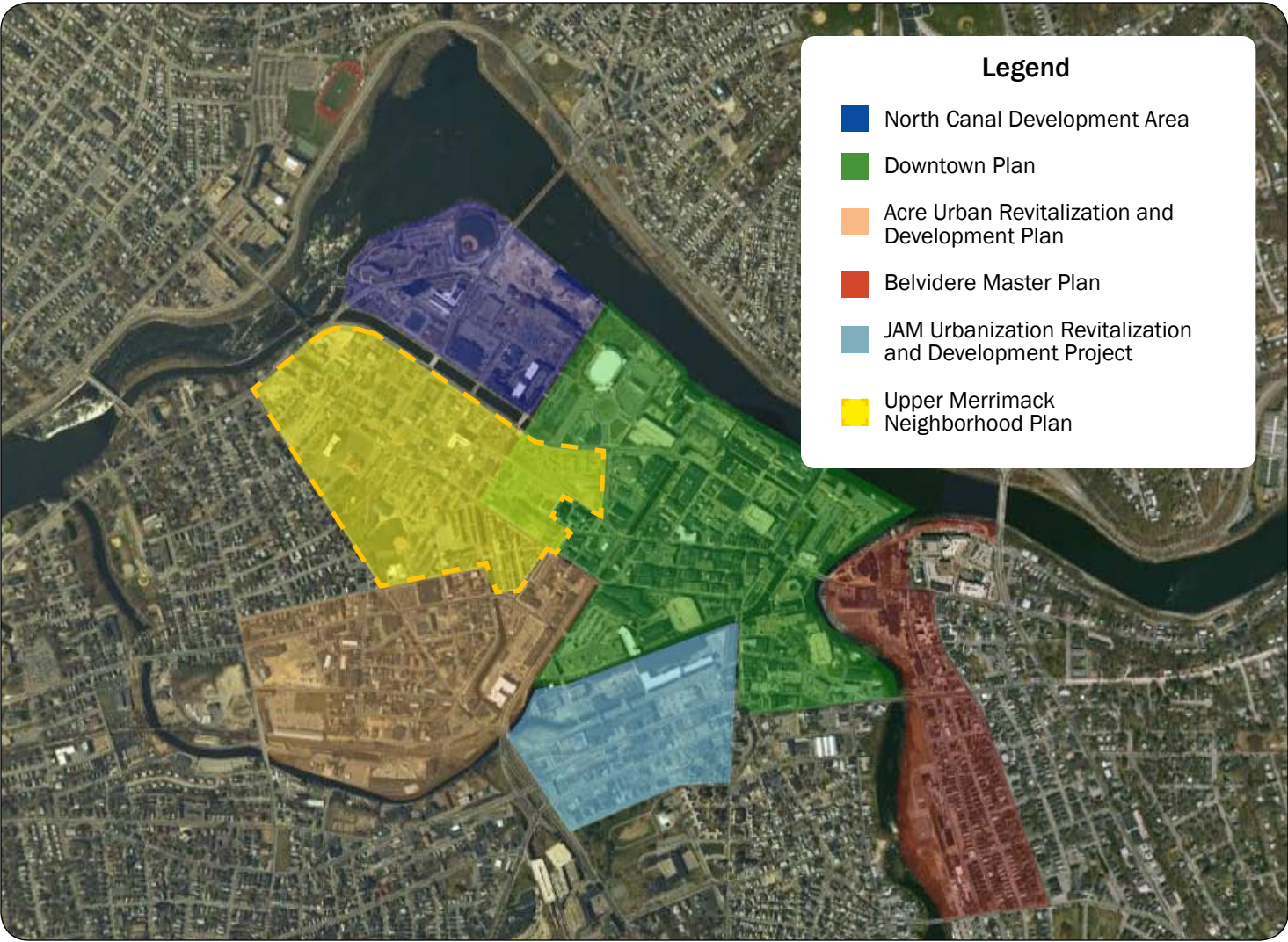
Vision

It is important that any vision for the Upper Merrimack neighborhood balance growth with preservation. This plan aims to remove barriers to growth and development, while preserving the diverse community. An emphasis is also placed on creating a comfortable urban environment, that is both safe and physically charming. The neighborhood is neither a transitional pass-through nor simply a connection between the University of Mass Lowell campus and downtown Lowell. It is a rich urban neighborhood with boundaries and destinations. This plan demonstrates a set of means to attract greater activity to Merrimack Street ways to preserve and maintain affordable housing, and ways to create more pleasant streets and to calm traffic and congestion. The neighborhood is surrounded by historic canals and the beautiful Merrimack River, and animated by a unique and long-standing history. This plan focuses on enhancing the connections between the neighborhood and these resources.



Scope of Plan

A Plan for Preservation and Growth



The Upper Merrimack Neighborhood Plan (highlighted in yellow) fills a gap in planning for the City of Lowell. Several other neighborhoods adjacent to downtown Lowell, including other parts of the Acre, have recent comprehensive revitalization initiatives.



Organization

This document is organized according to five themes: Open Space, Streetscape, Transportation, Housing and Community Development, and Catalyst Properties. Within each of these themes are short- and long-term possibilities for change.

By providing short-and long-term interventions as components of the implementation strategy, this document is intended to supply community leaders with an orderly set of feasible action steps.



The Upper Merrimack Neighborhood and existing building structures are outlined above.

Demonstration Projects are meant to be feasible options for immediate or short-term action within each of the focus areas. Each project has a set budget and can be carried out with approximately \$100,000. Some of the intervention alternatives presented in this report will work well together to generate shared value (for instance interventions in the streetscape and traffic calming, or in a parking reduction and infill housing).

Each section also includes overarching goals, existing conditions, and long-term visions. These are specific to each section, but are in unison with the overall vision for the Upper Merrimack neighborhood. It is our hope that this plan provides an array of attractive possibilities, some of which will motivate community support and action.



Short-Term Demonstration Projects

\$100K Projects to Initiate Neighborhood Revitalization

Below are short-term ideas or Demonstration Projects that can be carried out with \$100,000 of funding in the next six to twelve months. These suggestions are not meant to be carried out in isolation, but are immediately feasible mechanisms that demonstrate the City's commitment to a plan for the Upper Merrimack neighborhood.

Open Space

Short-Term Goal

Improve and enhance existing open space for community residents and their families.

Demonstration Project: Merrimack Square Playground

Incorporating community input through the design process, plan and build a playground on the vacant lot adjacent to the Mercier Center. The playground can include activities for all ages.

Streetscape

Short-Term Goal

Create a safe and pedestrian-friendly environment along Merrimack Street.

Demonstration Project: Streetscape Improvements

Improve streetscape through sidewalk conditioning and paintings, additional street trees (30 trees), street plantings (300-500 square feet) and trash cans and benches (15 of each).

Transportation

Short-Term Goal

Enhance vehicular and pedestrian safety along Aiken Street with traffic calming methods.

Demonstration Project: Aiken Street Traffic Calming

Improve pedestrian safety and comfort by reducing speeding along Aiken St. Modifications include: Corner bump-outs at Aiken and Merrimack Streets, corner bump-outs and painted crosswalks at Aiken and Moody Streets, and adding a brick crosswalk at Aiken and Merrimack Streets.

Housing & Community Development

Short-Term Goal

Improve conditions for existing small businesses and create a network for collaboration.

Demonstration Project: Neighborhood Business Consortium

Organize a neighborhood business consortium to bring together small businesses for joint marketing efforts, bilingual customer service, and employee and management training. The consortium can encourage businesses to take advantage of existing city services such as signage and façade programs.

Zoning

The Merrimack Revitalization Overlay District

This plan sets out a vision for positive changes to the physical environment of the Upper Merrimack neighborhood. Throughout this plan zoning is utilized as a mechanism for promoting changes for the betterment of the community. Zoning regulations determine the allowable uses and physical dimensions of buildings. They also set development requirements, such as regulating the distance buildings must be set back from the street and the number of off-street parking spaces that must be provided for a residential or commercial unit. In order to align zoning regulations with the visions expressed in this plan, we propose that the City of Lowell adopt a zoning overlay district that modifies the existing zoning regulations. We call this proposed overlay district the “Merrimack Revitalization Overlay District,” reflecting this plan’s goal of revitalizing the Upper Merrimack neighborhood.

A summary of the Merrimack Revitalization Overlay District is below. (*See Appendix A for details*)

Reduction in Parking Requirements

Currently two parking spaces are required for all residential units in the neighborhood. We propose that only one space be required for each residential unit built within the overlay district. For Single Room Occupancy units, we recommend that the parking requirement be reduced to one space for every two units. These reductions would encourage development by reducing the amount of land needed to build housing in the neighborhood.

Incentivize Ground-Floor Commercial Space on Merrimack Street

In order to encourage the development of Merrimack Street as the neighborhood’s main commercial corridor, we propose allowing bigger buildings to be built if they have commercial space on the ground floor facing onto Merrimack Street. The overlay district would set a standard Floor Area Ratio (FAR) of 3, and the bonus for buildings with commercial space on Merrimack Street would allow an FAR of up to 3.5.

Inclusionary Zoning to Promote Affordability

Create an inclusionary zoning clause in the proposed overlay district mandating 15% of units in all new properties over 10 units to be designated as affordable. As an alternative to including affordable units on site, developers can allocate appropriate development costs for affordable units into a City of Lowell Upper Merrimack Affordable Housing Development Fund to finance the development of other affordable units in the overlay district. An FAR bonus of 0.5 shall be applied to residential developments that have at least 20% affordable units.

Design Guidelines

Consistent setback requirements for buildings, standards for storefront and signage design, and other guidelines for the appearance of buildings will improve the neighborhood’s physical environment over time. We recommend using the suggestions regarding streetscape and design in this plan to create design guidelines tailored to the Upper Merrimack neighborhood.





Open Space

Connecting the Community through Green Spaces



In adopting the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, the City of Lowell committed to reducing sprawl through land use policies; preserving open space and developing pedestrian-friendly, compact urban communities; and maintaining urban forests through the planting of trees, thus increasing shade and absorbing carbon dioxide. This plan aims to help the City of Lowell achieve these objectives by improving and expanding open spaces, greenways and parks in and around the Upper Merrimack neighborhood.



Open Space

Connecting the Community through Green Spaces

Goals

Three major goals related to open space can improve the quality of life and environmental performance in the Upper Merrimack neighborhood:

- Improve access to existing open spaces.
- Enhance existing open spaces.
- Develop new open spaces.

Upper Merrimack will become a greener and more welcoming neighborhood, enjoyed by residents and visitors alike, by tapping into the open spaces that already exist in the area and creating new open spaces to meet the needs of the community.

Existing Conditions

At the present time, several issues affect the availability and quality of open space for Upper Merrimack residents. First, the neighborhood has relatively few parks and green spaces within its boundaries. However, several well-managed and well-maintained open spaces, such as Merrimack Riverwalk and North Common Park, are available within a short walking distance. But poor road and sidewalk conditions make it difficult and even dangerous for residents to access the parks on foot, effectively preventing many people

in the neighborhood from utilizing these high-quality open spaces a few blocks away.

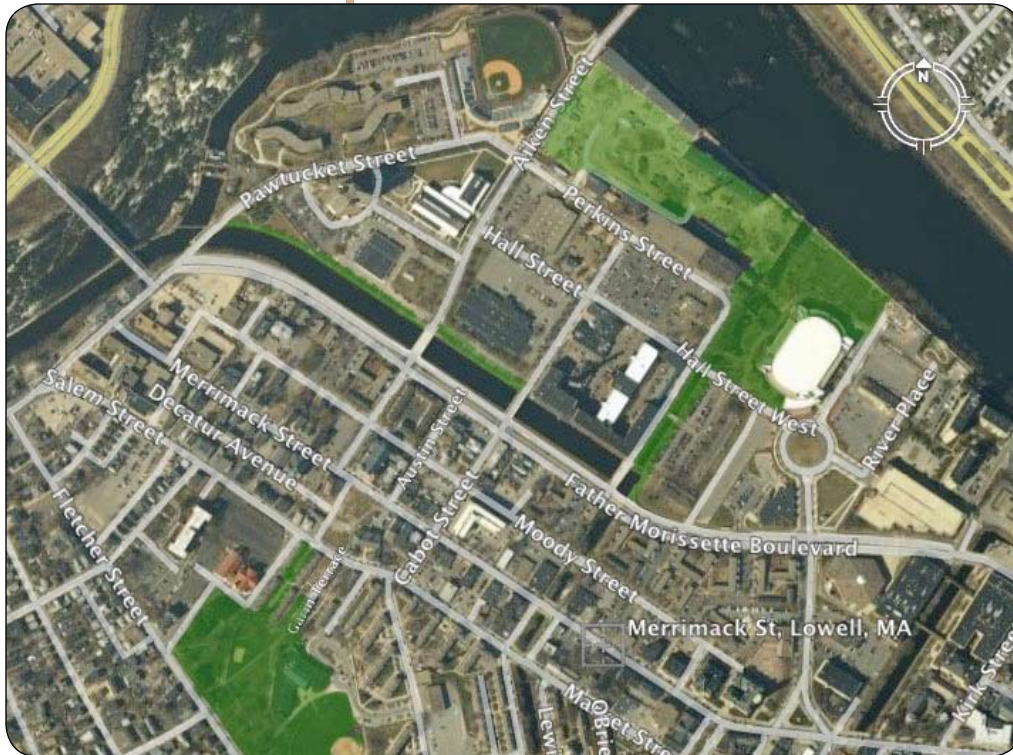
Second, within the neighborhood boundaries are several open spaces that are presently not being used to their fullest potential. Among these parcels are the parks along the Western Canal and the large grassy lot adjacent to the Mercier Center.

Finally, certain areas of Upper Merrimack feel unsafe to residents due to their isolation and perceived or actual criminal activity. Physical enhancements to these locations have the potential to help the community reclaim them as safe, family-oriented public open spaces.



Above: Current condition of Western Canal

Below: Current green open spaces in the area





Above: Merrimack Square, **Right:** Existing condition of site of Merrimack Square, where a little investment can go a long way.



Demonstration Project: Merrimack Square Playground

Public open space is critical to the vitality of an urban neighborhood. It provides a place for neighbors to meet, friends to relax, and children to play. Many recreational open spaces exist just beyond the boundaries of the Upper Merrimack neighborhood, but the heart of the area is significantly lacking in well-programmed open space. A first step in establishing such a space is to create a playground in a portion of the existing open space next to the Mercier Center as a Demonstration Project. This playground is part of the proposed Merrimack Square Park for this location, and demonstrates an initial commitment by the City of Lowell to the Upper Merrimack neighborhood families and young residents.

It is critical that the design process for the Merrimack Square Playground be directly informed by the needs and ideas of the community, as this project will set the tone for other open space projects in the future. A neighborhood charrette would provide useful input and help to build a shared community vision. Potential playground features include state-of-the-art handicapped-accessible play equipment, a seasonal water play area, and an artist-designed interactive play area.



Open Space

Connecting the Community through Green Spaces

Long-Term Vision and Strategies

Our long-term vision for open space, greenways and parks in the Upper Merrimack neighborhood addresses the goals of improving access to existing open spaces, enhancing existing open spaces, and developing new open spaces.

We also recommend that the city work with neighborhood organizations and individual residents to incorporate Lowell's city motto into future open space projects. By striving to promote art as "the handmaid of human good," the city can benefit from open space improvements developed by community members, and community members can gain a sense of ownership of the open spaces in their neighborhood by taking part in the design process.



Community art project



Current condition of crossing Father Morissette Boulevard

Access to Open Spaces

To the North

Just across Father Morissette Boulevard to the north are three connected open space areas. First, the Northern Canal has a well-maintained walkway from the Merrimack River to the Western Canal. Second, a nicely landscaped walkway is found along the Western Canal from Father Morissette Boulevard to where the canal meets the Merrimack River. Finally, the canal greenway connects to the Riverwalk and open space areas along the river.



Areas with poor pedestrian access.

It is currently difficult for pedestrians to reach these areas from the Upper Merrimack neighborhood due to pedestrian-unfriendly intersections. The most pressing need is for a crosswalk where the Western Canal crosses Father Morissette Boulevard near Suffolk Street. As a major pedestrian route, the intersection at Cabot Street and the Western Canal crossing should also be improved consistent with recommendations made in the Transportation section of this report.

To the South

A large baseball field and outdoor basketball court are located just to the south of Salem and Market Streets. The Western Canal walkway also continues to the south of the neighborhood on its way to a connection with the Merrimack Canal. The existing intersection providing access to these spaces for Upper Merrimack residents (at Cabot,

Salem, Market and Adams Streets) is difficult for pedestrians to negotiate and should be improved consistent with Transportation section recommendations.

Enhancement of Existing Open Spaces

Merrimack Square Park

We propose that the City work with the Housing Authority to fully develop the grassy lot at the Mercier Center into a pleasant neighborhood park. This area is already used as a major pedestrian route through the neighborhood, and physical enhancements could make it into a significant public amenity. This location is also perfectly suited for community art projects as the projects would be on central display, incorporated as part of the overall development plan.

Merrimack Square Park should be developed with input from neighborhood residents and should incorporate spaces and furniture appropriate to all ages and a multitude of uses, including the Merrimack Square Playground Demonstration Project. We envision the park as a “commons” for the neighborhood.

Northern Canal Walkway along Father Morissette Boulevard

This walkway currently provides no protection for pedestrians from cars traveling on Father Morissette Boulevard. The high chain link fence between the walkway and the canal is unattractive and obscures the view of the canal.

**Please refer to
Transportation
Section for road
improvement
recommendations.**



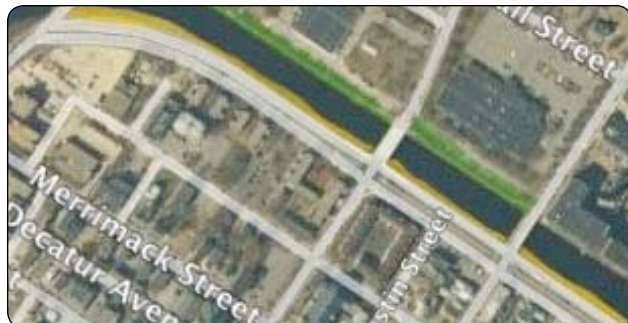
The grassy lot adjacent to the Mercier Center is developed into a park, anchoring the center of the neighborhood.



Open Space

Connecting the Community through Green Spaces

Top right: Aerial view of Northern Canal Walkway
Bottom right: Aerial view of Western Canal in Yellow
Below: South side of Northern Canal Walkway



We recommend that the city move the car railing to the street side of this sidewalk to better protect pedestrians from cars and to separate the sidewalk from the street. We also suggest removing the high chain link fence and replacing it with a railing of the same design used on the opposite bank of the canal. Finally, the City could work with the Commonwealth to plant appropriate trees in the strip of green space along the canal. This would provide shade to pedestrians and contribute to Lowell's climate protection commitments. Funding for this option is addressed in Appendix B.

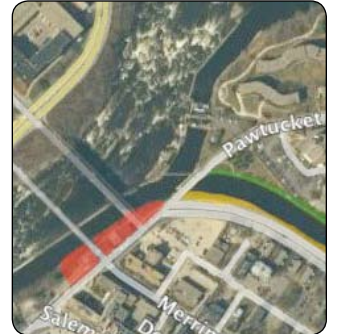
Western Canal

The National Park Service (NPS) at Lowell National Historical Park has completed plans to redevelop the Western Canal pathways along the length of the canal. A lack of funding has stalled completion of the section within the Upper Merrimack neighborhood. We recommend that the City make it a priority to work with the Park Service to secure funding to complete this redevelopment project. Restoring the park will create a pleasant greenway along the entire length of the Western Canal from the Merrimack Canal to the Northern Canal and communicate a sense of investment and pride in the neighborhood. These improvements will benefit neighborhood residents directly by making their open space more useful and enjoyable, as well as indirectly by encouraging visitors to walk the length of the canal system and thereby increasing foot traffic and the potential use of local retail.

New Open Spaces

Gateway River Overlook Park

The repositioned University Avenue Bridge will significantly change the northern entrance to Merrimack Street. This poses an excellent opportunity to create a new public open space that will take advantage of the scenic views overlooking the Merrimack River. It is our understanding that the Mission Church building and the building immediately adjacent to it have already been acquired. After the new bridge is built, the two remaining buildings along the canal will become isolated in their current positions. We propose that the city also move to acquire these buildings. Acquiring this land would create an opportunity to create a very valuable public amenity and enhance the western approach to the Upper Merrimack neighborhood.



Aerial view of Gateway River Overlook Park



The Gateway Overlook Park will frame the entrance to the Upper Merrimack Neighborhood.



Open Space

Connecting the Community through Green Spaces



Before



After

Decatur Alley is a narrow and overgrown corridor. Pervious pavements and plantings would greatly improve the alley.

We recommend that park space be developed on both sides of the bridge landing to maximize the impact of the gateway into the neighborhood. Materials from the Mission Church demolition could be salvaged to construct a gazebo near the original location. This location could become a vital community asset as a place for relaxation and community gatherings. On the other side of the bridge landing we recommend that the City work with the NPS to construct a historic marker to commemorate the old bridge. This marker could become a feature of the NPS walking tour by linking it with other Kerouac destinations throughout the city. Finally, the location of this overlook park would allow it to link with the existing Canal and River walks.

Decatur Alley Greenway and Pocket Park

The Decatur Alley is a cause for safety and security concerns among residents. Despite the potential difficulties involved in coordinating among multiple owners, we feel the alley has the potential to be an ideal community development project. We recommend that the City coordinate with the Coalition for a Better Acre (CBA) to build consensus around restoring the alley and solicit public input.



An alley is transformed into a pleasant semi-private space.

In addition to the alley renovations, a small corner of the parking lot behind the former St. Joseph's high school (where the unpaved alley begins) could be turned into a small sitting park. We recommend that the City install several benches and plant appropriate

trees and other vegetation. This would create an incentive for residents to use the space recreationally, increasing the probability that neighborhood eyes will be available to keep track of activity in the alleyway. Trees in this location would also provide shade to people using the benches and contribute to the city's climate protection goals.

Stormwater Management

All of these open space enhancements and additions will contribute to the maintenance and expansion of permeable surfaces. The neighborhood is surrounded by canal waters, and cultivation of open spaces and greenways will create areas for natural water filtration and groundwater recharge as a means of maintaining water quality. Improvements to existing canal banks and the addition of the overlook park and alley greenway have the potential to improve storm water management, while also improving opportunities for residents to safely enjoy outdoor activities.

Resources

Sponsorship opportunities and funding sources will vary depending on the scale and scope of the projects to be implemented in Lowell. Potential donors include local, state, and federal government agencies, corporate sponsors, charitable foundations, private donations, local businesses, or local service organizations. Each of these potential funding sources should be researched to ensure that their central goals and areas of interest are a good match for the project in question.

Although we have suggested an assortment of arts-based initiatives for the open spaces, seeking sponsorship should not be limited to arts-based funding options. A number of other funding sources have strong potential to link into the scope of open space restoration and redevelopment in Lowell. Likewise, in addition to funding dollars, non-monetary and/or in-kind contributions of products or services should also be pursued. Partnerships and funding streams may be built with bridges to the following areas of community development as well as human health and development:

- Youth at risk
- Job/leadership training
- Community building activities
- Elderly and disabled
- Adults and children
- Health
- Environmental restoration
- Habitat restoration
- English as a second language
- Community beautification
- Education

Appendix B lists a number of funding sources and informational resources to assist in the planning and execution of refurbishing the open space parcels in the study area. Although it is not meant to be an exhaustive catalog of grant opportunities, it should serve as a useful starting point.

Green Alleys

Groundwork Lawrence has completed a project in a similar alleyway, resulting in a beloved resource for local residents. Lowell could build upon this example to transform a dangerous and underutilized space into a pleasant and safe pedestrian route.





Streetscape

Improving Public Space



If we can develop and design streets so that they are wonderful, fulfilling places to be – community-building places, attractive for all people – then we will have successfully designed about one-third of the city directly and will have had an immense impact on the rest.

-Allan Jacobs, *Great Streets*



Streetscape



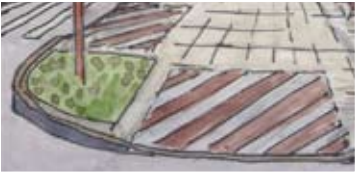

Improving Public Space

Streetscaping can be defined as physical improvements to the public realm. This is an important element in creating vibrant urban neighborhoods. A wide variety of streetscape interventions enliven public streets by creating a stronger community identity, more opportunities for social interaction, and an enhanced sense of comfort and safety for pedestrians.

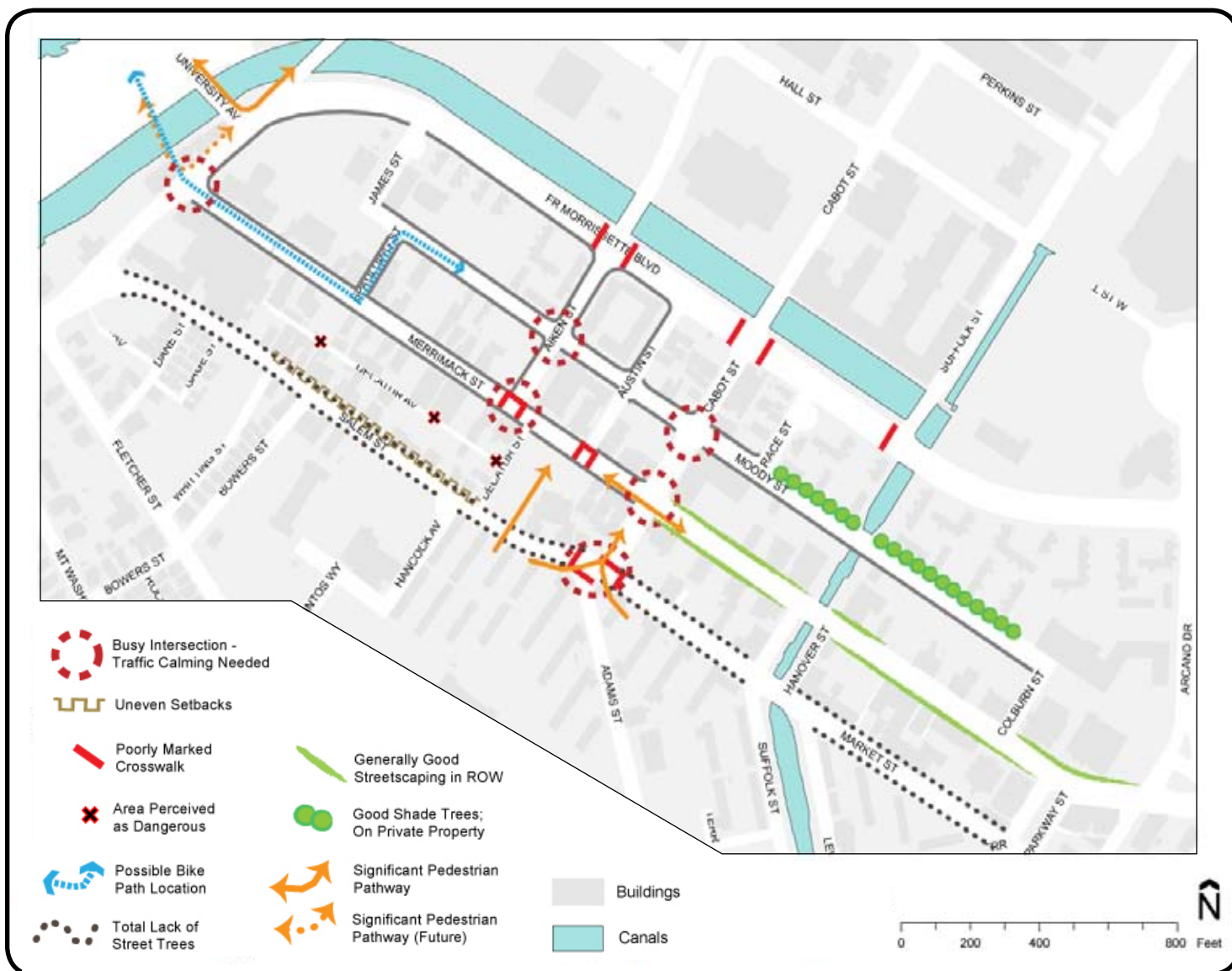
Streetscaping includes:

- Street furniture such as benches, bus shelters, trash cans, and bicycle racks
- Street lighting to enhance pedestrian and vehicular safety
- Sidewalk paving that provides a clear pedestrian path and is well-maintained
- Curbs and curb ramps at crosswalks for safe and accessible pedestrian crossing
- Plantings and trees to provide shade, enhance community character, and create a buffer between pedestrians and vehicles
- Signage, fencing and facade standards to create neighborhood identity

Goals

	Safety	Aesthetic/Comfort
Short Term	 <p>Sidewalks</p>	 <p>Street Furniture</p>
Long Term	 <p>Traffic Calming</p>	 <p>Design Guidelines</p>

- The following are overarching streetscaping goals that have been developed to address both long-term and short-term improvements to the Upper Merrimack neighborhood:
- Create a safe and comfortable pedestrian environment
 - Enliven street life, creating a sense of place and supporting local business
 - Unify the neighborhood visually
 - Improve the public space and experience



Existing Conditions

Opportunities

The Western Merrimack neighborhood already contains many positive elements that contribute to achieving the stated streetscape goals. For example, Merrimack Street east of Cabot Street has good shade trees and a generally good pedestrian environment, which can serve as a model for how to incorporate good streetscaping into other parts of the neighborhood. Sidewalks and streets are wide enough to accommodate a dedicated bike path that could bring more people through the neighborhood in the future. The new bridge connection to Merrimack Street presents an exciting opportunity to improve the identity of the neighborhood and therefore encourage more business in the area.



Streetscape

Improving Public Space

Please refer to
Transportation
Section for
traffic calming
recommendations.

Short-Term Strategies

Demonstration Project: Streetscape Improvements along Merrimack

The short-term demonstration project described in the table below addresses two key areas of improvement: safety and aesthetic/comfort. These improvements are intended to go on Merrimack Street southeast of Cabot Street.

Safety

The City can take immediate steps to begin improving the safety of the neighborhood. Low cost solutions include repainting existing crosswalks and creating new ones at the busiest intersections. Crosswalks and other street calming interventions provide visual cues to drivers and encourage slower speeds.

Sidewalk repairs should be prioritized. Throughout the neighborhood cracked and uneven sidewalks pose hazards to pedestrians, particularly older and disabled residents.

Aesthetic/Comfort

The Upper Merrimack neighborhood would benefit from new street furniture. Benches should be installed next to street trees, and especially at bus stops, in order to accommodate a wider variety of street activities. To discourage littering, trash cans should be installed throughout the neighborhood and particularly in areas with heavy foot traffic. The community and residents can work together to replace chain linked fencing with landscaping or other fencing alternatives, to improve the look and feel of the neighborhood.

Short-Term Demonstration Project Material Cost

Item	Quantity	Unit Cost	Total
Plantings	300 square feet	\$25	\$7,500
Trees	30	\$1,000	\$30,000
Sidewalk Improvements	300 square feet	\$40	\$12,000
Painting	500 square feet	\$0.20	\$100
Benches	15	\$150	\$2,250
Trash Cans	15	\$100	\$1,500
		Subtotal	\$53,350
		+ Labor Cost	\$46,650
		Total	\$100,000



Long-Term Strategies

Safety

Eventually, all asphalt sidewalks should be replaced with uniform concrete or pavers to provide pedestrians with a better sense of separation from vehicular traffic. In the process of choosing new sidewalk materials, the City should consider the role that streetscaping can play in mitigating environmental impacts. Permeable pavement is a cost-effective solution to managing stormwater runoff, lessening the burden on the city's sewer system and improving water quality in the Merrimack River.

Pedestrian safety can also be improved through more comprehensive traffic calming solutions. The City should work with traffic engineers to improve intersections with speed humps and street corner bump-outs to lower traffic speeds. Building upon crosswalk enhancements accomplished in the short term, these interventions are very effective at slowing down traffic and improving pedestrian safety.

Aesthetic/Comfort

The Upper Merrimack neighborhood can benefit from the creation of comprehensive design guidelines pertaining to the public areas and streetscapes. Such guidelines can include the following elements:

- Signage on buildings to reinforce the overall image and character of the community;
- Landscaping, including a mixture of deciduous and evergreen trees, shrubs, and groundcover to add textural interest and variety to the public realm;
- Building setback consistency to create a uniform sidewalk width that is visually appealing and accommodates landscaping;
- Street trees to make the neighborhood more vibrant and beautiful, provide shade, and contribute to the City's commitment to the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection agreement; and
- A specific streetscaping plan for Merrimack Street as a component of the Merrimack Revitalization Overlay District zoning overlay (*described in Appendix A*).

**Please refer to
Open Space Section
for stormwater
management
recommendations.**



Before



After

Looking southeast on Merrimack St. before and after streetscape improvements



Streetscape

Streetscape Improvement Visualization

Moody Street
near Aiken Street



Before

Improvements

- Landscaping
Plantings instead of fencing
- Materials
Improved pavement on sidewalks
- Pedestrian Environment
Defined curbs and differentiated pavements



After



After

Intersection of Western Canal and Merrimack Street



Before

Improvements

Signage

Uniform; improved wayfinding, business visibility and neighborhood identification

Street Furniture

Benches, trash cans, updated fencing

Materials

Improved pavement on sidewalks

Pedestrian Environment

Marked crosswalks and bump-outs



Streetscape

Improving Public Space

Merrimack Street northwest of Cabot Street



After



Before

Improvements

Signage

Uniform; improved wayfinding, business visibility and neighborhood identification

Street Furniture

Benches and trash cans

Materials

Improved pavement on sidewalks

Pedestrian Environment

Marked crosswalks and bump-outs

City Resources

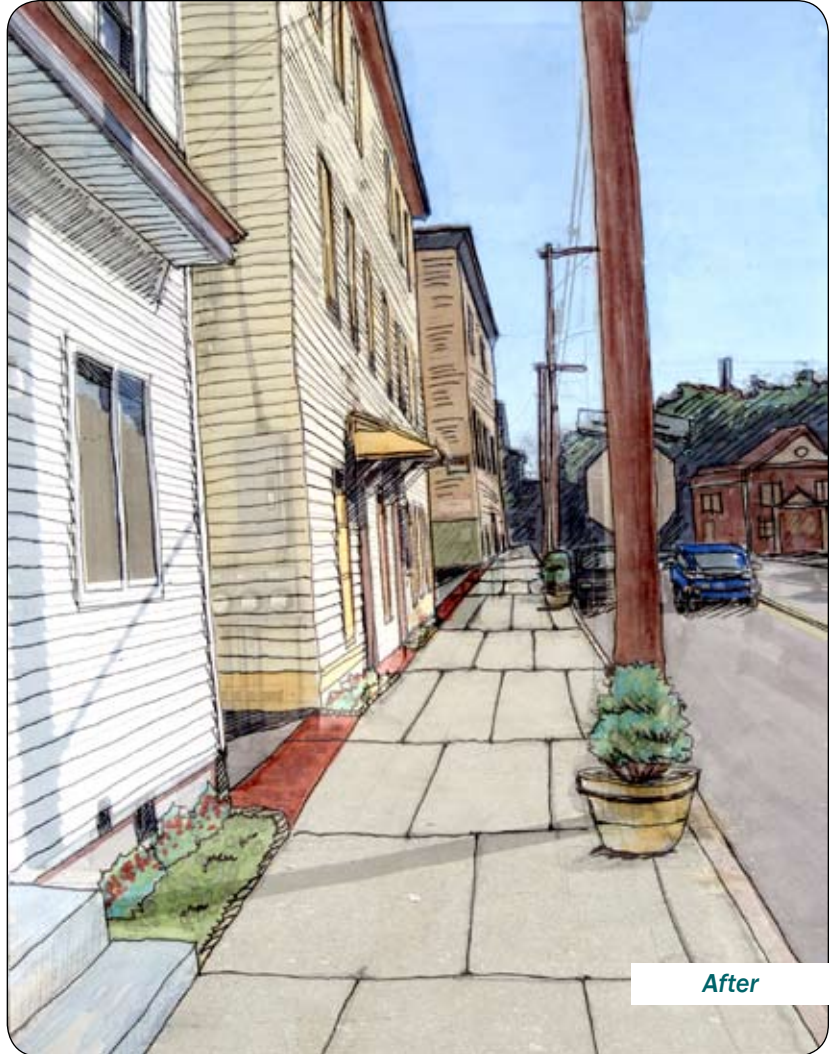
Interim Review Standards of the Acre Neighborhood District

>> <http://www.historiclowell.net/review-districts-permitting/and/AND%20Standards.pdf>



Before

Salem Street southeast of Pawtucket Street



After

Improvements

Setbacks

Consistent for all buildings

Materials

Improved pavement on sidewalks

Landscaping

Plantings in front of houses can green the streetscape even on narrow sidewalks

2007 City Pavement Projects

>> <http://www.lowellma.gov/newsitems/2007-city-pavement-projects/>

Residential Development Guidelines for Traditional Neighborhoods

>> <http://www.lowellma.gov/depts/dpd/projects/DG>





Transportation

Safety and Access



Transportation is a part of daily life in communities. The way that we travel in and around our neighborhood has a great impact on our quality of life and the success of local businesses. This section proposes transportation improvements for the Upper Merrimack neighborhood, based on community concerns and our observations of automobile, pedestrian, bicycle and bus circulation patterns in the area.



Transportation

Safety and Access



Cars traveling over the University Ave. Bridge heading southeast into the Upper Merrimack neighborhood.

The Upper Merrimack neighborhood will change with the reconstruction and redirection of the University Avenue Bridge. The bridge serves as a physical connection between UMass Lowell and Upper Merrimack, and as a gateway for pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

Goals

There are three main goals that will improve the safety and accessibility of the Upper Merrimack neighborhood, as the community prepares for the changes to the bridge:

- Enhance vehicular and pedestrian safety.
- Maintain adequate parking availability.
- Reduce traffic congestion.

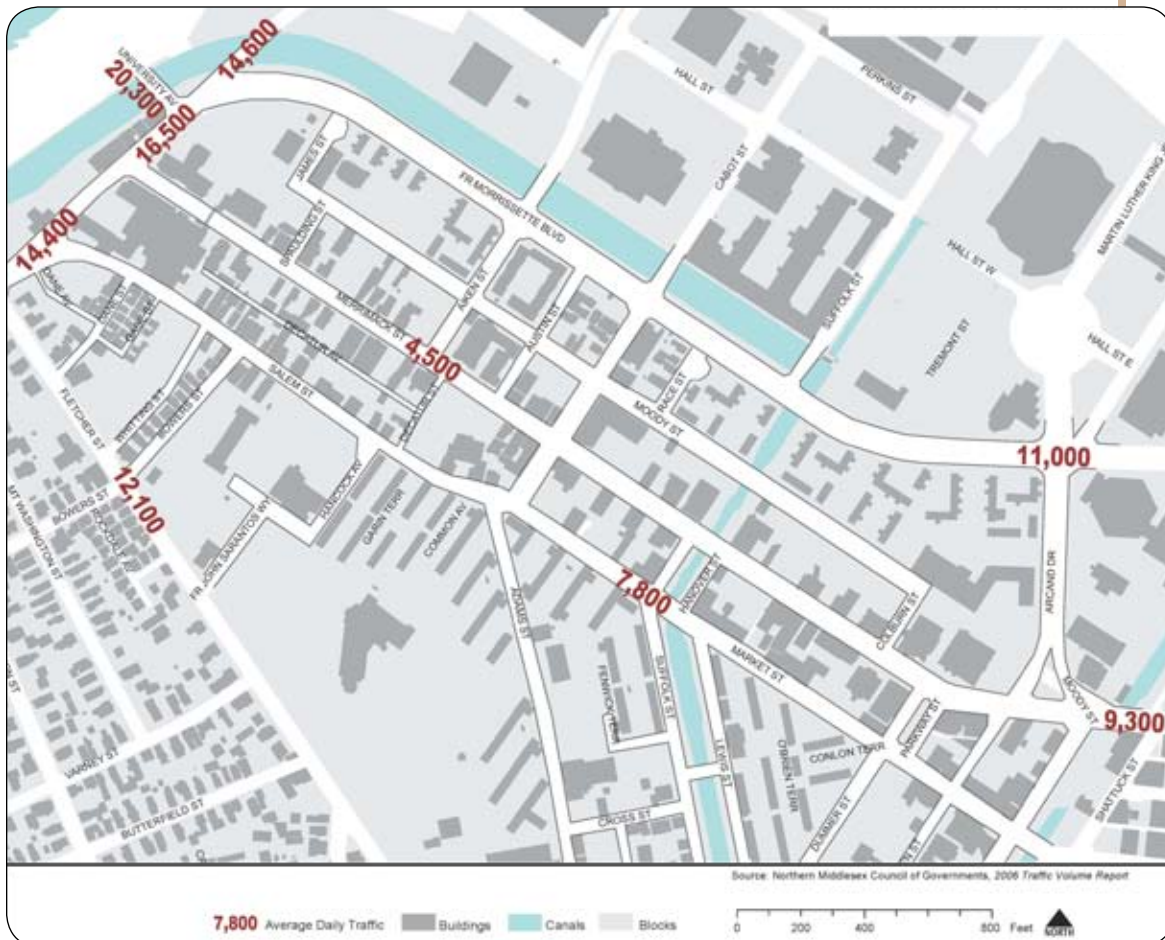
Existing Conditions

Neighborhood transportation concerns focus mainly on increasing safety by slowing down traffic, relieving congestion on neighborhood streets and increasing the availability of alternative modes of transportation.

Traffic Conditions

Vehicular traffic is currently moderate in most of the neighborhood. Traffic counts from the City of Lowell illustrate that traffic volumes are currently much lower on Merrimack Street than on other major streets in the neighborhood. However, residents express concerns about the possibility of increased vehicular traffic on Merrimack Street as a result of the University Avenue bridge realignment. Although an increase in traffic volumes without mitigation could have a significant impact on the look and feel of the neighborhood, a moderate increase in traffic along Merrimack Street could be beneficial to local businesses and support its potential as a lively main street.

Traffic congestion has also been cited as an issue on Salem and Market Streets during the morning and evening commute times. Other concerns expressed by residents include speeding traffic on local streets, specifically Aiken Street and Cabot Street. Finally, the intersection of Salem, Market, Cabot and Adams Streets is perceived as a confusing “free-for-all” that should be addressed in the near-term.



Average daily traffic counts in the Upper Merrimack Neighborhood.



Transportation

Safety and Access

Parking

There is currently an abundance of residential and institutional parking in the Upper Merrimack neighborhood. We determined that much of the parking facilities occupy parcels that could instead provide housing, retail or employment opportunities. These are considered underutilized lots in this plan. The map at right shows underutilized parking parcels in the neighborhood.



Alternative Modes of Transportation

Cycling offers a healthy, low-cost alternative to automobile travel. The Upper Merrimack neighborhood currently has no bicycle lanes. Bicycle lanes should be added to enhance connections between the Upper Merrimack neighborhood and downtown Lowell, the Western Canal, and between UMass Lowell campuses.



Public Transportation

Even though the Upper Merrimack neighborhood has a substantial population, current bus routes are not sufficient to conveniently serve all neighborhood residents. Improved pedestrian, bicycle and transit facilities in the Upper Merrimack neighborhood would ensure that residents have access to a safe and affordable means of travel.



Recommendations

In order to maintain access and safety throughout the Upper Merrimack neighborhood, we recommend the following general transportation interventions:

- Introduce traffic calming elements to enhance pedestrian safety and divert non-local traffic to routes other than Merrimack Street;
- Encourage redevelopment of underutilized lots by reducing the off-street parking requirement for residential development; and
- Increase on-street parking capacity by creating reverse-angle parking in certain areas.

Short-Term Strategies

Traffic Calming

Traffic calming is an important mechanism for supporting a traditional, human-scale neighborhood that places the comfort and safety of local residents and business patrons above time-savings for through traffic. Traffic calming involves changing the street design to slow traffic or reduce traffic volumes. These interventions can either force vertical movement (e.g., speed humps) or horizontal movement of cars (e.g., sidewalk corner bump-outs). The goal is not to prevent vehicular traffic altogether, but rather to reduce its dominance in residential neighborhoods.

Many traffic calming interventions, such as traffic circles, medians, and bump-outs complement streetscape improvements. If community groups exist locally that have the capacity to care for streetscape plantings, this could be an excellent way to imbue an area with strong sense of identity and dramatically strengthen the relationship of residents to their public spaces.

Please refer to Streetscape Section for more information on public space interventions and Housing & Community Development Section for zoning and parking reductions.

Prior Work

The City of Lowell Master Plan, completed in 2003, aims to “minimize the impact of automobile usage” by:

- Implementing “traffic calming procedures throughout Lowell’s neighborhoods,”
- Using “plant materials to buffer residential areas from traffic noise”, and
- Reducing automobile dependence through better transit access and support to local businesses.

The Master Plan sets out to “relieve pressure on neighborhood street[s]” by maximizing the ability of the city’s primary roadways to provide efficient vehicular access. Increased safety, comfort, and accessibility for pedestrians, cyclists and transit riders relieve roadway congestion, and encourage trips by non-auto modes. The proposed interventions in this plan support this vision for transportation. Additionally, we suggest that the measures in the 2001 Citywide Traffic Calming Plan be extended to the Upper Merrimack neighborhood, and the recommendations be used as general standards for design throughout the neighborhood.



Transportation

Safety and Access



Proposed Traffic Interventions; yellow indicates possible locations for reverse-angle parking.

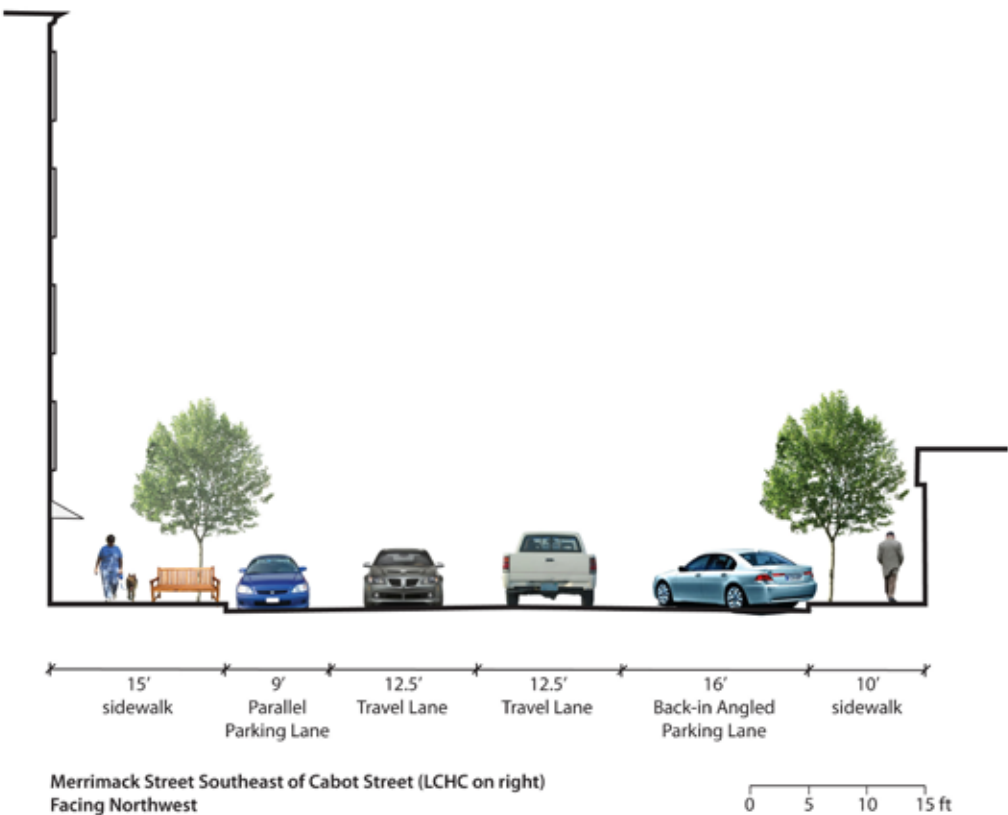
Parking Requirements in Downtown Lowell

The parking requirement was reduced from 2 spaces to 1 space per unit in downtown Lowell, helping to encourage the redevelopment of housing, retail and office uses there. Applying the same reduction to the Upper Merrimack neighborhood makes sense: according to the 2000 Census, car ownership and share of work trips by private vehicle are lower for this neighborhood than the Lowell average. Therefore, a reduction in off-street parking requirements should spur redevelopment of underutilized land without significantly affecting overall parking availability.

Parking

The current zoning requirement for two parking spaces per dwelling unit is excessive for this neighborhood. A reduction of this requirement from two spaces to one space per dwelling unit could create redevelopment opportunities by freeing up land currently used for parking and reducing the cost of residential development.

To ensure adequate parking capacity is maintained for neighborhood residents and businesses, on-street capacity should be increased by converting parallel parking spaces to reverse-angle spaces in areas serving retail and office uses. Sufficient roadway width is available in some places for 60 degree reverse-angle parking, which can provide approximately double the overall capacity of parallel parking. Reverse-angle parking has the added benefit of reducing travel speeds, thus increasing safety and comfort for pedestrians.



Section of Merrimack Street with angled parking and streetscape improvements. Location: Southeast of Cabot Street Facing Northwest (LCHC on right)

Cost for Aiken Street Demonstration Project

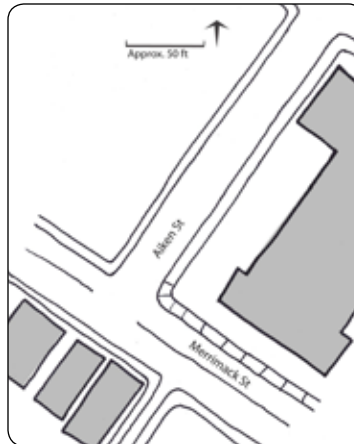
Intervention	Cost
Corner bump-outs (4) at Aiken and Moody Streets	\$40,000–\$80,000
Painted crosswalks (4) at Aiken and Moody Streets	\$400–\$1,200
Corner bump-outs (2) at Aiken and Merrimack Streets (part of improvements to Merrimack Square and long-term traffic calming on Merrimack Street)	\$20,000–\$40,000
Brick crosswalks (2) at Aiken and Merrimack Streets	\$10,000
Retain stop sign at Aiken and Merrimack Streets	no cost
Total cost	\$70,400–\$131,200

Demonstration Project: Aiken Street

Traffic calming measures will improve pedestrian safety and comfort by reducing speeding on Aiken Street between Father Morissette Boulevard and Merrimack Street.

Speeding on Aiken Street is likely a result of the wide, sloping design of the bridge across the Northern Canal onto Aiken Street and the lack of crosswalks or other visual cues for drivers to reduce speed as appropriate for a residential area. The street is also quite wide, further encouraging speeding.

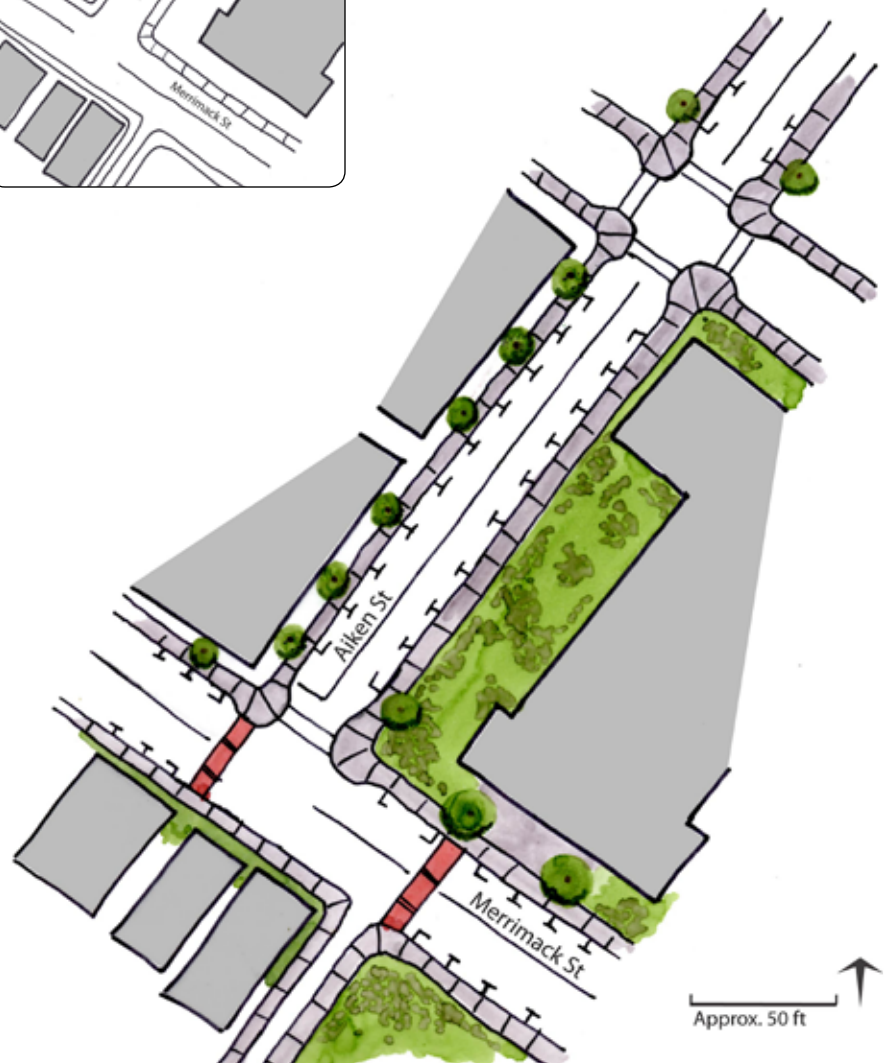
Traffic calming elements will make clear to pedestrians and drivers that the intersection of Aiken and Merrimack Streets is the entrance to a vibrant main street. Sidewalk bump-outs and brick crosswalks add visual cues that enhance pedestrian safety and the walking experience. Narrowing the street by extending the sidewalk using corner bump-outs would shorten pedestrian crossing distances and force cars to take the turn more slowly. Brick crosswalks add character to the streetscape. However, a similar visual affect can be achieved at a lower cost if colored paint or thermoplastic material is used instead.



Above: Looking north on Aiken

Left: Existing layout of Aiken intersection

Below: Recommended traffic calming design for Demonstration Project



Transportation

Safety and Access

Other Short-Term Interventions

The following interventions to slow traffic and increase pedestrian safety can be implemented as other infrastructure repairs or infill development take place in the neighborhood.

- Add bicycle lane along Moody Street with connection to the new University Avenue bridge. (\$8,000)
- Replace stop sign on Cabot Street, which some parents do not allow their children to cross due to safety concerns. (\$100)
- Similar to the intersection at Aiken and Moody Streets, add new painted crosswalks at Cabot and Moody Streets to provide drivers with visual cues to reduce speed and watch for pedestrians. This is also important for cyclists using the proposed Moody Street bicycle lane. (\$1,200)
- Ensure police enforcement of speed limits. (no cost)
- Implement angled on-street parking on blocks adjacent to the Western Canal to reduce travel speed on Merrimack Street and increase on-street parking capacity for businesses in this area. (\$850)

Recommended Long-Term Interventions

In order to further enhance vehicle and pedestrian safety, two additional locations have been identified for traffic calming. Furthermore, improvement to bicycle accommodation and public transportation will improve access throughout the neighborhood.

Gateway Intersection

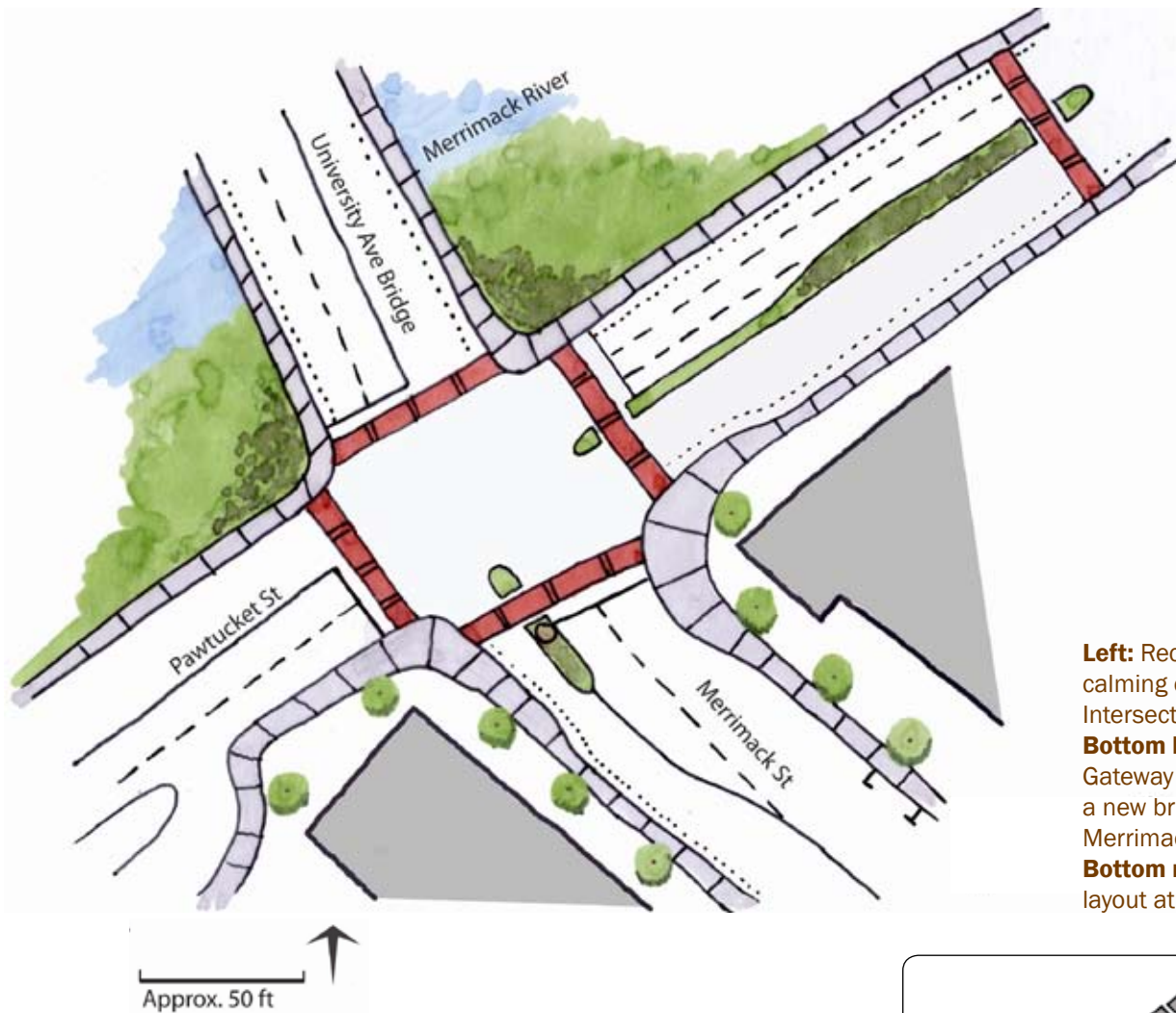
The entrance to Merrimack Street at the intersection of the new University Avenue bridge should be redesigned to encourage traffic to go around rather than through Merrimack Street.

The 25% engineering design plans for the new bridge do not explicitly include traffic calming measures, but these can still be implemented as the project moves forward.



Gateway Intersection Traffic Calming

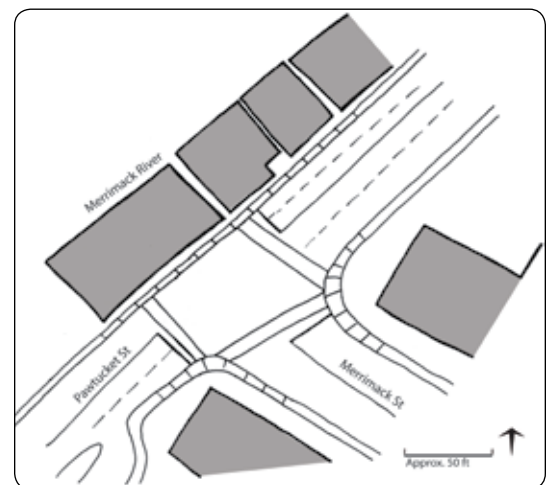
Intervention	Cost
"Gateway" median and pedestrian refuge on Merrimack	\$15,000
2 bump-outs on Merrimack Street corners	\$20,000-\$40,000
4 textured and colored crosswalks	\$12,000
Painted bicycle lane and safe left-hand turn path	\$400
Landsaped median on Pawtucket Street north of intersection	\$15,000
Total Cost	\$62,400-\$82,400



Left: Recommended traffic calming design for Gateway Intersection

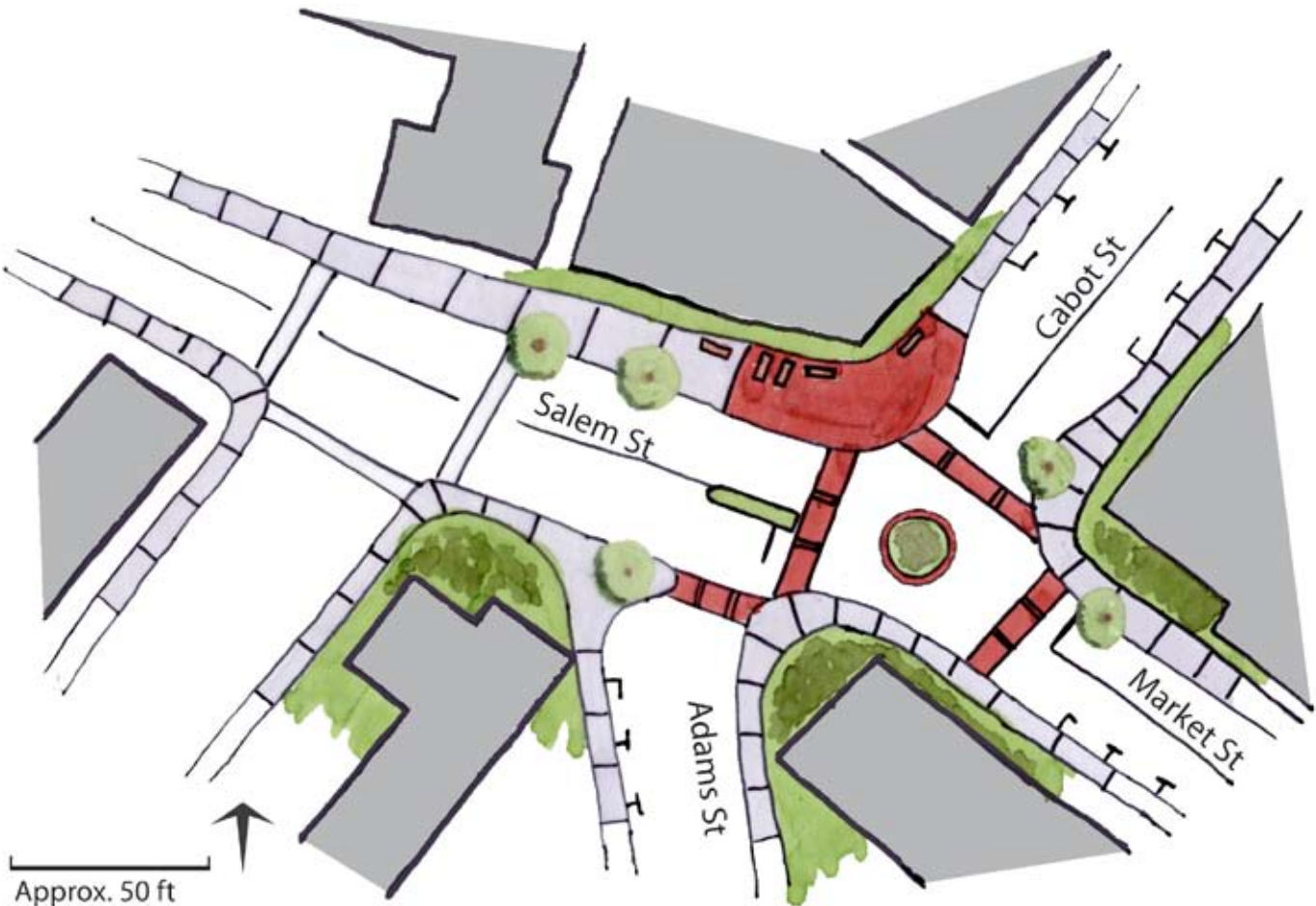
Bottom left: View of existing Gateway Intersection, where a new bridge will enter Merrimack Street

Bottom right: Existing street layout at Gateway Intersection



Transportation

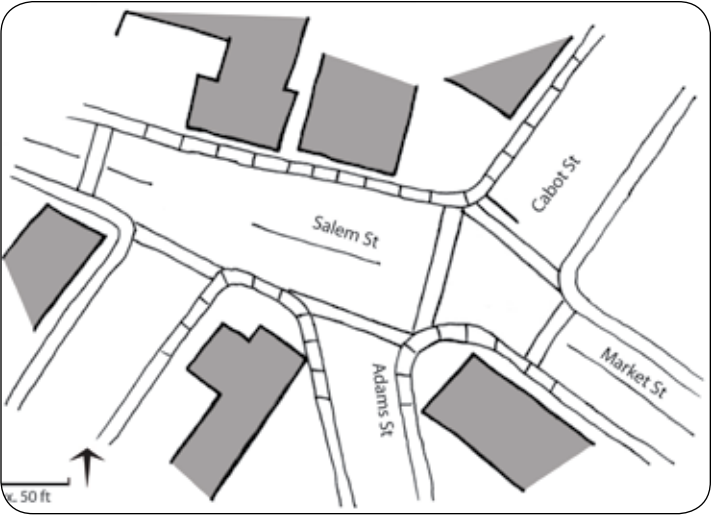
Safety and Access



Above:
Recommended conceptual
traffic calming design for
Cabot, Market and Salem
Streets

Near right: Views of Cabot,
Market, and Salem Streets

Far right: Existing layout of
intersection



Traffic Island on Cabot Street

Salem and Market Streets are a popular route for commuter traffic. The intersection of Salem, Market and Cabot Streets is busy and intimidating for pedestrians. As illustrated on the opposite page, the intersection could easily be converted into a neighborhood asset by the addition of a landscaped traffic island and a wider sidewalk on the northwest corner. These aesthetic and safety improvements would have the added benefit of discouraging non-residential traffic.

Redesigned Cabot Street intersection

Intervention	Cost
Sidewalk extension at north side of Salem	\$15,000
Brick-paved bump-out at corner of Cabot and Market/Salem	\$28,000
Standard bump-outs at corners of Cabot and Market, and Adams and Salem	\$20,000-\$40,000
Short median strip on Salem Street	\$5,000
Landscaped traffic island, including 2' mountable curb	\$6,000
Four new textured-pavement crosswalks	\$12,000
Total Cost	\$86,000-\$106,000

Upper Merrimack Bicycle Path

A dedicated bike path through the neighborhood and along the Western Canal could enhance connectivity within the neighborhood and increase access to other parts of Lowell. Bike lanes should be added where there is adequate street width for them and where cyclists will be protected from passing cars. Cyclists could either share the roadway with motorists or use a separate path.

Public Transportation Improvements

LRTA buses currently serve only a portion of the Upper Merrimack neighborhood. However, upon completion of the new University Avenue bridge, buses will resume service along Merrimack Street between downtown Lowell and the UMass Lowell North Campus, providing the neighborhood with more convenient transit service.





Housing & Community Development

Preserving Viability and Affordability



The Upper Merrimack neighborhood is a diverse community with a variety of housing structures, community service organizations and small businesses. In this section we address issues related to housing and community development, and we present areas for improvement can focus on the existing assets of the neighborhood.

For housing, this plan focuses on preserving affordability for current residents, as well as planning for growth and new housing stock. Addressing community development, this plan focuses on providing support for existing small businesses and community service organizations.



Housing & Community Development

Preserving Viability and Affordability

Goals

The following goals provide a framework for recommendations related to housing and community development:

- Preserve affordable housing.
- Improve conditions for existing small businesses.
- Maintain the strong network of community services in the neighborhood.

Existing Conditions

In the Upper Merrimack neighborhood there is a strong network of community service organizations, a few historic small businesses, and many affordable housing units or developments. The strong presence of community service organizations provides crucial services for residents throughout Lowell. Some of the existing small businesses have been in the neighborhood for decades, serving the local community.

Existing Housing

The Upper Merrimack neighborhood consists of a mixture of residential buildings with ground-floor retail, large multi-family buildings, and single-family homes.

Evolution of the neighborhood

The Acre is one of Lowell's oldest neighborhoods. In the mid 19th century the Locks and Canals Company constructed the neighborhood, centered around St. Patrick's Church. At that point in time Irish and Scottish immigrants dominated Lowell and were the main workforce, who settled in the city to work in the textile mills. Most of the brick structures or single family homes were built to accommodate mill workers or managers. In the Upper Merrimack neighborhood French Canadian immigrants settled and claimed the area "Little Canada."

Today the Upper Merrimack is home to many Latino residents, and recently Cambodian families. The percentage of Asian residents is higher than in any other part of Lowell, and overall the neighborhood has over 30% foreign born residents.

According to the 2000 Census, the median annual household income for this neighborhood falls between \$10,000 and \$22,000, which is far below the Lowell area median income of \$39,000.

The northwestern section of Merrimack Street has many traditional New England triple-deckers while the southwestern section has three to six story buildings, and includes more mixed-use structures with commercial on the first floor. A cluster of single-family homes lies along Pawtucket, Bowers, Salem, and Fletcher Streets. Overall, affordable and subsidized units are a predominant housing type, and contribute more than 50% of the housing stock in the neighborhood. Affordable developments include the North Common Village (on Moody Street) and North Canal Apartments (on Market Street). North Common (over 520 units) is owned and maintained by the Lowell Housing Authority and North Canal (over 250 units) by the Coalition for a Better Acre (CBA). The Housing Authority and the non-profit developer CBA own a large majority of real-estate, and both builders provide affordable housing to new immigrants, who are primarily Asian and Latino.



Existing Neighborhood Housing



Varied housing styles exist, including mixed-use buildings, apartments, and single family homes.



Recent developments and rehabilitation projects have been spurred by community-based organizations.



Public housing (left), single room occupancies (center), and apartment buildings with small units (right) supply affordable housing.



Some housing is poorly maintained; several buildings are condemned along Market Street.

Most of the large multi-family complexes were built in the 1970s. New developments in the last decade include House of Hope, townhomes at Moody and Aiken Streets, and the rehabilitated St. Joseph's School. Most neighborhood buildings are currently occupied, though some of the buildings appear minimally maintained. A series of vacant lots and buildings exists along Moody Street, particularly northwest of Aiken. Several structures along Market Street have been condemned.



Housing & Community Development

Preserving Viability and Affordability

Within the entire Acre neighborhood over 41% of the population lives below the poverty line and only 17% own homes. Most owner occupied homes are those that are single and two-family and lie just to the south of the Upper Merrimack neighborhood (south of Pawtucket Street). Within the neighborhood approximately 85% are renter occupied, with a relatively low turnover rate each year. Both CBA and the Housing Authority have long waiting lists, because often the units they are renting are in better condition and have better amenities than “market rate units.” CBA and the Housing Authority confirmed in interviews that their subsidized housing units are sometimes more expensive for residents than “market rate” properties. The Upper Merrimack neighborhood has the lowest gross rents for all of Lowell, averaging \$487/month.

Major Rental Housing in Upper Merrimack					
Project	Address	Managed by	Type	Ability	Unit
North Common Village	21 Salem	Lowell Housing Authority	Family	Affordable	524
Majestic Apartment	445 Merrimack	Peabody Properties, Inc.	Family	Market	50
North Canal Apt.	517 Moody	Maloney Properties	Family	Affordable	265
Dewey Archambault Towers	657 Merrimack	Lowell Housing Authority	Senior	Affordable	194
St. Joseph School Apt.	510 Moody	Coalition for Better Acre	Family	Affordable	15

Existing Community Development

Urban economic development plays an important part in the City of Lowell’s history and is a key component of planning for Lowell’s future. Like many American cities Lowell experienced urban disinvestment and decline in the 1930s, as many mill buildings and commercial structures became vacant as a result of the collapse of the textile industry. Lowell was once an industrial city where employment, job growth, and economic stability all centered around textiles. Federal Urban Renewal plans in the 1960s failed to jump start Lowell’s economy and it was not until the 1970s and the establishment of the Lowell Heritage State Park that downtown Lowell was reborn. Lowell National Historical Park was created in 1978 and focused around downtown and the canals. But the National Historical Park presence did not bring about change for the Upper Merrimack neighborhood.

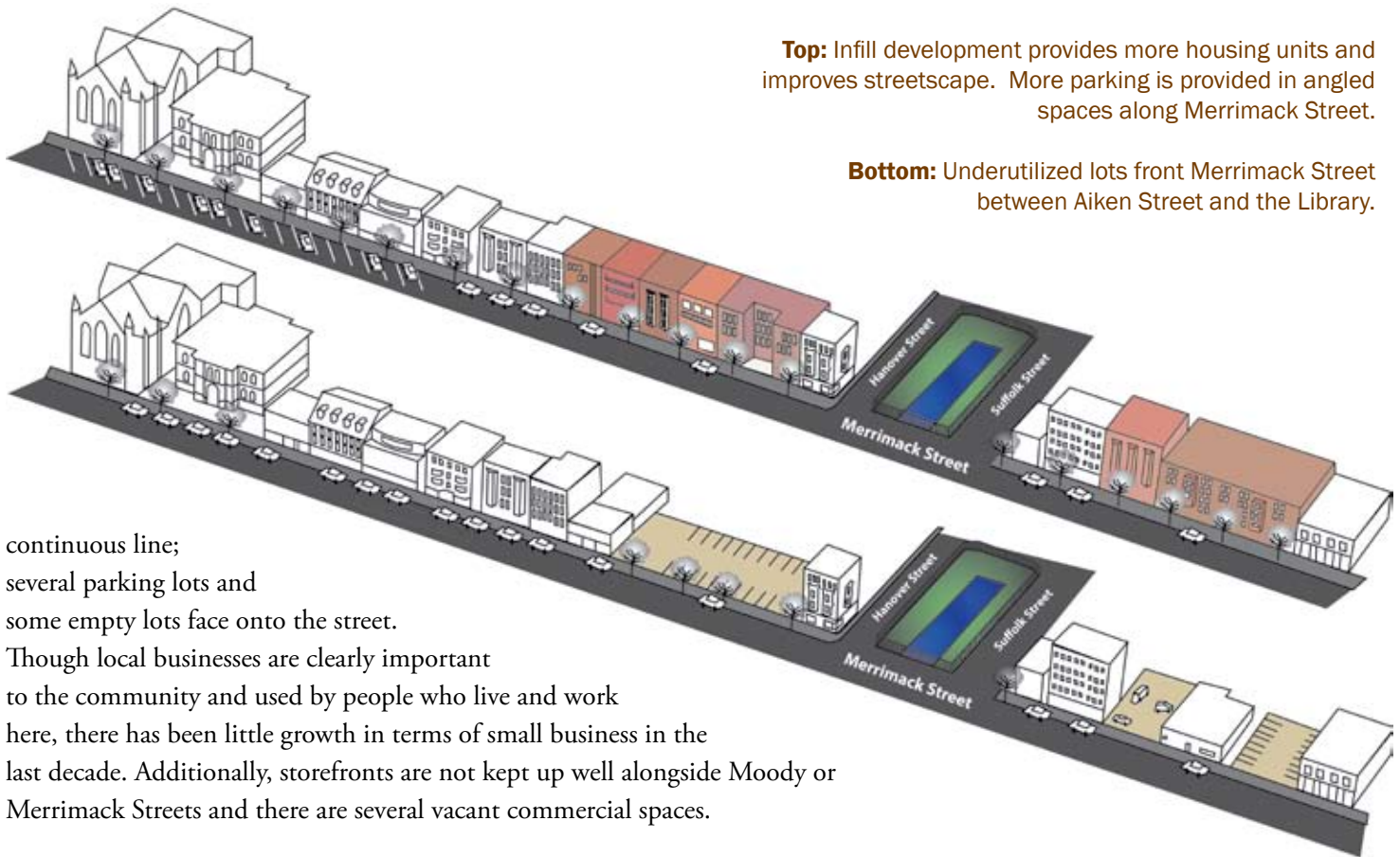
Most recently the Acre Urban Renewal Plan was created to energize the neighborhood directly south of the subject area for this plan. This plan included broad mechanisms to promote urban renewal through redevelopment of infrastructure, acquiring and selling vacant or abandon lots, and new zoning to increase residential and commercial use.

Today, Merrimack Street is the main commercial corridor of the neighborhood and supports a variety of small businesses. However, the building facades do not present a



Top: Infill development provides more housing units and improves streetscape. More parking is provided in angled spaces along Merrimack Street.

Bottom: Underutilized lots front Merrimack Street between Aiken Street and the Library.



continuous line;
several parking lots and
some empty lots face onto the street.

Though local businesses are clearly important to the community and used by people who live and work here, there has been little growth in terms of small business in the last decade. Additionally, storefronts are not kept up well alongside Moody or Merrimack Streets and there are several vacant commercial spaces.

Also located on Merrimack Streets is a strong network of community organizations that provide health services, food assistance, housing, and other social services. These include the Lowell Community Health Center, Catholic Charities, and the House of Hope. It is clear that these services are well-used, and that they should remain focal points of the neighborhood as it grows.



Short-Term Demonstration Project: Neighborhood Business Consortium

The Upper Merrimack neighborhood houses a variety of businesses, including several retail establishments and a long-standing credit union. Engaging these businesses in the future development of the neighborhood is essential to creating economic growth that builds on existing business and benefits current residents and merchants. A Neighborhood Business Consortium would bring local business owners together and give them greater strength in shaping neighborhood economic development. A unified strategy and shared services could benefit all members, and city funding to carry out improvements would allow the consortium to perform a variety of functions, including:



- Sharing ideas and marketing tactics, cooperating on a campaign to attract student customers from UMass Lowell
- Sharing resources such as bilingual staff and training
- Buying supplies cooperatively
- Administering a signage and façade improvement program
- Strategizing together to expand the range of businesses in the area



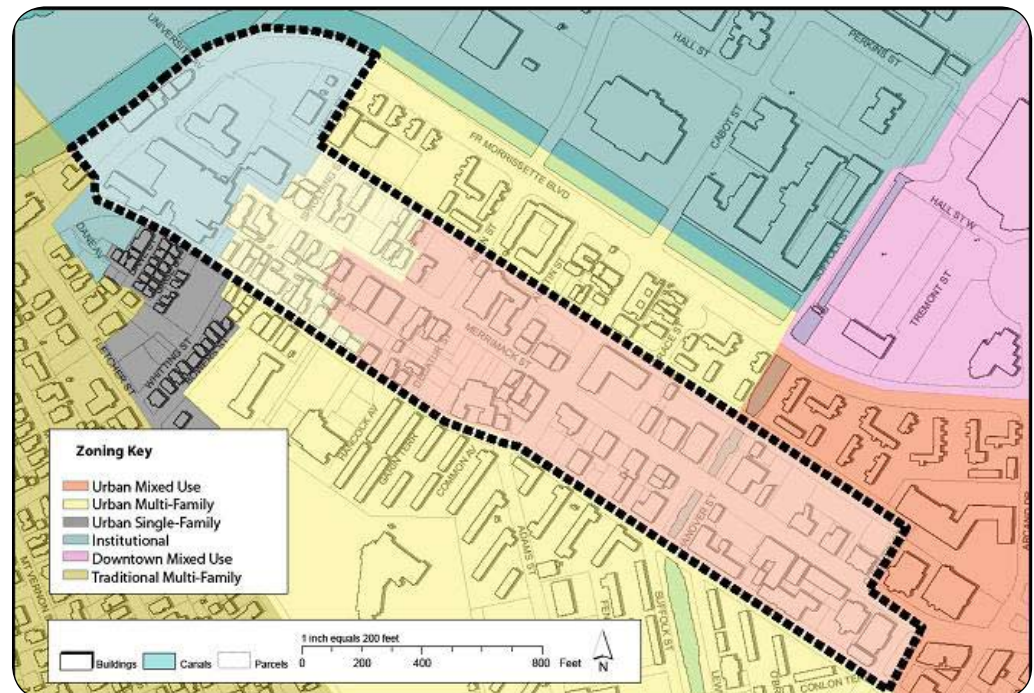
Housing & Community Development

Preserving Viability and Affordability



Right: New Zoning Overlay District allows for incentives to develop housing and businesses for the community.

Above: Schematic of what could occur with new zoning: infill development, streetscape improvements, and new open spaces.



*Please refer to
Catalyst Properties
Section for
macroeconomic
business innovations.*

Long-Term Vision

In the long term, the Upper Merrimack neighborhood should strive to foster a vibrant business district, a mixture of housing that accommodates mixed income levels, and the continued presence of community organizations that provide crucial services. Strategies to achieve these goals include encouraging infill housing, bringing alternative housing types to the neighborhood, and relocating some community organizations to the Holden Center to provide a central service center.



Zoning for Affordable Housing

While the process of changing the local zoning code can be long, work towards including measures that provide more affordable units can begin now. Through the proposed “Merrimack Revitalization Overlay District,” affordable housing can be required with inclusionary zoning.

- **Required Affordable Housing**

Using this method, new residential buildings with more than ten units would be required to make 15% of those units affordable. Neighborhood income levels should be used to determine affordable rental and ownership rates as the median income of Upper Merrimack neighborhood is lower than that for the greater metropolitan area. Developers could also meet this requirement by developing off-site.

- **Incentivized Affordable Housing**

The overlay district includes a density bonus and reduced parking requirements for buildings that provide additional affordable units.

Infill Housing

Filling in underutilized and empty lots with housing would allow for a continuous urban fabric. Infill along Merrimack Street should be prioritized as the primary street of the neighborhood to improve the pedestrian experience and activate a greater amount of activity for the businesses. Salem and Moody Streets serve as secondary streets that can accommodate parking and other less dense infill.

Housing Rehabilitation

Because many of the buildings in the neighborhood appear dilapidated, rehabilitation of currently occupied housing should also occur. The City could also partner with local financial institutions to provide capital to rehabilitate existing housing. Greater enforcement of building codes can also encourage property owners to maintain the quality of their buildings. As outlined in Appendix A, design standards are proposed as part of the “Merrimack Revitalization Overlay District.”

How infill and rehabilitation work: New residences on vacant lots on Moody Street augment housing stock, encourage rehabilitation, and improve the streetscape.



Housing & Community Development

Preserving Viability and Affordability

Alternative Housing Types

With housing types that suit a variety of occupants of different lifestyles and income levels, the Upper Merrimack neighborhood will be better able to support the diverse mixture of residents that will help the area thrive. Student Housing and Single Room Occupancy (SRO) units are two important components of that mixture.

Student Housing

UMass Lowell has a student population of more than 11,000. Few students currently live in the Upper Merrimack neighborhood. Increasing the amount of student housing in the neighborhood could bring new resources to the area and improve the connection between neighborhood residents and the UMass Lowell community.

Single Room Occupancy

SRO units are important elements in providing housing for a mixture of income levels and lifestyles, filling a housing need that is sometimes overlooked. These units are an option for transitional and very low-income residents; some SRO's exist in the neighborhood, and new SRO units should continue to be built. The units are single rooms with shared common rooms and kitchens in the building. Because residents of SROs are less likely to own vehicles, developers of SRO buildings should only be required to provide one parking space for every two SRO units as a way to encourage development of new SRO units, which can be accomplished through the zoning changes within the Overlay District.



Before and After: SRO infill on Moody Street.



PRECEDENT FOR STUDENT & AFFORDABLE HOUSING Davenport Commons (Boston)

Northeastern University's new Davenport Commons development provides a potential model for student housing in the Upper Merrimack neighborhood. Davenport Commons was built in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, a neighborhood with a great need for affordable housing. The new buildings combine affordable housing for neighborhood residents with housing for the university's students. The Upper Merrimack neighborhood and UMass Lowell should discuss opportunities for similar student housing expansion into the neighborhood.

Holden Center as a Community Service Center

We believe that their Holden Center can be an ideal central resource center for the various community service organizations found throughout the neighborhood, giving the services in the neighborhood a visible physical presence, savings in shared resources, and a strong voice in future planning in the neighborhood.

Physical Presence

By consolidating their services into one building, social service agencies could form a visible and accessible center of community services. This location has the potential to provide a welcoming place where residents from the Upper Merrimack neighborhood and throughout Lowell would know they could come for a variety of services. The small courtyard within the U-shaped building of the Holden Center could become a pleasant outdoor gathering place, and businesses catering to the needs of service center patrons might be able to locate nearby.

Shared Resources

Operating from one location, these organizations could coordinate sharing bilingual support staff and can collaborate on ordering supplies. Additionally a day only/ emergency child-care center can be included in the center. The child-care center can accommodate emergency situations for community residents and those that visit the health services in the building.

A Voice in Planning

Social service providers in the neighborhood have unique perspectives on the area's needs, and have a great deal to contribute to the direction of future development. Located in the same building, with common meeting space, these organizations would be able to make themselves heard much more effectively.

The Holden Center (bottom) could house community social services such as the Lowell Community Health Center (top) which now has several locations on Merrimack Street.





Catalyst Properties

Anchors for Change



A catalyst is something that causes or accelerates change. The report thus far has introduced a holistic set of suggestions for creating positive change in the Upper Merrimack neighborhood. This section is subtly different in its approach; here we employ the concept of “urban acupuncture,” that is, specified development at select locations intended to serve as anchors for change. The underlying principle of this approach is that further positive transformation will radiate from catalyst development into the broader community.

Catalyst development is not a “quick fix” solution. It can take years for catalyst developments to go from concept to completion, and more time beyond completion to witness their benefits come to full fruition. When deployed with appropriate forethought, however, this strategy has the potential to produce effective and sustainable economic development.



Catalyst Properties

Anchors for Change

Goals

The goal of this section is to introduce “urban acupuncture” as a possible mechanism for stimulating neighborhood activation. The approach includes:

- Redeveloping properties that are currently vacant or underutilized.
- Planning and implementing mixed-use projects which potentially blend retail office and parking with affordable and market rate housing.
- Attracting increased investment in the neighborhood on the whole, thus encouraging positive transformation throughout the community.
- Enhancing the quality of the street experience through new development, thus promoting foot traffic and street activity by both residents and visitors.

Existing Conditions: Significant Potential

Within the Upper Merrimack neighborhood there are several opportunities for potentially transformational development. A number of properties and land parcels sit vacant, undeveloped or underutilized. More exciting still, several of these properties are situated at prime locations for large scale development, and the proposed projects in this section address these possibilities.

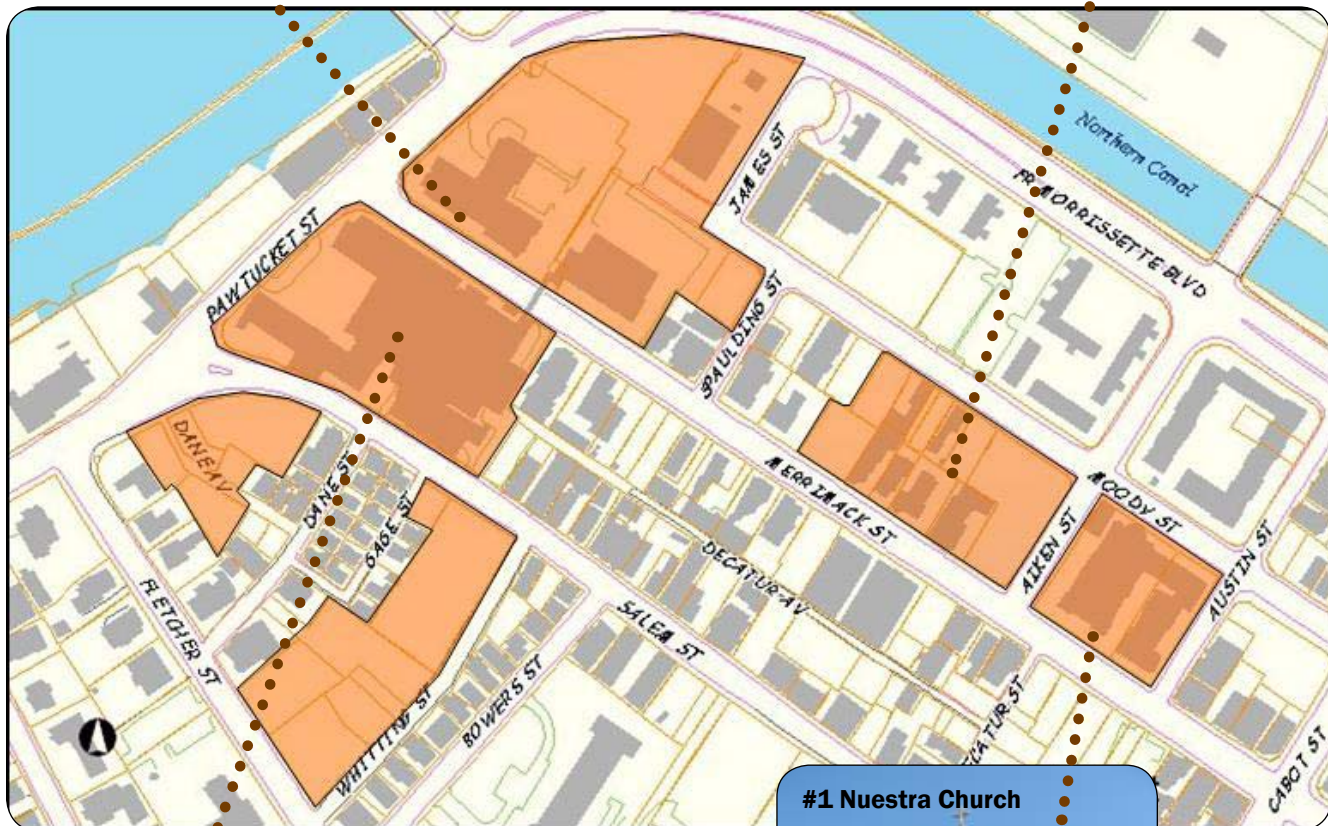
Due to the nature of catalyst properties and the suggested innovation for this focal point of our plan for the Upper Merrimack neighborhood, there are no short-term or demonstration projects. The Housing and Community Development focus area recommends short-term small business and economic development strategies.

Long-term Visions

We have isolated four target development sites to be considered:

- The first catalyst site, slated for immediate intervention, is the impending renovation of the centrally located Nuestra Señora Del Carmen church along Merrimack Street.
- The second two catalyst properties comprise the new Upper Merrimack Gateway at the entrance of the repositioned University Avenue Bridge. These properties include the current Holden Center building and adjacent parking lots, and the Arcadia Center and its adjoining parking lots.
- The final proposed project involves a group of properties located along Merrimack Street at the northern edge of the proposed Merrimack Square area; for the purposes of this discussion, this group of properties is located at “Mid-Merrimack,” bounded by Aiken, Merrimack, and Moody Streets.

Catalyst Development Sites



Catalyst Site #1

Nuestra Señora Del Carmen Church



Nuestra Senora Del Carmen Church, a historical and contemporary icon for the Upper Merrimack community.
Below: Grassroots campaign to activate the church

Located at the physical and symbolic heart of the community, the former Nuestra Señora Del Carmen Church has played a central role in the social and spiritual lives of many Acre residents. Beginning in 2004, the Archdiocese of Boston announced its plans to close many churches in Massachusetts, including Nuestra Senora Church. The church, its associated rectory and adjacent parking lot (indicated on the map below) were sold to a third-party developer whose general intention is to renovate the church complex to accommodate new housing units and/or another complementary community use.



Nuestra Señora Del Carmen Recommendations

Given its prominent location and strong presence along Merrimack Street, the church complex presents a special opportunity to serve as a focal point for the community. On the following pages are two possible scenarios for repurposing the church complex.

Making it Happen

Contrary to popular belief, historic preservation and affordable housing are not mutually exclusive; it is not a question of “either/or.” A number of resources exist for the very purpose of rehabilitating historic properties to provide new units of affordable (as well as market rate) housing. Both the State and Federal governments have established successful tax credit and grant programs to promote these kinds of worthy activities. The owner’s key to success with Nuestra Señora is to form partnerships with groups that are skilled navigators of these incredibly valuable incentive programs.

scenarios

A: Convert to housing

Convert former rectory into housing. The rectory’s regular shape and squared angles lend more versatility for conversion. This also allows for less costly renovation, thus providing a good opportunity to provide quality affordable housing units.

Also convert main church building into housing. Irregular shapes and angles within the sanctuary present a greater challenge for successful residential conversion, but could in fact present the opportunity to provide a diversity of housing options, ranging from studios to three bedroom units. The main church units would ideally be a mix of affordable and market-rate units.

B: Covert to housing & community facility

Convert rectory into housing, as in Scenario A. Again, due to its more regular dimensions and interior angles, conversion of the rectory would likely be more cost-effective than attempting the same within the main church building.

Reinstate main church building as a community focal point. In this repurposing scenario, the main church building becomes a neighborhood amenity for the surrounding community’s use. Possible uses may include:

- Dance hall
- Event space/reception hall
- Movie theater/performance space
- Neighborhood fitness center
- Art production and exhibition space



PRECEDENT FOR CHURCH CONVERSION

Church of the Blessed Sacrament (Boston)

Redevelopment of the Church of the Blessed Sacrament’s approximately 3.5-acre campus in Jamaica Plain is currently underway. The project involves a mixed-use program integrating adaptive reuse and new construction. Efforts will ultimately yield over 100 new units of housing of various sizes and levels of affordability, a substantial portion of which is being built within the main church building. The project also includes over 11,000 square feet of retail space, 150 enclosed and surface parking spaces, a community space located within the church and approximately one acre of landscaped green space.



Catalyst Site #2

Holden Center Properties



Proposed design for the Upper Merrimack Gateway, welcoming residents home and inviting guests to visit. The concept would transform the existing Arcadia Nursing Center into a mixed-use Arcadia Center.

***Please refer to
Housing &
Community
Development
Section for
additional Holden
Center Vision.***

The former St. Joseph's Hospital building is six stories tall and roughly 180,000 square feet. Traditional hospital services ceased operations a number of years ago and the building is currently owned and operated by Holden Healthcare for administrative and other activities. The original historic building also includes a newer addition on the rear parcel of the site. Excess office space is leased to outside community health service agencies. The Holden Center property also includes a surface parking lot at the corner of Salem Street and Pawtucket Avenue and a large surface lot along Whiting Street.

Holden Center Recommendations

Holden Healthcare recently announced its intention to sell St. Joseph's Hospital and the adjoining properties. This presents a number of interesting opportunities to reprogram the existing buildings and create new uses for vacant parcels. Current zoning allows a maximum of eight floors. If financially viable, two floors could be added to the existing building. Possible new uses for St. Joseph's Hospital include:

- A centralized location for local and regional community health services and agencies,
- UMass-Lowell student housing, classrooms and/or offices, and
- Senior or low-income housing, compact living units (CLUs) or single room occupancy units (SROs).



Above: Existing St. Joseph's Hospital and Acadia Nursing Home at the Gateway to the neighborhood.

Below: Holden Center Properties

St. Joseph's Rear Parcel

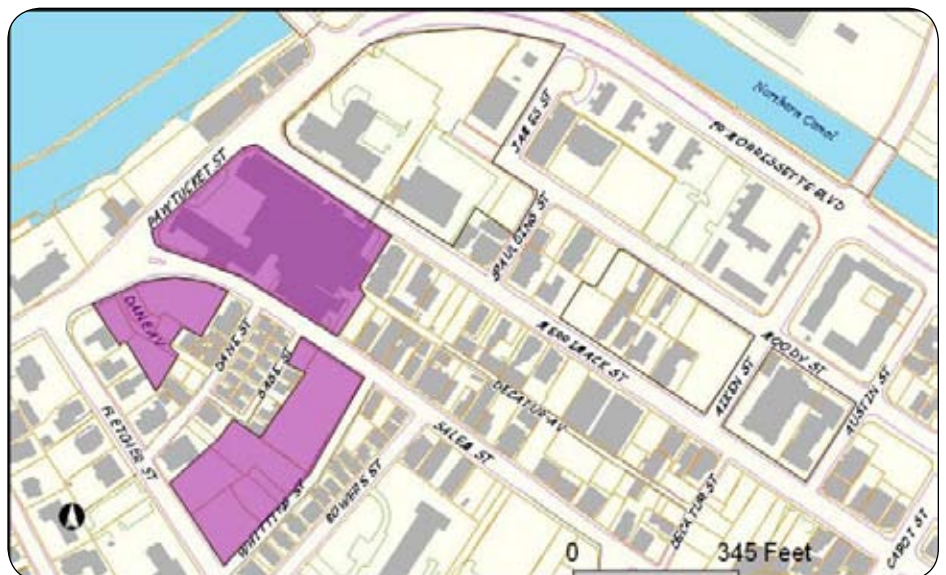
The current annex to St. Joseph's Hospital is an inefficient collection of low-rise buildings that could be redeveloped to a maximum of eight floors. Uses could include a possible new Arcadia Nursing Center, senior or affordable housing, or student housing.

Salem Street / Pawtucket Avenue Parcel

This corner parcel is ideally located to accommodate first floor retail (such as a drugstore), with one or two floors of housing above.

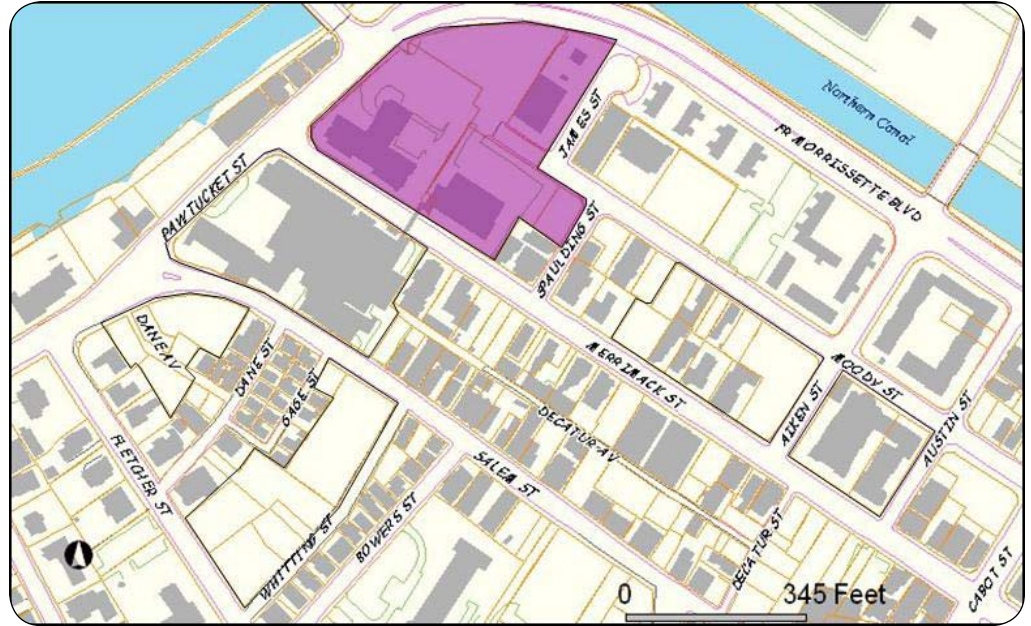
Whiting Street Parcel

This parcel is located within the Urban Single Family (USF) zoning district and should be developed according to the adjacent uses.



Catalyst Site #3

Arcadia Nursing Center Properties



Arcadia Nursing Center and parking lots

The Arcadia Nursing Center and adjoining parking lots occupy a rather large block bounded by Merrimack Street, Father Morissette Boulevard and Moody Street. This site, together with St. Joseph's Hospital to the south, composes the visual gateway into the Upper Merrimack neighborhood as people will approach the area via the new University Avenue bridge.

Arcadia Nursing Center Recommendations

A mixed-use development that includes:

- Possible new Arcadia Nursing Center;
- Street-level retail stores such as Dunkin Donuts, dry cleaner and laundry, etc.;
- Upper-level senior or affordable housing;
- Upper-level student housing; and
- A 585-space above-ground parking structure internal to the development.

The buildable area on the site is approximately 54,000 square feet. Each building level would include approximately 28,000 square feet for primary uses and 26,000 square feet for parking (which is excluded from floor area ratio (FAR) calculations). The proposed Merrimack Revitalization District zoning overlay would increase allowable FAR from 2.0 to 3.0, thus the building would likely be six or seven floors. The current institutional mixed-use (INST) zoning allows for a maximum of eight floors.

Catalyst Site #4

Mid-Merrimack



Mid-Merrimack block

The Mid-Merrimack site is bordered by Moody, Aiken and Merrimack Streets. The highlighted respective parcels are estimated at approximately 66,000 square feet and comprise ten parcels. The Nuestra Señora Del Carmen Church Parking lot, fronting Aiken and Merrimack Streets, is largely underutilized. The properties fronting Moody Street consist of two vacant parcels and two parcels with multifamily structures in states of advanced disrepair. The properties fronting Merrimack Street include one vacant parcel and four parcels with multifamily structures, which are all underutilized and play a key role in the redevelopment of the total site.

Mid-Merrimack Recommendations

A mixed-use development that includes:

- A large floor plate anchor tenant such as Trader Joe's, Stop and Shop, or CVS; essentially, a tenant which will both fulfill unmet community needs and attract additional businesses to the area;
- Mixed-income (integrated affordable and market-rate) housing above the street-level tenant; and
- Development which would include one level of below-grade parking (approximately 200 spaces).

The buildable area on the site is approximately 66,000 square feet. The first level of retail would accommodate a large tenant of approximately 60,000 square feet. The purpose of drawing this tenant is to provide local residents and UMass Lowell students with an affordable option for everyday shopping. With the development of the other catalyst properties, it is believed that a tenant of this nature could be drawn to the area. The upper levels would provide residential housing and a first story 66,000 square foot floor plate for a residential layout. The Merrimack Revitalization Overlay District will accommodate up to a six-story building and an additional retail FAR bonus of 0.5. The parking structure will accommodate the needs of a repurposed Nuestra Señora Del Carmen church, ensuring that the original number of parking spots is not only retained but expanded.



Catalyst Properties

Anchors for Change

A Note about UMass Lowell

UMass Lowell recently announced an \$80 million nanotechnology research center on the north campus and is expanding its activities in a number of locations. The University's increasing need for classroom space, student housing and administrative offices make it the ideal development partner for anchor projects in the Upper Merrimack neighborhood. Most importantly, the Merrimack Gateway is the geographic link between the north, east and south campuses, thus giving the community a strong voice in future development. The community's ability to reach out to the University and express their interest in UMass involvement can play a major role in expediting the development of the catalyst properties.



Comprehensive plan for new properties

Potential Future for Upper Merrimack

Implementation of the proposed catalyst development projects could potentially attract more residents and more investment into the neighborhood. By adding a diverse array of housing options to the existing housing stock, the added population could support retail tenants and attract new businesses. Higher foot traffic and interaction in this area will increase the neighborhood's overall desirability as a place to live, work, shop and play.

The map above depicts the potential spread of investment spurred by "urban acupuncture"-type strategies previously proposed. The Upper Merrimack neighborhood stands to gain a great deal through carefully planned historic rehabilitation and new development. Even a modest investment made today could mean a large reward in the future, and the neighborhood's future depends on actions now.

Appendices

Appendix A

Proposed Zoning Amendment

The Merrimack Revitalization Overlay District

The following proposed amendment to the City of Lowell Zoning Code would establish an overlay district in the Upper Merrimack neighborhood, modifying the base zoning in order to help accomplish the goals set forth in this plan. The text presented here is meant to provide a starting point for the Overlay District; we include some specific suggestions, but leave others elements, such as specific design guidelines, to be determined by the City and neighborhood groups.

Section 9.6 Merrimack Revitalization Overlay District

9.6.1 Purpose The Merrimack Revitalization Overlay District is established in accordance with the Upper Merrimack Neighborhood Plan, which aims to encourage growth, create a more pleasant and pedestrian oriented environment, and preserve affordability for the neighborhood's residents.

9.6.2 Location The Location of the Merrimack Revitalization Overlay District is shown on the attached map.

9.6.3 Applicability Buildings and uses within the bounds of the Merrimack Revitalization Overlay District shall be regulated by the applicable base zoning except as modified in article 9.6, which shall apply in addition to regulations imposed by base zoning districts.

9.6.4 Dimensional Requirements within the Overlay District

For the entire Overlay District, the maximum allowable Floor Area Ratio shall be 3, except when the following conditions are met.

1. *Ground Floor Commercial Space facing onto Merrimack Street.* In order to encourage the use of Merrimack Street as the neighborhood's main commercial corridor, an FAR bonus of 0.5 shall apply to buildings with ground floor commercial space whose main entrance faces Merrimack Street.
2. *Affordable Housing.* An FAR bonus of 0.5 shall apply to residential buildings where at least 20% of its units are considered affordable.
3. *Affordable Housing Inclusionary Zoning.* Mandates 15% of units in all new properties with 10 or more units to be designated as affordable. If developers wish to not build the necessary affordable units on the same site as their market rate units, they can allocate appropriate development costs for affordable units into a City of Lowell "Affordable Housing Upper Merrimack Development Fund." These funds can finance the construction and development of affordable units anywhere in the overlay district. An FAR bonus of 0.5 shall be applied to residential buildings that build at least 20% of its units as affordable.

9.6.5 Use Requirements within the Overlay District

Properties within the Overlay shall retain the use requirements associated with their base zoning designations, with the exception that commercial space shall be allowed throughout the district.

9.6.4 Parking Requirements

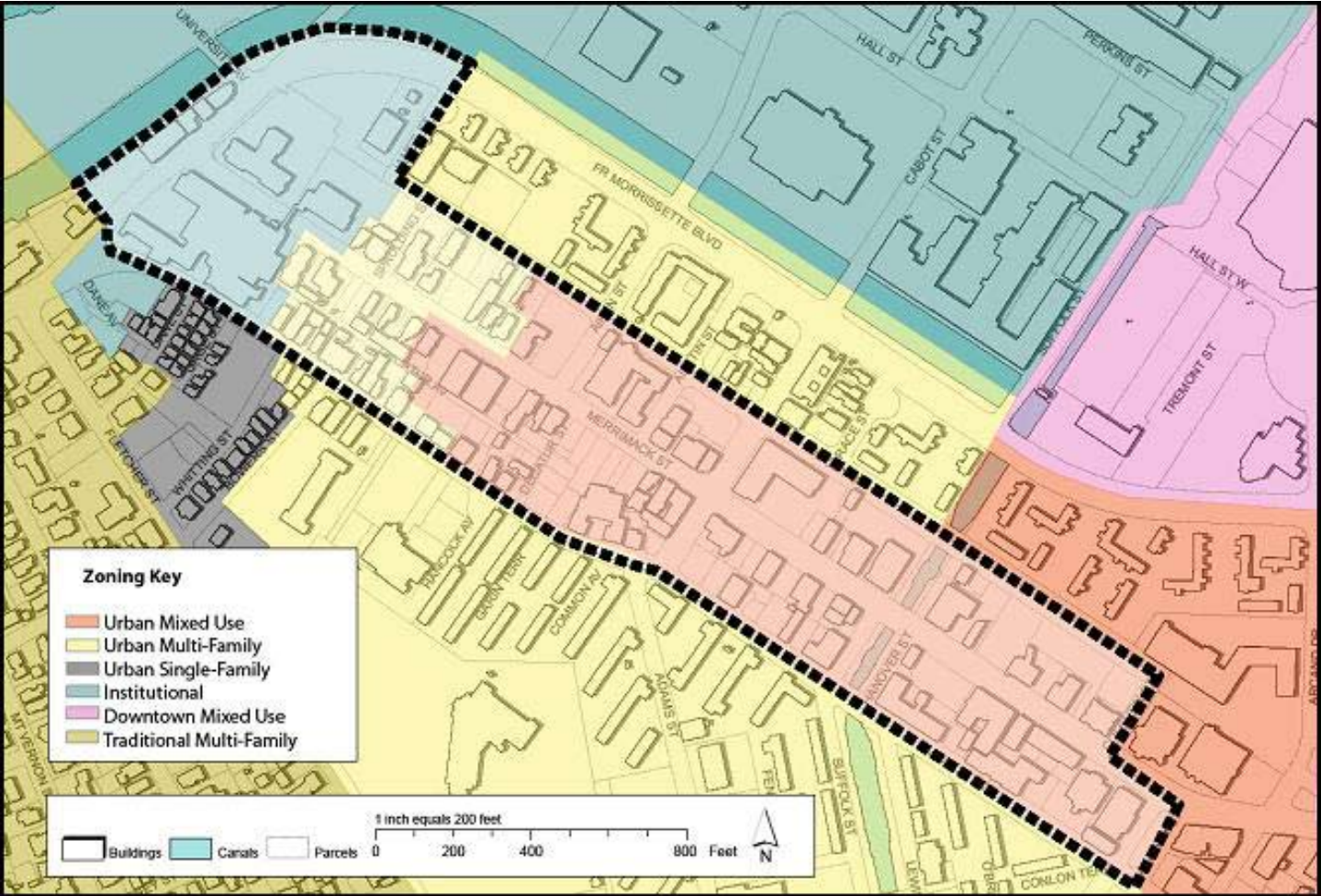
Throughout the overlay district, residential uses shall be required to have only one (1) off-street parking space for each unit of housing. For Single Room Occupancy (SRO) units, one (1) off-street parking space shall be required for every two (2) SRO units. Commercial properties shall retain the parking requirements associated with their base zoning district.

9.6.5 Design Standards

Within the overlay district require consistent setback for all new development, and compliance with existing Residential Development Guidelines for Traditional Neighborhoods.

Appendix A

Proposed Zoning Overlay Map



Appendix B

Potential Funding Sources for Open Space & Public Art Projects

State of Massachusetts/Regional Funding:

UMass-Lowell

An Arts Extension Service, based on the UMass-Amherst model, to help facilitate the fabrication and installation of public art funded by the university.

Project Zero: Harvard University Graduate School of Education

Project Zero's mission is to understand and enhance learning, thinking, and creativity in the arts, as well as humanistic and scientific disciplines. Many of the organization's initiatives involve collaboration with schools, universities or museums.

Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC)

MCC receives an annual appropriation from the state Legislature and funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Wallace Foundation, and others. Details on the budget are available online. In turn, MCC makes thousands of grants directly to non-profit cultural organizations, schools, communities, and individuals artists, through funding programs that use arts, science, and the humanities to build strong, diverse, livable communities. The beneficiaries of these programs comprise a cross-section of the population and citizens in each Massachusetts city and town.

Associated Grant Makers of Massachusetts

Associated Grant Makers, Inc. is the only regional association of grant makers, both foundations and corporations with giving programs, serving in, or making grants in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

Massachusetts College of Art: The Center for Art and Community Partnerships

The Center's objective is to use art as a catalyzing force for citizens to act creatively together. They envision opportunities for faculty and students in any academic department at MassArt to participate in community-based arts partnership activities either within course curricula or in co-curricular roles as artists, designers, and educators.

National Funding:

The Foundation Center

The Foundation Center is the nation's leading authority on philanthropy, connecting nonprofits and the grantmakers supporting them to tools they can use and information they can trust. The Center maintains the most comprehensive database on U.S. grantmakers and their grants.

National Art Education Association/Foundation

Foundation grants are made to members including students, retired members, state/province associations, and recognized affiliates. NAEA also sponsors a National Art Honor Society and National Junior Art Honor Society for middle and high school students that provides opportunities for its members to further advance their art training through service to their school and community.

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Program provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners for the restoration of native habitats.

Americans for the Arts

Americans for the Arts works to generate more public- and private-sector resources for the arts and arts education. They partner with local, state, and national arts organizations; government agencies; business leaders; individual philanthropists; educators; and funders throughout the country.

Arts and Healing Network

The Arts and Healing Network supports projects demonstrating how creativity can be a catalyst for positive change within communities. Also provides a listing of grants available for artist support.

Arbor Day Foundation

The Arbor Day Foundation supports a wide variety of national programs and initiatives encouraging communities to plant trees. Lowell would be an excellent candidate for their "Tree Line USA" program.

Appendix C

Existing Land Use Map

West Merrimack Neighborhood Existing Land Use



