

**DOWNTOWN
STRATEGIC PLAN
MANCHESTER, VERMONT**

Town of Manchester

8.10.18



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A successful strategic planning process requires a high degree of team work and local support. The people, staff, and stakeholders in Manchester, Vermont, provided both. Leadership and direction were provided by the Town of Manchester Planning Commission and Select Board, Town of Manchester staff, the NNECA-PA Conference Planning Committee, the Manchester Historical Society, and the many charrette & mobile workshop participants.

Very special thanks to those who provided venues and meeting space in support of this work:

- Bill Drusic for the Open Studio at Factory Point Place
- Manchester Community Library for the Wednesday night Charrette
- Hampton Inn for the Branding Session
- Taconic Lodge, hosts for the NNECAPA conference

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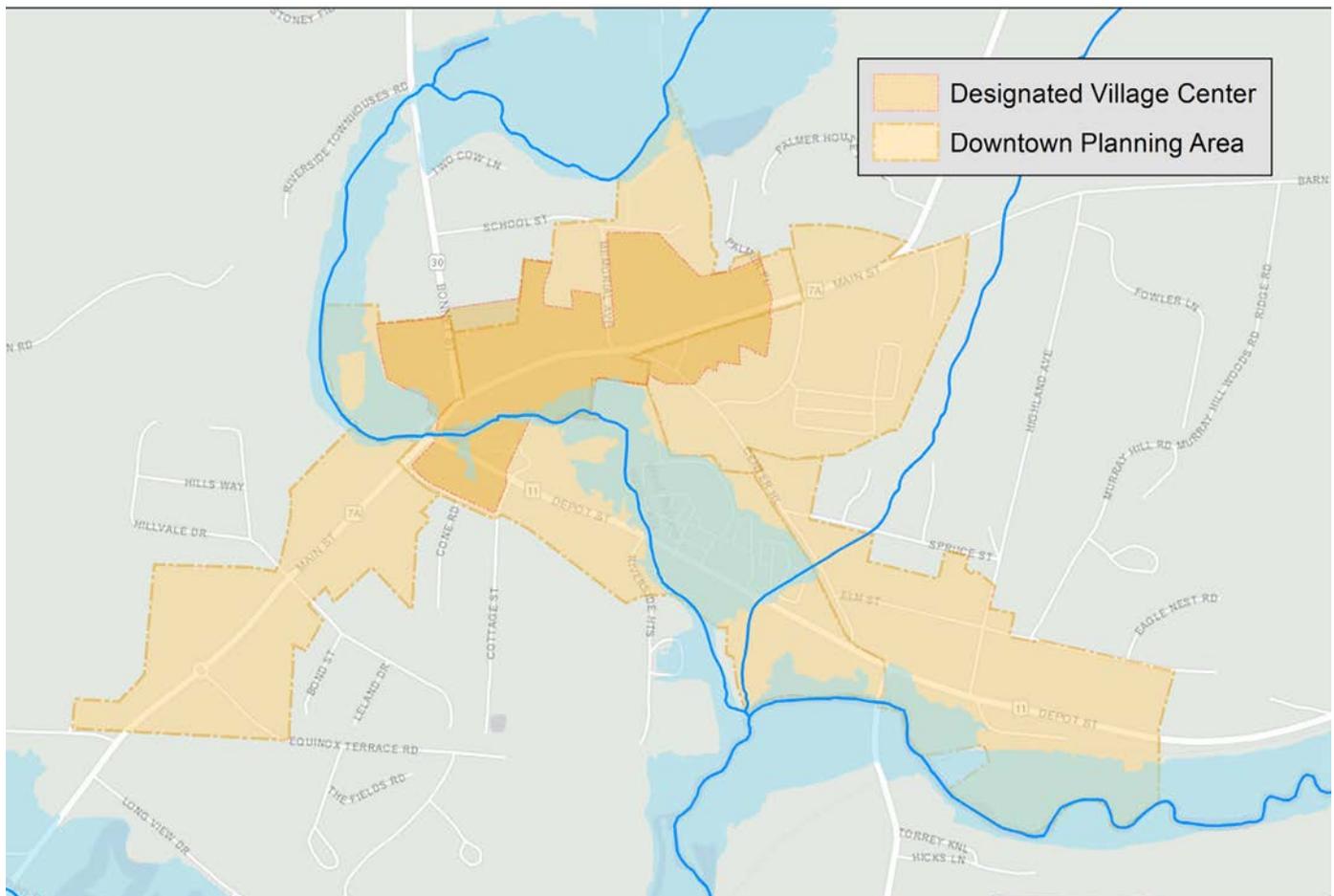




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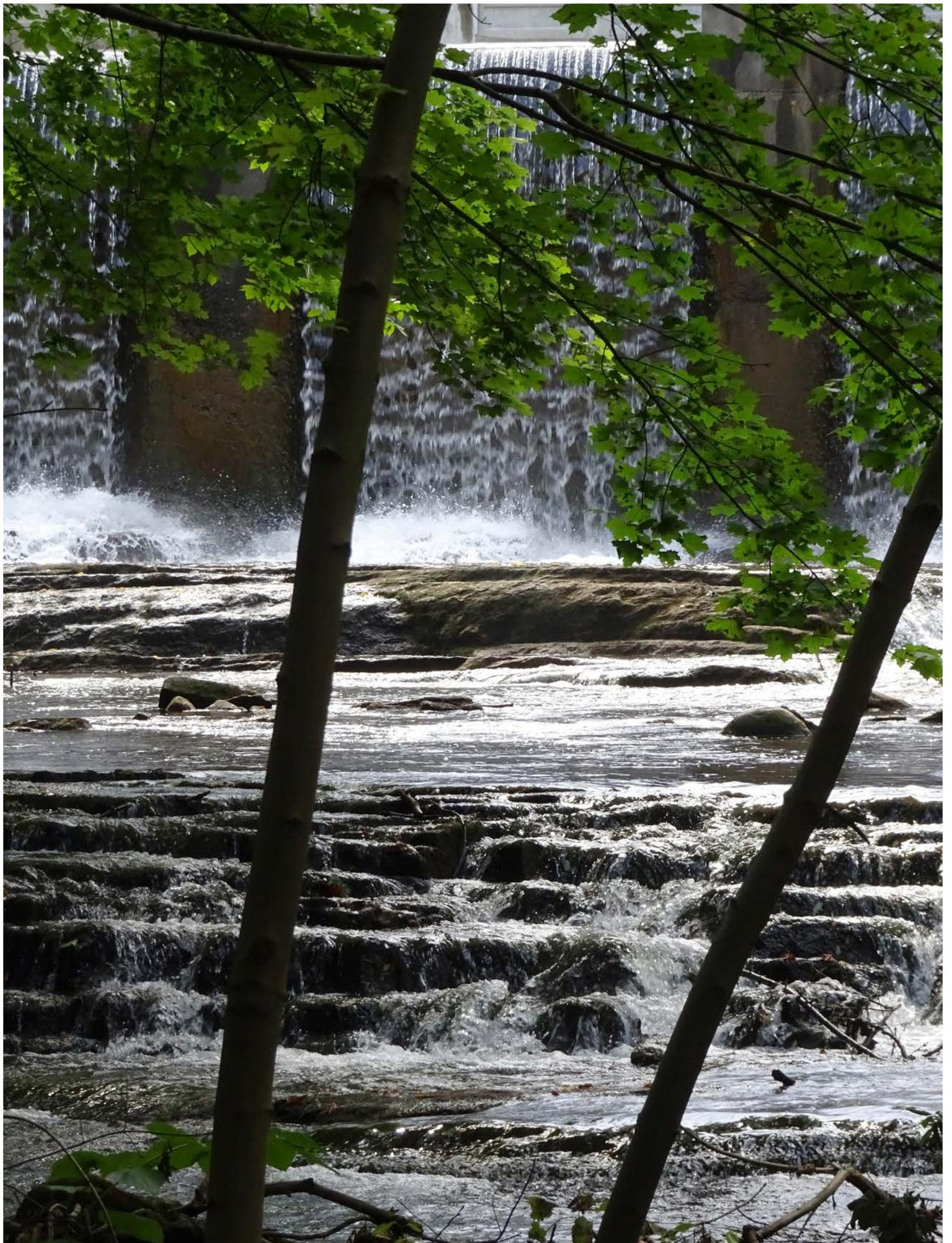


1. INTRODUCTION: PLANNING AT A TIME OF TRANSITION

Downtown Manchester, at the heart of Vermont's Northshire region, is rich in history, endowed with natural beauty, and valued highly by generations of residents and visitors who have come to live, learn, and enjoy life in Downtown and the surrounding region it serves. Downtown is a regional hub for shopping, arts, food and recreation, and also a vital counterpoint to the attractions and resources in nearby Manchester Village.

Over two and one-half centuries, Downtown Manchester has grown and changed with the comings and goings of hill farming, milling and railroads, the rise and change of recreation and pastimes from fly fishing to alpine skiing, and most recently, its emergence as a regional destination for retail outlet shopping. Through it all, downtown has maintained much of its visual appeal and historic character - as well as its central role in the daily coming and going of residents and visitors. Conversation around the future of Downtown Manchester has intensified recently with the changes to retailing, work, and housing demand that are leading to very visible change Downtown. Major changes in business organizations, notably a dissolution of the Chamber of Commerce, further underscored the need to build a new and unifying vision, and to find pathways forward. In sum, downtown Manchester is at a crossroads - or more appropriately, at a roundabout - that calls for a new vision, for different thinking about how to move ahead on policies and catalytic projects, and for a new set of partnerships and strategies to maintain community and economic vitality in a downtown that is rich in history, and blessed with natural and civic assets.

Manchester's leadership collectively recognized the fundamental changes taking place, and challenges for keeping Downtown Manchester a vibrant residential and commercial center for the town, and Northshire region, notably ensuring that fundamental transitions in retail would not lead to larger local or regional decline. Building on the recommendations of the adopted 2017 Town Plan and the findings of the 2016 Northshire Economic Development Strategy ("NEDS"), which evaluated fundamental changes in retailing, tourism, work, and demographics, this Plan sets forth a working framework for town actions and investments, as well as for collaborative and parallel actions by regional, Vermont, non-profit, and private entities with interests in Downtown. It synthesizes efforts by the town's elected and appointed officials, staff, citizens, and consultant team in 2016 and 2017, culminating in a three-day planning intensive in September, 2017. And most important, it is a living document that should be re-visited and updated regularly to assess progress towards the Vision.



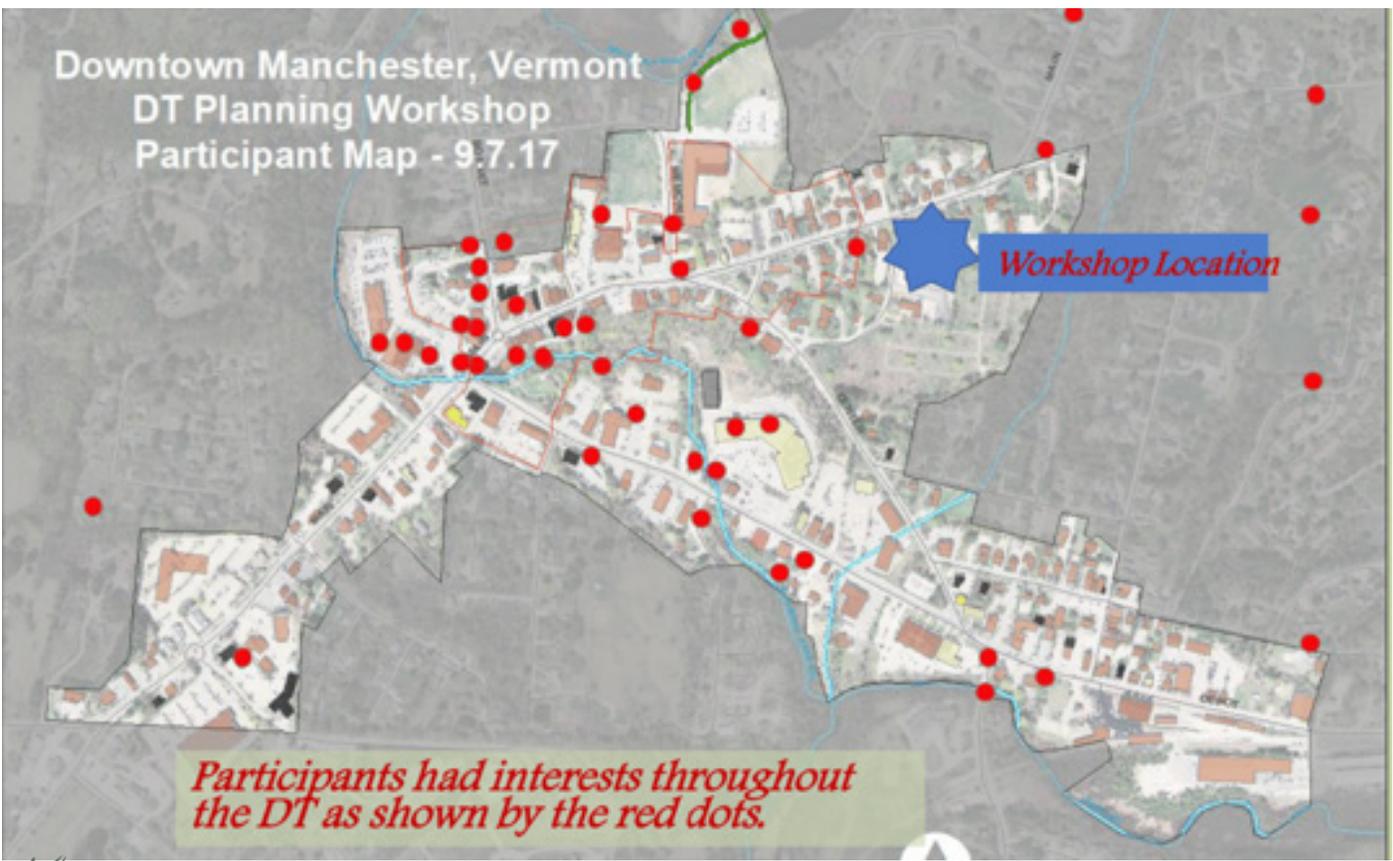


2. CREATING A PARTICIPATORY DOWNTOWN PLAN

Articulating a new vision and building support for the work to get there requires deep engagement with the community, especially in a place like Manchester that has always enjoyed strong private- and non-profit leadership. This Plan reflects a deliberate and active process of generating ideas and direction within the community, then testing and refining these ideas with stakeholders and the public. No plan ever reflects a full consensus of all potentially affected parties; nonetheless, through the town's efforts, the policies and direction in this Plan arose from, and were actively evaluated by, a broad group of decision-makers and stakeholders in the community. The program of stakeholder outreach and public engagement for this Strategic Plan centered on a four-day intensive Planning Week, held in September, 2017, which coincided with the annual conference of the Northern New England Chapter of the American Planning Association (NNECAPA). This unique effort, which allowed the town to use the 'hive mind' of leading professional and citizen planners in the region, led to a number of creative strategies and actions. The formal points of engagement for the plan included:

- Pre-workshop fact-finding and interviews by town staff and the consultant team with leadership and stakeholders engaged in arts, public management, economic development, historic preservation and interpretation, tourism and marketing, retail, residential development, schools, and the Manchester Riverwalk.
- A public charrette, held at the Manchester Public Library at the opening of the NNECAPA conference, focusing on the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities for downtown Manchester.
- A mobile "walking workshop" along Depot Street, which was open both to the public and to planners attending the NNECAPA conference, yielding productive dialogue and idea-sharing on a wide range of issues: Transportation and access management, design and access for Manchester Riverwalk, opportunities for visual enhancements and historic markers, the importance and challenges of addressing the Green Mountain Power substation at Depot Street and Center Hill Road, and how to incentivize conversion of retail space to workforce housing.
- Significant media coverage in advance of and during planning week, which created buzz around the planning process and called attention to the opportunities to participate and comment.
- The well-attended branding session at the new Hampton Inn, where professional planners brought Manchester residents and key Downtown stakeholders through a process of creating a graphic vision and description of Downtown's essential characteristics and desired future.
- An "Open House" on Main Street, with an informal presentation of the consultant team's work on visualization and mapping, open discussion of topics from the mobile session and charrette, and follow-up and feedback on outcomes from the branding session.
- Follow-up communication with additional stakeholders and town leaders.

Engaging planners gathered from three states and different regional agencies attending NNECAPA represented a substantial innovation and enhancement of this plan; the town was able, without cost, to take advantage of perspectives, ideas and transferrable approaches from professionals who have approached similar challenges elsewhere. A number of the recommendations in the Implementation Matrix are derived in pertinent part from input and suggestions made by NNECAPA participants.





3. DOWNTOWN'S FRAMEWORK

History shapes both the physical and planning/policy frameworks for Downtown Manchester, which were documented through a process of discovery from multiple sources, perspectives and angles. The consultant team synthesized information from the NEDS, Town Plan, stakeholder and public input, and team research to hone the “whats,” “whens” and “hows” of a vital downtown. Fact-finding with the town and through stakeholder interviews was placed in the context of Downtown’s history and the many different plans and initiatives underway today (following page).

Manchester’s economic history, which has much in common with many of Vermont’s other historic downtowns, shaped the physical character of Downtown. Four National Register Historic districts - Manchester Depot, North Main, Manchester Center (Factory Point) and Bonnett Street - and associated structures that reflect the history of Downtown’s physical development inform physical planning and provide a policy framework that derives from Downtown’s history.

In 2013, the Town obtained State of Vermont Village Center designation for a portion of Downtown (See Map, p. 2), which provides the opportunity for a variety of financial and tax incentives as well as priority for certain State of Vermont funding and programs. Downtown today consists of roughly 179 acres of developed land and 251 buildings, within which there are only 20 to 24 upper-floor dwellings and 12 structures in single-family residential use. Of the Town’s roughly 4,300 residents in 2018, only about 50 people live within the Downtown study area. While there are residential neighborhoods adjacent to the study area, increasing the opportunities to live within the core is a major objective of this Plan.

From the 2017 Manchester Town Plan

“Respect residents’ needs, and facilitate development which caters to the resident community, while respecting and acknowledging the economic values of visitor-based businesses. This challenges us to create an environment that supports and encourages a variety of economic uses, serving residents and visitors alike - a true mixed-use environment, with different types of retail activity, residential uses, professional offices, restaurants, service businesses, theaters, and other activities and amenities that contribute to a successful, vibrant community.”

MANCHESTER COMMERCIAL DISTRICT PARKING AND PEDESTRIAN PLAN



Prepared for:
The Town of Manchester
and the
Bennington Regional Planning Commission



Manchester Land Use & Development Ordinance

CHAPTER 3 OF THE MANCHESTER UNIFIED ORDINANCE

DEVELOPED WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE VERMONT DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT MUNICIPAL PLANNING GRANT PROGRAM (FY 2016)



NORTHSHIRE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

DORSET | MANCHESTER | MANCHESTER VILLAGE

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
CONSULTANT
CAMOIN ASSOCIATES
camoin
associates

FACILITATED BY
BENNINGTON COUNTY
REGIONAL COMMISSION
BCRC



FUNDED BY A MUNICIPAL PLANNING GRANT FROM
THE VERMONT AGENCY OF COMMERCE
AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
WITH LOCAL MATCHING FUNDS FROM
DORSET, MANCHESTER, AND MANCHESTER VILLAGE



FEBRUARY 2016



Manchester Town Plan, 2017

Adopted May 9, 2017



Town of Manchester, Vermont, Chartered in 1761

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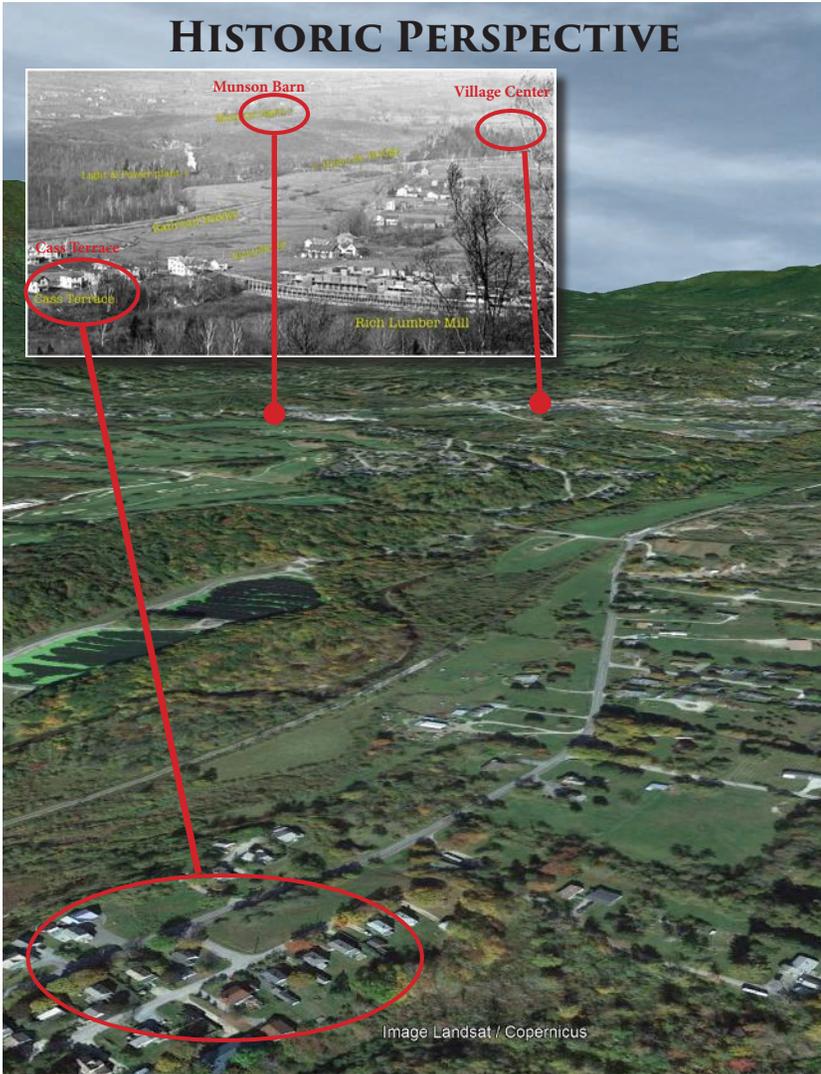
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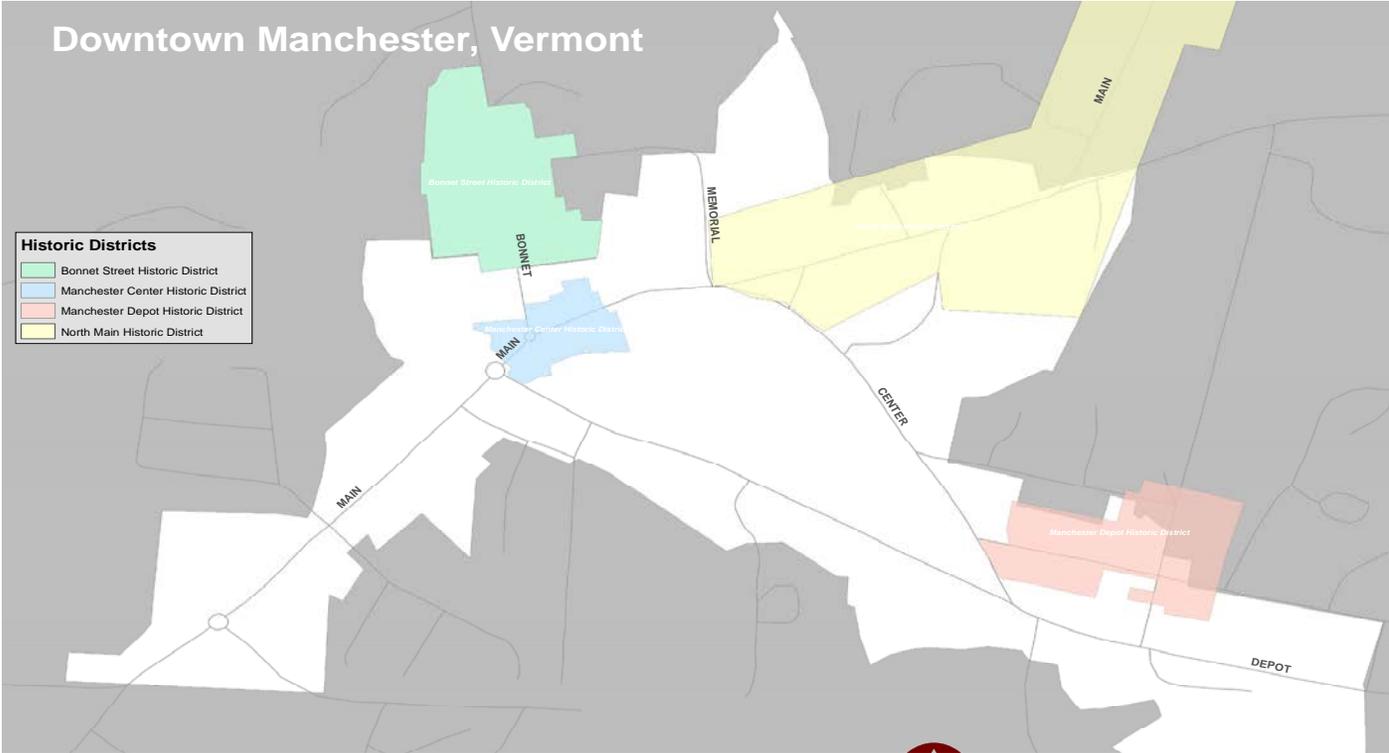


HISTORIC PERSPECTIVE



Right: The fabric of Manchester Town and Village reflects a complex history of settlements that arose at different times for different economic reasons; Richville, Barnumville, Robertsville, Manchester Center, Manchester Depot and Bear Town.

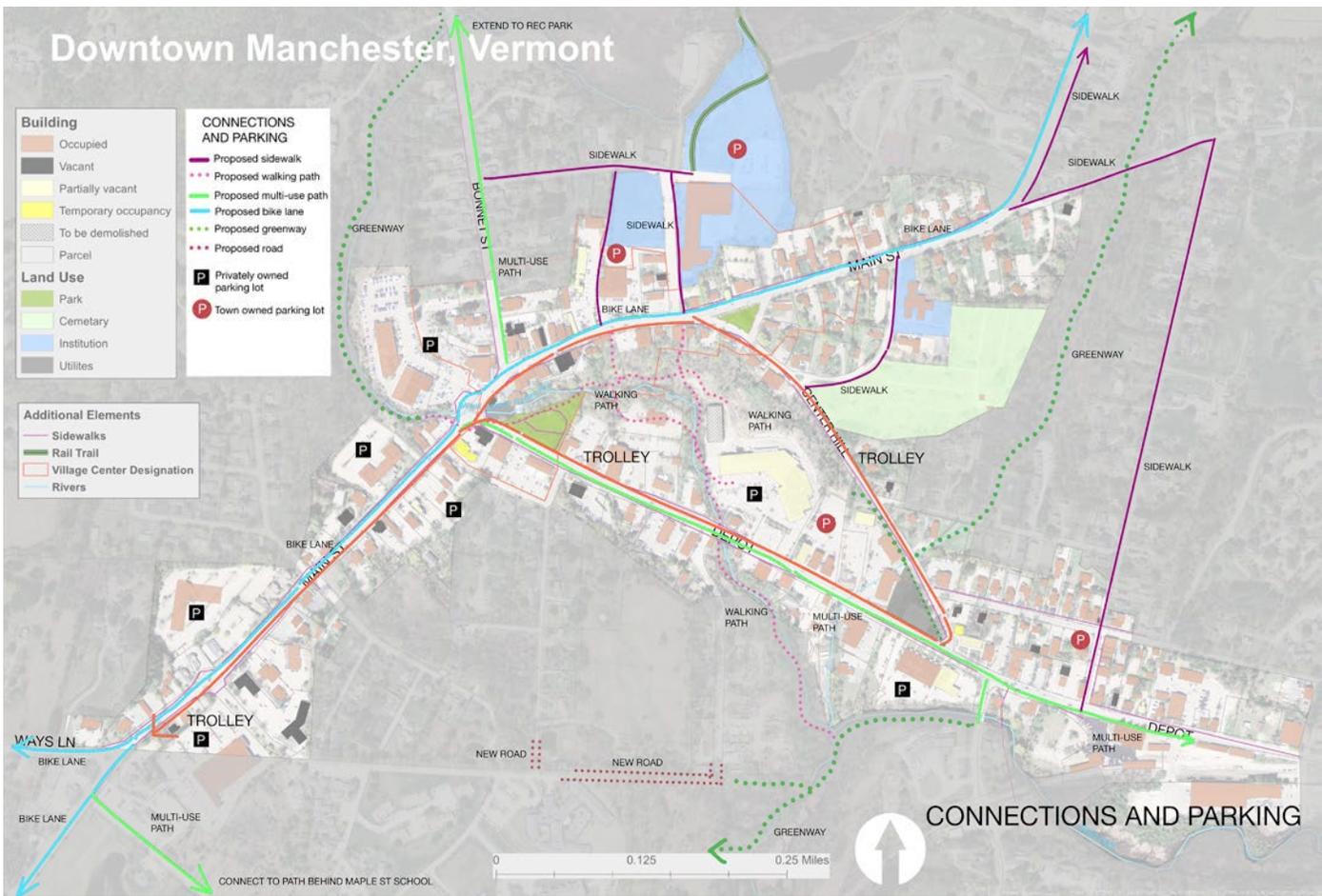
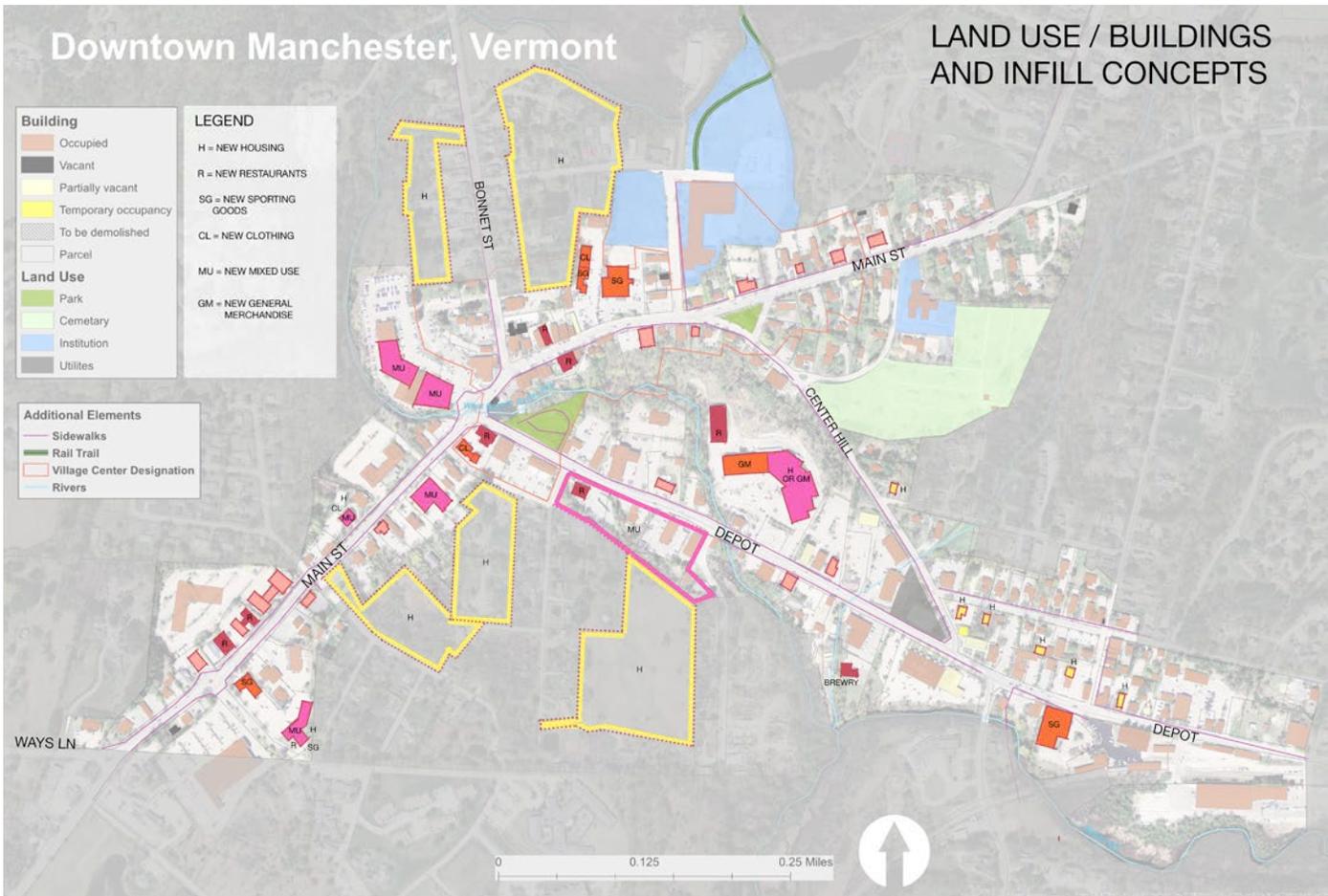
Below: The four legally designated Historic Districts in and adjacent to Downtown; Manchester Center (Factory Point), Manchester Depot, North Main Street and Bonnet Street.

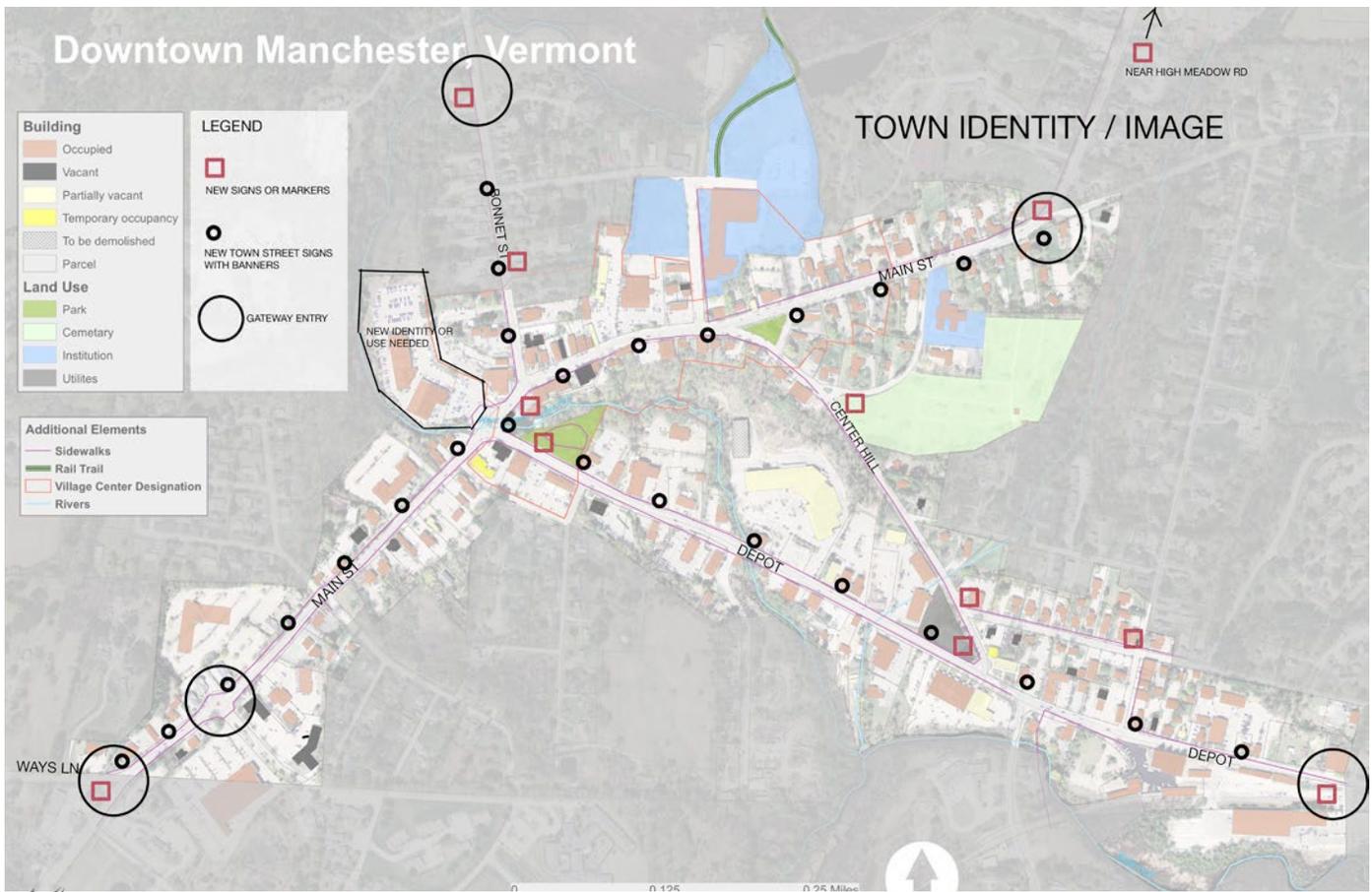
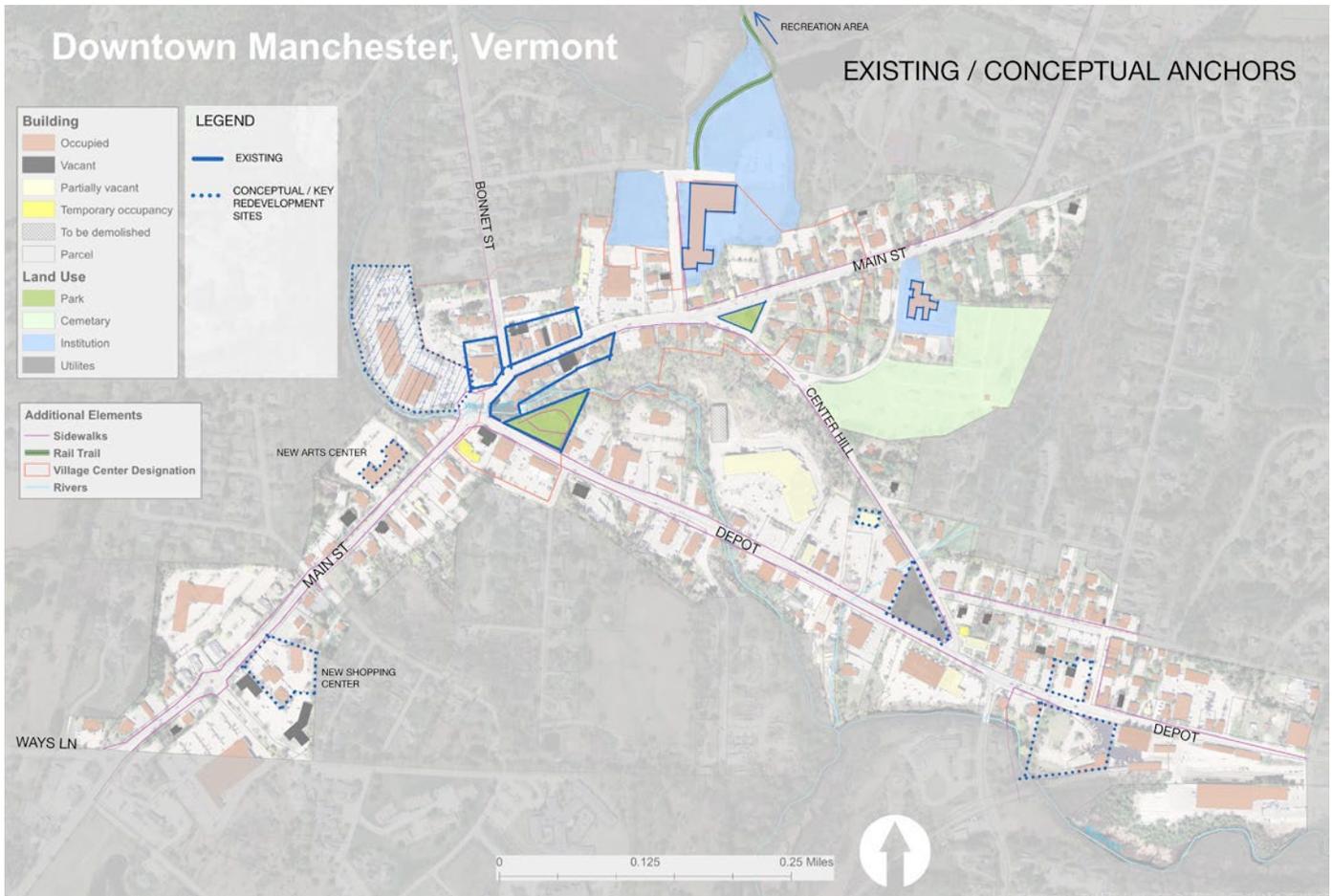


To understand how evolution of Downtown might occur in the future, the project team superimposed four layers on this structure to develop a composite planning map for Downtown:

- Current development patterns and recent retail change
- Plans underway for Manchester Riverwalk, potential path connections, circulation enhancements to Manchester Elementary - Middle School (MEMS), and renovation of Depot Street
- Sites for photo simulations: The Green Mountain Power substation at the intersection of Center Hill and Depot Street, and the frontage lots at the new Hampton Inn on Main Street.
- Potential locations for identity markers (signs, banners, and gateway design)





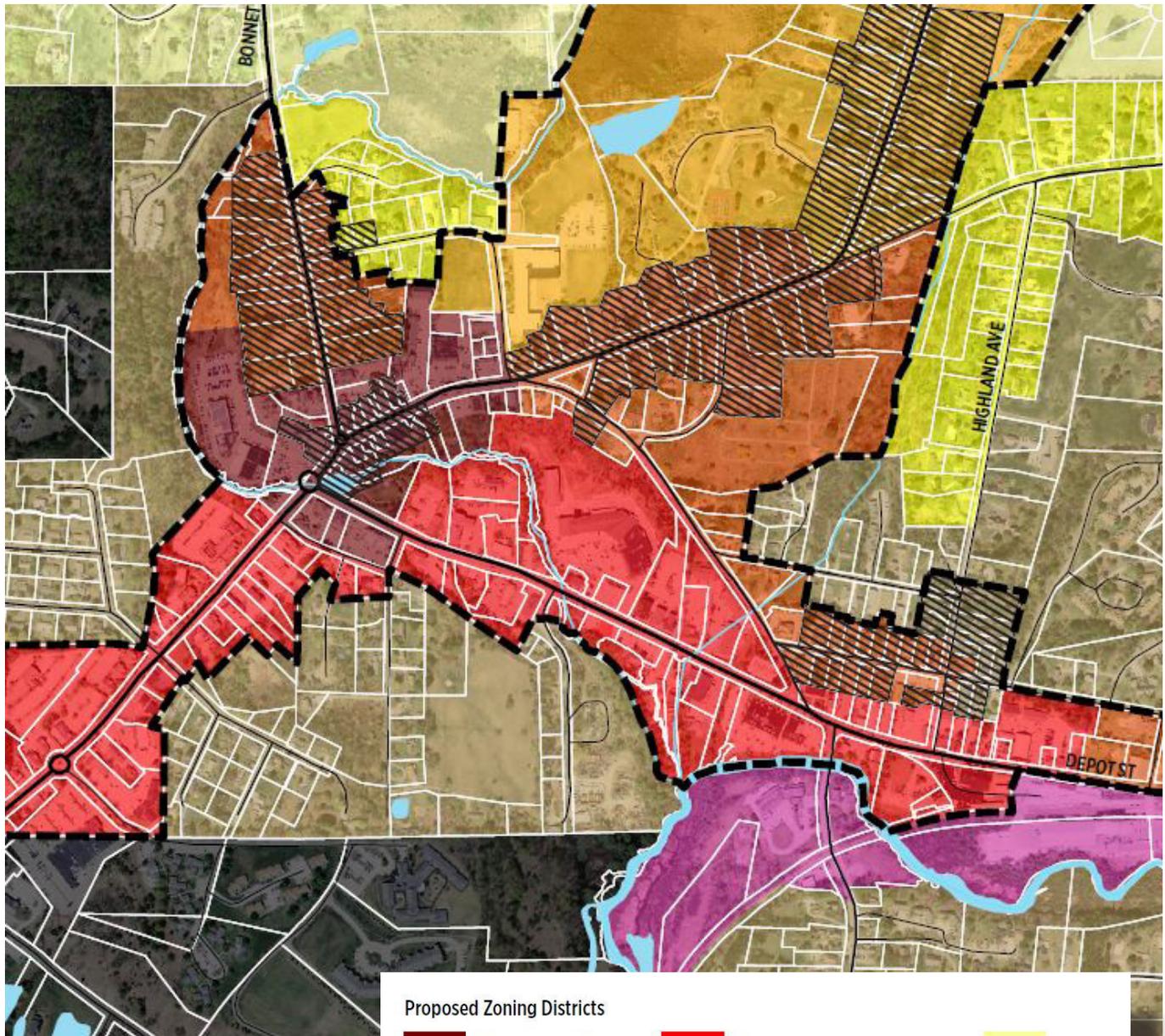


REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

Revising zoning regulations to promote and incentivize housing opportunities in and adjacent to Downtown was the principal focus of the town's comprehensive zoning update. Anticipated for adoption by June, 2018, the Town of Manchester's revised bylaws include provisions specifically intended to enhance Downtown's residential and mixed-use development potential. The revised regulations maintain Manchester's tradition of design review, which has led to the high-quality and visually consistent environment Downtown and will be a key component for ensuring that redevelopment of under-market properties and parking areas supports and reinforces the goals of this Plan and the Town Plan.

REGULATORY PROVISIONS IMPACTING DOWNTOWN
DOWNTOWN (DN) AND TOWN CENTER (TC) ZONING DISTRICTS:
Unrestricted residential density
Clear allowance for mixed-use development with a residential component
Requirement for two functional stories
Maximum setback of 15' in the historic Downtown district and 30' in the Town Center district
Increased building height to 40'
GENERAL PROVISIONS:
Streamlined administration by simplifying the number of districts and regulatory provisions
Expanded amount of land available for light industrial use
Additional mixed-use and residential density in areas served by municipal water and wastewater infrastructure
Increased building height of 35' - 40' for workforce housing
Density bonus for conversion of non-residential structures to residential use
Continued protection of forested ridgelines
Decreased base residential density allowances in rural districts
Incentivized working land/open space preservation with density bonus in rural districts

Proposed Zoning Amendments



Proposed Zoning Districts					
	Downtown (DN)		Town Center (TC)		Residential
	Mixed Use 1 (MU1)		Office Industrial (OI)		Rural Res
	Mixed Use 2 (MU2)		Residential 10 (R10)		Rural Agr
	Mixed Use 3 (MU3)		Residential 4 (R4)		Forest Co
	Design Review Overlay				
	Historic District				





4. DOWNTOWN PLANNING CHALLENGES

Fundamental challenges for Manchester drive the recommendations and strategies in this Plan. Downtown Manchester today is, in many ways, the same visually as it has been since construction of the roundabouts in 2013. Land uses within buildings and shopping plazas, however, are very much in transition. The retail, workforce, and housing shifts documented in the NEDS are playing out physically in Downtown Manchester in the following ways:

- A. RETAIL IS CHANGING** - Both traditional “bricks-and-mortar” and particularly outlet/discount retail are challenged by national and global shifts in retailing, even as certain uses including sporting goods are “missing” from Manchester. This vital part of Downtown’s fabric and economy will need to evolve accordingly to maintain vitality.

Related 2017 Town Plan Policy – Promote and enhance a changing retail and tourism economy, centered on a vibrant downtown: The Town Plan recognizes the essential need to have a tourism economy focused on the historic downtown, with connections to or opportunities for recreation, enjoying natural areas, taking advantage of commercial and cultural opportunities, and a specific discussion of the role of nightlife and entertainment opportunities for a vibrant downtown. ***Creating a Downtown Board that can serve in this capacity for Vermont Downtown designation is recommended.***



The NEDS study was facilitated by the Bennington County Regional Commission, with assistance from Camion Associates, to develop a road map for enhancing the number of quality jobs in the region that would enable more people to live and work within the Northshire region. The findings of this important study, which substantially informed the approach and focus of this Downtown Plan and are reflected in the Implementation Matrix, pointed to major trends affecting Downtown related to the housing and retail markets.

Fundamentally, Downtown Manchester is “leaking” both people (i.e. those who would live in or close to downtown, given the right housing opportunity) and retail expenditures (i.e. dollars that could be spent and circulated within Downtown, but are going elsewhere). Sporting goods and general merchandise were notable vacancies. While the idea of retail “leakage” from Downtown Manchester seems counter intuitive with its abundance of outlet retail and the creep of vacancies, it reflects three fundamental trends with implications for all aspects of this Strategic Plan. These are:

- (1) A decline in demand for specialty/outlet retail in the age of online merchandising,
- (2) Increased and unmet demand for general retail, sporting goods and related equipment, and
- (3) Substantial unmet demand for restaurants and bars, and for food-related retail, which are contributing to revitalization in many Vermont downtowns.

B. DOWNTOWN HOUSING DEMAND IS INCREASING, BUT THERE ARE SUBSTANTIAL BARRIERS TO NEW SUPPLY - Finding ways to foster development of more and different types of housing (rather than the conventional large-lot, rural single-family homes) underpins many goals of this plan. The regulatory framework provides a vital means of promoting increased downtown housing supply and diversity. Ultimately, new housing supply is essential to shore up the economic vitality of Downtown, and meet community desires and needs for more and different types of housing. This Plan’s recommendations are geared towards finding effective ways to work with the town’s existing development pattern, available buildings and sites, infrastructure limitations, and regulations to increase supply.

Related 2017 Town Plan Policy - Prioritizing Growth in the Core: Specific recommendations for zoning amendments to enable greater housing density, a greater variety of housing types, and a more effective regulatory framework for mixed-use development are being pursued with expected adoption of proposed new zoning.

“Leakage” on the housing and population side chiefly reflects the absence of housing opportunities at prices and in locations affordable to those who would otherwise live in Manchester, as opposed to only working in town, or commuting to jobs in Manchester from lower-cost or different housing opportunities elsewhere. This situation, evidenced in a drop in total building permits issued in Manchester since 2010, reflects an aging population, the high property tax burden associated with larger higher value, and an overall nationwide change in preferences for homes being within walking distance or close proximity of amenities and shopping. This trend presents an opportunity for the downtown areas in the Northshire - particularly Manchester, whose schools create a strong draw to families and whose Downtown has potential draw young professionals and retirees - to build units that are attractive to the types of tenants who want to be close to the downtown. Both the zoning update and the initiatives recommended in this Strategic Plan are intended to promote increases in the variety and supply of housing in or near (and well-connected to) Downtown.



Study Area Retail Leakage Recapture and Development Potential					
Select Retail Categories	25% of Study Area Leakage	5% of Regional Leakage	Potential Capture	Sales per Square Foot	Development Potential (Square Feet)
Furniture Stores	\$ (171,975)	\$ 321,831	\$ 149,856	\$146	1,025
Home Furnishings Stores	\$ 165,879	\$ 174,558	\$ 340,437	\$173	1,968
Electronics & Appliance Stores	\$ (427,326)	\$ 1,374,131	\$ 946,805	\$233	4,058
Shoe Stores	\$ 205,199	\$ 806,903	\$ 1,012,102	\$164	6,181
Sporting Goods/Hobby/Musical Instr Stores	\$ 177,664	\$ 556,907	\$ 734,571	\$158	4,643
Department Stores Excluding Leased Depts.	\$ 1,149,420	\$ (500,562)	\$ 648,858	\$138	4,700
Other General Merchandise Stores	\$ 1,102,204	\$ 3,491,132	\$ 4,593,336	\$138	33,273
Full-Service Restaurants	\$ 322,516	\$ 1,011,439	\$ 1,333,954	\$208	6,417
Limited-Service Eating Places	\$ 473,198	\$ 885,445	\$ 1,358,642	\$208	6,536
Special Food Services	\$ (174,518)	\$ 293,258	\$ 118,740	\$208	571
Total					69,372

DOWNTOWN NEW HOUSING UNITS PERMITTED, 2014-2017

Year	Single Family	Accessory Apartment	Multifamily Mixed Use
2014	10	1	3
2015	5	1	4
2016	6	1	1
2017	6	4	0

Recruiting new workers and residents, especially in the younger age brackets, will be critical to future economic vitality and increasing the stock of housing is crucial to achieving this goal. While NEDS found a demand within the Northshire Region for 200 to 400 units of workforce-level housing, new supply within Manchester has not been significant.

For purposes of housing demand, the Manchester Planning Commission has defined “workforce” as housing affordable to households earning between 80% and 250% of the Area Median Income of approximately \$50,000 in 2018. At these income levels, units with a sale price of approximately \$100,000 to \$312,500 or monthly rents ranging from \$930 to \$2900 would qualify as “workforce” housing. Recent development of units Downtown was priced far above these levels, indicating that there is a substantial need for more diverse housing types.

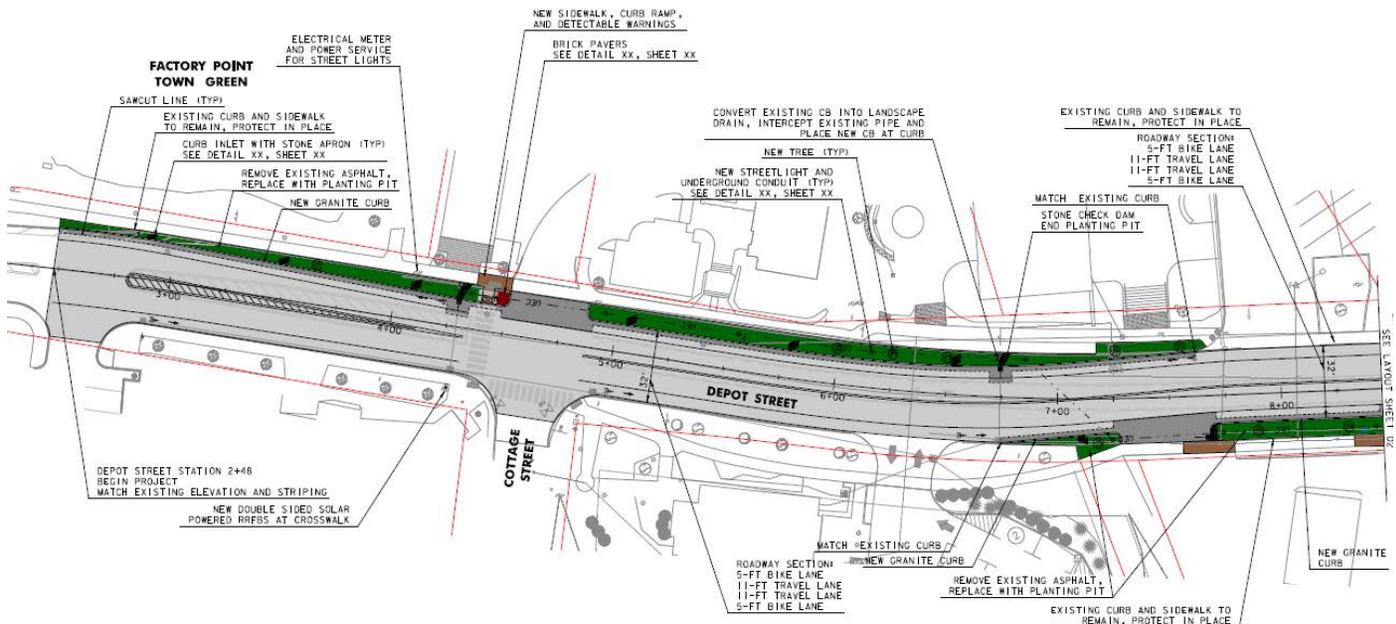
C. STAKEHOLDERS WANT TO SEE NEW INVESTMENTS IN CONNECTED AND MULTI-MODAL MOBILITY, AND MOBILITY ENHANCEMENTS ARE PLANNED, BUT THE TOWN AND MERCHANTS STILL MUST CONFRONT THE “PARKING PARADOX”.

Related 2017 Town Plan policy - Reinforcing downtown housing and vitality through transportation connections, including access to the Battenkill: Recommended actions that increase connectivity to and within downtown include continuing to build sidewalks, extending or establishing paths and trails and other amenities, addressing problem intersections and circulation areas, and enhancing access to the Battenkill.

Mobility within and through Downtown Manchester, and connectivity to adjacent neighborhoods and regional attractions, is a planning paradox: While there are facilities for pedestrians, bikers, shoppers and visitors, and more in the planning or constructions stages, perceptions persist that there is a “lack of parking” or “too much traffic,” and some of the finest resources - such as the first stage of the Manchester Riverwalk - are not as visible and utilized as they could be. Three major improvements in planning stages are crucial to implementation of this Plan:



Depot Street will undergo a major renovation in 2018 to enhance its suitability for pedestrian and bicycle travel.





(1) Planned bike/pedestrian improvements

Planned bike/pedestrian improvements to Depot Street, to be constructed in 2018, will transform Depot Street into a pedestrian-friendly environment, a wholesale change from the unsafe and unwelcoming environment today. The improvements to be built will include enhanced cross walks, bike lanes, and streetscape, including removal of the “suicide lane” turning system, and will further separate sidewalks from vehicle travel lanes. Once this project is implemented, Depot Street will have a very different character for travel which should increase both the perception of pedestrian- and bicycle-friendliness, and viability of multi-modal travel through Downtown.

(2) Manchester Elementary Middle School (MEMS).

One of the most challenging circulation issues, and one with implications for community facilities, education, and the region’s economy as well as safety - is the drop-off and pick-up system at MEMS. The present situation along Memorial Avenue and School Street, and in parking lots of both the school and adjacent properties, is not formalized or managed, and creates challenging and often hazardous situations during peak use.

A proposed redesign of the circulation system has been prepared that would reconstruct portions of Memorial Avenue and School Street; create a properly-engineered drop-off loop on Memorial Avenue; reconstruct and expand parking lots that presently are undefined, inefficiently utilized, and in disrepair;

reconstruct and enhance the playing fields across Memorial Avenue from the MEMS building; create two regulation-sized fields on MEMS properties, served by parking; and eliminate dangerous traffic conditions at the roadway intersection and on adjacent properties. The enhancement of the existing playing field and addition of two regulation-sized playing fields would enhance Manchester's emerging status as a prime location for sports tournaments, which offers significant benefits to Downtown's and the region's economic vitality.



The cost of the improvements, estimated to be above \$3 million, would be shared between the school district and the town since many of the improvements are to town roadways. Financing these improvements, however, has been complicated by the recent consolidation of Manchester's school district into the Taconic and Green Regional School District, comprised of nine towns. ***Moving forward with the MEMS improvements is critical to implementation of this Plan,*** and offers a multi-benefit "win" for the community.

(3) Manchester Riverwalk.

The prospect of extending the Manchester Riverwalk along the Battenkill also will have multiple on-going benefits for the Downtown and region. Manchester Riverwalk, a non-profit comprised of area residents with an interest in creating a walking path along the Battenkill, has sponsored and promoted creation of the first segment of the trail that now extends from the Factory Point Town Green to Friends of the Sun on Depot Street. A small directional sign is in place on Depot Street directing walkers to a recently-approved trailhead sign.



Accessing the river, which is in many ways an overlooked natural asset in Downtown Manchester, provides the opportunity for more pedestrian linkages, creating a regional attraction, providing interpretation of the milling history of the Factory Point district, and adding to Downtown's appeal "beyond retail." Evaluation of the potential for a pedestrian bridge across the Battenkill from Factory Point Town Green to Main Street is in early stages. Manchester Riverwalk is working on additional trail planning. While independent of the town, the town is supportive of Manchester Riverwalk on multiple fronts, and will continue to seek ways to support extension of and access to this local and regional asset.

D. REDEVELOPMENT OF KEY SITES AND BETTER PHYSICAL/VISUAL DEFINITION OF DOWNTOWN'S GATEWAYS WILL HAVE "MAKE OR BREAK" IMPACTS, BUT GAINING CONSENSUS ON THEIR BEST FUTURES IS CHALLENGING.

Related 2017 Town Plan policy - Addressing the Substation and other key sites through public process: The Town Plan specifically called for public process around potential relocation of the GMP substation.

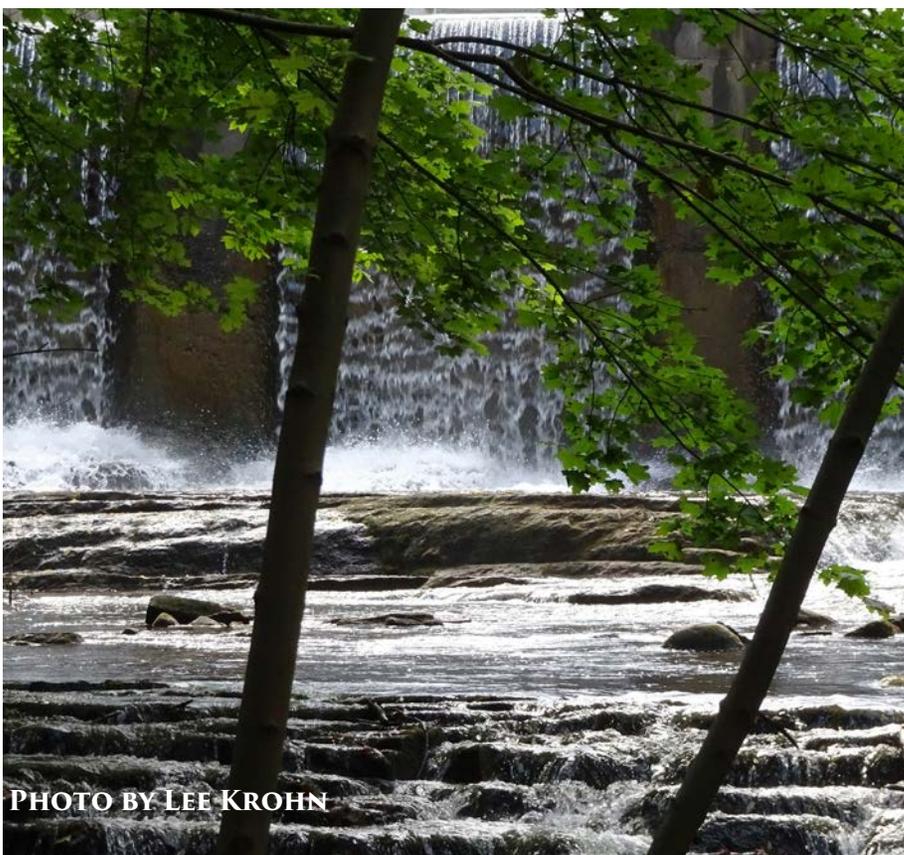
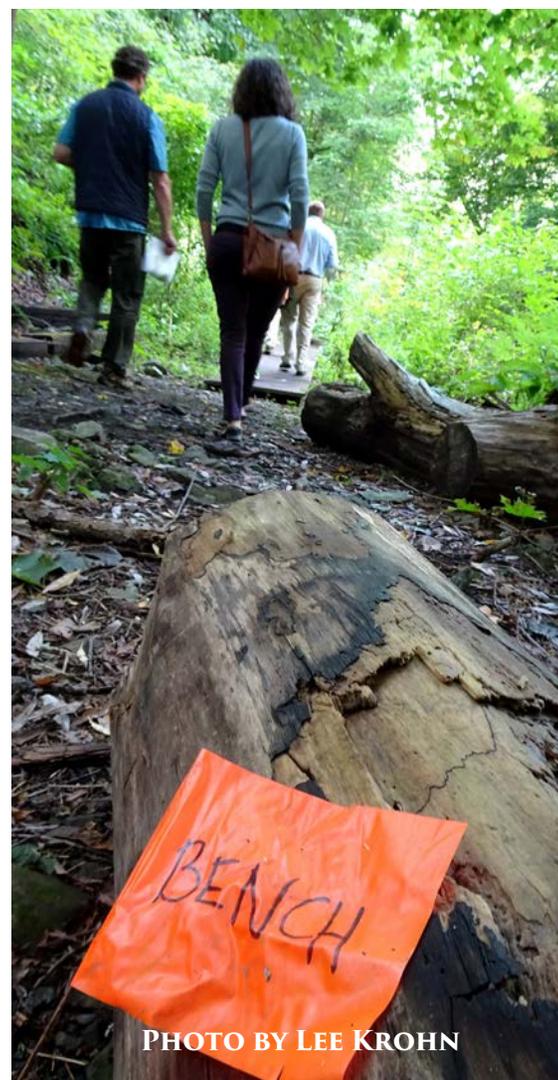


PHOTO BY LEE KROHN

PHOTO BY LEE KROHN



It is another paradox of Downtown that while it has a strong visual identity in many respects - Mount Equinox views, the Roundabouts, the Northshire Bookstore building - downtown lacks definition and monumentation at its key gateway points, and consistent visual cues downtown (whether wayfinding, banners, historic signs, or streetscape features) that are often used to mark and define historic centers and downtowns. For example, the future of the Green Mountain Power substation at Center Hill Road and Depot Street is perhaps the most visible of the challenging, but potentially catalytic, sites in Downtown, but a number of other sites in high-visibility locations on Depot Street and Main Street - particularly older shopping centers with large parking areas along the roadway frontage - present challenges and opportunities as well.

The specific challenges of managing surface parking on sites throughout Downtown, both as a whole and in the context of individual redevelopments, are addressed in Section 5 and the Implementation Matrix. Below are discussions of three “catalytic sites” whose redevelopment is key to the future of Downtown: Manchester Shopping Center, the Green Mountain Power substation, and the Manchester on Main site at the Shaw’s roundabout.

Redevelopment at Manchester Shopping Center

As one of the largest shopping plazas and parking lots Downtown, the future of Manchester Shopping Center has an outsized potential for impact on Downtown. A redevelopment proposal was approved in 2015, but has been put on hold indefinitely while major tenants are determined. At the present time there are significant safety concerns around the vacant bowling alley.



The visual quality and economic function of this plaza is a recognized priority for Downtown, and its site conditions are not optimal at this time. Opportunities through redevelopment of this site include an enhanced connection to the Manchester Riverwalk, by adding a pathway on the east side of the river and providing better parking and signage; expanding and improving retail food opportunities; and incorporating entertainment and evening uses. The developer has affirmed its cooperation with creating Manchester Riverwalk connections, and is seeking a tenant for the supermarket space. The Town's most important priority is to ensure strong communication and to pursue opportunities for supporting site improvements wherever possible, especially as plans are developed and as the Town pursues a unified strategy for Downtown parking.

Manchester on Main Site

The Manchester on Main site occupies the frontage of the Hampton Inn and is critical to the future of Downtown. During Planning Week, Orion Planning + Design prepared photo simulations of different options for development of the Hampton Inn frontage. Under the town's proposed zoning regulations the site has potential for mixed use development that includes housing. The developer has taken the pro-active step of installing signage indicating the site's desired future development as a mixed-use commercial and/or residential site, and there is an active permit for construction of three two-story retail structures on the site. However, there is no indication these will be constructed in the near future, and other options are likely to be possible.

The photo simulation below illustrates development of street frontage in proximity to the round about at an urban scale. There were consistently negative responses from the public to the 4-story scale that was shown, although the simulated development had fundamentally the same proportions as the Hampton Inn nearby. In subsequent drafts of the zoning, a minimum of a 15' setback from the sidewalk and a recessed fourth-story were incorporated into the requirements for the zoning district. Implementing this would adjust the visual presentation of the potential development as illustrated below.



As with the Manchester Shopping Plaza, the Town is committed to continuing dialogue with the land owner and developer to explore options for the site, including housing, mixed-use, and indoor recreation or cultural facilities, all of which are identified as needs in both the NEDS and this Plan

GMP utility substation

At the Depot Street/Center Hill Road gateway to Downtown Manchester sits a .74 acre lot occupied by a Green Mountain Power electrical substation. While not an impediment to pedestrian circulation per se, the substation is an unappealing visual element at a critical gateway. GMP and the town have explored options and costs to relocate the station out of Downtown and use the land for a park, or to screen the substation until such time as it is either moved or de-commissioned. Currently, the cost estimate to remove the substation is \$3.7 million; with final contingencies and improvements to make the site a park included, a realistic estimate to achieve a park comparable to the imagery below is \$4 million. An analysis by Orion Planning + Design as part of the plan suggested that the site is too small and too challenging a shape for economically substantial redevelopment. As a third option, a screening plan, shown on the opposite page, was developed, with an estimated cost of \$350,000 to \$400,000.

The photo simulations of the park and the visual buffer both were well received by the public at the Wednesday plan charrette, with the park certainly having the greater visual appeal. In the context of cost, however, many residents expressed that the tradeoff of the investment in the site to yield a small park might be less optimal than providing visual relief. However, limitations on power capacity that would be remedied by relocation of the substation and other GMP system enhancements could yield economic development benefits for the town. Pursuing a joint strategy to accelerate GMP investments in the system, along with business recruitment could jump start the opportunity to create a park at this vital gateway. This also could yield sufficient space for intersection improvements.





Rendering illustrating a park if the the substation is relocated.



Rendering illustrating a potential screening of the substation

E. MANCHESTER’S IDENTITY AND LEADERSHIP DIRECTION HAVE CHANGED, AND ARE RIPE FOR REVISION AND REFINEMENT

Manchester’s business community is working to re-establish its structure and focus after the long-running Manchester and the Mountains Chamber of Commerce, which served 13 towns in the Northshire Region, dissolved abruptly in 2016. The Manchester Business Association (MBA) is a new organization with a singular focus on Manchester. MBA leaders are now working to shift out of a regional, retail-driven chamber approach towards policies and activities that will support the full range of activities needed for a vibrant down-



town, with an emerging emphasis on food and the arts. Many MBA leaders participated actively in development of this Plan and will be active in its implementation.

A consistent theme in the engagement and discovery activities for this plan was the need for the public sector, civic leaders, non-profit organizations, and the business community to pull together to foster nightlife, active recreation, and social vibrancy - which was chiefly characterized as an environment with ample, consistent opportunities to enjoy recreation, different arts and culture offerings, and food. Many parties noted that Downtown Manchester's reputation for liveliness and "fun" has changed from years past. One noted that restaurants and bars close early, even when crowded, discouraging potential patrons and leading to a sense that downtown closes up early. Others noted that finding audiences for creative and more expensive food and arts offerings is challenging, discouraging some businesses from taking new or different directions.

Manchester's new downtown leadership, organizational structure, and focus offer the opportunity to restructure events planning, cooperative action, and branding. Significant business organization re-structuring offer a chance to work through its desired "now" and its desired future. Overall, the discovery and public engagement process pointed to a number of "intangibles" that can be addressed through what might be characterized as non-structural investments in Downtown. Stakeholders and the public stressed that wayfinding information - ranging from the use of technologies such as Google Maps and QR codes for downtown and parking information, to physical signage directing visitors and shoppers to available parking and trailheads - could help overcome the "parking paradox" and ensure that opportunities to engage and enjoy Downtown Manchester are not overlooked for lack of information and direction.



Manchester Heart of the Northshire



Bennington County is comprised of 17 towns and is the only Vermont county with two shire towns (county seats): Manchester in the Northshire (nine towns) and Bennington in the Southshire (eight towns.) The two shire towns are linked by the scenic Shires of Vermont Byway, which intersects with the Stone Valley Byway in Manchester and the Molly Stark Byway in Bennington. To the south, the Byway travels through the scenic Pownal Valley to the Berkshires.



This panel was funded by the Federal Highway Administration in partnership with the Shires Byway Committee, Bennington County Regional Commission and The Northshire Bookstore.

The Batten Kill

Vermont designated the Batten Kill in 1991 as the first "Outstanding Resource Waters" in Vermont. In the 1800s and early 1900s the Batten Kill, which flows under the roundabout, powered mills producing world famous architectural marble for statues and buildings. Today it is recognized as a world class fly fishing trout stream.



Historic marble bridge remains under roundabout. Used by permission of the Manchester Historical Society.

Manchester Riverwalk follows the river through downtown. The Batten Kill then winds its way southwest through Sunderland to Arlington and has multiple access points to the river for swimming, kayaking, fishing and tubing.

Recreation

Nestled between the Green Mountains to the East and the Taconic Range to the West, Manchester and the Northshire are blessed with majestic beauty. These mountains, the Batten Kill, and the four-season climate offer year round activities such as hiking on the Appalachian/Long Trail, driving or



Fishing on the Batten Kill. Courtesy of Jim Henderson

hiking to the top of Mt Equinox, the tallest mountain in the Taconic Range, golfing on nationally ranked golf courses, enjoying town recreation parks in Manchester and Arlington or taking a quiet walk around a quaint historic Northshire village. Access to snow shoeing and cross country skiing in the nearby ski areas of Stratton and Bromley add to the enjoyment of staying in Manchester, which had been selected as a #1 Fall Foliage Town in Vermont.

Agriculture

The quality soils and climate of the Northshire have given rise to wholesome locally grown products. While Vermont is recognized as the nation's top producer of maple syrup, the Northshire is widely



known for its locally grown organic produce, artisan breads and awarded winning cheeses made from goat, cow, or sheep milk. The working landscape and its bounty can be enjoyed at frequent year round farmers' markets, at area nurseries or on a scenic drive on the Shires Byway.

Entrepreneurial Spirit

The entrepreneurial spirit is alive in the Northshire, the place where in 1853 Franklin Orvis founded the Equinox Hotel and in 1856 his brother Charles founded Orvis Fly Fishing Company, the first mail order company in the US. Founded in Manchester in 1976, the Northshire Bookstore has been honored as the best independent bookstore



Family fun provided by local entrepreneurs. Courtesy of Karl Fisher

in New England. While it is known for its accomplished chocolatiers and bakers, retail stores with products from bird houses to beads, designer outlets, and award winning innkeepers and restaurateurs, successful high tech companies, like Arlington's Mack Molding, have also put down roots in the Northshire.

Arts and Cultural Heritage

In 1775, Ethan Allen marched north on what is the Shires Byway today on his way to capturing Fort Ticonderoga. In 1777, revolutionary war troops camped in Manchester and then traveled south along the Shires Byway to the Battle of Bennington. In the years before the Civil War, with its stately homes and marble sidewalks, Manchester became a tourist



Hildene gardens and main house. Courtesy Hildene, The Lincoln Family Home

destination when the railroads came to southern Vermont. With the Southern Vermont Arts Center, the American Museum of Fly Fishing and Hildene, the Lincoln Family Home, as anchors, Manchester is also home to countless galleries, artisans, and music and arts festivals. Whether working on canvas or paper, artists and writers like Norman Rockwell, Rockwell Kent and Dorothy Canfield Fisher chose to call the Northshire home.

Locally grown products abound in the Northshire. Courtesy of Elizabeth Berger





5. VISION AND THEMES

Six distinct themes emerged from the forgoing discovery process in Downtown Manchester. These themes form the planning framework and organizing elements for the remainder of this plan. These themes are:

HOUSING QUANTITY AND VARIETY: Increase the supply and diversity of housing available in and close to Downtown through conversion, rehabilitation, infill development, and new development on sites that are or can become walkable and bikable to downtown.

ECONOMIC RESPONSIVENESS: Facilitate successful transitions for existing retail space, exploring financing options for converting downtown space to housing, and recruiting and fostering new or “missing” uses.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS: Build a complete network of pathways and streets supported, but not dominated by parking, fully linking Downtown Manchester with schools, the Battenkill, parks, neighborhoods and countryside.

COMMUNITY ANCHORS AND GATEWAYS: Establish welcoming points of entry and wayfinding, and improve the appearance and function of key sites in Downtown Manchester.

MANCHESTER IDENTITY: Cooperatively develop and consistently use visual branding elements (i.e. Maple leaf/roundabout and four-season colors) to unify marketing, promoting Downtown Manchester as a pedestrian oriented destination with day and night vitality.

PARTNERSHIPS FOR VIBRANCY: Support organizations and partnerships, including a Downtown Board, to foster events, activities, opportunities, new businesses, and a customer service orientation that draws people to Downtown Manchester - and keeps them there.

Vision for Downtown Manchester

Downtown Manchester will be the historic and future heart of the community and the hub of thriving local and tourist economies in the Northshire region, known for the opportunities for living, working and playing downtown, easy walking and biking, connecting to natural areas, engaging in cultural and civic life, and enjoying a vibrant arts, culture, nightlife and local food scene.

THEME 1: HOUSING - QUANTITY AND VARIETY

Downtown Manchester's built environment today has many assets, and many opportunities. Manchester's principal challenge is to align its built environment – available space within buildings, current and potential re-development sites, and new development – with the opportunities and needs identified in the Town Plan and this Plan. In particular, Manchester seeks to develop policies, investments and strategies that will increase housing quantity and variety, and better position Downtown to adapt to economic changes and opportunities.

The most fundamental need at the present time is to re-balance the amount of Downtown and near-Downtown housing with non-residential space, particularly mid-size retail. The development community is providing insights on housing opportunities and needs which will be important as the new zoning regulations are implemented. Anticipated zoning changes provide a greatly improved regulatory framework in this regard, but zoning regulations themselves do not cause investment or change.

THEME 2: ECONOMIC RESPONSIVENESS

One of the most visible transitions underway in Downtown Manchester is the shift in how retail spaces are used, which is gradually aligning available space with market needs. Because of its history as an outlet retail destination, Manchester has an abundance of spaces that were developed and fitted out as roughly 3,000 SF, Class A retail spaces. Today, in the wake of fundamental shifts in the nature of retailing, Downtown's retail spaces are beginning to be re-used for housing, contemporary retailing, and in many cases new restaurants and food-related businesses.

While Downtown faced several years with above-normal vacancy rates and a notable number of empty storefronts in high-profile locations, property owners and developers have begun to overcome some of the factors that constrained reuse in Manchester. As a transitional use, a number of storefronts were made available for community and arts-related displays, reducing the visual impact of the transition and creating a sense of activity and vibrancy. Very recently, several retail buildings have been partially modified to accommodate new apartments. There is optimism today that with continued Town and business community support, the challenges with building codes, adjusting expectations for pricing and leasing terms, and gaining access to financing that can deal with complex building conversions can continue to be met and overcome.

Another important challenge and opportunity is to work locally and regionally to absorb the retail "leakage" documented in the NEDS, notably sporting goods, general merchandise, food-related uses, and a variety of restaurants, vis a vis the vacancies and under-utilized sites in downtown. ***It is a recommendation of this Plan that the Town work towards establishing a role or position, potentially in collaboration with MBA or other organizations, with responsibility for economic recruitment and to facilitate adaptive re-use and redevelopment, local entrepreneurship, and economic diversification.*** Potential new strategies include making Manchester a formal, known food destination, and a desirable destination for field games and tournaments. Achieving the circulation and related field improvements at MEMS are key to this approach, along with enhancing the variety of restaurants, evening entertainment options, and general merchandise retail.





Managing spaces in the interim phase of Downtown’s evolution also is underway. The town owns and leases three buildings on Depot Street that could be reused for different purposes in the future, depending upon lease terms, options and needs. As already noted, in response to the decline of outlet retail, some retail property owners are using vacant storefronts for retail and promotional displays, and for Downtown and community events. Continuing, this is one option for transitional use that can increase the sense of vitality Downtown. Pursuing these adaptive interim strategies will continue to benefit the community and advance the goals of this Plan.

THEME 3: COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Building a truly connected Downtown, with a medley of different options and experiences for recreation and getting from place to place, is a core community goal. Downtown has, for the most part, a functional pedestrian system and will see significant enhancements in 2018 when the pedestrian infrastructure and lane configurations on Depot Street are reconstructed to provide much greater opportunity for walking and biking. A focus of this Plan is continuing to build on these successes and investments to make new and different types of connections outside and within Downtown, and to enhance connectivity within multi-use properties, especially as redevelopment occurs. In a larger context, Manchester is one of only two designated Appalachian Trail communities in Vermont, making Downtown friendly and welcoming destination for hikers on

the Long and Appalachian Trails. This further underscores the economic value of completing and highlighting these connections.

Parking Opportunities and Challenges

Planning for parking, which is of course both a vital asset and also a challenge for Downtown, should be considered in the context of new and planned improvements to overall mobility. Like most Vermont downtowns, Manchester struggles with the perception that parking is “challenging,” but also with large, legacy parking lots in front of and behind some of its shopping centers that are both under-utilized and visually unappealing. Ideally, the goal for downtown parking is to create a “park once” scheme with centrally located, well-signed, and managed parking plus a strong network of mobility connections (See Connections and Parking Map).

Typical strategies include managed two-hour limits for on-street spaces to prevent all-day use, and strong coordination with merchants and property owners. In Manchester’s case, with the dispersed nature of its Downtown, the “park once” strategy must be repeated in the Factory Point, Depot, Main Street core and Bonnet Street areas to be successful - and coordination, in the absence of a strong chamber of commerce or other downtown management structure, is challenging.

Establishing a downtown board and more closely evaluating parking utilization will help Manchester move towards a “park once” approach in the distinct areas of Downtown. Support from the business community of

Building Along Depot Street

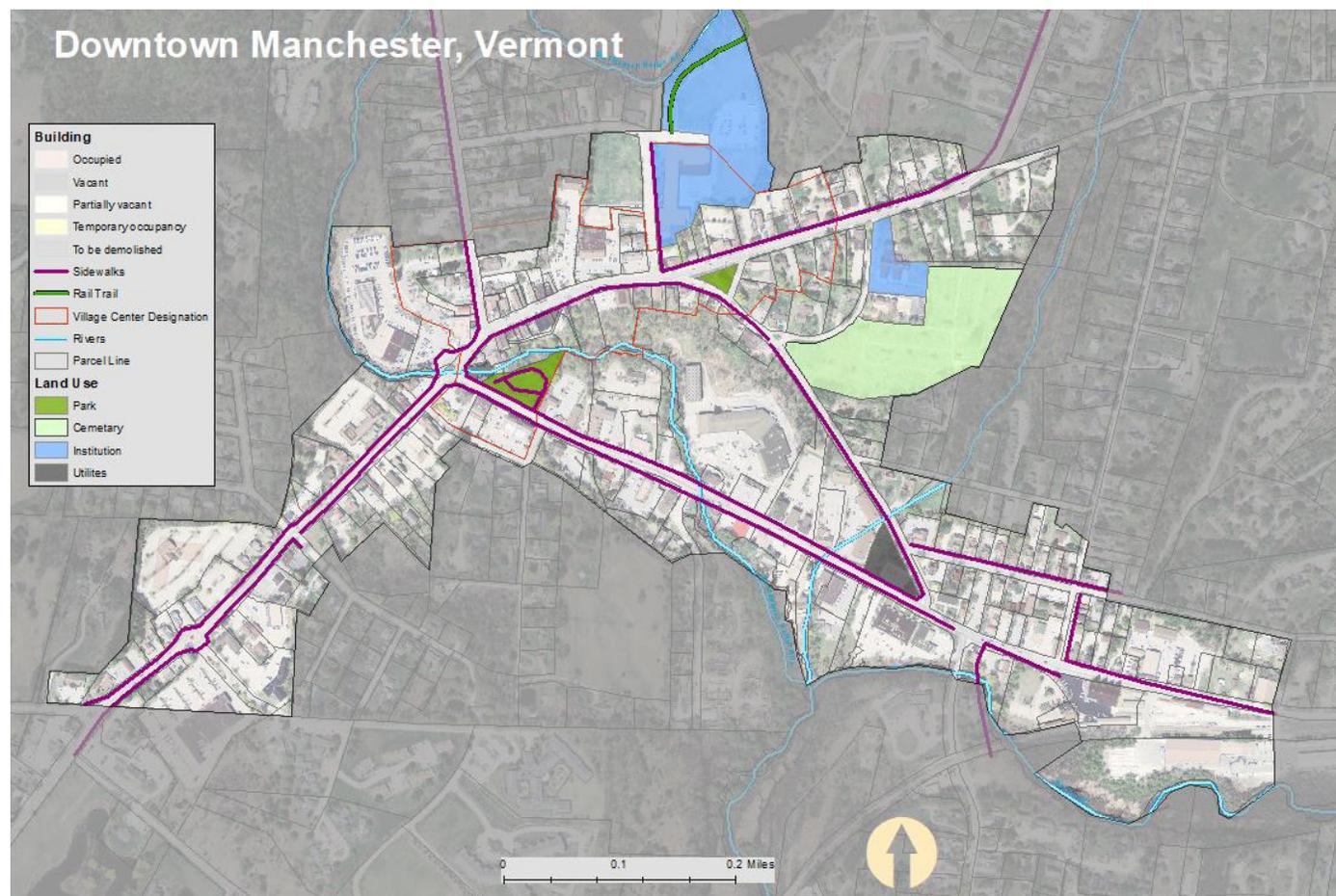


the park once strategy and improvement of Manchester's public lot adjacent to the historic downtown are vital to success. This strategy could also include establishing trailhead parking for the Manchester Riverwalk, with appropriate time limits to maximize the benefit of Manchester Riverwalk as a downtown draw. The map on page 13 shows where Manchester presently has municipal lots, on-street spaces, and private parking lots serving multiple buildings or uses. Evaluating utilization and communicating the results clearly and consistently to merchant groups, property owners, individual tenants, and town decision-making teams, is essential.

THEME 4: MANCHESTER IDENTITY - DOWNTOWN AND BEYOND

In addition to marking and interpretation, successful downtowns need a brand: a combination of visuals and words that convey the essence of what Downtown is and what it offers to locals and visitors alike. Manchester and indeed the Shires have not had a consistent or compelling brand; the consultant team turned up nearly two dozen different brands, logos, or tag lines used by town, private and non-profit organizations. Much of the work in the NEDS concerned branding needs and opportunities, notably how the Manchester and Northshire area brands itself relative to the outlets, how the relationship between Manchester Village and Downtown is promoted, and the need to promote the region's image as an agri-tourism and food destination.

To start filling these needs and shape this Strategic Plan, a community branding session was held during the NNECAPA Conference, involving nearly 50 residents, business owners, and stakeholders as well as a dozen professional planners who helped facilitate. Dubbed "Pinterest in the Public Interest," the branding



session challenged tables to assemble the phrases, words, colors, and images that characterized four “states” of Downtown: 1. what we know is positive, 2. what we know is less desirable, 3. what we fear could happen, and 4. what we hope to be. Participants put exceptional energy and creativity into the process and came out with words and phrases describing the best of current and future Manchester, colors with positive associations, and images.

The session generated tremendous positive energy and sentiment, a number of “tag lines” expressing the best present and future hope for Manchester, and a profoundly popular and exciting graphic that could form the basis for a new logo and branding program for Downtown, the town, and even the region. One table drew a roundabout and radiating pathways in dark green, with the Town’s orange maple leaf logo at its center and four primary-colored quadrants outside the center (see photo).

Participants felt this captured the ubiquitous roundabout and the well-recognized and well-liked maple leaf logo, and added blocks of colors (with positive associations) that could variously represent the four-season appeal of downtown, natural and cultural opportunities, or various events and festivals. The radiating pathways out from the roundabout could be used to show Downtown’s connections to regional attractions, such as (but certainly not limited to) the Battenkill River, Orvis, Manchester Village and the Equinox Resort, the Appalachian Trail, and Stratton Mountain. Along with a variety of possible tag lines, this color scheme and logo could form the basis for a logo family and a fresh, flexible, and visually unified branding approach for Downtown, the town, and the many organizations invested in Downtown’s future.

Branding session participants used colors, words and images to describe Manchester





Branding session participants developed a four-part logo based on the roundabout, with the Town's current Maple Leaf at its center and a color scheme using the current deep forest green for circulation, with maple-leaf red and orange, lighter green, and a deep blue. The shape and colors have tremendous potential as the basis for a logo "family" that can be used by the Town and other local and regional stakeholders.

THEME 5: COMMUNITY ANCHORS AND GATEWAYS

Principal challenges facing Downtown Manchester concern specific sites, as is the case in any Downtown, but also the visual treatment of the points of entry or gateways, and the public spaces in the Downtown itself.

Connecting through Interpretation and Wayfinding

Manchester's history is not landmarked and interpreted to its potential as it is in many other communities. Despite the Stone Valley Byway and the Shires Byway (which have some wayfinding having end points in Manchester Center), it is possible to come through Manchester without noticing, as examples, the mill and dam at Factory Point, the historic railroad depot, and Downtown's proximity to and connections with Manchester Village and Hildene. The town thus has enormous opportunities to improve the visual sense of place and entry, and to connect Downtown to Manchester Village and other "villes" that reflect the history of the settlement of Manchester by marking and celebrating its history, gateways, and thoroughfares.

Establishing wayfinding and interpretation to link key Downtown features to the surrounding settlements and institutions could provide important linkages to historic Manchester Depot (including the train station at Ark Miles), Factory Point Town Green, Factory Point Cemetery, Richville Road, Main Street connection to Manchester Village and Hildene, and Depot Street connection to the long trail and Appalachian Trail.



THEME 6: PARTNERSHIPS FOR VIBRANCY

Recent steps, including the preparation of this Plan, have helped organize and engage Manchester's business community, both with Town leadership and with other regional stakeholders. The 2016 dissolution of the Manchester and Mountains Chamber of Commerce, which had played a prominent role for many years, left an organizational 'void' in the community, particularly in terms of providing coordination with events and marketing for the "Shires" region. Today, however, the Manchester Business Association enjoys the support of the Town; \$50,000 was allocated towards MBA's budget at 2018 Town Meeting, an important vote of confidence in this organization and its potential to convene different interests and bolster the success of Downtown. The Shires regional marketing association also has provided its public support to MBA. Given the work done in this Plan and MBA's new role, the absence of a consistent visual identity or brand may provide the opportunity to use the work from this Plan and redefine a new "branding family." As MBA continues to develop, and this Plan is implemented, there is every reason to believe that this core partnership and other catalysts such as the ITV Fest, Riverwalk, and partnerships centered around the Long and Appalachian Trails can provide the avenues and resources needed to implement this Plan. A strong network of partnerships also can help identify future avenues to making appropriate links to tourism and marketing assets in the Village, including the Equinox Resort and Hildene.

As the Plan is implemented, an organization that can serve as the Downtown Board for purposes of State of Vermont downtown designation must be constituted. This can be as informal as an ad hoc group of community and Downtown interests, or as formal as a new organization or chartering an existing one as the formal Downtown Board. ***It is a core recommendation of this Plan that MBA and Town leaders, along with many of the catalytic stakeholders in this Plan, work quickly to identify the right composition and structure for a Downtown Board so that the Town can move forward with this application.***





6. IMPLEMENTATION MATRIX

This Strategic Plan is intended to provide guideposts and measures for success - but not rigid ones - to help focus and target investments, grants, town policies, and town support for non-profit and private actions. The Strategic Plan recognizes and weaves in the many significant new investments that have been made, including the Manchester Community Library and roundabouts, and those underway such as the Depot Street enhancements, the Manchester River Walk, and private redevelopment.

To achieve the plan goals listed below, an implementation matrix of actions and strategies has been developed. The matrix is unattached to this plan to facilitate active use and update, but is incorporated into the plan by reference.

STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

- **Goal 1: Housing** - Increase quantity and variety, in and close to Downtown.
- **Goal 2: Economic responsiveness** - repurpose retail space, recruit and foster new or missing uses.
- **Goals 3: Connections** - Build a complete network of pathways and streets, supported but not dominated by parking, fully linking Downtown Manchester with schools, the Battenkill, parks, and surrounding neighborhoods and countryside.
- **Goal 4: Identity** - Establish Downtown Manchester as a vibrant, pedestrian oriented environment with day and night vitality.
- **Goal 5: Anchors and Gateways** - Establish welcoming points of entry and wayfinding, and improve appearance and function of key sites in Downtown Manchester.
- **Goal 6: Partnerships** - Establish a downtown organization to be responsible for seeking Downtown Designation and implementing reinvestment agreement with Vermont Downtown Program.