

DRAFT

Upper Albany/Blue Hills Avenue Trident

Steering Committee Report

December 2008

PREAMBLE

Hartford's Tridents are viewed as a grid of converging arterials forming gateways to downtown while serving as independent pockets of economic development opportunities in the neighborhoods.

The Upper Albany/Blue Hills Trident began its work by adopting an overarching vision:

“The Upper Albany Trident will be an attractive destination that capitalizes on the rich heritage and traditions that have created a cultural crossroads for the Upper Albany neighborhood and adjacent communities.”

The goals established by the committee focused on these areas of interest:

- Project inventory review
- Employment strategy for community residents
- Consultant team input on future projects under development
- Absentee landlords and blighted buildings
- Outside the box input and ideas from the community
- Bike and pedestrian considerations

The vision and goals address the charge given the steering committee.

“To further refine and prioritize the Hartford 2010 recommendations and provide input, feedback and recommendations to the Implementation Committee.”

ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT

Considerable attention has been directed toward the Upper Albany/Blue Hills Trident over the past decade. Slow but steady progress has been made toward creating the desired "destination" status.

Two anchor projects are completed and currently operating. The Artists Collective was the first and many students and their families come into the neighborhood each week. The Mort and Irma Handel Performing Arts Center, recently opened, is brimming with students and faculty from the University of Hartford and the performance facilities will draw audiences from around the region periodically. The same holds true for the Artist's Collective performances. Phase II of the Handel Center is scheduled for completion within the next five years. This phase will provide significant growth opportunities for the community division of the Hartt School.

Several of the projects discussed by the Trident Steering Committee (Town Center at Albany and Woodland, Homestead Avenue and Sigourney/Homestead) are being developed under the auspices of the City of Hartford and/or the Hartford Redevelopment Agency (HRA). The involvement of HRA is an essential element of project control that far outweighs the often protracted time frames.

One of the key issues surrounding the discussions of project implementation and related time lines is the massive infrastructure project planned for Albany Avenue. This project is a cooperative among the City of Hartford, The Metropolitan District Commission and the Connecticut Department of Transportation.

Because of the work involving sewer separation and water supply must be coordinated with streetscape and parking improvements, the sequencing of the work is critical. It is also a very complex project that will likely last for several years. During this time there will be considerable business and traffic disruptions. In addition, there is no firm project start date although it is anticipated to begin in the spring of 2010. The Steering Committee expressed serious concern over the project coordination and makes a strong plea for ongoing communication and planning among the involved agencies. The concern is focused on parking and business access.

Disruption of this magnitude and for such a long duration will have an impact on any new startup initiatives along the Avenue that require a quick and predictable return on investment. It will be difficult to “cut the ribbon” on the proposed Town Center project until the MDC and DOT have finished their work. Business continuity and traffic flow must be preserved in order for existing businesses to survive during this time period.

The redevelopment of Westbrook Village and Bowles Park will have a material impact on this Trident, particularly on the western end adjacent to the University of Hartford itself and the Handel Performing Arts Center. The Trident Steering Committee has not had an opportunity to review and discuss these projects since the Hartford Housing Authority planning process has not been completed but a summary of the current status of these important initiatives is included later in this report.

ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Employment

A genuine concern of the Steering Committee was the availability of construction job opportunities for neighborhood residents as well as minority business owners as proposed development projects become a reality.

Discussion of contract provisions and stipulations occurred at several meetings and material regarding state hiring guidelines was distributed for information. Representatives from the City of Hartford, MDC and DOT have been made aware of these concerns and appropriate contract language regarding training and hiring will be built into agreements. Much of this is already covered by existing guidelines but the increased awareness was useful.

A review of hiring practices of recently completed projects and one in progress was conducted and some clarification and assurances were provided.

An inventory of blighted buildings and their owners has been completed and entered into a data base that is being used to identify neglected properties and to “encourage” owners to improve them. Progress is being made and the numbers have dropped but there is more work to be done on this matter.

Bike and pedestrian considerations have been discussed in many areas of the City. Unfortunately, Route 44 is and will remain a congested area with significant vehicular traffic. While streetscape improvement will make pedestrian access but safe bicycle lanes are not likely to be possible on the Avenue.

General Principles

Several recurring themes provide a golden thread tying the specific development projects together. These general principles emerge as ways to build the destination concept as well as serve important needs of residents and local business:

1. Consistently, discussion revolved around the need for a comfortable sit down restaurant that has a family orientation.
2. The availability of fresh food and produce is also important to attract residents and to support healthy living as promoted by our healthcare organizations. Much of the food available now is not of the healthiest variety and fast food abounds. A grocery store would benefit all and a recognized brand like Highland Park Market or Whole Foods would be preferable to some discount food store chain. It is recognized that there are challenges to be faced in attracting such a vendor much like those experienced by Bliss Market in downtown Harford.
3. Goods and services that would be helpful to students and their families include dance costumes and footwear and artist's supplies. These conveniences would be a neighborhood attraction and convenience.
4. The committee emphasized that any development opportunity should be properly sized for the projected customer base with price being an important dimension of any decision to proceed. Not only would it be desirable to bring people into our area to be served but existing business owners would have to support the new enterprises as well. That is why price sensitivity is so important.

Site Specific Recommendations (Out of the Box Thoughts)

1. Albany/Woodland (Town Center)

This 1.9 acre site is viewed as a true gem of an opportunity not to be squandered on a "big box" dropped onto the property with a huge front parking lot.

The Steering Committee supports the idea of the anchor tenant being an indoor market patterned after the Mercado or Quincy Market.

Fresh fish and produce would be featured and there are many successful examples around the country that draw visitors.

The market could be completed by a food court with several sit down restaurant choices.

Another specific notion was that of a soul food restaurant (moderately upscale) during the day and early evening that would transition to a jazzy club or cabaret later at night.

Additional offerings at the site could include:

- I. An ethnic bookstore and gift shop.
- II. Kinko's type (scaled down version) copying, printing and package delivery service.
- III. Dance costume and ballet slipper boutique.
- IV. Art supply store.

There has been discussion over moving the U.S. Post Office to the site.

2. Homestead Avenue (Philbrook-Booth-Spencer Foundry Building)

There are serious environmental concerns related to this site because of the nature of the former foundry business. The City does have control of the site and has begun cleanup and boarding up of the buildings to improve the temporary appearance.

The EPA has done their initial evaluation of the site but the results are not known to the committee. In regard to this circumstance, it was suggested that our political contacts be employed to attract super-fund dollars for clean up so that the site doesn't remain dormant for years.

This site is currently under City control but will probably become an HRA project.

Some specific suggestions for the Homestead site:

- I. Student housing with loft apartments
- II. Health Club/gym
- III. Artist colony housing with an Art Supply Store
- IV. Restaurant/Club
- V. Grocery store

The rail-line that runs behind the site is an asset not to be forgotten. It is now sparsely used for freight but passenger service should not be ruled out in conjunction with other city transportation projects.

3. Sigourney/Homestead

This site is under the auspices of the Hartford Redevelopment Agency. Site recommendation is currently underway (319-325 Sigourney) and demolition permits have been issued for 111 Homestead Avenue (Jessies' Package Store) Demolition should be completed by year's end.

The HRA will likely issue an RFP but they will entertain ideas from developers as they emerge.

In accordance with the NRZ plan, the Trident Steering Committee discussed a mixed-use development for this site. A zoning change from C to B3 is being considered to accommodate projects that include retail at ground level

with housing above. There is no retail in the area now but whatever evolves should be aligned with other projects along the Homestead corridor, considered another important gateway in need of serious attention. Open green space was presented as an option while future decisions are being made, particularly at a time when commercial funding is difficult.

The Committee reinforced the suggestion that a market analysis by experienced consultants be performed for the Homestead corridor.

4. Other Project Sites

The John E. Rogers Cultural Center, The Upper Albany Public Library Branch and the Collin Bennett Building were all touched upon at the Steering Committee meetings. Plans are all progressing and funding is being finalized. Apparently the library plan came in over budget and needs review and adjustment.

We can look forward to the next phase of the Handel Performing Arts Center within five years. An important element to future residential and retail to support the University of Hartford initiatives is outlined below in the Hartford Housing Authority narrative.

5. Westbrook Village and Bowles Park

The Hartford Housing Authority remains committed to the Trident process, and the need to place strategic, thorough, and inclusive plans on the table for consideration by the City of Hartford under its Hartford 2010 Initiative. Under the leadership of the Authority's new Executive Director, Alan Green, The HHA has placed the re-development of Bowles Park and Westbrook Village on the very top of its development planning. As such, the authority has assigned key personnel to move the process forward. This new administration is evaluating existing plans, and assuring these plans reflect the needs of the residents, the community and the Housing Authority, and will indeed complement the requests, needs and expectations of the Upper Albany/Blue Hills neighborhoods.

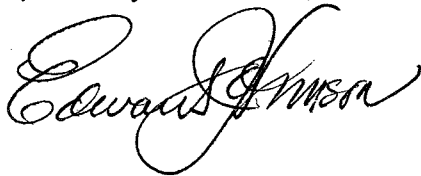
The new executive team has met with developers, community leaders and residents of Bowles and Westbrook and is restoring planning and resident committees to active status after several months without meetings. Planning committees will re-convene after the holidays, and will include existing and new representation of stakeholders, including the Mayoral offices of Hartford, West Hartford, and Bloomfield, The University of Hartford, Saint Francis Hospital, and other surrounding private and public stakeholders. Given the changing economic environment, the HHA has begun examining the likelihood of new funding sources and the factual availability of existing sources for the development. The HHA is reviewing resident/retail/commercial - mix models and designs, which includes

significant consideration for community access by neighborhoods surrounding Bowles and Westbrook, including access to HHA activity/community centers and other broad community enhancing structures.

SUMMARY

The Upper Albany/Blue Hills Trident Steering Committee is pleased to submit this report and believes it is representative of community sentiment regarding the future economic development in this area. The report is realistic, in our view, and in synch with planning discussions that have been ongoing over the past several years. The committee did not delve into the specifics of funding or the technical aspects of developing the sites but focused on a general philosophy of development for this important destination with a rich heritage and traditions.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Edward S. Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "E".

Edward S. Johnson, DDS
Chair, Upper Albany/Blue Hills
Trident Steering Committee