

A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

Farmington Avenue Commercial Revitalization

Hartford, Connecticut



October 4, 2012



**Urban Land
Institute**

Boston

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Executive Summary

Under the direction of the Urban Land Institute's Boston District Council, the Farmington Avenue Commercial Revitalization Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) convened in Hartford, Connecticut in October 2012, bringing together stakeholders, City planners, community leaders, and a panel of real estate, planning, and development professionals for a day-long session focused on identifying opportunities and strategies for revitalizing the commercial areas on the Farmington Avenue corridor. The report that follows, which summarizes the TAP recommendations, is comprised of five chapters.

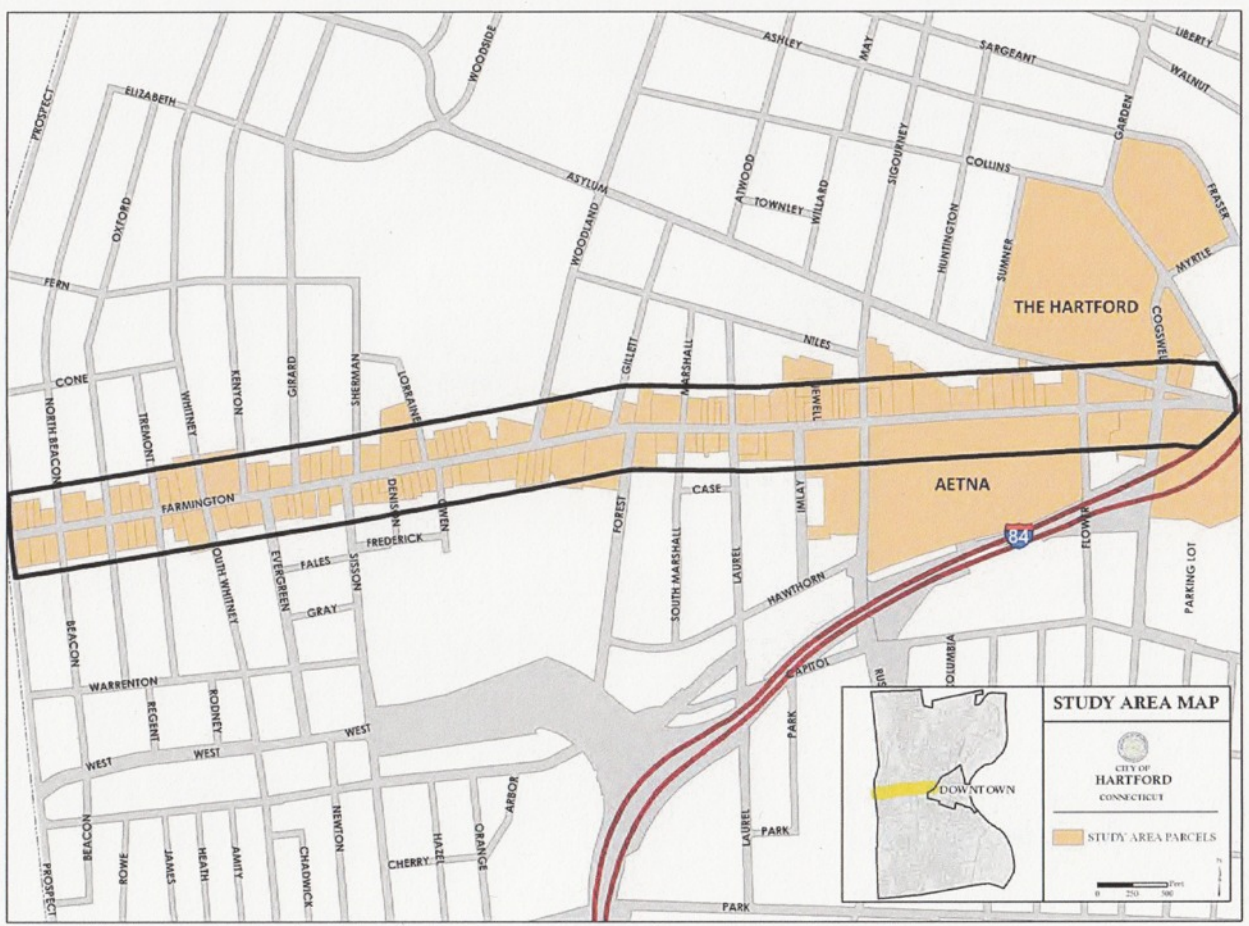
Chapter 1: ULI and the TAP Process gives an overview of the Urban Land Institute's Boston District Council and its Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) and provides a detailed list of participants in the Farmington Avenue Commercial Revitalization TAP including City officials, stakeholders, and the panel of land use and development professionals.

Chapter 2: Background and Assignment gives background information about the Farmington Avenue corridor, and the City of Hartford's objectives for the TAP, as stated in its initial application.

Chapter 3: Observations and Findings presents a collection of the Panelists' insights about the characteristics, opportunities, and obstacles to be taken into account in coming up with recommendations for the commercial revitalization of the avenue.

Chapter 4: Recommendations presents the Panel's concept plan for focusing attention around two commercial nodes, and discusses the retail/commercial opportunities, transportation infrastructure improvements, and branding/streetscape improvements that can jumpstart the revitalization of the avenue.

Finally, *Chapter 5: Next Steps* outlines some initial actions designed to catalyze the revitalization effort, including improving the reality and perceptions of safety; improving curb appeal; activating empty storefront and lots; and pursuing a Business Improvement or Special Services District.



Map of the Farmington Avenue corridor, and images from along the avenue



1. ULI and the TAP Process

Urban Land Institute (ULI)

The Urban Land Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit research and education organization supported by its members. Founded in 1936, the institute now has nearly 30,000 members worldwide representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines, working in private enterprise and public service, including developers, architects, planners, lawyers, bankers, economic development professionals, among others.

As the preeminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information, and experience among local, national, and international industry leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places. The mission of the Urban Land Institute is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and to help sustain and create thriving communities. The Boston District Council serves the six New England states and has over 1,000 members.

Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)

The ULI Boston Real Estate Advisory Committee convenes Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) at the request of public officials and local stakeholders of communities and nonprofit organizations facing complex land use challenges who benefit from planning and development professionals providing pro bono recommendations. At the TAP, a group of diverse professionals specially assembled with expertise in the issues posed typically spends one to two days visiting and analyzing existing conditions, identifying specific planning and development issues, and formulating realistic and actionable recommendations to move initiatives forward in a way consistent with the applicant's goals and objectives.

Panel Members

ULI Boston convened a panel of volunteers whose members represent a range of the disciplines associated with the challenges of identifying and evaluating best-case scenarios for the revitalization of the Farmington Avenue corridor.

Disciplines represented included architecture, construction, market analysis, retail development, housing development, commercial development, traffic/parking, and real estate law. Members were selected with the intent of convening a robust array of professional expertise relevant to the City's objectives for this TAP. Following is the list of panelists:

- Richard Lampman, G. Greene Construction (TAP Co-Chair)
- Larry Spang, Arrowstreet (TAP Co-Chair)
- Kwesi Brown, Milone & MacBroom
- Jason Denoncourt, The Gutierrez Company
- R. Michael Goman, Goman + York Property Advisors
- Anika Lemar, Wiggin & Dana
- Rai Mulbauer, BL Companies
- James Perrine, The Community Builders
- Doug Poutasse, Bentall Kennedy

Virginia Quinn served as a consulting technical writer, while Michelle Landers of ULI Boston provided organizational and technical support in preparation for and during the TAP event.

Stakeholders

The TAP benefited from the participation of a diverse group of stakeholders—city planning staff and law enforcement officers, small businesses owners, representative of large corporations and area institutions, and residents—who met with the

Panel and shared information, ideas, and opinions on a range of issues affecting the revitalization of the Farmington Avenue corridor. The following individuals served on stakeholder panels:

City of Hartford Planning Division

- Thom Deller, Director, Development Services
- Don Chapman
- Jon Mullen
- Kim Holden
- Irena Lazic
- Caitlin Fitzgerald
- Jillian Hockenberry
- Lynda Crespo
- Jeff Cormier
- Kevin Burnham, DPW Director

Small Employers/Organizations

- Jill Barrett, Farmington Avenue Alliance
- Don Hamer, Farmington Avenue Business District
- Peter Vouthounes, 240 Farmington Avenue owner
- Kevin Ahlquist, Hartford Police Department Zone Commander
- Chris Chanaca, Hartford Police Department CSO

Large Employers/Institutions

- Mike Knipper, The Hartford
- Mike Zaleski, Hartford Business Improvement District

Asylum Hill Neighborhood

- Jennifer Cassidy
- Jackie McKinney
- Dean Amadon
- Michelle McFarland
- Brenda McCumber

West End Neighborhood

- David Barrett
- David Jorgensen
- John Gayle
- Toni Gold
- Kyle Bergquist

TAP Process

The Farmington Avenue Commercial Revitalization TAP was held on October 4, 2012 at the Mark Twain House and Museum in Hartford, Connecticut. In the morning, Jeffrey Cormier of the City of Hartford Planning Division, Jill Barrett of the Farmington Avenue Alliance, and Jennifer Cassidy, representing the Asylum Avenue neighborhood, welcomed the Panelists and led an hour-long driving tour of the Farmington Avenue commercial corridor and West End and Asylum Hill residential neighborhoods.

The tour began at the Mark Twain House, then proceeded west along Farmington Avenue, turned north onto Whitney Street into the West End residential neighborhood, past the campuses of the Hartford Seminary and the University of Connecticut Law School, then west on Fern Street past Elizabeth Park, turned south onto Quaker Lane to the West Hartford line, back east through the West End commercial area of Farmington Avenue, then south onto Forest Street past Hartford High School and into the South Marshall Street neighborhood, turned east onto Farmington Avenue and continued past the St. Francis Hospital area, the Aetna and The Hartford corporate campuses, through the Asylum Hill residential neighborhood, then returned on Farmington Avenue to the Mark Twain House.

After the tour, the ULI panel interviewed a diverse series of stakeholders to gain a better understanding of relevant issues, dynamics, challenges, and opportunities related to the revitalization of the Farmington Avenue corridor. The panelists then engaged in an intensive charrette to develop potential concepts, strategies, and recommendations for the City to pursue. The panel presented these findings at a public meeting that evening at the Mark Twain House. The PowerPoint presentation is available electronically at the ULI Boston website <http://boston.uli.org>.

2. Background and Assignment

The Farmington Avenue Corridor

Farmington Avenue is a principal arterial street and one of the most heavily travelled corridors in Hartford, extending from the downtown through the Asylum Hill and West End neighborhoods and continuing through adjacent towns. This corridor has one of the highest commercial vacancy rates of all principal arterial and commercial streets in the city.

The Asylum Hill and West End sections of Farmington Avenue are distinctly different in the type of commercial retail as well as the population served. The Asylum Hill portion is characterized by multi-story, mixed-use structures having ground floor retail with residential above, interspersed with freestanding chain or franchise retail. This area is in close proximity to two major employers in the city, Aetna and The Hartford, but has struggled to establish a substantial commercial presence. The West End section is largely commercial consisting of one-story strip mall-type structures and homes converted to commercial uses. Surrounded by two universities and the most affluent neighborhood in the city, this section generally has lower commercial vacancy and is able to draw a night-time/after-work crowd.

City of Hartford's Objectives for the TAP

The City of Hartford asked the ULI TAP to evaluate existing commercial areas on the Farmington Avenue corridor, identify specific areas and needs, and recommend strategies or policies that will reduce commercial vacancy rates, strengthen the corridor, and create the environment that allows the type of commercial development that will complement Farmington Avenue.



Alice Cogswell Memorial at the east end of Farmington Avenue

- What are the marketing opportunities for commercial and retail uses along Farmington Avenue?
- What strategies or policies can the city employ to strengthen the commercial aspect of the corridor?
- How do we look the different sections of Farmington Avenue and establish connections throughout and with the downtown?
- What infrastructure improvements may be necessary to attract businesses to underutilized commercial areas?
- What design characteristics should be used to enhance commercial development?
- What public or private financing tools are available to encourage or fund investments in the area?
- What are the needs of existing retail businesses on the corridor?
- What types of retail are appropriate for each section of Farmington Avenue?
- What is the best first step?
- What are realistic time frames to accomplish the recommended development scenarios?

3. Observations and Findings

After reviewing related documents (including the 2011 Neighborhood Stabilization study and the 2002 New Farmington Avenue study), touring the entire length of Farmington Avenue and surrounding neighborhoods, and interviewing stakeholders (including officials from the City of Hartford, neighborhoods residents, and representatives of large corporations and small businesses), the Panel identified key characteristics, obstacles, and opportunities relevant to the revitalization of commercial areas on the Farmington Avenue corridor.

Characteristics

- The Farmington Avenue corridor is an area with a rich historical context.
- It is a bridge between downtown Hartford and suburban West Hartford, two centers of employment, entertainment, and retail activity.
- There is a lot of vehicular traffic, although people tend to drive through without stopping.
- There is strong neighborhood support from the vibrant residential areas on both sides of the Avenue
- The Hartford has 5,000 employees on their Farmington Avenue campus, with one building directly on Farmington Avenue and the rest on Asylum Street. Of those employees, only 100 live in city, and only 100 use public transit.
- There is an active immigrant/refugee flow, which can create opportunities for economic development.
- Young people are starting to move in, attracted to the area’s affordable rents; they want to be as close to the West End as possible.
- There is contrasting quality between the residential areas and the commercial establishments on the Avenue itself.

- The West End is diverse; very stable, with a sizeable population of renters; the most destabilizing influence is Farmington Avenue itself.
- The recent economic downturn had a negative effect on some proposed projects: a condominium/luxury project (purchased in 2008) planned at Farmington and Girard didn’t work at that site; developers proposed garden apartments for the vacant lot behind the FedEx plaza, which is zoned R7 (single-family housing), but the ZBA turned them down despite neighborhood support. It is currently being used as a staging area for the ongoing MDC project.



Mark Twain House, part of Farmington Avenue’s historic context

Opportunities

- Actual personal and property safety in the area is much better than is generally perceived.
- The police are interested in pursuing crime prevention through environmental design, and have attended LISC training programs.
- There is a large number of professionals along the corridor, either living in the surrounding neighborhoods or working in nearby businesses and institutions.

- Apartments near the Farmington Avenue corridor are considerably more affordable than downtown rental units.
- People can walk from Ashley Street to downtown in only 20 minutes.
- Some private developers are eager to act if the area can be improved: for example, the owners of the FedEx property would like to further develop that property; the CVS across the street would like to expand
- Many opportunities can be derived from the density of the existing commercial and residential neighborhoods.
- There is also a wealth of institutional resources here: corporations, hospitals, educational institutions (both Hartford public schools and higher education), as well as significant faith-based organizations in both Asylum Hill and the West End.
- South Marshall Street and Sisson Avenue are key intersections and cross streets to focus on in turning the corridor around.

Transportation

- Farmington Avenue is a major arterial, but the MDC reconstruction project has already caused some traffic diversion away from the area.
- Transit improvements are needed.
- Parking is a problem for commuters who might want to use local businesses.
- Biking along Farmington Avenue is currently very hazardous.
- Pedestrian and vehicular flows are currently in conflict—cross the street at your own risk

Branding and Streetscape Considerations

- Commuters must be given a reason to stop at businesses along Farmington Avenue, and doing so must be made easier.
- Hartford should be branded as distinct from West Hartford at the entrance point.
- Redesigned intersections, and new lighting, street furniture, paving, bus shelters, are needed.

- The avenue would benefit from a more distinctive look along its length.
- Signage guidelines would help; for example, at the newly renovated apartment building at the Farmington/Sigourney corner, the biggest sign says “FOR RENT”
- A pedestrian-friendly streetscape, with a more relevant retail mix, is needed.
- The building setback line, which was established in the late 1800s, is far enough from the street to create both challenges and opportunities.
- There are no regulations governing shared parking.
- Local planning efforts and initiatives should be drawn upon.
- A possible opportunity: uncover and preserve trolley tracks below the street and make them part of the street infrastructure.

Obstacles

- Property taxes are high.
- There is a high concentration of subsidized housing and social service uses, particularly in the Asylum Hill neighborhood.
- Most police and public safety issues involve quality of life (loitering, public drinking).
- There is a pervasive perception that the area is not safe.
- Haphazard zoning and archaic setback requirements characterize the area.
- There is a shortage of parking and an absence of regulations permitting shared parking.
- MDC reconstruction has already created some traffic diversion away from the avenue.
- The avenue lacks a cohesive identity.
- Many young employees prefer to live in West Hartford.
- Community groups acknowledge that their activism may contribute to delaying or discouraging property development and the implementation of changes.

4. Recommendations

As the Panel worked with the information gathered from the various sources, it became evident that even though the 1½-mile-long Farmington Avenue is considered a single “corridor,” it is not a homogeneous stretch. Attempting to overlay a uniform solution on the whole avenue end-to-end appears to make less sense than looking at the four distinct segments that make up Farmington Avenue:

- Union Station to Flower Street (referred to by some as the “wasteland”)
- Flower Street to Gillett Street
- Gillett Street to Sisson Avenue
- Sisson Avenue to Prospect Street

Each of these 4-to-5 block areas has its own character, and its own different needs, although all would benefit from sharing a common streetscape, theme, and branding identity.

Retail/Commercial Opportunities

Restaurants: It is worth giving some attention to trying to attract destination restaurants to the area. Currently, when commuters stop to spend money on Farmington Avenue, it is usually at restaurants. Restaurants can pull in people who then may also shop at other area stores. The goal is to have healthy, prosperous retail to provide goods and services to area residents and to enliven the corridor.

Medical/Office: Another commercial opportunity worth considering is medical office space. A lot of vehicular traffic comes up Sisson Avenue on the way to St. Francis Hospital; that, plus the proximity of several senior housing complexes, makes it a natural location for doctor’s offices and associated medical uses.

Neighborhood/Destination Retail: Retail on the corridor should serve as a “destination” for out-of-

towners but also serve the needs of local residents. Given the difficult traffic patterns and wide availability of convenient retail in surrounding suburbs, creating commuter-friendly retail is probably not feasible and should not be a priority.

Retail is different from office or industrial space; retail decisions are based on a location’s ability to generate sales (productivity). The Trade Area is defined by population (are there enough people there to come into a store and make a purchase?); income (do those people have disposable income to spend?); and traffic counts (are there enough cars going back and forth in front of a store?). Farmington Avenue fits the bill on all three counts, so in that regard it should be able to attract retailers to the area.

Context: But after the productivity test, the next consideration is fit: is this commercial node a suitable location for a given store? Fit comes down to curb appeal, and those issues need to be addressed on Farmington Avenue. Curb appeal consists of a lot of elements, but a clear identity is one of the most important. West Hartford town center, for example, is an identifiable area. New retailers want the appearance of a distinct locale, to be able to drive down the street and sense a fair amount of commercial activity going on that they can participate in. Does the street feel good? Will the neighboring tenants enhance sales volume?

Areas for Differentiation: The Panel concluded that one approach with a good chance of success would be to focus on two nodes along the corridor that seemed ripest for retail development, rather than trying to spread it out over the entire avenue. By focusing attention on those two zones in the middle, both of which have dense residential neighborhoods feeding into them, then the blocks in between can be treated as connective tissue that will fill in over time as they also benefit from the more general boulevard and traffic/parking improvements.

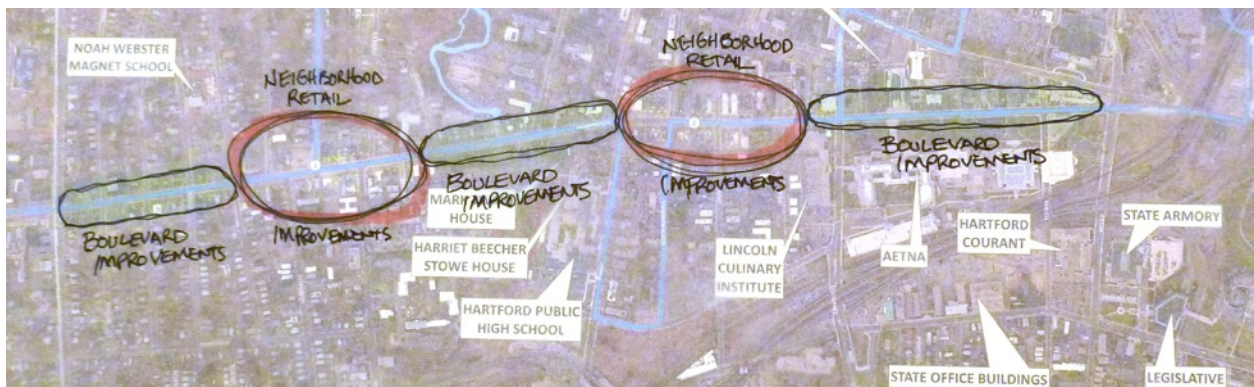
The first node is in the vicinity of the former diner at the intersection of Farmington Avenue and Laurel Street. Much of the work needed in this area involves social concerns, community policing, how to make it look and feel like a safe place to stop and shop. Some areas in this node are already undergoing improvements that can be built upon. The resources provided by a Special Services District could be used to help get more eyes on the street here.



Concept plan showing location of two retail nodes



The second node is by the Sisson/Whitney block in the West End, anchored by the building where the Braza restaurant was formerly located. This area is already close to being an active retail node, with several thriving establishments and a good flow of traffic coming up Sisson and turning onto Farmington.



Concept diagram showing two retail nodes and adjacent connective areas all enhanced by streetscape improvements

Transportation Infrastructure

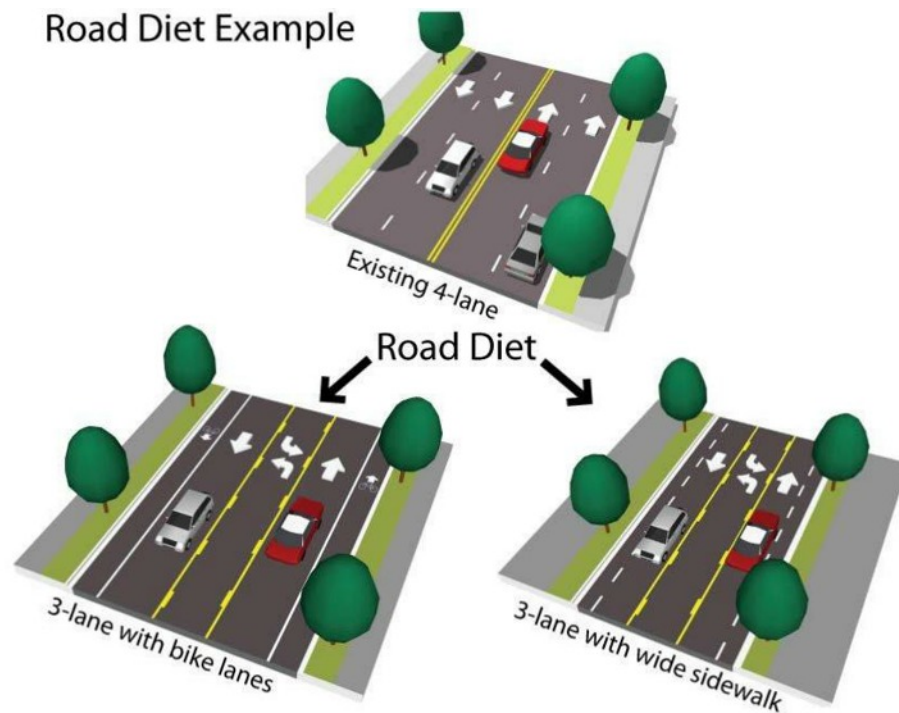
Transportation infrastructure improvements can contribute significantly to both the perceptions and the reality of public safety along the corridor. A Complete Streets approach is needed, taking into account the needs of all users: drivers, pedestrians, and bicyclists. The goal is to adopt a “road diet” that calms traffic without diminishing capacity.

Farmington Avenue is currently 4 lanes in both directions along its entire length. Traffic can be calmed by reducing the number of lanes from 4 to 3 in certain sections with side-by-side or two-way left turn lanes in the middle, with one turning lane in each direction at central locations along the corridor. A dedicated turning lane is particularly important in the retail sections of the corridor, in order to facilitate traffic flow while not diminishing capacity

Bike lanes can be provided along with landscaped or textured brick medians at certain sections of the corridor to serve as a refuge for pedestrians.

Quick fixes for the impediments caused by the heavy public transit activity along the corridor include designated bus shelters at various stops, and locating stops on the far sides of various intersections, so that stopped buses do not block right-turning vehicles.

Given the number of impending large-scale transportation projects (busway, high-speed rail) in Hartford that will affect bus use on Farmington Avenue, there needs to be a broader discussion that includes the Connecticut Department of Transportation and the institutions along the corridor to come up with a coherent plan that addresses related transit issues.



Pedestrian and Bicycle Infrastructure

The whole Farmington Avenue corridor is hostile to both pedestrians and bicyclists from a traffic perspective, but the current ongoing MDC project presents an opportunity for some short-term fixes. For example:

- Existing crosswalks are poorly marked, but as the road is being repaired, more visible crosswalks could be inserted. Patterned and textured crosswalks effectively slow drivers down and force them to pay attention to pedestrians.



- Creating nodes and peninsulas at major crosswalks will help pedestrians navigate busy intersections.
- Despite Farmington Avenue's wide setbacks, the sidewalks are positioned right along the road line, which is intimidating for pedestrians in a heavy traffic corridor. There are frequent wide driveways between the sidewalk and the retail buildings. Narrowing those driveways down to one or two necessary lanes would help alleviate the tension crossing that wide strip creates for pedestrians.
- Creating a shared bike lane as part of the traffic pattern has great potential here. Farmington Avenue is a hostile corridor traffic-wise for bike travel, so not many bicyclists use it to get downtown. But there is a powerful movement in the area in support of bike lanes. It may make sense to develop a short/mid/long-term plan: in the short term, make use of the wide setback line as a resource for bikes. After doing that, negotiate a right-of-way along the sidewalks' great depth that allows the sidewalks to be expanded into that

setback area to create a bike path separated from the road. The wide expanse of front lawn at the Aetna end of the corridor would allow for a more meandering, park-like experience.



In the very long term, the Park River Watershed offers a great opportunity to develop a greenway/bikeway along the river. This could help resolve the issue of the lack of weekend traffic, having the potential to bring riders to Farmington Avenue on the weekend, landing in a spot right between the two retail nodes discussed earlier. Recreational bikers on weekends and bike commuters during the week are more likely than cars to stop along the way and use the retail.

Branding and Streetscape Improvements

Identity is in large part a naming question. The name "Farmington Avenue" is too long, and doesn't conjure up any meaningful geography. "West End" could mean a lot of different places; it's not a clear indicator of locale. The "Asylum" of "Asylum Hill" has unhappy connotations. The Panel came up with "Midtown" as working name that describes the place between downtown Hartford and West Hartford, and has positive associations (midtown Manhattan, for example).

One way to help establish identity is by creating a definable entrance that gives a sense of having entered a specific area, such as a well-designed archway, consistent with the historical context of the area, that announces “Midtown” in big letters, over each end of Farmington Avenue.



Boston's Chinatown Arch

Once there, people should be able to perceive a consistent architectural theme running through the area: a color scheme, banners, street signage, lampposts, all clearly identifiable as and supporting the overall theme of Midtown.

These small, quick action steps are doable for a relatively low amount of money and without requiring a lengthy approval process. Corporate partners could be recruited to help raise the money, and perhaps within as little as a year, the new identity for the area could begin to emerge. Some quick victories would set the stage for bigger steps, such as creating a Special Services District to fund larger improvements.

6. Next Steps

Improving the Reality and Perceptions of Safety

- **Intensive Management by Landlords:** Some of the properties in the area require considerably more intensive management by the landlords. It's obvious that some of the properties have problems, are not well maintained, that some of the tenants are not the types of persons who should be in their neighborhoods, that landlords are tolerating unacceptable behavior from their tenants. A small percentage of disruptive individuals allowed free range make it hard on the rest of the people in those buildings and in the neighborhood. The landlords need to focus on property management, tenant selection, and lease enforcement.

Getting landlords to do that requires a coordinated effort: the police department contacting landlords whenever one of their tenants is arrested; building inspectors enforcing code requirements as a way not only of protecting tenants but also of getting a message across to landlords; elected officials putting pressure on landlords, telling them something must be done because they're hurting the neighborhood, the city.

Keeping the pressure on is the only way to get landlords to do their part. There is no reason for property with some or all affordable housing to be operated as substandard property; no reason why crime and other disruptions should be allowed. Right now, most of crime is minor: loitering, public disorderliness, drunkenness, some burglaries; but this can easily escalate into more serious crime if not stopped now.

- **Community Policing:** Local community law enforcement personnel seem to be dedicated and knowledgeable. It is critical to maintain a

program of foot patrols, police outreach, and regular community meetings, trying to engage as many area residents as possible so that people are comfortable reporting situations in problem areas to the police.

- **Job Connections, Training, and Support:** There is higher than average unemployment in parts of this corridor. When you have people, particularly young people, who don't proceed directly from school into a job or higher education, problems often occur. With no job, no way to earn money, it's easy to end up hanging around and getting into trouble, because there's nothing else to do.

It is important to emphasize programs that help build the skills that people need to find and maintain jobs; and not just how to do the job, but basic, everyday skills like showing up for work on time. There are people here who are as smart and talented as anyone else, but simply haven't had the background, training, or motivation.

On Forest Street, directly across from Hartford High School, the Connecticut Retail Merchants Association runs programs for youths interested in pursuing retail careers. It would be helpful to develop other opportunities to connect the high school students with nearby Farmington Avenue merchants.

Improving Curb Appeal

Efforts to improve curb appeal communicate to people that someone cares about that neighborhood. The idea of crime prevention through environmental design has started to take hold throughout the country, and members of the Hartford police force have recently undergone training about the approach. As an example, landscaping can be

installed in such a way that, in addition to beautifying an area, it doesn't provide a hiding place for wrongdoers.

If landlords and residents of troubled residential streets can be encouraged to take better care of their front yards, that better care can lead to a different perception of the area. If potential troublemakers think people are paying attention, they may think twice before vandalizing. If something is damaged, fix it right away. Undertake a program to improve storefront facades: improve signage, add landscaping and lighting, and people passing through will start to think Farmington Avenue is becoming a nice place, that positive things are happening here. Working to change perceptions through curb appeal improvements should be high on the list of goals for the corridor.

Activating Empty Storefront/Lots

Shopping mall managers pay a lot of attention to their customers' perceptions. For example, you rarely see an empty storefront in a mall because the manager will put something, anything in the window to distract from the fact that there's no tenant within. Attracting quality retailers to the Farmington Avenue corridor is going to require a long-term effort; what quick and simple things can be done in the meantime, temporarily, to activate the space so that empty stores or empty lots don't feel like a blight on the stores around it? Food trucks that will attract area college students could be parked in front; a weekly farmers' market or a regular Saturday flea market could be held in an empty lot. Realistically, it's going to take a while before there's developer interest in new building there, but generating activity and getting people excited about coming to the area will help pave the way.

Business Improvement/Special Services District

Build partnerships among neighborhood groups, local businesses, and the City, and bring energy to the area through a Business Improvement District (BID) or Special Services District (SSD).