

Cities exist because they bring things together. The better they do this job, the more they flourish. While some people think of Lowell as a suburb of Boston, it feels and functions more like an independent city-state. Much of this is due to its robust downtown core, which contains a surprisingly broad—and almost complete—range of daily activities. Collecting the largest number of mutually-supportive activities into the downtown, and achieving a healthy balance among them, will be a key factor in the city's future success.

Key activities in downtown Lowell include *Residential, Retail, Office, Institutional, Entertainment,* and *Hotel* uses. Each of these merits consideration regarding its current state, its contribution to the downtown, and its potential for growth.

Residential

The reinvention of downtown Lowell as an attractive and rewarding place to live is a true American success story. To a certain extent, it is the continuation of this trend that is likely to be the strongest engine behind the city's continued evolution and economic expansion. The past ten years have been particularly transformative, with more than a doubling of downtown residential units, from 1357 to 3268. Moreover, while only 21% of downtown housing was at market rate in 2000, that number has now reached almost 50%. This evolution reflects national trends towards urbanization, but more importantly manifests the gradual recognition among renters and buyers of the tremendous value that the city offers its residents. With prices well below Boston, downtown Lowell provides an urban lifestyle in a generally lively streetscape among historic buildings and a diverse population.



Lowell's large collection of Mills successfully converted to housing has served as a model for other cities nationwide.

This sort of authentic city experience is now favored by a certain brand of empty nester, who wants to retire or semi-retire into an active, culturally stimulating environment in which the essentials of daily life can be readily attained without driving a car. Downtown Lowell is one of many NORCs (Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities) where a growing number of well-off Americans are choosing to spend their late middle age and beyond.

In addition—and perhaps even more promising—is the attraction that Lowell presents to young adults, the Gen-Y'ers and Millennials, for whom the suburbs hold little appeal. Unlike the previous generations of potential residents, raised on *The Brady Bunch* and *Happy Days*, these young adults were raised on *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, and see urban life as the preferred alternative. They want a city to be gritty, not pretty,

and welcome the diversity and imperfection of a real downtown. The strong artistic and university presence in Lowell only adds to this draw.

While residential construction in Lowell has slowed somewhat due to the national mortgage crisis, there is every reason to believe that the downtown will see increased residential interest as the market warms. Currently, it is remaining fairly active while many other communities have experienced a complete end to housing activity. When construction picks ups again, the City should be prepared to direct developers to key downtown sites with specific programs and incentives where possible.

For a downtown such as Lowell's, with limited office and industrial activity and limited promise as a regional shopping hub, it is likely to be the residential market that spurs its future growth in all sectors. As more and more people choose to live downtown, there will be more demand for downtown retail and office space, independent of how those markets are functioning regionally. In this environment, Lowell's greatest product will not be a good or a service, but Lowell itself, and the experience that it gives to the people who live and visit here.

Downtown is well poised to accept more housing because of the extremely light parking demand that is present in the evenings. In addition to on-street parking availability, which is high, there are typically 4000 empty parking spaces available and unused each night in the City's five downtown parking garages. As will be discussed in the Parking section, these spaces represent money in the bank when it comes to new residential development. While the entirety of the downtown is essentially within a five-minute walk of

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at least one of these five garages, the most practical approach suggests focusing new residential development in the upper stories of buildings in the very heart of the downtown, on Merrimack, Middle, Market, and Central Streets, where a great amount of empty upstairs space exists within a three-minute walk of the Roy and Downes Garages. This location, in addition to being the best served by empty garages, is also the most successfully urban section of the downtown, best able to give residents the quality of life that currently draws people to cities. More residents will also give this area the 24-hour occupancy that keeps them feeling safe at night, and attracts yet more people downtown.

Retail & Dining

There is relatively little retail vacancy downtown, and an eclectic mix of stores. Indeed, Merrimack Street feels a bit schizophrenic in terms of the audience served. Is it a downtown for businesspeople, residents, high schoolers, or college students? The answer is Yes—that eclectic nature is its strength, a strength to be built upon.

While some people hope for a new shopping mall, a Target, a Bass Pro, or some major new influx of retail downtown, it must be accepted that such a development is not currently in the cards. Those retailers choose their locations based on straightforward auto-oriented and large-site criteria that the downtown is not poised to satisfy. Indeed, if there were demand for a major new retail footprint downtown, you would already know about it.

The future of retail downtown is to gently improve the things that are already being done fairly well. These

include:

- Convenience retail for residents, workers, and students who currently frequent the downtown on a regular basis.
- Less expensive cafes and restaurants serving the same.
- Somewhat more expensive restaurants as a destination, both on their own and in conjunction with entertainment downtown, most frequently at the Lowell Auditorium.
- Specialty stores with a unique product and a built-in clientele who will attract business independent of their location
- Funky shops, such as Freshies and Found, selling unusual, browse-able products and antiques.

Improving the performance of retail downtown should not be left to chance. An unorganized collection of independent merchants cannot be expected to compete effectively against the centrally managed subur-



Special events provide a boost to restaurants on Palmer Street.

ban malls and power centers. Happily, a nascent and important effort in joint management is underway through the Retailers Roundtable. Cross promotions and sharing sales data are necessary, and beginning to happen. This effort needs to be expanded to include coordination of the following:

- Store hours, including key evenings, Sundays, and in coordination with entertainment venues. Currently, it is not easy to have drinks after a show, or shop after a restaurant dinner. These are activities that should be commonplace in the downtown.
- Coordination of a specific weeknight (Thursday?) as a late night for students with special discounts.
- Coordination of a specific weeknight (perhaps the same one) as a late night in conjunction with a dependable and well-marketed weekly concert series at St. Anne's Church or another well-located venue. Ideally, this concert series could highlight student groups from UMass Lowell.
- Joint marketing including sales events.
- Joint efforts to attract students with discounts, particularly around food service. A number of downtown retailers currently offer student discounts, but these are not well coordinated or communicated on campus.
- Replacement of the failed U-Card system with a simpler system for students to use their meal plans downtown. UMass Amherst provides a model here, with students able to use a simple debit card rather than requiring an entire alternative currency.
- A joint effort to conduct a void analysis and to attract specific retailers to benefit the mix.

Making More of the Student Market

Younger downtown visitors, most notably high schoolers and college kids, comment on a lack of activities geared towards them. There is a strong desire for entertainment venues such as movie theatres, bowling, and the like that would give students something more productive to do than just hang out and get into trouble. In that vein, many merchants complain of the high schoolers downtown, and feel that, if anything, they are a net negative for business. This may be true for certain upscale shops, and students complain of being eyed suspiciously in many of the places they do frequent. But, whatever the perceptions, a conservative estimate suggests that high school students spend about \$10,000 daily in downtown shops, which would be dearly missed if the school were to be moved. Once again, orienting more shops towards this clientele could prove beneficial.

Incidentally, according to a school committee rule, LHS teachers are not allowed to leave the school building during the day. Whatever this might mean for education, it is bad for downtown. The retailers may wish to mount an effort to change this rule.

College students are another market that retailers have not yet fully tapped. The average UMass Lowell student spends \$47 per week off-campus in Lowell, which translates into close to \$20 million annually. But they spend twice as much outside of city limits. Clearly, if the downtown were able to serve these students better, it would benefit.

Due to the limited culinary offerings on campus, the Middlesex Community College students buy most of their meals in restaurants downtown, contributing

greatly to their success. The leadership at the college should be encouraged to not change this situation with new college-run eateries.

Potential Anchors

A downtown supermarket is something that has been discussed for some time, and one was proposed in the 2001 Downtown Master Plan for the site currently occupied by the medical office building on Arcand Drive. According to recent studies, the downtown may be poised for such a facility to happen fairly soon. In a recent article in *Planning* magazine, “The Supermarket as a Neighborhood Building Block,” authors Mark Hinshaw and Brian Vanneman describe a new generation of urban market, roughly 45,000 square feet in size, which most shoppers access on foot. The population threshold for such a market to thrive is typically about 4000 households, which downtown Lowell is fairly close to achieving. While downtown drivers are well served by the Market Basket in the Acre, and walkers rely upon the Market Street Market, it may soon be time for the City to put some resources behind attracting a mid-size supermarket into the heart of downtown.

A key anchor in many downtowns is the bookstore. Here we have a Barnes and Noble that is subsidized by UMass Lowell and its future is uncertain. In the meantime, it is not run to be competitive, and does not attract the audience a bookstore could. It’s likely departure—and its current condition—make one hope for a different bookstore downtown. Can one be attracted? One proposal, that this site become the entire UML bookstore, does not seem to be the University’s current thinking, but is certainly the best solution for the vitality of downtown. Whatever the

solution, the key to the success of a future bookstore will be the programming that is currently missing—the readings, book clubs, knitting circles, and other events that can be found at a Brookline Booksmith or a Newtonville Books.

There is great interest in a movie theatre downtown, but that is a contracting industry. It is most likely to succeed if run as a non-profit by people who want to make it their life’s work. In the absence of such an angel, this cannot be seen as an easy win. If a movie theatre is to be attracted, its best location to support other businesses would have to be very close to the downtown heart of Market and Central. While the Smith Baker Center has promise, it is too far from this location to have the desired spillover effect, and also has less parking nearby than would be available in the heart of downtown. The Somerville and West Newton cinemas were cited as models worth emulating, as well as Arlington’s Capitol Theatre and the Coolidge Corner Theatre in Brookline.

An excellent business to attract downtown would be Fedex/Kinkos, which is uniquely oriented to serving the laptopers and telecommuters who would consider making Lowell their home. A single Fedex/Kinkos can enable hundreds of businesses within walking distance. The closest one is currently 4 miles away, in Chelmsford.

One More Opportunity

There is very little presence downtown, except for the High School student body and the Brazilian Bakery, of the diversity that Lowell is known for. There are also many Lowellians from the international community who would enjoy a low-risk opportunity in the

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downtown to sell merchandise and foods from their native lands. Having a well-managed international market downtown could contribute a local spin on the Pike's Place phenomenon. Imagine a single large space with a farmer's market feel, independent booths for vendors, places to sit and snack a la Faneuil Hall, and a concatenation of Cambodian, Thai, Indian, African, South American (etc.) booths selling clothing, accessories, art, food (etc.) all under one roof. Key to its success would be a culturally fluent retail expert manager who understands how to create an environment that is attractive to both foreign cultures and American shoppers, who can advise, for example, that served water needs ice cubes and that televisions showing soccer must be kept at a reasonable volume. Establishments like Romeo & Juliet's on South Street could be convinced to open small branches here, and small-scale importers would be given an opportunity to share their wares. Ideal locations for this market would be the Bon Marche if the bookstore leaves or, even better, a rebuilt first floor to the former Sun printing press building connecting Prescott Street to the Lower Locks.

Office

Many people interviewed believe that bringing more office downtown is more crucial than bringing more residential downtown. Unfortunately, the presence of office space downtown is limited by the availability of daytime parking in the garages nearby. This topic will be discussed more thoroughly in the Parking section, but most downtown garages are, or will soon be, largely full during work hours, with the exception of the Roy Garage on Market Street and the Ayotte Garage by the Tsongas Center. The Roy

Garage typically has a limited amount of daytime vacancy that could support more office space nearby in the empty upstairs of existing buildings and on the key "missing tooth" site next to Enterprise Bank. The Ayotte Garage is more promising, as it has its biggest peaks during evening events, and generally maintains a daily surplus of over 500 parking spaces. These circumstances, which will be discussed more completely ahead, suggest that the best location for new offices downtown would be near the Ayotte Street Garage, which conveniently places it near the current office hub at Wannalancit Mills. In this area, the most readily available land surrounds Cox circle, where new buildings would give a much-needed edge to that urban space, and where office workers would enjoy proximity to the Tsongas Center and a short walk to LeLacheur Park.



The Wannalancit Mills contain one of the largest concentrations of office space in Lowell.

Conversations with the office development community suggest that, even in this economy, there is a market for new office space in Lowell. Wannalancit Mills is 96% rented, which puts it 14 basis points above the 495 corridor office market. Some people feel that downtown Lowell could achieve critical mass in office space once it gains perhaps an additional 500,000 square feet, at which point it would transition from being a satellite into "becoming its own sun." (The large number of office uses proposed for the Hamilton Canal District will only contribute to this growth.) The recent construction of the Jeanne D'Arc Credit Union building on Father Morrisette Boulevard is seen as an ideal model for future commercial development in this area.

In the longer term, as investment in transit (to be discussed) makes downtown Lowell less auto-dependent, it is easy to imagine a significant uptick in office space downtown, since tenants will no longer demand the same parking ratio currently in force. As with residential uses, the City will need to adjust its parking requirements at that time to reflect the larger percentage of transit riders.

Institutional

One of Lowell's great strengths has been its collection of downtown institutions, including its High School, UMass Lowell, Middlesex Community College, and the National Park Service. The High School will receive its own chapter ahead.

UMass Lowell

UMass Lowell has reoriented itself to the downtown in recent years, and wisely sees its future as one of even

greater integration into the heart of the city. Continued investment in the East Campus, the acquisition and repositioning of the Doubletree Hotel as the UML Inn and Conference Center, and the purchase of the Tsongas Center and adjacent properties, all offer tremendous benefit to the downtown. The University leadership has implied through its actions that its students will have a more complete academic experience if they are able to spend time in downtown Lowell on a regular basis, and it is encouraging to hear that additional plans are being considered for housing, academic buildings, and light-industrial business spinoffs in the neighborhood between the Tsongas Center and LeLacheur Park, where the University already owns considerable property. These plans are given suggested form in Chapter 11 of this report.

66% of UMass Lowell's 9000 students currently



Both Middlesex Community College and UMass Lowell contribute a student presence to the Lower Locks.

commute to the campus. The leadership's stated goal of a 50% commuting split implies that housing for over 1400 additional students is desired, and there is a strong interest in placing much of it downtown. It is imagined that 400 to 500 of these additional beds would be desired in the short term. They could be located in the East Campus / LeLacheur Park area, nearby the ICC, and/or on sites in between. These locations are expected to be particularly desirable to international students, many of whom do not own cars.

Another ideal location for student housing is in the very heart of downtown, on Merrimack, Middle, Market, and Central Streets, where there is still a large amount of upstairs vacancy. For a State institution to acquire a long-term lease on the upper floors of an existing building is not a simple process, but it is possible. The complexity of this task should not impede an investigation into its potential, as this upstairs activity would contribute badly-needed evening population to this area.

Right now, UMass has no plans to place any more students in this part of the downtown. For UMass students, concerns about safety can limit their willingness to live in this area or spend time there. Interestingly, the downtown is statistically the safest of the UML campuses. Perception always lags behind reality, but this misconception will be overcome more quickly as street-lighting and wayfinding are improved, as will be discussed ahead.

In addition to student housing, UML has two other types of buildings that it may wish to locate in the downtown: academic halls and, indirectly, spin-off businesses like the light-industrial ones that can

already be found on Hall Street. There are places for both of these downtown, and they are all of value in terms of the improved street edges and pedestrian activity that they can provide if designed properly. However, only the latter type allows a developed site to contribute revenue to the Lowell tax rolls, and so it is hoped that UML will work with the City to encourage many of these spinoff businesses to locate in Lowell—especially downtown Lowell—rather than elsewhere.

Middlesex Community College

Middlesex Community College is also a powerful presence in Lowell, with over 6000 students and 400 employees located within the downtown area. While these are almost entirely commuters, they still make great use of the downtown.

Most MCC students drive to Lowell and park in one of the city garages for free, as their fees are paid by the College. While one does not wish to add burdens to this population, that free parking creates a false economy that encourages driving over other transport modes. To price student parking, even modestly, would encourage some students to carpool and take transit instead. Such a protocol makes the most sense in the context of improved transit service, and should certainly be instituted in conjunction with the construction of the contemplated streetcar line.

While no-one complains of MCC's presence downtown, some merchants on Middle Street feel that the school's acquisition of adjacent properties has changed the nature of that street away from retail use, and that it no longer has the critical mass of stores to attract shoppers. To reverse this trend, future

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renovations of retail buildings for academic use should be sure to contain leasable ground-floor retail along the street edge, with a limited area dedicated to student access.

MCC's expansion needs include creating another major academic building, and providing nearby housing for perhaps 100 students. These uses should be located in the downtown and, as is the leadership's habit, would be best placed in empty existing buildings, with the caveat that no more street-front retail should be lost in the bargain.

MCC's current building locations have created a well-worn student path from the Lower Locks through the tunnel next to Tutto Bene, dangerously across Prescott and Central Streets, and down Middle Street. This path needs to be reinforced and made safer, with improvements to the tunnel and enhancement of the Prescott and Central Street crossings, as will be described ahead.

Also to be discussed ahead, the adjacency across East Merrimack Street of the MCC's two main buildings provides a great opportunity to create a heretofore missing campus heart, which could be further enhanced by the redevelopment of the currently underutilized "Cybercafé" building located just to the east across the Concord River.

National Park Service

It is not possible to adequately describe the tremendous boon that the National Park Service has been to the city of Lowell, in terms of investment, rehabilitation, tourism, and its stewardship of the city's heritage. Approximately 800,000 people attend

Park activities every year. For many of them, it is the National Park that introduces them to Lowell, initiating a lifelong relationship with the city. The presence of National Park Service rangers in the downtown contributes a feeling of safety and care for the public realm. The schoolchildren who regularly make field trips to the NPS visitor center and museum add considerable vitality to the downtown, and the historic trolley constitutes the heart of what could be an expanded modern streetcar system. The Park Service has been a transformative partner, and that partnership deserves continual recognition.



The National Park Service has played a transformative role in the downtown.

The Park Service could play an expanded role if arrangements were made with other local institutions to make an NPS downtown tour a more automatic aspect of arrival to the city. For example, every MCC and Lowell High School student could be required, as a part of campus orientation, to take such a tour—as

is currently practiced by UMass Lowell, to the tune of almost 2000 students each year. With a limited investment, canal tours could be made more common and popular, as has been accomplished by the Chicago Architectural Foundation in its city. While NPS has a restricted budget to promote such events, other city entities could help shoulder that cost, as they would all benefit from the economic spinoff.

As will be discussed ahead, the NPS ownership of certain key sites can provide procedural impediments to their redevelopment, for example the empty lot between Merrimack and Middle Streets. While these impediments can slow the evolution of these sites, they should not discourage such efforts. As long as there is collective will among the City, the Park Service, and the leading development entity, a series of steps can be identified for achieving the desired ends, and those steps can be initiated immediately.

As the chief steward of many key sites in the city, NPS has been well served by its sensible approach to historic preservation. It has recognized the tremendous asset which the old mill buildings and canals represent, and that damage to that asset weakens the viability of the Park and the appeal of the city. But it has allowed, and indeed benefited from, certain important changes to these structures, such as the opening up of the archways into the Market Street Mills. In any such transformation of a historic building or landscape, a delicate balance must be forged between communicating an understanding of a site's original design and adapting that design to serve modern needs, or even transforming it into something more compelling. Nowhere is the need for that balance more evident than in the Lower Locks, where the historic condition of the canal perimeter limits the potential of that site

as the spectacular urban center that it could become. This challenge will be discussed further in Chapter 13.

Entertainment

Lowell is fortunate to possess a number of sports and performance venues that bring people regularly into the downtown, and provide downtown workers and residents with entertainment within easy reach. These include the following:

The Lowell Memorial Auditorium is booked more than 250 nights each year, and hosts the Merrimack Repertory Theatre, the largest professional theatre company between Boston and Canada. It is well located just adjacent to the heart of downtown, yet does not generate as much dinner or shopping business as it could, due in part to its feeling of disconnection from West Merrimack Street.

The Paul E. Tsongas Center is a great city asset that does yet benefit the downtown as much as it could. Its perceptual distance from the heart of the downtown is much greater than its actual distance, due to the non-pedestrian quality of French Street, Arcand Drive and Cox Circle. Very few people walk to events there, or consider pairing such an event with a dinner downtown, and cars leaving the facility are rushed out of town along a path that makes a downtown detour unlikely, thanks in part to the one-way direction of Merrimack Street. In addition, the facility's 6200-seat capacity is rarely fully used, with fewer than one large event per month. It is hoped that the new ownership of this facility by UMass might provide the sort of stewardship necessary to encourage more active booking of this venue. As it is put to better use, there will be even greater reason to improve

its pedestrian and vehicular connections to the downtown. Finally, backups exiting the Ayotte Garage after large events suggest a possible reconfiguration of that parking structure, as will be discussed ahead.

One real success story in the city has been LeLacheur



While a real community asset, the Tsongas Center feels disconnected from the heart of downtown.

Park, where the Lowell Spinners boast some of the best attendance in minor league baseball, having sold out every home game for a decade. Unfortunately, as one person put it, “5000 people go to see the Spinners 40 times a year, and none of them set foot in downtown.” This situation raises two separate challenges that are addressed in this plan: how to turn the area of the ballpark into a more successful neighborhood, so that people attending games have more to do and more ways to spend money there; and how to better connect that neighborhood to downtown, both via transit and through a revitalized neighborhood around the Tsongas Arena.

Finally, an impressive collection of events hosted by the National Park Service are notable for the way they turn the city itself into a performing arts venue. The Summer Music Series in Boarding House Park and the justifiably famous Lowell Folk Festival, by wisely integrating themselves into the downtown, contribute significantly to its vitality. Some of the proposals in this Plan, such as the redesign of JFK Plaza, will necessarily displace some performance venues, which will need to be creatively relocated.

Hotel

The absence of a hotel in a downtown as appealing as Lowell's is one of the city's most striking incongruities. Rarely has a downtown with such character, entertainment venues, and tourist amenities lacked a hotel of significant size, and seems truly bizarre that a business visitor with meetings downtown would have to rent a room out by the highway, as the planning team did. An unscientific assessment of Lowell's size and assets suggests that the downtown should be able to support one mid-market hotel of significant size, and one smaller luxury boutique hotel for upscale tourists and business guests.

It is generally accepted that the Doubletree Hotel that has become UML's Inn & Conference Center was continually unsuccessful because of the way it was managed, not because of the non-viability of a hotel in that location. Its failure should not be seen as an indication of poor demand.

The ICC is being renovated to include a small “boutique hotel” of 40 guest rooms, which are greatly needed downtown. However, because it is located within a charmless 1980s building—and one that

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typically operates as a student housing facility—it is not likely to attract many luxury travelers or 4-star businesspeople. It is also too small to hold the large groups of people that come to town seeking lower price accommodations in association with events at the Lowell Auditorium. These rooms will fill a pressing temporary need, and will be particularly useful to people who come to Lowell on UMas business. In the long term, once the downtown is properly served with hotel rooms, these rooms can be converted back to other uses, as will be discussed in the Lower Locks proposal ahead.

A mid-market downtown hotel would be of tremendous use to patrons of the Lowell Auditorium, as well as most of its acts. The Auditorium has lost some events recently for lack of a hotel, such as a ballroom dancing weekend that books 50 rooms per night. This year, the Auditorium was able to hold on to the large



Missing in Lowell: an urban-style downtown hotel of any scale.

Order of the Eastern Star convention—more than 1000 room nights—by arranging a bus to hotels in Tewksbury. Such a hotel in downtown Lowell would also serve visitors to events at the Tsongas Center.

Several sites in the downtown seem ready for a luxury boutique hotel. The empty lot at the corner of Market and Shattuck, across the street from the National Park Service Visitors' Center, seems to be an ideal location, and a hotel has indeed been recently proposed for that site. The Bon Marche building is also an excellent site for a 4-star hotel, with La Boniche as its lobby restaurant. An even more promising location may be the lot at the corner of Central and Warren, which currently holds the Lowell Hair Academy. The L-shaped empty lot surrounding the Hair Academy building contains some Lower Locks frontage, which would provide a real amenity to hotel guests. The ideal hotel here would also incorporate the existing building itself, as will be discussed ahead in Chapter 13.