

# Recommended Mid-term Interventions 10

The four proposed interventions that follow are all imagined as being accomplished in mid-term. In planning vocabulary, “mid-term” generally refers to five to ten years. This time frame seems appropriate because, while these projects do not have many perceived impediments, they also lack immediate momentum. While many key players would like to see them happen, it will likely be a number of years before economic conditions and other motivating factors cause these proposals to excite concerted action.

That said, a number of these interventions could be initiated immediately if met with significant public and private support. The four mid-term interventions are:

1. Cox Circle
2. LeLacheur House
3. Boarding House Park Edge
4. ICC Square



## 10.1 Cox Circle

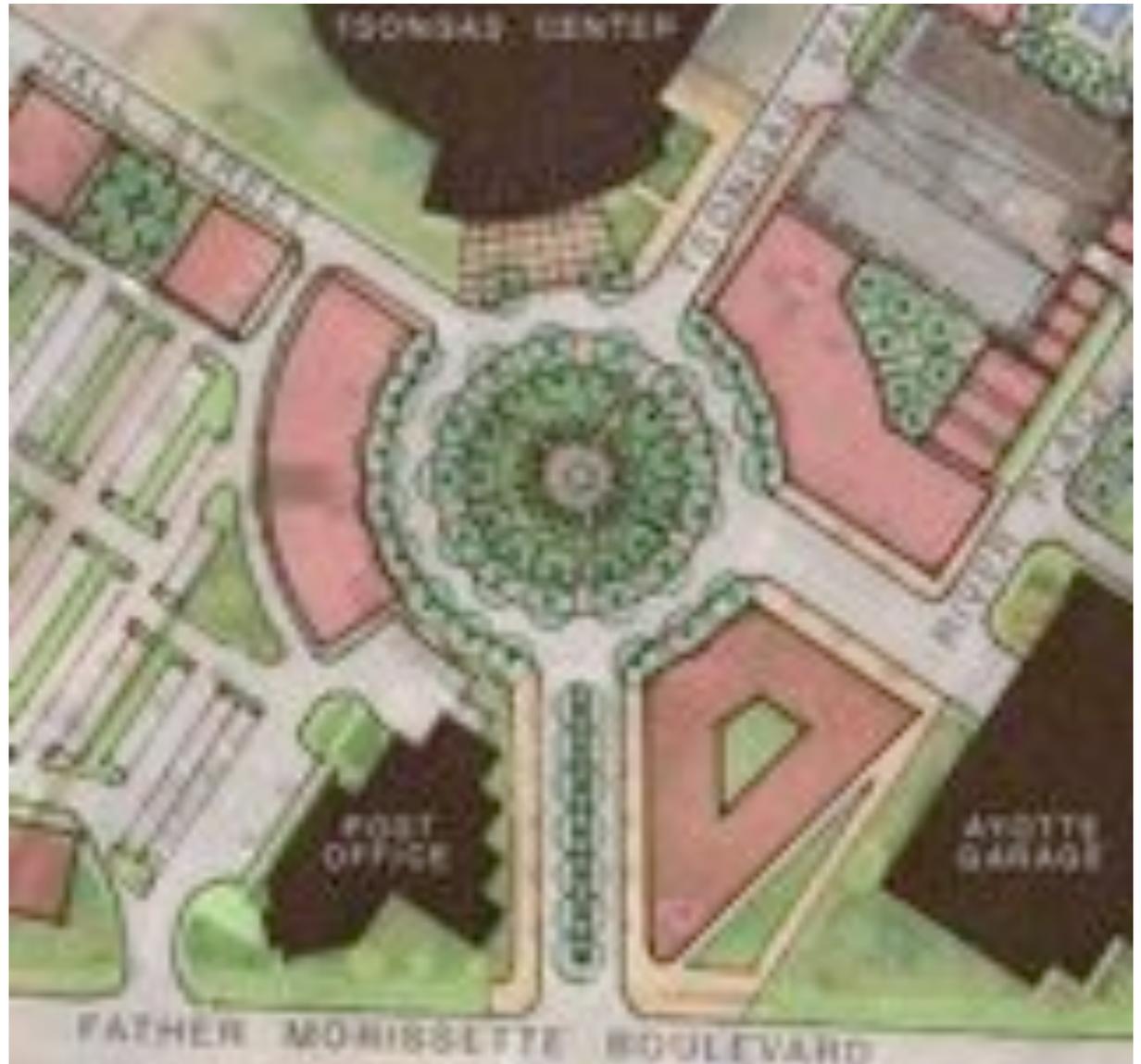


*Cox Circle currently lacks walkable geometrics, usable landscape, and enfringing structures.*

One definition of good city planning is the creation of scenarios in which a small amount of public investment leads to a large amount of private investment. By that definition, it is difficult to imagine a site in Lowell that is better poised to take advantage of good city planning than Cox Circle.

Simply put, Cox Circle is a space that is ready to become a place. Standing in the way of that transformation are three things: the circle's current high-speed geometrics, its decorative but useless landscape treatment, and its lack of surrounding built edges. The first two of these can be easily remedied with a limited amount of public investment. These changes, coupled with a slight re-jiggering of the City's parking obligations, can overcome the third challenge in short order.

The first step to transforming Cox Circle is to right-size its two travel lanes down to a standard high-flow width of 12' rather than their current inexplicable



*The proposed plan narrows an oversized roadway and creates a public place shaped by new buildings.*

20'. At this width, the circle will still comfortably handle its traffic, including semis. This narrowing enlarges the center circle to include a 16' perimeter sidewalk planted with trees on both flanks. A third ring of trees would then be planted surrounding the circle's paved center, which would hold a dramatic fountain of appropriate civic character. Grass or groundcover would separate the inner and outer paved areas, crossed by radial walks mapping pedestrian desire-lines across the site.

These changes would turn the circle into a real Circle, like DuPont Circle in Washington DC, which has become a much beloved public gathering space. This amenity would lend value to the surrounding real estate, and help to incentivize the vertical development of the three key sites surrounding it. These sites are as follows:

- The Police Lot northeast of the Circle, as already discussed in point 9.2, is poised to be redeveloped with a significant building holding the sidewalk edge. Whether a hotel or some other use, this building has the opportunity to create a prominent curved face that gives shape, interest, and activity to this new public space.
- The west flank of the circle is bounded by an area that is part Post Office parking lot and part City parking lot, but needs to become a second building site in order to properly shape the street edge. This can be accomplished by a reorganization and rationalization of the two lots, one that would ideally consolidate them also with the surface lots further west, to improve efficiencies all around. In this

reorganization, the Post Office would need to end up with its original number of spaces, requiring a limited contribution from the city lot.

- Finally, the City lot to the southeast of the circle is already ideally suited to become a building site, one that would complete the circle and hide it from the uninteresting façade of the Ayotte Garage. The plan above shows this new building occupying the entirety of its site. An alternative would be to run its east wall parallel to the garage to enlarge that view corridor; each solution has its advantages. This site is currently used by the High School for band practice and informal athletics, important activities that would unfortunately have to be displaced until a better site can be designated. As discussed in Chapter 12, these activities could eventually be located on the campus of a renovated downtown High School.

What activities are best placed in the two above buildings is open to discussion, but a number of important factors all point to office uses. These include the following:

- Unlike all of the other City parking facilities, the Ayotte Garage experiences its greatest spikes in use during certain evenings, when events fill the Tsongas Center. On non-event days, it is typically more crowded during office hours than overnight, but rare is the time when 200 – 300 empty spaces are not readily available. These spaces uniquely position Cox Circle as perhaps the only location in

downtown Lowell that is poised to absorb major office development without building expensive new parking decks.

- Adjacent to this site is the Wannalancit Mills and the new Jeanne D'Arc Credit Union, which already establish this neighborhood as one of the largest office sectors in Lowell. Adding yet more office to this area will help it to achieve critical mass as a regional office destination.
- The amenities of the adjacent Tsongas Center and the nearby LeLacheur Park are a plus for potential office tenants, whose employees can enjoy after-work recreation without moving their cars.

Finally, the proposed path of the new streetcar down adjacent Father Morrisette Boulevard will connect this neighborhood conveniently to the Gallagher Intermodal Center, to the benefit of rail commuters.

Surrounded by a large number of office tenants, the redesigned Cox Circle would become an even more valued amenity, particularly as a place to visit during lunch and breaks. Important to the success of this neighborhood would be the location of at least one café/restaurant/bar establishment on the ground floor of a flanking building. If this occurs within a new hotel, it must be sure to open onto the street, not just the hotel lobby.

Several conditions must be met if this comprehensive proposal for Cox Circle is to move forward. First, the city must renegotiate its current contract

## Cox Circle



*Offices with potential ground-floor commercial could take advantage of a newly amenitized location.*

that grants Wannalancit Mills an easement to 750 spaces in the Ayotte Garage. Wannalancit has not made use of these spaces, and has no plans to do so, but the obligation remains. Fortunately, the owners of Wannalancit have expressed an interest in participating in development around Cox circle, and are well qualified to do so, thus a mutually agreeable resolution does not seem out of reach.

Second, the greatest perceived impediment to a major increase in office space in this area is traffic along the Arcand-Dutton-Thorndike axis out of town at rush hour. One major contributor to this traffic is a lack of signal synchronization, so the desire to develop Cox circle is one more reason why that long-recommended effort should be undertaken soon.

Finally, it is worth noting that there is some resistance to development as this location due to the long waits experienced by people exiting the Ayotte Garage after large events at the Tsongas Center. It has been confirmed that the worst waits are due not to the design of the circle, but to the limited capacity of the Ayotte Garage exit. A cursory investigation of the Garage suggests that there exists the opportunity to punch a secondary exit point at its eastern end, allowing cars to access Father Morrisette Boulevard directly. This strategy is recommended for further study.



## 10.2 LeLacheur House



*Across Aiken Street from LeLacheur Park is a large vacant property owned by UMass Lowell.*

One of the most attractive anchors in the downtown is LeLacheur Park, which is close enough to the historic center to invite many pedestrian attendees to its forty annual baseball games, but which sits in a neighborhood of limited walkability. As indicated in the Urban Frontage Analysis, a number of improvements along Hall and Perkins Streets are needed if people are going to make the choice to walk there. One such improvement has the opportunity of happening fairly quickly, and that is the construction of a new UMass building on the site across Aiken Street from the ball field.

The University has previously proposed placing such a building on this sadly empty site, but was opposed by a few neighbors and delayed the process. The larger goals of a healthy city must prevail if positive growth is to occur, and a large building on this corner would



*New student housing sits atop parking and surrounds rear courtyards.*

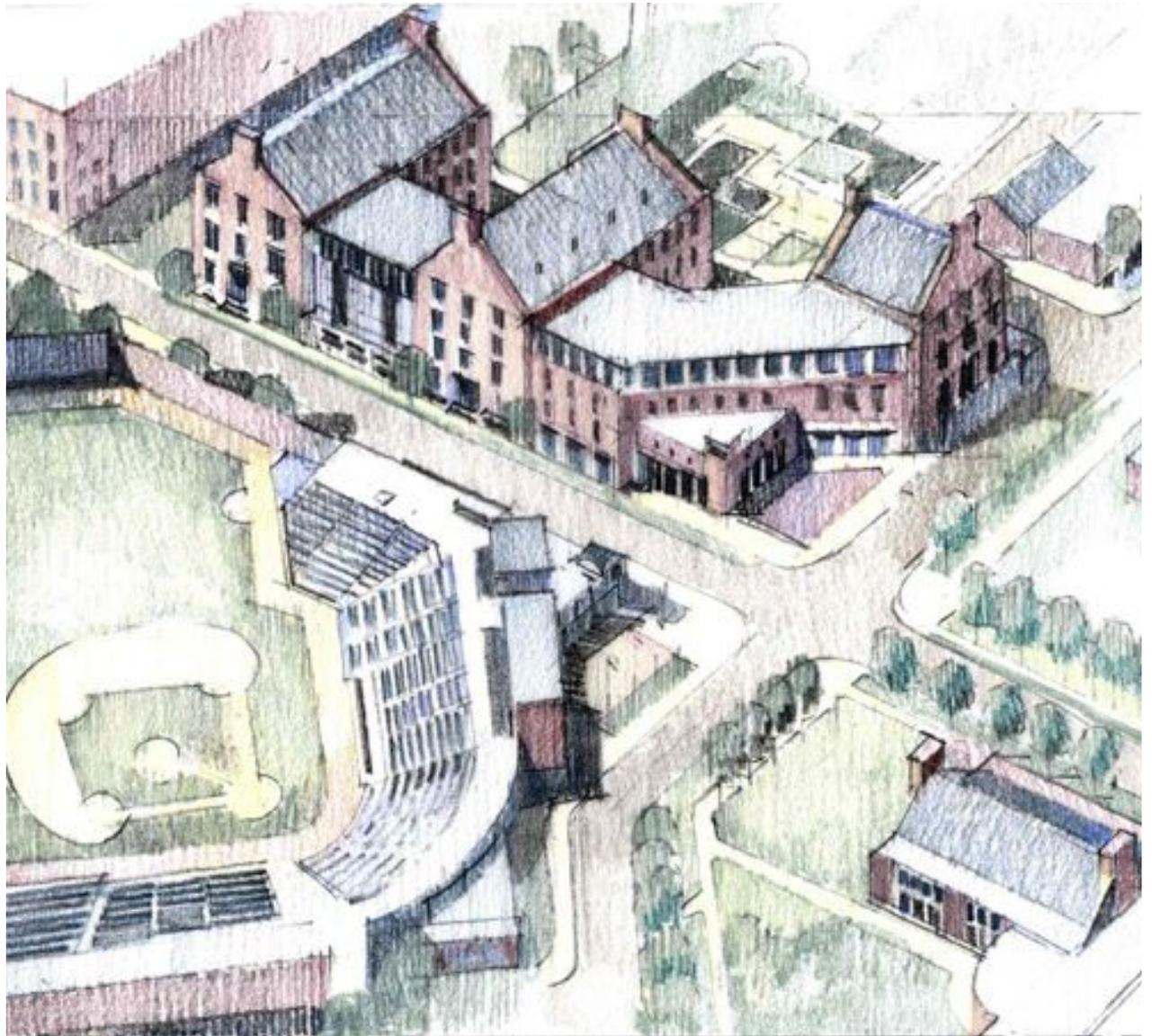
add tremendously to the development of this neighborhood.

The property benefits from a significant grade differential, such that a new street-level building can sit atop at least one full story of parking. That allows

## LeLacheur House

for a structure to fill its site, with wings embracing courtyards. The proposed building takes a cue from the ball field, and steps back from the corner of Aiken and Perkins with a 45-degree chamfer, creating a mirroring plaza. This is an excellent location for a small amount of retail space, ideally a corner store and café, which would give a gathering place to a neighborhood that lacks a social center. One could also imagine a bar/restaurant here, to serve hungry baseball fans. The principal use of this building, within limits, is fairly unimportant, as there is a range of activities that could successfully be placed on the site, including student housing, office/administration, and academic/research space.

When viewed from Aiken Street—a popular home-ward commute—this new building and LeLacheur Park would form a symmetrical pair, giving a sense of place to this transitional neighborhood. Until a suitable donor is found, we recommend calling it LeLacheur House.



*The new building mirrors the geometry of the ballpark with a front plaza and corner shop.*

## 10.3 Boarding House Park Edge



*The Boott Mills parking lot on John Street presents a weak edge to both Boarding House Park and French Street.*

One of the most attractive new public spaces in any American city is Boarding House Park, which places a lovely stepped landscape down to a large vine-covered bandstand against the backdrop of the historic Boott Mills. In addition to serving as a gateway to the Park Service's Boott Cotton Mills Museum, this park hosts world class concerts, including a solidly A-list summer music series.

A lovingly restored set of rowhouses gives a strong western edge to the park, but its eastern border is held by a parking lot that, despite containing some excellent trees, fails to shape or give activity to this important public space. This parking lot is used by office workers and residents at the restored Boott Mills lofts, but sits directly across French Street from the City's Downes Garage, which was ostensibly built so that surface parking lots could be put to



*This plan places rowhouses with rear gardens in the west half of the parking lot.*

other uses.

Clearly, the best use of this site would be to develop it entirely into housing, taking advantage of the Garage's massive overnight vacancy. However, owners

of the Boott Mills office facility believe that some surface parking must be preserved in this location to serve the CEOs of businesses leasing at the Mills. Since a compromise is more likely to be built quickly, this plan presents a solution in which only half

of the parking lot is put to more productive use, as rowhouses mirroring the renovated block across the park. It is easy to see in the plan below how these houses could be repeated facing east to take advantage of the entire block, once the landowner becomes convinced of the relative value of houses over parking. Interestingly, a similar concept for this site was proposed as early as the City's Preservation Plan of 1980.

Rowhouses have been suggested for this site for two reasons, first out of respect for the historic rowhouses across the park, and second in recognition of the need for a greater variety of housing product in downtown Lowell. Not every buyer wants a loft condominium, and rowhouses imply a slightly higher price point that is in keeping with Lowell's rising downtown demographics.

A few details of the plan bear discussion. The rowhouses are set behind the existing double-row of trees against Lower John Street, giving them a deep front public yard. Each rowhouse has a walled garden against the rear parking lot, in which overnight spaces can be reserved for their use. The southernmost rowhouse places its stoop and front door against French Street, lending character to that sidewalk, and a low wall (ideally 4' – 5' tall) limits the parking lot's exposure to French Street.

While a compromise solution, this scheme fully completes Boarding House Park. It also improves the walkability of a key stretch of French Street, so that residents and visitors are more likely to make the short stroll to and from Kerouac Commemorative Park, only one block east. Reintroduced parallel parking along this curb, as described in Chapter



*Rowhouses reflect the renovation across the park. An end-unit stoop and a low wall provide a better edge to French Street.*

3, will make that walk even more likely.

Much effort in recent years has gone into encouraging the redevelopment of vacant portions of the Boot Mills to the west of this site. That property is also important, especially to the success of the Riverwalk, which would benefit from increased

supervision along its edge. However, the construction of buildings in this more central, prominent location will have an even more visible and immediate impact on the character of downtown.

## 10.4 ICC Square



*The auto-zone east of Central.*

A powerful lesson in the history of urban design can be found in the neighborhood east of Central Street, where postwar auto-centric planning has caused Lowell's walkable downtown core to end abruptly. Streets become wider, one-way, and more swoopy, with useless wish-bone medians that introduce a highway vocabulary that encourages speeding. Buildings like the Butler Bank float in the middle of their parking lots, and the Inn and Conference Center sits behind its entrance drive with all the leafy convenience of a highway Marriott.

This area will remain suburban in nature well into the future. However, one significant opportunity exists to bring improved walkability to the key anchor of the ICC, while creating a more dignified setting for the former Saint Paul's United Methodist Church, which is being renovated to better house the United Teen Equality Center (UTEC). This proposal takes advantage of



*A new UMass building atop parking enfronts lower-speed street geometrics and a renovated green.*

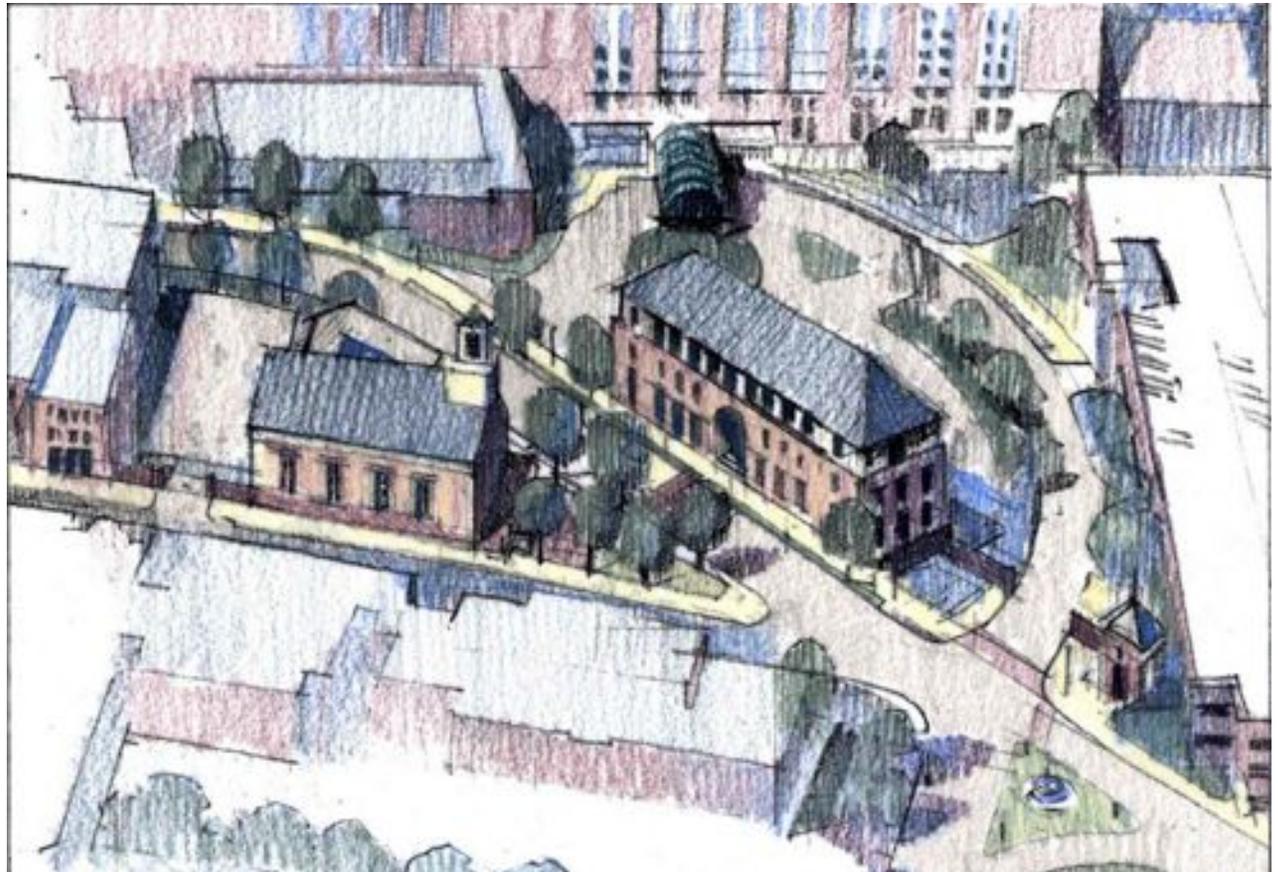
the excellent walkability of Hurd Street, and Chapter 3's plans to two-way Hurd and Warren, in order to create a complete walkable loop that embraces the Church and its front green.



*The ICC parking lot provides a weak edge to Warren Street and the church's triangular green.*

An intervention is made easy in this area thanks to the sunken parking lot of the ICC, which is properly located to hold a new sidewalk-edge building without losing any of its existing capacity. A new structure so located will sit above the parking lot—from which it can be serviced—and give proper shape to the churchyard. A reconfigured street corner—as described in Chapter 3—will introduce slower speeds and parallel parking to protect the northern sidewalk.

While there is no pressing reason for this proposal to be executed, it is included in this mid-term chapter due to its relative ease and low expense. If UMass can identify a need for a new building, then it makes sense



*Limited reconstruction turns an automobile-era zone back into a walkable environment.*

for the City to make the public roadway investment—indeed, the two investments are wisest in concert. One potential use for the new building would be to move the University's new small Inn out of the existing ICC building, where it would benefit from no longer being considered part of a student housing complex.

In conjunction with this effort, perhaps UTEC would

like to donate the churchyard to UMass Lowell, in exchange for an agreement to beautify and maintain it. The City can play a role in expediting such a transaction. It is worth noting that, as the District Court vacates its building to the south side of Hurd Street (planned for 2016) improvements to this neighborhood will increase the likelihood of reuse of that historic structure.

