

## An Approach to Success

This Plan document does not contain a thorough implementation discussion. This point requires emphasis, because it is precisely such a discussion which is the essential next step in its becoming a reality. While implementation is not a part of this project's Scope of Work, this brief chapter attempts to lay a groundwork on which to base that effort.

## Official Process

While this plan ultimately can only be accomplished with the enthusiastic participation of the private sector, it requires some very specific governmental actions if it is to begin to shape the future of the downtown. It is recommended that the Lowell City Council follow a three-step process in its adoption of the Plan:

### 1. Endorse the Plan in Concept.

This Plan contains many specific City investments as well as the effective rezoning of properties. Without specifically approving any of those financial or legal commitments, the City Council's general endorsement of the Plan document demonstrates a commitment to the principles and approach present in the plan, and further requires that the plan be consulted in conjunction with any city investment or zoning decision that relates to its recommendations.

For example, if an already-budgeted street improvement were located within the planning area, the Public Works department would be asked to consult the plan and either follow its recommendations or provide compelling arguments

to the contrary. Similarly, any owner bringing private property before the City Council for rezoning—if that property is discussed in the Plan—would be asked to follow the Plan or amply justify why not. Additionally, any property owner considering as-of-right construction on a Plan subject property would be asked to meet with the Division of Planning and Development to review and consider the Plan's recommendations for that site.

None of these requirements have the force of law, but all of them ensure that the Plan is given the opportunity to influence all construction that falls under its purview. Finally, endorsing the Plan in Concept initiates the effort to adopt the Plan in the Specific.

### 2. Adopt the Plan in the Specific.

This Plan will not have the desired impact unless it has the force of law. Different aspects of the Plan can be made legal in different ways. Proposed street reconfigurations should be specifically approved and budgeted. Proposed building interventions—to the degree that they are not in accordance with current zoning requirements—should be pre-approved as necessary through an optional zoning overlay, or made mandatory as replacement form-based code, potentially on a site-by-site basis.

Other recommendations, for example the JFK Plaza site design, should be approved preliminary in anticipation of a future need for expansion. Finally, the key interventions at the High School and the Lower Locks—and perhaps others—need to be broken apart from the plan and addressed

individually (while not delayed), due to their size, importance, and expense. In all cases, the proper strategy would be to approve all of the Plan's favored proposals so that no further action was required by Council to advance them in the future.

The first task to be accomplished in this regard, probably by the Division of Planning and Development, is to sort the Plan's many dozens of recommendations into the proper categories. The first category would include all of the recommendations that are determined to be quickly approvable by City Council, to be processed immediately in an omnibus measure. The second category would include all recommendations that warrant greater debate, to be taken up quickly, but not in such a way as to delay the first-phase recommendations. Debate would limit these recommendations to the point where they can eventually be approved in a second omnibus measure. Finally, larger issues like the Lower Locks would receive their own scrutiny and debate, and presented to Council for approval if and when their momentum dictates.

A useful document in this regard is the *Lowell Downtown Evolution Plan Executive Summary*, which presents all of the significant Plan recommendations in a more abbreviated form.

### 3. Create a Construction Schedule and Budget

For the projects that require City investment, the City Council will need to approve a schedule and a budget. Some of these proposals, like the reconfiguration of the one-ways, should be packaged then targeted for specific fundraising

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efforts. Others, like the improvement of Cox Circle, seem ideally suited for instruments such as District Improvement Financing. Clearly, recommendations of this Plan's magnitude will have to be completed in stages over a number of years, but the schedule for their funding should be established in the short term.

In addition to these three steps at the Municipal level, this Plan recommends naming a private non-profit organization that is focused almost exclusively on its implementation. Rather than just a document, the *Lowell Downtown Evolution Plan* needs to become an entity. This effort needs its own website, its own phone line, and—most importantly—its own director. There is simply no substitute for having a dedicated person who wakes up every morning and asks “What can I do today to implement this plan?”

This was the approach adopted by Plan Baton Rouge, a 1999 effort similar to this one, that by 2009 had accomplished fully 83 of its 104 “strategic actions” in transforming the heart of that city. These actions included a new hotel, planetarium, art museum, and farmers’ market. Such an organization need not be costly to run, but it must be focused, high-profile, and pro-active.

Conveniently, in Lowell, we do not have to look far, as there already exists a non-profit that is properly named and positioned to play this role. At the beginning of this process, it was commented that the Lowell Plan needed a plan. Now, with that organization’s continued indulgence, it has one.

## Some Final Thoughts

Lowell is remarkable because people stay here. Most subjects interviewed in this study had been born in Lowell, and the majority of them were third-generation Lowellians or more. This planning team has never before worked in a place with such a high



*Morning on the Industrial Canyon*

percentage of family retention. Indeed, it wasn’t until arriving in Lowell that we first heard the term “blow-ins,” let alone its modification “Blowellians.”

This continuity of population has its advantages and its disadvantages. The advantages, which dominate, include a powerful culture of stewardship, reinvestment, and philanthropy. People take better care of places where they plan to stay, and in Lowell that occurs in spades. The principal disadvantage is that the city’s long institutional memory includes some pretty bad experiences, and many Lowellians’ impression of Lowell remains the old Lowell of the

seventies and eighties, despite a preponderance of evidence to the contrary. Indeed, there exists a surprising disconnect between the quality of the downtown and locals’ opinion of it. Of course, some of the most critical haven’t been downtown in years.

These critics, some of whom enjoy responding anonymously and bitterly to news articles about downtown, would benefit from more interaction with the tourists who know only the Lowell of today, or the many young families and empty nesters who are choosing to make downtown their home. For them, and for this planning team, Lowell provides most of the advantages of a Boston or Cambridge, at a fraction of the price. The more one travels the United States and experiences its gradual transformation into a repetitive collection of nondescript suburban auto-centric zones, the more precious Lowell becomes. With its handsome landscape of mills, main streets, rivers, and canals, the city has already managed to gracefully outlive its original reason for being. Taking further advantage of these assets and others—as outlined in this Plan—will give the city an even greater promise as we enter an era that increasingly values those qualities that make Lowell exceptional.