

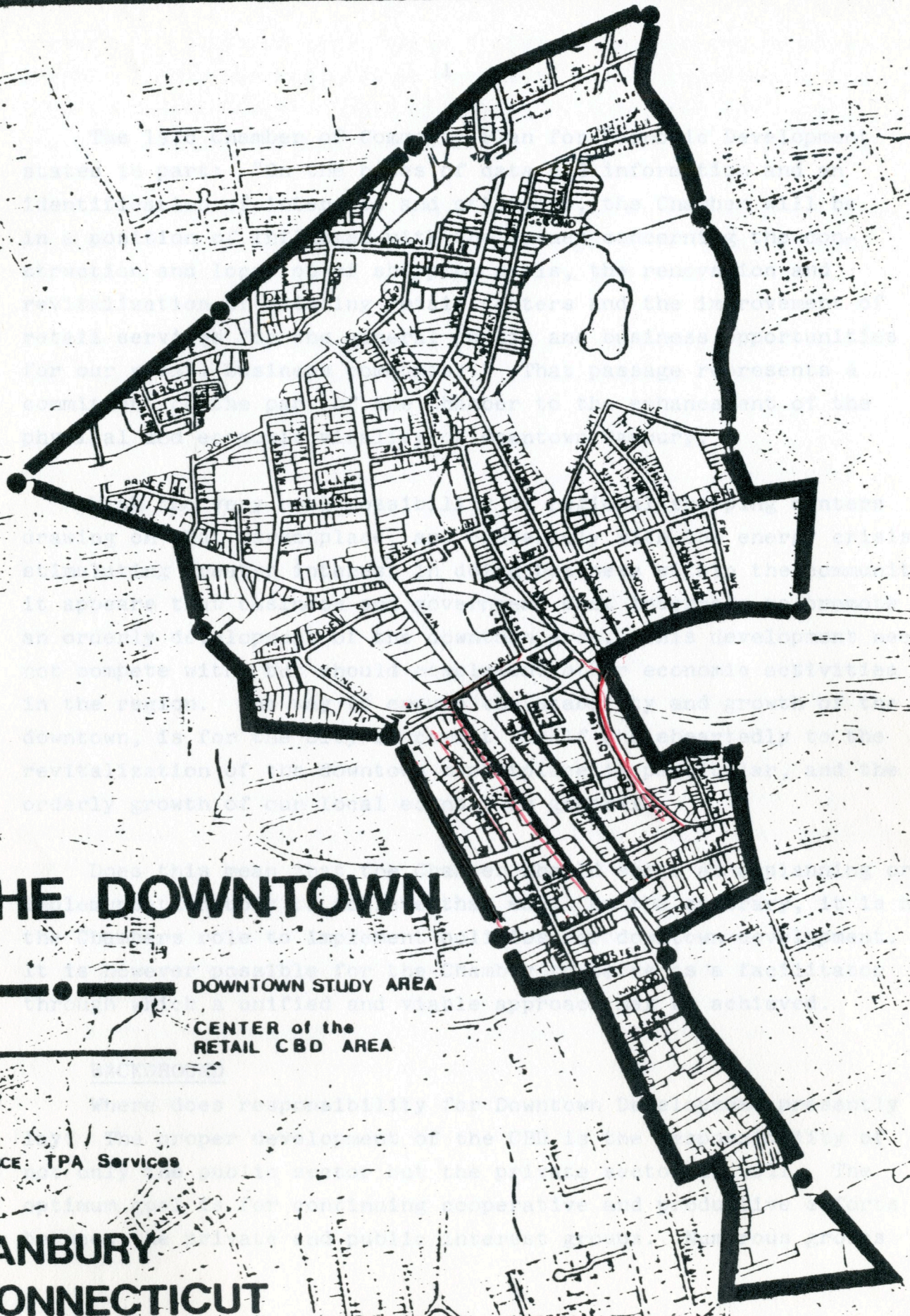
APPROACH TO  
DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION

BY  
GREATER DANBURY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

"It is clear...that the CBD is no longer serving Danbury as its only major retail center. It is, however, the urban center of the Community and an important component in both Danbury's and the region's economy."

-Plan of Development, City of Danbury, 1978

DANBURY  
CONNECTICUT



# THE DOWNTOWN

**————●————** DOWNTOWN STUDY AREA  
**————** CENTER of the RETAIL CBD AREA

SOURCE: TPA Services

## DANBURY CONNECTICUT

The 1978 Chamber of Commerce Plan for Economic Development states in part: "On the bases of data and information and an identification of interests and attitudes, the Chamber will be in a position of influence with the issues concerning the construction and location of shopping malls, the renovation and revitalization of existing retail centers and the improvement of retail services for the general public and business opportunities for our retail business community." That passage represents a commitment on the part of the Chamber to the enhancement of the physical and economic vitality of downtown Danbury.

With the very real possibility of regional shopping centers drawing on that marketplace, and conversely with the energy crisis stimulating greater interest in doing business within the community, it appears that business and government must intercede to promote an orderly development of the downtown area. This development need not compete with, but should complement other economic activities in the region. One way to ensure the stability and growth of the downtown, is for the City to commit itself wholeheartedly to the revitalization of the downtown marketplace in particular, and the orderly growth of our local economy in general.

Does this mean that the Chamber should serve as a planning or implementation body to achieve that end? On the contrary, it is not the Chambers role to implement policies for downtown development. It is however possible for the Chamber to serve as a facilitator through which a unified and viable approach may be achieved.

#### BACKGROUND

Where does responsibility for Downtown Development presently lay? The proper development of the CBD is the responsibility of not only the public sector but the private sector as well. The optimum goal is for continuing cooperative and productive efforts between the private and public interest groups. Numerous groups

throughout the years have formed to try to improve the downtown. Groups of downtown businessmen have long been interested in the future of Main Street. However, those efforts, for one reason or another were not entirely successful.

Downtown development depends heavily on an on-going dialogue between business and government, and neither have thus far been able to convert the dialogue into a commitment.

Aside from providing the actual physical setting and mechanical means of locating business in downtown Danbury, the City has not in the past played an active role in coordinating this very important ingredient of Danbury's future. Likewise, the private sector has not been sufficiently organized to deal effectively with local government on downtown issues.

#### THE PLANNING FUNCTION OF THE CITY OF DANBURY

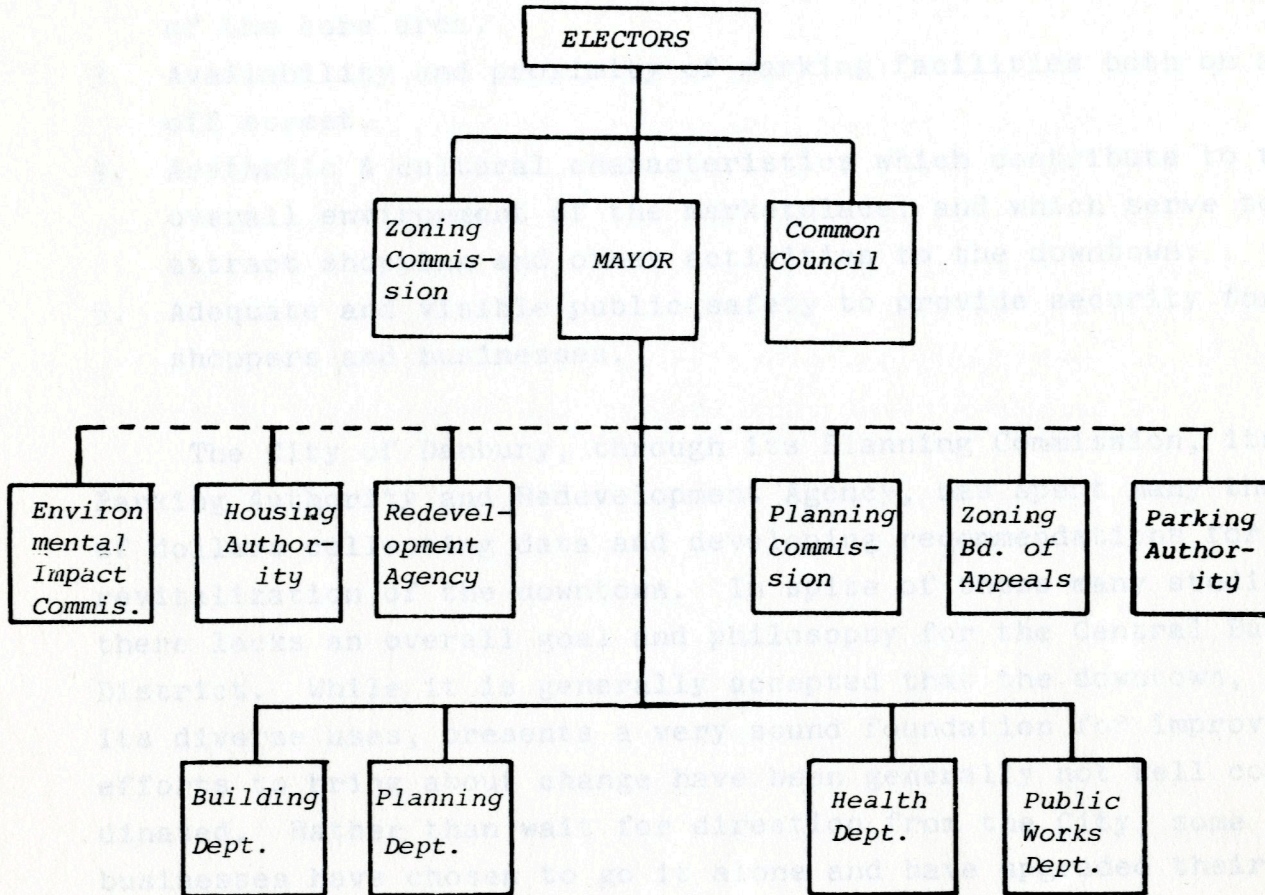
Planning can be said to consist of a complex series of interactions among planning professionals, technicians, governmental agencies, elected officials and the public. The modern planning process places emphasis not only on physical development but also on the social, cultural and economic aspects of that development. It cannot be only concerned with the physical aspects of planning, it must also be prepared to promote the implementation of its policies, and with the numerous public actions requires to produce growth and development in the urban area. Urban planning may be considered therefore in part a line activity and in part a staff activity. The planning and development process of the City of Danbury is characteristic of the total City Government.

Danbury's planning function includes the activities of Planning, Zoning and Re-development, as well as those activities which provide direct influence, such as the Mayor, City Engineer, Environmental Impact Commission, Building Department, Health Department.

#### MAJOR ISSUES

In its chapter on the downtown, the 1976 Plan of Development of the City of Danbury identifies several key elements of a viable downtown:

CHART I  
CITY OF DANBURY  
PLANNING AND RELATED FUNCTIONS



As can be seen, planning authority is diffused, and there are few, if any, formal lines of communication. This configuration makes it difficult for planners and even the Mayor to provide a unified approach to decision making. This lack of focus frustrates dialogue with the rest of the community, and inhibits the exercise of leadership. The organization structure must promote clarity, confidence and cohesiveness, lest the decisions produced be muffled and fragmented.

#### MAJOR ISSUES

In its chapter on the downtown, the 1978 Plan of Development of the City of Danbury identifies several key elements of a viable downtown:

1. Flexibility of use between retail, office, and residential.
2. Ease of vehicle and pedestrian traffic into, through, and out of the core area.
3. Availability and proximity of parking facilities both on and off street.
4. Aesthetic & cultural characteristics which contribute to the overall environment of the marketplace, and which serve to attract shopping and other activities to the downtown.
5. Adequate and visible public safety to provide security for shoppers and businesses.

The City of Danbury, through its Planning Commission, its Parking Authority and Redevelopment Agency, has spent many thousands of dollars collecting data and developing recommendations for the revitalization of the downtown. In spite of these many studies, there lacks an overall goal and philosophy for the Central Business District. While it is generally accepted that the downtown, through its diverse uses, presents a very sound foundation for improvement, efforts to bring about change have been generally not well coordinated. Rather than wait for direction from the City, some businesses have chosen to go it alone and have upgraded their facilities. This approach is risky in that individual decisions don't often take into account the full spectrum of interrelated events that make up the Downtown and give it an identity.

A series of studies on the downtown indicates that the primary impediment to economic revitalization is accessibility. The road network and traffic circulation pattern in and around the downtown is insufficient to accommodate existing traffic loads let alone that which would be generated by more intensive retail and commercial use. This single issue has the greatest overall capital cost implications. A proposal has been advanced by the City Planning Department for a study and preliminary design of a Franklin-Osborne-Maple Avenue

Connector Road which has been previously highlighted as a major solution to some downtown traffic circulation problems.

Aside from these considerations, there appears to be a great deal that can be done to improve the aesthetic quality of the area. In particular, the Plan of Development suggests that a facade improvement program would improve the general character of the downtown. Facade improvements may include reasonably inexpensive paint-up and fix-up work, as well as design changes. Further the plan indicates a need for sign control so as to avoid the proliferation of poorly designed, inefficient and unharmonious advertisements.

The cultural aspects of the Downtown play an important role in generating excitement and interest. The Danbury Preservation Trust has identified many artistic groups that have located in the core of the City. News of the impending formation of a Danbury Opera Association, Light Opera Company as well as the present Danbury Symphony, Community Chorus and other groups provide a foundation for cultural events in the downtown. A mechanism is required to blend these cultural assets with the economic base for their mutual benefit.

Police protection in the downtown is generally good. In fact, officials visiting from other cities have noted the comparatively high visibility at peak periods. However, due to staffing problems, the CBD is forced to compete with other sectors for ongoing protection.

#### THE APPROACH

How can we effectively employ the physical, cultural and economic resources of the community to realize the ultimate potential of the CBD? There must be a process to channel all of these elements into a focused, cooperative effort.

A recent study of eleven Northeastern Communities, including Danbury, conducted by the Council for Northeast Economic Action, found that the communities that were most successful in stimulating

revitalization of urban areas were those that enjoyed a solid, cooperative partnership between business, particularly bankers, and the public sector. Certainly, in order to form the basis of a good public/private partnership, it is essential that the respective participant groups be well organized. This is the critical area in which previous efforts have failed.

Many communities, large and small, have organized downtown action groups to sponsor activities designed to promote the CBD for business, shopping and culture, as well as conduct development projects. Such a group is now in the process of forming in Danbury. There are basically nine steps in the process of organizing for downtown Revitalization:

- Step One: Initiating Discussion
- Step Two: Expanding Community Involvement
- Step Three: Exploratory Meetings
- Step Four: Developing an Organization
- Step Five: Setting Downtown Goals
- Step Six: Studies and Surveys
- Step Seven: Setting Downtown Objectives
- Step Eight: Establishing Concepts, Plans, and Implementation Procedures
- Step Nine: Program Implementation/Evaluation/Continuation

The first three steps have been taken. The formulation of a basic organization structure is indicated as the next logical action.

The central theme of this effort should be to emphasize the cooperative efforts of the public and private sectors in jointly seeking to improve both the aesthetic and market characteristics of the Downtown. This should include the participation of merchants, banks, the Chamber of Commerce, community based organizations, local business, and other public and private agencies. Groups of this



nature also may sponsor a variety of conferences, cultural and promotional events, seminars and workshops related to the entire spectrum of downtown development.

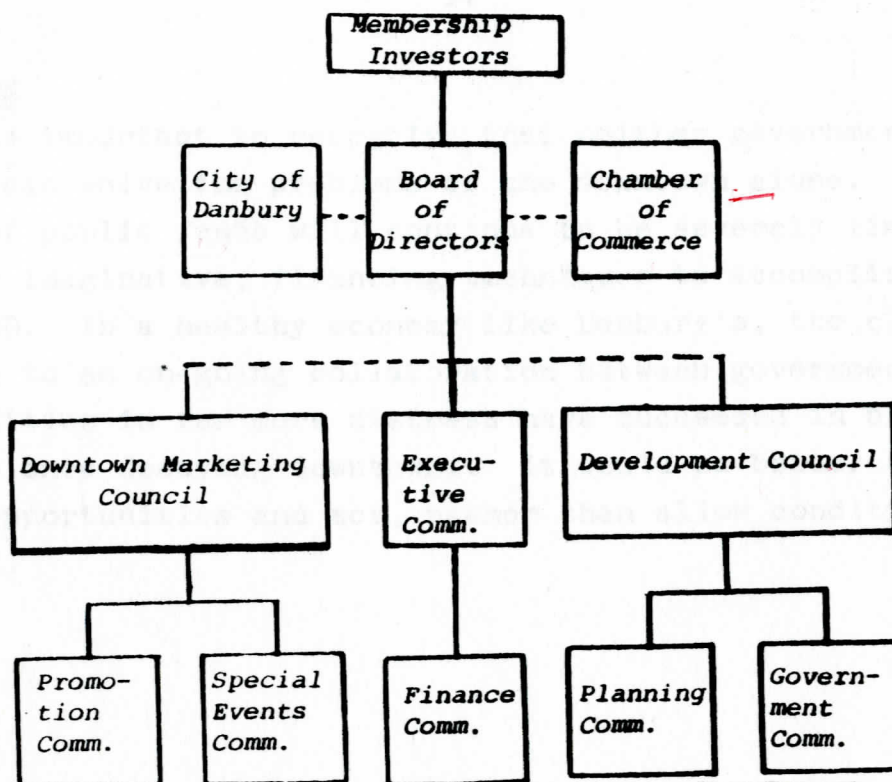
The Council for Northeast Economic Action study also identified the leveraging of private investment with public funds as a major measure of successful development activities. A popular mechanism for stimulating investment in Downtown areas has been the use of the development corporation. There are many models for this particular approach, which can be found in communities such as: Lowell and Springfield, Massachusetts, Norwalk and Meriden, Connecticut.

Development corporations typically undertake activities such as providing favorable loans to businesses for capital investment, adaptive re-use of older structures, land purchase and other efforts. It offers the advantage of raising capital within the Community, and the potential of involving a large number of local citizens, institutions and businesses as investors and contributors, in the making of decisions.

It is important that the City, through the Planning Department and other staff professionals provide technical assistance as needed. The Danbury Preservation Trust could provide input concerning the rehabilitation and preservation of suitable structures. The Chamber, as a representative of all area business, will seek to gather support for such programs from the general business community. The Chamber can also be utilized to supply technical staff to assist in organizational and operational activities.

Following is a suggested organization structure for a downtown action group.

CHART 2



This model envisions a combination of promotion and development functions in one organization. Although it would be possible to have separate organizations for promotion and development, to do so would result again in a risk of fragmenting rather than streamlining the revitalization process. Certainly the organization could be made operational in states to allow time to consider all alternatives. The direct continuing involvement of the Mayor is of utmost importance in this entire process. No other official has such an impact on the formulation and direction of local policy.

Once the organization is formed and its goals established, it is likely that it will require a budget to begin conducting its activities. It may eventually wish to purchase staff or other services in order to formalize its day to day operations. An opportunity may exist to seek matching funds from the City of Danbury as a means of "leveraging" private membership contributions.

Other methods will also be required to finance the development function, if one is deemed appropriate.

CONCLUSION

It is important to recognize that neither government nor business can solve the problems of the downtown alone. The availability of public funds will continue to be severely limited, requiring imaginative, financing techniques to accomplish the rebirth of the CBD. In a healthy economy like Danbury's, the climate is conducive to an on-going collaboration between government and business. Cities in far more distress have succeeded in breathing new life into once decaying downtowns. It would be better to grasp the present opportunities and act, rather than allow conditions to worsen and react.

DANBURY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

It is clear that the CBD is no longer a sleepy Danbury as its only major retail center. It is, however, the vital center of the community and an important component in both Danbury's and the region's economy."

-Plan of Development, City of Danbury, 1975