

The Downtown

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The downtown encompasses the older, more densely populated part of Danbury. Is it a viable area? What will its role be in Danbury's future?

Webster defines downtown as "the business center of a city or town", implying an area basically limited to commercial activity. But the central business district (CBD) of a community is customarily thought of as the heart of the City where various elements of the community come together and interact. Therefore, the CBD is often an area where the diversity of land uses is most abundant, including commercial, industrial, residential and municipal development. The downtown of a city also serves to form the image of a particular community perceived by individuals who reside within or outside the particular community.

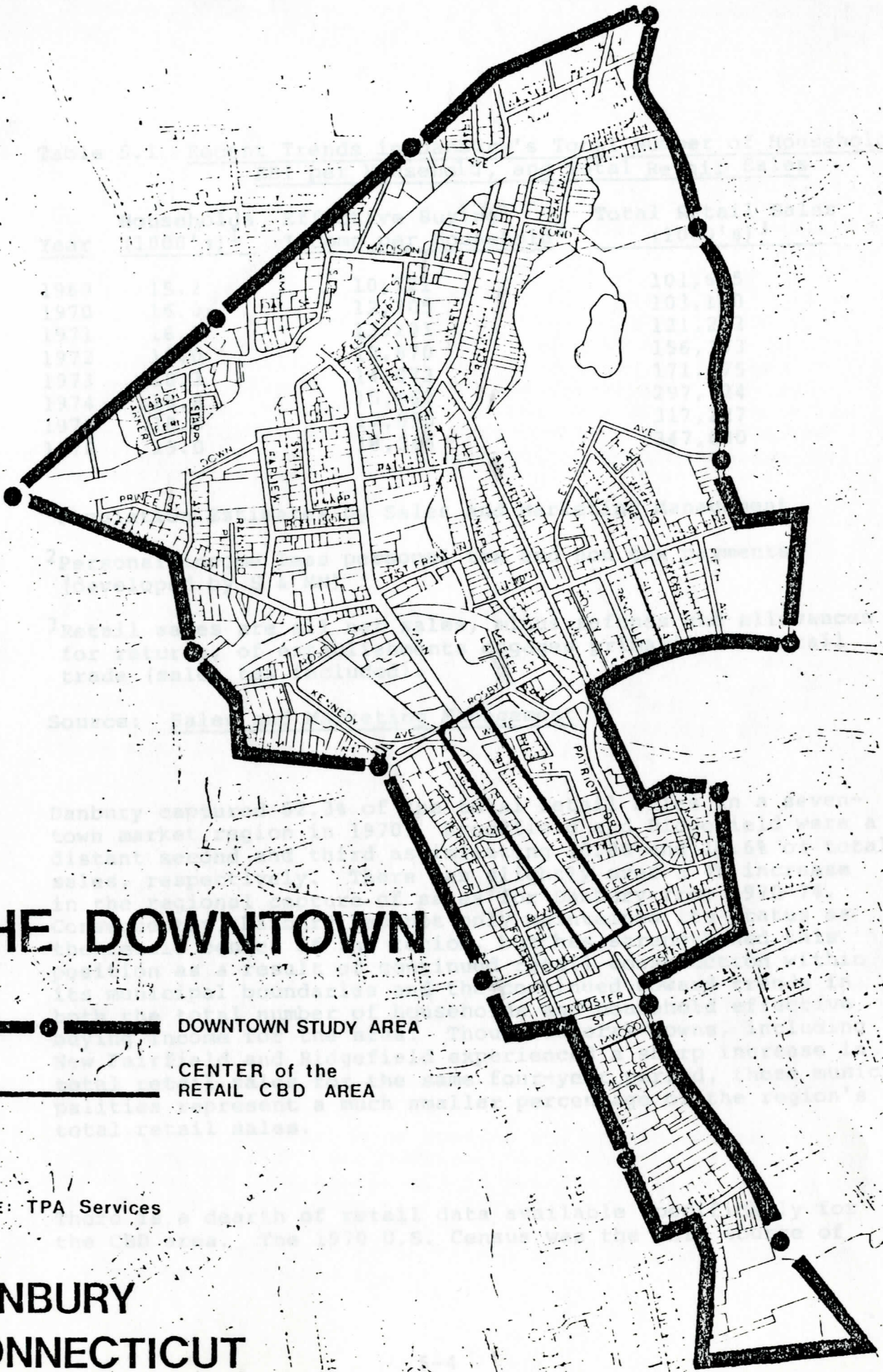
"DANBURY'S DOWNTOWN IS UNIQUE IN TWO RESPECTS: 1) THE CBD RETAIL AREA PROVIDES A MYRIAD OF COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISES MIXED WITH BANKS, GENERAL OFFICE AND MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS WITHIN A THREE BLOCK AREA ON MAIN STREET AND 2) WITHIN ONE BLOCK OF THIS DOWNTOWN RETAIL AREA, ONE COMES IN CONTACT WITH RESIDENTIAL LAND USES, WHICH COMPRISE THE MAJOR PROPORTION OF LAND AREA IN THE DOWNTOWN."

Danbury's downtown is unique in two respects. First, the CBD retail area provides a myriad of commercial enterprises mixed with banks, general office and municipal buildings within a three block area on Main Street to meet an equally great number of consumer needs. Secondly, within one block of this downtown retail area, one comes in contact with residential land uses, which comprise the major proportion of land area in the downtown. This factor alone necessitates a broader perspective of the downtown for planning purposes since any changes induced by the planning process will not only affect the retail center but the ambient land uses as well. In addition, all of these components interact to determine the character of the area and to shape Danbury's image and therefore must be considered in planning a program for the total area. This chapter will deal separately with the inventory and analysis of retail and residential land uses present in the downtown area in preparation for the enumeration of recommendations for an overall downtown program.

THE COMMERCIAL DOWNTOWN

For the purpose of this discussion, Danbury's commercial downtown (CBD) is considered to be the development along Main street from the intersection of Boughton and Center Streets north to the intersection of Kennedy Avenue and White Street, as delineated on the following map. The western and eastern perimeters of the CBD are defined as the rear elevations of the buildings which abut Main Street within the north-south boundary aforementioned. The eastern boundary also extends along Liberty and Delay Streets. These boundaries were qualitatively determined by the consultant through field analysis and observation of the dominant flow of vehicular traffic and pedestrian movement along street and sidewalks, respectively. The patterns of movement manifest a complex web of interaction between the variety of existing retail enterprises, institutional structures (banks, post office, etc.), and the tastes and preferences of the consumer.

This definition of the parameters of the CBD coincides with the area which has been the focus of four separate studies which have analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of the CBD in terms of its continuing as the City's retail center and which also have recommended strategies for improving its economic viability. Several conclusions can be derived by combining the results of these four reports:



THE DOWNTOWN

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

SOURCE: TPA Services

**DANBURY
CONNECTICUT**

Table 5.1 Recent Trends in Danbury's Total Number of Households,
EBI per Household, and Total Retail Sales

<u>Year</u>	<u>Households (1000's)¹</u>	<u>Effective Buying Income per Household²</u>	<u>Total Retail Sales (1000's)³</u>
1969	15.2	10,721	101,665
1970	16.0	12,205	103,130
1971	16.8	13,291	121,222
1972	18.0	12,870	156,393
1973	18.3	14,073	171,975
1974	18.8	15,863	297,724
1975	18.6	17,050	317,227
1976	19.0	18,346	347,030

¹Population Estimates by Sales and Marketing Management

²Personal income less personal tax and non tax payments
(developed by S & MM)

³Retail sales are all net sales, minus refunds and allowances
for returns, of establishments engages primarily in retail
trade (sales tax included).

Source: Sales and Marketing Management

Danbury captured 62.3% of the total retail sales in a seven-town market region in 1970. Brookfield and Ridgefield were a distant second and third assimilating 10.8% and 10.6% of total sales, respectively. There was slightly over a 4% increase in the regional capture of sales for Danbury from 1970-74. Consequently, Danbury has not only maintained its status as the retail center of the region, but has strengthened this position as a result of continued retail construction within its municipal boundaries and the continued upward trends in both the total number of households and household effective buying income for the area. Though several towns, including New Fairfield and Ridgefield experienced a sharp increase in total retail sales for the same four-year period, these municipalities represent a much smaller percentage of the region's total retail sales.

There is a dearth of retail data available specifically for the CBD area. The 1970 U.S. Census was the only source of

data found and indicated that in 1970 the CBD captured 24.2% of Danbury's total retail sales. In light of the fact that the retail expansion which has occurred in Danbury since 1970 has occurred outside the CBD, the implication is that this percentage of sales capture is now less. However, two factors speak well for the future of the CBD. First, the longevity of many storeowners testifies to the fact that the CBD is an area where an entrepreneur can maintain a "good business." Secondly, through the urban renewal process a parcel of land in the major retail block on Main Street has been prepared for development. This could provide the first major commercial development in the CBD in many years. The area is therefore at an important juncture; its future status will be guided by the policies now being formulated for implementation in the next few years.

THE RESIDENTIAL DOWNTOWN

As noted previously, the heterogeneity of the downtown requires examination of the area from a broader perspective than the economic aspects. Danbury's downtown is more than a retail center: it is the core area of the City and "home" to many residents. Planning for the area must therefore incorporate these varied functions and determine the characteristics of those who will be impacted by CBD activities.

"THE MOST SALIENT CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESIDENTIAL DOWNTOWN ARE 1) THE PREDOMINANCE OF MULTI-UNIT STRUCTURES (86% OF ALL OCCUPIED UNITS), 2) THE AGE OF HOUSING (85% OF ALL HOUSING IN THE DOWNTOWN AREA WAS BUILT PRIOR TO 1940), 3) 72% OF ALL DOWNTOWN HOUSEHOLDS ARE RENTERS, 4) THE AREA CONTAINS A SUBSTANTIAL PORTION OF HOUSING UNITS WITH A LIMITED NUMBER OF ROOMS AVAILABLE, I.E. 34% OF ALL UNITS CONTAIN 1-3 ROOMS, AND 5) ONE-THIRD OF ALL RENTER-OCCUPIED UNITS FOR THE DOWNTOWN STUDY AREA WERE CLASSIFIED AS LOW RENT BASED ON 1970 CENSUS FIGURES.

The detailed examination of housing and population characteristics completed for the Downtown Study portion of Phase Four of the Plan of Development update program utilized 1970 Census data for the enumeration districts which comprised the study area. This source provided the most detailed information available for specific areas within the City. The following is a summary of this data.

The most salient characteristics of the residential downtown are 1) the predominance of multi-unit structures (86% of all occupied units), 2) the age of housing (85% of all housing in the downtown area was built prior to 1940), 3) 72% of all downtown households are renters, 4) the area contains a substantial portion of housing units with a limited number of rooms available, i.e. 34% of all units contain 1-3 rooms, and 5) one-third of all renter-occupied units for the downtown study area were classified as low rent based on 1970 Census figures.

Age of housing is probably the single most important contributory factor for the conditions of blight and substandardness which exist in some parts of the area. As a rule, the term "substandard" connotes a myriad of external and internal housing conditions. In this case, however, the definition is that of the 1970 Census of Housing in which "substandard housing" was that which lacked a complete bathroom for exclusive use. Approximately 5.3% of the housing in the downtown area was classified as substandard in the Census, as compared with 3.5% for the City of Danbury. The highest incidence occurred in the commercial downtown area (within one block of the CBD) where approximately 12.5% of total occupied housing was "substandard". Substandardness in terms of lacking plumbing facilities is, therefore, not a pervasive problem in the downtown area, but as noted earlier age of the housing in the area results in a variety of physical and environmental deficiencies which would normally denote substandardness. Substandard in the sense of suitability for occupancy and freedom from health and safety hazards may therefore be a more common problem in the area; however, factual data in support of this premise is lacking.

In 1970, the number of units in the downtown area, which were overcrowded (1.01 or more persons per room), was relatively the same as that for the City - 8.2% and 7.0% respectively. Overcrowded housing units in the study area were more prevalent in housing that was rented than in that which was owned and was considerably greater in housing occupied by Blacks (23.1% of all downtown area units occupied by Blacks in 1970).

The density of the area's physical development is reflected in the fact that 14% of Danbury's total 1970 population resided in the downtown. Analysis of selected characteristics of this population in 1970 indicates marked differences between downtown

residents and the total population of Danbury. The most significant differences are a lower percentage of persons under 18 years of age, a higher percentage of persons over 64 years of age, a lower educational attainment level, a significantly lower median income, a significantly higher percentage of families with incomes below the poverty level, a significantly higher percentage of Black population, and a higher percentage of "blue collar" workers. These characteristics are summarized in Table 5.2.

The downtown area's existing housing characteristics, interacting with these demographic characteristics and a variety of environmental factors - accessibility to public transportation, accessibility to shopping or employment, market value and types of housing available outside the downtown area, and inflation - create the circumstances which determine who will live in the downtown area. The net positive or negative effect of this combination of factors will determine whose needs are met or will be met and who is or will be attracted to the area.

There are two general reasons which account for why people reside in a given area: Choice or necessity. Those who live in the downtown area by choice do so because the housing supply meets their needs and satisfies their tastes and preferences. The second reason why people live downtown has to do with the cost of housing in any given community. Housing is generally less expensive in a downtown. Functionally obsolete structures, lack of open space in the general area, heavier traffic volumes, noise and air pollution have all contributed to lessening the demand for dwelling units in the downtown, thereby causing the price for rental units within and near the CBD for example to be relatively lower than for rental units of more modern vintage in other parts of the particular community where traffic counts are lower and housing is less dense. People with small incomes who cannot afford the higher priced housing, much less an automobile, gravitate toward the inner city area with its more modest priced housing, public transportation and close proximity to needed services. Quite often the types of people who reside in the downtown are reflective of certain demographic and ethnic characteristics (e.g. the elderly and/or minorities). As has been noted previously, the study area has larger proportions of these segments than the remaining portions of the City of Danbury. If the present housing conditions (cost, type) in the downtown remain the same and the cost of housing outside the downtown area continues to increase, it is highly improbable that the characteristics of future residents of the downtown area will change dramatically.

Table 5.2

GENERAL POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

	<u>Downtown Study Area</u>	<u>City of Danbury</u>
Total Population	6,940	50,781
Median Income	8,490	11,394
Percent below Danbury Median Income	25.5%	----
Percent of Families below the poverty level	12.5%	5.6%
Blacks as a percent of total population	12.7%	5.2%
Population <18 yrs old	29.7%	33.9%
Population >64 yrs old	12.4%	9.5%
<u>Years of School Completed</u> (% over 24 years of age)		
Less than 1 yr of High School	45.2%	30.2%
4 yrs of High School or More	42.4%	50.4%
<u>Occupational Categories</u> (% of Total Labor Force)		
"White Collar"	33.0%	47.0%
"Blue Collar"	52.0%	39.0%
Farm Workers	-----	-----
Service Workers	15.0%	14.0%

Encouraging the maintaining and upgrading where necessary of existing housing as well as encouraging housing of all price ranges should be given a high priority in the greater downtown area. Attention should be given to the needs of those segments of the general population who could most benefit from housing designed for a particular life style geared to require public transportation and easy access to work or shopping -- the retired, the newlywed, or single with limited income as well as those families unable to afford the cost of living in the suburbs.

In addition, the construction of market rate apartments in the moderate to luxury price range would create physical and socio-economic diversity in the area. These activities should occur in the immediate area of the CBD along with mixed-use development combining retail, office and apartments stratified in moderate to high-rise structures directly within the CBD area.

As long as the carrying capacity of the area is not exceeded (i.e. adequate parking and access for vehicular traffic and desirable accommodations for the pedestrian) so that intensification of uses can take place by the above alternatives without impairing the quality of living in the area, attracting a diversified population can improve the economic viability of the central business district (CBD) as well. Improvement of the central business district therefore should be viewed from a social as well as an economic perspective. The key to accomplishing this objective is to develop a proper balance among the various uses so that they are mutually supportive of one another.

It cannot be overemphasized that in order to encourage desirable development to take place in the CBD, community commitment to improve the downtown arterial system is imperative so that accessibility is enhanced as well as to insure that adequate parking is strategically placed. These measures are necessary to facilitate traffic flow, mitigate congestion, bottlenecks and air pollution. This positive action will go a long way toward improving the attractiveness of the downtown not only as a place to shop but also as a place to live.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DOWNTOWN

The downtown area must meet the needs of a dynamic constituency including shoppers, professionals, employees, residents, and visitors. These recommendations should be viewed as the initial phase of a process, to facilitate public policy formulation and implementation rather than to pay "lip-service" to long recognized problems. Therefore, policy in this sense is defined as "an agreed upon course of action."

The following recommendations operate from the premise that downtown Danbury should be preserved as an urban center where the diversity of land uses -- commercial, industrial, residential, municipal, civic, and cultural -- is most abundant. The future of the downtown area should be guided by policies which will maintain this complex interaction and foster desirable social, economic, and physical diversity.

"THE FUTURE OF THE DOWNTOWN AREA SHOULD BE GUIDED BY POLICIES WHICH WILL MAINTAIN THE COMPLEX INTERACTION OF LAND USES EXISTING IN THE CBD AND WHICH WILL FOSTER DESIRABLE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND PHYSICAL DIVERSITY."

A variety of zoning districts and, therefore, land uses currently exist in the downtown study area and should be continued. This promotes physical diversity and facilitates various community segments coming together and interacting. Such a zoning and, therefore, land use pattern reinforces the downtown area as the hub of the community. The current zoning designations provided for appropriate land uses in the CBD, i.e., retail, professional and business offices, cultural, a variety of residential types and densities, and provision of parking. However, since the present zoning designation CL-CBD incorporates by reference all the permitted uses in both the RH-3 and CL-10 zones, a separate classification of uses for the CL-CBD zone should be developed to insure proper control over development in this respective zone. Future land use patterns in the downtown should not only enhance the area's existing development but also encourage those uses which will increase the downtown's role as a major tax base and the urban center of the community. Therefore revisions to the Zoning Ordinance to provide for strict sign control, to encourage higher density development in the CBD through use and provisions such as increased building height, as well as emphasis on the provision of off-street parking and site landscaping will serve to strengthen present and future

development in the downtown. However, extension of the CL-CBD Zone should be permitted only in response to market demands and after the existing CBD block (between White and Keeler Streets) has been developed.

An item of highest priority among the recommendations for the downtown area is to provide for the improvement of through traffic movement, i.e. traffic not originating or terminating in the downtown. This was one of the major proposals of the 1967 Plan of Development and the construction of Patriot Drive and the relocation of Liberty Street are the first steps toward providing a circumferential route for non-CBD traffic. Additional road improvements which will be required to accomplish this include: 1) construction of an Osborne-Franklin Street connector; 2) provision of a through route parallel to Main Street using a Maple Street-Thorpe Street Extension connection; 3) provision of an alternate east-west route parallel to White Street; 4) provision of an alternate north-south route parallel to Main Street south of Liberty Street by improving Town Hill Avenue; 5) increasing the capacity of White Street through various physical improvements which may also include the elimination of on-street parking; 6) improvement of Wildman Street particularly at the intersection with White Street; 7) provision for left turn capability and synchronization of traffic signals on Main, North and White Streets. These improvements will also improve access to the CBD and are included in the City's proposed Circulation Plan which is discussed in Chapter 10. Cost and scheduling of improvements are also discussed in that chapter.

"THE IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED IN THE DOWNTOWN RANGE FROM MAJOR TRANSPORTATION AND PARKING IMPROVEMENTS TO THE AESTHETICS OF STREETSCAPING AND COSMETIC IMPROVEMENTS TO BUILDING EXTERIORS."

Parking in the downtown has repeatedly been cited as the area's major problem: it affects shoppers, workers, residents and students. Several types of action will be required to improve the situation. Improvement of the retail CBD parking situation should be two-pronged: 1) On a short-term basis, it is recommended that the present policy of issuing monthly permits for parking spaces be changed and an automatic or manned ticket gate which levies a uniform charge on a per time basis be installed; 2) On a long-range basis, construction of a parking structure to accommodate the daily, basically commercial oriented vehicular traffic which frequents the downtown area is recommended.

One of the principal parking problems within the City at this time occurs at Western Connecticut State College. This major traffic generator is presently located on White Street, the main east-west roadway in the City of Danbury. A totally inadequate provision for parking by the State of Connecticut has resulted in on-street parking on both sides of White Street leaving two lanes available for traffic flow. This is inadequate for the volume of traffic travelling this roadway. In addition, the capacity of these lanes is effectively reduced by delays resulting from parking maneuvers. The State of Connecticut must be approached to correct this situation. Additional off-street student parking is essential to efficient traffic circulation on White Street.

The possibility of utilizing an adaptation of the auto-restrictive zone technique to ease the parking deficiencies present adjacent to the CBD, and to alleviate the traffic congestion which occurs on White and Osborne Streets due to the institutional uses located in the area should be investigated. Initiation of a shuttle service by the Danbury Hospital and Western Connecticut State College for their employees between designated outlying parking areas and place of employment should be considered. The peak hour effect of this technique on traffic flow along White Street, Osborne Street, Locust Avenue and Balmforth Avenue could be significant.

Public transportation usage in Danbury and the surrounding areas is not projected to reach a level where it will significantly reduce parking requirements and traffic in the downtown. However, the transit system provides an important service, particularly to certain population segments such as the elderly, young, low and moderate income persons and the handicapped. The public transportation system should be considered a component of the downtown and improved, expanded or altered as appropriate. The use of mass transit in the City of Danbury is most practical and will be most efficient in the downtown and the densely developed adjacent areas.

Several transportation-oriented problems existing in the CBD and immediate area have been identified and corrective actions have been recommended. However, it is beyond the scope of this

report, to analyze the downtown traffic situation in the depth which is required to develop a viable circulation plan for the downtown area which maximizes traffic flow. A detailed traffic count analysis of the CBD should be undertaken to obtain current traffic volume data to which projections can be added. These figures will determine the extent and type of improvements required in the long run. In conjunction with this, it is recommended that the transportation function of city government be expanded. The present volumes of traffic and the potential for increases in the future indicate that Danbury has reached a point in its development requiring expansion of the Engineering Department staff to include a traffic engineer with responsibility for traffic analysis, coordination of development proposals with transportation planning (local and regional) and recommendation of improvements required for efficient traffic circulation.

The downtown's "image" can be further enhanced by attention to aesthetics, both natural and man-made. Open space in the downtown area should be preserved and maintained as public open space wherever possible without impairing the city's ability to generate revenues to provide municipal services. This measure would provide convenient, directly accessible areas for public use to those segments of the community who are most in need of open space because of a dearth of available land for such purposes. The social value of such parcels of land are insurmountable and unfortunately, not readily quantifiable. Consideration for the provision of recreation/open space opportunities in the downtown are the development of linear and/or pocket parks on small or marginal pieces of land, and the development of bikeways particularly where road improvements are occurring.

CBD open space would not only provide areas for passive or active recreation but would also facilitate social integration of various subgroups, e.g., neighborhood families, meeting places for employees/businessmen during the lunch hour, etc. A streetscaping program including curb and sidewalk improvements, tree planting, and the installation of flower beds will also enhance the physical appearance of the CBD. As noted previously, landscaping requirements should be an important element of all future development proposals, particularly in the CBD where the density of development would be enhanced.

Cosmetic improvements to both the interior and exterior of commercial buildings along Main Street should be encouraged. This measure also has the potential to augment the economic viability of the downtown area. Facade improvement creates aesthetic improvements and physical diversity to the downtown's silhouette. A tax incentive may be warranted to foster private retailers to continue such action. As the residential and office uses in the CBD expand increased consideration of pedestrian traffic in terms of access and interaction of uses will also be required.

A coordinated implementation program involving both the public and private sectors will be required to accomplish these goals. Municipal actions such as adoption of a downtown development strategy, zoning designations for desired land use and density of development, provision of road and utility improvements, and designation of areas for various forms of Federal assistance will set the stage for private actions. Federal programs which are appropriate for utilization in the downtown area should be sought and coordinated in light of the strategy developed.

It is important to realize that all of these recommendations are tangible (physical) and should be viewed as benefits to the urban center. Their implementation would represent a net positive change and would tend to strengthen the city's tax base.

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