

# A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

## City of Methuen

Methuen, MA



June 18, 2015



**Urban Land  
Institute**

Boston/New England



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# Executive Summary

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Under the direction of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council, the Methuen Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) convened in Methuen, Massachusetts on June 18, 2015, bringing together stakeholders, community leaders, and a panel of planning, design, and development professionals for a day-long session focused on identifying the issues, constraints, and opportunities presented by the downtown of Methuen. The report that follows, which summarizes the TAP recommendations, is comprised of four chapters.

**Chapter 1: ULI and the TAP Process** gives an overview of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council and its Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) and provides a detailed list of participants in the Methuen TAP including city officials, stakeholders, and the panel of land use professionals.

**Chapter 2: Background and Assignment** gives background information about Methuen as well as current conditions of the downtown and buildings. This chapter also reviews the City of Methuen's objectives for the TAP, as stated in its initial application, which were to obtain recommendations on market issues, planning and design, feasibility and financing, and management and implementation.

**Chapter 3: Observations and Findings** presents the feedback the panel received from stakeholders, the panel's insights about Methuen's positive attributes (including the river, the waterfall, the historic fabric, the Music Hall, and access to transportation arteries), the downtown's opportunities (including large and centrally located vacant parcels, Gateway City designation, waterfront parcels, and the Odd Fellows Hall), and the principal challenges (including special permit zoning, difficult topography, lack of additional mill buildings, the slight mismatch in state funding programs for Methuen's assets, scattered assets, and planning fatigue).

Finally, **Chapter 4: Planning Considerations** presents the short- and long-term recommendations in the areas of financing and funding strategies, the use of tactical urbanism to prototype urban interventions, identifying cultural assets to highlight, programmatic changes, and longer-term physical improvements.



*An aerial view of downtown Methuen.*

# ULI and the TAP Process

## a. Urban Land Institute (ULI)

The Urban Land Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit research and education organization supported by its members. Founded in 1936, the Institute now has over 30,000 members worldwide representing the entire spectrum of land-use and real estate development disciplines, working in private enterprise and public service, including developers, architects, planners, lawyers, bankers, and economic development professionals, among others.

As the pre-eminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information, and experience among local, national, and international industry leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places.

The mission of the Urban Land Institute is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and to help sustain and create thriving communities.

The Boston/New England District Council serves the six New England states and has over 1,100 members.

## b. Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)

The ULI Boston/New England Real Estate Advisory Committee convenes Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) at the request of public officials and local stakeholders of communities and nonprofit organizations facing complex land-use challenges who benefit from planning and development professionals providing pro bono recommendations. At the TAP, a group of diverse professionals specially assembled with expertise in the issues posed, spends one day visiting and analyzing existing conditions, identifying specific planning and development issues, and formulating realistic and actionable recommendations to move initiatives forward in a way consistent with the applicant's goals and objectives.



*The panelists visiting the Methuen Memorial Music Hall.*



*The panelists during the Methuen charrette process.*

## c. MassDevelopment Support

Recognizing the alignment between the ULI Boston/New England Technical Assistance Panel program and MassDevelopment's mission to support sustainable redevelopment across the Commonwealth, the two organizations have partnered to support TAPs in towns and cities throughout the Commonwealth. The Methuen TAP was the sixteenth sponsored by MassDevelopment to date.

## d. Panel Members

ULI Boston/New England convened a panel of volunteers whose members represent a range of the disciplines associated with the planning and development challenges presented by downtown Methuen.

Disciplines represented include architecture, development, design, planning, and transportation planning.

Members were selected with the intent of convening an array of professional expertise relevant to the City of Methuen's objectives for this TAP. The panelists were:

- **Larry Spang**, Principal, Arrowstreet
- **James Shanley**, Newburyport, MA
- **Meera Deean**, Urban Designer and Project Manager, Utile, Boston, MA
- **Kristina Johnson**, Manager of Transportation Planning, Howard Stein Hudson, Boston, MA
- **Michael Miller**, Senior Vice President of Real Estate Operations, MassDevelopment, Boston, MA
- **Lee Pouliot**, City Planner, City of Chicopee, MA
- **Dave Traggorth**, President, Traggorth Companies, Boston, MA
- **Siqi Zhu**, Urban Designer, Utile, Boston, MA

William Buckley, Director of Economic and Community Development, and Rebecca Oldham, Program Coordinator, served as the primary contacts for ULI Boston/England for the town.

Michelle Landers of ULI Boston/New England provided organizational and technical support in preparation for and during the TAP event. Tania Hartford, Director of Real Estate Services, and Abby Raisz, Intern, represented MassDevelopment at the TAP.



*The panelists on the downtown walking tour.*



*The panelists during the brainstorming session.*

## e. Stakeholders

The TAP benefited from the participation of a diverse group of stakeholders — policy makers, town staff, business owners, and town officials — who met with the panel and shared information, ideas, and opinions on a range of issues affecting downtown Methuen. Stakeholders at the session included:

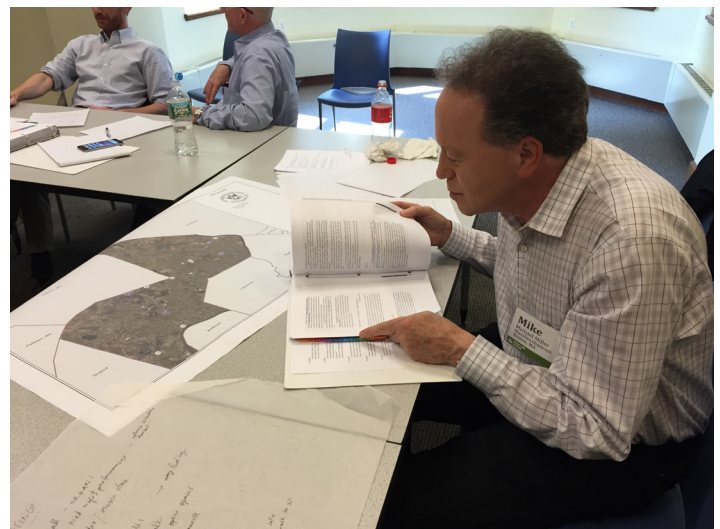
- **Johan Lopez**, Property Owner
- **Robert Palmisano**, Property Owner
- **Tom Lussier**, Historic District Commission, Visioning Committee
- **Dennis DiZoglio**, Executive Director of the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission, Visioning Committee
- **Mike Parquette**, Planner at the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission, Visioning Committee
- **Joseph Leone**, Chairman of the Community Development Board
- **Erin Murphy**, Merrimack Valley Planning Commission
- **Linda Early and Blaise Coco**, Realtors and Property Owners
- **Joseph Solomon**, Chief of Police
- **Arthur Broadhurst**, Property Owner, Visioning Committee
- **Anthony Difruscia**, Attorney and Property Owner
- **Steve Fisichelli**, Realtor and Property Owner
- **Nancy Carace**, Property Owner, Visioning Committee
- **Matt McLennan**, Realtor and Property Owner, Visioning Committee
- **Rick Harvey**, Property Owner

## f. TAP Process

The Methuen TAP was held on June 18, 2015 at the Nevins Public Library room. In the morning, William Buckley, Director of Economic and Community Development, and Mayor Steven Zanni welcomed the panelists, and then Mr. Buckley led a walking and bus tour of the city's downtown and the surrounding area.

The tour began at the Nevins Public Library, and the group walked down Broadway to the town center. After examining the buildings surrounding the clock tower, the group walked up Hampshire Street and down Lowell Street to the fire station and Five Corners. Turning back along Osgood Street to see the falls and Gaunt Park, the panel then boarded a bus. They visited the Music Hall, the commercial development near the Polartec factory, and the Loop. After the tour, the ULI panel interviewed a series of stakeholders to gain a better understanding of the relevant issues, dynamics, and opportunities surrounding Methuen's downtown. The panelists then engaged in an intensive charrette to develop recommendations addressing some of the critical issues associated with the revitalization of downtown Methuen. The TAP concluded with a presentation to members of the community at a public meeting that evening at Nevins Public Library.

The presentation is available electronically at the ULI Boston/New England website <http://boston.uli.org>.



# Background & Assignment

## a. Methuen's Downtown

Methuen was officially incorporated in 1726 out of a portion of Haverhill, and though it grew as a result of New England's mill and textile industries in the 18th and 19th centuries, the City itself never developed a substantial mill presence in its downtown. Three wealthy families, however, have played a major role in the city's development, and their names are present on many of the city's assets.

### ORIENTATION AND CONDITIONS

The Nevins Memorial Library sits at one boundary of downtown, near Route 213. The clock tower sits in the center of downtown, and the Five Corners intersection marks the area's other major boundary.

The real estate brokerage near the clock tower is one of the city's recent recipients of CDBG money for facade improvements, and the owner of that building also recently purchased what is known as the Page building, an attractive historic mansion. The former Masonic Lodge was also recently purchased. The two main properties downtown still for sale are the Odd Fellows Building, a historic building which used to have a coffee shop and still contains a dance studio, and the 1859 House, a restaurant.

The hardware store at Lowell Street is mostly shut down, and has had troubles ever since the nearby Loop mall opened and was able to draw away commercial traffic.

The fire station at Five Corners is an attractive historic building, but it does not have sufficient room for new engines, and the ambulance has to be stored off-site. The city has considered the possibility of consolidating the fire and police departments in another location and trying to reuse the firehouse for another purpose.

The rail right-of-way passing through downtown has been converted to a rail trail. Most of it is asphalt gravel, but steadily portions of the trail are being paved, and this should serve in the future as a useful

link between Salem, Methuen, and Lawrence.

The Methuen Memorial Music Hall, located just outside downtown along Broadway on the way to Lawrence, was built in the early 1900s specifically to house what was at the time considered to be the largest pipe organ in the United States, after the Boston Symphony Orchestra stopped using it. The Music Hall is managed by a set of trustees. Historically, residents remembered many more events happening and the hall being much more open to the public, though events now are less common.

There is one major set of mill buildings downtown, which was converted in 2001 into the Mill Falls Apartment complex, a set of 97 units with 40% affordable.

The waterfall in the center of downtown, while spectacular, has limited access. There is a municipal parking lot in the one spot with direct views of the falls. There is also a small active hydroelectric plant present, and the back of the 1859 House restaurant and the mill complex overlook the view.



*The great organ at the Methuen Music Hall*

## b. Recent Activity

The city has had discussions with the state about the process of creating a 40R smart growth zoning overlay downtown, but it has not yet submitted any formal applications.

The city has completed multiple infrastructure improvements in recent years. The Nevins Memorial Library downtown completed a \$7 million renovation in 2002. The Lowell Street bridge crossing the river was rebuilt following collapse, with new sidewalks and fences. Downtown parking has been increased with new surface lots. These changes are on top of many infrastructure improvements in the 1990s, including the Spicket Falls and Riverwalk Park and construction of the clock tower.

Multiple properties have recently undergone changes of ownership and many are in the process of being improved, including a real estate brokerage and multiple buildings previously owned by the Page family.

## c. Objectives

The City of Methuen requested that panel consider the following key issues related to the revitalization of downtown:

- **Market Issues:** What strategic marketing approach should be utilized to attract appropriate developers to the project area?
- **Planning and Design:** What zoning should be in place to attract the kind of development desired? What methods can help the city maintain the desired character of the downtown during redevelopment?
- **Feasibility and Financing:** What kinds of establishments should the City try to attract? What is the best way for the City to determine feasibility of attracting the kind of development desired?
- **Management and Implementation:** How can the City encourage the owners and stakeholders to undertake development and action that supports the vision of the downtown?



*A view of the Mill Falls Apartments and river from above the falls.*



*Home Shop Properties, the real estate brokerage that has taken advantage of Methuen's facade improvement program.*

# Observations & Findings

Throughout the process, the panel heard several ideas consistently and repeatedly. Despite the historical inability to spur meaningful development downtown, many stakeholders feel that the time is right to make a change. Private investment in properties is on the upswing. The Mayor has made a commitment to focusing on downtown during this current term. Moreover, the City has expressed comfort with its finances, and it may be able to finance key catalysts. Moreover, the Planning Department has new staff that have come onboard, and so there is plenty of capacity to be bold.

The panel also heard several goals repeated over and over. Stakeholders want to bring more people downtown. They want to revitalize restaurant and retail activities. They want to encourage residential development. And finally, they want any new planning to be visionary and not just incremental.

That said, the panel also heard some opinions that varied. Stakeholders did not share a consistent view of what the boundaries of downtown were, besides an amorphous area centered around the clock tower, falls, and Five Corners. There was little agreement on what to do about parking. Some stakeholders felt that parking was a major constraint on future development, and others felt that there is more than enough and roads could even be shut down.

There also seems to be uncertainty with respect to the Historic District Commission's role. They play an important part in preserving the historic fabric, which is a valuable asset to the city, but stakeholders expressed concern that they make any kind of redevelopment difficult or unpredictable.

Finally, there were two trains of thought about the type of future redevelopment. Some stakeholders feel that any kind of revitalization is good, and that any tenant who wants to move to Methuen is a tenant that will speed along the downtown efforts. Others felt that a priority should be put on more valuable or better tenants, even if that means goals take longer.

## a. Site Assets

First and foremost, the panel sees the river and the falls as unique opportunities for revitalization. These beautiful natural resources were repeatedly mentioned as valuable parts of Methuen's downtown, but there are very few ways to actually experience them.

Downtown also has "good bones." The historic buildings are attractive and will be good resources for finding funding sources. The public realm has good sidewalks, and there is plenty of room for additional street activity. The existing parks and pedestrian walkways help create a green fabric that is able to link the disparate parts of downtown together. Along with the falls, the Music Hall is an incredible resource. The panel was without exception amazed at the musical and visual beauty of the organ performance it witnessed. Interviews suggested that few residents of the city have ever even been inside.

Additionally, the downtown has quick access to I-495 and I-93. As developers begin to look for additional places to cultivate an urban or millennial demographic, the ability of Methuen to serve as a commuter town is strong.



*The Odd Fellows Building in downtown Methuen.*

## b. Opportunities

With these assets in mind, the panel identified particular aspects of downtown that seem particularly attractive, and it used them to guide its recommendations.

There are multiple large and vacant parcels, and they are centrally located. Key developments on these sites can serve as a signalling mechanism to other property owners that the city is serious about meaningful changes downtown.

The City has Gateway City designation. This is an excellent way to get funding to start to make some of the changes it wants.

Beyond the falls, all parcels along the river are valuable. If development can happen to allow accessibility along roads while ensuring good views of the river, that will raise property values.

Finally, the panel thinks that the Odd Fellows Hall is a good enough building that it could be redeveloped into residential housing now. A combination of historic tax credits and the Housing Development Incentive Program can help close the funding gap.

## c. Challenges

There are still challenges the city must overcome to achieve its goals for downtown.

Zoning is complicated, and most projects require special permit approval. While it may seem good that the municipal government gets higher level of control over individual project, the dampening effect on developers by making the development process so unpredictable is substantial.

The topography around the falls and river is difficult. Between Hampshire Street and the river is a large change in elevation. Development with entrances on multiple levels is always expensive, and creating public realm improvements that can span that gap is expensive as well. Additionally, making any kind of grade changes accessible not only by stair but by ADA-compliant ramps can demand lots of space.



*A view of the falls from the municipal parking lot.*

As attractive as the extant historic buildings are, there are not many of them. In particular, Methuen never had the robust mill industry of cities like Lawrence. This means that there are fewer mill buildings as “low-hanging fruit,” with a historic former industrial character that can be readily redeveloped into lofts at attractive price points.

The large and centrally-located vacant parcels are an opportunity for development, but it is important to acknowledge that many of the Commonwealth’s financial incentive programs are not focused on this kind of downtown condition.

The downtown’s “core assets,” ranging from the city hall to the library to the fire station, are scattered. This makes it difficult to pick any one area of downtown to anchor as a center.

Finally, the city has a case of planning fatigue. There are no less than four major downtown or citywide plans from recent memory. With so many plans and so little implemented, the city needs some kind of downtown champion to make a new idea stick. As far as this panel’s recommendations can go, there will still need to be community support to make any kind of meaningful difference.

# Planning Recommendations

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## Summary

- **Financial:** implement state and local initiatives for redevelopment, work with MassDevelopment and ULI, use CDBG and meals tax money on larger improvements, encourage use of historic tax credits, use inspectional services for vacant lot enforcement, and build affordable housing as a spur for more market-rate housing.
- **Tactical Urbanism:** small test interventions like music events, parklets, and revised traffic patterns to draw residents and visitors to the downtown.
- **Cultural:** the music hall, the open space, and the existing building fabric will be what attract people to downtown.
- **Programmatic:** arts festivals, block parties, and farmer's markets will give people additional reasons to go downtown.
- **Physical:** Hampshire Street and Gaunt Park are good places for these events, and Hampshire Street eventually needs a more permanent connection with the downtown's river.

## Financial

As it currently stands, it is not realistic to get fully conventional financing for new market-rate construction in Methuen. While this is a hurdle to overcome, it is not insurmountable. The downtown has enough assets and potential resources that with some assistance in closing the funding gap and some creative programming, developers should be excited at the prospect of coming downtown.

The panel recommends that the city immediately start implementing as many state incentives for redevelopment as possible. The panel has heard multiple stakeholders and city officials discussing the possibility of creating a Chapter 40R district (a Smart Growth Zoning Overlay). The city should do this.

Additional state incentives, like HDIP (the Housing Development Incentive Program) and MassWorks grants (state grants for infrastructure improvements) are relatively easy ways to get financing for the sorts of projects this panel is suggesting.

While the initiatives listed above are provided on the state level, there are additional multiple incentives that the city can implement itself. TIFs and DIFs (tax increment financing) allow the city to designate a portion of future additional tax revenue generated from an improvement as the income stream needed to finance a bond to pay for the improvement itself. The Community Preservation Act allows the city to levy and use property taxes to improve open space, historic buildings, and create housing.

MassDevelopment (the state's development finance agency) and ULI, this TAP's two sponsors, are heavily involved in redevelopment projects across the state, and work with many developers who work in similar kinds of municipality. The city should reach out to developers through these agencies and spark interest in the initiatives it is beginning to undertake.

The city's Community Development Block Grant funds have been used successfully so far to promote facade improvements, but the panel believes that going forward, this money is an excellent source for funding larger and more strategic opportunities, especially when other funds have too many other restrictions and constraints.

As a result of the city's good financial management, the panel heard that the city is using its meals tax to shore up the city's financial reserves. It believes that the city might leverage this meals tax toward downtown revitalization efforts.

During stakeholder interviews as well as during the TAP presentation, the panel received questions from city residents about the availability of tax credits for development. Given the large number of important historic buildings downtown, the city should be more proactive in informing its key property owners about Historic Tax Credit grants and resources.



Step 1: Tactical Urbanism





### Step 3: Longer-Term Physical Improvements

The panel also heard during interviews that stakeholders are unhappy with the number of vacant lots downtown. One resource the city can use to encourage development on these lots is its Inspectional Services Division, which can be more stringent in inspecting those vacant lots. This might encourage developers to do something on those sites, rather than letting them stay fallow with fines.

Finally, the panel recommends that the city be strategic and consider additional affordable housing projects. A well-built affordable housing project is indistinguishable from market-rate housing. A well-designed affordable housing project creates a sense of place where one did not exist before, and creates a market where people want to go. Affordable housing projects are an excellent way for the city to set the stage for additional market-rate housing down the road.

## **Step 1: Tactical Urbanism**

The panel recommends that the City use tactical strategies to test the broader set of interventions it is recommending. The idea here is that multiple options can be tested, with low impact and low cost. Before spending the capital to create a new park, for example, the city could place temporary programming on a vacant lot to see if activity there seems to have a beneficial effect. Before committing to shutting down or redirecting a road, that road could be closed for a few hours a day as a temporary plaza space. If an idea is a bad one, the City can figure that out quickly, and move on to the next idea.

## **Step 2: Identifying Cultural Assets**

Methuen has many cultural assets already, and it should use them proudly for any downtown revitalization efforts.

The panel strongly recommends that the city be more strategic in its relationship with the Music Hall. While multiple stakeholders expressed that the organization running the Music Hall largely likes to

keep to itself, the panel is confident that there must be a middle ground that balances preservation with public engagement. Right now, weeknight concerts seem like an inconvenient time. Moving concert dates to Friday or the weekend could be part of a larger festival schedule. Hosting additional types of performance or broadening the musical selection would allow music hall performances to reach a larger subset of people seeking cultural enrichment.

The panel also recommends that the river and its corresponding open spaces be made more central. The river is beautiful, the falls provide a stunning view, and the open spaces are small but attractive. Better signage, increased publicity, and general civic awareness of these resources should actually draw people downtown. Additionally, the city should publicize the walking distance from local destinations to central parking lots. The mental map described by stakeholders makes the downtown seem larger and more disparate than it actually is.

The scale and the character of existing buildings is quirky and historic, and this panel believes that it is an important piece of allowing multiple kinds of activity to take place. Resources like Yelp demonstrate that when residents actually venture to downtown, they find gems of businesses (and resources like the falls and music hall.) This is a good sign that programmatic changes can make a difference.

## **Step 2.5: Programmatic Changes**

Any programmatic improvements should be considered with two goals in mind. Programs should build community, and they should test planning concepts and community interests.

Arts programming is an excellent example. Many Massachusetts municipalities have arts festivals that allow for community engagement at low cost. AHA! is a monthly festival in New Bedford where dozens of small businesses and institutions related to art, history, and architecture are able to draw thousands of visitors through outreach and creative

programming. Porchfest in Somerville showcases well over a hundred bands, who all perform in various private properties at the same time, spread across the city. By staggering performance times, the festival encourages residents to travel east-to-west and see the whole city for themselves.

Block parties and farmers markets are other ways to activate underutilized space. While farmers markets only need to occur once a week or a few times a month, they are still a way to encourage new people to see what exists downtown. Block parties encourage residents to meet their neighborhoods and see what assets exist around them that they might be ignoring.

These are the sorts of interventions that can be tried tactically, and improved on incrementally.

### Step 3: Physical Improvements

First and foremost, the city needs to decide what it wants to define “downtown” as. Roughly speaking, this panel identified downtown as bounded by Broadway, Osgood Street, Hampshire Street, and High Street, though these boundaries are not hard and fast.

The panel thinks that Hampshire Street is an excellent choice for temporary closures for festivals, food trucks, and other events. At the TAP presentation, several businessowners expressed concerns that the idea of street closures, especially on Hampshire, could pose an undue hardship on the few businesses that are actually present already. The panel wants to stress that these sorts of closures are supposed to have minimal negative impact while maximizing positive benefit. While a street might be closed to single-occupancy vehicle traffic for part of the evening on a weekend, local commercial and delivery vehicles can still be permitted to enter to allow businesses to function. The city will certainly want to coordinate its timing on these initiatives with a schedule that minimizes impact on businessowners. If, finally, after testing an intervention like this, a street closure does not have sufficient positive impact, the city moves on to another idea.

Gaunt Park is an attractive location, but the large parking lot along the street obscures the resource from view. This is an excellent example for where programmatic changes mentioned above can be made more permanent.

The panel would like to see Hampshire Street eventually connected more permanently with the river. The connection between the two at the alley by Bada Bing could be improved, with better lighting, improved paving, new signage, and so on. Additionally, a potential stair connection could be placed by the 1859 House. While topography is a challenge and a corresponding ADA ramp would need care, the panel heard from many stakeholders that there is discussion for various property redevelopments along that block. One way or another, additional ways of connecting those two paths is important.

Additionally, the panel recommends that Route 28 / Broadway undergo a “road diet” where it meets Hampshire Street. Part of the larger strategy of “complete streets,” this means shrinking lane widths or reducing the number of car lanes and using that space to increase sidewalks, create bike lanes, and create better green spaces and medians. The idea is to, within an existing right-of-way, shift the balance of road utilization from focusing solely on the car and more toward encouraging multiple modes of transit. This shift is part of the strategy of encouraging more foot traffic in the largely empty downtown, and goes hand in hand with active programming opportunities.

Finally, the panel sees the revitalization of Five Corners as a long-term goal. It certainly serves as a gateway to downtown, and the firehouse is an attractive anchor. However, the panel thinks that these improvements can only come after substantial work has been done closer to the falls, at which point property values might be valuable enough to finance the larger expenditures needed at Five Corners.