# A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

# Coordinating Action In The North Canal District

Lawrence, Massachusetts



Lawrence 1912: The Bread & Roses Strike

APRIL 11, 2013



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Under the direction of the Urban Land Institute's Boston District Council, the Lawrence Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) convened in Lawrence in December, 2012, bringing together stakeholders, including City, business, and community leaders, and a panel of land use and development professionals to focus on the North Canal Historic District, specifically on the factors limiting commercial lease up. The panel was also asked to consider strategies the city could embrace to support revitalization in the district with limited resources. The report that follows summarizes the TAP recommendations in five chapters.

*Chapter 1: ULI and the TAP Process* gives an overview of the Urban Land Institute's Boston District Council and its Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs).

Chapter 2: Background and Assignment provides relevant background information about the North Canal Historic District, including subdistricts as described in the 2007 Lawrence Canal District Revitalization Strategy: Existing Conditions, Issues, Opportunities, and Strengths Report (LCDRS). The chapter also highlights recently completed and ongoing activity in the district, as well as the city's efforts to date.

*Chapter 3: Observation & Findings* presents the most significant insights that emerged from interviews with stakeholders and the panel's tour of the Study Area. The panel identified four main factors that continue to contribute to high vacancy rates and slow lease up of mill properties: (1) building stock; (2) investment challenges; (3) transportation infrastructure/parking; and (4) amenities / aesthetics, which are discussed in more detail in the chapter.

Chapter 4: Planning Considerations presents the panel's recommendations, which are organized under (a) The Canal; (b) Circulation, Access, and Parking; and (c) Signage and Branding. As the organizing feature of Lawrence's downtown area, the canal has the potential to be one of the City's greatest assets. The canal could be part of an elaborate plan in the long term, but there are a series of high impact, relatively low budget interventions that would enhance the canal such that it becomes a real amenity much sooner. The city also needs to address circulation, access, and parking holistically, and develop a a parking strategy that is informed by comprehensive development strategy. Finally, a coordinated signage and branding campaign would make Lawrence's sites and attractions more recognizable and signal "welcome" to newcomers and returning visitors alike.

*Chapter 5: Recommendations* provides recommended actions for stakeholders to pursue toward these planning considerations. These include (a) Smooth the Entitlement Process; (b) Leverage Relationships; (c) Be Creative and Clever; and (d) Focus on Transportation.

*Appendix A* provides a detailed list of participants in the Lawrence TAP including Town officials, stakeholders, and the panel of land use and development professionals.

*Appendix B* provides a list of documents referenced.



Figure 1: The North Canal Historic District and Downtown Lawrence

# 1 | ULI & 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 nearly 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, economic development professionals, among others.

As the preeminent, 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 District Council serves the six New England states and has over 1,000 members.

## b. Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)

The ULI Boston 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 typically spends one to two days 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.

### c. MassDevelopment Support

Recognizing the alignment between ULI Boston's Technical Assistance Panels and MassDevelopment's mission to support sustainable redevelopment across the Commonwealth, the two organizations have partnered to support TAPs in eight Gateway Cities throughout the Commonwealth. The Lawrence TAP was the seventh sponsored by MassDevelopment to date.

### d. Panelists and the TAP Process

#### **Panel Members**

ULI Boston convened a panel of volunteers whose members represent a range of the disciplines associated with urban redevelopment, with specific expertise in revitalization of underperforming commercial areas.

Disciplines represented included planning, architecture, market analysis, and development finance and entitlement. Members were selected with the intent of convening a robust array of professional expertise relevant to the Town's objectives for this TAP. Following is the list of panelists:

- George Tremblay, Arrowstreet, Inc. (TAP Co-Chair)
- Jeremy Wilkening, Somerville Community Corporation (TAP Co-Chair)
- Astrid Glynn, TPRG
- Victor Karen, Development Consultant
- Craig Lizotte, VHB
- Kathy McCabe, McCabe Enterprises
- Rhonda Spector, Mass Development

Caitlin Bowler, planner, served as a consulting technical writer, while Michelle Landers of ULI Boston provided organizational and technical support in preparation for and during the TAP event.

Three other individuals served as primary contacts for ULI Boston.

- James Barnes, Director, Community Development Department, City of Lawrence
- Brad Buschur, Project Director, Groundwork Lawrence
- Jim Lydon, Senior Vice President at MassDevelopment, provides overall coordination of MassDevelopment involvement in the joint ULI/MassDevelopment TAP Program.

#### **Stakeholders**

The TAP benefited from the participation of the diverse group of stakeholders—property owners, local residents, community-based organizations, business people, city council members, and other city and regional officials—who met with the panel and shared information, ideas, and opinions on a range of issues effecting the North Canal District. A comprehensive list of all stakeholders is located in Appendix A.

#### **TAP Process**

The Lawrence TAP was held on December 4, 2012 at the Everett Mill, 15 Union Street, Lawrence. James Barnes and Brad Buschur welcomed the panelists at the Lawrence History Center on the 6th floor of the Everett Mill before leading the panel on a walking tour of the North Canal Historic District. The tour began at the site of the Everett and Stone Mills and proceeded onto the Island, passing Union Crossing, 60 Island Street and Duck Mill, before looping back on Canal Street via the rehabilitated bridge at Pemberton Mill. After the tour, the ULI panel interviewed a diverse series of stakeholders to gain a better understanding of relevant issues, dynamics, and opportunities in the North Canal Historic District The panelists then engaged in an intensive charrette to develop potential revitalization concepts for the District, as well as "next step" recommendations. The panel presented these to the public that evening. The presentation is available electronically at the ULI Boston website http://boston.uli.org.



Duck Mill; Looking south across the canal.

# 2 | Background & Assignment

# a. The North Canal District

The North Canal Historic District is at the heart of Lawrence's historic past. As described in material produced by the North Canal Coalition in January 2012, "The North Canal District encompasses a mile long, 60 acre tract of buildings, streets, a dam, and a canal all developed starting in 1845 with the construction of the North Canal locks and wasteways. It was the heart of a new manufacturing city intended to accommodate 30,000 people. Incorporated in 1853, Lawrence became one of the largest and best-planned mill cities in America" (NCC 2012).

The 2007 Lawrence Canal District Revitalization Strategy: Existing Conditions, Issues, Opportunities, and Strengths Report (LCDRS) identifies a series of sub-districts, zones, and corridors within the Canal District Study Areamuch of which is contained within the North Canal Historic District boundary (Figure 2). These include: **The Gateway Initiative Sub-District [A].** This triangular area greets visitors arriving in Lawrence via I-495 and Marston Street. It includes the recently completed 865 car municipal parking lot, the Everett Mill, which spans three blocks along Union Street, the Stone Mill, and 181 Canal Street. A park is planned for the Oxford site (corner of Canal and Marston Streets) to be completed in 2013.

**Canal Street Gateway [B].** The first segment of Canal Street is designated as a Gateway Corridor in the LCDRS Report.

Canal Street Corridor/Redevelopment Zone [B1]. Canal Street forms the northern border of the canal and provides access to the Island at a number of pedestrian and vehicular crossings.

**East Island Sub-district [C].** This district is anchored on its western edge by the redeveloped 60 Island Street and the Union Crossing redevelopment effort and defined at its western end by the Ferrous site, otherwise known as the "Urban Wild."

The former mill building at 60 Island Street was converted into office and commercial space and has served as an unofficial "incubator" for small local enterprises The building was handsomely renovated into Class B space and now houses several major anchor tenants, including a branch of Cambridge College and a start up software development company that is in the process of expanding further. It stands as a symbol of what a revitalized Lawrence could be. But at 64,700 SF it is considerably smaller than other mill buildings in the area (i.e. Everett Mill, approximately 455,000 SF) that are significantly underutilized.



Figure 2: Sub-Districts within the North Canal Historic District

Union Street Corridor [D]. Union Street is a primary access route into the City, especially from the south (via the Duck Bridge). Past Canal Street, its eastern edge is dominated by the six story Everett Mill facade.

**Central Island Sub-District [E].** The central section of the island contains a mix of mill buildings now being put to various uses, including adaptive reuse residential (Washington Mills, 155 units) and passive commercial (Pemberton Building, Iron Mountain). Residential uses have been proposed for Pacific Mills (350 units) and 240 Canal Street (291 units), but

those projects are currently uncertain. Reconstruction of the Duck Bridge and the Pedestrian Bridge make this section of the island significantly more accessible than it had been.

West Island Sub-District [F]. "The West Island includes the city's vastly underutilized Pemberton Parking Lot, the State's Pemberton Park along the Merrimack River, and Cardinal Shoe Company. Because of the West Island's relative remoteness from the central business district...its future is not clear" (LCDRS 36).

### **b. Recent Activity & Partnerships**

#### COMPLETED:

- Union Crossing at 50 Union Street (60 units; commercial space)
- Washington Mills (150 units)

#### **ONGOING:**

- Northern Essex Community College Expansion. Expansion of the Northern Essex Community College is well under way; completion of the El-Hefni Allied Health and Technology Building, which will become the new center of NECC's Lawrence Urban Campus in 2013. This was possible only with the City's collaboration regarding demolition of the In-Town Mall.
- Spicket River Greenway Project. This 2.5 mile long network of trails will link six new and existing parks from Methuen to the Merrimack River.
- Malden Mills/Polartec/Loft50 (156 unit, mixed income rental)
- Monarch on the Merrimack (204 units)
- North Canal Coalition. This ongoing partnership includes businesses, property owners, and community-based organizations collaborating on issues central to the District. Participants meet monthly to discuss planning and implementation strategies as well as updates on development activity. (The group originally formed to support the Reviviendo Gateway Overlay District, which enabled residential use by right in a portion of the North Canal District.)

#### c. The City's Efforts to Date

In the past decade the City—with significant support from the State—has pursued progress through incremental, sustained efforts, assisting in completion of a number of large scale public works projects. These include:

- Completion of the Gateway Redevelopment area, which includes creation of 865 parking spaces on a former brownfield site and which will include a 3-acre passive park on the Oxford site.
- Completion of major infrastructure projects on Canal Street, including rehabilitation of the the Duck Bridge, the Canal Street Bridge (over the Spicket River), and the widening of Canal Street from the Marston Street intersection to Union Street.
- Opening of the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Massachusetts immigration office.
- The City continues to engage in planning through support of other organizations, including MassDevelopment (2007/2008), and more recently Project for Public Spaces, Inc., in collaboration with Groundwork Lawrence, Lawrence CommunityWorks, and the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance (2012).

### d. The City's Objectives for the TAP

In the TAP application the City and Groundwork Lawrence (co-applicants) articulated three specific questions for the panel to address as it considered the existing conditions in the North Canal Historic District. These were:

- (1) What are the main factors impacting high vacancy rates and slow lease up of mill properties?
- (2) What strategies should the mill owners implement [to facilitate more lease up]?
- (3) How can a City government with strained resources support the strategies?



Panelists in the Gateway District.



An informal walkway on the canal's south side in the Central Island Redevelopment Zone, directly in front of the Duck Mill. The newly reconstructed Pedestrian Bridge is in the background.

# **3 | Observations & Findings**

The North Canal Historic District is a unique and fascinating place with a variety of opportunities that have yet to be realized because of equally formidable challenges—often on the other side of the coin.

The panel identified four main factors that continue to contribute to high vacancy rates and slow lease up of mill properties: (1) building stock, (2) investment challenges, (3) transportation infrastructure/parking, and (4) amenities / aesthetics.



The historic Stone Mill

TABLE 1: CHALLENGES/OPPORTUNITIES IDENTIFIED BY PANEL

Challenges	Opportunities
Excessive Building Stock	Good building stock
Structure of Stock	Historically significant stock & landscape
Infrastructure deteriorating—canal, sidewalks	Infrastructure improvements—bridges, parking
Flooding issues	Waterfront property
Parking allocation, location, circulation	Good geographic location
Market—commercial and residential	Regional connections
Strained resources	Public transportation / commuter rail
Fragmented vision	Urban environment—attractive views
Image	Labor force

#### (1) Building Stock

The sheer scale of the space available in Lawrence's historic mills is incredible. A 1997 summary inventory of total building square footages across three districts—the North Canal Historic District, the Central Business District, and the South Canal Mill District—prepared by RKG Associates reported 12.8 million gross square feet on 279 acres of land. Most of the buildings identified in the 2007 LCDRS report as being underutilized were in the North Canal Mill District. These include: (1) Ferrous Technology Site, (2) Everett & Stone Mill, (3) Duck Mill, (4) Pemberton Mill, (5) 250 Canal Street, (6) Pacific Mills, (7) River Mill / Newark Paper Company. According to the LCDRS Existing Conditions report, in 1997 the commercial vacancy rate in the North Canal District was 32% (compared to 41% in the CBD and 31% in the three districts overall).

Although handsome when renovated, much of this kind of "flex" space poses challenges for modern uses. Everett Mill, for instance, is too wide to accommodate residential uses, while Pemberton Mill—now used for storage by Iron Mountain—has very little area on site to allow for parking.



The sheer scale of building stock available in Lawrence is remarkable. The Ayer Mill, now home to New Balance offices, is shown in the distance.

#### (2) Associated Investment Challenge

Large capital investments —such as modern freight elevators—would be required to allow new tenants to move in, leaving owners in something of a financial Catch-22.

#### (3) Transportation Infrastructure / Parking

The North Canal Historic District is an urban landscape originally designed to accommodate walkers, that now struggles to adequately serve walkers and drivers. For those who drive, there is an abundant and increasingly well-maintained parking supply, but it is not logically connected to the places people want (or could want, if redevelopment were to occur) to go.

In 2007 the LCDRS Report described the underlying problem as follows:

"In many cases, properties lack room to provide sufficient parking to support full redevelopment. Physically, structured parking facilities could provide sufficient parking spaces; however, current real estate economics do not allow property owners to afford the construction of structured parking. In other cases, there are significantly underutilized parking lots scattered throughout the downtown and canal district; however, they are either not located where highest demand exists, or, they are associated with individual existing properties that have not offered their surplus spaces for use by others" (LCDRS 51).

Sidewalk infrastructure is poor and sometimes unsafe because of its physical state or proximity to roads with narrow shoulders, and a lack of enforcement on sidewalk snow removal for both walkers and drivers (since drivers eventually need to walk to get from their cars to their destinations). And for those who rely on transit, the 30 minute peak arrival times are inadequate.

Lastly, there is an unclear parking revenue structure.

#### (4) Amenities / Aesthetics

The North Canal Historic District could benefit from aesthetically driven upgrades to its public realm. This would include formal walking paths, lighting, and signage. But what it absolutely requires to become a thriving neighborhood are amenities that will serve residents—and workers—who move into the area. A streetscape with adequate sidewalks, lighting and sidewalks is also an important, but longer term proposition.

# 4 | Planning Considerations

# a. The Canal

The North Canal is arguably the organizing feature of Lawrence's downtown area—physically and historically—and has the potential to be one of the City's greatest assets. Originating at Broadway and Canal Street, the canal stretches a full mile east until its termination at the Lower Locks Waterfall, located at the confluence of the Spicket and Merrimack Rivers.

Although in various states of disrepair, it maintains a real, if dilapidated beauty and serves as a reminder of the City's storied past. The City and State have invested significant resources to improve the infrastructure that provides access across the canal.

A significant cluster of established organizations, leased up buildings, and successful projects continues to take shape east of Union Street, maintaining the promise that a mix of people—workers and residents—will spend large portions of their days in the vicinity of the Canal and could see it as an amenity. These projects include the Essex Arts Center, 60 Island Street (including Cambridge Community College), Phase 1 of Union Crossing, and Phase 2 of that project, which is now seeking financing for redevelopment.

While reconstruction of the canal may seem a distant possibility in this time of fiscal austerity, thoughtful and judicious landscape and pedestrian upgrades to land directly adjacent to the canal could create a viable pedestrian environment along the canal. (See the route in Figure 2). An investment to link the Duck Bridge with the "urban wild" at the Ferrous Site would create a solid link that could bring life to the canal. The City should pursue this and similar actions in the spirit of the May 2012 *Placemaking in the North Canal District* report—"lighter, quicker, cheaper."



#### **Action Steps:**

How can a City government with strained resources support these strategies?

**Engage Business Owners.** The City should engage business owners and property owners located along canal in the service of the *Placemaking in the North Canal District* plan. That document provides significant guidance in terms of vision, possibilities, and recommendation for action throughout the canal district, including at the (1) Ferrous site / Lower Locks Waterfall, (2) the intersection at Union and Canal Streets, (3) Lawrence Heritage State Park, (4) along the Canal, and (5) Pemberton Park/Cardinal Shoe. Create a business roundtable to ensure that steps planned and implemented support elements of this plan, which is the result of major recent efforts.

Work with Partner Organizations. There are a number of strong and vested organizations in Lawrence that may have an interest in collaborating in efforts to make upgrades to the canal corridor a reality. The organizations include Groundwork Lawrence, Lawrence CommunityWorks, Lawrence General Hospital, Northern Essex Community College, and Cambridge College.

**Infrastructure, Lighting, Safety**. Small improvements, especially in regards to lighting, can make an outsized impression in terms of perceived safety and invitation to use an otherwise unimproved area. Plan connections to Essex Street as part of this effort; these connections could be visual in nature at first.

**Engage public safety officials**. Promote a visible public safety presence on the canal, especially during possible recreation times—e.g. morning and late afternoon. Build police ministation along canal that can be a home base for bike and pedestrian officers.

**Manage legal research.** Enel, an Italian power company with North American Headquarters in Andover, MA, owns the canal itself and is responsible for its maintenance. The City should take a leadership role in working with Enel Green Power to clean and beautify the canal, in part by monitoring and facilitating the research required to eliminate barriers to development and action.



This multi-use trail links Lake Ontario in the north to the Erie Canalway Trail, south of Rochester's downtown.



Coordinated wayfinding signage.



An interpretive sign at High Falls.

### **b. Circulation, Access, and Parking**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, parking is an issue for the city; parking is abundant and well-maintained, but it is not logically connected to the places people want to go. For this reason, circulation, access, and parking for the entire district must be considered deliberately and addressed holistically. The City should initiate and lead a District-wide effort to develop a parking strategy that is informed by comprehensive development strategy. Such a strategy would consider uses, density, and design guidelines (that account for parking requirements) and would provide stakeholders (property owners, business operators) with the information they need, while reassuring developers, property owners, and institutional stakeholders who are looking to act.

It will be critical that mill owners commit to participating in such an effort, so that all needs and concerns are adequately identified so they can be incorporated into the resulting strategy going forward.

### **Genesee Riverway Trail**

#### **Rochester, New York**

The Genessee Riverway Trail is a 16 mile long multi-use trail that runs through Rochester's downtown along the banks of the Genesee River. The trail wends through the downtown riverside historic district, linking historic and natural sites of interest such as, the Erie Canal Aqueduct (1842) and High Falls. In the heart of downtown it connects to the city's 1.25 mile Heritage Trail (walking) that links to additional sites off the river. A system of wayfinding and interpretive signs encourage and guide public use.

#### c. Signage & Branding Campaign

Lawrence has a lot to recommend it to visitors of all stripes, from museums and notable architecture to parks and restaurants. Yet there is very little signage to help a visitor new to the city find those attractions or public parking. A branding campaign—manifested through wayfinding signage—would give the city an opportunity to put a welcoming foot forward by orienting people to the city and inviting them to look around. Both mill owners and the city should participate in and support a District-wide public relations/ branding campaign.



An interpretive sign on the Riverway looking toward the Frederick Douglass–Susan B. Anthony Memorial Bridge.

# **5 | Recommendations**

### a. Smooth the Entitlement Process

- Fast track permitting.
- Empower a Development Point Person. This person would coordinate staff from all departments involved in the development process, including planning, inspectional services, economic and community development, and historic preservation.

### **b. Leverage Relationships**

- Maintain partnerships at the local level.
- Build on the City's strong partnership with the Commonwealth.
- Capitalize on Public and Private Relationships.
- Convene and call corporations and state partners.

### c. Be Creative and Clever

- Resource investments need to maximize benefits. All major investments need to solve at least two problems (Example Infrastructure and Placemaking).
- Judiciously and creatively use development incentives such as DIF, TIF and Brownfield Tax Credits.
- Aggressively pursue funding options and look at corporate and foundation funding, especially for amenities.
- City should work with Lawrence CommunityWorks and Groundwork Lawrence on new MA Community Development Tax Credit Program.

### d. Focus on Transportation

- Develop comprehensive, district-wide parking strategy and policy.
- Explore and support new resource development such as a parking authority, lighting district or public-private partnership.
- Applaud revenue collections for Essex Street parking and enforce existing parking fees and collect all revenue.
- Consider the full trip in planning, from entering the District to getting to the front door.



Figure 3: Connecting Institutional Goals & Objectives With City Priorities

# Appendix A

The TAP benefited from the participation of the diverse group of stakeholders—property owners, local residents, business people, city council members, and other city and regional officials—who met with the panel and shared information, ideas, and opinions on a range of issues effecting the North Canal District. The following is a list of all who participated in the interview sessions.

#### **BUSINESS & NON-PROFIT REPRESENTATIVES**

- Chet Sidel
- Gary Sidel
- Luis Yepez
- Richard Bass
- Marianne Paley Nadel
- Alida Davis
- Michael Broomfield
- Loryn Sheffner

#### **PUBLIC OFFICIALS**

- Jim Barnes, Community Development Department Director
- Patrick Blanchette, Chief Economic Development Director
- Dan McCarthy, Land-Use Planner
- Michael Mitchell, Lawrence Heritage State Park (DCR)
- Frank Moran, City Council President (State Representative elect)
- Dan Rivera, City Council Vice-President, Budget and Finance Committee Chair

- Joe Costanza, Merrimack Valley Regional Transportation Authority
- Dennis Dizoglio, Merrimack Valley Regional Planning Agency

#### **Non-profits**

- Andre Leroux, Mass Smart Growth Alliance
- Dave Tibbets, Merrimack Valley Economic Development Council
- Heather McMann, Groundwork Lawrence
- Spencer Buchholz, Lawrence Community-Works
- Leslie Costello, Essex Arts Center
- Susan Grabski, Lawrence History Center
- Lane Glen, President, Northern Essex Community College
- Mary Ellen Ashley, Northern Essex Community College

# Appendix **B**

The documents listed below were referenced in this report.

- Placemaking in the North Canal District: Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper—A short term action plan. Project for Public Spaces, Inc. May, 2012.
- Series of Maps. North Canal Coalition. January, 2012.
- Lawrence Canal District Revitalization Strategy: Master Plan Strategy Report. Prepared by: R.E. Dinneen Architects & Planners, Inc., Bluestone Planning Group, RKG Associates, Byrne McKinney & Associates. November, 2008.
- Lawrence Canal District Revitalization Strategy: Existing Conditions, Issues, Opportunities, and Strengths Report. Prepared by: R.E. Dinneen Architects & Planners, Inc., Bluestone Planning Group, RKG Associates, Byrne McKinney & Associates. July, 2007.