

# A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

## City of Westfield

Westfield, MA



October 26, 2015



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# Executive Summary

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The Westfield TAP convened at Westfield City Hall on October 26, 2015. Under the direction of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council, the all-day event brought together city leaders and planning officials, downtown business people and building owners, and a panel of design, engineering, development, and planning professionals. The session focused on how Westfield could take its downtown revitalization efforts to the next level after spending \$100 million on a series of sweeping infrastructure improvements. The report looks at the past, present, and future of downtown Westfield while highlighting opportunities and offering recommendations for city and community leaders.

**Chapter 1: ULI and the TAP Process** offers an overview of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council and its Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs), while also detailing the panel members and stakeholders who took part.

**Chapter 2: Background and History** details the evolution of downtown Westfield through the 19th, 20th, and early 21st centuries.

**Chapter 3: TAP Goals** lays out the three major questions/goals that Westfield sought panelists help with.

**Chapter 4: Assets and Infrastructure** highlights Westfield's strengths. The city has built \$100 million in new infrastructure over the past few years, including two bridges over the Westfield River, one new and one completely renovated, as well as new utilities, streets, and sidewalks downtown. Westfield has a number of large and stable employers, both private and public, and a modest pace of growth that puts it in the middle of the pack for Western Massachusetts cities and towns. The city also boasts a strong residential real estate market, with low vacancy in the downtown.

**Chapter 5: Challenges** examines some of the difficulties Westfield faces as it tries to revitalize its downtown business district, including:

- **Attracting New Business:** Westfield is a dynamic city with rural, suburban and urban elements. Downtown Westfield is lacking a cohesive message and identity, which could establish it as a destination. Downtown Westfield needs new attractions to draw residents to its core. Both panelists and stakeholders offered ideas from a retail anchor to a movie theater or performance arts center to a Westfield State University bookstore.
- **Market Leakage:** There is significant market leakage, with Westfield residents spending roughly a quarter of their dollars outside the city. Vacant storefronts and absentee landlords, leading to empty and rundown buildings, are a significant issue.
- **Aging Real Estate:** Yet attracting new downtown businesses is difficult, with building owners unable to recoup the cost of retrofitting older buildings.
- **Parking and Way Finding Signage Issues:** Some merchants complained of overly strict rules and overzealous enforcement by the city, while signs for municipal lots and points of interest are few and far between.
- **No Downtown Business Association:** Meanwhile, the dismantling of the city's business improvement district has left a leadership void downtown.

# Executive Summary continued

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## **Chapter 6: Varying Opinions/Contrasting Views**

discusses the different views expressed between downtown business owners, city leaders, and residents on some key issues.

There was disagreement whether truck traffic poses a big problem to efforts to revitalize downtown Westfield. Some residents and panelists felt it could be an impediment to al fresco dining and could limit overall walkability. Others argued the issue is overblown.

There was also disagreement over a proposal to build a bus station, parking garage and commercial complex on the urban renewal site on Elm Street. Some question whether the bus station would truly be an economic magnet and whether the \$14 million slated for the parking garage might be better spent on other projects.

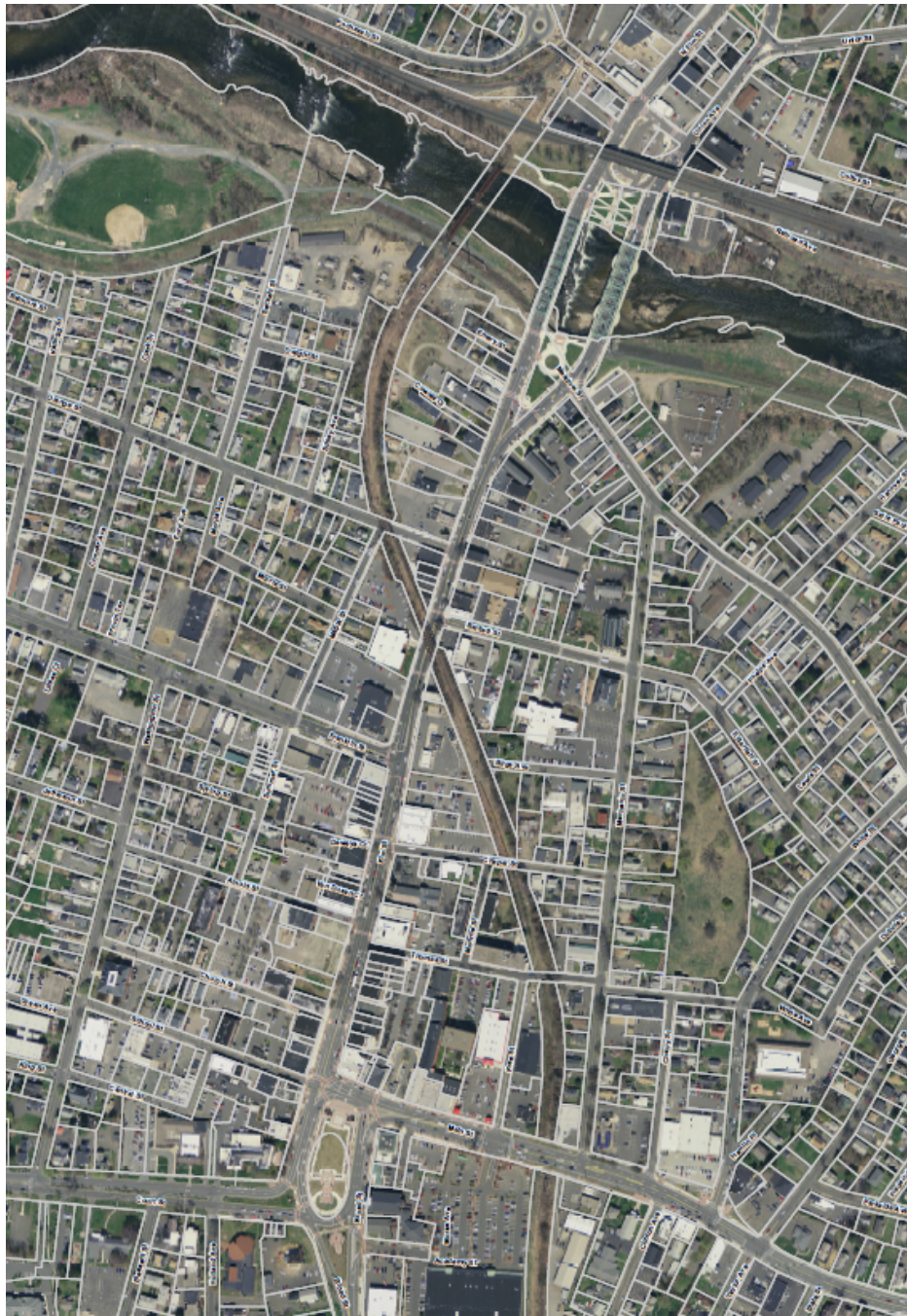
**Chapter 7: Recommendations** explores some of the new projects and initiatives that have the potential to revitalize downtown Westfield as well as recommendations from the panel, including:

- Urban Renewal Plan: The city has an approved urban renewal plan, with hopes of building a transportation center/commercial complex on a long unused lot in the heart of the downtown commercial district.
- Design Competition: The panel has suggested a design competition to generate new ideas and concepts for the site and test feasibility.
- Town/Gown Connection: New leadership at Westfield City Hall and the Westfield State University could provide the basis of a new relationship for pursuing downtown partnerships, with Westfield's new mayor and Westfield State University's new president urged to make those connections early and often.

- Bike Path/Festivals: The extension of the Columbia Greenway bike trail and the creation of riverfront parkland next to the city's new and revamped bridges is also a major step forward. Westfield should take advantage of these new attractions to program place-maker events, such as a bike race or a "River Day." Further, the panel was encouraged by the revamp of a food festival, similar to the days of the "Taste of Westfield." The panel recommended that an annual food festival continue.
- Signage: New signage highlighting city attractions and parking availability, and possibly new funds for renovating older downtown buildings for new retail and other tenants, are other ideas discussed.

**Chapter 8: Feasibility and Financing** discusses the panel's recommendation that additional research should be done on some key issues. Westfield should consider a transportation-and-parking study as well as updating market leakage stats. The chapter also looks at potential state, federal, and private sources of financing for downtown revitalization efforts.





*Downtown Westfield Study Area*

# 1. 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 35,000 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)

Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) are designed to bring interdisciplinary land use expertise to communities and stakeholders at low cost. Panels are composed of experienced experts in multiple real estate, planning, and architecture specializations who volunteer to spend one full day in the designated area to assess its current challenges and future opportunities. They interview stakeholders, community leaders, and residents; examine future development scenarios; and outline actionable steps for implementation. The day ends in a public presentation that summarizes the panel's findings and general recommendations. This detailed final report is published 6-8 weeks later.

## c. MassDevelopment Support

MassDevelopment is the state's economic development and finance authority. The authority works closely with state, local, and federal officials to boost housing and create jobs. With the power to act as both a lender and developer, MassDevelopment also works to fill in gaps in infrastructure, transportation, energy, and other areas that may be holding back economic growth. MassDevelopment has worked with ULI since 2011 to help sponsor and support the TAP process in cities and towns across the Commonwealth.



*The panelists tour downtown Westfield.*



## d. Panel Members

ULI Boston/New England convened a volunteer panel of experts to examine the challenges and opportunities facing downtown Westfield and offer recommendations.

The panel members were chosen for their expertise in fields based on the objectives Westfield set forth in its TAP application: planning, architecture, traffic/civil engineering and real estate development. The panelists were:

- **Jim Heffernan**, Attorney, Patridge, Snow & Hahn LLP (TAP Chair)
- **Scott Payette**, Principal, Scott Payette Architects
- **Naveenth Raj Congeevaram**, Brokerage Associate, Mansard Commercial Properties
- **Jamie Simchik**, Principal, Simchik Planning & Development
- **Russell Burke**, Director of Planning, BSC Group
- **Peter Gagliardi**, Executive Director, HAPHousing
- **John Markowitz**, MassDevelopment, Vice President, Infrastructure/Finance
- **Neil McCullagh**, Director, Corcoran Center For Real Estate and Urban Action, Boston College
- **Matt Mrva**, New England Director of Landscape Architecture, Bohler Engineering
- **John Mullin**, Professor of Regional Planning, University of Massachusetts Amherst, and Associate Director of the Center for Economic Development

Peter Miller, Director of Community Development for the City of Westfield, served as the primary contact for ULI Boston/New England for the city.

Scott Van Voorhis served as a consulting technical writer while Michelle Landers and Ileana Tauscher of ULI Boston/New England provided organizational and technical support in preparation for and during the TAP event.



*The panelists during the planning charrette.*

## e. Stakeholders

The Westfield TAP brought together a wide range of stakeholders, including downtown building owners and representatives of major local institutions and businesses. Stakeholders included:

- **Ted Cassell**, Owner Broker, Park Square Realty
- **Kathleen Witalisz**, Chair, Westfield Redevelopment Authority
- **Kevin O'Connor**, Vice President, Westfield Bank
- **Peter Morizio**, Partner, Morizio Brothers Property Management
- **Patrick Berry**, Owner/President, Westfield News Group
- **Tom and Anne Woodson**, George's Jewelers
- **Michael Knapik**, Executive Director, Westfield State University Office of Advancement & University Relations
- **Ronald Bryant**, President, Baystate Noble Hospital

## f. TAP Process

The Westfield TAP met on October 26, 2015 at Westfield City Hall.

Peter Miller, Director of Community Development, gave TAP panelists a tour of Westfield, driving by many of the points of interest in and around downtown Westfield. These included the Westfield State University campus, about 2 ½ miles from downtown Westfield, the new Great River Bridge, and newly created parkland by the Westfield River.

Panelists and stakeholders then met in downtown Westfield in front of the Bentley Billiards building, which is encumbered by liens from various debtors, including the city, and is an example of some of the challenges the city has faced dealing with absentee landlords.

The group also looked at the urban renewal site just across Elm Street from the building, where a bus station and commercial complex are proposed.

Everyone then walked down the Elm Street commercial corridor, observing the mix of businesses, as well as challenges, such as vacancies and heavy truck traffic.

A downtown property owner detailed the challenges faced by building owners in attracting new tenants, with the often prohibitive cost of upgrading older buildings discussed.

Panelists then reconvened at Westfield City Hall for a series of interview with city officials, business leaders, commercial and residential building owners, local store owners, and residents.

After a working lunch, panelists spent the afternoon discussing potential ideas for revitalizing downtown Westfield and putting together a presentation highlighting their observations and recommendations.

The findings were then unveiled that evening before a group of city officials and residents in the Westfield City Council chambers.

The TAP concluded with a question-and-answer session after the presentation. Some residents expressed concerns ranging from truck traffic downtown to a failure to capitalize on previous reports detailing proposals for revitalizing the city's business district.



*Panelists touring in front of a local pizza place.*



## 2. Background & History

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### a. Evolution of Downtown Westfield

Once a sleepy farm town, Westfield was transformed into a major industrial hub during the 1800s. The city became the largest manufacturer of buggy whips in the country, earning the colorful nickname “Whip City.”

Other factories churned out everything from cigars to radiators.

Bicycling also got its start in Westfield. Columbia, one of the best known bicycle brands and the founder of the cycling industry in the U.S., opened its doors in Westfield back in 1877 and still calls the city home.

However, the city’s manufacturing base peaked and then began to decline in the second half of the 20th century as low cost competition from other parts of the U.S. and overseas took its toll.

Once a thriving shopping district with its own movie theater and other attractions, Westfield’s main downtown business corridor, Elm Street, has faced a slow decline as manufacturing took a hit and suburbs took shape in other parts of the city.

A fire in 1952 destroyed the Westfield Professional Building. The six-story building, which covered half a block, was home to doctors, dentists and lawyers.

Many professionals relocated out of downtown business corridor to other locations after the fire.

Longer term development patterns have also helped siphon off foot traffic and shoppers from downtown Westfield.

Thousands of residents live in suburban neighborhoods away from downtown, some with access to a retail strip featuring big box stores on the east side of Westfield. Many more residents prefer to travel to surrounding communities including West Springfield, Easthampton, Northampton, and Hadley for their shopping, dining, and entertainment.

This newer retail development, in turn, is positioned between the older businesses of downtown Westfield and the city’s suburban developments. This means many residents can do their shopping without ever setting foot downtown.

Downtown Westfield is also relatively isolated from another potential source of activity and retail demand – Westfield State University (WSU).

Roughly 800 students live in or near downtown, in a WSU dorm and in private apartments and other rentals. The university’s main campus is 2 ½ miles away, putting it out of easy walking distance. Still, some steps are being taken to help connect the campus with downtown, including an extension of the bike trail.

### b. Recent Efforts

Despite these challenges, Westfield has taken major steps to set the stage for the revitalization of its downtown, having spent \$100 million over the past few years in local, state and federal money on major infrastructure improvements.

The streets and buildings around Park Square and the old town green have undergone a dramatic makeover, with the common revitalized and a pavilion built.

But the Park Square revitalization is effectively cut off from the main portion of downtown Westfield’s business and retail corridor on Elm Street by what has effectively become a dead zone, a large empty lot where an old department store once stood.

Proposals to redevelop the site over the past few decades never came to fruition.

However, city officials have created an urban renewal plan to fill in this significant gap in the fabric of downtown, with a proposal taking shape by Pioneer Valley Transportation Authority to build a bus terminal as part of a larger commercial complex.

### 3. TAP Goals

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In its TAP application, city officials asked the panel to look at both the urban renewal site and downtown in general. Below are the questions Westfield asked TAP panelists to focus on during the October-26th charrette.

**Feasibility & Financing:** Downtown development in secondary (or tertiary) urban markets presents significant challenges in building profitable development pro-formas, thus requiring either direct subsidy or sophisticated investors capable of employing programs like New Market Tax Credits and other complicated financing mechanisms. Lacking in-house expertise, *how best can the community make our downtown sites attractive to private investors?*

**Short-term, Low-cost Alternatives to Building:**

Because of the length of time associated with planning a wholesale redevelopment of vacant space, particularly those with some form of public or quasi-public site ownership, placemaking and creative uses of underutilized vacant land are strategies we would like to employ in the short term. Particularly as it relates to our Riverfront, we are looking for low-cost, high impact strategies to utilize space that abuts our future bike trail extension. *What suggestions might a ULI panel provide as we investigate such uses?*

**Code & Underutilization Concerns at Existing Buildings:**

Several of Westfield's early century two- and three-story properties have been incapable of modification or adaptation for modern uses. Specifically, several buildings are unsuitable for commercial kitchens and finding tenants for upper-story space has challenged many property owners. *What suggestions or strategies might the City employ or investigate to repurpose existing structures in our downtown area?*

## 4. Assets & Infrastructure

Key parts of Westfield's downtown have been remade over the last several years amid \$100 million in infrastructure improvements paid for by city taxpayers and the state and federal governments.

With new bridges, parks, and with new leadership taking over at both City Hall and at Westfield State University, the city is poised to elevate its downtown improvement and redevelopment campaign to the next level.

### a. New Bridges, Parks, Utilities

Two bridges now lead into the heart of downtown where just one aging structure once stood. The \$80 million Great River Bridge opened up in 2012, while the original Westfield River span was refurbished. The bridge projects have opened up the city's waterfront along the Westfield River for a variety of potential uses. Three parks were relocated or revamped along the river, with a four acre site opened for potential development as well.

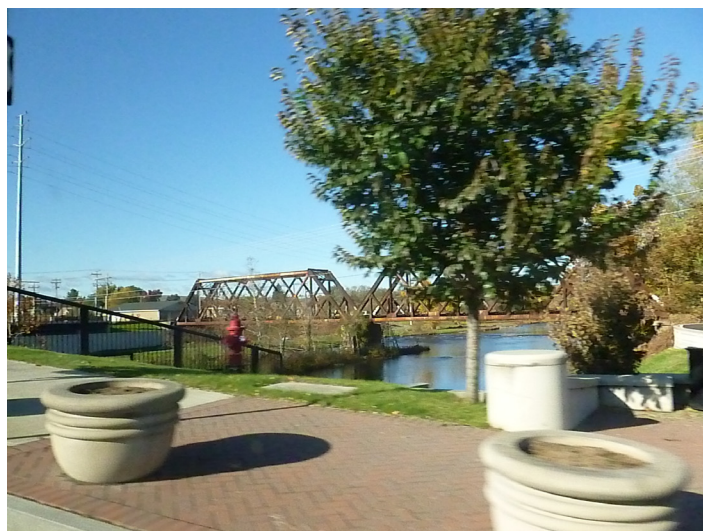
The city spent another \$14.5 million reconstructing and reorganizing Elm, Main, Broad and Court Streets, including new utilities. A pavilion now stands on a newly created Park Square Green. The pavilion includes a stage for concerts and performances and is surrounded by a town-common-style green designed for arts festivals and other gatherings.

Federal money is paying for a new Esplanade on the south side of the Westfield River, creating a waterfront overlook near the Great River Bridge and the downtown commercial district along Elm Street.

City officials are overseeing an ongoing series of improvements in the Gas Light District, also located in downtown Westfield. The district's boundaries are Court, Elm, Franklin, and Washington streets. New utilities and sidewalks are being built, parking is being revamped, and traffic signs and pavement markings are being improved, while a pocket park and a fountain are being installed as well. The aim is to create an environment that is inviting for walking

and biking and conducive to arts and entertainment events and venues.

Even as new green space opens up, Stanley Park, run by a private nonprofit created by the founder of the Stanley Home products empire, remains Westfield's showcase gem, with sculpted gardens, scenic walking trails, and ample grounds for recreation, sports, and concerts.



*Great River Bridge*

### b. New Rail Trail

The Columbia Greenway Rail Trail has the potential to become a major draw for cyclers across the region. The trail stretches from Southwick and the Connecticut border north to the bridges over the Westfield River, following the path of old, elevated rail lines through downtown. The Columbia Greenway connects with the Southwick and Farmington trails in Connecticut, creating a 60 mile, round-trip loop of paved bike paths. There is hope that future extensions will push the trail northward through Southampton, connecting the trail to the existing trails in Easthampton and Northampton.



### **c. Strong Anchor Institutions**

Westfield is home to a number of large institutions and companies. Baystate Noble Hospital is the city's largest employer, with a payroll of 800, followed by Westfield State (600), C&S Wholesalers (350), Mestek Inc. (349), Savage Arms (340), and the 104th Tactical Fighter Group (290 full, 1,300 part-time) of the Massachusetts Air National Guard at Barnes Air National Guard Base. Westfield Bank, actively involved in lending to local businesses, is headquartered downtown and employs 130, while Berkshire Bank employs 180.

Westfield also has its own, municipally owned electric and gas companies, with lower rates for businesses and city residents than comparable, investor-owned utility companies.

### **d. Solid Residential Market**

Downtown residential vacancy rates in Westfield are at a relatively low 4 to 5 percent. A large student population downtown has helped keep the number of empty units low. Rental rates are fairly affordable as well, with the median rent for an apartment pegged at \$400 a month. While some percentage of downtown residents rely on Section 8 housing vouchers, a recent market-rate townhome development has also highlighted the potential for middle class housing as well. Many of the city's historic commercial and residential buildings have been preserved.

Westfield's population has also grown in recent years, though at a modest pace. The number of Westfield residents rose by 1.3 percent between 2010 and 2014, according to U.S. Census Bureau numbers. That was below Amherst (5.2 percent), but above Springfield and Holyoke, which saw growth of .5 and .6 percent, respectively, during the same time period.

## 5. Challenges

Downtown Westfield has come a long way over the past decade thanks to the city's major infrastructure reboot.

However, challenges remain, with a large section of Westfield's downtown business and shopping district underutilized and in need of a boost.

Commercial vacancy in the downtown business district is high, while attracting new stores and shops is a challenge given current market conditions.

Westfield residents spend a significant portion of their dollars at stores and other shopping venues in other communities. And downtown Westfield lacks a major retail or entertainment draw to generate more foot traffic for current businesses, let alone new ones.

Absentee landlords have led to the deterioration of some downtown buildings, making it harder to attract private investment, which has lagged behind the substantial public sector commitment.

Overly aggressive parking enforcement by the city is a major complaint of downtown merchants, while there are too few signs alerting potential customers and visitors to available parking and major attractions.

There is also a leadership vacuum, with no association dedicated to downtown businesses since the decision to dismantle a business improvement district a few years ago.

### a. Attracting New Business

Some business owners and other stakeholders argued for the need for a national retailer to act as a magnet and anchor downtown. But the panel felt this could be difficult given the current lack of foot traffic in the district and the demanding business formula employed by the major chains.

Others were hopeful that Westfield State University would revamp plans to open a bookstore or campus storefront.

As it stands now, downtown building owners say they struggle to fill storefronts. Rents for commercial space are fairly low and aren't enough for building owners to cover the cost of fitting out space for a new shop or store. Many of Westfield's commercial buildings date from the early 1900s and late 1800s, with often significant and costly improvements needed to bring them up to city building and fire codes.

### b. Market Leakage

One reason why some downtown businesses may be starved for customers is that Westfield residents are often driving to other local towns and cities to do their shopping. Westfield residents spent \$741 million at shops, stores, restaurants and other establishments in 2013. Of that, \$564 million was spent inside city limits, with 26 percent of those dollars going elsewhere.



*Former site of Bentley Billiards, now vacant, in Downtown Westfield.*

### **c. Entertainment Draw Needed**

Westfield also lacks an entertainment draw that would provide a reason for city residents and others across the region to venture downtown. Westfield once had a movie theater, but it burned down years ago. There is also no performance space downtown for arts and music. The dearth of entertainment options has made it difficult to engage the several hundred Westfield State students who live downtown or attract students from the university's main campus and residents in the surrounding neighborhoods.

### **d. Absentee Building Owners**

Absentee landlords are also a major problem, leaving some buildings empty and in a state of steady deterioration. Some building owners are significantly older and living in other states, but are reluctant to let go of properties based on sentiment or unrealistic expectations of their worth. For example, the Bentley Billiards building at 89 Elm Street has been empty for years, with unpaid back taxes in the tens of thousands of dollars. The building stands across the street from a city-owned urban renewal site Westfield officials hope to turn into a new transportation/commercial complex.

### **e. Lack of Private Investment**

While downtown Westfield has seen a significant infusion of public funds, attracting private investment has proven more difficult. One local contractor had hoped to build a new headquarters building downtown, but was unable to get financing. Despite plans to occupy half the space in the proposed, 120,000-square-foot building, the bank was concerned about the risk involved of finding a viable commercial tenant to occupy the other half.

### **f. Parking Enforcement Issues**

Some business owners contend parking rules and enforcement is also a barrier to drawing people downtown. Parking on meters is limited to one hour on the street and two hours in the municipal lots. Stickers can also be purchased for a three-hour lot. The city strictly enforces parking limits, with one business owner routinely picking up the cost of tickets for customers who come downtown. His employees use egg timers so they can move their cars before they are ticketed. The limits come even as many spaces go unfilled.

### **g. Signage Needed**

People coming downtown to shop or do business and who are not familiar with the area could easily miss downtown by following US 20 West instead of heading into the downtown core. Even still, there is a lack of signage for the city's recreational, civic, and institutional locations. Wayfinding signage off the Massachusetts Turnpike towards the city's core and key locations would be helpful. Moreover, while there was some signage for the parking, clearer signage to the exact locations would be helpful.

### **h. No Downtown Business Association**

Downtown Westfield a few years ago decertified its business improvement district in a campaign led by a downtown businessman. The district had raised roughly \$200,000 each year for downtown improvements. With the end of the BID, no new downtown business association or group has stepped forth to advocate for Elm Street businesses.



## 6. Varying Opinions/Contrasting Views

### a. Truck Traffic

Routes 10 and 202 both run through downtown Westfield. Elm Street, the city's main business thoroughfare, acts as a major cut-through to the nearby Massachusetts Turnpike. Downtown Westfield sees 25,000 car and truck trips a day. Some panelist felt that the heavy flow of traffic, especially by the heavier trucks, could pose a challenge to downtown revitalization efforts, making it more difficult to cross the street and walk between various businesses. Concern about pedestrian safety was also raised by some residents in the evening presentation session.

Truck traffic, in turn, could complicate efforts to improve the parking situation downtown. One downtown stakeholder expressed strong interest in having angled parking in front of shops and stores downtown. But the heavy flow of truck traffic could raise safety issues, one panelist argued, forcing shoppers and others doing business downtown to back into the street as they are leaving.

However, not everyone agreed that truck traffic on Elm Street was a significant problem. Complicating matters, Westfield still has a significant number of small manufacturing companies in the downtown area, which are also helping draw large trucks.

### b. Urban Renewal Site

There was significant disagreement on what should be built at the urban renewal site on Elm Street, currently slated for a bus terminal, a parking garage, and retail and office space. Some city stakeholders questioned the need for the 500-space garage, arguing the \$14 million it would cost to build would be better spent on other downtown redevelopment initiatives. Some also questioned whether PVTA's plans for a bus terminal would truly be an economic magnet and whether the bus line is heavily used.



*Truck traffic along Elm Street.*

# 7. Recommendations

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In order to revive its downtown, Westfield needs to find ways to fully leverage underlying strengths like Westfield State University and the city's storied past as home to one of the most prominent names in bicycling.

Westfield State University, which has dorms downtown but whose campus is more than two miles away, is a major resource that has yet to be fully tapped. Leadership changes at City Hall and at WSU offer an opportunity for the city to wipe the slate clean and forge a new relationship with one of its major economic drivers.

Westfield also should consider promoting its history as a way of tapping into new ways to draw visitors and shoppers to the city. In addition to its past as the leading buggy whip producer in the world – hence “Whip City” – Westfield should also find ways to highlight its unique role as the birthplace of cycling in the U.S.

The panel also looked at short-term alternatives to activate downtown Westfield – and some of its new parks, bike trails and other infrastructure - through festivals, races, and other “place-maker” activities.

## a. Approved Urban Renewal Plan & Design Competition

One of the longest standing gaps in Westfield's downtown can be found on Elm Street, where a vacant lot has stood since 1986, when the city's last department store burned down. Westfield now has an approved, urban renewal plan aimed at redeveloping the 2.86 acre site, which stands between the redeveloped Park Square area and the main Elm Street commercial corridor. The Pioneer Valley Transportation Authority has stepped up as a potential development partner with the city. Current plans call for a 2,500-square-foot PVTa transportation pavilion, four bus berths, a 500-space parking garage, ground floor retail, and three to five stories of office space above.

The Westfield Redevelopment Authority and the PVTa should consider holding a design contest for the Elm Street project, possibly asking for architects paired with potential developers. This could open up new possibilities for the design of this key project while also helping get a better read on its financial feasibility. In addition, a design competition would create excitement and a vehicle for envisioning the future of downtown Westfield.

## b. New Leadership

New leadership will soon be taking charge at Westfield City Hall and at the Westfield State University. This presents an important opportunity for Westfield's new mayor to forge a new partnership with the university with an eye to engaging WSU to explore possible downtown revitalization opportunities.

A top priority for Westfield's new leadership should be discussing ways the university can get more involved downtown. Students could provide a major spark for the local economy. As an example, each student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst spends \$18 a day, on average, in local stores, shops and restaurants. Ideas for discussion include:

- Make it possible for WSU students to spend their “Owl Bucks” downtown. The upfront charge for installing the system would have to be covered to make it work for local merchants, who are also concerned about ongoing fees as well.
- A performing arts center/bookstore
- Appointing a Westfield representative to the Westfield State University Board.
- Exploring with the university how much of its purchases are made at local stores, shops and businesses under state mandated, local procurement guidelines.
- Examining the idea of opening or relocating a graduate center downtown, bringing in older students more likely to set down roots.



- Moving some administrative or back-office functions downtown
- Opening a university sponsored hotel/conference center/alumni center downtown

### c. Bike Path and Riverwalk

The new Columbia Greenway and the new parkland along the Westfield River offer an opportunity to bring new visitors and activity to downtown Westfield.

There is palpable excitement over the Columbia Greenway on cycling websites, with one trail enthusiast boasting of having bought a house next to it.

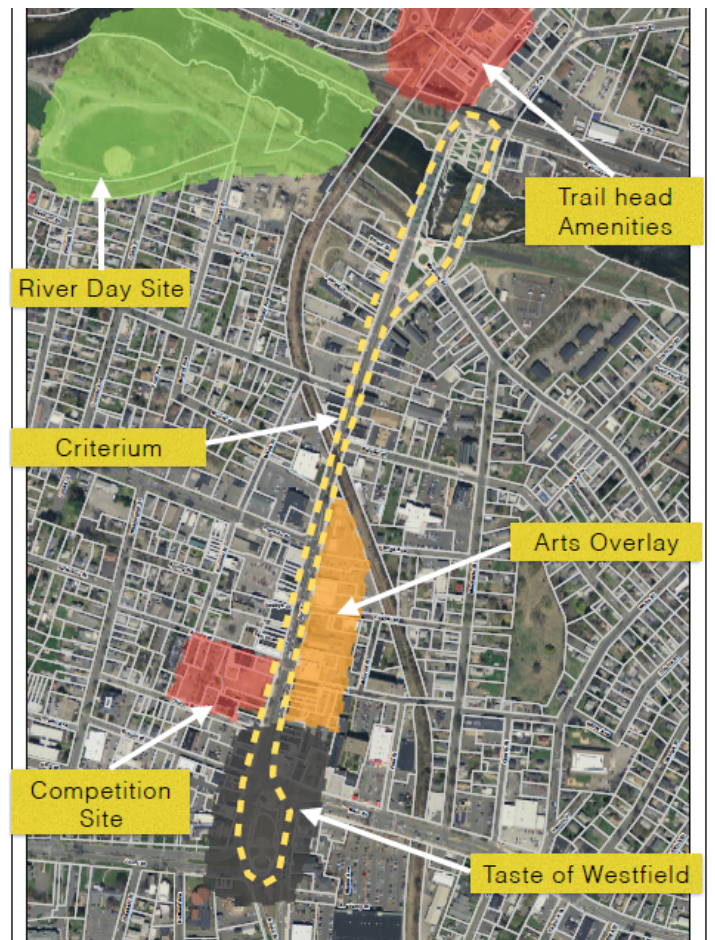
Cyclists like to stop, take a break and look around. Trail riders spend on average \$4 to \$11 per trip at local shops and stores, according to the National Park Service.

A bicycle/coffee shop at the trailhead might be one way to tap into this market. A bed and breakfast might find a market as well for individuals, couples and families out on the trail over the weekend or during a cycling vacation.

Shorter term, a pop-up bike shop/food truck might provide a welcome service for cyclists stopping in Westfield. Hosting a family bike event and a competitive race – a Westfield Criterium – might be another relatively low cost way to bring new energy and visitors downtown.

A similar approach could be taken with the new Riverwalk along the Westfield River. A “River Day” festival could help showcase the city’s waterfront possibilities with inner tubing, fishing, music, performance stages and other activities.

Inviting a kayak vendor to set up shop for the summer along the river could provide another, steady draw.



*Sample bike route.*



## d. Leveraging Westfield's Historic Fabric

Unlike many older cities, downtown Westfield has a remarkably preserved downtown, having escaped the worst excesses urban renewal. The city's downtown has a large collection of commercial and residential buildings dating to late 19th and early 20th centuries.

However, one barrier to the full use of a number of these buildings is the expense of bringing them up to code. One possibility might be a loan fund or other source of financing that could help pay for the needed renovations and retrofits.

Westfield also has some great local history that it could capitalize on as well to draw visitors. The town is home to the legendary Columbia bicycle company and was a major hub of bicycle production for many years.

Given the ever increasingly popularity of cycling it, it is a connection that has great potential and is currently underplayed.

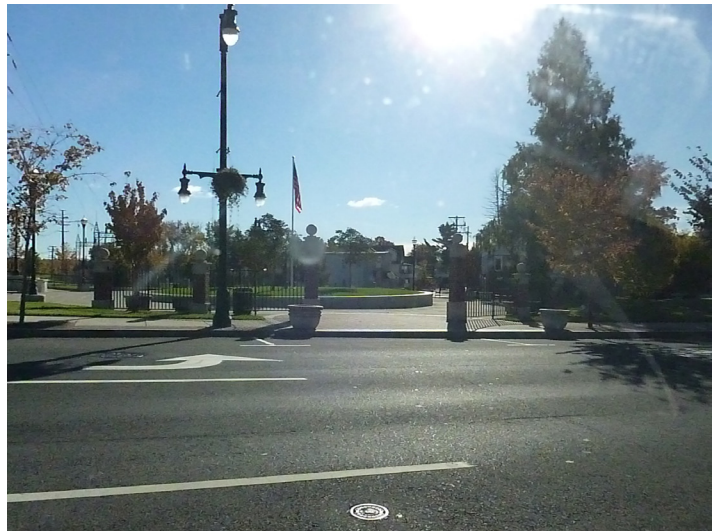
Westfield is also home to Westfield Whip, still doing business in the city and during its heyday the largest manufacturer of buggy whips in the country. It's the origin of Westfield's nickname, "Whip City," with plans for a museum that will highlight the factory that was the city's major employer in the 1800s.

There are other local historical connections as well, with Westfield near the trail along which Revolutionary War General Henry Knox hauled cannon from Fort Ticonderoga to the siege of Boston during the winter of 1775/76.

## e. Place-making Events

As plans for longer-term projects and plans take shape, Westfield can capitalize on its new infrastructure, parks and bike trails by encouraging, organizing and hosting ongoing events aimed at drawing visitors to the city's downtown. While the city's new riverfront parks are a perfect venue, place-making events can also be used to bring new activity to the now dormant urban renewal site on Elm Street that has been identified as a crucial weak link in the fabric of downtown Westfield. One model could be a 2.7 acre patch of green space outside the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center. The Lawn on D has gone from being unused space to a hub of activities, from a Halloween costume party to concerts to movies. Taking a page from this example, food trucks could be invited in to set up shop at the urban renewal site on Elm Street, as well as local artists looking for a place to display their works.

Other suggestions include a River Day festival down on the waterfront and a family fun ride/bike race through downtown.



*Potential for place-making events in Park Square.*

## f. Connecting with the Arts

An overlay cultural, arts and entertainment district could help encourage related development and offer an open door to the arts community in Western Massachusetts. Artists have played a key role in revitalization of a number of urban areas across Massachusetts, including Boston's Fort Point neighborhood and Lowell. Closer to home, Northampton and Easthampton are examples of the positive impact a thriving arts scene can have. Creating low-cost co-working space could help in attracting artists and start-ups as well.

## g. Parking and Signage

City officials should undertake a study of the city's parking needs and demands. Consideration should be given to relaxing parking restrictions downtown, especially the one, two and three hour limits currently in place. Better signage, such as blue parking signs pointing out municipal lots, are also needed. Signage should also be considered to highlight other city attractions and points of interest, such as the Riverwalk or the Columbia Greenway.

## h. Forming a New Business Group

Resurrecting the old business improvement district might not be a realistic option. But downtown Westfield businesses still need an organization that can push for their interests at City Hall and beyond. One possibility would be for a voluntary business association.

## i. Downtown WiFi Initiative

With the help of MassIT, Westfield has installed the equipment needed to provide WiFi access downtown. The city is now working with Westfield Gas & Electric to take advantage of this capability. While there are still some final infrastructure issues to hammer out, the city should make the rollout of the new WiFi initiative a top priority.



*Example of effective wayfinding signage.*

## 8. Feasibility & Financing

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As Westfield pursues plans to revitalize its downtown, a transportation and parking study is needed to help sort out some key issues. These include whether the 500-space garage, proposed as part of the urban renewal site project, is needed to meet market demand or may be indicative of resources better spent elsewhere. The proposed design competition for the urban renewal project could also tease out issues of feasibility and market demand as well, panelists felt.

Market leakage stats, which are now a couple years old, should also be updated. The city would benefit from an in-depth market survey that would examine credit card and zip code data to get a better understanding where city residents are spending their dollars, one panelist said.

Holyoke-based Common Capital, a nonprofit dedicated to revitalizing low income neighborhoods, could also be a good source of small business lending.

There are also a number of potential state and federal programs that could aid with financing. State and federal tax increment financing can be used to help support infrastructure work needed to attract new private sector development.

As an officially designated Gateway City, Westfield has access to a number of state initiatives aimed at spurring new development.

The Housing Development Incentive Program, or HDIP, offers a pair of tax incentives for developers who rehab buildings for use as apartments or condos. The first features a tax exemption on some or all of the increased value of the building after renovation. A state tax credit for Qualified Substantial Rehabilitation Expenditures is also available.

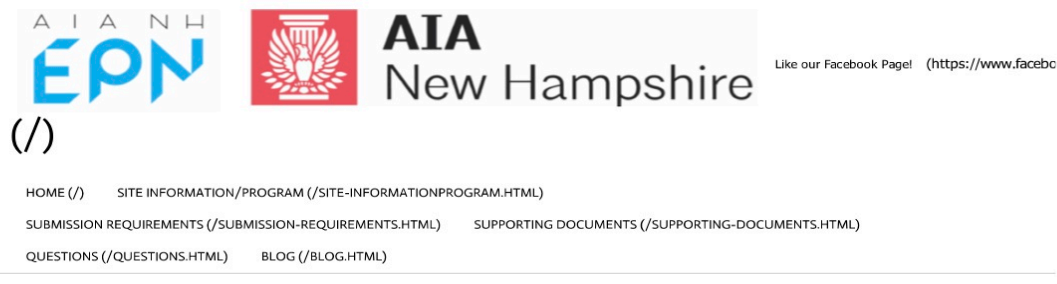
MassDevelopment's Transformative Development Initiative, or TDI, is an umbrella for a trio of offerings. TDI Assistance includes small grants for place-maker projects ranging from farmers' markets to pop-up stores.

MassDevelopment can make equity investments in real estate projects through its TDI Investment, while the aim of TD Cowork is to help create collaborative workspace venues.



# Appendix

## a) Sample Design Competition Call for Entries: Page 1



### 2016 AIANH Emerging Professionals Design Competition

The AIANH Emerging Professionals Design Competition was created to provide an opportunity for interns and young architectural professionals to strengthen their design skills, gain recognition, and assist a community with their design challenges. It is open to all New England architectural interns and architects within five years of registration. Participants **do not** need to be members of AIA. We are also proud to announce this year we are welcoming in contributions from planners in the New England area. Planners wishing to participate should be either an intern, or be AICP licensed less than 5 years.

#### Design Challenge:

The 2016 design competition is a open ideas competition regarding an Inter-modal Transportation facility in Manchester, NH. This project is seen as both an architectural and planning design challenge (a final building must be realized).

#### Design Vision:

There are many factors that can and will lead to an ultimate winning design. As you will see, the program has a handful of obligations needed to meet the challenge, but is then open for interpretation of what the building will need to be successful. Designers should become familiar with how transportation/inter-modal facilities operate, and propose ideas of how their architectural and planning design would be successful.

Designs should first and foremost integrate various forms of transportation conveniently and seamlessly. The bus and rail systems are the primary modes of transportation the building will be designed and planned for, with other modes such as biking, Segways, taxis, walking, skateboarding, etc. coming secondary. It will be very important to design around the idea of transportation, and how cars, buses, and people arrive, use the site and building, then depart.

The fun part of this design challenge is creating your own building program around the transportation hub, which should strengthen the overall concept. Researching existing and past inter-modal facilities is highly encouraged. Integrating new ideas regarding transportation and challenging the way we think about travel is even more encouraged. On top of the standard operating spaces required, should there be any secondary type of program around the transportation do you think would work best? Should you integrate a commercial or retail area? Residential space? Maybe a library or public gathering space? Essentially, the building will have to be more than just a bus and train station to be successful. It should be a place residents might want to visit for a reason other than taking a bus or train. The decisions regarding this aspect should be clear and, again, strengthen the overall concept.

While there is no particular design style, one thing that is very important to AIANH and the architecture community in general is designing with sustainability in mind. If designers choose to make sustainability part of the concept, it should reflect in the design and be apparent on the final board. Jurors will take note of strong sustainable ideas. Designs should also be inspired by surrounding structure, architecture, and infrastructure.

#### Partnering Organization:

The Southern New Hampshire Planning Commission (SNHPC) help support programs that address regional needs and priorities, many of which are established by the Commission. Among the agencies providing funding assistance to the Commission are the United States Department of Transportation, administered by the New Hampshire Department of Transportation; the United States Environmental Protection Agency, administered by the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services; the New Hampshire Office of Energy and Planning; and the New Hampshire Bureau of Emergency Management. The SNHPC region includes the City of Manchester and the towns of Auburn, Bedford, Candia, Chester, Deerfield, Derry, Francetown, Goffstown, Hooksett, Londonderry, New Boston, Raymond, Weare and Windham. The region encompasses portions of Hillsborough, Merrimack and Rockingham counties.

#### Deadlines:

**Registration: Open until submission deadline**

#### 15 September 2015:

Registration opens and programs are available for download [here \(/supporting-documents.html\)](#).

#### 8 January 2016:

# Appendix

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## a) Sample Design Competition Call for Entries: Page 2

### **January 2016:**

Jury proceedings administered by AIANH Board of Directors. Winners will be announced at the Awards Banquet and all of the top entries will be on display.

### **Late January 2016:**

AIANH Awards Banquet, January 22nd at Labelle Winery in Amherst, NH.

### **January-February 2016:**

AIANH will try to send boards off to exhibit space for public viewing. We will inform all entrants of possible location(s).

### **Evaluation Criteria:**

Submissions will be evaluated by the jury according to the following criteria: (Jury Selection to be announced)

- Strong organizing conceptual principle, both in built form and proposed program
- Thoughtful consideration of site and context, and integration of transportation in and out of the site
- Handling of program, from functional concerns to the poetics of experience
- Demonstration of tectonic expression and architectural image
- Ability to communicate ideas visually; quality, completion, clarity, effectiveness of presentation and production of high quality work including diagrams, orthographic drawings, three-dimensional renderings, and graphic layouts
- Inventiveness
- Representation of a complete architectural project, physically, spiritually and conceptually

### **Drawings/Photos Provided:**

The following information is available for download: Program, site images, 3D sketchup contours, and site photographs.

### **Site Visit:**

Site visits are highly encouraged to gain familiarity with the area, traffic patterns, and surrounding structure of the site. Visiting the site is not a prerequisite to complete the competition.

### **Resources/References:**

See attached plans and studies.

### **Name \***

First

Last

### **Email \***

### **Address \***

Line 1

Line 2

City

State

Zip Code

Country