

A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

City of Leominster

Leominster, MA



March 9, 2016



Urban Land
Institute

Boston/New England

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Executive Summary

The Leominster TAP convened at Leominster Public Library on March 9, 2016. Under the direction of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council, the all-day event brought together city leaders, downtown business people and building owners, and a panel of design, planning and real estate professionals.

The charrette focused on Leominster's interest in transforming its downtown into a destination, not just for city residents and its growing population of young professionals, but for North Central Massachusetts as well. The TAP looked closely at: the mix of restaurants and shops downtown; the availability of parking and traffic; downtown parks and green space; pedestrian safety and access; overall downtown connectivity; a planned rail trail and the Monoosnoc Brook Walk.

Chapter 1: ULI and the TAP Process: 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 Leominster and its role as a pioneer in the plastics industry and as a haven for generations of immigrants.

Chapter 3: Strengths and Assets: A look at Leominster's many attributes, from a solid core of downtown businesses and a wave of new apartment

construction to an engaged city government and an increasingly diverse population.

Chapter 4: Challenges: Downtown Leominster also faces obstacles as it tries to broaden its appeal, from a lack of stewardship on part of the business community to a dearth of destination retail.

Chapter 5: Recommendations: The Panel recommends the city consider a range of changes to its downtown to improve access, from reimaging Monument Square to forming a business improvement district.

Chapter 6: Community feedback: The public session in the evening provided a valuable first response to these findings and recommendations.

Chapter 7: Next steps: These include a parking study, an audit of vacant retail space, and a survey of business owners on what the downtown brand should be.



Study Area of Downtown Leominster, which includes Carter Park, Monument Square, Monoosnoc Brook Walk Way, the Leominster Public Library, and YMCA.

ULI and the TAP Process

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 38,000 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.

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 meeting that summarizes the panel's findings and general recommendations. This detailed final report is published 8-12 weeks later.

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



The panelists tour a new development near the downtown.



Leominster Public Library

support the TAP process in cities and towns across the Commonwealth.

The Panel

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

Co-Chairs

- James Heffernan, Of Counsel, Partridge Snow & Hahn, LLP
- Emily Keys Innes, Senior Urban Planner, The Cecil Group

Panelists

- Heath Cody, Project Designer, SGA
- Sarah Eisinger, Vice President, Real Estate, MassDevelopment
- Andrew Starr, Strategist, Gensler
- Michael Wang, Principal, Form + Place

The panel was assisted by:

- Ileana Tauscher, Associate, ULI Boston/New England

MassDevelopment

- Tania Hartford, Director of Real Estate Services

Report Writer

- Scott Van Voorhis, V2 Content Solutions, Natick

Panelists have donated their time

Final Deliverable – The written report is available at <http://boston.uli.org>

Community Stakeholders

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

- Neil Abramson, Owner of ECI Stores
- Martin Connors, President of Rollstone Bank
-



Former piano factory site.



Panelists and mayor tour Lofts at City Place, currently under construction.

- Rick Healey, President of Foster-Healey Real Estate
- Peter Bovenzi, Owner of Bovenzi Development
- Jim Whitney, Owner of Whitney Development
- Michael Covino, President of Niche Hospitality
- Joshua Longtin, Director of Operations, Niche Hospitality
- Thomas Bagley, Owner of Bagley, Anderson & Mayo Insurance
- Leslie Storrs, Owner, North Shore Century 21
- Pat Wyman, Owner of Wyman Liquors
- Marieke Cormier, Owner of Roots Natural Foods
- Susan Shelton, Library Director, Leominster Public Library
- Dr. Todd Rowe, Orthodontist
- Jennifer Gordon, Associate Executive Director, Leominster Community Branch, YMCA of Central Massachusetts
- Steve Koroskenyi, Pastor, Christian Life Center
- Robin Koroskenyi, Worship Arts Director, Christian Life Center
- Laraune Brooks, Director of the Senior Center, City of Leominster

TAP Process

The Leominster TAP met March 9 at the Leominster Public Library.

The day kicked off at the new START business incubator on the third floor of the Gallagher Building on School Street, with the lower floors currently filled with city offices.

Mayor Dean Mazarella led a tour of the downtown. The panel stopped at the new City Place Lofts, now under construction. Members spoke to developer Jim Whitney about his plans for the 51-unit apartment project and took note of the new Leominster Community Branch of the YMCA, which just opened in the building as well as other new development nearby. The panel walked down Adams Street to the city's old piano factory, now slated for apartments. The panel also visited MAKE, a retail storefront on Main Street leased by the city as part an effort to encourage new retail start-ups. Panelists walked around Monument Square, and the arteries feeding into it, looking closely at the businesses and buildings around it, as well as at traffic conditions and pedestrian access.

Panelists reconvened at the Leominster Public Library for a series of interviews with business owners and residents during the morning.

After a working lunch, panelists spent the afternoon discussing ideas and proposals for making downtown Leominster a true regional destination and drafting a presentation with a mix of observations and recommendations.

The TAP panel unveiled its report that evening before a group of city residents, business owners and officials in a meeting room at the library.

The evening ended with a question-and-answer session in which participants raised a number of questions, from downtown traffic to how to implement the recommendations. The presentation is available online at boston.uli.org.



Background and History

Evolution of Downtown Leominster

Like many New England communities, Leominster started off as a small farming village in the early 1700s. Arguably its most famous son, John Chapman, was born in 1774, later to become the legendary “Johnny Appleseed” for seeding new orchards along the frontier. With abundant sources of water power, Leominster became an industrial hub by the mid-19th century, with more than two dozen comb factories. By the early 20th century, the city had grown into a pioneering center for the new plastics industry, headed by the homegrown Viscoloid Co. until it was acquired by DuPont in 1925. The city expanded dramatically, with new factories attracting waves of immigrants, predominantly from Quebec and Italy. Injection molding, iconic Foster Grant sunglasses, as well as colorful pink flamingo lawn ornaments all got their start in the city’s plastics industry.

Central Massachusetts and especially the Leominster/Fitchburg area remains an important center for the plastics industry, accounting for 33 percent of all the sector’s jobs in the state. Overall, a quarter of Leominster’s workforce is still employed in manufacturing. Leominster’s downtown has also changed over the decades. While it has benefited from the loyalty of a number of long-time family businesses, the growth of suburban neighborhoods and the rise of mall-style shopping has sapped downtown Leominster of some of its old vitality, transforming it from a central destination hub to a place people pass through on their way somewhere else. The Mall at Whitney Place, just off Route 2, dominates the local shopping scene. However, new interest from apartment developers and plans by city officials to capitalize on this promising new trend with an array of improvements may mark the start of a new chapter.

Leominster’s Objective for the TAP

In its TAP application, city officials noted the last urban renewal plan commissioned for downtown Leominster dates to the 1980s. The city’s goals for the TAP were to reexamine downtown with an eye to broadening the mix of businesses and explore ways to make it a destination for both city residents and others across the region.

1. How can Leominster see through the present assortment of stores and determine what other types of stores and shops would be feasible that would actually reflect the type of community we are so that shoppers will patronize and support local businesses?
2. How can the city and Leominster plan and design their downtown area with the impression there is a lot of diversity, plenty of parking, public transportation, and something for everyone so all are welcome to enjoy the center of town for activities and shopping?
3. How specifically should the city of Leominster connect its assets and advantages with the downtown area to benefit the existing small businesses along with attracting more interest from new patrons and shops?

3. Strengths and Assets

Downtown Leominster has a number of solid assets on which to build. Both the mayor and the city council are engaged and interested in the needs of downtown businesses and institutions and the city's increasingly diverse population. Residential developers are showing growing interest in the city's stock of old mill and industrial buildings, with one loft-style project under construction and another on the way. Thousands of people from across the city and the region flock downtown each year to a series of established festivals and events, providing valuable exposure to local businesses. An array of beautiful and well-preserved historic buildings dating to the late 19th and early 20th century help anchor downtown. Built in 1910, The Leominster Public Library was renovated and expanded in recent years and has become a de facto community center. There are also several large churches downtown and handsome commercial buildings like the 1890 Wood Block building. With the Whitney Place mall just down the street off Route 2, Leominster is a regional draw for shoppers across North Central Massachusetts.

Strong Municipal Report & Highly Visible Mayor

Downtown Leominster businesses as well as building owners and developers benefit from a city government actively involved and responsive to their concerns. Leading the way is Mayor Dean Mazzearella, first elected in 1993 and the longest serving mayor in the Commonwealth. Mazzearella is a well-known figure downtown and is proud of the city's support of local businesses. Led by Mazzearella, City Hall currently provides the services that in many downtowns are paid for and overseen by merchant-led business improvement districts, or BIDS. City officials not only make sure streets are cleaned and cleared of snow and flower boxes are maintained, but they are also leading efforts to improve streetscapes, create new pedestrian connections, and provide space for local start-ups under the mayor's START incubator.

Strong Architecture and Anchor Institutions

Several important city and civic buildings and institutions anchor downtown Leominster. City Hall, the Leominster Public Library, and the city's police and fire headquarters, Leominster District court, and a newly opened branch of the YMCA are all clustered within a few blocks of each other. Built in 1910 and renovated and expanded a few years ago, the city library is an iconic local structure as well as a hub of community and civic activity. Two big new apartment developments are also taking shape within the same area: City Place and a planned redevelopment of the city's old piano factory. There are also several large and architecturally distinctive churches downtown, including St. Cecilia's Church, built by French Canadian immigrants in the early 1900s. The church's towering steeples can be seen for miles. Downtown Leominster also has several major bank branches and offices, including Rollstone Bank, Bank of America and Enterprise Bank. Ginny's Helping Hands is a local social services organization, operating a food pantry since 1980.



Example of strong architecture in the downtown.

Rising Real Estate Market

Downtown Leominster is undergoing a residential renaissance, with two large and previously abandoned buildings now slated for a mix of market rate and affordable apartments. With help from a \$5 million loan from MassDevelopment, local builder Jim Whitney is converting the second of two former mill buildings into the 51-unit Lofts at City Place. The YMCA recently opened their new Leominster branch in the building and attracts a regional membership. Whitney previously converted the first of the two mill buildings, at 98 Adams Street, into professional office space. Another apartment project is slated to take shape down the street, with plans to convert the old Jewett Piano Case factory into 46 apartments. Overall, Leominster home prices rose 7 percent in 2015, to a median price of nearly \$220,000, while sales increased by more than 41 percent, according to The Warren Group, publisher of Banker & Tradesman.



Historic home near the downtown.

Festivals and Events

Leominster has an active festival scene, with some events drawing thousands to the city's downtown. The annual Johnny Appleseed Festival is a popular



Destination restaurant Rye & Time in Monument draw, as is the Taste of Leominster and a craft beer festival held each year during the summer. While the festivals do not always provide a boost for downtown businesses, they do provide valuable exposure to the city center.

Ample Parking and Traffic

Downtown Leominster sees a steady stream of traffic on a daily basis, which equates to more visibility for local businesses. The city also has an abundance of parking spaces, some municipally owned, others controlled by private businesses.

Business Vitality and Downtown Core

Leominster has a solid core of downtown businesses, a mix of restaurants, banks and shops, with a relatively healthy vacancy rate, notwithstanding the now empty TD Bank building. Wyman Liquors has been a downtown anchor for decades, as has Allen's, a long-time Leominster department store. Cutiques, a home furnishing and decorative retail store, relocated to downtown in 2013, moving into the 1895 Gavin building. The Rye & Thyme restaurant does a brisk business out of the Wood Block Building. Rollstone Bank, Santander, Bank of America and Enterprise all have branches and or offices downtown. Aunty Ellen's Creative Confections is an example of a new and successful business in Leominster.



Parking in the downtown.

Distinct town Center, Rail Trail and Brook Walk

Leominster also benefits from a clearly recognizable city center, radiating out from the elegant Monument Square and the historic buildings clustered around and near it. The Monoosnoc Brook Greenway offers a scenic getaway in the heart of downtown, following the river's meandering course. There are also plans for a 4.5 mile rail trail that would connect downtown Leominster with downtown Fitchburg.

Diverse demographics

Leominster also benefits from a racially and ethnically diverse population. While 75 percent of the city's population is white, Hispanics and Latinos make up 15 percent of the city's population. African Americans account for about 5 percent of city residents and Asians about 2 percent. The city also attracted a large community of French Canadian immigrants from Quebec during its years as thriving factory town in the early 20th century. St. Cecilia's Church and its soaring steeples, built by the city's French Canadian community, is a prominent reminder of their impact. Median household income is \$59,248, with families evenly spread along various income tiers between \$35,000 on up to \$149,000. Roughly 20 percent of the city's population is 60 and older, though the largest single block of residents are 25-54.

A ULI Boston/New England Technical Assistance Panel



Mayor Mazzarella shows the panelists a student art exhibit in Leominster City Hall

4. Challenges

Leominster also faces some challenges as it looks at ways to bring new life to its center. Businesses rely heavily on City Hall to take the lead on issues impacting downtown, with little incentive to develop their own stewardship, including streetscape improvements, snow removal, landscaping and the like. There is no clear leader or single business organization advocating for downtown. Meanwhile, downtown Leominster faces other challenges that need to be addressed, including the mix of retail offerings, the location of parking, and traffic and pedestrian safety. Also, while the city has a commuter rail stop a mile and a half from downtown near Route 2, it is only lightly used.

Business Engagement Lacking

As noted, city officials work hard to meet the needs of downtown businesses, performing many functions that in other cities might be taken care of by business improvement districts under the management of local merchants. But while such an approach certainly has advantages and benefits, it may also contribute to a lack of involvement and stewardship by city businesses. If a less involved mayor were to take office at some point in the future, it is not clear whether downtown businesses would be ready, as least as it stands now, to fill the void. And while there are a number of business organizations in Leominster, business owners report being approached with multiple asks from different groups with no evident coordination between their efforts.

Dearth of Destination Retail, Mid-Range Dining Options

Downtown Leominster faces a challenge with the TD Bank building, a substantial structure that is currently empty and needs activation. But for the most part, downtown storefronts and buildings are filled. The biggest problems is the mix of offerings, with a lack of destination retail that might draw residents and shoppers downtown for more than a quick trip

to the ATM or a meeting with an insurance broker. Businesses that could provide more of an enduring draw include bookstores, ice cream shops, clothing stores or even a brew pub. There is also a need for a wider range of dining options. There are a number of quick service options, including pizza shops and sub shops, on one end of the dining spectrum, with the Rye & Thyme on the other. But downtown would benefit from a few mid-range, family restaurants, as well as café-style establishments offering coffee or a quick bit to eat.

Mall Competition

Downtown Leominster businesses also face another big challenge: competition from the largest concentration of national chains and retailers in North Central Massachusetts. The Mall at Whitney Field sits astride the main entryway from the highway to downtown Leominster, located just off Route 2 near the junction with I-190. Anchors include a Burlington Coat Factory, JCPenny, a Macy's, and a Sears, with an array of specialty retailers as well ranging from



TD Bank site in the downtown.

American Eagle Outfitters and Victoria's Secret to The Children's Place.

Coordination of Festival Management

Leominster does not have a problem drawing people downtown for festivals. In fact, the city has a number of events that are big draws, with the Johnny Appleseed and craft beer festivals being among the most popular. But how the events are scheduled has become a major concern for downtown businesses, who complain of festivals being held on consecutive weekends. While the events can provide good exposure for local businesses, they are also not necessarily money makers, with downtown restaurants or stores of secondary interest to festival goers. With parts of streets blocked off, the events can present logistical challenges as well, making it difficult, for example, for drivers at downtown pizza shops to make their deliveries.

Parking Management

Downtown Leominster has no lack of parking, with numerous city and privately-owned lots. And city officials even take a more relaxed approach to parking enforcement in order to encourage downtown shopping and business activity. But the city's parking

inventory, while abundant, is not effectively managed or organized. That has created significant problems for some business owners, who complain of a dearth of nearby spaces dedicated to their employees and customers. One business has made it clear it would be interested in expanding but for the lack of available parking spaces nearby. Overall, there is significant confusion over who owns downtown Leominster's wide array of parking lots – the city or private institutions and businesses – as well as who is allowed to use the spaces and at what cost.

Pedestrian Safety and Accessibility

There is no lack of traffic moving through downtown Leominster. But busy streets combined with traffic lights that aren't always synchronized can create a difficult environment for pedestrians and potential shoppers. Monument Square, an inviting park in the middle of downtown, is particularly difficult to access during hours when traffic is at its peak. There is also a lack of clear and direct pedestrian walkways connecting the new Lofts at City Place and the planned redevelopment of the old piano factory into apartments with the Leominster Public Library, City Hall, and the businesses and restaurants clustered around Monument Square.

No Downtown Playground or Park Connections

New apartments are beginning to take shape in downtown Leominster, potentially drawing young professionals and possibly young families as well. But downtown lacks a playground, a key child and family friendly amenity.. While there are many playgrounds in Leominster, there is not one downtown. There are also a number of great green spaces and parks in Leominster, but they lack easy bike or walking connections between them.



Green space in downtown lacks easy pedestrian access.

In Search of a Brand

Leominster has a clear and distinct downtown, but it lacks a clear brand. There are multiple views and takes on what downtown Leominster is, but no single, unified vision that can help attract residents, shoppers and visitors. At the public presentation by the TAP panel at the end of the all-day charrette, the panel's co-chair asked the audience members a simple question: "When you think of downtown Leominster, what's the one word that comes to mind?" The answers included "hub of the city, traffic, community, walkable, banks, historic and center of Leominster."

Signage and Streetscape Design

There is no lack of signs in downtown Leominster. In fact, there are so many that it can be confusing for newcomers and visitors. The downtown streetscape lacks a unified theme in terms of lighting, landscape, power lines and other design features. Wayfinding signs to direct visitors to parking and significant buildings and businesses are also missing.

Renovation Challenges

While Leominster is lucky to have so many beautiful, historic buildings, rehabilitating them so they can be used to accommodate new shops or offices can be cost prohibitive. Downtown rents aren't high enough to justify the investment. Yet while dollars are key, there also needs to be an effort to reimagine the role



Signage in the downtown.

some of these landmark buildings might play in a revitalized downtown Leominster. That means looking at both how these buildings might be used in the future as well as how they may contribute in a larger sense to the downtown experience.

Safety

There is a perception that downtown Leominster is not always a safe place in which to move around. Part of it is the lack of foot traffic, especially at night, which can make a walk beyond the core of businesses and city institutions beyond Monument Square a lonely experience. That image hasn't been helped by a number of long-standing abandoned mill buildings, as well as isolated incidents of crime, though that picture is changing as some of those old structures find new life as apartments.



Boarded-up building in downtown.

5. Recommendations

Evolution of Downtown Leominster

The panel's recommendations for downtown Leominster fall under three broad categories:

Connectivity, Coordination and Commonwealth.

Greater connectivity is needed to create a more walkable downtown, with parking carefully allocated to meet the needs of city businesses. Better coordination involves more careful planning of festivals and other downtown events and regular communication between downtown businesses and City Hall.

Commonwealth, a community working together for the common good, envisions a more proactive approach by downtown businesses, taking the lead on advocating for needed improvements and other key issues, as well as efforts to promote greater overall community involvement downtown.

Boosting Connectivity

Reimagining Monument Square

Monument Square is a diamond in the rough, with the potential to become a focal point for major community events and gatherings. But to reach its full potential, it needs to be easier for pedestrians to reach the park, which is surrounded by busy downtown thoroughfares. The city should explore traffic calming techniques, as well as moving the bus stop on the square to another location. (Brightly painted and visible crosswalks would increase safety for pedestrians and drivers.) One possibility involves making the Mechanic Street side of Monument Square a one-way heading into Leominster center. The park could be extended onto the extra space no longer needed after the current two-lane road is reduced to a single lane. The section of Mechanic Street next to the square could be shut down as well for major events. Another possibility would be to extend Monument Square across Mechanic Street to the buildings on the other side, converting that portion of street into park or plaza space. It is a design that has been used in other Massachusetts cities and elsewhere. A thorough traffic study should be commissioned to understand implications of implementing these recommendations, including emergency vehicle response times.



Reimagining Monument Square. Panelist drawings showing pedestrian-friendly and traffic calming improvements.

Connecting City Place

The construction of the City Place Lofts will bring dozens of new families and young professionals to downtown Leominster. However, in order for the city to fully benefit from this influx of new residents, more effective pedestrian connections are needed to downtown's core around Monument Square and the Leominster Public Library. A phased, two-part plan might focus first on making streetscape and sidewalk improvements around City Place itself, with a second phase centered on obtaining easements necessary to link City Place up with the library and Monument Square businesses. The pedestrian pathway might also be a great place to put a playground to serve downtown and adjacent residents.

Gateways to Downtown

Leominster benefits from a distinctive downtown. Anyone driving into downtown will clearly recognize they have arrived at the city's core when they reach Monument Square. But the drive in along Mechanic Street, which connects downtown with Route 2, is a different story. There is little to signal what's up ahead when entering the downtown's outskirts, with the streetscape an uninviting collection of older industrial buildings and lots. Downtown would benefit from a unified system of lighting, sidewalks and greenery, which could be extended down Mechanic Street to create a welcoming, "gateway" feel.

Brook Walk and Rail Trail

The Monoosnoc Brook Greenway and the city's budding rail trail could be extended through downtown over a couple phases. This would link up green space and parks scattered across the city center and its outskirts creating an emerald "necklace" of green spaces. Additionally, pedestrian mews or alleys, or side streets between buildings, would also help create connections and add interest and beauty to the streetscape, especially if combined with landscaping and efforts to create lively storefront retail spaces as well.



Potential rail trail site.

Coordination

The downtown Leominster business community could gain greatly from greater coordination. As it stands now, the city has a number of business groups, but none with authority to take the lead on downtown issues. Downtown businesses should consider forming a business improvement district. A BID would provide a central organization to both coordinate events downtown as well as ensure that businesses downtown can control their own destiny when it comes to everything from routine maintenance to streetscape beautification. Such a downtown business organization will also help lessen the strain on city resources; City Hall will no longer have to act as a de facto BID while the new group will provide a single point of contact in the downtown business community for city officials to deal with. If a BID isn't feasible, then downtown businesses should consider ways of

strengthening existing organizations.

The downtown business community and city officials should consider a number of steps to improve communication and planning around both day-to-day issues and major events. There should be regular meetings between the city and a designated small business liaison at City Hall and the business community. This position could be charged with better coordinating downtown businesses and developing sector-specific incentives to attract new businesses (such as restaurants). A community calendar of upcoming events and festivals would help get everyone on the same page. And business owners should be given a seat at the table when festivals and other big events are planned, not only to avoid back-to-back scheduling and to find ways of minimizing the negative impacts, but to also brainstorm on ways to take advantage of this natural marketing opportunity.



A BID could assist with storefront improvements.

Commonwealth

City businesses need to take on more of a proactive, stewardship role in the future of downtown Leominster, whether through a BID or some other organization.

Parking is a common challenge that a BID or some

other downtown business coordinating group might work together with city officials to solve. That could mean forging partnerships between private and institutional lot owners and the city and creating ways to designate and reserve parking for business and city employees.

A new unified approach could also enable downtown businesses to share services and team up on branding and marketing.

A new downtown business group or coordinating entity might also put together a comprehensive portfolio of empty stores and retail spaces it can market more widely to potential tenants. A BID might also hire a broker to market and lease these storefronts, with the costs shared among downtown business owners. Daytime and evening restaurants and destination retail should be a top priority.

Such an organization might also conduct regular surveys of downtown businesses, taking their pulse on everything from the need for façade improvements to whether flower baskets might work better than planters.

There are also a number of smaller but important improvements that should be considered as well. A storefront window decorating contest could liven up staid storefronts, while opportunities to add temporary or even permanent public art might be considered as well.

A holiday market could provide another draw for downtown, while also serving as an incubator for promising new retail businesses. And the newly empty TD Bank building could be brightened up with pop-up windows or stores.

Part of the building, or another storefront location, might also make a good place for the city's START business incubator as it gains momentum.

6. Community Feedback

The TAP panel's proposals were unveiled at a public meeting at the Leominster Public Library after the all-day charrette on March 9. In general, the panel's observations and recommendations were well received. Still, there were some questions and concerns. One long-time community resident spoke out against any closing of Mechanic Street next to Monument Square, raising concerns that it could slow down city fire crews as they head out on various calls. City Councilor Richard Marchand also expressed concern, arguing the Mechanic Street should remain two ways to prevent traffic backups. He did agree, however, that untangling the city's parking situation makes sense, with confusion as to which lots are city owned and which are controlled by private owners. Marchand also endorsed the

idea of better coordination among business owners, especially with respect to joint marketing efforts. Others asked what next steps might be in terms of starting to translate the report's recommendations into action and possibly launching a larger planning effort for downtown.

7. Getting Started and Next Steps

As downtown businesses and city officials follow up on the TAP's recommendations, there are a number of initial steps that might help build momentum and interest.

Parking Inventory

Downtown Leominster faces some difficult parking challenges. While there are thousands of spaces downtown, this large inventory is not effectively managed, leaving some businesses struggling without enough nearby parking for employees. In a key first step to tackle the downtown Leominster's parking dilemma, city officials and business owners should team up to take a comprehensive inventory of how many spaces there are downtown, where they are, and who owns them. This could be done without necessarily having to hire a consultant.

Retail Inventory

A broader mix of shops and restaurants are needed downtown to make it more of a draw, including destination retail like a brew pub, an ice cream shop or a bookstore, among many other possibilities.

There is also vacant space that will need to be filled at the TD Bank building. To get started, downtown business and city officials could survey how much retail space is vacant downtown and where, and identify which spaces would meet the needs of particular business types.

Survey

Finally, downtown Leominster needs to develop a brand that it can market. To get going, a survey is needed of downtown business owners to assess their views on downtown's identity and image they would like to promote. A paper and online survey of residents would assess whether local perceptions are consistent with the image that local businesses favor.