

Downtown Fitchburg Community Forum



October 20, 2007

City of Fitchburg
Office of Economic Development
and
Montachusett Regional Planning
Commission (MRPC)

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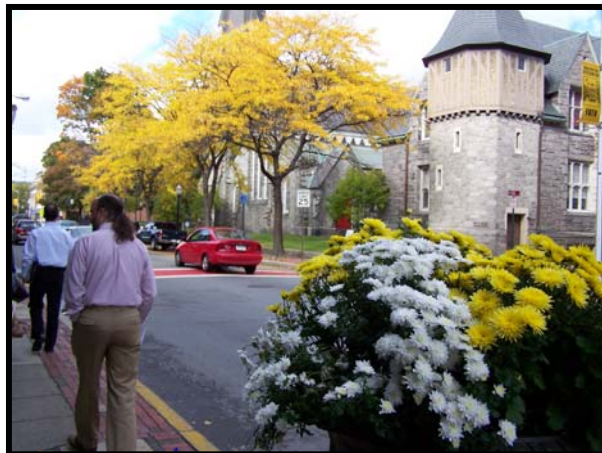
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Acknowledgements

The City of Fitchburg Economic Development Office and the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) would like to thank the following contributors.

- The participation of the residents, business owners, property owners, public officials from the City of Fitchburg, and all other participating stakeholders made this event a success. The Fitchburg Economic Development Office and the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission would not have been able to produce this report of the results of the Downtown Fitchburg Community Forum without their input and support.
- An event such as the Downtown Fitchburg Community Forum needs to be held in a suitable location. The support received from Christ Church and use of the Guild Hall was considerable.
- Ellen DiGeronimo invited the participants to “*Discover Fitchburg, A City for All Seasons*” with a slide presentation of the four seasonal banner designs that speak to the cultural, artistic, educational and recreational assets of Fitchburg and the Fitchburg display at the Johnny Appleseed Visitors Center that reinforces the marketing theme. She stated that Fitchburg is the Cultural Center of Northern Worcester County. A special thanks to the 55 businesses that supported the Discover Fitchburg Banner Program for their support and a special thank you to Fitchburg Savings Bank for the breakfast fare.
- Ensuring that a central business district (CBD) provides opportunities for people to live, work and play is essential. It is also compliant with “smart growth” principles. (Smart Growth is an urban planning and transportation theory that concentrates growth in the center of a city to avoid urban sprawl. Smart growth also advocates compact, transit-oriented, walkable, bicycle-friendly land use, including mixed-use development with a range of housing choices.)
- The MRPC has been uniquely positioned this fiscal year to be able to provide training, education and technical assistance in the area of “growing smart” through the provision of state funding in the form of Streamlined Permitting funding awarded to the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC).



The Downtown Fitchburg Community Forum’s “Base Camp” was Christ Church, Main Street. Within this location Focus Groups were held Early in the Morning. From This Location Walking tours were Launched Later in the Morning.

This report is based upon the input given to the facilitators of the Downtown Fitchburg Community Forum. This document should be used for planning purposes only.

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Over 80 People Attended the Event Held in Guild Hall, Christ Church, Main Street

Executive Summary

Introduction

There is only one place in the Montachusett Region with the combination of assets such as:

- Residents and workers demanding a variety of goods and services, especially those in close proximity to the downtown.
- Fitchburg State College.
- Cluster of businesses in the legal field: Law firms and the District Court.
- Providers of human service delivery entities employing people delivering and providing basic health, food and habitation services.
- Local, state and federal government facilities such as City Hall, Central Fire Department, Police Station, Registry of Deeds and the Post Office and District Court.
- Multiple financial institutions.
- Religious facilities.
- Local public schools.
- Manufacturers.
- Transit hub to cab services in the twin cities, bus connections to jobs and businesses, and the train service to the Boston

metropolitan area at the Intermodal facility.

- Development sites offering opportunities for housing, start-up businesses and expanding ventures from Moran Square to the Upper Common.
- More than 3,750 parking spaces.

That place is Downtown Fitchburg.

Assets and other issues were identified through a “Downtown Fitchburg Community Forum” held on in Guild Hall, Christ Church on Main Street October 20, 2007, coordinated by the Fitchburg Economic Development Office and managed by the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC).



Participants Listened Attentively to All Attendees in Guild Hall, Christ Church During the Forum

There are Challenges in All Downtowns

Many central business districts (CBD) across New England have been facing issues concerning redevelopment especially in the light of the decades-old manufacturing sector.



Ellen DiGeronimo, Downtown Coordinator Provides Information to the Audience

Fitchburg is not immune to ups and downs in economic cycles. While Fitchburg has had to face issues, such as a large manufacturing plant closing affecting its downtown, the community attempts to mitigate each potential threat with appropriate planning, collaboration and workable solutions.



Former Central Fire Station: Oliver Street

Assets & Liabilities

Keenly aware of the mixed blessings contained within central business districts, Forum participants acknowledged the new blood in the downtown, underutilized assets and other projects that require attention.



Main Street Has Spaces Available for Entrepreneurs
Former (Shawmut) Bank Building, Once Owned by the State
for an Arts Presence on Main Street, is Now a
“Building Full of Opportunity”

The long-term vacancy of the former Fitchburg Theater and the area surrounding it was identified as one of the sections of Main Street that need attention.



Fitchburg's Former Theater
A Focus of the Forum's Discussion
Waiting to be Reborn

Community Forum Participants Provide Honest Remarks

The participants in the fall 2007 Downtown Fitchburg Forum did not allow any negativity to divert them during the day-long planning effort. Positive aspects were discussed openly and honestly.

The collective energy of the participants was used to weld together their ideas with a highly-charged spirit to plant the seeds of implementation to make measurable, consistent, and appropriate improvements in Downtown Fitchburg.



Attendees Provided Valuable Insight

Challenges in the Downtown were identified, not as insurmountable hurdles, but as obstacles that can be overcome with the application of the appropriate amount of effort.



During a Tour
Forum Participants Talk About the Possibilities

In Downtown Fitchburg New Opportunities Present Themselves - Often



Destare, Downtown Fitchburg's Newest Restaurant, is Attracting Patrons from the Fitchburg Area, East of Fitchburg and Southern New Hampshire (Sentinel and Enterprise, 11/8/07).

New ventures in the central business district were identified. Later, discussion centered on how to keep attracting new businesses to the downtown and maintain them after they have established themselves.



A New Business is Coming to Downtown Fitchburg

Frankness was the Order of the Day

Participants were honest about the challenges in Downtown Fitchburg. Some of the challenges identified by program participants included the presence of empty storefronts, and safety concerns and negative perceptions about the Downtown promulgated by the media and other parties.

Assets Exist: Exploit Them for the Benefit of the Community

The central business district contains many assets such as affordability of space, Nashua River and Riverfront Park, Fitchburg State College, "walkability" of the downtown, and events that bring people into the downtown (i.e. Longsjo Bike Races and Civic Days).



Christ Church Located in the Heart of the Downtown Allowed Residents, Businesses Owners and Other Stakeholders to Visualize a New Downtown On October 20, 2007

Convert Challenges Into Results

The mood of the group was to convert the challenges into opportunities connecting those challenges with the existing assets and building into a larger cluster of positives in the Downtown making the CBD a more viable district.



David Streb, Planning Coordinator Leading a Tour and Making a Point

Honesty is the Best Policy

Honest conversation, input and dialog was the order of the day. This report has been completed with the intention of respecting, reflecting and documenting that honesty as a compilation of a report that will serve to complement other planning efforts (i.e. Fitchburg Vision 2020 Blueprint, Urban Renewal Plan, etc.) and momentum toward a reborn effort to revitalize Downtown Fitchburg.



Keeping Time in a Renaissance Park.
Green Space Near City Hall and Fitchburg Savings Bank

The report that follows documents the day's events, methodology and all of the input provided by the participants at the fall 2007 Downtown Fitchburg Community Forum.

The balance of the report has been segregated into the following sections:

- Process and Methodology.
- Post Tour Discussion.
- Summary of Findings Based Upon Input.
- Five Year Plan.

Process and Methodology

On Saturday October 20th from 8:15 to 2:00 there was a **Downtown Fitchburg Community Forum**. It was held at the Christ Church at 569 Main Street, in Downtown Fitchburg. The Forum was designed to help to develop a new community vision for Downtown Fitchburg. The Forum was for all those community members interested in bringing new energy and direction to the revitalization of this part of our city. Over the course of the day 83 people were involved.

This is the heart of Fitchburg and as it goes, so goes the City as a whole. It was an open, active, and public process that brought interested parties together to create a vision and a dynamic movement that will change the downtown of the future.

This event was sponsored and managed by the Fitchburg Economic Development Office (EDO) in partnership with the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC).

Participants ranged from Fitchburg residents, business and building owners, municipal officials,

including the Mayor and City Councilors, the Local State Representative, city staff including the Economic Development Office and Planning Department, the local Community Development Corporation, and others including candidates for political office. For those in attendance this exhibited a renewed interest in the Downtown. They brought their energy and ideas to help to create a vision and set the direction as Fitchburg moves into the 21st Century.

The meeting ran from breakfast at 8:15 AM, beginning with an interactive forum, and then to a tour of segments of downtown Main Street, followed by a light lunch. The afternoon included a discussion and planning session that ended about 2:30 PM.

The day began with a welcome by Mayor Daniel Mylott, Representative Stephen DiNatale added his comments and encouragement to the participants. Ellen DiGeronimo, Downtown Coordinator, Fitchburg Economic Development Office set the tone and summarized the purpose of the meeting by using numerous slides including artist's renditions of downtown architecture were projected for all to see. Glenn Eaton, Acting Executive Director of the MRPC completed the welcoming remarks by noting that,

“There are no problems in Downtown Fitchburg: But there are opportunities to be exploited for the community’s benefit”.

The rest of the day was facilitated by Bob Biagi with the help of nine additional MRPC staff as small group facilitators, and recorders.

The goals of the day were:

Goal 1

To create a revitalized downtown serving the needs and desires of Fitchburg residents and local businesses.

Goal 2

To provide an open dialogue in order to build a common vision of future development in downtown Fitchburg.

Participants divided into four groups, each with different discussion questions. There was a facilitator and a recorder in each group and the answers were written on newsprint. All responses have been included in Appendix A.

The next part of the process was a walking tour of different segments of Main Street, between Moran Square and the intersection of River and Main Streets. Each of

four groups was led by guides who were familiar with each of the four segments.

- Group I was led by Justin Hildebrandt and David Streb and covered the area between River Street and Main street (Crocker Field) to Central Street and Boulder Drive.
- Group II was led by Ann Wirtanen and Terry Kennedy, and covered the area from Central Street and Boulder Drive to Oliver and Putnam Streets.
- Group III was led by Marc Dohan and Chris Ioshua, and encompassed the area between Oliver and Putnam Streets to Blossom and Cushing Streets.
- Group IV toured the area between Blossom and Cushing Streets to Moran Square (intersection of Lunenburg and Summer Streets, and the Sawyer Passway area), was guided by Bob Antonucci, Dan Curley and Jay Bry.

The night and early morning prior to the tour saw a heavy rainstorm. Then fortunately the rain stopped before the meeting, and the day lightened-up and the weather was pleasant for walking. After the walking tour the participants returned to the meeting room for a light lunch and further discussion and setting of priority items (see

below for a summary while the detailed responses can be found in Appendix B).

There was a general consensus that the Forum was a first step and that this effort needs to continue. It was the feeling of the participants that the city should devote time to develop a cross-flow of information between residents, businesses, city officials, offices and departments, local agencies and institutions. While several participants felt that they were not prepared to prioritize ideas most felt that this was a useful step. Participants left energized and hopeful, and ready to continue the process.

It was recommended that a matrix be used to facilitate future planning. An example of such a matrix has been provided. (See Appendix C for the proposed matrix.)

“Post-Tour” Discussion

Methodology and Instructions to Forum Participants

All the participants in the Downtown Forum reconvened into one large group during the “Post-Tour” question-and-answer period.

The following are the two questions that the group discussed:

Question A

After seeing your area first hand, are there any comments, changes, or additions you would make regarding this morning’s session?

Question B

What suggestions would you make regarding the revitalization of the Downtown?

Responses from Forum Participants Grouped by Theme

Similarities emerged among many of the comments made by attendees during the “Post-Tour” question-and-answer period.

For the ease of the reader and future planning efforts the participants’ responses have been categorized, as follows:

- 1) Development
- 2) Transportation
- 3) Aesthetics/Beautification
- 4) Public Works/Maintenance
- 5) Government/Implementation
- 6) Marketing/Themes/Events
- 7) Infrastructure
- 8) College
- 9) Other



Making a Point About Planning and Implementation

1) Development

Commercial/Residential Development

- There exists a “chicken and the egg” situation between attracting residential development and commercial development to the downtown.
- Is it possible to lure people downtown without having private amenities (bars, restaurants, stores)?
- Private businesses won’t locate unless there is a certain population density.



The Johnsonia Building, a Former Hotel, Now Accommodates Housing, Retail Spaces and Offices

Circle Street

- There is untapped potential on Circle Street, there is a beautiful view of the Nashua River which could be capitalized on.



Green Space Exists Along the Nashua River in the Heart of Downtown Fitchburg

Vacant Lot (next to Fitchburg Theater Building)

- Wild vegetation growth at the empty lot.
- Could be a good location for a new parking garage, which would provide parking for the Court House and a redeveloped Fitchburg Theater Building in the future.
- The current chain-link fence could be replaced with something more aesthetically pleasing.
- A staircase could provide access between Main Street and the lower level parking lots.

Riverfront Park

- Converting the opposite side of the river to a park would make the park more desirable.
- (David Streb) If that were going to happen, it would require the purchasing of that land.



Riverfront Park

Vacant Buildings

- The former Superior Court sits vacant, which has redevelopment potential.

Moran Square

- A lot of work must be accomplished at Moran Square.
- Harper Furniture Building is in bad condition.



The removal of Caron's Flea Market and Availability of the Summer Street Fire Station and Harper's Furniture Helped Micon Products, Inc. Expand Operations and Grow this Key Manufacturing Business Onto Main Street In Moran Square

- The Intermodal Transportation Center needs to be finished (painting not complete).



The Intermodal and New Parking Garage Provide Commuters Transportation to Metro-Boston. Metro-Boston Residents Can Take a "Ski Train" to Wachusett Mountain Ski Area (via the Intermodal and Bus Shuttle) in the Winter Months

Hotel

- Attract a hotel to downtown Fitchburg.

2) Transportation

Parking Garage

- A parking garage is needed for the upper-common area.

Parking Meters

- People who are visiting the downtown are being penalized by time expiring on the parking meter.
- If there was a way to determine short term parking, the city could offer some sort of relief to these individuals (for visiting the doctor's office).
- However reducing or eliminating parking fees could strain already tight city budget.

Sidewalks

- Varying widths for the sidewalks along Main Street.
- Future development should seek to widen sidewalks to encourage more pedestrian activities.

3) Aesthetics/Beautification

Boulder Drive Aesthetics

- The stretch past the Fitchburg Savings Bank Building and Putnam Place.
- Currently it is an eye-soar, and is not pedestrian friendly.
 - Back of buildings are displayed.

- DPW Building is visible.
- It currently lacks a pedestrian friendly atmosphere.
- It needs to be less highway-like.
- Narrowing the road might be necessary.
- Adding a bicycle lane.
- Adding greenery (trees, shrubs, grass) could encourage more pedestrian activity.

Business Facades

- Some commercial building facades are currently in poor condition.
- What may be a viable business, is difficult to determine if it is vacant or occupied based upon its first floor use.
- The creation of a Downtown Business Association could play a role in encouraging businesses to remain in a more attractive state.

- There is a need to stipulate what the buildings should look like on Main Street.
- However, when doing this, the City must meet the developer half way, otherwise the developer may see barriers to working in Fitchburg: "Can't force them to lose money".

4) Public Works & Maintenance

Waste Disposal

- There is a lack of trash containers located along Main Street.
- This could be a large contributor to the trash located on the street.

Tree Grates

- Areas along Boulder Drive where trees used to be planted, now only have the stumps remaining.
- Not only is this bad aesthetics, but it also could pose a safety issue.

Trees

- Trees not replaced throughout Downtown Area after they were cut down.

5) Government & Implementation

Zoning.

- There needs to be strict adherence to zoning on Main Street.
- There can not be industrial uses located in an area where commerce and a pedestrian friendly atmosphere is attempting to be created.

6) Marketing, Themes & Events

- New Image/Experience Downtown.
- Market an alternative lifestyle/living experience in Downtown Fitchburg.
- Encourage a pedestrian lifestyle
 - Shuttle to transport people through Downtown.
 - Grocery Stores not feasible, instead encourage/recruit specialty stores (produce shop, farmers market, etc).
 - Adopt a more European lifestyle, that will give Fitchburg a uniqueness.

Historical/Cultural District

- Market the Downtown as the Fitchburg Historical/Cultural District.
- Create signage to be displayed at the entrance of the Downtown to inform people of the District.
- Such a marketing theme can inform people of all the cultural and historic amenities that the city has to offer, and help to project the image of Fitchburg as a cultural hub for visitors entering the city.

Walking Tours

- Conduct occasional walking tours for the public, to help

inform them of the historic, cultural, architectural uniqueness of the city, as well as other amenities that the City has to offer.

Quarterly Events

- Hold quarterly events (for the different seasons possibly) to get people downtown.

Fair/Marketplace

- There is a need for a venue to market and celebrate the diverse range of cultures that exist in Fitchburg.
- Whether it be a fair, marketplace, or some other venue to introduce visitors to the different foods, art, and customs of Fitchburg residents.

H.M. Francis

- Responsible for much of the architectural design of the City buildings.
- A new H.M. Francis District, is being worked on in collaboration with the Historic Society and other entities.
- It is a way to build upon a unique quality of the City
- It is also possible for collaborating on walking tours and historical/cultural signage.

Art Fair

- Create a Sunday Arts venue, to get people Downtown.

- Will help to alleviate the fear of visiting downtown.

Marketing

- Need a marketing strategy to connect the college students with the downtown.
- Requiring mandatory tours to incoming freshmen is a good way to lay the groundwork for building this connection.

Unique Venues

- The Forge-In is a unique venue to Fitchburg, and there is a need for more of these events.
- Leominster has a successful “summer stroll”.
- Need these types of events to get people in the door and open their eyes to what Fitchburg has to offer.

Advertising

- Have an audio recording that visitors can listen to as they stroll down the streets of Fitchburg (Walking Tour).

7) **Infrastructure**

Wireless

- Making the downtown connected to high-speed wireless internet would be an important tool for economic development.

- College kids would be drawn to the downtown.
- Plus it would encourage businesses.

8) **Fitchburg State College**

College Town

- There needs to be mental shift towards becoming a “college town”
- In the past Fitchburg State College and Worcester Poly Tech had intentions of buying property downtown, which ended up falling through.

College Bookstore

- By moving the College Bookstore onto Main Street, it could greatly increase the number of students walking along Main Street.

Art Project (FSC Student)

- There is a need to create a stronger linkage between the students at the College and the City.
- The Fitchburg Theater is at the entry way of the City.
- The theater “closed” signifies the city being “closed” or the “Lights are off”.

College Life

- Starbucks is a major attraction for college age students, and it should be sought for the downtown.
- Trader Joe’s is another venue popular for students, as well as either segments of the population.

College Experience

- Internet-Cafés, Coffee Shops, and other venues are needed.
- Survey the student body at FSC as to what they would like to see in the Downtown.

Summary of Findings Based Upon Input

Upon the completion of welcoming remarks from local officials the participants participated in four groups addressing the following four areas:

- Strengths, Assets and Attractions.
- Issues, Problems and Weaknesses.
- Barriers and Threats.
- Opportunities Available.

All comments made by the forum’s participants have been documented and appended to this report in “Attachment A”.

The following summarizes a sample of the responses that participants developed regarding the strengths, issues, barriers, and opportunities that exist Downtown.



Participants Were Actively Engaged in the Event

Strengths, Assets and Attractions

Fitchburg prides itself in having wonderful parks (Crocker Field and the Riverfront Park), historic architecture, cultural amenities, a walkable downtown, and direct access to Boston via the commuter rail. Other assets include strong local media coverage (FATV), talented artists and musicians, magnificent churches, and the cultural amenities linked to Fitchburg State College. Notable attractions include the annual Civic Days celebration and the Longsjo Classic.



Gathering Information on the “Walkability” of Main Street During One of Four Walking Tours

Issues, Problems and Weaknesses

Problems with vacant space and empty storefronts, cleanliness, inadequate parking, and a negative perception plague Downtown Fitchburg. Other issues involve a lack of funding for projects, an insufficient marketing effort, a lack of corporate investment, poor collaboration and communication among key players, and a sub-par effort to attract college students to Downtown. Issues that outsiders would perceive as weaknesses include the perception of the City being a magnet for individuals dependent upon social services, safety issues associated with dilapidated properties (drug and violence), and empty storefronts at highly visible locations.

Barriers and Threats

Obstacles, such as the costs associated with maintaining historic architecture, absentee landlords, excessive speeding, high utility costs, and negative media “spin” must be overcome in Fitchburg. The barriers existing between the Downtown and the college, stakeholders (non-profit organizations), and residents (and the services that they demand) have to be removed in order to strengthen the City’s core. Threatening trends affecting

Downtown include increased foreclosure rates, a lack of municipal revenue, and aging buildings.

David Rogers of Workers Credit Union informed the audience that four public safety signs would be donated to the City of Fitchburg by WCU for use in Downtown Fitchburg which drew loud applause from those present.

Opportunities Available

A multitude of opportunities exist in Downtown Fitchburg. Creating a college atmosphere, establishing an Arts District, developing a theme (niche), and attracting young professionals are all viable options for reinvigorating Downtown. Future opportunities also exist with potential development along the Nashua River, forging tourist linkages between the City and Wachusett Mountain, and adopting more business-friendly practices in City Hall.

Discussion Based Upon Input Received From Participants

During the discussion section participants got the chance to engage in a thorough discussion about issues facing Downtown. Below is a summary of a sample of the responses, which are broken up into eight categories.

Development

Circle Street (located along the Nashua River) and the vacant site abutting the Fitchburg Theater are potential locations for future development. Moran Square, a gateway to the Downtown, is an area with development potential that is in need of investment.



Former Fitchburg Theater Building:
Subject of Much Discussion During the Community Forum
on Downtown Fitchburg

Transportation

Parking meters are viewed as being an impediment to attracting people Downtown. Additionally, a parking garage is perceived to be needed at the Upper-Common, and future sidewalk lengths need to be widened to accommodate more pedestrian traffic.



Parking Meter: New Technology



Parking Meter: Former Technology

Aesthetics/Beautification

The stretch of Boulder Drive past Fitchburg Savings Bank and before Putnam Place is in need of improvement, as it features a barren landscape (the back walls of businesses, a sea of parking spaces, etc.) that is unwelcoming to pedestrian traffic.



Putnam Place

Also, certain areas of Downtown could use alterations to the business facades.

Public Works/Maintenance

The lack of trash containers and the empty tree grates along Main Street were significant concerns voiced by a number of participants.



Making a Point About Coffee Sales and Downtown Trash Receptacles

Government/Implementation

There needs to be a strict adherence to zoning, otherwise conflicting uses could emerge that would harm the Downtown experience.

Marketing/Themes/Events

Events such as walking tours, quarterly festivals, fairs, and unique venues can capitalize upon and celebrate the assets that the City has to offer. Offering an alternative lifestyle (pedestrian), or a new theme (H.M. Francis District) can create a new image for Fitchburg.



New Home of the Fitchburg Historic Society and Research Results, Inc. on Main Street

Infrastructure

Connecting Downtown to *high-speed wireless* internet could encourage new businesses and residents to locate in Fitchburg. It should be noted that the Downtown already has many Wi-Fi “hot spots”. Some of these were mentioned at the Forum (and are documented on the City of Fitchburg’s website).

Free Wireless Internet (Wi-Fi) Hotspots in Fitchburg

(Partial List - Downtown Hot Spots)

- [*Fitchburg Public Library, 610 Main Street.*](#)
- *Fitchburg Law Library, 84 Elm Street*
- *MD of the PC - 12 Mill Street - between Boulder Drive and Main Street near the parking deck.*
- *Hooligan's Bar, 29 Blossom Street, Fitchburg (near downtown)*
- *The Boulder Cafe - 880 Main Street, Fitchburg (at the Upper Common)*

Source and Full List Available at:
[*http://www.ci.fitchburg.ma.us/wifi.htm*](http://www.ci.fitchburg.ma.us/wifi.htm)

College

It is essential to attract all of the amenities associated with a college atmosphere, in order to attract college students Downtown. Better linkages between the college and city must exist, whether it be locating college buildings downtown, having students collaborating on City projects, or any other effort that will forge a stronger bond.



Fitchburg State College

Five Year Plan

Methodology and Instructions to Forum Participants

Part C of the Discussion Question portion of the Forum focused on the goals to be accomplished over the next five years. There were two aspects to this portion of the forum:

- 1) As a group, collectively brainstorm actions that can be undertaken within a five year time frame.

Ideas shared by all of the participants can be found in Appendix B (Responses from Forum Participants Grouped by Theme During the “Post Walking Tour” Discussion).

Upon the completion of the identification of all possible projects to be implemented or completed within five years, a “prioritization” exercise was completed by the participants.

- 2) Collectively, the group identified the most important projects to accomplish over the next five years.

In part 2, participants were given three orange sticker-dots to identify their five year priorities. The sticker-dots were totaled to establish the collective list of priorities. The results of this two-step exercise follow.

Five-year Goals as Seen through the Eyes of the Participants

Participants in the five-year goals prioritization portion of the Downtown Fitchburg Community Forum had strong feelings about implementing projects that focused on Marketing, Themes & Events, Development, Government Implementation, and Public Works & Maintenance over other issues mentioned.

It should be noted that while the participants of this Forum prioritized some issues over others, that those issues with a lesser priority may have equal or greater importance during future planning efforts and as present highly prioritized issues are addressed.

Projects proposed to be initiated or completed within the next five years follow.

Top Priorities Within the Next Five Years

#	Priority	Score	Category
1.	Establish an Implementation Plan Using Matrix to Address Priorities	16	Public-Private Community Organization & Implementation
2.	Marketing and Outreach Aggressively	12	Marketing, Themes & Events
3.	Cleaning Schedule for Downtown	10	Public Works & Maintenance
4.	Perception Change	7	Marketing, Themes & Events
5.	Fitchburg Theater Redevelopment	7	Development
6.	Filling Downtown Space	6	Development
7.	Create Community Organization		Public-Private Community Organization & Implementation
8.	Energy Rate Reduction	6	Public-Private Community Organization & Implementation
9.	Restaurant Recruitment	4	Other
10.	Expanded Economic Development	4	Development

Appendix A: Input Received During “Breakout Sessions”

After the “welcoming remarks” portion of the program had been concluded, all of the participants broke into four groups, each covering one of the following topics:

- Strengths, Assets and Attractions.
- Issues, Problems and Weaknesses.
- Barriers and Threats.
- Opportunities Available.

Specific questions were asked within each breakout group. The questions asked can be found below.

1) Strengths, Assets and Attractions.

What are Downtown Fitchburg’s Strengths?

- What Advantages, Assets, and Resources does Downtown Fitchburg have?
- What does Downtown Fitchburg Do Well?

2) Issues, Problems and Weaknesses.

- What could be Improved in Downtown Fitchburg?
- What Resources are you lacking?
- What are Others likely to see as Weaknesses?

3) Barriers and Threats.

- Are there any Obstacles, Problems, Challenges, or Barriers?
- What Trends could harm revitalization efforts?

4) Opportunities Available.

- What Good Opportunities are open to Downtown Fitchburg?
- What Trends could we take advantage of?
- How can we turn our Strengths into Opportunities?

**Group 1 -
Strengths/Assets/Attractions**

Downtown Fitchburg’s Strengths

- Architecture.
- Longsjo Classic.
- Walkable downtown.
- College resources.
- Accessibility.
- Cultural facilities cluster .
- Existing buildings.
- Commuter rail.
- New residences.
- Affordability.
- River/Riverfront Park.
- Traditional cultural center.
- Components for viable downtown.
- Crocker Field.
- Potential for many businesses.
- Abundance of open space.
- Want/Willingness/Opportunity for change.

- Local talents (artists, etc).
- Young talent (money, FSC).
- FATV: good local media.
- Commuter Rail access.
 - Plenty of new parking.
 - Using lack of highway .access to their advantage.
- “Destination”.
- Responsible property owners, i.e.: new business Destaré.
- Tight knit community/networking within city.
- Energy.
 - Downtown Fitchburg has a sense of energy, not an abandoned Downtown.

Advantages, Assets, and Resources

- Walking.
- On/off street parking.



A Prior Night’s Rainstorm Cleared Out Enabling Light to Shine Onto Walking Tour Participants as They Identified Downtown Parking and Other Assets

What does downtown Fitchburg do well?

- Pride → cleaner, more attractive.
- Identification → “City for All Seasons”.
- Adequate parking → walkability.
- Good traffic flow.
- Gaining success.
 - Pride, “civic days”, Celebrate Our Children.
- Traditions established & defined.
 - Coverage of events.
- Community police and policing, act well as

ambassadors, feeling of safety
& positive.

- There is a positive police presence that gives a sense of security and safety.
- Historical assets realized.
- Opportunities sought after.
- Commuter rail/ski train/ bike trail.
- Appreciation of older buildings/ “Village within a city”.
- Excitement about new opportunities.
 - Share vision in community.
 - Arts/college-strong intellectual influence.
 - Capitalizing “college town”.
- Bring college downtown .
- Future city/college success .
 - New construction .
 - North Street-gateway.
- Downtown sparks good community events.
- Ethnicity, Diversity, Identity, Welcome.
- Template is there - city of hills.
- Downtown churches.
- Community staff in area.
- Non-profit involvement.
- New business = new contribution → philanthropy.
- Good housing for seniors.

**Group 2 –
Issues/Problems/Weaknesses**

What could be improved in
Downtown Fitchburg?

- Cleaner downtown, gardened with flowers, etc.
 - Citizens felt there was a need to make the Downtown more attractive for visitors.
 - Add landscaping features (gardening, flowers).
- Empty store fronts (low cost solution).
 - Either fill empty store fronts with tenants, or find solutions to make empty store fronts more attractive for potential owners and/or renters.
- Police presence to prevent loitering.
 - There is a need to have a strong police presence to prevent loitering in prime downtown locations.
- Parking issues (real or perceived).
 - There may be enough parking spaces to meet the demand, however people are reluctant to visit Downtown, if they must walk long distances to reach their intended destination.
 - Some areas may be lacking parking.
- Store owners take responsibility for property.
 - Store owners need to take on the responsibility of the area surrounding their property, when it comes to cleaning up trash, maintaining signage, and getting rid of loiterers.
- Street lights and sidewalks
 - Implement improvements to street lights and sidewalks to make them more attractive.
 - Additionally, fix broken items (street lights) when they fall into disrepair.
- Tree grates.
 - Either replace.
- More free parking (time limit?).
 - There is a need for additional free parking spaces, possibly without a time limit, to encourage patrons to visit Downtown.
- Courthouse/library parking
 - More signage displaying where parking areas exist are needed.
- Needs to be a reason for people to come downtown (more businesses, etc).
 - City sponsored events and sidewalk sales can help attract people Downtown, which will help create the

image of Fitchburg becoming a destination.

- Too much vacant space.
 - Vacant space can contribute to the negative perception of Fitchburg, by attracting businesses and residences to fill this vacant space can help to alleviate this false perception.
- More statues and artwork
 - Such structures can help to improve the downtown landscape.
- Perception
 - Need a shift away from a negative to a more positive perception of the City.

What resources are you lacking?

- Money
 - The City lacks the funds to implement changes.
- Cooperation and communication.
 - Need better collaborative, cooperative, communicative efforts between the City government and the private sector.
- More major corporations on board.
 - Big corporations located downtown would encourage college students downtown (Starbucks).
- Transportation.

- Visitor housing (hotels, etc).
- Public works personnel.
- More state aide.

- More reason for groups of people to visit, i.e. walking groups, tours, events.
- More marketing.
- More seasonal uses of empty space.
 - Seasonal uses could include seasonal events, or even decorating storefronts for the holidays.
 - Stronger partnership between building owners and city (committee).
- Attract more college students safely.
 - Show the students all that the downtown has to offer.
- Farmers market.
 - Excellent way to attract people downtown.
- Support for local business.

What are Others likely to see as Weaknesses?

- Supporting too many homeless is a magnet for homeless from other cities.
 - Institutions, such as Our Father's House, that intend to help the homeless, may attract more homeless to the area.
- Types of housing that attracts the undesirable.

- Dilapidated housing structures tend to attract slum lords and drug dealers to the community.
- Increase the “right” type of people (young professionals, college students, etc.), which would change the way others “perceive” downtown.
- Empty store fronts.
- Nothing to draw people in
 - Nobody wants to live in a boring or uneventful city.
- Homeless have nowhere to go during the day.
 - Find something positive for them to do.
- Big empty furniture store.
 - Major eye sore located at one of the gateways of the Downtown.
 - This site must be filled, and if it can’t, an alternative solution must be found (Day Care Center?).

Group 3 – Barriers and Threats

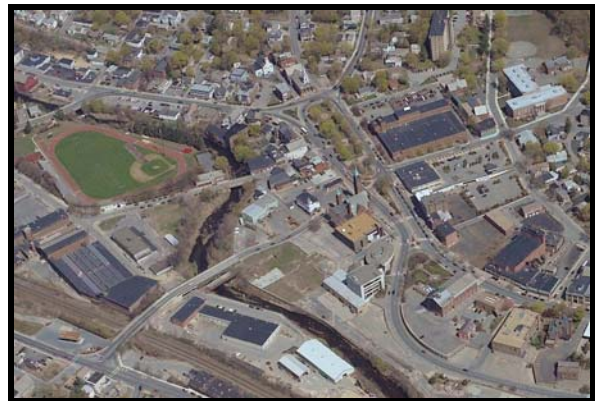
Are there any obstacles, problems, challenges or barriers?

OBSTACLES

- Perception of downtown as not safe, not clean, dead, nothing going on.
- Public relations to negative obstacles (spin harmful).
 - Public relations need to be positive, not “negative”. Regardless of the entity involved in “public relations” (local government, non-profit, newspapers) any negative messages only contribute to a reinforced negative perception of the Downtown.
- Pedestrian safety – negotiation at certain intersections.
 - Excessive traffic speeds caused safety issues for pedestrians at certain intersections.
- Trash outside businesses
 - There needs to be a focused effort to remove trash from the Central Business District.
 - One business owner stated that he sweeps the sidewalk and entryway to his business twice a day, but his efforts are futile since the trash just gets blown back over when

the next strong wind gust hits (useless unless all businesses are participating).

- Vacant storefronts .
 - Having some vacant space for a downtown is healthy (want room for businesses to move in), however group members felt that the amount of vacant space in the downtown was excessive.
- Improve cleanliness.
- Difficult or lack of parking in certain areas
The upper common is a perceived problem area for parking, and many group members felt additional off-street parking, or a possible garage would be a good solution.



The Upper Common is Flanked by Crocker Field and the Nashua river to the West and the Post Office and Workers Credit Union to the East as well as Other Commercial Enterprises

- Strict enforcement of speed limits.
 - Raised cobblestone crosswalks.
 - Slow/calm speed traffic calming methods.
- Pride in ownership of properties.
- Maintain renovations, costs of renovations are barriers.
 - The cost of maintaining historic architecture may be a barrier to development in the Downtown.
- Absentee landlords
 - Could be a leading cause of the high vacancy rates.
- Enhance view of downtown.
- Deferred maintenance issues.
- Old buildings costly to maintain.
- High utility costs
 - High utility costs are a perception and a reality.
- Preservation of the way things used to be.
 - Lack of involvement.
 - Reflection of their perspectives .
- Recreate synergy.
 - There appears to be a lack of collaboration between the private and public sector Downtown.
 - Key players (Business and property owners, Chamber of Commerce, City Government, etc.) need to

reconnect and move the City forward.

- Access critical mass.
- Traffic speed too fast on Main Street.
 - Slow it down; maybe go back to two-way traffic.
- Need businesses: retail, unique boutiques. Configuration of Main St.
 - Length, curve, compensate beyond Blossom St.



Some Retailers Make Downtown Fitchburg their Home.
Shack's is an Institution on Main Street.

PROBLEMS

- Lack of middle-aged men in leadership roles.
 - This comment appears to have been related to the need to train future leaders in multiple organizations involved in long-term sustainability of certain downtown institutions (YMCA, Senior Center).

- Lack of retail on Main Street, need consumers to come to Main Street.
 - Safety issues after dark.
 - Lack of life in store fronts.
- Lack of appropriate business
 - Main Street lacks the necessary retail businesses to attract people to the Downtown.
- Need to find a way to connect the needs of faculty, students, and other college groups to the Downtown.
- Chamber of Commerce
 - Chamber of Commerce should be involved heavily in redevelopment efforts Downtown.

CHALLENGES OR BARRIERS

- Tie downtown into neighborhoods, have Main Street reflect the people living nearby.
- There is a certain demographic of residents living in close proximity to Downtown, and the City can capitalize by bringing in businesses that cater to these individuals' demands for goods and services.
- Lack of identity.
- Need critical mass in the buildings-downtown.
- Perception that the downtown is not a place to be.
 - This negative perception needs to be eliminated.
- Create the perception of no vacant space downtown.
- Use existing non-profits.
 - Access the services of all non-profit entities that have a stake in Downtown Fitchburg.
- College connection needs to be strengthened.
- Getting word out to organizations.
 - Sign across the street.
- Fitchburg Friday Event/draw people in.
 - Having events in the Downtown is critically important to businesses survival on Main Street.
 - Life after 5:00 was a major concern of residents.
- Media doesn't work together.
 - Redevelopment representatives are encouraged to sit together with the media to create a positive image of Fitchburg being a great place to live, work, and play.
- Police stopping for speed – use speed meters.
 - An increase in motor vehicle law enforcement was identified as a concern of downtown businesses and pedestrians.
- Downtown not too bad.
- Clean in most store fronts.

TRENDS

- Age of buildings and maintenance they need.
- Income needed to rehab buildings.
 - In order for older buildings to be maintained, they must be occupied (rent pays for the repairs).
- Competition of publicly owned building or nonprofit owned.
 - Public sector properties may have the edge in attracting businesses (due to subsidies), while private properties are left to suffer with vacancies.
- Lack of municipal finances has adverse effect on people and property (police, fire, etc).
- Fitchburg Sentinel negative press.
 - Negative press will add fuel to an existing up-hill battle when it comes to Downtown issues.
- Foreclosure rates high
 - Finding ways to help those faced with foreclosure is crucial to keeping buildings occupied.
- City develop pro-business, pro-developer attitude.
 - The City should have business friendly policies, and work better with developers.
- Stop old trend to knock down buildings.

Group 4 – Opportunities Available

What good opportunities are open to Downtown Fitchburg?

- Two lane traffic.
- Cost of getting a new business going.
- Fitchburg is appealing.
- Get in at the ground level business-wise .
- Looking at things from a college perspective .
 - Find stores or venues that would encourage college students to spend time Downtown.
- Focus on the services.
- Tourism.
 - Make a concerted effort to market the city as a tourist destination, which will bring more people downtown.
- Arts District location (ex. Northampton).
- Slowing down traffic.
- Close down Main Street for Flea Market.
 - On a Sunday morning block-off vehicle traffic from Main St, and hold an event to attract people downtown.
- Businesses need to market, advertise and get information to other businesses.
 - Distribute pamphlets featuring attractions, restaurants, bars, etc.
- Need continuity with Main Street.
- Advertising not good
 - Most people will not go Downtown for retail shopping.
- We need a theme.
 - The City needs a niche/image that can be used in marketing and tourism promotions.
- Side roads need support with Main Street
- Parking is bad, need localized parking
- Create a map telling you where to go with common business.
- Map that lists businesses.
- Where people stay market business.
- Tap into the schools – let them know what is here.
 - Attracting younger people is needed to revitalize Downtown.
- Know the heritage in brochure.
- Contest for decorating during the holidays.
 - A storefront decoration competition could help to promote Downtown.
- Push seasonal events.
- Nashua River key to attracting businesses.
- Illuminate 5th Street Bridge.
- Bike trail recreation.
- Reconnect Broad Street and Boulder Drive.

- Efforts to reconnect Broad Street and Boulder Drive can improve traffic flows Downtown.

Look at traffic patterns.

One card system (example: UMASS) accepted off campus for FSC Students.

Encourage business downtown.

Wachusett Ski Train – give them a reason to stay .

Address parking on Main Street
City Hall should be friendlier with permits.

Streamline permitting.

Look after the businesses we have now.

Appendix B: Responses from Forum Participants Grouped by Theme During the “Post Walking Tour” Discussion

Numbers in parentheses represent relative importance assigned to each issue by participants (using the orange sticker dots, mentioned earlier). The following categories have been ranked in order of importance as determined by Forum participants.

1) **Public-Private Community Organization & Implementation** (27)

Community Organization Creation (6)

- There is a need for each individual property owner to take on the responsibility to clean up the area around their property.
- This could be implemented through a Community Organization (Neighborhood Group).

Expand Economic Development Office (4)

- The current staff is doing a great job, despite being limited in terms of numbers.
- With more staff, the City would be able to go after many more grants, and accomplish a lot more for the City.

Implementation Using Matrix [Goal Oriented] System (16)

- The creation of a process of implementation is key.
- The process must be broken down into stages.
 - Goals.
 - Lead Agency Involved.
 - Cost of the project.
 - Funding Source.
 - Status of Funding Source.
 - Time Frame.
- A sound process of implementation is key to moving projects from the “idea stage” into reality.

Quick Action Items

- Prioritize five year plan into items that should be accomplished during different time periods.

Unified Look for Downtown (1)

Use zoning regulations to create complimentary downtown architecture and facades.

2) Marketing, Themes & Events (19)

Marketing and Outreach Aggressively (12)

- The City needs the ability to reach out for those sources of funding.

Perception Change (7)

-The City needs to advertise itself.

- Convey a message of love for the City
- People are the City's strongest assets, and we need to build upon their capabilities to make Fitchburg a great place.

3) Development (18)

Fitchburg Theater Redevelopment (7)

- There needs to be a Master Plan developed for the Fitchburg Theater. A fully function theater is a great way to attract FSC students downtown. Good gateway for the city.

City Owned Property (1)

- Make a concerted effort to sell off any city owned property at a discounted price, with the goal of converting it into affordable housing.

Filling Downtown Space (6)

- The City must take an active role in recruiting business and residents to fill the vacant downtown space. By filling space, many of the problems of the Downtown may start to subside, while also creating an image of the City being and vibrant.

Restaurant Recruitment (4)

- The City should try to attract some restaurants to the Downtown.

Bed and Breakfast Hotel

- A bed and breakfast hotel can attract people to the City's core, and become yet another amenity that the City has to offer.

4) Public Works & Maintenance (13)

Cleaning Schedule (10)

- Create a schedule to clean Main Street.
 - Not merely a one-time thing, but something done routinely.
- Put plan into action to remove the tree grates.
- Offer community service credits to FHS students to clean up the City.

Replace Tree Grates (3)

- Areas along Boulder Drive and Main Street where trees used to be planted, now only have the stumps remaining.

Not only is this bad aesthetics, but it also could pose a safety issue.

5) Other (7)

Churches (3)

- Churches in recent years have been under a financial burden, and may require assistance to stay open.
- These buildings represent some of the best architecture in the City, as well as playing a crucial role in partnering with other agencies regarding community development and social programs.

Energy Rate Reduction (4)

- Surging energy rates are not only a burden on people currently living in Fitchburg, but also act as a deterrent for people and businesses looking to locate in Fitchburg.

Something must be done to alleviate this burden.

6) Aesthetics & Beautification (6)

Adding Trees on Main Street (3)

- In addition to providing shade during hot summer days, adding trees to Main Street helps create an improved downtown experience.

Building Exteriors (3)

- Renovations must occur to the exterior of some Downtown buildings, in order to make the area more aesthetically pleasing.

7) College (1)

Fitchburg State College Signage (1)

- One of the Gateways to FSC intersects with Main Street.
- It would be nice to have an impressive looking sign to inform visitors of the college.

Appendix C: Possible Planning Matrix A by Category and Matrix B by Priority

Planning Matrix by Category

#	Category	Project	How	Who	When/Timetable/Schedule
1.	Public-Private Community Organization & Implementation				
2.	Marketing, Themes & Events				
3.	Development				
4.	Public Works & Maintenance				
5.	Other				
6.	Aesthetics & Beautification				
7.	College				

Planning Matrix by Priority

#	Category	Project	How	Who	When/Timetable/Schedule
1.	Establish an Implementation Plan Using Matrix to Address Priorities				
2.	Marketing and Outreach Aggressively				
3.	Cleaning Schedule for Downtown				
4.	Perception Change				
5.	Fitchburg Theater Redevelopment				
6.	Filling Downtown Space				
7.	Create Community Organization				
8.	Energy Rate Reduction				
9.	Restaurant Recruitment				
10.	Expanded Economic Development				

Appendix D: Montachusett Regional Planning Commission Volunteers, Contributors and Staff

<u>COMMUNITY</u>	<u>APPOINTED BY PLANNING BOARD</u>	<u>APPOINTED BY SELECTMEN OR MAYOR</u>
Ashburnham	Bruce Whitney	Christopher Gagnon
Ashby	Alan Pease	Wayne Stacy
Athol		James W. Meehan
Ayer	Pat Walsh	Christopher Ryan
Clinton	Richard Freel	Don Lowe
Devens *	Peter Lowitt	
Fitchburg	Paula Caron	
Gardner	Alan Gross	Robert Grubb
Groton	Joshua Degen	John Saball
Harvard	Kara Minar-Maguire	Lucy Wallace
Hubbardston	Linda Brisbois	Paul Hale
Lancaster	Victor Koivumaki	Eugene Christoph
Leominster		Jack Raymond
Lunenburg	James Halloran	Robert Bowen
Petersham		Ellen Anderson
Phillipston		Ronald Recos
Royalston	Vyto Andreliunas	Linda Alger
Shirley	Charles Colburn	Joseph Lynch
Sterling	Michael Padula	Robert Spencer
Templeton	Robert Rose, Jr.	Robert Columbus
Townsend	Louis Kiklis	Pat McLoy
Westminster		Andrew Sears
Winchendon	John White	

* Ex-Officio Member

MONTACHUSETT REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION OFFICERS

Name	Title	Community
Victor Koivumaki	Chairman	Lancaster
Vyto Andreliunas	Vice Chairman	Royalston
John White	Secretary	Winchendon
James Meehan	Treasurer	Athol
Robert Grubb	Assistant Treasurer	Gardner

MRPC STAFF AND CONSULTANTS

MRPC staff contributing to the forum and report preparation are in **boldface**, below.

(By Department by Last Name)

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<p>Geographic Information Systems (GIS)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renee Marion, GIS Analyst • Jason Stanton, GIS Analyst 	<p>Transit and Transportation Planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brian Doherty, Transportation Planner • Sheri Dufour, Transportation Planner • Brad Harris, Transportation Project Director • George Kahale, Transit Project Director • George Snow, Principal Planner 	<p>Homeland Security, Pre-Disaster Mitigation and Other Projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robert Biagi, Consultant