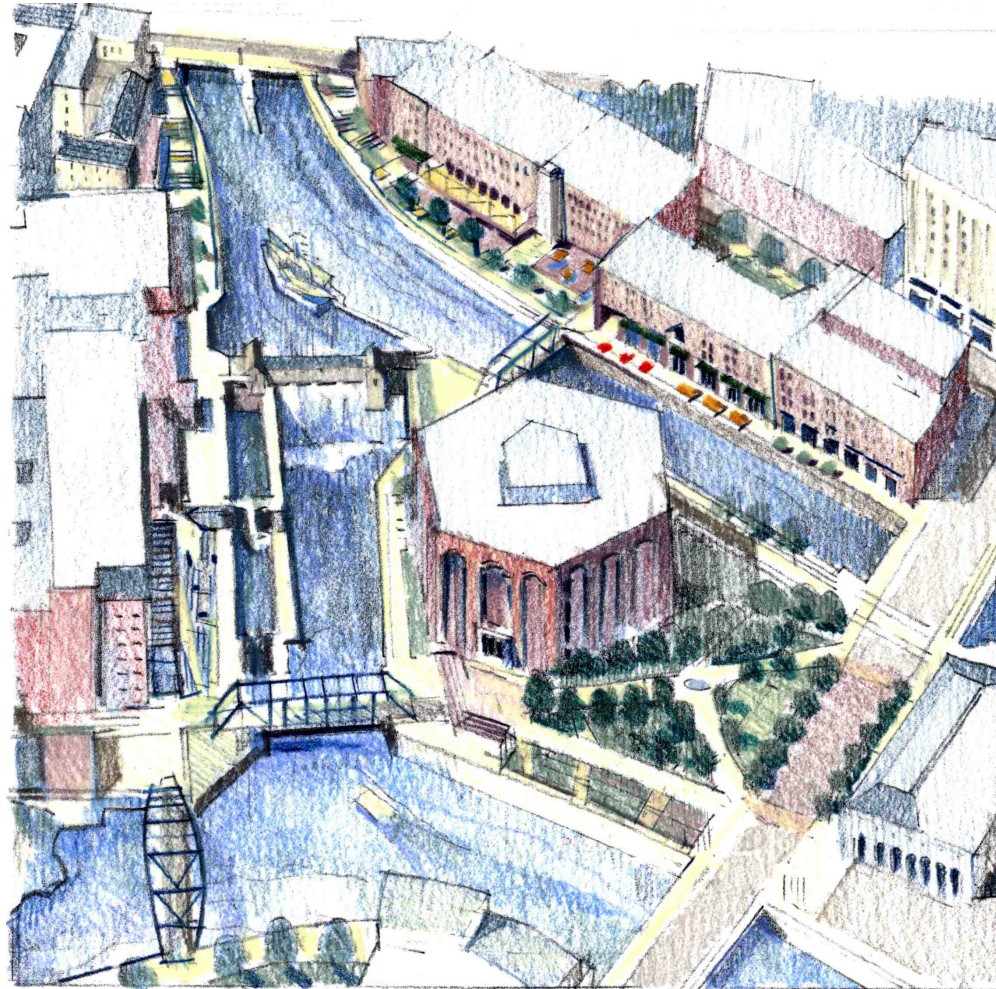


# LOWELL DOWNTOWN EVOLUTION PLAN

## ACTIONABLE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



COMPLETED SEPTEMBER, 2010

BY SPECK & ASSOCIATES LLC

IN ASSOCIATION WITH:

AECOM AND ROCK MAPLE STUDIOS

# ACTIONABLE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....3

Chapter 1. Activities Downtown..... 3

Chapter 2. Streets in General .....3

Chapter 3. Street Reconfigurations ..... 5

Chapter 4. Signals and Crosswalks ..... 5

Chapter 5. Transit .....6

Chapter 6. The Riverwalk and Canalway System .....6

Chapter 7. Parking ..... 7

Chapter 8. Walkability Analysis and Urban Triage ..... 7

Chapter 9. Recommended Short-Term Interventions ..... 9

Chapter 10. Recommended Mid-Term Interventions ..... 11

Chapter 11. Recommended Long-Term Interventions ..... 13

Chapter 12. Lowell High School .....15

Chapter 13. The Lower Locks .....16

Chapter 14. An Approach to Success .....19

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## INTRODUCTION

This document is called an Actionable Executive Summary because it is designed and written to be of use in the Plan's implementation. For that reason, it outlines the Plan's recommendations in the most expeditious manner possible, *without discussing the reasoning behind any of them*. If you are looking to understand why certain recommendations have been made, please refer to the *Lowell Downtown Evolution Plan*, posted on [www.lowellplan.org](http://www.lowellplan.org).

This document has culled from that Plan every specific recommendation, so that it may serve as a checklist in the Plan's implementation. This document is organized exactly along the lines of the Plan itself, so additional information can always be found by turning to the corresponding section in the Plan.

Finally, the authors would like to humbly suggest that readers of this document might find the Plan to be much better reading than this summary. *May we encourage you to look at that document first?*

## CHAPTER 1. ACTIVITIES DOWNTOWN

### Residential

The City should actively direct housing developers to key downtown sites with specific programs and incentives where possible, with a focus on the upper stories of buildings in the very heart of the downtown, on Merrimack, Middle, Market, and Central Streets.

### Retail and Dining

The nascent Retailers Roundtable should be grown into a bona fide Merchant's Association that coordinates cross-promotions, store hours, open evenings, special events, and joint marketing. It should also create a unified proposal for campus-meal-plan substitution, and actively recruit additional retailers to improve the store mix. These retailers would take advantage of a currently underserved student entertainment market, and might also contain a now-potentially-viable downtown supermarket, a subsidized cinema, an expanded bookstore, and a Fedex/Kinkos. A new International Market is recommended as part of a larger transformation of the Lower Locks.

### Office

Due to the distribution of available daytime parking in City garages, a limited amount of new office is recommended for the heart of downtown, principally on the empty site next to Enterprise Bank. A larger opportunity exists in the sites surrounding Cox Circle, which should become Lowell's next major office development.

### Institutional

UMass Lowell is encouraged to put more of its beds downtown, ideally in the heart of downtown. For student safety, lighting on the University Ave. Bridge should be inexpensively improved as it awaits replacement. UMass Lowell's (UML's) expansion into the Hall Street neighborhood should be encouraged, but ideally should include both academic and for-profit uses. Middlesex Community College (MCC) is encouraged to continue expanding its presence downtown, as long as it does not displace storefronts along retail corridors like on Middle Street. It should transform its parking lot on East Merrimack Street into a campus green. Every matriculating UML and MCC student should be required, as a part of campus orientation, to take a National Park Service tour of downtown. The National Park Service should investigate making canal tours more common and popular.

### Hotel

An unscientific assessment of Lowell's size and assets suggests that the downtown should be able to support one mid-market hotel of significant size, and one smaller luxury boutique hotel for tourists and business guests. The City and the Lowell Plan should work together to correct the strange absence of a downtown hotel.

## CHAPTER 2. STREETS IN GENERAL

### Background

Proposed changes (ahead) to Lowell's downtown streets are based on optimizing the following criteria, all of which support walkability and retail success:

- A network of many small streets, rather than fewer large streets;
- Lanes that are not oversized;
- Two-way streets vs. one-way streets where possible;

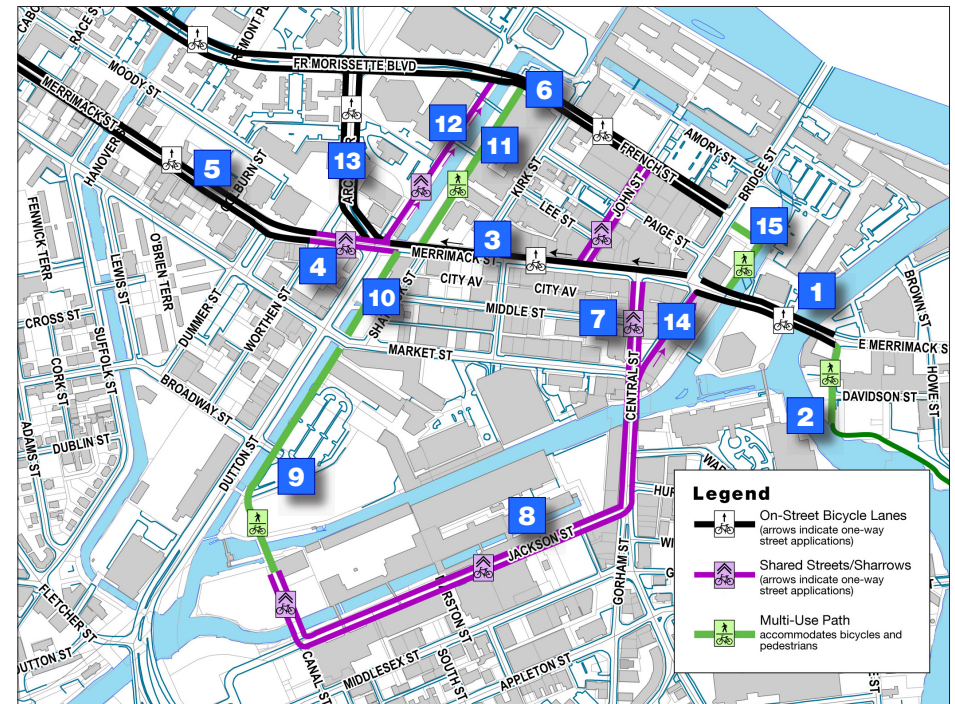
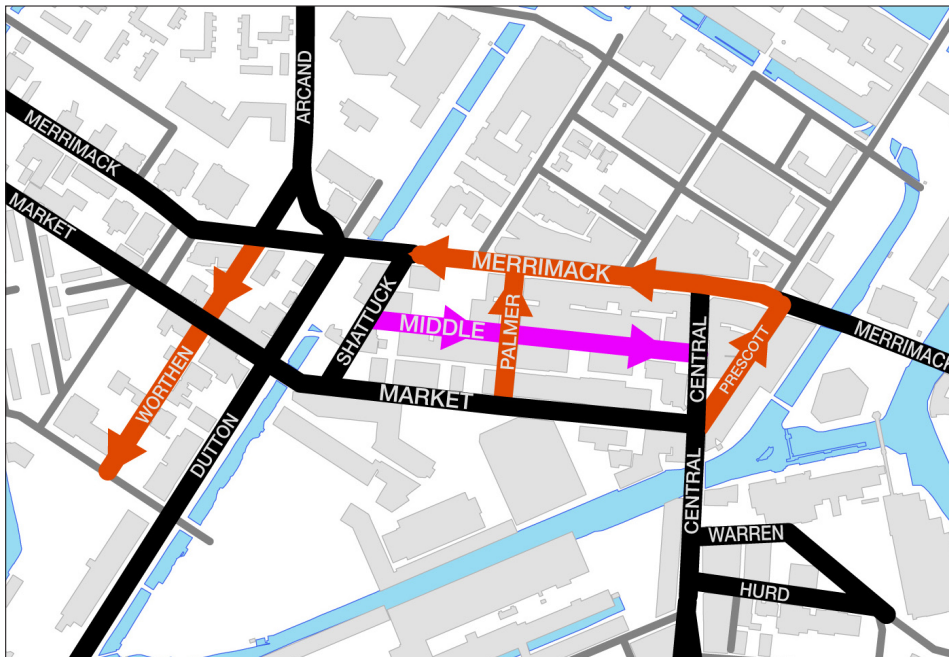


- Limiting use and length of left-hand turn lanes;
- Avoiding swooping curved trajectories;
- Limiting curb cuts across the sidewalk;
- Continuous on-street parking wherever possible; and
- Continuous street trees.

## Traffic Circulation

After careful study, traffic modeling, and deliberation, the following changes are recommended for the downtown's circulation system:

- Market, Shattuck, Central, Warren, and Hurd Streets are returned to two-way traffic;
- Merrimack Street between Dutton and Shattuck is returned to two-way traffic;
- Flow on Middle Street is reversed; and
- Left turns north are reinstated on Worthen Street in front of City Hall.



## Bicycle Accommodation

A downtown bicycle network is proposed to include the following:

1. Bike lanes are placed on Merrimack from Bridge to Davidson, connecting the MCC campus and the Lowell Memorial Auditorium to the downtown core.
2. A clear path south of East Merrimack connects to the Bay Circuit Trail along the Concord River.
3. Westbound Merrimack is restriped to include a westbound bike lane.
4. Sharrows (marked shared lanes for bikes and vehicles) are placed through the Ladd-Whitney Monument Square intersection to carry the bicycle connection through to West Merrimack.
5. Merrimack is restriped west of Monument Square to include bike lanes.



6. Bicycle lanes are added to French and Father Morrisette Boulevard.
7. Sharrows are placed on Central from Merrimack to Jackson.
8. Sharrows on Jackson complete the loop to the Hamilton Canal District.
9. A sharrow and a multi-use path run through the Hamilton Canal District, as outlined in the District Master Plan.
10. A multi-use path is formalized along the Merrimack Canal between Market and Merrimack.
11. The existing trail between Merrimack and French is used to connect through Lucy Larcom Park on the Lowell High School campus.
12. A proposed Lowell High School redesign extends Dutton into a one-way sharrow.
13. Arcand Drive is restriped to receive bike lanes between Merrimack and Morrisette.
14. Sharrows are added to the right lane of Prescott to allow cyclists to access to Merrimack without dismounting between Central and Prescott.
15. A connection through Jack Kerouac Park between French and East Merrimack is made up of an east-west path along the south edge of the park and a north-south path along the canal.

Additionally, it is recommended that the City, Lowell High School, UMass Lowell, and Middlesex Community College collaborate in short order to complete a collective bike rack inventory and plan.

### CHAPTER 3. STREET RECONFIGURATIONS

Changes to Lowell's downtown streets include the following:

- Conversion from one-way two to two-way travel;
- Insertion of bicycle facilities;
- Resizing of travel lanes to support appropriate urban driving speeds;
- Resizing of parking lanes to more economical dimensions;
- Insertion of missing parallel parking;
- Sidewalk widening and tree planting along unsafe-feeling curbs; and
- Modification of roadway geometries from suburban to urban configurations.

On a street-by-street basis, the following modifications are proposed, in the following suggested order:

#### SHORT TERM

##### Circulation:

1. Market Street: converted to two-way.
2. Shattuck Street: converted to two-way.
3. Central Street: converted to two-way and one parking lane added.
4. Ladd and Whitney Monument Square: Worthen and Merrimack segments made two-way.

##### Restriping:

5. Merrimack Street: lanes resized to include a bike lane.
6. East Merrimack Street: one parking lane traded for 2 bike lanes.
7. West Merrimack Street: lanes resized to include bike lanes.
8. French Street: lanes resized to include a parking lane and two bike lanes.
9. Arcand Drive: lanes resized to include bike lanes.
- 9b. Short-term revision to Father Morrisette Boulevard (see 13): two travel lanes traded for two parking lanes and two bike lanes.

#### MID-TERM

##### Independent Construction Projects:

10. Prescott Street: one travel lane partially converted to parking and widened sidewalk.
11. Warren and Hurd Streets: converted to two-way; parking and urban geometrics added.
12. Dutton Street: widened sidewalk and parallel parking added where possible.

#### LONG TERM

13. Father Morrisette Boulevard: redesigned as a complete street including a streetcar.

Each of the above proposals is fully illustrated in the Downtown Evolution Plan.

### CHAPTER 4. SIGNALS AND CROSSWALKS

Recommendations are made in the four categories of synchronization, cycle length, signalization regime, and crosswalk provision.

- The reconfiguration of traffic signals mandated by the recommended circulation pattern should bring with it a modern synchronization regime, which will add only marginally to its cost;
- Traffic signal cycle lengths should be kept short, with no full cycle lasting

- longer than 60 seconds;
- All downtown crosswalks with dedicated-motion signalization regimes should be replaced with concurrent-motion signalization regimes, and all push-button signal requests eliminated; and
- Missing crosswalks and handicap ramps should be reinstituted, and midblock crosswalks should be added to every block that exceeds 600 feet in length.

## CHAPTER 5. TRANSIT

### The Streetcar

The Plan endorses the proposal for a downtown streetcar, presuming that it satisfies the following criteria:

- *A comprehensive route* that connects downtown to the key anchors of the Gallagher Intermodal Transportation Center, the Tsongas Center, LeLacheur Park, and UMass Lowell's East and South Campuses as well as the east end of the University Avenue Bridge. The latest proposed route reaches all these anchors, and has the potential to do so efficiently once Phase II is complete.
- *An easily comprehensible route* that distributes the different train lines along the proposed tracks in a way that each train's path is clear and simple. The fare-payment mechanism must also be patently obvious to potential riders.
- *Frequent headways* of 15 minutes or less for at least 18 hours each day, with GPS time-to-train indicators in each station stop.

### Streetcar Funding

In addition to federal and state monies, the following sources of transit funding are proposed for consideration:

- Savings accrued to UMass Lowell, the Park Service, Lowell High School, and the Lowell Regional Transit Authority (LRTA) due to the trolley's replacement of existing service;
- The enactment of a Transit Benefit Ordinance like the ones that have been implemented in San Francisco and Chicago; and
- A new funding technique recommended by the Brookings Institution, in which cities share in the property value increases that are caused by rail construction.

### Implementation Concerns

It is by no means a foregone conclusion that the responsibility for the streetcar should fall to the Lowell Regional Transit Authority. If the LRTA is to be asked to implement such a system, it must be provided with the resources it needs to do that job well without harming the financial well-being of the institution.

## CHAPTER 6. THE RIVERWALK AND CANALWAY SYSTEMS

The city's excellent Riverwalk and Canalway system will not achieve its full potential until it becomes more continuous, with better wayfinding, better visibility, and more frequent and attractive gateways into walkable neighborhoods.

### More Continuous

The City is advised to maintain a high priority on the completion of the planned Riverwalk as it passes the Massachusetts Mills, rounds the peninsula at the confluence of the Merrimack and Concord Rivers, and connects back into the Lower Locks area. This system should also connect east across the Concord River to Lowell's leg of the 200-mile Bay Circuit Trail. Incidentally, Lowell is the unfortunate owner of one of very few remaining gaps in this regional trail, a circumstance that demands action.

### Better Wayfinding

In areas where the trajectory of the Riverwalk and Canalway system is not clear, a continuous linear element is recommended, for example inlaid bricks in the sidewalk, in the manner of Boston's Freedom Trail.

### Better Visibility

There are several places where the removal of a wall or the construction of a new building would greatly enhance the perceived safety of a segment. Several of the interventions proposed in Chapters 9 – 13 are motivated in part by this objective.

### Frequent Attractive Gateways

A new Riverwalk connection is proposed on the east flank of River Place Towers. As outlined in the interventions that follow, the sites flanking River Place are redesigned to make that street a more attractive connection to the Riverwalk, and the block east of River Place Towers is completely remade into a new urban waterfront.

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## CHAPTER 7. PARKING

### The Role of Parking

It is counterproductive to think of public parking as a right of citizenship or as a city revenue source. Rather, it is a public good that must be priced properly if the downtown is to function properly.

### On-Street Parking Strategy

A congestion-pricing scheme should be implemented in retail areas to ensure continuous availability of a limited amount of on-street parking, typically one space per block face. Until such a system is in place however, two small changes are recommended: First, on-street parking should be made slightly more expensive per hour than parking in nearby structures, so that long-term parkers are encouraged to keep the curbs free. Second, in retail areas, on-street parking should no longer be free between 6 PM and midnight, which encourages residents to fill spaces in front of businesses.

### Structured Parking Strategy

Contrary to perceptions, the City's five municipal parking structures still hold significant unused capacity. All of them are mostly empty at night, and many of them still contain empty spaces during business hours: cumulatively, the lots peak at under 70% occupancy on a typical day. Taking advantage of available parking essentially means two things: First, the huge nighttime vacancies suggest that additional residential development can locate anywhere nearby an existing lot without requiring any significant new parking provision. Second, the identification of sites for future office development should be based on the current location of unused daytime capacity, in conjunction with the City Parking Administrator's ability to shift demand strategically.

### Parking Design

Surface parking lots should be hidden from walkable streets by occupied buildings, even if these buildings are extremely thin. When no other solution is available for a surface parking lot, an attractive landscaped wall or hedge, approximately 4' to 5' tall, should be built at the lot edge. While this can be considered a second-rate solution, many surface lots in Lowell would benefit from such an intervention. Multi-story parking structures should contain occupied space at street level. Many cities now insist that all new parking structures

include ground-floor retail space, but upper stories are also ideally hidden behind habitable space—20'-deep apartments are best. At the very least, parking structure facades should be detailed to resemble an occupied building, which is much easier when sloped ramps are restricted to the center of the structure so that its street edges remain flat.

## CHAPTER 8. WALKABILITY ANALYSIS AND URBAN TRIAGE

There are two types of areas within the downtown where public investment will have a greater impact on livability than in others. First, only certain streets in the downtown are framed by buildings that have the potential to attract and sustain pedestrian life. Investments in walkability should be made first in those places where an improved public realm is given comfort and interest by an accommodating private realm—or a private realm that can be improved in short order. Second, there are streets of lower quality than those above, but which are essential pathways between downtown anchors, for example from the historic city center to the Tsongas Center. These streets require greater investment to become walkable, but that investment is justified by their importance to the downtown pedestrian network.

By studying existing conditions, we can see where streets are most ready, or most needed, to support pedestrian life, and focus there.

### The Urban Frontage Analysis

The drawing shown ahead is the Urban Frontage Analysis for downtown Lowell. Specifically, the axes marked in green comprise the current Network of Walkability, in which streets (or paths) are fairly consistently shaped by buildings that render them comfortable. In contrast, the axes marked in yellow are street segments that are not currently comfortable, but are nonetheless very important to walkability. These streets connect key anchors to the existing network, including the two sports venues, the JFK Civic Center, and the Lowell Memorial Auditorium, among others. These axes represent the places where investment to improve street frontage is most desired.

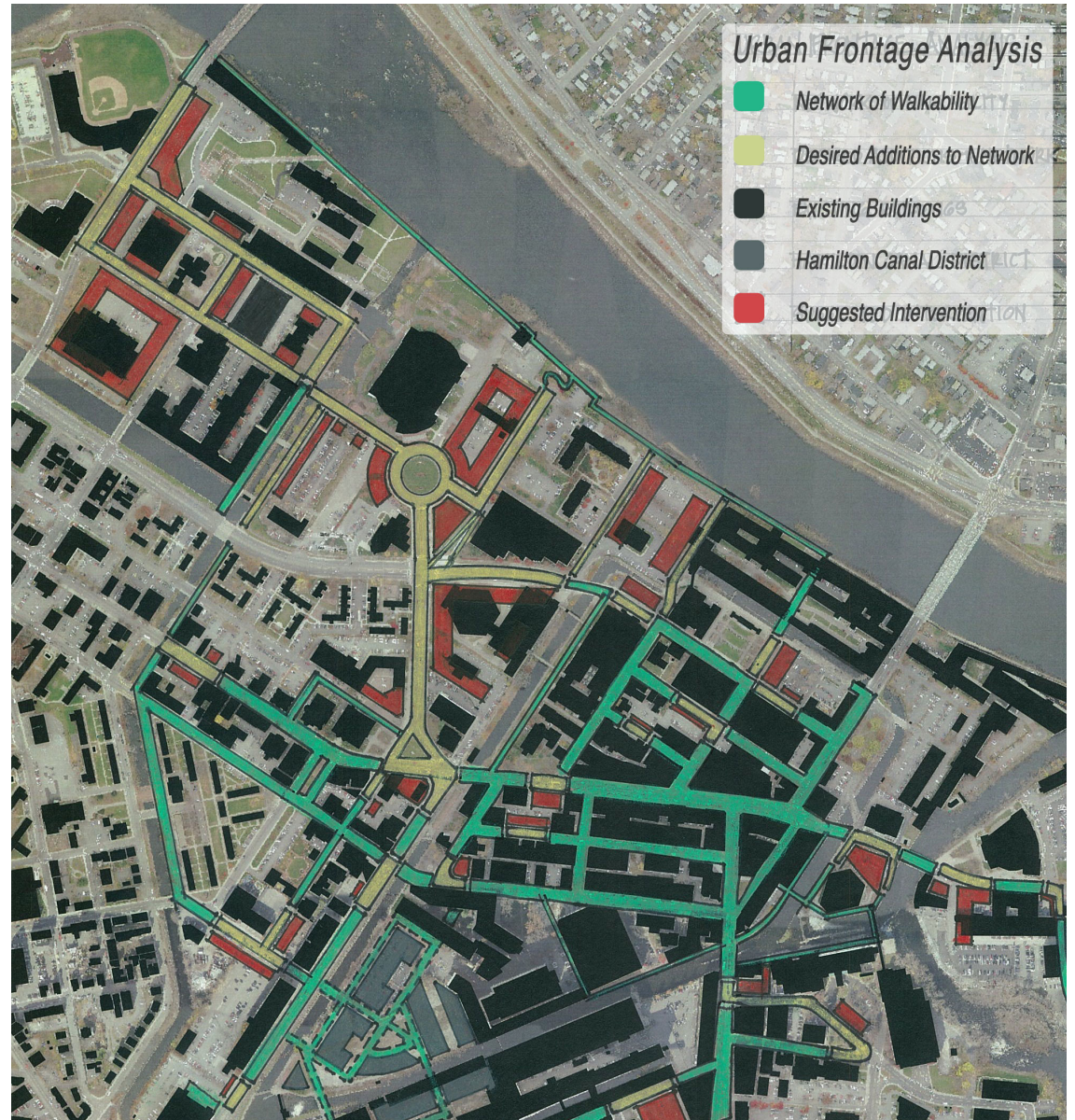
In this drawing, existing buildings have been shaded in black, so it is easy to see which streets have adequate edges and which do not. The buildings in gray are



anticipated construction within the Hamilton Canal District, and they are successfully arranged to create a future walkable district, shown with the dashed green line.

Finally, the objects shown in red are what planners refer to as the “missing teeth:” the new interventions that are needed to provide adequate spatial definition where it is lacking within the desired network. Most of these are buildings, but not all of them; some instead must take the form of walls or landscape. Every stretch of yellow street requires a corresponding stretch of red. As these interventions are constructed, the Network of Walkability will become increasingly complete.

That noted, the extensive research and discussions that went into this Plan suggest that all of these proposals are possible, many in the short term. The following five chapters of the Plan describe in detail what these proposals are and how they might be accomplished.





## CHAPTER 9. RECOMMENDED SHORT-TERM INTERVENTIONS

The five proposed interventions that follow can all be accomplished in the short term if significant will is brought to bear. In planning vocabulary, “short term” generally refers to five years or less, which in the chronology of the city is a blink of the eye. However, some of these projects could be completed within a year or two if begun quickly.

### 9.1 The Missing Tooth on Merrimack

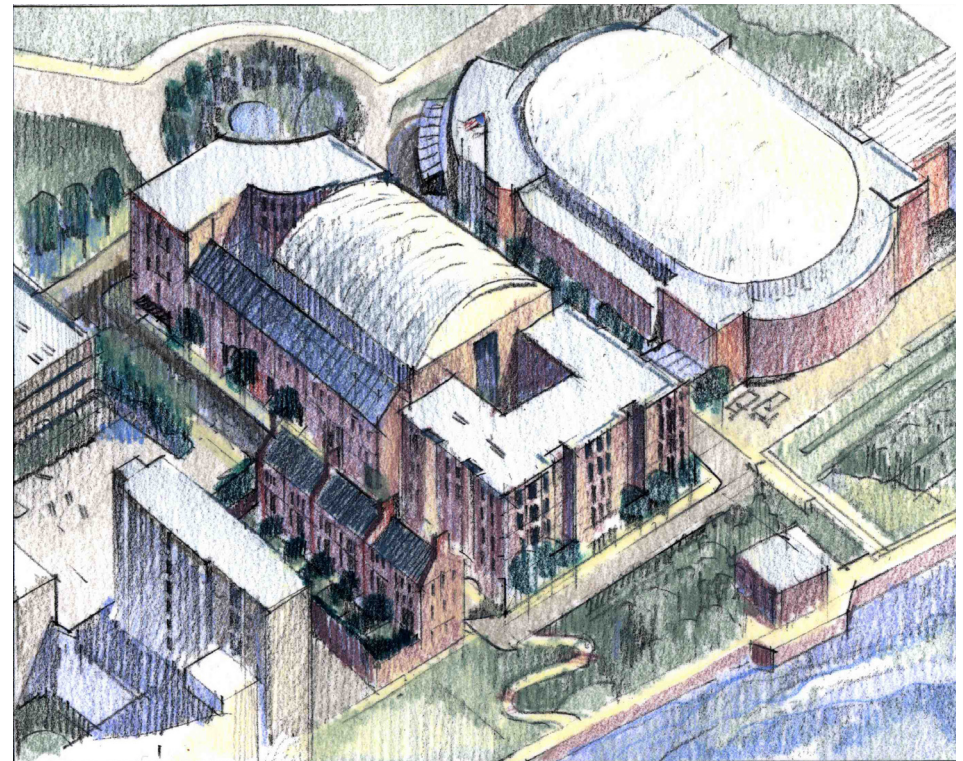


Lowell's downtown core only has one significant “missing tooth,” the empty lot next to Old City Hall, bounded by Merrimack and Middle Streets. Owned by the National Park Service and adjacent to Enterprise Bank's offices in Old City Hall, this site is desired by the Bank for a contemplated expansion. The intervention proposed for this site places a single large building against Merrimack Street, with a façade that can be articulated as three smaller buildings if desired. The parking lot against Middle Street, which could eventually hold another new building against the sidewalk, is for the shorter-term reconfigured to encourage cross-block pedestrian traffic on a continuous footpath, with its thin fence along Middle replaced by

a more substantial wall, ideally 4' to 5' tall. Both edges of the reconfigured parking lot are lined by trees, which help humanize the Middle Street sidewalk.

### 9.2 The Tsongas Center Area: Riverplace Center

A key site on Cox Circle, just to the side of the Tsongas Center, is the block referred to as the Police Lot. The redevelopment of this block has the potential to dramatically improve the surrounding public spaces of Cox Circle, River Place, and the Riverwalk. First, along Cox Circle, it is essential that a building of significant height line the curving sidewalk edge. As development heads farther north on this block, it should line the River Place sidewalk with building faces. Next, the introduction of a new drive connecting River Place to Tsongas Way would allow for expansion of the existing park, creating a prominent waterfront address and a

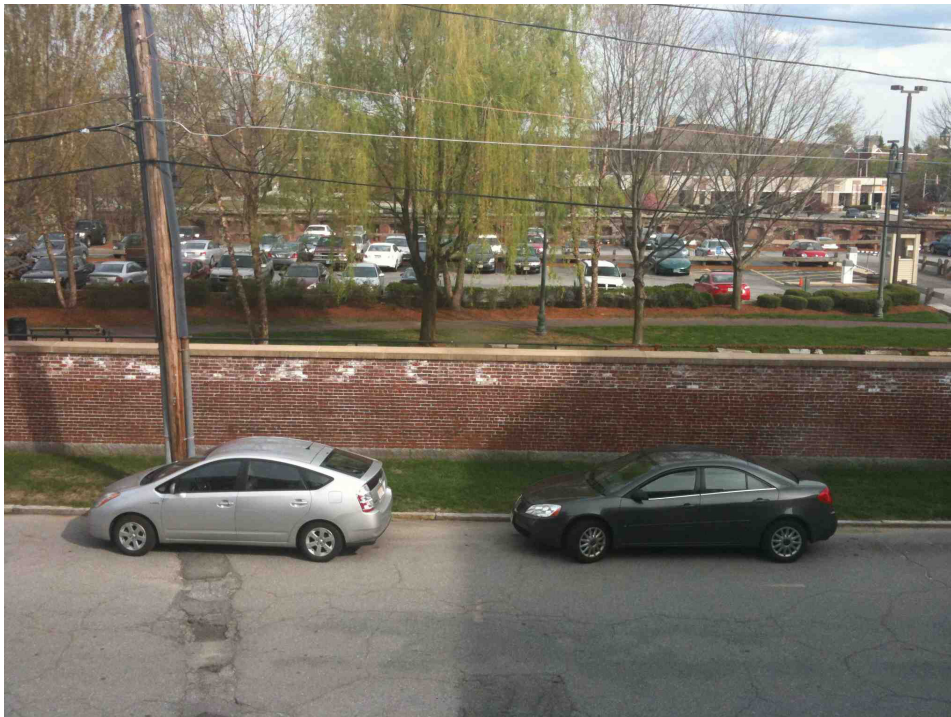




short riverfront drive. Finally, across River Place, eight new rowhouses could face the sidewalk, hiding a parking lot from view. A midblock parking garage could put on its roof a practice ice rink, making the Tsongas Center a more versatile venue.

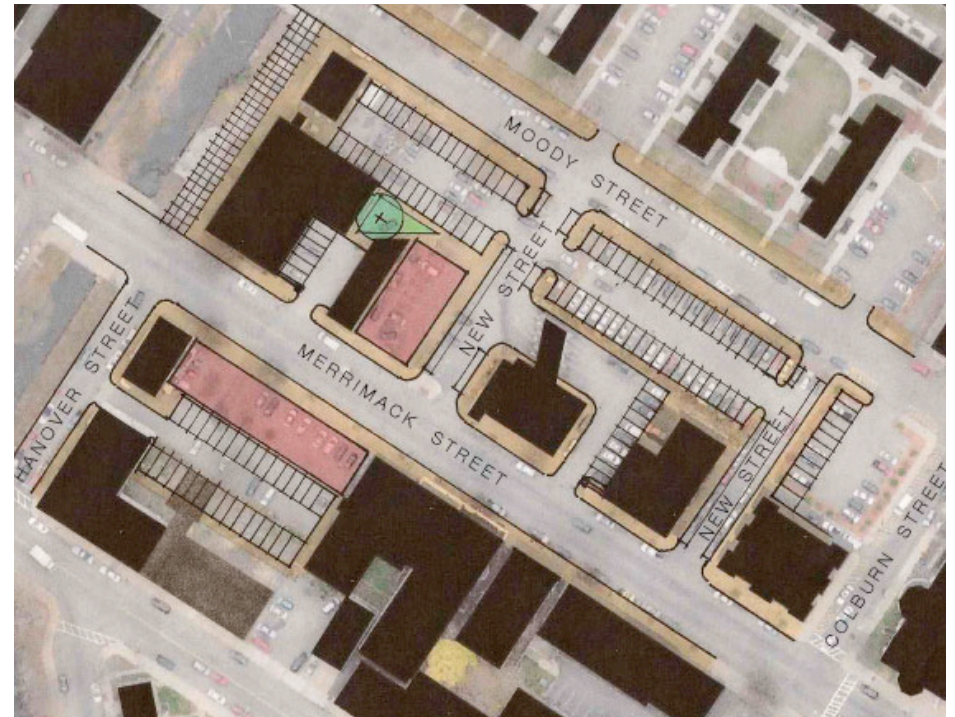
### 9.3 The Suffolk Street Canalway

The Western Canalway loses its walkable character in the stretch between Father Morrisette Boulevard and Hall Street, where it sits unsupervised, sandwiched between a tall brick wall and a massive parking lot. Each of these conditions is easy to fix. The wall can inexpensively be lowered to 2' to 3' in height, where it will no longer cut off the Canalway from the Wannalancit Mills. The parking lot edge requires an intervention called a Lot-Liner Building, which consists of a thin row of apartments that sit atop parking. These two changes would bring this stretch of the Canalway back to life.



### 9.4 The Moody/Merrimack Connection

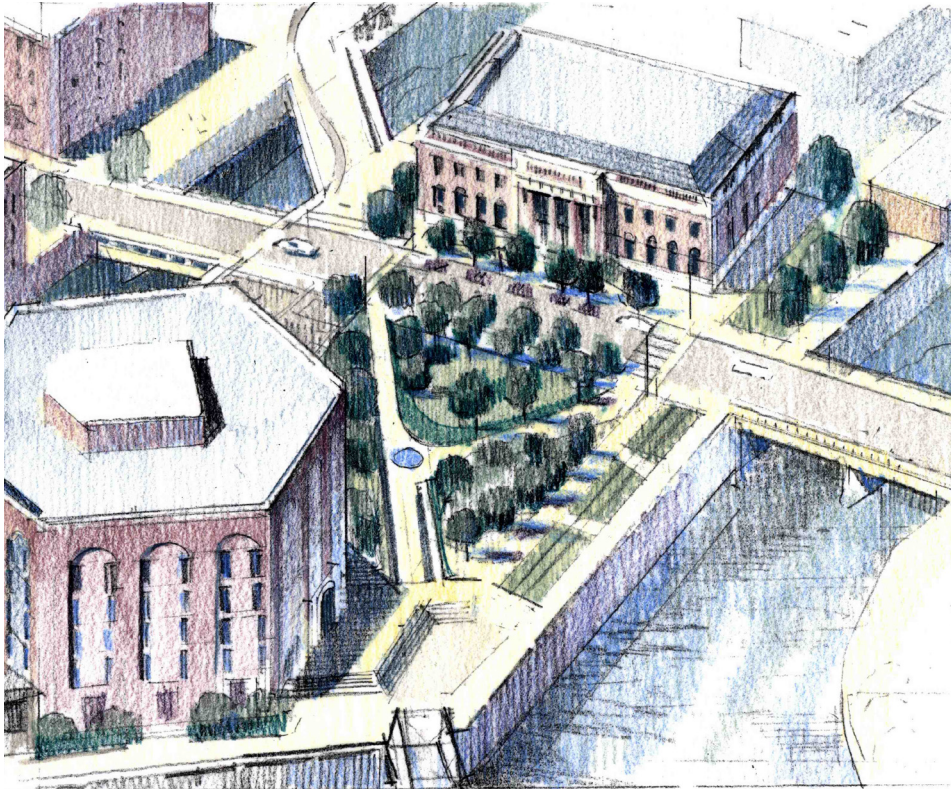
One powerful indicator of—and contributor to—walkability is small blocks. When the urban renewal team turned its attention a generation ago to Lowell's civic heart, they created a number of such mega-blocks, only one of which seems currently fixable: the very long rectangle bounded by Merrimack, Moody, Cabot and Colburn Streets. A number of small interventions can quickly improve the activity in this area. First, just west of Colburn Street is a parking lot entrance that would become the second half of a one-way street pair if it were allowed to continue through to Moody. Second, another cross-street can be inserted through the parking lots just west of Sovereign Bank turning that bank's better side façade into a front. These changes delicately introduce a more intimate street network to the area. The proposal also shows the missing teeth that need to be filled to create a consistent street-wall along the important westward axis of Merrimack Street.





## 9.5 MCC Quad

A final short-term opportunity of great promise lies in the hands of Middlesex Community College, whose two principal buildings are separated by an unnecessary surface parking lot. A properly designed campus green in this location would give MCC a presence in the city that it currently lacks. As designed here, the green centers symmetrically on the Federal Building, creates a central gathering space with a fountain and benches, shields the City Campus building loading dock and mechanical equipment, and provides a terraced green overlook to the Concord River. It connects pedestrian desire-lines along the site, and continues its plaza across East Merrimack Street with a raised brick speed table, to calm traffic and claim that territory for MCC.

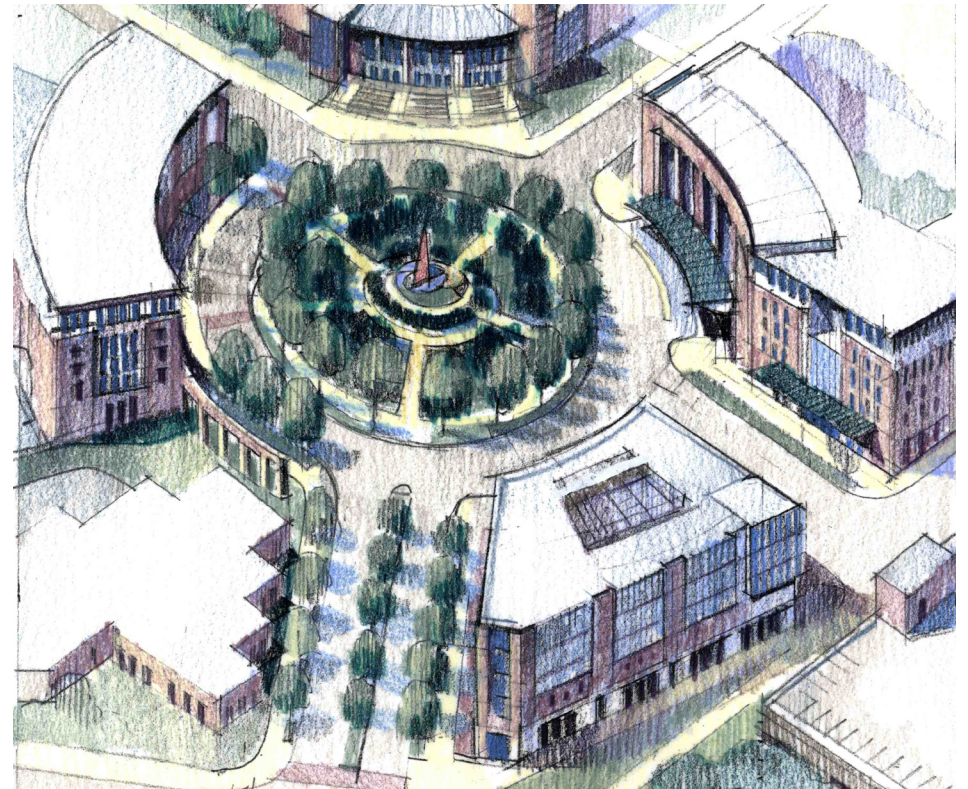


## CHAPTER 10. RECOMENDED MID-TERM INTERVENTIONS

The four proposed interventions that follow are all imagined as being accomplished in mid-term. In planning vocabulary, “mid-term” generally refers to five to ten years. This time frame seems appropriate because, while these projects do not have many perceived impediments, they also lack immediate momentum. That said, a number of these interventions could be initiated immediately if met with significant public and private support.

### 10.1 Cox Circle

Cox Circle is well positioned to be the next great public space and mixed-use office

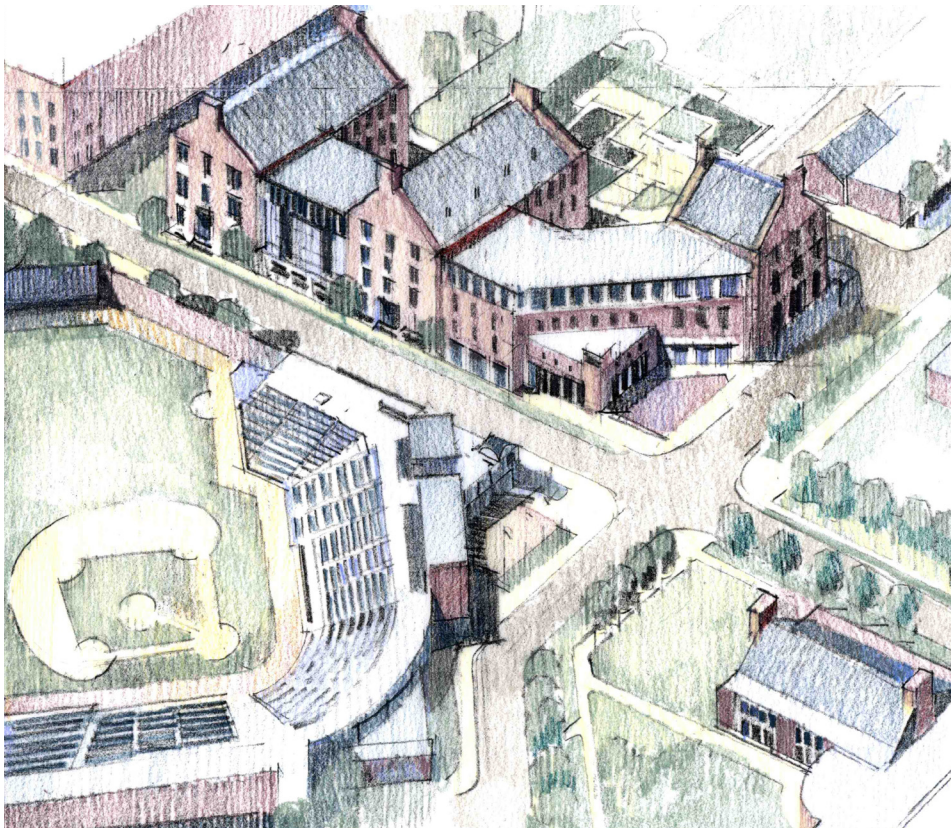




development site in Lowell. The proposal detailed in the Plan enlarges the central green by right-sizing the two driving lanes that surround it, and redesigns it as a true urban circle. The three empty lots surrounding the Circle are proposed for office and potentially hotel use, with commercial space facing the sidewalk. Parking for much of this development could take advantage of available capacity in the Ayotte Garage.

### 10.2 LeLacheur House

UMass Lowell is considering placing a large building with student housing and a small amount of retail space across from LeLacheur Park, at the corner of Aiken and



Perkins Streets. This Plan shows an ideal configuration for this important building, which creates friendly edges to both streets while mirroring the baseball park's small corner plaza. The proposed building fills its site and takes advantage of a grade change to create a level of parking below grade.

### 10.3 Boarding House Park Edge

Boarding House Park currently lacks an eastern edge, and the walk from this park to Kerouac Commemorative Park along French Street is blighted by the parking lot across the street from the Downes Garage. That garage's large number of empty evening spaces helps to justify a new set of rowhouses flanking Lower John Street, as proposed as early as the City's 1980 *Preservation Plan*. The rowhouses are set behind the existing double-row of trees, and each rowhouse has a walled garden against the rear parking lot. The southernmost rowhouse places its stoop and front door against French Street, lending character to that sidewalk, and a low wall limits the parking lot's exposure to French Street.





## 10.4 ICC Square

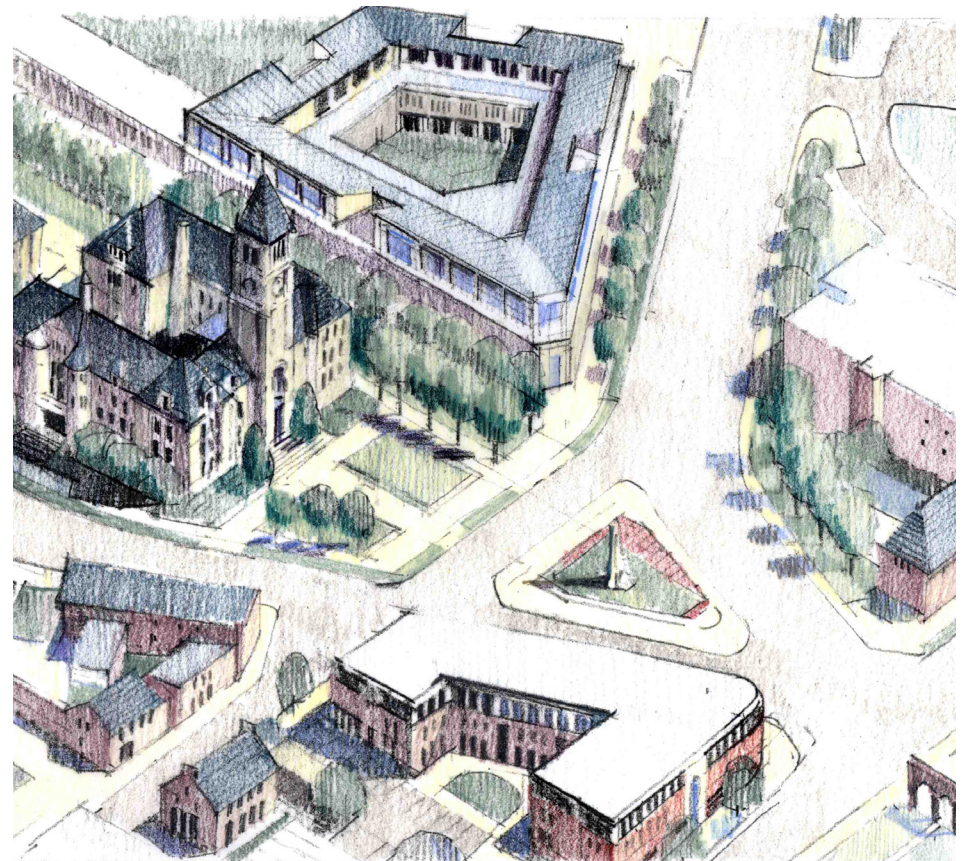
The neighborhood east of Central Street will remain suburban in nature well into the future, but one significant opportunity exists to bring improved walkability to the key anchor of the UMass Lowell Inn and Conference Center, while creating a more dignified setting for the United Teen Equality Center (UTEC). This proposal takes advantage of the excellent walkability of Hurd Street, and Chapter 3's plans to two-way Hurd and Warren, to create a complete walkable loop that embraces the Church and its front green. An intervention is made easy in this location thanks to the sunken parking lot of the ICC, which is properly located to hold a new sidewalk-edge building without losing any of its existing capacity. A new structure so located will give proper shape to the churchyard, while a reconfigured corner—as described in Chapter 3—will introduce slower speeds and parallel parking to protect the northern sidewalk.



## CHAPTER 11. RECOMENDED LONG-TERM INTERVENTIONS

The four proposed interventions that follow are all imagined as being accomplished in the longer term. In planning vocabulary, “long term” generally refers to ten to twenty years. While some of these transformations may be accomplished more quickly, most lack funding or an economic incentive to happen immediately. These interventions are put forth here not because they can be done, but because they should be done, and they will not happen later unless they are planned now.

### 11.1 Ladd and Whitney Monument Square





Due to its high-speed street design and lack of proper spatial definition, the civic heart of Lowell does not invite walking. This intervention replaces the unsuccessful JFK Plaza and the pedestrian-unfriendly service station with new buildings that give stronger edges to the public space of the Ladd and Whitney Monument Square. The question of whether to maintain or tear down the unpopular JFK Civic Center is answered with a new addition that reduces the Plaza to a more appropriate size while placing a prominent building against the street edge, framing the lawn in front of City Hall. The Hess Station and adjacent Goodyear tire store, both auto-centric uses that invite cars across the sidewalk, are replaced by a new mixed-use building that further shapes the square. The new public building is recommended for whenever additional City office space is demanded, independent of whether there is any motivation to repurpose the Hess site at that time.

### 11.2 The Hall/Perkins Neighborhood

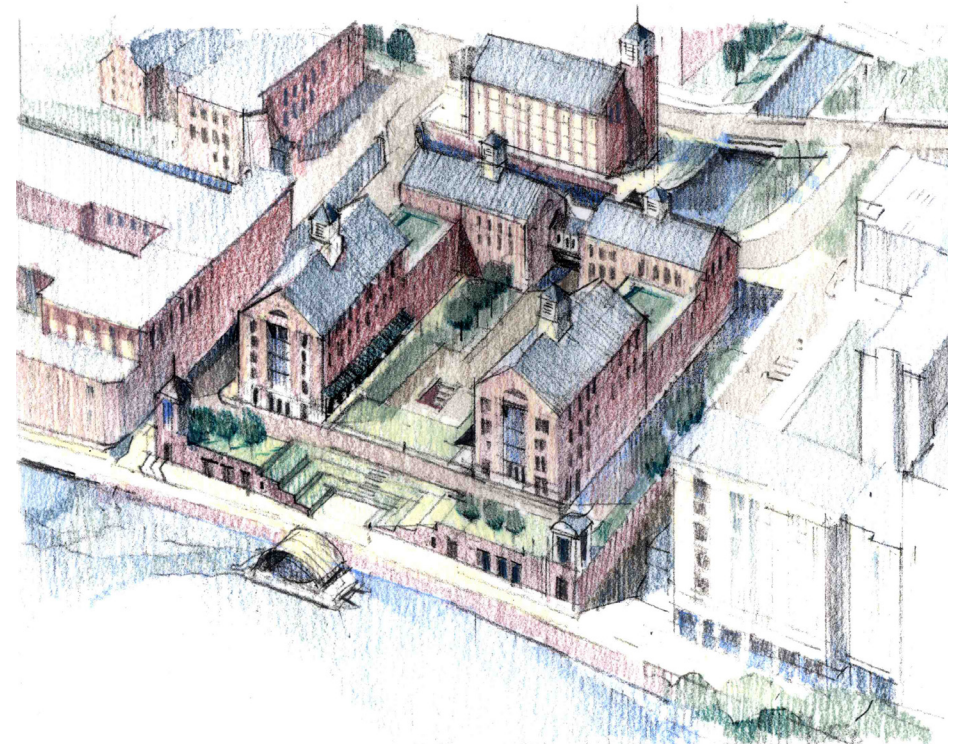
UMass Lowell's large land ownership in this area has motivated a more comprehensive proposal for the neighborhood's ideal long-term build-out. With the goal of creating friendly building edges against public sidewalks, new buildings or building expansions are placed where they hide parking lots and ugly building edges from the street. Specifically: the western 60 feet of the M2D2 parking lot becomes a building site, as does its setbacks facing Hall and Perkins Streets. The western 60 feet of



the Perkins Lofts parking lot receives a similar treatment against Cabot Street, and the flanks of the UMass research facilities receive liner buildings against Hall and Perkins. Finally, the large Notini block is redeveloped both to provide attractive edges to its surrounding streets and to supply mid-block parking to its surrounding area.

### 11.3 The Promontory

Only a few opportunities exist for connecting Lowell more visibly to its Merrimack River waterfront, and the most promising of these is the site that currently houses Lowell Five's headquarters and a parking lot for River Place Towers. Like earlier concepts for this site, this proposal imagines large mixed-use buildings reaching all the way from Father Morrisette Boulevard to the riverwalk. Unlike previous proposals, it imagines a continuous public drive surrounding this devel-

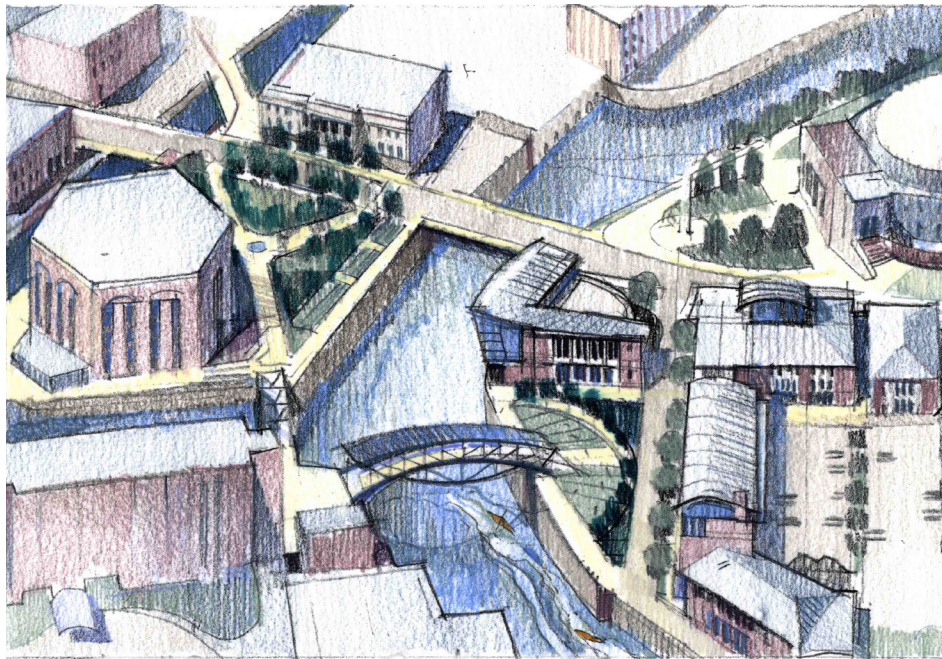




opment. This waterfront drive is achieved by placing a deck above the lower River Place Towers parking lot, creating a promontory above the river. This new ground plane could fit another entire level of parking beneath it, supporting the development of the site to a mid-rise density. At the edge of this drive, a public overlook could give way to an amphitheatre-shaped series of steps that work their way down to the riverwalk, providing a dramatic integration between levels. Against the edge of the riverwalk below, the two-story parking deck could be shielded from view by a dozen unique rowhouses with a riverwalk address.

#### 11.4 The Davidson Lot

The fourth long-term proposal involves the Davidson Lot, which sits just across the Concord River from the Lower Locks. This site's front parking deters walking along East Merrimack Street, and its weak parking-lot corner does not welcome pedestrians to the water's edge. Its principal building mass sits in the center of the lot, where it does nothing to shape surrounding street spaces. In a recommended



long-term reconstruction, an expansion to MCC's "Cybercafé" building would replace the parking at the East Merrimack Street corner and welcome people into Davidson Street, which would be reconfigured as a real street as it curves through to Howe Street. New construction along this street would hide the site's large parking lot from the Lower Locks. As the natural completion of a Lower Locks walking loop, this site would ideally be connected to the plaza across the Concord River by a dramatic pedestrian footbridge. A final suggestion for this site would be placed in the Concord River: the whitewater rapids that were proposed in Lowell as part of the Boston Olympic bid.

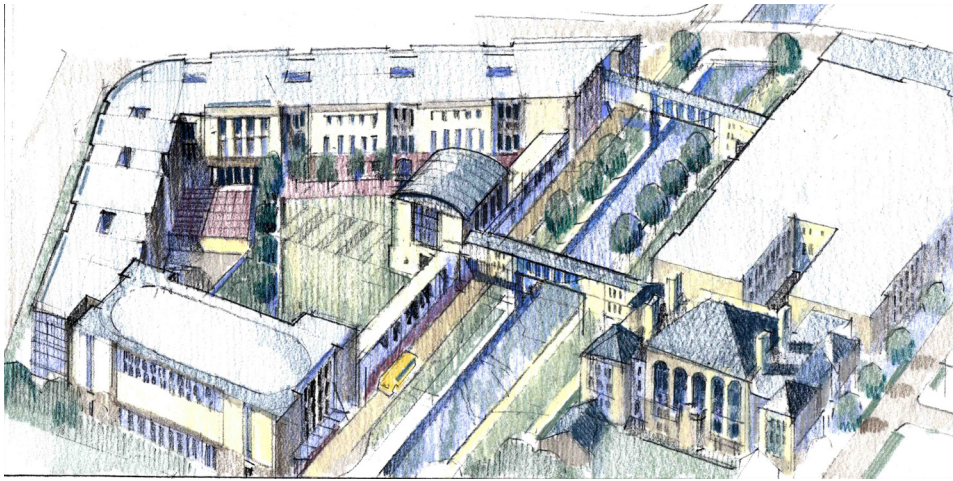
## CHAPTER 12. LOWELL HIGH SCHOOL

One of the great questions currently under discussion in the community has been whether to move Lowell High School out of the downtown to a new suburban location, most likely in the area adjacent to Cawley Stadium. This conversation, which has been underway for some time, presents the families of Lowell with two choices, both of which seem to be unacceptable. Fortunately a third path exists, which is a renovated high school on the current site, made possible through the acquisition of one adjoining property, the medical office to its south. This renovation would be focused primarily on the replacement of the school's newer 1980 wing which, unlike the older school buildings, has been plagued with problems since its construction.

This process would be slower and more complicated than the construction of a new building from scratch but, if properly handled, could be completed without any great sacrifice to student education, comfort, or convenience. It would also allow for the preservation and continued use of the school's favored older buildings, which would most likely result in a considerably lower cost than an entirely new facility.

The proposed new site plan for the school aims to solve a number of current problems. First, it is larger, allowing the building to become no less complete than it would be if located on a suburban site. Second, it creates a large green space at its center, larger than the Cox Circle property that is currently being used for sports and band practice. Third, it creates a firm, attractive edge against Arcand Drive, set directly against a broadened tree-lined side-

walk, helping to invite pedestrians between the JFK Civic Center and the Tsongas Center. Finally, it steps back from its current location directly against the canal and trolley tracks, allowing for the continuation of Dutton Street through the property from Merrimack Street to Father Morrisette Boulevard. This street, one way and for school use only, would take tremendous pressure off of Morrisette, Kirk, and other downtown streets, easing the mid-afternoon choke.



Like the construction of any new high school, this proposal cannot be accomplished until State assistance is available, which is not expected soon. But such funding will materialize eventually, and when it does, it will be important to have a confirmed plan in place.

## CHAPTER 13. THE LOWER LOCKS

The final intervention proposed in this Plan holds within it the potential to fundamentally transform Lowell into a city of the first rank, both as a tourist destination and as a location for business. It surrounds Lowell's Lower Locks which, even in their current condition, make a profound impression on first-time visitors and appeal to all but the most jaded Lowellians. But visitors to this site who are equipped with the experience of other urban waterfronts can't

help but consider the Lower Locks as a missed opportunity. Its potential can be found in places like Providence and San Antonio, where public and private investment in urban riverwalks have contributed dramatically to the remaking of the cities around them. In contrast to these urban waterfronts, large areas of the Lower Locks could still be characterized as fundamentally rural in their conception. Instead of stone, iron, and sculpture, we get wood, crabgrass, and asphalt. Lighting is low and inconsistent, and many balusters and other features seem merely expedient rather than designed. Defunct steam pipes in peeling insulation mar the water's edge, and awkward ramps—and even a small parking lot—occupy spaces that are better suited to be public plazas.

### Two Levels of Proposals

This Plan includes both a physical proposal for the Lower Locks and a programmatic one. It can be said with some confidence that a merely physical transformation to this dramatic landscape has the power, if done properly, to turn it into a tourist-worthy destination that will contribute mightily to the future success of the city. However, the impact of that physical investment can be greatly increased if the spaces are also programmed with unique uses that give people a specific reason to visit them.

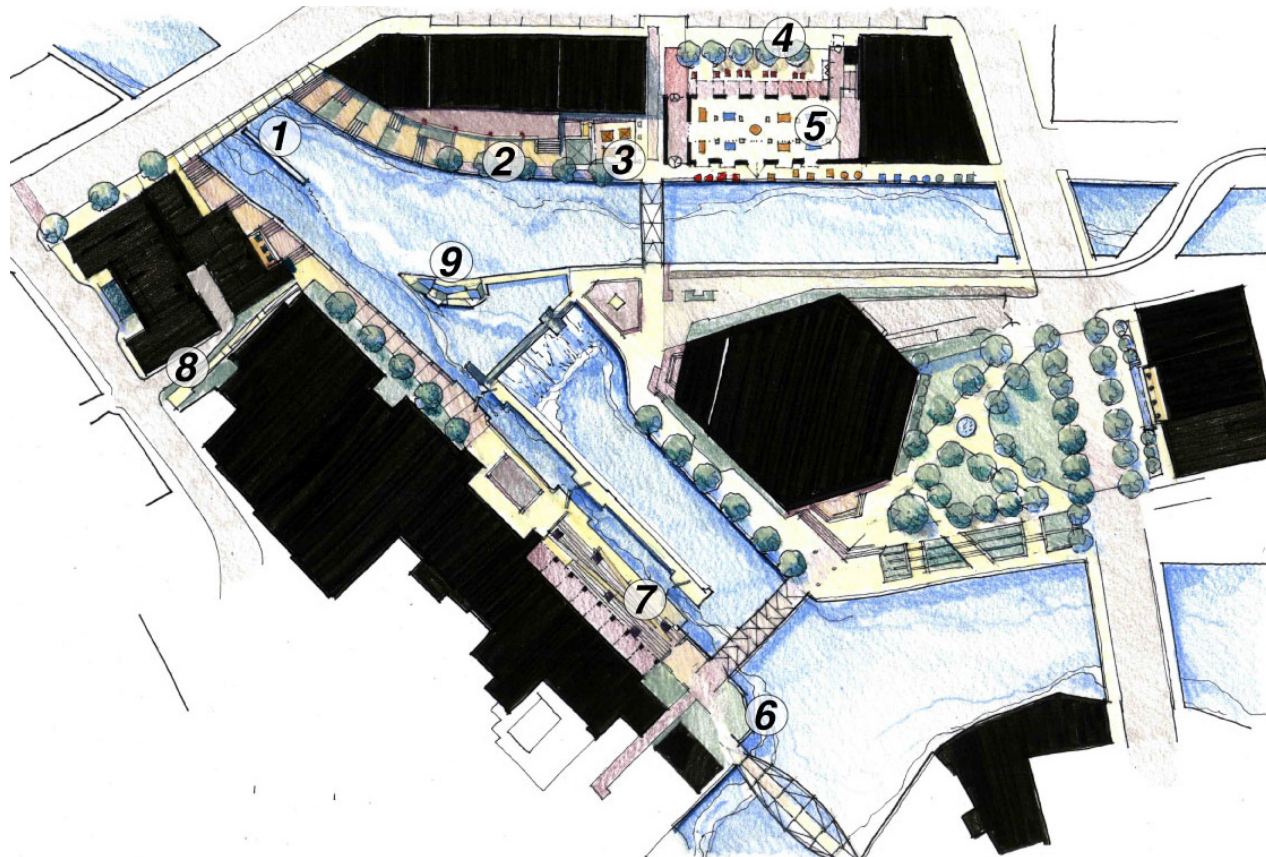
The physical proposal contains several levels of intervention. The first level is intended to correct flaws in the current scheme—narrow stairs, awkward ramps, parking lots, encroaching building additions—and to bring the entire public space up to the highest level of civic materials and detailing, including stone, ironwork, and well-designed urban furniture. The second level involves a number of specific urban and architectural interventions including: the redesign of the back of the Prescott Street building against the aforementioned parking lot; the creation of a plaza against Prescott Street in place of the former Lowell Sun Printing Press building; the introduction of one new and one replaced footbridge; the reconstruction of the back of the UMass Lowell Inn and Conference Center where it meets the Lower Locks; and the addition of a new building embracing the Lowell Hair Academy. Each of these will be shown ahead in detail.

The programmatic proposal suggests that the Lower Locks area could be



reprogrammed as an Outdoor Museum of Water Power, at which a collection of durable industrial machinery could be displayed on pedestals throughout the public spaces. They could be organized chronologically in a circuit around the Lower Locks, starting and ending at Central Street, and thoroughly integrated into all of the area's other uses. This proposal has not been studied in depth, and may not be the best use of the Lower Locks site. But it seems compelling and,

for that reason, the renderings that follow show a physical proposal that has been supplemented by the inclusion of just such an outdoor museum.



## Walking Through the Plan

Our tour of the Lower Locks begins and ends at Central Street, proceeding clockwise through the site. Each number below corresponds to a location in the plan.

### 1. *The Western Cascade*

This proposal peels back the Central Street bridge rail to the width of the waterway, and creates a tilted plaza that turns the Central Street sidewalk and both sides of the canal into a single public space. Stone stairs, platforms, planters, and display pedestals run gently downhill from the street, taking a full 90 feet to land at waters edge.

### 2. *Artisans' Walk*

While existing trees would be kept, the parking lot would be completely transformed into a stone public space. The half-story-up/half-story-down configuration of the enfronting building would allow for a re-configuration in which a large row of porches sit above a sunken courtyard receiving southern sun. It is recommended that these lower two stories be acquired, so that the basement can be repurposed as a colony for the industrial arts and the first floor as a gallery row.

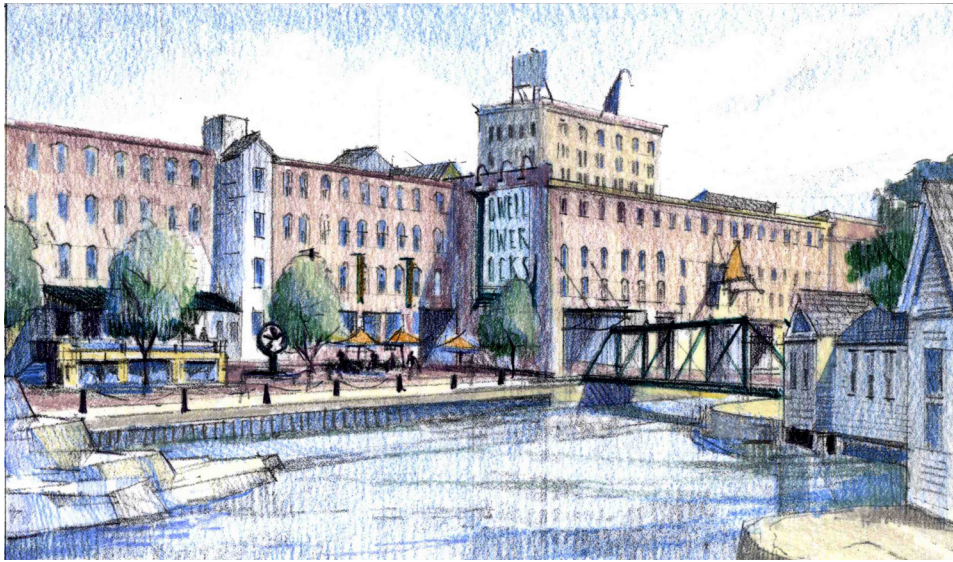
### 3. *Lower Locks Plaza*

Directly behind Tutto Bene, the porch and trees end, and the space opens up into a nicely sized plaza, ideal for outdoor dining. The huge blank wall of the adjacent building receives a clearly contemporary graphic mural that "brands" the space and can be used in an international tourism marketing campaign.

### 4. *Prescott Plaza*

Currently, Prescott Street feels entirely cut off from the Lower Locks, which can be reached only through a dark tunnel adjacent to Tutto Bene. This proposal





removes the former Lowell Sun Printing Press to create a new plaza against Prescott Street, eliminating the tunnel and easing access to the Lower Locks. This plaza makes the most sense if built in conjunction with item 5, the International Market, for which it would serve as a frontispiece and outdoor expansion zone.

#### 5. *The International Market*

Lowell's remarkable population diversity is not well represented in the downtown's shops. While not central to the larger scheme, the location of an International Market in the single large ground-floor space connecting Prescott Plaza to the Lower Locks would create a new attraction downtown that celebrates and benefits the immigrant community.

#### 6. *The Concord River Plaza and Footbridge*

The public space of the Lower Locks really ends across the Concord River at the Davidson Block, where another intervention is proposed. Both investments would be more likely to bear fruit if they were directly connected to each other by a dramatic new bridge, ideally designed through an international artists competition. This scheme also replaces the unattractive and view-obscuring footbridge across the Lower Locks with a more fitting industrial-style structure.

#### 7. *The UMass Steps*

As shown several pages back, another underutilized space is located at the rear of the UMass Lowell Inn and Conference Center, where one of the most interesting spaces in Lowell is chopped up into an ungainly switchback ramp and enfronted with the private patios of a dozen hotel rooms. UMass Lowell leadership has expressed an interest in eventually replacing those rooms with a large function space, which could be enfronted with a public porch against a stepped sculpture garden.

#### 8. *An Ideal Hotel Site*

The most promising potential hotel property in downtown is probably the Lowell Hair Academy. The proposed plan shows the historical buildings shedding their nonconforming one-story addition, and then being wrapped by a building that occupies the parking lot and reaches down to the canal edge with a new entrance. The hotel would ideally place its café/restaurant against Central Street, reaching back along the stair cascade to an outdoor dining porch.

#### 9. *The Central Fountain*

This final proposal takes advantage of a current sore spot, the scruffy grass island that sits awkwardly in the middle of the canal basin. This central location is the perfect spot for a large sculptural fountain. The character of this installation could range from the proudly civic to the noisily celebratory. The proper choice along this spectrum can be made only by the people of Lowell. Any such solution would represent a large financial investment, but one that would bring Lowell and the Lower Locks resoundingly into the present day.





## CHAPTER 14. AN APPROACH TO SUCCESS

The Plan document does not contain a thorough implementation discussion. This point requires emphasis, because it is precisely such a discussion which is the essential next step in its becoming a reality. While implementation is not a part of this project's Scope of Work, this brief chapter attempts to lay a groundwork on which to base that effort.

### Official Process

While this Plan ultimately can only be accomplished with the enthusiastic participation of the private sector, it requires some very specific governmental actions if it is to begin to shape the future of the downtown. It is recommended that the Lowell City Council follow a three-step process in its adoption of the Plan:

#### 1. Endorse the Plan in Concept.

This Plan contains many specific City investments as well as the effective rezoning of properties. Without specifically approving any of those financial or legal commitments, the City Council's general endorsement of the Plan document demonstrates a commitment to the principles and approach present in the Plan, and further requires that the Plan be consulted in conjunction with any city investment or zoning decision that relates to its recommendations.

#### 2. Adopt the Plan in the Specific.

This Plan will not have the desired impact unless it has the force of law. Different aspects of the Plan can be made legal in different ways. Proposed street reconfigurations should be specifically approved and budgeted. Proposed building interventions—to the degree that they are not in accordance with current zoning requirements—should be pre-approved as necessary through an optional zoning overlay, or made mandatory as replacement form-based code, potentially on a site-by-site basis. Other recommendations, for example the JFK Plaza site design, should be approved preliminarily in anticipation of a future need for expansion. Finally, the key interventions at the High School and the Lower Locks need to be broken apart from the Plan and addressed individually (while not delayed), due to their size, importance, and expense.

#### 3. Create a Construction Schedule and Budget

For the projects that require City investment, the City Council will need to approve

a schedule and a budget. Some of these proposals, like the reconfiguration of the one-ways, should be packaged and then targeted for specific fundraising efforts. Others, like the improvement of Cox Circle, seem ideally suited for instruments such as District Improvement Financing. Clearly, recommendations of this Plan's magnitude will have to be completed in stages over a number of years, but the schedule for their funding should be established in the short term.

To be implemented effectively, any plan needs a local champion dedicated to its success. For this document, it is the Lowell Plan—aptly named—who will quarterback the effort, working hand in hand with the City, UMass Lowell, Middlesex Community College, the Lowell National Park, and the merchants and citizens of Lowell.

