

Town of Windham

Downtown Advisory Committee

Final Report

“A Sense of Direction for the Development of the Downtown Area”

December 28, 2004

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Downtown Advisory Committee (DAC) was formed by the Windham Board of Selectman in July 2004 “To identify potential developers and review alternative plans for the Seth Chauncey Hotel and Nathan Hale buildings and to discuss other development opportunities such as, but not limited to parking, zoning, and river access.”

The DAC’s charge from the Board of Selectman gave the committee six months to complete its work. During the period between July 2004 and December 2004, the DAC held twelve meeting to discuss downtown development. Additionally, the DAC formed housing and development sub-committees, and seven sub-committee meetings were held during this period. At the request of the DAC, RGM Associates, a consultant to the committee, held three forums to gather public input on the direction of downtown development.

The committee’s accomplishments, in conjunction with town staff, include conducting a successful developer’s day to introduce Windham to developers, the identification of three prospective developers with an interest in developing properties downtown, and the creation of a “sense of direction” document that was used to obtain buy-in from CHFA that affordable and supportive housing belongs at sites not on downtown Main Street.

This document defines the committee’s sense of direction for the development of the downtown area, and recommends specific implementation steps to help achieve the committee’s vision.

II. SENSE OF DIRECTION SUMMARY

The DAC believes the following direction should be emphasized in the development of the downtown Willimantic:

- The theme for the development of downtown should be tourism and arts and entertainment.
- Downtown development should include both commercial and residential development, particularly residential development containing market rate housing.
- The town should create an implementation oversight entity (i.e. a continuation of the DAC or a successor organization) focused on keeping downtown development moving in a direction consistent with the community's goals.

III. DEFINITIONS

As used in this document, key terms are defined as follows:

- The downtown area is defined as the area from High Street to Jackson Street, and from Valley Street to the Willimantic River.
- Affordable housing is housing where there is an occupancy restriction (such as income limits) resulting from the use of government monies to build or rehabilitate the units AND the rental rates are set at below market levels.
- Supportive housing is affordable housing that includes various types of social service support for the residents.
- Market rate housing is housing that does not have any occupancy restrictions and where the rents and costs are not restricted by government regulation.
- The Windham House building refers to the property at 819 Main Street, formerly known as the Hotel Hooker, and also formerly known as the Seth Chauncey Hotel.

VI. DOWNTOWN THEME

Sense of Direction

The DAC has identified the following theme for the development of the downtown area:

- The theme for downtown should be tourism and arts and entertainment.
- Events and organizations consistent with this theme (e.g. third Thursday, the flower bridge, etc.) should be encouraged. Event marketing should be coordinated.
- Successful arts and entertainment strategies used in other downtowns should be reviewed and adapted for use in Willimantic.
- The town should work to improve its image. Public relations efforts should be used and real and perceived public safety issues should be addressed.
- The town should work to improve its relationship with ECSU in an effort to bring students, faculty, and staff into downtown.
- The existing historic buildings complement tourism and arts and entertainment uses. The town should use zoning to preserve the historic theme as buildings are built or renovated, and should create an architectural review board to review downtown development and rehabilitation designs.
- The downtown should be made as pedestrian friendly as possible. The town and state should review traffic flows and improve as necessary.
- The river is a valuable but underutilized resource. The river should be visible and accessible from downtown. Development of the Tin Sin and/or YMCA sites should include provisions for pedestrian and visual access to the river.
- The whitewater park and trail system, and similar uses of the river area, should be encouraged.

Implementation Steps – Arts and Entertainment Theme:

The DAC believes the following steps are necessary to develop the down consistent with an arts and entertainment theme:

- ✓ Pursue Main Street Community designation to assist with Main Street improvements, event coordination, and community marketing.
- ✓ Request the state DOT evaluate downtown for traffic improvements and to make Main Street more pedestrian friendly.
- ✓ Look at other communities and apply lessons from their arts and entertainment strategies.
- ✓ The development of river access should be coordinated with the development of the key buildings/sites, and with development of river uses, such as whitewater park and trail system.
- ✓ Work to develop strategy to get ECSU more involved in downtown, as stakeholder and customer.
- ✓ Work to clean up image, including public relations campaign and improvements to public safety.
- ✓ Enforce garbage and blight ordinances.

V. HOUSING

Sense of Direction

The DAC believes the direction for housing downtown and in the community should be as follows:

- The community has an obligation to address the housing needs of any existing town residents who would be displaced by downtown development.
- Any residential development on downtown Main Street should be on the upper levels of buildings. The street level should include commercial space.
- Residential development on downtown Main Street should include market rate housing units and can include some affordable housing units but should not include supportive housing.
- We encourage and promote housing for professionals, seniors, and students downtown.

- Supportive housing, as determined by need, can be provided at other sites not in the downtown area.
- As determined by need, transitional, transient and other housing units for individuals and families from the community who are currently homeless or reside in the tent city should be provided at sites not on downtown Main Street.
- Any new residential development downtown should include adequate parking for residents.
- Homeownership rates in the community should be increased to a healthy level. The conversion of multi-family properties from rental to owner-occupied should be emphasized.
- Affordable housing in the community should be both decent and affordable.
- Affordable housing efforts should regional. Willimantic should not bear a disproportionate share of affordable housing development.

Implementation Steps – Housing:

The DAC believes the following steps should be pursued to implement the housing direction:

- ✓ The community should work with CHFA to determine specific need for affordable, supportive, transient, transitional, and other housing units in the community and to identify locations for this housing not on downtown Main Street.
- ✓ Needed housing can be provided by relocating existing residents of the Windham House building into other housing in the community, and through the development of new or rehabilitation of existing housing units on multiple sites, or perhaps a single site, in the community.
- ✓ The community should work through the Willimantic Housing Authority and not-for-profit housing developers and social service organizations to affect the development of the needed housing.
- ✓ Once housing has been developed, the existing Windham House building should be promoted for commercial development.

- ✓ The community should increase the use of CHFA, Fannie Mae, local bank and other homeownership programs in Willimantic in support of the goal of increasing the number of owner-occupied dwellings in the community.
- ✓ With the assistance of CHFA, the community should develop a comprehensive housing strategy.

VI. COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Sense of Direction

The DAC believes the following should be the direction for downtown commercial development:

- Downtown development should be consistent with tourism and arts and entertainment theme.
- Downtown buildings should include retail on the first floor.
- Downtown development should include businesses and buildings that can cater to the local college students, faculty, and staff. Examples might include a market rate hotel, housing developed for students or for new or temporary faculty and staff, or arts and entertainment programs run by or serving the college community.
- Downtown development should be conducted privately, or with the assistance of the new Thread City Development Corp (“TCDC”).
- The extensive use of affordable housing finance programs designed for the development of many units at below market rates (such as low-income housing tax credits) should be discouraged downtown.
- The key buildings/sites for downtown commercial development are the Tin Sin lot, the Nathan Hale building, the Windham House building, and the former YMCA building.
- River views and pedestrian river access should be included in plans for the development of sites on the south side of Main Street, including the Tin Sin lot and the YMCA site.

- Any new commercial development downtown should include adequate parking for the expected use of the building.

Implementation Steps – Downtown Main Street Development:

- ✓ The key buildings/sites on downtown Main Street should be developed into commercial and market-rate residential uses.
- ✓ The town should continue to work to find qualified developers, to identify sources of grants and other funds to assist with development, and to assist CHFA in the marketing/sale/development of their properties.
- ✓ The town or the TCDC should consider buying the Nathan Hale property (to control development) provided a satisfactory deal can be obtained.
- ✓ The town should modify its zoning regulations to strengthen its ability to preserve the existing architecture downtown and control the look of new construction, and promote downtown development and/or arts and entertainment development.
- ✓ The development of new parking spaces downtown should be coordinated the development of the key buildings/sites.

VII. IMPLEMENTATION

The DAC's work has been action oriented. We have endeavored to identify implementation steps to support the direction we recommend for the community. As such, we don't want, and perhaps cannot afford, to have this report placed on a shelf to collect dust while downtown development stagnates or proceeds in a disorganized manner. Too often, once the originating entity is disbanded, recommendations become difficult to implement without an entity specifically focused on implementation.

As such, we recommend that an implementation oversight entity (i.e. a continuation of the DAC or a successor organization) be created to remain focused on downtown development and to continue moving and guiding development in a direction consistent with the community's goals.

APPENDIX

Members of the Downtown Advisory Committee

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