

Milford Downtown Plan- DRAFT REVISED 2/23/02

Yale Urban Design Workshop

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Milford Downtown Plan

Yale Urban Design Workshop

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beginning in the Spring of 1999, the Yale Urban Design Workshop, a community design center based at the Yale University School of Architecture, has worked with Milford Progress, Inc., the Milford Chamber of Commerce, Inc., and the City of Milford to develop a set of goals and recommendations for the development of Downtown Milford. The process of this study has been based upon broad community participation and consultation, culminating in May of 2000, in a three-day charrette, conducted by the Urban Design Workshop and hosted by Milford Progress and the Milford Chamber of Commerce.

Out of this process has come a rich trove of information, ideas, and enthusiastic support for Downtown development, which is presented here in the framework of a plan for the short and long-term future of the Downtown area as a critical component of the City of Milford and the South Central Region of the State of Connecticut. As such, this plan is intended to support, extend, and be used together with Milford's new Plan of Conservation and Development, prepared by Harrall-Michalowski Associates, Inc., as well as the Regional Plan of Development prepared by the South Central Regional Council of Governments.

Milford is, by New England standards, a significant urban concentration of medium size (52,305 residents in the 2000 census), but has maintained a center and neighborhoods with a scale and character more in keeping with a smaller New England town. That is not to say that Milford does not face urban-scale issues, such as traffic, parking, infrastructure development and maintenance, and preservation of open-space and historic resources, more reflective of its actual size and role in the region. Indeed, one of the central questions for this plan is how to maintain the generally much beloved scale and character of Downtown Milford, while creating a vibrant center for a city of increasing energy and diversity.

The structure of Milford is predominantly linear, in an east-west orientation, following the shoreline – of which resource Milford has more than any other town in Connecticut. All the major infrastructure systems – the historic corridor of Route 162 (Bridgeport Avenue, Broad Street, and New Haven Avenue), the railroad, the Post Road, Interstate 95, and the Merrit Parkway - reinforce this linear structure, while the north-south connections, including the Harbor and the Wepawaug River, are generally weaker.

The structure of Downtown Milford is, in many ways, a microcosm of this larger structure, with the exceptionally long and narrow Green – almost a half-mile from east to west – providing the dominant image and reflecting this structure, as well as its origins as the widened center of the main market street. In fact, the Downtown as a whole consists not only of the Green and its immediately adjacent blocks, but also the Harbor, River Street and the Government Center, which form, at least *potentially*, a splendid and unprecedented south-to-north ensemble (also of about a half-mile in extent).¹ All this is within a (theoretically) easily walkable radius from the actual epicenter of the Downtown area at the intersection of Broad and River Streets, but suffers from the same weakness of north-south links, and congestion of east-west corridors, as the rest of Milford, with traffic and some deterioration of the pedestrian environment contributing to the situation.

The potential is, however, enormous. In addition to the fundamental quality and inherent charm of the Green itself, no other town that we know of has the combined assets of Green with retail and business center, train station, Harbor, river, “Duck Pond” and Government Center, in such immediate and dramatic proximity to one another. This weaving together of attractive open space, historic architecture, and the economic and institutional engines that both symbolize and drive the life of the community, is the unique and irreplaceable framework for Downtown development. It is the primary goal of this Plan to protect, enhance and take full advantage of that fundamental armature that shapes Milford’s center.

Both the potential and the limits of economic development in Downtown Milford should be predicated upon its unique character. It is a source of pride and identity for the citizens of the entire City of Milford, and should be more widely recognized as such within the region, taking its own distinctive place alongside the historic centers of shoreline towns such as Branford and Guilford, and lively small downtown environments such as South Norwalk. As opposed to the auto-oriented strip retail of the Post Road, which is more a function of, and a service to, the larger region centered on New Haven, Downtown Milford is, and should continue to be characterized by a pedestrian-oriented retail and office environment that is the focus of life in Milford itself, with some specialty retail, restaurants and entertainment providing – along with the inherent attractions of the setting – the primary draw for a regional market, and for visitors passing through the region.

Mayor Lisman has summarized the overall economic goal for the Downtown area as being “sustainable in a down economy, and thriving in an up economy.” To do this, some modernization and greater focus for downtown retail must be combined with the

¹ For the purposes of this report, “Downtown Milford” will usually be taken to refer to the central area of the town, including the streets and blocks adjacent to the Green, the Hospital to the west, and New Haven Avenue east to Harborside and Milford Academy, as well as the Government Center north to Main and Cherry Streets, including Laurelton Hall, and the Head of the Harbor, including Fowler Field. These boundaries correspond to the Downtown boundaries indicated in the Harrall-Michalowski draft of the Plan of Conservation and Development. As in that Plan, an extended definition of Milford Center may be used to include the area south of Route 1, west along Bridgeport Avenue to Clark Street and Robert Treat Parkway and east along New Haven Avenue to Buckingham Avenue.

protection and enhancement of the scale and character of the physical environment. The need for a critical mass of retail and office space, with its attendant parking needs, should not be allowed to erode the fabric that makes the Downtown a recognizable and distinctive place. In any case, even larger downtowns are no longer the single dominant economic center within their regions, but have become more specialized business environments. Existing and emergent “clusters” that are supportive of the Downtown environment should be identified and encouraged.

Significant clusters include a restaurant, entertainment, and arts cluster, the first component of which is developing nicely and would be supportive of, and supported by, initiatives in the other two areas. This might well relate, through the encouragement of exhibition space and galleries, to the fact that Milford already has the two best photo supply and camera stores in the region. In such an environment, antiques businesses should also flourish and contribute, and indeed, this is happening to some extent in Downtown Milford already, but this activity should be presented and highlighted less as “second-hand shops” and more as a complement to a historic center.

Downtown Milford is also fortunate to have retained a concentration of banks and professional offices. These have often moved to more convenient peripheral locations in other small cities, but it is still possible to shop and “do business” in Downtown Milford, and these activities contribute to a lively daytime environment. Restaurants, arts and entertainment extend this activity beyond the working day, especially in fair weather, when outdoor dining and perambulating take advantage of the Harbor, the river and the generally attractive open spaces of the center. New businesses which support this environment should be actively encouraged, including a bookstore with cafe, a small downtown repertory cinema or dinner theater, specialty food stores (small groceries and delis, a bakery, etc.), and a small inn or bed and breakfast establishments.

Currently, the most dynamic sector in downtown development, not only in Milford, but in small and large cities across the country, is residential – primarily rental units oriented towards young unmarried or childless professionals, or, in some cases, empty-nesters and retirees (although Milford also has excellent neighborhoods of single-family homes immediately adjacent to the Downtown, with a good range of affordability). These groups, in particular, appreciate the convenience and liveliness, easy of access and pedestrian scale, historic character and charm of downtowns. Milford, with its commuter train station, its recreational opportunities and its strategic location has special assets in this market. Whereas once, the office and retail sector drove downtown development in most cities, now downtown residential development supports the revitalization of these other sectors, and increases a city’s tax-base without the impact on services such as schools, and other less desirable effects associated with low-density sprawl. Models such as the Schooner’s Wharf development are exemplary of these trends, and of the sort of medium-density, contextual, mixed-use development that should be supported. There are, however, a limited number of available and appropriate sites, which should be identified and proactively planned through public-private collaborations, in order to maximize shared benefits and minimize negative impact in areas such as traffic and parking, open-space conservation, etc. Downtown Milford should be recognized as a

special kind of residential neighborhood that is and will be, for many people, a good place to live.

The sorts of “modernization” of downtown that will be necessary to create and sustain the kind of business environment described above and already emerging, will include significant improvements in traffic planning with an emphasis on enhancing the pedestrian experience, and especially, therefore, improvements in parking configuration, location, access, and management, including a timely consideration of future locations for appropriate amounts of new parking to be developed through public initiative. Retail modernization will also involve the identification and development of at least a few sites that might allow for larger floor areas than are currently accommodated in older commercial structures, without tending towards the sort of strip-style or “big box” development that often accompanies newer retail development. (Typical suburban super markets are, for example, now in the 50-60,000 square foot range, but a smaller food market, in the 15-20,000 square foot range, would be welcome in most small downtown areas.) Improvements to older buildings that allow modern retailing, as well as office or residential above the first floor should also be encouraged. More restaurants, residential development and Downtown development in general will also require the sorts of changes to sewer regulations in the Downtown area that are now being considered.

One way of sending a strong message about the City’s and the business community’s commitment to appropriate and attractive Downtown development is to begin immediately to improve the appearance of the Downtown streetscape. The streets, sidewalks and buildings adjacent to the wonderful public landscapes of the Green, the Harbor, and the Government Center should look as good as they do. Streetscape improvements, including lighting, pavement treatment on sidewalks and crosswalks, benches, trash receptacles, and signage of all kinds, should be designed to a consistent and high standard. Pilot projects should undertaken in key areas, such as South Broad Street and River Street, and new developments, such as Schooner’s Wharf should support and link to these pilot projects. In addition, parking areas should be considered as important streetscape opportunities. They are often the very first pedestrian experience a person has of the Downtown. In particular, the parking areas off the Green, south and north of Broad Street should be re-planned to provide a better environment for both cars and pedestrians. The South Broad Street parking areas need to be treated as critical links between the Green and the Harbor, and developments and interstitial spaces connecting to that parking should be refurbished and planned comprehensively. Furthermore, railway overpasses provide unavoidable and important gateways into the Downtown area and should be appropriated for civic messages and images, sponsored by private businesses, and the underpass area should be made more attractive for pedestrians.

Every town that we work with, and especially the business community of those towns, thinks that their traffic and parking problems are critical, and usually far worse than they actually are, and Milford is no exception. There are, of course, some very real and serious issues in this area, but the first realization is that the goal of planning is not simply to allow traffic to flow at top speed at peak times or to have immediately obvious parking for every car at peak demand. Good planning in a downtown area will balance

the needs of motorists and safety and quality of life for pedestrians, as well as balancing the demands of through traffic with the different pace of downtown destination traffic. Milford would benefit from the new philosophy and practice of “traffic calming,” even as it addresses areas of difficulty and friction, such as the Broad Street-River Street intersection, where neither motorists nor pedestrians are very happy at the present time. As crosswalks are improved and marked, some slowing or stopping of traffic all along Broad Street may help take some of the heat off the River Street intersection, but comprehensive reconsideration and redesign of that intersection is also in order (and should be included as part of the redevelopment of the River Street-Daniel Street block). In the short run, better traffic management and a revision of the one-way restrictions at that intersection will provide some relief at peak times. In addition, consideration should be given to bus stop locations, especially the major stop on Broad Street at River that often backs up and restricts the safe and smooth flow of traffic. Better scheduling of “break times,” so as not to correspond with peak traffic times, would help alleviate this situation. Ultimately, a “transit hub,” concentrating bus traffic and commuter parking, should be established in proximity to the train station.

Parking is not currently as inadequate as many perceive. Major parking reservoirs are, however, fragmented, poorly planned, and poorly signed. Significant improvements should be made, as noted above, to parking areas both south and north of Broad Street. Parking guidelines, signage, and pedestrian-friendly planning should be developed to implement a “park once” philosophy in the Downtown area, that encourages visitors, shoppers, diners, and even casual errand-runners to find easy off-street parking and to leave their car there while they conduct *all* their business in the Downtown. For this to work, especially in the long run with continued Downtown development, the City will have to collaborate with existing and new businesses and developers to find appropriate locations for new *shared* parking. Each development cannot be expected to provide for all of its own peak parking needs without seriously eroding the fabric of the Downtown. In the short run, improvements to parking, like improvements to traffic flow in general, are mainly a management issue. Consideration should be given to better use of areas north of the railway line, targeted to commuters, the after-hours use of Government Center parking lots, and the role of Fowler Field. In the longer run, the possibility of a parking structure serving commuters and long-term parking in the area north of the railway line and accessible from High Street should be considered.

In summary, both traffic and parking are, for Downtown Milford, management issues as much as design issues. A thorough and full-scale traffic and parking study for the entire Downtown area should be undertaken in order to sharpen and verify these recommendations, and that study should then be updated at regular intervals. Parking management should be the responsibility of a new Downtown Parking Authority based on public and private collaboration and shared resources.

As already noted, Downtown Milford is blessed with exceptional open space resources. These could, of course, always be improved and enhanced, especially in the case of Fowler Field, which should be comprehensively re-planned to take better advantage of its waterfront location. For the most part, however, the central agenda for Downtown open

space is to enhance its approaches and improve its *connections*: between spaces (such as the Harbor, the Green, the Wepawaug River, and the Government Center), between open spaces, vistas and the Downtown streetscape, and between Downtown open spaces and the larger potential network of open spaces throughout the entire city of Milford.

To this end, the charrette developed preliminary plans for a Milford River Walk that would run alongside, and occasionally cross, the Wepawaug River, running from the Harbor to the Government Center Duck Pond in its first phase, and providing an attractive, scenic and slower-paced pedestrian parallel to on-street connections, which should be enhanced as well at the same time. We believe that since critical portions of this Walk already exist, or could be provided as part of other developments, such as the New Haven Avenue (Mama Bear's) site already on the boards, it could be completed quite easily, with enormous impact and benefit, not least, as an example of the sort of green connections that might eventually criss-cross and interconnect the whole City, and of the kind of design strategies that should be encouraged in the articulation of guidelines for new development.

The value and shape of design guidelines of some sort for the Downtown area is one of the issues that motivated this study in the first place, and although it has receded somewhat as the work has focused on specific current issues and opportunities, clearly the long-term usefulness and sustainability of any plan is dependent on some formal mechanism for its review and implementation in the case of individual future projects. It is our recommendation, based on extensive discussion with the City, citizens, business people, and colleagues throughout the State, and in concert with the recommendations put forward in the new Plan of Conservation and Development, that a special "Downtown Design and Development District" be created as an overlay zone. The purpose of that District would specifically be to encourage implementation of this plan not only through public action, but also through the active encouragement of private development that follows the goals and principles set forth here. Guidelines should deal as much with the relationships *between* buildings, and between buildings and open space, landscape and views, as with the style or details of individual buildings. As we noted above, it is the weaving together of open space, old and new buildings, and patterns of use that provides the strongest framework for Downtown Milford's current character and future development.

Of course, the guidelines should also include specific recommendations, based on clearly illustrated examples, of best (and worst) practices with regard to building design, massing, signage, materials, and relationship to the street. These guidelines should be customized for different areas of the Downtown District, taking into account, for example, the difference between the contiguous street front commercial structures that are the primary fabric of South Broad Street, and the free-standing, often more residential scale structures that characterize North Broad. They should also extend to the "backs" of downtown building, which often are significant "fronts" to areas of public parking, as well as having their own array of characteristic uses. The guidelines would also incorporate design standards for streetscape in the Downtown District. The over-arching goal of this should remain the encouragement of appropriate development that supports

both the vitality and the character of Downtown Milford. Design guidelines and regulations enacted as part of an overlay zone would be administered and enforced by the Milford Planning and Zoning Board.

Two short to mid-term projects (see below) could serve as proving grounds for the articulation and refinement of the Downtown Design and Development (Village) District (D.D.D.D.). The first should be the design of a mixed-use infill structure on the recently burnt-out site in the center of South Broad Street. This project would involve not only the most straightforward principles of contextual infill façade design, but also the combination of ground floor retail and upper floor residential that should be characteristic of Downtown buildings, as well as a significant connection to parking and open space to the rear of the building. The charrette developed a preliminary design for this site, as well as several alternative designs for another key site, the block bounded by Daniel Street, River Street and New Haven Avenue. That block has been a focus of concern for several decades, as evidenced by fairly drastic plans for its redevelopment in the past. We view this block, given its current condition and the apparent development pressure at its edges, as ripe for a major redevelopment project. While the City and property owners have already moved to stabilize and enhance neglected or derelict portions of the block in the short-run, ultimately the City should take the lead in a comprehensive plan for the entire block and adjacent areas, including street and traffic patterns, that could then be issued to potential developers as a Request for Proposals. The pedestrian scale and architectural character of Daniel Street could be preserved and enhanced, at the same time that its function in the context of Downtown is significantly improved. More appropriate uses, focusing on the commercial and entertainment functions that are already coming to characterize this area of Downtown, should be encouraged, along with small areas of public outdoor space.

Specific areas of focus such as those just outlined form an important part of this Plan. Unless the Plan is also a concrete agenda for action, it will gather the proverbial dust on the proverbial shelf. Avoiding this fate is a function not only of the Action Plan that is included in the report, but more importantly, of the broad-based participation and enthusiasm that has characterized all phases of the process leading to the Plan. Of course, not every project proposed will be based on a unanimous consensus, nor will every project realized be greeted with universal admiration and acclaim. However, the goal of this planning process and the Plan itself is that the sum of its parts create a whole Downtown that is greater than any individual project, good or not so good. Alexander Garvin has defined successful planning as public action that produces a positive and sustained private market reaction. That process has already begun in Milford.

Town Structure

From its historical origins as a New England village at the head of the Harbor, where the current downtown is located, Milford has developed in a more or less linear fashion, running east-west along the shore of Long Island Sound. Indeed, Milford has more miles of shoreline than any other Connecticut town, a fact more recognized and appreciated by residents than by most visitors, for whom the dominant image of Milford is neither its historic center nor its waterfront.

Topography, tradition and circumstance have created distinctive areas within this larger pattern of development, such as Woodmont, Silver Beach, Devon and Walnut Beach, as well as the Downtown. Although the Downtown remains the hub and source of institutional identity within this constellation of sub-centers and neighborhoods, it is by no means the exclusive center any longer from a business and retail perspective, and it is, increasingly, a special kind of residential neighborhood in its own right. We will discuss the implications of this relatively new status later, but for now it should be noted that the physical structure of Milford confirms both the persistent importance of Downtown and the inevitability of its role as one of several “centers.”

In large part this is a function of the fact that the two major modern automobile corridors through Milford bypass the downtown area. While the historic east-west corridor of Bridgeport and New Haven Avenues passes straight through Downtown Milford in the form of Broad Street, the route of the Boston Post Road (U.S. Route 1) deviates from Bridgeport Avenue east of the center of Devon, as does the later Connecticut Turnpike (Interstate 95), which follows and almost precisely parallel trajectory. The implications of this deviation for Milford are enormous and make Milford fundamentally different from a structural and planning point of view than other Connecticut shoreline communities where the Post Road and/or I-95 pass directly through or immediately adjacent to the downtown area (e.g. Stamford, New Haven, Madison, etc.), or, for that matter, towns where these corridors produce a major north-south division, between a historic center and shore south of the highway and a largely rural, but increasingly suburban, area north of it.

In Milford, most of the town and its population lie south of both the Post Road and I-95 and therefore have a more natural focus in the Downtown and along the shoreline. At the same time, the fact that the Post Road and I-95 effectively bypass the center of Town has served to both isolate and protect the Downtown from more recent automobile oriented development and the attendant traffic. The Post Road and adjacent areas have clearly borne the brunt of this sort of development, creating an important engine of economic growth well-beyond the capacity of the Downtown and diverting a good deal of the strip-style development that has invaded and eroded so many historic downtown areas in New England and across the country. While this may have, at times, made the Downtown seem like a backwater, we will discuss later the extent to which the divergent roles of the

Downtown and the Post Road corridor may turn out to be a strategic advantage for Milford. Although it should be noted, also for later discussion, the extent to which all of these crucial east-west corridors have become more and more congested in recent years.

In spite of the fact that most of Milford continues to cluster south of the major through corridors, it is nevertheless the case that the north-south connections within the Town are much more weakly developed than the east-west infrastructure systems. Here, again, an apparent deficit may turn out to be an advantage, since the lack of regional scale north-south corridors has encouraged a micro-fabric of pedestrian scale neighborhood streets, and preserved an, as yet, underdeveloped network of open spaces along the mainly north-south geography of the Harbor and the Wepawaug River, which really forms the backbone of the Downtown area, just as the Green forms its heart.

Indeed, the structure of Downtown Milford is, in many ways, a microcosm of the overall structure of the Town, with the exceptionally long and narrow Green – almost a half-mile from east to west – providing the dominant image and reflecting this structure, as well as its origins as the widened center of the old market street. In fact, the Downtown as a whole consists not only of the Green and its immediately adjacent blocks, but also the Harbor, River Street and the Government Center, which form, at least potentially, a splendid and unprecedented north-south ensemble – also of about a half-mile in extent. Thus all of this is within a (theoretically) easily walkable radius from the actual epicenter of the Downtown area at the intersection of Broad and River Streets, but suffers from the same weakness of north-south links, and congestion of east-west corridors, as the rest of Milford, with traffic and some deterioration of the pedestrian environment contributing to the situation. Obviously, the challenge is to better connect each of the components of the Downtown district, so that each can realize its distinctive potential as part of a coherent overall plan.

The Components of Downtown:

The Green

While Milford's is by no means a typical New England green in its physical form, being, as noted above, exceptionally long and narrow in connection with its origins as a wide (i.e. "Broad") street, it has come to share many of a green's characteristic images and functions in the life of the town, as well as some of its more recent problems. As a primary source of Milford's identity, and the obvious open-space "anchor" of the Downtown retail district, the Green should be carefully protected, while at the same time taking full advantage of its charm and accessibility.

The first thing to note about the physical character of the Green and its flanking streets, aside from the considerable east-west length, is the difference of the architectural development of the north and south sides. The north side, across Broad Street, is primarily lined by free-standing buildings, some commercial and institutional, but many still residential in character, if no longer in use. Like the grand homes that some once were, these buildings usually do not come right up to the sidewalk, but are rather set back

behind attractive front lawns. By contrast, most of the buildings on the south side of the Green are typical main street commercial buildings, multi-story and fronting directly on the sidewalk. This creates a significant and interesting contrast between the two sides of the Green that should be respected and enhanced by future development.

For the most part the blocks that form the built edges of the Green are relatively deep, and therefore accommodate significant amounts of parking, as well as both service and public retail access to the rears of the buildings facing the Green. This is a great asset for the operation of the Downtown, but lack of planning, coordinated management, clear points of access, and comprehensive design, has prevented Milford from taking full advantage of this basically sound arrangement. Convenient parking and service access to the rear of Broad Street buildings is one of the best friends downtown preservation can have, as it obviates the necessity of strip-style development.

Finally, the Green, which is heavily and happily used for special events in Milford, could be a more significant and livelier part of the daily life of the Downtown if it were easier to access and walk through. Crosswalks from Broad Street sidewalks to the Green, much less across the Green to the opposite side of Broad Street, are too few and far between. This encourages jaywalking, although at most points the edges of the Green offer very little in the way of a safe haven, since there are no sidewalks or other “landing” areas. Furthermore, once one has arrived at the Green, there is no continuous pedestrian circulation down the length of the Green, either along the edges or through the middle. Visitors and residents are thus missing a potentially very attractive “third way” to circulate through the heart of the Downtown area, in addition to the existing sidewalks. Certain areas of the Green are more active than others, although it should be noted that the west end of the Green is conspicuously under-developed and inactive in comparison with the eastern end - as well as being somewhat more poorly defined by its surrounding buildings - but in any case, the points of interest are not well-connected, either to each other or to the rest of the town center.

The Harbor

The relationship of Downtown Milford to Milford Harbor is one of the most extraordinary assets for the development of the town center. There are very few places along the Connecticut shoreline where one can literally sail a boat into a substantial downtown shopping and entertainment area. While barely visible at present, the Harbor is remarkably close, if not always readily accessible, to almost every part of the Downtown. As one approaches the Harbor by car or on foot, wonderful views open up. These views are especially dramatic from certain points, like the new pedestrian bridge spanning the mouth of the Wepawaug River, and Head of the Harbor project has done a superb job of making the immediately adjacent area attractive and lively. As a result the relative underdevelopment of other areas fronting the Harbor, and the weakness of the connections between the Green and the Harbor, have become more conspicuous. In particular, this Plan will propose ways of strengthening connections to the Harbor along Factory Lane and through the parking areas behind South Broad Street, while improving the Harbor frontage of Fowler Field. The Harbor is particularly in need of some sort of

vertical “beacon” – even if these are only the masts of boats – that can be seen at least from the corner of Broad and River Streets.

River Street and Government Center

River Street, including Factory Lane between Broad Street and the Harbor, is the major north-south axis of the Downtown area. It is the crucial linkage between the three components of the town center: the Harbor, the Green, and the Government Center. While there is no significant feature, other than the Harbor itself, which marks the southern end of this axis, the steeple of the First United Church of Christ provides a splendid and characteristically New England beacon for much of the length of River Street traveling north. That vista is unfortunately blocked at a critical point by the railroad trestle crossing River Street, although with a more imaginative and positive treatment, the trestle could become a two-way gateway for the Downtown area, mediating between the Green and the Harbor to the south, and the Government Center to the north. In fact, moving north on River Street, the trestle frames a significant vista that unfolds as one emerges from the underpass, with the cupola of the Town Hall in the foreground and the church steeple in the background. All of this would be reinforced if there were a greater degree of architectural and retail continuity both north and south of the trestle. Indeed, the extent to which River Street is effectively interrupted by the railroad overpass is most clearly indicated in the spotty nature of both streetscape and commercial activity either side of the trestle.

It is, however, most unfortunate, that River Street has minimal contact with the source of its name, until one has passed the Town Hall moving north. At that point, the charming landscape of the duck pond comes into play, creating one of the most delightfully picturesque “urban” settings in the center of any New England town. But the lack of any active relationship to the rest of the Wepawaug corridor, at least between the duck pond and the Memorial Bridge, and again between the Memorial Bridge and the new pedestrian bridge, is a huge missed opportunity to weave landscape and streetscape together in a unique ensemble that genuinely links the entire town center from north to south. Such a project could also serve as an anchor for the development, in the not too distant future, of a comprehensive network of trails and open spaces that connects Downtown with the entire City of Milford, and ultimately with the region.

All of this builds upon the inherent man-made and natural structure of Milford as we find it now: a place which has, as we have repeatedly said, great “bone structure,” but needs the addition of critical elements, the opening up of strategic vistas and the protection of others, to supply the essential connective tissue.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: The Functions of Downtown

The downtowns of American cities, large and small, are not what they used to be. Once the major focus of commercial, financial, institutional and community life within their regions, downtowns have been reshaped in the last half century by the automobile and accompanying patterns of suburban development. Very few downtowns have retained a dominant share of retail and office development within their region, many have lost at least some the cultural, entertainment and institutional functions that gave them a monumental presence and a central position in the lives of their citizens, and some have even lost the civic and governmental centers which made them the symbolic focus of community identity.

Recent years have seen a partial reversal of the decentering forces that marginalized or even ravaged many downtowns. While residential and commercial development continues to expand on the periphery of many cities and towns, Americans have come to recognize the negative impact of unchecked sprawl on the environment and their quality of life, and therefore, conversely, to appreciate the attractions of the traditional commercial and residential districts, with their historic architecture and pedestrian scale, that still characterize the centers of many urban areas. Precisely those features that once seemed to make older downtowns less competitive within a regional market, now help those areas to discover a new niche within a wider spectrum of commercial, residential and entertainment alternatives. And while downtowns will never again totally dominate their regions as they once did, they have increasingly re-emerged as special kinds of places to visit, shop, enjoy cultural events and activities, and live, based upon their embodiment of qualities that newer suburban environments can only attempt to simulate.

In this changing context, Downtown Milford is very fortunate, not only to have retained much of its traditional commercial, institutional and residential fabric – minimally scarred by the strip-style development by means of which some downtowns attempted to remain competitive, but also to have that located within a concentrated area that is easily walkable, blessed with exceptional landscape and open space resources, and well-served by regional transportation networks. This is obviously a time of enormous opportunity for Downtown Milford, and we strongly believe that the opportunity should be seized, to encourage both new investment as well as redevelopment and enhancement of existing sites... *but only if those cherished aspects of the current Downtown are carefully respected and protected, and new development thoughtfully and appropriately planned by a partnership of public and private constituencies to complement existing assets, while avoiding, as far as possible, any adverse impact and correcting problems that may have already arisen.*

Downtown Milford in the Region

Milford is strategically located within the east coast metropolitan corridor. It is served by the New Haven Line of the Metro-North Railroad, which provides a roughly 10-minute connection to New Haven, a 45-minute connection to Stamford, and an hour and a half connection to Grand Central Station in New York. It is also served by seven exits off I-95, the major north-south automobile route along the east coast, and one exit from the Merritt Parkway. It is situated between the regional airports in Stratford and New Haven, and is an hour from the international airport north of Hartford.

Within this context, Milford provides a medium-size, affordable residential and commercial alternative to larger and more rapidly developing urban and suburban concentrations. The convenience of its location is reflected in the concentration of regionally oriented commercial and office developments, especially adjacent to highway intersections. Downtown Milford, in spite of its proximity to the major transportation arteries has, at the moment, a much smaller share of regionally oriented business, and captures a relatively small share of the enormous volume of tourist traffic along the northeast corridor in summer months. It is, as has already been noted, protected – in both a positive and negative sense – from that additional potential volume of visitors and customers by the intense commercial development of the Route 1 corridor, which bypasses Downtown Milford, and by the rather weakly articulated approaches to the Downtown area from the major highways. In that respect, the Downtown, with its attractive character, amenities, and pedestrian scale, is still a fairly well-kept secret, if not within the immediate area, at least within the larger region. As that changes – and it is currently changing – Milford faces a number of obvious challenges and opportunities with respect to the next generation of Downtown development.

The strengthening of the Downtown area through redevelopment and modest, but appropriate, growth in a variety of sectors is consistent with the current Regional Plan of Development produced by the South Central Regional Council of Governments, of which Milford is part. This recently issued plan calls for “infilling and strategic redevelopment in urban corridors,” which is precisely the strategy recommended for Downtown by this Plan. To ignore the pressures, opportunities and pitfalls of new development will only encourage their worst effects in long run, not prevent them. With the its train station, development of its harbor, the emergence of a lively restaurant district, and the growth of its hospital, Downtown Milford is already well on its way to playing an enhanced role within the region. It is entirely appropriate for local businesses to recognize and build upon this base.

Downtown as a Place to do Business

The retail environment of Downtown Milford was never dependent on the sort of large regional anchor department stores that once dominated the commercial districts of larger cities like New Haven, and have now been lost – probably never to return – to suburban strips, shopping malls and, most recently, “big box” developments. In fact, Milford has

all of these along its Route 1 corridor, and while these siphon retail traffic and dollars away from traditional centers, including both Milford and New Haven, they have also, as has been noted, protected Downtown Milford from well-intentioned, but generally misguided, efforts to redevelop downtowns based on large-scale, automobile-oriented interventions.

Downtown Milford has therefore been able to take advantage of – and is poised to leverage even further – the extremely valuable assets of its more traditional small-town center. Planners and developers have discovered in recent years that shopping districts based on small and medium-scale street-oriented buildings, a largely traditional architectural environment accommodating new development as infill, and a pedestrian scale that includes a mix of uses and building types within a walkable area are, in many respects, more attractive and inherently more flexible than the larger, single-purpose developments characteristic of suburban strips. Not that there aren't special challenges for older town centers such as Milford, in accommodating modern retailing and the conveniences and amenities that shoppers still expect in even the most charming of traditional settings. This is especially true with respect to vehicular circulation and parking, which will be discussed in more detail below. But Milford is also fortunate in its relatively low level of development, which despite appearances, still leaves some strategically located sites for potential infill, or more concentrated redevelopment, all with adjacent reservoirs of parking, that could be more effectively laid out and managed to relieve any increased pressure.

The greatest challenges for Downtown Milford in taking advantage of the physical and spatial framework that it has inherited lie in protecting and enhancing the special qualities of that environment and developing a more exciting retail mix that takes advantage of the inherent character of the setting. The first challenge will be met, in part, by the increased awareness and enthusiasm that has, in recent years, been manifested in the business community and among all citizens, and was so evident and important in the development of this plan. It will also be guided by the creation of a special Downtown Design and Development District, with both design guidelines and management strategies, of the sort discussed further on in this report.

As for the retail mix, the work of the Chamber of Commerce, local business people and developers, and government agencies and officials should continue to be guided by an appreciation of the kind of place that Milford is, and could be. Opportunities and sites should be identified for new elements in the mix such as a bookstore, food shops and specialty retail, while existing assets, such as the two leading camera shops in the region should be highlighted, and others, such as second-hand stores, should be upgraded and enhanced to create real areas of identity and focus, presented, for example, as antiques stores and galleries. All of this will be facilitated by the aggressive implementation of the sort of streetscape and urban design improvements suggested below. Downtown Milford should look like what it is and wants to be: a charming and traditional, but also vibrant and modern retail center.

These goals for the retail sector will be supported by the continued and enhanced presence of office uses in the Downtown area, alongside of shops. Milford is fortunate in that a number of banks and real estate firms continue to have an active and visible presence in the Downtown area, and that the continued presence downtown of most governmental functions anchors an attractive district of law offices and related uses. In general, the ground floors of buildings along the Green itself, especially on South Broad Street and the section of River Street south of the railway overpass should be reserved for retail uses, and the second floors and interstitial spaces between buildings and along side streets developed as office space, understanding that increased retail success in downtown areas sometimes leads to increased competition for prime locations with office uses. These uses should be encouraged, wherever possible, to share parking with each other and with retail uses, based on an awareness of different periods of peak demand and a mix of short-term and longer-term parking.

The ability of local residents to both shop and conduct other sorts of business conveniently and sociably in their local Downtown will continue to provide a fundamental base and logic for the town center, even as the number of new visitors to an improving Downtown continues to increase. Both of these groups will be best-served by a lively, safe and pedestrian-oriented shopping and business district, where it is possible to *park once*, and then do the rest of one's business on foot. Whether one is drawn downtown by daily activities or by a special trip – to purchase a camera or eat in a favorite restaurant – the same basic principles of urban design in support of the quality of the built environment and the pedestrian experience will apply.

Downtown as a Destination

Whereas once downtown as a destination meant major shopping trips to department stores or afternoons at the movies, the new role of downtowns as one among many destinations within a region is more likely to highlight a stroll along an attractive street, a cup of coffee or an ice cream cone, a visit to a unique shop or two, or dinner at a “slow-food” restaurant - perhaps, in fair weather, seated outdoors on a sidewalk or terrace. Downtown Milford has all of these amenities, but will develop even more.

Indeed, the downtown retail sector that seems to be most rapidly approaching a critical mass and real regional prominence is restaurants. Encouraged undoubtedly by the inherent attractiveness of the settings – along the Green or overlooking the Harbor or the River – quality restaurants with both indoor and outdoor dining are drawing more and more people, from farther and farther afield, to Downtown Milford, bringing with them additional development opportunities as well as management issues, especially with respect to traffic and parking. Clearly, if Milford is to take advantage of the opportunities and avert any negative side effects then it must be more pro-active in planning for the ongoing development of this dynamic sector.

For example, since in general restaurants are quite happy to be in close proximity to each other, it makes good sense to develop plans for shared parking, including some with valet service, that avoids contributing to additional congestion as much as possible and takes

advantage of different peak hours that some of the retail parking, and most of the office and commuter parking. The cluster of popular restaurants focused around the busy intersection of River Street, Broad Street, Factory Street and New Haven Avenue is now an impressive generator of afternoon and evening activity in the Downtown area, but also serves to highlight the problems of what was already a poorly planned intersection. Milford cannot afford to let what has become an anchor district for its Downtown become a further focus of turmoil. It is in the collective interests of the business community, the City and restaurant owners and developers to articulate a collaborative and forward looking plan that will reassure local residents, address current and future problems, and fully realize the potential of what is going on in this critical part of Downtown.

Beyond the coordination and accommodation of this current development, it is appropriate to ask what else might complement and build upon an emergent restaurant district, beyond related food service uses such as cafes, bakeries and delis, and development of additional opportunities for outdoor dining. Clearly a closely related use, one that often arrives first and encourages the development of restaurants, is arts and entertainment. Downtown Milford should be able to support more activity of this sort, including increased use of, and visibility for, its attractive Center for the Arts in the former train station. Live music, and even a dinner theater or small repertory cinema have proven to be successful downtown destinations in other cities of Milford's size and character. Comprehensive redevelopment of a larger site, such as the Daniel Street block, which is already becoming integrated into and emergent restaurant district through recent improvements, could be used to enhance the mix of related uses and small outdoor spaces that promises to make this an attractive and lively anchor for the Downtown. Existing auto-oriented uses that could more conveniently conduct their business in places other than Downtown should make way for more compatible commercial development and public outdoor space.

Finally, insofar as Downtown Milford becomes a destination, for visitors arriving by land and sea, places for some of these visitors to stay will be in greater demand. It is unlikely that most people attracted to the Downtown for its own sake will be interested in staying in a motel on the Post Road. The development of additional bed and breakfast establishments in the Downtown area and immediately adjacent residential neighborhoods should be encouraged, and facilitated by appropriate zoning and code requirements implemented as part of a special Downtown District overlay. In addition, another possible destination development goal for the Downtown area might be a small inn on an infill site, and/or as part of the redevelopment of an existing building.

Downtown as a Place to Live

More than any other sector, what seems to be driving the revitalization of downtowns across the country is the rediscovery of downtown as a great place to live. Of course this new residential development is different from the downtown residential characteristic of older industrial centers. As American family structures and expectations change and diversify, as more and more Americans turn away from the problems increasingly associated with peripheral sprawl, and as people make a wider variety of residential

choices in the course of their lives, the lifestyle afforded by residence within walking distance of older core areas looks more and more attractive, especially to young people without families, and older empty nesters and retirees. Some will prefer – and will be able to afford – the centers of large cities and the loft spaces of renovated old commercial and industrial buildings often available there. But others will choose the more affordable charm of smaller town centers, especially when, as in Milford, public transportation makes access to larger centers so convenient.

There is no doubt that Milford is, in its own way, experiencing the effects of this partial shift back to the center, even as it, like other Connecticut cities, must continue to contend with the management of an ongoing demand for suburban style housing in both older and new residential areas. The key for Downtown Milford is to encourage the repopulation of the town center as something good for business, the environment and people at various stages in their lives, while proactively managing that development so that it supports, rather than compromises, other goals. The insistence that new residential development include a mix of uses, especially commercial uses in the Downtown area, the targeting of that development to appropriate infill sites, with parking available nearby, but also the care that new development not overbuild, in either its scale or its parking count, are all part of that planning process. We believe that projects such as Schooner Wharf are exemplary of the trends noted here, and the sort of development that attempts to respond appropriately to those trends. We also believe that increased public involvement in such projects, including investment in infrastructure such as additional parking, at earlier stages of conceptualization, rather than only during the approvals process, would enhance both the projects and the entire Downtown.

In fact, if we begin to think of our downtowns as a special kind of neighborhood, then all aspects of downtown planning and design will respond to the sort of pedestrian scale, attractive appearance, smooth and safe functioning, and general quality of life that we have come to expect from the places where we have our homes, as well as our businesses.

Key Recommendations:

- Emphasize the character of Downtown as a distinctive small New England town center, with a unique mix of local businesses and a few national franchises that are blended with local scale and character
- Build upon and enhance the pedestrian scale of the Downtown area with easily walkable connections between the Harbor, the Green and the Government Center, all connected by sidewalks, landscape and views, so that residents and visitors may “park once,” and do the rest of their business on foot
- Enhance and expand the current mix of retail with additional businesses in key sectors, such as restaurants (including outdoor dining), coffee shops, and small boutiques; new businesses that add value and activity, such as a bookstore, food stores, and arts and entertainment; and upgrading of some current uses, such as second-hand stores presented as antique shops

- Encourage appropriate mixed-use infill, with a preference for ground floor commercial frontage along the core streets (Broad Street, Factory Lane, River Street, Daniel Street and New Haven Avenue)
- Enhance the status of Downtown as a special kind of neighborhood, protecting the charming residential areas adjacent to the Downtown, promoting infill residential development, including apartments above new and existing stores

URBAN DESIGN ELEMENTS

While many of the individual buildings and public spaces in Downtown Milford are attractive and even unique, too often the infrastructure which articulates the relationships between buildings and spaces, and shapes the experience of both motorists and pedestrians as they move from one place to another in the Downtown area, is of lower quality and level of maintenance than the primary spaces and structures themselves. This is also true of some building facades and, in particular, entrances and lower levels of buildings; that is to say, those aspects of architecture which relate most immediately to the quality of pedestrian experience and the first impression that visitors (and residents) have when they come to Downtown Milford.

The role of urban design in a place such as Milford is not necessarily to create grand new spaces, streets or monuments, but to improve, highlight and embellish qualities, relationships and views that already exist – at least potentially. When this is done well, it often recedes into the background, creating a sense of general quality, well-being and prosperity, with occasional moments of recognition and delight, as opposed to the intrusive experience of mediocre or poor urban design elements, which contrast with, and even spoil, the experience of an otherwise splendid urban landscape. In other words, the streets, sidewalks and buildings adjacent to the wonderful public landscapes of the Green, the Harbor, and the Government Center should look as good as they do.

Streetscape and Lighting

One way of sending a strong message to residents, visitors and potential investors about the City's and the business community's commitment to appropriate and attractive Downtown development is to begin immediately to improve the appearance of the Downtown streetscape. Currently, streetscape treatment is inconsistent, interrupted, and often weakest at critical points. Like too many towns, Milford has frequently had its streetscape shaped by traffic engineering rather than urban design, with a result that is, ironically, pleasant neither for the pedestrian nor the motorist. While a primary goal of improved streetscape design is to begin to level the playing field on which both automobiles and pedestrians must feel comfortable, improvements which are designed for the comfort and safety of the pedestrian will ultimately make a safer and more pleasant driving experience as well. Automobiles are not the enemy. On the contrary, they add vitality and interest to the street, and most importantly, bring the visitors and customers who will become pedestrians, once they leave their vehicles, and make Downtown Milford a lively retail and business environment.

A crucial place to begin an ongoing program of streetscape improvements is along South Broad Street and Factory Lane, with a particular focus on the central intersection of the Downtown Area at Broad Street, River Street, New Haven Avenue and Factory Lane. This intersection, for better or worse, shapes the impressions and perceptions of almost everyone arriving to, or passing through, Downtown Milford, and is a major – largely

negative - factor in the pedestrian experience of Downtown. We will deal with suggested traffic improvements in this area in the next section of the report, but whether or not those improvements are implemented, the quality of the streetscape and the appearance of the surrounding buildings and the activities they accommodate, will ultimately make or break the success of this critical area. Therefore the South Broad Street and Factory Lane Streetscape Improvement Program should be a pilot project, designed to set a standard for the rest of the Downtown.

The City has already proposed new street lights to be installed along South Broad Street. Street lights, along with trees and other landscaping, can provide a regular rhythm that helps to define the street edge and demarcate a permeable zone for pedestrians and sidewalk activity. In Milford, the regularity of consistent lighting and street trees along North and South Broad Street could provide an attractive counterpoint to the more picturesque disposition of planting on the Green. Lighting should illuminate, but not too brightly for comfort and visibility, the building facades and pedestrian areas. Additional lighting may accentuate important monuments and significant places, such as prominent corners and passages between buildings. It is important not to leave conspicuously dark zones in the Downtown area, including parking lots.

In addition to the new street lighting already proposed by the City, there should be a comprehensive and coordinated improvement of sidewalks, benches, trash receptacles, newspaper vending machines, signage and building facades. These elements should, wherever possible, be collected together in a logical and attractive manner, rather than randomly distributed. For example, newspaper vending machines should be regulated and installed properly in specified locations. Any advertising other than store windows and signs should be discouraged. Street furniture and signage should be appropriate, but also present an opportunity to develop a set of signature elements that speaks of Milford, as opposed to any other recently spruced-up New England town center. Furthermore, overhead wires should be removed and relocated either below grade or, if that is too costly, at the rear of buildings. Immediate attention should be given to vacant or underutilized store fronts, with an emphasis on lively and attractive window displays, inviting entrances, and activities that encourage and take advantage of the high – and potentially much higher – level of pedestrian traffic in this area. Encouragement should also be given to, and accommodation made for, activities that spill over into the street, as well as shops and businesses with longer opening hours that will contribute to the evening activity in the Downtown area generated by the growing roster of restaurants. A combination of City and business initiatives and incentives could create an atmosphere of collaboration and friendly competition in making the improvements necessary to turn this area from a liability into the sort of “best foot forward” that the Downtown needs.

The commercial architecture of South Broad Street is fundamentally good, but currently under-appreciated, as is evidenced by the uneven level of maintenance, the covering of architectural detail by later signage and siding, and the current tenant mix. Façade restoration and improvement, along with new signage, should proceed alongside the streetscape program, beginning with the section of South Broad Street between Factory Lane and Harbor Walk. At the same time, coordinated design guidelines of the sort

described later in this report should be put in place to make explicit the standards that are applied in this pilot project, and to encourage new development that supports and extends these standards. A mixed-use infill building that fills the gap created by the recently burnt-out site in the center of South Broad Street could be an useful case-study for the articulation of these guidelines.

The intention of these suggestions is not to make South Broad Street into a stand alone set-piece, however attractive it might be, but to provide an example and impetus for the improvement of other critical areas, such as River Street, Daniel Street, and New Haven Avenue, but even more importantly, to connect a revitalized South Broad Street to the good things that are happening – or could happen – all around it. Indeed, given the quality of the Green and the Harbor, and the new projects which are emerging within a five-minute walking radius of this area, South Broad Street and its adjacent intersections, passages, and parking areas, are a sort of “missing link” in tying together many of the assets of Downtown Milford. Therefore it is imperative that the pilot Streetscape Improvement Program proposed *turn the corner* into Factory Lane and connect to the new Schooner Wharf Development and the Harbor, *extend into* the passages between buildings along South Broad Street and link parking areas to the south, including attention to the parking areas and the “rear” facades of buildings, and *link to* the Green, North Broad Street, River Street and New Haven Avenue. Not only do the businesses of South Broad Street extend through their sites – many with entrances to the side or to the south – but parking areas must feel as if they are integrated into the overall streetscape plan if they are to function as they are intended. As with lighting, conspicuous gaps in treatment and attention will cause the entire pedestrian system to work less well.

In fact, design and investment should be focused precisely on those crucial points of connection. Where the jumble of signs, wires and fixtures is now most chaotic; where the sidewalk feels most unfriendly and exposed; where the pedestrian is most confused and least comfortable; new paving, lighting fixtures, seating, and directional signage should make places that celebrate the visual and physical connections between the unique mix of ingredients that make Downtown Milford. The most important elements of this connective urban tissue are the sidewalks themselves.

Sidewalks and Crosswalks

Sidewalks are not merely a temporary refuge from the street and a practical way to move from place to place, they constitute a significant network of public space where people not only move, but meet, rest, shop, and appreciate their city. If they are a pleasure to look at and walk on, then they will be intensively used, relieving traffic congestion generated by many short trips and, more importantly, creating the liveliest sort of retail environment. No mall or strip shopping center is as interesting and dynamic as an effective downtown sidewalk.

Parts of Milford’s sidewalk network are well-tended and effective, but these parts are often interrupted by stretches that are in poor repair and cluttered with casually placed signage, utility poles, plantings and other equipment. In the case of a sidewalk network,

the whole, if coherently and consistently designed, is always greater than the sum of fragmentary parts. Pilot projects such as South Broad Street, and new developments such as Schooner Wharf, should therefore deploy a consistent treatment of sidewalks and paving that provides a standard for the rest of the Downtown area. Sidewalks should be repaired, enhanced, and/or extended to strengthen critical pedestrian connections in areas such as Factory Lane and Shipyard Lane. Where curbs do not exist separating sidewalks from vehicular right-of-ways, these should be installed, and new or existing curb cuts minimized. Particular projects may incorporate signature elements within a more general sidewalk treatment, but these should be subordinated to overall continuity.

The most important, and often least well-designed parts of any sidewalk system are crosswalks. While accessibility requirements have made us more sensitive to the connection of crosswalks to the rest of sidewalk system, Milford, like many towns, still treats crosswalks as mainly a part of the vehicular street system. For important crosswalks, an effort should be made to extend sidewalk paving treatments across the street, as well as widening existing sidewalks at crossings wherever possible. At the very least, main intersections must be made psychologically less daunting to pedestrians of all ages and abilities. As suggested above, and as discussed below, the intersection of River Street, Broad Street, New Haven Avenue and Factory Lane, must be thoroughly redesigned. It is, arguably, the very center of Milford, and should, as far as possible, feel more like a plaza than an intersection. While its practical function is unavoidable (although even that aspect could be improved), its lack of a more attractive and pedestrian-friendly treatment creates a huge and damaging gap at the most critical point in Milford's sidewalk network. Sidewalk paving should be widened and improved at the corners and extended across the intersection, special clustered lighting fixtures should be installed, necessary signage should be tidied and special directional and identity signage developed (see below), benches should be provided near each corner, and overhead wires and fixtures removed or improved.

Downtown Milford has the additional distinction of a Green in the middle of its main shopping and business street, which, while wonderfully attractive, makes crossing from North to South Broad Street an above-average challenge. Additional crosswalks connecting the two sides of Broad Street via the Green should be implemented at crucial points, such as the entrance to Harbor Walk, where connection can be made not only to the parking area, but also eventually to the Harbor through Schooner Wharf. Many New England towns have effectively implemented and enforced mid-block pedestrian crossings in a safe and attractive manner. These help to control the sort of jay-walking that now occurs in Milford, as well as providing a traffic-calming device. Again, wherever possible, these crosswalks should be made of something more substantial than paint.

Well-designed and executed, a continuous network of sidewalks is an important way-finding device as well, helping and encouraging people to find their way around on foot, especially when reinforced by complementary and distinctive signage.

Signage

There are several categories of signage that can contribute to, or detract from, the overall character, appearance and identity of a place. First, and often most conspicuous and controversial, are the wide variety of signs that property owners and their tenants affix to the facades of their buildings, from address numerals to company logos to temporary banners announcing sales. The regulation of these signs is dealt with in more detail below in the section of the report on design guidelines. These signs are, however, like buildings, important private contributions to the larger conversation that we call urban design. They need not be invisible, banal, or quaint to be appropriate. Indeed, in some places, such as Camden Town in London or the Las Vegas Strip, unusual, even garish, signage is the major agent of strong and effective urban identity, not to mention good business. Milford is obviously a less dramatic case, and a more likely candidate for some degree of regulation, such as encouraging signage of a certain size and character in specific zones of a building façade. However, even in Milford, exceptions should always be considered for unique cases, existing or proposed. For example, the giant neon Citgo sign in Kenmore Square in Boston now functions more like a piece of public art, and is protected as such. Milford's most distinctive "sign" at present may be the submarine at the Harbor, and it could use a few more such "follies," that function both as public art and as advertising for Downtown, either publicly or privately sponsored.

The second major category of signs is those provided by public agencies or, occasionally, public institutions or civic organizations. These fall into three, not necessarily mutually exclusive, categories. *Identity signage* tells you where you are and what's special about that place, and Milford has not nearly enough of this, especially at significant points of arrival within the urban structure. Significant buildings and monuments, like the Memorial Bridge, contribute in this category, but not every key site has – or should have – a distinctive building. *Directional signage* tells you how to get to other interesting and important places from where you are, and Milford has some of that, but mostly supplied, along with their usual repertoire of standard off-the-rack graphics, by the State Department of Transportation. This is a missed opportunity, not only for the practical reasons of helping visitors find their way around and, especially, find convenient parking, but also as a source of local identity insofar as it can highlight those features, and the relationships between them, that make Milford so special. In this way, both directional and identity signage reinforce the spatial and visual relationships that urban design in general seeks to develop and strengthen.

A third category of signage is what we call *event signage*, including posters, banners, sign boards, etc., usually installed temporarily, but often in a more or less permanent location or fixture, to announce special events, seasons, or simply to celebrate the place. Milford, a city with lots going on and many traditional events, has plenty of this, but not always used to best effect. It can, for example, often be combined with identity and directional signage, especially at significant points of arrival and orientation, and can also be the occasion for making new places with kiosks, lighting, newsstands and other kinds of street furniture. Milford currently lacks well-designed informational nodes of this sort.

RR Overpasses

As has already been mentioned, the presence of the railroad in the heart of Downtown Milford is an unavoidable and crucial factor in the planning and design of the town center. It is, we believe, an enormous asset to the Downtown, and should be celebrated as such, rather than being tolerated as a mere (in)convenience, that allows people to get to and from Milford, but also clogs the center with additional traffic, while forming an unsightly impediment to easy movement from north to south within the town center. The obvious areas for improvement are the station itself, along with adjacent infrastructure, including parking, and also the railway overpasses.

In particular, the overpass on River Street is, as has been noted, at an absolutely critical location with respect to the overall structure and function of the Downtown area. At present, almost every aspect of this central urban element is to be counted on the debit side of the urban design balance sheet. The area under the trestle is unsightly, even unpleasant, the immediately adjacent streetscape is poorly designed and maintained, and the trestle itself is a scaffold for commercial advertising, rather than a triumphal entrance into the center of Milford.

The improvement of the River Street trestle and its adjacent streetscape should be, at most, a mid-range project of great importance, where a small public – and perhaps private - investment has the potential to make a huge impact on the impression of the town center for both vehicular and pedestrian traffic. The trestle should be designed as a double-sided gateway, with appropriate civic imagery. This is not incompatible with private sponsorship, but the public interest should come to the fore. The underpass area should be cleaned up, roofed over, and well-lighted, and the adjacent sidewalks and shops should be made part of the overall ensemble.

Key Recommendations:

- Implement a comprehensive and coordinated program of Downtown streetscape improvements, including: façade improvements and restoration, lighting (especially pedestrian scale lighting, not only along streets, but in parking areas and passages between buildings), sidewalks and crosswalks, street trees, signage, bike racks, kiosks, and regulation of vending machines and advertising
- Articulate and enhance gateways and entry corridors into the Downtown area, including new identity and directional signage, improvement of railway trestles, and control of strip encroachment along key approaches to the Downtown
- Implement these improvements as an early action project at the critical intersection of Broad Street, River Street, Factory Lane and New Haven Avenue, and extending west along South Broad Street and South along Factory Lane

TRAFFIC AND PARKING

As in most towns, Milford residents and merchants think that the most serious issues facing the Downtown area are traffic – too much of it – and parking – not enough. In Milford, this perception is aggravated by the coincidence of the town center’s principal business street and the major local east-west through route, which also happens to be (partly) a state road (CT 162). This structural condition, not uncommon in New England towns, has been further exacerbated by the recent and ongoing revival of the Downtown, particularly in the residential and restaurant sectors. The latter has fueled a noticeable spike in traffic and parking demand, particularly at the late afternoon rush hour, and particularly in the vicinity of Downtown Milford’s most congested and awkwardly planned intersection. Although even at these peak times the waits – for lights and parking places – are quite short, in absolute terms, this does not alleviate the potential frustrations of, and heightened conflicts between, through traffic and customers in cars and on foot. Unless, however, it is recognized that the primary goal of effective downtown planning is not simply to allow traffic to flow at top speed at peak times or to plan parking areas for peak demand, these conflicts will only escalate, provoking unreasonable fear of reasonable development or, worse, eventually creating a downtown indistinguishable from a suburban strip.

Good planning in a downtown area will balance the needs of motorists, on the one hand, and the safety and quality of life of pedestrians, on the other, as well as balancing the demands of through-traffic with the different pace of Downtown destination traffic. In this, we agree with the tone of Harrall-Michalowski’s recent memo to the Milford Planning and Zoning Board (October 9, 2001), which prefaces its technical analysis and recommendations for the Broad Street/River Street/Factory Lane/New Haven Avenue intersection with the following statement of principle:

It is important to note that the purpose of this analysis has not been to develop recommendations to move vehicles through this intersection in the highest volumes and at the greatest speed possible. This intersection is the heart of the Downtown and is part of the overall fabric of the area. While the intersection is also part of the circulation system moving vehicles east to west through the city, there must be a balance between this circulation function and the best interests of a healthy, vibrant and pedestrian scale downtown. This analysis has been done as an integral part of the overall downtown planning effort which has as its goal the preservation of the scale and character of the area while providing for a continued vibrancy.

This philosophy is especially crucial for Downtown Milford, the principal asset of which is its intimate relationship of Harbor, Green, Broad Street and Government Center, all within a easily walkable radius of each other, convenient public transit, and – as it turns out – plenty of potential parking.

Traffic Calming

It may seem ironic that one way to deal with the problematic perception of traffic congestion is to slow traffic down even further. But that approach, now known as “traffic calming,” is being implemented in a wide variety of contexts across the country. Basically, that approach argues that a primary goal of good urban design in both downtowns and neighborhoods is not only to increase pedestrian comfort and pleasure, but also to communicate to drivers the fact that have entered a pedestrian-intensive zone, where they must defer to people on foot, and so might as well slow down themselves and enjoy the architecture and street life, rather than focusing exclusively on being the first or last through the next traffic light. Given its distinctive small town character, its variegated buildings and views, its centrally located Green, and its increasingly lively retail and entertainment scene, Downtown Milford is ripe for this approach.

The proposed improvements to the Downtown streetscape will go a long way towards implementing this fundamental change in attitude. By either replacing or supplementing standard issue state highway lighting and signage with lighting, signage and other elements that speak of local character, rather than the placelessness of the generic roadscape, Downtown Milford will announce itself more clearly as a distinctive place to be appreciated and even experienced, rather than as a slightly more congested area to be passed through as quickly as possible.

One important way in which many downtowns have introduced traffic calming is the multiplication of designated pedestrian crosswalks. This not only serves pedestrians in the most obvious way, it also clarifies the situation for drivers, who will have fewer jay-walking pedestrians emerging unpredictably from in-between parked cars to watch out for. When properly designed, signed and regulated, pedestrian crosswalks with sidewalk bump-outs, distinctive paving treatments set into the blacktop, and prominent signage on both sides of the street reminding motorists to “Yield to Pedestrians in Crosswalks,” enhance safety, make a friendlier environment, and increase commercial activity, all without the inconvenience and expense – for both motorists and pedestrians – of full-scale signalized crossings. The on-street parking spaces lost to the bump-outs are more than compensated for by the improved accessibility of parking on both sides of the street.

Again, Downtown Milford is an ideal candidate for this sort of treatment. The distance between signalized crossings is now quite extreme, and since cars rarely expect to slow down or stop in between signals, the frustration of waiting is only increased. More crosswalks would “pace” the traffic, especially at times of peak use for both cars and pedestrians. Certainly a new crosswalk corresponding to the entrance of Harbor Walk, and serving, therefore, pedestrian access to and from the important reservoir of parking behind the buildings of South Broad Street, as well as the new walkway through the recent Schooner Wharf project to Milford Landing, would be a significant enhancement and a logical piece of the emergent Downtown structure. Consideration should also be given to restoring the pedestrian crosswalk at the fountain on the eastern end of the

Green, as well as improving the crossing from the Green to Depot Street. Additionally, pedestrian crossings of New Haven Avenue at Daniel Street have increased dramatically, and pedestrians rarely will bother to detour west to the signalized crosswalks at River Street and Factory Lane. A new crosswalk should be planned in this area as part of the proposed Milford Riverwalk (see below). Eventually, at least one additional crosswalk towards the western end of the Green may also be in order. Together, these additions to the pedestrian circulation network would evenly spread the slow-downs and temporary stops for traffic throughout the Downtown area, with significant “calming” effect.

Broad St/River St/Factory Lane/New Haven Avenue Intersection

Above, it was suggested that the streetscape of this crucial intersection at the epicenter of the Downtown be redesigned so that it feels more like a plaza than a daunting gulf in the pedestrian network, and an infamous headache for motorists. At its most ambitious, such a redesign might include normalizing the flow of through traffic, selective widening, and reconfigured turning lanes, as well as redevelopment of the Daniel Street block and the Mama Bear’s site. In general, however, we agree with the findings of the Harrall-Michalowski memorandum (October 9, 2001), and their subsequent recommendations in the Plan of Conservation and Development, that the incremental improvements gained by such a heroic project would not justify the expense, or the potential damage to the scale and fabric of the Downtown area. We also agree that, under the circumstances, the improvement of this intersection from both a traffic and pedestrian point of view is mainly a management issue.

In particular, the partial reinstatement of the old practice of a uniformed police officer directing traffic, at least at peak times, could contribute to the improved functioning of this intersection for both pedestrians and motorists, and to the friendliness and charm of this unavoidable area. Specially paved crosswalks could be coordinated with a paved area in the center of the intersection for the police officer, or other uniformed director of traffic, in a way that, combined with new lighting, signage, benches and kiosks, as well as improvements to adjacent buildings, would truly make this intersection a *public space*.

We would also endorse any modification of the current one-way street arrangement at this intersection, which now forces traffic into quite bizarre and increasingly congested patterns of circulation. In particular, traffic from South Broad Street should be allowed to turn left onto River Street and northbound traffic from Factory Lane should be able to proceed directly through the intersection. In all of this, we would of course defer to the technical expertise of traffic planners and engineers, with the reiterated proviso that the primary goal here, as elsewhere in Downtown, is not necessarily maximum speed and efficiency of traffic flow, as much as a safe and lively pedestrian-oriented business environment and public realm.

In fact, one-way street systems are, in general, artifacts of an era in urban planning when downtowns were considerably more congested – being the uncontested centers of regional retail and office uses – and the conventional wisdom was to facilitate smooth

traffic flow through city centers by treating downtown streets like limited access regional highways, rather than as local public spaces. It is now generally recognized that this approach made for longer local trips, greater frustration, and a less attractive retail environment, with the result that many cities are now gradually or, in some cases, systematically, returning to a network of two-way streets. In the long run, we believe that this would be a sensible strategy for Milford as well, while in the short run, some pressure might be taken off of the Broad Street/River Street intersection by making High Street at the Green two-way. This would also contribute to easier access to and from the “loop” of downtown parking behind North and South Broad Street, as discussed below.

Bus Stops

With its convenient downtown train station and accessible regional bus service Milford generally has outstanding public transit for a town its size. Indeed, the Downtown core and adjacent residential areas already fit the paradigm for transit-oriented development that so many regions nationwide are struggling to approach and that seems to be the only truly sustainable solution to many of the problems of the northeast corridor, and the South Central Connecticut region in particular.

Aside from commuter parking, which is discussed below, the only recommendation to be put forward in this area is to attend to the major downtown bus stop and shelter in front of the old Taylor Library, where stopped buses frequently contribute to traffic congestion in the Broad Street/River Street intersection. This problem might be alleviated by simply rescheduling the “breaks” that drivers take, while leaving their buses parked in line at the curb. A more extreme solution would be to move the stop west towards the corner of North Broad and Depot Streets, or relocate the stop altogether, to the train station, where it would be part of an intermodal hub.

In fact, since buses stop on demand in Milford, there is no need to have a large number of formally designated stops with shelters, except in a few high use locations, such as the Green, the Government Center, the Hospital, or the train station. These locations should be designed to contribute to overall streetscape goals and character. The train station, in particular, should be developed as a transit hub, combining bus stops and commuter parking.

Parking

Parking is not, of course, an isolated issue, but is intimately connected to the comprehensive development goals for the Downtown area, as well as to previously mentioned considerations such as access to public transit, ease and accessibility of pedestrian circulation, and the logical flow of local and through traffic. In general, Milford is well-situated to, and should, follow the strategy that is now described as “park once,” according to which residents and visitors with one or more Downtown destinations are encouraged to find a reasonably convenient parking space quickly and then to proceed to all of their various destinations, planned and spontaneous, on foot, before returning to their vehicle.

For the “park once” strategy to work, parking areas must be conveniently located (as many of Milford’s currently are), clearly identified with signage (as few of Milford’s currently are), inter-connected and collectively managed so that parking options are multiplied rather than restricted (empty parking lots right next door to full lots are a tell-tale sign of dysfunction), and attractively designed so that parkers and pedestrians feel safe and comfortable at all stages of the journey from their cars to their destinations and back again.

Based on these criteria, the South Broad Street parking area is an immediate candidate for re-design. This is a critical reservoir for Downtown parking at all hours and is within easy walking distance of most significant Downtown destinations. Motorists approaching the town center from River Street or New Haven Avenue should be directed to proceed down Factory Lane directly to this area, without circumnavigating the Green. The variegated quilt of public and private parking in this area should, as far as possible, be interconnected and comprehensively designed and managed, with easy access to both Factory Lane and High Street, so that it might function as part of a larger loop-system of parking in the areas behind both South and North Broad Street, as well as train station parking. The lot itself should be re-striped and landscaped, with a clear pedestrian walkway connecting Harbor Walk to the passage through the new Schooner Wharf development leading down to Milford Landing. This is, by the way, an absolutely critical strategic pedestrian connection from north to south through the town center that could, with a new crosswalk (proposed above), connect to parking behind North Broad Street and form the pedestrian equivalent of the vehicular loop described above. All of this should then be clearly and consistently signed and managed.

Other parking areas should generally be designed and operated according to the same principles, with attention given to specific local uses and conditions. Fowler Field, for example, does not make much sense for commuter parking, but it does provide an important reservoir for special event parking, and is easily connected to the areas of most intense evening activity and so can provide additional parking for those uses after hours. Commuter parking belongs logically as close as possible to the train station, and if there were ever an occasion to construct structured parking in the Downtown area, it should probably be conceived as primarily for commuters, so as to access state funding for that purpose. While such a structure would no doubt be north of the tracks and somewhat removed from the heart of the Downtown area, it could serve for valet parking at night, or self-parking with a shuttle to specific destinations. After hours, the large area of parking at the Parsons Government Center could also function in this way.

In all of these cases, the crucial issues are ease of pedestrian and vehicular access, well-designed, well-lit parking areas, and intelligent and coordinated management. Indeed, we are in agreement with the Downtown Parking Inventory and Usage Study (Memorandum of July 10, 2001) submitted by Harrall-Michalowski to the Milford Planning and Zoning Board, and reiterated in the Plan of Conservation and Development, in thinking that the easiest and most dramatic improvements are to be made with respect to management. Milford should have a regular Parking Authority, charged with oversight, planning and

management of Downtown parking, with the ability to secure funding and enter into publicly advantageous arrangements with private owners and developers. This Authority should work in concert with city government, Downtown merchants, and possibly with a Downtown Special Services District, should one be formed (see below), to realize the goals of a pedestrian friendly Downtown where parking once makes sense. Only in this way will Milford avoid planning for parking on a project-by-project, or crisis-to-crisis, basis. Just as it is unreasonable to expect each project in a traditional small-town downtown to provide all the parking it would need at peak times, as if it was in a suburban strip location, so it is unreasonable to expect each developer to bear the burden of the sort of comprehensive downtown planning that should be based on a proactive public and private partnership.

Key Recommendations:

- Implement one or more new pedestrian crosswalks to the Green at strategic locations, with “Stop for Pedestrians in Crosswalk” rules enforced
- Rethink the River Street-Broad Street intersection to improve traffic flow, pedestrian safety and well-being, and general appearance; re-institute officer to direct traffic at peak hours
- Rethink use and/or location of bus stop on North Broad Street to prevent traffic back-up
- Establish Downtown Parking Authority with public and business representation to conduct ongoing parking counts and surveys, develop signage, brochures and other information directing residents and visitors to available parking, and coordinate management and long-range planning
- Redesign parking areas to the rear of South Broad Street buildings to make better use of available space, connect to currently separate lots and driveways, improve the rear entrances to businesses, landscape parking areas and develop one or more walkways across the parking area connecting to the Schooner Wharf development and the Harbor beyond.
- Restore two-way traffic on High Street from the Green to better connect South Broad Street parking and North Broad Street and commuter parking in one continuous loop
- Project future parking needs in relation to future development, including preliminary planning for one or more parking structures adjacent to the train station, to relocate all or most commuter parking, improve design and make better use of Fowler Field parking

RECREATION AND OPEN SPACE

Perhaps more than any building or group of buildings, it is the relationship of Downtown Milford to its unique site, and the open spaces, landscape and views that enhance awareness of that site that are most characteristic of Milford and give the place its special character. Understandably, the citizens of Milford have been more assiduous about protecting and enhancing their signature open spaces than in preserving and maintaining ordinary streetscapes and commercial structures. And yet, that protective instinct borne of appreciation and pride has sometimes been in conflict with the need to maximize the use of those spaces as public places and as the special kind of infrastructure that can support and enhance a vibrant and distinctive commercial center. Furthermore, the natural tendency to focus on individual spaces has led to some neglect of the wonderful potential for pedestrian-scale connections between those spaces as part of an overall concept for the Downtown in which the whole is even greater than the sum of its extraordinary parts. Striking the right balance between use and conservation, between passive and active uses, between landscape and hardscape, and between familiarity and growth is no easy matter, but it is ultimately essential to the success of Downtown Milford. Each element presents its own opportunities and challenges.

The Green

The Green is exceptionally long and while it is perceived and thought of as a single space, it is rarely experienced or used as such. There is little provision for walking continuously from one end of the Green to the other, either on internal paths or along sidewalks. On the other hand, it is entirely appropriate that the landscape and uses of the Green change somewhat from one end to the other. The eastern end is relatively narrow, surrounded by the busiest part of the Downtown – as well as a great deal of vehicular traffic – and is home to more monuments and built features.

The western end of the Green is relatively wider and quieter, with less – probably too little, at present – activity, both on and surrounding the Green. A large lawn, protected at its edges by appropriate landscaping and perhaps some topography, and ringed with benches facing inward, could provide an enhancement of this urban oasis as spot for reading and relaxing. The eastern end would then retain its more urban character, but better connected by pedestrian crosswalks to the life of the street on either side.

The Duck Pond

This area effectively constitutes a second town green associated with the Government Center, but with its own unique, picturesque landscape. Together the Green and the Duck Pond might be seen as thoroughly charming small city versions of the Boston Common and the Public Garden. Our principle recommendation for this area is to link it to the rest of the Downtown landscape through the new Riverwalk proposed below. Eventually, this may be the first link in a more extensive chain of green connections that

encourage pedestrians and bicyclists from all over the region to enjoy this special open space.

The River

The landscape created by the Harbor and the Wepawaug River have the potential to be, even more than the Green, Milford's signature open space. Access to the River, both pedestrian and visual, is currently quite fragmented and sporadic. Without compromising private River frontages, Milford needs to make much more use of this asset as a public open space, as a magnet for outdoor activity, including seasonal dining of the sort enjoyed by patrons of Stonebridge, and as a connected corridor linking districts within the Downtown area. The new pedestrian bridge at the mouth of the River and the head of the Harbor is an important first step in this program of linkages and new vistas.

The Harbor

Recent projects have highlighted and enhanced the attractiveness of the Harbor, but as with other Downtown open spaces, the Harbor needs to be much better connected to the rest of the Downtown area. Few towns, even in New England, have such a dramatic proximity of a historic town center and a working waterfront, but some that do, have taken better advantage of this asset than Milford. One need only think of the charm of Nantucket or Edgartown, or the new vitality of downtown Providence as it recaptured its river and waterfront. Such heroic efforts are not really needed in Milford, just some strategic linkages and local improvements.

Fowler Field

One such area for improvement is Fowler Field on the east side of the Harbor. It needs to develop a much stronger identity and sense of itself as a downtown waterfront park. Many of its active recreational uses could be more appropriately accommodated on less dramatic and valuable sites. While it would be appropriate to retain some, if not all, of these uses, the waterfront and waterfront activity – both passive and active – should always take precedence. The disposition of these uses, and of parking, should be rearranged and managed over time so as not to detract from the primary value of this space. All parking should be landscaped, while some additional special events parking might be provided on unpaved surfaces. In addition, this area should be much more strongly linked to the entire Downtown area for convenient pedestrian access. Ultimately these links should include planned access for pedestrians to the recently playing fields of Milford Academy, recently acquired by the City, and a much better site for large-scale active uses. A planning firm should be engaged to develop a recreational master plan for all of Milford, that would coordinate long-term location of active and passive recreational uses, and based on this, a landscape architect should then be engaged to prepare a long term master plan for Fowler Field to guide decisions over the next ten years.

Weaving it All Together

The Riverwalk

Linkages seem to be the dominant theme for this report, and we believe there could be no better short-term demonstration of the potential value of that approach than the creation of continuous Riverwalk along the Wepawaug River from the Harbor to the Duck Pond. The plans for this project speak for themselves in terms of the connections they facilitate, the opportunities and pleasures they might provide. Such a project could be relatively easily realized, with enormous potential impact, especially in highlighting the truly special character of Downtown Milford. While not as extensive perhaps as the famous San Antonio Riverwalk, Milford's could be even more attractive, thanks to the presence of the Harbor and the Duck Pond as anchors at either end.

Green Connections

Ultimately, the Riverwalk, and other Downtown open spaces, should be seen as the Downtown pieces of a system of open spaces, and greenways that might interconnect Milford and the entire region. Discussions of this sort of project are underway not only in Milford, but in many towns throughout the region, and ambitious projects of this sort are actually underway in places like Los Angeles and Phoenix. The contribution of visionary schemes of this sort to quality of life, and ultimately to the very practical issues of attracting and retaining businesses and residents, is becoming more and more apparent, and Milford has significant assets and opportunities in this area. Downtown revitalization is by no means an isolated undertaking. With miles of shoreline and attractive neighborhoods, as well as a historic and scenic town center, Milford has ample occasion to think at larger scale of connection.

Key Recommendations:

- Activate the entire length of the green with new walkways and appropriately located activity or seating areas, especially at the west end of the Green
- Develop a town-wide recreational master plan
- Re-plan Fowler Field to make better use of the space, including parking, and especially to make better use of harbor frontage and views
- Plan and develop a continuous Riverwalk along the Wepawaug River from the Harbor to the Duck Ponds
- Wherever possible, identify significant vistas and points of connection between different areas of Downtown; protecting those corridors and improving them as landscaped connectors
- Begin conceptual planning of a town-wide system of trails, bike paths, and open space corridors originating in the Downtown area and anchored by the Riverwalk

DOWNTOWN DESIGN GUIDELINES

Downtown Milford is currently composed of a lively mix of architectural styles and types, buildings from different periods, including several of real architectural distinction, and an interweaving of landscape elements and public spaces that create an overall environment of exceptional quality and truly friendly scale and character. The Downtown area is relatively free of strip encroachment of the sort that erodes the pedestrian scale fabric of streets with too much surface parking, too many curb cuts, and inappropriate suburban-style buildings and signage. With the exception of a few awkwardly designed and scaled recent buildings (such as 1 New Haven Avenue), most new construction has been more or less compatible with, and supportive of, the overall character of the Downtown. Indeed, with the exception of some poorly designed and/or out-of-scale signage, and some buildings that are badly maintained and have had their architectural character obscured by inappropriate accretions and material treatments, the most serious design issues facing Milford have to do less with the buildings and more with the spaces between those buildings. That is to say, the most dramatic gains may be made by attention to and investment in the sort of improvements to, and investments in, streetscape and public space suggested above.

Nevertheless, there are key buildings that must be identified and protected, sore spots that should, when possible, be attended to, and opportunities that could be exploited. One function of design guidelines in this context is simply to state explicitly the operating principles that most everyone already recognizes, at least at an intuitive level, and to make sure that any new building, or changes to existing buildings, respect those principles, or, if they are departed from, that such a departure is understood and justified in terms of special circumstances that authorize a design of both unique character and exceptional quality.

Another important reason for articulate design guidelines is to support appropriate development by making clear to potential developers and their architects what is expected. The worst situation for all concerned is an onerous, but potentially arbitrary, design review process, in which neither the applicant nor the community is clear about standards or requirements, so that time and money is invested in a climate of uncertainty and therefore potential misunderstanding. If generally agreed upon design guidelines point, explicitly, to both good and bad examples to which everyone has access, then the discussion may begin from a platform of reasonable clarity.

The discussion that follows will distinguish among several distinct areas within the overall Downtown district, and will attempt to identify both general principles and specific examples upon which formal design guidelines might be based. There are however, some general conditions and principles that may be summarized:

Preserve and Enhance Beacons and Anchors

“Beacons” are buildings, monuments, or other design elements – and also natural features - of unique or distinctive character and/or exceptional quality that contribute significantly to the identity of a place and/or mark important or prominent locations within the spatial structure of a district. These warrant special recognition and protection, including designation as local, state or even national landmarks. Not only should the beacons themselves be carefully preserved, but also their settings should be protected and, whenever possible, enhanced, and views of them should be protected and incorporated into planning strategies. Examples of important beacons in Downtown Milford include the First Church of Christ Congregational, the City Hall, the Duck Pond, the Taylor Library, the old Depot, the Memorial Bridge, the waterfall and new pedestrian bridge, and the Simon Lake submarine. Examples of minor beacons might include the old Masonic Lodge at the corner of North Broad and Depot, with its special corner treatment, or the turret of the old Mama Bear’s building in relation to the Memorial Bridge. Examples of places where beacons might be needed include the railroad trestles as entrances to the Downtown, the walkway leading from Harbor Walk through the parking lot to the new passage through the new Schooner Wharf project and down to Milford Landing, as well as the harbor itself, which has no distinctive vertical beacon to announce its presence from a distance. Just as existing beacons should be protected, the potential sites for new beacons should be seen as opportunities for exceptional design efforts that might not necessarily follow the normal design guidelines. In addition to their role as markers of place, the representational function of beacons makes them ideal candidates for incorporation as images into distinctive signage and public art.

“Anchors” are, like the anchor stores of a mall, public and private activities that function as “destinations” and thereby generate traffic – especially pedestrian traffic – that supports other activities. Some institutions, like the City Hall, are both beacons and anchors for the Downtown, but other anchors, both public and private, such as the Library or the Stonebridge restaurant, are not currently as well connected to the pedestrian structure of the Downtown as they should be, given their function. (This accounts for the fact that they generate more than their share of vehicular trips – even locally within the Downtown area.) On the other hand, the western end of the Green suffers from a relative lack of both beacons and anchors, although the potential of the Hospital as a regional anchor is considerable.

Minimize curb cuts and relegate parking areas, delivery and drive-throughs to the rear of buildings

This is an obvious general condition that has more urgency for many other towns than it does for Downtown Milford, where there has been, as has been noted, relatively little “strip encroachment.” But automobile oriented, strip-style development must be guarded against, and corrected, or at least mitigated where it has already occurred, as with the parking lot at the east corner of North Broad and Depot, the office building at the west

end of the Green, and the commercial building on the west side of River Street just north of the trestle.

In addition, as the Downtown district is increasingly seen to extend east on New Haven Avenue and west on Bridgeport Avenue, care should be taken to also extend the architectural character and pedestrian environment of the core Downtown area, guarding against excessive curb-cuts, strip-style development and especially strip-style signage.

As a general rule, curb cuts rarely need to be more than 14 feet wide for commercial uses and no more than 12 feet for residential uses. When interrupted by a curb cut, the continuity of the sidewalk surface material should be maintained, and the material of the driveway interrupted.

Spaces between buildings and service alleys not generally used by the public should be screened or gated.

Design elements that are part of individual buildings should be compatible with the dominant architectural character and themes of the particular building (and, where appropriate, its neighbors); streetscape elements should be consistent with streetscape treatment proposed for the entire Downtown area, or sub-districts thereof

A building need not have exactly the same awning or signs as the buildings next door, although those elements should occur in the same general zone of the building façade and at the same scale. However, streetscape elements such as sidewalk paving, benches, trash receptacles, street and sidewalk lighting, and trees and other plantings should not be designed on a building-by-building basis, but rather should contribute to an overall program.

Wherever possible, streets in the downtown area should be lined with trees and other appropriate plantings. Street trees should have canopies high enough so as not to block ground floor views or restrict pedestrian or vehicular visibility.

New additions to older Downtown buildings follow the guidelines set forth in National Park Service “Preservation Brief 14”:

- *Preserve significant historic materials and features.* Avoid constructing the addition on the primary or other character-defining façade, (like a cross-street side). Secondly, minimize loss of historic material on exterior walls. Building finishes used for the addition should be similar in material, quality, color and dimension to those used on existing structures.
- *Preserve the character of the building.* The scale (size and proportion) of the addition should be compatible with the original building. An additional story on

an existing building with a characteristic roofline can be set well back from the roof edge to ensure that the building's profile is not radically changed.

- *Make a visual distinction between old and new.* Avoid a phony historical look. Additions should be sympathetic to the base building, yet be a product of its own time. Have shared elements create a sense of visual relatedness. If the building is an important one in the community, consider a visual separation between the addition and the original building, as this would preserve the identity of the historic building.

All additions and renovations of Downtown buildings should comply with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation:

1. Every reasonable effort shall be made to provide a compatible use for a property which requires minimal alteration of the building, structure, or site and its environment, or to use a property for its originally intended purpose.
2. The distinguishing original qualities or character of a building, structure, or site and its environment shall not be destroyed. The removal or alteration of any historic material or distinctive architectural features should be avoided when possible.
3. All buildings, structures, and sites shall be recognized as products of their own time. Alterations that have no historical basis and which seek to create an earlier appearance shall be discouraged.
4. Changes which may have taken place in the course of time are evidence of the history and development of a building, structure, or site and its environment. These changes may have acquired significance in their own right, and this significance shall be recognized and respected.
5. Distinctive stylistic features or examples of skilled craftsmanship which characterize a building, structure, or site shall be treated with sensitivity.
6. Deteriorated architectural features shall be repaired rather than replaced, wherever possible. In the event that replacement is necessary, the new material should match the material being replaced in composition, design, color, texture, and other visual qualities. Repair or replacement of missing architectural features should be based on accurate duplications of features, substantiated by historic, physical, or pictorial evidence rather than on conjectural designs or the availability of different architectural elements from other buildings or structures.
7. The surface cleaning of structures shall be undertaken with the gentlest means possible. Sandblasting and other cleaning methods that will damage the historic building materials shall not be undertaken.
8. Every reasonable effort shall be made to protect and preserve archaeological resources affected by, or adjacent to any project.
9. Contemporary design for alterations and additions to existing properties shall not be discouraged when such alterations and additions do not destroy significant historical, architectural, or cultural material, and character of the property, neighborhood or environment.

10. Wherever possible, new additions and alterations to structures shall be done in a manner that if such additions or alterations were to be removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the structure would be unimpaired.

In the design of new buildings and additions to, or renovations of, existing buildings the following criteria should be considered:

Height – Building height in Downtown Milford is variable by district as noted below, so that the general guideline should recommend heights within the range of heights found on the immediate block. However, in general, buildings should be at least two stories in height, or, if they are single story, should have a roof treatment, or even a false front, that appears to extend the height of the building to roughly two stories. A rough figure for minimum eave or cornice height might be on the order of 15 feet, but always determined with reference to adjacent structures. Corners present special opportunities, as do beacon sites as noted above. At major intersections, corner buildings should relate as much to each other as to the other buildings on their immediate blocks.

Width – The differentiated character of various parts of the Downtown area is profoundly influenced by the original platting of the site. The rhythms created by lot size should be respected by new development, although there may be both functional and aesthetic reasons supporting wider or narrower structures in specific locations. It is, nevertheless, possible to use bay and window dimensions and rhythms to re-establish some degree of continuity with adjacent buildings.

Setback – As with height and width, there is some variation in setbacks from street to street in the Downtown area. There are, furthermore, occasional, and not always unpleasant, exceptions within districts. As long as variations are related to public use, such as sidewalk vending or food service, and not to mere provision of parking, they may be considered. Although if buildings are set back, the sidewalk edge should always be delineated, with appropriate planting, fences or low walls. The safest rule of thumb is, however, consistency with other buildings on the block – unless those buildings are already examples of negative impact. When in doubt, building to the sidewalk in downtown commercial areas is generally the best practice.

In any case, all buildings facing the street should have a clearly defined front façade parallel to the street, with principal entrances facing the street. The relationships between adjacent buildings, with the possible exception of corner buildings or other beacons, should be parallel or perpendicular.

The intention of this and the previous criteria being to encourage the use of buildings and their facades to define and enclose the public space of the street.

Proportion of Openings - Again, there is considerable variation between districts in this regard, but in general, buildings should respect their neighbors with regard to window size, type and orientation, as well as in the relationship of window area to wall. Ground floor commercial uses will certainly have a higher percentage of glazing than upper floor

office and residential, although even large areas of display window should be appropriately subdivided to relate to the rest of the particular building and to other buildings in the immediate block. No building facing the street should, in fact, have large areas of uninterrupted blank wall, and there should be frequent entrances facing the street and clearly identified.

Horizontal Rhythms – A great deal of the overall character of a continuous street elevation comes less from consistency of style, and more from continuity of elements such as cornice lines, implicit floor levels, bands between storefronts and upper stories that provides a zone for signage, canopies or awnings, or, in the case of residential structures, porches or verandas. These patterns should be attended to, not only in new buildings, but particularly in façade renovations, where care should be taken to restore, add, or at least not remove, elements that create these patterns.

Roof Form – Roof forms provide a significant differentiated indicator of building type, as between commercial and residential structures. Even where residential buildings have been converted to commercial or office use, these differentiations should be respected and maintained. Nor should commercial structures be dressed up with applied roof forms to look like or allude to residential forms such as gables. Most of the older commercial structures are generally finished at the tops of their front facades by projecting false fronts with cornices which mask the actual roof. Overhanging roofs on commercial structures are generally out of place in older town center, and more recent renditions of the mansard roof have proven particularly problematic on both commercial and residential structures. Again, corner or beacon sites may warrant exceptional roof features.

Materials – The predominant exterior building materials of Downtown Milford are wood, brick and stone, applied in ways that are generally characteristic of residential, commercial and institutional architecture of New England. Concrete and concrete block are less in evidence, at least in the public facades of Downtown buildings, and metal siding and stucco are used sparingly in limited applications. This pattern of use provides a very general framework for new construction, which should certainly avoid synthetic materials, such as dryvit and vinyl siding, and exhibit a level of detailing and quality of construction compatible with the standard of building in the Downtown area. Overall quality of material and construction is more important than any specific style, or literal matching of material treatment, although attention to general patterns of application – such as horizontal application of wood siding rather than diagonal – is also important.

Color – Used judiciously, color can be an important source of interest and variety in buildings. It would not, for example, be desirable for most of Downtown Milford's buildings to be of a single color, or even a narrowly consistent palette. On the other hand, the best way to use unusual, bright, or contrasting colors is in the details of a building. Colors should coordinate with, not necessarily match, other colors on the block. Color may also be applied with an awareness of orientation, since colors on south and west facades appear warmer than those on north and east facades. Different periods and styles of architecture are associated with different color schemes. For example,

Greek Revival architecture of the early nineteenth century is usually predominantly white with contrasting dark trim, while late nineteenth century Victorian buildings may have a livelier color scheme.

Signage – Signs are a necessary part of any business district. They provide an image and identity for businesses. Each sign plays a substantial role in creating the overall visual character of a business district and can greatly enhance or detract from that character. Common problems with signs in many commercial areas are excessive size and inappropriate placement on buildings, producing a cluttered and confusing environment. The shape and graphic style of signs should relate to the architectural lines of a particular building. The most appropriate areas are those on a façade which have continuous flat surfaces devoid of architectural detail. Signs should appear as an integral part of the building instead of as tacked-on afterthoughts. The dimension of the “signable area” should be the determinant of sign size, so that signs will appear to fit the building. The horizontal band between the storefront and the upper stories is the most appropriate zone for signs on most traditional commercial buildings, and signs above the first level of a building should be very strictly regulated since they are generally inappropriate.

Signs should be concise, functioning to identify a business rather than advertise specific products or brands. A good window display tells more about the available products than any number of signs, and a well-maintained building is the best testament to the quality of goods and services offered. Trademark buildings, which identify an owner or occupant by means of a trademarked architectural style or treatment should be discouraged. Franchise businesses should subordinate their trademark architecture and signage to the overall character of Downtown Milford.

Signs should always be well-crafted and maintained, professionally made and securely and appropriately attached. Variety is encouraged, but certain types and conditions should be avoided:

- Large projecting signs that obscure buildings facades and interrupt the visual continuity and harmony of the street should be discouraged, although smaller, distinctive hanging signs at ground floor level can be attractive and effective.
- Large flashing, illuminated signs such as hollow, plastic box signs should be avoided.
- Lighted signs do identify businesses at night and encourage evening shopping, but lights should be used judiciously and tastefully. Small neon or otherwise lit window signs are acceptable and perfectly appropriate for certain businesses, such as restaurants and bars.
- Roof signs should be avoided. As a rule of thumb, signs should not be placed above the sills of the second floor windows. This rule puts signs at a reasonable height above the sidewalk for pedestrian viewing.
- Buildings set back from the street in certain areas of the Downtown may have free standing, as opposed to wall-mounted, signs, but these should be discretely placed and scaled, so as not to become strip-style signage, which is not appropriate in the downtown area.

These guidelines are not meant to stifle creative signage, but rather to organize information in a location and format that is appropriate and useful. Cooperation among businesses in using signs which do not compete with each other or detract from the areas architectural character will ultimately attract more customers and pedestrians to the Downtown than a cacophony of competing signs.

Storefronts – Storefronts are, as already noted, a special form of signage and advertising, and will thus change as businesses change, and even change seasonally or as businesses modernize. This change should not be allowed to compromise the underlying architectural character of existing buildings. Storefronts should fit within the original area allotted to them, and not project or extend beyond it. Windows should be appropriately treated, as noted above, with well-tended, attractive displays that are not obscured by excessive signage. Entries should be clearly identified and accessible. Projecting elements, such as bay windows, hanging signs, wall-mounted lighting, porches, canopies and awnings, should be in keeping with the architectural character of individual buildings, as well as respecting the continuity of the immediate block elevation. Awnings, in particular, may provide a lively, attractive, and economical addition to a commercial façade, and place for signage. They may be brightly colored, with contrasting lettering, although darker colors such as dark green, crimson, and navy blue show dirt and wear less than lighter colors. Gaudy or loudly patterned awnings are generally discouraged. Awnings should be professionally manufactured and mounted, and should have a minimum clearance of 7’6” between the awning frame and the sidewalk.

It is generally expected that the ground floors of buildings within the core Downtown area, with the exception of some institutional buildings, will be treated as storefronts, even when the uses are offices or restaurants. Retail activity and a retail character should, however, predominate. Office uses are best located along frontages perpendicular to main streets, or at upper stories above stores. Streets such as North Broad and Cherry where offices occupy older residential structures are an exception to this general rule.

Those criteria should be applied differentially to the distinct districts that comprise Downtown Milford:

South Broad Street

This is the most dense and consistently traditional commercial row in Downtown Milford, with a high volume of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and high level of visibility. Buildings should be built to the sidewalk and generally abut each other with party walls. Interstitial spaces between buildings that are accessible to the public should be used to provide additional commercial frontage, and are especially appropriate for offices. Building heights will be at least two stories. Signage will generally be flush mounted or hanging, at first floor level.

The most urgent design issue for South Broad Street, in addition to the proposed streetscape program, is an aggressive program of façade improvements, aimed at restoring the original architectural character of the commercial buildings, by stripping away inappropriate material veneers, restoring details, regulating and improving signage, and encouraging owners and tenants to develop attractive window displays.

Finally, the spaces between buildings that serve as passages to additional commercial frontage along the sides and rears of buildings, as well as to Downtown’s most important reservoir of parking, must be upgraded and maintained – as well as extended, as suggested above, to connect through that parking, ultimately to Milford Landing and the Harbor beyond. These are critical spaces to both the appearance and proper functioning of the Downtown

North Broad Street

The special character of North Broad Street comes from its mix of commercial, institutional and older residential structures. In contrast to South Broad Street, some buildings, especially if they are residential in scale and character, may be appropriately set back from the street. In this case, front yards should be treated and landscaped as if they were residential front yards in the center of a town, with low wood fences at the sidewalk line, painted to match the architecture of the building, and very discrete signage at the scale of the first floor or front porch of the structure. By no means should front yards be used for parking or drive-ins.

The “Backs”

The rear of commercial buildings along South Broad Street facing the parking areas represents a special condition and opportunity. Many businesses have second public entrances, as well as service access on this side, and other business front exclusively in this direction. As mentioned above, the parking in this area is heavily used and should be treated as a special kind of public space, with lighting, landscaping and sidewalks that make it attractive to pedestrians. By the same token, the “backs” of South Broad Street buildings should be treated as special kind of front, with signage and well- marked entrances. Service areas and trash receptacles, where absolutely necessary, should be screened with appropriate walls – not with chain-link fence – and storage of materials and goods should also be screened. Areas for pedestrian use should be clearly distinguished from parking areas and overall patterns of pedestrian and vehicular circulation clarified. This parking area must be centrally managed, and lots under different ownership should be continuously accessible and collaborate in establishing parking guidelines as well as design standards.

River Street

River Street leading to the Government Center is, for the most part, an attractive and lively mix of commercial, office and institutional uses, interrupted by the unfortunate

railroad underpass and some excessive curb cuts and parking areas north and south of the underpass. Buildings along River Street should generally be treated as part of the commercial core and built to the sidewalk line with two story retail frontages. There are special opportunities associated with the buildings along the east side of River Street, where rear connections to the proposed Riverwalk may create locations for new businesses and special treatment and landscaping.

Factory Lane

Factory Lane might be considered, along with the entire Broad Street/River Street/Factory Lane/New Haven Avenue intersection, Downtown Milford's weakest link. This is Downtown's major connection to the Harbor, and with the development of Milford Landing and Schooner Wharf, an increasingly lively area. The streetscape must be dramatically improved and sidewalks must predominate over curb cuts, and the sides of buildings must be made to feel more like fronts, ideally with addition of new openings towards Factory Lane, but at least with cosmetic treatment and maintenance. The redevelopment of the building at the corner of Factory Lane and South Broad Street, which is a critical action item for Downtown in general, could easily include new street-level and upper-level openings along Factory Lane. In connection with limiting curb cuts, the existing area of front yard parking should be relocated and the area paved and landscaped for pedestrians.

Downtown Design and Development District

For these guidelines and suggestions to be effective over time, they must be linked to new administrative and regulatory structures. We are proposing the creation of a special "Downtown Design and Development District" (DDDD) as an overlay zone, to provide Planning and Zoning, or some appropriately constituted subset thereof with delegated responsibility, with the authority to oversee, advise and regulate new development, renovation and general improvements in the Downtown area, in accordance with this plan and the new Plan of Conservation and Development. This District would include the area identified as Downtown Milford in this report and in the Plan of Conservation and Development. Within this District, appropriate infill and mixed-use development would be encouraged, with some uses, such as restaurants with outdoor dining, regulated by special permit. All projects would, however, be subject to design review as part of Site Plan Review requirements.

For this process to be effective, it is essential that all submissions for review and approval by Planning and Zoning must include thorough and clearly represented documentation, not only of plans, but also of elevations, building massing, details and materials (including material samples), color, landscape and streetscape treatment, and relationships to adjacent structures and spaces. For large and/or complex projects, a model should be provided, along with appropriate renderings and perspectives.

Design guidelines that emphasize relationships between buildings, and between buildings, open spaces and vistas are quite appropriate for Downtown Milford, where the

real strength and character of the place derives as much from those relationships as from the architectural character of individual buildings. For this reason, we encourage the creation of a special district with the twin goals of good design and appropriate development, rather than the largely protectionist device of a historic district, which seems less useful for what should be a lively and varied downtown commercial area.

The ultimate success of these measures is, however, as much a function of effective management and ongoing maintenance as it is of good planning and design. Therefore we propose that the DDDD include plans for an independent special services district (SSD) to be constituted by local merchants and property owners in collaboration with the City of Milford. Along with a new Downtown Parking and Traffic Authority, the DDDD and a Downtown special services district would provide the administrative apparatus for the ongoing realization and sustainability of the goals of this plan. The start-up of these new structures might well be galvanized by participation in the Connecticut Main Street Program, which helps towns develop effective marketing and management plans for their town and neighborhood centers. The national impact of this sort of program and the success of well-managed main streets has been highlighted in many recent reports and publications.

Key Recommendations:

- Implement a special Downtown Design and Development District as a zoning overlay with design guidelines and signage standards, and a special services district, including a publicly and privately financed manager and management team to oversee Downtown maintenance, security, and landscaping
- Develop specific guidelines for distinctive areas such as North and South Broad Street, where the South would, for example, encourage lively commercial signage mounted on buildings, while the North would treat commercial frontages more like front yards, with discrete, free-standing signage
- Undertake infill projects in the Daniel Street block and the vacant South Broad Street site as demonstrations of the guidelines proposed

ACTION PLAN

Short-Term Projects (1-2 years)

- South Broad Street Streetscape and Facade Improvements*
- Factory Lane Streetscape
- Schooner Wharf Development*
- South Broad Street Parking Lot and Harbor Walk Extension
- Comprehensive Signage Program
- Downtown Design and Development District Guidelines and Management Plan

Mid-Term Projects (3-5 years)

- New Haven Avenue Site Development*
- Daniel Street Block Redevelopment
- Fowler Field Master Plan
- RR Overpass Improvement
- River St.-New Haven Ave. Intersection Improvement
- New Crosswalks to Green

Long-Term Projects (5-10 years)

- Wepawaug River Walk
- Milford Greenway Plan
- Western Green Redevelopment
- Downtown Parking Structure(s)

*Indicates projects in planning stages or underway