

# **Setting the Stage for Thompsonville's Revitalization**

**Prepared For:  
The Town of Enfield, Connecticut**

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## Introduction

This “white paper” discusses revitalization issues, opportunities, and recommendations for the Thompsonville neighborhood of Enfield, Connecticut. (See Map 1 for neighborhood boundaries.) The paper was prepared by Michael Berne and John Shapiro of Abeles Phillips Preiss & Shapiro (APPS), a planning and real estate consultancy based in New York City with an extensive economic development portfolio in Connecticut. The methodology involved:

- Review of existing documents
- Two site visits
- A full day of interviews and workshops in Thompsonville
- A half-day follow-up work session with Enfield officials

The existing documents that were reviewed include the following (with parenthetical indication as to how they are referred to in the remainder of this paper):

- Bigelow Commons promotion materials
- The Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG), Regional Transit Strategy, February 2001
- Halcyon Real Estate Advisors/Ernst & Young, Thompsonville Revitalization Strategy, prepared for the Town of Enfield and the Thompsonville Revitalization Strategy Committee, March 1992. (The Halcyon/Ernst & Young report)
- Harral-Michalowski Associates, Inc., Enfield Plan of Conservation & Development Update: Memorandum 8 (Thompsonville Revitalization Strategy Update), prepared for the Enfield Planning & Zoning Commission, February 1998. (The Plan of Conservation & Development Update)
- Journal Inquirer, selected articles.
- Selected maps, historic photos, and lithographs, etc.
- Thompsonville Revitalization Strategy Advisory Committee, “Thompsonville Business Survey”, 1994. (1994 merchant survey)
- Town of Enfield, Zoning Ordinance, revised as of June, 1995
- United States Census Bureau, 1990 Census for Tract 4806.

The participants in the workshops and interviews were as follows:

- Roger Alsbaugh, Assistant Town Planner
- Barry Berger, Police Department
- Dave Cheney, merchant
- Mark Dionne, residential developer
- Gerald Fitzsimmons, neighborhood activist
- Jose Giner, Director of Planning
- Mary Lavorgna, merchant
- Patrick Macari, business owner
- Ron Marcotte, Chief of Police
- Rich Metcalf, rehabilitation specialist
- Judy Mottolese, Community Policing Steering Committee

- Scott Shanley, Town Manager
- William Squires, industrial property owner
- Mary Lou Strom, Mayor
- Dan Vindigni, Assistant Town Manager
- Raymond L. Warren, Director of Economic Development
- Laura Watson, Community Development
- John Shapiro, APPS, economic/neighborhood development specialist
- Mike Berne, APPS, retail specialist

The paper is organized as follows:

- Statement of the overall challenge
- Roster of key issues
- Roster of key opportunities
- Recommendations

The recommendations are divided into four groups as follow:

- Main Street revitalization
- Housing reinvestment
- Image Enhancements
- Capacity building

The overall conclusion is that a comprehensive approach to revitalization in Thompsonville can meet with success. The historic business district can be upgraded as a small but handsome “Main Street” attraction, with more prosperous stores and eateries. Housing investment can be spurred in the southern portion of Thompsonville and near the proposed commuter train station. Modest landscape improvements and regulatory controls can ratchet up the image of the community, in general. However, success is contingent on both Town funding and local capacity building, including the formation of a community development corporation.

## **The Challenge**

Once anchored by the bustling Bigelow-Sanford Carpet factory complex, Thompsonville was a thriving New England mill town. Today, the neighborhood’s original economic underpinning has become obsolete; the population has limited buying power; many landlords and homeowners are unable or unwilling to maintain their properties; and the historic business district has been relegated to virtual irrelevance by the automobile. Once a riverfront hub of Enfield, Thompsonville is isolate on the edge of a town that is now oriented to its highways and malls.

While the challenges are daunting, the stakes are higher than some might posit. The Thompsonville neighborhood is very important to the Town of Enfield, for a number of reasons:

- Enfield has been transformed from an agricultural community into a conventional commuter suburb. The historic center of Thompsonville offers hope of retaining

community focal points. Suburban communities across the country are now expending great efforts to create contrived “traditional” town center developments, which fail to offer the eclectic charm experienced in older organic creations such as Thompsonville.

- The low median household incomes and low property values in the Thompsonville area are a drag on the averages for the town as a whole, with implications for the town’s overall tax base and image.
- The Town has an interest in safeguarding past, current, and committed investments in the boat launch, gateway, dredging of the pond, substantial investment in the Lamagna Center, and the recently improved VFW park, in addition to the Town Hall facility at the edge of Thompsonville.
- The proposed Enfield station on the proposed commuter rail service in the New Haven-to-Springfield corridor would be located on the Thompsonville riverfront. While this plan is a long way from implementation, both its chances of its realization as well as the opportunities that would be created there from, would be maximized by Town investment in the revitalization of the surrounding neighborhood.
- Thompsonville’s blight will not always be easy to contain. The neighborhood’s struggles already show on U.S. Route 5 (Enfield Street) in the numerous vacancies and the low-image Family Dollar store in the Enfield Plaza strip mall opposite Parker Road. The most rundown area in the Thompsonville neighborhood, just to the north of Main Street, could spread in influence to the more stable precincts.

Most important, approximately 4,600 people live in Thompsonville. One out of ten Enfield residents live in the neighborhood; and out of four residents lives within a one mile radius of its historic center. Furthermore, the town grew out from the neighborhood. Such population base and historic importance cannot be easily ignored. The question, therefore, is not whether any interventions are justified, but which ones will be most productive.

## **Issues**

Revitalizing Thompsonville requires an honest appraisal of the issues facing the community. These include the following:

- The primary trade area (one square mile surrounding the center of Thompsonville, bordered by I-91 to the east, Route 190 to the south, the Connecticut River to the west and Parker Street to the north) consists largely of low income of this population of roughly 4,600 was approximately \$27,000, and only 30 percent of the neighborhood’s units were owner-occupied.
- The secondary trade area (one mile to the north and south of the primary trade area, bordered by I-91 to the east, Bridge Lane to the south, the Connecticut River to the west, and the State line to the north) is wealthier and more stable. Median household income of the population of roughly 5,500 was approximately \$45,00, and 70 percent of the housing units were owner-occupied. The tertiary trade area,

consisting of the roughly 37,700 residents in the rest of the Town of Enfield, boasts an even higher median household income of \$52,000 and an owner-occupancy rate of 80 percent.

The upshot is that primary trade area residents do not represent an income and ownership profile that is likely to impress prospective retailers. Secondary and tertiary trade area residents, which have more money and are a more reliable customer base, are sufficiently far away from the Thompsonville business district to have to drive a car to get there, and once in a car, they are more likely to shop in more automobile-friendly settings elsewhere.

- These more automobile-friendly settings absorb most of the existing and prospective demand generated by trade area residents. They include a super-regional shopping area which has developed immediately to the east of I-91, so as to capitalize on excellent interstate access and Enfield's location halfway between Hartford and Springfield. The 2.5 to 3.0 million square feet of retail space includes the 1.5 million square foot Westfield Shoppingtown (known locally as Enfield Square), anchored by Filene's, Sears, and a soon-to-open Target and oriented to mid-market shoppers, as well as other modern automobile-oriented shopping formats such as strip centers and freestanding boxes.
- The Route 5 (Enfield Street) business corridor is also a more appealing location for most types of businesses, given its greater visibility to passby motorists, less congested driving conditions, and ample on-site parking. With an average daily traffic count of 10,000 to 14,000 vehicles (depending on location), twice to three times as many people pass through this business corridor as live in Thompsonville. It is the preferred location for retailing, according to both realtors and the merchants surveyed in 1994.

Nonetheless, the Route 5 corridor experienced declining traffic volumes every year between 1992 and 1996, as I-91 emerged as the preferred route for even intra-Enfield trips. Traffic counts are down 10 percent in the commercial portion of Route 5 between Main/Elm Streets and Brainard Road. This is a contributor to increases in vacancy and disinvestment.

- The Thompsonville business district offers limited parking, which limits the tenant mix to purveyors of the convenience goods and services desired by the nearby walk-in population, or destination niche retailers which customers go out of their way for. Compounding its inconvenience to motorists, public transportation is limited, according to local residents; and hilly terrain and concerns regarding crime impede pedestrian access. These problems were apparent in the 1994 merchants survey. When asked "what entices you to choose Thompsonville as a place in which to locate your business," only a handful of the 38 respondents gave answers that had to do with convenience and location, with most answers citing accidents of fate.

- The residential areas, particularly to the north of Main Street/North Main Street, suffer from high commercial vacancy rates and low commercial rents. Landlords suggest a number of explanations: (1) low demand for commercial space, with residential uses commanding higher rents even for ground floor space in some cases (rental statistics are cited later); (2) the perception that most businesses are likely to fail and are not worth the risk; (3) owners must pay in such a weak real estate market for taxes, maintenance, utilities, and insurance (as opposed to triple net leases, where the tenants pay), and insurance costs are exceedingly high; (4) the conversion from a retail use to another retail use involves a costly bump up in building code requirements.

Much of the problem has to do with the reality that primary trade area can only support a limited amount of commercial activity. In Thompsonville, supply of retail space exceeds demand, as purchasing power in the primary trade area is much less than it was when the neighborhood was a booming mill town. With such choice of space, merchants would rather locate to the south of the business district, where the housing stock is probably more expensive, explaining the numerous empty spaces in the residential area to the north of the business district. The neighborhood supply/demand imbalance is expected to continue into the future, as Thompsonville is largely built out and so new residential development is likely.

- Turning to housing, the low incomes and low home-ownership figures cited above impair housing investment. An increasing number of non-whites (i.e., African Americans, Mexicans, and Asians) add new vitality to the neighborhood, but also has a negative impact on public perceptions in this suburban, mostly white town.
- Neighborhoods like Thompsonville benefit from the location of civic buildings, institutions, and programs. They bring people and disposable income. The trend to remove uses like the post office, the senior center and government offices therefore has a negative impact on neighborhood community development. Policymakers need to be more conscious of the impact of such relocation decisions, and act to reverse them.
- The housing stock largely hails from the pre-war era, with many units predating the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The typical lot is tiny, at 50x100 (5,000 sq. ft.) to 100x150 (15,000 sq. ft.). In a traditional suburban setting, these characteristics are a competitive disadvantage, unless the historic aspects of the unit are emphasized in the marketing.
- Nor is there a price-driven reason for the typical Enfield resident to seek housing in the Thompsonville neighborhood. While the following statistics cannot be directly compared, they do indicate, on an order of magnitude basis, that Enfield housing is already competitively priced in the region. The median household income in Enfield was \$52,000 in 1995, compared to a median residential sales

price of \$115,000 in 1996, for a ratio of \$1 to \$2.2. The normative ratio is \$1 to \$2.5.

- Quality of life issues impair housing investment, too. Throughout the neighborhood, there are complaints regarding crime, graffiti, abandonment, etc. Even the better areas are under stress. For example, in Route 5's residential portion south of Elm/North Main Street, residents complain about the impact of the corridor's role as a major traffic route (i.e., volumes, noise, and safety concerns) on its historic character.
- The residential neighborhoods to the north and south of Thompsonville business district are very different. To the south of High Street, the housing stock is more unique, eclectic, and impressive. To the north of Main Street and North Main Street, on the other hand, standard worker housing predominates, incomes appear to be lower, and as mentioned above, the overwhelming majority of ground floor commercial units are empty.
- Both residential and commercial rents are too low to support unsubsidized new construction and major rehabilitation. The prevailing commercial rents approximate \$6 to \$10 per square foot per year (psf/yr) at the better locations, whereas break-even rents for new construction are generally placed at about \$15 psf/yr. The prevailing residential rents are \$8 psf/yr, and break-even rents for new housing construction are generally placed at about \$12 psf/yr.

Perhaps more importantly, there is a basic social and economic disconnect between the town and its original center in Thompsonville. While the neighborhood's boosters have often suggested wholesale neighborhood transformation, the town's skeptics have often posited that nothing can be done to upgrade the neighborhood given its mix of poverty and minorities. Present levels of community development funding are therefore insufficient to conduct the scale of housing rehabilitation, renewal, or other types of development necessary to make significant progress. In addition, Thompsonville has struggled to take full pride in and build upon the considerable incremental improvements and latent assets of the neighborhood.

## **Opportunities**

Momentum has been created by the advances of the last two decades. The derelict Bigelow Carpet Mill is now a large housing complex tenanted mainly by a younger population with higher incomes than are characteristic of the balance of the area. Thompsonville's zoning has been modified to reflect the recommendations of the 1992 plan. Landscaping and signage have been improved at the Town Hall/North Main Street gateway into Thompsonville. A new boat launch has been built. Giorgio's, an infamous bar known for drugs and fights, has been closed. The Strand Theatre no longer shows X-rated or 99-cent movies.

As the billboards for Boston's "Big Dig" say, "Rome was not built in a day." It took decades for Thompsonville to fall into despair, and it will take decades to revitalize the neighborhood. But Thompsonville can continue to move in a positive direction by taking advantage of the following opportunities:

- The Thompsonville neighborhood can take advantage of the excellent regional accessibility afforded by its proximity to the I-91 entrance/exit at Elm Street, as well as the entrances/exits at Route 5 and Pearl Street to Route 190, which serves as one of the only three crossing points over the Connecticut River between Hartford and Springfield. A possible commuter rail station stop would provide added reason for people to travel into the neighborhood.
- Thompsonville can also benefit from the visibility it gets from its more popular retailers and uses. The neighborhood boasts a number of very successful local businesses such as: Diana's Bakery, Geery's Fine Arts, Sylvia's Restaurant, The Country Store, Carl's Appliance, Gladys's Tailor Shop, and Ruggiero's Electric—that cater to a clientele beyond the immediate area and provide the business district with exposure to larger markets. Also, the Angelo Lamagna Community Center draws from the entire town, and is heavily used throughout the week.
- Thompsonville also gains stability and public attention from the many institutions based in the historic mixed-use area. In addition to the Lamagna Center, these include several churches, the soon-to-be-relocated Thompsonville Senior Center, Thompsonville Fire Station, the Pearl Street Library, the T. Alcorn Elementary School, and especially the Enfield Town Hall.
- The success of the Bigelow Commons apartment complex proves that Thompsonville can attract more affluent households, provided that an affordably priced and attractive housing product can be offered. Bigelow Commons' emphasis on security, historic character, and amenities point to the ingredients of a competitive housing product in Thompsonville. According to industry rules of thumb, the roughly 1,000 Bigelow Commons residents would be able to support anywhere from 2,000 to 3,000 square feet of retail space, and/or would bolster market support for 10 to 15 stores.
- The area may yet benefit from the 1990's revolution in the way that developers, retailers, and lenders look at urban markets. Potential profitability is now seen not only in a high median household income, but also in a high "density of demand." That is, the relatively low spending power of individual households can, for many retailers, be compensated for by the high number of total households in a compact area. Often enough, there is far more aggregate spending power in poor urban neighborhoods than in affluent suburban ones.
- From a real estate perspective, there are a number of well-located Town-owned and underutilized sites in the study area that could play a role in the revitalization effort. The Town owns the parking lot at the intersection of Pearl Street and

Asnuntuck Street, and the vacant lot at the intersection of Pearl Street, Main Street, and North Main Street. The Route 5 as well as the Thompsonville business districts offer low rents, and therefore are favorable settings for start-up businesses.

- Thompsonville has a historic character worthy of preservation and support. While most home buyers seem to prefer conventional houses on amply sized lots along subdivision cul-de-sacs, there is growing appreciation of small historic houses on small lots in traditional neighborhood setting. Such interest is not just a matter of taste, but also lifestyle, spurred by the more complex families of today: empty nesters, single parents, and dual-income couples with no kids.
- Thompsonville's latent historic assets are also present in its downtown, a pedestrian-oriented business district replete with nineteenth century buildings, a pond/green, churches, and other historic buildings, and in complete contrast to the "Anywhere U.S.A." quality of the large retail concentration on the other side of I-91. Nationally, as shopping in superstores and strip malls has gained favor, there has been a countervailing growth in popularity for districts that offer unique retailing, and the opportunity to socialize and dine as well as shop. Downtown Thompsonville can perhaps fill this niche, albeit on a far smaller scale.
- Thompsonville has over 5,000 linear feet of riverfront. A riverfront park is envisioned for the most accessible area, at the foot of Main Street. Furthermore, the dramatic change in grade extends the benefit of river views into the heart of the neighborhood. Waterfront access and visibility is also a real estate enhancer, that grows in significance in proportion to the disposable income of the residents; simply put, the more affluent will pay quite a bit more for views than lower-income people. Thompsonville's waterfront features can therefore accentuate the impact of any improvement in the neighborhood's appeal to middle-income households.
- For a number of reasons, the prospects for implementation are encouraging. Thompsonville's recent successful community policing effort demonstrates the ability of all of its stakeholders, i.e., residents, businesses, landlords, etc., to work together toward a common goal. The Town of Enfield includes the headquarters of a few large corporations, such as Lego and Casual Corner, and an otherwise major corporate presence on the part of Hallmark, Phoenix Home Life, and Jagenburg Manufacturing Company, which could perhaps be persuaded to contribute financially to Thompsonville's revitalization. The Town's economic development, community development, and planning departments are well-staffed with experienced and able personnel. The Town has just updated its Plan of Conservation and Development, and is now updating its zoning ordinance.

## **Recommended Strategies**

The key to revitalizing Thompsonville is to realize that no one project will suffice. A comprehensive approach is needed.

First, targeted investments can attract more shoppers and diners to Thompsonville's historic business district and newer Route 5 business district. Second, homesteading and historic preservation need to be married to spur housing reinvestment. Third, incremental but targeted landscaping and façade improvements, plus one major project on the riverfront, can vastly improve the entire neighborhood's image. Finally, a community development corporation (CDC) can be formed to carry out and coordinate the neighborhood's revitalization.

These and other related recommendations are elaborated below.

### **Business District Revitalization**

In its 1992 revitalization strategy, Halcyon/Ernst & Young recommended turning Thompsonville into "a place where people come to browse and enjoy." The idea was to create a destination themed shopping district drawing on the neighborhood's "historic ambiance, village scale, waterfront access, and satellite location to regional malls", and consisting mainly of specialty retailers such as antique and craft shops, art galleries, restaurants, etc. A development program was generated to address the unmet demand for 20,000 square feet of retail space identified by Halcyon/Ernst & Young.

Such a vision is unrealistic, at least at the scale and intensity put forward.

- Rents are too low to support new construction, let alone new construction predicated on expensive items such as structured parking.
- The typical Enfield shopper is likely to be more conservative and price conscious, preferring chains and franchises to upscale, hence expensive, shopping formats. (In 1985, the Town's per capita income figure was \$25,400, compared to the State's \$30,300; as fewer than one in five labor work force members had a bachelor's or higher degree;
- Thompsonville's downtown is incapable of achieving the critical mass necessary for such retail themes without draconian investment, urban renewal, etc. well beyond current resources.

Therefore, Thompsonville's best hopes lie in upgrading and supplementing the current mix of stores, rather than pursuing wholesale redevelopment and retreating. This would entail a "main street management" approach to the district's revitalization. The ingredients of this approach involve retail mix, retail and dining attractions, civic and other types of attractions, parking, urban design, and above all else, problem solving.

Focusing first on the retail mix:

- Given the socio-economically and culturally bifurcated nature of the market (i.e., low-income households and affluent young professionals), stores and retail categories with cross-over appeal should be encouraged. A good example of a

- fusion retailer is Caronna's Package Store, which is popular among both lower-income and Bigelow Commons customers. Other possibilities include an Italian specialty food store, a fresh produce store, cards and stationary, and variety stores.
- Ethnic eateries also hold promise. A Mexican restaurant could for instance, appeal to the neighborhood's new immigrants and Bigelow Commons residents. Residents also miss the café, which apparently closed for personal reasons that do not reflect on its business potential. A possible logical location would be the space formerly occupied by Giorgio, which should in any event, given its great visibility and resulting high impact, justify an otherwise excessively costly tenant recruitment effort.
  - Some 25 to 40 percent of Thompsonville households do not own cars and must rely to a large extent on local commercial offerings. These households present a captive market for the following convenience needs and services: variety store (the one on Pearl Street has still not opened), produce market, card/stationary store, hardware store, rent-to-own store, travel agency, check cashing outlet, taqueria, and Chinese take-out.

Not all of these businesses are appropriate for the same locations. For example, a rent-to-own store would probably prefer the sort of larger floor plate, and a travel agency the greater visibility, that could be found on Route 5. On the other hand, the produce market should be next to or near Caronna's, and the card/stationary store next to or near one of the two gift shops. Meanwhile, the check cashing outlet and the Chinese take-out establishment, which do not necessarily communicate the right message about the neighborhood, should be put in locations that are less visible to outsiders yet also convenient to locals who constitute their market. It is most important that appearances be kept in mind so as to avoid losing more affluent customers. For example, the variety store should under no circumstances be called a 99-cent store.

- Comparison retail should be viewed warily. A Thompsonville clothing or a shoe store, for instance, would not stand a chance when it has to compete with the chains at or in the area of Westfield Shoppingtown. However, The Country Store, Geery's Fine Arts, Diana's Bakery, and Sylvia's all have a town-wide if not a regional clientele. They located in Thompsonville for erratic, difficult to copy reasons, but they remain there, all the same. With its low rents and values, Thompsonville can still be a suitable area to incubate start-up businesses, though these can be expected to fail or move out as often as they might succeed and stay.
- Also risky is any business that counts on visibility, convenience to motorists (not pedestrians), or a market population larger than 5,000 people for its success. In all three respects, Route 5 has the edge over Thompsonville's traditional business district.

Further focus on magnet stores and businesses: as mentioned earlier, Thompsonville already boasts a number of stores and businesses that import patrons. Additional prospects are as follows:

- A farmers market should be established on the prominent Town-owned parking lot at Pearl Street and Asnuntuck Street. The farmers' market staged at the Town Hall parking lot during 1992 and 1993 failed presumably due to insufficient local demand. But Bigelow Commons was at that point only in the start-up phase and Bigelow's residents are now frustrated by the necessity to travel out of the neighborhood for the foodstuffs not provided at Caronna's. Staging the farmers' market on Sundays would not only capture the demand generated by Bigelow Commons, but also that resulting from the area's many churches, some of which also have a town- and region-wide draw.
- A flea market has also been suggested for Thompsonville. This use would likely be quite successful, given its appeal across income categories. It too could be staged at the Town-owned parking lot at Pearl and Asnuntuck Streets.
- Efforts should be made to attract one or several destination restaurant(s). Halcyon/Ernst & Young found that over half of the demand for the restaurants in Thompsonville would come from residents of the tertiary market area. Therefore, to succeed in the long run, a Thompsonville restaurant has to be a destination. Logically, such a restaurant should build on the intrinsic assets of Thompsonville; to do otherwise begs the question of why it would locate off of major thoroughfares and away from the mall. Possible locations include the food of Main Street, at the Connecticut River; the Old Casket Factory on River Street; or the fire house at the corner of Main and Pearl Streets. Of these three locations, the first two would be suitable for a destination fish/seafood restaurant (like Chart House); the latter two for a brew pub.

The best site would be the 3.1 acre River Street parcel, the former site of a power plant, which is sufficiently large to also accommodate a waterfront park with parking shared with the prospective commuter rail station. This multi-benefit project would justify the involvement of the State and/or a non-profit land trust, any one of which may bring additional funding to bear. Acquiring site control over this property might necessitate use of the Town's or the State's condemnation powers. Reportedly, the present owner's asking price for the property far exceeds its appraised value. He is also proposing a 30 unit housing development, even though the site is prone to flooding and the underlying zoning only permits something in the area of three units. It should be noted that the feasibility of any project, even a restaurant, would be a function of the environmental conditions of the site.

Focusing next on other types of anchors and magnets: Thompsonville will succeed as a business district only if it is successful as a civic place. The Town Hall and the Lamagna Center already contribute to this character, though both could be augmented in this regard. A community theater would supplement these civic anchors.

- The Town should seriously consider rehabilitating the former Higgins School as part of the Town complex. The school has been underutilized since 1979, and reportedly would cost \$3 to \$5 million to repair. Every

effort should be made to find a new economic use so as to not have Town-owned properties adding to blighting conditions.

- The remaining 38,000 square feet in the Higgins building could be used for additional municipal purposes, perhaps in a series of moves that also frees up other public building for redevelopment. Alternatively or in addition, the building could be used as an incubator facility. Elsewhere, historic school buildings have been reused for community theaters (the Landmark School in Port Washington, Long Island), artist work spaces (P.S. 1 in Queens), and offices (Southampton, Long Island).
- Community leaders have expended tremendous effort in ridding the Strand Theater of pornography, saving the derelict building from demolition, securing State funding for its possible redevelopment, and focusing public support on a theater reuse that would be a boost to the business district's regional image and proposed restaurants. The next step is a dispassionate appraisal of the Strand's potential reuse as a theater, with particular emphasis on its market and operational prospects. Usually, the Achilles' heel of cultural and theater projects is not the capitol costs, which lend themselves to fundraising and ribbon cutting, but the operating deficits resulting from the low revenue generated by the performance venue. We fear that this project suffers from this fatal flaw.
- Contingencies should therefore also be addressed. The Lamagna Center is highly popular and crammed for space. Located next to the Strand Theater, it is possible that the Center could play a role in its neighbor's redevelopment. Options include shared management and maintenance at cost-savings to both; shared HVAC and other building services; expansion space for the Center on the Strand's upper floor(s); or, while something of a let down, reconstruction of the Strand as flex space in which a Lamagna auditorium or gymnasium doubles as a performance space. These options should be considered in the Strand reuse study. In addition, it is advisable to consider a new and improved façade program in this very visible area.

Shifting the discussion to land use, the objective should be to create a compact, walk-able business district at the heart of the community; a place where people can linger as well as shop.

- Retail development should be focused on Pearl Street between High Street and North Main Street/Main Street.
- Pearl Street to the north or south of this small area is weaker, with most spaces either vacant or occupied by marginal businesses. Some planned shrinkage is in order for the retail space to the north with ground floor storefronts converted to residential (in accordance with what the real estate market is currently demanding) or live/work space (in accordance with the unique ability of these spaces to combine visibility to customers with backyards and/or upstairs space). Zoning map or text changes would be needed to implement this recommendation. A program to encourage the tenanting of vacancies in the retail space to the south,

- however, could meet with success. Every effort to assist making these stores more attractive (windows, signs, painting) will help to attract new merchants.
- Alternative uses may also be in order for Route 5. As noted, vehicular counts, hence market support, has decreased in the corridor. It would be appropriate to allow townhouses, nursing homes, etc. as uses within the BL (Business Local) district, which now prohibits most types of residential uses.

Turning next to parking in the Thompsonville business district: The area does and does not have a parking problem. Specific uses, such as the Lamagna Center and Strand Theater, are desperate for parking. Other uses, such as the Country Store and Geery's Fine Arts, appear to be relatively satisfied with the parking that is available.

- The general parking strategy should emphasize turnover of the most on-street parking spaces and the most convenient parking lot spaces so that these are available for residents running errands, and users of Caronna's and Dianna's, two of Thompsonville's strongest businesses. This goal could be accomplished by striping and a two-hour time limit. Longer-term parking should be provided along side streets and in the more remote portions of the parking lots.
- To maximize on-street parking, diagonal parking should be considered along Pearl Street (north of High Street) and on North Main Street in front of the Strand Theater. Bus stops, loading areas, and fire hydrants areas should be consolidated./
- Even if spaces are reserved for particular users, private and public lots should be demarcated with consistent signs, landscaping, etc., so as to reinforce the image that parking is ample in the business district.
- The core area's zoning is progressive but can be tweaked to good purpose. The current TV (Thompsonville Village Center) zoning in this area: (1) allows residential and retail uses; (2) makes demolition or "substantial demotion of the exterior of any structure" contingent on compliance with the objectives of the Thompsonville Revitalization Strategy; (3) requires ground floor retail; (4) prohibits 5,000+ square foot uses to interrupt the pedestrian-oriented shopping street environment; (5) allows bars only by special permit; (6) allows parking as a principal use only by special permit; and (7) requires input from the Thompsonville Revitalization Committee with regard to all discretionary approvals. The TV zoning properly allows shared parking and for on-street parking within 500 feet of the site to count toward parking requirements. However, the TV zoning sets a high standard of four parking spaces per 1,000 square feet for retail, three spaces per 1,000 square feet of office, one space per conventional residential unit, and one-half space per elderly housing unit. The retail standards could be greatly reduced to two or three spaces per 1,000 square feet. Although not realistic in Thompsonville at this stage, some communities provide for payments in lieu of providing parking. Typically, such payments are set at the cost of creating a parking space, e.g., \$5,000 per space for the acquisition and construction of atgrade parking.

Turning to urban design: (Most streetscape and façade improvements are discussed later under Image Enhancements)

- The Town Hall complex is at the eastern edge of the Thompsonville district. As discussed later under image enhancements, improvements to the Freshwater Pond and Brook parallel to North Main Street and between Pearl Street and Route 5 would enhance the connection between Town Hall and Thompsonville. This project is currently funded with permits pending.
- The waterfront and Bigelow Commons is at the western edge of the district. As discussed later under image enhancements, the Town-owned parcel at the junction of Pearl, North Main, and Main Streets should be maintained as a village green, with a Freshwater Brook walkway leading down the hill (as called for under zoning and in the 1992 plan). The village green could include a gazebo, benches, lawns, etc., laid out in a manner suitable for the green's use as a performance and special event space.
- As a further amenity (and visual backdrop to the proposed village green), adjoining Pearl/Asnuntuck parking lots owned by the Town and Diana's could be merged and, as discussed elsewhere, made available to the public. Simple gestures like a picket fence and a center flagpole could give this parking lot a civic character. The lot would then ideally be used for the farmers' and flea markets.
- Pedestrian enhancements can be pursued to unite the pieces of the Thompsonville business district. These include the Freshwater Brook walkway from the river to Town Hall. They also include pedestrian-scaled lighting, striated crosswalks, uninterrupted shopper oriented buildings, and other design features elaborated upon elsewhere. As with all types of improvements, especially streetscapes, a key to success is a functioning maintenance program.

Finally, integrating all of the above; the essence of "main street management" is problem solving carried out in cooperation between government, developers, merchants, and property owners. As examples:

- Caronna's has expressed interest in expanding. Perhaps the fire station would like to relocate to larger quarters better able to accommodate the bigger fire engines of today. This would free up the fire station for Caronna's. The fire house could be provided at low cost to Caronna's in exchange for a master lease that keeps the store open in the evenings, and that mandates delivery service, so as to be more convenient to commuters living at Bigelow Commons.
- Diana's would like to attract a florist to provide added synergies. Perhaps this use could be attracted to the prominent space formerly occupied by Giorgio's bar. At the same time, perhaps Diana's could be induced (with low interest loans for façade improvements) to take on more of a retail character, it only at a symbolic level, with outdoor tables, exhausts channeling the smell of freshly baked goods onto the sidewalk, Sunday afternoon hours to serve churchgoers, etc. (Presently, approximately 80 percent of Diana's business is wholesale, and 75 percent of its retail trade is to residents from outside of the neighborhood.)
- In addition, the Town should try to make Diana's parking lot on the south side of Pearl Street available to the public. Perhaps it could be purchased at its appraised

- value, with appropriate zoning actions to assure that it still counts towards the parking requirements for Diana's multiple holdings on Pearl Street.
- Bigelow Commons would like to expand its residential unit count in lieu of obligations to provide office and other non-residential space. Perhaps this could be tied to their purchase of the Levitz Building across Main Street, and the tenanting of its two ground floor vacancies with a deli and Laundromat of equal value to Commons and neighborhood residents.

The thrust of these recommendations is to use "main street management" tools to make the most out of the Thompsonville business district's latent assets. The resulting business district would still be quite small, but would have a disproportionately positive image in the neighborhood and town, thanks to its one-of-a-kind retailers and restaurants, civic uses, historic character, and amenities.

### **Housing Reinvestment**

It is essential that the economic development strategy for Thompsonville place equal importance on housing reinvestment as on commercial development. Any increases in household income will be matched by increases in consumer expenditures. Developers and entrepreneurs will be more willing to risk their capital and time on projects located in neighborhoods that are on the upswing, even if it is from a bottomed-out position.

The emphasis of the housing strategy should be on housing rehabilitation, homesteading, and historic preservation. The rationale for these target areas, and the concomitant recommendations, are provided below.

- Promoting homeownership is the number one priority. As noted earlier, 30 percent of the neighborhood's units are owner-occupied, compared to 70 percent of the Town's. Housing investment- whether through money, home improvements, or tender love and care- is obviously greater under homeownership. Turnover and transiency is lower, too.

Promoting homeownership in Thompsonville will, however, be daunting. It is difficult to get people to put down their life's savings in a neighborhood where they do not feel their investment is secure, especially given the affordable price of housing in other more stable neighborhoods nearby. It takes more public subsidy to create affordable homeowner units, which have more space and amenities, plus down payment requirements. As an innovation, the Town should explore a mutual housing model "without walls." Mutual housing involves application of a higher than usual rent towards the purchase of subsidized housing units managed by non-profit housing and community development corporations. To date, such projects have been in single developments. The Town should explore whether the same idea might be applied to the rental of houses that are dispersed throughout the neighborhood. Federal and State funding could be sought to endow and thus test this innovation.

The best homeownership strategies are generally through incentives rather than subsidies. The Town should explore a homesteader program, involving tax abatements (e.g., graduated over twenty years) for houses converted from rental to homeownership. Tax abatements for one set of beneficiaries and not another is always controversial. A Thompsonville tax incentive can, however, be justified if enacted as part of a Neighborhood Revitalization Zone (NRZ) strategy for the neighborhood. NRZ's were explicitly created under State legislation in order to provide extra regulatory latitude and to focus investment in distressed areas. (See later discussion on building capacity.)

- While homeownership should be emphasized, it needs to be coupled with strategies to improve rental housing, if for no other reason than that most of the neighborhood's housing is now rental, and will remain so for the foreseeable future.

Enforcement is part of the strategy here. At a typical \$700 per month for a two-bedroom apartment, landlords can afford basis maintenance of their properties. The Town should pursue a team approach to code enforcement, employing building, zoning, fire, and health code inspectors. It should be noted that the best results of such systematic enforcement programs is attained when owners are aware and informed of the purposes and objectives.

Rental housing improvements can also be effectuated through the NRZ legislation, which allows rents to be collected in escrow pending landlord improvements. (NRZ's are discussed later under Capacity Building)

- The proposed expansions of Bigelow Commons should be encouraged as the best opportunity to expand the amount of rental housing in the neighborhood. In 1992, Halcyon/Ernst & Young postulated a demand for up to 11 rental units a year in the area, based on projected population growth and development pressure. The building and population boom of the 1980's has abated, however. To be marketable, new construction must offer a superior product. The Bigelow Commons has a proven track record, as testified by a 100 percent occupancy rate, a five-month waiting list, and the highest rental apartment rents in Thompsonville (at monthly rents of \$760 for studios, \$920 for one bedroom apartments, and \$1,300 for two bedroom apartments). This track record is the result of strong property management, high quality design, a moderate level of amenities, and competitive prices- the four features of a successful development identified by Halcyon/Ernst & Young. The developers and managers of Bigelow Commons should be trusted to know their market best- thus lending credibility to their proposal to build more units, retire commercial space, and change the amenity mix.
- As discussed later (under Image Enhancements), Thompsonville's historic character should be marketed so as to reposition the neighborhood's homeowner and rental housing product. This is of course predicated on historic preservation safeguards. The Town should designate all of the appropriate portions of the neighborhood as historic, and protect them through historic review procedures.

- Without such protection, homesteaders will not be reassured that their investments will not be put to waste by insensitive design next door or down the block. More directly, historic designation generates both State and Federal tax incentives for homeowners (see later discussion under Capacity Building).
- For the time being, housing reinvestment should be focused on targeted areas. Two prime examples include Enfield Street (Route 5) south of High Street. These two corridors are distinguished by the high quality of their historic homes, and by the fact that they are major feeder roads to highway exits. In general, the area south of High Street has a higher quality of historic housing, compared to the area north of North Main Street/Main Street, where triple-deckers and other worker housing formats are more prevalent. But another prime example includes the blocks surrounding Bigelow Commons. This area should be marketed as an alternative homeownership area for Bigelow residents ready to graduate out of rental housing.
  - Housing reinvestment should also focus on modest rehabilitation, not new construction and substantial rehabilitation. As noted, the neighborhood's key asset is its historic housing, not its opportunity for new construction. As indicated, the demand for new market-rate housing units is quite modest, and easily absorbed in a single project (such as the Bigelow Commons expansion). Most important, limited public largesse can have a more widespread benefit if directed to many modest rehabilitation projects than if directed to a single new construction or substantial rehabilitation project.
  - Similarly, the Town should also support de-densification, especially when the alternative is more costly housing rehabilitation at the public expense. Severely deteriorated structures should be demolished, with their lots recycled as parking or open space for adjoining residences (under a "side lot" program), or for the community (under a community garden program). Exceptions should be made for architecturally significant buildings that are not cost-prohibitive to rehabilitate. (Note that both this and the prior recommendation were put forward in the Plan of Conservation and Development.)
  - Enthusiastic support should be given to the proposed commuter train station along the waterfront, at the foot of Main Street. Rider-ship is expected to be low. According to the 1990 census, approximately 3,000 people commuted to and from Hartford and another 3,000 people commuted to and from Springfield (assuming that Springfield represents approximately half of the Hampden County Commuters). These roughly 6,000 people are the main pool of commuters which the proposed commuter service will draw from. Over time, their number should grow, given the added convenience presented by the train station. As one example, imagine the impact of the train station on the marketing of units in the adjoining Bigelow Commons. The train station will therefore add demand and visibility for Thompsonville housing. It will "put Thompsonville on the map", so to speak.

There is no single housing strategy that will transform Thompsonville. Nonetheless, the Town should direct all available homesteading tools and discretionary housing dollars to the neighborhood. It should also continue to focus on quality of life concerns. These

presently involve solidifying the recent successes of the neighborhood and police department in reducing crime, traffic calming on residential streets, etc. They also include image enhancements, as discussed next.

### **Image Enhancements**

The importance of image enhancements is not lost on the business community. In the 1994 merchant survey, when asked what “one thing [would you change] about either the Town or the local business climate”, nearly half of the answers had to do with image. To quote:

- Neater, cleaner appearance
- Improve area and maintain it
- Require and assist business to keep their site appealing
- Co-op advertising program for T’ville business
- Clean up area
- Bring more people in special events, dances
- Positive outlook from local papers

(Note, the next most popular sets of answers had to do with crime and loitering, and then help with finances or public approvals, each with about half as many answers as those dealing with appearance and image.)

As of now, the Thompsonville business district is for the most part failing to attract Enfield residents from outside of the neighborhood, as well as Bigelow residents, who tend to drive straight through the neighborhood en route to/from I-91 or the shopping area on the other side. The leakage could be captured with a better retail mix that concentrates on the sorts of fusion niches discussed above. But a variety store, for example, is unlikely to draw middle income shoppers if its exterior appearance connotes an off-putting low-end image. In some way, Town and Bigelow residents must be given a reason to give Thompsonville business district a second look.

Image enhancements in Thompsonville should focus on gateways (the main thoroughfares and walking routes through the neighborhood, i.e., Pearl Street, North Main Street, and Route 5), and on the arrival points (the main intersections and destinations within a neighborhood, i.e., the intersection of Pearl, North Main, and Main Streets the sight lines from Main, North Main, and Pearl to the Lamagna Community Center, the Town Hall campus, the business district, etc.). Recommendations include the following:

- At and near the Pearl/North Main/Main Street intersection, facades and signage improvements should be used to upgrade the business district’s image. This should involve both free technical assistance to enhance the design and financial assistance to help pay for improvements. While one-third of the merchants expressed interest in fixing up their facades if public assistance were provided, fewer than one-third of the merchants own their space (both figures according to the 1994 survey of businesses). Therefore, both merchants and property owners will need to be convinced. As further inducement, a signage amortization law

should be enacted, in which non-conforming signs must be retired after, for example, 10 years. The Town's relatively new signage regulations for the TV zoning district are already quite good, but turnover is too low for them to have a significant impact without retirement of the unattractive signs.

- As a top priority, pedestrian-scaled, historic-style lighting fixtures should be placed throughout the core business district and along North Main/Main Street from Town Hall down to the waterfront. Such lighting would not only make the area more attractive and unified, it would also enhance the perception of safety. In contrast, if the streets are more brightly lit than the sidewalks and walkways, the latter appear dark and foreboding by comparison.
- The connection between the Thompsonville business district and the riverfront/proposed train station/Bigelow Commons now consists largely of dead space. As described earlier, a village green, retail uses in the Levitz building, and a well lit and attractive walkway would make this corridor comforting and interesting to the pedestrian. The TV zoning requires a setback to allow a walkway along the Freshwater Brook. But zoning is contingent upon redevelopment, and the preferred use for this corridor is really public open space, consistent with the Plan of Conservation and Development.
- Moving up the hill, the connection between the Thompsonville business district and Town Hall/Route 5 now consists of attractive park space and pond that nonetheless reads as the front lawn for what appears to be public housing. The Plan of Conservation and Development calls for making Freshwater Pond and Brook a focal point of the Thompsonville village center, with ongoing maintenance and expansion of the pond's landscaping, a concept which is also consistent with plans proposed in the earlier Thompsonville Revitalization study. A heavily planted buffer of the surrounding residential development would augment these plans to create a better amenity of Freshwater Pond.
- Lower Pearl Street (south of High Street) is already an attractive, residentially scaled road, lined with many attractive historic homes, as well as a Carnegie Library. As described earlier, it should be targeted for housing and historic rehab, as a model block. The Town should also consider enacting a tree ordinance to protect Pearl Street's canopy of old growth trees. Commercial conversions should be prohibited; and in the rare instances where enacted through variance, signage should be minimal and parking should be relegated to the rear or side of buildings, with preservation of the front lawn as well as the historic house. The same strategies apply to the broader, boulevard-like portion of Route 5 south of Elm Street.
- Along Route 5 north of Elm Street, the primary issue is landscaping and signage, not building facades and historic preservation. The Town's BL (Business Local) zoning should be amended to mandate tree planting and landscaping on the periphery of the property and in the front parking lots. Improvements should be made to sign regulations, including prohibition of backlighting and amortization of non-conforming signs. The goal should be a tasteful auto strip.
- One further residential image enhancer has to do with the waterfront. River views and park amenities do not create value, the way housing quality, convenience for commutation, and quality of public schools do. But they clearly enhance value, as

testified by the price differential between units within the same building that do and do not have views. Thompsonville presents a rare opportunity for a major waterfront park, next to a commuter train station, graced with a destination restaurant as well as a public boat launch, directly opposite the Bigelow Commons. The Plan of Conservation and Development recognizes this opportunity as well. Upland views of the waterfront also need to be protected, and, frankly, exploited. Industrial and lumber yard property along the ridge line could, in this context, be slated for housing and park development that maintains views from upland property.

At the risk of repetition, it is worth emphasizing that the most important image enhancer is simply preservation of Thompsonville's historic character. This is clearly recognized in the TV zoning's call for architectural review and contextual development. But strong historic district guidelines need to be drafted for much more if not virtually all of the neighborhood.

### **Capacity Building**

In the interviews and workshops, participants testified that there is the perception that the pace of reinvestment has stalled. Certainly, it has (and will) wax and wane as resources are available. Now is the time to strike with implementation. We remain in a boom period, however, moderated it is this year compared to last. This means that there is more private investment interest and more public tax revenues with which to pursue revitalization.

The interest of both community and municipal leaders in pressing forward was apparent in all of our interviews and workshops. Delegation and coordination of responsibilities are, however, needed to avoid duplication and maximize results. For each of their parts:

- The Town should move immediately to enact the zoning recommendations put forward above. The recodification of the zoning ordinance now underway in timely.
- Several local banks had previously put in place special lending programs for Thompsonville businesses, consistent with the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA). Halycon/Ernst & Young suggested that a low-interest loan pool be derived from CRA funds. This still is a good, if difficult-to-implement, concept.
- The Town and community should take advantage of State enabling legislation to form a Thompsonville Neighborhood Revitalization Zone (NRZ). State resources are to be directed to NRZs. It is also legal, within NRZs, to condemn property and collect rent in escrow for poorly maintained properties.
- The Town and community should seek National Register district listing of large swaths of neighborhood. National Register listing enables developers to receive tax benefits on the historic restoration elements of residential rental and commercial projects. The only liability is that State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) approvals are needed for use of State or Federal dollars within districts. Thus, National Register listing would create tax incentives for building rehabilitation, without any real penalty.

- Elected State officials should press for reforms in the State Historic Tax Credit Program. This program allows corporate tax write-offs for rehabilitation of homeowner dwelling units in historic districts. The State Legislature should adjust the regulations to allow personal tax write-offs, consistent with the original intent of the Program's sponsors. (Note that the State Historic Tax Credit Program and the National Register Tax Incentives complement each other perfectly: the former addresses homeowner housing, the latter rental housing and commercial development. Therefore, both should be pursued.)
- Local and regional leaders should also continue to lend support to a Thompsonville rail station for the Springfield/New Haven commuter train service.
- The State should be encouraged to create a State park along the Thompsonville waterfront. This might involve engaging a non-profit entity such as the Trust for Public Land (TPL), which is able to act as a intermediary between property owners and the State, by receiving the land as a tax-benefited donation. Note that the Town should continue to retain the area's low density zoning, consistent with the area's flood-prone topography and scenic importance.
- The Town should prepare a formal presentation and handout putting forward a working plan for Thompsonville. While it would be made clear that the working plan will be revised based on community and funder input, the formality of a plan would help to generate community support and funder interest: it's a "chicken and egg" issue. The plan should include a map and inventory of accomplishments; as well as a rendering of a possible new train station anchored development; and a concept plan for a County park and train station on the waterfront.

It is also of use to take stock of what implementation strategies should be eschewed:

- There is sufficient tax base in the Thompsonville neighborhood to support a Special Services District (SSD). SSDs allow the levying of property fees, akin to taxes, that are dedicated to business district improvements, and controlled by an association elected by property owners, with the consent of the municipality. There is insufficient tax base in the business districts to support an SSD. The same limitation applies to other forms of Special Improvement Districts (SIDs).
- Merchant organizing, also called for in the Halycon/Ernst & Young report, is not likely to yield great results at this time. As the 1994 survey testifies: The merchants have too little in common, just now. Their interests lie in different places; few of them own their space; few are rooted in the community by factors other than inertia; most are just hanging on. Most important, there is not enough of a commercial benefit to paying merchant association dues, etc. Merchant organizing is best done through the general NRZ/CDC organizing called for above.
- Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts are becoming a popular tool with which to underwrite bonds for capital improvements by tapping the resulting increase in tax revenues. The TIF mechanism works best when the capital improvements are for site assemblage for lucrative development, roadway improvements that generate added value for property, etc. A TIF would only make sense for a possible rail station.

- High-cost single development projects are not preferred. Such projects tend to absorb all available subsidies and grants, for an isolated impact. For example, new construction for business incubators is not cost-effective in Thompsonville, given the availability of competitively priced space. Structure parking for retail is not warranted, since it only benefits the uses within several hundred feet of the parking facility. (The exception is the proposed riverfront train station, restaurant and park- since this would create a destination. Possible exceptions are the former Higgins School and the Strand Theater projects. Clearly, high-visibility small projects, like farmers' market, are excepted. All of these were discussed earlier.)
- Retail tenant recruitment is not preferred, either. Such efforts tend to absorb enormous amounts of staff time, with intermittent and unpredictable results. Exceptions should be made for extraordinarily visible locations and/or magnet uses. (One such exception is the Giorgio's space, which occupies a highly visible location at Thompsonville's 100 percent corner. Another exception is a destination restaurant at the proposed waterfront park and train station, or at the fire station.)

It is essential for the long-term strategy that immediate results be seen. Presented below are a number of short-term priorities, generally modest in cost, that will help build progress and a track record.

- Revised zoning
- Farmers' market
- Façade improvement and tenant recruitment for Giorgio's space
- Feasibility study (with alternatives) for Strand Theater project
- Outdoor dining at Sylvia's and Diane's
- TPL, State or County commitment to take on the waterfront project

Finally, as Thompsonville does not yet have a CDC (community development corporation), an implementing body needs to be established, with all of the major players (e.g., Bigelow Commons, community center, theater sponsors, etc.) involved. The large corporations in Enfield (i.e., Lego, Casual Corner, etc.) should be approached by the Town for matching funds that could set the organization in motion (e.g., pay for a grant writer and early implementation projects that create credibility). The Thompsonville CDC could then be put in charge of public benefits projects, fundraising, NRZ planning, etc. It would provide a forum in which to air the benefits and costs of projects, and make measured decisions about the allocation of precious subsidies and grants. Most important, it would provide a mechanism to create a partnership between residents, business people and municipal leaders and officials.