

MARKET NICHE STRATEGY FOR ROCKVILLE

A Discussion Memo



Prepared by:
Phillips Preiss Shapiro Associates, Inc.
434 Sixth Avenue
New York, NY 10011
jshapiro@ppsaplanning.com
tsayegh@ppsaplanning.com

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The Connecticut Main Street Center
Connecticut Light and Power
P.O. Box 2370
Hartford, CT 06146-2370

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INTRODUCTION

Rockville is the historic center of the surrounding towns of Vernon, Tolland and Ellington in Tolland County, Connecticut. At the turn of the last century, Rockville had a bustling downtown and a vibrant industrial economy fueled by the textile mills located along the nearby Hockanum River. During this prosperous era, top-quality civic architecture and large Victorian homes were built within the downtown area of which many are still extant.

By the 1950s, downtown Rockville began to face major competition due to highway construction and changing shopping patterns, making it difficult to remain a strong shopping destination. Urban Renewal led to the demolition of some buildings and streets in downtown to make way for parking and “modern” shopping center style building configurations. However well-intended, this severed the urban fabric without drawing new customers. Image issues and crime perceptions in the 1970s and 1980s compounded the challenges to downtown. Today, Rockville suffers from low foot traffic and many vacant storefronts.

Despite the decline during these decades, downtown Rockville today has some key assets for becoming a more successful shopping and civic destination. Rockville features a small, attractive downtown that is visually defined by a number of signature historic buildings. There are several long time establishments with a loyal customer base; there are, as well, a few new businesses entering the market. “Gentry” are buying and renting not only the grand Victorians, but also lofts and apartments in those mills that have been reused for housing. Most important, the County Courts, Town government and medical institutions help to give downtown Rockville a sense of purpose and destination as a civic center.

The Rockville Downtown Association, Inc. (RDA) is spearheading the current initiative aimed at revitalizing downtown. In this regard, the RDA has requested the technical assistance of consultants to determine a market niche approach to economic development that is realized through market-driven strategies.

The Connecticut Main Street Center is the overarching organization of the local main street management programs in Connecticut. CMSC has selected Phillips Preiss Shapiro Associates to be its designated consultant for providing technical assistance on market-driven strategies to the main street programs it oversees.

The technical assistance effort began with the compilation and review of all relevant design, land-use, demographic, and economic data and maps as well as existing plans and studies pertaining to Rockville. A full day tour and series of interviews and work sessions were then carried out in November 2004. The site visit culminated in an interactive workshop with RDA, town, business and civic leaders. Alternative market niche and enhancement strategies were presented and tentatively agreed upon.

The strategies are predicated on the concept that Rockville's particularly small downtown, significant nearby competition and limited resources necessitate the adoption of a targeted market-based approach in order to achieve long-term economic viability. Three potential approaches are: (1) embellish the "nostalgic image" of downtown to draw a greater share of Rockville's current market; (2) promote downtown as a restaurant row that becomes a regional as well as a local draw; or (3) carry out a housing strategy that fosters the development of nearby neighborhoods that in turn better support local businesses. The various approaches are not mutually exclusive and it was agreed that minor, near-term "main street management" improvements could be made on all fronts. However, Rockville must choose one approach to emphasize for the long-term to channel capital investment, resources, and identity-formation.

This report serves to document and elaborate upon the findings and recommendations. It begins with a market overview. The three alternative options are then described, featuring a matrix indicating how various enhancement strategies would vary under each option. The short-term strategies in each category are then elaborated upon. The report concludes with a description of some next steps for RDA and the Town to consider.

Although this report addresses the issue of business recruitment and provides ideas and strategies for filling Downtown's retail vacancies, it is not recommended that this becomes the thrust of the revitalization effort. Tenant recruitment is important and has its place; however, it is a highly intensive and time-consuming process which yields only occasional success. Additionally, tenant recruitment is merely a short-term approach to revitalization. Instead, the long-term revitalization of Rockville is about making more fundamental changes that transform the character of the district and enable it to *attract* (vs. recruit) niche retailers. Thus, it is vital for Rockville to enhance and upgrade existing businesses and invest in physical improvements as the core of its revitalization strategy.

Special thanks is due to Luise Craige from RDA and John Simone of CMSC for organizing and leading the effort; and to the Town of Rockville, the Senior Center and of

course the RDA for hosting the workshops. A full list of participants and a partial list of consults are presented below.

Partial List of Study Participants

R. Jarvis-New England Civil War Museum
D. McConville-ECHN/Rockville General Hospital
J. Jeamel-Rockville Bank
A. Letendre-Hockanum River Linear Park Cmt.
S. Marcham-Vincents Pharmacy & RDA President
J. Comeau-Beacon Prescriptions
T. Joyce- Town Planner
N. Pade-Assistant Town Planner/Economic Development Dir.
L. Steveson-Residential Property owner/Landlord
M. Herbst-Town Councilor
B. Motola- Loom City Creamery
P. Tracey-CPA
The Honorable Mayor Ellen C. Marmer
J. Cohen- Vernon Economic Development Commission/Chair
D. Waskiewicz-Crystal Blueprint & Stationery
W. Fox-Town Councilor
P. Beron-Town Councilor
P. Bylkbashi- Commercial property owner
R. Dence-Char-Laine Manor Home for the Aged
D. Kennedy-Vernon Economic Development Commission
P. Olson- Ladd & Hall Furniture/Courthouse Plaza
R. Miller-Dawn's Dream Café
D. Chmielecki- Rockville NRZ Planning Cmt.

Partial List of Sources

The Rockville Charette Report, Yale Urban Design Workshop, 2004
Town of Vernon Market Study, 2004
CERC Town of Vernon Profile, 2004
CERC Town of Manchester Profile, 2004
Vernon Plan of Conservation and Development: Downtown Rockville Supplement,
2003

MARKET POSITION

Rockville Center faces some considerable constraints in becoming a retail-shopping destination, which requires a targeted approach to enable it to realize its potential. The key limitation for the downtown is the amount and configuration of retail space, which does not suit the requirements of a typical “main street” or downtown destination. However, Rockville’s comparatively small size, pedestrian-scale, and historic charm would allow it to compete by offering shopper’s a different experience than an auto-oriented shopping center.

Rockville’s market position is particularly tenuous at this juncture. Without Rockville Hospital, the County courts, Town government, and a few successful stores (namely the furniture store, Ladd & Hall, and the stationary/wicker store, Crystal Blueprint & Stationery and Crystal’s Personal Touch) located in the center, the stability of existing downtown retail could be in jeopardy. Most of the retailers interviewed in connection with this effort indicated that their businesses would probably do significantly better if sited elsewhere around the town or region, suggesting there is not something intrinsic to downtown Rockville that sustains these businesses. A revitalization strategy that develops a single market niche for Rockville is imperative for long-term success in either growing the downtown’s market share or expanding its trade area.

Liabilities

Accessibility and visibility to the maximum number (or targeted) potential customers are critical considerations for retail business districts. Demands for easy highway accessibility, ample parking and noticeable signage have dictated the development of shopping centers and districts along major roadways. Unlike the days when downtown Rockville was at the heart of Vernon and Tolland and adjoining the major sources of employment for the residents of both towns, the business district has slipped to a relatively marginal status from a locational perspective. It is not just a matter of generous floor plans and parking, which former Urban Renewal strategies for Rockville remedied in part. Downtown Rockville is simply now a backwater, compared with its former centrality.

To be more specific: Downtown Rockville is not centrally located near major roadway interchanges. In fact, several other locations within a short distance of downtown realize far more vehicle traffic. Downtown is within a few miles – not right at -- Exit 67 off I-

84. Highway signs indicate that Rockville center should be accessed via Exit 66, which is not only further from downtown, it also directs traffic along a roadway dominated by strip development and auto-oriented shopping centers. (Exit 67 does not take drivers past as much competition, and it offers more of a gateway, with a dramatic mill building located at the Grove Street turn.) Although Downtown is situated along Route 83, there is not much traffic during the day. In general, downtown Rockville does not have the traffic to compete with other nearby shopping districts.

Downtown Rockville also has significant competition nearby. Both convenience and comparative retail options are available all along Route 83, within a few minutes drive from downtown. The large Buckland Hills Mall and surrounding big-box retailers are also within a few miles, as is the new upscale (if contrived) lifestyle center, Evergreen Walk. The closest competing downtown-center is Manchester, which appears to trump Downtown Rockville in terms of the size of the district, the amount of contiguous retail space (100,000 square feet), diversity of attractions (e.g., Cheney Theater), and convenience to the greater Hartford area.

A further constraint for retail in downtown Rockville is that the local population is stable. Although Tolland County has experienced some of the strongest population growth in the state, Rockville and the Town of Vernon are actually witnessing a slight decline in population growth, with an aging demographic trend. A stable to declining population affects retail potential since the local market and disposable income are not growing. (Demographic factors are discussed further in market demand.) This implies that the answer is to enlarge the trade area to tap a growing regional population. But a new problem arises, in that regard.

At least 100,000 square feet, the starting size of a specialty shopping center, is needed to be a shopping destination. Currently Rockville has approximately 20,000 square feet of occupied storefronts, plus the furniture store, Ladd & Hall, which is approximately 20,000 square feet in itself. There appears to be another 80,000 square feet of vacant or underutilized retail space. So at about 120,000 square feet, the amount of square footage is adequate.

But the configuration of that square footage is not. Downtown Rockville suffered greatly from Urban Renewal initiatives, which essentially destroyed the double-sided retail layout and broke up the street wall in parts of downtown. The most egregious of the Urban Renewal projects was the destruction of Market Street in the heart of downtown and its replacement with a parking lot. Several site-planning mistakes have led to a situation where many of the major anchors turn their backs on Main Street and down-

town (i.e., Lad & Hall furniture store, the new hospital entrance, the “Mecca” strip mall). Consequently, Rockville has a downtown comprised of single-load corridors where retail only occurs on one side of the street. This single-sided pattern essentially snakes throughout the main four blocks that comprise the center. Downtown functions not as one but as many as five mini-districts, none of which are nearly large enough to have much presence in the retail marketplace.

Downtown Rockville also suffers from issues surrounding its image. During the 1970s and 1980s, gang violence prompted many businesses – including doctors’ offices – to move out of downtown to further down on Route 83, where the roadway widens and caters to big-box and auto-oriented shopping centers. Although gang violence is not an issue today, the courts continue to bring bad publicity, and there are occasional drug-related incidents in the area. There was also a great deal of dilapidated housing near downtown, most of which were old, large homes that were broken down into rental apartments. Now, merchants and residents consider the area very safe, and the current Village Street renovation and ongoing wave of Victorian home rehabilitations around the public green, called Talcott Park, signal a housing comeback. Nevertheless, lingering perceptions of downtown as a dangerous and blighted place, however inaccurate, make it more difficult to build a destination identity.

Assets & Opportunities

In contrast to the limitations that Downtown Rockville has for conventional retailers, it boasts a number of assets for niche retailers, as demonstrated in the variety of establishments already there including a good ice cream parlor, an attractive café, and great wicker and furniture stores.

The Rockville General Hospital is a major win for downtown. Located right in the heart of downtown, the Hospital is investing \$26 million in renovations, expansion and new entrances. Its administration is committed to keeping Rockville General a community-based hospital. It is a major employer, with 700 workers on staff, of which 500 are employed full-time. This concentration of employees offers a captive daytime population that is yet untapped. Patients and visitors at the hospital may also demand services that can be met by the niche retailers.

The County courts and municipal offices amplify Rockville’s identity as a civic center. This image is evidenced in the number of municipal office buildings and courthouses that comprise the physical fabric of Downtown. There are over 250 Court employees

and as many as 1100 Court visitors on a given weekday, creating a significant public presence associated with both municipal and judicial activities.

For a small downtown, Rockville Center has a great many – hence an extraordinary proportion -- of signature buildings. The Senior Center, Town Hall, the Courthouse, the hospital mansion and the churches in downtown are all examples of the fine architecture that dominates the center. They create a strong physical image and nostalgic feel, bolstered by some historic mill buildings and storefronts. Usually, edifices strengthen a streetscape of historic “background” buildings. Here, the landmarks are the norm. The visual interest that these buildings create lends itself to the creation of a niche destination that significantly differs from a shopping center experience.

Although the retail space in downtown is limited and not appropriate for chains, it does offer prospects to a wide variety of retailers. Usually, downtowns are limited by the prevalence of small storefronts interrupted by retaining walls and columns. The retail space available in Rockville varies considerably in size and layout. The uniqueness of the available retail space lends itself to stores and restaurants with idiosyncratic preferences. Also, retail space is relatively affordable, making it an attractive for start-up businesses and entrepreneurs.

From a physical standpoint, Downtown Rockville is a relatively small downtown. Its dimensions and pedestrian-scale give it strong potential as a compact, walkable shopping district. Its small size is also a benefit from a revitalization perspective, as it would enable small changes or investments in downtown to have a large impact on the town center. This situation gives more leverage to reinvestment efforts in Rockville than in most downtown areas.

Although not the most central location given current roadway patterns, Downtown Rockville is not altogether inconvenient. It is within a few minutes drive from Interstate 84; and the main thoroughfare through downtown is Route 83, a commuter roadway. The fact that it is on a commuter route gives it potential to capture this population during morning and evening rush-hour, as well as to generate interest for this market segment to visit at other times.

Rockville also has a number of other latent opportunities that could become meaningful over time. One example is the New England Civil War Museum, which has an impressive collection, although it is open infrequently since it relies on a volunteer staff. The numerous mills near downtown are another asset, which add to the architectural richness of the area. Many of them have already been rehabilitated for housing; however,

developing a retail complex is another potential possibility for mill rehabilitation, depending on the types of businesses that Rockville attracts. The Hockanum River and the nearby trails are a visual and natural resource that could be better integrated into downtown once the momentum is in place. In particular, the waterfall near the Anacoil property is a unique attraction that with some investments could help draw visitors and enhance downtown's image.

Downtown Rockville must draw upon its various assets in determining the appropriate market niche strategy to pursue long term.

Sources of Demand

Rockville has several populations that it can draw on to support downtown businesses.

The primary population for downtown is Rockville residents, as well as those in the surrounding town of Vernon. According to the 2000 Census, Rockville has a total population of approximately 7,700 residents while Vernon has 28,100 residents. Tolland County, in which Rockville is located, has the fastest growing population in Connecticut, having witnessed a 6.4 percent growth rate from 1990 to 2000. In contrast, Rockville has experienced a more stable – if declining – demographic trend. Similarly, the Town of Vernon has been falling behind both county and state in overall population growth, with a 6 percent decline in population from 1990 to 2000.

Table 1. Population Growth and Median Household Income

	Population Growth (1990-2000)	Median Household Income (1999)
Rockville	n/a	\$32,400
Vernon	- 6%	\$47,800
Tolland	+ 6%	\$59,000

Source: US Census 2000

Rockville's population is at lower end in terms of income level. At \$32,000 per household in 1999, Rockville is well behind the county median household income of \$59,000. It is also about \$15,000 below the Town of Vernon's household income level of \$47,800. To some extent, Rockville and Vernon are facing aging populations which translate into a growing number of residents with fixed-incomes. Also, Downtown

Rockville's proximal population is predominately low-income residents since there is a concentration of subsidized housing (Section 202 – senior citizen, and Section 8 – low income programs) in the downtown area. Only 30 percent of Rockville's housing stock is comprised of owner-occupied units, as compared with 56 percent and 73 percent for Vernon and Tolland County, respectively. In fact, many larger homes in Downtown Rockville have been converted into rental apartments, some of which are in substandard conditions. The county has generally been attracting affluent populations looking for housing value, however, this has yet to be the trend in the Rockville area (Source: EPR, Vernon Market Study, 2004). There are some historic house enthusiasts who have recently bought and rehabilitated Victorian homes in Rockville, but they do not yet represent a critical mass.

The secondary population for Downtown Rockville to draw on is local employees. A number of employers are located in downtown alone, including Rockville General Hospital, Town Hall, the Courts, the AnCoil Company and private doctors' offices. There are over 500 fulltime hospital workers and a sizable group of municipal employees, amounting to a healthy potential daytime population. These employers also attract the additional population of those visiting Rockville for hospital patients, doctor appointments, business meetings and municipal services. For example, Court visitors make up a substantial population, ranging from 700 –1100 visitors per day from Monday through Thursday (with lighter Court visits on Fridays). Despite the numbers of employers and corresponding visitors, Rockville has yet to successfully capture and serve this market segment.

A tertiary population is the commuter population that utilizes Route 83 through Downtown Rockville as their main route to and from work. Since employment centers are dispersed throughout the region, commuter traffic flows in both directions. Despite the potential of this market, the current lack of desired services and enforced short-term parking remain impediments.

Market Niche

Although market numbers are important for determining market niche, the nuances of these figures as well as existing assets need to be closely considered. Downtown Rockville has several unique qualities and characteristics that play a role in building market niche.

Loyal Shoppers. Rockville and Vernon have stable, if slightly declining, populations. This is particularly true in comparison to the county where the population growth has exploded. The stability of the local population can help foster customer loyalty for downtown businesses. Indeed, merchants report that old-time residents from Rockville and Vernon are their most loyal patrons. Furthermore, an older demographic is aging in place and even moving into Vernon and neighboring towns as babyboomers settle into new developments. Seniors tend to value personal service, something traditional downtown businesses generally deliver better than large shopping malls. Also, seniors often generate demand for services such informal eateries, personal banking, pharmacies and hobby shops. This population of older adults might have an interest in shopping/eating in a well-preserved small town atmosphere, creating the potential to develop a market niche around the nostalgic aspect of Downtown Rockville.

Downtown Rockville Residents. Local and nearby residents are expected to be a strong customer base for any downtown. Generally, local residents generate something like up to 5 square feet per person in local retail space. This would be enough to support roughly one third (35,000 square feet) of the space now sited in Rockville Center.

Local residents also usually set the tone and atmosphere of a business district, since they tend to comprise most of the foot traffic and street life. For example, a town with a large concentration of college students differs in atmosphere from one with a large number of artists, which also contrasts with a town that has a large senior population. Thus, local and nearby residents are important to shaping market niche.

The population of downtown Rockville does not yet offer a clear market identity. It has a mixed dimension that gives it a varied image: seniors, low-income residents, historic house enthusiasts, etc. The disposable income in the immediate community is well below neighboring communities, so walk-in traffic to downtown businesses is very limited. Additionally, the loitering of residents in downtown may be prolonging a negative image of downtown among outsiders.

Local Workers. Local workers – namely, hospital, municipal and court workers – offer the potential of a solid weekday, daytime crowd for downtown businesses. Studies indicate that on average, locals spend around \$3,000 per year on local purchases – half for dining out. Thus far, daytime workers have not yet proved loyal patrons of downtown due in part to downtown’s negative image, the lack of desired services, and the competition from internally provided services, namely, the hospital cafeteria. But usually workers tire of local cafeterias, even where the food is subsidized, and make one or several forays a week. Rockville could use additional lunch spots that could serve as viable alter-

natives to the hospital cafeteria. Developing a concierge trade is also possible to serve the eat-in office crowd and hospital patients.

Commuters/I-84 Crowd. Downtown Rockville has a notable commuting population that passes through downtown along Route 83 during the morning and evening rush hours. As highlighted in the 2004 Market Study for the Town of Vernon, half (48 percent) of these commuters typically stop at least one time either on their way to or way home from work on a typical commuting day. Commuter retail stops are likely to revolve around convenience shopping, including some of the services already provided by existing downtown businesses. Enforcing the area's short-term parking regulations will be essential for making Downtown Rockville a viable stop on the commuter route. Physical improvements – such as lighting and beautification strategies – can have a strong impact on commuters in terms of building a more positive image and impression of downtown, as well as generating interest in visiting during other non-commuting occasions.

Regional residents. There is a considerable population within a short drive from downtown. The towns to the North of Rockville such as Tolland and Ellington have a growing, higher-income population. Residents of these towns actually have to drive through Rockville on 83 to get to Route 384, offering another potential market that is more affluent. Also, there are no other real downtown business districts in these towns. The closest downtown competitor with Rockville is Manchester, which is an additional 10-minute drive for these residents from Downtown Rockville. Thus, due to the relative dearth of historic downtown districts in the area, Downtown Rockville could focus on offering a unique, more authentic downtown experience for regional residents. A strategy that emphasizes preserving and enhancing the traditional downtown character of Rockville could help solidify this regional market. It should be noted, however, that the fact that Rockville's immediate downtown population is more low-income and diverse as compared to the population of neighboring suburbs might discourage some regional residents from visiting due to racist and/or classist sentiments.

There are some factors that challenge Downtown Rockville's potential to attract a regional population. Its closest downtown competitor, Manchester center, actually has a higher population count and is more affluent than Rockville, thus making it more likely to dominate the market. To be successful in capturing more regional residents (particularly from Vernon, Tolland and Ellington), downtown Rockville must strive to distinguish its retail identity from that of Manchester.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

Downtown Rockville can choose from among the following approaches to its revitalization: (1) embellish the “nostalgic image” of downtown to draw a greater share of Rockville’s current market; (2) promote downtown as a restaurant row that becomes a regional as well as a local draw; or (3) carry out a housing strategy that fosters the development of nearby neighborhoods that in turn better support local businesses.

With its concentration of signature buildings, downtown already functions fairly well as a nostalgic center for its local customer base. Given the hospital, courts and Town Hall, the downtown has a weekday/daytime dining clientele to supplement the weekend clientele of residents. These approaches are complementary, and it also is possible to pursue small-scale, main street management activities that serve all three approaches. Yet, given limited capital and resources, it would be strategic to emphasize one approach over the next few years.

Nostalgic Approach

From a market-niche point of view, the essence of this approach is to achieve a higher capture rate from Rockville Center’s primary trade area of local residents.

Given the number and proximity of signature buildings in downtown, Rockville already evokes the nostalgic image of a downtown from another era. The older storefronts help to complete this look. Rockville’s relatively small size for a downtown makes achieving this strategy particularly possible. The hospital, courts and Town Hall provide a civic image and foundation. It is only necessary to make minor improvements in the streetscape, crosswalks, lighting, edifices, and central park landscaping to fully develop a nostalgic atmosphere.

The nostalgic image also appeals to the existing demographics in the primary trade area. Both Rockville and Vernon have somewhat aging populations and are experiencing an increase in the number of empty nesters in the vicinity. A senior population is likely to be attracted to completing their convenience shopping in a well-preserved downtown comprised of local-owned businesses that put a premium on service.

Another reason to pursue the nostalgic option is that there is a dearth of historic districts in the area. Most of the nearby shopping and dining options are part of auto-oriented shopping centers and offer little charm. Playing up its historic image through the nostalgic approach to revitalization would enable Rockville to significantly distinguish itself from other shopping destinations.

Downtown Rockville is also limited in retail space. With a total of about 120,000 square feet of retail including unoccupied or underutilized space, downtown is roughly the same size as a typical convenience shopping center. Only about 20,000 square feet of retail is currently occupied by downtown businesses (excluding Ladd & Hall), making it more equivalent to half the size of an average supermarket. The existing businesses in Downtown Rockville range from pharmacies and personal banking, to stationary stores and small cafes. They compensate for small size with superior service. Given the space constraints and the existing business mix, a strategy like the nostalgic option that aims to capture more of the existing trade area appears particularly appropriate.

The nostalgic image of downtown is already present but there are several ways to enhance and fully develop this image to improve Downtown Rockville's local marketability. One important emphasis must be improving the pedestrian-friendly character of the district through improved crossings. There would also need to be a short-term focus on the beautification of streetscape and landscape elements in a manner that maintains and enhances downtown's historic charm. Small, frequent local events such as farmer's markets could help to further boost the image of downtown for the surrounding communities.

Eventually, more large scale, capital-intensive improvements would be necessary for this strategy. These measures could include: redeveloping the shopping centers to restore the street wall; introducing traffic calming measures like bumpouts/neckdowns; exposing the cobblestone under streets; attracting new tenants to downtown; and pursuing façade improvements that build on the historic character.

Restaurant Row Approach

From a market-niche perspective, the essence of this approach is to expand the trade area, albeit with a smaller capture rate focused on dining and complementary sales and services, such as boutiques.

The retail space that is available in downtown Rockville is eclectic, lending itself to restaurant tenants as they usually appreciate more idiosyncratic spaces. Plus, retail space in Downtown Rockville is relatively cheap for the area, which is an important factor for attracting restaurant entrepreneurs.

There are a lot of daytime uses in Downtown Rockville -- namely the hospital, County courts, and municipal offices -- that could provide around the clock business for restaurants. Furthermore, there is not currently a restaurant district in the wider area. The nearby towns of Ellington and Tolland do not offer a downtown atmosphere for dining, although the demographic characteristics suggest strong potential for such an attraction.

Another reason to pursue the Restaurant Row approach is the fact that Rockville's immediate population does not really have the disposable income to support downtown businesses. The existing population count only supports about 35,000 square feet of convenience retail space. The higher income populations are mostly in Rockville's expanded trade area, served by regional highways and malls, reducing the ability to tap into discretionary spending on "comparison" shopping for items such as clothes and furniture. By developing downtown as a restaurant district, Rockville can tap into this larger regional market, although it would be serving less of the local population.

Rockville currently is dark and dead at night. Therefore, choosing this strategy would require the downtown to take on a different persona as a nighttime destination. Night-lighting the signature edifices would achieve an important effect and make downtown inviting at night. Lighting the monument on the hill would further enhance the atmosphere. Commuters in the evening would witness the transformation of the town and be likely to return to visit restaurants on other occasions.

Developing Downtown Rockville as a restaurant district would require a major recruitment effort for restaurant tenants. Recruitment would include completing a reconnaissance of the local restaurant market, making an inventory of available space in downtown, and providing compelling market research to potential tenants. Integral to the restaurant strategy is developing a shared parking agreement with the hospital and courts to increase nighttime parking capacity. In time, the addition of arts and entertainment elements to the downtown could eventually follow the successful establishment of restaurants.

Since the restaurant row approach requires attracting customers from a larger geographic area, accessibility and visibility are essential to the successful of this strategy. Currently, Downtown Rockville is inconveniently accessed via Exit 66 off I-84. To im-

prove the perceived convenience of Rockville as a destination, the Town should petition the State to change the highway signs on I-84 to reflect Exit 67 as the appropriate exit for “Historic” Rockville. To advance the visibility of downtown as a destination, the mill and the intersection at Grove Street should be transformed into a more attractive gateway that provides a sense of arrival for visitors to the district.

Housing Approach

From a market-niche perspective, the essence of this approach is to encourage more upscale housing, hence both more local spending capacity and a better image for downtown.

This strategy addresses the fact the immediate population in Rockville is currently too small and not affluent enough to support the local businesses. Furthermore, the immediate population does not have the personality that would translate into a positive image for downtown, as would be the case if the neighborhood was known as an artist haven, or a center of “alternative living”, or a historic destination. It suggests that attracting a more upscale or “bohemian” surrounding demographic would help downtown to prosper. This takes a long time, and thus is a long-term approach for downtown.

Many historic one-family homes in Rockville were built between 1830 and 1900 and were converted in recent decades to multifamily structures due to their large size, seen as impractical for single families. Several of these segmented houses have been falling into disrepair. As such, their condition contributed to the blighted image of Rockville that developed in the 1980s and 1990s. Also, vacant housing units in Rockville are nearly twice the Vernon rate, at 10 percent. The owner-occupied rate for Rockville is only 30 percent, versus 57 percent for Vernon.

Admittedly, this approach advocates the gentrification/yuppification of Downtown Rockville. The rationale is that the introduction of a higher income population and the improvement of the town’s physical housing stock is the only long-term solution to ensure the viability of downtown businesses. It places a strong emphasis on the rehabilitation of the existing housing stock. Assuming that social diversity should be a goal, gentrification efforts should be balanced with mechanisms that allow lower-income residents to remain in downtown in better housing, in order to create a stable mixed-income community in Rockville.

The housing strategy is not just about improving housing, but more generally making Rockville a better place to live for all residents. Key elements of this strategy could include the following: low-interest loans to doctors (hospital-guaranteed); historic district events such as house tours (e.g., Victorian Teas, Dickens Day); new zoning regulations for single-family residences and incentives to convert back multifamily homes; and community activities like painting the river's path in the parking lot that create community cohesion and identity.

A housing strategy that produces sustainable neighborhoods around downtown will improve Rockville's image and provide a loyal local customer base for downtown businesses.

While Rockville can employ a number of small-scale improvements on all fronts, the community and Town would be advised to focus on one of the alternative approaches for the long-term. Any of these strategies will need to substantially address ways to assist existing businesses in marketing and repositioning their services in order to fully benefit from market-based revitalization efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Rockville's particularly small downtown, significant nearby competition and limited resources together call for the adoption of a focused approach for achieving long-term economic viability. The prior chapter identified three potential approaches: (1) embellish the "nostalgic image" of downtown to draw a greater share of Rockville's current market; (2) promote downtown as a restaurant row that becomes a regional as well as a local draw; or (3) carry out a housing strategy that fosters the development of nearby neighborhoods that in turn better support local businesses.

In fact, the various alternatives are not mutually exclusive and it was agreed that in the near-term, complementary "main street management" improvements could be made on all fronts. Table 4 summarizes the strategies that relate to each approach, differentiating by level of investment. The first column lists the short-term, cost-effective actions that are largely complementary: the "low hanging fruit", so to speak. The second column lists expensive actions: the hard choices that should likely be put off until there is greater certainty as to the preferred direction for Rockville, based on both community and market feedback.

Pedestrian Improvements

The distinguishing feature of any downtown or "main street", in comparison to the shopping center or strip development, is that it emphasizes the pedestrian over the automobile. People come to shop or dine, of course; but they also come to run multiple errands, walk around, sight-see, see friends, and enjoy themselves. The prerequisites are a safe pedestrian environment, ample and shaded sidewalks, attractive storefronts and buildings, places to socialize, and things to do. This section focuses on the first two components: a safe environment and sidewalk improvements.

In the past decades, the emphasis has been on moving traffic through downtown Rockville. This policy dates, no doubt, to a time when Rockville was a bustling place that was trying to compete with new shopping centers and malls for the burgeoning number of suburban automobile drivers (as compared to the walk-to-work mill employees). It is now antiquated.

The Town has already launched upon a series of intersection improvements with pedestrian safety in mind. These should continue. Each intervention requires its own brainstorming.

Thinking ambitiously, the Town and community might eventually consider a full program of bump-outs (neck-downs) at crossings, special pavers, etc. These are quite expensive, however, and should follow rather than precede the other actions described here. While of general benefit, they would be most valuable if the Nostalgia theme were the priority.

One impediment is that the road is now a State route, meaning that the speed and efficiency of vehicular traffic is the paramount consideration of those in command, notwithstanding their shared interest in improving pedestrian safety and conditions. Since this road is no longer a very high-volume commuter thoroughfare – not to mention that in Rockville it cuts through a major community and an historic district – it provides the State with a unique opportunity to pursue context-sensitive solutions. The Town should work closely with the Department of Transportation and other State agencies to develop an agenda for pedestrian-centered improvements.

Returning to the short-term, the Town and RDA should continue to emphasize sidewalk improvements. These start with keeping sidewalks in good repair – a prerequisite in terms of seniors and people with strollers. They also involve street trees for shade during summer; pear and other species that do not hide signs are preferred (a problem evidenced in parts of downtown already). Benches are often considered problematic in downtowns where there is loitering, as is the case in Rockville. Private benches, directly abutting the storefronts and supervised by merchants, are the answer. These can be bought by the municipality or RDA, however; and could be painted and decorated as part of a community improvement and publicity effort.

Table 2. Potential Strategies

Approach	Short-term & Inexpensive “Main Street Management” Actions	Major Expenditures & Redevelopment
Nostalgia	parking management crosswalks, streetscape cajoling (the essence of Main St management) frequent small events storefront and façade improvements landscape Central Park builds loyal customers	pavers, bump outs pedestrian-scaled lighting shopping centers redeveloped
Restaurant Row	tenant recruitment Parking management light edifices, street lighting gateways, signage on highways	civil war museum big events artist housing performance spaces parking decks Artisans pedestrian-scaled lighting
Historic Neighborhood	bank/hospital subsidized employee mortgages Historic District guidelines/enforcement house tours NRZ partnering, zoning for one-family painting the river path in the Market St lot use parks for community gatherings	housing redevelopment parking decks sunshining the river pedestrian-scaled lighting

Source: Community workshop, November 2004

Perhaps the most important physical improvement involves pedestrian-scaled lighting. This is essential for the Restaurant Row concept to have any footing: people simply will not come to downtown if it looks unsafe, and it will look unsafe if it is dark, and it will look dark if the street is not better lit. Lighting is also important for the other concepts: local residents will avoid Rockville during winter if it is dim in the late afternoon; and homesteaders will be dismayed by proximity to an unsavory looking downtown. Thus, lower and preferably historic lighting fixtures should be provided throughout downtown. Ambient lighting, from spotlighting of edifices (as discussed later), is also useful. These are expensive expenditures, dependent on State or other grants. But their across-the-board importance prompts us to put them in the first column.

Access

As emphasized, enlarging the trade area for the Restaurant Row approach is contingent on improving the approaches to downtown. All of the approaches would benefit from a clearer sense of identity for the center.

For the Restaurant Row approach, this starts at the highway. Shifting the “signed” exit for Rockville Center to Exit 67 would be an improvement, as this route is both shorter in duration, more direct (i.e., involves fewer turns and changes in the built environment), and leads to a more scenic entry (discussed next). The signs should highlight the new (or perhaps “old” is more apt) image of Rockville as an historic place.

Special attention is needed where Grove Street meets East Main Street. This includes signs to downtown and, if possible, the scenic overlook; renovation and night-lighting of the historic mill at this building; landscaping and welcome signage at the bluff directly opposite; and upgrade of the several historic houses on the north side of the road.

A similar set of interventions could be pursued at the opposite end of downtown along Union Street. A traffic light, improvements to corner properties, and more attention to the Library and Hospital entrances would not only avert traffic conflicts and improve access to important community institutions, but also create a greater sense of anticipation for downtown.

Gateways are important; so are arrival points. In Downtown Rockville, the key arrival point is at Central Park, which deserves all of the attention paid to it.

Parking

To start, the Town, RDA and others should cooperate on a parking management strategy for downtown. The basic concept is threefold: (1) fast turnover of cars to allow quick errands (as enforced with meters for the most convenient spaces in front of stores); (2) long-term parking for shoppers within sight of the store or main street (2- or 3-hour parking in the best parking lots); and all-day parking for merchants, workers and downtown residents where it will not interfere with shopping trips (in the parking lots further away).

The details of this strategy will take careful thought and, to be sure, a bit of wrangling. At a certain point, the municipality must simply act with regard to those spaces under its

control. To do otherwise is to make the most optimal parking strategy for shopping a hostage to the interests of a few. The classic problem, for example, is that merchants and businesspeople want parking to be ample and visible for customers, while retaining the luxury for themselves of parking in front of their own businesses.

Growing in effort, the Town, RDA and others should cooperate on shared parking. Again, the basic concept is simple: the peak demand for different uses differs by day of week and time of day, allowing the same parking resources to be shared. Shared parking can be promoted through revisions to parking regulations, including incentives (e.g., tax deductions for private parking that is opened up to the public, mindful that it typically costs many thousands of dollars to acquire land and build parking facilities). The main players in Rockville Center are, however, non-profit and government. Their parking lots can only be shared if they come to realize that a revitalized downtown is good for them, too. This requires further outreach and discussion.

Parking turnover and shared parking only works if the shoppers realize how easy this makes parking. Tickets should be leniently enforced (wait a bit of time before ticketing, for instance; dedicate the fees to something like street planting; and make these practices common knowledge). Fences and paths should be placed to make it easy for shoppers to go between the shared and dedicated lots and the stores and businesses. Consistent signage should direct shoppers to the common and larger parking resources.

Additional parking is not now needed. By observation, there is in aggregate ample parking. We are confident that a full count of the number of parking spaces would be ample to serve all of the retail space now in downtown. The critical issue is the parking in front of the businesses. For example, on-street parking with short turnovers (e.g., 15 minutes) is needed in front of the café opposite the hospital, whereas long-term parking is needed within 400 feet for patrons of any restaurants to locate on that block.

Moving, however, onto bigger scale development would likely trigger the need for more parking. In particular, theater or housing development would create peaks that likely could not be accommodated by existing parking resources. Rockville's topography could, in this instance, be a major asset. The change in grade would allow, in a number of locales, a single parking deck, with no ramps. Single parking decks entered from different levels typically costs half of the more typical \$15,000 per parking space associated with garages.

Physical Upgrades

The least expensive option involves storefront and minor façade improvements largely carried out through more tasteful signage, painting of buildings, and awnings. As Norman Mintz’s work in Corning, New York attests, cajoling and free design work by a talented designer can induce substantial improvements by property owners and retailers as they undertake necessary upkeep, sign replacement, renovation, etc. The threat of historic guidelines or discretionary design review adds a “stick” to the “carrot” of free help.

Stepping up in price and effort, full-scale building and façade improvements are in order. The RDA and Town are already supporting several such projects (e.g., RDA’s Façade Improvement Grant Program and design technical assistance).

One inexpensive improvement would be to spotlight Rockville’s unusual number of distinguished landmarks. Most downtowns consist of mostly “background” buildings with a few handsome edifices. Somehow, little Rockville has the opposite: many striking buildings with far fewer than usual filler buildings. Nightlighting these buildings – a number of which tower over downtown thanks to changes in topography – could make downtown a memorable place. This strategy has bearing on all of three of the approaches being tested here.

One very expensive improvement would be to “sunshine” or “daylight” the Hockanum River, that is, uncovering buried segments of the waterway. This would involve demolishing some buildings and portions of parking lots. It would require substantial acquisition and engineering. The results would likely be quite spectacular since many communities have sparked major investment with such open space amenities. But this option only makes sense if major housing development is pursued, as that would create both the reason and, by virtue of site availability, the opportunity to re-engineer the river and downtown’s infrastructure. Until such development is contemplated, it may be nice to simply remind people of the river: improve the several riverside park spaces, especially the waterfall overlook; and, as some have already suggested, using paint and interpretive signage to show where the river is and explain its historic significance.

Places to Socialize

Central Park is perhaps the most important element of this part of the strategy. The current efforts to re-program, enlarge and improve the park are terrific and appropriate. Securing resources for these park enhancements should remain a top priority.

Outdoor dining and sales can also be useful in creating a sociable environment in Downtown. Outdoor expansion of restaurants and stores is particularly viable where there is significant passby travel and/or outside visitors – both of which are true of Rockville, due to commuting patterns and hospital visitation. Outdoor retail and restaurant activity can be a problem where there is high pedestrian crowding and/or narrow sidewalks. Neither of these characteristics is true of Downtown Rockville at the present time; and regulations can specify a minimum passable sidewalk of, say, four feet.

Special events have their place here, but some careful thought is needed. Big-time events would be more appropriate if the emphasized approach is Restaurant Row; jazz festivals, etc. are useful to reach a wide audience in a large trade area. Small events would be more appropriate if the emphasized approach is Nostalgia; farmers markets, etc. are useful to reach a consistent audience, week after week. Specialized events would be more appropriate if the emphasis is on gentrification; house tours are useful to reach a targeted audience of potential homesteaders while park and garden projects are effective for reaching existing gentry, as well as all local residents.

Our best guess is that the RDA, hospital, and others should put aside such considerations for the time being, and emphasize modest events that build off of existing interests, whatever these might be. As with farmers markets, the biggest and best have generally started out as the love children of a few enthusiasts. In a year or so, the RDA and others would be in a better position to evaluate what is working and what deserves emphasis.

Tenant Recruitment

Rockville Center should focus on attracting businesses that complement Downtown's market position and support the development of a market niche. The Town must look to stores that draw from the existing anchors, namely the hospital, courts, town hall, etc. However, Rockville should avoid recruiting businesses that require high foot traffic since Downtown is not currently at that stage. The following types of businesses appear to have the greatest potential in Rockville Center:

- Casual dining, aimed at court visitors, with gourmet take-out component (including “fast-casual” chains).
- Sit-down restaurants, aimed at residents who become familiar with Rockville Center.

- Ethnic restaurants.
- Catering business, with small retail outlet.
- Health food based on positive image of the hospital and neighborhood revitalization efforts, with take-out component.
- Micro-enterprise/start-up businesses, looking for low rents.
- Gifts/card shop, within sight of the hospital entrance, with book and/or candy department.
- Specialty florist in close proximity to hospital (e.g., Korean florist)
- Antique or home furnishing stores, based on neighborhood revitalization effort and existing furniture store.

A tenant recruitment strategy involves significant legwork by the RDA for only an occasional success. Chains and franchises go to malls and shopping centers, not struggling downtowns. Nor are these types of stores generally preferred, since they reduce rather than amplify the sense of downtown as a special place with service-oriented retailers. Tenant recruitment would be necessary, however, for the Restaurant Row approach, which involves targeting a specific type of retailer. Some recruitment of restaurants would be of value to both the Nostalgia and Housing approaches, as they help to create the retail mix that makes downtown attractive. It is no accident that the residents interviewed in connection with this study effort indicated that their favorite businesses in Rockville were the ice cream parlor and café.

Given the Court/Hospital employee and visitor populations, Rockville should consider recruiting one of the newer, “fast-casual” restaurant chains (e.g., Panera Bread, Quizno’s Sub, Chipotle) to fill the retail space below the Adult Learning Center. These businesses are a new take on the fast food chain, and have proven quite successful. Although no wait service is provided, “fast-causal” restaurants offer a higher quality dining experience as compared with traditional fast food chains, focusing on improved atmosphere and better quality food. As such, their price points are a little higher. This tenant strategy appears promising since several “fast-casual” businesses have proven willing to locate near hospitals. One major constraint that may arise is the particular space requirements of a given chain.

To initiate a broader restaurant recruitment strategy (as part of the Restaurant Row Approach), Rockville should identify successful restaurants within a 20 to 40 minute drive of Downtown. In particular, it would be valuable to uncover restaurants with locational qualities similar to Rockville (e.g., near a hospital). A Rockville representative should then target the owners of the selected restaurants to inquire about their interest in open-

ing a second restaurant location in Downtown Rockville. Market data and leasing information should be integrated into the recruitment pitch.

Another potential recruitment effort could focus on antique and home furnishing businesses. These businesses neither rely heavily on foot traffic nor require as many actual sales (i.e., it is less about sales volume and more about the sale of big ticket items). There are some features of Downtown Rockville that would appeal to antiques or home furnishings businesses, namely: relatively low rents; varied, idiosyncratic space; and the presence of existing antique/furniture businesses that have some pull.

Tenant recruitment requires a targeted marketing piece. In this case, it would emphasize the diversity of clientele (daytime hospital and court workers) as well as residents. Recruitment also requires champions, such as other local entrepreneurs. For Downtown Rockville, the owner of Loom City Creamery could play such a role by offering a credible success story. Additionally, upgrading and diversifying the product lines of existing businesses to better match the demands generated from existing anchors would strengthen these operations and help in attracting new tenants to Rockville Center. For example, existing eateries could introduce a delivery component (if not already offered) and actively market this option to local employees.

It is important to remember that investing in more fundamental improvements to Downtown is a more permanent and effective approach to addressing retail vacancies than tenant recruitment.

Redevelopment

There is only so much land in Rockville Center. Market support is also limited, so new development would also involve employing limited subsidies. Once developed, the new buildings and/or uses remain for indefinite periods, even if they do not contribute to the synergy and prosperity of the center. The vestiges of the Town's dalliance with Urban Renewal attest to this. Thus, these decisions should be carefully weighed, with both feasibility and cost-benefit analyses. Redevelopment, more than any of the other options, requires hard decisions with regard to the long-term approach to Rockville Center.

Nostalgia approach. One option would be additional retail redevelopment, in accordance with proposals by retail tenants and/or developers. Such proposals would likely result in only a temporary boost in downtown's fortunes, unless there was a more fundamental improvement in the nature of Rockville Center.

Restaurant Row approach. Another option would involve a theater or other cultural uses that would bolster Rockville's potential niche as a Restaurant Row.

A theater would be contingent on substantial capital subsidy for the theater itself and perhaps structured parking. It would also be contingent on operating endowments. This in turn would likely be contingent on a resident theater company, begging the question of why a theater company would locate here instead of, say, Hartford or Manchester.

Artist housing is more viable, given the prevalence of mill buildings. The Amerbelle mill building at the eastern end of Rockville Center off Grove Street is potentially ideal for this use, since it (1) lacks parking, inviting a use which involves larger live/work lofts rather than smaller apartments, and thus generates less parking demand in aggregate; and (2) is partially used, inviting an amalgam of live and work space that evolves over time, rather than wholesale redevelopment. The building also adjoins a wonderful waterfall and overlook, which, if improved, would add to the prominence and allure of the lofts, for artists and visitors alike.

The New England Civil War Museum is a potential but limited asset, here. This museum apparently has a rich collection, and is housed in a wonderful landmark. It is, however, run on a shoe-string; and it is not likely that the collection is so spectacular as to attract public or private gifts sufficient to put it on a whole other footing. The rule of thumb in entertainment and culture is that people will travel in each direction up to one-fourth the time of the entertainment/cultural event itself. To go further than Vernon, the museum would need to offer a collection that easily took more than one hour for the casual (i.e., non-Civil War buff) visitor. Based on our interviews, however worthy of protection and support, the museum is not likely to prove a panacea for downtown.

Housing approach. The third option would involve housing development in Rockville Center, not just in the surrounding neighborhood.

This includes lower-cost conversion of upper-story space in existing downtown commercial and mill buildings. Most of these buildings are historic, and many would involve rental housing, in which case the developers could benefit from national tax incentives for the restoration of income-producing properties listed on or eligible for listing on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. Special approvals are needed from the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), likely entailing a need for technical assistance by the Town or RDA.

Housing development also includes more expensive new construction, taking advantage of the assemblages created by Urban Renewal for now-defunct or marginal commercial development. This potentially large redevelopment would likely involve direct subsidies or, as is more likely, the national tax incentives associated with “80/20” mixed-income housing developments that are approved by the State.

Neighborhood Improvements

Of course, any and all upgrades to the neighborhood surrounding Rockville Center benefit all of the approaches. They make the physical improvements that underlie the Nostalgia and Restaurant Row approaches more sustainable. They provide more local clientele for better stores and restaurants. They are, of course, an integral element in the Housing Approach.

Village District designation is another important vehicle for bolstering neighborhood improvements. The State of Connecticut is ambiguous (at best) when it comes to discretionary design review, except for Village Districts. These districts can, for all practical purposes, be the equivalent of Historic Districts in most other states. Rockville’s key asset is its historic quality. While individual property owners will benefit from demolition or disregard of historic standards, the downtown and community will suffer. This situation is no different than the underlying logic for all zoning controls, such as for height, density, parking, etc. The Town should move aggressively towards setting up Village District designation (and/or related historic safeguards). Securing this status early is important to ensure that as redevelopment momentum picks up, there is not damage to downtown’s historic fabric. Additionally, the Town might also consider creating a design overlay district, since these designations have proven to be another effective mechanism for bringing about desired physical and design improvements.

National Register District listing is a potential “carrot” to complement the “stick” of Village District regulations. As explained, National Register listing conveys potential federal tax incentives for restoration of landmarks and contributory buildings.

Another angle for neighborhood improvement is to foster the conversion of some of the existing multi-family dwellings to single-family dwellings. This could be achieved in part through land-use regulations by introducing single-family zoning to select areas around downtown.

The Town and Hospital are to be commended with their efforts to target full blocks for renovation and upgrade. One option to explore would be Hospital guarantees of mortgages given to Hospital workers who choose housing within a walking distance, i.e., in or adjoining Rockville Center. Taking this position would make it easier for banks to risk their capital. Housing within walking distance makes it easier for households to cut back to one car, rather than two, and thus to afford the housing in the first place. The rare foreclosure might involve resale of the property at a loss; but if efforts are successful, it is more likely to involve resale at a profit, even if the sale is restricted to Hospital workers. Such programs have proved successful in other communities, and are the underpinning of the nationally recognized community revitalization efforts of the University of Pennsylvania, for example.

CONCLUSION

Rockville can become a civic and dining destination for Vernon, as well as Tolland and Ellington to the north, bolstered by a stronger residential market in the center and adjoining historic buildings and areas. Existing magnets – such as the hospital, courts and town hall – generate a weekday and daytime clientele for restaurants; this clientele complements the weekend and evening clientele generated by local residents. More, and more affluent residents would diversify the local population, and upgrade the reputation of Rockville as a social mixing place.

There are short term/less expensive strategies that at once create more of a restaurant destination, and at the same time complement or bolster the residential character of downtown. These strategies are summarized as follows:

- Pedestrian Improvements: sidewalk repairs, benches in front of businesses, lighting
- Parking Management: enforcement of short-term parking, shared parking plan
- Tenant Recruitment: restaurant recruitment, marketing of available space
- Arrival and Access: gateway signage and central park landscaping
- Physical Upgrades: storefront and minor façade improvements, spotlighting edifices
- Places to Socialize: resources for central park, outdoor dining, modest events
- Neighborhood Enhancement: Village District and Historic District designation, design overlay district, hospital mortgage guarantees, single-family zoning