

LOWELL MASSACHUSETTS

"THE ENVISIONING CENTRALVILLE PLAN"

Lowell's Division of Planning and Development (DPD) has engaged the Community Growth and Land-Use Planning course of MIT (11.360) to envision redevelopment along the Bridge Street Corridor and in surrounding residential areas in the Centralville Neighborhood and recommend implementation strategies to make the plan a reality. Keeping with the smart-growth principles of vibrant and walkable neighborhoods for all of its citizens, the project is designed to promote and enhance the character of the existing Centralville neighborhood.

BACKGROUND & PROJECT AREA:

Since its inception, Lowell has been a port of entry for new immigrants from around the world looking for a better way of life. These new arrivals have helped to shape the character of the City's neighborhoods, and remain an integral part of Lowell's past and future. Diversity is key to Lowell's identity, and the City works to maintain a population characterized by diverse incomes and ethnic backgrounds as an essential component of the community's character and revitalization.

To attain these goals, Lowell continues to focus on protecting and improving streetscapes, neighborhood commercial centers, natural areas, and public squares, as well as public safety, education, recreation, and other municipal services, as codified in the Comprehensive Master Plan (2003) and recently adopted Zoning Code and Map. These documents and related initiatives are designed to enhance and promote the historic and cultural character of the City and its neighborhoods and ensure a high quality of life for current and future generations.

A short walk north across the Merrimack River from the historic downtown area is Centralville, an ethnically diverse, working-class neighborhood. At the heart of the neighborhood is Bridge Street, which connects downtown with Dracut to the north and provides businesses critical access to the downtown and the rest of the city's roadway network. Bridge Street's first commercial activity dates to 1870 with neighborhood grocery stores and butcher shops. Nowadays, a number of in-fill opportunities are present along Bridge Street. Given Lowell's commitment to its neighborhoods, the city is seeking recommendations on what type of in-fill is appropriate and beneficial for the neighborhood and what interventions the city might make to make that vision reality.

Student work in the course will principally address the neighborhood business zone and adjacent residential neighborhood along Bridge Street between the Merrimack River and the Robinson Middle School.

SCOPE OF WORK:

There are three layers of questions that Lowell DPD would like answered:

- ◆ What is an appropriate vision for the neighborhood?
- ◆ What interventions can the city make to encourage that vision?
- ◆ How might the city finance those interventions?

The context for these questions is provided by the city's Comprehensive Master Plan, which places priority on protecting and enhancing the unique character of the neighborhoods, as well as weaving together residential and commercial districts. In regards to the final question, DPD expects to utilize the recommendations of the course to seek Neighborhood Strategy Revitalization Area (NSRA) status for the Bridge Street Corridor from HUD. NSRA is a designation from HUD for a distressed area of a community that allows more effective targeting of community development resources. The NSRA designation will allow the City of Lowell to concentrate federal grant funds on implementation of specific goals of the plan. The city would like for the course to consider the feasibility of this application with the input of city officials.

DELIVERABLES:

The Envisioning Centralville Plan should address the question of redevelopment along the Bridge Street Corridor and the surrounding neighborhood by addressing the following questions:

- ◆ What are appropriate in-fill projects for the key parcels in the district?
 - Bridge and West Sixth intersection
 - Bridge and West Third intersection
 - Riverfront and Gateway parcels
- ◆ Are the current zoning codes and guidelines sufficient for the district? Specifically, how can the NB (Neighborhood Business) zoning district serve to ensure that it preserves walkable neighborhood-oriented retail and mixed-use within its borders?
- ◆ What type of specific interventions (eg. pedestrian improvements, wayfinding, parking improvements, green space, traffic calming, etc.) can the city make in order to encourage appropriate projects?

- ◆ What regulatory tools can the City use to protect and enhance the goals of the Master Plan and the proposals in the 'Envisioning Centralville' plan?
- ◆ What costs are involved in implementing the aforementioned interventions?
- ◆ What is the added value to the neighborhood from the projects in question? And what are the risks involved (eg. Gentrification)?

Two presentations are required:

1. A Preliminary Findings public presentation will be scheduled for late October 2005.
2. A Final Report public presentation at completion of the semester.

In addition to officials from the Division of Planning and Development, members of the community, City Council members, Planning Board members, and other interested parties will be invited to attend each meeting.

Students will meet with representatives from the Centralville Neighborhood Action Group and Centralville Neighborhood Partnership at the beginning of the semester along with officials from DPD. Students will have the opportunity to coordinate interviews with members of these groups as well as neighborhood business owners and other interested parties.

