



The Farmington Avenue Joint Committee

A New Farmington Avenue

Hartford, Connecticut



Project for Public Spaces, Inc. • Abeles Phillips Preiss & Shapiro, Inc. • Urbitran Associates, Inc.

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A NEW FARMINGTON AVENUE

Prepared for:

The Farmington Avenue Joint Committee
Hartford, Connecticut

Prepared by:

Project for Public Spaces, Inc.
153 Waverly Place
New York, New York 10014

With:

Abeles Phillips Preiss & Shapiro, Inc.
434 Sixth Avenue
New York, New York 10011

Urbitran Associates, Inc.
71 West 23rd Street
New York, New York 10010

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INTRODUCTION

We envision Farmington Avenue in Hartford as a gateway to the City, as a charming and beautiful public realm, as a vital urban place that serves the residents of the neighborhoods it passes through, and as a Grand Avenue uniting Greater Hartford's western suburbs with downtown Hartford. This renewed Avenue supports a high-quality mix of unique commercial, cultural, professional, residential and academic activities; it is home to some of the most important institutions in the Capitol Region. The Avenue is a place where elderly people feel safe and where parents are comfortable bringing their children. It is a profitable business location. It is a center of entertainment and recreation. Streets and facilities welcome pedestrians and bicyclists. Commercial buildings and public improvements complement the architectural heritage of the adjacent residences to create a unique sense of place. The Avenue reflects the diversity of families and life styles that is one of Hartford's most valued features. People are drawn from around the region to this vibrant center of community life.

Farmington Avenue Joint Committee (FAJC), Vision Statement For Farmington Avenue

This comprehensive vision statement set the stage for this extensive study of Farmington Avenue – a study not only about how the street functions today, but how it could be transformed through enhancement of the street, its retail environment, and as well as its management.

Farmington Avenue—stretching from Union Station to the West Hartford line—has had a long, rich history in the city of Hartford. Once a “Millionaire’s Row” with distinguished mansions like that built by Mark Twain, the avenue has evolved into a street which actually changes character significantly every two or so blocks. Historic and cultural landmarks and important institutions still line much of the avenue, ranging from the Mark Twain and Harriet Beecher Stowe Museums to the corporate headquarters of Aetna to St. Joseph’s Cathedral. Interspersed are smaller landmark buildings and the renovated residential complex of Clemens Place.



Farmington Avenue yesterday, today, and tomorrow.



There are two distinct commercial districts on the avenue: Asylum Hill and the West End. These areas are given the most attention in this study, as they are the most heavily used sections of the street, at least by their adjacent residential neighborhoods. While traffic speed, pedestrian hazards, bicycle safety, and a lack of “a sense of place” are problems along the whole of Farmington, it is in the retail districts that these problems become most acute. Moreover, these districts are not fully serving the retail needs of the adjacent neighborhoods, so a considerable part of this study has been devoted to an economic and marketing analysis of their existing performance as well as their potential, especially given Hartford’s continued population decline. These two districts operate relatively separately, and each has its own problems and opportunities.

Given these and other problems, the Farmington Avenue Joint Committee was established in 1996 in order to develop a comprehensive plan for the corridor’s enhancement. The Joint Committee of over 20 members represents the diverse constituencies along this 1.6 mile stretch of the avenue. In 2000, Project for Public Spaces (PPS), a non-profit community planning organization from New York City, was selected to prepare this comprehensive plan through an extensive public participation process, working with its subconsultants Urbitran (traffic engineering) and Abeles Phillips Preiss and Shapiro (economic and planning consultants).

The Farmington Avenue study area extends from Prospect Avenue to the vicinity of Union Station (Spruce Street). For the purpose of this study, the project team, with input from the Farmington Avenue Joint Committee, has divided the entire study area into six areas. These are as follows, moving east to west from downtown to West Hartford.

- *East Gateway (Union Station to Asylum Place/Flower)*: This area takes in the connection between downtown and Union Station, and Farmington Avenue, under an overpass to I-84. This area has been termed “no man’s land” given its stark character, extensive roadway traffic, vacant sites, and lack of a sense of gateway to either downtown or Farmington Avenue.
- *Aetna/Institutional Zone (Asylum Place/Flower to Sigourney)*: The headquarters of Aetna with a huge front lawn facing St. Joseph’s Cathedral, and other office uses dominate this zone on Farmington.
- *Asylum Hill Commercial District (Sigourney to Forest)*: There is a lot of intrusion of the

automobile in this area, although Asylum Hill has a less suburban layout and older, more significant architecture than the West End.

- *Central Residential and Cultural Zone (Forest to Denison)*: With the handsomely renovated Clemens Place and historic house museums, this area features gracious front yards and large amounts of green space.
- *West End Commercial District (Denison to Whitney)*: A greatly altered area, this area features extensive intrusion of “suburban strip” type gas stations and neighborhood retailing, intermixed with older commercial structures and residences converted to business use. Most of the front yards are a mish mash of parking lots.
- *West Gateway (Whitney to Prospect)*: This is a mixed use, but primarily residential/office area. Much of the original fabric of the street is intact here, with many handsome buildings, front yards, large trees, and minimal intrusion of parking lots.

METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

In identifying the issues and recommendations, the project team has used different techniques to investigate how the street functions and the perceptions that residents, office workers, and others have about it. The goal was to look at the five key issues presented in this report from a variety of points of view, using a variety of methods. Based on this research, design opportunities for transforming the streets and other public spaces into vital and attractive places intrinsic to community life and identity have been identified.

The study included:

- *A brainstorming session* held with the FAJC.
- *Interviews* with key individuals, including Hartford officials, property owners, and institutional and other community members, to obtain their views on the goals and objectives, their plans for future projects in the study area, and any additional information

that may have a bearing on the project. Interviews included representatives of: City of Hartford Department of Public Works, Planning Department, and Department of Community Development; West Hartford Planning Department; Greater Hartford Arts Council; Mark Twain House; Colonial Theater; ConnDOT; Transit District; CRCOG; Connecticut Transit; West End and Asylum Hill: Neighborhood Revitalization Zones (NRZs); St. Francis Medical Center; Harriet Beecher Stowe Center; Aetna; Clemens Place; Connecticut Bicycle Coalition; and St. Joseph's Cathedral.

- *Review of the many existing studies* that have been completed (e.g., the Hartford West Major Investment Study, the Asylum Hill and West End Neighborhood Revitalization Zone NRZ Plans, the Economic and Urban Design Action Strategy for downtown Hartford) as well as studies now under way (e.g., the Hartford-New Britain busway study and the West Side Access Study) among others. Existing traffic counts were reviewed, and additional counts collected. Current zoning codes, city ordinances, and programs were studied to identify any regulations that may discourage the creation of an attractive and pedestrian-friendly environment.
- Existing *land uses, conditions of open spaces, building contextual relationships* and exterior appearances, parking and loading areas, landscape elements and vehicular and pedestrian circulation were analyzed and documented, and physical conditions and urban design qualities of the Farmington Avenue streetscape were evaluated, including facades, landscaping and pedestrian amenities.
- Using the city's video cameras posted at the East Gateway, Laurel Street, and Sisson Avenue, analyses of lane utilization and obstruction of lanes by parked vehicles, as well as pedestrian jaywalking patterns, were completed.
- A *community forum* held in February attracted 100 people who gave their input and ideas.
- Surveys of residents were mailed to 2,500 households in adjacent neighborhoods. Though nearly 1,000 were returned undeliverable, 145 completed forms were returned from a total of 1,500 actually delivered. These survey results have a statistical error of plus or minus 10%. The survey respondents were evenly distributed between residents of the West End, and Asylum Hill. Over half of respondents have lived in their neigh-

borhood for 6 years or more. Survey respondents were predominantly female – two-thirds with ages between 36 and 50. There was a clear split between renters and homeowners, with 56% renters and 43% owners. One-fourth of respondents reported a household income of less than \$20,000, while another fourth reported an income of over \$80,000.

- *Surveys of businesses* were collected from 95 businesses, 75% of the total in Asylum Hill and 73% of the total in West End. The majority of businesses were owner operated (60%), and leased their place of business (75%).
- *Surveys of employees working on Farmington Avenue* were completed by 70 people, which does not constitute a statistical sample but shows interesting trends nonetheless. Half were Aetna and ING employees, 27% were from Imagineers, and the rest were employees of various other businesses located on the avenue. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 36 and 50, got to Farmington Avenue by car, and reported a household income of over \$51, 000. More women (62%) responded to the survey than men.
- *“Placemaking” workshops* were conducted in early April in both Asylum Hill and the West End. In these workshops, participants conducted “place audits” of specific sites, with teams of two or three people evaluating different blocks in terms of how they are functioning and generating ideas for their improvement. These ideas were then shared and discussed with the other participants – yielding many specific ideas for improving these two retail districts.
- A *demographic analysis* was conducted collecting and analyzing data about trade areas and trade area characteristics, population, number of households, in- and out-migration of population and households, ethnic characteristics, income characteristics, spending power, etc.
- As part of a *parking analysis*, license numbers were recorded hourly on one day in key off street parking lots in both Asylum Hill and the West End. In addition, on-street parking was analyzed during off-peak hours (early weekday mornings, late evenings, and weekend mornings). This information has been analyzed to study occupancy/vacancy of different lots and on-street locations as well as turnover, and overall utilization patterns.



The collected and analyzed data, as well as the major issues identified, were presented in graphic and slide format to the Farmington Avenue Joint Committee in late May, 2001. The forum included a number community members and groups, and was successful at achieving consensus as to the overall design direction for the project.

Two general street reconfiguration options to address the issues and opportunities were presented to the community in late July, 2001. In addition to the comments from over 100 participants at this meeting, FAJC staff met in a series of smaller meetings to collect concerns and ideas about the proposed plans. Following these sessions, a preferred alternative – presented in this report – was developed.

FORMAT OF THE REPORT

This report is organized into four main sections. First, broad issues are discussed, summarizing the information and data collected about the “problems” of the streets, followed by recommendations for addressing those problems. Next, the proposed design concept for the street is presented area by area, along with specific findings and recommendations. Section Three describes streetscape design features which apply to all districts. Finally, a section on implementation and next steps describes both short and long term strategies for completing the design of the project as well as suggestions for financing and funding of construction. A glossary of abbreviations is included in an appendix. Technical Appendices are presented in a separate document for those interested in more data collected during the study.