

FARMINGTON AVENUE: A DESIGN CHALLENGE



Farmington Avenue, with its gracious lawns and historic structures, has special qualities treasured by the community, despite its many problems. While these special qualities are recognized, they must also be considered to be endangered because of outdated zoning regulations. New tools are needed to assure that the character of Farmington Avenue is preserved for future generations.

One of the reasons for Farmington Avenue's unique character comes from the setback of buildings from the street, creating a building-to-building distance of about 145 feet. To get an idea of the scale of this space, one need only realize that this could be filled with 10 to 12 lanes of traffic (certainly not a recommendation of this study!). How this setback will be used in the future – whether as more attractive front parking areas or as landscaped lawns – will have a major impact on the image of the street.

Findings

In Section II below, the urban design and zoning characteristics of each district on the avenue are explored in more detail, including the features that make each area of the avenue unique. This section discusses the issues which impact upon all of the areas:

Land Use Controls

The types of permitted uses on the different parts of Farmington Avenue are determined by the city zoning ordinance. The predominant zoning in the West End and Asylum Hill commercial areas is B3 and B4, with R01 and R02 in between. B2 zoning is found in the eastern gateway, near the Asylum Avenue intersection.



- *Retail* uses. The provisions of the B4 zone are generally consistent with the goal of promoting neighborhood-oriented businesses and a pedestrian-oriented character in Farmington's shopping districts. It allows a wide variety of retail, service, and eatery uses, while prohibiting automotive uses, like car washes, car sales, service stations, and repair shops. In contrast, the B3 zone – which is present in spots in both the West End and Asylum Hill – is quite permissive, allowing not only such automotive uses, but also quasi-industrial uses like a diaper service, industrial laundry service, and rug cleaning service.

- Currently, even though the B2 and B4 zones prohibit uses that specifically serve the automobile, it should be stressed that other commercial uses may be built in an auto-oriented format, such as drive-through banks and fast-food restaurants. Commercial sites may also be built with large parking lots that do not allow easy or convenient pedestrian circulation, the Kinko's building being the prime example. It is for this reason that even areas that are currently zoned B4 have been developed in a fashion that much resembles typical strip-style commercial development. Moreover, both B3 and B4 districts allow sit-down restaurants as-of-right, and the code makes no distinction between fast-food and other restaurants. Thus, any fast-food restaurant could be developed in the B2, B3, and B4 zones.
- *Office and residential uses.* All finance, insurance, and real estate services are permitted as-of-right in each of the R01, R02, B2, B3, and B4 zones. All residential uses are allowed in all five districts. However, 1-, 2-, and 3-family residences are prohibited in the B2 district, to encourage high-density housing near downtown. These mixed-used office and residential zoning districts seem to be appropriate to the vision of Farmington Avenue, although their specific requirements need to be revised.

Design and Development Controls

In general, the city's zoning ordinance is out of sync with the community's vision for Farmington Avenue – as it allows development to occur that is out of context with other buildings and architecture on the street. Moreover, parking and signage regulations need to be revamped to reflect the new design of the street as well as to require a higher level of design quality and uniformity than currently exists on the avenue.

Residents and businesses have also cited inadequate zoning enforcement as a problem, particularly with regard to parking and signage. For example, although some of the parking lots along Farmington Avenue have been grandfathered in, allowing them to exist legally under the existing zoning code, some others may be in violation of the code. Some of the portable signs and banners attached to building facades also may be in violation. Some abandoned signs remain as well, although the code requires their removal. Better enforcement can help make the street more attractive to both customers and passersby.

Development Density

Very high intensities of development are theoretically possible on Farmington Avenue. Allowable F.A.R.s (Floor Area Ratio) range from 2.0 to 7.0. (This means that the total square footage of a building is determined by multiplying the size of the site by a number between 2.0 and 7.0). Useable open space standards range from 40 to 50 square feet per person. With the high allowable F.A.R.s, it is unclear whether a residential developer could build to the maximum F.A.R. and still provide required parking and open space. Parking and open space requirements may be the greater constraints on residential build-out potential, not F.A.R. Residential development is not likely to exceed four stories nor to include structured parking garages except for the city's site in the East Gateway, because tower and garage construction are costly and unwarranted by current land values. Both the parking and open space requirements should be re-evaluated for residential development, given the goal of creating a "main street" feeling on Farmington. Because tower and garage construction are more financially feasible, office development can achieve the current maximum F.A.R.s along the corridor.

Parking

Zoning regulations deal with several aspects of parking:



- *Front parking.* Many of the required front yards along Farmington Avenue – particularly in the West End and Asylum Hill shopping areas – have been converted into parking areas. According to § 35-941(b), parking is not allowed in any part of any front yard. However, the code also stated that “in any case where vehicles were permitted to park within twenty-five (25) feet of the front lot line in a B3 district or B4 district prior to March 26, 1984, such parking shall continue as a permitted use.” Thus, such pre-existing parking lots are still legal under the provisions of the code, although any front-yard parking lots established after the March 26th, 1984 date are in violation of the zoning code.
- *Rear/side yard parking.* Although parking is generally permitted in side and rear yards in business districts, it is prohibited in the rear yard of an RO2 zone abutting an R5, R6, R7, or R8 district, regardless of the use in the RO2 zone. Many of the RO2 zones on Farmington Avenue abut R5 or R7 zones to the rear, limiting the potential for accommodating parking in those rear areas. As an alternative to prohibition, design controls, described below, can address the negative impacts of parking in these areas.

- *Shared parking.* Currently, the city zoning code allows only very limited shared parking arrangements, requiring all businesses to locate parking on, or very near, their own land – without regard to the availability of on-street parking or to the possibility of consolidating rear lots serving multiple users. Parking spaces for multi-family structures must be located within 500 feet of the entrance, and for non-residential structures, within 750 feet. More distant parking lots are allowed if a shuttle is provided.

The exception is churches, which may rely on nearby off-street parking lots (belonging to theaters, stadiums, auditoriums, other places of public assembly, stores, office buildings, and industrial establishments) to meet up to 75% of their normal parking requirements. Similarly, other places of public assembly may rely on the parking lots of stores, office buildings, and industrial establishments to meet up to 50% of their normal requirement.



- *Landscaping and buffers.* Current design controls, or lack thereof, have contributed to the bleak-looking expanses of asphalt along Farmington Avenue. On residential and commercial properties, the screening of parking lots with more than 5 spaces (by fence, wall, or compact hedge) is required for areas adjoining or facing a residential district or use. The screening has to be a minimum of 4 feet tall and a maximum of 6 feet tall. The fence or wall can be built right up to the property line. For parking lots with more than 30 spaces, the screening must be dense year-round evergreens. These provisions suggest that, although parking lots with more than 30 spaces have adequate perimeter screening, smaller lots do not. Because a fence or a wall can be used instead of a hedge in lots with 30 spaces or less, no landscaping is actually required at all. In addition, minimum setbacks of 10 feet are required only if next to a house, school, hospital, or human care institution; in all other cases, no setback is required.
- In terms of landscaping within lots, only employee parking lots have regulations. Provisions for employee parking lots include adequate landscaping provisions, however, requiring four-foot landscaped setbacks and a four-foot landscaped strip between every two tiers of parking spaces. Both the setback and the strip must be planted with trees, shrubs, or other evergreen vegetation. The landscaping has to be a minimum of 4 feet tall. There are no similar regulations for commercial lots (used by shoppers, clients, or customers) and residential lots (used by residents).

Signs



In response to the challenge of creating a retail identity with such a large setback, businesses – often in buildings that are obscured with trees – provide large, bold, multiple, and vertical signs so as to maximize exposure to passing auto traffic. Combined with the general clutter of much of the parking and the often unattractive storefronts, the image of the street becomes more of an “auto strip” than an historic urban, neighborhood commercial district.

- Free-standing signs. Currently, free-standing signs are permitted in all the major zones along the corridor – B2, B3, B4, R01, and R02. Free-standing signs are allowed to be 20 to 30 feet tall, but not in excess of the window-sill line of the second story. Although this limitation appropriately keeps visual nuisances away from second-story offices and residences, it could also discourage businesses from moving into space in multi-story buildings, if they can find a comparable single-story space elsewhere. Although “flashing, revolving, or animated signs and signs that make noise” are prohibited, the zoning code contains few provisions regarding the design, materials, or lettering of signage
- In the B3 and B4 zones, signs must be located behind the building line. If they are in front of the building line, the maximum sign height for signs on a pole is reduced to 13 feet and they have to be set back a minimum of five feet from the street. This suggests that potentially taller signs (25 feet in the B3 zone and 20 feet in the B4 zone) would be located farther back on the property (and closer to the residential areas behind the building). This also results in signs that are bulky (short and stout) along the sidewalk, as can be seen at the gas station at the corner of Sherman Avenue, and taller signs that are setback from the sidewalk, as can be seen at the laundromat between Whitney and Evergreen Streets. Such short signs would be more appropriate in a residential or office setting, where they would accent a front-yard garden, but in retail areas, they are hard to see by motorists and can end up cluttering the pedestrian environment.
- In the R0 districts, signs are not required to be behind the building line, and there is no 13-foot height maximum for signs that are located in front of the building line. As a result, even though total sign height is limited to 20 feet (the same as in the B4 zone and shorter than in the B3 zone), the R0 zones can actually appear to have taller signs. The 20-foot signs in the R0 districts could be erected right up against the side-

walk, whereas the 20-foot or 25-foot signs in the B4 or B3 zones would have to be set farther back.

- *Building signs.* Business signs attached to the façade of a building, which are permitted only in the B2, B3, and B4 zones, are regulated in much the same way as free-standing signs. No business signs can be attached to residential buildings, and for any building with a mix of business and residential uses, the signs can only be attached to the non-residential part of the building. This provision is entirely appropriate. The zoning code is currently unclear as to whether business signs attached to the building must be attached flat, or whether they could be hung from an awning or some other apparatus projecting from the wall. In all zones along the corridor, small identification signs are allowed to be attached to the building. These smaller scale signs are well-suited to the residential and office environment.
- *Outdoor advertising.* “Outdoor advertising” signs are permitted in the B3 zone (Signs related to a business, product, or service offered off-premises). Outdoor advertising signs must be 1,000 feet apart, but a sign can be double-faced. Under this regulation, one or two billboard signs in the West End’s B3 zone could be placed.

Urban Design

There are essentially only minimal other design controls that protect the distinctive character of the street and allow future development to be compatible with the community’s vision:

- *Building design.* Farmington Avenue has an eclectic mix of building types – from historic homes, to 1920’s-era apartment buildings, to strip-style shopping centers. Aside from setbacks and F.A.R., nothing in the zoning code directly regulates the location, orientation, scale or design of buildings or additions. Some of the strip-style buildings on Farmington Avenue have large blank walls, inadequate pedestrian access, and poor façade treatments, features which are inconsistent with the traditional format of older buildings. Although it is not necessary to mandate a single architectural style along Farmington Avenue (architectural variety is actually an asset in urban areas, not least because it distinguishes the city from bland-looking suburban areas), design controls can help create a more inviting and pedestrian-friendly environment, particularly in the commercial nodes of the West End and Asylum Hill.





- *Historic preservation.* Protection of historic structures on Farmington is weak, as it is throughout the city. There is no city historic preservation legislation, although there are two local historic districts established under state statute in the city's residential areas. The state authorizes municipalities to establish locally designated historic districts and individual properties⁵. The enabling statute states that for designated resources, municipalities can require exterior changes (alterations, additions, demolitions) viewable from a public way to be consistent with the existing architectural character of the district. Such local districts are regulated by a local Historic District Commission. Creating a local historic district on Farmington would require the support of the majority of landowners, and would probably be difficult to establish on technical grounds as well given the significant gaps in historic fabric that exist on the street.
- Portions of Farmington Avenue and certain buildings along the corridor are already listed on the National or State Registers of Historic Places, affording them some limited protections. In addition, the Mark Twain House is a designated National Historic Landmark. National Historic Landmarks are designated by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior for their exceptional value in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States. There are only about 2,500 National Historic Landmarks throughout the country. These designated historic resources are listed in Table 1.

Sites that are listed on the National or State registers of Historic Places, or determined to be National Historic Landmarks, are recognized as valuable national or state historic resources and are protected from being damaged or destroyed as the result of federal or state actions, such as a highway expansion. The listing of a property on either an historic register or landmarks list does not strip the property owner of his or her rights. The owner of a site listed on the National Register is "free to maintain, manage, or dispose of the property", provided that the property has received no federal funding.⁶ The same principal applies to National Historic Landmarks.⁷

Historic districts are typically designated in areas where there is a generally consistent style of period of architecture.⁸ Although many of the neighborhoods abutting or cutting

6 National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places <www.cr.nps.gov/nr>, visited November 13, 2001.

7 National Park Service, National Historic Landmarks Program, <www.cr.nps.gov/nhl>, visited November 13, 2001.

8 Two of the National Park Service's designation criteria state that historic places listed on the national register are those which "possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association" or which "embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction." These criteria are two that are commonly utilized when considering the designation of historic districts.

Table 1. Designated Historic Sites and Districts Along Farmington Avenue

Source: Connecticut Historical Commission

| Listed on State and National Registers of Historic Places | Date of Designation if Available |
|---|---|
| Mark Twain Home, 351 Farmington Ave. | December 29, 1962, <i>National Historic Landmark</i> |
| Harriet Beecher Stowe Home, 73 Forest St. | October 15, 1966, <i>National Register of Historic Places</i> |
| Day-Chamberlain House, 77 Forest St. | October 6, 1970, <i>National Register of Historic Places</i> |
| Listed on State Register of Historic Places | |
| 86 Farmington Ave. | |
| 180 Farmington Ave. | |
| 237-239 Farmington Ave. | |
| Immanuel Church, 360 Farmington Ave. | |
| 551-553 Farmington-Rusden | July 5, 2000 |
| Historic Districts | |
| Assylum Hill District | November 11, 1979, <i>National Register of Historic Places</i> Date N.A., <i>State Register of Historic Places</i> |
| Laurel and Marshall Street Subdistrict | November 11, 1979, <i>National Register of Historic Places</i> Date N.A., <i>State Register of Historic Places</i> |
| Nook Farm and Woodland Street Subdistrict | November 11, 1979, <i>National Register of Historic Places</i> Date N.A., <i>State Register of Historic Places</i> |
| Imlay and Laurel Streets Subdistrict | April 29, 1982, <i>National Register of Historic Places</i> Date N.A., <i>State Register of Historic Places</i> |
| Little Hollywood Historic District | July 25, 1985, <i>National Register of Historic Places</i> Date N.A., <i>State Register of Historic Places</i> |
| West End North Historic District | Date N.A., <i>National Register of Historic Places</i> Date N.A., <i>State Register of Historic Places</i> |
| West End South Historic District | Date N.A., <i>National Register of Historic Places</i> Date N.A., <i>State Register of Historic Places</i> |



through Farmington Avenue demonstrate such consistency – many of which have already been designated historic districts – Farmington Avenue itself does not have the same consistent style. Therefore, designation of Farmington Avenue as a unique historic district would probably be difficult to achieve and would serve little purpose. However, FAJC should undertake a study of the area to determine whether any of the existing historic districts should be further expanded to include buildings along Farmington Avenue, or whether there are any additional structures along the corridor that would qualify for listing on the National or State registers of historic places or designation as an Historic Landmark.

Facades and Streetscapes

While Farmington Avenue's historic structures and community institutions get high marks for attractiveness, the retail areas were criticized in surveys and in the public forum for their clutter of store signs, unattractive storefronts, and lack of care to the parking/public areas facing the street. In fact, at the community forum, participants were asked to mark on a map, "What's right about Farmington? What are the assets? Where are the best places now?" They were then asked to mark the problem areas. The "best" places were almost entirely those areas outside of the West End and Asylum Hill commercial districts. Surveys reinforced these findings. Only 20% of residents and 25% of businesses felt that the attractiveness of the street was "good" or "excellent."

Throughout the avenue, a close analysis of streetscape features shows that – while there are many attractive features of the street – there is no sense of connection or unity, and many elements are in poor repair. For example, the older, traditional light fixtures on the street need to be repainted. When the city replaces the fixtures, they use one that is a cobra-head style that does not match. Trees—one of the avenue's distinguished features—are placed haphazardly and there are often gaps that break the continuity of trees on the street. Sidewalks are often in poor repair, and are a mish mash of materials.

Cleanliness was also criticized. A number of surveyed residents said that the dirty appearance of Farmington is the feature they like least about the avenue. Litter clean-up was the most often suggested improvement by both residents and business owners. Cleanliness, which is always a problem in urban commercial districts, is exacerbated on Farmington Avenue by the large number of fast food and take-out food places on the avenue. It is also exacerbated by the lack of coordination of maintenance on the avenue. For example, private owners, who are responsible for maintaining their own property, do not perform this task uniformly, nor do all owners have the same level of resources. Major corporations like Aetna and institutions such as St. Joseph's Cathedral and the Mark Twain House are meticulously maintained, while many smaller businesses are not. The city maintains the street itself, and performs trash pick up including emptying of litter baskets; but this is clearly not enough to fill in the gaps in the heavily used retail districts. The Mark Twain branch of the public library, tries hard to keep up the area in front of their facility, but report that it is a constant battle. The contrast is dramatic, and unfortunately

it is the perception of the well-cared for institutions and corporations that suffer from the lack of cleanliness of the nearby retail districts.

While facades and signage, as discussed above, are a problem for Farmington Avenue, there has been some progress in recent years. Many new businesses (Ichiban, the Half Door, Tisane, etc.) seem more aware of the design of their storefronts, especially in the West End where the re-used Colonial Theater and the Roo Bar will set a new standard for the area.

The city's Department of Housing and Community Development administers a façade program where owners assume 35% of construction costs, and the city assumes the balance in the form of a 10 year loan, which is forgiven at the rate of 10% per year and becomes a grant if an owner remains on the property for the full 10 years. This is a popular program, and waiting lists are long. While West End businesses have participated, not a single property has been improved in Asylum Hill. Another limitation is that many properties only need minor improvements, such as repainting, a new awning or sign, and better store displays.

There is some level of city support for improving maintenance and appearance on the street. The Farmington Avenue Business District coordinates merchant activities, such as business retention and attraction, coordinating for the city's façade program and placing new trash receptacles on the street. They also coordinate with the Hartford Arts Council/"Hartford Blooms" program where merchants can buy a flowerpot for \$100 and the Arts Council maintains it. As noted, FABD's staffing has been reduced by the city.

Recommendations

Hartford's zoning ordinance as it relates to Farmington Avenue business districts should be revamped. Specifically, all of the B3 districts should be converted to B4, and additional restrictions added to B4 to restrict quasi-industrial, automotive, and drive-through restaurant uses. The "no man's land" area would remain B2, however.

Portions of Farmington Avenue – particularly the West End and Asylum Hill commercial shopping districts – should be considered for *Village District* designation under State law.

The Village Districts law, adopted in 1998, allows municipalities to establish such districts as part of the zoning regulations in areas "of distinctive character, landscape, or historic



value that are specifically identified in the plan of conservation and development.” New development or building alterations within a designated Village District would be required to be “harmoniously related to their surroundings, and the terrain in the district, and to the use, scale, and architecture of existing buildings in the district.” Also, “all applications for new construction and substantial reconstruction ... shall be subject to review and recommendation by an architect or architectural firm, landscape architect, or planner.”⁹ Creation of a Village District along Farmington Avenue would be preferable and more feasible than the creation of an historic district. The Village District could be used to establish modest design controls e.g., requiring front entrances, contextual setbacks, front orientation, percent of front glass, no solid roll-down gates and possibly materials. Moreover, it would be easier to enact, because it does not require that existing structures meet more stringent national criteria of historic significance.

In terms of specific regulations guided by zoning, enforcement of the existing regulations – especially parking regulations – should be a high priority. FAJC should pursue improved enforcement in order to identify and eliminate these and other zoning violations. Under the existing code, the city may inspect any property suspected of a zoning violation and can order the remedying of the violation, although there has been a lapse of enforcement along Farmington Avenue in recent years, as the city has not had the resources to be aggressive in its zoning inspections. There are two strategies that can be considered for improvement. First, FAJC should encourage the city to follow West Hartford’s enforcement program, where community groups help identify violations in their neighborhoods. Second, the city can require inspection of any property for violations prior to consideration of any application for a variance, conditional use permit, or site plan approval. This encourages property owners to eliminate violations on their own as they plan to make improvements to their properties. Third, code enforcement sweeps can be arrayed, with advance warning to property owners to alert them to the most common infractions. This promotes self-correction and reduces the caseload for the city and the courts.

FAJC should consider recommending that the city allow on-street and front set-back parking to count toward parking requirements in all B4 zones. Moreover, the new parking created in the front setback areas should be designated as common parking areas, with time limits that are enforced by the city. This parking should be considered as meeting parking requirements on the street. If all commercial areas along Farmington Avenue are rezoned to B4, as recommended in this section, then on-street parking could count toward parking requirements for business in both the West End and Asylum Hill commer-

cial nodes. This provision would be appropriate even for B4 zones beyond the Farmington Avenue corridor, because of the neighborhood and pedestrian orientation of the B4 zone.

Shared parking provisions should be expanded such that any two adjacent uses can use the same on-street parking spaces to meet their parking requirements, provided that they can show that their peak hours of use do not coincide during any particular hour, day, or season. This would allow some of the commercial uses in the Asylum Hill and West End shopping areas to share their parking, allowing consolidation of front and rear lots. As a theoretical example, a store that sells electronic equipment (open primarily Monday through Saturday during the day time) could share parking with a popular pub that attracts patrons primarily on Thursday through Sunday nights.

For parking lots with 30 spaces or less, not including the new on-street parking on side access roads, the zoning code should be amended to provide a minimum 2-4 foot planting strip around the entire perimeter of the parking lot. In addition, lots of all sizes should provide a minimum amount of landscaping within the parking lot. Given the small size of most lots along Farmington Avenue, the minimum landscaping requirement should be expressed in a manner that allows flexibility in the layout of the site and lot. For example, the preferred approach would be to require about 300 square feet of landscaping in one or more “landscaping islands” in the parking lot for every 5 parking spaces. This proportion is about equivalent to what is built in new shopping centers and malls.

Provisions for free-standing signs along Farmington Avenue also need to be completely revised to reflect the new design of the street. The construction of the side access roads will necessitate relocation and/or replacement of many businesses signs. This should be viewed as an opportunity to collaboratively work out a new system with businesses and property owners. For example, free standing signs should not be permitted for commercial uses on new side access roads: these roads should have a single common sign prior to the entrance to the side access roads listing businesses in that area.

For commercial businesses outside of side access roads, free-standing signs should be permitted, but there should be better controls on their height and design. Rather than having heights of free-standing signs in excess of 20 feet tall along Farmington Avenue, except for two-story buildings, the current 13-foot height limit and the 5-foot setback for free-standing signs should be kept, but applied to the entire property. That is, taller signs should not be permitted even if they are setback behind the building line. In fact, free-



Improved parking lot. San Bernardino, CA.



Hanging Signs. Mystic CT.



Hanging signs. Portland, OR.

standing signs should not be permitted more than 15 feet from the front property line along Farmington Avenue, in order to prevent signs from negatively impacting the livability of upper-floor residences or the visual quality of adjacent neighborhoods. Finally, the proposed rezoning of B3 areas to B4 would eliminate the potential for new billboards or other “outdoor advertising” signs to be permitted along the corridor

Free-standing signs should be more subdued in residential and office areas (B2, R01, R02). The code already prohibits business signage from the R01 and R02 zones, which helps achieve a more subtle appearance for those areas. However, free-standing signs identifying the name of the apartment or office complex are still permitted in these areas. In residential areas, the preference for privacy makes subdued signs more appropriate, and offices do not need large free-standing signs viewable by motorists, because offices do not need to attract off-the-street customers like shops.

Small hanging signs, attached to an awning or some other apparatus projecting from the façade wall, can make for a particularly attractive pedestrian-oriented shopping environment and should be specifically permitted in the code. Currently, the zoning regulations place an overall cap on the total signage area for each site. This total allotment is supposed to cover any combination of attached façade signs and free-standing signs. If projecting signs are also permitted, then the total allotment for signage area needs to be revisited.

In dealing with signage, amortization of nonconforming signs, should be considered. In addition to the street’s redesign, rezoning of existing B3 areas to B4 would potentially result in additional nonconformities. Sign amortization is a complex legal issue that raises issues of “property taking” and “freedom of speech.” Although the State of Connecticut apparently allows sign amortization without compensation, the amortization process must be designed in a way that is reasonable and does not violate Constitutional protections.¹⁰

In order to pursue sign amortization, the city would have to adopt an ordinance specifying the maximum time period in which the nonconforming sign must be eliminated. The time frame must be long enough to allow the sign owner to recoup the investment in the sign. This period can vary greatly, depending on the initial date of construction/installation, the expected life of the sign, the initial cost of the sign, and the debt incurred. Many municipalities nationwide have used 5 years (from the date of the ordinance) as a benchmark

for sign amortization, although FAJC should not automatically advocate for a 5-year period. Instead, FAJC should work with the city to undertake an investigation of nonconforming signs along the Farmington Avenue corridor in order to identify their date of installation, life expectancy, cost, debt, and other details. Based on that information, FAJC and the city can determine a reasonable amortization period.

Adding extensive landscaping, trees, and lighting, amenities along the full length of the avenue will provide an attractive and unified environment for pedestrians. Many areas of the avenue will require only modest improvements, such as in the West Gateway and the Residential Cultural Districts – which already have attractive lawns and landscaping. Others, especially retail areas, will need a major overhaul. Basic elements like more trash receptacles placed in strategic locations are needed. Special lighting, new trees, flowers, and other landscaping will bring a much wanted “green” quality to other areas of the avenue and, with a consistent design treatment for paving, lighting, and tree placement, will help unify the diverse districts on the street. (Information in the “box” below describes in more detail issues about streetscape elements.)

To address both small and large scale façade improvement projects, the city’s façade program should be augmented by a lower cost “quick fix” effort. Under this program, technical assistance should be made available at low or no cost to property and business owners who are willing and able to make modest investments to improve their facades and signs.

And last, but certainly not least, maintenance of Farmington Avenue should be expanded by establishing a Special Services District (SSD). A Special Services District is authorized by the State of Connecticut to allow – with the consensus of property owners – an incre-



Sidewalk amenities. Rochester, NY.

¹⁰ It is critical that the amortization ordinance targets sign structures without targeting the content of those signs as well. The former is permissible under the law, while the latter violates freedom of speech rights under the U.S. Constitution. For example, it would be permissible to ban and require the amortization of billboard signs, defined as a free-standing or roof-attached structure of a certain size, shape, dimension, oriented to roadways and intended to be viewed by passing motorists. However, the definition cannot include any reference to what might be displayed on the sign, not even making the distinction between the advertising of off-premises and on-premises products or services. Any such reference to content could be construed as a violation of free speech. If a sign advertising off-premises products or services were to be banned, federal courts have reasoned that the city would also be able to ban signs making a political or religious statement, such as a billboard sign that says "JESUS LIVES: For more information, call ***-***-**** or visit www.***.org." Such a limitation is not permissible, because it limits content. However, if all billboard signs are prohibited by nature of their structure, not their content, then the prohibition can withstand legal challenge. This point suggests that any amortization ordinance should not reference the "outdoor advertising" signs currently described in the code, which do suggest that the content of a sign might be regulated. Instead, prior to adopting any sort of amortization ordinance, the zoning code should be amended in order to re-structure sign regulations on the basis of sign structures, eliminating any reference (however minimal) to sign content.

ment on property taxes to be collected with the entire proceeds going to providing “special services” for a commercial district. These services are determined by each district, but can include enhanced maintenance, security, parking, and marketing. For Farmington Avenue, a SSD is particularly important given the need to maintain new streetscape improvements. However, an SSD will only have enough funding to be effective if the district encompasses major corporations, such as Aetna and ING. The level of need on the street simply cannot be filled by the relatively small commercial tax base in the retail areas of Asylum Hill and the West End. Although it will take some convincing to create a district, the successful SSDs in Stamford and Bridgeport, Connecticut— as well as in other districts as diverse as 125th Street in New York City and downtown Philadelphia — all serve to point to the potential of a SSD on Farmington Avenue.

STREETSCAPE RECOMMENDATIONS

Just as the design layouts presented in Section III are a starting point for discussions about the future design of the street, so this section of the report presents some key issues about the design of specific streetscape elements themselves.

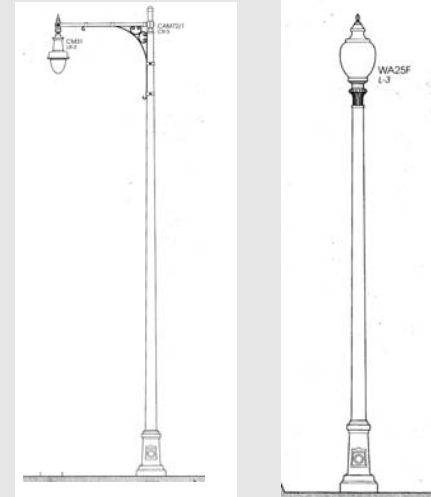
LIGHTING

Existing

- Older traditional street lamps, replaced in some locations with cobra head style lights.
- Individual, uncoordinated lighting for fronts of stores and rear lots.
- Some lighting of historic facades (i.e., Ahern Funeral Home, Clemens Place Apartments).

Proposed

- Street lights: restored existing traditional light poles with new lamps. Historic style Cambridge series by Antique Street Lamps manufacturer is recommended.
- Pedestrian level lighting adjacent to storefronts in side access roads
- Coordinated rear parking lot lighting
- Special lighting at roundabouts
- Light historic buildings at night



BUS STOPS

Existing

- Minimal shelters, seating, and information
- Bus stop sign is only indicator

Proposed

- Larger, more visible, better maintained bus stop signs
- New seating, inside and outside shelters
- Trash receptacles at every bus stop
- Information at every stop
- Custom made bus shelters
- Length varying by location and use
- Transparent walls on three side for weather protection and visibility
- Information maps, routes, schedules and transit art displays can be featured on the sides
- Pitched roof recommended for snow



TREES

Existing

- Many landmark, mature trees
- Placement of trees inconsistent on avenue, and many gaps
- Some trees have reached or are nearing the end of their expected lives (i.e., cherry trees in front of Hastings Hotel)

Proposed

- Consistent rows of trees established according to specific districts:
Inside edge of sidewalk in West Gateway and Cultural/Residential areas
- Sidewalk edge in new side access roads
- Double row of trees in areas where sidewalks are wider, i.e., transitions from side access roads to current location of sidewalks
- "Gateway" tree at Prospect and Farmington
- Infill trees compatible with mature trees
- Special tree plantings in roundabouts

BENCHES

Existing

- There are few, if any, benches on the street.

Proposed

- Two benches in historic style appropriate for the historic character of the avenue are proposed:
- "The World's Fair Bench" in cast iron and wood (available also in recycled plastic) by Litchfield Industries Inc.
- "The Gramercy Bench" in powder coated cast aluminum and wood by Thomas Steele Inc.

PAVING

Existing

- Asphalt paving of road and all parking lots
- Concrete sidewalks, many in poor repair
- Crosswalks striped with paint

Proposed

- Asphalt paving of road, but special pavers (such as interlocking pavers) added to central median to allow left turns
- Side access road, potentially with special pavers as well (subject to cost)
- Sidewalks mix of concrete and edges of brick or special pavers
- Speedtables and raised crosswalks also with special pavers



WASTE RECEPTACLES

Existing

- FABD has installed waste receptacles in retail areas

Proposed

- “Ironsites” series trash receptacle by Victor Stanley Inc. in black or green (this model can be easily opened on the side to remove trash bag)
- Coordinated planters of same series available from manufacturer



BICYCLE RACKS

Existing

None available

Proposed

- Historic style “Gramercy Bicycle Rack” holds nine bikes in stainless steel by Thomas Steele Inc.
- Contemporary style “Boa Bicycle Rack” in high-tensile steel holds eight bikes available in a variety of colors by Dobra Design Inc.

FARMINGTON AVENUE: A PUBLIC PLACE

Beyond its pure pedestrian function, there is strong community support to make Farmington Avenue a place where people can go to stroll, socialize, and meet others. Half of residents in the survey said that developing “community gathering places” is a high priority. This notion of creating gathering places is one that has to be adapted to each area along the avenue— with different approaches used in retail areas than in institutional or residential sections. Security – creating spaces which will be self-policing and which will not become places just for loiterers to hang-out – is also an important concern of “place making” on Farmington Avenue. (The transformation of College and Chapel Streets in New Haven is an example of how successful street corners can work.)

Findings

People do go to Farmington Avenue for more than just convenience shopping. Two thirds of residents surveyed said that they met friends and socialized on Farmington Avenue: 12% at least twice per week, 17% at least twice per month, 12% once per month, and 18% less than once per month. A number of residents also reported walking, biking or jogging on Farmington Avenue for exercise at least twice per week (31%) and at least twice per month (16%).

The fact is, though, there are not many places to gather especially in the retail areas of Asylum Hill and the West End. The unattractive pedestrian spaces, with no seating, few cafes, cars parked everywhere create an environment that allows people to walk through but not to linger. Both residents and businesses are particularly displeased with the number of comfortable places to sit outside (two-thirds of each said the amount was “poor”), the variety of events, festivals and promotions (half said it was “poor”), and the attractiveness of bus stops and street furniture (again, half said it was “poor”). Indeed, bus stops it should be noted are one place that people (i.e., bus riders) must gather – and these are mostly devoid of any elements to make them more pleasant and comfortable, much less to take advantage of the stops as nodes of activity that help revitalize adjacent retail.

Security

Creating gathering places and addressing security concerns must go hand in hand. During the placemaking workshop, participants noted areas where people hanging out create an uncomfortable feeling on the street as well as locations that seem desolate because of lack of activity. They discussed how Hartford Public High School students—who usually quite innocently use Farmington Avenue as they leave school—are a source of concern by both residents and businesses. This demonstrated how complex an issue security is. Security, in fact, includes the effectiveness of the police in dealing with actual crime, combined with efforts to establish public spaces that are “self-policing” as well as where people perceive the area to be safe.

Currently, security is a major concern, especially in Asylum Hill. Residents rated daytime security on the avenue as “poor” (12%) or “fair” (27%) – increasing to 33% “poor” and 30% “fair” in the evening. Businesses had similar rankings, and noted that it is a reason why some are considering relocating; “more police visibility” was the most common suggestion by businesses for how to improve Farmington Avenue, after beautification and cleanup efforts. Three-quarters of businesses said improving security is a high priority for the avenue; two-thirds of residents felt the same. Some businesses also reported that customers are afraid to use rear-parking areas.

Unfortunately, actual crime statistics support these concerns. Serious crime increased 6.8% in 2000 over the five year average. Robbery increased 70% compared to 1999 (80 incidents versus 47 in 1999), auto theft 87%, and burglary 93%. On a positive note, in part because of the efforts of the Hartford Police Department’s Community Service Office in the West End, there has been increased arrests for “quality of life” crimes, such as excessive noise and loitering. This strategy has proven successful in New York City and other cities in deterring more serious crime, and this approach will be important to continue on Farmington Avenue in the future.

Enhancing Cultural Institutions and Corporations as Places

While the focus of this study is on the avenue’s commercial districts, one of the key issues identified during the study was how to enhance the presence of key institutions, facilities, and corporations on the avenue, and to integrate them onto the street. These include: museums and cultural institutions such as the Mark Twain House, the Stowe





Mark Twain House.



Harriet Beecher Stowe Cultural Center.

Center, the Mark Twain branch of the Hartford Public Library (which is looking to expand), The Hartford Children's Theater, the Hartford Ballet and other tenants in the Hartford Courant Arts Center; religious institutions such as the St. Joseph's Cathedral and Immanuel Church; the corporate campus of Aetna, ING-Aetna Financial Services, and the Hastings Hotel; as well as the residential complex of Clemens Place and its adjacent open space, Clemens Green. While each of these locations has its own particular issues and concerns, they share certain characteristics that the redesign of the avenue aims to address.

In general, these uses tend to operate as "islands" with little connection to the neighborhood or one another – in part because of concerns about security. As a result, the avenue has evolved into a series of distinctive, but segmented, enclaves – whether they are cultural, corporate, residential, or religious institutions. The one exception is the branch library, which occupies a storefront and is very much integrated into the life of Asylum Hill. The "enclave" nature of the avenue as institutions reflect their concerns about safety and security for employees, visitors, etc., as well as the sense that local retail and the avenue as a whole have little to offer. As institutions expand (Mark Twain House, for example, is building a new visitors center and expects visitation to increase from 55,000 to 100,000 people a year), encouraging better linkages between the avenue and its "anchors" will help both to achieve greater vibrancy and vitality. The Stowe Center is very interested in creating a more "cultural district" feeling on its block, encompassing all the institutions on both sides of Farmington Avenue. Institutions are also beginning to work together by coordinating Christmas lighting and sharing event calendars, yet more could be done from a streetscape perspective. The Arts Center will be renovated in the near future: this is another opportunity to enhance the visibility of uses, especially the school of ballet.

Public spaces around institutions and corporations also tend to be underdeveloped. The Aetna "lawn" is a beautiful but lightly used space, although 10 years ago it was known for its street vendors (removed when parking on Farmington was eliminated on that block) and was a busy place at lunch. The library would like to provide seating and amenities for library users in its front plaza. The lack of identity of public spaces also decreases the visibility of cultural attractions. During the public forum, many people expressed an interest in using Clemens Green – a bridging point between the Asylum Hill and West End neighborhoods – for cultural events, art fairs and possibly a farmers market. The Harriet Beecher Stowe house plans to restore its landscaping to its historic design, and improve its visibility through pruning of shrubs.

Finally, signage guiding visitors to various attractions on Farmington is an important concern. Currently, signage is unattractive and somewhat confusing: a particularly bad example is at Sisson and Farmington where a clutter of differently designed signs has been added over time to the intersection, which is a key gateway from I-84 to Farmington. Signage at most of the cultural and corporate facilities could also be improved. This includes better signage for “off avenue” destinations such as The St. Francis Medical Center. A signage plan is underway: Hartford Proud and Beautiful, an affiliate of the Hartford Arts Council, has been working to develop a signage plan (including both vehicle oriented and pedestrian signs), and has funds to install 160 new signs citywide.

Recommendations

The process of creating “places” along the avenue must be coordinated with the streets’ pedestrian and retail functions, and must be adapted to the needs and context of each district.

“Mini-plazas” in the retail areas of the West End and Asylum Hill should provide spaces for small events and gatherings. These spaces, which should be planned in more detail in future phases of the design process, are proposed for the busiest corners: near Sisson in the West End and at the corner of Laurel in Asylum Hill. These spaces sometimes contain bus stops, as well as have adjacent uses (restaurants, the public library) which use these spaces as well as provide an ongoing security presence. These are spaces where food vendors could set up as well to serve a similar function. As visible spots in each neighborhood, each plaza should have a special feature – art, fountain, a garden, kiosks, etc – that makes it a unique focal point.

Existing underused spaces should be programmed for more activities. The front lawn of Aetna should be utilized more both for employees and the neighborhood. Aetna should involve its employees in developing ideas for enhancing the lawn, especially as a place to go during lunch. Employees are interested in more variety of things to do and places to eat, and restoring some of the food vendors would be one step in animating the space. Clemens Green should also be considered as a place for special events. By replanting trees and providing infrastructure (such as electrical outlets), the space could be used for cultural events and activities that support the goals of the adjacent institutions. Again, more planning is needed to determine the types of activities people and organizations would like to see there and to plan accordingly. In the long term, as with the Aetna lawn, the short term activities might suggest ways for the space to be permanently improved.



Mini Plaza. California.



Pedestrian Space. Denver, CO.



Los Angeles bus stop improvement, before and after.

Every bus stop should be considered as a “place” with more spacious and well lit waiting areas and amenities, including a shelter and outdoor seating. In more heavily used stops where there is space, others might sit there as well and other activities, such as food vendors, might take place. Adjacent business can also serve bus patrons. Their amenities should be clustered at these bus stops as well, including bike racks, trash receptacles, transit information, and flowers and landscaping. If the location is particularly central and in proximity to other important uses, the bus stops can include community functions such as bulletin boards, local art, etc. A major bus transfer facility is proposed for the corner of Farmington and Sigourney, allowing for these stops to serve both Farmington Avenue lines and the downtown circulator. This can reinforce the role of the Aetna lawn as an activity area.

Cultural institutions on the avenue need to enhance their visibility through better signage and thinking of themselves as part of the district. The construction of the central median and roundabout at Woodland should be viewed as potential sites for banners, art, and other features to call attention to Farmington’s cultural attractions. Moreover, each institution on the avenue should look at its signage and improve its location and visibility. Every entrance, whether it be a sidewalk from Farmington or a driveway to the parking lots such as at the Mark Twain lot, should be viewed as a gateway to that institution with colorful plantings, seating, and should clearly promote its attractions and hours of operation. Working with Hartford Proud and Beautiful to make sure that an effective directional signage system is implemented is also an important part of enhancing the visibility of cultural institutions.

A comprehensive approach to security must be undertaken in coordination with placemaking activities. Some security concerns can, of course, be addressed through design. Removing nooks and crannies, and making circulation more continuous will also help make areas safer. Lighting, especially in the new front access roads as well as in the consolidated rear lots, is absolutely essential. Store entrances facing the street and the rear lots should provide security presence as well. Controlling areas where people will loiter involves locating public spaces where they can be controlled by adjacent uses which will discourage such loitering. Existing security guards for major corporations and institutions can also play a role if their job is expanded to included exterior public spaces. Beyond these measures, security is a concern that addresses the entire neighborhood, and crime control can only be accomplished, as success in New York City has shown, through a comprehensive approach to community policing, more visible police on the street, and identifying and shutting down crime hot spots. While a Special Services District can play a role in such an effort, ultimately the responsibility for safe streets rests with the city police.