



The Farmington Avenue Comprehensive Community Plan A Framework for Action

*Perspectives relating to the economic development potential
of the Corridor from Sigourney to Woodland Streets*

Prepared by
Christiansen Consulting
in partnership with

The Hartford Business Improvement District and Hartford Preservation Alliance

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September 1, 2015

What would it take?

To create a vibrant, pedestrian friendly and safe
Farmington Avenue Corridor
between Sigourney and Woodland Streets

With a high quality and diverse mix of
commercial, cultural and residential offerings,

And with a cohesive identity
where commercial and residential buildings
complement the rich architectural heritage?

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Stakeholders Interviewed—*for this paper*

- ◆ David Ambrose, *AHNA and resident*
- ◆ Jill Barrett, *Farmington Avenue Alliance*
- ◆ Sara Bronin, *Hartford Planning and Zoning*
- ◆ Jonathan Clark, *Asylum Hill Condo Manager and Resident*
- ◆ Thomas Deller, *City of Hartford*
- ◆ Morgan Ferrarotti, *The Hartford Financial Services Group*
- ◆ Mike Freimuth, *Capital Region Development Authority (CRDA)*
- ◆ Mary Kay Garrow, *Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)*
- ◆ Floyd Green, *Aetna*
- ◆ Toni Gold, *Project Management Consultant*
- ◆ Chris Hartley, *St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center*
- ◆ Katherine Kane, *Harriet Beecher Stowe Center*
- ◆ Todd Lavigne, *TempsNow!*
- ◆ Michael Marshall, *Aetna*
- ◆ David Panagore, *Planning Consultant*
- ◆ John Simone, *CT Main Street*
- ◆ Tara Spain, *Homeowner*

Farmington Avenue Corridor



Goals and Methodology

Mixed use areas, such as the six-block historic Farmington Avenue Corridor from Sigourney to Woodland Streets (with transit, residential, cultural institutions, churches, businesses, and corporations) are generating economic development and creating vibrant communities. **So why isn't this neighborhood thriving? What would make this Corridor a place where people want to live, visit, shop, stay and learn?**

The **Hartford Business Improvement District (HBID)** and **Hartford Preservation Alliance (HPA)** seek to develop collective action to answer these questions for the Farmington Avenue Corridor. Our goal is to bring together diverse stakeholders to:

1. **Establish a common vision**
2. **Create an action plan**
3. **Establish a community redevelopment capacity**

Towards this end we have developed this framework for discussion at a community forum to be convened September 21, 2015 and for a planning task force. With stakeholders working together to achieve a shared vision, we believe this Corridor can become a model example for urban revitalization.

Characteristics of Successful Community Development

(Synthesis of interview comments)

- ◆ Shared community vision
- ◆ Redevelopment capacity Investment
- ◆ Transit with-in ½ mile radius
- ◆ Residents with disposable incomes to support retail
- ◆ On-site owners—*residential and commercial*
- ◆ Diverse mix of market-based retail and commercial options
- ◆ Cohesive identity and look—*signage and streetscape*
- ◆ Walkable and bikeable with adequate parking
- ◆ A public-private partnership that can convene, engage and manage ongoing community development
- ◆ Gathering places and opportunities to connect—*e.g.: restaurants, retail, community events*
- ◆ Safe and the perception of safety

Context: A Neighborhood of Contradictions

The Farmington Avenue Corridor from Sigourney to Woodland Streets is a neighborhood of contradictions:

Fragmented Cluster: Within this 6-block area, in one of the nation's poorest cities but one of the richest regions, there are:

- ◆ Two of the nation's most important insurance companies: Aetna and The Hartford, among the largest employers in Hartford.
- ◆ Two world renowned cultural institutions: Harriet Beecher Stowe Center and Mark Twain House and Museum.
- ◆ Major medical center: Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center, an anchor in Asylum Hill.
- ◆ Three historic churches: Immanuel Congregational Church, Trinity Episcopal Church and St. Joseph's Cathedral.
- ◆ Educational Anchors: Lincoln Culinary Institute, Hartford High School and the Classical Magnet School.

All are important entities! Yet the Farmington Avenue business district is fragmented with small shops, lower-income multi-unit apartments and condominiums, which together have been unable to take advantage of the high volume of traffic, commuters and employees in the area.

Lack of Neighborhood/Visitor Friendly Streetscape and Retail: As a further contradiction, this is one of the most traveled corridors in the state. In fact, the Farmington Avenue bus is CT's highest volume bus route. Most commuters only pass through, though they see the landscape and retail environment every day. Landmark buildings like the former Comet Diner remain abandoned. The lack of easy access to parking, attractive streetscape, cohesive architecture, and visitor-friendly retail and restaurant options do little to invite people to stop, shop or stay.

Lack of Cohesive Community: From the 2010 census the Asylum Hill neighborhood has 12% Caucasian, 29 % Hispanic/Latino, 47% Black and African American, 8% Asian and 4% other. This rich ethnic diversity has not translated into a cohesive community.

Safety Perception Challenges: All acknowledge that HBID district initiatives, to keep the street clean and dissuade panhandlers, are making a difference in street safety. Crime has actually decreased in the last few years. Yet the perception that this is not a safe place discourages people from spending time on the Corridor.

The CTfastrak Game Changer: Many believe the launch of the CTfastrak this March, is a potential "game changer" for this Corridor. The CTfastrak rapid transit bus should bring additional riders. However, now that they have built it, how do we get people to come and do more than pass through the area? Even those most passionate about the CTfastrak acknowledge this is no small feat and that it will take hard work to take advantage of this opportunity.

So what can realistically be done now? How can the community resolve some of these contradictions and leverage the CTfastrak opportunity? The purpose of this paper is to identify key assets, opportunities, challenges and issues to set the stage for the community to come together to clarify their vision and define a Comprehensive Community Plan that can actually happen. As a first step we asked key stakeholders for their perspectives.

Vision Perspectives: Potential, Perceptions and Realities

Compilation of interviewed stakeholder perspectives highlighting critical factors affecting the Corridor's success:

"All the ingredients are there, and there are plenty of places that have done this."

Toni Gold, Project Management Consultant

*"This is a key commercial thruway trying to act like a neighborhood serving retail. **BUT...** This schism is problematic. The conundrum is you could pour endless money into properties and get nothing. Rather you need a better front door or streetscape; then the neighborhood will be primed for investment. Complete a few key restoration projects, and like in the game of GO, you create key spheres of influence that act as neighborhood beacons."*

David Panagore, Urban Planning Consultant

*"Why now? Why is this a perfect moment to re-envision this Corridor? The CTfastrak station is the game changer and a real opportunity. **BUT...** Now that we have built it, how do we get them to come? It will take lots of work from a dynamic public/private partnership that must evolve and years of ongoing and incremental change to take advantage of this, but it's a start."*

John Simone, CT Main Street

*"I think the best opportunity for the Corridor is to focus on developing the block between Marshall and Laurel—there you have space that is pliable in terms of ownership—then the edges will benefit. **BUT...** One problem may be that this Corridor is not bad enough so other Hartford arteries get priority."*

Jill Barrett, Farmington Avenue Alliance

*"The HBID work has made a tremendous difference in the last few years. With the ambassador program, our streets are cleaner and safer with most of the panhandling gone...Our Corridor has everything it takes to be a little city. We have the shops, the people that live locally and the transportation system. **BUT...** There is no incentive to re-invest because by the time you renovate and pay property taxes, there's no way to make a profit. The city needs to make money available for interest free loans for qualified investors and a 10 year no property tax incentive to refurbish empty lots and empty buildings. With these two changes alone, I believe this area will flourish."*

Todd Lavigne, TempsNow!

*"We need more individuals and families personally vested in the neighborhood and its quality of life. By investing in the Habitat Houses, we are helping place homeowners into new residences where they will proudly become active participants in the maintenance and safety of the neighborhood. **BUT...** We need to have a comprehensive plan that spells out the steps for not only residential units, but retail opportunities and security strategies."*

Mike Marshall, Aetna

*"This gateway Corridor is important visually. Perception about place is visual. So investment here is critical to changing perceptions about Hartford. **BUT...** There are four building zones in this small area...A more consistent zoning code would enable the land uses to be developed in a more uniform and coherent manner."*

Sara Bronin, Hartford Planning and Zoning

*"This is the best neighborhood geographically in the city with the potential to become a mini-arts district; the museums, HartBeat Ensemble and Hartford City Ballet are already in place. **BUT...** We need enhanced streetscape and incentives to attract a wider spread of incomes, more people owning property and younger people to see this area as an alternative to downtown."*

Tara Spain, Homeowner

*"I live in this neighborhood and I do not think I should have to drive outside for simple things like haircuts, buying wine or eating lunch. **BUT...** To attract these types of businesses, people must feel this is a safe place. More police walking on South Marshall Street, cameras and better lighting would help as well as better managed apartments to discourage the challenging things that go on in these buildings."*

David Ambrose, AHNA, Resident

*“My perspective is on the city as a whole and my focus is on changing the economic character of Hartford...That being said, this is one of the city’s major Corridors with characteristics of a moderate commercial node or traditional main street— by this I mean 3-4 story mixed use buildings with retail on the bottom. **BUT...**You need to create a clear image of the neighborhood and articulate a clear and concise statement of what you want to achieve. Then we can better decide how to help...Adoption of Form-Based Code is an important tool.”*

Thomas E. Deller, Director of Hartford Development Services

*“Farmington Avenue is a walkable street with many human-scale assets, not the least of which are international attractions such as Stowe and Twain bringing people into the neighborhood. There is no shortage of vision. **BUT...**It will take power, influence and persistence, as well as rebuilding trust, to make things happen.”*

Katherine Kane, Harriet Beecher Stowe Center

*“This has always been a significant commercial Corridor linking the downtown to the various neighborhoods. The arteries like the highway, train station and CTfastrak station are key assets that are sometimes overlooked. **BUT...**We need a way to connect them and give the neighborhood an identity. It could begin with something as simple as consistent signage that brands the neighborhood. It is also critical to provide incentives for investors to develop a new project that generates market rate rentals, bringing greater density and more discretionary income to the area.”*

Mike Freimuth, CRDA

*“In thinking about this neighborhood, aesthetics like signage, planters, banners, and cleanliness are important in making it feel like a welcoming, walkable and safe place. Perceptions matter. **BUT...**We cannot hope to revitalize the Corridor without looking at back rooms and involving the people who are living in Asylum Hill. One question is how can to better include renters into the discussion?”*

Mary Kay Garrow, Hartford LISC

*“With any community, it is important to identify what stakeholders really want and need. **BUT...**That is not always easy in such a diverse and transient neighborhood as Asylum Hill. Therefore, The Hartford commissioned the Harwood Report in 2013, which revealed that Asylum Hill stakeholders aspired to have a safer, more connected community. As a direct response, we worked with our community partners to provide free lunchtime concerts in the park, orchestrated Arbor Day tree plantings that closely involved neighborhood residents, expanded the Asylum Hill Walking Tour program and introduced the Asylum Hill Fresh Express. Participation in each has increased as word of mouth grows about the opportunities.”*

Morgan Ferrarotti, The Hartford

*“In my mind the neighborhood has never been safer, and we have the potential to support a restaurant or a fun place to take guests. **BUT...**There's still the perception that it's not a safe place, and unfortunately, proactive police patrolling of the neighborhood was eliminated.”*

Jonathan Clark, Asylum Hill Condo Manager, Resident

*“The Corridor has the potential to be a vibrant place...I suggest encouraging businesses that employees might use after hours, such as quick eating establishments and places to take care of errands. **BUT...**It must be remembered that this is a Corridor for emergency vehicles to move through. So in planning new streetscape it is critical to make sure ambulances are not hindered...Also the perception of crime has long been a barrier to neighborhood development. Better lighting and visible police patrolling on the streets would make a difference”*

Chris Hartley, St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center

*“I love Hartford and this area has the potential to be incredible, especially as an arts or writers district with HartBeat, Twain and Stowe. **BUT...**People need to believe it’s a great place...we need a positive campaign. Then perceptions and perspective will change. Begin by taking the randomness out of the neighborhood, and then gradually add resources; whether a bike or walking trail, new vendors or creating the same look and feel with awnings and signage. When we do this, folks will then believe in the potential, have a sense of pride and invest in the area’s future.*

Floyd Green, Aetna

Key Assets: already in place to be leveraged for success

- ◆ **Historic Buildings** such as the Comet, The 224, apartment buildings, the churches and cultural institutions.
- ◆ **Committed Partners** including neighborhood groups, corporations, churches, a hospital, educational institutions, arts and cultural organizations—all with a Corridor stake bringing unique circles of influence and constituencies.
- ◆ **Strategic Location** as a connector between downtown, city neighborhoods and towns to the west.
- ◆ **Convenience** with proximity to highways, downtown, West Hartford center, a hospital and Elizabeth Park.
- ◆ **Ethnic Diversity** with broad representation of race and nationalities.
- ◆ **Compact** with good access and scale.
- ◆ **Retail Tenants** with relatively little turnover of businesses.
- ◆ **Transit** as the state's busiest bus corridor including the new *CTfastrak* station at Sigourney.
- ◆ **Traffic** with 1,000's of cars passing through daily. The Hartford has doubled parking capacity to accommodate headquarters consolidation.
- ◆ **Employees** with 1,000's working here daily—nearly 1,700 recently relocated—all with untapped disposable income.

Key Gaps: to address

- ◆ **Economic Development Voice:** No economic development action plan or organization to advocate for it.
- ◆ **Reinvestment Ability:** No organization charged with and able to reinvest in property.
- ◆ **City of Hartford:** Robust commitment to community development including zoning changes, policing, streetscape and other projects.
- ◆ **MDC Road Project:** Road projects with specific completion dates.
- ◆ **Brand:** No retail, residential or tourist destination coordination to enable Corridor promotion.
- ◆ **Pedestrian Friendly Streetscape:** The lack of a streetscape plan makes this a difficult place to navigate.
- ◆ **Police Patrols:** Cuts in funding to support community policing, so effective in the past, impact Corridor safety.
- ◆ **Perceptions:** Those who live and work here do not believe this is a safe neighborhood that is moving forward.
- ◆ **Absentee Commercial Owners:** Prevent investors with a real stake from actively spending time on the Corridor.
- ◆ **Homeownership Base:** Ratio of renters vs. homeowners demonstrates an imbalance in community stability.
- ◆ **Retail Mix:** No dining and few small scale retail businesses.
- ◆ **HBID District:** Funding does not include Gillett to Woodland Streets.

All the raw ingredients are here to create a vibrant and thriving little downtown and arts (writers and cultural) district if we address critical Corridor gaps.

What Needs To Happen: to achieve this vision

General

◆ Partner Commitment

- **City:** Gain a commitment from the city to move critical projects along in a timely way, release already authorized funds and remove obstacles like permitting and building codes.
- **Other Partners:** Align partners with *power* and *influence* to make things happen and speak with one voice.

◆ CTfastrak Station: Clarify and take advantage of the CTfastrak opportunity.

◆ Tax Incentives: Give business owners an incentive to invest and young people an incentive to live here.

◆ Local Ownership: Add more retail and residential ownership, so they will be involved and attract a more vibrant commercial/retail mix.

◆ Neighborhood Friendly Cultural Cluster: Leverage arts and culture assets to create a mini-cultural district.

◆ Street Activity/Gathering Places: Develop events, food options, music venues and other opportunities that invite people to gather.

◆ Safety: Change the perception of safety—particularly around South Marshall Street—by enhanced community policing, communication, lighting and even cameras. (Note: *HBID district work and police substation relocation have made a tangible difference.*)

Summing Up: It Will Take Coordination: To address these issues and move forward in a focused way, speaking with one voice, a person or group must be identified to implement an action plan as well as to proactively coordinate, advocate and monitor both opportunities and issues critical described below in order to achieve Corridor economic development priorities.

Rezoning

◆ Form-Based Zoning: Consider Form-Based Zoning Code (FBZC) so projects can move forward.

◆ Blight and Vacant Property Code: Assure robust enforcement of Hartford’s blight and vacant property code.

Summing Up: It Will Take Form-Based Zoning Codes: Form-based zoning would make for a more cohesive Corridor and could facilitate projects while maintaining the Corridor’s historic integrity.

Complete Streets

◆ Improving the Corridor “Front Door”: So people want to enter and investors will consider investing.

◆ Traffic Calming Strategy: Would encourage people to stop and shop by slowing traffic.

◆ MDC Road Project: Completion of road work is a critical part of any streetscape initiative.

◆ Bus Shelters: Creating attractive shelters would add to streetscape aesthetics.

◆ Design Standard Enforcement: Design standards include signage requirements, property maintenance, façade improvements, as well as style and scale of new buildings.

Summing Up: It Will Take a Better Front Door: Improving the “front door” of the corridor, or streetscape, will encourage development, investment, shoppers, walkability, bikeability and slower cars.
**Note: A comprehensive streetscape strategy was most consistently cited as the foundation of any Corridor plan by those interviewed.*

Redevelopment Capacity Building

- ◆ **Redevelopment Capacity:** Identify a community redevelopment capacity to actually acquire and provide for the rehabilitation of blighted buildings so that vacancies are eliminated and new, vibrant uses are created. The properties most often recommended as critical catalysts for development include:
 - **Marshall to Laurel Street:** Develop the former Comet Diner and adjacent properties.
 - **Hawthorn Parcel:** Develop the parcel on Hawthorn, which is the largest undeveloped area in the city.
 - **South Marshall Development:** Target redevelopment of buildings on South Marshall.

Summing Up: It Will Take Completing One Redevelopment Project: Stakeholders believe that acquiring and developing just one project (that includes both retail and market-level rentals/ownership) would set the stage for further revitalization. This could change the thinking about the Corridor's potential, invite further investment and give the community a sense that initiatives are moving forward.

Residential Scale Comprehensive Community and Cultural Potential

- ◆ **Street Activity:** Develop more street activity with musicians and food carts.
- ◆ **Arts/Writer District:** Leverage art and cultural assets.
- ◆ **The 224:** Potential to leverage the health, wellness and community engagement at The 224.
- ◆ **Coffee Shop:** Open a coffee shop where people can gather and meet.
- ◆ **Bed & Breakfast:** Open a B & B for cultural tourism with Nook Farm as the anchor.
- ◆ **New Employees:** Take advantage of the 1700 new employees by creating neighborhood friendly streetscape and an interesting retail mix.

Summing Up: It Will Take Creating a Mini-Cultural District: With enhanced pedestrian-friendly streetscape and the improved perception of safety, it will be possible to further develop and promote this area and foster employee participation in supporting street businesses and activities.

Funding Opportunities

- ◆ **DECD Funding:** Take advantage of Department of Economic and Community Development (*DECD*) funding that LISC is administering to promote Transit Oriented Development (*TOD*).
- ◆ **TIF District Designation:** Take advantage of the newly enacted Tax Increment Funding (*TIF*) legislation to potentially become a TIF district and complete some of the streetscape. (*Note: This funding is specifically for municipalities enabling them to borrow against future tax increases.*)
- ◆ **CRDA Funds:** Explore the potential of a CRDA partnership.
- ◆ **Historic Tax Credits:** Encourage utilization of Historic Tax Credits in a development strategy.
- ◆ **City Funding:** Work with the city to allocate community economic development resources.
- ◆ **Foundations and Corporations:** Work with funders to identify funding partnerships and grants.

Summing Up The Summaries: With stable community development capacity in charge to coordinate an action plan that includes: 1) form-based zoning; 2) enhanced community policing; 3) neighborhood-friendly streetscape; 4) the development of one mixed use project; and 5) promoting the Corridor as an arts/cultural district, it will be better possible to access available funding and get the attention of people with power and influence to make things happen.

Conclusions, Recommendations and Next Steps

Conclusions

- ◆ **Economic Development Potential:** The potential for economic development is present on Farmington Avenue.
- ◆ **Regaining Trust:** At the same time there have been many studies and groups that have worked to move this area forward with minimal results, so people are cautious and skeptical about new attempts.
- ◆ **New Initiative Considerations:** Any new initiative must consider the challenges of getting the city to fund and complete streetscape work, absentee landowners, the lack of home owners and market-rate renters as well as the perception that this is not a safe or inviting place to live work and walk.

Recommendations

- ◆ **What It Will Take:** For this corridor to move forward, access available funding and get the attention of key influencer will require the following:
 - **Create a vision and action plan and convene a Comprehensive Community Action Plan Task Force** to refine and implement this action plan.
 - **Identify a community development organization** to coordinate and manage vision/action plan, advocate on its behalf, identify supporting resources and make sure at every step that this is the will of the community. Building this capacity is the most critical success factor and will focus attention that is needed to produce a vibrant community corridor.
 - **Create a redevelopment capacity** to develop at least one mixed-use project to set the stage for future development.
 - **Enhance on-foot police presence** to help change the perception that the Corridor is unsafe.
 - **Enhance streetscape** by engaging the city to support and implement a comprehensive streetscape plan. Such a plan will create a better “front door” so the Corridor is an inviting, pedestrian-friendly place.
 - **Introduce form-based zoning** so it is less complicated to get projects started but maintains the historic integrity of the Corridor.
 - **Introduce other redevelopment incentives** to encourage economic development investment.
 - **Brand and promote the Corridor** as an entity. It could begin simply by giving it a name and then developing consistent signage so there is a unique look. Many believe the Corridor has the potential to be a mini-arts/writers district. Whatever the focus that emerges, it is critical to engage stakeholders in helping to promote and influence the Corridor’s future.

Short-Term Next Steps for 2015

- **Convene a Community Forum in September 2015** to develop a comprehensive community action plan using this framework as the platform for discussion.
- **Convene a Comprehensive Community Action Plan Task Force** to refine/implement the action plan and propose details of a permanent community development organization and redevelopment capacity.
- **Brand this six-block Corridor** by first giving it a name and then promoting it as an entity.
- **Communicate the vision, action plan and brand** that emerge to build enthusiasm and raise the profile of the Corridor.

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“It will take a shared vision.”

Frank Hagaman, Hartford Preservation Alliance

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