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Mansfield CT: Planning a New Village Center¹



A case from the library of “smart growth” leadership case studies prepared by the New England Environmental Finance Center, available at <http://efc.muskie.usm.maine.edu/pubs.htm>

Abstract. The case follows the development of a plan for a new village center in Storrs, the central village of Mansfield, Connecticut. A process that was transparent and inclusive of the community members yielded a plan that gained the approval of the Town, the landowner (the University of Connecticut), and the citizenry. The process relied on the mending of fences, the leadership of key participants, and an innovative strategy that included development of a nonprofit corporation and creative use of grant money. While zoning changes are still in the works, the first stage of building goes forward.

¹ Prepared by Maggie Jones for the New England Environmental Finance Center’s “Next Communities Initiative,” Richard Barringer, ed., Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine, Portland ME, August 2006. Copyright © 2006 Muskie School of Public Service

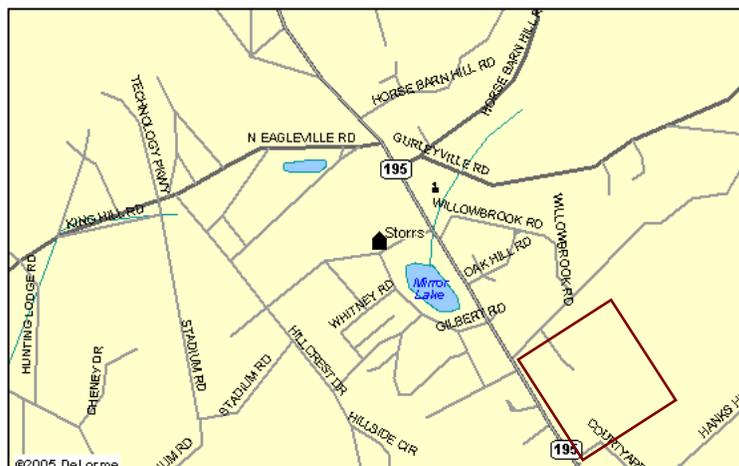
Mansfield. Mansfield is a town of 45.5 square miles in northeast Connecticut, including the villages of Mansfield Center and Storrs, home to the state university. In 2005, Mansfield’s population was 23,324, but there were fewer than a thousand registered voters. This is due to the presence of the University of Connecticut, whose students are included in overall population but may or may not live in Mansfield year-round.

Mansfield was incorporated in 1702. The settlers were farmers, and the town has remained rural and agricultural, for the most part. What industry developed located near the rivers, including textile mills and steel factories, including the first silk mill in the United States. In 1881 the Storrs Agriculture School took in its first students, eventually to become the University of Connecticut. Today, the University has a student population of 17,000 and provides a large share of the cultural and social activities in the town. It is also the town’s largest employer.

The Site. The site of the proposed new village center is in a developed area across from the southern end of the University campus, in the village of Storrs. The main road through the town and campus, Rte. 195, travels from northwest to southeast through the town toward Mansfield Center, and on toward Willimantic, the closest city.

The northern edge of the site is marked by Mansfield Road, which intersects Rte. 195 in a “T” and heads northeast to a residential area. On the west side of 195, from north to south, there are a few University buildings, E.O. Smith High School, and the town hall and community center. On the east side is a two-block length of linear strip-development, with two one-story strip malls containing coffee shops, a convenience store, a Mexican restaurant, and an automobile service center. The buildings are on a grade; offices and laundry facilities exist on the grade level, with shops on the street level.

The intersection of Route 195 and Mansfield Road has long been the area where businesses that serve the University population have set up. According to long-term resident Ruth Moynihan, as late as the 1970s the residents considered the intersection a “village center.” In recent decades businesses have closed up or moved, and the University itself has stepped in to provide services to students on campus,



Map of Storrs, with the red box showing site of the new village.

including movies and nightlife. At the time of this case study (June 2006) the strip malls along Rte. 195 contained several closed-up storefronts.

The University owns 90 percent of the parcels that make up the current development and the area under consideration for a new village. It also owns a large portion of Storrs’s protected land, including the nearby Moss Sanctuary and Joshua’s Trust, which abuts the land under consideration for the new village.

First steps. A village center at the intersection of Rte. 195 and Dog Lane is not a novel idea. In the 1970s the Town’s Plan of Development recognized the need for a “downtown” in the area. In several surveys, the students of UConn indicated that the lack of a downtown detracted from their overall university experience. University leaders have long bemoaned that the university is not near a vibrant downtown, unlike its major competitor, the University of Massachusetts.

Meanwhile, the relationship between the Town and the University deteriorated during the previous two decades, largely over conflicts of land use. These issues came to a head in the 1990s as the University began to its expansive UCONN 2000 project, funded by \$1 billion in state funds. (The \$1 billion was later supplemented by another

\$1.3 billion for the 21st Century UConn program.) This injection of money allowed the University to update its facilities and build new housing for students.

Residents of the community, however, grew unhappy with the University's aggressive building program. New housing appeared overnight in sensitive areas, including a housing project near the Moss Sanctuary that demolished a stand of trees. In 1999 the University incurred the wrath of area residents by reaching an agreement with the Pfizer Corporation to place an animal vaccine research center on a picturesque hill along Rte. 195. Area residents joined together to oppose the plan, and the resulting legal action caused Pfizer to withdraw.

In September 2001 concerned citizens in Storrs created Citizens for Responsible Growth, to monitor further development activity by the University. A founding member was Ruth Moynihan, a historian and adjunct professor. Many in the organization went on actively to participate in the Storrs Village planning process.

During the summer and fall of the same year, the University began plans for new graduate student housing. Three areas were under consideration: one near the Moss Sanctuary, a watershed near Pink Ravine, and a large parcel abutting Joshua's Trust. Citizens for Responsible Growth began a petition drive to make certain the University would develop outside the sensitive areas of town. The University agreed to develop near the existing strip development along Rte. 195.

Soon after, the University, the Town, and area residents began to see an opportunity to mend fences and develop a plan, building off the University's housing plan, that would benefit both the school and the community. Mansfield's then-mayor, Mike Shorr, attended a National League of Cities meeting and was inspired to move forward in a concrete way. Shortly thereafter, the Town hired HyettPalma, a national consulting firm specializing in the economic enhancement of new and existing downtowns.

HyettPalma met with people from the University, the Town, and the community. After reviewing the site and the interests involved, the firm suggested the formation of a partnership made up of University, Town, business, and citizen representatives to look at the kinds of strategies that would lead to a "sustainable" village. The partnership, called

the Mansfield Downtown Partnership, is a registered nonprofit organization overseen by a board of directors and headed by executive director Cheryl Van Zelm.

The Master Planning Process. The Downtown Partnership hired a multidisciplinary consulting firm, Milone & MacBroom, to head up a team of experts to analyze existing conditions at the site, develop an appropriate marketing plan for new development, and prepare a concept master plan. Milone & MacBroom held several public meetings and charettes to get citizen input. The process entailed four steps, outlined in the final master plan:

1. inventory and analysis of existing conditions, including evaluation of natural resources, land use, and cultural factors;
2. development of a market strategy, including both market analysis and interviews of current businesses;
3. concept development, in which the two analyses above were translated into possible land use scenarios; and
4. market development plan and implementation strategy, in which the selected alternative was refined and recommendations made for an implementation strategy.

Along with the professional work performed by the team of experts, Milone & MacBroom conducted a series of “design charettes” in September 2001 to allow members of the public to express *their* visions of what a downtown might be. (University students were involved in a later charette.) The community expressed the desire that the area be sustainable year-round, and not just marketed to the students; their likes and dislikes concerning architecture and layout; and especial concern about traffic issues, including pedestrian safety, the screening of parking, and traffic calming. To make the place more pedestrian-friendly and more like a traditional New England village, many wished that a community green be incorporated in the design.

In its 2002 report to the Downtown Partnership, Milone & MacBroom covered both the expert and community feedback. The report focused on the features that inhibit the area from being an attractive downtown in its present state. It observed that the classical architecture of the University and Town buildings, and the historic, New England-feel of the residences nearby, contrast harshly with the “eclectic architecture, the

disjointed vehicular and pedestrian circulation patterns, and the strip development orientation of the buildings toward the highway.”

Two issues of especial interest were parking and traffic levels. Parking is already very tight for the existing development, and expanded, denser development would worsen the problem. A traffic analysis pointed to the lack of pedestrian-friendly features due to the number of curb cuts and the lack of continuous sidewalk. The report concluded that, if traffic patterns continued, the “level-of-service” for the three intersections in the study area would deteriorate within a few years, with or without development. “Any redevelopment in the downtown that will generate traffic beyond what now exists will cause further deterioration in the level-of-service at these intersections unless operational improvements are incorporated into the improvement plan.”

In its review of the natural systems, Milone & MacBroom delineated a wetland in a part of the study area that is not presently developed. It suggested retaining the wetland, which they deemed to be in moderate condition. Design principles suggested a mix of uses, block lengths of 200 to 300 feet in a grid layout, a hierarchy of streets of different widths, vernacular architecture, a central green, and pedestrian-friendly features.

Milone & MacBoom stated as a goal that Storrs Center become a “destination district” with a greater quantity and variety of uses to attract visitors, and outlined a conceptual master plan based on the alternative design that won the greatest public approval. It also recommended, as an implementation strategy, that the Downtown Partnership create a Municipal Development Agency (MDA) under Connecticut statutes. The Partnership decided to take this course rather than simply changing the permitted uses and leaving the development process up in the air. In May 2002, the Town authorized the Partnership to act as its Municipal Development Agency and undertake development of the Storrs Center area.

Once the conceptual master plan was finalized, the next step was to decide whether it was time to bring in whoever would actually build the village. This is what Martin Berliner, Mansfield’s Town Manager, described as a “chicken and egg scenario. Do you do your plan and go to a developer, or do you go to a developer to help inform the process? Or do they (the developer) inform the process or wreck the process? There

was a concern there that people would say, ‘Well, you’ve got the developer, so we have no more say.’” The Partnership decided that the best way was to bring a developer in; they did not want to run the risk of finalizing a plan that a developer wouldn’t go with.

Entry of Leyland Alliance. In June 2004, the Partnership contracted with Leyland Alliance of Tuxedo NY to be the project developer, through an RFQ (request for qualifications) process rather than an RFP. A development agreement between the two was signed in August 2004.

The Partnership next instituted six citizen committees to work on different aspects of the development plan: advertising and promotion, business development and retention, finance and administration, membership development, planning and design, and nominating. The committees have worked in tandem with Leyland on various aspects of the plan for development. Berliner expressed his opinion that the formation of committees was “just genius, since it got people involved who have become salesmen for the project. They go out and talk to other members of the community, who are more likely to listen and trust them.”

Early on Leyland came forward with the proposal that just 15 of the 45-acre site be developed, the rest to be preserved in perpetuity as open space. Using an environmental review performed by one of its contractors, Leyland determined that the wetland area was home to endangered tree frogs and too sensitive to have development nearby.

That Leyland proposed more dense development than originally planned gave some residents pause. In a series of open meetings and design charrettes, project manager Macon Toledano tried to assuage people’s fears. Leyland firmly believed that a development including some four- or five-story buildings would blend well with the architecture of the nearby University and Town buildings.

Together with the design committee, Leyland worked up a development plan that included a new village green, using a planned new University building as one of the four “walls” of the greenspace. The building, a fine arts center, was designed by architect Frank O. Gehry in association with Herbert S. Newman and Partners, the architecture

firm subcontracted by Leyland for the Storrs Center design. The architecture team also developed buildings of various heights that fit in with the architecture of a New England town center.



Leyland Alliance Conceptual Design for Storrs Center (new construction shown in yellow)

The design includes a new village street running parallel to and to the east of Route 195. This will create a neighborhood of mixed uses, with retail on ground floors, offices on second floors, and residences above. Farther east, a connected residential neighborhood will include a variety of residences, including condominiums, town houses, and multifamily homes.

The Downtown Partnership (operating as the MDA) and Leyland worked together to prepare an official Municipal Development Plan, which received approval from the Partnership’s board of directors, the Mansfield Planning and Zoning Commission, the Mansfield Town Council, the UConn Board of Trustees, and the County Planning Commission. (The Planning Director for Mansfield has been heavily involved in the Partnership from the beginning, and vocal in his support of the process and Plan.)

Public Process and Compromise. Four issues related to the development created causes for concern within the community. The first involved the proposed density for the area. The nature of the town is rural, and, in the words of one resident, “It looks as though they’re trying to build a city there.” The one factor that has ameliorated this concern is the height of the University buildings. While there is no public movement against the density of the proposed village, residents appear to be withholding judgment on whether such a large-scale development will work in their town.



The Proposed New Village Includes Buildings of More Than Three Stories.

The second issue is traffic. In the fall, winter, and spring, when the University is in full-session, the three intersections near the school can be backed up for half an hour. There is no convenient route around the school at this time, and Rte. 195 is a major artery to other parts of the state and to I-84, the interstate to Hartford and New York. The University and the Town have been pondering a north-south road through campus that would bypass Rte. 195.

The third concern is parking. The University now requires that people pay for parking on campus. There is little on-street parking at present, and parking at the existing malls is limited, as well.

Finally, the development required the relocation of some businesses to accommodate construction. This worried not only those businesses but others in the community concerned about the intentions of Leyland and the MDA. To ease people's concerns, Leyland and the MDA plan to build a first building, "Building 1A," to house the businesses that need to be relocated for the new construction.

Views of the Process. Everyone involved on behalf of the Town and University expresses satisfaction at how open the process has been. For people in the community who wished to know about the project, there were many public meetings, a project web site, and monthly open houses at the Partnership office. These, along with the existence of committees and work groups, made the process "completely transparent," according to Martin Berliner.

Ruth Moynihan expresses a different opinion. While there had been charettes and public meetings at the beginning of the process, Moynihan, in particular, did not think these were particularly successful at respecting the voice of the citizenry and giving people a venue to express their wishes. However, as the process continued, the work of Cynthia van Zelm and Leyland Alliance began to allay people's fears.

Moynihan points to van Zelm, in particular, as a positive force for building trust in the community for the project. "I must say, I think she has done an amazing job. To begin with, she began to meet with individuals, anyone who wanted to talk. I made an appointment and told her, 'You know, people are really angry about what the University has done, and what has gone on here. We are terrified about what is going to happen to our properties, to the ecology of the area, and to the watershed. And we're going to be watching, closely.' And she has made a real effort to reach out to anyone who was concerned."

The opportunity to work on the design committee eased Moynihan's mind about the process, as well as the quality of Leyland's work. Especially important to Moynihan was the careful environmental study Leyland's team performed. She expressed a change in her opinion: originally she assumed that the town center project was a "University

project adopted by the town.” Today she feels more positive about the possibilities of a revitalized village center.

Current Mayor Elizabeth Paterson also points to van Zelm’s leadership as being key in building trust and consensus within the community. “She’s gone out to *every* group in this community with her dog-and-pony show. Because of the type of personality she is, people way over here and people way over there all love her. What more could you ask for in a project like this?”

Prospects for the Future. The Municipal Development Plan received unanimous approval from the Planning Commission. At the time of this case study (August 2006) the MDC has just received Town approval for the construction of Building 1A, to house the relocated businesses. The Partnership and Leyland have been working on securing public funds for the relocation of businesses and the building of a parking garage.. Eighty percent of the money for the village development, however, will come from Leyland, itself, through traditional development financing.

When asked whether this approach to funding will make rents in the area expensive, van Zelm concedes that the buildings, traditionally styled and constructed, may not be affordable to many of the businesses now in the area. “Leyland has done their best to keep costs down,” and grant money for relocation will help some of the businesses currently in the area. In terms of the residential uses, Van Zelm has a list of some 125 people who have expressed interest in purchasing a town house or a condominium in Storrs Center.

Leyland plans to build the village in stages, beginning with Building 1-A. The development as a whole still relies on zoning changes and site plan approval from the Town. The development team plans to go before the Planning Commission in fall 2006 to secure zoning changes that will allow the plan to go forward. Van Zelm explains that the Downtown Partnership, through the MDA, has essentially functioned as a separate planning and zoning commission; but it must go before the public and the Town to secure the needed zoning changes. Van Zelm expects them to become a reality in Fall 2006.

Teaching Note:

Important ideas illustrated in Mansfield case include:

1. The importance of good process, of transparency and patient trust-building.
2. The importance of melding sound expertise with public process and decision-making.
3. The importance of effective, persistent leadership.
4. The importance of ownership and control of the property, and of ownership's commitment to effective process as well as outcome.
5. The importance of good design, responsive to and enabling of public sentiment.
6. The importance of effective partnerships to overcome inevitable obstacles.
7. The importance of the creative use of state law and state and federal grant opportunities to move a project forward.