

# Bloomfield Center Plan

Town of Bloomfield, CT

Economic Development Commission

June 2013



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# INTRODUCTION

## Overview

Bloomfield Center is the traditional heart of the Town. It emerged as a community focal point in 1736 due to its central location in Windsor's newly formed Parish of Wintonbury. The Congregation Church anchored the Parish here.

Bloomfield incorporated as an independent town in 1835 and the Center emerged as a typical New England village with a hotel, tavern, post office, residences and some industry. In the late 1800s the Town established a Town Green.

Toward the end of the 1800s, Bloomfield Center became a "modern" community with electricity, telephones, and passenger rail to Hartford and other points. As the next century rolled in, the civic role of the Center solidified with construction of a town hall and library. In 1909 trolley service extended into the Center.

Beginning in the 1940s, Bloomfield transitioned to an automobile society as trolley and rail service ended. Over the next decades, building patterns in the Center changed as retail development responded to consumer preferences for convenient parking. Commercial development began shifting away from the Center to areas with large vacant parcels and better highway access.

Bloomfield Center remains a civic and business hub despite physical and market changes and trends. The Center has retained key physical elements of its historic village. The size and shape of the Town Green has changed over time, but the Green has consistently served its intended purpose as a community gathering spot.



*Area that is Bloomfield Center today in 1801. From Wintonbury Historical Society.*



*Bloomfield Center taken 1900 to 1910. Photo from Wintonbury Historical Society.*



*Bloomfield Center Today.*

The Center draws visitors who attend church services, dine, visit medical offices, and see a movie. New businesses continue to choose to locate in Bloomfield Center and several property owners wish to expand or upgrade buildings.

As a town, Bloomfield's demographics are transitioning. Incomes of residents are rising and Bloomfield is attracting empty-nesters with discretionary income to spend, if given the opportunity to do so. Nationally, there is greater interest in living in and visiting places with a village setting.

This action plan identifies ways that Bloomfield Center can be prepared for its next transformation. This Plan's intent is not to recreate the Bloomfield Center of yesteryear, but to embrace and build upon changes in the market, our population, and consumer preferences while reinforcing and enhancing those physical elements that help create a village or town center atmosphere.

## **Process for Creating this Plan**

The Economic Development Commission oversaw the creation of this Plan. Input from stakeholders was critical to understanding issues and challenges in the Center and in gauging property owners' long term interests. The Consultant interviewed many business owners, property owners, town officials, town staff, staff and members of the Chamber of Commerce, and representatives from the University of Hartford.

The Commission discussed draft strategies with the Town Council and presented this Plan to the public for feedback.

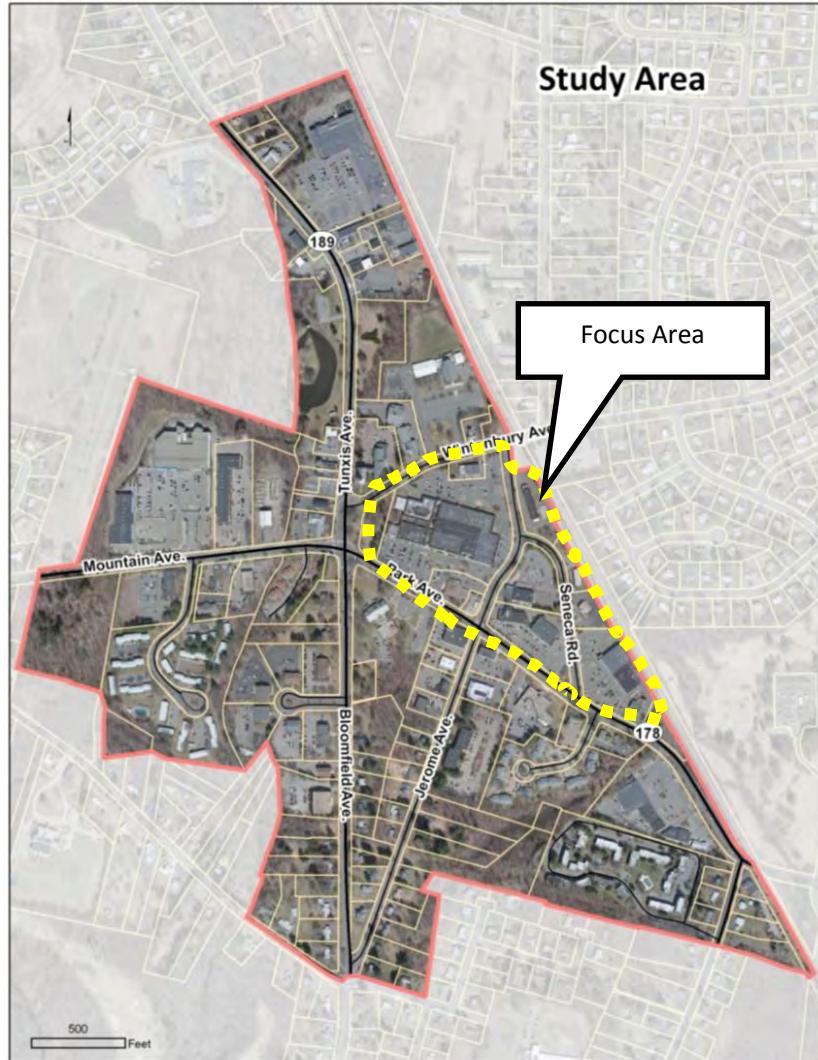
Interim project reports provide detailed findings and observations. In addition, a market assessment was conducted. A summary of those reports is found in the Appendix of this plan. More detailed information is contained in those interim reports. For details, refer to the October 23, 2012 Inventory and January 4, 2013 Assessment reports.

## About Bloomfield Center

This Plan encompasses the full Bloomfield Center District (the BCD zone). Key statistics for the Town Center as a whole include:

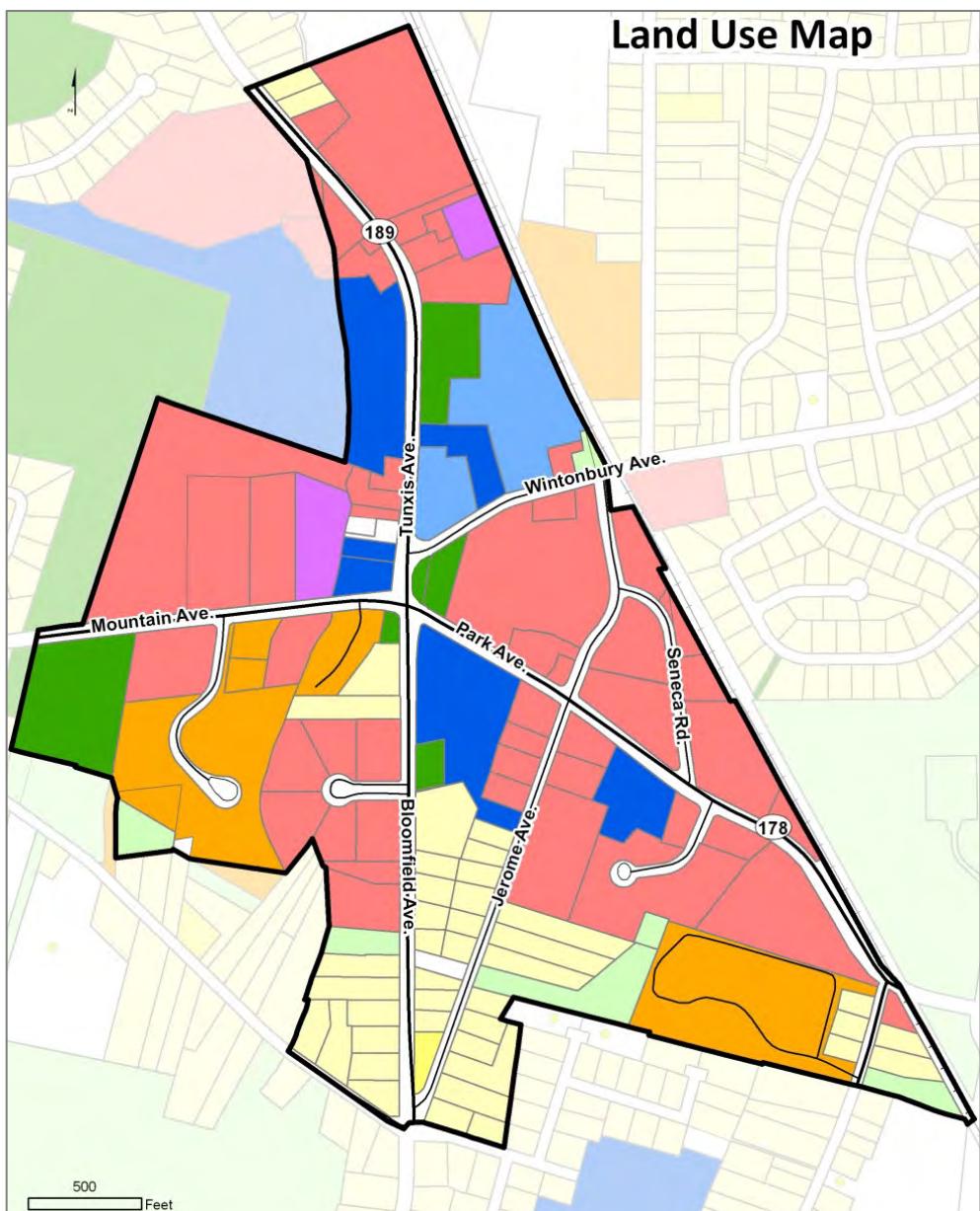
- 205 acres (1.3% of land in Bloomfield)
- 117 parcels
- 1.5 million square feet of building area
- \$63.3 million in total assessed value (3.4% of Bloomfield's total assessed values)
- \$50.7 taxable assessment
- Represents only 1.3% of the Town's total land area, but contributes to 3% of the Town's tax base

The focus area is the part of Bloomfield most associated with the term "town center". Improvements and / or redevelopment here would have the greatest visible impact.



According to land use data in the Plan of Conservation and Development, half of the land in the Center is used for economic development purposes such as offices, retail, dining and other businesses. Residential uses account for 27% of the land and town facilities account for 9%. There is little vacant land.

Land Use	% of Land in Town Center
Single Family	14%
Multi-Family	13%
Commercial	48%
Industrial	2%
Dedicated Open Space	6%
Managed Open Space	4%
Community Facility	9%
Institutional	5%
Vacant	0.3%

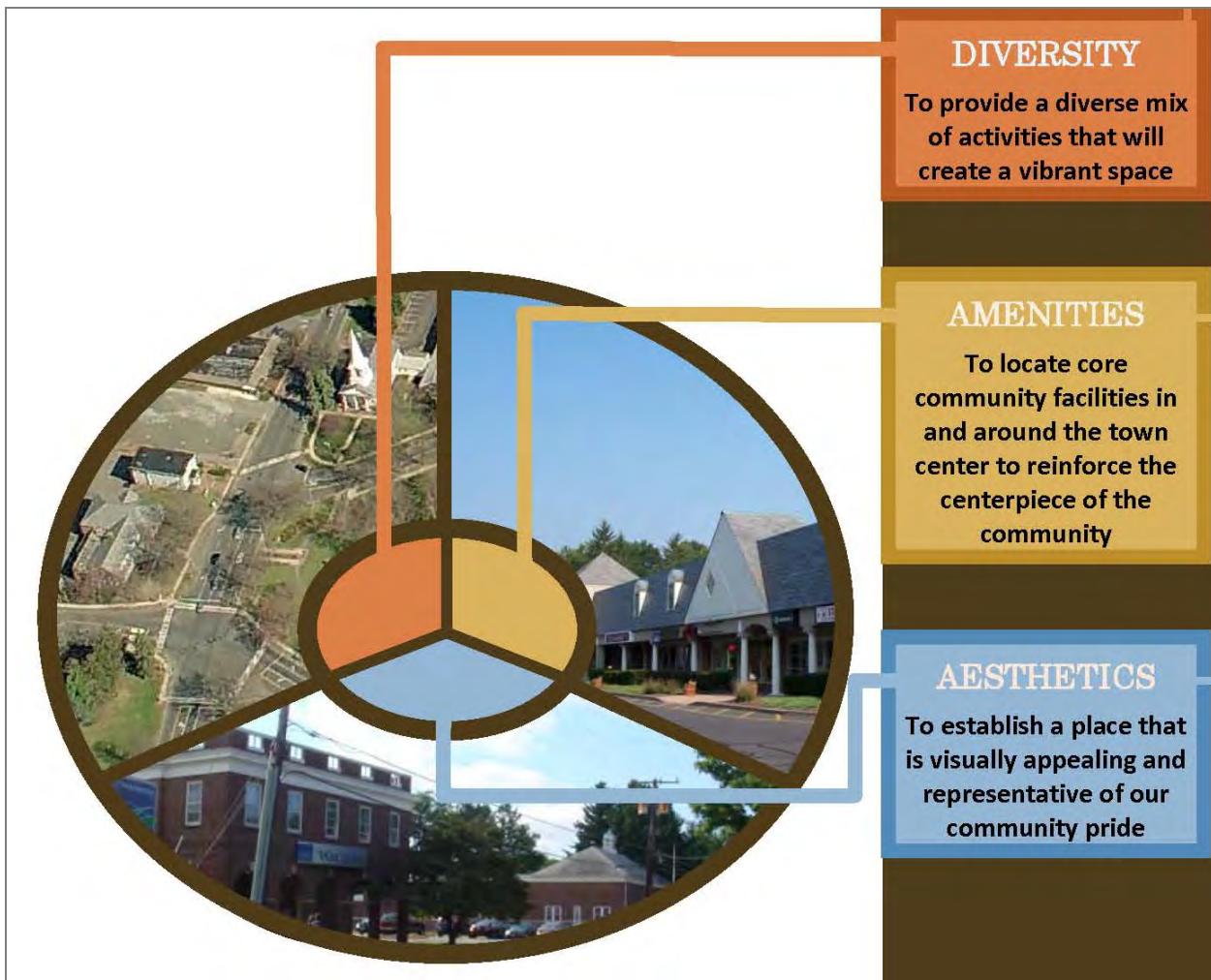


# COMMUNITY VISION

Bloomfield's town-wide Plans of Conservation and Development consistently support the Center as a key economic focal point. The 1973, 1984, and 2000 Plans reinforced the importance of the Center as Bloomfield's cultural, civic, business and commercial hub.

In 2004, the Center for Integrated Design at the University of Hartford studied conditions in the Center and recommended physical improvements for streetscapes and activities to increase vitality of the Center.

The 2012 Bloomfield Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD) relied on extensive public input to formulate visions for many topics including Bloomfield Center. That vision (see below) forms the basis of the strategies in this Bloomfield Center Plan.



*Vision for Bloomfield Center, 2012 Plan of Conservation and Development*

Both the POCD and the 2004 University of Hartford Study identify and depict physical enhancements for the Center. They examine preferable building design, site layouts, streetscape improvements, way finding signs and alternative road configurations. This Plan defers to those two documents for strategies to improve Bloomfield Center's appearance.

This Plan focuses instead on other elements necessary to improve and enhance Bloomfield Center.



*One concept from the University of Hartford study.*

# STRATEGIC APPROACH

## Key Findings

An analysis of existing conditions, a market assessment, and interviews with stakeholders revealed key issues and opportunities (see Appendix for a summary of the analysis).

The following key findings had the greatest influence on the strategic direction of this Plan:

1. New development would primarily be through redevelopment since there is very little vacant land in the Center.
2. Residents and stakeholders (who provided input during this project and the POCD-update process) felt redevelopment is important to achieve the vision for Bloomfield Center.
3. Yet redevelopment potential today appears to be low because commercial rents in the Center are low and that might mean that landowners would not make an adequate return on their investment.
4. There may be demand for some additional small-scale retail, restaurants and offices (see chart on next page).
5. Stakeholders consistently recognize that Bloomfield's diversity and the increase in international cuisine present a branding opportunity for the Center.
6. Today's approach to parking will not work in the future. Each landowner provides all of their parking needs on their own property. This is creating some issues today and will likely impede future redevelopment.
7. Other than the parking issue, the Zoning Regulations appear to allow ample development and redevelopment in the Center.
8. The Town, business owners, landowners, and residents all play a role in revitalizing the Center, but there is no leader dedicated to such efforts.

## Implications

If this Plan were to focus solely on spurring large scale redevelopment in the Center, it might take many years or even decades to see progress. Yet many residents and stakeholders appear ready for the Town, businesses and property owners to take action now to improve the Center and take advantage of current trends and opportunities.

It became evident that this Plan should focus energy on short term actions that will instill pride in our Town Center, build a better business climate and help set the stage for longer term redevelopment. Therefore this Plan places great emphasis on working with what we have today in the Center, while aspiring to eventual redevelopment that embraces village-style patterns.

## Summary of Market Assessment

 Green = possible demand  Red = demand not apparent

Sector	Findings	What it Means
Retail and Restaurant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Town-wide potential demand of 34,000 sf to 57,000 sf</li> <li>• Target area, possibly 20,000 sf</li> <li>• Likely smaller, home-grown type businesses, not chains</li> <li>• Possibly smaller grocery, specialty foods (6,900 sf to 11,500 sf)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smaller businesses can be higher risk (for both business owner and landlord); Town might elect to play active role in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ recruiting businesses to Center</li> <li>◦ subsidizing rents</li> <li>◦ helping small businesses start-up</li> <li>◦ helping to market new businesses</li> <li>◦ addressing parking needs</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Town-wide potential demand of 46,100 sf to 123,000 sf</li> <li>• Target Area, possibly 5,000 sf to 25,000 sf</li> <li>• Types of offices likely in Target Area – medical and smaller personal services (e.g., insurance, real estate)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New offices will bring in employees and others that might, in turn, improve demand for retail and restaurants</li> <li>• However, need a balance; too many offices in prime locations = little activity on evenings and weekends</li> </ul>
Hotel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional occupancy trends are improving, but below threshold for more rooms</li> <li>• Limited financing for new hotels</li> <li>• Bloomfield Center may not be able to draw business travelers or tourists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Substantial redevelopment and land assembly would be needed to fit a hotel in the Center</li> <li>• Subsidy likely needed to make financials work</li> </ul>
Residential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited number of residential units (20 to 50) in Target Area; parking likely a challenge though</li> <li>• Few housing development opportunities within ½ mile walk of Center</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception that Bloomfield Center does not yet have enough commercial activity to draw those who wish to live in a mixed use setting (apartments over retail)</li> <li>• Best option might be apartment buildings that share part of a site; revenues from such apartments could help make commercial redevelopment more feasible</li> <li>• Might be infill / redevelopment opportunities for smaller-scale apartment buildings</li> </ul>

## Summary of Strategic Approach

A five-prong strategic approach can help build a more vibrant Bloomfield Center. Each of these is detailed in the next chapter:

**1** Strengthen the Town's ability to do economic development in Bloomfield Center

**2** Support and help grow existing businesses

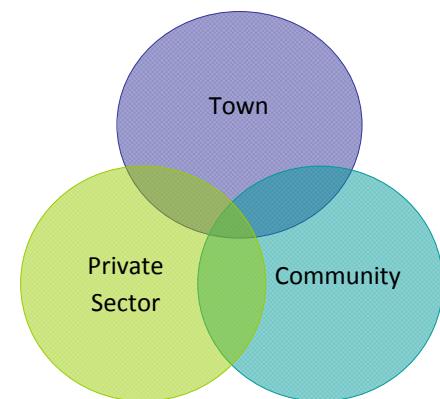
**3** Fill vacancies

**4** Create a climate of investment through town investment

**5** Set the framework for longer term redevelopment

## A Partnership

Achieving the vision for Bloomfield Center requires a partnership between the Town (staff, commissions, and committees), the private sector (landowners and business owners) and the community (residents and community organizations). To successfully implement the strategies in this Plan, all partners must be involved and engaged.



# DETAILED APPROACH

## 1| Strengthen the Town's ability to do economic development in Bloomfield Center

Some of the actions in this Plan entail little to no cost, but will need a person or a group to spearhead the action and see it through. Today, individuals on staff and two groups participate in aspects of economic development. But as the following assessment notes, the Town lacks a clear go-to person to lead efforts and be a liaison to businesses.

Tasks	Who Takes Lead Today	Assessment
Attract business to the Center	Town Manager, Mayor, Town Council, Town Planner, Economic Development Commission	<b>NEEDS IMPROVEMENT</b> - No staff person solely focused on economic development nor an entity (commission or committee) focused solely on the Town Center
Review and approve permits	Building Dept., Town Planner, Planning and Zoning Commission, Health District, and others.	<b>WORKS WELL</b> - Recently-opened businesses said process works well, easy to determine which approvals are needed, and staff is helpful
Help business grow, expand	Town Manager, Mayor, Town Council, Town Planner, Economic Development Commission	<b>NEEDS IMPROVEMENT</b> - No staff person solely focused on economic development nor an entity (commission or committee) focused solely on the Town Center

### Strategies

- A| Designate town staff as the leader and go-to person for economic development in the Town Center.
- B| Determine which commission or committee will oversee progress and provide guidance on implementing this Plan and other Town Center initiatives.
- C| Publicize the Town's organizational approach.

## A| Designate a Leader

A designated person can focus on economic development town-wide with dedicated attention on the Town Center. Overall duties might include:

- Carry out the actions in this Plan.
- Staff the lead commission / committee (see Strategy B below)
- Identify funding sources for initiatives including grants.
- Coordinate with other departments regarding issues facing the Center (Public Works, Police, etc.)
- Serve as the point person for economic development inquiries.

This Plan does not recommend if this role should be filled by a part-time or full-time position or through a contractual arrangement. Communities around Connecticut use different approaches. Ultimately town leaders should evaluate the best approach for Bloomfield.

## B| Determine Lead Commission / Committee

Today, both the Economic Development Commission (EDC) and the Land Use and Economic Development Subcommittee of the Town Council address business issues. One group should be designated as the overseers of implementation of this Plan. This designation may be the most important initial step to take in order for the initiatives in this Plan to be successful.

Their role could entail:

- Set annual priorities of which actions to focus upon.
- Monitor the implementation status of this Plan.
- Report progress to the Town Council.
- Update this Plan as actions are completed and new ideas or priorities arise.
- Appear before other town commissions to support projects and improvements in Bloomfield Center.

Since one role of the lead entity is to report progress to the Town Council, this Plan recommends that the EDC is designated as the Lead Commission. This provides for a "checks and balances" mechanism.

## C| Publicize the Town's Organizational Approach

Once the Town designates its point-person and lead committee/commission, it is important to get the word out so that businesses know who to contact. It also demonstrates the Town is intent upon carrying out economic development initiatives in the Center.

## 2| Support and Help Grow Existing Businesses

A successful business draws people to the Center, which in turn can create demand for new businesses. Also, when businesses do well, they might upgrade their properties or expand. These improvements help raise property values and improve the climate for redevelopment in the Center.

### Strategies

- A| Support efforts by businesses to work together.
- B| Promote Bloomfield Center.
- C| Coordinate events that draw people to the Center.
- D| Help businesses improve property or expand.
- E| Help solve existing parking problems.

## **A| Support Efforts by Businesses to Work Together**

Today, some businesses casually work together on an as-needed basis. For example, the movie theater and a restaurant cross-promote their businesses and some restaurants work with liquor stores. However, Center businesses do not regularly coordinate efforts or meet to discuss common issues. Some restaurant owners indicated interest in the Town helping to organize occasional meetings between businesses.

The Town could take an initial lead to bring business owners or groups of similar businesses together on a regular basis. Given the focus on the emerging restaurant scene in Bloomfield, the Town might start with the restaurants. Taking the lead might entail:

- Arrange the logistics for a first meeting (date, place, and agenda).
- Determine beforehand initial ideas on how the businesses can work together in the short term.
- Facilitate the meeting.
- Provide follow-up assistance to carry out ideas that arise at the meetings.

## **B| Promote Bloomfield Center**

The Town can take an active role in promoting Bloomfield Center. A first step is to reinforce that the center is a "place". Actions include:

- The Town government should consistently refer to this part of Town as "Bloomfield Center," including in references to the location of town facilities such as on the website.
- Update the website to make reference to Bloomfield Center, such as on the About Bloomfield page.
- The Town should encourage businesses in the Center to refer to "Bloomfield Center" in their advertisements and on their web pages.
- Consider updating the zoning regulations to allow for slightly larger or differently configured signs if the business incorporates "Bloomfield Center" into their sign design.
- Demarcate the Center with banners or welcome signs which specifically refer to Bloomfield Center.
- Program the electronic community sign to run "Welcome to Bloomfield Center".

One idea raised is to promote businesses in the Center through advertising in regional publications and even on an electronic billboard on Interstate 84 or 91. The Town could also buy radio ads that feature a Bloomfield Center business of the week or month. This might work best as part of a branding initiative (see box on page 14).

The Town could also coordinate targeted advertising of Bloomfield Center businesses to groups including the over-55 and senior living developments in town, visitors who regularly attend the churches in the Center, and University of Hartford students.

The Town could also provide on-line promotional information by creating a separate web page that focuses solely on Bloomfield Center. Web sites created for other town centers can guide Bloomfield's efforts:

- Downtown Manchester, CT: <http://www.downtownmanchester.org/>
- Ridgefield, CT (the site is for the entire town, but is an example of an effective municipal business development website): <http://www.ridgefielddevelopment.com/> .
- Storrs Center in Mansfield, CT: <http://www.storrscenter.com/> .
- Village Center, East Hampton, CT (website by a community group): <http://www.itsawonderfulvillage.org/>

#### Branding Bloomfield Center

A branding effort can help generate buzz and "sell" the Center. Branding should elevate existing strengths or assets. Stakeholders identified Bloomfield Center's growing restaurant scene as a selling point, especially the diversity in ethnic cuisine offered. If the Town develops a tag-line to publicize this strength, it can form the basis of a marketing campaign.

A branding expert can help identify an effective and catchy phrase that captures the intention, but here are some ideas to provoke thought:

*Bloomfield Center ~ All America City with International Flavor*

*Bloomfield Center ~ Global Dining Close to Home*

*Travel the World in Bloomfield Center ~ One Restaurant at a Time*

*Bloomfield Center ~ World Cuisine with Hometown Feel*

Alternatively, the Town could hold a contest in which residents make suggestions and vote on their favorite phrase. A contest would actively involve the community and generate buzz for Bloomfield Center.

### C| Coordinate Events that Draw People to the Center

The Town should continue to hold events on the Town Green and introduce new events. Restaurant owners raised the idea of holding a "Taste-of-Bloomfield" on the Green. However, it is uncertain if there is a large enough base of restaurants today to support this kind of event.

There are other types of dining related events that do not require a large number of participating restaurants and are proving popular in other downtowns and town centers. For example, in the fall of 2012, restaurants in downtown Norwich participated in their first "Grub Crawl". Interest in the event exceeded expectations, resulting in a waiting list. To hold a Grub Crawl in Bloomfield Center, the Town could find a volunteer willing to coordinate efforts with the restaurants and publicize the event.

Local officials might also encourage residents to organize "Dish Mobs", especially for newer restaurants in the Center. Dish mobs select a restaurant and a date (usually a slower restaurant evening) and spread the word for people to dine at that restaurant on that set night. Either a Grub Crawl or Dish Mob can draw attention to Bloomfield Center and generate good business for participating restaurants. Outdoor dining also draws restaurant-goers and adds visible activity. The Town could create a guide explaining how to obtain permits for outdoor dining and distribute it to restaurants in the Center.

Stakeholders felt there is a lack of family entertainment options in the Center, aside from the movie theater. During warm weather months, the Town could sponsor family-oriented events, such as outdoor movies, and work with restaurants to either cross-promote or sell food at the event.

The Town could also work with the University of Hartford to determine if student-oriented events could be held in the Center.



*"Grub Crawl" in Downtown Norwich, October 2012. Photo courtesy of Norwich Community Development Corporation.*

#### D| Help Businesses Improve Property or Expand

Large and small Connecticut communities offer loans for businesses to upgrade existing building facades, parking lots and grounds. Bloomfield could establish such a Façade Improvement Fund and give priority to those businesses located in Bloomfield Center.

Other grant and loan programs are discussed under the next goal of filling vacancies. Those programs focus on attracting new businesses but could be tailored to also help existing businesses expand.

When businesses upgrade their buildings or grounds, the Town Beautification Committee could recognize their efforts and help generate publicity for the business.

Upgrades to signs can dramatically improve the appearance of a business or property. Regardless of whether a façade improvement program is established, the Town should encourage property owners to upgrade and coordinate signage on their properties.

#### Façade Improvement Program Example

Wethersfield established a Façade Improvement program, which provides a forgivable loan for up to 50% of the cost for improvements. Eligible improvements include new signs, sign removal, landscaping, windows, awnings, siding, painting and other projects.

The Town set up the fund with an initial appropriation and has added to it with the grant money and additional town appropriations. The Town Planner and Town Attorney work with an economic development commission to review and approve the loans and the design review board reviews the planned improvements. They receive approximately three to four applications per year.

Local officials consider the program to be a great success, with 20 projects undertaken to date.

Before:



After:



*Photos from Town of Wethersfield web site.*

## E| Help Solve Existing Parking Problems

Parking issues related to redevelopment are discussed later, under Strategy 5. Today, businesses in Bloomfield Center generally can meet parking demand on-site. But one area is facing challenges during peak business hours - Jerome Avenue just south of Park Avenue.

The Town Hall parking lot abuts those parcels, making it very convenient to park at Town Hall and walk to the businesses. Businesses report that patrons have tried to park at Town Hall but were told they could not. The Town should allow public use of the lot, determine if time restrictions are needed (e.g., perhaps just evenings and weekends), and adopt a formal policy. Parking lot signs could be installed to identify the lot as a public lot and note any restrictions.

Some businesses along this stretch of Jerome Avenue have agreements to share parking with neighbors. If needed, the Town could help businesses develop formal sharing agreements and interconnect private parking lots.



### 3| Fill Vacancies

Vacant storefronts have a greater impact on the image of an area than vacant offices do because storefronts are highly visible. This Plan supports efforts to help fill any vacant space throughout Bloomfield Center, but places special emphasis on storefronts in retail strip malls, such as the Wintonbury Mall.

#### Strategies:

- A| Creatively fill vacant storefronts with temporary uses.
- B| Help draw new permanent businesses to vacant space.
- C| Provide financial assistance to draw the types of businesses that will make Bloomfield Center a destination.

## A| Creatively Fill Vacant Storefronts with Temporary Uses

Downtowns and town centers are enlivening empty storefronts by displaying artwork in the store windows. This is commonly referred to as "Pop-Up Art". Usually only the window is used and the public does not enter the building. Though in some cases the interior space is used for performances, art shows and other uses.

Adjacent businesses benefit from the temporary aesthetic improvement and, because it is a temporary use, the landlord can continue to recruit a permanent use. The artwork can also draw new visitors to the Center.

Some communities have formal programs, while others have taken an ad-hoc approach. Connecticut communities that encourage or coordinate placing art in vacant storefronts include Torrington, Bridgeport, Middletown and Hartford.

The Town could approach landlords of buildings with vacant storefronts and seek art work through the Hartford Art School at University of Hartford or the high school. Priority should be given to vacant spaces in retail strip malls, such as the Wintonbury Mall (see box for ideas).



Examples of artwork in vacant storefronts.

### Local or Regional Groups that Might Creatively Fill Vacant Storefront Windows in Bloomfield Center

Ideally preference should be given to showcasing the work of or projects by local artists, community groups or students. When that is not possible, other groups could be contacted.

- Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford
- Visual and Performing Arts Program at Bloomfield Public Schools
- Wintonbury Historical Society
- Prosser Public Library
- The Artists Collective (greater Hartford)
- Farmington Valley Arts Center
- Windsor Arts Center

## B| Help Draw New Permanent Businesses to Vacant Space

The Town can actively seek out those businesses that:

- are most desired in the Center and,
- will help turn Bloomfield Center into a destination (see box).

The Town can promote vacant space by keeping an inventory, providing information about the space, and putting interested businesses in touch with the property owners.

Communities in Connecticut and elsewhere in the country have adopted loan and grant programs to help invigorate their downtowns or to attract specific types of businesses (Bloomfield offers a Tax Incentive Program, in accordance with Connecticut General Statutes 12-65b).

Examples of targeted programs and general programs include:

- REINVEST Loan Program – Middletown, CT. Low interest loan for up to 50% of construction costs of exterior or interior improvements.

<http://www.middletownplanning.com/Divisions/reinvest.html>

- Rent Subsidy Program – New London provides subsidies up to \$5 per square foot for first year and \$2 per second year. Must locate in a vacant storefront. <http://ci.new-london.ct.us/filestorage/27/55/2071/RentSubsidyProgramDetails.pdf>.

- Restaurant Forgivable Loan Program – Lombard, IL. Provides forgivable loans for up to 1/3 of the costs for renovated space for a sit-down restaurant; 1/10<sup>th</sup> of loan is forgiven for each full year the restaurant operates in the location.

<http://www.villageoflombard.org/index.aspx?NID=794&ART=1830>.

- Downtown Retail Business Grant – Lombard, IL. For targeted new businesses and existing businesses. 50% matching grant for start-up or expansion.

<http://www.villageoflombard.org/index.aspx?NID=795&ART=1913>.

Similar to a Façade Improvement Program, the Town would need to allocate funding to any such grant or loan program.

### 4Rs: Restaurants, Retail, Recreation, Residences

In cases where a public expenditure is used to assist a new business or development, the investment should clearly meet the goals for Bloomfield Center. The "RRRRs" can help make Bloomfield Center a vibrant place to visit with activity on weekdays, weekends and evenings.

#### Restaurants

- Sit down restaurants
- Tea rooms
- Coffee shops

#### Retail

- Boutique or small scale retail ("mom and pop", gift shops, gourmet shops)
- Home grown businesses (by Bloomfield residents)
- Small grocery or specialty food stores

#### Recreation

- Arts and cultural venues
- Social venues such as wine bars, pubs or lounges
- Events

#### Residences

- Apartments above retail
- Housing within walking distance to the focus area

Lastly, when a new business opens in the Center, the Town can help generate buzz through ribbon cuttings, grand opening ceremonies, and announcing new businesses on the Town website. The Town should also work with the Chamber of Commerce to reinvigorate its grand opening program.

## 4| Create a Climate of Investment Through Town Investment

Public investment in Bloomfield Center sends a signal to property owners and business that the Town is committed to the Center. The Town has invested in improvements in the Center and should continue to prioritize those projects that:

- make the Center more attractive, and
- help spur private investment.

As noted, the Plan of Conservation and Development and 2004 University of Hartford study identify specific capital improvements for Bloomfield Center. Additional ideas for “town investment” in the Center were raised by stakeholders during the development of this Plan.

### Strategies:

- A| Improve parks.
- B| Continue to improve streetscapes.
- C| Address real and perceived safety concerns.
- D| Maintain stormwater infrastructure.
- E| Improve community maintenance.

### A| Improve Parks

Two important public assets are found in Bloomfield Center – the Town Green and Filley Park. Successful town centers have public outdoor gathering areas that are attractive and well-used. Needed and desirable upgrades to the Town Green should be identified and included in the Capital Improvement Program. The Town should also move forward with improvements at Filley Park.



### B| Continue to Improve Streetscapes

The Plan of Conservation and Development and the 2004 Center Plan contain specific recommendations for improvements on public ways – including sidewalks, way finding signs, welcome signs, street trees, and even roadway reconfigurations. This Plan defers to those recommendations and recommends that the Town undertake improvements regularly by seeking grants and providing funds through the Capital Improvement Program. The Town's Beautification Committee could expand their efforts in the Center.



The Town could also explore a public art program, working with local artists.

### C| Address Real and Perceived Safety Concerns

The Bloomfield Police Department indicated that crime is not a significant problem in the Center, although even a few incidents can deter business customers.

Areas characterized by storefront vacancies and little foot traffic can be perceived as unsafe. A range of land uses that have different hours of activity (weekdays, weekend, and evenings) can improve the feeling of safety. As Bloomfield Center strives to offer this wider array of activity, the Town should have an ongoing commitment to monitoring any issues.

#### D| Maintain Stormwater Infrastructure

The 100 year flood plain cuts north and south through Bloomfield Center. This area is subject to recurring flooding. Drainage infrastructure does help manage some flooding but that infrastructure must be maintained in order to perform its intended function.

Bloomfield developed a Stormwater Management Plan in 2004 to meet federal requirements. The maintenance of drainage infrastructure is a key component in that Plan. The Town should ensure that the drainage infrastructure under the Town's jurisdiction receives regular attention.

#### E| Improve Community Maintenance

Attention to upkeep, including on private properties, can improve the overall image of the Town Center. In addition to maintaining public infrastructure, the Town can ramp up enforcement of regulations that relate to abandoned junk and encourage property owners to upkeep buildings and grounds.



## 5| Set the Framework for Longer Term Redevelopment

The 2012 Plan of Conservation and Development and past Plans have consistently expressed a vision for increasing development potential in Bloomfield Center in ways that reinforce its “town center” role. Components of a town center include:

- A mixture of uses.
- Buildings close to the street and oriented toward the street.
- A walkable setting with attractive and inviting streetscapes
- Parking is available, preferably centralized, but parking lots do not dominate the landscape.
- Outdoor amenities, such as public gathering areas, parks and outdoor dining.
- Housing in the Center or within walking distance to the Center.

Redevelopment in the Center should meet this vision. As noted larger scale redevelopment might depend upon increased property values in the Center. The strategies laid out thus far in this Plan can help to improve property values and make redevelopment an attractive option for property owners.

### Strategies:

- A| Ensure that redevelopment proposals help achieve the goals for Bloomfield Center.
- B| Provide technical assistance to property owners who are planning redevelopment.
- C| Evaluate closing Seneca Road.
- D| Promote shared parking facilities.
- E| Increase the number of residents living in the Center.
- F| Support development of a hotel, should one be interested in locating in the Center or elsewhere.
- G| Be open to being a “partner” in redevelopment.

### Sample Redevelopment Visions from Plan of Conservation and Development



*Wintonbury Mall site today.*



*Wintonbury Mall site with one new building.*



*Wintonbury Mall site redeveloped.*

#### **A| Ensure that Redevelopment Proposals Help Achieve Goals**

The zoning regulations for the Bloomfield Center District stress the importance of protecting the architectural and historic character of the Center, enhancing streetscapes, improving pedestrian amenities and other aspects that contribute to a town center setting. The Town should continue to ensure that new development meets the goals of this Plan, particularly in terms of:

- meeting high architectural standards set forth in zoning,
- providing attractive landscaping, and
- designing sites to contribute to a village atmosphere, similar to ideas outlined on the POCD and University of Hartford study.

#### **B| Provide Technical Assistance**

Redevelopment is often more difficult and more expensive than building on vacant land. Part of the challenge is trying to design a site to accommodate:

- a building large enough to generate an adequate return on investment,
- parking, and
- other requirements such as landscaping and sidewalks.

Property owners might need technical assistance from those with experience in designing developments in a town center or downtown setting. The Town could create a Technical Assistance Program and contract with design, transportation, and other professionals who could provide free or reduced cost assistance to landowners. Ideally they would receive this assistance in the early stages of project development so that they have not invested substantial money into preparing designs that are not appropriate for the Center.

### C| Evaluate Closing Seneca Road

Closing Seneca Road is not a new idea. This land could greatly help increase the development potential for all adjacent parcels.

For example, the owner of the former Farmers Exchange building is exploring redevelopment options, but the size and configuration of that parcel make it very difficult to meet parking requirements. If the land used for Seneca Road became available for development, it might be possible to overcome those issues. The Town should convene the property owners that abut Seneca Road to begin discussing ideas.

A traffic study would be necessary to determine how much traffic this road carries and impacts to other roads and intersections if it were closed. Alternatives could be explored, such as making Seneca Road a one lane, one way road with on-street parking.



### D| Provide Public Parking

Today, each property generally provides their own parking on-site (some parcels do share parking). As a result, the majority of each parcel is used for parking. Parking lots generate less in tax dollars than buildings do, they do not contribute to a walkable atmosphere, and the pavement impacts the overall appearance of an area.

Most visitors to Bloomfield Center will arrive by car so providing parking is important. In the short term, the Town should allow greater use of the Town Hall parking lot for public use, strongly encourage property owners to work together to share and interconnect parking areas (see page 17), and install signs directing people to parking areas.

Successful redevelopment will depend on providing centralized public parking. Options (including those identified in the Plan of Conservation and Development) are:

- Work with the Connecticut Department of Transportation to provide on-street parking, where feasible.
- Seek creative partnerships with property owners where the property owner would allow their lot to be used for public parking and in return the Town could take over maintenance of the lot or explore tax incentives or other financial incentives.
- When substantial redevelopment occurs, the Town could purchase property to create centralized parking.

In the event that the Town decides to own or manage public parking, the Town may need to set up a municipal parking authority to manage public parking.

#### **E| Increase the Number of Residents Living in the Center**

Based upon Bloomfield's aging population, the popularity of recent multifamily developments, and other factors, the market might support an additional 20 to 50 housing units in the Center (predominantly rental). However, there is little vacant land either within Bloomfield Center or within a ½ mile walking distance to the Center. Housing development would likely occur through redevelopment or on those few vacant parcels.

Within the focus area of Bloomfield Center (identified on page 3), a mixed use approach would be most appropriate. Mixed use entails housing units located on floors above retail or office uses. As property owners prepare to redevelop, the Town should encourage property owners to consider providing residential units.

Outside of the focus area, smaller scale apartment buildings (perhaps up to ten units) might be appropriate provided they are carefully reviewed to mitigate potential impacts to neighboring properties.



*Examples of mixed use style buildings with housing units above retail or offices.*

## **F| Support Development of a Hotel**

The market analysis suggested that the likelihood of a hotel being built in the Center in the short term is low because:

- Occupancy trends in the region are improving, but are still below the threshold that would spur the addition of rooms in the region.
- There is limited financing for developing new hotels. This makes it especially difficult for boutique style hotels.
- Recent and past discussions with major employers and those in the hospitality business indicate that Bloomfield Center today is not likely to draw business travelers nor tourists. This is partly due to the lack of a large-enough cluster of office / corporate offices or tourist attractions and because hotels in nearby communities already meet the needs of corporations located in Bloomfield (most notably hotels in Simsbury and Windsor).
- The amount of land needed to support a hotel is not readily available. Land assembly would most likely be necessary.

However, this Plan recognizes that the addition of a hotel could greatly contribute to the Center by bringing jobs and visitors. The Town should continue to monitor the hotel market and if that market improves, gauge the interest of hotel developers. Even if a hotel were to located elsewhere in Bloomfield, it could benefit the Center if the Town promotes the Center's offerings to the hotel's guests.

## **G| Be Open to Being a “Partner” in Redevelopment**

Some communities become an active partner in land development in order to see desirable projects move forward. Examples include:

- Acquiring land and then working with developers to redevelop. The Town could turn over the land at reduced cost or retain ownership and lease the land at a favorable rate.
- Committing to lease space in new buildings. Having a long term lease commitment can help reduce risk for the developer.
- Helping to finance site improvements, such as parking or infrastructure, or providing in-kind assistance. Some communities have used Tax Increment Financing to help fund new development or redevelopment. Tax Increment Financing uses future gains in taxes to finance current improvements.

This Plan does not make recommendations as to whether the Town should take these steps for any specific properties. And the best approach is not evident until a land owner proposes a specific project or a key piece of land comes on the market. Over the short term, the Town should determine which of these roles, if any, it would even consider playing. This enables the Town to begin initial discussions as opportunities arise.

# APPENDIX:

## Inventory and Assessment Summary

### Natural Constraints

Approximately 15% of the Center is located in the 100 year floodplain, which substantially reduces redevelopment potential of some centrally-located properties. Solutions to minimize flooding are costly, would likely entail a lengthy federal and state permit process and any “solution” in the Center would likely simply shift the problems downstream. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that the best approach is to continue to take measures to reduce damage when the flooding does occur.

### Business Conditions

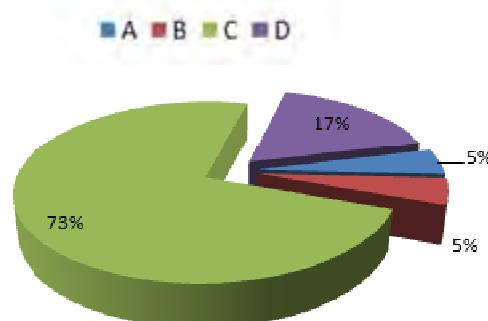
Commercial uses are the predominant land use in the Town Center and commercial buildings constitute two-thirds of total assessed values in the Center. These commercial uses greatly contribute to the Town's overall tax base.

As noted, the Town Center represents just 1.3% of all land in the Town. But the commercial uses in the Town Center account for 12% of the town-wide commercial tax assessment. More intense development on relatively smaller parcels (a key characteristic of town centers) means that land is used more efficiently – i.e., more tax dollars per acre of land.

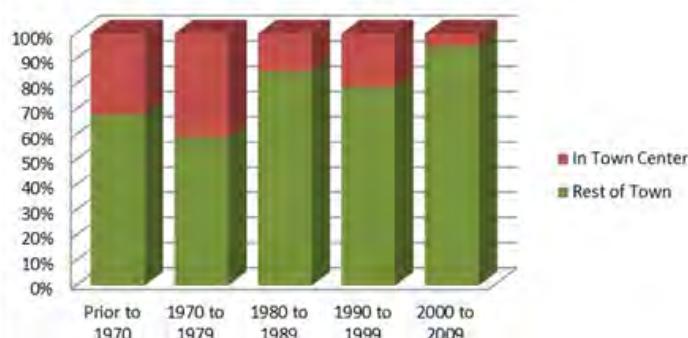
Roughly 77% of buildings in the Town Center were built prior to 1980. As a result, the majority of commercial buildings in the Town Center have an average or below-average rating for building condition in the assessor's database. The database rates buildings on a scale of A through F, and P for Poor in the assessor's database. Almost all buildings (90%) in the Center are rated C or D.

The Town Center captured only a small percentage of new development in recent years. Prior to 1980 the Center was able to

**Building Grade - % of Total Buildings  
in Town Center**  
(Commercial and Industrial Buildings)



**Total Commercial Development**



capture over one third of new development. That percentage dropped to 5% from 1990 to 2000. This is not atypical of New England communities, which saw commercial development in their town centers peak 30 plus years ago. This is particularly so in communities like Bloomfield with a fairly stable population and little vacant land in the center.

There are an estimated 20 vacant store fronts in the Town Center (space in retail strip settings). Information on vacancies within office buildings was not readily available. An inventory of the number and types of businesses is in the table below.

Type of Business	Examples	Estimated Number of Establishments*
Restaurant	Sit-down, coffee shop, fast food	21
Retail	Pharmacy, liquor store, grocery	20
Auto-Related	Gas station, repair	8
Personal Service	Salon, cleaners, tailor	21
Entertainment	Theater	1
Office (non-medical)	Attorney, insurance agent, company office	91
Medical	Dentist, psychology, clinic	26
Financial Institution	Bank, credit union	6
Other	Dance school, post office, furniture repair	12

\*Based upon field observations in late 2012 and data from assessor. Establishments in office buildings is a general estimate based upon signs located outside buildings and in lobbies.

Available data does not clearly indicate instances where multiple establishments share space, new businesses (which may not have a sign up) or businesses that recently moved or closed.

## Housing

Housing in the Center includes single-family houses and apartments. Some single family houses have been converted to commercial uses.

Housing values are much lower in the Center than the rest of the Town:

- The average assessed value of single-family house parcels in the Town Center is 10% lower than the town-wide average.
- The average assessed value of apartment parcels in the Town Center is 66% lower than the town-wide average.
- Sales prices for single-family houses in the Town Center are estimated to be 10% to 20% lower than the town-wide median.
- The average monthly rents for apartments in the Town Center are lower.

Similar to commercial parcels, the age of the buildings plays a factor in these lower values. This is particularly true for the apartment buildings, where newer and larger apartments are able to charge higher rents.

## Infrastructure

According to Town officials, there are no known issues related to the provision of water, waste water collection, electricity, natural gas or communication services in the Center.

Drainage infrastructure has been installed to help alleviate flooding. There appear to be maintenance issues with some drainage ditches which were built by developers and deeded to the Town.

## Parking

Parking was inventoried for all commercial and industrial uses in the Town Center. The overall parking ratio of 5 spaces per 1,000 square feet is high for a town center. This is likely due to the lack of centralized parking facilities and the more auto-oriented style of development that has emerged in the Town Center.

Town Center – All Business Uses	
Total Estimated Parking Spaces	3,340 spaces
Total Building Area (minus canopies, decks, and other outdoor areas)	722,000 square feet
Parking Ratio	5 spaces / 1,000 square feet

## Development Potential

A build out analysis estimated the total building potential under current zoning regulations.

Acres analyzed	85
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Useable acreage (minus natural constraints and landscaping requirement)	59
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Existing Square Feet of Building	780,382
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Total Square Feet at Build Out	1,354,000
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Increase	+573,600
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Percentage Increase	+73%
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Existing Parking Spaces	3,340
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Parking Spaces at Build Out	6,430
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These results are theoretical. Parking requirements make four story buildings unfeasible on many parcels. In order to meet parking requirements and fit the maximum amount of building allowed under regulations, the results for many parcels show buildings with first floor footprints of 1,000 square feet or less. Not only is this building configuration unfeasible, but it would result in small buildings amid a sea of parking (i.e., not in keeping with a Town Center atmosphere).

## Market Conditions

### Key Demographic Findings

- Bloomfield's population is expected to remain relatively stable in terms of size over the next few years.
- Bloomfield is older than the County, with a median age of 48 (compared to the County's median age of 40) and has a higher concentration of residents over age 55.
- The number of households earning \$100,000 and greater in Bloomfield is expected to increase almost 50%.

### Key Economic Findings

- Overall, Bloomfield experienced less of an economic decline over the past few years compared to the County. The Town actually saw an increase of 860 jobs from 2006 to 2010, despite decreases in the County and State.
- Growth of wages for jobs in Bloomfield grew at a faster pace than the County and State from 2006 to 2010.

### Retail and Restaurants

- Overall, Bloomfield is an "importer" of retail sales, meaning that sales are higher than the expected demand.
- Sales are "leaking" for certain retail sectors (i.e., people shopping outside of Bloomfield): apparel and accessories, groceries, and department stores / general merchandise stores.
- However, there may be limited opportunity for new retail. There are a number of retail vacancies in the Town, including in the Town Center. Also, lease rates are low, indicating that redevelopment costs would not be covered anticipated lease rates.
- Bloomfield is also leaking sales for restaurants and might be able to support a limited increase in dining establishments.

### Office Market

- Class A office space in Bloomfield leases for around 25% less than for Hartford.
- Class B office space in Bloomfield (the predominant office space in town) leases for rates similar to Hartford.
- Properties available as of August 2012 tend to be on the lower end in terms of lease price per square foot.
- Bloomfield might see a demand for office space of between 46,100 to 123,000 square feet, with greatest potential for the health care industry, followed by finance and insurance, and then technical and professional services.

## **Hospitality**

- Based upon a sampling of hotels in the region, the occupancy rate of approximately 65% represents an increase from 53% in Fiscal Year 2010.
- The industry standard is that a sustained occupancy rate of 70% or greater indicates the potential for adding inventory.
- There is limited financing for developing new hotels. This makes it especially difficult for boutique style hotels.
- Recent and past discussions with major employers and those in the hospitality business indicate that Bloomfield Center today is not likely to draw business travelers nor tourists. This is partly due to the lack of a large cluster of office / corporate offices or tourist attractions and because hotels in nearby communities already meet the needs of corporations located in Bloomfield (most notably hotels in Simsbury and Windsor).
- Fitting a hotel in the Center would require redevelopment and likely the consolidation of parcels.

## **Residential**

- The median sales prices for existing condominiums was greater than the median sales price for existing single family houses.
- The median sales prices for new condominiums is much greater than for new single family houses.
- New condominiums are selling for prices much greater than existing condominiums (more than double over the last four years).
- There is little vacant land within the Center and within “walking” distance of ½ mile from the Center.
- “Mixed Use” Potential (residential above retail or office uses): Some stakeholders noted that Bloomfield Center might not be ripe for mixed use because they believe that households seeking a true mixed use setting would be more likely to live in areas with more amenities, restaurants, retail and other services. In other words, the current mix of services and amenities is not there yet in Bloomfield Center.

This conclusion is based on perception – not hard data. If property owners express an interest in this form of residential development, they should be encouraged. For example, the owner of the Farmers Exchange site is exploring mixed use opportunities but is facing a challenge addressing parking.

Longer term, the use of the Griffin Line for rail service or other form of public transit could be a catalyst in demand for mixed use buildings in the Center.

## **Stakeholder Observations**

From September 2012 to February 2013, many stakeholders were interviewed. Stakeholders include town staff, local officials, Bloomfield Center businesses and property owners, the Chamber of Commerce and the University of Hartford.

The following summarizes their input.

### **Challenges**

- Perception that many property owners are not motivated to change what they are doing – their property is earning income today, so why take on the risk of redevelopment?
- Key property in the Town Center is the Wintonbury Mall, which has a large number of vacancies.
- People may choose to go elsewhere on evenings due to the lack of a night life, outdoor dining, and lack of entertainment other than theater.
- Lack of strong Town Center identity or brand, perception of “low self-esteem.”
- Feeling by property owners that rent prices do not support redevelopment. Would need financial help or ability to build revenue generating uses (such as housing).
- Concern that the Town will not make investments in the Town Center (e.g., improve infrastructure, provide additional staff support, actively aid redevelopment).
- Each retail plaza is self-contained – they do not feed off of / capitalize upon one another. Businesses do not regularly meet or work together.
- Flooding.

### **Ideas and Opportunities**

- Starting to see generational changes with property owners. The younger generation might have new ideas and be more interested in exploring options for their properties.
- There are property owners who would like to do more / redevelop under the right market conditions and with some level of support from town. For example:
  - Owner of the 64 Jerome (farmers exchange building along railroad tracks) is actively working with an architect on options, including mixed use. Parking is the biggest challenge and technical assistance on addressing parking could help.
  - One property owner on Barnard Lane would like to add 6,000 square feet of office space (but needs support from the Town to reduce flooding by maintaining a drainage ditch).
  - The owner of the Wells Fargo property and part owner of Post Office would like to redevelop these older buildings, while still providing space for both of these uses.
  - Others also appear receptive to new ideas.

- Other ideas for redevelopment:
  - If library moves, there is potential to redevelop despite the flood issue (if ground floor used for parking).
  - Would the closing of Seneca Road open up enough land to spur more development?
- The University of Hartford is an asset:
  - 4,500 undergrads and 2,000 graduate students.
  - Shuttle buses are well-used since many students do not have cars. Former shuttle bus to Bloomfield cancelled due to low ridership.
  - Students do visit the restaurants in the Town Center, but tend to go to downtown Hartford and West Hartford more for nightlife.
  - Students also rent apartments (e.g., roughly 40 units at Hawthorne are rented by students).
  - Off campus space for offices and for graduate classroom space – they do seek space on an as-needed basis.
- The Town Center is gaining a reputation for its ethnic restaurants. Should do more to capitalize on diversity.
- Bloomfield has done well attracting medical-related uses – are there more opportunities?
- Hold more events in Town Center to attract possible patrons to businesses.
- The churches in the Town Center draw a large number of attendees from the region. Senior housing developments also bring attendees in on bus. Is there an opportunity to get these attendees to spend time and money in the Town Center?
- Possibility of Griffin Line coming back is not out of the picture.

# Acknowledgments

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