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DOWNTOWN NORTHAMPTON STUDY
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: DRAFT

The following findings were obtained through the following means:

Surveys	--364 pedestrians and 67 merchants were surveyed on a Friday and a Saturday during October to determine prominent attitudes and suggestions concerning downtown.
Film	--a time lapse film was made of downtown documenting general appearance, activities taking place, auto and pedestrian traffic patterns, and parking patterns.
Parking Analysis	--a team spent two eight hour days (Friday and Saturday) recording exact in and out times for all cars parked in the 117 spaces on Main Street, and in 245 lot spaces. Illegally parked cars were included in the study.

PEDESTRIAN USE PATTERNS

Downtown Northampton is one of the major shopping and social centers of the Pioneer Valley. It is a lively and vibrant city supplying its users with basic necessities as well as specialties and entertainment. Nearby Smith College is a major influence on downtown Northampton, as are the other four colleges of this "five college area." Currently, 38% of the people using downtown are students. Sixty percent of its users are female. Seventy-eight percent are between the ages of 18 and 35. Sixty-five percent have lived in Northampton for five years or less. The present vitality of downtown is due in part to the relatively high percentage of downtown businesses that serve the needs of this young, somewhat transient population.

Of major importance is the equal numbers of people who walk downtown as drive (45% and 44% respectively). These figures become meaningful when compared to the same from other towns studied. In Plainview, Texas 11% walk to get downtown; in LaGrange, Georgia 25% walk downtown. Northampton also has higher percentages of people who take the bus and bicycle downtown - 7% and 2% respectively. These figures confirm the special need Northampton has to further plan and design for a dominant pedestrian population. This becomes even more apparent when considering the varied, but largely social, kinds of activities taking place in downtown.

"Doing errands" is the most often stated main purpose for being downtown. Twenty-seven percent of the users say they do errands downtown three or more times per week. Of these 27%, 82% bank at the same time; 65% socialize; 59% work, use professional services and shop; 56% eat and 54% stroll. It is clear from this data that Northampton's vitality is at least in part due to the ample opportunities downtown provides for many varied activities to take place. There are more people going more places more often in Northampton than in either of the other two towns studied.

In Northampton there are 8% more people eating downtown once or twice a week, 8% more people attending movies or other entertainment once or twice a week, and 19% more people strolling and window shopping on a given day. Unlike Plainview and LaGrange, movie theatres and restaurants were among the most regularly patronized businesses.

Northampton offers fewer professional services than Plainview or LaGrange, and perhaps consequently has a less demanding market for them. Forty-eight percent of Northampton's downtown users never go to a professional office, whereas those percentages in Plainview and LaGrange respectively are 28% and 22%.

As in Plainview and LaGrange, banks, drug stores and clothing stores were the most regularly patronized. When asked what types of businesses they would like to see more of, the majority of the 18-35 age group said: restaurants (16%); speciality retail (15%); grocery stores and bakeries (13%); and less expensive stores (10%). Among the older age groups there were very obvious desires for a department store. This includes requests from 28% of the 18-35 age group, 40% of the 31-50 age group, and 71% of the over-65 age group. Older people also requested grocery/bakery stores, specialty retail (luggage, audio, camera, music, esoterica) and restaurants.

The vitality of Northampton is further evidenced by the higher percentages of people staying downtown longer than in other towns studied. When compared to Plainview and LaGrange, 14% more of Northampton's downtown users stay longer than one hour; 6% more stay longer than two hours. In LaGrange and Plainview, 34% of the people stay downtown longer than one hour. In Northampton, that number rises to almost half - 48%. Most people (68%) normally use downtown during the week. Twenty-six percent come downtown on Saturday's and 5% in the evenings. Asked if they would shop more in the evenings if given the opportunity, 42% said no, 38% said yes and 20% were undecided.

As the major activity generating group using downtown Northampton, the 18-35 age group should be distinguished from the student group, whose use of downtown is slightly different. Survey results indicate that students use downtown for shorter periods of time and for more specific reasons than non-student groups. Sixty-one percent of the student users stay downtown less than one hour. Only 48% of the non-student group stays downtown less than one hour. The main reasons students use downtown is to do quick errands (30%), to shop (23%), and to bank (18%). In the non-student group 22% list their main reason being to work, 21% to do errands, 19% to shop and 12% to bank. The lower percentages in the non-student group indicate this groups's activities are slightly more diverse. Supporting this, only 14% of the student group socializes downtown; 23% of the non-student group socializes downtown. Only 20% of the students eat downtown; 38% of the non-students eat downtown. Only 33% of the student group uses professional services downtown; 65% of the non-students use them. Only 7% of the student users work downtown; 24% of the non-student users work downtown. In terms of attitudes, the student group feels prices are too expensive and that shopping hours are somewhat inconvenient.

MERCHANT AND PEDESTRIAN ATTITUDES

The merchants gave very positive feedback concerning the health of downtown. Eighty-one percent said they wouldn't move from downtown if given the opportunity, mainly because of the strong sense of community, the friendly, lively atmosphere and the good market downtown. Sixty-six percent said business over the last five years has improved. Twenty-two percent said business, if not improved, had at least stayed the same. Seventy-six percent felt that if commercial development continues in the next five years the way it has during the last five years, business will improve.

Pedestrians and merchants both gave downtown good ratings in the categories of attractiveness (97% of both groups rated it good or fair), convenience of shopping hours (87% said good or fair), friendliness of sales people (95% said good or fair), and quality and variety of goods available (96% said good or fair).

Both pedestrians and merchants feel the lack of available parking is downtown's major problem. Sixty-one percent of the merchants feel it is poor; 46% of the pedestrians agree Both groups also feel that there are an inadequate number of comfortable places to rest outdoors (48% rated downtown poor on this). Pedestrians felt there weren't enough outdoor promotions and events.

The most glaring differences of opinion between merchants and pedestrians concerns the cost of goods sold and the cleanliness of downtown. Only 74% of pedestrians as compared to 88% of merchants feel that the cost of goods downtown is good or fair. Contrarywise, 90% of pedestrians feel downtown rates well in cleanliness; only 76% of merchants agree. Pedestrians are also more hesitant about going downtown at night - with only 77% (as compared to 89% of the merchants) feeling downtown to be at least fairly safe at night.

Generally, merchants feel outlying malls haven't affected their business. Seventy-six percent feel that malls have had no effect, or a positive effect on business downtown. Store owners feel this is due to the unique character and quality of their goods, and the excellent services provided to the customer. Pedestrians generally agree with the merchants by saying they feel downtown to be more attractive, more convenient to home and possessing a better variety and quality of goods. On the other hand, they feel that parking is better, prices cheaper and shopping hours more convenient at the malls. Those merchants who feel their businesses had been adversely affected by the malls site convenience of parking and cheaper prices at the malls as the major reasons why.

Fifty percent of the merchants in Northampton have arrived within the last five years, supporting the notion that Northampton is a fast growing, increasingly vital shopping center. To promote their stores, 41% of the merchants use window displays as their major advertisement. Fifty percent of the merchants change their displays at least once a month, with 23% changing them more often than that. It is clear that in the merchant's view, storefront appearance is an important factor in attracting customers. Fifty-three percent of the merchants feel that their storefronts need improvements. Of the 28 who feel that way, 12 would like design assistance; 5 are uncertain if they want assistance or not. Major desired improvements include facade work (10), moving or enlarging windows (3), new signs (3) and new landscaping (2).

PARKING ANALYSIS

Seventy-three percent of the pedestrians on the street said the convenience of parking in downtown Northampton was worse than in the malls. Forty-six percent said the number of convenient parking spaces was "poor."

Forty-four percent of the users of downtown Northampton drive to get there. Of those parking on Main Street, 72% stay under half an hour, indicating that a large number of people drive downtown to run errands.

We found that people who drive downtown in all the towns we studied stay downtown for approximately the same amounts of time. Fifty percent to 60% of those driving downtown in all towns stayed less than fifteen minutes. Approximately 19% stayed under thirty minutes; 10% stayed under forty-five minutes; 6% stayed under sixty minutes; and 10% stayed over an hour. Northampton had a slightly higher number of people staying longer than did the other towns.

In the lots only 24% of the parkers stayed less than fifteen minutes; an additional 19% stayed under thirty minutes. The number of parkers in lots staying longer than one hour increased to 35% (from 13% on Main Street). This indicates that the lots attract fewer people running quick errands and more people shopping for major purchases, browsing, socializing or working.

Twenty-two percent of the total number of people who parked on Main Street parked illegally by double parking, or in crosswalks, bus zones and fire hydrant lanes. Of these 22%, over half were double parked.

The result of those who park for long periods of time on Main Street (either by feeding the meter or through ineffective enforcement) is that parking capacity is greatly reduced. Capacity can by increased by 41% (91 cars) by eliminating those parking longer than the one hour limit. By reducing the time limit to forty-five minutes and enforcing it, 62% more cars could park on Main Street over the course of a day. Ineffective management can substantially reduce parking capacity.

Parts of the private lots adjacent to Thorne's lot and the Masonic lot often are left unused. At present access to Thorne's lot is remote from Main Street and not well marked. The private lot adjacent to Thorne's blocks a potentially major access to Thorne's which would make the lot much more accessible to downtown users. Similarly, circulation to and through the Masonic lot is difficult due to adjacent private lots. Fences bordering each of the private lots also detract from the overall appearance of the lots.

The public lots seem remote from Main Street, not only in the distance needed to drive to them from Main Street, but also as a result of the "service entrance" appearance of the backs of the buildings facing the lots. In the cases where a back entrance is provided to customers, little or no attempt has been made to invite shoppers into the store at that part.

USER SUGGESTIONS

Many people expressly said that Northampton is a very enjoyable place to shop. Most of the preceding figures support that view. However, users did have suggestions for improvements which are summed up on the next page.

Most specifically expressed dissatisfactions concerned the present retail mix. Twenty people felt that Northampton's restaurants, boutiques and specialty shops were too expensive. Thirteen thought there were too many boutiques and specialty stores. People also wanted to see more restaurants, a department store, discount stores, grocery stores and special places for teens to socialize.

In terms of amenities: there were 24 pedestrian and 9 merchant requests for more and bigger trash cans, and better servicing of them. Eighteen pedestrians wanted more benches to rest on - especially near bus stops. There were 28 pedestrian and 26 merchant requests for more or better parking facilities. Five pedestrians and 6 merchants would like extra lots or a parking garage. There were 5 varying requests to change the meter rates and time limits. These ranged from "remove the meters" to "have 1-4 hour meters so shopping won't be interrupted."

There were 11 requests from each of pedestrians and merchants for a cleaner downtown, along with 8 pedestrian requests for an enforced dog clean-up ordinance.

Nineteen pedestrians and 7 merchants expressed a desire for more outdoor fairs or festivals, musical or cultural events, educational programs or street theatre.

Eleven pedestrians were dissatisfied with traffic flow. Seven were concerned about pedestrian safety.

Eleven people requested more trees, shrubbery, and flowers on the sidewalks. Six wanted sidewalk renovations.

Fifteen pedestrians requested storefront renovations (of those, six wanted to get rid of the "Ann August" facade); 9 requested more parks; 7 wanted more evening shopping hours.