

4 PLANNING CONCEPTS

This section describes planning principles and a long-range concept plan that will guide the future of downtown Chapel Hill. The plan stresses the preservation and conservation of areas of downtown that are significant to the community, and points out areas that are appropriate for new development harmonious with the existing character of downtown Chapel Hill. This section is organized according to the four main topic areas of the Goals and Objectives.

ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

The following basic ideas and principles serve to guide the plan:

1. Downtown is the heart of the community, a vibrant, vital place.

The downtown area remains strong economically and in terms of level of use by its citizens.

2. Recognize what is good about downtown and preserve that; find ways to encourage those

characteristics in new development.

This plan will work to preserve buildings and areas that contribute to the historic and community character of Chapel Hill. The intent here is to provide a tool to manage change in a logical and positive way.

3. Preserve and enhance those elements that contribute to the vitality of downtown.

This plan preserves areas that are identified as historic, and character-setting, in that they most clearly identify the essence of downtown, as well as areas that are working well and do not warrant significant change.

4. Identify areas where there is opportunity for change.

This plan looks for opportunities to replicate desirable elements and identifies areas appropriate for new initiatives.

This plan identifies areas where there is opportunity for change, such as areas that are deteriorating or areas where there is pressure for redevelopment in

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The plan “envisions a smooth, orderly transition from intensive downtown retail/commercial uses to surrounding residential districts.”

an area that is not character-setting, and does not contain other positive elements.

5. Promote a mix of uses downtown.

This plan advocates a diverse mix of office, commercial and residential uses in the downtown area.

6. Identify areas of intensive retail/commercial uses (with some office/residential uses) and identify areas emphasizing less intensive office/residential uses (with some small-scale retail).

This plan encourages areas of higher intensity where it makes sense to do so.

7. Recognize that downtown is partly defined by its open spaces used by the public, and that these traditional gathering places need to be protected.

Open spaces contribute to the architectural richness of downtown, as well as the experience of community, by promoting public interaction.

8. Provide additional open spaces as future development occurs that are people-friendly,

usable, and visible to the street.

Future development should continue to incorporate open space into site layouts.

9. Enhance pedestrian corridors and connections to adjoining neighborhoods.

The Town’s Comprehensive Plan calls for the protection of existing neighborhoods.

This plan envisions a smooth, orderly transition from intensive downtown retail/commercial uses to surrounding residential districts.

ECONOMIC VITALITY

Chapel Hill’s downtown remains an intensely vital place, one of the most successful downtown areas in North Carolina. Although the mix of businesses has changed over time, the downtown area remains strong in terms of level of use by citizens, and in its contribution to the Town’s tax base. There has been a significant loss of small, locally owned retail businesses over time. A concentration of banking, restaurants, and stores oriented to the student retail market exists in a portion of the downtown. Other

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areas remain undeveloped, or are underdeveloped with surface parking lots. Planning concepts for enhancing the future economic vitality of Chapel Hill’s downtown area follow.

Intensity Areas

Parts of downtown are suitable for intensive retail/commercial uses, while others are more appropriate for concentrations of office/residential uses. While this plan encourages a mix of commercial, office, and residential uses throughout the downtown area, it also identifies focal areas of land use intensities. (See Concept Plan Map on Page 39.)

Areas of more intensive retail/commercial use are projected along East and West Franklin Street, as well as the westernmost block bounded by Merritt Mill, West Rosemary Street, and North Roberson Street. In these areas, office/residential uses would be encouraged as secondary uses to the retail/commercial uses.

Areas in which it is desirable to emphasize office/residential uses lie generally along both sides of West Rosemary Street, and areas north of East Rosemary Street. Such uses would help to provide



The plan states that West Rosemary Street is an area where it is desirable to emphasize office and residential uses.

a transition to the adjoining residential neighborhoods. In these areas, commercial uses would be encouraged, but not as the predominant land use pattern.

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The 100 block of Franklin Street is famous throughout North Carolina.

Diversity of Businesses

The plan advocates a diverse mix of businesses in the downtown area. In this context, the term “diverse” refers to a mix of businesses that provide a broad range of retail, banking, restaurant, grocery, entertainment and professional services to the community. It also refers to a policy of the provision of business space in which smaller local businesses may locate and develop in the community over time. An objective of this plan is to achieve a balance in the types and sizes of businesses, and to retain and promote locally owned businesses.

In particular, there is an absence in the Downtown area of grocery stores or specialty food markets that could serve the surrounding residential neighborhoods. Businesses like these would help to foster a broader diversity of uses downtown.

Civic Uses

A key factor to maintaining the economic vitality of downtown is to locate public buildings there in order to create an increased level of activity and to draw more people to downtown. A significant new civic structure may be designed in conjunction with additional parking decks as a stand-alone facility or as the anchor for a larger mixed-use facility.

The new Employment Services Center being developed by Orange County on West Franklin Street is another such generator of civic activity.

TOWN CHARACTER/LAND USE

Downtown Chapel Hill retains the character of a small-town. The “100 Block” of downtown is justly famous throughout North Carolina, and is a major tourist destination in the region. As the heart of a community founded in 1793, downtown

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Chapel Hill has respected its historic roots and has sought to maintain the fabric of its buildings. Achieving appropriate scale and compatibility in new development so that it is sympathetic with past architectural motifs remains a key issue that has surfaced in many forms and forums over the years. Accordingly, this plan identifies those elements worthy of preservation, and integrates new development within the fabric of those existing structures.

Preservation and Conservation Areas

A key concept of the downtown plan is the preservation of buildings and areas that contribute to the historic and community character of Chapel Hill. The Town's center is the heart of the community, and symbolizes those values and urban qualities which generations of citizens, alumni of UNC, and visitors to the area cherish. Much of the downtown's character derives from its one and two story, small-scale storefronts at the street level and its pedestrian-oriented environment. Although the 100 block of East Franklin Street is its most notable and heavily frequented area, similar areas of cohesive building fronts exist on West Franklin Street as well.

Other key preservation areas are the properties occupied by churches, whose open courtyard spaces provide periodic relief to the wall of building storefronts. Church buildings, with their colonnaded porches and spires, architecturally enrich the downtown at the street level and skyline. In addition, individual historic church buildings, such as the Old Methodist Church at 201 East Rosemary Street and the Chapel of the Cross located at 304 East Franklin Street, are notable. The downtown also has several rows of "Williamsburg-style" buildings dating to the 1950's which have become a valued part of its architectural character and are, therefore, worthy of protection.

The Concept Plan highlights areas of preservation or conservation (See Concept Plan Map on Page 39). Future development in these areas should be undertaken only with the idea of protecting the ex-



Corner of Rosemary and Henderson Streets.

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isting buildings, and should be harmonious with and integrated into the existing fabric.

Opportunity Areas

The plan also identifies areas appropriate for new initiatives, including new development, redevelopment, additional civic uses, conversion to (or retention as) open space, and parking.

The plan identifies seven key areas as potential sites for new initiatives:

A. Midway

The Concept Plan envisions the Midway area as a neighborhood commercial area. The plan supports initiatives to retain and create neighborhood businesses, which serve the Northside neighborhood, especially in the Midway area, which historically has been an area composed of African-American businesses. Currently, the Town is assisting Empowerment, Inc. with its development of a small business incubator facility to be located on North Graham Street in this area.

B. West Rosemary Street Sites

The University of North Carolina owns significant sites on the north and south sides of West Rosemary Street. Additions or modifications to the existing building at 440 West Franklin, possibly in combination with the provision of a new parking deck, provides a site for a major university or other civic/public use.



Parking Lot 5, in 200 block of West Franklin Street, represents a significant break in the streetscape and building lines of downtown.

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C. Parking Lot #5 Area — 200 Block West Franklin, North Side

The 200 Block of West Franklin is the plan's major opportunity area. Currently, the area represents a significant break in the streetscape and building lines of downtown. The pedestrian-oriented scale of the 100 Block of East Franklin and of the western areas of West Franklin Street is lost. Although the sidewalk and street tree plantings have helped to form a bridge between these two areas, much more is needed.

The plan envisions new development that would serve as a visual bridge between East and West Franklin Street, and draw pedestrians westward. To achieve this, the plan recommends a scale similar to the 100 Block of East Franklin Street – two to three stories along Franklin Street, designed in a manner to be compatible with existing small-scale storefront development. The design guidelines of the plan, provided in a separate document, offer further detail concerning scale and appropriate development patterns.

Greater intensities in new development should be located in the interior of larger sites, such as park-

ing lot #5, in a manner similar to one or more of the schemes developed in a Design Charette held in March 1997 (see separate document for more information). As was illustrated in these proposed development options, building masses would step up and back from Franklin Street, so that a building line of two-story development is maintained along the street edge of the 200 Block, allowing for more height behind the street line.

D. Parking Lot #2

This site, located at the corner of Rosemary and Columbia Street, is owned by the Town and currently is used for surface parking. This site could be used for a combination of land uses, a parking deck, or possibly a transit transfer center. Development on the site should bring closure to the building frontages at this intersection. A small plaza or park at the street level would provide open space and public areas.

E. University Square Area — 200 Block of West Franklin-South Side

On the south side of the street, at University Square, this plan proposes the addition of a line of

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retail shops at the street edge to re-establish the West Franklin Street building line at the sidewalk. The site would accommodate a future parking deck in the rear.

Both the north and south sides of the 200 block of West Franklin Street represent a major opportunity to re-design an entire block of downtown at significant densities and in a manner that would introduce an enhanced level of vitality to street life there. This re-design should be compatible with downtown's existing historic and architectural character.

F. Mid-Block W. Franklin Area

This site currently has a restaurant on it, located in a former gas station. The site extends from Franklin to Rosemary Street, and therefore is an opportunity area for providing additional pedestrian linkages north to south. The site could support significant new development at a scale compatible with surrounding development. Such development should take advantage of the change in grade levels between Rosemary and Franklin to achieve a compatible design.

G. Parking Lot #3

Owned by the Town, and located on the south side of West Franklin Street at the mid-point of the street, this site could accommodate a mini-park/public open space.

Summary of Opportunity Areas

These are areas appropriate for significant levels of new initiatives. In addition, other areas of downtown generally are noted as appropriate for new development. New initiatives should be bold and innovative, yet still blend with adjoining areas of preservation.

Mix of Uses

The recommended plan encourages development that provides a mix of office, commercial, and residential uses downtown. In particular, opportunity areas for future development should support larger, integrated mixed-use development combining these uses. These opportunity areas should provide a transition to Franklin Street by maintaining the scale of two to three story buildings along that street. Transitions to adjoining residential areas

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should be accomplished by placing residential development in the areas of the site that adjoin or face residential development to the north or south.



Courtyard in between shops and a restaurant on West Franklin Street.

Open Spaces

Downtown is defined by its open spaces, as well as its buildings. The interplay of buildings with open spaces contributes to the character of downtown, as well as the sense of community. These open spaces, both public and private, have been tradi-

tional gathering places for the community, as well as places to sit and watch the world go by. Some of the best-known spaces include the courtyard plaza in front of the Old Post Office at Franklin and Henderson Streets, known as a site for demonstrations and vigils; and McCorkle Place, which links the University to the community and downtown.

Other significant spaces include the green areas in front of downtown’s churches, such as University United Methodist Church, University Baptist Church, and University Presbyterian Church. In addition, the University maintains a small park next to the old Blue Cross-Blue Shield Building on W. Franklin Street. Measures should be taken to enhance the plaza on top of the Town’s parking deck on East Rosemary Street so that it is used more widely as a public open space.

Future development should follow the pattern of providing some measure of relief to building front-ages at the street line with judicious placement of small open spaces. These spaces could be paved courtyards or “green” open space. The spaces should be designed to support social interaction and be readily visible to the street.

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Future campus buildings should leave McCorkle Place open and unimpeded.

Transitions

Downtown Chapel Hill is fortunate to retain its setting of surrounding residential neighborhoods and to have a major activity center of the University of North Carolina adjoining a portion of the downtown. Each of these provides a continuous flow of pedestrians and an available market for the provision of goods and services.

The Town's Comprehensive Plan calls for the line between residential neighborhoods and the downtown to be well defined and continuously maintained. It calls for the protection of these existing residential neighborhoods. A key component of this plan is to achieve a smooth, orderly transition from more intensive downtown retail/commercial uses to the surrounding

residential districts. Such a transition would be accomplished in part by promoting office/residential development along the north side of West Rosemary Street.

The University campus overlaps the downtown at key points. Most notable of these is McCorkle Place, which provides a window from the University onto Franklin Street. Future campus buildings

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should leave this corridor open and unimpeded. In addition, opportunity areas exist on South Columbia Street for developing new buildings at the street line, along with the provision of open spaces. The renovation and upgrading of Fraternity Court would enhance the downtown area as well.

The University owns several buildings in downtown Chapel Hill. Those on the 100 Block of East Franklin should be preserved and protected. Of continuing concern is the conversion of former commercial space to office uses for the University.

Design Guidelines

An important aspect of this plan is a program of design guidelines to assure that new development is compatible with the historic, architectural, and community character of downtown Chapel Hill. (These are provided as a separate document.)

TRANSPORTATION

Downtown is the historical, spiritual and social center for Chapel Hill, and is a center for the community’s transportation systems. Major road arterials lead to and from downtown, and the Town’s transit

routes are interconnected there as well. The Town has provided public parking downtown to support commercial and office uses. The central area of the downtown and University campus is a major pedestrian and bicycling destination. In the future, the regional rail fixed-guideway system might also link these areas with the larger Research Triangle region.

Pedestrian and Bicycle Systems

Downtown Chapel Hill is notable for its pedestrian-oriented environment. It is a place of community gatherings, street fairs, and celebrations; it is a place where a major activity simply is to walk up and down the street. The Town’s Master Streetscape Plan, a long-range program for upgrading the sidewalk infrastructure that supports pedestrian use of downtown, is gradually being implemented as funding permits.

Although downtown has a significant number of pedestrian paths, a more aggressive policy is needed for implementing improvements to serve the needs of foot traffic downtown. Key streets such as West Rosemary Street do not have safe sidewalks. It is a goal of this plan that every street in the Town

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Center shall have paved sidewalks on both sides of the street. (See Concept Plan Map on Page 39.)

In addition, this plan highlights the need to continue to develop north-south pedestrian connections as new development occurs. Such connections are essential to residents living in the adjoining neighborhoods north and south of the downtown. These links assist in maintaining and improving the economic vitality of downtown. They also link Franklin and Rosemary Streets, and help break up long blocks between cross streets.

According to the Town’s 1988 bicycle plan, bicyclists in the downtown area would use the street network for travel, with the exception of a bicycle lane proposed for Rosemary Street. The more recent 1992 Regional Bicycle Plan proposed bicycle lanes for Rosemary Street, Cameron Avenue, and Columbia Street.

Parking

The goals and objectives set forth in the 1989 Comprehensive Plan include a policy to ensure the availability of short-term parking for commercial viability in the Town Center, while seeking to minimize

the total number of automobile trips. This plan reaffirms that policy.

To provide for parking needs in the Town Center, the plan directs that the Town continue to operate parking lot facilities; and that as demand for additional parking increases over the longer term, construct parking decks on Town-owned lots. The most likely areas for the construction of future parking decks are lot #2 at the corner of Columbia and Rosemary Streets and lot #5 at the corner of



The parking Lot 2, at the corner of Rosemary and Columbia Streets, is considered a likely location of a future parking deck.

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Church and Rosemary Streets. As discussed elsewhere in this plan, these sites are also prime locations for new development, which would provide a mix of uses, including, perhaps, a transit transfer center.

In the short term, public lots, which are now leased to private businesses due to an initial lack of demand for public spaces, would be gradually returned to hourly public parking as the demand for parking increases in the downtown.

A goal of the 1989 Comprehensive Plan is to limit long-term parking in areas where transit services are sufficient in order to encourage alternatives to the use of the automobile in Chapel Hill. These policies support the concept of gradually reducing the amount of long-term private parking, and reversing the requirement for on-site parking as part of new downtown development. They also support the concept of private development projects providing payments to the Town equal to the cost of providing its required amount of parking in the downtown area. Funds received would be earmarked for future construction of public decks on Town-owned property.

Transportation Management Plans also can play an important role in providing adequate transportation services in the downtown area. In general, a Transportation Management Program is a requirement placed on new development projects to produce and abide by an annual plan for providing transportation alternatives to employees of business, office, or residential uses. Such plans should play an increasing role in reducing the demand for parking and increasing the opportunities for economic development downtown.

Transit Transfer Center

The idea of locating a future transit transfer center in the downtown area has been discussed for many years. The purpose of a transfer center is to provide an adequate area for transit passengers to transfer between buses serving transit routes in and around Chapel Hill. At a minimum, the center would include spaces for transit vehicles, and for layover and waiting passengers.

There is the potential for developing such a center in conjunction with other public or private developments, or siting it adjacent to a future fixed-guideway stop downtown. This kind of facility

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would serve the needs of passengers who must transfer frequently, and would encourage greater use of an expanding transit network serving the downtown and the larger community. This facility could also provide a transfer point for the Triangle Transit Authority (TTA) bus service, and for private providers such as the Trailways bus system.

Regional Fixed Guide-Way Transit

The Triangle Transit Authority is developing a regional fixed-guideway system to connect Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill. Phase I is scheduled to connect Raleigh and Durham. Phase II would add the Raleigh-Durham International Airport and Chapel Hill to the system. The Authority's plan includes a fixed guideway corridor that enters Chapel Hill through the proposed Meadowmont development and along properties south of NC 54 to the UNC Hospital area. The University of North Carolina is now studying possible routes that would provide access to the Hospital and the University.

The ongoing US 15-501 Major Investment Study (MIS) is assessing the feasibility of implementing the fixed guideway corridor to the UNC Hospital. The US 15-501 MIS will also quantitatively evaluate the feasibility of extending phase II of fixed guideway transit to the Horace Williams Tract. This downtown plan proposes that the fixed guideway transit system also connect with downtown Chapel Hill and Carrboro. It would then continue northward along an existing rail corridor to the proposed UNC development on the Horace Williams property.

Ideally, a fixed guideway stop would be compatible with coming through downtown and should be located in or near downtown Chapel Hill, so that the Town would be linked regionally via transit to the centers of Raleigh, Durham, and Cary. This stop should be combined with other civic, governmental, or mixed-use developments to provide alternatives to the use of the automobile and to enhance the pedestrian-oriented environment.