

CHAPTER SIX

The Village Center - Commercial

VISION

The Village has a small, thriving, historic commercial area of various types of retail, office, and service businesses. Residents of the Village can shop, bank, put gas in their cars, stop for coffee or to go to a restaurant in the Village Center.

CONTEXT

In Rural by Design, Randall Arendt notes that "...in order to be successful, town centers possess both a strong *cius* (town hall, commons, post office, churches, etc.) and a healthy retail base." The Village Center has survived for so many years and thrived in part because of its combination of public, retail, as well as other uses.

There is no question that the Franklin Village Center possesses a strong *cius*, with the presence of the Broughton House, Village Green, Library, Post Office, and Police and Fire Stations within the Village Center. Whether there is a healthy retail base is the primary concern of this plan. An inventory revealed there are 27 non-residential uses in the Village Center. Only seven (25.9%) are currently occupied by retail businesses. One retail space is currently vacant. Only one retail business, the Market Basket, supplies essential goods and services. The others supply specialty goods, gifts, and boutique items.

On the other hand, nine (33%) of the buildings or leased spaces are occupied by professional office-service type businesses (attorneys, architect, dentists, interior design, real estate, etc.). Another five (18.5%) of the buildings or leased spaces are occupied by service type businesses (electric contractor, spa, cleaners, etc.). Together, these non-retail businesses account for over 50% of the businesses in the district.

The inventory reveals that the Village Center does not have a strong retail sector. Rather, professional office and service-type businesses are predominant. This information provides a partial understanding why there is not the level of foot traffic people desire. Professional office and

service-type businesses do not generate much foot traffic, unlike retail, which encourages foot traffic from business to business, within a reasonable distance. Thus, through time the district has changed considerably from one that provided essential retail goods and services to a predominantly office-service type district.

The business mix reveals one aspect of Village Center context. There are three other dimensions of context that are important:

- At the local level, the Village Center is an integration of mixed characteristics – residential, commercial, recreational, cultural, historic, and rural. It is not only a place to shop, it is a *residential neighborhood*. Not unlike other residents of the Village, residents of the Village Center are looking for privacy, security and a sense of well being. Planning and zoning efforts must respect the neighborhood context within which the Village Center operates.
- At the Village-wide level, the Village Center is the true center of the Village, as a result of being the governmental center, the main gathering place, the center of religious life in the Village, the place for recreation, and the center of commerce. The Village Center creates an identity for the entire Village. For example, the logo on the Village's letterhead conjures up an image from the Village Center. When many people think of Franklin, it is the Village Center that comes to mind. It is a very powerful image, which is the reason maintaining the health of the Village Center is so important.

- At the regional level, the Village Center, particularly the retail uses, are in competition with all of the other retail development in surrounding and nearby communities, particularly Southfield, Bloomfield Township, and Farmington Hills. Village Center businesses must offer some combination of convenience, acceptable price, exceptional service, unique products or other amenities if they are to attract patrons away from regional retailers. Some retailers in the Village Center have said that up to 80% of their customers come from outside the Village. This gives a good perspective on the regional context within which the Village Center operates.

RELEVANT ISSUES

A comprehensive listing of relevant issues facing the Village Center evolved out of a February 27, 2006 meeting, at which Village Center business and property owners participated in a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats). About 14 business and property owners participated in the session. The SWOT analysis revealed the following (please see table):

Strengths

Not surprisingly, the Village Center's unique historic character topped the list of strengths. People recognize that, if not for the historical buildings and character, the Village Center might be just another downtown or strip commercial area. People also recognize that the Village Center is more than just a business center – it is a gathering place for the Village for a multitude of purposes, it is the center of local government, and it is also the recreation and cultural center of the Village.

Traffic levels are cited as a strength, providing high visibility for businesses. Vehicles passing by are considered essential for the success of retail trade, so high levels of traffic – within reason – along Franklin Road would be considered good for business. However, high traffic volumes are also cited as a weakness, because they make walking risky and disrupt the Village's historic charm.

Weaknesses

Many of the weaknesses cited by business and property owners relate to the compact character of historic buildings and plats of the Village Center, which produce small buildings on small lots that have little room for landscaping. In addition, the commercial district itself is relatively small. The size constraints affect the competitiveness of businesses in the district, which must compete with larger businesses on more spacious sites in larger commercial districts in surrounding communities.

As important as it is as strength, the historic character of the Village Center is also viewed as a weakness. In particular, business owners consider the historic district regulations too restrictive. It is a delicate balance: maintaining the character of the historic district while providing enough flexibility to the businesses to compete in the modern marketplace. It is a balance that has not been achieved of late, in the view of some, who consider the downtown as “tacky” and in need of being refreshed.

The discussion of weaknesses would be incomplete if it did not direct attention on Village Center improvement efforts of recent years. There has been dissatisfaction with these efforts, based on the comments from the February 27, 2006 SWOT meeting and other meetings. At the heart of this dissatisfaction is the lack of a comprehensive, sustained, long-term effort to revitalize the district. Also, based on comments at the February 27 meeting, Village revitalization will need support from both the Village government

Table 8: Franklin Village Center SWOT Analysis, February 27, 2006

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unique historic character • Wealthy local population • Traffic levels provide high visibility • The gathering place for the Village • Neat, but not overly trim; quaint • High canopied trees visually unite the varied uses and styles along Franklin Road • Seat of local government • The Village Green • Presence of the Post Office and Library • Plenty of parking • Visually interesting buildings • Mixed use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small size of buildings • Small size of commercial district • Old buildings require a lot of maintenance • Traffic levels make walking risky • Overhead utility lines are unsightly • Historic district regulations restrict changes • Lack of room for landscaping in front • Parking is not coordinated • Mix of uses may not be ideal • Downtown is tacky, needs to be refreshed
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage or develop uses that enhance existing attractions, such as a farmers' market • Create a Chamber of Commerce or similar organization for collaborative promotion • Develop architectural design guidelines • Link parking in the rear, particularly on the east side of Franklin Road • Develop landscape design guidelines • Enhance existing trees with new plantings • Create/schedule events that bring people to the Village Center • Set up Special Assessment District to collectively fund improvements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing traffic and speeds that detract from historic charm and hinder pedestrian enjoyment • Competition from commercial development in the region • Tree disease, pests, and age • Lack of critical mass to keep commercial district going • New development and renovation not in keeping with existing character

and commercial establishments. Local businesses must have the will and desire to mobilize local resources and talent. To the extent that such self-determination is absent, it will impede progress in improving the Village Center.

Opportunities

The SWOT analysis identified several opportunities, some of which were linked to weaknesses. Design, in the form of urban design guidelines and landscape design guidelines, was seen as a key opportunity. Design guidelines empower communities to direct changes rather than become unwitting victims of blind market forces and thoughtless expansion. By taking care that new additions or alterations to the landscape do not diminish existing historic properties, design guidelines encourage the dynamic interaction of old and new traditions. By encouraging the creation of new buildings that contribute equally enduring examples of contemporary design to the historic streetscape, design guidelines invigorate and enrich community character. Design guidelines protect and encourage the authentic and unique qualities of a neighborhood and by doing so they would help Village Center merchants achieve their number one goal: to distinguish themselves from the competition.



Another important opportunity identified was the creation of an organization for collaborative promotion, such as a Chamber of Commerce. This could be facilitated using the Main Street Four-Point Approach program for commercial district revitalization, discussed in detail later in

this Chapter. The first point in this program is Organization, which “involves getting everyone working toward the same goal and assembling the appropriate human and financial resources to implement a revitalization program.”

The second point in the program is “promotion.” Promotion sells a positive image of the district and encourages consumers and investors to live, work, shop, plan and invest in the district. Currently, the Village does some promotion, mostly through special events. However, a comprehensive promotional effort is needed, focusing on advertising, retail promotional activity, special events, and marketing campaigns. Recently, a number of merchants have joined together to market and promote their offerings in local publications.

Threats

Competition from commercial developments in the region is perceived as a threat to the commercial sector in the Village Center. A related threat is the possible lack of critical mass to maintain a competitive position in the marketplace. Recently, a business relocated from Franklin to downtown Royal Oak where there is a greater critical mass, illustrating the impact of this factor on growth and development of the Village Center’s commercial district.

There is a threat, particularly if design guidelines are not adopted, that new developments and renovation will not be keeping with existing character.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Implement the “Main Street Four-Point Approach,” promulgated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.* The four points that are part and parcel to this approach are Organization, Promotion, Design, and Economic Restructuring.
 - As described previously, Organization involves getting the stakeholders working toward the same goals and assembling the appropriate human and financial resources to implement the Main Street program. Key goals of the organizational step are building consensus and cooperation, and a sustained effort.
 - Promotion involves selling a positive image of the commercial district and encouraging consumers and investors to live, work, shop, play and invest in the Main Street district.
 - Design is a multifaceted element that broadly means getting Main Street into top physical shape, but involves more: attractive window displays, parking areas, building improvements, street furniture, signs, sidewalks, street lights, and landscaping.
 - Economic Restructuring focuses on strengthening existing economic assets while expanding and diversifying the economic base.
- *Develop and follow an overriding “theme for commerce” in the Village Center.* This theme should communicate the essence of what commercial activity is to be like. It is intended that this theme for commerce will be the standard against which new uses, renovations, and new developments will be measured to determine their appropriateness.

- *Encourage coordinated parking behind buildings.*
 - Vehicles should not be allowed to park in front of commercial buildings, except as required, such as for the Franklin Post Office.
 - Parking is limited in the Village Center, but there are a sufficient total number of spaces. Ideally, parking should remain hidden from Franklin Road by placing all parking behind buildings, where feasible.
 - On the east side of Franklin Road, more efficient use of existing land set aside for parking could be achieved by joining or combining parking lots. By joining or combining parking lots, it may be possible to reduce the number of entries onto Franklin Road, a measure that would improve traffic safety and upgrade the pedestrian environment.