



The Farmington Avenue Joint Committee

# A New Farmington Avenue

Hartford, Connecticut



Project for Public Spaces, Inc. • Abeles Phillips Preiss & Shapiro, Inc. • Urbitran Associates, Inc.

We envision Farmington Avenue in Hartford as a gateway to the City, as a charming and beautiful public realm, as a vital urban place that serves the residents of the neighborhoods it passes through, and as a Grand Avenue uniting Greater Hartford's western suburbs with Downtown Hartford. This renewed Avenue supports a high-quality

## The Vision

mix of unique commercial, cultural, professional, residential and academic activities; it is home to some of the most important institutions in the Capitol Region. The Avenue is a place where elderly people feel safe and where parents are comfortable bringing their children. It is a profitable business location. It is a center of entertainment and recreation. Streets and facilities welcome pedestrians and bicyclists. Commercial buildings and public improvements complement the architectural heritage of the adjacent residences to create a unique sense of place. The Avenue reflects the diversity of families and life styles that is one of Hartford's most valued features. People are drawn from around the region to this vibrant center of community life.



Farmington Avenue Joint Committee (FAJC),  
Vision Statement for Farmington Avenue

## The Planning Process

This comprehensive vision statement set the stage for this extensive study of Farmington Avenue - a study not only about how the street functions today, but how it could be transformed through enhancement of the street, its retail environment, and as well as its management.

Farmington Avenue-stretching from Union Station to the West Hartford line-has had a long, rich history in the city of Hartford. Once a "Millionaire's Row" with distinguished mansions like that built by Mark Twain, the avenue has evolved into a street which actually changes character significantly every two or so blocks. Historic and cultural landmarks and important institutions still line much of the avenue, ranging from the Mark Twain and Harriet Beecher Stowe Museums to the corporate headquarters of Aetna to St. Joseph's Cathedral. Interspersed are smaller landmark buildings and the renovated residential complex of Clemens Place.

Two distinct commercial districts on the avenue: Asylum Hill and the West End are given the most attention in this study. They are the most heavily used sections, at least by their adjacent residential neighborhoods. While traffic speed, pedestrian hazards, bicycle safety, and a lack of a sense of place are problems along the whole of Farmington, it is in the retail districts that these problems become most acute.

Given these and other problems, the Farmington Avenue Joint Committee was established in 1996 in order to develop a comprehensive plan for the corridor's enhancement. The Joint Committee of over 20 members represents the diverse constituencies along this 1.6 mile stretch of the avenue from Prospect Avenue to the vicinity of Union Station (Spruce Street).

In 2000, Project for Public Spaces (PPS), a non-profit community planning organization from New York City, was selected to prepare this comprehensive plan through an extensive public

participation process, working with its subconsultants Urbitran (traffic engineering) and Abeles Phillips Preiss and Shapiro (economic and planning consultants).

The study included:

- A brainstorming session held with the FAJC;
- Interviews with key individuals;
- Review of the many existing studies;
- Analysis of existing land uses, conditions of open spaces, building contextual relationships and exterior appearances, parking and loading areas, landscape elements and vehicular and pedestrian circulation;
- Analysis of traffic flows using the city's video cameras;
- Surveys of residents, businesses, and employees working on Farmington Avenue;
- "Placemaking" workshops with teams of two or three people evaluating different blocks;
- Analysis of demographic and economic trends; and
- Analysis of parking utilization of on and off street spaces.

The collected and analyzed data, as well as the major issues identified, were presented in graphic and slide format to the Farmington Avenue Joint Committee in late May, 2001.

Two general street reconfiguration options to address the issues and opportunities were presented to the community in late July, 2001. In addition to the comments from over 100 participants at this meeting, FAJC staff met in a series of smaller meeting to collect concerns and ideas about the proposed plans. Following these meetings, a preferred alternative was developed.





## Summary of Key Recommendations

### Farmington Avenue: A Transportation Corridor

The goal of the street redesign is to improve pedestrian and bicycle access and circulation, while maintaining adequate capacity on the avenue for vehicles and reducing excessive conflicts and speed. To achieve this goal, Farmington Avenue should be changed from a 4-lane to a 3-lane configuration. At the East Gateway, where Farmington and Asylum converge, a simplification of traffic movements is suggested and a reduction in lane widths. Finally, measures (such as lane shifts and modern roundabouts) to discourage speeding are recommended as part of a comprehensive approach to balance the street's diverse uses:

- Improve the experience of walking and strolling on the avenue, by creating a continuous and comfortable sidewalk system on Farmington.
- Facilitate the crossing both Farmington Avenue and side streets with more crosswalks.
- Improve the efficiency of transit operations and visibility and comfort of transit stops in the redesign by consolidating bus stops to roughly spaced to every other block, and locating them on the "far side" of intersections wherever feasible to minimize conflicts with right turning traffic.
- Provide a continuous at-curb bike lanes running along the avenue both east and west-bound.
- Consolidate front and rear lots to increase the amount of parking, assure a more efficient and aesthetically pleasing solution to parking, and maximize parking resource.
- Maintain emergency vehicle access with the 3-lane configuration.



## Farmington Avenue: A Business Destination

Three business destinations were studied - the two neighborhood business districts and the city owned parcel at Farmington and Broad in the East Gateway -- to determine how they can attract new businesses which better meet local needs and keep business profitable, given declining population in the city and the economic challenges of many of the areas flanking Farmington Avenue. The following strategies are suggested for each district:

### The Asylum Hill Business District

- Supplement work of brokers by providing tenant recruitment services.
- Target current and future vacancies in Asylum Hill for convenience retailers and service providers catering to local residents and, potentially, office workers and students.
- Emphasize improvements to the operations and cosmetics of merchants that currently operate in Asylum Hill.
- To the extent possible, capitalize on the potential for augmented sources of patronage, i.e., daytime workers from Aetna and others, students who reside in the neighborhood.



### The West End Business District

A destination restaurant / bar / entertainment scene, oriented largely to students and recent graduates, also seems to be emerging, while wealthier local residents are most interested in stores and institutions that reflect their needs and sensibilities.

- Focus on anchor projects, including the Colonial Theater, the Wall Building, and the former Cheese & Stuff space;
- Actively pursue additional restaurants, bars, entertainment venues, and specialty retail, with a "college town" theme that also attract West End and possibly West Hartford residents.





### East Gateway

In terms of the prime one acre city property at the corner of Broad and Farmington, the following is suggested:

- Rather than proceed with short term development that would not realize the full potential of the site, take advantage of the present hiatus in forms of development to undertake the basic planning and promotional work that will be important to marketing the site to a major tenant or developer later on.
- To address long-term community interests, define the land use and urban design parameters for the site.

Pursue interim strategies so that it is not just "a hole in the ground." be aimed at improving the appearance of the site, and possibly to generating income during what is likely to be a multi-year holding period.

## Farmington Avenue: A Design Challenge

To implement a new vision for Farmington Avenue will also require that its zoning and urban design be transformed as well.

### Streetscape

To upgrade the streetscape, capital improvements will be needed - but also continued enhancements of building facades and increased maintenance:

- Add extensive landscaping, trees, and lighting, amenities along the full length of the avenue to provide an attractive and unified environment for pedestrians.
- To address both small and large scale façade improvement projects, augment the city's façade program with a lower cost "quick fix" effort. The city should complete a project in Asylum Hill, which has not received assistance to date.
- Improve the maintenance of Farmington Avenue, including new capital improvements, by establishing a Special Services District (SSD).

### Zoning

The zoning ordinance also needs to be revamped to better correspond to the new vision for Farmington Avenue, especially as regards to parking signage regulations:

Convert all of the more permissive B3 district to the more neighborhood oriented B4 category, and restrict uses like drive-through restaurants in the B4.

- Consider establishing Village District designation under state law for Farmington Avenue - particularly the West End and Asylum Hill commercial shopping districts - in order to maintain the "distinctive character, landscape, or historic value that are specifically identified in the plan of conservation and development."
- Improve enforcement of the existing zoning regulations - especially parking regulations.

In addition, the following specific zoning changes with parking and signage should be considered:







### Parking

- Consider allowing on-street and front set-back parking to count toward parking requirements in all B4 zones.
- Expand shared parking provisions to allow common use of on-street and off-street parking
- For parking lots with 30 spaces or less, not including the new on-street parking on side access roads, amend the zoning code to provide a minimum 2-4 foot planting strip around the entire perimeter of the parking lot.

### Signs

- Establish new signage regulations revised to reflect the new design of the street, with side access roads and a "main street" feel.
- For commercial businesses outside of side access roads, permit free-standing signs but with better controls on their height and design.
- Encourage small hanging signs, attached to an awning or some other apparatus projecting from the façade wall.
- In dealing with signage, consider amortization of nonconforming signs, to allow the owner to recoup the investment in the sign.



## Farmington Avenue: A Public Place

Finally, the design of the street needs to encourage places for public gathering, while maintaining a strong sense of security:

- Create "Mini-plazas" in the retail areas of the West End and Asylum Hill to provide spaces for small events and gatherings.
- Program existing underused spaces, like Clemens Green, for more cultural activities and special events.
- Make every bus stop a "place" with more spacious and well lit waiting areas and amenities, including a shelter and outdoor seating.
- Enhance the visibility of cultural institutions on the avenue need through better signage and thinking of themselves as part of the district.
- Take a comprehensive approach to security - working with the police, improving lighting and design, and controlling areas where people loiter -- in coordination with placemaking activities.



## Implementation

The implementation of "the New Farmington Avenue" is based on several assumptions:

- Implementation will occur in phases, as funding and "block by block" consensus is achieved, beginning with short term improvements and experiments that could be accomplished in 2002;
- As a long term project, the transformation of Farmington Avenue will require on-going staff capacity is absolutely essential. This is important because of the wide range of tasks required to implement the plan - promoting it to funders, seeking funding itself, etc. While it is an effective body for communication and cooperation, the Farmington Avenue Joint Committee (FAJC) must now consider becoming an on-going non-profit organization that will both complete the planning and design process and assure its implementation.
- There will be a continued need for planning and design assistance, and while the PPS team proposes to maintain a leadership role to assure that concepts are translated into effective designs, local design and engineering assistance will be needed.
- An on-going maintenance and management plan must be created with the final design plans, and a Special Services District created which is "interlocked" in some way with FAJC.

## Funding

The funding of the New Farmington Avenue can be expected to come from multiple sources. The establishment of the Farmington Avenue Joint Committee as an ongoing stewardship organization is critical to establish the credibility of the fundraising effort, which has proven to be a successful formula in other Hartford efforts, such as Riverfront Recapture and the Bushnell Park Foundation. In the case of the riverfront, the obstacles to implementation were even greater, but the result of consistent effort ultimately made fundraising easier as monies from multiple sources were able to match each other over time.

The following are funding sources that should be considered for the project:

- City of Hartford.
- State of Connecticut.
- Foundations and Corporations.
- Property Owners and Non-Profit Corporations.
- Transit Improvement Funding Sources (Federal, State, Local)





FARMINGTON AVENUE LOOKING WEST  
Asylum Hill

FARMINGTON AVENUE LOOKING EAST  
View of West End and Sisson Roundabout

