

HIGHLAND NEIGHBORHOOD GASTONIA, NC



URBAN DESIGN MASTERPLAN PROJECT REPORT

THE URBAN REVITALIZATION OF THE HIGHLAND NEIGHBORHOOD FINAL PROJECT REPORT

Contents:

1. **Overview of the Project**
 - 1.1. Introduction / Context
 - 1.2. Objectives
 - 1.3. The Neighborhood
 - 1.4. The Project Methodology

2. **The Urban Design Master Plan**
 - 2.1 Residents' Concerns and Contributions
 - 2.2 Consultants' Analysis and Master Plan Concepts
 - 2.3. Detail Development
 - 2.3.1. Chester Boulevard: the Redesign of Hwy 321
 - 2.3.2. The York Street Neighborhood Center
 - 2.3.3. Grocery Store Site
 - 2.3.4. The Highland Street Neighborhood Center
 - 2.3.5. Davidson Avenue
 - 2.3.6. New Housing Opportunities
 - 2.3.7. New Street Connections and Improvements
 - 2.3.8. Parks and Greenways
 - 2.4. Administrative Tools for Development Control
 - 2.4.1. New Zoning Classifications
 - 2.4.2. Design Standards
 - 2.4.3. Special District Designation

3. **Future Actions**
 - 3.1. Priorities and Phasing
 - 3.2. Formation of a Community Development Corporation

4. **Executive Summary**
 - 4.1. Redevelopment Principles
 - 4.2. Elements of the Urban Design Master Plan
 - 4.3. Administrative Tools for Development Control

List of Figures:

1. Highland Neighborhood Overall Master Plan
2. US 321 / Chester Street Boulevard Plan
3. Chester Street / York Street Neighborhood Center
- 4a. Chester Street / York Street Grocery Store developed with Outparcels
- 4b. Chester Street / York Street Grocery Store Basic Development
5. Davidson Avenue Extension and Workshop Units
6. Boulevard Plan Legend

THE MATERIAL PRESENTED

The Master Plan for the Highland Neighborhood comprises three interrelated parts:

a. **The Master Plan Drawings**

1. **Overall Master Plan** (1 board)
Figure 1 in Project Report
2. **US 321/Chester Street Corridor: Boulevard Plan and Adjacent Neighborhood Improvements** (5 boards)
Figures 2, 3, 4a, 5 and 7 in the Project Report (Plans and Legend)
Street Sections also contained in the Draft Design Standards document
3. **Grocery Store Proposal** (1 board, with improved version shown on #2 above, the Chester Street Boulevard Plan)
Figures 2, 4a and 4b in the Project Report

b. **The Final Project Report**

c. **Draft Design Standards**

for Streets, Building Types, Parking Lots and Public Open Space

These Draft Design Standards are indicative of the appropriate development codes for implementation of the Master Plan. While every care has been taken to make them accurate and relevant to the case in hand, they should not be construed as final documents.

1. OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

1.1. Introduction / Context

This project is the result of desires by community leaders in the Highland community of Gastonia, NC, to bring about much needed physical and economic revitalization of the Highland area, an historically African-American neighborhood situated immediately to the north of downtown.

As a result of this community activism, the staff of the Gastonia Planning Department under Planning Director Jack Kiser, approached David Walters, Professor of Urban Design at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and James Williams, Principal in LDP Consortium Inc, Land Planners and Landscape Designers in Charlotte, to lead a "Design Charrette" -- a short-term intensive community design workshop -- focused on the revitalization of the extensive Highland neighborhood. This followed an earlier successful urban design and planning charrette in the nearby Firestone Village, and the Highland venture continued the the pattern established by the Firestone Master Plan as a textbook case of this process in action.

1.2. Objectives

The main objectives of the charrette may thus be summarized as:

- a. to produce an Urban Design Master Plan that "kick-starts" the revitalization process by establishing a clear and practical vision to improve the physical character of the Highland neighborhood;
- b. to provide a framework for physical development within which policies can be subsequently developed to attract and guide new public and private investment in buildings and community infrastructure;
- c. to revitalize the residential, business and civic environment in the neighborhood;
- d. to stabilize, enrich and improve the quality of life within the community;
- e. to involve as many members of the community as possible in starting the process of neighborhood revitalization;
- f. to support new investment and development in the neighborhood, especially the establishment of a grocery store and drug store, by creating a positive and upbeat image and message about the future of the neighborhood.

1.3. The Neighborhood

The area known generally as the Highland neighborhood measures roughly 1.4 miles north to south and 1.8 miles east to west on its longest dimensions. The boundaries of the area underwent some extensions during the charrette process as a result of neighborhood input, but it can generally be defined as being bounded by Long Avenue and the railroad trench on the south; Interstate 85 on the north; a branch of Kaylor Creek on the west and Broad Street on the east, with this last boundary being extended beyond Broad Street at its northern end to include the newer residential neighborhood of Green Acres.

The area, whose population according to the 1990 census now numbers about 6,300 residents, falls roughly into two sections, bisected by US Highway 321, Chester Street, running north-south. To the east was the original Highland neighborhood, historically an African-American community, while the area to the west of the highway was long dominated by the local hospitals and associated homes and offices of medical professionals. When medical services were relocated to a suburban site early in the 1970s, the doctors and other health workers left the area, which then gradually merged with the old Highland neighborhood to the east in terms of its ethnic and socioeconomic character. Several buildings remain on the county hospital site, and are now used for storage or miscellaneous office purposes, but this site remains considerably underdeveloped.

As an African-American neighborhood, Highland was starved of resources for long periods of its history. Despite these adverse circumstances, a strong community spirit was developed and maintained to this day, with numerous churches acting as communal focal points, and community leaders ready and willing to speak out on neighborhood issues.

To the east of Chester Street, Highland was laid out on an approximate north-south grid of varying block sizes with generally unpaved roads and few sidewalks. Over the years roads have been paved, but with little attention to detail; often asphalt has been simply laid over the original dirt road, with little or no other improvements to the basic infrastructure of the public space of the street. York Street provided the main neighborhood center, with a mixture of commercial and religious buildings. The majority of the housing comprised typical Carolina workers' cottages, many of which remain to this day with only minor modifications and little upgrading of amenities.

The condition of the housing stock varies widely, ranging from well-preserved and maintained single family homes to badly subdivided units run by multiple landowners that are barely more than slums. An increasing number of homes have been bought by absentee landlords to rent out as cheap accommodation with minimal maintenance, circumstances which have lowered the overall environmental standard of the community.

To the west of Chester Street the general physical character is somewhat different and more diffuse, ranging from previously fine homes to reasonable quality public housing; from an affluent middle class section near the Highland School to poor quality cottages adjacent to Chester and Long Streets. The grid of streets itself is much looser; while some areas close to Chester Street are similar to the tight pattern around York Street, generally block sizes are larger and streets curve more with the topography. Highland Street forms an embryonic central north-south spine for the western half, much as York Street does for the eastern portion. Davidson Avenue is the dominant east west connector in both sub-areas, but at present this fizzles out just to the east of York Street.

Commercial development along Chester Street has rarely achieved any standard of reasonable quality in recent years. Most buildings are mediocre, often in a poor state of repair amidst untended lots of scruffy appearance. To the traveler or commuter passing through Highland, Chester Street presents a very demeaning and miserable impression of the adjacent community. Apart from a few average highway commercial businesses at the northern end of Chester Street adjacent to I-85, the neighborhood possesses very little in the way of viable commercial development, with no grocery store or drug store, and very little in the way of convenience shopping or service retail. In the wider context of Gastonia as a whole, the lack of a grocery store and a drug store in the central northern part of the city is very noticeable, and community pressure to rectify this situation has become increasingly vocal in recent months. In this regard, the words of Councilman Walker Reid describe the current situation well: "There's a hole in the middle of the map."

The community does possess many churches which remain important community focuses within the neighborhood. However, particularly in the York Street neighborhood, some churches have become the worst offenders in their destruction of the human-scaled traditional streetscape and character by demolishing buildings and creating huge and barren parking lots in front of their buildings. Such short-sighted actions on the part of institutions that should be setting a much better example and standard of community leadership are particularly disappointing.

The community is fortunate to have two schools within the neighborhood to provide additional focal points of community energy, Woodhill Elementary on the east side and Highland Junior High on the west. At the time of writing it has become apparent that concerted community action will be necessary to ensure that the Highland school withstands pressures on it to close, and instead, see that it remains an active force and asset in the community. This report and Master Plan proceed on the assumption that the school will remain open, and be remodeled into a Vo-Tech High School as previously envisaged by the school authorities.

Industrial development following a creek and the barely used rail line

that traverses the eastern side of the neighborhood from northwest to southeast provides another major land use within the community. These manufacturing premises are generally modest, ranging from the viable to the decrepit, but they do provide employment for the town as a whole. However, it is not apparent that the residential population of Highland has any particularly strong affinity with these businesses.

Adjacent to the southern end of the industrial area lie several blocks along Long Avenue that are rapidly developing into the municipal civic center, with government, law enforcement and social services facilities to be housed in several large new buildings. It is fair to say that this development, long in coming, has bruised the Highland community and left appreciable resentment about the loss of many homes and some businesses due to the major incursions made into the neighborhood by this massive development and its associated demolitions and land clearance. The urban design and site planning layout of these new facilities only compounds the problem, for they have been positioned on their sites with little or no consideration of good urban design principles and human-scaled relationships to the adjacent residential community. The civic center takes mediocre suburban-style design ideas and overlays them onto a tight urban setting to the considerable detriment of the neighborhood. All the residential streets that line the new development are faced with either an ocean of asphalt in the form of huge parking lots, or meager landscaping that fails to soften the brutal boundary of the civic facilities. It will take a major planning, design and community effort to mitigate these problems all along the southeastern edge of the Highland community.

The final elements of note within the project area concern community facilities and recreation. Chief among these site are Sims Park, a collection of ball fields east of Chester Street and immediately south of I-85, and the Erwin Center, a neighborhood recreation complex off Davidson Street on the west side of Chester Street. Included among the facilities at Sims Park is a baseball stadium that once housed the local semi-professional team, long since deceased. This stadium has the capacity for greater use; it is likely that a stronger connection with the community could be established by innovative programming. By contrast the Erwin Center has been refurbished in recent years to provide community facilities, a small branch library, a good baseball field and a newly renovated swimming pool. These good facilities provide a major landmark and center of activity within the community.

Other important community education and recreation services are provided by the Gastonia Boys and Girls Club, currently located at the south end of Chester Street, but now landlocked by patterns of current and future development, and very much in need of quick relocation to a better site. One such possibility has already been discussed involving a nearby under-utilized school building adjacent to the small Cherry Park

The current zoning pattern chiefly comprises a range of residential classifications interspersed with small pockets of business zoning, mostly adjacent to US 321. The other major land use classification is industrial, consisting of land adjacent to the interstate and following the tracks of the Northwestern Railroad. These classifications are reasonable except for the industrial zoning surrounding the Woodhill Elementary School on three sides. This issue will be addressed in Section 2 below, in conjunction with recommendations for some new approaches to zoning classifications and community revitalization.

1.4. The Project Methodology

The Urban Design Master Plan has been produced as a result of much active local participation from residents, civic, community and business leaders. This participation was orchestrated through the Community Design Charrette process. A Design Charrette is a term derived from intensive design work at the great French architecture academy, L'Ecole des Beaux Arts (School of Fine Arts), in Paris during the nineteenth century. At that time, students worked in professors' offices scattered throughout the city, and when design projects were due, the School sent out a cart (charrette) to collect the drawings. The clatter of the cart's iron-rimmed wheels on the Paris cobblestones could be heard in advance of its arrival, and was the signal for frantic last minute bursts of activity on the part of the students.

The word for the cart that collected the drawings eventually came to stand for the intense design process itself. This evocation of short periods of highly-focused creative activity has been carried over into modern usage, particularly in regard to community-based activities, where a large number of people can have the opportunity for input.

In this instance, the design process with the community was organized around three events; an original "Kick-off" meeting with the community on Thursday August 15th, 1996 at 7pm; an all-day "walk-in" session to gather more local information from residents and city staff on Friday August 16th, and a detailed design work session all day on Saturday August 17th. In addition, the community reconvened for a presentation of the draft plan for comment on Thursday September 12th, also at 7.00pm. All events were held in the main hall at the Woodhill Elementary School in the neighborhood.

The initial meeting included a welcome by Mayor Garland; remarks by Carl Stewart, Chairman of the Gastonia West Committee and a leading proponent of the previous Firestone Village Charrette; an address by Walker Reid, the neighborhood's representative on the Gastonia City Council; and overviews of the charrette exercise by the urban design consultants James Williams and David Walters. There followed an open discussion of issues and concerns in a "town meeting" format.

During the Friday sessions many local residents came in to give their

views on an informal basis, preferring this format to speaking at a large meeting. City and County staff also attended to provide information concerning their various agencies.

On Saturday, citizens worked in small groups on a range of issues derived from the earlier discussions. Eventually two groups developed schematic design concepts for issues concerning residential, business and civic development, including ideas for parks, greenways and other public spaces. Each group marked their ideas on maps of the area which were then displayed for communal review in the late afternoon. A high degree of consensus on these overlapping issues was achieved, and these rough plans formed the basis for the development of the Draft Master Plan prepared by James Williams and David Walters which was presented back to the community on September 12th at the final community meeting of this particular process.

This last meeting was an affirmation of the consensus developed during the earlier sessions. The large group of residents and community leaders endorsed all the proposals in the Master Plan (described in detail in Section 2. below), which intentionally strikes a balance between business and residential issues, and between bold moves and incremental improvements.

2. THE URBAN DESIGN MASTER PLAN

2.1 Residents' Concerns and Suggestions

The headings and notes in this section are derived from comments and ideas put forward during the group of three consecutive community forums in August 1996. They are followed by the main points of the consultants' analysis of the neighborhood, and it is clear that there is a lot of consensus and overlap of concerns regarding the present condition and future development of the Highland neighborhood.

The issues brought up by the community can best be summarized under five main headings;

- a. Retail and Commercial Facilities -- development of a grocery store and drug store as a central element of the commercial revival of the area;
- b. Housing -- improvement of the existing housing and construction of new affordable and mixed income homes;
- c. Streets and Public Space -- improvements to the appearance, circulation patterns and safety of the streets and main highways that form the public infrastructure and visual character of the area;
- d. Schools and Community Facilities -- the importance of maintaining and developing the two existing public schools and other community facilities in the neighborhood;
- e. Community Image -- correcting an unfair negative image on the part of outsiders.

a. **Retail and Commercial Facilities:**

This issue is the single biggest focus of residents' concerns. It has been established from analyses carried out by the city planning staff that within the context of Gastonia as a whole, there is a large area in the north central zone of the city not served by any neighborhood center type retail, grocery, store, drug store, bank, small restaurants etc. The Highland neighborhood is effectively in the center of this deprived zone. It is clear that a key element of any Master Plan must address the potential siting of such new development, its integration into the community and its connection to the passing traffic from outside the area. While any new retail development is likely to be well supported by the community, a high volume of passing traffic is also essential to the survival of any such enterprise.

b. **Housing:**

Many residents talked about the problem of cheap rental conversions of former single family homes as being one of the biggest factors in the deterioration of parts of the neighborhood. Some residents also complained of inconsistent code enforcement by the city regarding substandard rental accommodation. There was a very clear request that sites for new housing be found within the community, both in terms of affordable accommodation

and for market rate homes to support middle-class families in their search for housing in traditionally black neighborhoods.

c. **Streets and Public Space:**

Not surprisingly, much attention was paid by the residents to issues that directly affected their shared living environment – the public spaces that form the "urban living rooms" of the community, basically streets and parks. Many people expressed safety concerns about crossing Hwy 321, particularly children crossing to and from the Erwin Center.

At the scale of neighborhood streets, there was a strong desire on the part of residents to see physical improvements to the streetscape, particularly sidewalks and street trees. Some residents also noted the advantages of an extended greenway and parkland system to provide connections between these facilities and to act as a resource throughout the neighborhood.

d. **Schools and Community Facilities:**

The neighborhood feels very strongly about its schools and other community facilities like the Boys and Girls Club and the Erwin Center. Residents were united in their desire to keep the Highland School open, most likely as a newly adapted Vocational Technology High School, and in their support of the Boys and Girls Club moving to a better site in the community. Several people expressed reservations about the Sims Park baseball stadium, saying that it was rarely used, and suggesting that the site may be developed for other purposes, more community ball fields or even as a site for new housing.

e. **Community Image:**

Residents were unanimous in their desire for more emphasis to be given within the community, the city and the local media to the positive aspects of the Highland neighborhood. All coverage tends to be of negative aspects such as crime and drugs, which, according to residents, makes the neighborhood appear far worse than it really is. Many people viewed this Master Plan process as one way of changing peoples' perceptions of the area.

2.2 Consultants' Analysis and Master Plan Concepts

In a design project such as this charrette, the value of residents' input is enormous; indeed the process cannot succeed without such insights and involvement. As a companion to this information, it is necessary to have an objective evaluation of problems, opportunities and potential solutions from outside consultants. This section summarizes the consultants' analysis and outlines six major concepts to guide the redevelopment of the Highland community. These six points form the main conceptual structure of the Master Plan.

- a. Capitalize on, reinforce, repair and improve the strong urban pattern of the original neighborhood

Basically, this says, build on what you've got, don't tear things out and start over unless it's absolutely necessary, and make sure your policies and codes match the needs of the area.

As noted above, most of the Highland neighborhood comprises a grid of varying proportions laid out on both sides of Chester Street, with some minor deformations due to topography. The main highway of Chester Street divides the neighborhood and creates a perceptual barrier and safety hazard on a day-to-day basis. However, it also can be the main agency of commercial renewal for the neighborhood because of its importance as a regional highway with a lot of passing traffic. To the eastern side of Chester, York Street constitutes the main organizing north-south "spine," even though it is today only a shadow of its former self in terms of community business and activity. To the west, Highland Street performs a similar function, but in a relatively weak and underdeveloped manner. Other important north-south neighborhood streets are (from west to east) Weldon, Pryor, Morris and Boyce on the west side; and Marietta and Broad on the east of Highway 321. Davidson Avenue forms the most important east west connector, located approximately halfway between Long Avenue to the south and I-85 to the north. While there are several local problems of discontinuity and disjunction in this street layout, which need to be remedied to ensure more connectivity throughout the area, the layout itself still remains an appropriate infrastructure around which to base the revitalization of the community. (See Fig. 1. Highland Neighborhood Overall Master Plan).

That's the good news. However, this network of streets that is decent in principle is very poor in its detail, appearance and character. US Hwy 321/Chester Street is a special case and is dealt with separately below, but local neighborhood streets are almost universally in need of sidewalk, curb and gutter, street tree planting and other improvements to bring them up to a condition worthy of a residential neighborhood in our society.

Elements of the Master Plan, described in more detail below, provide some generic recommendations for street design that will need to be modified and implemented on a street-by-street basis throughout the neighborhood. It also makes specific proposals to reinforce the character and utility of York Street, Highland Street and Davidson Avenue, and the Plan creates some specific new streets to remedy existing deficiencies and to open up some opportunities for the kind of neighborhood scale development necessary for the economic and physical renewal of the area. Sections 2.3.2 and 2.3.3 below relate to the improvement of the York Street area; Section 2.3.4 to Highland Street;

2.3.5 to Davidson Avenue; and Section 2.3.7 outlines the new street connections and improvements. Fig. 2 illustrates several of these schematic layouts. Design standards for the relationship of buildings to streets, the streets themselves, public open spaces and parking lots are included in the Draft Design Standards document.

- b. Improve the design of US Hwy 321 / Chester Street to mitigate its divisive impact on the community: improve its safety for pedestrians and its visual and economic attractiveness for new development.

At the present time, Chester Street creates a major scar through the area, lined with commercial development ranging from moderate to poor to derelict, and forming a dangerous traffic barrier to movement within the community, with traffic counts averaging around 20,000 vehicles a day from the 1995 traffic figures. At the same time the highway is an important catalyst for future commercial development of the type long sought by the neighborhood, a grocery store, drug store and other convenience retail. These conflicting attributes are brought together and resolved by recreating the major highway as a true boulevard, handling, by its design, both fast-moving through traffic, and slower neighborhood journeys by car, bicycle and on foot.

Subsequent section in this report deal with these matters in more detail. Section 2.3.1 Chester Boulevard: the redesign of Hwy 321 describes the overall proposal in detail; Sections 2.3.2 and 2.3.3 relate to the improvement of commercial facilities along its length; Section 2.3.8 Parks and Greenways describes proposals for a linear park as an integral part of the boulevard design; and detailed street sections contained in the Draft Design Standards document illustrate the various dimensional configurations of the redesign scheme. Fig. 2 illustrates the overall proposal with detailed street cross sections included on supplementary drawings and in the Draft Design Standards document.

- c. Pay great attention to the design of the public realm -- the streets, plazas, parks and greenways.

It is these public spaces that we inhabit on a daily basis that form our sense of identity in the neighborhood and the foundation of our memories of place. These spaces are our "urban living rooms," and they can be enhanced by the incorporation of details such as neighborhood signage at community "entrances," and the incorporation of public art projects -- involving local artists, community members and schoolchildren -- into the design of neighborhood entrance markers and signs, street furniture, lampposts, landscape, paving patterns and so forth.

In this report, Section 2.3.7 deals with new street connections

and improvements in more detail, and Section 2.3.8 Parks and Greenways explains the proposals for new greenways / linear parks around and through the community. The Draft Design Standards document illustrates appropriate design standards for public streets and open spaces.

d. Create a policy for new development that is explicitly modeled on the use of traditional urban patterns and building types.

Whether major new buildings or modest infill development, all new buildings should match the compact arrangements, and traditional building types of the traditional American town. Building designs that might fit suburban locations have no place in a neighborhood like Highland, except at certain controlled locations on Hwy 321.

Demolition should be limited to those very few areas where it is the only real option; otherwise a principle should be adopted throughout the neighborhood that original buildings should be refurbished creatively, and not demolished except in the most extreme of circumstances.

New buildings should be developed on a principle of compatible mixed use wherever possible. All new proposals for traffic management should be based on principles of "traffic calming" where priority is given to the safety and convenience of the pedestrian rather than through traffic. Appropriate traffic management is also related to the development of proper parking standards appropriate to the neighborhood. Suburban-style approaches to this issue can do nothing but harm to this type of neighborhood. There are several instances of badly sited and designed parking lots destroying the space and character of neighborhoods, especially on York Street, and of course all around the periphery of the new civic center buildings. The Draft Design Standards document sets out good design practice for all these issues in easily understood diagrams; Fig. 2 illustrates the impact of these principles in key areas of redevelopment within the community.

e. Develop a policy and design standards for new housing infill throughout the area.

While there are several pockets of decent housing within the community, much of the housing is in moderate to poor condition. In addition to the deteriorating quality of many of the older traditional mill cottages, the standard of more recent infill has generally been low, compounding the problem of poor housing conditions.

While the city and other housing organizations such as Habitat for Humanity have done good work in rehabilitating dwellings and building new homes, some of the city's earlier housing improvements

are nearing the end of their life expectancy, and a new round of work needs to be put in hand. In both refurbishment and new infill development it is important to ensure that any changes in street layout and the arrangement of homes to the public realm of the street always respect the design guidelines established in this Master Plan regarding traditional patterns of arrangement. Appropriate design concepts for a variety of dwelling types are contained with the Draft Design Standards document.

f. Create new and appropriate legislative tools to accomplish these tasks.

Conventional suburban-style zoning practices are simply not applicable to older traditional neighborhoods like Highland. Although residential zoning currently exists over most of the neighborhood, its detailed provisions will need to be revisited to allow and support community revitalization. New zoning designations will be required, based on a flexible approach to mixing compatible uses combined with firm design controls over the placement and overall character of buildings. This may be part of a special Overlay District, whereby the general character of the area can be preserved and enhanced with special regard to its specific character and needs. Section 2.4 below provides details of these new approaches and should be read in conjunction with the Draft Design Standards.

2.3. Detail Development of the Master Plan

The six main concepts that guide the redevelopment of the Highland neighborhood, noted above, are as follows:

- a. *Capitalize on, reinforce, repair and improve the strong urban pattern of the original neighborhood;*
- b. *Improve the design of US Hwy 321 / Chester Street to mitigate its divisive impact on the community: improve its safety for pedestrians and its visual and economic attractiveness for new development;*
- c. *Pay great attention to the design of the public realm -- the streets, plazas, parks and greenways.;*
- d. *Create a policy for new development that is explicitly modeled on the use of traditional urban patterns and building types;*
- e. *Develop a policy and design standards for new housing infill throughout the area; and*
- f. *Create new and appropriate legislative tools to accomplish these tasks.*

With these concepts in mind, the detail development of the Master Plan can be summarized under the following headings.

2.3.1. Chester Boulevard: the Redesign of Hwy 321

2.3.2. The York Street Neighborhood Center

2.3.3. Grocery Store Site

- 2.3.4. The Highland Street Neighborhood Center
- 2.3.5. Davidson Avenue
- 2.3.6. New Housing Opportunities
- 2.3.7. New Street Connections and Improvements
- 2.3.8. Parks and Greenways

2.3.1. Chester Boulevard: the Redesign of Hwy 321

This set of proposals constitutes the centerpiece of the Urban Design Master Plan. It aims to turn Chester Street from a mediocre commercial strip highway that divides the neighborhood into a truly urban boulevard, a place that is the focus of the community's activities and which creates a good image of the neighborhood (see fig. 2).

While the highway is very efficient at moving traffic, it does so at a substantial cost to the safety and visual environment of the Highland community. The main objective of the Boulevard plan therefore is to increase the safety and amenity for local residents while maintaining efficient traffic movement. It does so by paying close attention to the environment along the edges of the Boulevard, utilizing all the land available within the right-of-way to create sidewalks and wide medians planted with substantial street trees. In addition, along the central area between Biggers Avenue and Caldwell, a new frontage road is created on the east side, integrated with new commercial and residential development that forms the proposed Chester Street / York Street Neighborhood Center (see fig. 3). This frontage road handles low speed traffic with on-street parking and wide tree-lined sidewalks for maximum safety and comfort of local residents and shoppers.

The environment along the edges of the Boulevard is further developed by a series of landscape proposals that clear away derelict buildings and clean up areas of undeveloped land to create a linear park / greenway along most of its length as it bisects the community. This linear park, along with the frontage road development allows the center turn lane to be eliminated for a portion of the Boulevard's length and replaced with a central tree-planted median (see Fig. 3).

At the southern end of Chester Boulevard is the site for the new grocery store. Fig. 4a illustrates this development with the addition of buildings on outparcels that line the Boulevard to create a more urban edge in this area.

Along its length, some new street connections are made to the Boulevard to improve connectivity between different parts of the neighborhood on either side. Additional crossing points for pedestrians are proposed, controlled by pedestrian operated traffic signals. Detailed plans and cross-sections for the three different sections of the Boulevard are illustrated in the Draft Design Standards document.

2.3.2. The York Street Neighborhood Center

This is a very important element in the revitalization of the York Street neighborhood, once the focus of most commercial and civic activity in the community. While most of this activity has ceased, leaving behind several near-derelect properties, the area can be revived by linking it to new commercial activity on the adjacent Chester Boulevard at its north and south ends.

The street grid becomes fragmented at the northern end of York Street, failing to connect to adjacent areas across creeks on either side. This area is in particular need of revitalization; the street infrastructure is poor and there are several groups of homes in need of replacement or extensive rehabilitation. During the charrette a representative of the Fort Company, a major property owner in this local area, indicated a willingness to consider some major redevelopment options for their property, and thus a comprehensive scheme has been created linking a revived north York Street with the new commercial center on the new frontage road to Chester Boulevard (see fig. 3). By extending Sloan Avenue, Sycamore Avenue and creating a new Street between them, a new street grid is created for the area, and with additional foot and cycle paths extending Normont, Biggers and Sloan Avenues between the Boulevard and the new greenway along the creek to the east, the integration of the area into the larger community is much improved.

While new commercial development is concentrated along the new Boulevard frontage road, where its high visibility and convenient parking make it an attractive investment opportunity for small scale businesses, the area behind to the east is the site of new residential development. Here approximately 14 poor quality homes are replaced with 13 larger single family detached houses and 24 duplexes.

2.3.3. Grocery Store Site

At the south end of York Street is the site identified by the consultants as the only practicable location for the new grocery store and drug store so desired by the community. Figure 4b. illustrates the basic development of this site, with the main building mass laid out between York Street and Chester Boulevard. On a site of approximately 7.25 acres, the basic development contains a 40,000 sq.ft. grocery store, a drug store of 8,000 sq.ft. and 9,000 sq. ft of other convenience shopping, with nearly 300 car parking spaces. A more developed version of the site plan is shown in Fig. 4a, where additional outparcels are included to maximize the frontage to Chester Boulevard, and additional parking is available by clearing more of the site.

This site is well located for this purpose, being central to the whole Highland neighborhood, easily accessible for passing traffic on Hwy 321, and convenient for the large working population in the new civic and government center immediately to the east. Additionally it is well-placed to serve the downtown area and other neighborhoods in north and west central

Gastonia. However, this site, although the best, and probably the *only* location for such a development, is not without its difficulties. Site development costs will be considerable due to the difficult topography, the presence of rock, and a small creek that flows across the site. In addition at least six homes and one active business would have to be displaced to make way for the new development.

At the time of writing there exists a traffic plan to extend Walnut Avenue across the south eastern corner of the site. The consultants **most strongly urge that this proposal be stopped immediately**. There seems little justification for such a road configuration other than to shave a few seconds off the time it takes to exit the parking areas surrounding the civic center complex. Such a road alignment would make it impossible to use this site for a grocery store, and the whole of the Highland community, and the wider areas of northern Gastonia, would be deprived of these much-needed services. Instead of the new extension, Walnut Avenue should remain a T-intersection with York Street, and York and Rankin Avenue improved to facilitate traffic circulation through the grid to the intersection at Chester Boulevard.

In addition to the commercial developments noted here, the Master Plan proposes a new housing initiative immediately to the north of the site along Grace and Moran Streets. Here some poor quality houses are demolished and replaced with new single family homes, duplexes and apartments, lined along improved streets with sidewalks and street trees and a linear park bordering Chester Boulevard. This development can be justified not only by the need to replace some very poor housing stock, but also by the fact of its immediate adjacency to the new commercial site. The upgrading of the community's image for outside investors is a very important factor in persuading new businesses to move into the area.

2.3.4. The Highland Street Neighborhood Center

Just as York Street functions as the north-south "spine" of east Highland, Highland Street serves a similar function in the western half of the neighborhood, although in a much less formal fashion. The Overall Master Plan identifies York Street, Davidson Avenue and Highland Street as the three most important neighborhood streets in the community, forming a connected network at the heart of the area (see Fig. 1).

With direct access from West Airline Avenue to the south, Highland Street was once the focus of hospital and medical activity in the area. Even today it retains several active businesses and churches along its length, together with the large under-developed tract of land owned by the county, and which was once the main hospital site for the whole area. While the county has some modest plans to clean up the site and to retain some buildings for its use, much of the site area will remain vacant and has good development potential for a mixture of uses -- residential, commercial and

institutional. A comprehensive scheme for this site, just two blocks west of the Erwin Community Center, could spur the economic redevelopment of the western part of the Highland neighborhood.

The other major proposal for Highland Street is that its main length be connected to its isolated northern extremity and thus lead directly onto the campus of the Highland School, embedding the institution firmly within its surrounding community, and providing a fitting terminus to this important street. An adjacent extension westwards to join up with Sycamore Avenue at its intersection with Weldon Street would improve connectivity and open up some new land for low density housing to complement and extend the existing neighborhood. Although not shown on the Master Plan, the opportunity exists for one or more short one-block connecting streets between Pryor and Highland in the very long block (2,000 ft). north of Rankin and south of Davidson Avenue. This would do a lot to increase the development potential of the area.

Other potential sites for development in the vicinity of Highland Street include low density residential infill within the large square block bounded by Rankin, Pryor, Granite and Morris; and moderate density housing with retail and office development along West Airline Avenue on the boundary of the neighborhood.

2.3.5. Davidson Avenue

Davidson Avenue has already been identified as one of the neighborhood's most important streets, forming as it does the community's main east-west connector. This symbolic and actual importance requires that urgent attention needs to be paid to improving the streetscape along its length with sidewalks and street trees, for compelling reasons of safety and community image.

To the east of York Street however, the Avenue dies out at its junction with North Falls Street. There has long been a proposal on the city's thoroughfare plan to make the desired connection across the valley to Marietta Street where Davidson resumes its course, but difficult topography and engineering around the existing nursing home close by, have frustrated its implementation. In the context of this Master Plan for the revitalization of the community, this proposed extension takes on a revived importance, and the Master Plan offers a new solution to some of its previous problems.

Figure 5 shows a realigned intersection of Davidson with North Falls, and the improvement of North Falls northwards to its junction with Sullivan Avenue, which is then extended across the creek directly to Marietta at its intersection with the isolated eastern portion of Davidson Avenue. This arrangement skirts the grounds of the nursing home, and opens up land for development along its length towards Marietta Street. This is a good location for new complexes of small workshops, organized around congregate facilities

and shared spaces, together with some live/work units, where small business owners and craftsmen may live in apartments directly above their workshops. This type of development is ideal for start-up businesses, and makes a good transition between the industrial areas and housing to the south.

2.3.6. New Housing Opportunities

While there are several sites throughout the neighborhood for infill housing, the single most important site within the community is comprised of three parcels of land around Woodhill Elementary School. With modest road improvements along the southern boundary of the school to improve connections between the school and its surrounding community, a total of approximately 16 acres of land can provide good sites for single family and multi-family dwellings on the east, south and west sides of the school property. At a density of about 6 units per acre, approximately 100 homes comprising a mix of detached houses, town homes and apartments at different price ranges, can be constructed in a development that would follow the straightforward arrangement of homes lined along neighborhood-scaled and tree-lined streets. In addition to providing much-needed housing opportunities, a well-scaled development of new homes and neighborhood streets would provide an excellent setting for the elementary school, improving both access and communal security for school property. In the development along the east side of Marietta, there are opportunities for some small-scaled mixed-use development, with some local business and retail operations interposed with the housing to provide neighborhood-based services.

Some of this land is currently zoned industrial, but the consultants believe that it is very important to revise this designation so as to ensure the appropriate community setting for this neighborhood school. The current zoning categories were derived from the general city plan developed during the 1980s, and this Master Plan brings to bear clearer logic and updated ideas about the most appropriate types of development for the neighborhood. Plenty of other industrial land exists nearby in the area to satisfy any anticipated demands.

Other sites for infill housing include the York Street and Highland Street Neighborhood Centers as noted previously (see [2.3.2] and [2.3.4] above). Additional housing development should be focused in the south-eastern corner of the neighborhood, immediately north and east of the new proposed landscaped buffer and greenway corridor that borders the large parking lots around the new civic center. A strong housing presence here will consolidate and reinforce this boundary, minimizing creeping blight into the neighborhood from the large open car park areas.

2.3.7. New Street Connections and Improvements

The Master Plan specifies several new street connections and

improvements, some of which improve the accessibility and setting of the two schools within their community, as noted above (see Fig. 1). While the biggest street improvement is the redesign of Chester Street / Hwy 321 as a truly urban boulevard, other major proposals previously discussed involve the redefinition of Highland Street, York Street and Davidson Avenue as main neighborhood streets with streetscape improvements to match. The extension to Davidson Avenue has also been noted above, together with the new streets and extensions involved in the creation of the new York Street Neighborhood Center.

Other street connections in the Plan comprise the following:

Boyce Street fills in its missing link by connecting between Sycamore Avenue and New Way, and at its northern extremity a T-junction is formed to create an extension to Chester Boulevard. This improves connectivity within and around this local area, improves access to the Highland School, and could spur some more development in the northern part of highway commercial area along the Boulevard.

Close by, the northernmost portion of Morris Street, between Doffin Lane and Radio Avenue, is slightly realigned to increase the parcel size of commercial property along Chester Boulevard. Although this shaves off a small portion of school land, the realignment opens up greater possibilities for much needed mixed-use commercial and office development along the northern portion of Chester Boulevard.

The isolated section of Granite Avenue between Morris and Boyce is extended to Chester Boulevard to improve accessibility to the new grocery store site for west Highland residents.

The small neighborhood streets between Harrison and Bradley Avenues are extended eastward to connect with North Falls Street. These connections will probably comprise footpaths and bikeways, but at least one street may be taken through for vehicles.

As a general note the street and sidewalk improvements shown on Figures 2, 3, 4a and 5 are illustrative only, and should not be mistaken for definitive proposals for each particular street. In principle, each street in the neighborhood should have sidewalks, curb and gutter and street trees. These public spaces are truly the "living rooms" of the community; pedestrian safety, the human dignity of the public realm, and the community image will all benefit from a detailed program of street improvements, including public art projects by local artists to commemorate aspects of the community's heritage. The generic street sections included in the Draft Design Standards document provide the design and dimensional basis for these required improvements which will need to be prioritized on a case by case basis.

Lastly, there are several streets in Highland that have the same name but are discontinuous; Sycamore Avenue, Boyce Street, Highland Street, Davidson Avenue are only a few examples. This is clearly a serious problem for emergency response vehicles as well as being a continuing local irritant. While the new connections proposed in the Master Plan will eliminate some of these conditions, a program of selective renaming of separated streets needs to be undertaken. In all instances this should be seen as an opportunity to honor past members of the community. In some instances involving personal family names, separated streets with the same name might have their separate portions named for different members of the same family, for example Bill Smith Street and Fred Smith Street; one portion may remain simply Smith Street with a separate piece renamed Bill Smith Street. In this way no community members' names would be removed from the public realm. (This suggestion comes from Councilman Walker Reid).

2.3.8. Parks and Greenways

The final element of the Master Plan is the system of community parks and greenways that encircle and traverse the neighborhood. The importance of the linear park along Chester Boulevard has already been discussed in terms of its role in attracting commercial investment and improving the community image. In many ways these twin goals are self-reinforcing.

While streets will always be the main routes for pedestrians as well as motorists, off-street facilities for moving around by bicycle or on foot should be provided wherever practicable and efficient. A coherent greenway structure can go a long way to focus resources for cleaning up creeks and other undeveloped land, while providing an efficient sub-network for community transportation.

The Master Plan illustrates a main circumferential greenway along Kaylor Branch creek to the west, which then skirts the edge of I-85, along the boundary of the business park to Chester Boulevard at the interchange ramps (see Fig. 1). Across the Boulevard it continues along the landscaped edge of Sims Park, offering northward connections under the interstate to other existing park facilities and Gaston College; eastward extensions parallel to I-85 all the way around to and through the Green Acres neighborhood on the eastern boundary of Highland, leading back to the eastern end of Davidson Avenue; and southward links along the creek bed parallel to the railroad, across Davidson Avenue and Marietta Street until it joins the new landscape buffer around the civic center parking lots in the southeast corner of the neighborhood.

This landscape buffer around the parking lots needs to be much more than the normal minimal standard of a few trees and bushes. The Master Plan envisages it as a thick bermed and contoured linear landscape, extensively planted and containing bike and walking paths. Some car parking spaces will need to be surrendered from the huge parking lots surrounding

the buildings. This is a small price to pay for stabilizing this portion of the neighborhood, and creating conditions where once again it can become a pleasant place to live, with opportunities for small infill projects of affordable housing.

This linear landscape buffer leads directly to the new grocery store site, and from there the greenway system moves northward up Chester Boulevard, either all the way back to Sims Park, or to Davidson Avenue, where the improved and enhanced streetscape leads out west to connect up with the Erwin Center and the system's starting point on Kaylor Creek. The Erwin Center is also connected back to the Chester Boulevard linear park by a greenway that follows a small creek north of the cemetery.

2.4. Administrative Tools for Development Control

To achieve these design objectives and to bring these and other projects to fruition requires a new approach to zoning and development control. Measures are needed that deal with the specific complexities and fine grain of the neighborhood's physical environment, and to control inappropriate conventional development based on suburban paradigms. Many such procedures and codes are being developed in cities across the country as municipalities grapple with the problems and opportunities of older traditional neighborhoods. In Mecklenburg County, NC, the three towns of Davidson, Cornelius and Huntersville have created a development control framework that is particularly appropriate for the circumstances of the Highland neighborhood.

For Gastonia, there are three types of legislative mechanisms necessary for successful implementation of this, and similar, Master Plans:

- i. *New Zoning Classifications* are based on traditional mixtures of uses and integration of facilities rather than suburban concepts of separation and single use. These are more flexible than conventional suburban-style zoning provisions, and are based on the more traditional practices of American Town Planning earlier in this century, here updated for current conditions.
- ii. *Specific Design Standards* and regulations based on traditional Building Types and Street Design that orchestrate the correct relationships between buildings, and between buildings and the street. While the Zoning Classifications are more flexible, the Design Standards are more prescriptive regarding placement and relationships of buildings, parking and public space in order to improve the quality of the public spaces in the community.
- iii. *Special Overlay District Designation* to enable the main characteristics of the neighborhood to be preserved and enhanced with the range of development control ordinances that are most appropriate

for its special needs and opportunities.

2.4.1. New Zoning Classifications

There are four new Zoning Classifications suggested for Highland instead of the current three main categories of Commercial, Industrial and Residential, each with their myriad of subset classifications. These new districts, which are illustrated in the Draft Design Standards document, are:

- a. Neighborhood Center District (NC)
- b. Neighborhood Residential District (NR)
- c. Highway Commercial District (HC)
- d. Campus Business District (CB)

(These Zoning Classifications are indicative of the appropriate ordinances for implementation of the Master Plan. While every care has been taken to make them accurate and relevant to the case in hand, they should not be construed as final documents).

a. Neighborhood Center District:

The Neighborhood Center District is provided for the location of shops, services, small workplaces and civic/educational/religious buildings central to a neighborhood and within walking distance of dwellings.

Permitted Building Types

*Urban Workplace, Shopfront Building, Mixed Use Building,**

* The Mixed Use Building duplicates the Shopfront building type and has at least two occupiable stories. At least 50% of the habitable area of the building shall be for residential use. All three of these building types have a maximum size of 6,000 sq. ft. of first floor area.

Apartment Building, Attached House, Detached House, Civic Building

The Architectural Guidelines pertinent to these Building Types are designed to permit the construction of varied building types in close proximity to each other. Such varied Building Types are made compatible through similar massing, volume, frontage, scale and architectural features.

Uses permitted by Right

Single-family homes, Attached homes, Apartments, Commercial Uses (excluding adult establishments, Drive-through facilities other than banks, outdoor storage and sales and large scale manufacturing), Churches, Civic, Fraternal, Cultural or Community Uses.

Uses permitted with Conditions

Bed and Breakfast Inns, Cemeteries, Country Club, Day Care Centers, Group Homes, Private Clubs and Bars, Produce Stands and other Temporary Retail Uses, Recreational Facilities, Rental Cottages / Accessory Dwellings (in outbuildings), Restaurants

with outdoor seating, Rooming and Boarding Houses, Neighborhood Gasoline Stations (excluding major service and repair of motor vehicles), Schools.

Specifications

Corner stores and small shopfronts with residential components on upper floors are encouraged. Individual buildings that mix uses vertically are encouraged. Higher densities of residential development are encouraged on infill sites; however, all projects shall respect the massing of existing buildings within 300 feet of new construction.

In order to promote pedestrian scale and foster a perception of safety, on-street parking is required for all commercial buildings except on frontages along Franklin Boulevard. Minimum parking requirements may be satisfied using on-street parking or shared rear-lot parking areas. All buildings shall front onto public streets

b. Neighborhood Residential District:

The Neighborhood Residential District provides for residential infill development within the neighborhood. A range of housing types is encouraged. Low-intensity business activity is permitted at first floor level in mixed use buildings at residential scale, according to locational criteria. This is generally determined by placement at an intersection of important neighborhood streets.

Permitted Building Types

*Detached House, Attached House, Apartment Building, Civic Building, Mixed Use Building.**

* The Mixed Use Building duplicates the Shopfront building type and has at least two occupiable stories. At least 50% of the habitable area of the building shall be for residential use. All three of these building types have a maximum size of 6,000 sq. ft. of first floor area

The Architectural Guidelines pertinent to these Building Types are designed to permit the construction of varied building types in close proximity to each other. Such varied Building Types are made compatible through similar massing, volume, frontage, scale and architectural features.

Uses permitted by Right

Single-family homes, Attached homes, Apartments, Churches, Civic Uses.

Uses permitted with Conditions

Bed and Breakfast Inns, Cemeteries, Country Club, Commercial Uses (Retail/Office - 1st Floor only), Day Care Centers, Schools, Group Homes, Private Clubs and Bars, Produce Stands and other Temporary Retail Uses, Recreational Facilities, Rental Cottages

/Accessory Dwellings (in outbuildings), Rooming and Boarding Houses, Home Occupation.

Specifications:

The Residential District is coded to preserve the traditional building pattern of mixed residential development which is integrated to form an active and cohesive neighborhood. Limited commercial activities may be integrated into this District on the ground floor of residential buildings. Parking for these activities may be satisfied using on-street parking.

Innovative designs of residential development are encouraged on infill sites; however, where properties are built with existing single-family dwellings, these buildings cannot generally be replaced by anything other than a new single-family home. Projects shall respect the massing of existing buildings within 300 feet of new construction.

c. Highway Commercial District:

The Highway Business District is established primarily for auto-dependent uses in areas not amenable to easy pedestrian access. Highway commercial districts will serve not only the Highland neighborhood, but interstate travelers and other commuters as well. Because of the scale and access requirements of uses in this category, such uses often cannot be compatibly integrated within a neighborhood Center District.

Permitted Building Types

Detached House, Attached House, Apartment Building, Civic Building, Highway Commercial, Shopfront*, Workplace*.*

* These building types may have up to 65,000 sq.ft. of gross floor area on major thoroughfares; up to 15,000 sq.ft. on minor thoroughfares. In Shopfront and Workplace buildings second floor apartments and/or offices are encouraged.

Uses permitted by Right

Amusement facilities (indoor), Boarding houses and hotels, Churches, Civic, fraternal, cultural or community buildings, Commercial uses, Restaurants and Bars, Single Family Homes, Attached Homes, Apartments, Schools.

Uses permitted with Conditions

Produce Stands and other Temporary Retail Uses, Car washes, Body shops, Gasoline service stations (including service and repair of motor vehicles), Vehicle and boat sales.

Specifications

District boundaries will generally require a densely foliated buffer yard; frontages on US321 will require formal street tree planting. Mixed use buildings are encouraged at all times.

d. Campus Business District:

The Campus Business District is established to provide for large business or light industrial parks which are already in place, and for new business or light industrial complexes, which, because of the scale of the buildings or the nature of the use, cannot be fully integrated into the fabric of the community.

Permitted Building Types

Detached House, Attached House, Apartment Building, Civic Building, Highway Commercial, Shopfront*, Workplace*.*

* These building types may have up to 65,000 sq.ft. of gross floor area on major thoroughfares; up to 15,000 sq.ft. on minor thoroughfares. In Shopfront and Workplace buildings second floor apartments and/or offices are encouraged.

Uses permitted by Right

Commercial Uses, Distributive Businesses, Laboratories, Manufacturing and Assembly (excluding heavy manufacturing), Offices, Warehouses, Wholesale Sales, Schools.

Uses permitted with Conditions

Car Washes, Commercial Communication Towers

Specifications

Campus districts should be buffered from adjacent properties; nonetheless, buildings in a campus district that front a neighborhood street shall relate to the street as prescribed by the building type. (Individual workplace buildings oriented to the street and scaled for compatibility with the surrounding environment are also permitted in the Highway Commercial District, and on a smaller scale in the Neighborhood Center District. Such workplaces should not be reclassified to the Campus Business District, which is generally reserved for large buildings with associated extensive parking and loading facilities). Residential uses within a campus Business District should generally be limited to live/work conditions (e.g. an apartment over a workshop), or personnel employed for campus security.

2.4.2. Design Standards

All Design Standards are set out in easy-to-read diagrams that establish the main design parameters and requirements. They are grouped under four headings:

a. Street Design

Examples are included in the master plan of three special street conditions along the length of Hwy 321 as it traverses the neighborhood. The detail changes in these three conditions are particularly important to the success of the plan. Overall it is the intention of all street design to place a much higher priority on

pedestrian values than has been common in recent years.

Additionally, three generic street sections are also included as the basis for the design of new streets and street extensions throughout the neighborhood.

b. Building Types

The seven Building Types permitted in the Highland neighborhood, the *Urban Workplace*, *Shopfront Building*, *Highway Commercial*, *Apartment Building*, *Attached House*, *Detached House*, and *Civic Building* are able to provide for almost all the permitted uses in the districts, and are described in detail in the Draft Design Standards. These Building Types are derived from traditional models commonly found in American towns and cities during the first half of the century, and which embody much better design principles than more recent suburban examples. The only exception to this is the large grocery store which exceeds the areas coded for highway commercial buildings, and which is subject to a separate site plan review. The preferred configuration of the grocery store layout on its specific site is shown in Fig. 4a.

c. Off-Street Parking

The design of parking lots is critical to the success of the plan. The objective is to provide the majority of off-street parking to the rear of buildings, with only limited amounts between buildings (to maintain a consistent streetscape) and *none at all* in front of buildings other than on-street parking which should be allowed in most instances. Buildings set back on their lots and surrounded by cars are inimical to all the values and concepts embodied in this plan. Detailed design criteria for a typical lot are included in the Draft Design Standards.

d. Public Open Space

The design of open space within the neighborhood, with the exception of large parks and greenbelt areas is governed by the concept of the "outdoor room," that is, the clear spatial definition of public space between buildings. The intention is to repair and enhance the public realm, or the "outdoor living rooms" of the community. With the exception of greenbelts or greenway trails at the edges of the neighborhood, all other public spaces -- parks, squares and plazas -- should be formed by buildings fronting onto them in a coherent manner. Public spaces should not be tucked behind buildings in inaccessible and unusable locations.

2.4.3. Special Overlay District Designation

Although any form of historic district legislation is not appropriate to the Highland neighborhood, it *is* a historic place; while it has many problems,

its overall form and character speak volumes about times past, and the heritage of citizens of Gastonia for several generations. It needs special tools to save and redevelop itself properly for its second century of life. The neighborhood has its own set of rules of physical structure and urban form by which it was laid out, and by which it grew for several decades. These must be respected in any and all redevelopment efforts. It is vital to avoid the application of standard "one-size-fits-all" approaches to this task: this will cripple the neighborhood. It is therefore appropriate and necessary to distinguish the area by a special overlay district designation to enable redevelopment efforts to be tailored to its particular needs, and free from the effect of generic ordinances that may be more generally applicable in the city at large.

3. FUTURE ACTIONS

3.1. Priorities and Phasing

It is not possible to be precise about the timing of specific projects over the next few years, but it is appropriate to apply generalized priorities to aspects of the area's development potential.

Before any of these new projects and proposals can be effectively initiated and implemented, the community must form itself into a Community Development Corporation. This is really priority number one.

While this is being organized, the most immediate and urgent priority for the community is to ensure that the Highland School stays open, preferably as the Vocational Technology High School that was discussed by Dr. Sadler, the Superintendent of Schools during the charrette. This Master Plan includes the assumption that the Highland School will remain an integral part of the neighborhood for the foreseeable future. If efforts to secure the school's future fail, then most urgent consultations should be held with all relevant parties to generate an alternative community use for the school buildings and grounds.

The next most important short-term objective has to be the development of a grocery store in the community, but this is related to numerous other factors having to do with the improvement of the area's visual and economic character as perceived by outside investors and consumers. Moves to initiate the grocery store development must therefore be connected to wider ranging policies to upgrade the US 321 corridor.

The highway corridor that is Chester Street / US321 is central to the neighborhood physically, functionally and symbolically. The transformation of the corridor from a scruffy commercial backwater to a thriving urban boulevard will be long and hard, but it is truly the centerpiece of the whole urban design Master Plan. This corridor revitalization, together with its connections back into adjacent neighborhoods such as the new York Street Neighborhood Center, must be given very high priority.

A project smaller in scope, but close to the heart of many residents is the relocation of the Boys and Girls Club to better premises. Although an attractive solution involving the old school textbook store on west Rankin next to Cherry Park has already been discussed, and is embodied in the Master Plan, it will be necessary for the community to monitor the situation closely, and support it fully.

Streetscape improvements throughout the neighborhood are also very important, for reasons of safety and community image. All residential streets in the neighborhood deserve the basic dignity of sidewalks, curb and gutter and street tree planting. Priorities within the area for this remedial treatment

will need to be the subject of further detailed studies.

While other projects may be discrete and specific to one particular site, the issue of decent affordable housing is a pervasive one throughout the community. The Master Plan identifies two major sites and a number of minor ones for new housing, and the sites at York Street and around Woodhill Elementary School should be studied further as a matter of high priority.

3.2. Implementation and Community Development Corporations

It is clear that the revitalization of the Highland neighborhood can be accomplished; the community has the leadership to proceed with the development and implementation of the Master Plan. For this process to be effective however, the community must bring together three main ingredients -- communication, collaboration and commitment. It will be necessary to identify and begin development of a series of initiatives and objectives that will engage the Highland community itself, community-based organizations, the private sector, and the city of Gastonia. Within such a framework, each resident and community organization has an important and active role to play in ensuring that the vision of the Master Plan materializes into a strategic plan for action.

Community-based organizations such as Community Development Corporations (CDCs) represent a particularly effective way of achieving these goals; they provide the community with "ownership" of the development process and a stake in the outcome of revitalization efforts. Organized as a nonprofit corporation under the North Carolina Nonprofit Corporation Act, and with a tax-exempt status as described in Section 501(C) of the Internal Revenue Code, a CDC operates exclusively for the provision of public improvements, facilities, amenities and social services.

The passage of the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) helped to convince banks that community lending can be good business. The CRA was adopted by Congress to increase lending in neighborhoods that were once "redlined" by banks because loans were perceived as too risky. CDCs perform a vital role in mobilizing community resources and attracting community development funds. Banks have progressively set aside funds earmarked for loans to Community Development Corporations for housing, economic development, child care and similar projects. The residents of Highland must rise to this challenge by requesting lending institutions to visit their community, sit on the board of their new CDC and advise them in the preparation of loan applications.

To this end it is recommended that the Highland Economic Development Corporation (HEDC) be established in conjunction with other community-based organizations like churches and Communities United for Positive Progress (CUPP). The HEDC would assume the following roles and

responsibilities:

- a. Define programs and projects for local improvements that would benefit the Highland community and communicate these to Gastonia city officials;
- b. Review the city's improvement plans for the Highland neighborhood and recommend ways of implementation;
- c. Function as a catalyst for development projects identified in the Master Plan to leverage revitalization efforts and sustain economic development in the community;
- d. Work with other nonprofit and private organizations to target private investment opportunities in the neighborhood;
- e. Organize local people to assist in neighborhood clean-up programs, services for senior citizens, community-based policing, etc;
- f. Function as a central clearinghouse for the most effective programs to assist local business development, encourage local employment and promote affordable housing;
- g. Create a community newsletter to inform residents of activities, incentive programs / workshops and all revitalization efforts.

4. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Highland neighborhood is a special place with its own set of rules of physical structure and form. These must be respected in any and all redevelopment efforts. It is vital to avoid the application of standard "one-size-fits-all" approaches to this task. Well intentioned though such efforts maybe, they will cripple the neighborhood.

4.1. Redevelopment Principles

There are six main concepts that guide the redevelopment of the Highland neighborhood. These six points form the main conceptual structure of the Master Plan.

- a. *Capitalize on, reinforce, repair and improve the strong urban pattern of the original neighborhood;*
- b. *Improve the design of US Hwy 321 / Chester Street to mitigate its divisive impact on the community: improve its safety for pedestrians and its visual and economic attractiveness for new development;*
- c. *Pay great attention to the design of the public realm -- the streets, plazas, parks and greenways;*
- d. *Create a policy for new development that is explicitly modeled on the use of traditional urban patterns and building types;*
- e. *Develop a policy and design standards for new housing infill throughout the area; and*
- f. *Create new and appropriate legislative tools to accomplish these tasks.*

4.2. Elements of the Urban Design Master Plan

- a. *Chester Boulevard: the Redesign of Hwy 321*

This set of proposals is the centerpiece of the Urban Design Master Plan. It aims to turn Chester Street from a mediocre commercial strip highway that divides the neighborhood into a truly urban boulevard, a place that is the focus of the community's activities and which creates a good image of the neighborhood.

The main objective of the Boulevard plan is to increase the safety and amenity for local residents while maintaining efficient traffic movement. It does so by paying close attention to the environment along the edges of the Boulevard, utilizing all the land available within the right-of-way to create sidewalks and wide medians planted with substantial street trees. In addition, along the central area between Biggers Avenue and Caldwell, a new frontage road is created on the east side, integrated with new commercial and residential development that forms the proposed Chester Street / York Street Neighborhood Center. (See subsection b. below). This frontage road handles low speed traffic with on-street parking and wide tree-lined sidewalks for maximum safety and comfort of local residents and shoppers.

b. *The York Street Neighborhood Center*

This is a very important element in the revitalization of the York Street neighborhood, once the focus of most commercial and civic activity in the community. While most of this activity has ceased, leaving behind several near-derelict properties, the area can be revived by linking it with new and extended streets to new commercial activity on the adjacent Chester Boulevard at its north and south ends.

At the north end, new commercial development is concentrated along the new Boulevard frontage road, where its high visibility and convenient parking make it an attractive investment opportunity for small scale businesses. In the area between this part of Chester and the north end of York Street is the site of new residential development. Here approximately 14 poor quality homes are replaced with 13 larger single family detached houses and 24 duplexes.

c. *Grocery Store Site*

The site identified by the consultants as the only practicable location for the new grocery store and drug store so desired by the community, is located at the south end of York Street with frontage onto US321 / Chester Boulevard. On a site of approximately 7.25 acres, the basic development contains a 40,000 sq.ft. grocery store, a drug store of 8,000 sq.ft. and 9,000 sq. ft of other convenience shopping, with nearly 300 car parking spaces.

There exists a traffic plan to extend Walnut Avenue across the south eastern corner of this site. The consultants **most strongly urge that this proposal be stopped immediately**. Such a road alignment would make it impossible to use this site for a grocery store, and the whole of the Highland community, and the wider areas of northern Gastonia, would be deprived of these much-needed services.

d. *The Highland Street Neighborhood Center*

Just as York Street functions as the north-south "spine" of east Highland, Highland Street serves a similar function in the western half of the neighborhood. With direct access from West Airline Avenue to the south, Highland Street retains several active businesses and churches along its length, together with the large under-developed tract of land owned by the county. Much of this site area will remain vacant in the county's plans and has good development potential for a mixture of uses -- residential, commercial and institutional. A comprehensive scheme for this site, just two blocks west of the Erwin Community Center, could spur the economic redevelopment of the western part of the Highland neighborhood.

e. *Davidson Avenue*

Davidson Avenue is one of the neighborhood's most important streets, forming the community's main east-west connector. This symbolic and actual importance requires that urgent attention needs to be paid to

improving the streetscape along its length with sidewalks and street trees, for compelling reasons of safety and community image.

To the east of York Street however, the Avenue dies out at its junction with North Falls Street. The Master Plan extends a revised street network across the creek directly to Marietta Street at its intersection with the currently isolated eastern portion of Davidson Avenue. This arrangement opens up land for new complexes of small workshops, organized around congregate facilities and shared spaces, together with some live/work units, where small business owners and craftsmen live in apartments directly above their workshops. This type of development is ideal for start-up businesses, and makes a good transition between the industrial areas and housing to the south.

f. *New Housing Opportunities*

While there are several sites throughout the neighborhood for infill housing, the single most important site within the community is comprised of three parcels of land around Woodhill Elementary School. With modest road improvements along the southern boundary of the school to improve connections between the school and its surrounding community, a total of approximately 16 acres of land can provide good sites for single family and multi-family dwellings on the east, south and west sides of the school property. At a density of about 6 units per acre, approximately 100 homes comprising a mix of detached houses, town homes and apartments at different price ranges, can be constructed in a development that would follow the straightforward arrangement of homes lined along neighborhood-scaled and tree-lined streets. In addition to providing much-needed housing opportunities, a well-scaled development of new homes and neighborhood streets would provide an excellent setting for the elementary school, improving both access and communal security for school property.

g. *New Street Connections and Improvements*

While the biggest street improvement is the redesign of Chester Street / Hwy 321 as a truly urban boulevard, other major proposals involve the redefinition of Highland Street, York Street and Davidson Avenue as main neighborhood streets with streetscape improvements to match. The extension to Davidson Avenue has been noted above, together with the new streets and extensions involved in the creation of the new York Street Neighborhood Center. A number of other miscellaneous improvements are contained in the Master Plan.

In principle, each street in the neighborhood should have sidewalks, curb and gutter and street trees. These public spaces are truly the "living rooms" of the community; pedestrian safety, the human dignity of the public realm, and the community image will all benefit from a detailed program of street improvements. Priorities should be established on a case by case basis.

h. *Parks and Greenways*

While streets will always be the main routes for pedestrians as well as motorists, off-street facilities for moving around by bicycle or on foot should be provided wherever practicable and efficient. A coherent greenway structure can go a long way to focus resources for cleaning up creeks and other undeveloped land, while providing an efficient sub-network for community transportation.

The Plan illustrates a main circumferential greenway around the neighborhood with others that traverse it, linking Chester Boulevard, Sims Park, the new grocery store site and the Erwin Center.

4.3. Administrative Tools for Development Control

To achieve these design objectives and to bring these and other projects to fruition requires a new approach to zoning and development control. Measures are needed that deal with the specific complexities and fine grain of the neighborhood's physical environment, and to control inappropriate conventional development based on suburban paradigms. There is an interconnected system of three different administrative tools for development control:

- i. New Zoning Classifications based on traditional mixtures of uses and integration of facilities rather than suburban concepts of separation and single use. These are more flexible than conventional suburban-style zoning provisions, and are based on traditional practices of American Town Planning, common earlier in this century and here updated for current conditions.
- ii. Specific Design Standards and regulations based on traditional Building Types and Street Design. These orchestrate the correct relationships between buildings and between buildings and the street. While the Zoning Classifications are more flexible, the Design Standards are more prescriptive regarding placement and relationships of buildings, parking and public space in order to improve the quality of the public spaces in the community.
- iii. Special Overlay District Designation to enable the main characteristics of the neighborhood to be preserved and enhanced with the range of development control ordinances that are most appropriate for its special needs and opportunities.

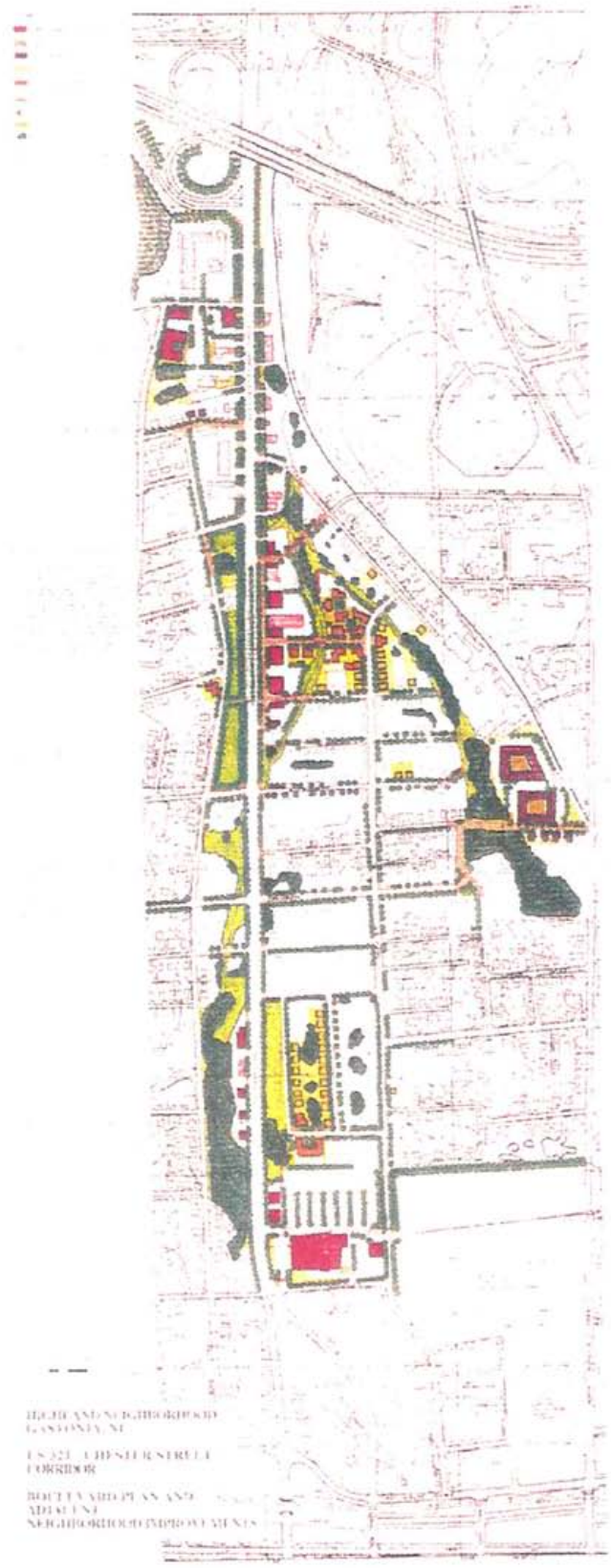


Figure 2: US 321/Chester Street Boulevard Plan



Figure 3: Chester Street/York Street Neighborhood Center

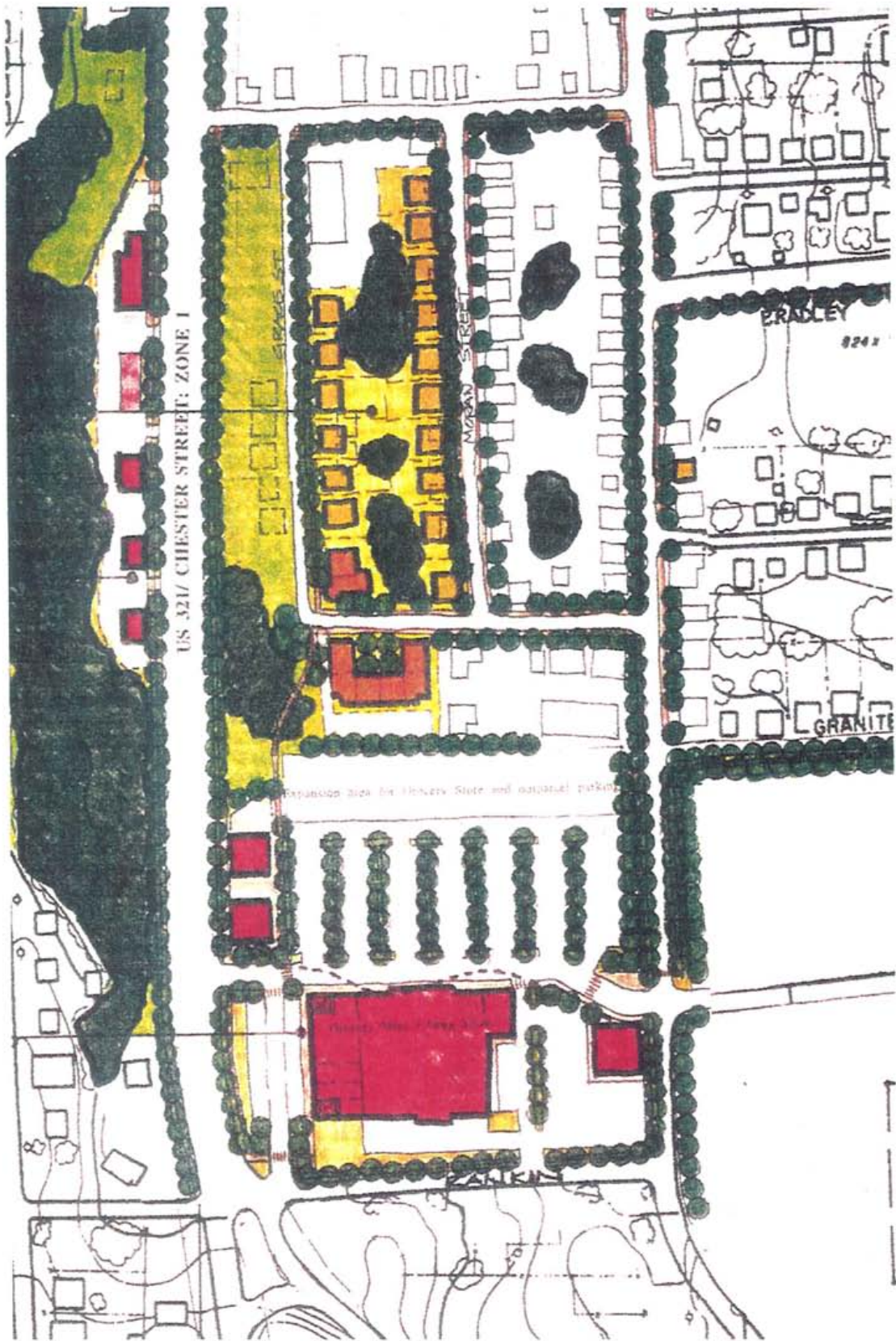


Figure 4a: Chester Street/York Street Grocery Store Developed with Outparcels

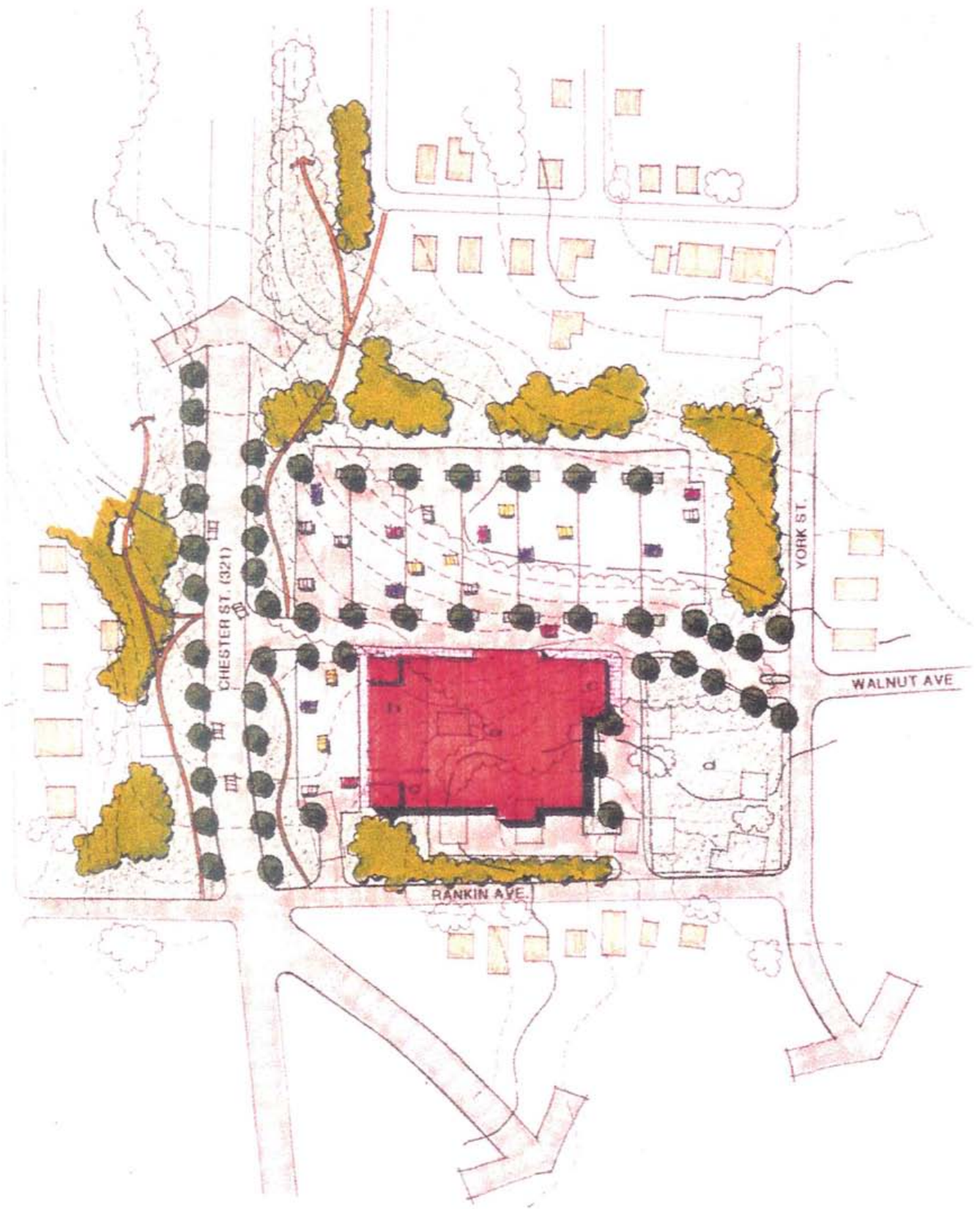
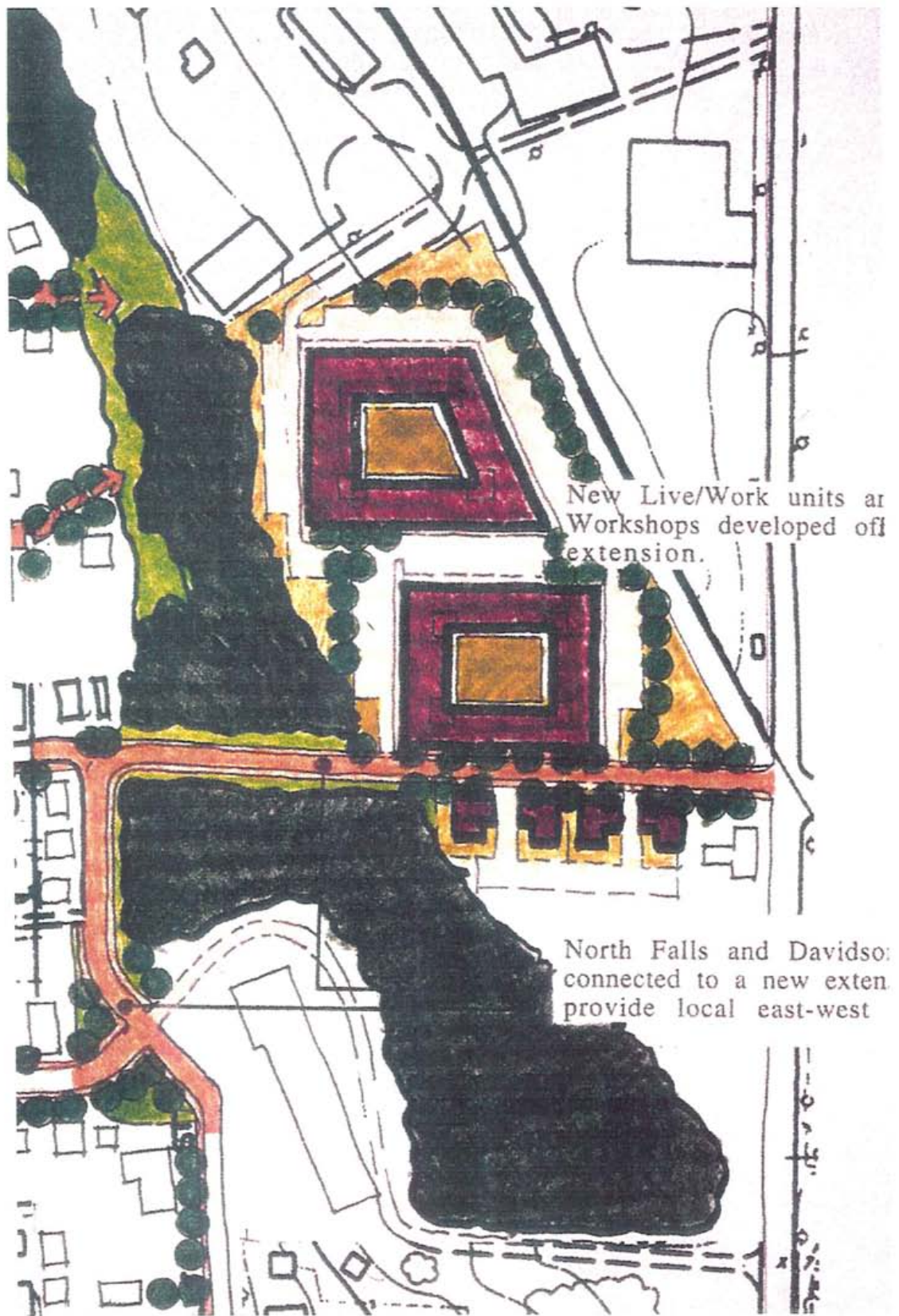


Figure 4b: Chester Street/York Street Grocery Store - Basic Development



New Live/Work units at Workshops developed off extension.

North Falls and Davidson: connected to a new exten. provide local east-west

Figure 5: Davidson Avenue Extension and Workshop Units

LEGEND

-  New Commercial Development
-  Existing Commercial Development
-  Small Workshops / Live-Work Units
-  New Single Family Housing
-  New Small-scale Multi-family
(Duplexes and Fourplexes only)
-  New Streets and Sidewalks
-  New Street Trees
-  New Greenway / Linear Park
-  Existing Tree Mass