

# NEWS & views

*Economic Development Division*

SPRING 2004

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*News & Views*, published quarterly, is the newsletter of the Economic Development Division of the American Planning Association. We welcome articles, letters, suggestions and information regarding workshops and other educational opportunities for economic development professionals. Please forward your submissions by email to our Managing Editor, Zenia Kotval, AICP (address below).

CHAIR: Michael Delk, AICP  
mdmld@msn.com

SECRETARY/ TREASURER: Dr. Rhonda Phillips, AICP, CED  
University of Florida  
rhondap@ufl.edu

EDITOR: Zenia Kotval, Ph.D., AICP  
Michigan State University  
kotval@msu.edu

ADVERTISING: Jeff Mills  
jmills@appleisp.net  
(860) 742-7234

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## Why We Want a Rail Trail: Let Us Count the Ways...

by Mary Albertson, Planning Director for the City of Leominster

In April 2002, the Leominster Planning Office received a letter from CSX Transportation, advising the city that the railroad was considering discontinuing service of a 4.2-mile portion of their rail line from Fitchburg to Leominster, and so began our journey on how to develop a Rail Trail.

Leominster and Fitchburg are located in north central Massachusetts. The two cities are often referred to as the Twin Cities and each city has approximately 40,000 residents. The two cities are the largest in north central Massachusetts and are within commuting distance to Boston. There are long-standing rivalries between the two cities, the most famous being the Thanksgiving Day Football Game, or more popularly referred to as the Turkey Bowl. I am told it is the seventh oldest football rivalry in

(continued on page 3)



*The Twin City Rail Trail traverses between Leominster and Fitchburg, Massachusetts behind North Main Street and along route 12.*

## **THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR**



As this issue of *News & Views* goes to press, the Division's election is still underway. Regardless of the outcome, I want to personally thank our candidates: Karla A. Aghajanian, AICP; Carson Bise, AICP; Robert M. Lewis, AICP, CEcD; and Rhonda Phillips, AICP, CED, for all being willing to get "in the arena" by throwing their hat into the ring for the Chair-elect and Secretary/Treasurer positions. We are blessed to be able to count so many extraordinary individuals among our membership.

Since this is **election time at APA**, you may view all national candidates' position statements on the APA website at [www.planning.org/elections](http://www.planning.org/elections). Please check the Division website ([www.planning.org/economic](http://www.planning.org/economic)) for officer and Bylaws election results on or about March 31.

**Dr. Zenia Kotval**, our newsletter editor for the past two years, will be stepping down after this issue. We are very pleased to welcome Dr. Ned Murray, AICP, the Associate Director of the Florida International University Metropolitan Center, as our new editor and member of the Executive Committee. Please see Dr. Murray's bio on page 15.

The award committees are presently reviewing applications for the **Student Scholarship Award** as well as the **Excellence in Economic Development Award**. Announcements on those selections will be posted on our website by the end of March as well.

If you are planning on attending APA's **National Planning Conference**, April 24 through 28, your plans should already be finalized, although it is still not too late. A great venue will be complimented with an exceptional agenda of workshops. Please look for the two Economic Development Division proposals: "Planning for Agriculture" and "Corporate Location Labor Force Criteria." Each will be presented from a perspective unique to those involved in economic development. Also, mark your calendars for Monday evening at 5:30 for the Division's annual business meeting. Check the conference brochure for specific location.

The APA Divisions Council is sponsoring **Airports in the Region Symposium** on Sunday, April 25, from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Objectives are to present and discuss current issues, trends and selected case studies that will be used to kick-off this research and development initiative. The purpose is to define the planning considerations for airfront districts, and develop best practices

planning guidance for improved airport/land use compatibility, regional planning and analytical methods/tools. For more information on this exciting topic contact Whit Blanton, AICP, Chair, APA Transportation Planning Division ([www.apa-tpd.org](http://www.apa-tpd.org)), c/o Renaissance Planning Group in Orlando, FL at (407) 487-0061, ext. 13.

In conclusion, this is my last issue writing to you as Chair of the Division. I am amazed at how fast the past two years have gone. It has certainly been rewarding and enjoyable. While one would always like to have done more, I am pleased with the continued prominence of the Division and know that under the watchful and knowledgeable guidance of Chair Terry Holzheimer, along with the incoming leadership, we'll continue to improve.

I can't get away without thanking Chair-elect Terry Holzheimer, Secretary-Treasurer Rhonda Phillips, Newsletter Editor Zenia Kotval, Immediate past-chair Peter Lowitt, Conference Program Committee Chair David Slater, and *News & Views* Publisher Jeff Mills, J.M. Communications, for all their support and guidance. In addition, a very special thanks to Susan Turner and Mike Welch at APA. They have always been there when needed and never fail to provide timely assistance in an exceedingly professional manner.

As always, we welcome your comments, suggestions, or items for consideration for publication. Send them to *News & Views* Editor Edward Murray [murrayn@fiu.edu](mailto:murrayn@fiu.edu) or me at [mdelk@templeterrace.com](mailto:mdelk@templeterrace.com). ■

Make no little plans,

— Mike Delk, Chair

## **Editor's Farewell**

Dear Readers:

It has been a pleasure and privilege to be your editor for the past two years. I've had the opportunity of working more closely with the Division, something I shall continue to do, and working with and getting to know the newsletter contributors. I thank you, one and all, for making this a great experience. I am very pleased to pass on the baton to my good friend and colleague Edward Murray. I have known Ned for 20 years and believe he is one of the finest planning professionals I know. I am sure the newsletter will reach new heights under his leadership. Once again, Thank You!

Sincerely,  
Zenia Kotval

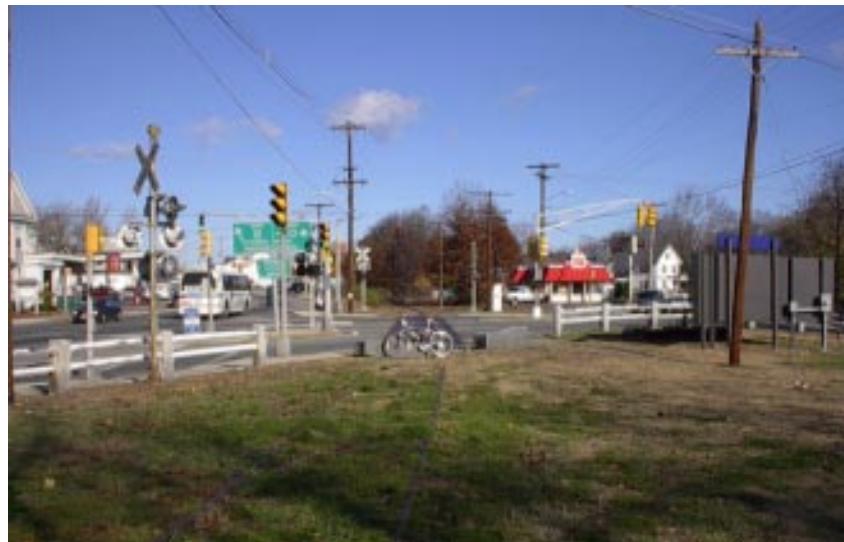
RAIL TRAIL, CONT. FROM P. 1

the nation and has been played for 107 years. Unfortunately, the two cities have also competed off the football field for the same economic development opportunities. To date, the rail trail to connect the two cities has proved to be a great opportunity to work together for a common economic development goal.

We did not have to look far for examples of rail-to-trail projects. Massachusetts has a number of successful rail trail projects such as the Minuteman Commuter Bikeway celebrated as "America's 500th Rail-Trail" when it opened in 1992 and the Cape Cod Rail Trail that is one of New England's oldest rail trails. We started our journey by contacting Craig P. Della Penna, New England Representative of the Rails to Trails Conservancy. We found Mr. Della Penna to be a wealth of information. The assistance that we have received from the Rails to Trails Conservancy has been fantastic.

What we learned from the Rails to Trails Conservancy was that since CSX had applied to the Surface Transportation Board (STB) for discontinuance of service, Leominster and Fitchburg had the opportunity to request that the STB place a "Public Use Condition" on the abandonment and make a Request for Interim Trail Use. This was our introduction to the federal "railbanking" program. In October of 2002, the Rails to Trails Conservancy facilitated a meeting between CSX and communities with rail corridors that CSX wished to abandon in Massachusetts. Currently there are three rail corridors located in six communities that CSX is looking to abandon. Besides Leominster-Fitchburg, the

communities are Holliston-Sherborn and Framingham-Sudbury. What we learned at this meeting was that although there were other rail trails in Massachusetts, the three CSX abandonments would be the first railbanking project in Massachusetts. We also learned that because this is a new concept, we needed to



*The beginning of the Twin City Rail Trail at Carter Park on Main Street.*

educate our state and local transportation officials on the benefits of railbanking.

For Fitchburg and Leominster, we have accepted the challenge to work toward being one of the first railbanking projects in Massachusetts. This is an opportunity to create a 4.2-mile rail trail that will connect the two largest cities in Northern Worcester County. It is located in a congested area of the communities and although it will not solve the traffic problems in our communities, it does provide another mode of transportation to connect our communities. Studies show that the economic benefits of trails and greenways include increases in property values, increases in tourism and visitors, increases in business opportunities for entrepreneurs to serve the trail, increases in the posture of the community to compete for corporate citizens, and increases in the likelihood of revitalization of existing properties...

increases in the likelihood of revitalization of existing properties. Trails and greenways also encourage overall planning benefits such as preservation of open spaces, encouraging physical fitness, creating new recreation opportunities, creating new non-motorized transporta-

*(continued next page)*

RAIL TRAIL, CONT. FROM P. 3

tion opportunities and preserving cultural and historical resources.

We consider ourselves to be fortunate to be working with CSX Transportation on this railbanking endeavor. The company has been willing to meet with our communities and negotiate a reasonable short-term agreement to facilitate our project. Although we have a long way to go before we finalize an agreement to formally railbank this corridor, we are confident that CSX will continue to be our partner in this process.

The City of Leominster is very fortunate to have a good track record in achieving open space preservation and recreation projects. In recent years, Leominster has acquired over one thousand acres of open space the most notable being Sholan Farms. Sholan Farms was slated for development as a 160-lot subdivision on 165 acres of beautiful apple orchards. In 1999, this subdivision project was filed with the Leominster Planning Board and it was a matter of time until the project would be approved because the subdivision was an allowed use and the Board had no discretion to deny approval. The citizens of Leominster rescued this apple orchard. There were grassroot fund raising efforts such as selling scented candles appropriately named Sholan Farms Baked Apple. There were newspaper articles in cities throughout the country. Even the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article on the city's efforts to save Sholan Farms. Through the hard work of local and state officials and many dedicated volunteers, Leominster purchased Sholan Farms in 2002 and it will remain for generations

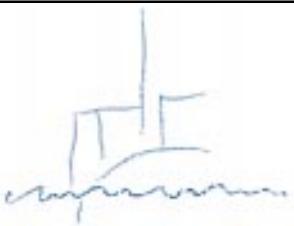
to come as the last working apple orchard in the birthplace of Johnny Appleseed. The success of Sholan Farms has given citizens the confidence to make a difference in their community.

The Rails to Trails Conservancy has played a key role in developing this project. To jumpstart the project, the Conservancy sent a notice to every member on its mailing list who resided in the general Fitchburg and

Leominster area. The Conservancy assisted by providing detailed information to the local newspapers that resulted in informative and positive stories regarding the potential project. Craig Della Penna was very willing to make detailed power-point presentations to the communities regarding the benefits of a rail trial. He attended meetings that were organized by the Leominster and Fitchburg Planning Offices and he attended meetings

before local groups such as the Rotary Club. He talked to interested citizens about how a rail trail can actually transform a neighborhood or an entire community. He explained how to establish funding for acquisition, construction and maintenance in order to make the project a reality.

Following the organizational meetings, the "Friends of the Trail" (Friends) group was organized. The group has met every other month for a year and has established a mission statement, prepared a set of bylaws, formed an executive committee, and joined the North Central Massachusetts Community Foundation to assist in the fundraising efforts. The actual project has been named "The Twin City Rail Trail."

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The bridge that crosses Route 2 toward the beginning of the Twin City Rail Trail.

The Friends are working toward a four million dollar funding goal that should cover the costs for a short-term lease, clean-up, final purchase price and construction. Both communities have worked with federal, state and local officials regarding this project. Congressman John Olver is a rail trail enthusiast and has experience in obtaining federal funding for other trail projects in his district. We are hopeful that he will be successful in securing funding for our project as well. State Senator Robert Antonioni is also a great supporter and has earmarked money in the latest state transportation bonding bill for the project. Leominster Mayor Dean Mazzarella has long advocated for a rail trail in Leominster, and Fitchburg Mayor Daniel Mylott is also a great supporter.

So why is everyone so excited about a rail trail? The more we have learned about railbanking the more

it seems to make sense. The following information is gleaned from the Rails to Trails Conservancy Fact Sheet on Railbanking. In 1983, the U.S. Congress amended the National Trails System Act to create the railbanking program. What is so positive about the railbanking program is that communities have the opportunity to develop trail projects that are wonderful economic development tools. However, railbanking also preserves the railroad corridor for future railroad uses. In the case of Leominster and Fitchburg, the 4.2-mile rail corridor historically provided rail service to many industrial clients. Over the years the industrial rail users on this corridor have disappeared. For example, the Foster Grant factory was located on this rail corridor and the company received railcar shipments of materials used in

the manufacturing of those famous sunglasses. Foster Grant sunglasses are no longer made in Leominster, and the site of the Foster Grant factory is now the home to a suburban shopping center. It has been many years since a train has traveled this corridor.

It is difficult to know if a train will ever need to travel on this portion of the Leominster and Fitchburg line. Today it seems impossible to think that rail service will ever be necessary or profitable. However, times do change and what is so important to understand is that once a rail corridor is abandoned it is gone forever. In many cases the rail corridor exists as a result of easements. Once the rail use is gone the easement is gone. There are also cases where the railroad owns title to the property and can sell the property to abutting property owners. Railbanking is an agreement between a railroad

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RAIL TRAIL, CONT. FROM P. 5

company and a trail agency to use the rail corridor as a trail with the stipulation that if the rail company ever needed to use the corridor again for rail service then it would be sold back to the railroad. A railbanked corridor is not considered abandoned; it can be sold, leased or donated to a trail manager without reverting to adjacent landowners. The bottom line is that when the corridor is gone, there is no possibility of a trail and maybe more importantly no possibility of ever resurrecting rail service. Railbanking allows for the rail corridor to be maintained for future generations.

Throughout the United States, there are many examples of the economic benefits of a rail trail or greenway projects. In many cases rail trails provide an excellent small business opportunity. Entrepreneurs can take advantage of rail trail popularity. Through our work with the Rails to Trail Conservancy we know that trails provide economic opportunities. There are many examples of trail projects where abutting businesses have actually turned to face the trail in order to better accommodate the patrons. Businesses have replaced automobile parking spaces with bike racks and used car lots have become bike shops. Small restaurants and cafes are a perfect example of businesses that do well located on a rail trail. People who use the trail need a place to eat, drink and rest. There is documentation that the larger trail networks have generated as much as over a million dollars in yearly revenue from tourists, development in and along the corridor and the overall increase in real estate values. In some real estate markets it has been said that proximity to a rail trail increases property value and lessens the time a property is on the market.

The Twin City Rail Trail is located in close proximity to and runs parallel to Massachusetts State Route 12. This is a very developed and congested corridor and home to over one hundred small businesses with a majority of those businesses being locally owned and operated. The rail trail would provide great potential for small business development and redevelopment. A number of the existing businesses could benefit from a rail trail in this area. The Bagel Inn is a great example. This is a small locally owned café that offers breakfast and lunch seven days a week. It is a perfect place for hungry trail users to stop and rest. There are a couple of variety stores located along the corridor that could benefit by providing services for trail users. Several other existing businesses along the Leominster and Fitchburg corridor that could benefit from a rail trail are the Pasta Company, a locally owned Italian café and the always popular Dunkin Donuts and Barnes and

Noble. The possibilities are endless.

The Twin City Rail Trail will include connections to other tributary trails in Leominster and Fitchburg. The Twin City Rail Trail will originate near downtown Leominster and will have a direct connection to downtown. This connection will provide a one half mile-walking loop through downtown Leominster. This is an opportunity for downtown businesses to benefit from the rail trail. For people who work in the downtown, the trail could be a great choice for exercise during their lunch break or even an alternative mode of transportation to their jobs. This will also allow people who would not normally stroll through the downtown to discover businesses that they may not have noticed from the car. In Leominster the rail trail will also provide a connection to the Doyle Field trail and recreation area. This is a very popular recreation destination and is used by many visitors on a daily basis.

Fitchburg is also planning for projects that will connect to the rail trail. The rail trail project has the potential to connect to Fitchburg's Riverfront Park and this would provide a direct connection to the Nashua River. The Fitchburg Redevelopment Authority is spearheading the Riverfront Park Project. The proposed park includes the rehabilitation of a historic iron bridge, the installation of a new fountain and street furniture, and the general clean up of the riverbanks. Both the rail trail and the Riverfront Park project should bring people into downtown Fitchburg.

### Conclusion

In a few years we will write a story on the ribbon cutting ceremony for the opening of the Twin City Rail Trail. Folks said we could never raise enough money to buy Sholan Farms but we did. Fitchburg and Leominster might continue to have the seventh oldest football rivalry in the nation but hopefully by the time we play game number 110 there will be a trail that connects these two cities. The vision for the Twin City Rail Trail is to finally connect these two cities by something other than football. To create an economic development project that benefits each community and makes for this trail a destination. ■■■

*Mary Albertson has worked in local planning in Massachusetts for 15 years and served as City Planner in Westfield and Planning Director in Holden prior to taking the position of Planning Director in Leominster in 1997. This article was written with the assistance of Kerrie Carnes, Small Business Coordinator for the City of Leominster.*

# The University as a Contributor to the Local Economy: Key Thoughts for Local Planners

by John R. Mullin, Ph.D. and Zenia Kotval, Ph.D.

**A**s we move into the twenty-first century, economic development officials are increasingly attempting to find new ways to "jump start" their local economies. Traditionally, this has involved, among others, finding appropriate land, ensuring there is adequate infrastructure, helping to train the local workforce, bringing financial institutions on board and assisting local entrepreneurs to bring their ideas to the market place. More recently, it has been also oriented toward ensuring that human capital is being invested into the community such that the local schools, recreation facilities, cultural attractions and public safety systems are all first rate. What has been too frequently undisplayed and understated in this mix is the role of universities, colleges and community colleges in the local economy. It can be extremely powerful and beneficial when combined with the activities noted above.

This article represents a concise contribution toward coming to an understanding of how these institutions can help at the local level. It's based on our experiences as faculty and administrators at five different universities across North America and, as well, as practicing economic development consultants in more than 40 communities where institutions of higher teaching have been located. We hope it is informative and helpful to you. Here are our thoughts.

## Key Points

### **1. It's important to understand the mission of the colleges in your jurisdiction and nearby communities.**

Not all institutions are the same. Private Universities such as Stanford, MIT and Duke have worldly aspirations; Land Grant institutions are more apt to provide outreach services to their respective states; private colleges such as Colgate, Dartmouth and Amherst will tend to be cloistered, while community colleges will have a sub-state, regional focus. How these institutions perceive themselves represents a critical starting point in gaining their help.

### **2. It is important that economic development specialists either participate in or have a firm**

### **understanding of the institution's Master Plan.**

We have worked in two communities where two of the most highly regarded private colleges in the land have had a policy of not sharing their plans with the local communities. And yet, both are expanding, adding dormitories, classrooms, theatres and recreation facilities. All of these have an impact on the future of the community.

We have worked in others where the city requires the University to prepare and submit its Master Plan for approval by the City Council: they cannot build anywhere without such approval.

Above all, it's important to be "at the table": We have participated in a recent re-zoning project in Middletown, Connecticut where, because of the leadership of Wesleyan College staff, a very contentious set of issues were resolved without great difficulty. On the other hand, news of an expanding stadium at Boston College and an Arts Center at Williams led to considerable dispute.

### **3. Higher institutions need the community as much as the community needs them.**

We know many universities and colleges that have become quite concerned that they are losing "market share" because of quality of life issues. Admissions staffs tell us that parents and potential students will come to the campus and be most impressed with the faculty and the beauty of the campus. And yet, outside of campus, the community looks depressed or has few attractions. Mount Holyoke College, realizing there was no town center nearby, worked with its host town, South Hadley, to create such a center. Designed by the renowned architect Graham Gund, this center now houses restaurants, bars, bookstores, grocery stores and the like. Both Amherst College and Wesleyan invested in downtown hotels to improve their quality of life.

It should also be pointed out that, in order to hire an outstanding faculty member, an institution must ensure that the "trailing spouse" also can have professional job opportunities. If the area is depressed and the campus is isolated from the surrounding community,

*(continued next page)*

then the chances of attracting this desired faculty member may be slim. Williams college, in North Berkshire, Massachusetts, was so concerned with the erosion of the economy that it became a critical participant in revitalization efforts.

### 4. All major universities are attracting affiliated think tanks to their borders: These can be tremendous economic boosts to an area and do not need to be on campus.

Take a walk along a typical campus street: You will often see, in an old house, for example, the Institute for Popular Economics, the Center for Asian Studies or the Iowa Center for Social and Behavioral Research. All of these bring wages, jobs and sizzle to a community. They should be encouraged to be embedded in the community and placed as close to downtown as possible. There is a great opportunity here, for more and more universities are encouraging their faculty members to develop these centers. And, at times, these can be expanded into major businesses. We know of one faculty member, for example, who developed an idea at one of the University's think tanks, developed a spin-off company and is now the owner of the largest privately owned business in the town.



The ERA logo consists of the letters 'ERA' in a large, bold, white sans-serif font. The letters are partially cut off by a thick black horizontal bar that runs across the page. Below the letters, there are two small rectangular blocks: a light gray one on the left and a dark gray one on the right.

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### 5. Encourage campuses not to build shopping centers on campus.

In fact, we once lived in a community where the "locals" referred to the local campus as "Idiot Hell." We know of others where loud, boisterous and rowdy students are not wanted in the downtown and police treat their activities with little sensitivity. In areas where the towns treat the students as foes, many campuses are endeavoring to provide for all student needs within their borders. These will include everything from bars to pharmacies, bookstores and department stores. While the net result is the students are out of downtown there is also a significant economic loss. Consider this: There is anecdotal evidence that each student at the University of Massachusetts (Amherst) campus spends approximately \$10.00 per day in the local economy. Given that the typical student spends about 200 days in the region and that there are approximately 25,000 students, the direct dollars involved is approximately \$50 million. Imagine if the University developed a shopping complex and entertainment center that would keep them on campus? The loss would be significant. Indeed, we can illustrate this with a case study involving St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y. The campus bookstore expanded and expanded until it became the largest store in town. Whereas the University marketed its products to the students and they left campus about the 15th of December for the holidays, all goods went on sale in the middle of the shopping season. The townspeople flocked to the campus store, local businesses suffered and the business community was quite upset. Clearly, rowdy behavior must be controlled. Just as clearly, students must be welcomed.

We need to make several other points here. First, while students have spending money, they do not make capital improvements. They do not buy housing, automobiles or furniture (other than at flea markets). Nor do they use legal, financial or other professional services. In this sense, they skew the typical market place. Planners need to be aware of this. Secondly, while students increasingly have cars, large percentages do not. Therefore, mass transit is important. We have seen mass transit as simple as virtual rickshaws at Arizona State University or as sophisticated as the Five College System in the Five College Area of Massachusetts (covering Smith College, Amherst College, Hampshire College, Mount Holyoke College and the University of Massachusetts), the fact remains that mass transit counts. Thirdly, downtown merchants must recognize that the campus population is typically quite different

from the “real people” who live in town. Campuses encourage diverse, “different” people. So many of our rural campuses have minimal experience with the counterculture that it drives a healthy market awry. What happens when a purple haired, ring pierced, all black dressed, minority enters into a shop where the typical purchaser of goods is a suburban white woman? We know from our surveys that the students, too often, feel unwelcome. And yet, they are part of the community and they have money. We know that many of the students are arrogant, self-centered, sophomoric and independent. Yet, they need to be, alas, tolerated. Finally, we need to remember that student time is different from typical shoppers. When is the last time that a downtown merchant has seen a student at his/her door at the opening time in the morning? Stated alternatively, merchants must be open when the students shop: Later is better!

## 6. Colleges are increasingly becoming anchors in outmoded structures.

Up to the moment, at least, Colleges have been less concerned with the expense of building than the private sector. Moreover, they tend to build their structures for a longer time than the business community. For this reason, they may be candidates for taking on the revitalization of old structures. We can illustrate this with three examples. In Springfield, Massachusetts, Springfield Technology Community College (STCC) took over virtually all of the space and campus formerly occupied by the former Springfield Armory and later the Digital Equipment Corporation. Over time, it rehabilitated the buildings for campus use, a college sponsored incubator and stimulated the creation of a national historic site. All three activities are prospering. In fact, STCC is a recent award winner for its outstanding accomplishments from the United States Economic Development Agency. In Manchester, New Hampshire, the University of New Hampshire now occupies one of the famed mill structures that once belonged to the Amoskeag Corporation while in Malone, NY, the North County Community College occupies one of the town’s old mills. In all three instances, the importance of these institutions to the local economy has been profound.

***While students have spending money, they do not make capital improvements. They do not buy housing, automobiles or furniture (other than at flea markets). Nor do they use legal, financial or other professional services. In this sense, they skew the typical market place.***

## 7. Downtowns make great sites for extension and night school activities.

Every downtown, in order to succeed, must expand its hours of operation. In fact, we endeavor to create downtown plans that emphasize sixteen hours of operation. A cornerstone of this effect is to maximize evening activity. One such option is to bring extension and night school students into a campus branch center to the Downtown. These students spend money downtown and help to increase street traffic that adds to local color. We have noted this in Providence where the University of Rhode Island operates an extension center in the middle of the City’s emerging entertainment district and in Greenfield, Massachusetts where hundreds of students per week use the Greenfield

Community College campus, located in the middle of the shopping district.

## 8. The market for hotels is different in college towns.

A typical hotel attracts its customers over four nights (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday). Hotels in college communities typically attract their customers on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. Thus, hotels in college communities need to make their money in one day less than average. To insure that

this happens, the college, town and hotelier need to partner to work together such that schedules favor the market place. Such events/activities as homecomings, commencements, summer camps and the “great college tour” are coordinated. A given note on the “great college tour”: We have increasingly noted a new American “bonding” experience: Parents are increasingly packing up the SUV’s and visiting five to six colleges to determine the best fit for their offspring. The payoffs from these visits can be enormous: We know one college where 7000 visits were made but no hotels were nearby. A given note: When we pointed out these numbers to the college, they quickly invested in a local hotel that matched the character of its campus: It has been a tremendous success. Clearly, there are opportunities here.

## 9. College icons and symbolism are important.

If one looks around the community on a Saturday  
(continued next page)

morning, one will see sweatshirts, car stickers and other college paraphernalia regardless of where one lives across America. And yet, so many downtowns ignore the college symbolism. We have worked in one "Ivy" level community where you could not buy anything related to the college on Main Street. And the merchants wondered why students did not frequent downtown!

If there are thousands of students in your community who want to visit your downtown and who still want to tie into university icons, where do they go? We know that anyone who has gone to a four year college will remember a "downtown spot" where they have been welcomed. Whether it is as famous as Yale's Morry's or the sleazy bar in your town, the fact remains that they are major contributors to town-gown relations.

### **10. Negative perceptions must be corrected at once.**

If your community has a history of unwelcoming student behavior, of brutal action concerning student behavior or antagonistic reactions to students trying to purchase goods, then change must occur. We have found incidents of all of the above. The citizens in Newton, Massachusetts, next to Boston College, have little good to say about student behavior. Minority students at Wesleyan report "passive-aggressive" behavior when they walk into a shop (i.e., a shop clerk looking over their shoulders wherever they roam in the store). Finally, we worked in one college community where a tragic murder occurred more than ten years ago. And yet, when we undertook a survey of perceptions of downtown as a place to visit, resident after resident made reference to this tragic happening. Clearly, the safety of downtown had to be addressed constantly.

### **11. Students need a place to protest.**

While this may only be indirectly related to economic development, students want to express their opinions within the public realm off campus. Towns should be supportive of such activities. To this end, we urge towns to make available town commons, public parks and other central areas for these purposes. The end result is that the students have a sense that the town is part of their everyday life. We know that this approach will not be easy. However, given the notion of public protest within downtowns, we believe this approach will be meritorious.

### **12. The seriousness of life is a "turn-off" for student markets.**

While no one wants to put obstacles in front of people who need employment, alcohol rehabilitation, drug

assistance or social security assistance, the fact remains that, when they are located within major shopping areas, they take away from the vibrancy of the local market experience: They need to be located nearby but not on the central market street. In college communities, the location of anything that takes away from a youthful, free spirited market place will cause a decline in market sales: students do not want to be reminded of the struggle of everyday life.

### **13. College communities attract an "edginess" population.**

We used to call such people "hippies." The fact remains that college communities continue to attract people who can be considered "counterculture." They range from the dropout to the druggie to the Ph.D. candidate driving a taxi. All of these folks will be frequent visitors to downtown. They must be welcomed.

### **14. College markets are "youth oriented."**

The needs of college students are not the same as the typical marketplace. They tend to "impulse" buy inexpensive low end goods, purchase books and buy food. Above all, it is important to realize that the majority of students are under twenty one years of age (below legal drinking age!) In short, given snub appeal (Talbot's) or "The House of Second Chances," the latter will have a better chance of success.

### **15. Physical connections to the campus are important.**

These connections range from walkways to bike routes, bus connections and walking trails. The key point is that the connections between campus and downtown must be seamless.

### **A Summary Note**

There are others. We hope that you all can share them with this newsletter. As a final note, town gown relations are exciting, traumatizing, unique and special. They change so constantly that they keep economic planning on edge. At the same time, the contributions that they bring to the town are enormous. To us, nothing could be better. ■

*John R. Mullin, Ph.D is a Fellow of the American Institute of Certified Planners. He is the Vice Provost for University Outreach and the Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Zenia Kotval, Ph.D., AICP is Director of Urban Planning Partnerships at Michigan State University and the outgoing editor of News & Views.*

# The Genesee County Urban Land Redevelopment Initiative

by Daniel T. Kildee, Genesee County Treasurer

**F**ew cities across the nation face greater challenges than Flint, Michigan. But because of Michigan's new tax foreclosure law and the creative ways Genesee County officials are using new authority to deal with abandoned property, one of Flint's toughest problems may soon be under control.

Located in Genesee County, Flint is the birthplace of General Motors. In 1970, as Flint's population peaked at 193,000, it seemed the economic engine of Flint could never stall. General Motors employed 80,000 people at factories scattered around the city. From the 1920s through the 1970s, Flint was a magnet for workers who came to work in those factories, and the newcomers built new neighborhoods — enough for the 250,000 people expected to populate this growing city in the coming decades.

But for Flint, like most older American cities, the expectation born of the optimism of the industrial

revolution was replaced by a reality far different than the vibrant, compact, growing city described in Flint's 1965 master plan. By 2000, Flint had lost more than 60,000 of those high-wage jobs, and the city population had fallen to 120,000. People left Flint as manufacturing jobs disappeared. Many left Michigan in search of work, but most of the flight from Flint was to just a few miles outside the city, to one of the dozen suburban communities growing as fast as Flint declined, while the county — with a population of about 440,000 — assimilated into the more stable southeast Michigan economy.

Left behind is a city struggling with a weak real estate market and thousands of abandoned houses and empty lots. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, over 12 percent of Flint's housing stock is empty. While the problems associated with abandoned property are obvious — crime, fire, disease — the effects of abandoned property on the city are exacerbated by the resulting loss of tax base. Abandoned properties diminish the value of surrounding property, which directly reduces property tax revenue that could be used to address the problems caused by abandonment.

*(continued next page)*



"Before" photos of houses on foreclosed, land-banked property that were torn down to make way for the construction of new energy-efficient affordable homes by the non-profit CDC, Greater Eastside Community Association (GECA).

Sadly, the very system intended to move tax-foreclosed property back to productive use actually contributed to the downward spiral of urban land.

Under Michigan's former system of tax foreclosure, abandoned properties were either transferred to private speculators through tax lien sales or became state-owned property through foreclosure. Under either scenario, local leaders lacked authority to interrupt the decline of tax-reverted land. In fact, the former system encouraged low-end reuse of tax reverted land due to the length of time between abandonment and reuse — often more than five years.

The system actually contributed to contagious blight as one property infected the next as property after property passed through tax foreclosure, and rarely resulted in significant redevelopment because the tax lien sales resulted in countless different owners without marketable title. Thousands of properties not sold at a tax lien sale were titled to the state — the "death penalty" for property.

Worst of all, the system was heartless. The former law provided no way for local officials to intervene to help a family facing the loss of their home. A family facing tax foreclosure was at the mercy of a tax lien holder, usually an out-of-state investor with a personal financial interest in the property being foreclosed.

It was a low-end market free-for-all that rarely accomplished any public good beyond the efficient collection of taxes. Even valuable properties lost in tax foreclosure were destined to tumble through the predictable devolution of use: a family home became a decent rental house, then a dilapidated rental house, then an abandoned house, until the property became a

valueless lot scattered among other properties falling through the same pernicious process.

But now, there is some hope. Since the passage of PA 123 of 1999, the State of Michigan and county governments have greater authority in gaining control of vacant abandoned land.

The new system provides for state or county foreclosure after two years, and under certain circumstances abandoned property can be foreclosed after only one year. This process results in a clear title judgment by the state court, a significant advantage in reuse of land. Under the new system, all property lost to foreclosure is titled to the ownership of the county, or to the state for counties that choose to pass this responsibility to the state.

The new law also provides some funding to assist a county in managing tax foreclosed properties by restricting "profit" from the sale of valuable property to a "Land Reutilization Fund" to pay costs associated with managing the inventory of foreclosed land. Together with increased fees for delinquent taxes, this source has brought over \$2.6 million to the Genesee County in the first two years of the program.

The new law also allows a county treasurer to postpone foreclosure on a property owner facing a "substantial financial hardship."

This is a more efficient course, as it delivers property to new ownership much more quickly and typically in far better condition than the former system.

In Flint, however, it was clear that while the new procedure was a significant improvement, a more aggressive approach would be required to use this new law to its maximum potential in dealing with the high



"After" photos of new homes built on properties acquired by the Genesee County Land Reutilization Council (LRC).

volume of vacant and abandoned land.

With funding from the C.S. Mott Foundation, Genesee County engaged a local consulting team and a number of national partners in developing a more creative approach to use tax foreclosure as a community development tool. This research, with the help of The Brookings Institution, Local Initiatives Support Corporation, ICMA, the Urban Land Institute, and others led to the creation of the Genesee County Land Reutilization Council (LRC), a land bank formed by the city, county and local governments. The LRC is funded with proceeds from the tax foreclosure process, and allows the county to acquire land through foreclosure and determine the best use of land with the community's needs in mind, rather than simply selling the land at auction to the highest bidder with no control of the ultimate use.

Some highlights of the Genesee County program thus far:

- In the first two years under the new law, Genesee County has taken title to more than 2,500 parcels of land, including nearly five percent of the land in the city of Flint.
- 990 families have been saved from foreclosure through the County Treasurer's foreclosure prevention program, which allows owner-occupants facing foreclosure a one-year postponement, followed by active case management by the staff of the treasurer's office.
- 140 foreclosed tenant-occupied properties owned by the land bank are managed by non-profit housing agencies. As an alternative to selling tenant-occupied properties to another potentially irresponsible landlord, these properties are assigned to agencies seeking to stabilize neighborhoods and encourage home ownership.
- The LRC has begun rehabilitation of 37 houses for new owner-occupied housing.
- Since February of 2003, 171 dilapidated houses have been demolished, with another 140 to be demolished by the end of this year. Using local Community Development Block Grant dollars, the county demolition program has become an efficient alternative to typical demolition programs primarily because the county is the property owner. Using the experience of the first two years, a more



*"After" photo of a burned house rehabilitated for a first-time homebuyer.*

significant demolition program is being planned for the 3,500-4,000 abandoned houses in Flint.

- Over 100 vacant lots have been conveyed to next-door neighbors through the LRC "side lot" program. 600 more side lot transfers are planned from the current inventory.
- Hundreds of empty lots have been assembled for city development projects, as well as for local non-profit and community organizations.
- Two non-profit agencies are developing new infill housing on 16 tax-foreclosed properties.
- Several non-profit agencies are under contract to maintain empty lots owned by the county — cutting weeds, cleaning trash and boarding buildings, funded entirely from tax foreclosure proceeds.

While this new system is a dramatic change and is having some immediate effect, the real value is best measured in the long-term impact this effort will have on the city.

To ensure intelligent long-term use of this and other tools, Genesee County has initiated a significant land reutilization and community planning effort. This initiative, funded primarily by the Ruth Mott Foundation, combines a neighborhood planning component with regional land use planning. The goal of the neighborhood planning is to assist the LRC in determining the disposition of tax-foreclosed land consistent with an

*(continued next page)*

GENESEE COUNTY, CONT. FROM P. 13

intelligent strategy for each neighborhood, working with existing neighborhood organizations where possible. The challenge to neighborhood planning lies in the answer to the question: "How does a city get smaller and better at the same time?"

A regional land use planning effort, led by the faculty of the University of Michigan School of Architecture and Urban Planning, will seek to connect urban "smart growth" practices such as the tax foreclosure project with better regional land use policies. The recent report of the Michigan Land Use Leadership Council, a bi-partisan panel appointed by Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, provides a framework for this local effort to make "smart growth" a reality in the Genesee County area.

Genesee County's progress in addressing the problems of vacant and abandoned property has been a result of partnerships between state and local government, local non-profit community based organizations, academic institutions in Michigan and around the country, as well as several key national organizations concerned with urban redevelopment. There is much more to learn, and much more to be done in creating a coherent set of policies that embrace urban land as the asset it should be. But Flint, Michigan, has made a bold start, and can provide some important lessons to other communities large and small struggling to deal with forgotten urban land. ■■■

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*Dan Kildee is the elected Treasurer of Genesee County, Michigan. He recently served on the Michigan Land Use Leadership Council appointed by Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, and is a member of the Advisory Committee for SGA/LISC/ICMA Vacant Property Campaign. Kildee is the Co-Chair of the Michigan Redevelopment Readiness Advisory Committee and is a member of the Michigan Economic and Environment Roundtable. He is President of the Genesee County Land Reutilization Council, Inc., the county's newly formed land bank. Reach Dan Kildee at (810) 257-3024 or at dkildee@co.genesee.mi.us.*

## Welcome to Our New Members...

Gregory J. Baker	San Antonio, TX	David L. Harzoff, AICP	W. Sacramento, CA	Daniel E. Osborn	Westminster, CO
Elia Bassin	San Luis Obispo, CA	Sharon Hausam	Bernalillo, NM	Britt Page	New York, NY
Lucy Buck	Austin, TX	Julie Herlands	Falls Church, VA	Gene Pearson FAICP	Memphis, TN
J. Chris C. Buydos, AICP	San Jacinto, CA	Derek R. Hull	Inkster, MI	Harold B. Pettigrew	Brooklyn, NY
Kevin Byrd	Blacksburg, VA	Emiko Isa	Los Angeles, CA	Michael J. Reale	New York, NY
Rong Cai	Blacksburg, VA	Thomas H. Jensen, AICP	Circle Pines, MN	James W. Ribron	Detroit, MI
Casey R. Callahan	Blacksburg, VA	Daniele M. Johnson	Aberdeen, MD	Kevin J. Richards	Washington, NC
James B. Carpentier, AICP	Scottsdale, AZ	Dwane L. Jones	Greenville, NC	Jamie L. Rudell	East Lansing, MI
Darla Charbonnet	Corona, CA	L. Thomas Jones	Ridgeland, MS	Billy E. Sabin	Blue Earth, MN
Joel M. Dabu	New York, NY	Adriane Kramer	Baton Rouge, LA	Sean Sacks	Cambridge, MA
Ellen C. Dailey, AICP	Saint Louis, MO	Lisa Moeller Lange	Royal Oak, MI	Donna L. Sampson	State Center, IA
Tamara L. DeRidder	Portland, OR	Dawn Leger	Bristol, CT	Mark Sanborn	Angola, IN
Adam Dickson	Jonesborough, TN	Brad Leibov	Chicago, IL	James Schenkelberg	Milwaukee, WI
Tomas Duran	Whittier, CA	Gregory Long	Alexandria, VA	Simon M. Shima, AICP	Albuquerque, NM
Hanzada S. Farah	Minot, ND	Antony P. Lorianus	Toronto, ON	Cory A. Thomas	Cincinnati, OH
Fredalyn M. Frasier	Atlanta, GA	Michael D. Lyons	Columbus, OH	John Loren Wagner	Chesterfield, MO
David Fronczak	Chicago, IL	Pierre Martinez, AICP	Rocklin, CA	Matt Walker	Warsaw, VA
Aaron B. Gagne	Westminster, CO	Paul Louis Marx	Washington, DC	Nancy J. Walsh	Atlanta, GA
James E. Gahres, AICP	Manassas, VA	Brenda Mckenzie	Chicago, IL	Marty Brett Wieder, AICP	N. Richland Hills, TX
Margaret Mary Gibbs	Amherst, MA	Marvin R. McNeff	Saint Paul, MN	Nancy J. Williams	Rockville, MD
Paul M. Gorte, AICP	Joliet, IL	Jennifer L McNeil	Chicago, IL	Chris Williams	Kansas City, MO
Joshua T. Hall	Chardon, OH	Arthur F. Mullen, AICP	Detroit, MI	Robert Cass Wojcik	Fort Lauderdale, FL
Jana Hanson	Mount Vernon, WA	Eden Negash	Jersey City, NJ	Kankun Yo	Walnut, CA

## Welcome to our New Editor!

We welcome our new editor, Ned Murray, Ph.D., AICP, to the "staff" of *News & Views* next issue. Dr. Murray, Associate Director of the Florida International University Metropolitan Center, has over 20 years of combined professional and academic experience in urban planning and economic development. Prior to his arrival at the FIU Metropolitan Center, he was a visiting Assistant Professor within the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at Florida Atlantic University. Dr. Murray received his Doctorate in Urban and Regional Planning from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and M.S. in Community Development from the University of Missouri-Columbia. His prior professional positions include Principal Planner for the City of Worcester, Massachusetts and Director of Planning and Development for the City of Leominster, Massachusetts.

Dr. Murray's recent urban economic development plans in South Florida include the City of Miami's Targeted Industry Study, Martin Luther King Boulevard Commercial Corridor Market Study and FEC Corridor Strategic Redevelopment Plan, Miami-Dade's Economic Development Implementation Plan and the City of Fort Lauderdale's Flagler Heights Redevelopment Plan. Dr. Murray's work has been the topic of panels at the National Conference of the American Planning Association (APA), annual conferences of the Florida Chapter of the APA and annual conferences of the Florida Redevelopment Association (FRA). Dr. Murray has authored numerous papers on urban planning and economic development including published articles in *Economic Development Quarterly*, the IEDC *Economic Development Journal* and CUED's *Commentary*.

Welcome aboard, Dr. Murray! ■

## Calendar of Upcoming Events

### **IEDC Professional Development Series:**

#### **Business Retention and Expansion**

April 21-22, 2004 • Atlanta, GA

[www.iedconline.org/prodev\\_BRE\\_GA.html](http://www.iedconline.org/prodev_BRE_GA.html)

#### **Celebrate Community, American Planning Association National Conference**

April 24-28, 2004 • Washington, D.C.

[www.planning.org/2004conference/index.html](http://www.planning.org/2004conference/index.html)

#### **IEDC Professional Development Series: Entrepreneurial & Small Business Development Strategies**

May 13-14, 2004 • Dallas, TX

[www.iedconline.org/prodev\\_Small\\_Bus\\_TX.html](http://www.iedconline.org/prodev_Small_Bus_TX.html)

#### **IEDC Professional Development Series: Brownfields Redevelopment**

May 20-21, 2004 • Salt Lake City, UT

[www.iedconline.org/prodev\\_Brownfields\\_UT.html](http://www.iedconline.org/prodev_Brownfields_UT.html)

#### **Suburban Place Making, Audio Conference Training Series**

Presented by the American Planning Association and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

May 26, 2004

[www.planning.org/audioconference/](http://www.planning.org/audioconference/)

### **IEDC Professional Development Series:**

#### **Real Estate Development and Reuse**

June 17-18, 2004 • Columbus, OH

[www.iedconline.org/prodev\\_Real\\_Estate\\_OH.html](http://www.iedconline.org/prodev_Real_Estate_OH.html)

#### **Land Use, Planning and Environmental Law**

Joint Program presented by the American Planning Association, the American Institute of Certified Planners, and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy  
June 23, 2004

[www.planning.org/audioconference/](http://www.planning.org/audioconference/)

#### **Sustainable Communities 2004, City of Burlington, Vermont**

July 14-18, 2004 • Burlington, VT

Call (802) 272-2684, fax (802) 454-1708, email [info@global-community.org](mailto:info@global-community.org),  
[www.global-community.org/conference/](http://www.global-community.org/conference/)

#### **World Future Society Annual Conference**

July 31-August 2, 2004 • Washington, D.C.

Call (301) 951-0394, email [ccoles@wfs.org](mailto:ccoles@wfs.org).

#### **Annual ACSP Conference**

Oct 21-24, 2004 • Portland, Oregon,

[www.acsp.org/events/conference.html](http://www.acsp.org/events/conference.html)

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