

## OVERVIEW OF UPDATE OF WATER STREET COMMERCIAL DISTRICT PLAN

**BACKGROUND.** The Water Street Commercial District Plan was originally prepared in 1982 through the collaboration of City staff, property owners, business owners, and neighborhood residents in response to a number of issues affecting the area. Through a year-long process, the original plan was prepared to set forth recommendations to address issues such as image of the area, insufficient parking, inappropriate building façade treatments, mix of businesses, property conditions, and condition of the riverfront.



Over the past 26 years, the Water Street Commercial District has made significant strides in many areas and today exhibits a character and charm that is unique to Eau Claire and western Wisconsin. With its close proximity to the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, unique mix of businesses, historic character, unique buildings, and location along the riverfront and recreational trail, the area is not only a destination for the neighborhood and University, but for the City and beyond.

Although much progress has been accomplished over the years, problems and issues still exist in the area and those interested in the well-being of the Water Street Business District feel that the original plan should be updated. Therefore, property owners and businesses approached the Plan Commission in the fall of 2006 to initiate the process of updating the plan. Work on updating the plan commenced in May of 2007.

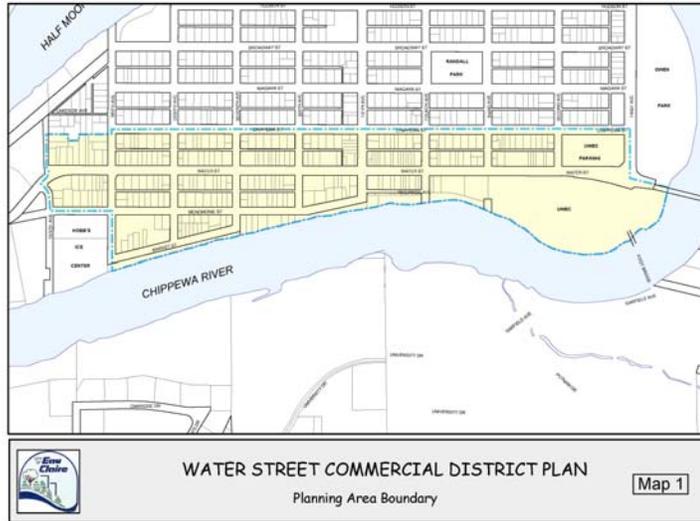
To assist in the preparation of the plan, the Plan Commission appointed a 15-member committee to work with City staff in updating the plan. Membership on this Update Committee included persons representing: property owners, business owners, landlords, students, the University, Bridge Coalition, and the Historic Randall Park and Third Ward Neighborhood Associations.

**PURPOSE.** The purpose of the Water Street Commercial District Plan is to provide property owners, businesses, residents, and policy makers with the following:

- Information about the conditions that currently exist within the planning area;
- Provide a framework to base decisions regarding improvements and planning policies;
- Outline public and private recommendations for the area over the next 5-15 years.

This plan serves to further define the City's Comprehensive Plan, which was adopted by the City of Eau Claire in September of 2005. The Comprehensive Plan stresses the importance of planning for Eau Claire's existing commercial areas and older neighborhoods, which are an integral component in forming the image and fabric of the community. The Comprehensive Plan also seeks to encourage more vital commercial centers, which provide pedestrian and walkable environments.

**PLANNING AREA.** The planning area for the Water Street Commercial District as shown below includes the area bounded by: the Chippewa River on the south; First Avenue and Chippewa River to the east, Chippewa Street to the north, and Tenth and Ninth Avenues to the west. Although the document focuses on the commercial areas within the planning boundary, the plan also encompasses residential areas located to the west and southwest of the core commercial area. This planning area is also located within the southern portion of the Historic Randall Park Neighborhood Association boundaries; therefore, policies contained in the adopted neighborhood plan for Randall Park are also applicable to this plan.



**CITIZEN INPUT AND COMMENT.** Over the course of preparing the plan, several opportunities have been provided to obtain community input concerning the development of the updated plan. This includes: distribution of a mail-out survey to all the businesses located within the Water Street area, posting of a citizen opinion survey on the City's website asking for input on issues and suggestions, meeting with the Historic Randall Park Neighborhood Association Steering Committee on September 16, 2008 to discuss the draft plan. Finally, the committee held a public informational meeting on October 1, 2008 to obtain input on the initial draft of the plan. All property owners and business owners within the planning area were invited.

The Plan Commission held a public hearing on the plan on January 5, 2009 and recommended its adoption. The Eau Claire City Council then held a public hearing on the plan on January 12, 2009 and upon completion of the hearing adopted the plan.

**WATER STREET ASSETS (from surveys and committee input).** Variety of shops and restaurants, variety of small and unique businesses, central and convenient location, unique character, historic character, pedestrian friendly, bus service, nightlife, and riverfront trail.

**WATER STREET PROBLEMS & ISSUES (identified from surveys and committee input).**

- A. Land Use and Urban Design.** Current policies do not encourage commercial/residential redevelopment west of 6<sup>th</sup> Ave., need to evaluate current prohibition of drive-ups for business services, poor upkeep of some buildings, no grocery store, concerns related to taverns within the area and associated problems, and lack of building design guidelines.
- B. Parking and Transportation.** Insufficient parking, poor snow removal along Riverside Avenue and along the curb in 200-500 blocks, inadequate street lighting, and poor alley condition.
- C. Bicycle and Pedestrian Environment.** Concerns relating to pedestrian safety, and need for bicycle amenities.

- D. Open Space, Parks and Riverfront.** Poor visibility of river from trail and Menomonie Street, limited physical access to shoreline, underutilization of riverfront, and gap in riverfront trail system.
- E. Business Environment.** Need for improved marketing of area and coordination with DECI, encouraging participation of businesses with BID, negative image of the area in the evening, poor wayfinding signage, and need to update BID boundaries.

## VISION AND GOALS.

### Vision Statement

*Water Street is an attractive, safe, pedestrian and bicycle friendly, vibrant area, providing services for the adjacent neighborhoods, the community and the region. It is a center for the creative class and provides a compact and diverse mix of retail shops, restaurants, office, entertainment, arts, and housing opportunities. The district capitalizes on its tradition, history, strong commitment of business owners, and its proximity to the neighborhoods, the University, Downtown, and the Chippewa River.*

### Goal Statements

- A. Land Use and Urban Design.** Promote land use and design in the planning area, which is conducive to the needs of the Water Street commercial area, neighborhood and community, and which capitalizes on the history and character of the area. (6 objectives related to this goal.)
- B. Parking and Transportation.** Provide adequate parking and transportation facilities to address the needs of business, residents and neighborhood, and provide convenient, safe, and attractive multi-modal circulation to and within the planning area. (6 objectives related to this goal.)
- C. Bicycle and Pedestrian Environment.** Promote safety and convenience both for bicyclists and pedestrians. (4 objectives related to this goal.)
- D. Open Space, Parks and Riverfront.** Seek continued improvement of the physical condition of the open space areas and the riverfront and utilization of these resources to the benefit of both the Water Street area commercial district and the community as a whole. (3 objectives related to this goal.)
- E. Business Environment.** Strive for a vibrant and healthy business district serving the needs of the neighborhood while providing a unique retail, restaurant, and entertainment experience for the community and beyond; that provides a high quality physical and visual environment that incorporates elements of the history and tradition of the district, a unique identity, complementary design, and environmental aesthetics. (10 objectives related to this goal.)

## DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS.

### A. Land Use and Urban Design.

1. Retain the special zoning provisions for the 400 block of Water Street, which are aimed at maintaining the high pedestrian orientation of this block.
2. Continue to encourage new buildings to be constructed at the front property line, and encouraging buildings to be at least two stories in height with an upper floor residential component.

3. Encourage higher density development along Water Street to the west of Sixth Avenue, similar in scale to the existing commercial areas that includes first floor commercial and upper floor residential apartments.
4. The Committee recommends a change in policy concerning vehicle drive-ups. The current policy does not allow them in the 200 thru 500 blocks of Water Street. The Committee recommends that they continue to be prohibited in the 400 block, but that standards be established where they may be permitted in the remainder of the planning area by conditional use permit in certain situations.
5. The Committee recommends a change in policy regarding the review of new restaurants. The current policy requires approval of a conditional use permit for all new restaurants, but it is recommended that a restaurant not involving a liquor license be a permitted use. A restaurant that would include a liquor license would continue to require a conditional use permit.
6. The committee recommends that no new taverns be permitted in the 200 thru 400 blocks of Water Street. New taverns proposed to the west of Fifth Avenue would require a conditional use permit.
7. The Committee recommends that consideration be given to redevelopment of existing residential areas along the river to provide new housing opportunities of a density higher than allowed under the current Mixed Residential zoning. Such new development would need to be of large-scale and meet a series of design guidelines. Creation of a redevelopment district should be discussed.
8. Develop design guidelines to assist building owners in making appropriate building façade improvements and encourage appropriate design of new buildings.
9. Designate the existing National Register Historic District within the 400 block of Water Street as a local historic district.
10. Recommend that non-accessory parking lots in the area west of Sixth Avenue and in the vicinity of the riverfront not be permitted.



## **B. Parking and Transportation.**

1. Provide additional off-street parking. Additional parking should include the purchase of properties along the south side of the 400 block of Chippewa Street and expand the existing City parking lot to the west. This is similar to the recommendation contained in the original plan.
2. Increase enforcement of the parking regulations in the City parking lots and on the streets in proximity of the commercial areas.
3. Study the feasibility of designating Riverside Avenue as a one-way street to reduce traffic conflicts and congestion. The alley north of the 400 block of Water Street should also be studied as a possible one-way.
4. Work with the Police Department to study enforcement or design options to reduce vehicle speed along Water Street.

5. Study the timing to the traffic signals along Water Street to better coordinate the signals.
6. The BID should seek agreements with UWEC and owners of private parking lots to encourage joint use of the facilities when not in use.
7. Reconstruct the alleys within the planning area, which are in poor condition.
8. Develop a plan to improve the removal of snow along the curbs within the commercial areas.

### **C. Bicycle and Pedestrian Environment.**

1. Continue to utilize the center median “Yield to Pedestrian” signs placed on Water Street at the intersection of Fourth Avenue and consider placement of these signs at the Third Avenue intersection.
2. Paint crosswalks at the intersections of Third, Fourth, and Fifth Avenues along Water Street to better identify their location and visibility for motorists.
3. Work to improve lighting along portions of the riverfront trail and streets extending north from the Water Street commercial district.
4. Encourage bicycle commuting traffic to utilize the riverfront trail system.
5. Install additional bicycle racks within the commercial district and along the trail.



### **D. Open Space, Parks, and Riverfront.**

1. Develop an access point to the Chippewa River at the extension of Fifth Avenue to provide a location for people using the river for tubing, rafting, and fishing to access the shoreline.
2. The City should periodically trim the vegetation along the trail and Menomonie Street to improve the view of the river.
3. Study alternatives to complete the gap in the riverfront trail within the 600 block of Menomonie Street.
4. Develop a plan for the utilization of the City-owned land located northwest of Chippewa Street and First Avenue. This land was purchased by the City using floodplain mitigation funds, but is somewhat of an eyesore.
5. Support efforts of City to provide additional parking for Hobbs Ice Center, one option being the purchase of properties to the north of the building.

### **E Business Environment.**

1. Continue membership with the Downtown Eau Claire, Inc. (DECI) which allows the BID and Water Street businesses to enhance marketing and the promotion of special events.
2. Educate business owners about the availability of business assistance programs that are available through the State, City, and University.

3. Consider expanding the boundary of the BID from the current western boundary of Sixth Avenue to Tenth Avenue to enable all the businesses within the planning area to benefit from the programs, marketing and activities provided by DECI and the BID.
4. Coordinate with the Chippewa Valley Convention Tourism Bureau on programs, grants, and marketing for the area.
5. Support efforts of community organizations and the City to develop and implement a city-wide wayfinding signage program that includes the Water Street area.
6. Support efforts of community arts and theatre organizations to develop a community performing arts center, possibly in the vicinity of the Haas Fine Arts Center.
7. Actively market the area for a new grocery store.
8. Consider additional streetscape improvements to further enhance the appearance of the area and instill a sense of arrival to Water Street. (The plan provides a summary of possible improvements that should be considered.)
9. The Police Department should continue to maintain a visible presence along Water Street and the BID should work with the police in the dissemination of information, scheduling of increased patrols, and in the implementation of additional safety and security programs.
10. The BID should continue to work with the Bridge Coalition to sponsor education and prevention programs to address concerns related to excessive alcohol consumption.
11. Target intensified code enforcement within commercial and residential areas to address problems such as poor property upkeep, illegal signage, and the accumulation of garbage.

Within the plan, these recommendations are given a general time-frame for implementation and the groups or organizations responsible for their implementation are also identified.