

**PLANNING FOR
DOWNTOWN NEW BRUNSWICK**

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New Brunswick Tomorrow

June 1976

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INTRODUCTION

The Plan for downtown New Brunswick is an important element in the city-wide planning and development program of New Brunswick Tomorrow. It comes at an appropriate time, for major development opportunities are occurring that hold promise for substantial growth and revitalization in the downtown.

The downtown plan concentrates on the urban core -- the area generally defined by the Raritan River to the east, New Street to the south, Joyce Kilmer Avenue to the west, and Hamilton Street to the north. It is also concerned with the physical and functional relationships between the core and its surrounding neighborhoods, particularly as expressed by the major avenues that are links to and from the downtown.

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We have departed from a master plan or urban design concept in the traditional mold. The conventional approach, for example, would treat all areas of the downtown with a similar level of design detail throughout. In our view, a more appropriate and realistic way was to create an overall conceptual framework for downtown circulation and land use, and thereafter to concentrate our design efforts more fully in those areas having the greatest potential for significant and immediate revitalization -- what we have defined as immediate action projects.

Other downtown developments may well take place in the short term. We have not included them in our design studies but we have established guidelines for their ultimate use and character, and have specified certain sites which have unique significance for future development.

CIRCULATION AND PARKING CONCEPT

The circulation concept provides a framework within which development proposals for downtown revitalization take place. At its simplest level, it rationalizes the existing street network into two downtown loops -- one north of Albany Street and the other south of Albany. They operate as independent systems, and, in concert, as one overall downtown circumferential intercepting the many radial streets leading into the downtown core.

The lower loop is comprised of Albany Street, the projected Route 18, New Street and Joyce Kilmer Avenue. The upper loop is formed by Hamilton Street, Water Street, Albany Street, and Easton Avenue.

Route 18

The need for a new Raritan River crossing has existed in New Brunswick for over 50 years. The extension of Route 18 north of Albany Street will finally fulfill that need. Route 18 also has been, and continues to be, a center of concern and controversy because of its environmental effects. We, too, share that concern. Relative to our responsibilities, the greatest shortcoming is that it isolates the downtown from the river.

After reviewing in great detail the status and background of Route 18, we concluded that the basic plan should be accepted as a given. Our role, we felt, was to investigate ways to make the highway serve the downtown more effectively for traffic and to minimize it as a physical barrier. Route 18 and its service road form the eastern leg of the proposed downtown loop system. We recommend two minor modifications to better facilitate this. First, a south-bound exit ramp from the highway to New Street should be added to the Route 18 plans. Second, south-bound traffic on Water Street (which we propose be realigned and connected to Hamilton as part of the northern loop) should be allowed to cross Albany at a signalized, on-grade intersection to join the Route 18 service road. These modest improvements provide continuity to the overall downtown loop.

Albany Street (Route 27)

Aside from Route 18, Albany Street is the most important arterial in the downtown. It is also the most congested. The construction of the new interchange at the Albany Street bridge will relieve one bottleneck. At the other end, however, where French, Easton and Albany converge at the railroad plaza, the problem will still persist.

Congestion here is caused mainly by left-hand turning movements -- from Albany outbound onto French, and from Easton inbound onto Albany -- and by a lack of capacity on French Street in the vicinity of the railroad viaduct.

The solution is to eliminate these movements and increase street capacity by creating a one-way street system in the railroad plaza area. The concept proposes that Easton become one-way outbound until its intersection with Somerset, and that French become one-way inbound from Joyce Kilmer to Albany. In this way, Route 27 thru-traffic would utilize Easton and Somerset going to the west, and utilize French Street coming into town from the west. Somerset rejoins French a mile to the west of railroad plaza.

With Easton one-way to Somerset, an additional link is needed to permit inbound vehicles on Easton to engage the downtown loop along the Joyce Kilmer corridor. We suggest several alternatives. An interim solution is to use Brown Street (extended through to Somerset) or to relocate Brown in an easterly direction to meet Joyce Kilmer at French Street. The most effective, long range solution is to extend Joyce Kilmer northward to the intersection of Easton and Somerset.

Joyce Kilmer Corridor

The New Brunswick street system evolved over the years as a strong pattern of radial routes or spokes converging at a single point: the downtown core. The problem is that downtown streets can no longer absorb traffic from all points of the compass. Moreover, there is no clear circumferential route around the downtown that can redistribute vehicles from one sector to another without first engaging and congesting the heart of the downtown. In fact, this is nothing new. A downtown planning report of fifty years ago noted the same conditions.

The weakest link in a potential circumferential has long been the western side of the downtown. Streets are discontinuous, the railroad viaduct is a barrier, and new developments over the years have foreclosed possibilities once real. An improved Joyce Kilmer Avenue in concert with the Easton-Kilmer link presents the best opportunity for achieving the downtown circumferential. Accordingly, Joyce Kilmer will require widening between New Street and French. In addition, the widening of Carroll Place on the southern side of the loop is also recommended.

George Street

The full implementation of the downtown loop system will relieve substantially the pressures on George Street as a traffic carrier. It can then be reorganized and enhanced for bus transit and for pedestrians. As an ultimate goal, George Street could become a transit spine with no private vehicular traffic except for service and delivery at off-peak hours. Concurrently, the pavement would be narrowed and more space given to the pedestrian. The design concept for this is described later in the report.

Downtown Parking

The circulation concept proposes the establishment of three major reservoirs or nodes of downtown parking. They are located in a triangular pattern directly adjacent to the downtown circumferential. The intent is to intercept and provide parking for long-term parkers without their engaging local streets in the center of downtown. High turn-over, short-term parking would take place, as it does today, in lots, structures and on-street spaces within the core.

The first node is the lower block of Commercial Plaza. Surface parking will meet the demand in this precinct for several years. Ultimately, as nearby office and residential growth takes place, structured parking will be feasible.

The second node is located in the core's northeast quadrant. It is directly accessible from the loop on Hamilton and Water Streets and will service the new office development that is projected in that precinct.

A third, and longer-range parking node, is located on the western edge of the core adjacent to the Joyce Kilmer corridor. The exact location and extent of parking here will depend on future development opportunities as the government center expands and street improvements take place along the corridor.

Implementation

It should be emphasized that these various street links and improvements represent increments in an ultimate downtown circulation system. They will not all be accomplished tomorrow nor at the same point in time. Each must await the appropriate opportunity for implementation. Some will take place within the context of adjacent redevelopment projects, others can proceed independently. In the case of the Brown Street link or its alternatives, there are important land use decisions in terms of hospital and neighborhood development that must be addressed concurrently with circulation decisions. The key point is that the circulation plan should be firmly established as an ultimate objective for the downtown so that, as new development takes place and conditions change, the opportunities for achieving the plan are not lost.

DOWNTOWN LAND USE

The plan builds on the downtown's existing strengths and is not a radical restructuring. It defines the downtown core in terms of five generalized use areas: (1) A retail and activity zone centered about George Street between Albany and New Streets; (2) a major new office and mixed use precinct at the southern end of George Street; (3) an office and mixed-use development area at the northern end of the George Street spine; (4) the City and County governmental center to the west of George Street; and (5) a new in-town residential community to the east of George Street in the Hiram Market area.

This organization is not meant to imply a strict or formal separation of land uses within the downtown. There are transitions between areas and, in fact, a certain mix of uses within each zone should be encouraged. The use areas establish the predominant function whereby each zone derives its special character.

The following recommendations and design proposals for early action and future action development are within the context of this basic land use framework and the circulation and parking system that serves it.

GEORGE STREET

New Brunswick is in transition as a general merchandise retailing center. Nearby shopping centers are increasingly drawing business away from the downtown and the trend will no doubt continue for the short-term. The downtown, however, can consolidate and strengthen its role as a specialty retail and activity center. Locally, it can cater to the shopping needs of those working and living close-by . . . office workers, governmental employees, students and residents. At the regional level, it can become a focus for entertainment and cultural events.

New Brunswick Tomorrow has projected a market for 350,000 square feet of new and rehabilitated downtown retail space during the next ten years. The bulk of this growth should be centered on George Street. We recommend several basic principles for the enhancement of George and the strengthening of the downtown as a specialty retail center:

1. Downtown retail uses should be concentrated and consolidated on George Street between Albany and New Streets. This 1500-foot stretch is an ideal length for a shopping street, and is well suited to the scale of pedestrians.
2. The basic scale and massing of George Street and the buildings that line it should be maintained. The street width is relatively narrow, some 60 feet, creating an intimate pedestrian environment. The relatively low building heights reinforce this human scale.
3. New development along George Street should be primarily infill rather than large scale office or retail construction. It should include rehabilitation as well as modest new structures. The P. J. Young site would be an appropriate starting point.
4. The "rib-blocks", that is, the Church, Paterson, Bayard, Liberty side-blocks should be strengthened with retail uses to reach out to the Government Center on one side and the Hiram Market area on the other. Church Street, today, is the most pleasant retail block in the downtown. More of this on the remaining blocks can set the stage for successful redevelopment of the Hiram area and future growth of the Government Center.

5. Automobile traffic can be deemphasized on George Street and more space given over to the pedestrian. One important constraint should be mentioned, however: it is not possible to narrow George Street's pavement width or to make other than cosmetic changes in the street environment until the previously proposed traffic improvements have been implemented. Major enhancement of George Street, therefore, is not an immediate action prospect and the concept should be viewed in that context.

The design concept narrows George Street's pavement width from 36 to 24 feet to create a transit and pedestrian zone between Church and Livingston Streets. The pavement widens or bulbs slightly for 100 feet to the north and south of the Paterson Street intersection to provide bus pick-up and drop-off areas, and delivery zones. The six additional feet gained on each sidewalk provide space for new trees, benches and fountains. Concurrently, street and sidewalk pavements would be replaced in patterns of concrete and inlaid brick with an asphalt roadway.

Livingston has also been narrowed between New and George Streets is one-way in this portion. The additional land gained is used for diagonal parking, heavily landscaped and separated from the stream of moving traffic.

COMMERCIAL PLAZA

Commercial Plaza, a large two block development area on the southeast corner of the downtown, was cleared in the 1960's under urban renewal. It has remained largely vacant, a gaping hole in the urban fabric of the downtown. Both an eyesore and an opportunity, it is perhaps the most appropriate place of all to begin the process of downtown revitalization.

The plan for Commercial Plaza combines immediate action and long-range development. In fact, the first increment of the plan is to be in construction by the summer of 1976. The overall plan has three broad phases:

First Stage Office Building

The plan's initial increment is a 125,000 square foot, five-story office building. It is modest in size but even so accomplishes important goals for the downtown.

First, it is placed along George Street and so closes the "open wound" that has existed on that site for many years. It is the beginning step in reinforcing George Street as downtown's main activity center.

Second, it is deliberately a low building, reinforcing the street wall, and consistent with the existing scale and massing of George Street. Also, the building will be of brick, a traditional building material that reflects the established character of the downtown.

Third, while the building itself is necessarily low cost, we believe it should and can provide some amenity that will encourage and establish higher standards of urban design in buildings to follow. The building's Z-configuration creates a landscaped plaza shared with its adjacent neighbor, the Methodist Church, opening onto George Street. An outdoor cafe would be ideal here, and a work of sculpture as a demonstration of associating public art with new downtown development would be a welcome gesture.

A glass enclosed lobby in the center of the building provides a diagonal pass-thru from the George Street entrance plaza to a second open space which forms a forecourt for the adjacent existing office building, and creates a link to the second stage development site beyond.

Second Stage Development

The remainder of the block is composed of three office buildings: two low structures similar in scale to the initial building, and a third 20 story tower. The total floor space is 400,000 square feet.

This site now lacks one major prerequisite for successful development: a suitable "front door" address. New Street and Liberty slope quite steeply and are side streets in the downtown grid, and Neilson is certainly a "back door" approach. The solution is to create a new north-south street, parallel to George through the center of the block. It will serve as an additional approach to the George Street building and create the street frontage about which the second stage development is organized.

Third Stage Development

The lower block of Commercial Plaza, below Neilson Street, is the last development stage. It is today one of the most remote and isolated sites in the downtown. In our judgement, development is not feasible nor desirable until healthy new growth reaches toward it from George Street eastward, and from the Hiram Market area southward.

In the interim five to ten years we recommend that the block be reserved as a land bank to be used for surface parking serving upper Commercial Plaza.

ALBANY STREET CORRIDOR

Albany Street performs two different but equally important functions. At the regional level, it is a major north-south arterial and will remain a carrier of thru-traffic. Locally, it is an adjunct to the George Street retail precinct and a main downtown circulation street. It is lacking on both counts, however. Functionally, it is congested, confusing and inefficient as an arterial. Physically, it is bleak, blighted and unappealing as a downtown activity corridor.

The recommendations for Albany Street can change these basic conditions, but they have an even larger purpose. In our view, the transformation of Albany Street can set the stage immediately for a host of downtown revitalization projects. In fact, a new image for Albany Street is a prerequisite for the regeneration of the entire northern half of the core area.

The Greening of Albany Street

The first recommendation is to transform the physical image of Albany Street into a green boulevard by widening it, creating a median, and placing trees and extensive landscaping along both sides from the bridge to the railroad viaduct. We propose widening the right-of-way from 66 feet to 130 feet. The median zone will separate lanes of opposing traffic, hold various lighting standards and provide space for turning lanes at certain locations. The outsides of the roadway will accommodate buses and parallel parking, and are bulbed at the intersections and at other pedestrian crossing points.

There will be a variety of pavement patterns and materials to differentiate various street functions. Traffic lanes will be of asphalt. Turning lanes, bus and parking lanes, and sidewalks will be in combinations of concrete and inlaid brick. The purpose of this is to minimize, visually, the thru-traffic portion of the street to a narrow band and to emphasize with common materials the pedestrian and downtown-related areas of the street.

Railroad Plaza

The "greening" of Albany with its concurrent traffic improvements will enhance the railroad plaza as a gateway to New Brunswick. The station itself is an attractive and pleasant building that can be rehabilitated. The landscaped setback along Albany Street's north side creates a new setting for the station making it more visible along the Albany Street axis.

We propose new retail and entertainment uses to the east of the station along Albany and George with parking, including taxi stands and a station pick-up area, at the rear. The block is strategically located between Rutgers immediately to the north, an emerging office precinct to the east, George Street retail to the south and the railroad station to the west. Appropriate uses would include park and plaza area, a movie theatre and playhouse (as exist there now), restaurants, cafes and similar generators of daytime and nighttime activity.

Hotel Site

We propose the block on the south side of Albany Street between Neilson and Memorial Parkway as a downtown hotel site. Market projections indicate that a 200-room hotel with convention and conference facilities is feasible today. The plan includes future expansion to a total of 300 rooms.

The site is an important one and especially appropriate for a hotel. It is highly visible and at the Route 18-Albany Street gateway to the downtown. It will benefit from the new Albany Street image, and from the proposed new office precinct on the north side of Albany Street.

The Albany Street frontage adjacent to the hotel between Neilson and George Streets is also a key location for redevelopment. We propose that it be restricted to a depth of approximately 100 feet to preserve the existing Church Street retail. The recommended use is a low-scale office building with ground floor retail. It should reinforce the street wall of Albany.

HIRAM MARKET DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT

We propose the creation of a new residential community in the historic Hiram Street area of the downtown. It is especially appropriate for New Brunswick which has a strong and stable tradition of in-town living. The site is the four-block zone between Neilson and Memorial Parkway, Church and Richmond Streets. It has a net area of 8.8 acres.

The location is significant in that it is where New Brunswick had its beginnings and where vestiges of the old town still remain. It is convenient to the business district and within close walking distance of employment centers, the University, bus and train service, parks, open space and the river. It is close to the Albany Street redevelopment corridor including the adjacent proposed hotel.

We recommend two alternative concepts, or more specifically, one concept with an option. The goal is to restore the fabric of low-rise buildings and small-scale streets to the Hiram area. The solution is a low-rise, high-density community of approximately 375 townhouses and row houses. The option is to increase this number of units to approximately 650 by including two highrise towers.

The basic concept is a grouping of four housing clusters. Five story, stacked duplex and triplex townhouses are placed along the Neilson and Dennis Street frontages. Five story elevator row houses front Church and Hiram Streets. The net density would be some 42 units per acre -- a substantially high number for this housing type. But the scale of buildings will be sympathetic and compatible with New Brunswick and the Hiram quarter, in particular.

Open space and landscaping is an essential environmental ingredient for the community. Neilson Street with its fine churches will be further enhanced with trees. The townhouses will have private gardens and the center of each housing cluster will be devoted to landscaped, common open space. A wide, tree-filled buffer zone is located between the housing and Route 18. It will shield the community from highway traffic, and create a green backdrop and enclosure for the community.

Hiram Market can be more than a residential neighborhood. It can become a center of life and activity for all of New Brunswick. The uses that are proposed and their physical arrangement encourage this. The main axis is Hiram Street from Neilson Street to the river. The intent is to create in symbolic terms the spirit of the 19th century Hiram Market as a town focus. Hiram Street will be rebuilt as a pedestrian place lined with shops and filled with kiosks, cafes, trees,

benches; a place for fun, relaxation, and enjoyment during the day and evening.

It is a short walk from the center of town on George Street to the Hiram area. And it will be an increasingly pleasant one as new shops are developed along the side streets filtering down to Neilson Street and Hiram.

The plan carefully distinguishes between private streets that are mainly for the use of residents, and public ways which will encourage visitors to join in the life of the community. Hiram Street is very much a public place as is Neilson which will collect pedestrians from all parts of the downtown. Dennis Street, on the other hand, will be a private neighborhood precinct.

The development of Hiram Market creates the opportunity to reunite the downtown with its riverfront. From the end of the Hiram Street promenade a raised boardwalk crosses Route 18 and leads to the river and parkland beyond. Here, we propose the beginnings of riverfront redevelopment. An amphitheatre overlooking the river is placed at the end of the boardwalk, and closeby is a small boat basin and marina. The Route 18 extension requires the filling of the canal to a point slightly south of the Albany Street bridge. The boat basin in this location will become the terminus of the canal in the downtown area.

Parking for the townhouses is along the edges of the housing clusters. There is one space per housing unit. The site is accessible by car from all sides along Neilson, Church, Richmond, Liberty and Paterson Streets.

The second alternative or option is to build two towers in place of one of the townhouse clusters. The result would be to increase the number of units from 375 to 650. A tower solution is the most appropriate way to increase density if land and development costs require it. It will preserve the most open space at the ground, and provide fine views of the park and river for apartment residents. A design solution using mid-rise structures of typically 8 to 10 stories, we feel, is not tenable. It would result in a project-like appearance and would create a wall sealing the community off from the riverfront.

The tower option places two slim high-rise towers of 24 and 30 stories at the side of the site closest to the river, where it is more compatible with the highway scale of Route 18. The low housing would flank Neilson Street with its existing small scale fabric. The towers enclose a plaza and arrival drive under which two levels of parking would be built. The plan provides some 385 units of housing in the apartment towers and 265 units in the low rise housing.

FUTURE ACTION PROJECTS

The development projects described previously are first priority in that they are immediate action possibilities or are part of a prescribed sequence of development events. Additional developments will certainly take place. But it was premature, we felt, to investigate design concepts for programs do not exist, and conditions and opportunities may well change. Design solutions at this point in time would have no reality.

The following principles and goals are noted for several longer-range development opportunities.

Government Center Expansion

City-county administrative and judicial functions should expand in a northward direction and be planned in concert with the proposed intercept parking node along the Joyce Kilmer corridor. Plans should include a strong pedestrian link to the railroad plaza area and be coordinated with future redevelopment that will take place on the south side of Albany across from the station.

The Arnold Constable Site

We propose that the governmental offices now located on the previous department store location eventually be relocated into the expanded center. The Constable site is a prime development area for future office and related uses.

Livingston Triangle

Similarly, the block bounded by Livingston, George and Carroll Place is a strategic, gateway to the downtown that in the long term will be appropriate for large-scale offices and mixed use development.

NEIGHBORHOOD RELATIONSHIPS

The downtown concept is concerned with adjacent neighborhoods on two levels: (1) the nature of the various city-wide arterials leading into the downtown as affected by downtown circulation proposals and (2) the nature of the edge conditions or interface between the downtown and the immediately adjoining residential communities. It is not the intent nor scope of this study to mandate neighborhood goals or development. It is important, however, to point out the major implications of the downtown plan on these areas.

Lower George Street between New Street and the Douglas campus is an emerging neighborhood spine. A greater bus transit emphasis on George Street will benefit this neighborhood. The first Commercial Plaza building will close the gap between neighborhood and downtown. The proposed U. A. W. housing development at New Street and George, and the proposed adjacent community center will further create a strong and healthy link to the core area.

Livingston Avenue is the grandest boulevard of New Brunswick and a major gateway to the downtown. The gateway point itself offers several splendid sites for future office and mixed-use redevelopment. Livingston should retain its public and city-wide aspects as exemplified by its many churches, library and other institutions. It is a natural neighborhood boundary and local services would be inappropriate here. Two flanking, smaller scale streets -- Joyce Kilmer and Remsen -- would be more appropriate as neighborhood focuses.

French Street (Route 27) is a major commercial thoroughfare. It is healthy and an economic asset to the city. As the downtown portions of Route 27 along Albany Street are redeveloped for new office and related uses, it would be appropriate to relocate a portion of this highway-oriented commercial to the French Street corridor.

Somerset is a dual-use street. It is a major arterial by virtue of its size and capacity, it is also the center of New Brunswick's Hungarian community with its concentration of restaurants, churches and organizations. The downtown circulation concept utilizes Somerset as an outbound alternative to French Street westward. There will be increased traffic, but with improved signalization and more efficient use of the roadway, the street can function well for both vehicular and community use.

Hamilton Street will continue its role as a major arterial experiencing some increases in traffic volumes since, within the core area, it forms the northern leg of the loop system. It is more a neighborhood edge than a seam joining communities.

Easton Avenue is an important commercial spine serving adjacent university and residential communities. It is also a growing center of medical offices located as it is between St. Peter's and Middlesex County Hospitals. With the implementation of the Easton-Joyce Kilmer link, the avenue will become more strategic as a major downtown approach tied directly to the circumferential system.

College Avenue is the main spine of the Rutgers campus. The implementation of Hamilton Street as the northern leg of the downtown loop creates a unique opportunity. College, as a result, could be closed to traffic and made into a pedestrian-way between Hamilton and Somerset.