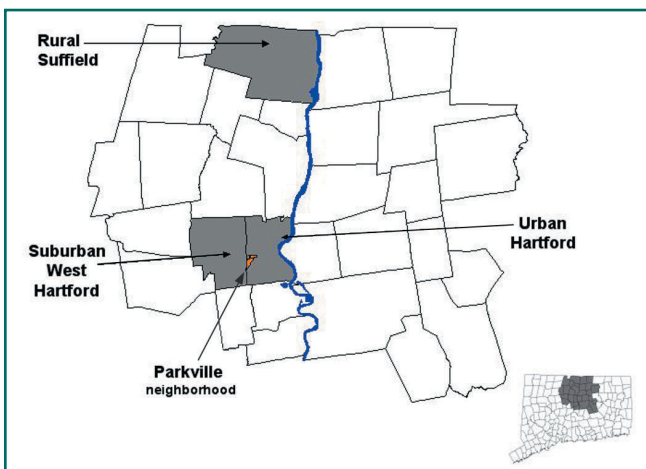


HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT: PICTURE IT BETTER TOGETHER: TAKING TRANSPORTATION GOALS FROM POLICY TO REALITY

The Hartford region is similar to many of the older urbanized areas of the Northeast and Midwest: its total population is growing slowly, yet its settled area continues to expand as population migrates from the central city to the suburbs. This development pattern has led to problems such as the loss of farmland and open space on the metropolitan fringe, growing levels of vehicle travel and traffic congestion, and increasing limitations to mobility and economic opportunity for residents without a car. Recognizing the regional nature of these concerns, planners and community leaders in the Hartford region are developing transportation and land use strategies in three “prototype” communities: one urban, one suburban, and one rural.

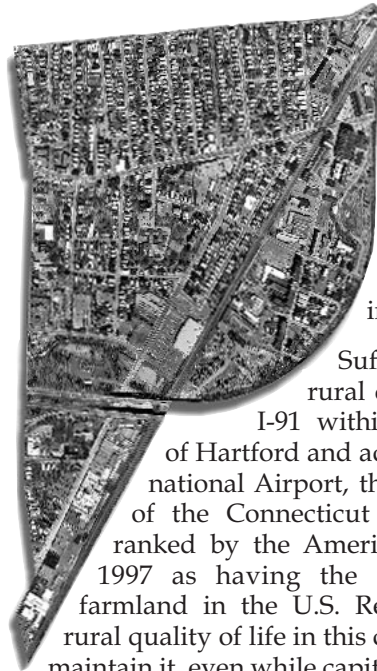
The urban community is Parkville, an older neighborhood in the City of Hartford. This community is bordered on the east by a railroad right-of-way, industrial area, and freeway (I-84) that isolate the neighborhood from the rest of the city. Parkville faces a number of transportation-related challenges, including cut-through traffic, a lack of pedestrian facilities, poor truck access, and an ethnically diverse, highly transit-dependent population. Yet it also faces opportunities, including a proposed busway connecting to downtown Hartford along underutilized portions of the rail corridor and the pending redesign of interchanges along I-84.

West Hartford is an older suburban community adjacent to Parkville. Traditionally affluent and relatively homogeneous, its population is becoming more diverse. While



Prototype Study Areas in the Hartford Region

Aerial view of the Parkville neighborhood. Courtesy Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection.



two busway stations are planned in West Hartford, the area in which they are planned is more auto-oriented and less walkable than other neighborhoods of West Hartford—posing barriers to reducing automobile use.

Suffield is the prototype rural community. Located on I-91 within commuting distance of Hartford and adjacent to Bradley International Airport, this historic town is part of the Connecticut River Valley, an area ranked by the American Farmland Trust in 1997 as having the 19th most threatened farmland in the U.S. Residents appreciate the rural quality of life in this community and want to maintain it, even while capitalizing on the economic benefits of its proximity to a major airport.

Together these three communities represent a “cross-section” of the Hartford region. The communities are participating in an innovative planning project, funded by a TCSP grant, to integrate physical design, open space, and economic planning with a variety of transportation concerns. The project is bringing together stakeholders at different levels—community, city, region, and state—to address these complex and interrelated issues. Project outcomes will include transportation and land use strategies for each community as well as a “best practices” guidebook for other communities in the region.

THE PROJECT

Awarded an FY 1999 TCSP grant of \$480,000, Hartford’s “Picture It Better Together” project is a collaborative effort between the City of Hartford, on behalf of Parkville neighborhood organizations, and the Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG). These groups had originally prepared two separate grant proposals, with Parkville focusing on neighborhood planning and CRCOG focusing on education



and outreach around regional growth issues. After recognizing their mutual interests the two groups decided to join forces, with Parkville serving as one of CRCOG's three prototype communities.

At the regional level, project sponsors decided to focus initially on education and dialogue, in order to introduce people to alternative development concepts and determine reactions to these concepts. Activities have included:

- A visual preference survey to determine residents' preferences for different types of development;
- A telephone survey comparing attitudes toward growth and development among residents of the three communities; and
- A focus group with commercial and residential developers to identify barriers to alternative development patterns.

At the same time, the prototype communities have undertaken efforts to develop local transportation and land use strategies. Final recommendations for the Parkville neighborhood were presented in June 2001; these recommendations included: pedestrian and traffic linkages, urban design strategies, and zoning changes that will better integrate planned transportation improvements and development projects with the neighborhood. Suffield, focusing on broader issues related to land preservation and community development, has held a workshop to develop a conceptual growth plan for the town.

West Hartford has already developed a number of "exemplary" development practices, including a traditional neighborhood development zoning ordinance. These practices, along with the results of TCSP project activities, will provide the basis for a "best practices guide" that includes model policies, zoning ordinances, and design practices. The guide will assist communities throughout the Hartford region in implementing transportation, land use, and economic development strategies that preserve and enhance community character. Finalization of the best practices guide is anticipated by early 2002.

To evaluate the long-term impacts of the project, land use and zoning changes will be tracked, especially along the busway corridor, using land use and zoning data-bases developed by CRCOG.

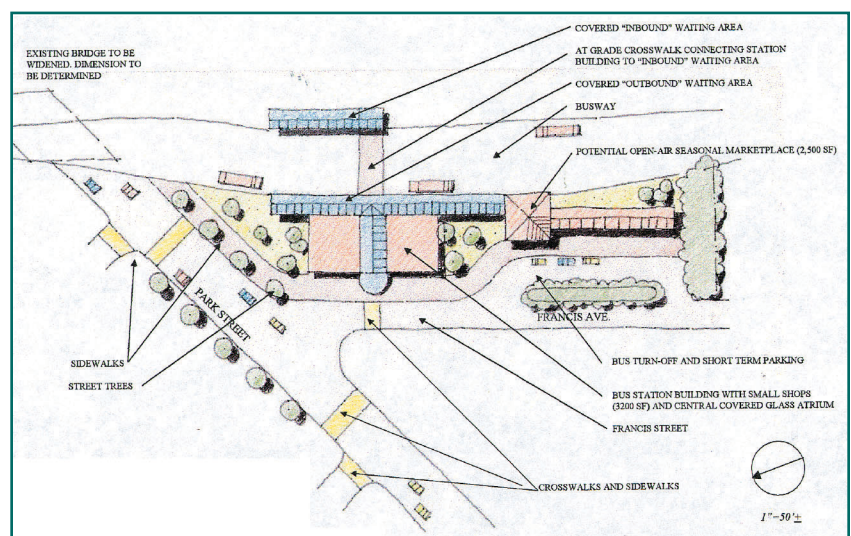
PARTNERSHIPS AND PARTICIPATION

A unique aspect of Hartford's project is the unprecedented level of cooperation among local and regional groups. An advisory

committee comprised of citizens, elected officials, and municipal staff guides project activities in each of the three communities. Especially in Parkville, neighborhood groups have taken a leadership role in the project from its inception, and share decision-making responsibilities equally with the city and CRCOG. The Parkville Revitalization Association has led the participation effort, with cooperation from the Parkville Business Association, the Parkville Community Organization, the Parkville Senior Center, and the Parkville Community Problem Solving Committee.

Community participants have also developed relationships with the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT). The Parkville community worked with ConnDOT to design a busway station that is integrated with the neighborhood. ConnDOT and Parkville are also working together on the redesign of I-84 interchanges to reduce land consumption and make opportunities available for new development. In Suffield, TCSP project participants are working with another CRCOG project, the Bradley Area Transportation Study. The two groups are working on a proposal for a new access road to Bradley International Airport to incorporate appropriate land-use regulations and context-sensitive design. Participants in these studies are also examining an existing state road through Suffield town center to better fit it with the character and business needs of a small town center.

Project partners have also met with the Connecticut Development Authority, which has expressed interest in helping to steer development toward the busway. Their assistance will serve the twin objectives of promoting transit-oriented development and economic growth in busway corridor neighborhoods.



Parkville's busway station design: The station is located near the neighborhood center, and the design reinforces the urban street edge. Courtesy Miniutti Group

RESULTS

The TCSP project already is resulting in changes to individual transportation and development projects in Parkville and Suffield. The Parkville busway station is one example. The redevelopment of an Exxon gas station site in Parkville is another. This site on Park Street—vacant for 10 years—is particularly significant because it is on the Hartford-West Hartford line and therefore creates a first impression for people as they enter the City of Hartford. Neighborhood groups were ultimately successful in working with the developer to ensure that the project—a gas station/convenience mart—fit in with the neighborhood. This urban context station is a first for the region. The developer agreed to the following changes to the initial design proposed for the site:

- Direct sidewalk access to the convenience store;
- Fewer curb cuts, resulting in fewer pedestrian-vehicle conflict points;
- A landscaped buffer with a fence between the sidewalk and the parking lot and pump area;
- Bicycle parking; and
- Redesign of the store and canopy to reflect the architecture of the neighborhood.

In Suffield, a successful three-hour charrette was held involving 40 elected officials, town staff, and citizens. Participants were given maps, overlay sheets, and markers and asked to identify what they would like to see for the community—for example, areas that are important to preserve, as well as appropriate places for village or cluster development. The charrette resulted in a conceptual plan for development and preservation in Suffield.

Ongoing studies in each project community, as well as the best practices guide, will result in additional changes to transportation and community design practices.

REACTIONS

According to Linda Osten, project manager with CRCOG, findings from the telephone survey (available on CRCOG’s web site) show that “people really are concerned about where growth is happening in the region.” Media coverage of the survey generated inquiries from elected officials and real estate appraisers. Rather than spurring parochial concerns about growth, the project is helping give visibility to issues of regionalism and interconnectedness. Participants from Parkville

noted they now have a better appreciation of growth issues facing Suffield, while participants from Suffield have developed a deeper understanding of urban issues.

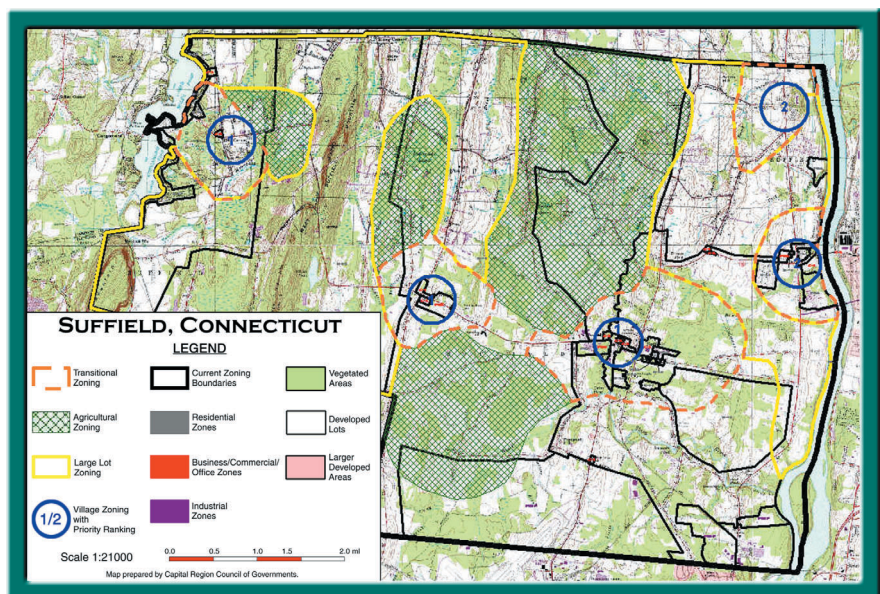
“Because of the TCSP project, we have a better understanding of transportation issues and how they relate to the neighborhood. We are also gaining a better understanding of what to look for in the design of new development.”

— Joe Langlais, Chair,
Parkville Community Association

Parkville neighborhood groups in particular are excited about the level of responsibility they have been given in the project. Participants praised both the city and CRCOG for their open and participatory approach to the project.

Reactions from the development community to the proposed growth concepts have been mixed. In the developer focus group, commercial developers were generally receptive to concepts such as mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly development, but noted difficulties such as zoning codes and the preference of banks to finance residential and commercial separately. Residential developers were more skeptical of the proposed concepts, with many believing that “people only want a single-family home on a one-acre lot.” Developers suggested subsidizing a “model development” to prove that these alternative concepts can work.

Another barrier to broader adoption of the design practices exhibited at the Exxon station site (which



required a zoning variance) is the reluctance of the City of Hartford to scare off potential developers. While changes to zoning codes or a more stringent design review process would help to ensure that future developments are “neighborhood-friendly,” some city and economic development agency officials fear that such changes could discourage much-needed development. The TCSP project team is crafting recommended zoning changes that it hopes will be politically acceptable as well as effective at shaping future development.

LESSONS LEARNED

The Hartford TCSP project illustrates the benefits of bringing together partners at all levels—including local jurisdictions, regional and state agencies, and neighborhood groups—to address issues related to transportation and land development. Participants noted some lessons learned from the project:

Involve the community from the beginning. Participants have enjoyed an unusually close and collaborative working relationship, fostered by CROG and the City of Hartford, which has led to more productive efforts and better outcomes. For example, the Parkville project team meets weekly, allowing members to become more educated on transportation and design issues. As a result, solutions to problems are driven by the community rather than the city or a consultant.

Both the DOT and the community can benefit by working together. Because of ConnDOT’s cooperative work with the neighborhood on station area design, the base of support for the busway has substantially increased.

“TCSP deserves credit for helping to move station area planning for the busway far earlier in the planning and design process than traditionally has been the case.”

– Kathy McCabe,
Parkville Project Manager

Small towns can benefit from outside planning assistance. Suffield recently hired its first full-time planner. Of 28 other towns in the region, roughly one-third are rural or small communities. Planners in these communities spend most of their time on site reviews and have little or no time to take a longer-range perspective on development. Developing a region-specific best practices manual, as the Hartford TCSP project is doing, is one way of assisting small towns and

cities in adopting relevant, locality-specific policies and zoning ordinances.

Good planning takes time, energy, and committed leadership. The Hartford project in general, and the Parkville neighborhood group in particular, is distinguished by a core of planners and community leaders who are committed to addressing problems and creating change. The collaborative planning approach has required extensive effort devoted to team-building through meetings, coordination, and personal communication; both the city and CROG admit that it may be difficult to replicate such intensive planning efforts for every project. Those involved, however, agree that while time consuming and occasionally cumbersome, such collaborative planning is worth the effort.

Don’t overlook the resources required for evaluation. Hartford’s original TCSP proposal included a number of ambitious evaluation measures, but project participants soon became so involved in project activities that they had difficulty addressing the evaluation. They have since narrowed the list of evaluation measures, focusing specifically on land use changes, and are pursuing additional resources for evaluating other impacts. Local business interests in the Parkville community have been one of the prime motivators for evaluating the success of the TCSP project.

The Hartford region is still in the early stages of developing transportation and land use strategies that simultaneously support community livability, economic development, and environmental protection. The successes of the TCSP project thus far have shown that a regional dialogue and local partnerships can, indeed, influence peoples’ thinking and lead to beneficial change.

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