

# Franklin Center

## Concepts for the Future

The center of the Town of Franklin is linked to the past, present and future of the community that surrounds it. Many of its buildings date from a time when it was the focus of local civic activity and commercial business. Trolleys used to run along Main Street, connecting the town center to other places of work and residential areas. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Franklin Center was an attractive place to work, shop and live.

Like many similar centers throughout New England, some of the commercial and civic vitality of the area has gradually been diminished as transportation and shopping patterns have changed. But the town center retains unusual assets that set the stage for a revitalized future. It remains the site of successful businesses, including local banks. The attractive campus of Dean College flanks the area, contributing the benefits of an academic culture. Splendid historic buildings line the streets within the center, and the streets that connect it to surrounding neighborhoods and the region. There is an MBTA commuter rail stop, and the Town owns some key buildings and parcels. Perhaps most importantly, there are citizens, businesspeople and property owners committed to the long-term success of the district.

Part of the revitalization effort requires creating a vision of the best future for the area. Such a vision can only be accomplished through a consistent program of improvements in the many facets of a healthy town center. This poster has been designed to indicate how a vision might be formed for the district, and to indicate how many separate initiatives and programs can be combined to dramatically change the center of Franklin. It has been prepared as an agenda for discussion and decisions that will involve hundreds of participants over several years. You are invited to join in the discussion and help determine how you can best contribute to the positive changes that could lie ahead.

At the center of the poster, ideas for improvements are illustrated to spur discussion. Around its perimeter are ideas about how programs and reinvestment can be coordinated and contribute to an attractive and valuable town center.

*This poster has been prepared through a design services grant to the Town of Franklin by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development. The concepts contained in this poster were prepared by The Cecil Group, Inc., based on ideas that emerged from meetings and workshops sponsored by the Town and involving numerous participants, including members of the Franklin Downtown Partnership – a non-profit corporation sponsoring programs and activities to enhance the town center. For more information about how to get involved, please contact Carol Harper, Downtown Manager, 508-520-4907.*

## 1. Architecture, Facades and Historic Preservation

The quality of the architecture in a town center is directly linked to its commercial success and value. Franklin Center is a genuinely historic community, with landmark-quality buildings that link the present to the past. Appropriate new architecture and high quality renovations can contribute to the ambiance of the district. However, many of the buildings today are in disrepair or have been altered in ways that detract from the success of the district as a whole. Positive change must happen gradually, with the willing support of property owners and businesses. Many similar communities have dramatically enhanced their town centers through coordinated programs, and Franklin could follow suit.

### Actions:

- Create special design guidelines to advise owners and builders
- Create a special grant or loan fund to support façade improvements
- Create site planning standards that reinforce the goals for the area

## 2. Streetscape Improvements: A Place to Walk

An attractive and safe pedestrian environment is a key component of a successful town center. People may drive or ride the train, but once they arrive to a place they prefer to walk. Parts of Franklin Center have been improved with trees, sidewalk extensions, and crosswalks. However, not all sidewalks are built according to ADA standards, crosswalks are not always well marked, and improvements need to be extended to other locations. Well designed and maintained sidewalks, crosswalks, street trees, ornamental lighting, benches, and sitting areas will contribute to attract people to a center that is perceived as being safe, active and pedestrian friendly.

### Actions:

- Create streetscape improvement programs to beautify the town center
- Create a program to enhance Main Street, including street banners and more trees
- Establish more and better pedestrian connections between points of interest
- Replace existing lighting with new ornamental fixtures
- Relocate utilities underground

## 3. Image and Identity: A Sense of Place

Places, and in particular public spaces, need to convey a strong and positive image to be memorable and attractive. In Franklin Center, image and identity can be strengthened by means of physical elements and programmed activities. The concepts of gateway design and the definition of district boundaries are important physical elements that help assert the image and identity of a place. Informational and directional signage also play an important role in definition and orientation as people find their way through the area.

### Actions:

- Design and build special gateway elements at the main points of access to the town center
- Enhance the design of the Main and East Central intersection as the key gateway area
- Incorporate art into the design of public spaces, such as painting, sculpture, music, and occasional live performances
- Initiate and sponsor an annual festival or seasonal events
- Create special informational and directional signage to identify the district



## 4. Better Parking and Pedestrian Connections

Close proximity and easy access between parking and centers of pedestrian activity is fundamental to a convenient town center. More and better parking seems to be a pressing need for Franklin Center in the future, especially if new businesses and amenities are developed. The potential to create new parking is limited by the lack of vacant sites. However, additional parking may be created through the following measures: reorganizing existing parking areas inside the triangular block formed by Main, Emmons and West Central Streets, adding parking spaces to some commercial lots along West Central Street, and building a parking deck or a garage facility adjacent to the MBTA station.

### Actions:

- Rationalize parking areas within the town center through public and private efforts
- Develop a strategy to build satellite parking and connecting pedestrian walkways
- Build a parking deck or a parking garage adjacent to the MBTA station

## 5. Circulation Strategies and Traffic Calming

The existing traffic circulation patterns at the core of the center rely on one-way streets around a triangular central block. These types of layouts tend to ease and expedite vehicular traffic, since they don't require too many stops or traffic lights. However, they are not necessarily pedestrian-friendly. There are places in Franklin Center where cars practically race through the area, and crossing the street may be dangerous. Traffic calming measures along Main Street, more pedestrian activated signals, and better crosswalks could help to substantially improve the quality of the pedestrian environment.

### Actions:

- Initiate transportation studies to identify circulation problems and strategies
- Investigate the potential for widening West Central Street and make it two-ways
- Implement traffic improvements to increase pedestrian safety and ADA compliance
- Investigate the potential to implement traffic calming measures along Main Street

## 6. Public Places: Coffee, Food, and Friends

Cafes, restaurants, and food establishments are important amenities that provide services to other businesses and animate public spaces. There are some popular restaurants in the town center of excellent quality, but there may also be opportunities for more. The clustering of restaurants close to each other actually tends to attract a larger number of customers looking for variety of choice, which often results in better business for the overall district. In Franklin Center, the proximity of Dean College represents an additional opportunity to develop a restaurant center atmosphere by catering to the needs and taste of college students.

### Actions:

- Promote the creation of more restaurants and cafés in the town center
- Work with Dean College to create a restaurant atmosphere attractive to students
- Explore the concepts of small courtyards, atrium spaces and outdoor café terraces

## 7. Cultural Uses: A Place to Go

The New England Center for the Performing Arts, currently in the planning stage, represents an extraordinary opportunity to add an important asset to the future of Franklin Center. The project is a joint initiative of the Franklin Performing Arts Company, the Franklin School for the Performing Arts, and Dean College. The center will feature a state-of-the-art 800-seat theater with a second 300-seat flexible venue, rehearsal halls and teaching studios. The performing arts center will create a new focus of activity on East Central Street. One of the key ideas that have been proposed for discussion is the design and construction of a pedestrian overpass that would connect the performing arts center to parking at the MBTA station.

### Actions:

- Support the proposed New England Center for the Performing Arts
- Develop a parking strategy, exploring connections to parking at the MBTA station
- Seek and find alternative reuse options for the existing performing arts school building
- Explore the potential to build a new cinema in the town center if the existing one closes

## 8. Mixed Use: A Place to Live, Shop and Visit

Traditional town centers combined working, learning and living spaces in the same neighborhood, sometimes even in the same building. The interaction of multiple uses and functions in proximity contributes to the perception of a district as being active and vibrant. Efforts to increase the livability of town centers often involve the inclusion of housing or civic spaces in commercial developments and vice versa. In Franklin Center, several buildings are in the process of changing use or ownership. These represent opportunities for innovation and the attraction of new amenities. The Old Town Hall, for example, could be redeveloped to include commercial uses, cultural activities, and possibly a food court or a retail market component.

### Actions:

- Promote the development of mixed use buildings in the town center whenever possible
- Explore the possibilities of converting the second floor of some buildings to residential use
- Encourage use of the ground floor for retail and civic spaces
- Initiate marketing studies to identify innovative reuse options for buildings in transition

## 9. Promoting Franklin Center

A successful town center requires a healthy mix of businesses, residences, and civic spaces that is adequate, adaptable to change, and sustainable. In an ever-changing world, national chains less vulnerable to the ups and downs of the market economy are replacing local shops. Marketing commercial spaces to selected prospective users, such as a retail specialty store, is an important management tool employed by shopping malls to ensure a continuous stream of customers and revenue. Communities like Franklin, can also benefit from employing similar techniques to identify and attract the most desirable uses to their town centers.

### Actions:

- Continue and expand marketing initiatives to attract the most desirable uses
- Create programs to manage and maintain the quality of the streetscape and public open spaces
- Seek alternative sources of funding for improvements and reinvestment, including public/private partnerships with business owners
- Initiate and continue efforts to retain "anchor" uses in the town center, such as the Post Office and Benjamin Franklin Savings Bank
- Initiate and continue efforts to attract new "anchor" retailers, such as Borders, The Gap, Starbucks Coffee, etc.