

# DNW DW

Downtown North / Downtown West  
A Plan for the City of Hartford

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# Project Vision

To harness the full potential of Downtown North and Downtown West by creating a seamless environment.

# Project Overview

This plan creates a framework that is founded on implementable projects, and builds a vision for long-term development. It builds upon past planning efforts for the area, and takes a fresh look by responding to changing economic conditions.

The plan, funded by a Department of Housing and Urban Development Sustainable Communities Grant, includes the following:

- **Existing Conditions Study:** The team conducted a thorough analysis of the existing conditions of the study area. This informed our planning approaches and decisions.
- **Market Analysis:** An analysis of the housing and retail markets has informed the development potential for the area. This information has been used to program design solutions and direct the appropriate uses for the study area.
- **Urban Design Framework:** A broad approach that assesses the whole of the study area and how it relates to its context has set the structure of bigger urban design moves, such as street alignments or new streets, open space networks, determining focus areas for development, etc.

- **Recommendations and Implementation Plan:** The final designs and development scenarios reflect a synthesis of market demand and a mix of public and private investments. A phased approach to the overall set of recommendations will be necessary.
- **Design Guidelines and Zoning:** Coordinated with the in-progress rewriting of the City of Hartford zoning, a new set of design guidelines for the City-owned parcels in Downtown North has been developed.

- This document comprehensively looks at
- 1 the vision for the project and the previous studies
  - 2 the physical evolution of the study area,
  - 3 the on-the-ground character of the study area,
  - 4 the condition of the existing transportation network,
  - 5 the state of existing parcels to help inform a planning strategy,
  - 6 five development scenarios and associated transportation improvements that form unique districts,
  - 7 additional transportation improvements,
  - 8 open space planning and landscape design for the study area and

- 9 design guidelines for City-owned parcels

This report provides a strategic approach to planning for Downtown North and Downtown West. It will also present a clearer framework for marketing the district for future development and informing requests for development proposals.

*This plan creates a framework based on implementable projects, and builds a vision for long-term development.*

# Vision for Hartford

## To harness the full potential of Downtown Hartford by creating a seamless built environment that balances pragmatism and vision.

The regeneration of Downtown North/ Downtown West (DN/DW) will require strategy, foresight, and opportunistic planning. The two areas differ in their scale, density, activity, and use. Downtown North is characterized by large underutilized parcels, non-contextual single-use buildings, and small but valuable remnants of the old neighborhood. Downtown West is a more lively urban environment offering the daily amenities one looks for in a city; however, it remains piecemeal at certain locations and is often pockmarked by surface parking lots.

These different conditions require unique approaches to each area. The consultant team used parcel testing for Downtown West sites to determine the development capacity. Downtown North requires a longer term strategy; with the City we developed criteria that helped us select the most opportune development sites for further testing. A phasing plan will prioritize the study area’s development sites.

In addition to development sites there should be a concurrent focus on connectivity, streetscape and pedestrian conditions, and access to open space. The roads in Downtown North are generally over-scaled and should partially be geared to pedestrian movement rather than solely vehicular. There is a dearth of open space in the majority of the study area; however, Riverside Park, immediately across the interstate, is a major citywide asset. Access to the riverfront park is a priority for this planning study.

Ultimately, beyond establishing development priorities, the goal of the plan is to set a template for the growth of a neighborhood in Downtown North and to “fill in the gaps” in Downtown West. This long-term process can have the effect of breaching the physical divide between Downtown Hartford and the adjacent neighborhoods, as well as making Downtown Hartford a desirable place to live and visit.



Sizeable vacant lots provide opportunities for large-scale development. Sites that about I-91 should explore ways to connect to Riverside Park and the Connecticut River



Riverside Park is a major citywide asset, but remains somewhat inaccessible from the rest of the study area.

# Study Area Evolution

Traces of the old neighborhood remain, as does the hope that a new neighborhood will emerge.

The area north of I-84 has witnessed substantive change over the last 50 plus years, suffering the wholesale demolition of much of the neighborhood in the 1960s. What was once a largely residential neighborhood adjacent to heavy rail infrastructure, was cleared for larger-scale commercial development. The neighborhood to the west of Main Street witnessed a more piecemeal deterioration, with an urban landscape that reveals gaps in



1640 Map of Hartford, CT

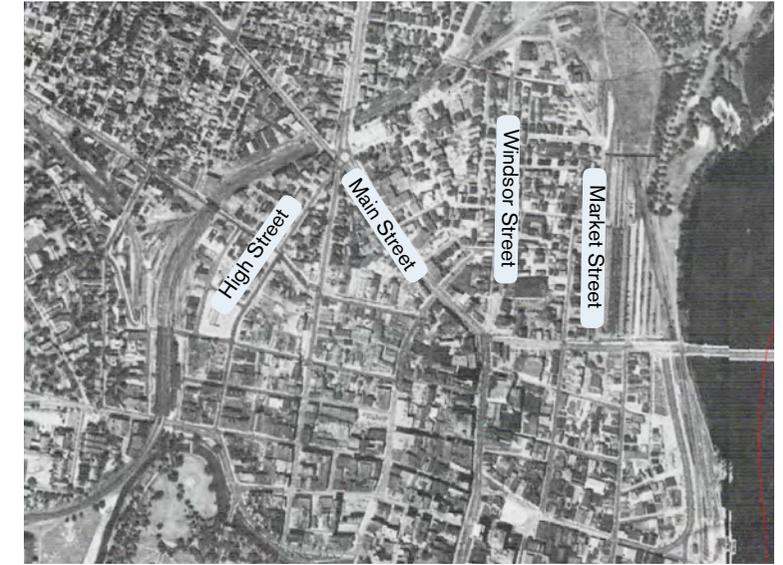
its continuity. However, it is witnessing new investment and prioritizing preservation of its historical assets.

Downtown West's transformation over the same period of time is less dramatic, as it has retained much of its historic structure and many of its buildings. Some have been replaced by commercial office buildings or event spaces, such as the XL Center, and surface parking lots that scatter the area remain an obstacle to the area evolving into a true neighborhood.

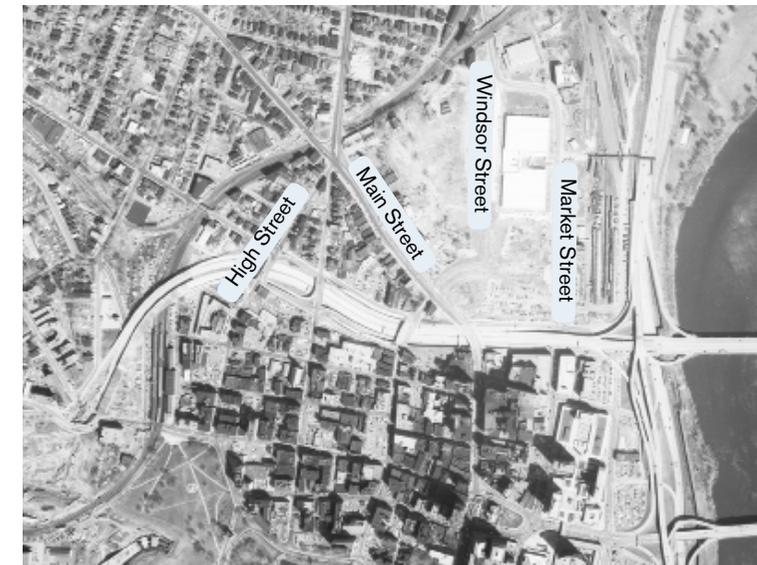
A 1640 map of the City of Hartford shows the primary structure of a street network that still holds true today. Albany Avenue/ Main Street, High Street, and Windsor Street served as paths to the city center. Observing the street network today shows that Main Street still forms the backbone of the study area and is the primary connection to downtown. High Street, also represented on the 1640 map, will become an increasingly important connection as the primary pedestrian route to an evolving Union Station.



1880 Sanborn Map



1934 Aerial Photo



1960's Aerial Photo



2008 Aerial Photo

# Previous Studies

## Building upon Hartford's Plans

Few plans are born without precedence. They are almost always an effort to build upon prior studies that served as a solid stepping stone, or else they provide a fresh view to something that has lost its relevance due to changing economic conditions or approaches to urban planning.

A broad range of studies have been done for Downtown Hartford, but there are a few with particular relevance to Downtown North and Downtown West. These studies are both foundational for this master plan and, in some cases, in need of reexamination. They provide directives ranging from future land use assumptions to targeting areas and buildings that are well suited for redevelopment to creating a public realm plan and cognitive map of how to navigate Downtown Hartford to best take advantage of its assets.

Understanding these plans, why they were needed, and where they should be taken will help inform our planning decisions, so as not to contradict universally accepted recommendations and to avoid commonly agreed upon mistakes.

### Downtown West Opportunities Plan

The purpose of the plan, commissioned in 2006, was to guide public and private investment by identifying areas in Downtown West that are well suited for redevelopment. Many of these areas or properties are still relevant with respect to their development potential and were further explored during this planning process. The plan focused on six components

- Development Anchors
- Cultural and Entertainment Assets
- Development Challenges / Opportunities
- Potential Sites for a Parking Garage
- Office / Mixed Use Opportunities
- Housing Opportunities

A reexamination of this document informed our assumptions about the state of certain properties in Downtown West.

### Downtown Circulation Study

The 2010 Downtown Circulation Study was a comprehensive plan to understand Hartford's current circulation patterns, demands, and needs.

Projects were identified that resolve some of the major issues for downtown, as well as work with the One City, One Plan Comprehensive Plan for Hartford. They are

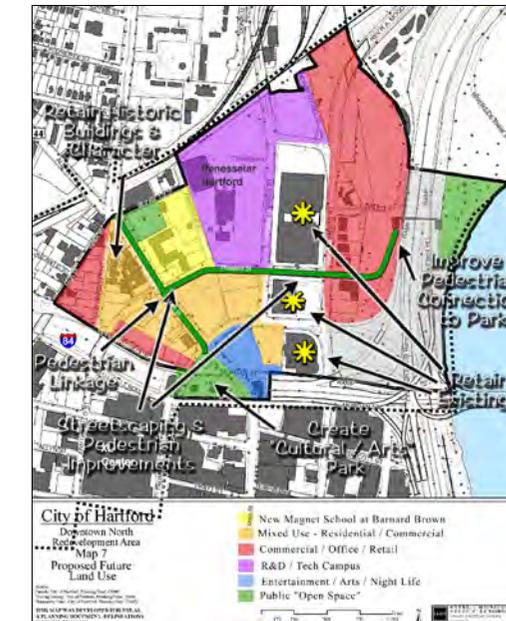
1. Asylum Street Improvements
2. North Chapel/Walnut Street
3. Columbus Blvd/Market Street
4. Market Street and Morgan Street

The projects were largely concerned with the conversion of one-ways to two-ways, as well as intersection redesign for improved traffic mobility at peak-periods.

### Downtown North

The Downtown North project from 2008 provided a platform from which this master plan evolved. Its purpose was to “remove obsolete and blighted buildings from a critical perimeter area of the Downtown, conduct site assemblage, and create a development opportunity for mixed-use development, rehabilitation of historic structures, and educational and commercial development that will strengthen the development patterns of the Project Area”.

This current plan takes into consideration the findings and observations made by the Downtown North plan and take this



Land Use Plan from the 2008 Downtown North plan

approach to a greater level of detail and a larger expanse of area.

The Downtown North plan identified five discrete areas with unique characteristics. They were

- ① The Ann Street Historic Corridor;
- ② Trumbull Street Village;

- ③ Downtown North Technology Campus;
- ④ Market Street Service Corridor; and
- ⑤ the New Magnet School at Barnard-Brown.

The assessment of these areas and their characteristics were considered in the master planning process, but adherence to them was not requisite, as development conditions have changed and City priorities have shifted. Nonetheless, this document proved to be an instructive guide to the conditions of Downtown North and Downtown West.

### iQuilt

In 2008 the iQuilt planning process began, born out of the recognition that while Hartford is fortunate to have a wealth of cultural assets, the links between those assets are often broken, disparate, and unapparent.

The iQuilt Plan is summarized as “Downtown Hartford’s exciting urban design strategy for walkability and creative placemaking. It capitalizes on two of Hartford’s greatest strengths: its extraordinary concentration of arts, cultural, and landscape assets and its

exceptionally compact downtown.” The plan is by most measures focused on signage, wayfinding, and placemaking strategies for Downtown Hartford - primarily projects in the public realm of varying scales and time frames.

The centerpiece of the iQuilt is the Greenwalk Master Plan. This is a landscape and public realm strategy and design concept that proposes a strong linear “green” connection from the Connecticut River to Bushnell Park, linking the City’s two greatest open space assets and providing a much needed east-west connection across downtown. The new Greenwalk will also be located so as to be no more than a 5-minute walk from many of Hartford’s treasured cultural assets. The plan becomes manifold; it is a way to connect open spaces, provide wayfinding, and encourage tourist and residents alike to visit Hartford’s valued cultural destinations.



# Study Area Character

By bearing both the traces of its historical structure and the scars of urban renewal planning, the study area also reveals the potential for change.

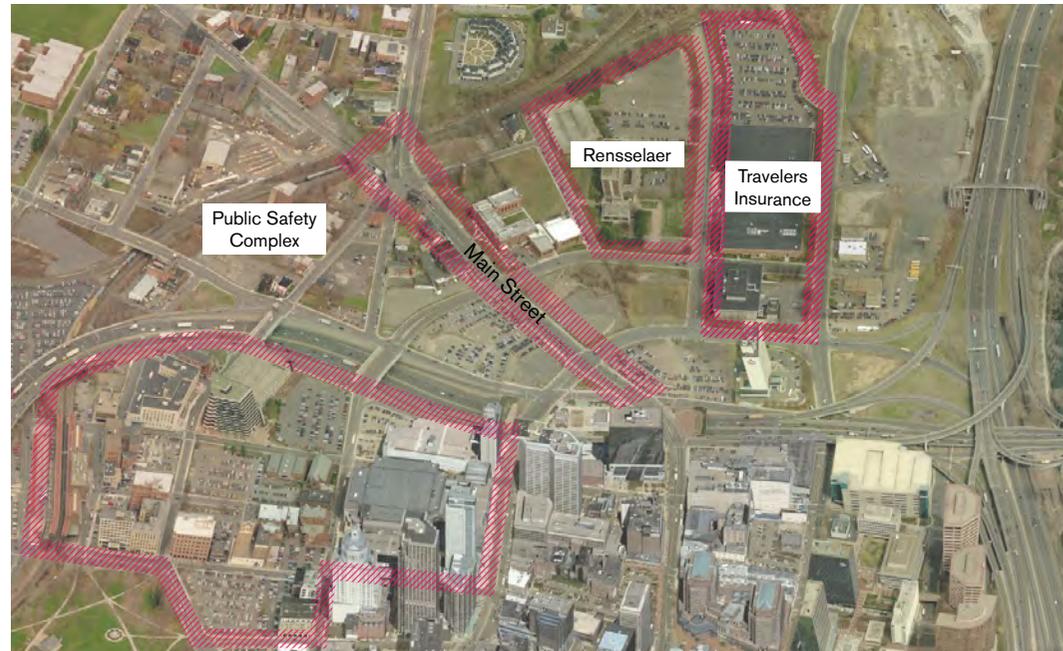
# Study Area Character

The greatest challenges, and opportunities, of the study area lie in the regeneration of underutilized sites.

The clearance of the Downtown North in the 1960s removed a fine-grained urban street network that was a mix of residential uses and local retail, and replaced it with

monolithic buildings, such as the Travelers Insurance building and the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and surface parking lots. East of Main Street only a handful of buildings exist. The area is a collection of vacant or underutilized lots and surface parking. Along Main Street is collection of neighborhood retail buildings. The most significant new structure and investment in the area is the Public Safety Complex.

In contrast, Downtown West is a collection of turn-of-the-century commercial and residential buildings; however, it also is not immune from an ample collection of surface parking lots. Downtown West includes Union Station and the XL Center, two major landmarks in the city that draw visitors, as well as a collection of bars, restaurants, and institutional buildings, clustered south of I-84.



Pedestrian bridge over I-91: The only access in the study area to Riverside Park is via the imposing and isolated pedestrian bridge. Additional access points to the waterfront are needed, as well as improvements to the pedestrian overpass.

This aerial shows the extents of the study area, which is partly characterized by underutilized parcels, surface parking lots north of I-84, and a more active urban environment in the Downtown West area.



The photos demonstrate the varied character of the study area, ranging from neighborhood retail along Main Street to a bucolic Riverfront Park.

## Roads

The majority of the streets in Downtown North that are north of I-84 tend to be oversized or poorly utilized. Many of them are built for a higher traffic volume than is present, such as Market Street and Pleasant Street. These are streets that could be narrowed to accommodate wider sidewalks, bike lanes, or on-street parking where necessary.

The streets south of I-84 in Downtown West tend to be more urban in nature with on-street parking, narrower lanes, shorter pedestrian crossing distances, and more intersections at which to cross.

Specific problem areas include

- ❶ Market Street: Despite being only four lanes, the street feels expansive and underused.
- ❷ Intersection at Main Street and Albany Avenue: The intersection is intimidating to pedestrians and confusing to drivers.
- ❸ Highway crossings: Bridge crossings and highway underpasses should be improved to draw people comfortably from Downtown North to Downtown West.
- ❹ Scale of streets: As future development is built, the streets should be redesigned to Complete Streets standards.



Market Street: Lined by parking lots, scattered uses, and the Travelers Insurance building is a high speed corridor that should be evaluated in the planning process.



Intersection at Albany Avenue and Main Street: Main Street is an important commercial node for the area, but it fails to offer a walkable environment for people in the neighborhood.

## Parcels

The greatest challenge for the study area is also the best opportunity for change. The number of vacant or underutilized parcels in both Downtown North and Downtown West, many of which are City-owned parcels, present strategic development sites for infill development and may be a way to spur development on a district scale.

An incremental approach to parcel redevelopment is more appropriate for Downtown West, while parts of Downtown North along Market Street present a chance for large-scale redevelopment.



### Public Ownership

City-owned property, such as the parcels at Main Street, Trumbull Street, and Pleasant Street (totaling 8.3 acres) are well suited for redevelopment. Their adjacency to the downtown core can help bridge the gap between the two areas.



The underutilized parcels between Market Street and I-91 present opportunities for large-scale redevelopment

### Key Buildings

The buildings in study area vary greatly by their use, size, context and engagement with the city. Different areas within the project boundary have distinct building character and uses.

Areas to the east of Main Street in Downtown North have larger, often monolithic, single-use buildings, such as the Travelers Insurance building, and the Rensselaer campus building. They tend to be removed from the street edge and any urban context. Generally, they are surrounded by surface parking lots or an apron of landscaping.

Main Street still retains some of the original three-story commercial and residential structures. This neighborhood scale should be built upon for future development. The new Public Safety Complex on High Street is the first step toward changing the character of that area.

Downtown West has a substantive amount of historic, mixed-use building types. This scale of density and its relationship to the city should be preserved and built upon in this area.



Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Hartford campus is surrounded by a landscaped lawn and surface parking lots to the rear of the building.



The buildings along Main Street are remnants of the original neighborhood prior to urban renewal and should be preserved and built upon in future plans.



The new Public Safety Complex along High Street shows a commitment by the City to spur development in this area.



The vacant building at the intersection of Market Street and Trumbull Street is a barrier to creating east-west development continuity.



The Travelers Building, which stretches multiple city blocks, is an impediment to creating strong east-west connections and is a difficult presence on Market Street.



Union Station is a major hub for the city expansion plans, including the new busway project, will make it a significant part of the redevelopment of Downtown West.

### Open Space

One of the city's greatest assets is Riverside Park; however, it remains difficult to access. Within the study area is 152 acres of open space with trails running along the river front for 2,000 linear feet. Unfortunately, not only is it not visible, but it's difficult and unpleasant to access for pedestrians.

Currently the only access point to this part of the riverfront is the pedestrian bridge over I-91. The next closest point is the set of steps at the Science Center Park. There is vehicular access, but it is well north of the study area. Connecting the amenity of the park to the study area is a priority in the master plan.

