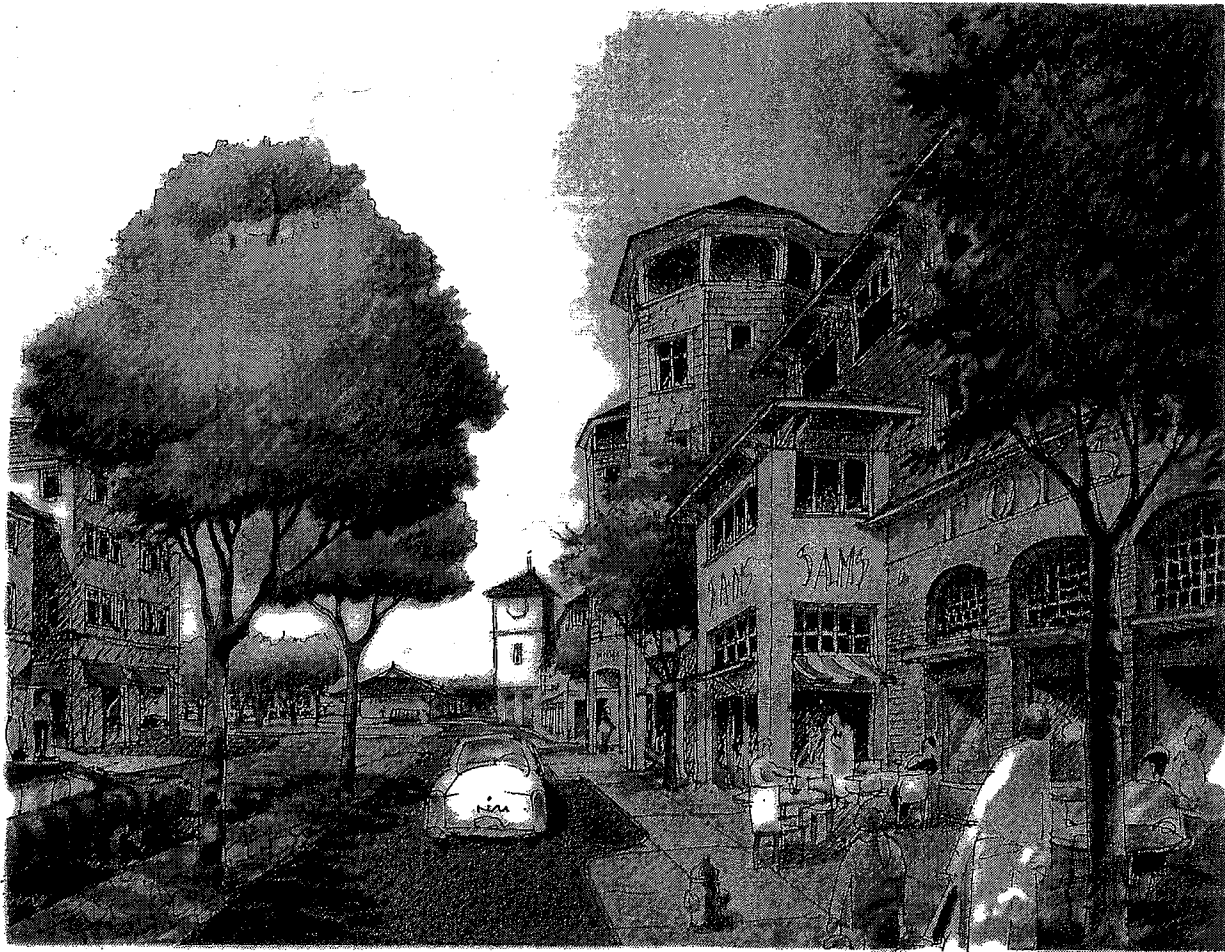


TOWN CENTER PLAN FOR THE CITY OF MERCER ISLAND

NOVEMBER 30, 1994



THE CITY OF MERCER ISLAND
AND
THE REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY
WASHINGTON STATE

PREPARED BY
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THE CITIZENS OF MERCER ISLAND

The Town Center Design as Part of the Comprehensive Planning Process

The Town Center Design is a critical step in the City of Mercer Island's effort to revitalize it's downtown. Begun in late 1992, the CBD Revitalization effort has been a consistent marriage of public involvement and reality-based town planning. The initial steps in the City's effort brought together more than 200 citizens into a series of planning, research, education and discussion sessions. Tempered by professional expertise, the "citizen visioning" process culminated at a May 1993 Design Charrette. The event produced a broad vision and direction for future downtown development.

This citizen vision became the foundation for the drafting of the City's (state required) Comprehensive Plan. The Comprehensive Plan, completed in the fall of 1994, describes the broad goals and strategies for future growth in the community. In order to implement this plan, the City must now rewrite the zoning code, the true regulator of growth.

An effective code for the town center must create value for the City. Rather than being seen as an impediment, a good code regulates the build-out of the town center in a predictable, feasible process. It must reflect a shared community vision of its function and its form, and it must facilitate, not hinder, those developers who abide by it.

The Town Center Design Workshop

The goal of the design workshop was to arrive at a shared, feasible vision, plan, and code for the town center. The process would bring all key players and citizens together with design professionals to test detailed alternatives.

The participants were: citizens-at-large, elected city officials, city planning staff, city Planning and Design Commission representatives, Metro and Regional Transit Authority (RTA) representatives and engineers, landowners, developers, economic and marketing analysts, planners, and architects.

The impending arrival of light rail system, or the upgrading of the regional bus system, is an opportunity to organize the downtown around the transit station. As a sponsor of the workshop, the RTA was interested in the design of the transit station and its relation to the Mercer Island Town Center, as a possible model for the region. It was important, however, that the plan of the town center not be dependent on a station, since its future is still to be determined by the regions' voters.

The workshop was held at "The Connection", a city-leased meeting facility in the center of the downtown. The facility was transformed into a complete working design center. For five days and six nights, a core design team worked continuously, incorporating the input gathered from three public design sessions. The event was publicly announced. The door was always open for interested citizens to drop by. During the 5 days, designers worked with Metro and RTA on the station, with citizens and business owners in the study area, with landowners on their development potentials, and with city on zoning codes. In order to assure that efforts were based in reality each design step was analyzed for economic and marketing feasibility.

The results were presented at the session of the City Council on December 7.

Outcomes of the Workshop

The product of the workshop contains 4 components: The Plan and its Codes, The Demonstration Projects, The Market and Economic Analysis, and The Next Steps.

The Plan and its Codes

The intention of the Town Center Plan is to show how the area could be built out over time. It is an illustrative plan, showing feasible designs based on the code. It is comprised of the overall illustrated plan, the zoning map, and the code. There are two major public centers of the plan: Station Square and a Civic Square. In addition to the transit station itself, Station Square contains a site for a hotel, parking structures and a multi-use building for offices, retail and cinemas. The Civic Square, located to the at 30th and 78th, is intended to add day and night activity to the south of 78th street in the form of perhaps a public theater and a postal station.

Well placed, adequate parking, is important to a successful plan. The basic parking strategy is to locate it not only at the station, but throughout the downtown, specifically behind the buildings that will front the sidewalks of 78th street. The economic study shows that the market will not support the construction of parking structures - it is necessarily a public and private responsibility. Additionally, a parking management program must assure that there are adequate spaces for commercial business.

The code proposed for the town center addresses, building use, location and height. In order to promote around-the-clock activity in the town center, mixed-use, (commercial, retail and residential, within the same building), is allowed in the town center area. People will only walk when it is interesting and safe. In order to make streets that encourage pedestrian activity, buildings are required to line the sidewalk with their parking behind. All major entries must be off the sidewalk. This sidewalk-focused activity brings supervision and safety to the street as well as visual interest.

The comprehensive plan has a 5 story maximum for the town center. In order to allow views throughout the downtown and to ensure variety of building mass along the street, the 5 story sites are reserved for corners only. Midblock sites have a maximum of three stories with a 10 foot setback and a two story maximum with zero setback.

The Demonstration Projects

The feasibility and vision of the plan was tested on four demonstration sites. Working with local landowners, architects developed alternative designs and phasing strategies for four sites. Marketing and economic analysis was done on each. Demonstration project #1, primarily a residential project with some ground floor retail, proved most feasible in today's market.

Marketing and Economic Evaluation

Present at the workshop was Greg Easton, the author of the recently completed *Economic Analysis of Proposed Downtown Land Use Plan*. This study provided a valuable foundation for the design effort. Analysts were able to make use of recent data when advising designers and in the specific analysis of the demonstration projects.

The major points of the market analysis of this previous study are:

- The Mercer Island Downtown can expect to attract the Island's employment growth and multifamily development.
- Office development in the downtown will attract primarily Island-serving uses, but may also attract some regional serving uses.
- The downtown retailers can attract spending by both local and non-Island residents.
- The Island could attract either a highway oriented hotel or smaller specialty inn.

The major points of the financial analysis of this previous study are:

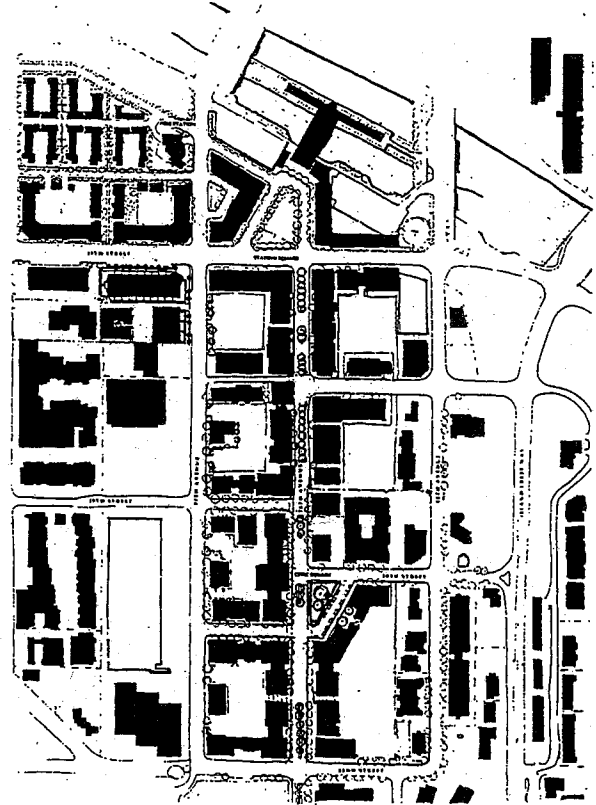
- Residential development is the most feasible use in the near term. The prospects of other uses will improve as local and regional development pressures increase.
- Structured parking is not supportable at this time without public assistance.
- Ground floor retail can be a strong contributor to development feasibility on good retail sites.

(See appendix for a complete *Summary of Previous Economic Study*).

The Next Steps

Plans without a clear strategy for achieving them are those which gather dust on the shelves of municipal libraries. The workshop benefited from the advice of C.R. Douglas of the Seattle Commons. The Mercer Island Town Center shares many of the same challenges as the Commons project: it is basically a private/public venture to redevelop a single use area into a vibrant mixed-use center. The full set of recommendations are at the end of this report. The major points are to:

- Create a shared vision.
- Establish a new entity to be a "custodian of the vision."
- Make a headquarters of operation in the town center area.
- Initiate creative fundraising.
- Enact a community outreach program.

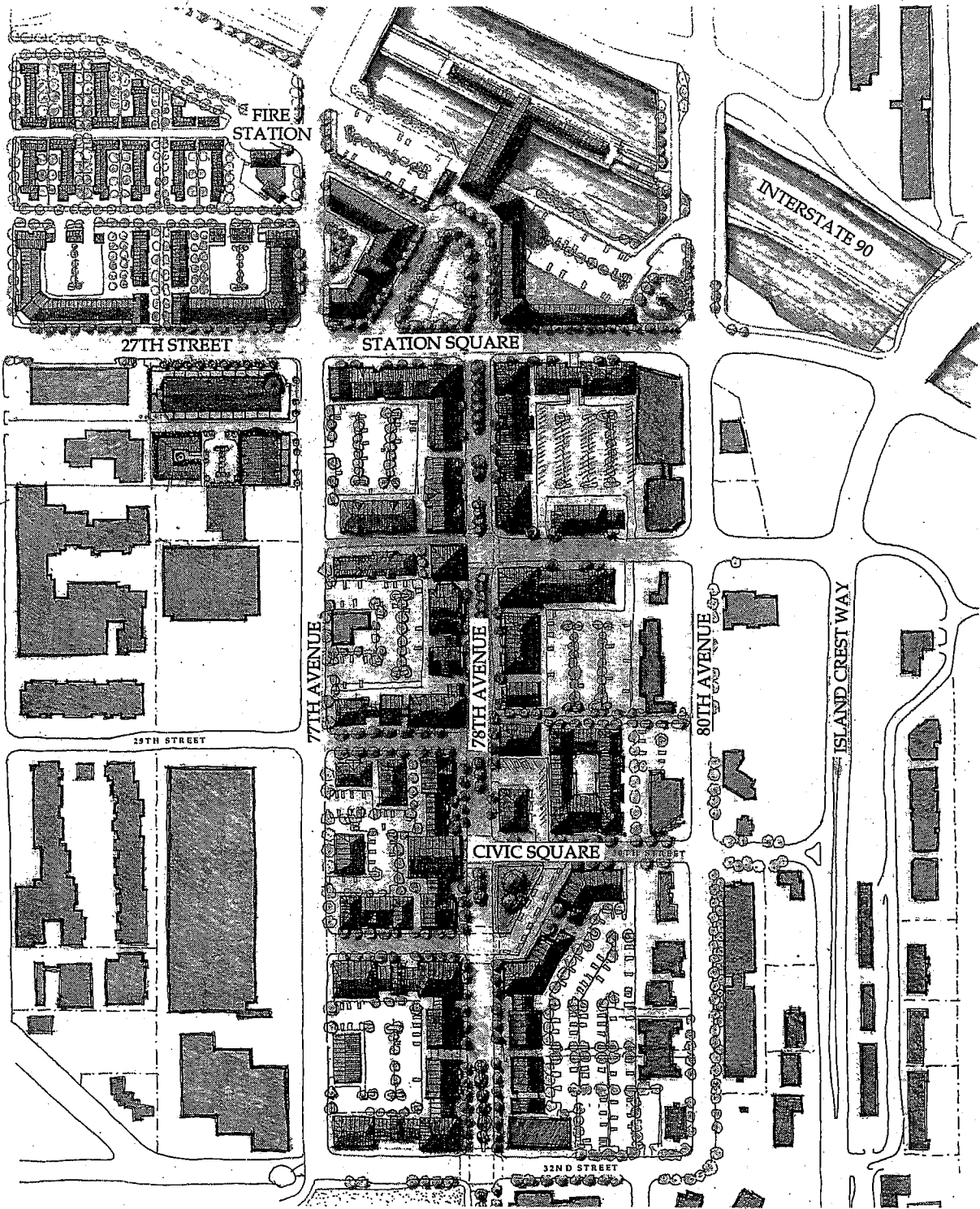


EXISTING DOWNTOWN

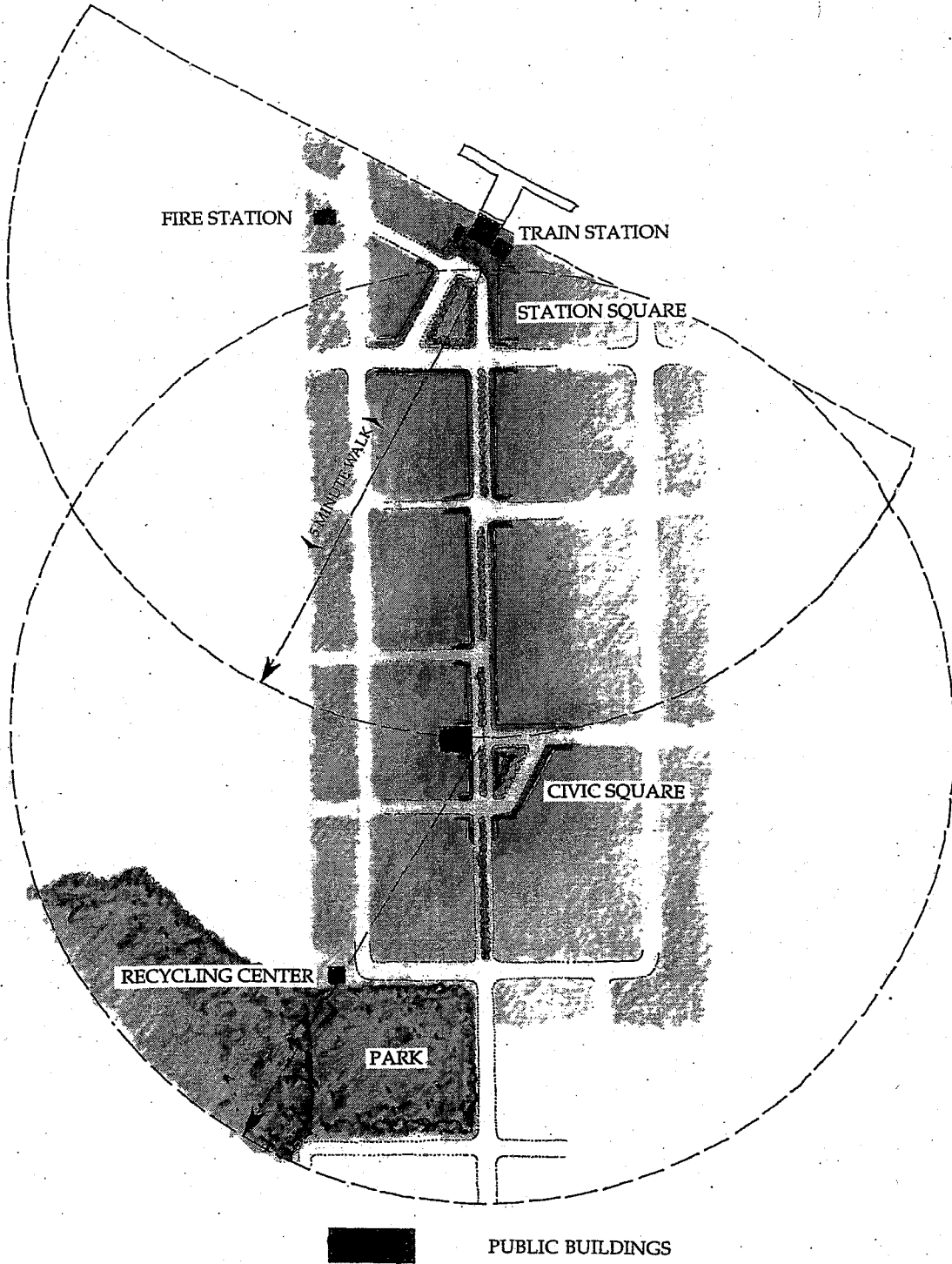
Downtown Mercer Island is currently dominated by a pattern of single use, low rise buildings, separated from the street by parking lots. The new street improvements, however, now provide the infrastructure upon which to build pedestrian oriented streets. The existing blocks west of 78th are 800 feet in length; far too long for sufficient circulation of cars and pedestrians.

TOWN CENTER PLAN

The Town Center Plan reverses the existing pattern by locating buildings long the sidewalks (setback between 0 and 10 feet) and moving the parking out of sight behind the buildings. Parking lots are accessed off secondary streets only. The large blocks are broken up with an new 31st street and a 30th lane.



The Town Center Plan is based on the Comprehensive Plan which identifies the entire district as a mixed-use zone with the development of 78th Avenue as the major pedestrian-oriented retail street, a location of a "town center" around the intersection of 27th and 78th, and a major parking facility in the station area north of 27th and 78th. The plan creates a "station square" as the town center, and lines 78th with mixed-use buildings that have ground floor retail with parking behind. A second civic square is located at 30th and 78th to bring day and night activity to the south end of the street. In order to increase circulation, the proposal calls for the creation of two new streets, 26th between 76th and 77th, and 31st street between 77th and 78th and an extension of 28th west of 78th as a lane.



PUBLIC SPACES & BUILDINGS

The quarter-mile or a 5 minute walk, is the measure of a neighborhood. In the Town Center Plan, there are placed the Station Square, with the transit station, and The Civic Square, with its public theater, a quarter mile from each other. Within another quarter mile south of Civic Square is the Mercerdale Park, site of the recycling center, a social magnet. This even distribution of public spaces and building will act as the social centers of downtown.

ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT OF OVERALL DESIGN CONCEPT

The overall design concept addresses certain economic principals and is responsive to the findings of the previous study. The key elements of the concept from an economic perspective are described below.

MIX OF USES

The concept includes a mix of uses which draw support from off-island, the island as a whole, and from the downtown itself.

- There is a range of housing available from two story townhouses to housing over retail, to park-like residential blocks. The characteristics of the housing in the downtown will change over time in response to other development. Initially, the development will likely feature large units in single purpose residential structures (or structures with some retail).
- Office development is provided in street front facilities, between retail and residential in mixed use facilities, or in commercial structures (including office and retail). Such development would meet the needs of Island-serving office users.
- Retail development is accommodated in street front space for convenience retail, small scale retail complexes on the ground floor of mixed use buildings, and at stands and carts. Large scale retail such as grocery stores would remain where they currently exist. There are various sites offering special opportunities for restaurant development - either around public plazas, central courtyards or upper level view space. A movie theater is shown. Such a theater could offer classic, art, or second run films; or if competitive conditions warranted, offer first run films in a multi-screen format.
- Hotel development is shown on a site facing on the station square. Such a site offers the kind of high amenity setting which would be necessary for a specialty inn as suggested in the previous market overview.

PROVISION OF PARKING

Provision of parking is a key element of the plan. Parking must be ample in amount and conveniently located to meet of the needs of tenants and users; designed to avoid the image of a vast open parking lot; and available to developers at an affordable development cost. The plan calls for 2 structures offering parking for commuters adjacent to the rail station. This parking could be made available in off-hours for other users.

Other parking is to be offered in the interior of blocks throughout the downtown. Such parking must be designed to assure service access to adjacent buildings and preserve an attractive outlook for tenants of adjacent office or residential development. Some mechanism must be devised to allow for coordinated management of parking facilities and some form of public subsidy. One possibility is a downtown business improvement association which could manage publicly funded parking structures on privately owned land.

CREATION OF AMENITY

The type of development which the City desires and which is shown in the plan will require higher rents and sales prices for the new uses. Such increases will only be supportable if the market perceives the downtown as an attractive place to locate. The plan shows several amenities which will contribute to this perception.

- The Station Square is the focal point of the development at the north end of downtown.
- The small square at 30th and 78th provides a similar feature to the south.
- The pedestrian oriented 78th provides a link between the two, effectively connecting the downtown from north to south.

Additional public amenities to the east and west of 78th should be incorporated over time to enhance the entire downtown.

USER DRAW

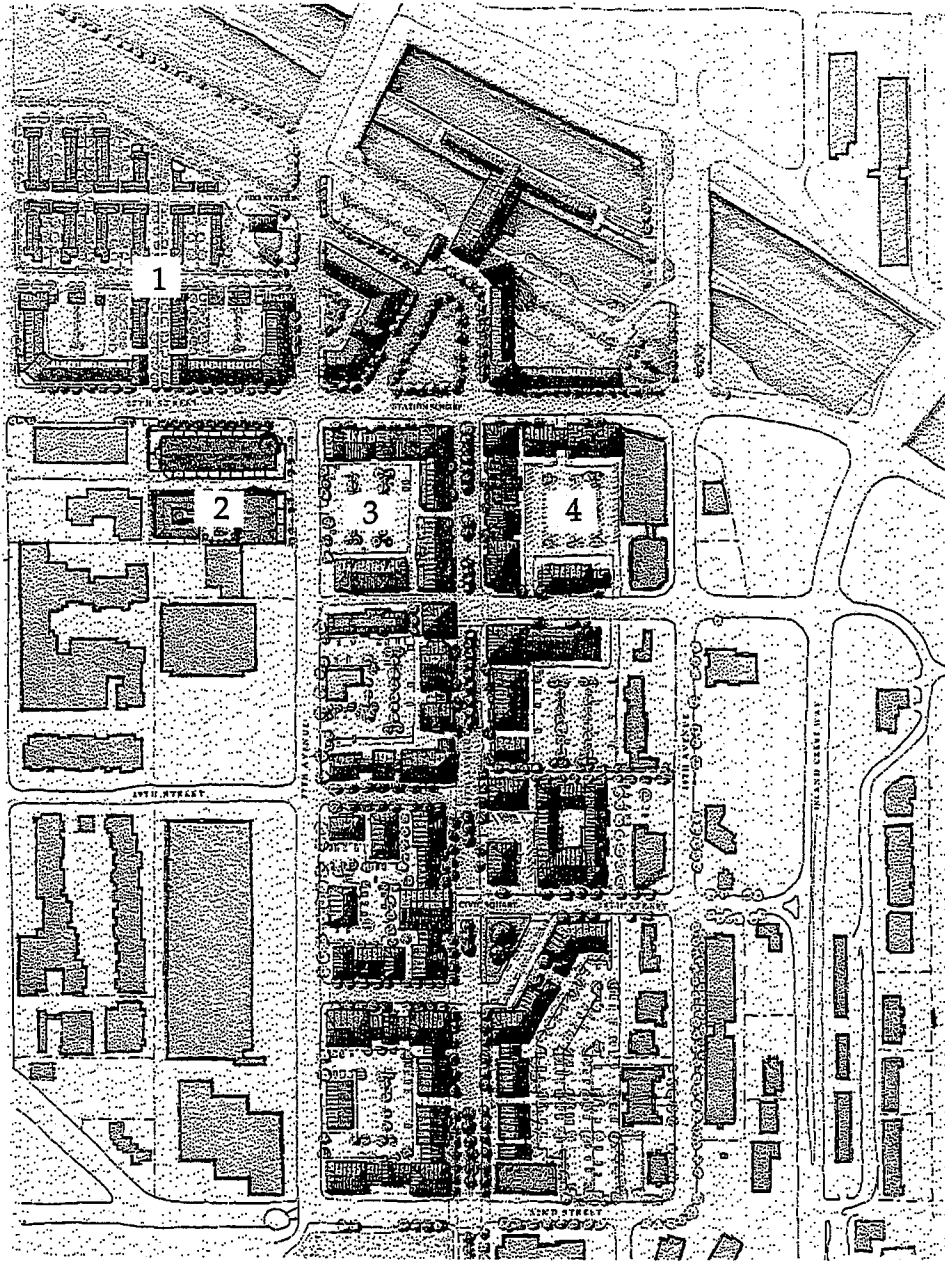
Inclusion of a special attraction can provide a catalyst for additional development. The plan includes several such attractions.

- The transit station will generate traffic including both inbound and outbound commuters. These users will require a variety of convenience goods and services - coffee, newspapers, drycleaning, and daycare. In addition, these users will be exposed to other businesses which they may choose to patronize at times other than their daily commute.
- The public facilities such as a community center or community theater will attract users to the downtown. Such facilities may complement the transit station as they attract users in the evening and/or weekends.
- Some private commercial establishments create a significant draw both locally and regionally. Certain restaurants achieve this status as do certain specialty retailers. Similarly a movie theater can serve as this type of draw.

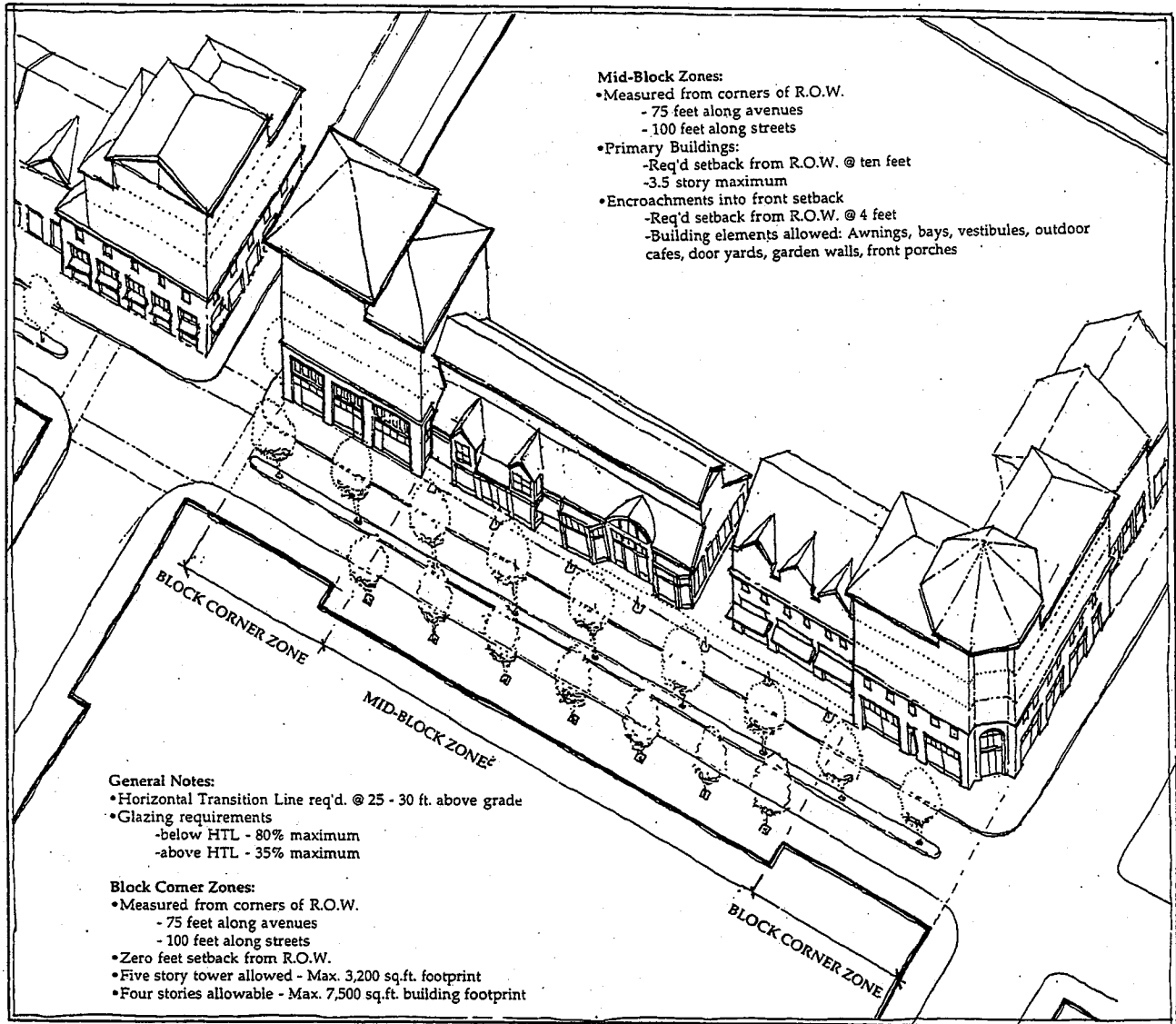
OBJECTIVES, FOR DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

The conclusion of the previous economic analysis and the assessment of the overall concept support the identification of demonstration projects which offer the following:

- A demonstration project offering residential development with ground floor retail space and surface parking would be feasible and could be developed now.
- Demonstration projects featuring higher intensity mix use development can be developed over time to take advantage of the new amenities created in downtown as well as investments in public parking and other elements of a coordinated parking strategy.

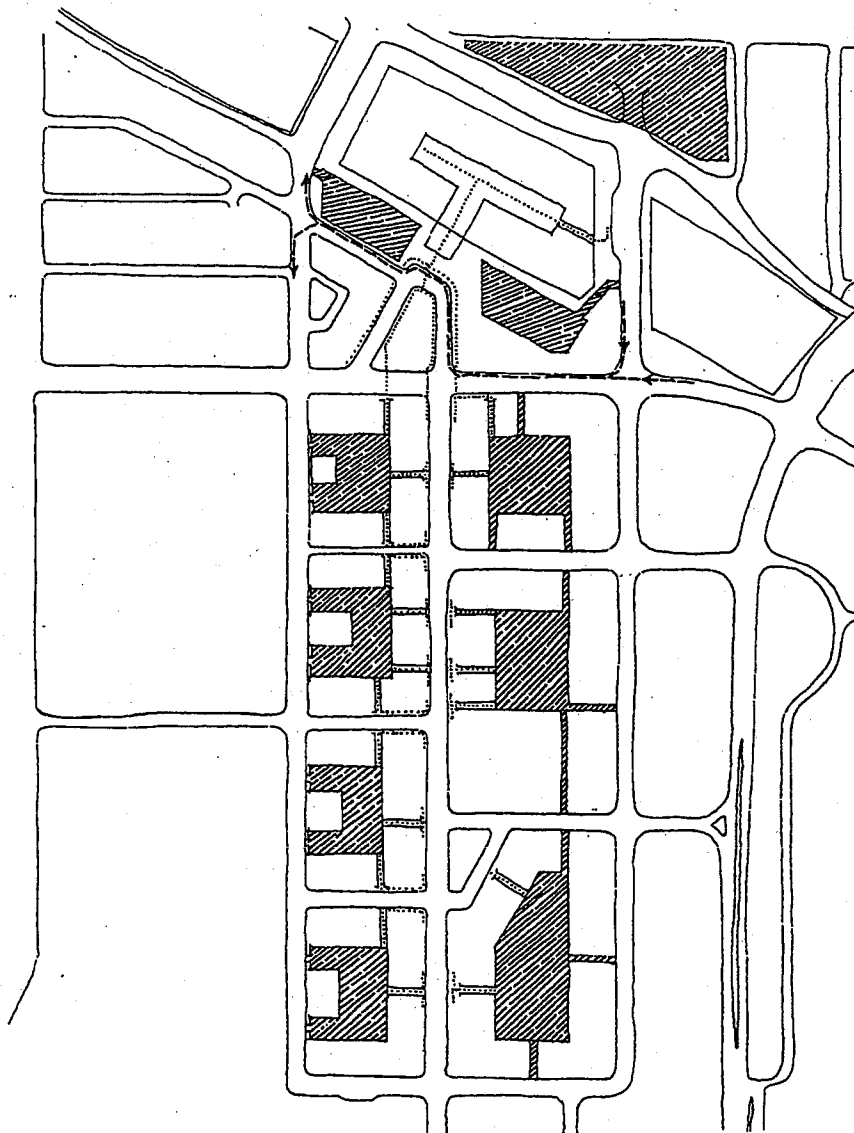


In addition to the Station Square, four demonstration projects, comprising the surrounding parcels, were detailed in the workshop. The purpose was to test the zoning and architectural coding proposals for financial/market feasibility. Each project was designed in 1/16" scale and under the market advise and financial analysis of the economic team. The conclusion of the previous economic analysis and the assessment of the overall concept support the identification of demonstration projects which offer the following: a demonstration project offering residential development with ground floor retail space and surface parking would be feasible and could be developed now, and demonstration projects featuring higher intensity mix use development can be developed over time to take advantage of the new amenities created in downtown as well as investments in public parking and other elements of a coordinated parking strategy.




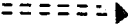


BUILDING PLACEMENT AND MASSING

The placement of buildings along 78th is intended to provide a variety of height and setback while maintaining a unified street edge. In general, corner sites are allowed to be built to 5 stories and are placed to the sidewalk right-of-way. Mid-block sites can go to 3 1/2 stories and are set back 10 feet from the right-of-way, with 2 story building elements set back 4 feet. These setbacks give way to existing trees and provide space for outdoor seating and displays, (see details in above drawing).



DRAWING KEY

-  ON SITE PARKING
-  PARKING LANE
-  PEDESTRIAN WAY
-  BUS ACCESS AND EGRESS

CARS AND BUSES

In order to activate 78th street with pedestrians, the parking is distributed in the center of each block. Car access is from the secondary streets, with pedestrian paths linking the lots to 78th. Parking is managed so that adequate spaces are guaranteed for commercial, and residential uses. The local bus system serves the station by entering Station Square at 78th and exiting the square via the new street north of the hotel.

