

So much of Lexington's desirability as a place to live and work is grounded in the health of its downtown. Many residents, however, believe that Lexington Center isn't healthy—and not without reason. Lexington's Colonial Times is introducing a new feature called Center Beat—occasional reports on the forces that shape Lexington's downtown, the factors that contribute to its vitality, and the issues that sap its strength. The aim is to spark informed conversations about what's wrong—and right—with Lexington Center, and to inspire positive changes. This month's inaugural article offers a primer on the many variables affecting our downtown.

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Empty storefronts and “Space for Lease” signs in our central business district (CBD) have many residents and business owners worried that Lexington's downtown is in decline. Although many shops continue to thrive, over the past five to ten years, numerous businesses have come and gone in Lexington Center. Often retail stores leave only to be replaced with a non-retail business, which weakens the shopping environment for businesses that remain in the Center.

The recent economic downturn can be blamed for some of the current distress, but the Center “problem” has been around longer than the current woes and so have the efforts to address it. Why have so many businesses failed in Lexington? Are we encouraging the right type of businesses to locate in Lexington? What can be done to enhance the success of our retailers and to increase retention? Can Lexington sustain a retail-driven central business district? And, just what does a modern, thriving downtown look like in 2010.

Lexington Center is a complicated organism. It is affected by competition in the local commercial real estate market, the profitability of local businesses, the loyalty or indifference of Lexington residents, and the attentiveness and support of town government. Numerous groups have attempted to improve the Center [see sidebar]. Lexington's Comprehensive Plan (ComPlan) was developed between 2000 and 2002. At that time the Planning Board created the Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee (CPAC) which worked with consultant Philip B. Herr & Associates to update an existing plan from the 1960s. The planning relied on findings from the 20/20 vision committee and numerous stakeholder meetings. The resulting document entitled *The Lexington We Want* remains the town's guiding document and acknowledges the importance of the Center to the cohesiveness of the community as a place of “shared experience” while acknowledging impediments to success and recommending corrective actions. But progress against that plan has been painfully slow. All the while the economy and the retail market continue

to evolve and change at a furious pace. While businesses struggle, the Center “problem” remains unsolved.

Rents, taxes, restrictive zoning, over-complicated permitting, signage regulations and parking are the hot-button issues in this discussion. In this initial article we'll take a look at these issues and talk with people involved in trying to move the Center toward a healthy, sustainable future.

DOING BUSINESS IN LEXINGTON

Are Rents Too High?

Why all the vacancies? The standard answer is: Because rents are too high. But a closer look suggests that business closings and vacancies in Lexington Center can result from any number of causes. Reportedly, the Depot Square Gallery closed because of poor sales, Kosroff's Jewelry and the Sundial Bookstore because the owners retired, and Waldenbooks because of a shift in corporate strategy. The Decelles/Cohoes space has remained empty for a considerable period of time, but was actually off the market until this summer because it was being used for storage during the Battlegreen Inn construction.

When it comes to filling vacancies, landlords and tenants sometimes hold out for favorable rental terms, acknowledges Connie Neville of Lexington, a commercial real estate advisor with Sperry Van Ness. In many cases landlords wait until they find a stable entity that can support the rent (think banks) and slowly the streetscape is transformed from a vital and engaging assortment of small shops and restaurants with inviting windows and charming signs to a bland and corporate aesthetic. But other factors may contribute to extended vacancies. “If a tenant leaves before the lease expires, the tenant might still be paying rent. In that case, the landlord has no incentive to find another tenant, but the space looks empty,” she explains. Also, transactions take time. “It can take three or four months to negotiate terms, prepare the lease, and settle the particulars of moving in. That ties up the property. If the tenant walks away, the landlord must start the process all over again,” she says.

Susan Yanofsky, Lexington's Economic

The Heart of THE Community How healthy is Lexington Center?



Development Officer, contends that Lexington Center's vacancy rate isn't exceptional in the current recession. Her data suggest that Lexington's reputation for high rents is unwarranted. “We are not outliers in terms of what's being charged [in neighboring towns],” she says. But some business owners disagree. Ice cream store owner Joe Rancatore says that his rent is lower in his Belmont store, and Deran Muckjian, owner of Catch a Falling Star, estimates that his core rent, before utilities and taxes, is 30% higher in his Lexington store than in his Winchester store. That said, more than one Lexington Center landlord has been known to renegotiate terms to help a retail tenant stay in business.

Salon owner Paul Mammola, who is both a tenant and a landlord, says, “Rents are high in Lexington—but we buy high.” He explains that landlords can lower their rents just so far because they must cover fixed costs, like taxes, mortgages, insurance, and maintenance fees. Unlike their counterparts in Wellesley, Belmont, Concord, and Winchester, Lexington businesses also have to contend with a split tax rate. Lexington's residential tax rate is \$13.31 per thousand assessed value; its commercial rate is \$25.27 per thousand. Muckjian says that the annual property taxes on his 1500 square foot Lexington store are \$12,312, but only \$4,200 on his 1600 square foot Winchester store. Lexington's water rates are also higher. In Winchester, Muckjian pays \$75 a year for water; in Lexington, he spends \$275 a year. For restaurants with high usage, the impact of

higher water rates can be substantial.

Zoning, Permitting & Signage

“I'd like to see some more action,” says current LCC Chair Jerry Michelson, who has served on the Committee for ten years, and admits to frustration at the perennial recycling of the same issues.

This fall the LCC will conduct a review of the town's *By Right Usage Table*—a guide that sets forth the types of businesses that can be sited in the Center without seeking a variance from the Board of Selectmen. According to Susan Yanofsky the current table, dating from 1980, prohibits among other things “indoor athletic and exercise facilities,” effectively barring fitness studios and similar services (businesses that have been quite successful in towns like Winchester and Belmont) and advertising and design firms. Yanofsky admits that the town needs to take a look at many these restrictive and outdated rules and indicates that the Lexington Center Committee will be unveiling a new set of recommendations to present to the fall Town Meeting in the next few weeks. “As we are going through the zoning,” says Susan Yanofsky, “it's not easy, but we're trying to make it easier without sacrificing quality.”

“People are doing something, and all changes are in the right direction,” says LCC member Pam Shadley, Co-Principal of Shadley Associates Landscape Architects. A key issue, says Shadley, is making Lexington friendlier to business by re-examining restrictions on usage, and streamlining the approval process



“The Center has to have stores people want to shop in, and the community has to want to support their stores.”

Lexington resident, Florence Koplow

“The biggest challenge facing the Center, and one that the town can effectively combat, is the mix of businesses. The town is in the process of creating a predictable permitting process which will lessen the start-up costs and time it takes for smaller businesses to get up and running. This permitting streamlining along with zoning changes will encourage a greater variety of businesses which typically comprise a shopping area.”

Susan Yanofsky, Economic Development Officer, Town of Lexington

for newcomers. One store-owner says the current approval process is “like pulling teeth.”

On the prickly subject of the Historic Districts Commission’s role in approving signage for new businesses, an encouraging glimmer of progress comes from Sharon Spaulding of Spaulding Management who reports that at a July HDC hearing with Chair Joe Welch, commission members and a new tenant commission members “couldn’t have been more helpful,” in working with them on designing a sign. “We wound up with a better sign,” she says.

Another zoning issue relates to parking. The number of available parking spaces in the Center is directly related to the number and types of businesses that can locate there. On-site parking requirements are part of the zoning ordinance and they vary for each usage, often discourage new business and are well-known for encouraging creative “work-around” solutions. “if a space was originally a retail space,” explains Sheila Watson, former Chair of the LCC, “and a dining establishment wanted to go in, the tenant had to go out and find additional spots—kind of *phantom spots*—because restaurants require more parking. These arbi-

trary and capricious rules put impediments in the way of doing business. We need to evaluate the most effective way to do zoning in 2010.”

According to the ComPlan: “The key limit on the ability for business floor area to expand in the Center is parking. Shifts between categories of retail uses, even within the same floor area, are made difficult in Lexington Center because of the regulatory system, especially regarding parking.” This problem drives landlords to seek less intensive tenants for their vacancies—like offices or banks because they require fewer parking spots under the ordinance. An unintended consequence of that rental strategy is the exacerbation of the long-term parking problem (long-term spots for employees).

The Other Parking Problem

Parking supply is often cited as a huge barrier to doing business in downtown. Anyone who has tried and failed to find a convenient parking spot at peak times like lunch and dinner may assume we have a shortage of spaces in the Center. But is that the right assumption?

Parking has a huge impact on the vitality of the Center, so what *do* we know right now? A 2001 parking study commissioned by

the town of Lexington and executed by Vana-se Hangen Brustlin (VHB) of Watertown (an engineering, transit and environmental firm) uncovered one major problem that has not changed in the ensuing ten years—namely the shortage of convenient long-term parking for employees in the Center. The firm counted spots; evaluated turnover considered long-term and short-parking alternatives as well as permitted parking, and concluded that there is a shortage of short-term parking (3 hours or less) in Lexington Center at peak hours of the day. The shortage is caused when employees use short-term meters close to their work to park all day and then fill the meter to avoid getting a ticket. The shortage hurts retailers and restaurants at peak times of day and deters shoppers—especially shoppers with limited time on their lunch breaks—from coming back to the Center if they have to waste time chasing around and around for a spot. [see parking sidebar]

The town has installed a mix of 30 minute and 2 hour meters in some lots, increased enforcement and is now chalking tires and in some cases booting the vehicles of constant offenders. While it may be a tired subject, it is an increasingly important one in a convenience-based retail environment struggling to capture customers. There is a breadth of approaches. Some experts advocate for more intensive peak-use management, more expensive “convenience” spots and less expensive “bargain spots”, different parking layouts, shared-use agreements, and off-site locations with shuttles, compact garages with first floor retail, parking as a revenue source and the list goes on. Ideally planners would love to create a “park-once” environment where patrons would park their car and walk through a delightfully compact, mixed-use downtown.

As planners deal with these different ideas, one thing we know: providing increased long-term parking close to the Center, while maintaining an adequate supply of short-term meters to accommodate peak hour parking is the immediate challenge.

Market Demand-Who’s Shopping in the Center?

Susan Yanofsky feels the Center is failing to capture the local resident’s shopping dollar. For Florence Koplow, a 41-year resident and devoted Center shopper, it comes down to two points: “The Center has to have stores people want to shop in, and the community has to want to support their stores.”

How many shoppers does it take to create success in the Center? Of the Lexington residents that work, most commute to other areas outside of town according to the 2000 census. Since daytime population is a key to a vibrant central business district, Susan Yanofsky is excited about the potential for increasing employment in the hubs on Spring Street, and Hayden and Hartwell Avenues. Employees from the businesses in these two areas can be important customers for Lexington businesses during working hours. The “commute route”



Lexington Parking Study

A 2001 parking study commissioned by the town of Lexington and executed by Vana-se Hangen Brustlin (VHB) of Watertown (an engineering, transit and environmental firm) found that Lexington Center has a problem with long-term parking in the Center. The lack of long-term parking is creating a problem with short-term parking at peak hours.

The firm counted spots; evaluated turnover considered long-term and short-parking alternatives as well as permitted parking. The location with the largest peak-hour parking deficit is between Muzzey Street and Waltham Street according to the study, but all areas south of Mass. Ave. had peak-hour parking deficits.

The study showed that in many cases long-term parkers—mostly employees in the center—parked at short-term meters and fed the meter all day to avoid a citation. The town has tried to mitigate the problem by providing long-term parking in outlying lots through annual parking permits. Currently, the permit parking program consists of 187 parking permit spaces in three lots: Depot Square Lot, Church of Our Redeemer, and Town Hall. However the VHB report indicated that many of these spots remained vacant during most days or were being for a portion of the day only. Businesses encourage their employees to use of these lots, but the spots are a fair distance from the Center.

A special count of the Meriam Street attended lot showed that long-term parkers made up 85% of the spots taken during the mid-day peak. On a Friday at 12:30 PM, 311 cars were parked in the lot and of them only 48 were short-term parkers—3 hours or less—and 263 were long-term parkers. The number of long-term parkers in this lot reinforced data from the permitted parking areas that showed underutilization of remote long-term parking. Many employees use the attended lot for long-term parking.

Strict enforcement procedures are attempting to discourage abuse of short-term parking. However, providing increased long-term parking close to the Center will clearly improve the supply of short-term meters needed to accommodate patrons of the Center at peak hours.

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is a huge market for retailers, and employees are known to shop close to work, but capturing these consumers is also a challenge for central shopping districts because commuters are strapped for time.

Simply bringing bodies in to work in Lexington does not guarantee their dollars will be spent in Lexington. The shopping experience for the commuting consumer must be convenient—easy and quick. This requires special attention to traffic and parking. [see parking sidebar]. For those working on Hartwell Avenue, both Bedford and the Burlington Mall are as accessible as Lexington Center raising the question, Can the Center compete on convenience and ease of use?

The Right Mix

Too many banks. Too many salons. These are time worn complaints about Lexington Center. It isn't easy to create just the right mix of businesses and amenities to make your downtown a destination. Lexington has had a laissez-faire retail plan for years. Businesses succeed if they don't fail—a kind of Darwinian approach that does not encourage stability. To attract the right mix of stores, restaurants, and services, you need market analysis, a strategic recruitment plan and personnel to pursue desirable tenants.

With no real data and no plan, it is difficult for landlords to recruit appropriate tenants, for prospective store owners to build successful business plans, and for town planners to craft commerce-supporting policies. "As a landlord I think the mall affects us in terms of leasing space because of its proximity," comments Sharon Spaulding, local landlord and property manager.

"The biggest challenge facing the Center, and one that the Town can effectively combat, is the mix of businesses," she says. "The Town is in the process of creating a predictable permitting process which will lessen the start-up costs and time it takes for smaller businesses to get up and running. This permitting streamlining along with zoning changes will encourage a greater variety of businesses which typically comprise a shopping area."

The Future of Lexington Center

Emmy Hahn, head of the Downtown Initiative Program in the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development was a featured speaker at a June forum on *Downtown Vitality as an Ongoing Process: Lexington Center and Other Examples*, organized by the Lexington Chamber of Commerce. Hahn recommended three actions to help Lexington develop a full understanding of the problems facing the Center: a comprehensive regional market analysis to help refine the town's business mix, strategic planning to tackle parking and zoning restrictions, and the creation of a business improvement district. Establishing a business improvement district usually involves agreement among property owners, merchants and town government in which additional fees and/or taxes are imposed and collected to be used to implement improvements. When asked how the Select-

men view their role with respect to Lexington Center, Selectman Hank Manz said, "Our job is to try to get people together, to encourage movement, to counter some of these historic rumors." Manz concedes that the town's approach to fostering vitality in the Center has often appeared fragmented and reactive. The Planning Board, the LCC, the Selectmen and the Economic Development Task Force are "all trying to clean up the inevitable overlaps and conflicts that develop over 100 years," he says.

In approaching this topic it is easy to become nostalgic for "the way things used to be," to dwell on the negatives and old ideas, but that will not move the discussion forward. We should look at the many assets of Lexington Center—what works, what is unique and what we can build on for the future. To that end, members of the LCC, the Planning Board and Economic Development can build on advances in Lexington's civic fabric—the development of the Depot Building as a public space, the renovation and use of Cary Library by many civic organizations, Lexington Symphony's success at Cary Hall and, of course, our wonderful and unique historic houses.

Beyond the control of the town are social, technological, economic and demographic factors that are changing the face of Main Street across the country. Paul Mammola, who has watched the ebb and flow of Lexington's prosperity over fifty years, and knows the place intimately as a resident, businessman, landlord and tenant, is confident that even in challenging times, the town will find a way forward. "This town will always persevere and survive," he says. "It will come back." The recent openings of "Nourish" and "Cake", and the scheduled arrival of a new deli suggest that he might be right.

If you have any comments on Lexington Center, please write to us at info@colonial-timesmagazine.com.



What's great about the Center...historical significance, wide sidewalks and outdoor spaces for meeting up with neighbors!

Improving the Center— Past Efforts & Successes

Groups of committed residents, business owners, landlords and town officials have given countless hours in past years to considering how to improve the Center, often pro bono, and with little thanks or recognition.

The Lexington Center Committee (LCC) was commissioned by the Selectmen in 1980 to advise on activities that would keep the center vital while respecting its historic and aesthetic character.

From 1999-2002 the committee was chaired by Sheila Watson. In 2002 she was joined by co-chair Jerome Smith. Together, they directed the group as they worked with the Town Manager, the Board of Selectmen, Town Meeting, the Planning Board and the Department of Public Works to push forward structural improvements and update zoning and licensing laws.

"It takes passion and dedication to get things done," says Watson, a former Town Meeting member for Precinct 6. During her tenure the LCC had a number of successes that helped improve the Center. Watson counts the 2005 change in the local liquor licensing law that led to an influx of smaller eateries to the Lexington dining scene as one of the best. The law removed the requirement on restaurants to have at least 100 seats in order to be able to serve alcohol. Now, the granting of liquor licenses is at the discretion of the Board of Selectmen and because of the change smaller establishments like Upper Crust Pizza and Dai-kanyama were able to locate in Lexington and serve alcohol.

Changing the licensing laws took two and half years—a fast-track effort compared with the six-years (from 2001-2007) that it took to create 31 parking spaces in the NSTAR lot behind the Edison Building. Watson credits Town Manager Carl Valente and the Board of Selectmen for negotiating with NSTAR who made the land available to the town in the spirit of public/private partnership. LCC also lobbied successfully to reinstate a part-time street-cleaner position to help keep the Center litter-free, and supported the rehiring of a full-time Economic Development Officer filled by Susan Yanofsky in June of 2007.

Mindful of frustrations among LCC members that "we don't finish anything," Watson and Smith dusted off an existing LCC sidewalk plan that called for bricking the sidewalk on the south side of Massachusetts Avenue. The Disabilities Commission (DC) initially had concerns about the use of brick, with its potential for unevenness and subsidence. "The DC let us go through town with wheelchairs and walkers. It was the biggest eye-opener in the world," says Watson, who is confident that the new surface has been installed to the highest specifications, and will not deteriorate.

Yet another group stepped into the mix in 2004. Urban planner Daphne Politis and architect Carl Oldenburg, both Lexington residents



Connectivity advocated by the LCC increases walkability in the Center. The stairs pictured above represent an element of connectivity allowing pedestrians to walk safely from the parking lot behind CVS, across the bike path and into the Meriam Street lot.

and then LCC members, co-founded the Lexington Center Collaborative as an offshoot of the LCC and the Design Advisory Committee. The idea was "to bring all stakeholders together to help develop consensus and a common vision for the future," says Politis. The Collaborative held a day-long forum or "Charrette" at Cary Library in June of 2005, that drew around 100 participants—a mix of residents, merchants, landlords and town officials and committee members to consider future directions for the Center. Although 100 people is a limited barometer of town sentiment, some interesting ideas evolved from those who participated in this exercise including mixed use zoning in the Center, higher rooflines, improved signage, overall walkability and connectivity and a review of both parking regulations and the role of the Historic Districts Commission.

The ongoing "connectivity" project to improve pedestrian access to the center from the Minuteman Bikeway and the Depot and CVS parking lots, with the use of cut-throughs, stairs, ramps and pathways, is another tangible result of the Collaborative's initiative. A new phase of this project is set to begin this fall.

Another key idea to emerge from Charrette participants was the concept of Lexington as a "meeting and greeting" place rather than a "retail Mecca." In pursuit of this, LCC obtained funds under the Community Preservation Act to upgrade Cary Hall as a performance venue, by extending the stage, adding blackout curtains and improving lighting. The Hall is now home to The Lexington Symphony and has been a great success.