

LEE DOWNTOWN STRATEGIC REVIEW

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Report prepared for the Lee Community Development Corporation

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BACKGROUND

The Lee Community Development Corporation (Lee CDC) is working to help revitalize downtown Lee. With their long experience in economic development and specific development projects, the Lee CDC has a unique skill set to draw attention to Lee's opportunities and to help advance specific projects to help Lee's economy and downtown.

The Lee CDC requested Feiden Associates to do a one-day strategic review to help the Lee CDC organize their strategic plan. The one-day site visit (May 4, 2007) included meetings and brainstorming with the Lee CDC and with Lee CDC partners, including business owners, town officials, and the Chamber of Commerce. This assessment summarizes the findings from that one-day visit. It is designed to spark ideas for an eventual downtown strategic plan.

STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Lee is well positioned to have a vibrant downtown.

- **Downtown Lee is an architectural beauty.** It has the type of downtown that visitors fall in love with immediately.
 - The simple test: On any summer or fall day, look at people getting out of cars with out-of-state license plates. Far more of them will pull out their cameras and take a picture than those same tourists will do almost anywhere else on their journey through Massachusetts.
 - This architecture goes hand in hand with Lee's rich cultural and history.
- **Downtown has a relatively low vacancy rate and vibrant and active businesses.** Downtown vacancy rates, both on the first floor and on upper floors are higher than would be ideal, but they do not create the abandoned look that tip the sense of vitality away from many downtowns.
- **Downtown rents are affordable compared to most successful communities.** This lowers the cost of entry into the downtown market and is attractive for footloose businesses which can locate anywhere and are attracted to Lee because of the quality of life.
- **Lee's downtown is made up primarily of locally owned and unique businesses.** Visiting Lee is a unique experience, not just one more undifferentiated town.
- **The Housatonic River adjacent to downtown is dramatic and can be a strong draw.** Most communities would love to have a river resource such as the Housatonic. It is downtown Lee's greatest and yet most underutilized recreation, economic, and cultural resource.
- **Lee has the opportunity for a river walk/bikepath along the Housatonic River and eventually connecting to Lenox and Pittsfield.** Representative Olver wants to help make this regional connection happen if there is local support.

- **Lee has easy access to I-90, the Massachusetts Turnpike.** It is the first Berkshire community that visitors heading east on I-90 encounter and it is well signed as the “Gateway to the Berkshires.” This allows Lee to build on the cache that the Berkshires have in Boston and New York.
- **Lee has local support for a vibrant downtown and residents who are committed to this vision.**
- **Help is available for the asking.** Representative Olver was able to get an earmark for designing bikepaths along the Housatonic that connect communities. The Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (Berkshire RPA) is anxious to help on this and other projects, to the extent resources allow, and competitive state grants are available for many projects that could aid downtown. The Berkshire Economic Development Corporation is a willing partner on any economic development projects. Local groups, from the Kiwanis to the Chamber of Commerce and certainly town government, want to help and make it work.
- **Lee has more than adequate parking to serve its needs now.**
- **There are 2 million visitors a year shopping at the nearby by Prime Outlets mall.**

CHALLENGES AND THREATS

Lee has some challenges to improving downtown that will be hard to overcome.

- **The Lee downtown is not yet at the size threshold needed to build a critical mass.** Although very attractive, and alive during the day, it does not have the activity or vibrancy to attract visitors from afar or create the type of vibrancy that can keep a town open at night.
- **Lee faces some major economic challenges.** The Lee paper mills, that have formed the cornerstone of Lee’s economy for many years, are threatened by overseas competition and will probably shrink, if not eventually close. While tourism jobs abound in the Berkshires, there are relatively few other comparably well paying jobs for working class residents.
- **Lee is successful enough that many Lee residents and businesses are complacent.** There is only a limited sense of the need to pull together as a community and make real changes. There is no community-wide consensus or even discussion process in place to pull the community together.

PLANNING PRINCIPLES

The recommendations in this report build on the planning principles below:

- **Build community involvement and consensus building on the future of downtown.**
- **Take full advantage of useful grant and technical assistance resources for downtowns.**

- **Coordinate planning activities to involve all stakeholders.**
- **Involve businesses in encouraging business expansion.**
- **Use downtown redevelopment to enhance community quality of life.**
- **Build a stronger Lee identity to help the community attract business.**
- **Build on Lee's and the river's natural resources and attractive setting.**
- **The Lee CDC can help serve as a catalyst for change, but cannot steer the process.**

RECOMMENDATIONS—PLANNING PROCESS

- **Lee needs to have a single management entity which coordinates the charge for a successful downtown.**
 - The Lee CDC can help kick off the process and help with specific development projects, but their economic development success owes in large part to their ability to stay focused and not suffer from mission creep.
 - The Chamber of Commerce is a partner in downtown, but their mission of tourism outreach, marketing and member services does not allow a focus on downtown.
 - A new organization, or a semi-independent organization within the Lee CDC or town hall, is needed to focus on downtown. A non-governmental organization with strong ties to town government is probably best.
 - This program could be modeled after the National Trust Main Street Center or any of the dozens of similar models that exist.
 - The downtown main street center should, ideally, have a full time or near full time presence.
 - Seed money might come from fundraising, perhaps some Lee CDC seed money, and town match.
 - Long term funding must be sustainable from membership, town contributions, and eventually possibly a business improvement district.
 - Communities use different models for oversight boards of such downtown groups. Some emphasize inclusiveness and building conversations by involving relevant town officials (e.g., town manager, selectman, planning board members) and business community members (retail sector, manufacturing sector, consulting sector, and economic development support organizations (Lee CDC, chambers of commerce, etc.)). Others emphasize a committee dominated by or exclusively consisting of business interests, which then reports their recommendations to the town. Typically, the first model is used for town-sponsored efforts and the second is used for efforts sponsored by non-profit economic development partners. Either way, it is critical that the membership is a majority private-sector, with enough government participation to ensure sharing of information and partnerships.
 - In the long term, this management entity should be transformed into a business improvement district (BID) for shared purchasing of marketing and other shared services for downtown businesses.
- **Lee should sponsor a consensus-building downtown community workshop with residents, board members, and businesses.** It is critical to get community members involved in the

process, create a shared vision, and identify strategic next steps. The workshop should include the following elements:

- A call to action for a shared vision for downtown and for the north end of Main Street.
 - Business owners, board members, and the general public should be invited and involved
 - Community, business, and town officials need to include a strong outreach (direct phone calls or visits) to solicit business and community involvement.
 - The workshop should be around 3 hours on weekday evening or a Saturday morning.
 - Communities or volunteers typically provide some food to make the workshop fun.
 - The workshop should be moderated by an experienced moderator who will be viewed by all as being neutral.
 - The workshop could be structured around anyone of several models to get people talking and participating:
 - Modified strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats workshop (SWOT).
 - What should our downtown be and like in twenty years, and what steps do we need to get there?
- **With Lee CDC assistance, but broader participation, a full strategic plan for downtown should be completed after the workshop.** Berkshire RPA should be invited to participate in this process.
 - **Lee should implement a business calling program.** Lee CDC, the new downtown main street center, and town officials should create a schedule to meet with downtown businesses, major employers throughout town, and a cross section of other businesses to better understand their needs and identify strategic steps to town can take to improve the business climate in the downtown.
 - **Lee should draft and adopt a tool-kit of assistance programs to encourage new downtown business development.** Adopt clear town policies where they do not already exist and write up a clear information handout on tax increment financing and summarizing state programs and financial assistance would help existing and new businesses. Sending the message that the town welcomes investment alone has value.
 - **Lee needs to build a brand that is more than the Gateway to the Berkshires.** Marketing is what you tell people you are, branding is what people say behind your back.
 - Lee’s current brand is that it is a good community to go through on your way somewhere else.
 - The target brand for visitors, and businesses and residents, is Lee as the base from which they can reach everywhere else.
 - Logos and signage is important. Work with MassHighway and seek Jacobs Ladder improvement funding.
 - Build a message that show how downtown calls out and draws visitors in and gets them to stay and pass on the message of Lee as a hidden gem.
 - **Build on “The Berkshire Blueprint” and identify how Lee can capture more of the Berkshire’s creative economy.**

RECOMMENDATIONS---PROJECT RELATED

- **The Lee CDC East Side project is a great opportunity that should be encouraged in anyway possible.** Getting every single historic brick building back into full use is the most important improvement that Lee can ever have.
- **The Lee CDC West Side project is also a great opportunity, but great care must be made that in searching for downtown investment the opportunity for access along every inch of the river is not lost.** River access does not have to be very wide, for quality is much more important than width along the river. It does have to both be accessible everywhere and inviting so the public knows that it is there.
- **Build involvement of merchants and downtown businesses.** Many downtown businesses have not been engaged in downtown planning and downtown activities. This is common in many communities and individual businesses struggle with their own daily challenges. Business involvement, across the board is critical for downtown success:
 - Any main street center staff person needs to take and have the time to go door-to-door and get to know all of businesses.
 - Street fairs and special events can help build a sense of working together and shared goals and not just a series of separate businesses. Founders Day is such a successful model to build on.
 - Simple events, such as a quarterly contest for the best designed display window, can work to get businesses to work together or in a healthy competition
- **Implement streetscape and signage improvements program.** Lee generally has a great downtown streetscape, but there are significant opportunities for improvement:
 - Pedestrian curb extensions in the area north of downtown up to the mill at every single crosswalk.
 - Improved landscaping along Main Street on the North End north of downtown.
 - Improved signage to attract some of the 2 million existing visitors to the Prime Outlets mall to come downtown.
 - Create a “living museum” of historic signage along the river and downtown streets to provide self-guided walking tours for visitors.
 - Calm traffic on Main Streets North End to ensure that vehicles go no faster than their speed around the Main Street/Center Street intersection. Traffic should be calmed by curb extensions (see above), the increased parking on the street, and narrowing the width of the travel lanes to 11’ in each direction.
 - Add a Historic Lee or equivalent sign to the Massachusetts Pike tourism information signs located just before the Lee interstate exit.
 - Improve the first view of the Housatonic River visible immediately after exiting the interstate. Ideally either remove the billboard their or use it as a welcome to Lee shops and restaurants sign.
 - Consider reversing the angle of parking on Main Street so that it is reverse angle parking.

- Explore whether it is possible to angle parking on both sides of Main Street in the downtown.
- **The opportunity, to build a bike path along the river eventually connecting all the way to Pittsfield is the most exciting public investment project in Lee and one that can help make Lee a major tourism destination.** Representative Olver's earmark and future transportation improvement program money create a rare and exciting opportunity to transform the river, the region's view of Lee, and its attractiveness as a tourism destination.
- **Encourage a greater concentration of activity to help create a critical mass in Lee Center.**
 - Increase allowable zoning density and reduced dimensional requirements in and close to downtown.
 - Encouraging more housing on upper floors downtown.
 - Encourage denser development near downtown (within 1,500 feet, the usual walking distance) of Main Street and on the strip between downtown and the mill complex to the north.
 - Allow and encourage tables outside each eating establishment, so long as there is at least four feet of unobstructed sidewalk. Bring the streets alive.
- **Manage parking more effectively and plan a parking system to meet the needs.**
 - The most valuable parking for businesses is on street parking. Businesses, employers and the town should demand that their employees not park on the street or in critical short term areas. Ideally through employer pressure and, if necessary, police enforcement, on-street parking must be reserved for short-term use.
 - No new parking lot should ever be developed on Main Street. Lots should only be behind buildings.
 - Existing and new walkways between Main Street and Railroad Street and, to a lesser extent, between Main Street and High Street should be created to provide a visual and a real walking corridor to shorten the walking distances and the perceived walking distances and show people how close large amounts of parking are to Main Street.
 - New parking lots should be developed only when needed for major projects. The parking lot necessary to serve the Lee CDC east side project is probably the last lot Lee will need for many years.
 - Focus on making parking easier for impulsive visitors. Consider switching one way traffic flow by Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center from northerly and westerly only to easterly and southerly only. This will make it easier for visitors who see the Visitor Center or enter Main Street and immediately fall in love to stop and park.
 - Do not require any parking for downtown uses. The market will create parking when needed and better use of municipal and private lots can allowed more shared parking and greater parking utilization of existing spaces.
- **Planning for the eventual shrinking or closing of Lee paper mills cannot begin soon enough.** This poses the greatest economic and social challenge to Lee's future.
 - The Lee CDC has already helped Lee position themselves for the economic challenge by creating new employment opportunities, but planning for the reuse of the mill buildings themselves needs to move forward.

- Brownfield (historic environmental releases) should be planned for in cooperation with present mill owners and using EPA and other grant funds.
- Community visioning, planning, and zoning changes to allow mixed use of the mill complexes (jobs and housing) should move forward.
- Focusing on improving Main Street north of downtown to provide a better connection between downtown and the huge mill complex north of downtown should be a priority.
- The Lee CDC development projects are great employers, but the area between downtown and the mills north of downtown could also be housing some of the same type of office uses that are current in the Lee CDC Corporate Center and Quarry Hill Business Park.

120-DAY ACTION AGENDA

Of the actions described above, some can and should be implemented within the next 120 days to build momentum.

- **Hold a consensus-building downtown community workshop.**
- **Kickoff a business calling program to identify what downtown businesses need.**
- **Kick-off a full downtown strategic plan, with community participation.**
- **Allow and encourage tables outside each eating establishment.**
- **Sponsor a contest for the best display window.**
- **Request that the Berkshire RPA conduct a quick assessment of opportunities for traffic calming, curb extensions, and improved crosswalks on the north end of Main Street.**
- **Support the Berkshire RPA’s effort for a Housatonic Bikepath from Lee to Pittsfield.**
- **Consider immediately switching the direction of the one-way drive from town hall to the Chamber of Commerce visitor center.**
- **Work with the paper mills to seek EPA Brownfields assistance for assessment, if they are ready for such work.**

FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

The table below shows some of the sources of grant funding available to implement the above recommendations. Other funds, including town capital improvements and community contributions, are also critical investments in the future of Lee.

Potential Grant Sources and Uses

Funding Source	Awarding Authority	Potential Uses
Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)	MA Dept. of Housing and Community Development (DHCD)	Needs of low and moderate income residents. Sample uses: improvements to downtown public housing, facilities for seniors, improved handicap accessibilities, streetscape improvements, more downtown housing with an affordable housing component
Community	DHCD	Economic redevelopment opportunities. Sample

Development Action Grant (CDAG)		uses: downtown revitalization and infrastructure that supports for economic development
Priority Development Fund (PDF)	DCHD	Support sustainable development housing. Sample uses: Housing production plan, site specific planning for housing downtown.
Public Works Economic Development (PWED)	MassHighway	Road improvements for economic development. Sample uses: infrastructure to Eastern States site, downtown streetscape improvements.
Smart Growth Technical Assistance Grants	MA Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA)	Technical assistance for smart growth. Improved mixed use zoning, strategic plan for river resource protection.
Brownfields Pilot	US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)	Site assessment and cleanup of non-Superfund Brownfields sites. Cleanup grants require site ownership but assessment grants do not.
Brownfield Redevelopment Fund	MassDevelopment	Site assessment and cleanup loans (potentially forgivable)..
Land and Water Conservation Fund and Self Help funds	EOEA	50% federal OR 65+-% state matching funds for recreation and conservation, including river front improvements.