



CASE STUDIES



Placemaking in Renton: Significant Public Investment and Long-Term Commitment

Over the last 15 years, the City of Renton has fostered two successful redevelopment projects that have transformed sparse landscapes into dense, walkable neighborhoods with mixed-use/multi-family housing and active commercial districts. Downtown Renton and The Landing (an urban village-style shopping and residential development) are examples of placemaking that required significant public investment in facilities and infrastructure, and a clear long-term commitment and vision to achieve buy-in from developers. Despite their successes in these efforts, the City faces ongoing challenges in the wake of the current recession, and is currently wrestling with how to increase market demand, sustain developer interest, and facilitate new growth and development.

HISTORY/CONTEXT

Downtown Renton

With the transfer of the Boeing Corporation's 777 operations to Everett in the early 1990s, Renton experienced significant employment loss and massive office vacancy. In response, City leaders decided to take a more proactive approach to revive the economy through economic development investments. They formed a blue-ribbon Commission made up of Chamber of Commerce members, school leaders, and other stakeholders to craft the City's economic development plan. The Commission recommended focusing on growth in the downtown core by re-establishing it as a vibrant residential and commercial district (as it had been in the 1960s prior to the opening of Southcenter Mall) and transforming it into a major activity hub of South King County.

By the mid-1990s, the City had developed a long-term vision and began providing the critical investments necessary to facilitate the redevelopment process. A key initiative was assisting in moving a set of car dealerships, which had dominated the downtown landscape, to an auto mall off of I-405, as well as purchasing and repurposing the vacant land downtown. The City also worked with King County Metro to develop a transit center, constructed a large parking structure, and built a 1-acre park (the Piazza). Developer interest and investment was quick to follow, and three mixed-use apartment projects were initially built by Dally Homes, Inc. (totaling approximately 260 units). These were some of the first transit-oriented developments in King County. New businesses began to fill in the retail space, and more businesses opened in the adjacent historic downtown core, which had also seen some private investment.

Downtown Renton



The Landing



Since the initial redevelopment, the downtown neighborhood's commercial landscape has seen considerable turnover, with businesses closing, and new businesses opening. Vacancy rates are relatively low, but a number of commercial spaces remain empty. Four new multi-family developments, with over 400 new residential units, have been built since the mid 1990s. Overall, City leaders are pleased with the progress that has been made, but believe the neighborhood has not yet reached its full potential as a vibrant, bustling regional hub.

The Landing

The Landing, an urban-village style shopping development with 600,000 square feet of retail, a 14-screen cinema, and 880 multi-family residential units, opened in 2008 on 46 acres of land in North Renton previously held by Boeing. The roots of the project can be traced back to 2003, when Boeing requested an industrial-to-commercial rezone for 13 acres of holdings near Boeing Field so they could sell the property to the Target Corporation for a stand-alone retail store. The City agreed to the rezone, but on the condition that additional holdings were also rezoned as part of a broader development project. The City and Boeing worked together to create a new comprehensive plan designation, new design regulations, and a new development agreement that committed the City to investing in public infrastructure that supported redevelopment (as long as there were revenues anticipated for the project). In total, the City invested \$22.5 million in new roads and utility infrastructure financed by bonds on future revenues, as well as State, Federal, and Economic Development Administration (EDA) grants.

The project garnered interest from developer Harvest Partners, who agreed to build The Landing as a hybrid shopping center with some power center characteristics, but also a dense, pedestrian-oriented core around a movie theatre. In order to assist with parking garage costs that would have been prohibitive to the walkable neighborhood commercial portion of the development, the City agreed to make an additional \$10.6 million investment in a parking structure. Developer Fairfield Residential soon signed on to construct two large multi-family developments on the Landing site. The residential developments opened in 2009 and 2010, respectively, and added 880 units.

Overall, City leaders and developers view The Landing as a success, with an 80% commercial lease rate, and tenants reporting strong revenues. In addition, the residential developments are sustaining relatively low vacancy rates. However, leadership would like to see more of the smaller, vacant shop spaces near the core filled to provide more unique character to the development.



STRATEGIES AND TOOLS

The City of Renton has utilized a number of strategies and tools in their efforts to promote denser development and vibrant commercial districts:

Investing Heavily in Facilities and Infrastructure. In both downtown Renton and The Landing, the City has made substantial public investments in facilities and infrastructure. City leaders believe that merely providing 1-2 dispersed investments or prodding the market through incentives would not, on their own, have been enough to attract developer interest or spur meaningful growth. They believe a large, comprehensive suite of investments supporting multiple projects is critical to ensuring success.

Since the mid-1990s, Renton has invested more than \$40 million in its downtown. During the initial downtown revitalization efforts, investments were made on several fronts. The City relocated the car dealerships, which were seen as a significant impediment to dense growth downtown, to a new auto-mall near the highway, and then purchased the vacated land and actively worked to repurpose it, which included building a water line, sidewalks and other infrastructure to support new development. They worked closely with Metro to build a bus-oriented transit center, and constructed a 575-stall parking garage that served as a Park and Ride for Metro. In addition, they built a new 1-acre park downtown. Currently, the City is working with the King County Library System to construct a new 15,000-square foot library in the downtown core.

The Landing's success depended on public investment in infrastructure. Since Boeing had its own water and electrical systems, as well as streets that did not meet City standards, the City had to completely redevelop the utility infrastructure and build a new road network. In addition, as noted above, the City spent an extra \$10.6 million to construct a 600-stall parking garage to ensure that the developer would build a dense, walkable core, as opposed to another big box power center (which would have been built if the investment was not made). In total, the City made over \$33 million in initial investments to support The Landing.

Demonstrating Long-term Commitment. The comprehensive investments in facilities and infrastructure were part of a broader strategy to demonstrate that the City was making a genuine, lasting commitment to the projects, which was critical for developer buy-in. This commitment was also demonstrated through the development of a well-defined vision and plan toward achieving it. In both downtown Renton and The Landing, the City presented themselves as a true partner to developers through their clear long-term commitment and vision for the areas.

Partnering with Local Transit Agency. The City's partnership with King County Metro was instrumental in the transformation of downtown Renton. This partnership allowed for the design and construction of the Renton Transit Center, which provided increased foot traffic and bolstered the City's efforts to turn the neighborhood into a regional hub. As noted above, it also led to the construction of a large parking garage that would serve as a Metro Park and Ride.

In addition, Metro signed a 10-year lease for Park and Ride stalls inside the garage of one of the initial mixed-use developments. The lease helped the developer underwrite the cost of the building, and allowed them to construct another deck of underground parking.

Providing Incentives to Developers. Renton has implemented a couple of incentives aimed at attracting and shaping development:

- **Property Tax Exemptions.** The City has leveraged a statewide tax exemption program that allows certain jurisdictions to give a multi-year break in property taxes for multi-family housing projects. They initially limited the exemptions to three areas of the City, including downtown Renton and The Landing. However, The Landing had its designation removed once 840 multi-family units were secured, as the City felt there were enough units that incentives were no longer warranted. In downtown Renton, the designation is still in place and all subsequent mixed-use and multi-family developments (aside from the initial three) in the area have utilized the exemptions.
- **Permit Fee Waivers for Owner-Occupied Projects.** In an attempt to promote long-term ownership, Renton implemented a program that waived permit and mitigation fees for owner-occupied multi-family projects (i.e. condo developments). However, only two projects (both 50-unit condo developments) have used the program, one of which sold only three units and was foreclosed upon. The economic downturn and weak condo market have likely affected interest in this program.

Financing Tool: Bonding off of Future Revenues. In order to fund the significant up-front public investments for The Landing, the City decided to issue bonds based on the expected future City tax revenues that would be generated by the sales activity at The Landing, assuming 1% sales tax growth annually. While the initial sales figures have not been sufficient to fully fund the debt service for the public investments, City leaders believe that the project was necessary to jump start the transformation of this area of town. Further, as the economy rebounds and The Landing reaches its potential, the City believes that the financial returns will match the economic development success of the project.

Increasing Employment Base and Civic/Cultural Attractions. City leadership has also recognized the potential benefits of increasing downtown Renton's employment base and drawing more civic attractions to the area. As noted, the City is currently working with the King County Library System to construct a new library in the downtown core, which will provide an opportunity to bring additional civic activity downtown. There is currently a community process underway to determine what that activity should be.

In addition, the City's Arts & Culture Master Plan has a suggestion for a "galvanizing" public art project that would support downtown, and the Renton History Museum Downtown also has an ambitious business plan. Various other options have been considered, such as moving City Hall into downtown, but ideas such as this are long term in nature. This is an area the City continues to work on as an additional strategy to support economic development.



KEY MARKET FORCES

Several key market forces have influenced Renton's redevelopment efforts. These include:

Geographic Location. Renton benefits from its central location within the Puget Sound region, close to a number of the region's major employment centers (most notably, Downtown Seattle and the Eastside) and Sea-Tac Airport, with access to several interstate and State highways. The City's pivotal location makes it attractive to potential residents and commuters, bolsters its role as a regional hub, and brings hundreds of thousands of drivers across its borders every day.

Population Growth. Renton has seen a 107% growth in population since 1990, with much of the increase coming through single family home construction in suburban parts of the City during recent real-estate booms. The new population has created a stronger demand for local vibrant commercial districts. According to city officials, not only do residents prefer to avoid the inconvenience of driving longer distances to reach amenities, they appreciate the sense of place that these districts provide to the City. While the bulk of the population increase has been accommodated in the suburbs, there has also been significant residential growth in Downtown Renton. City leadership would like to see the downtown residential population grow at a faster rate than in the suburbs, as this would be more likely to stimulate demand for the commercial core.

Boeing Renton Plant. With a workforce of over 14,000 people, Boeing is a major employer for Renton. Boeing's Renton location has been a key force behind The Landing's success, which is adjacent to the plant and provides attractive housing, dining, and retail options for the plant's employees. City leadership credits having a robust employment base within close proximity as an important factor in the development's strong performance. Boeing's announcement to assemble the next derivative of its best-selling 737 airplane, the 737MAX, in Renton ensures that employment growth and robust commercial activity in this part of Renton will continue for years to come.

SUCCESSSES

From a policy perspective, these projects meet the City's goals for citywide community and economic development, and neighborhood revitalization. More broadly, the City has developed attractive destinations for local and regional residents on land that was underdeveloped or largely industrial. Not only have these redevelopments generated new tax revenues for the city, but as unique 'places' they have provided the City with a stronger identity within the region, which could serve as a foundation for future growth.

Commercial and residential vacancy rates are low and tenants are reporting strong revenues at the Landing. Over the last 15 years, Downtown Renton has seen a substantial increase in commercial activity, and nearly 700 multi-family units have been built in the area. Approximately another 1,000 units are in various stages of entitlement, but have stalled due to the current economic recession.

CHALLENGES

Despite Renton's successful redevelopment efforts, City leaders still believe both areas have a significant way to go before they reach their full potential, particularly downtown Renton. The City is facing a number of important challenges, many of which have been exacerbated by the current economic downturn. These include:

Growing the Market. Broadly, this has been the City's greatest challenge in supporting development efforts in Downtown Renton, and encompasses several of the challenges discussed below. Although the City has been able to establish a market through investment and commitment, it has still not reached the levels they had initially hoped for. Put more plainly, the City still struggles with how to convince more consumers, residents, and employers/workers to come Downtown to live, work, and shop. In the current economy – where potential consumers are shopping and dining out less and the housing market is weak – this challenge has been amplified.

Attracting Employers. The City has struggled to attract large and small employers to downtown Renton, which has been detrimental to the commercial environment. The City has considered moving City Hall to downtown, which would increase the daytime population by 700-800 people, and could invigorate the retail and dining establishments in the commercial core. In addition, increasing employment could lead to improved public safety, as the area would be busier and there would be more eyes on the street. However, this has not occurred, and there is still a significant lack of foot traffic during daylight hours on weekdays.

Attracting More Private Investment to the Historic Downtown Core. City leadership had initially hoped that their investments in facilities and infrastructure would spur significant private investment to improve and maintain the built environment of the historic downtown core. While some investment has been seen, it has not reached the level they anticipated.

Filling Retail Spaces in Older Store Fronts. A lot of the retail spaces in the older store fronts in downtown Renton remain vacant, and with the current state of the economy it has been especially challenging to attract new tenants.

Capturing More Pass-through Traffic. As noted earlier, a lot of people drive through Renton every day. However, a challenge for the city has been convincing people there is a 'place' (or places) worth stopping for. Much of this has to do with increasing awareness and attracting more high-profile businesses and activities.

Changing Public Safety Perceptions. Another challenge for the City has been to convince both developers and the general public that downtown Renton is a safe and secure area. Initially, the City worked hard to develop a clear vision and make investments and commitments toward portraying downtown as a safe, walkable area, including marketing, special events (such as the Farmer's Market, tree lightings, and other activities), as well as all of the physical improvements mentioned earlier. Although they have achieved some success, the recent economic downturn has stunted some of that momentum.

Covering Debt Service on Tax Revenue. When bonding off of future revenues to finance investments in The Landing, the City was aggressive in their assumptions and assumed 1% sales tax growth annually. Since opening, sales tax revenue growth has not met projections, and the debt service is not being covered by additional tax revenue. Despite this challenge, the City is optimistic that the matter will be resolved, and understands that in the long run it was a good investment that was necessary for the project to occur.



POLICY CONSIDERATIONS AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

Based on Renton's story and experience in fostering dense development, below are a set of policy considerations and key takeaways for Thurston County:

Value of Comprehensive Investment in Infrastructure and Facilities. Cultivating dense development requires higher levels of investment. Choosing a constrained area and delivering comprehensive, multi-faceted investments toward an array of projects provides a higher likelihood of success in attracting developer interest and nurturing a dense, vibrant commercial district. Piecemeal investments in geographically dispersed areas may not be enough to attract substantial growth. An enduring commitment and a willingness to provide substantial investments across the board are key components of a successful initiative. Major coordinated investments come with increased financial risk, but these risks can be mitigated through close coordination with the development community.

Long-Term Commitment and Vision Reduces Risk for Developers. In order to secure buy-in from developers, jurisdictions should aim to present a clear vision of how an area will develop and demonstrate their long-term commitment to fulfilling that vision through significant and transparent investments (see above). In other words, it must be made clear to developers that the jurisdiction will be a dependable partner and make good on their commitment to deliver the necessary groundwork. This commitment reduces risk and uncertainty for developers and increases their willingness to collaborate with, and invest in, a community.

Employers and Civic Uses Increase Foot Traffic. Cultivating a strong employment base and attracting civic uses to the targeted area are effective and dependable ways of developing a market. They both lead to increased foot traffic and higher daytime populations, which support commercial activity in the area.

Partnerships with Local Transit Agencies. Transit connections can play a critical role in bringing people to an area, as well as attracting residents and consumers that are less car-dependent, and who live a lifestyle more conducive to dense development. Park and Ride agreements with transit agencies can also provide a funding source for parking facilities in mixed-use centers of activity.

Incentives for Mixed-Use/Multi-Family Developments. Incentives for multi-family development are available to encourage developers to build in targeted areas. In particular, there is a statewide tax exemption program that allows certain jurisdictions to give a multi-year property tax break for multi-family housing projects. Jurisdictions can target the exemption to specific geographic areas.

Bonding Off Future Revenues to Finance Investments. Although there is some risk involved, bonding off of future revenues can be a critical tool to ensure that necessary investments in infrastructure and facilities can be made.

The 'Old Bones' of Historic Neighborhoods are Strong Foundations to Build On. A historic downtown core provides an opportunity to cultivate dense, vibrant commercial districts in an existing neighborhood that may already have a strong sense of place and identity.

Streetscape Investments Should be Supplemented by Market Development. While streetscape improvements are critical, they are not sufficient by themselves to promote and attract investment in a dense, vibrant commercial district. Such improvements must be done in tandem with strategies that develop a market by attracting employers, civic uses, and/or transit connections.



Developing the Aurora Corridor in Shoreline: Mobility, Safety, & Neighborhood Connections

Aurora Avenue North in Shoreline is the City's largest arterial and primary commercial corridor. For decades, it had been characterized by substandard pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, slow and unreliable bus transit service, auto-oriented strip retail development, poor connections to adjacent residential neighborhoods, and high automobile and pedestrian accident rates.

With the ambitious Aurora Corridor Improvement Project, Shoreline has been working for over 14 years to address issues related to the improvement and redevelopment of the corridor in a multitude of ways, including dramatically improving mobility through new transit lanes and roadway improvements, building new pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, and upgrading utilities. Along with improving mobility, safety, and aesthetics, a key goal of the project is to nurture more concentrated economic development along the corridor, with clusters of activity at transit stops. Project leadership aims to create a more balanced, less automobile-dominated environment that is attractive to drivers, transit-riders, pedestrians, and bicyclists. They believe that making the corridor more accessible and safer for people via all modes of transport will greatly improve overall market potential in the long-term.

Aurora and 152nd - Before



Aurora and 152nd - After



HISTORY/CONTEXT

When the City of Shoreline incorporated in 1995, one of the major issues facing leadership was what to do with Aurora Avenue North. At the time, the new city's primary transportation corridor was known for housing used car lots, strip malls and seedy establishments (such as casinos and adult entertainment venues), and had a reputation as being a hotbed of prostitution and other illegal activity. Pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure was virtually non-existent, automobile accident rates were among the worst in the state, and – while transit ridership was high due to the corridor's central location – bus service was slow and unreliable. These mobility and safety issues served as a deterrent for residents to frequent establishments on the corridor, and hindered the potential for strong commercial growth and concentrated centers of activity.

In 1996 and 1997, city leadership developed its first comprehensive plan, which included policy direction to revamp and revitalize the Aurora corridor. Following the comprehensive plan's adoption, there was a year-long pre-design process, with heavy community involvement, to take the goals and policies in the plan and turn them into a design concept. The team developed several scenarios, and the cross-section included in those scenarios was eventually implemented through the project, incorporating the following improvements: Business Access Transit (BAT) lanes, large sidewalks with setbacks, landscape improvements, access management with medians (left and U-turn pockets), new signals and lighting, new streetscape amenities, and various other improvements.

During the process, there was significant pushback from the business community, who feared that the project and its construction would negatively impact them. This led to the formation of a Citizen's Advisory Task Force to guide the pre-design study and as a means for the project team to engage with the business community and the public. A number of key compromises and concessions were worked out between project staff and the Task Force, which led to mutual agreement on project's design principles in 1998 such as allowing interim width sidewalks in certain cases to reduce building or parking impacts, or low growing vegetation in the medians to protect visual access across to the businesses. Following this agreement, the project team spent several years putting the staff team together, going through the environmental review and appeals process, completing right-of-way acquisition and design, and assembling the necessary funding. Total costs for the first two phases were approximately \$35 million and \$40 million, respectively, and the remainder of the project is budgeted at \$60 million (although it will likely cost less). Funding sources include federal grants, the State's Transportation Improvement Board (TIB), WSDOT's Regional Mobility Grant Program, State Nickel Gas Tax, and 9 ½ cent Gas Tax, Surface Transportation (STP) and Congestion Mitigation Air Quality (CMAQ) funds, Department of Ecology, City Roads Capital Funding, and King County.

Construction on the three mile project began in 2005 and is currently more than 2/3 complete, with the second mile reaching Substantial Completion in 2011. The project has already generated some success, including a dramatic reduction in accident rates along the first mile and an increase in transit speed and reliability. However, the amount of new development and business activity along the corridor has been relatively modest, particularly mixed-use and other multi-family developments. City leadership recognizes that the project is part of a long-term economic redevelopment process, which includes other efforts such as the Town Center Subarea Plan, which will establish a critical base in Shoreline for future growth.



STRATEGIES & TOOLS

The Aurora Corridor Improvement Project and other efforts by the City of Shoreline include an array of strategies and tools to improve the corridor and increase economic development opportunities:

Mobility and Safety

Investing in Transit Improvements. The project includes significant investments toward improving the speed, reliability and safety of transit in the corridor. These investments include Business Access Transit (BAT) lanes for bus priority; lighting, shelters, and sidewalks at bus stops; general sidewalk improvements along the corridor; and transit-supported zoning and densities. The City worked closely with King County Metro to facilitate and implement these improvements. Since the onset of the project, city leadership projects that transit speed and reliability has increased by over 30% through Shoreline's section of the corridor and safety conditions at bus stops and along the Corridor's sidewalks have improved significantly. The launch of RapidRide Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service along the corridor in 2013 is expected to further bolster speed and reliability.

City leadership recognizes the importance of safe, reliable, and efficient transit in spurring development and fostering a busy, multi-modal corridor with nodes of concentrated activity. If buses are frequent, on time, and able to move a lot of people quickly, it makes the corridor much more attractive for potential residents and developers. In particular, good transit is critical to leveraging Shoreline's close proximity to Downtown Seattle and other large employment and commercial centers in the region. By improving access to these destinations, living along the Aurora corridor becomes a feasible and attractive option for a broader segment of the population, particularly those who are seeking an affordable alternative to some of the region's more expensive areas. In addition, improved transit allows for the development of concentrated nodes of commercial activity, where residents (and non-residents) can run daily errands, shop, and dine, with easy access via transit.

Investing in Other Mobility Improvements. In addition to improving transit, the project involves significant investments in other mobility improvements, including roadway changes (e.g. access management with medians, new signals) to increase vehicular traffic flow and major improvements in pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure to bolster non-motorized transportation. Some key pedestrian and improvements include construction of continuous sidewalks along both sides of the road, installation of colored crosswalks and improving lighting. As a partner project, the City designed and constructed a 3.25 mile long segment of the Interurban Trail, running approximately parallel to Aurora. This bicycle and pedestrian project includes two bridges, green spaces and features that recognize its historic significance in the community. One key investment made in developing the Interurban Trail involved removing several old, dilapidated buildings along a ten block section and repurposing the land into a greenway park with bike and pedestrian paths.

Aurora and 160th - Before



Aurora and 160th - After



City leadership believes that improving the Corridor for pedestrians and bicyclists will play a critical role in making the area more accessible and attractive, as well bolstering commercial activity and interest in new residential developments. Overall, leadership aims to take a balanced approach to mobility improvements and to ensure that all modes of transport are accommodated.

Investing in Safety Improvements. Another strategy driving many of the investments discussed above is to improve safety conditions along the corridor. A significant deterrent for potential residents and other visitors to the corridor has long been a perception of an environment unsafe for pedestrians and bicycles, with high crime and vehicle accident rates. Mobility, infrastructure, lighting, and other improvements implemented through the project will, over the long-term, play a key role in changing safety conditions and the public's perceptions of the corridor as an unsafe place. Leadership also believes that as the corridor becomes busier and nodes of activity are developed, there will be more "eyes on the street", which will help to further lower crime rates.

Improving Connections to Adjacent Neighborhoods. City leadership believes that residents walking or biking from adjacent neighborhoods have the potential to play a major role in increasing pedestrian traffic and commercial activity along the corridor. The project aims to improve ties to these (mostly single-family home) neighborhoods by making the connector streets safer and promoting the corridor to nearby residents as a convenient place to run daily errands, shop, dine, or catch a bus. Improving the connector streets includes installation of traffic calming measures, making landscape improvements, and implementing the pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure improvements mentioned above.

Development Incentives and Strategies

Developer Incentives: Minimizing Utility Costs and Building Frontage. As economic development incentives for developers, key investments were made by the City in constructing new utilities and hookups, undergrounding power lines, and building the frontage (which includes curb, gutter, landscaping/amenity zone, sidewalk and driveways) along the corridor during project construction. These investments serve to significantly reduce costs for potential developers, improve the attractiveness of the corridor, and increase developer interest in the corridor.

Allowing for Flexibility in Mixed-Use/Multi-Family Development Regulations. While the City aims to promote concentrated nodes of activity and more pedestrian-friendly development, a key strategy has been to ensure flexibility in mixed-use/multi-family development regulations, to maximize efficiency and minimize lost opportunities. For instance, in certain areas the City allows horizontal mixed-use developments, which have the advantage of not requiring multiple uses in the same building. In addition, in vertical mixed-use buildings, the City does not restrict ground floor commercial spaces to retail and allows for other commercial uses, including office space. Leadership also recognizes the benefits of multi-story buildings that are not mixed-use, which increase property tax revenue.

Overall, City leadership believes that allowing for more flexible regulations will be key to improving development opportunities throughout the corridor.



Recognizing Multiple Forms of Pedestrian-Oriented Improvements. City leadership emphasized that their approach to improving pedestrian mobility along the corridor is not limited to a “pedestrian village” model, which typically involves narrow streets, high Retail Floor-Area-Ratio (FAR), more boutique establishments, and traffic calming. While some of these traits exist in certain sections of the corridor, there are multiple stretches where pedestrian improvements are restricted to widened sidewalks, improved transit connections, and other basic changes to the streetscape. While project leadership hopes to develop several key nodes of relatively dense activity concentration (most notably the Town Center), they recognize that along a 3-mile corridor there will be numerous sections that remain primarily auto-oriented. However, along these stretches, pedestrian-oriented improvements can still be made to improve accessibility, safety, and convenience.

Targeting Nodes for Activity Concentration. Currently, City leadership has targeted three primary nodes as key activity centers and focal points for growth: Town Center near 175th Street, the Sears node between 155th and 160th Streets, and the existing park and ride at 192nd Street. These areas are zoned and targeted for more concentrated clusters of commercial activity and housing, as well as increased mixed-use development.

Town Center in particular has been singled out as a focal point for much of the City’s future growth accommodation. The Town Center Subarea Plan provides an ambitious vision of a vibrant, walkable cultural and civic center with a mix of public spaces, active businesses, and multi-family and single-family residential units along with a land use code that is form based. Although it is not part of the Aurora Corridor Project, the City has already made several key investments in the Town Center, including building a new City Hall and linear park between Aurora and Midvale Avenues. Other civic improvements include a new Fire station and reconstructed high school. Future investments are expected as well.

Outreach to Business Community and the Public

Establishing a Citizen’s Advisory Task Force. As noted earlier, project leadership faced significant pushback from the business community, who were concerned that the impacts of the project and its construction would deter drivers, take private property and reduce parking and negatively affect businesses along the corridor. A Citizen’s Advisory Task Force was appointed by City Council as a means of engaging with the business community and the public. The Task Force was structured like a board, with thirteen seats and representation from different groups, including six business representatives, six neighborhood representatives, and one special transportation advocate. They worked with project staff through the pre-design process and ended up recommending the final alternative and the project’s guiding design principles. The Task Force played a critical role in achieving buy-in from the business community.

KEY MARKET FORCES

Several key market forces have influenced Shoreline's efforts. These include:

Proximity to Seattle. Shoreline's close proximity to Seattle and its major employment and cultural centers makes the area attractive for potential residents and employers. Potential residents looking for more affordable housing alternatives with relatively easy access to the city would likely consider living in Shoreline, which brings an increased demand for commercial services and other amenities. In addition, as Seattle's neighborhoods continue to densify over the long-term, development will likely continue to spill over into adjacent cities, such as Shoreline.

Access to Light Rail. The expected arrival of two Link light rail stations, as part of an expanding regional system, in the early 2020s will be critical in broadening Shoreline's market potential. While the light rail route will follow an I-5 alignment, the Aurora Corridor is only one mile or less from both of the planned stations. The presence of light rail nearby will not only attract new residents, but will also provide much easier access to the city for people around the region.

Higher Income Neighborhoods. City leadership notes that a few neighborhoods in Shoreline, including The Highlands, Innis Arden and Richmond Beach, house a relatively affluent population, and that demand likely exists among this population for higher-end retail and commercial establishments. These types of establishments are currently lacking in Shoreline and the Aurora Corridor. This is a market that could be targeted as development opportunities increase.

Increased Residential Population Along the Corridor. City leadership sees an increased residential population along the corridor as a key market force that will drive commercial activity and spur development.

Traffic. Over 40,000 vehicles pass through the Aurora Corridor in Shoreline every day. While many do not intend to stop, the traffic represents a large pool of potential consumers. Additionally, there are 7,000 daily transit boardings and deboardings on the Aurora Corridor in Shoreline. City leadership hopes that as commercial activity becomes more attractive, drivers and bus-riders will be more likely to stop along the corridor.



SUCSESSES

While the Corridor is still under construction and results are expected over the long-term, the project has already seen some significant successes due to the changes that have been implemented so far. Mobility has improved, as there has been a projected 30% increase in transit speed and reliability. In addition, while pedestrian and bicycle traffic have not been measured, infrastructure improvements have clearly made walking and biking along the corridor much easier. Safety conditions have also improved, as vehicle accident rates have been reduced by over 60% in the first mile, and safety upgrades have been made for all other forms of transport.

Aurora Avenue is now much more aesthetically pleasing, which has inspired many of the businesses and property owners along the corridor to make improvements as well, including re-painting, new landscaping, and façade upgrades. While crime rates and overall public perception of the corridor will take a longer time to improve, highly visible project landmarks such as the pedestrian bridge above Aurora at 157th Street and the greenway between 175th and 185th Streets demonstrate to observers that significant investments are being made to revitalize the corridor.

As noted earlier, economic development has been relatively modest so far, although there have been some new projects in recent years. Three banks have built new facilities along the corridor, and a new mixed-use YMCA facility, businesses and 500 residential units opened less than half a mile south of Costco, on 192nd Street. In addition, there have been several other multi-family developments built along the corridor. Most importantly, however, City leadership believes that the project (along with other efforts, such as the Town Center Subarea Plan) is creating a strong infrastructure base and setting the stage for significant commercial and residential growth in the coming decades. They believe that the changes implemented through the project are necessary to achieve those levels of growth, but they recognize that it will likely happen progressively and are not expecting immediate impact.

CHALLENGES

City Leadership continues to face a number of challenges in achieving project goals. These include:

Attracting Developers in the Current Economy. Although the City has made significant investments to reduce costs to developers (by building new utilities, undergrounding power lines, and building frontage) and to foster an accessible and attractive environment for commercial activity, new commercial and residential development – particularly mixed-use and multi-family – has been relatively modest over the last few years. City Leadership credits the current state of the economy, and the cautious approach it has inspired in developers, for the slowdown in development. However, as noted previously, Leadership also believes the process will happen gradually, and are anticipating that development will increase over the long-term.

Working and Compromising with the Business Community. Project leadership faced a significant challenge in pushback from the business community, who worried that construction and other impacts of the project would negatively affect the business landscape on the corridor. Although the Citizen’s Advisory Task Force was an effective tool for collaboration, one of the major challenges for project staff was finding a balance between maintaining critical design aspects and satisfying Task Force members, particularly representatives from the business community. Ultimately, the CATF and Council adopted a document entitled “the 32 Points” which provided for design flexibility and put many of the concerns the business community had in writing. For instance, it narrowed the sidewalk by one foot on each side of the road and provided for flexible interim sidewalk to preserve parking or structures. Ultimately, the process of working with the task force was successful, but challenging. Clearly one of the biggest impacts on business concerns was the completion of the first mile, and the adjustments (lessons learned) that were made to the remaining corridor, and having the roadway completed so that drivers could experience the left turns, U-turns, and other improvements. The collection and monitoring of data was also a useful tool to utilize in the second public involvement and environmental process.

Limitations Due to State Highway Designation. Aurora Avenue’s designation as a State Highway prevented project leadership from being able to implement some preferred design elements. For instance, leadership had hoped to add more pedestrian crossings, additional signals, and narrower lanes to minimize right-of-way impacts, but were not allowed to do so, as these changes would have impeded vehicle progression.

Shallow, Narrow Lots. A significant economic development challenge for the City is that commercially zoned lots along the corridor are typically narrow and only one or two lots deep. As they are usually adjacent to single-family zoned neighborhoods, redevelopment into a significant project is challenging. Therefore, relatively large developments with underground parking, and vertical elements requires significant land assembly, which can dissuade developers from taking on bigger projects along the corridor.

Re-development Instead of Greenfield Opportunities. Another challenge is that much of the corridor is already built-up and requires re-development, with very few Greenfield opportunities. This means that buildings must be torn down before being built anew, and City Leadership claims that many property owners along the corridor are non-entrepreneurial and are not willing to take the risk that such an endeavor would require.



POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Based on Shoreline's story and experience, below are a set of policy considerations and key takeaways for Thurston County:

Value of Investing in Transit Improvements. Providing speedy, reliable, and safe transit service is a critical component for spurring development along a corridor and improving accessibility for potential residents and visitors. These improvements can be made through establishing BAT lanes for bus exclusivity, increasing bus fleets, installing lighting and shelters at bus stops, and various other improvements. A good transit system fosters denser, more pedestrian-oriented development and allows for concentrated nodes of commercial activity. In addition, providing good transit lowers potential costs for residents, which may allow for higher rents and serve as an incentive for developers to build in the area. Partnering with local transit agencies early is key to establishing transit-supportive zoning.

Value of Other Multi-Modal Transportation Investments. In addition to transit, other investments in mobility improvement can play an important role in making a corridor more attractive and accessible to people using all modes of transport. Improving non-motorized transportation facilities, such as pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, is paramount to increasing foot traffic and establishing the type of walkable environment that lends itself to mixed-use and multi-family developments.

Value of Investing in Safety Improvements. Areas perceived as being unsafe will likely struggle to attract demand for residential or commercial activity, and will be avoided by pedestrians and bicyclists. Investing in improving safety conditions through a myriad of strategies can play a key role in attracting development. Such strategies can include improving pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, traffic calming, lighting improvements, making roadway improvements to decrease vehicular accident rates, and increasing police presence.

Improving Connections to Adjacent Neighborhoods Increases Activity. Corridors are likely to see increased foot traffic and commercial activity if better connections are established to adjacent residential neighborhoods. By prioritizing pedestrian and bicycle improvements and implementing traffic calming on key connector streets to such neighborhoods, city planners can leverage a large pool of potential visitors and increase pedestrian-oriented activity.

Building Utilities and Frontage as Developer Incentives. City leaders can reduce costs for developers by building utilities and hookups, undergrounding power lines, and building frontage. Providing these cost-reducing measures can serve as a significant incentive to potential developers.

Being Flexible in Mixed-Use/Multi-Family Regulations. Allowing for flexibility in mixed-use/multi-family development regulations, depending on context, can improve opportunities for growth and maximize efficiency. While areas designated as high-concentration nodes may require stricter guidelines, certain stretches of a corridor may benefit from a more adaptable approach. For instance, not restricting ground floor uses to retail and allowing for horizontal mixed use developments (such as apartment structures behind retail) may help bolster development in areas that are currently lagging. In addition, promoting multi-story buildings that are not mixed-use provides the advantage of increased property tax revenue with a lower risk for vacancies.

Recognizing Multiple Forms of Pedestrian-Oriented Environments. Not all pedestrian improvements require the capital investment necessary to establish a “pedestrian village”. Improved walkability can also be developed primarily through better transit service, widened sidewalks, and other streetscape improvements. Long corridors typically have varying levels of development, and some stretches may require less investment in pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. These sections can still be made more accessible to pedestrians and bicyclists through the improvements noted above, but they do not require the same infrastructure and facilities as areas designated for higher concentrations of activity.

Targeting Nodes to Invest In. Targeting key nodes for increased investment provides opportunities for more concentrated development, higher levels of activity, and the establishment of landmark “hubs” along a corridor. Limiting the number of nodes is critical to securing the necessary level of investment and establishing environments that are distinct from the rest of the corridor.

Achieving a Balance while Working with the Business Community and the Public. While outreach is critical and it is important to achieve buy-in from the local business community and the general public, leadership should be cautious not to concede too much and hold their ground on issues they find to be particularly important. In general, it is important (but difficult) to strike a balance between achieving the necessary buy-in and preserving the most important elements of a project.



Creating a Vibrant Center in Burien: Civic Infrastructure & Community Involvement

Over the last 15 years, the City of Burien has been planning and developing an ambitious downtown revitalization, including a new public-private mixed use project, revitalized and new streets, and a new transit center. The cornerstone of this resurgence is Burien Town Square – a one-acre park anchored by an array of civic infrastructure (including a regional King County library, Burien City Hall, and a new pedestrian-friendly street grid), residential mixed-use development, and active boutique retailers and restaurants along SW 152nd street (Burien’s “Main Street”). The success of Burien Town Square as well as the overall downtown revitalization has been continuous and meaningful community involvement, helping to secure acceptance from the public and the business community.

2009 saw the opening of the new Burien Transit Center, the Town Square civic uses, and the first phase of the residential mixed-use condo development within the Town Square project. Although the mixed-use development encountered some initial problems due to the national economic situation, the City’s civic investments have continued to draw people downtown, and city-funded streetscape improvements on SW 152nd Street have catalyzed an increase in commercial activity and pedestrian traffic along the area’s traditional main street.

City leadership recognizes that challenges lie ahead, but is optimistic that the investments made in infrastructure and facilities, the synergy of uses that continues to develop, and the involvement and support of the community will establish Downtown Burien as an active civic center, as well as a strong commercial and residential market.

Downtown Burien - 152nd Street



Burien Town Square



HISTORY/CONTEXT

The City of Burien incorporated in 1993, and one of City leadership's first major goals was to revitalize downtown and re-establish it as a vibrant hub. Early on, it was determined that the plan would center around a public gathering space with civic activities. Between 1995 and 2000, the City engaged in a visioning process, adopted its first Comprehensive Plan and developed a more specific series of downtown plans, where a number of key ideas were solidified: Burien Town Square, a revitalized main street, unlimited residential density, and height limits up to 12 stories.

Prior to incorporation, King County attempted to build an activity center in, what is currently, Downtown Burien, but the project failed to gain traction because the County took a top-down approach and did not do enough to involve the community. City leadership vowed not to repeat the same mistake, and ensured that there was broad public involvement and buy-in before proceeding.

As each step in the downtown planning process began, the community was asked whether the goals and objectives agreed upon in the previous planning phase were still desired. This continuous check-in with the community ensured that the City was following the community's vision for downtown. It also led to broad acceptance of the ultimate redevelopment plan, including the Town Square project. As the plans for downtown evolved, it was eventually determined that the Burien Town Square would be built on a 10-acre site at the NW corner of SW 152nd Street and 4th Avenue SW, and that there would be a range of civic infrastructure and activities, surrounded by several mixed-use buildings. In addition, there would be substantial investment in upgrading a 10-block stretch of SW 152nd street and several blocks of 4th Ave. SW.

City Investments

In the early 2000s, a \$6 million upgrade to SW 152nd St. was completed, and it served as a catalyst for private investment and an increase in commercial activity in the traditional core. The City facilitated the Town square project by assembling land as well as reducing the 10-acre superblock into smaller parcels by creation of a new street grid. In addition, they invested in the new Burien City Hall and library structures, a parking structure, and a park. In total, the City spent \$53 million on investments related to the Town Square project. They quickly found a partner in developer Urban Partners and established a development agreement to build three mixed-use buildings (although only one has been built so far).

Outcomes

The Town Square project opened in 2009, and the civic infrastructure almost immediately increased foot traffic and activity downtown. However, due to the housing market crash, the residential portion of the mixed-use project saw weak initial performance and Urban Partners' financing (Corus Bank in Chicago) was foreclosed on, which led to the FDIC acquiring the development and suspended sales for nearly two years. A new developer, ST Residential, (in partnership with the FDIC) has recently taken over, adjusted prices, and begun selling units again. In recent months, the development has seen some momentum, and city leadership remains cautiously optimistic that sales will grow in the coming years.



STRATEGIES AND TOOLS

The City of Burien has incorporated an array of strategies and tools in its downtown revitalization process:

Investing in Civic Infrastructure. The Town Square project includes significant investment in civic infrastructure and activities in the heart of Downtown Burien, including a new city hall, library and park. The park, which serves as a central green space, hosts a number of events and activities, including a farmer's market and summertime weekly music performances. City leadership adopted the strategy of investing in civic infrastructure because they felt it would help establish downtown as a citywide (and potentially regional) destination and bolster foot traffic and activity during the day.

Streetscape Investments in Downtown Core. In order to leverage their attractive downtown core and increase commercial activity, city leadership made a substantial investment in streetscape improvements along a 10-block stretch of SW 152nd street, the area's primary commercial corridor. The investment successfully attracted private investment and served as a catalyst for a number of new businesses to open along the corridor.

Synergy of Uses. Through the downtown revitalization, the City of Burien aims to establish a synergy of uses around the Town Square, including civic activities, a revitalized commercial district, a transit center, and residential mixed-use developments.

Extensive Community Outreach. City leadership learned from mistakes made during previous King County efforts, and ensured that there was substantial community outreach during each phase of the planning and design process. The City provided numerous substantive opportunities for the public to weigh in and provide input on what would happen in Downtown Burien, as well as what the overall vision for the Town Square project would be. This allowed for broad community buy-in, which leadership believes was key to achieving and maintaining political and financial support. In addition, the developer was more willing to get on board because they had a clear vision to follow as a guide, and believed there was minimal potential for community opposition.

SEPA Urban Infill Exemption. Burien was the first jurisdiction in Washington to utilize an "urban infill exemption" that provides mixed-use project within an urban growth area with a SEPA exemption for infill development, as long as the Comprehensive Plan for the area was previously subjected to an Environmental Impact Statement. This saved the Town Square developers a substantial amount of money and time duplicating environmental review.

Not Restricting Ground Floor to Retail. In an effort to ensure development code flexibility, the City has not restricted the ground floor of the mixed-use developments to retail usage. The only criteria is that along SW 152nd St. and 4th Ave. SW is has to be non-residential use, which includes retail, restaurants and office space.

KEY MARKET FORCES

Several key market forces have influenced Burien's efforts. These include:

Geographic Location. Burien's relatively central location within the region, as well as its close proximity to Seattle and other employment and cultural hubs, make it an attractive option for residents and commuters looking for affordable housing costs.

Economic Recession. Leadership believes the recent economic downturn, which coincided with the opening of the Town Square's first mixed-use residential development, dramatically altered the housing market and was a key driver behind the disappointing initial sales. As a result of the new housing market conditions that have emerged in the wake of the recession, developer ST Residential (who have recently acquired the building) have substantially lowered prices and changed their marketing approach.

Increased Residential Population. City leadership has made several efforts (most notably the Town Square project and allowing unlimited residential density) to promote increased residential density Downtown. Although the city has seen success in revitalizing the commercial core downtown and bringing civic activity to the area, they believe that an increase in the residential population living within close proximity to Downtown will be the most important driver behind developing and growing their market.

SUCSESSES

City leadership believes they have made great strides towards establishing an active, community-oriented downtown, with a range of uses and attractions. Following significant public investment in streetscape improvements on SW 152nd Street, Burien's downtown commercial district has seen a remarkable transformation over the last decade. There has been a substantial amount of private investment in the area and many new businesses – including bars, restaurants, and boutique shops – have opened in recent years. This has increased activity and foot traffic during the day and evening, and garnered the city substantial publicity for fostering a commercial district that has become one of the “trendiest” in South King County.

The Town Square Project, while requiring heavy public investment in civic infrastructure, has successfully established a central gathering space within downtown, and substantially increased daytime foot traffic. The project has a way to go before it reaches full potential, particularly the residential and ground-floor commercial components of the mixed-use development. However, leadership believes they have established the right environment and the necessary capacity to allow for future targeted commercial and residential growth within Downtown.



CHALLENGES

City Leadership continues to face a number of challenges in its downtown revitalization process. These include:

Stagnant Condo Sales in the Current Economy. As noted previously, the current recession played a key role in the mixed-use development's stagnant initial condo sales, as well as closing the bank (Corus Bank based in Chicago) that was providing financing for the project. This led to a nearly two-year period where the development was held by the FDIC and sales were suspended. Sales have now resumed with ST residential (in partnership with the FDIC) taking over, and units are already selling at a faster rate than they had previously (although they are still fairly modest). In addition, while Urban Partners initially had a development agreement for three mixed-use buildings, as a result of the economic downturn it is currently uncertain whether they will be the developers building the remaining structures.

Filling Ground Floor Spaces in Mixed-use Developments. Although the City is not restricting commercial uses for the ground-floor spaces in the mixed-use development, currently all of the spaces are vacant. This reflects some of the same market challenges facing the residential components of the project. City leadership hopes that as more units are sold and the residential population increases, risk for potential businesses will be reduced and the spaces will begin to fill in.

Managing Public Spaces for Different Groups. The City and King County Library Service (KCLS) (which manages the Library/City Hall building) have faced challenges in ensuring that all populations are comfortable when visiting the Library/City Hall and Town Square Park. For example, while public safety has not been an issue, there are visitors to the library who have reported feeling intimidated by loitering teenagers. However, a key goal of the library (and the project as a whole) is to establish a space that is welcoming and accommodating to minors. The City and KCLS are working to establish guidelines that will better allow all groups of people who visit the public spaces to be comfortable.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

Based on Burien's story and experience, below are a set of policy considerations and key takeaways for Thurston County:

Value of Investing in Civic Infrastructure. Bringing key pieces of civic infrastructure to an area targeted for concentrated growth can attract private capital, substantially bolster foot traffic and increase activity (particularly in the daytime), as well as ultimately establish a destination where one may not have previously existed. These types of investments can serve as a catalyst, or a long-term foundation, for commercial and residential growth.

Value of Investing in Traditional Streetscapes. Investing in streetscape improvements in traditional commercial areas is a potentially high-value endeavor that can improve attractiveness with a relatively small amount of money. Developers, business owners, and consumers tend to find these areas attractive; they typically have built-in identities and amenities due to their infrastructure and street layouts. Developers and the City do not have to start from scratch or make the types of heavy investments typically associated with place-making.

Consider Establishing a Synergy of Uses to Increase Overall Activity. By taking a comprehensive approach and establishing an array of uses within a concentrated area (e.g. civic, commercial, residential, transit), a jurisdiction can establish a dynamic environment with a synergy between uses that substantially increases overall activity.

Broad Community Outreach to Achieve Buy-in and Vision. A broad community outreach process is a critical tool to establish public buy-in, which is key for a project's political and financial support. In addition, community outreach can reduce risk for developers by establishing a vision which serves as a clear guideline, as well as minimize the potential for future community opposition.

Consider Allowing Uses Besides Residential and Retail in Mixed-use Developments. Given the current economic climate, restricting the ground floor of mixed-use developments to retail can be a constraint that limits development opportunities. Consider allowing other uses, such as food service or office, to broaden the base of prospective businesses. The key is having uses that provide street-level activity, both pedestrian and visual ("eyes on the street").

Consider Utilizing the Urban Infill SEPA Exemption or a Planned Action Ordinance as a Developer Incentive. The SEPA infill exemption or a planned action ordinance can serve as a powerful incentive to developers by substantially reducing costs associated with SEPA compliance. These tools allow a jurisdiction to provide exemptions to developers who are building on areas where an environmental review has already occurred.