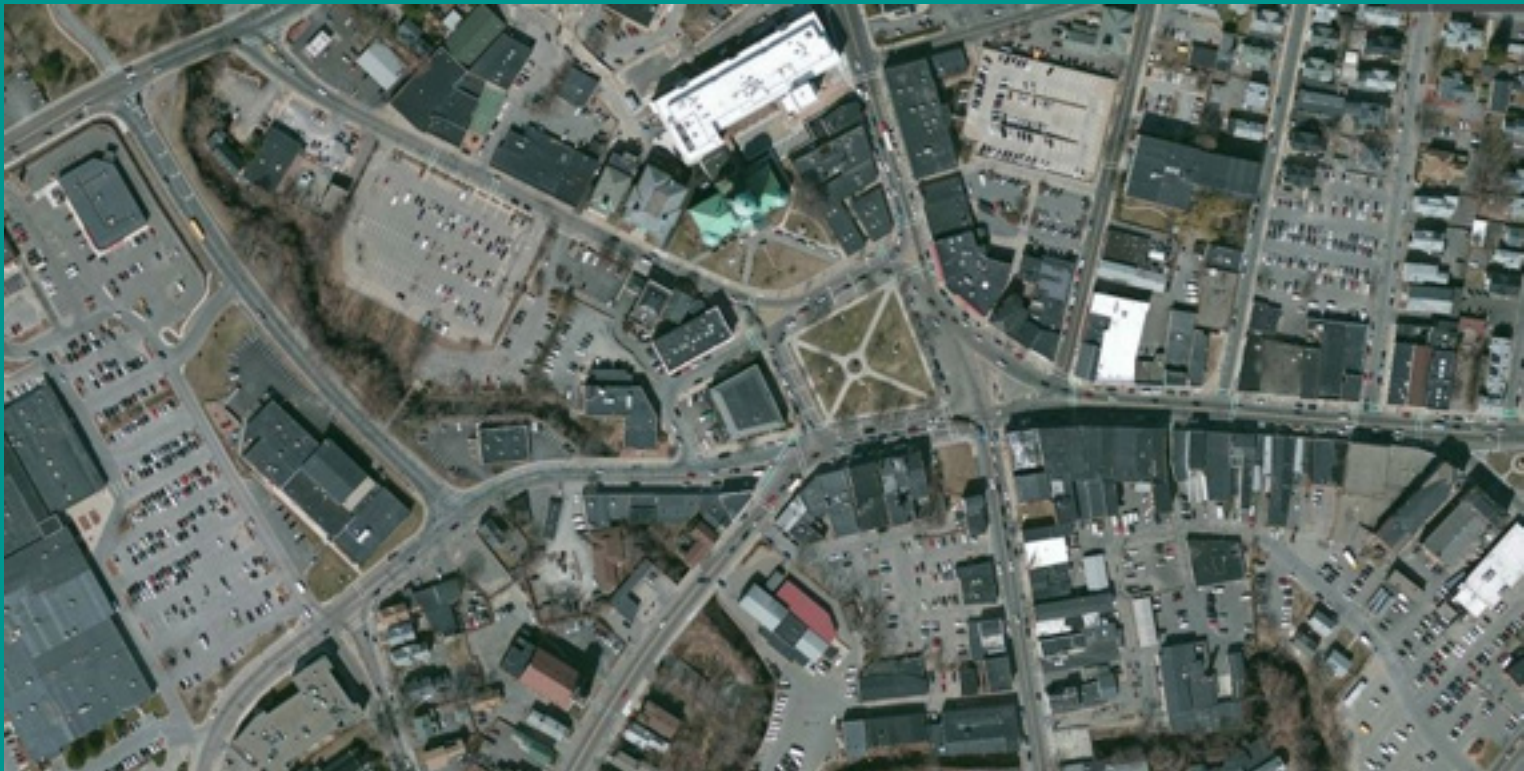


# A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

City of Taunton

Taunton, MA



May 3, 2016



Urban Land  
Institute

Boston/New England



MASSDEVELOPMENT

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# Executive Summary

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The Taunton TAP convened at Baron Lofts in downtown Taunton on May 3, 2016. Under the direction of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council, the all-day event brought together city leaders, downtown business people and building owners, along with a panel of design, planning and development professionals.

The charrette focused on ways to capitalize on downtown Taunton's many positive attributes, from beautiful architecture and the Taunton Green to a budding nightlife sector, to attract new businesses, shoppers and residents. The panel explored ways to make downtown more pedestrian friendly, the economics of new housing construction, and the need for both a capital planning process and a new and updated master plan.

**Chapter 1: ULI and the TAP Process** Offers an overview of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council and its Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs), while also detailing the panel members and stakeholders who took part.

**Chapter 2: Background and History** After a long history as a manufacturing hub, Taunton begins to reinvent itself and explore ways to revive its downtown.

**Chapter 3: Assets and Opportunities** Downtown Taunton has many strengths that can be built on, from a strong civic spirit and beautiful parks to a budding entertainment sector.

**Chapter 4: Challenges** Downtown Taunton also faces challenges, including a cumbersome permitting process and the lack of a clear brand and compelling value proposition to draw visitors, shoppers and potential investors.

**Chapter 5: Community Feedback** Responses from the community at the public presentation.

**Chapter 6: Recommendations** The panel offers its recommendations, including a long-term capital plan, a streamlined permitting process for new businesses and developers, and a new downtown planning study.

**Chapter 7: Next Steps** Lays out a number of state financing and planning resources that could prove helpful as Taunton moves ahead with its downtown revitalization plans.

# ULI and the TAP Process

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## Urban Land Institute (ULI)

The Urban Land Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit research and education organization supported by its members. Founded in 1936, the institute now has nearly 40,000 members worldwide representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines, working in private enterprise and public service, including developers, architects, planners, lawyers, bankers, and economic development professionals, among others.

As the preeminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information, and experience among local, national, and international industry leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places. The mission of the Urban Land Institute is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and to help sustain and create thriving communities. The Boston/New England District Council serves the six New England states and has over 1,300 members.

## Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)

The ULI Boston/New England Real Estate Advisory Committee convenes Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) at the request of public officials and local stakeholders of communities and nonprofit organizations facing complex land use challenges who benefit from planning and development professionals providing pro bono recommendations. At the TAP, a group of diverse professionals specially assembled with expertise in the issues posed typically spends one to two days visiting and analyzing existing conditions, identifying specific planning and development issues, and formulating realistic and actionable recommendations to move initiatives forward in a way consistent with the applicant's goals and objectives.

## MassDevelopment Support

MassDevelopment is the state's economic

development and finance authority. The authority works closely with state, local and federal officials to boost housing and create jobs. With the power to act as both a lender and developer, MassDevelopment also works to fill in gaps in infrastructure, transportation, energy and other areas that may be holding back economic growth. MassDevelopment has worked with ULI since 2011 to help sponsor and support the TAP process in cities and towns across the Commonwealth. Support the TAP process in cities and towns across the Commonwealth.

## The Panel

ULI Boston/New England convened a volunteer panel of experts to examine the challenges and opportunities facing downtown Taunton.

## Co-Chairs

Nyal McDonough, Vice President  
Berkshire Group  
Boston, MA

Jeremy Wilkening, Director of Real Estate Urban  
Edge  
Boston, MA

## Panelists

Fran DeCoste, Chief Operating Officer  
TR Advisors  
Boston, MA

Heather Gould, Assistant Chief Development Officer  
City of Worcester  
Worcester, MA

Gary Kane, Senior Project Manager  
The Architectural Team  
Boston, MA

Amanda Maher, Vice President, Real Estate Services  
MassDevelopment  
Boston, MA



David Matton, Principal of Public Infrastructure  
Howard Stein Hudson  
Boston, MA

Matt Marotta, Designer & BIM Leader ICON  
Architecture  
Boston, MA

Matt Zahler, Senior Project Manager  
Trinity Financial  
Boston, MA



### **ULI Boston/New England Staff**

Ileana Tauscher  
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Manikka Bowman  
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### **Report Writer**

Scott Van Voorhis  
Natick, MA

### **Stakeholders**

Dennis Ackerman  
Chairman - Taunton Zoning Board of Appeals  
Downtown Property Owner

Jann Alden  
Vice President & Regional Banking Officer- Bristol  
County Savings Bank

Jose Bejarano  
Board of Directors - Business Improvement District  
(BID)  
Downtown Business (Tuxtowne) and Property Owner

Estele Borges Taunton City Council  
Realtor, Realty Executives Metro South, Taunton, MA  
Client Relations Director/PTA  
Exercise Physiologist Epic Health Services, Inc.

Daniel Dermody  
Taunton City Council

Dave DeSantis  
Board of Directors, BID  
Downtown Business (First Taunton Group)  
& Property Owner

Jay Dorsey President - BID  
Downtown Property Owner

Margaret Gudmundsson  
Downtown Business (Coffee Milano) & Property  
Owner

Carlos Mello  
Downtown Business & Property Owner

Tonya Miller  
Downtown Business Owner (Crossfit SANE)

Lew Pacheco  
Board of Directors - BID  
Downtown Business (Pacheco Jewelry) and Property  
Owner

Jeanne Quinn  
Taunton City Council President Real Estate Attorney

Lou Ricciardi  
President, Taunton Development Corporation  
President, Ricciardi Financial Group

Michael Wedge  
President - Downtown Taunton Foundation Clerk -  
BID  
Downtown Business (Home Water Solutions)/  
Property Owner

## TAP Process

The Taunton TAP met May 3, 2016 at Baron Lofts at 8 Trescott Street in downtown Taunton. Mayor Thomas Hoye greeted panelists and led a tour of downtown, taking note of Taunton Green, City Hall, and the new Taunton District Court, as well as the city's budding nightlife district on Weir Street and other key businesses and buildings.

The panelists reconvened at Baron Lofts for a series of interviews during the morning with business owners, city officials and other stakeholders. Following a working lunch, the TAP panel engaged in an intensive, brainstorming session on the opportunities and challenges facing downtown, drafting a series of observations and proposed recommendations.

The panel unveiled its report before city residents and officials that evening before a meeting of the Taunton City Council. A question-and-answer session followed.



Images from the walking tour of Downtown Taunton.

# Background and History

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## Evolution of Downtown Taunton

Founded in 1637, the City of Taunton is one of the oldest cities in the United States. Known as the “Silver City”, it was the historic center of the silver industry beginning in the 19th century when companies such as Reed & Barton, F. B. Rogers, Poole Silver, and others produced fine-quality silver goods. Taunton was also the center of the iron-making industry, utilizing much bog iron from the numerous swamps in the surrounding area.

Taunton’s iron industry produced a variety of goods including stoves, tacks, and machinery for the textile industry and steam locomotives. Taunton Locomotive Works (begun in 1846) operated in the city during this time as the city became an important transportation hub due to its central location. Taunton was also home to several textile mills and other industries, such as felt and brick making. The city was the major shipping point for grain from the inland rural farm areas of Massachusetts to the rest of the nation via Weir Village and the Taunton River.

Taunton is one of 26 cities in Massachusetts designated as Gateway Cities —defined as midsize urban centers with populations between 35,000 and 250,000, an average household income below the state average and an educational attainment rate (bachelor’s or above) below the state’s average. For generations, these communities were home to industry that offered residents good jobs and a “gateway” to the American Dream. Over the past several decades, manufacturing jobs slowly disappeared. Lacking resources and capacity to rebuild and reposition, Gateway Cities have been slow to draw new economy investment. As with other gateway cities, Taunton faces a number of social and economic challenges as a result of the downturn in nation’s economy. Taunton’s downtown has also faced added challenges in recent decades, with the extension of I-495 in the early 1980s and the development of the Silver City Galleria in the early 1990s siphoning off shoppers and activity.

The City of Taunton is located approximately 40 miles south of Boston. Taunton has a total area of 48.4 square miles. It is the third largest city by area in Massachusetts. The city has one major river, the Taunton River, along with its tributaries including the Mill River and the Three Mile River. The city has a mayor-council form of government. Taunton also has a school committee and many boards and commissions. As the seat of Bristol County, Taunton is home to the county’s few administrative offices and several of its courthouses, including the Bristol County Superior Courthouse.

According to the 2010 census, the total population of the City of Taunton is 55,874. The city has a large multi-cultural population; ethnic backgrounds include 23% Portuguese, 17% Irish, 5.5% Hispanic/Latino, and 5% African American (Census State & County Quick Facts). Most of Taunton’s immigration occurred at the turn of the 20th century when immigrants came to work in the city’s mills. Currently, there are 22,332 households in the city, out of which 32% have children under the age of 18 living with them, 15% have a female householder with no husband present, and 36% are non-families. Nearly 29% of all households are made up of individuals and 10% of those 65 years of age or older are living alone. About 11% of families and 13% of the total population are below the poverty line, including 17% of those under age 18 and 11% aged 65 or over (U.S. Census 2010).

## Taunton’s Statement of Need

The City of Taunton is presently engaged in a concerted effort to revitalize its downtown. Actions to date include the recent completion of a downtown study by UMass Dartmouth’s Urban Initiative, major infrastructure improvements, the creation of a Business Improvement District (BID), proposed zoning changes aimed at encouraging development, establishment of the state’s Housing Development Incentive Program, and the introduction of a Rent Rebate Program for new businesses locating to the downtown.



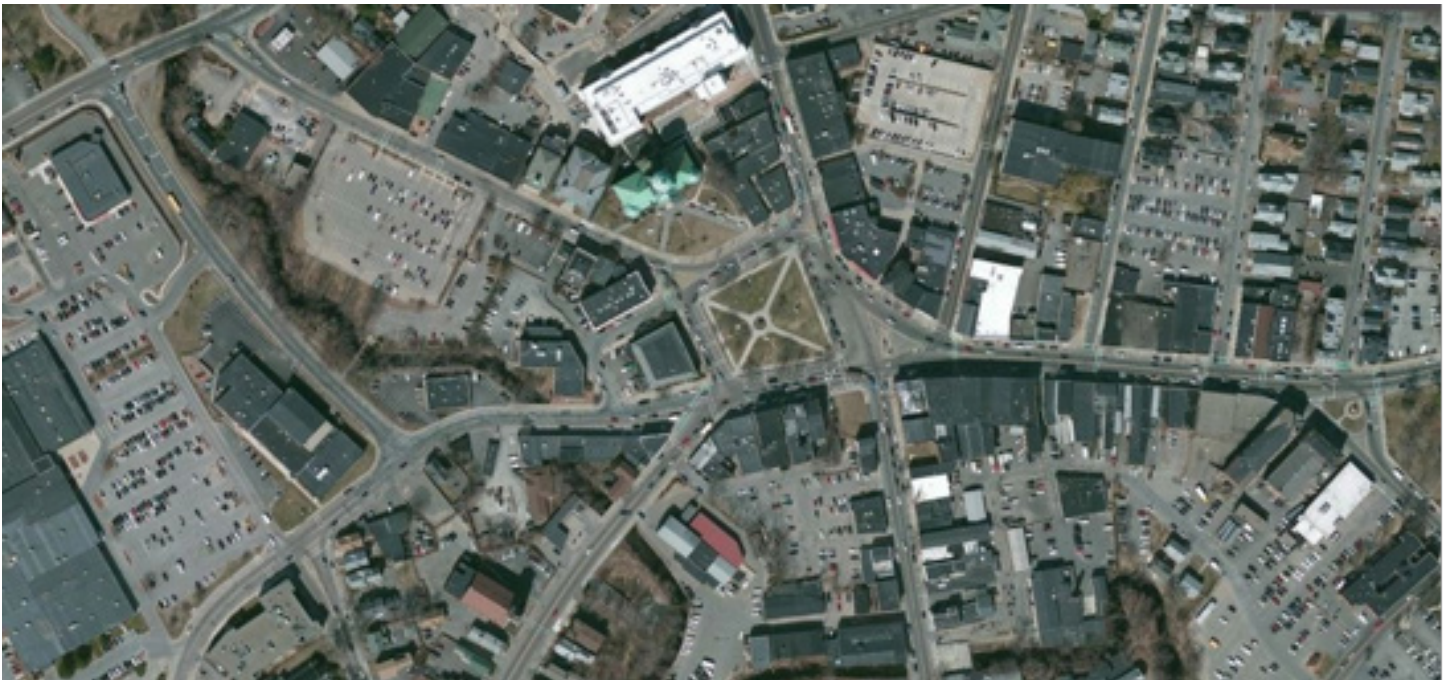
Although some progress has been made in recent years, Taunton's downtown area continues to struggle with vacancies (especially in the upper floors), lack of destination retail, an absence of nighttime activities that can bring visitors to the downtown, and perhaps most critically, an inability to attract significant investors.

The City seeks to identify achievable and realistic market opportunities and potential prospects, given the existing market conditions, unique characteristics and competitive advantages of the downtown, and to ultimately craft a targeted marketing strategy which recommends concrete steps aimed at pursuing those opportunities and prospects.

### Questions to be Addressed by the Panel

1. Based on the existing physical, demographic, and market conditions of downtown Taunton, what types of investments are most likely to take place and make the most sense for the City?

2. How can investments in the downtown best be attracted and are there measures the City can take to attract more investment?
3. What are the City's most important strengths and assets and how can those strengths and assets be incorporated into future redevelopment strategies?
4. Is the City's vision for downtown clear enough for future redevelopment efforts?



Aerial image of study area

# Assets and Opportunities

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Downtown Taunton has a number of attributes that bode well for the city's efforts to revitalize its core. City Hall is supportive of local businesses, with a palpable sense of community in the downtown business community. The Taunton Business Improvement District (BID) established in 2010, is made up of Downtown property owners working together to revitalize the City's central business district. BID programs include: Downtown maintenance services (daily sidewalk cleaning, storefront window washing, and supplemental snow plowing), beautification projects, collaborative marketing initiatives, and public safety enhancements. Downtown businesses get wide exposure from the thousands of cars and trucks that pass through downtown Taunton each day and there is more than ample parking throughout the business district. There is a budding nightlife scene on Weir Street, while Taunton Green is an underutilized jewel with the potential to become much more of a hub for events and activities.

## Strong Support for Development

Mayor Thomas Hoyer and the Taunton City Council take an active interest in downtown and are strongly supportive of efforts to promote development and new activity downtown. City officials are working to streamline the permitting process and are considering potential plans to renovate the nineteenth century City Hall building, severely damaged by fire in 2010.

## Business Improvement District

Taunton's BID continues to play a key role in promoting the revitalization of downtown by assisting local business owners in the acquisition of older and underused buildings.

## Beautiful Buildings and Parks

Downtown Taunton is beautiful, with handsome, relatively well-maintained 19th and early 20th century commercial buildings and a centerpiece greenspace, Taunton Green. Currently underutilized, the Green



Beautiful buildings surround Taunton Green.

has great potential to become a hub for a variety of events and festivals that could draw additional people downtown, from shoppers to potential future residents.

## Good Exposure

Downtown Taunton is at the confluence of major state roadways. The 23,000 cars and trucks that pass through downtown everyday provide valuable exposure – and free advertising – to local businesses.

## Budding Entertainment Sector

A local craft beer company is in the process of buying a building on Weir Street for a brew pub. It joins a growing number of pubs and restaurants, that have set up shop on Weir Street, a short walk from Main Street.

## Potential Casino Marketing Opportunities

The Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe has begun construction of its \$1 billion First Light Casino in East Taunton. The casino is expected to generate 20,000 round trips a day – creating a potential marketing

opportunity for downtown businesses.

### **Strong Community Spirit**

The downtown business community is supportive of each other, working together through a BID. The city also has a strong commitment to helping others, with downtown home to a number of churches. There are a number of social service agencies in and around the downtown area, serving the needs of local residents.

# Challenges

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As the City considers ways to bring greater vibrancy to its downtown, Taunton faces a number of challenges. Overall, Taunton's efforts are hampered by a lack of an overarching long-term vision for the city as would be detailed in a Long-Term Capital Plan. The downtown is also in dire need of a new master plan. Developers and business owners complain of a cumbersome permitting process. Because commercial and residential rents are low, new construction is a challenge. There is also a perception – not backed up by the crime statistics – that downtown Taunton can be unsafe, particularly at night. And while Taunton Green is a beautiful centerpiece for downtown, its tremendous potential is greatly hampered because it is not pedestrian friendly.

## Long-Term Capital Plan

Taunton currently lacks a capital planning process for major projects. This makes it difficult for the city to weigh the implications of the various long-term issues it needs to address and results in unacceptable delays in such critical decisions as finalizing a solution for the replacement of City Hall.

More importantly, it prevents elected officials and its electorate from being able to bring the thoughtfulness and consideration that they need to be able to apply to all of the city's major decisions.

## Lack of Long-Term Vision

Downtown Taunton lacks a clear brand or compelling value proposition when it comes to attracting new development, businesses and residents. One factor behind this has been a lack of long-term planning that would help downtown stakeholders forge a vision of where the city's center is now and where it is headed. Taunton has not drawn up a master plan since 1998, nearly two decades. We applaud the city's efforts, as we know they are now preparing to update that plan.

## Cumbersome Permitting Process

A common complaint by business owners is the time it takes to line up the necessary city permits to do everything from opening a new store to building new apartments. It can take months to win the necessary zoning relief and obtain a building permit and other required approvals, business owners and developers report. There were examples provided of some business owners being denied permits, with no explanation regarding the appeal process. While this is a common problem for communities, it has a greater impact in gateway communities such as Taunton in that the economics of expanding or opening a business in such communities are already challenging. Based on conversations with panelists, this additional burden has impacted development in the City. In order for Taunton to gain a competitive edge, the City would best be served by having as seamless, efficient and predictable a process as possible. As a part of this it would be beneficial for town employees to be clear about all of the approval options available to a retailer/restrateur if they have to deny a permit or approval.



Empty lot in Downtown.



## Development Feasibility

There is strong support for new market-rate housing and commercial development downtown. But without tax credits or other forms of assistance, neither is feasible given the current rents. Commercial rents downtown are not high enough to make ground up construction work. Meanwhile, commercial taxes are high compared to other local communities, at nearly \$35 per \$1,000 of assessed value, or the highest possible rate allowed under state law given the city's residential rate of \$15.68. Renovating upper floors of downtown commercial buildings for residential use – an idea that is also being explored by local developers – also faces challenges. It would cost an estimated \$197,000 to build out each second floor unit. To earn a 7 percent return, a developer would have to charge \$1,800 a month in rent. However, the median rent for a two-bedroom in Taunton, at \$1,259, does not support such an investment. In order to move forward, the developer would need a \$63,000 subsidy per unit. Parking ratios – the requirement that residential developers must have a certain number of parking spaces under their control for each unit – is an additional challenge facing would-be apartment and condo builders.



Road design around downtown favors vehicular traffic over pedestrian and bicycle traffic.

## Crime Concerns

There is perception that downtown Taunton has a crime problem. While there are occasionally scattered incidents, the idea that the city's center is a dangerous place – particularly at night - is not backed up by crime statistics. Helping feed that concern is a lack of adequate street lighting at night, as well as sparse foot traffic in the evening hours.



Clear signage could alleviate parking issues.

## Parking and Pedestrian Connectivity

Finding the right parking space and getting around downtown on foot can prove challenging at times. While there is no shortage of parking, there is little signage pointing out available lots on side streets or any indicator of whether they are public or private. With heavy traffic flow throughout the day, getting around downtown on foot requires patience and caution. Heavy traffic, in turn, makes it particularly difficult for pedestrians and others interested in visiting Taunton Green.



# Recommendations

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Downtown Taunton has many things going for it, from beautiful buildings and parks to engaged city and business leadership. However, in order to take advantage of its natural attributes, additional planning and coordination is needed. Taunton needs to become the easiest and most accessible community for starting a new business if it is to compete with municipalities that have more attractive retail demographics.

## Long Term Capital Plan

This is a threshold issue for effective governance. MassDevelopment offers potential financial help in achieving this goal. We cannot recommend it highly enough.

## Improve Permitting Process

Mayor Hoye mentioned that efforts have already been made to streamline the permitting process. City officials should build on that progress and consider additional ways to make the city permitting process more user- friendly for new businesses looking to open downtown, existing businesses to expand and developers interested in renovating existing buildings. Business owners interested in opening a restaurant or store downtown tend to be first-time entrepreneurs, with limited background in the complexity of local and state permitting rules. The city needs to have a business advocate or ombudsman to help businesses navigate the approval process.

## Revive the Downtown City Hall

From an economic perspective, there are almost always less expensive alternatives than having City Hall downtown. So the question becomes why pay more to have the City Hall downtown? We see City Hall as the nucleus of the city. It communicates physically the pride the city has in its employees and in its residents. We would encourage Taunton to show its pride here and be as welcoming as it can to its residents, potential residents and business

owners. The new City Hall will reflect the City's commitment in making the downtown a vibrant city center for residents, businesses, and people traveling through the City. The Long Term Capital Plan will help the town weigh that expression of pride and welcoming with its other financial commitments.

## Strengthen Planning

As the City moves forward with updating its 1998 master plan, it should also revisit some of the ideas in the 2009 UMass Dartmouth "Downtown Taunton Development Study." Taunton should also consider a downtown visioning process with input from residents and major stakeholders to define and craft a brand and marketing message and create a district plan for downtown Taunton.

## Make the Crown Jewel Shine

Taunton Green is the elegant centerpiece of downtown, but its use is limited by the heavy traffic around it (the biggest problem comes on the eastern edge from Main Street to Broadway, with the distance across the street the Green simply too wide). One possibility would be to widen the sidewalk, creating a plaza across the street from the area. It would also have the added benefit of helping slow traffic down. Adding parking spaces might also help narrow the gap and bring Taunton Green closer to other side of Main Street and downtown as a whole. On special occasions, the City could close the street down entirely, creating a pedestrian pathway from downtown to Taunton Green. It can be tested out on a temporary basis simply by putting out some orange cones. Eventually, special paving patterns and pavers might be rolled out in this area to emphasize its role as a connector. Overall, by slowing traffic, it may spur drivers who might have sped through to take notice of what is happening downtown.

## Market Downtown Taunton

Taunton suffers greatly from a perception of crime

and poverty, much of which is unfounded. In the past five years, downtown crime rates have dropped substantially. To counter this the City should:

1. Develop a market analysis and marketing strategy aimed at promoting downtown as a place to do business. The study should look at what's available in terms of space and determine the local market. The City and the BID should focus on recruiting new businesses and investments to the downtown.
2. Introduce a downtown police officer to walk the beat and/or ride a bike in downtown. This will improve both the perception and the reality of crime in downtown.
3. Consult with professionals in the marketing/image business to work on methods to counteract perceptions. Knowing that the media has a negative news bias, provide them with positive stories and realistic viewpoints.

### Live up Downtown with Placemaking Activities

Taunton should consider festivals, farmers markets, pop-up retail stores and other events and attractions to draw people downtown. If downtown Taunton is seen as an attractive place to be, that in turn could provide some great soft marketing in terms of recruiting new businesses and spurring residential development.

### Connect Weir Street with Downtown

The budding entertainment district on Weir Street is a success story the city should be proud of. But it is important to capitalize on that success by more closely integrating the restaurants and pubs on Weir Street with the rest of downtown. This could be accomplished by creating a clear pedestrian walkway from Weir Street to Main Street.

### Create a Home Base for Arts and Culture

Possible candidates include the old district courthouse

and maybe even the postal service building, should it come on the market.

### Improve Parking

Improved signage is needed to help shoppers and other visitors find public parking lots downtown. Fresh striping and new lighting would help encourage the use of these lots and dispel lingering safety concerns.

City officials may also want to consider revising signage regulations. Current rules prohibit "blade signage," making it difficult to identify businesses for those driving or walking through downtown.



Wayfinding and street improvement updates will help with both directing vehicular traffic and finding parking



Proposed connections between Taunton Green and surrounding sidewalks.

# Community Feedback

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The Taunton City Council discussed the suggestions put forth by the Taunton TAP panel on May 3, 2016 after the all-day charrette. The consensus was the panel's observations hit upon a number of downtown issues that the City has been grappling with for years. Overall, there has been a long-standing desire to bring additional retail establishments and increase the number of apartments to the downtown, but city officials have been stymied in terms of crafting an approach. What to focus on first – retail

or residential – has been a matter of debate. City Council President Jeanne Quinn noted downtown traffic patterns – and how to improve them – have also been discussed. The Council agreed with the TAP recommendation that the City undertake a major effort to update its planning for downtown. It was noted that a 2009 study of downtown by UMass Dartmouth has been revisited and will be updated, while Mayor Hoye pointed out that funding was included in the current budget to update the city's last master plan.

## Next Steps: Funding Sources

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The following is a list of funding sources Taunton can explore to assist in implementing recommendations.

### Funding and Technical Assistance

- State and federal Historic Tax Credits
- Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD)
- District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA)
- Department of Housing & Community Development (DHCD)
- Planning Assistance Towards Housing Grants (PATH)
- 40R
- Community Compacts (through Commonwealth)
- Community Preservation
- MassDOT Complete Streets Funding
- MassDevelopment Technical Assistance
- Cultural Facilities Fund
- AIA –Urban Design Assistance Team (downtown visioning)
- Congress for New Urbanism Do Tank
- WalkBoston
- MassWorks