

## ***Fourth Draft***

# **Urban Lab Fact Book: Westminster Crossing and Reviving Cathedral Square**

New Commons  
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This is a draft fact book for Westminster Crossing and Cathedral Square. This one document contains the conditions, facts and projects, either underway or planned that address the whole area. It is a multidisciplinary fact book, assembling what is known from all the plans and from different people who don't always have the chance to communicate and share their plans.

Note: Everything in this emerging fact book is draft. The facts have to be checked and added to. The ideas at this time are just that: ideas and not defined agreements or priorities. Content is added to the Fact Book, as it becomes known.

### **I. What is the location?**

The area is Weybosett Street to Westminster and Empire to Route 95 and across the highway to the south and west sides.

### **II. What are the potential long-term goals for the location? Frame the goals as benefits.**

- Improve pedestrian, vehicular, and biking connection between downtown and the western neighborhood along Westminster St.
- Reduce the negative environmental effects of 1-95 and the service roads within the project boundaries. Connect Cathedral Square to its surroundings and redesign Cathedral Square making the square a vital, well-used center of a mixed income/mixed use neighborhood.
- Identify sites for mixed use and mixed income development including affordable housing.
- Neighborhood connectivity needs to go both ways. Connect the square and that part of Westminster Street to both to the west and south sides and to Federal Hill as well as back into the downtown with a focus on pedestrian connectivity.

### **III. What are the conditions – immediate and emerging – of the location?**

**What are the known facts about the location (that will serve as the foundation of the fact book – social, economic, ecological, community knowledge, cultural & built environment)?**

**Who lives there, works there, and who else relies on this place? Who has a stake in the place?**

- Catholic Diocese and its head of property.
- Parks Department.
- RIH (for holding 12 Section-8 loans covering current lower income housing units).
- Property owners like Blue Cross.
- Grace Church (Bob Brooks is new chair of DRC).
- Cathedral Square as amenity for people from the entire downtown.

**What are the constraints surrounding the site: physical, legal, financial, or political? What are the blocks and barriers of the location?**

- Once a beautiful and significant public space located at the point where Westminster and Weybosset Streets converged, the original Cathedral Square served both as a proper setting for the cathedral and as a dramatic point of arrival from the west and south side neighborhoods. This now abandoned stretch of Westminster Street collected incoming vehicular and pedestrian traffic from neighborhoods farther to the west and south, due to the convergence of Westminster and Cranston Streets. The existing condition disrupts the continuity of traditional street network in a way that underscores the isolation of Downcity from the west and south side neighborhoods and vice versa.
- For traffic headed downtown from the west, Westminster Street terminates at Mc Vinney Auditorium and funnels traffic to turn along the service road. Pedestrian traffic is also forced to find a path around the building – a route that is neither obvious nor welcoming—or to detour to Washington Street. For traffic going west, Westminster Street is closed at Empire Street, forcing a detour to Weybosset Street.
- In addition, although physically connecting Downcity with the west and south side neighborhoods, the I-95 Westminster Street Bridge is a psychological obstacle to an active pedestrian connection between the neighborhoods. The experience of walking across the bridges is daunting. There is resurgence in the west and south side neighborhoods. The presence of I-95 causes

negative visual and noise effects for the neighborhoods. I-95 is a concrete wall – we have to attack it from both sides of the highway.

- Finding an appraiser whose value the property owners trust.
- You can't simply open up Westminster by the Blue Cross building. There are steps and a wide sidewalk; but the street is still underneath the steps.
- Timing of moving the auditorium is important. We need to do this in three years. Auditorium and administration buildings share the same HVAC system.
- Classical and Central High Schools are big blockages to connectivity into the west side – another lab.
- Impact of moving I-195 on in-city signage and roads – there will be more traffic flow in the area.
- Help us understand how federal highway affects us. Lots of thinking nationally on the impact on cities of tearing down of highways? What's the impact on DOT funding?

#### **What must be researched?**

- Who owns which buildings? Vacancy rates?
- Architectural plans for Auditorium and administration buildings?
- Physical conditions: width of Westminster Street Bridge and what is under the Westminster stairs – the original street; utilities?
- GIS: Profile and how many people live within 5 minutes of the area?
- What will be the type and quality of retail that could go into the place?
- What are the political boundaries?
- What do we need to do to the architecture? The architecture needs improvement. What are the building owners willing to do?
- A space map – what variables move people in and out of the area?
- A map of the public spaces – what they are now and what they could be?
- What's the overall economic impact on the city, and this area, of opening up the land of I-195 for development? Will I-195 development affect other areas adversely?

#### **What is in motion as an emerging condition that will impact the location?**

- Proposal submitted and approved from Providence Foundation and DPD to statewide Planning for a \$50,000 feasibility study.

#### **What plans or projects are on the drawing board as an emerging condition?**

- “Welcome to Providence” signage; etc.
- Tax incremental financing (TIF) proposal for the city includes two proposed pedestrian bridges: Westminster Street and Broadway.

#### **IV. In the location, what are the potential solutions, opportunities, projects or value adds?**

- Demolish the McVinney Auditorium and reconnect Westminster Street through Cathedral Square for vehicles, pedestrians, and bicyclists. (The Diocese is receptive to doing something in return for compensation.)
- Redesign Cathedral Square as a vibrant public space that embraces cars, people walking and sitting, and bicycles.
- Identify additional development sites within the study boundary. The primary use would be for mixed income housing.
- Develop a cost-effective solution to improving the pedestrian experience on the Westminster St. I-95 overpass. Since the bridge is actually wider than it needs to be, it is possible to use that excess width to turn the crossing into a more comfortable experience for pedestrians. From the highway, the bridge would also become a significant symbol at the gateway to Providence, part of a picturesque composition that includes the proposed redevelopment at Cathedral Square.
- Provide landscaping or other treatment to the eastern slopes of I-95 to improve the experience from both I-95 and the neighborhoods.
- Open up Jackson Walkway to become a street again as it is currently a pedestrian mall.
- Turn first floor of buildings lining the stairs up to the Square (now offices) back to retail.
- Make it a mini-HUD Hope 6 kind of project by adding market rate housing to the Section-8 housing already present.
- Parks: Address Cohen Park and connect it to Cathedral Square. Pocket playgrounds for kids and adults.
- Consider looking at the impact of a fourth area that requires attention to fully knit together Westminster Crossing – large lots and institutions, e.g., Classical, Central. In this area, there are large amounts of underutilized land, in the form of plazas and surface parking lots that could be the basis for more intense, high-density use primarily for housing.

## **V. To achieve the goals, what know-how, from which practitioners will be required? (Use multiple tiers to organize talent)**

- Need city street expert to validate feasibility of reconnecting Westminster Street. For example, if we cut through, what is underneath?
- Need for new urbanist streetscape know-how.
- Need new urbanist know-how on pedestrian/car bridges.
- Need a civil engineer.
- Retail marketing.
- Public programming.

## **VI. Inside the labs at the Congress: what do we want new urbanists to help with the most?**

For example, make a list of the top issues of the location that new urbanists can be most helpful with. Produce a 3-to-4-page brief with a map for use at the lab.

1. Plan for reconnecting downtown street pattern to the neighborhoods by walking from 400 Westminster Street (the home of the Planning Department) to White Electric Coffee Shop on Westminster Street on the other side of the highway. Overall flow and mobility of the area for buses, cars, bikes, pedestrians? What can be done to improve the Westminster St. and the I-95 overpass experience? Think about narrow bridges, e.g., Washington and Westminster? How to link all the bridges? Landscaping for the I-95 service roads?
2. Design and planning: Develop site plans to replace the auditorium with the two side buildings (currently attached) staying. Determine ways to improve the aesthetic experience through landscaping, façade improvement and new development. Development parcels, where? What is the possibility of structured parking to support the creation of development sites?
3. Programming: Program Cathedral Square for new use. What makes vibrant public places in other cities and how might they fit for this area?

## **VII. What are the proposed study actions for the next 75 days?**

1. Interview location specific stakeholders and form a group to dig deeper into developing this fact book.
2. Answer basic research questions.
3. Assemble critical maps and images.