

DOWNTOWN CHAPEL HILL SMALL AREA PLAN

A Component of the Chapel Hill Comprehensive Plan

With
DOWNTOWN
DESIGN
GUIDELINES

*Adopted
March 27, 2000*

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DOWNTOWN DESIGN GUIDELINES

Downtown Chapel Hill Design Guidelines follows **Appendix II** of the **Downtown Small Area Plan**

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TABLES and FIGURES

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1 VISION STATEMENT

The expansion of Chapel Hill outward beyond its original “village” limits is a relatively recent phenomenon, having occurred in most part since World War II. It is this central district, organized around the symbiotic centers of the Downtown and the University campus, which dominates most historical perspectives of the town.

In the planning process, it is necessary to take the long view of a subject area, to look into the future, to acknowledge that change and evolution over extended periods of time are typical attributes of a dynamic urban community, and to work to institute programs, which will direct and control this evolution. For the citizens of Chapel Hill, this idea may require a difficult reorientation of their perception of the town as an expanding “village” to the idea that it is, in fact, a modern small city, with all the real amenities and problems which are now typical of such a small American urban center in the late twentieth century.

The Downtown Small Area Plan places one guiding principle above all others in importance: The preservation and extension of the vital people/

pedestrian-oriented character of the Downtown center, and the fostering of programs and policies which would tend to intensify the social and cultural activity that defines this character. No action, aggressive or modest, in the implementation of this plan would be judged appropriate which did not work to serve this fundamental goal.

Downtown Chapel Hill, like the central business districts of virtually all American towns and cities, has faced a changing relationship with suburban commercial locations. It has been transformed by a demographic shift from its former role as the sole commercial center, serving and supported by an adjacent resident population, to that of a symbolic center, to which more distant auto-bound residents and visitors specifically travel in order to experience its amenities and the enduring charm of its eclectic urban atmosphere.

The Downtown Plan will seek to reverse this tide of decentralization by encouraging the “incubation” of vital, well-integrated, mixed-use development, of which housing, with its after-hours population, would be a key component. Incentives, instituted through creative zoning and other ordinance modifications, would encourage other desirable commer-

THE PLAN SAYS

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> VISION STATEMENT

cial and cultural uses, which would also draw people and a heightened intensity of activity to Downtown.

The Downtown Plan maintains and builds upon the qualities that make Chapel Hill unique. Through a policy combining preservation of the most significant buildings with the enlightened, planned development - or redevelopment - of underutilized lots, blocks, and “holes” in the urban streetscape, the Downtown area may be able to enjoy a new era of increased vitality. This maturation of Downtown would maintain continuity from its village roots through references to these antecedents in architectural details and through the preservation of landmarks. It would be distinguished also by major new civic and commercial structures that - in concert with older structures - would form a coherent, rhythmic pattern of open spaces and closed street “walls” in varying levels of density and intensity up and down the primary streets.

A key concept in this planned “modulation,” or rise and fall of intensity along these axes, is the critical role of these larger public buildings, which would become centers of social and cultural activity, as well as give form to the streetscape.



Shadows on the doorway of a Rosemary Street building.

> VISION STATEMENT

As the Downtown area reaches maturity, transportation and parking systems must adequately serve the needs of downtown residents, workers and visitors. This effort should include a coordinated plan that includes centralized parking structures, continuous street parking, enhanced pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, and public transit, including a downtown light rail fixed-guideway stop and coordinated full-time bus service to all parts of the community. This may include a multimodal transportation facility downtown.

The Downtown Small Area Plan is explicit about the kinds of development and programs that it would encourage and support. Enacting the means to implement these programs will be equally essential to achieving the goals of the plan. Some measures are easier to visualize and accomplish than others are. For instance, developing strategies for the completion of the streetscape program or the implementation of appropriate pedestrian and bikeway linkages to

and from Downtown are activities that have already been accorded some attention and commitment.

Accomplishing the broader and more abstract initiatives that this plan proposes will require that town leaders assume a more proactive role than in the past in enacting the aggressive changes and modifications to existing regulations described herein that would make these Downtown initiatives possible.

As the Downtown area is expected to evolve over the next several decades, so also, in a parallel manner, is this plan intended to be an evolving document, capable of being supplemented, amended, and updated as changing conditions warrant. What should not change, however, is the essential mission of maintaining the downtown as the social, cultural and spiritual center of Chapel Hill, and ensuring that the qualities and features which draw citizens to its sidewalks, shops, and halls are preserved and regenerated continuously into the future.

THE PLAN SAYS

The Plan is “intended to be an evolving document, capable of being supplemented, amended, and updated as changing conditions warrant.”



Scene in courtyard of West Franklin Street office/retail development.