

REPORT
of the Planning Board Subcommittee on
The Central Business District
Lexington, MA

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Submitted: October, 1977

As a result of the State passing a new zoning act, the displacement of the retail food store by a bank, and continuing concern for the vitality of the town center, the Planning Board set up a Committee to study the Central Business District in the center in order to identify the problems facing the center and to make recommendations to the Planning Board with respect to necessary or desirable zoning changes which would enhance the CBD as a community asset, as well as improve its economic viability and its ability to serve the Lexington community. As part of this task the Committee was to consider the desirability and the feasibility of creating a transition zone between the business district and the adjacent residential zones.

The first question that faced the Committee was the problem of what the center should be and what kind of services it should make available to the residents of the town and to visitors to this area. To start considering this question is to open Pandora's Box - much time has been spent discussing this issue both during meetings and other times. There are probably as many opinions as to what the center should be as there are people in the town.

There are some general statements which can be made. The area should contain activities that are both necessary

and desirable for normal life. These would include cultural, institutional, governmental, retail and service activities. It is over the specifics that there is disagreement. At the present time there is much talk about the fact that the center may have too many banks. In the past, however, some have felt that there were too many shoe stores or restaurants. Tomorrow it may be that there will be too many of the very services which we are trying to encourage today. The question of what the center should be is central to the whole question of what the problems are and how to improve the area.

The Committee does feel that the center should be for retail businesses, i.e., those businesses which sell goods to the walk-in trade. Beyond this group there seems to be differing opinions. Some feel that the center should not be regulated and that the economics of the area should determine the mix of the businesses there; that this will in the long run result in a better center for the town than any board which might control the area might effect. The other end of the spectrum on this issue is that the area should be reserved for retail businesses and that other businesses should either be regulated by Special Permit or encouraged to locate in other zones that have been reserved for those activities. In any case, the Committee is aware that in the end the economics of the

situation will in the end determine the services in the Center. No business will locate there unless it can make an adequate profit - there must be sufficient demand for its services or goods; there must be enough traffic of customers, and the expenses must not be too high. It is for this reason that the Committee decided to look at the problems facing the present businesses in the Center and to identify those which the town could take steps to alleviate, hopefully without much controversy.

The primary problem which faces the present Center, one which impacts not only the businesses in the Center but also the residential areas adjacent to the Center, is that of parking. The parking problem has many facets. Some areas of the Center have problems all of the time and all of the parking areas are full some of the time. In any case, there are not enough parking spaces for short-term parking for customers of the retail businesses which one would like to encourage in the Center. Some of the reasons for this will be dealt with later.

There have been a number of studies of the town, and the Center in particular, done over the last thirty years. Three in particular were discussed in varying detail by the Committee: the Lexington Center Report of 1966, which was done by Economic Development Associates for the Chamber of Commerce and the Planning Board; the Metcalf and Eddy

Report of 1968, which was done for the town as a proposal for a master plan but was never accepted as such; and the League of Women Voters study of parking in the Center, which was done in 1974. A number of other reports have recently come to the attention of the Committee. These include reports dating back to 1946. Each of these reports have identified the lack of adequate parking as a major problem of the Center, and each has made suggestions for helping to solve this problem. The above reports should be read by anyone who is interested in the problems of the Center. This is not to say that the Committee endorses any of these reports, but it does feel that some of the suggestions can serve as good bases for attacking the parking problem. (One cannot endorse all the reports in their entirety as they make recommendations which in some cases are mutually exclusive with suggestions made in other reports.)

In spite of the large number of studies of the area and the similar conclusions and many similar suggestions, there has been little action taken by the town in order to alleviate the parking problem. There are a number of reasons for this inaction. The primary one is that there does not seem to be agreement on what the Center should be and which businesses should be encouraged or discouraged from operating there. Without some kind of agreement on what the Center should be, it is difficult to measure the 'success' of the present Center, and to decide whether

any action would improve or worsen the situation.

The other reasons for the inaction on the parking problem include the cost of change, politics, inertia, attitude and the presence of other sources of services such as the Burlington Mall. At this time of tight budgets, or in fact at any time, people are not particularly fond of funding projects which they see as primarily benefitting only a small group. In order to get town funding or backing for any project in the area of parking, it is necessary to convince the citizens of the town that the Center is an asset to the whole town and the problems there affect all the people in the town. In any political group, the members may represent different constituencies with differing interests, interests which are often mutually incompatible. In such a case it is not unreasonable that rational individuals with differing interests cannot come to agreement on certain issues, no matter how much discussion. A parking lot may be of benefit to the user, but it is a nuisance to the abutter, and it is not unreasonable that there will be disagreement over the placement of parking facilities.

Even when people are all in agreement regarding some issue, there is often much ground work to be done before the goals can be reached. And unless there is continuity of effort, then any attempt at meaningful change is bound to fail.

Of course one often runs into the problem that many people prefer the status quo because it is known, whereas the new is unknown and therefore risky. But it must be kept in mind that the world is not static and that there is no option of maintaining the status quo. There is change all the time and it is important to try to make this change improve the situation and not deteriorate it.

Finally, the presence of the Burlington Mall and adjacent shopping areas must be considered. Not only do people come to expect easy access to parking, but the presence of a large number of retail stores makes some feel that the retail services in the Center are superfluous, and that it is not necessary to encourage or support them.

The Committee, faced with many studies on the Center and very little action for one reason or another, decided to concentrate on what it considered to be a major problem in the Center, one that there seemed to be general agreement on that it was a problem with some real possibilities for alleviating, namely the problem of finding adequate parking in the Center. After all the work that has been done previously, the Committee is not anxious to repeat the work only to have the results end up as a study to be filed on a shelf in the library.

The problem of parking has arisen over the years because of increased affluence which brought with it a

greater dependence on the automobile as the primary mode of transportation and the corresponding decrease in the use of public or mass transit. In the early part of this Century, many people from Boston came out to Lexington by trolley to visit an amusement park at what is now Route 128 and Bedford Street. The trolley is now gone and the bus service is not as frequent. With automobile popularity and wider home ownership there also came more spread out suburbs. The result has been that any area which is to serve people must have the space for their automobiles.

The problem of lack of parking in the Center manifests itself to the merchants in town through customer complaint and decreasing use of the Center. The automobile has made distance almost irrelevant as a consideration in deciding where to make purchases. The time to drive to Burlington Mall is often less than the amount of time it takes to find a parking space in the Center.

There are several options which can be followed to deal with parking problems. The first is to do nothing. Basically the idea is that the economics of the situation will eventually bring about a proper balance of services in the Center. This approach requires no outlay from the town and requires no increase in the restrictions on businesses in the Center. One argument for this approach is that the

land owners, who have a financial stake in the future of the center, can better determine what the services should be than could a governmental board.

The second option is to work to increase the number of spaces that are presently available in the Center and to alter the patterns of use of those spaces. There are several ways of increasing the number of spaces: acquire more land for municipal lots, make use of existing non-public lots in the area for all-day parkers, consolidate fragmented parking areas, change layouts in present lots, and build parking structures. Each of these approaches has good points and bad points. Some require money from the town, or at least guarantees on loans.

A third option is to place restrictions on the CB district. In the last year there have been a number of expansions of existing buildings that have eliminated parking spaces used by all-day parkers. The users of these spaces and the employees in the new buildings must now find other places to park in an already overcrowded center. Restrictions can be in the form of changes to the Use Table, Special Permits, and changes in the dimensional requirements for businesses in the Center. Business uses that were felt to be incompatible with more desirable uses could be restricted and encouraged to locate in other zones. Parking could be required. Present private parking areas could be acquired.

The Committee feels that to do nothing will result in a deterioration of the center as a community asset. The lack

of parking will force customers to go elsewhere for shopping and the Center will eventually become an office center with a few businesses such as restaurants and banks. In order for the Center to stay a community asset with a wide variety of services available, the town must take an interest and a number of steps must be implemented immediately.

There is a feeling among at least some of the members of the committee that the town should consider changing the Use Table for allowable uses in the center in order to give retail businesses a better chance to compete for the available space. At the present time there appear to be a number of different types of businesses that are able to pay almost any rent, no matter how high. The result is that it is difficult to attract new retail businesses to the center. The difficulty with this issue is that it requires that the question of what an ideal center would contain must be answered before one can decide what businesses and services should be allowed and what should be restricted. While diversity is desirable to some, duplication of services often helps to increase the traffic for those services with the result that all businesses benefit. This is one reason that shopping malls are successful.

There are a number of problems with placing more restrictions on the Center. The zoning laws must be in conformance with the state zoning act and activities cannot simply be restricted because it seems to be a good idea. Restrictions must be for one of the reasons in the statement of the purposes

of the zoning act. Once it is decided that a restriction is to be invoked, the question arises as to who will be the administrator of the law and what the criteria will be for the issuance of a permit or an exception to the rules. All of these questions have been discussed by the committee but very few answers have been found. The best that can be said now is that the question of restrictions is still a very open one.

The Committee would like to make a number of recommendations for actions that can be implemented by the Town in order to help with the parking problem in the Center. The ideas are not necessarily original, but they are still worth implementing. They do not constitute anything in the way of a master plan, nor are they intended to completely solve the parking problem in the Center. The suggestions are brought forth as some actions that can be taken without great expense and they constitute a first step in alleviating the parking problem. If the town is unwilling to take even these modest steps, then it is felt that further discussion and study by this committee are futile.

The Committee makes the following recommendation:

1. There should be no expansion of the CB district until the parking in the area is improved. There should be no special permit or variance issued without adequate off-street parking for employees and expected customers.
2. A Parking Authority should be established.
3. Meter rates should be raised to 10¢ per hour. Parking should be limited to one hour on streets and two hours in municipal parking lots. Meters should be installed on Waltham and Muzzey Streets to Forest Street, and on Meriam St. to Oakland St. Meters should be installed on Mass. Ave. from Woburn St. to the Post Office and from Winthrop Rd. to Wallis Court.
4. Parking fines should be increased.
5. Money from meters and fines should be reserved for projects that will improve parking in the Center under the auspices of a Parking Authority.
6. Given the increased usage of parking spaces after 6 P.M., the hours that the meters on Mass. Ave and Waltham St. are in effect should be increased to 9 P.M. six days a week.
7. Parking in the areas adjacent to the Center should be monitored and restricted if necessary to promote the

flow of traffic. Should the parking in these areas need to be restricted, parking should be prohibited during a time period during the morning. (e.g. 8 A.M. to 10 A.M.)

8. With the exception of the Battle Green, signs that restrict the duration of parking to one or two hours should not be used. Where it is necessary to restrict duration of parking, meters should be used.

9. Negotiations should be started with owners of private parking areas in and adjacent to the Center for use by all-day parkers with stickers. The charge for the stickers would pay for expenses associated with such a program.

10. One of the first applications of the money derived from the parking meters and fines should be the development of space for all-day parking. (for example, the Meriam St. lot and the Edison Lot.)

All of the above suggestions are, the committee feels, low cost actions that do not require any large expenditure of funds by the town. In fact, if they help to revitalize the Center, the town may actually realize a net gain through increased tax revenue.