

Town of West Hartford

Transit-Oriented Development Planning Initiative

Community Engagement Summary Report

July 2021



with assistance from



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was a collaborative effort between SLR International Consulting and Town of West Hartford staff. Special thanks to the following staff who played an integral role in the planning and community engagement process.

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

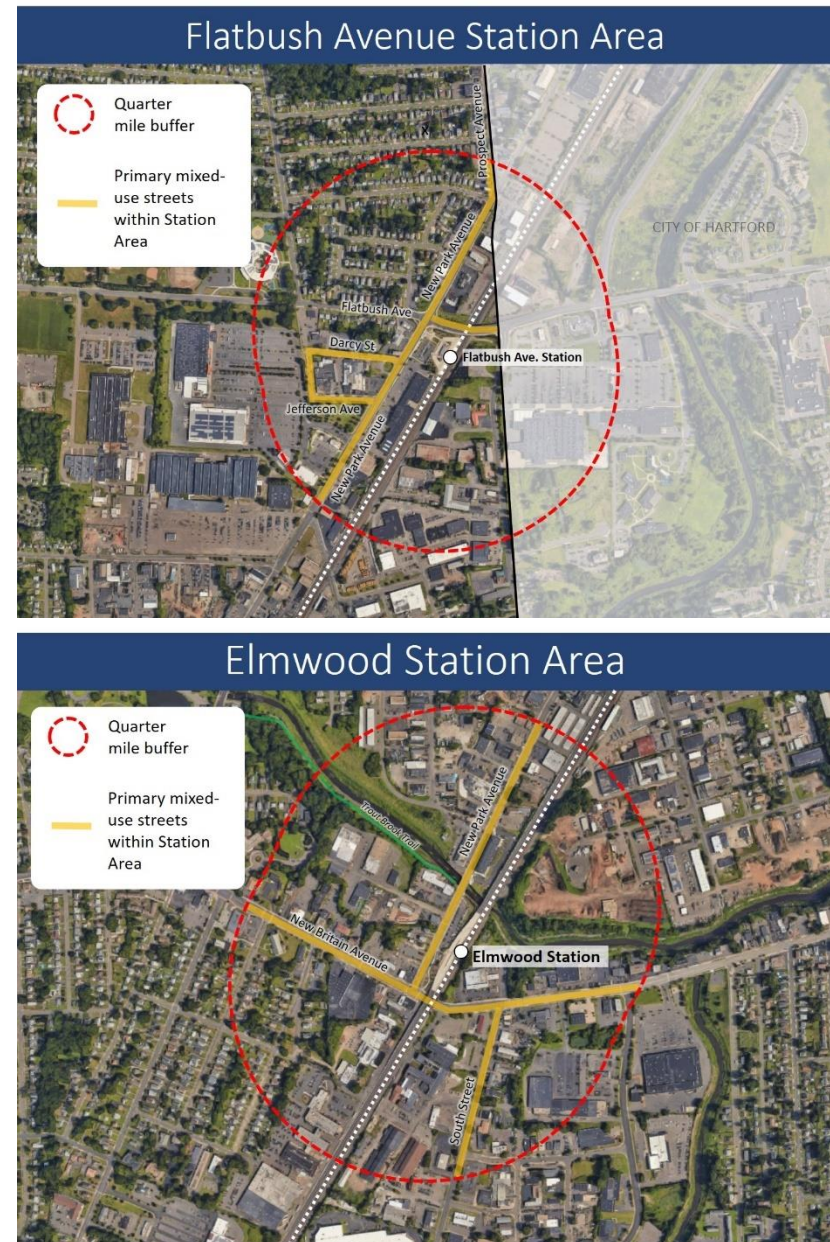
The Town of West Hartford is conducting a transit-oriented development (TOD) planning initiative to review the zoning ordinances around its two CTfastrak stations. This effort is a continuation of past planning studies and seeks to further many of the goals and strategies outlined in the recently adopted Plan of Conservation and Development.

Specifically, this initiative seeks to better understand the opportunities and constraints for implementing a possible transit-oriented development supportive zoning ordinance and will focus on areas within one-quarter (0.25) mile of the Elmwood and Flatbush Avenue stations.

Prior to considering potential changes to the zoning ordinances within the two CTfastrak station areas, the Town of West Hartford Town Council seeks to understand the current usage patterns, perceptions of the existing quality of the built environment, and desires of residents, property owners, and businesses. This report summarizes the community engagement process.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

The Town of West Hartford staff, with assistance from SLR, conducted a community engagement process between April and June of 2021. Due to restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, all community engagement was conducted virtually. Feedback was solicited through an online visual preferences surveys, a focus group with local businesses and property owners, and an online community forum.



COMMUNITY & VISUAL PREFERENCE SURVEY

A community and visual preference survey was launched in April 2021 and remained open through June of 30, 2021. There was a total of 726 responses. The survey was publicized using Town email blasts, press releases, and stories in local news outlets. For full survey results, please see Appendix A.

About the Respondents

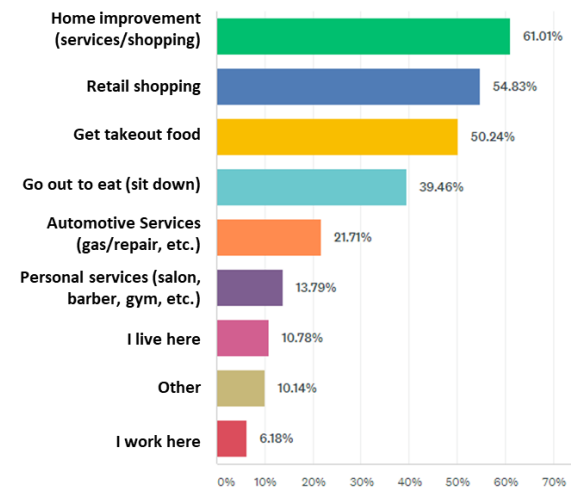
- About 92% of survey respondents live in West Hartford. Respondents most frequently live in the 06107 and 06110 (Elmwood) zip codes.
- About 7% of respondents indicated they own property in the study area while a further 3.6% own a business in the study area.
- About 27% of survey respondents were over 65 years old. An additional 23% of respondents were between the ages of 55 and 64.

Usage Patterns and Perceptions

- Over half of survey respondents visit the station areas less than once a month. Only about 5% of respondents visit the station areas every day.
- Respondents most frequently visit the station areas for home improvement services and shopping (61%), retail shopping (55%), and takeout food (50%)

- A vast majority (86%) of respondents most commonly travel to the station areas by car. About 8% travel there on foot and 3% travel there on a bike.
- Survey respondents see the greatest opportunities in attracting new businesses (71%), creating a more walkable environment (71%), supporting and retaining existing businesses (67%), and growing the tax base (56%).
- Respondents saw greater opportunities for business uses than for residential uses.

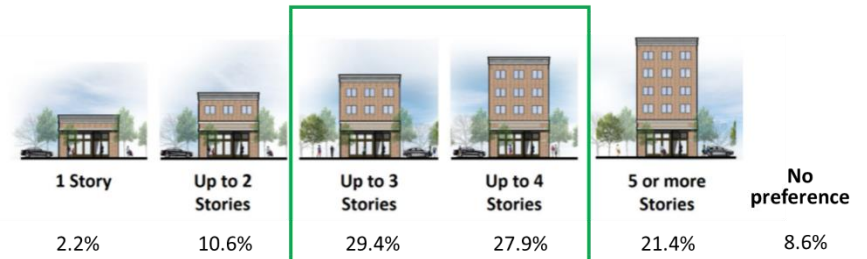
What types of activities do you do in the Station Areas today?



Visual Preferences: Flatbush Avenue Station Area

- Most respondents noted that they do not feel safe as a bicyclist or pedestrian and that traffic is a concern.
- About 60% of respondents indicated that they do not find the Flatbush Avenue station area as visually attractive today.
- Respondents prefer moderately tall buildings in the Flatbush Avenue station area, with 57% of respondents stating that 3 or 4 story buildings were the most appropriate maximum building height. There was a sizable share (21%) of respondents who felt that 5 story buildings were appropriate.
- Survey respondents support moderately dense development. The highest share (67%) of respondents felt that 616 New Park Avenue was about the right density, followed by 24 North Main Street (63%).
- Most survey respondents preferred buildings placed close to the street (25%) or buildings set back from the roadway with a landscaped buffer (32%) or public space (29%) in front. Only 11% preferred buildings set back from the roadway with parking in front.
- A majority of survey respondents favored parking in the rear of buildings in the Flatbush Avenue station area. Parking in front of buildings was identified as the least appropriate parking type.

Which maximum building height do you think is most appropriate for the Flatbush Avenue Station Area?



Is this density too dense, not dense enough, or about right for the Flatbush Avenue Station Area?



Visual Preferences: Elmwood Station Area

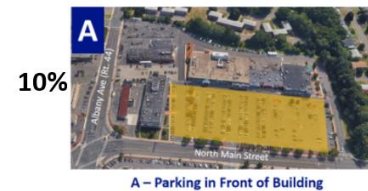
- Respondents viewed the bicycle and pedestrian environment more favorably than Flatbush Avenue, although most agree that it needs improvement.
- About 70% of respondents felt that the Elmwood station area lacks enough green or public space.
- Respondents prefer moderately tall buildings in the Elmwood station area, with 59% of respondents stating that 3 or 4 story buildings were the most appropriate maximum building height.
- Survey respondents support moderately dense development. The highest share (64%) of respondents felt that 24 North Main Street was about the right density, followed by 616 New Park Avenue (62%).
- Most survey respondents preferred buildings placed close to the street (25%) or buildings set back from the roadway with a landscaped buffer (36%) or public space (28%) in front. Only 8% preferred buildings set back from the roadway with parking in front.
- A majority of survey respondents favored parking in the rear of buildings in the Elmwood station area. Parking in front of buildings was identified as the least appropriate parking type.
- Overall, visual preferences responses for the Elmwood station area were very similar to preferences in the Flatbush Avenue station area.

Which type of site design do you think is most appropriate for the Elmwood Station Area?



3% of respondents indicated no preference

Which type of parking configuration do you think is most appropriate for the Elmwood Station Area?



7% of respondents indicated no preference

FOCUS GROUP

A virtual focus group was held on May 21, 2021 with property owners, businesses, and representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, Elmwood Business Association, and Home Design District. The purpose of the focus group was to discuss the TOD Planning Initiative and hear participants thoughts on opportunities and constraints within the study area. Key takeaways from the focus group include:

- Some parking areas within the TOD areas are underutilized, such as BJ's and Home Depot and other big box retail sites. These areas could potentially support infill development if parking requirements were lowered.
- Other businesses, such as New Park Brewery, don't have enough parking. Excess parking on neighboring sites could meet this demand through shared parking arrangements if zoning enables/incentivizes it. There is a need to "right size" parking.
- The Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND) District has not been successful at achieving its vision because it has loopholes that allow property owners to bypass the zoning requirements. Potential changes to the ordinances in the station areas should consider ways of reducing loopholes.
- The TOD station areas are home to many thriving home design businesses. Future changes to the ordinance

should allow these businesses to continue to thrive and succeed.

- Additional TOD-supportive uses and amenities would benefit existing businesses. For example, by providing a place to take a client out to lunch or a venue that can host a business meeting.
- There is an opportunity to better connect the station areas to the residential neighborhoods beyond ¼ mile. These connections would need to overcome some of the physical barriers that exist today such as the rail line, busway, and Trout Brook.



COMMUNITY FORUM

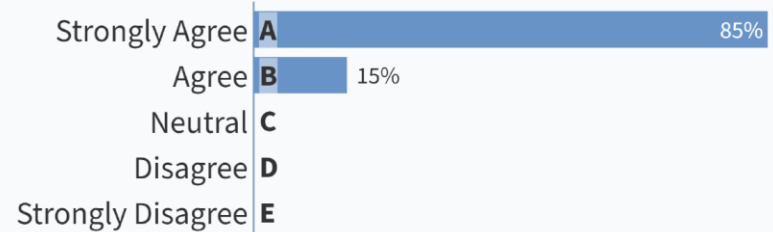
A virtual community forum was held on May 26, 2021. A brief presentation was made providing background information on the study, a review of existing conditions, and the preliminary survey results. Approximately 20 community members participated in an interactive audience polling exercise on issues, opportunities, and the future vision for the TOD station areas.

- When asked to identify the top planning or land use issues in the TOD station areas, participants most frequently identified the lack of bicycle and pedestrian amenities, traffic, affordable housing, and the limited amount of vacant land to support new development.
- When thinking about Flatbush Avenue station area in ten years, participants most frequently envisioned improved streetscapes, a greater mix of land uses, and infill development.
- When thinking about the Elmwood station area in ten years, participants most frequently envisioned improved streetscapes, more green space, and infill development or redevelopment.
- Participants were generally supportive of growth and change in the TOD station areas, including stronger design standards, reduced parking requirements, and support for higher density development.
- Vacant and underutilized sites with large parking areas were commonly identified as priority sites for TOD by participants.

What do you see as the top three planning or land use issues in the TOD Station Areas?



West Hartford should more strongly regulate building and site design in the TOD station areas



Total Results: 13

KEY FINDINGS AND TAKEAWAYS

Overall, the community is supportive of transit-oriented development principles within the two station areas. The following conclusions summarize community perceptions and how they align with potential changes to the zoning ordinances.

- Community preferences for the Elmwood and Flatbush Avenue station areas are very similar to one another. If a new TOD zoning district is created, a single zone should cover both station areas.
- Home design businesses and services are the main draw within the TOD station areas today. Community members envision the corridor maintaining a business focus. There was very strong support for attracting new businesses as well as supporting and maintaining existing businesses. Housing was also supported, but not as strongly as business uses.
- Due to the strong community desire to support and retain existing businesses, it is recommended that the zoning ordinances continue to allow a diverse mix of land uses, with strengthened building and site design standards to ensure cohesion and consistency across sites.
- The community is supportive of transit-oriented design principles, including parking areas located in the rear of buildings, buildings placed close to the street, and enhancing opportunities for green space and public space.
- Underutilized parking areas were identified as a key opportunity throughout the public engagement process. Reductions in minimum parking requirements should be evaluated, which could allow these areas to support transit-oriented infill development.
- Community members support moderately dense development including buildings ranging from 3 to 5 stories and floor-area-ratios of 1 or more.
- Most survey respondents felt that auto-oriented development was “not dense enough” for the TOD station areas, meaning that minimum densities should be explored alongside maximum densities.
- The resident and business communities both support the proposed complete streets improvements within the New Park Avenue corridor.