

**SUSTAIN SOUTHERN MAINE
MILL CREEK PILOT
LESSONS LEARNED
April 15, 2013**

Realities and Assets in an In-Town Shopping Center

1. An older shopping district that was laid out in a low-density, strip center format within an otherwise urban or village environment faces **constraints to redevelopment**:

- The **constraints of past decisions** – For example, long-term arrangements with an anchor tenant (dedication of large parking fields, requirements to maintain visibility from main roads, long-term leases, etc.) or past sales of outparcels limit flexibility and the prospects for short-term change.
- The **constraints of the site** – The suburban model of development placed the buildings at the rear of their parcels with large parking areas in front, truncating the local street system and removing street frontages that might otherwise be available for incremental redevelopment.
- **Disconnections from the surrounding area** – Design of the district – considered contemporary at the time – created superblocks without concern for connections to the surrounding neighborhood. It could not anticipate the nearby development from which it is now disconnected. In Mill Creek these include waterfront and community parks and, from a pedestrian point of view, the adjacent residential neighborhoods. It is further constrained by a major power line right-of-way that seals off key street frontage oriented to the Fore River.

2. But an older, in-town shopping center also has **assets that present opportunities for profitable redevelopment**:

- proximity to a built-in population and flows of people – including a surrounding, often densely settled neighborhood and commuter traffic;
- proximity to synergistic uses and activities with which to forge connections;
- in some cases, adjacency to properties that have become obsolete or are underused in their locations and are ripe for combining with the center;
- an existing street system that can be redesigned and reconnected to create opportunities for new development;
- an established public transportation system
- the relative ease of re-branding a district in a highly visible location;
- fewer natural resource constraints to face in the permitting process;

- political and community support attached to non-controversial redevelopment of an older urban site.

Place in the Hierarchy of Centers

3. Thinking about the growth potential of an existing district **requires understanding its place in the hierarchy of centers**: does it have the draw (from largest market area to smallest) of a regional, community, neighborhood, or convenience center? The Mill Creek district, which is anchored by a supermarket and key retailers such as a drug store, hardware store, and Laundromat, as well as banks, food service, and automobile sales and services, operates as a large neighborhood retail center. Its primary market area appears to have a 2 – 3 mile radius, encompassing some of the most populated sections of the region, with **strong** demographics.

4. The urban environment in which a district like Mill Creek is embedded is **richer and more varied** than the suburban. It offers an expanded set of opportunities for (a) spillover of new uses from the urban surroundings (residential, hospitality, and cultural, for example), (b) new physical and marketing connections to the surrounding urban market, and (c) incremental urbanization of the district itself, expanding the choices of commercial tenants that are drawn to urban districts.

Capacity for Growth

5. The Mill Creek district has the **capacity to absorb 5% - 10% of South Portland's projected job and housing growth** over the next 25 – 35 years. These translate to:

- 165 to 330 jobs, or 85,000 to 150,000 square feet of additional commercial space
- 120 to 240 new housing units

6. **Some of the capacity for growth is available because** – not uncommonly, and as is the case in the Mill Creek district – **portions of the district's parking fields are relatively unused**. It is reasonable to seek a higher and better use of this acreage. The Mill Creek pilot suggests that:

- A reasonable **parking ratio is 2.5 to 3.0 spaces per 1,000 square feet** of leasable commercial building area rather than the 4.0 to 5.0 spaces per 1,000 square feet typically required in local ordinances and sought in shopping center developments; [NEED TO VERIFY AS PART OF SYNTHESIS] and
- It is possible to **increase the floor area ratio** (the ratio of total floor area to total land area in parcels of land) from a typical ratio of around 0.2 found in most districts composed of strip commercial centers **to a ratio of 0.4 to 0.5**, roughly doubling the revenue-producing floor area in the district. [NEED TO VERIFY AS PART OF SYNTHESIS]

7. **The growth likely will be gradual and probably will come in sectors other than retail**, at least in the first instance. In an in-town setting adjacent to urban neighborhoods and proximate to a large job center like the Portland peninsula, the leading opportunities may be housing, business services, food service, small professional offices, arts, some independent specialty retail, and – at such time as the supply in regional districts (downtown Portland, Maine Mall area) is absorbed – potentially hospitality.

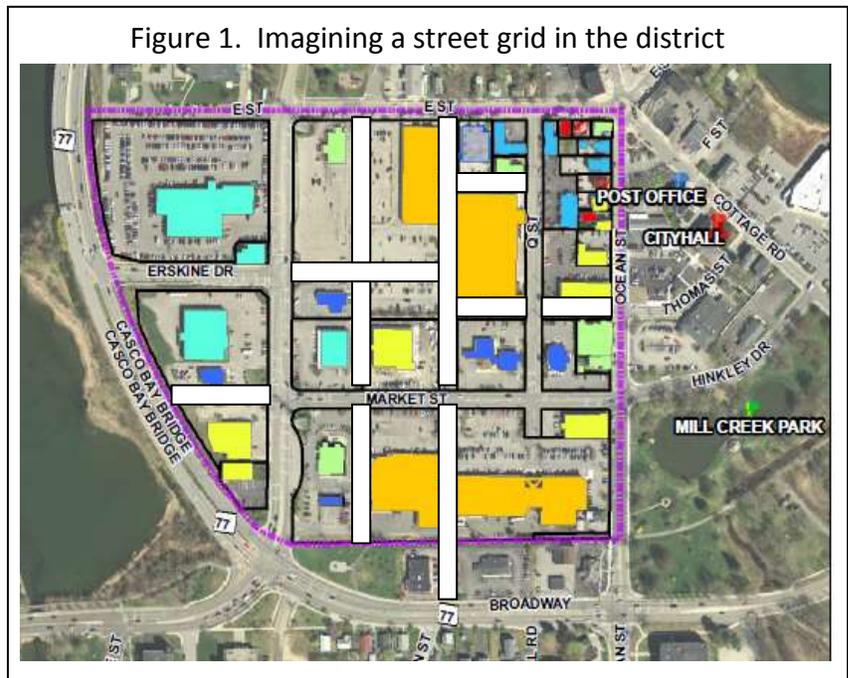
- Because of evolving demographics, particularly the entry of “Generation Y” into its household formation years and the aging of the Baby Boom generation into its retirement years, **housing aimed at different segments and income levels appears to be the strongest first opportunity to add to the district.** The advantages of the district –proximity to established day-to-day retailers, good community amenities, public services, and public transportation connecting to nearby regional centers – makes the area especially attractive for workforce housing and senior housing.

Where to Start

6. **Start by imagining a street grid superimposed on the district**, with the streets spaced 300 feet to 500 feet apart. Preserve any existing cross streets (such as, in the Mill Creek district, Market St., E St., Q St., Erskine Drive and Ocean St.).

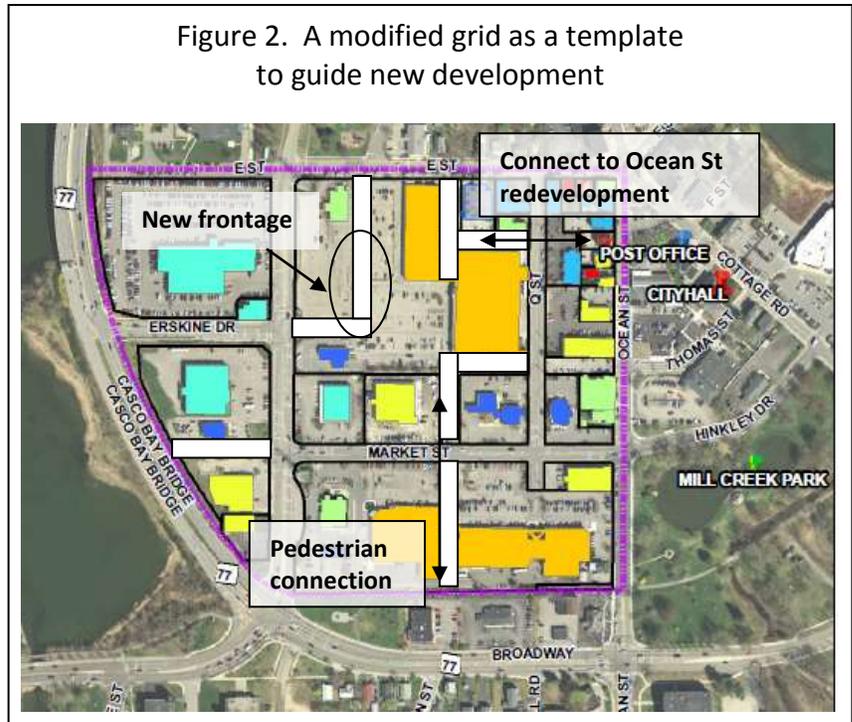
- Do this not with the expectation of establishing a street grid that will replace the superblock shopping center environment. **Where a district’s retail core is healthy and profitable, property owners, investors and tenants have no reason to overhaul what exists.**

But this exercise begins to show where there may be logical opportunities to penetrate the district or to forge connections at the boundaries of the district. See Figure 1. **Much of the grid will not survive in the plan, but it serves as a template to see where intersections and extensions make sense from the points of view of both commerce and community.**



See Figure 2 as an example of how a modified grid can serve to signal the potentially best places to forge connections to the surrounding area, create new frontage opportunities within the district, and improve pedestrian access through the district – while not infringing on established leases for anchor tenants.

7. Strengthen identity and brand by upgrading the pedestrian environment. This can be done early, without significant disruption of existing businesses or layout of the district. It focuses on two or three key, existing corridors: interior streets, such as Market St. and Waterman Dr.; and extensions beyond the immediate district to connect it to amenities, such as waterfront and parks. Both Market St. and Waterman Dr. were designed to handle higher volumes of traffic prior to the relocation of the Casco Bay Bridge. There may now be room for upgrades that include wider sidewalks, landscaped esplanades, and on-street parking.



8. Strengthen identity and brand by upgrading facades. Some older portions of a district or center may be better removed and replaced with more productive, contemporary space. But if this redevelopment is some time in the future, new facades – especially in combination with an upgraded pedestrian environment – can promote the district’s identity without large investments in redevelopment. In the Mill Creek district, Shaw’s Plaza is showing its age. The Mill Creek Shopping Center’s façade was upgraded a number of years ago but the back of the center, where freight deliveries are made, now also fronts on the Greenbelt Walkway and, with upgrades, could also announce itself to the heavily traveled Broadway.

Work from the Edges In

9. If a district such as Mill Creek has a strong retail core, it may be neither practical nor profitable to pursue wholesale redevelopment (as may be the best option in the case of a failing center). **It may be better to focus first on the edges of the district, especially if there are untapped amenities at the edges.** This is the case with Mill Creek, with parks on three sides (Mill Creek Park, Legere Park, and the Greenbelt Walkway) and the Fore River on the

fourth. These amenities did not exist – or were not valued – at the time the Mill Creek area was first developed; the buildings and businesses are oriented away from them.

The introduction of high density housing in an urban format that takes advantage of these amenities can redefine the edges of the district, provide for stronger visual entries into the district, and boost retail support for the district. The housing may include first floor retail and/or undercover parking. See Figure 3.

Phase the Redevelopment to Accommodate Growth

10. Let the earlier stage investments in pedestrian upgrades, façade

improvements, the introduction of housing, and the assurance of appropriate street and pedestrian extensions in agreed upon locations **work to stimulate the market**. At that point, **give the market time to respond** and to determine the pace and scale of growth in the district, and the final mix of uses.

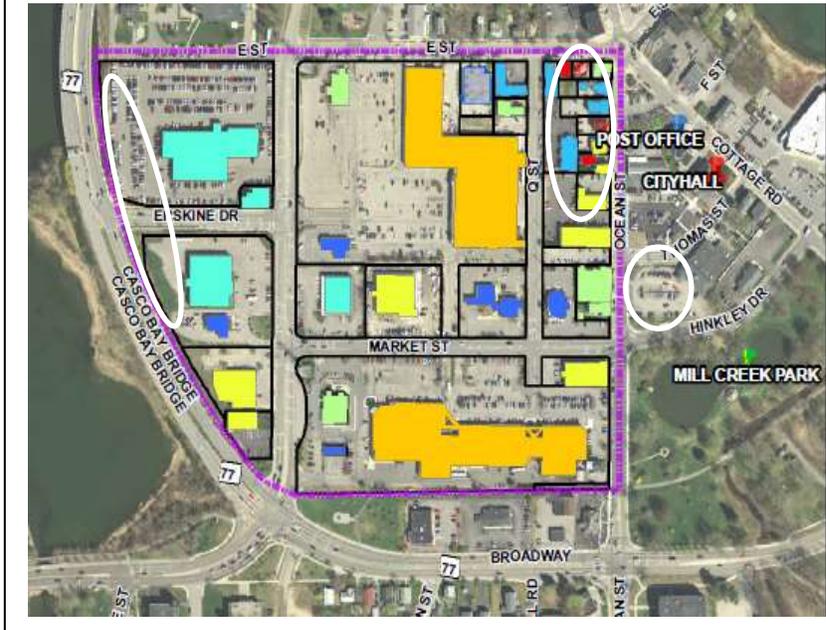
- But monitor the progress and **make sure that a streamlined framework is in place to support redevelopment to proceed over time**. This includes zoning, tax increment finance district funding (including an affordable housing TIF), an “official map” of potential street extensions incorporated into a comprehensive plan, appropriate design guidelines, and outreach to parties of interest to build awareness of the long-term goals.

Positioned for Transportation Efficiencies

11. A neighborhood center like Mill Creek is well positioned to meet a variety of needs of residents in the immediate area and of customers coming to the center.

- With an improved pedestrian environment, the **potential for “capturing trips”** – i.e., allowing people to satisfy several needs on the same trip (food, shopping, coffee, other services) without needing to drive back onto the road system – **is high**.

Figure 3. Examples of possible housing locations near amenities and services, at the edges of the district.



- And when residents in the immediate area have needs that cannot be met in the district, there are **choices for travel to other centers** (auto, bus, bicycle, walking).
12. The ability to capture trips and improve choices for travel to other centers will increase as housing and an enhanced mix of uses are introduced into the district. **A district like Mill Creek would benefit from faster turnaround times (i.e., shorter headways) for buses to the closest job centers** – the Portland Peninsula and the east end of South Portland (Southern Maine Community College and others). Each is within 1.5 miles of Mill Creek. **The objective should be for shuttle-type operations on no more than a 30-minute cycle** at least during key times of the day. This requires a level of residential density and demand that may be feasible as Mill Creek’s housing and commercial base grows. (Note that a ferry shuttle between Knightville/Mill Creek and the Portland Peninsula would not be out of the question.)