

Center Neighborhood Profile Summary

The Center neighborhood is one of several which, taken together, make up the urbanized core of Manchester. The neighborhood's boundaries, as defined by the department, are Broad Street to Parker Street and Middle Turnpike to Center Street. Within these boundaries are small residential clusters built primarily on a grid street system. These residential areas are made up of mostly single and two-family homes, the great majority of which are well-maintained.

Some of the oldest homes date from the late 1800's and early 1900's and are located along Main Street, Center Street and Middle Turnpike. Most of the residential area was built in the 1940's and 1950's, representing part of the first major expansion in Manchester in the post World War II era. The neighborhood developed first along Center Street and Main Street, with development then moving to the east and west from Main Street.

This development coincided with major expansions of Manchester's institutional infrastructure. One of the characteristics of the Center neighborhood is that it is a busy part of town, in many ways a focus for the entire community. The residential areas are divided not only by major east/west arterial streets (Center Street and Middle Turnpike) and major north/south streets (Main Street, Parker Street and Summit Street) but also by Center Springs Park, Manchester Memorial Hospital, and Manchester High School. On the edge of the neighborhood are the police station, Illing Middle School and the municipal government campus.

Not surprisingly, the neighborhood's location and the presence of institutional uses are seen both as advantages and disadvantages by neighborhood residents. The main advantage is convenience: to shopping, services, parks and recreational activities, and health care as well as proximity to the downtown, the public library and government offices. Not only are these services a short drive, they are also within easy walking distance from much of the neighborhood.

On the other hand, there is a considerable amount of automobile traffic, much of it going beyond the speed limit on the wide arterial streets. Sirens are a common sound, related mostly to hospital and other emergency activity. The high school, and to an extent Illing Middle School, bring hundreds of teenagers into the neighborhood as they walk to and from school.

The activity at the high school, and the behaviors of some students, contribute to a "town versus gown" set of tensions at times. Residents on the main route to Manchester High School, and especially on the streets nearest to it, are often irritated by the behavior of some of the students. The open campus rule, or the practice of some students to violate or abuse the privilege, is also a source of concern. Students cutting through private property, using foul language, and loitering are among the behaviors which concern neighborhood residents. The high school does have security personnel and a policy handbook which it follows, and it has made efforts to deal effectively with problems which are reported to it by the neighbors.

The residential areas of the neighborhood are well-maintained. The houses and yards are well-kept, and the small lots which dominate the neighborhoods, along with small front yards, add to

the intimacy and sociability of the space. This physical design creates clearly defined public and private spaces. Since most homes in these areas are one or two-family structures, parking does not present a problem.

Neither does the age of the housing present any obvious problems in terms of physical obsolescence of the buildings. The only exceptions are the older neighborhood locations such as the area along Center Street (between Edgerton and Trotter and Valley) and Lilley, Wadsworth, and Summit Streets. These are the oldest residential sections with the largest houses and with a higher concentration of investor-owned properties.

Physically and demographically, the Center neighborhood is a stable community. It has not experienced the rapid changes in property ownership or age and income characteristics of residents that other older neighborhoods have experienced. In terms of percentages of owner-occupied housing to renter housing; age of population; age of housing; income; and racial composition the Center neighborhood is very similar to town percentages as a whole. One important exception may be the higher percentage of single parent households with children (13.1% in the Center neighborhood compared to 7.4% townwide).

As mentioned earlier, the Center neighborhood is a collection of residential areas divided by major streets and large institutional uses. Another important distinction is that this neighborhood is served by three elementary school districts: Washington, Bowers and Waddell. This absence of a "neighborhood" school may help to account for a lack of neighborhood organizations, and suggests that many residents may not define their neighborhood boundaries as we have. We may find, as we continue our neighborhood planning, that residents from the Center neighborhood may appear at other neighborhood meetings because their interests, especially in the schools, lead them to a different set of affiliations.

We've already noted that major institutions and public spaces are interspersed among residential areas. Among the greatest assets, both actual and potential, is Center Springs Park. This 50 acre site consists of a large pond, playgrounds, hard courts, a hockey skating area, and hiking trails through a hemlock grove and a hardwood grove.

The park has been undergoing a major rebuilding, starting with the construction of the new lodge which also houses park and recreation offices. Currently, a major pond restoration project is underway which will improve water quality, fishing, and skating conditions and ease long-term maintenance responsibilities. The potential exists for expanded use of the park for programmed activities, and neighborhood residents suggested more furnished picnic areas as a desirable addition to the park.

Manchester Memorial Hospital is another major institutions in the neighborhood. The hospital is a major property owner, a major employer, and a major influence on the activity in the neighborhood. Not only is the hospital itself an imposing physical presence, but it serves as a magnet for medical related office uses, in particular on Haynes Street. Haynes Street has gradu-

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ally converted from a residential street to a street of offices for doctors or medical laboratories. The hospital's last major physical expansion included a large parking garage, a new outpatient service facility, and a facility for a magnetic resonance imaging machine.

Although at one time there were neighborhood concerns about the hospital's physical expansion, the current trends in the health care industry indicate that actual physical expansion of Manchester Memorial Hospital at its present location may not be a major development issue for the neighborhood or the community. With more emphasis on outpatient services, mergers or various forms of partnerships between hospitals, and increasing pressure for managed care and cost containment, it is quite possible that hospital services will be located away from the Manchester Memorial Hospital location to sites with more convenient regional highway access. Also, the types and levels of care provided at the hospital itself may be refocused in the future.

The hospital is a major community asset and the town government should work closely with Manchester Memorial Hospital as it goes through this transition period. However, we see no reason why the existing zoning in the hospital area poses any constraints to the hospital's near-term planning and development activity.

The Manchester Parkade/Broad Street business district was also studied in the course of our Center neighborhood work. This area is located on the western boundary of the neighborhood and influences the neighborhood as a major traffic generator and as a direct abutter to a small residential neighborhood (Little, Durant, and Essex Streets).

Since the opening of the Buckland Hills Mall and the subsequent retail development in Buckland Hills, the Parkade and Broad Street area has undergone a major transition. The Middle Turnpike Parkade lost several anchor tenants including Sears, D & L, and the Channel home improvement store. Taking advantage of these new vacant spaces, Super Stop and Shop relocated from the Broad Street Parkade to the Middle Turnpike Parkade spurring a major physical renovation and revitalization of the latter center.

While the Middle Turnpike section of the Parkade had taken the brunt of the initial market shift with the openings in Buckland Hills, they have since spectacularly rebounded and repositioned themselves as a major community shopping center. Unfortunately, part of this success had to deal with taking tenants from other locations, including the Broad Street Parkade. Currently the Broad Street Parkade is in the planning stages of a repositioning and revitalization strategy of its own. Related commercial development in the area was the approval of the Shaw's Supermarket which will replace Morande Ford at the corner of Center and Broad Street.

While we are confident that the Parkade area will continue to be an important business district in the community, we should carefully monitor the activities there. In order to get a better feel for what's going on here, we held a meeting with the Parkade/Broad Street merchants on January 26, 1995. As part of that meeting a list of advantages and disadvantages of the district was identified, and a series of possible recommendations generated.

We were encouraged to find that most of those present felt the location was still a strong business destination. Advantages included a low crime rate; not being overly congested with automobile traffic; and being in a good location to serve a large market area with good shopping demographics.

Among the disadvantages were the absence of an organization to market the Parkade/Broad Street area as a business district. Some concerns over the physical appearance of Broad Street; the effect of sign clutter on the one hand and concern about insufficient signs for large strip centers on the other; and a lack of overall aesthetics and what were viewed as community public spaces were seen as physical disadvantages.

In addition to the traffic generating characteristics of this major community shopping area, some of the residential neighborhoods are more directly impacted by the proximity of residential properties to commercial properties. As we have found in other neighborhoods, the often inadequate screening or buffering between commercial properties and business properties is a matter of some concern. In the Center neighborhood this problem appears to be concentrated along Broad Street and to a lesser extent on Center Street and West Middle Turnpike between Broad and Main.