

CHAPTER 7: CHESTER CENTER

Chester Center, also referred to as Chester Village, is a loosely-defined area at the head of Chester Creek which once served as a major shipping center on the Lower Connecticut River. Changes in transportation modes, from water-borne transportation to roads and railroads, both of which restricted the flow of water in and out of Chester Creek, reduced the importance of the Village area as a hub for commerce. New development in Chester and in the region as a whole grew up along major roads, and the Village, which was bypassed by the Middlesex Turnpike (now Route 154), did not attract much new commercial investment. By the late 1960s, the Center was considered a target for demolition and redevelopment. Fortunately, the significant financial and political investment necessary to “re-do” the Village did not materialize, and much of the original development patterns and architecture remain. Aspects of Chester Village are discussed in several other chapters of this Plan. Chapter Seven specifically examines the Village area in greater depth, and includes recommendations for immediate action to protect and enhance the important functions that are served by the Village.

Location - Delineation of Village Boundaries

The people of Chester have expressed a desire to maintain the village as a cultural resource and a gathering place for community life. In times of increasing energy costs, it is practical and desirable to focus community activities in the village while maintaining the rural character of other areas of Chester. The village should be a hub which is pedestrian friendly, accessible by public transit and linked to other parts of



Figure 7-1: Road Race 2008 (Source: Cummings & Good)



town by walkways, bike paths and public transit. The Center includes North Quarter Park and development at the intersection of Route 154 and Main Street. One way to envision village boundaries is to include the entire area where a passenger might disembark from a transit bus at a designated stop and conveniently and easily walk to several destinations within a cluster of uses. Within this framework, logical stops would be located at the Route 154 intersection, at the corner of Water Street and Main, and perhaps at the present Library.

The heart of Chester Village is the collection of buildings at the intersection of Water Street and Main Street. About 47 acres of land within 400 to 600 feet of the intersection are currently zoned for commercial use. A recent study showed 52 housing units located within this commercial zone. This mixture of retail and service establishments with residential uses

helps maintain the vitality of the Center. The area surrounding the commercial district is zoned for a variety of residential densities. In actual use, however, many non-residential uses extend beyond the commercial zone, creating a larger area which is also considered the “village.” This Plan recognizes that any efforts to enhance the village character must also include the larger area.

Uses in the larger village area are a mixture of commercial, multifamily and single family residential. Structures which are generally open to the public, like restaurants and retail businesses, or serving a public use, such as the library or churches, are located along an axis which is described as: Main Street from its intersection with Route 154 to its intersection with Route 148 and continued along North Main Street to East Liberty Street and Route 148 its intersection with Straits Road to its intersection with the driveway to the Carini Preserve. Since the current zoning districts were adopted in Chester, new zoning regulations have evolved to address mixed uses and design considerations, and to differentiate subzones within a broader context. Chester needs to update its zoning requirements to encourage the existing mix of uses, without allowing one category of uses to force out another. In particular, it is important to encourage economic activity in the center while preserving the quality of life for residents of the area.

In addition to new zoning requirements, public investment in appropriately-scaled town facilities and infrastructure is essential to the retention of the character of the village. Boundaries should be established which recognize the village as a connected whole. Public investment should be focused



Figure 7-2: Restaurant Du Village/ Main Street
(Source: Cummings & Good)



Village District Zone with Overlay Zones

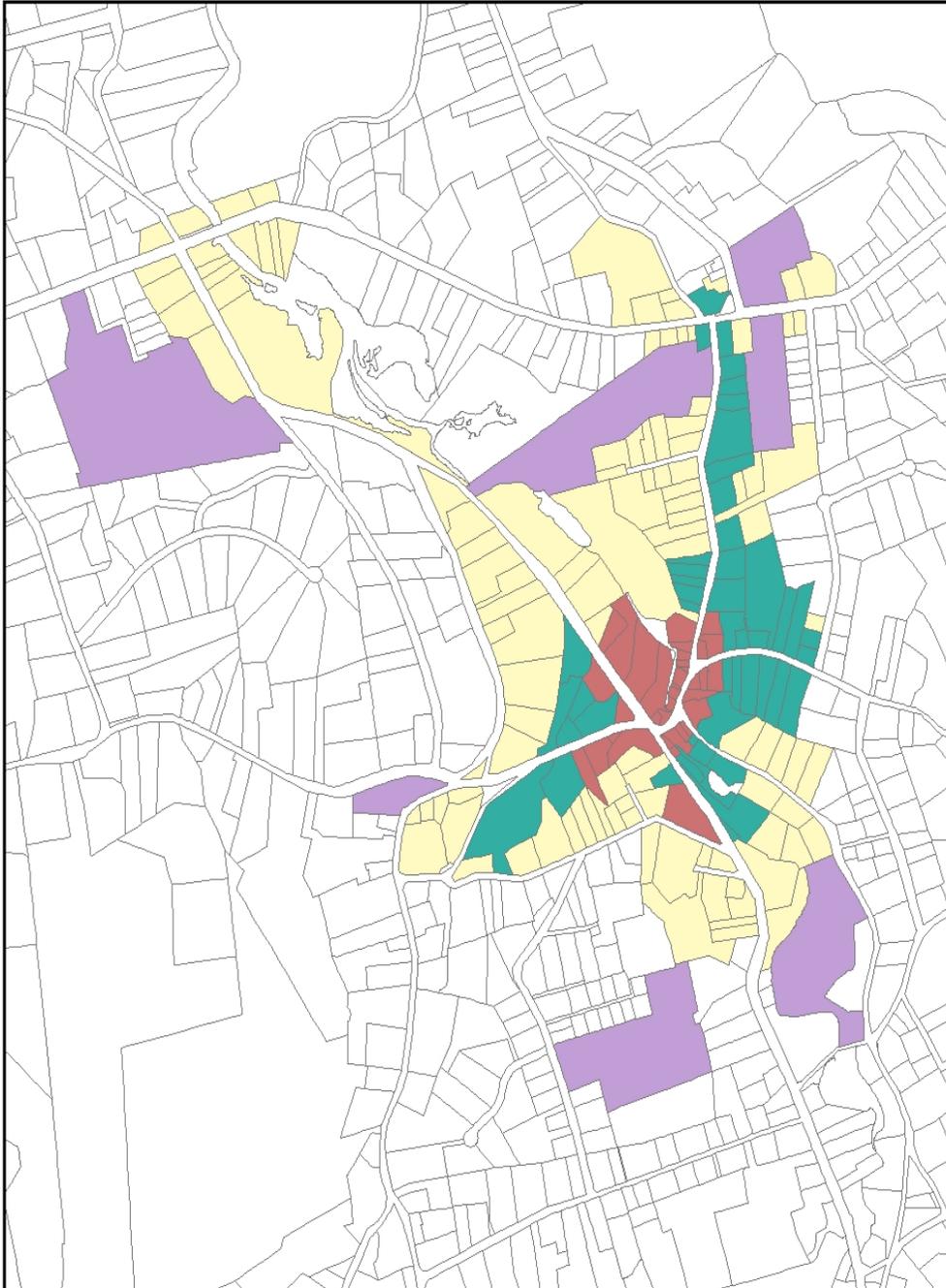
Map 7-1

The first tier is the dense, mostly commercial area. The second tier is an area with lower densities and a mixture of residences, civic uses, and less intensive non-residential uses. The third tier is an area which is primarily residential, with a village-like character. Each of these tiers has a role in the larger village area. The third tier includes a portion of the hillsides surrounding the downtown which provide a scenic backdrop for the center itself.

- Village Tier 1
- Village Tier 2
- Village Tier 3
- Destination Areas



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on enhancing the larger village area by concentrating town services, including recreational activities, along the axis in the greater village area.

Three Tiers

This Chapter recommends addressing the village area in a three-tiered approach. The first tier is the dense, mostly commercial and mixed-use area. The second tier is an area with lower densities and a mixture of residences, civic uses, and less-intensive non-residential uses. The third tier is an area which is primarily residential, with a village-like character. Each of these tiers has a role in the larger village area. The third tier includes a portion of the hillsides surrounding the downtown which provide a scenic backdrop for the center itself. (See Map 7-1)

Role of the Village Area

Chester Village does not aspire to be an all-purpose retail and service center. There is neither sufficient area nor infrastructure capacity for the intensity and scope of new development which has occurred in commercial centers elsewhere in the Estuary Region. Chester residents are fortunate to have a choice of commercial areas and services a short distance away in nearby towns, whether in Deep River, Essex, Old Saybrook, Haddam or Killingworth. Today, the future of many existing and newly-developed commercial areas in the region is unknown and unpredictable. Oversaturation by retail chains appears to be leading to the closing of older stores. Increased use of the Internet for retail purchases may affect local retail establishments. The high cost of energy involved in shipping goods around the country may lead to more emphasis on locally produced goods. Even busy regional centers may experience empty storefronts as consumer practices change. Chester should not sacrifice the character and scale of its village area to allow what may be short term development; it has a different role in the town and region.

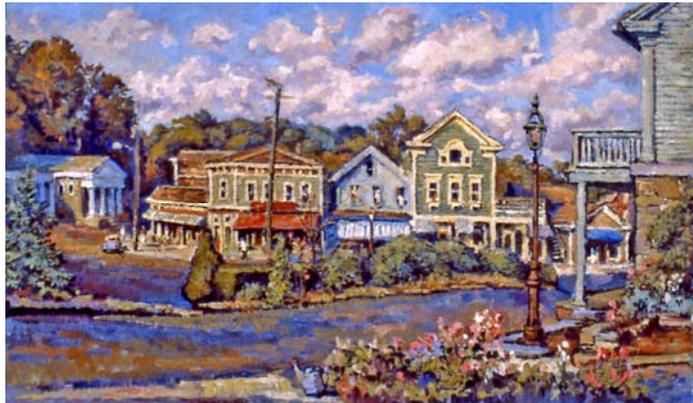


Figure 7-3: "Afternoon View of Main Street in Chester's Center" (Source: Painting Leif Nilsson)

Having defined what Chester Village is not, this Plan includes a vision of what the village is and can be for the Town of Chester. The village has a very strong "sense of place" that comes to mind when many people think of Chester. It has a nostalgic quality of a more simple time. John Stilgoe notes that the term "nostalgia" now connotes a rose-colored view of the past, but the term was originally a



medical one, meaning “homesickness”, indicating a yearning for something. The Chester Center of today is very different from Chester in the past, but it evokes a sense of an idealized village of the past.

Chester Village deviates from the usual historic New England patterns of seaport, factory town or agrarian rural village center. The village patterns are a result of topographical and physical constraints, being at the convergence of two streams, precipitously steep slopes and historic transportation routes. The buildings themselves are largely historic stone and wood buildings, worn but renovated and maintained, retaining an old-fashioned and stable infrastructure of second-story flats, shops, offices and homes. Roads and sidewalks have no particular geometric or engineered pattern, crossing at odd angles, following historic patterns of cart paths, walking paths, railroads and trolleys. To find an aesthetic



Figure 7-4: 4 Water Street (Source: Caryn B. Davis)

counterpart, an admirer of Chester village would have to travel to northwestern Connecticut, the Berkshires, or European small villages similarly developed near winding streams with closely spaced faces of steep hillsides and historic building preservation. The natural setting of surrounding hills and Chester Creek creates a sense of enclosure for much of the village center. Chester and its setting is reminiscent of an old world vernacular set apart from the hustle of everyday modern American life and land use. This setting is more than helpful in creating the old world sense of community and personal interaction, the loss of which is being lamented in many towns which are more prominently located on major traffic routes. Chester is not that remote, so the tourism trade is more vibrant than in many more isolated villages and attracts an interesting market segment.

Community Activities

One of the most important aspects of Chester Center beyond its primary commercial function is the role it serves as a location for community gatherings. Chester Center’s physical arrangement and commercial activities act as magnets that draw community events. Chester Center is alive with people shopping, dining, walking or celebrating. While it is busiest in the summer, there is activity year round. The presence of residential uses and busy restaurants means that people are present throughout the day and evening. The Center is pedestrian-oriented, and there are things to look at while taking a walk. Many of Chester’s celebrations are staged from the Center, including parades and “strolls” supported by local merchants. Unlike some downtown areas in the region, Chester Center has not become primarily a location for business offices which close at five. At night, it is not a landscape of dark windows and empty parking spaces.



The community aspects of the Center can be further enhanced by providing facilities which support the needs of participants in the Center's community life. Clearly designated and well-signed parking, walking paths along the axis, public sanitary facilities, chairs and benches and other modest improvements can make the "downtown experience" more pleasant. More formal community activities require organizers; credit must be given to the merchants and others that make the effort to plan and schedule community events, and to the town government for supporting such events. There is an opportunity for even more activity if people can be found to work on these projects. A return of a local farmers' market, a First Night Celebration, amateur races of various kinds or other themed events could be added to current activities. These activities can be successful in a setting which preserves the physical character of the Center. Attracting local people to the Center is as important as drawing visitors from further away since the combination of the two is synergistic.

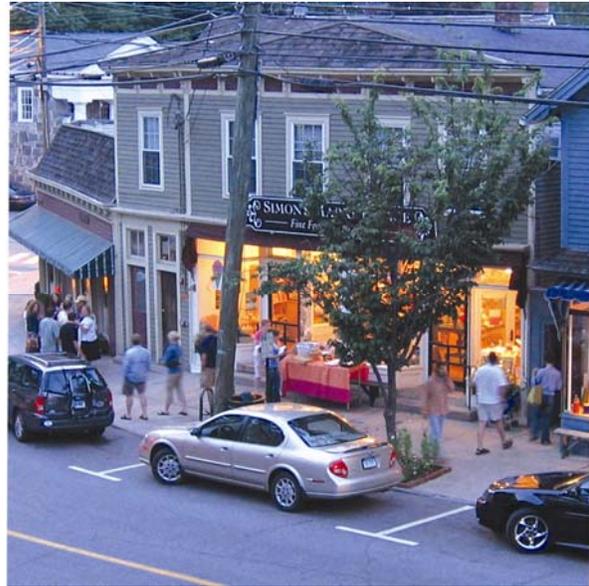


Figure 7-5: Chester Center (Source: Skip Hubbard)

Natural Resource Limitations

Chapter Two of this Plan includes a discussion of a key natural resource which is called Chester Creek today. This area was formerly known as Pattaconk Cove. Chester Village reached its height as an economic center because of its location at the "head of the cove". The Center's location was driven by the existence of the Cove, rather than by the environmental suitability of the area for development. Subsequent development of the railroad and Route 154 bridges restricted the flow of water between the Cove and the Connecticut River. A portion of the Cove was filled in to obtain more commercial land, and the density and character of development polluted the waters draining to the Connecticut River. Today, there is a much greater understanding of the environmental limitations of the area and an appreciation for the natural diversity found in the rare tidal freshwater wetlands along the Creek.

Any future plans for Chester Center must respect the vulnerability of the area's natural resources. While visual access to the Creek/Cove is desirable, access should respect the delicate nature of the area. The Harbor Management committee should be convened to identify locations to preserve or create new views of the Creek and to seek additional public access points. Any municipal or state improvements in the Chester Cove area, such as reconstruction of existing paths and bridges, should be designed to accommodate such increased access.



Infrastructure

Chapter Six discusses Chester's infrastructure and the maintenance and improvements which are necessary to serve townspeople in the future. In dealing with Chester Center, all infrastructure improvements should be of a scale and character that enhances the special qualities found there today. This is not a typical commercial area, and all improvements should be carefully scrutinized for their potential impact on the Center's "sense of place".

Sewage Disposal

In October of 2007, the voters of Chester approved construction of a limited sewer collection system for a portion of Chester Center, discharging to the Deep River sewage treatment plant through a force main which is to run down Route 154. The proposed sewer system was controversial, with some residents advocating for an alternative community septic system, fearing that sewers would lead to increased development in the village area. The Water Pollution Control Authority reduced the sewer service area from that originally planned, with the intent of addressing only existing septage disposal problems. The Planning and Zoning Commission, in supporting the Deep River connection, agreed to examine their zoning regulations for the Center to assure that incompatible development would not be allowed due to increased sewer capacity. Both the Authority and the Commission acknowledged the need to work together to have a coordinated approach toward only that growth which was appropriate for the Center.



Figure 7-6: Chester Center aerial (Source: Cummings & Good)



Roads

The major roads leading to Chester Center are owned and maintained by the State of Connecticut Department of Transportation. In the past, DOT has made road improvements to state roads based primarily on safety considerations for vehicular traffic flow. In recent years, such road improvements have been criticized for failing to recognize the contextual setting for the road. Road improvements to the downtown area surrounding the intersection of Water Street and Main Street must be

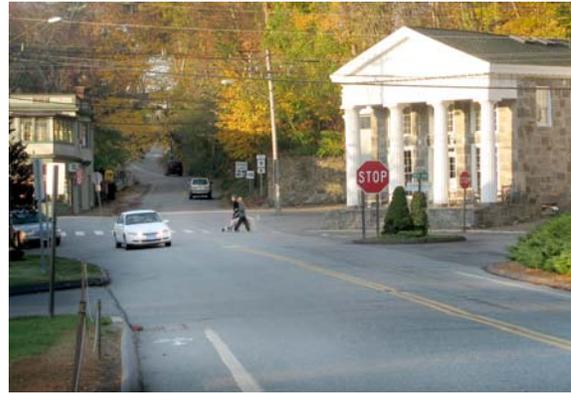


Figure 7-7: Main Street (Source: Cummings & Good)

designed to minimize any significant negative impacts on the character of the area. The intersection currently does not meet geometric standards for a modern four-way intersection, yet this anomaly is an important aspect of the character of the downtown area. In 1998, the Connecticut General Assembly passed enabling legislation for creation of “village districts”, which would restrict the character of road improvements in village zoning districts adopted under the standards of Chapter 124/Section 8-2j of the Connecticut General Statutes. A village district under this statute would allow the town greater control over design within the village area. In addition, measures to promote pedestrian circulation and to slow traffic (“traffic calming”) should be incorporated into any redesign or improvement to Main Street, North Main Street and state roads through the Center. Local communities can apply to the DOT to have sections of state roads designated as scenic highways, as an additional means to influence road design. The criteria for designating scenic roads appear to fit Route 148 from the Connecticut River to the Killingworth town line, Route 145 and Route 154 for its entire length in Chester.

Pedestrian Circulation

A major attraction of the village is its pedestrian-friendly scale and circulation pattern. Maintaining and improving this asset is essential to preserving the character of the village. The design of any improvements to roads in the Center should begin with provisions for pedestrian safety and convenience. A location for future bus stops should be identified and enhanced with seating and aesthetic amenities. Although it may seem premature to designate such locations now, it appears inevitable that there will be an increased use of public transit over the next decade. Measures to slow traffic along Main Street should be considered. “Traffic calming” is a young technology, but concerns about speeding and safety are already being voiced in the area.



Parking

Chester has struggled with the issue of adequate parking for the village area. Past efforts have resulted in creation of parking areas somewhat removed from the entrances to downtown attractions. This additional parking may provide sufficient spaces for day-to-day usage, but it is not well marked. Pedestrian linkages between shops and restaurants and the remote parking need improvements in the area of lighting and secure footing. For larger events in the Center, such as parades or races, nearby parking is inadequate. In the future, additional event parking should be created at more distant locations, and linked with the downtown by a shuttle service.

Street Furniture

In this context, “street furniture” is a term used to describe safety, convenience and aesthetic enhancements to an area. In this case, the term includes street lighting, signage, planting and landscaping, linkage and sidewalks, and literally, street furniture such as benches and waste receptacles. Much of the current lighting in the Center is not helpful for pedestrian circulation after dark, creating glare and shadows which make walking more difficult. Lighting should be restricted in wattage, height and direction, as well as requiring fixtures which are contextually appropriate. Signage should be designed to assist visitors in accessing more remote parking areas, and should be appropriately lit. Street “furniture” such as additional benches is desirable and should be of a consistent style. Many Chester residents appear to use bicycles; bicycle racks could be provided to encourage cyclists to stop and walk within the village.

Design

Traditionally, local zoning regulations have been silent on the subject of building and site design, and the result in many towns has been new development which clashes with and eventually changes the character of land use in certain areas. That is changing, however, as communities realize how little it takes to drastically alter the visual character of an area.



Figure 7-8: Chester Designs (Source: 2006 Chester 6th Grade Class)



Chester Center is not an assemblage of specific historic period architectural structures. It has adapted and changed with changing technologies and economics. Despite that adaptation, the Center retains a unity of scale, massing and proportion. It evokes an older time. The basic buildings and patterns are still in place despite being significantly altered over time. Its structures blend into a pleasing whole. There are very few discordant elements. Because of its small scale and compact nature, even minor incompatibilities can stand out. Retaining a context which is not based on historical accuracy is a more difficult task than creating an historic district based on a particular era. There appears to be considerable public support for design controls and guidelines which will try to protect the character of the Center. The subject of design standards for the Center has been discussed over several years by the Planning and Zoning Commission. Numerous examples of such standards are available from other locations, and should serve as a starting point for Chester.

Design standards should include guidelines for “mass” (height, bulk and roofline) and “proportion” (relationship between height and width). In addition, the nature of the unbuilt area around buildings (setbacks, yards) should be guided by existing development. Other guidelines should offer preferences for the nature of the openings in the façade, primarily doors and windows, materials, color, texture and details of ornamentation. These parameters can be reviewed by the Planning and Zoning Commission as part of the required site plan review process, or as part of a special permit process already in place. A more difficult task is retaining the views from the village of the surrounding wooded hillsides. Conversations with developers and lot owners on land in the surrounding hills should be held to encourage awareness of the impact on the Center from development on the hills beyond.

RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING CHESTER CENTER:

- 1. Limit development within the Center to that which respects the special character of the area.**
- 2. Adopt Village District regulations under Chapter 124-Section 8-2j of the Connecticut General Statutes. Include design standards which address bulk, massing, architecture, and site improvements in a manner consistent with the existing character of the Village Center.**



Figure 7-9: Main Street Winter Crossing (Source: CRERPA /LJD 2007)



3. Review and modify allowable uses to assure that a mix of activities is maintained in Tier One and Tier Two of the Center, with a particular emphasis on retaining single- and two-family residential uses. Concurrently, non-residential uses must be permitted with sufficient conditions so as to avoid creating a nuisance for existing residents. Refine zoning criteria for permitted uses and special permit uses.
4. Review zoning to ensure that home occupations are encouraged at an appropriate scale and intensity for the village.
5. Develop a cooperative agreement with the Water Pollution Control Authority to implement a policy limiting expansion of uses in the Center following construction of the new sewer system. Amend regulations and ordinances as necessary to enforce the policy.
6. Conduct a study of pedestrian circulation within the village area, with emphasis on safe and convenient linkages along the Water Street/West Main Street axis, connections to North Quarter Park, clearly defined access to existing parking areas, and access to current and future public transportation routes and bus stops.
7. To the extent possible, locate or relocate new and expanded municipal uses in the village axis area for ease of access and for community identity.
8. Develop and implement a signage plan for the village area, including better directions to parking areas and walking paths.
9. Consider alternative use of designated parking space as gathering areas for use during special events or seasonally.
10. Prepare and submit applications to the Connecticut DOT for designation of Route 148, Route 154, Route 145, including the Main Street Bridge, Water Street Bridge and Route 154 Bridge as state scenic roads.
11. Continue town support of community events within the village area, especially outdoor gatherings which add to the vitality of street life in the village center.



