

# ***Proud Past, Bright Future***

**Somersworth, New Hampshire  
Community Design Charrette  
September 22nd and 23rd 2017**



*Somersworth, N.H., Opera House.*



# Somersworth Community Design Charrette Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks go to those individuals who donated their professional and personal time to make this charrette a success.  
Also, many thanks to the citizens, businesses and town officials who shared their time, services, thoughts and knowledge with us.

## The Plan NH Charrette Team

### Charrette Team

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## The Somersworth Team

*Without the support and participation of all of the following individuals, organizations and businesses this charrette would not have been possible:*

### Leader: Shanna Saunders

Also:

Robert Belmore, City Manager	Keith Hoyle, Fire Chief
Dana S. Hilliard, Mayor	Dave Kretschmar, Police Chief

And:

Martin Pepin	David A Witham
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Martin P. Dumont, Sr.	Nancie Cameron
Jonathan McCallion	Jessica Paradis

*Plan NH is grateful for the special support of these members:*



# Plan NH Comes to Somersworth, NH

September 22 and 23, 2017

## Who is Plan NH?

**Plan New Hampshire, The Foundation for Shaping the Built Environment** (Plan NH), is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization formed in 1989.

Plan NH has a *Vision* of a New Hampshire that is vibrant and healthy for its people, its economies and the environment.

Plan NH's *role, or Mission*, in achieving that Vision is to encourage good planning and design and development because, we believe, that *what* we build, and *where* and *how* we build it has a significant impact on that vibrancy and health.

Plan NH *champions principles and ideas* that balance building projects - and this would include anything built in the public realm, such as buildings, roads, bridges, memorials, public sculpture - with

- The needs of people - where they live, how they get about, what services are necessary, what they value
- maintaining the “sense of place” of our towns, cities and villages that make them unique – including preserving historic assets, open spaces, agriculture and farming
- protecting our air, water, flora and fauna

Among our signature programs is the *design charrette*, an exercise that brings professionals from our membership together with our communities to explore design ideas, usually around a town center or other significant neighborhood.

Through recommendations made, Plan NH can demonstrate the role and importance of the principles and ideas noted above in concrete, real examples.



## What is a Design Charrette?

Simply stated, a Charrette is a brief, intense, brainstorming session in which ideas are brought together for the purpose of defining potential planning recommendations and possible design solutions for an identified need. For Plan NH, this is usually related to a town center or other significant neighborhood in a community.

The charrette is typically of a short duration – for Plan NH, 8 hours on a Friday for listening and then another 8 hours the next day for brainstorming, crafting recommended solutions, and presenting thoughts to the community.



### **The Charrette Process:**

- Identify the need or opportunity
- Collect information from the community itself to understand more deeply and broadly the situation
- Analyze and evaluate what is seen and heard
- Develop recommendations for meeting the need or addressing the challenge

The process engages planning and design professionals in direct dialog and conversation with local residents to collect information needed in order to develop good and relevant recommendations about how to address a particular challenge. Plan NH sees this part of the process as a period of *discovery*: discovering who the community is, what they value, what they really want. This community input is essential and critical to the value of the outcomes.

The results of a Plan NH charrette are general and overarching planning and design *recommendations*, rather than specific directions. Plan NH does not dictate, but suggests. Most often, the outcome of a Plan NH charrette is described as a “vision”: an expression of how things *might be*, based on what the team saw and heard and learned.



## **Why did Plan NH come to Somersworth?**

### Executive Summary:

In April of 2017, the City of Somersworth submitted an application for a Plan New Hampshire Community Design Charrette. The focus of the charrette was to look at the Somersworth Plaza in downtown Somersworth.

The Plaza was built in 1965 as part of Urban Renewal. It is an automobile -entered strip mall, which is set off from Main Street by a large, mostly empty parking lot. Businesses in the center seem to be struggling as has most of Main Street from Lower Market Street to the former General Electric Plant.

The city is concerned that the design of the plaza is incompatible with a vibrant walkable city, which is currently evidenced along High Street and Lower Market Street. The city has invested heavily in other parts of downtown and is planning a complete street program on Main Street.

The Somersworth Master Plan has addressed the plaza specifically, "Action Item 1.2: Revitalization of the downtown Somersworth Plaza to encourage new buildings directly on Main Street and add a mix of retail, office and residential opportunities with building designs that are compatible with the historic character of Main Street."

Plan NH accepted the application with the understanding that the focus area would extend to Main Street in addition to the Plaza.



# *The Charrette Process & Overview*

On Friday, September 22, the Plan NH team met toured the charrette area, met with City officials and conducted two community listening sessions with the objective of learning as much as possible about the Charrette area and as much as possible from City leaders and community members about their vision for the charrette area and for the City as a whole.

On Saturday, the Plan NH team met and discussed what we saw and heard and formulated some strategies for revitalizing the Plaza by creating a new City Center. During the course of the late morning and afternoon, the Plan NH team studied the options, reviewed connections, way finding, green spaces and the new City Center, culminating in a team presentation to the public on Saturday afternoon.

## What Plan NH Saw

- As the team toured the study area, it was immediately apparent that it lacks the vibrancy seen on High Street and Lower Market Street. There are several empty storefronts, several of which appear to be neglected. Not surprisingly, there was little traffic and few, if any pedestrians.
- The Plaza parking lot was fairly empty and the Plaza storefronts don't seem particularly visible owing to the deep recess of the storefronts under the city owned facade.
- The south end of the study area is anchored by the former City Hall, now Somersworth Historic Society and the Stein Park.
- There are some empty lots on the north side of the park which are potentially available for additional park land.
- The north end of the study area is also anchored by a park fronting a one block stretch of one-way out traffic.

*Charrettes blend the broad experience of design professionals with local citizens' detailed knowledge of their community to produce a plan of action that addresses issues of particular concern. The charrette provides an overall framework within which more detailed solutions and plans can be developed.*

- There are some significant historic assets in the study area, including
  - the former rail station,
  - the former Somersworth Bank,
  - the City Library,
  - former Police Station,
  - as well as historic structures to the south of the Plaza, including the Somersworth Historic Society.

There is an auto repair business located at the north end of the study area, which seems poorly located for its purpose and creates significant disruption to pedestrian flow.

Across the railroad tracks, which parallel Main Street, are

- significant mill buildings, including a very successful residential conversion,
- Canal Street Mill
- the "S" Building
- and the former General Electric Plant, now Aclera.

Also parallel to Main Street is a canal, which was historically used to generate power to the mill site. Opposite of the mill buildings is the Salmon Falls River.

***From the perspective of built and natural assets, the study area is uniquely rich.***



# **What Somersworth Told Plan NH**

## What The City Leaders Told Plan NH

- Somersworth is seen as a community with a stable population, with growing diversity in its residents.
- The city is relatively small in area measuring 10 square miles in total.
- There is a significant number of festivals held annually in different locations around town, including a Pumpkin Festival, a Children's Festival and a very popular Food Truck Festival, which drew 15,000 people to downtown Somersworth.
- There is an active Chamber of Commerce which represents Somersworth, Berwick, ME and Rollinsford.
- Even when the High Street/Lower Market Street corridor is active, the Plaza parking lot does not get used, there seems to be a perceived safety issue associated with lighting, numbers in general and lack of activity.
- The City is pursuing a Complete Streets proposal for Main Street, which will in part be informed by the Charrette.
- There is a high volume of traffic daily (17,000 to 21,000 cars) on High Street, most of which is travelling through the city.
- The City Leaders would like to have Somersworth seen as more of a destination than a conduit for people.
- The City struggles with an image problem.



***"We can begin by doing things at the local level, like planting community gardens or looking out for our neighbors. That is how change takes place in living systems, not from above but from within, from many local actions occurring simultaneously."***

***Grace Lee Boggs***



# **What the Town Residents Told Us**

Two public listening sessions were held during the afternoon and evening of September 22nd.

The purpose of the sessions was for the public to share their ideas with the charrette team about what they see and what they would like to see in the study area.

Residents were also asked to let the Plan NH team know what may not be known by the team about the study area and the community.

Comments from both sessions are transcribed below, along with notes taken during the evening session.

## What Somersworth Residents and Business Owners Told Plan NH

Two public listening sessions were held during the afternoon and evening of September 22. The purpose of the sessions was for the public to share their ideas with the Plan NH Charrette team and about what they would like to see in the study area. The process follows a "world cafe" model, which allows for participation and input from everyone in the room. Participants are asked three questions:

What Do You See?

What Do You Want to See?

What Else Does Plan NH Need to Know?

The information that comes out of these questions is sorted to identify common threads from the community about the study area and the community's vision overall, which is instrumental in developing recommendations.



Below comments and highlights from both sessions are summarized.

## What Do You See?

Stark contrast between Main Street and High/Lower Market Streets  
Empty storefronts - "Not open for business"  
Decayed sidewalks  
General feeling of neglect  
Not family friendly  
Hard to see natural features, such as the Salmon Falls River and the Canal  
Absence of people and traffic  
Historic mills and Main Street buildings  
Mostly empty parking lot at the Plaza  
Too much asphalt  
Not enough green space  
Place of opportunity  
Parks  
Sketchy  
Isolated  
Poor accessibility/walkability

## What Do You Want To See?

Public Market  
Green Space in Plaza  
Mixed Use  
Bring back Elm Street (Government Way)  
Community Area/Meeting Space  
Vibrancy Again

More Pedestrian Friendly  
Knit the Holistic Community Back Together  
Multipurpose Destination  
Connections/Activity  
One Way Traffic Zone  
"Hip Zone", Unique Open Area for Arts, Music, Play  
Accessibility  
Good Wayfinding  
More Green Space  
Better connectivity between Main/High/River/Mill

## What Else Does Plan NH Need to Know?

Somersworth Has a Negative Image and doesn't promote itself well.  
We Have Working Retail on High Street  
It's Difficult to get to Somersworth (16 traffic lights from the Spaulding)  
Positive Connections with Berwick  
New Park Land Coming in Berwick  
Somersworth Has Passion  
Rich in Culture and History  
Need a Better Building Permit Process  
Reputation for Higher Taxes, With a Decline in the Base  
Number of High Profile Festivals in the Summer and Fall  
Former Riverwalk Study Was Done

# **Charrette Team Observations and Recommendations**

Observation	Recommendation
<p>1. Somersworth has a strong sense of community and a sense of pride. In many ways, the Main Street corridor and Somersworth Plaza have failed to recover from changes at the former GE Plant, thus suffers from a sense of PLACE.</p>	<p>Find ways to invest in upgrading the quality of living spaces in the area. Target certain specific areas for investment to inject positive energy in the area. Provide more green space for both passive and active outdoor activity; provide more options for downtown living; provide walk-able streets and connections to city assets and natural features.</p>
<p>2. Architectural Character - The study area has a number of examples of excellent buildings in various states of repair. The lack of vibrancy appears to have contributed to a lack of investment in the area, which contributes to a vicious cycle—less activity, less opportunity, less value, less of a reason to visit leading to less activity, etc.</p>	<p>Provide enhanced façade treatment to the existing Somersworth Plaza to bridge the gap between significant older structures in the study area. Consider developing a new mixed use downtown facility to frame a new town green and to provide revenue to support added enhancements. Activate existing vacant buildings, such as the former Bank building as an incubator space, or business cooperative center, allow for “pop-up” retail/gallery space in empty storefronts to activate the street.</p>
<p>3. Civic Center— As a Milltown first, Somersworth developed along a working riverfront. Because of that focus of an economic center, there was never developed a signature Town Center.</p>	<p>Reallocate parking in the Somersworth Plaza to maintain adequate counts of spaces. Provide a street front to the plaza and connect the new street to the downtown grid. Turn the sea of asphalt into a new Town Square as a gathering place, a ceremonial center and cultural geographic center to Somersworth.</p>
<p>4. Scenic Value: The Salmon Falls River was historically vital to the development and growth of Somersworth—now there is an opportunity to provide connections to the River and adjacent Town of North Berwick to leverage the natural features of the river to promote activity.</p>	<p>Provide connections between natural features, parkland and other areas of the City so that the study area is made a part of the whole again.</p>
<p>5. Town assets - The study area contains the City Hall, Post Office, Library, Parks and the Historical Society. There are a number of reasons to go to Somersworth’s Main Street corridor, there needs to be more reasons to stay.</p>	<p>Bring more activities downtown, such as the various festivals, and have them center on the new Town Green.</p>



# Charrette Themes

A number of important themes emerged out of the tours of and discussions with the community:

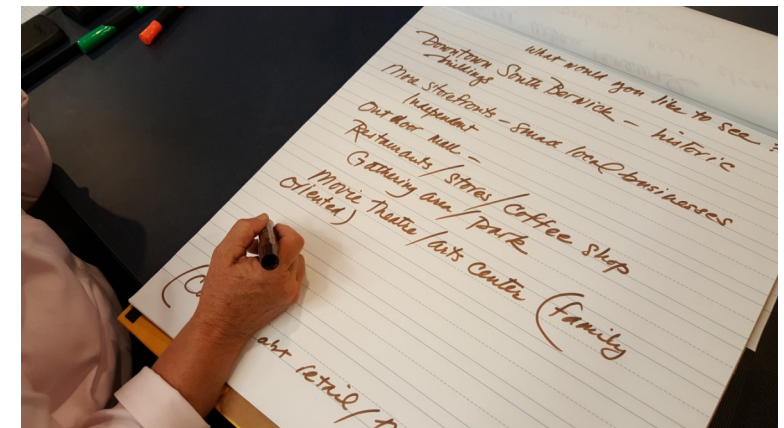
- **Growth Versus Change—Plan for Change**
- **Somersworth—Proud Past, Bright Future**
- **Sense of Place**
- **Sense of Pride in the Community**
- **Connections**

Change is inevitable. Somersworth has gone through a lot of change over the years, most significantly with the downsizing and sale of the GE Plant. Somersworth truly has a Proud Past. At one point in history, that plant was the economic heart of the City. When that changed, the City had to change. Somersworth leadership clearly understands that shift and is committing to doing what it takes to put the heart back in the City. Creating a new town center provides the important starting point for that change, hence the Bright Future. By creating a new Center and enhancing its connection to the rest of the community, physically and culturally, creates a true Sense of Place.

In addition, Somersworth needs to address: *What IS the change you are seeking to make?*

And then, who is it for? We believe:

- Downtown residents and landlords
- Other Somersworth residents
- Downtown businesses
- Visitors



## **Study Area Observations**

Largely empty store fronts along Main Street sit in mainly solid and interesting buildings. It should not take too much of an increase in activity in this area to generate greater interest in street level business.





## *Study Area Observations*

The former Bank Building is a significant example of Mid-Century Modern architecture. It has stood vacant for a number of years. The interior banking lobby is significant open space, which could serve well as a central feature to a business cooperative, or a business incubator space. We understand that the building is priced to move and would recommend that the City consider buying it to rent out in that manner.



The Somersworth Plaza fronts a large parking lot, set way back from Main Street. Storefronts are set deeply behind a heavy colonnade, limiting visibility and welcome-ness. We recommend that the façade be redesigned to serve two purposes—1. To provide more distinction between businesses architecturally, and 2. To provide more visibility for the retailers. An added feature is to create a new, connected street to improve both vehicular and pedestrian traffic to the Plaza.

We also recommend that the City consider allowing upper story residential additions to the building to add to the choices for downtown living in Somersworth.



## *Study Area Observations*

This wonderful building was the old railroad station. It has been difficult for businesses to survive in its location. There is a lack of connectivity to the more vibrant High/Market Street corridor in part due to one way traffic and to the presence of an auto repair business between the old station and those areas.



Natural and man-made water features are adjacent to the Main Street Corridor. Once these are connected to the downtown, they will serve as an added reason to come down and enjoy the downtown.



# *Start With What You Have*

As seen in the previous pages, there is a lot to start with:

- There is significant open space available in the Somersworth Plaza.
- There are some very good, yet underutilized buildings.
- There are natural features.
- There are the Post Office, the Library and City Hall.
- There is the High Street and Market Street corridors.



People already have a reason to come here,  
yet there doesn't seem to be enough to keep them here.

The question is: What can be done to reinvigorate those great assets?



## *A New Street, a New Town Center*



In this image, the parking lot of the Somersworth Plaza has been modified to create a new street in front of the retail building and to create a new Town Green.

The street brings definition to the storefronts and creates much better separation between vehicles and pedestrians.

Modification to the retail structure provides greater visibility of the storefronts and increases the available space for parking immediately in front of the stores.

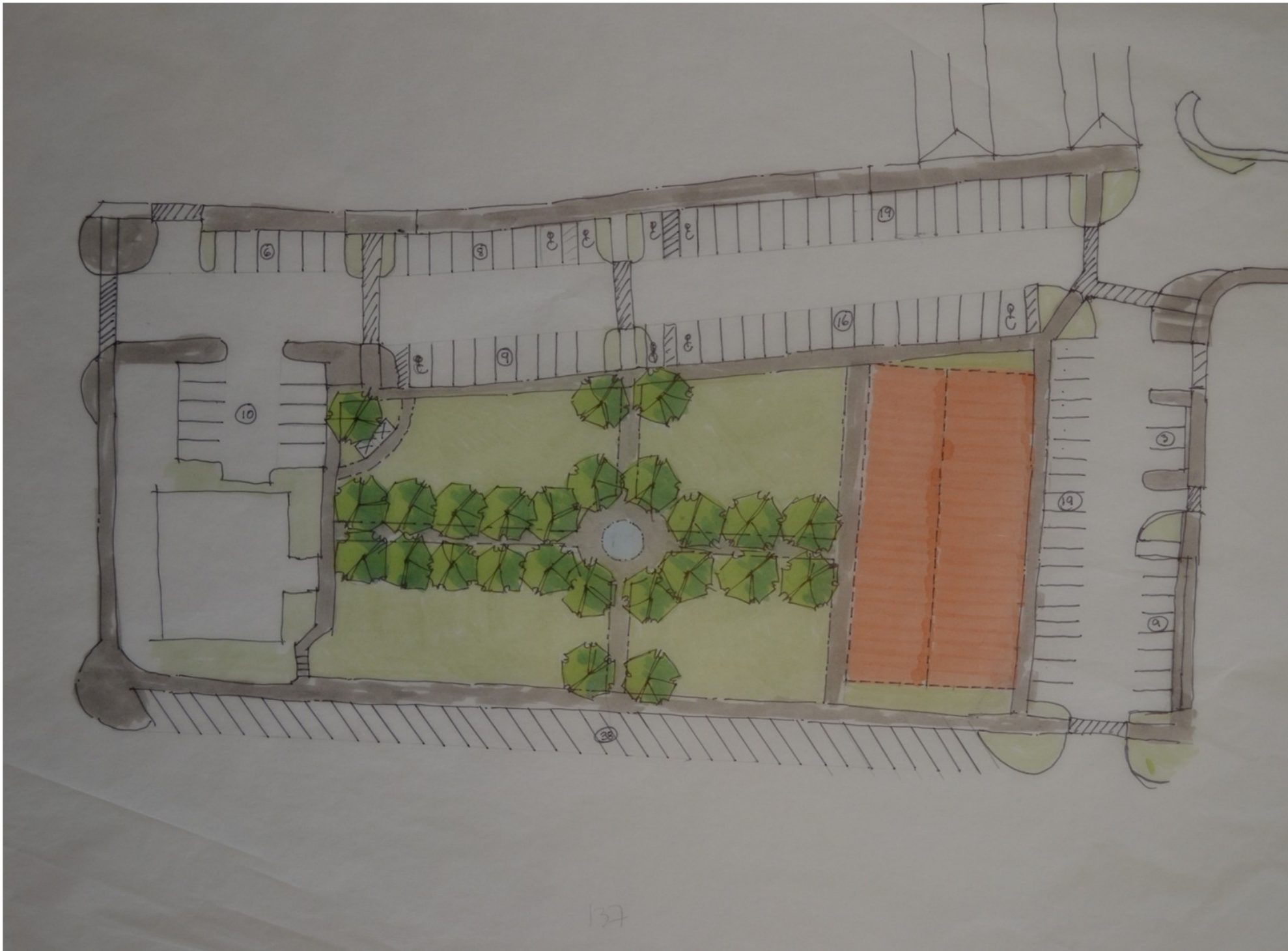
The Town Green becomes a new cultural and visual center to the City. It is here that the numerous and widely popular festivals can call home. In down times, it would serve as much-needed green space down town.

*"Today we live in a world of many centers and still long for an axis mundi, a marked center of our known world."*

*Howard Mansfield*



## ***A New Street, A New Town Center Option***



In this option, a new 3-story building would be developed along one side of the Green.

This building would serve as a commercial pavilion on the ground floor, which would be active on all four sides of the structure, thus connecting with the green and street equally.

The upper two floor would be residential, ensuring greater activity in the area and “informal oversight” of the Green.

The architecture of the building would be brick faced, with fully articulated windows, recalling the form of the buildings that used to stand on Main Street where the parking lot is now.



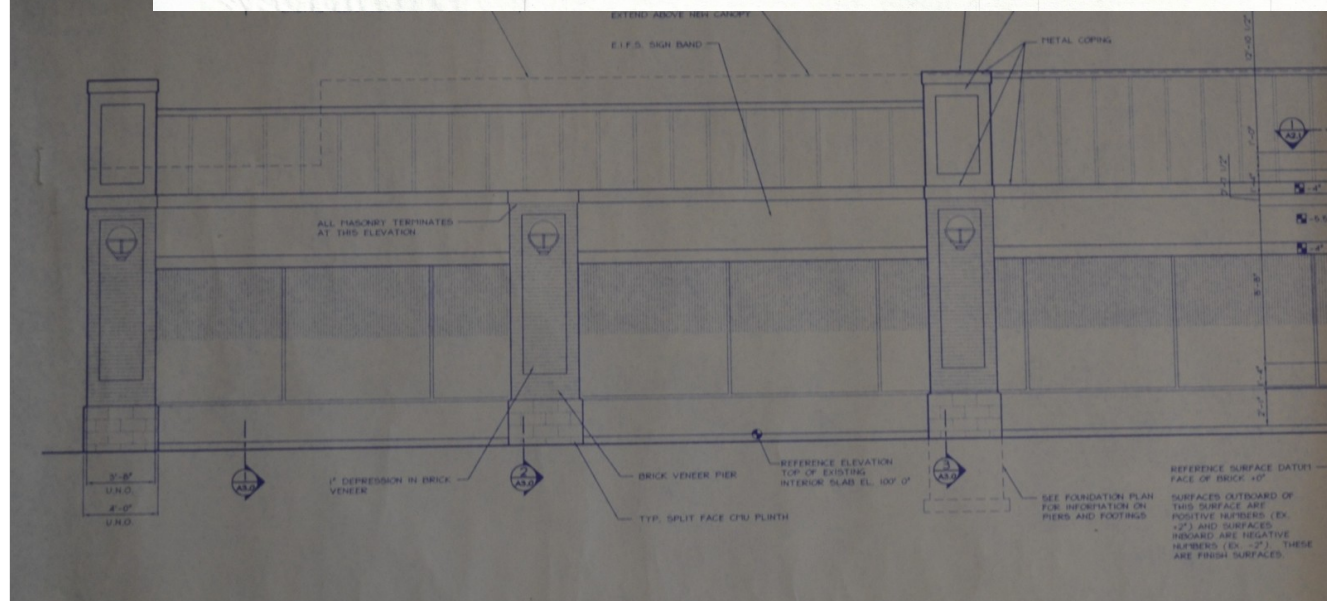
# *The Retail Building Re-Imagined*



As discussed earlier, the heavy masonry colonnade would be removed to enhance storefront visibility and to provide added space for the new street.

As a prominent face to the new Town Green, we recommend adding a second story to the building to create more presence, which could also serve as added residential space around the Town Green.

Architecturally, the façade would use more historical treatment, (e.g. brick, stone, shingled roofing) and benefit from providing some articulation, creating the sense of at least two buildings, which would break down the scale and give the appearance less of a shopping center and more as downtown buildings.





# **Parks and Open Space Features in Somersworth**

Somersworth is a city of only ten square miles. In that limited area however, there are a number of extraordinary recreational spaces and natural features.

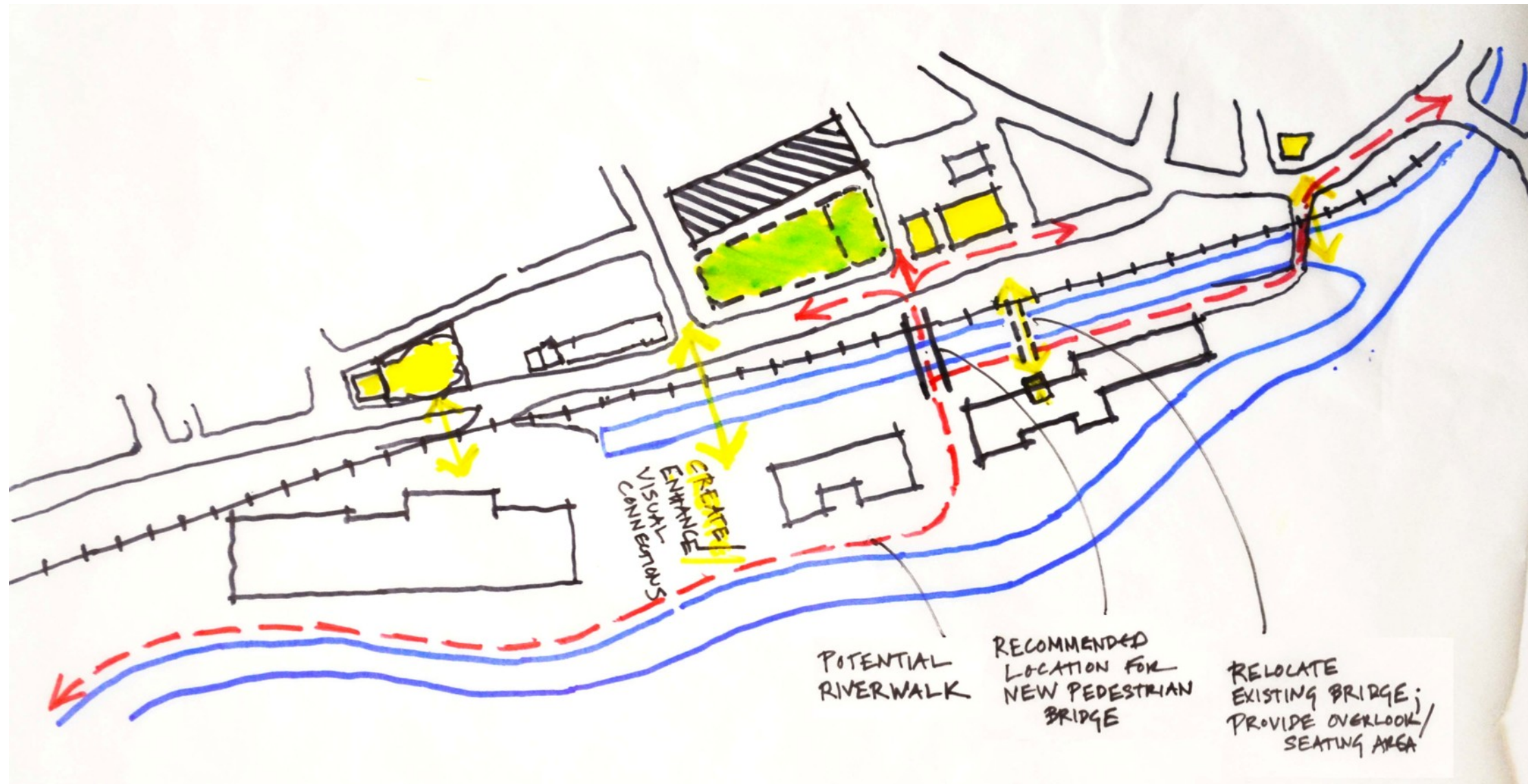
Of visual and historic interest are the Salmon Falls River and the GE Mill Canal—both close to downtown.

Developing connections between these special places and the downtown will naturally increase visits to the downtown, either on foot or by vehicle.





## Main Street Connections and Transitions

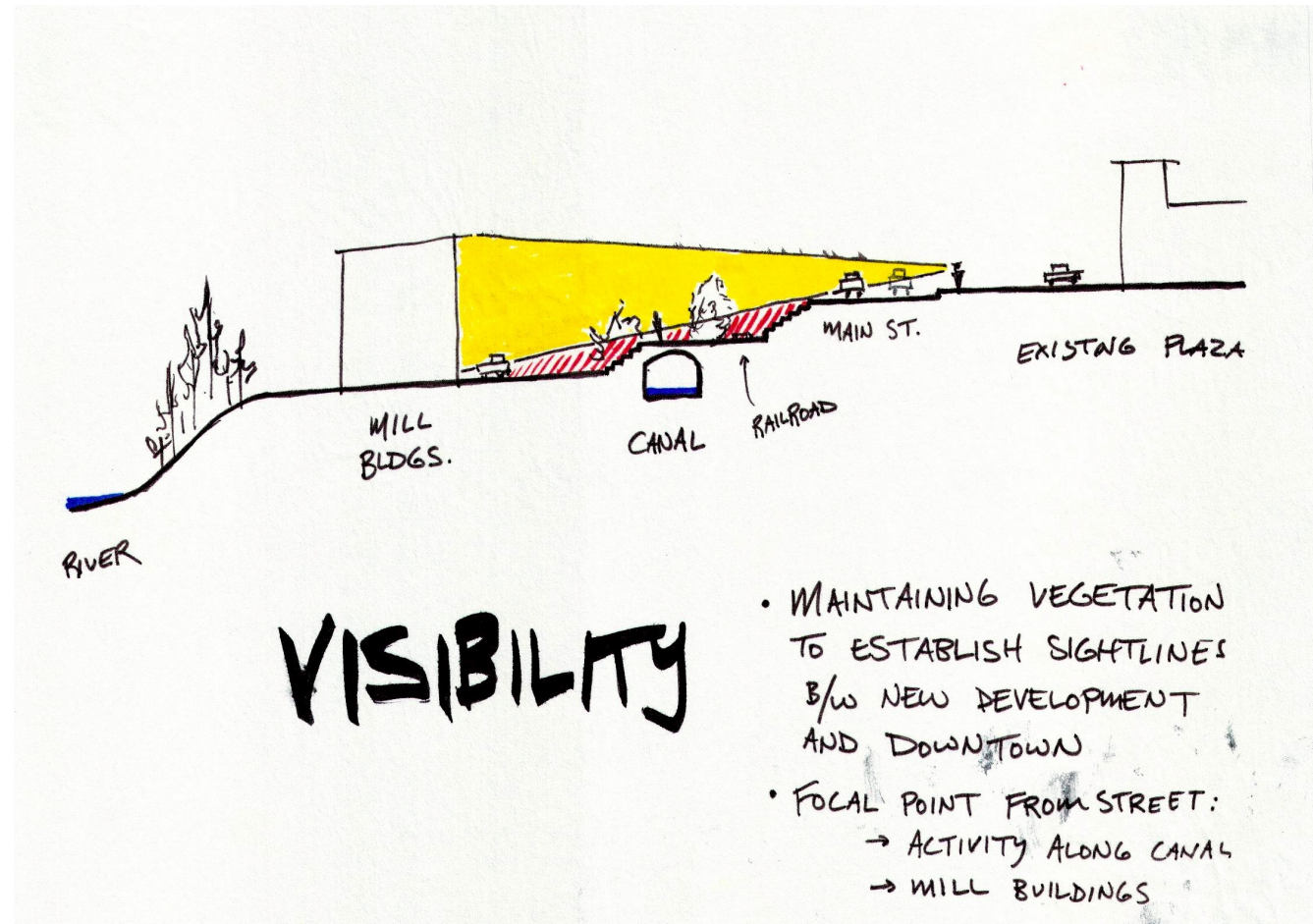


Looking at potential connections, our team took advantage of the proximity of natural and developed features to the downtown and future Town Green.

The planned Riverwalk would amble along the river between the Aclera Building and the "S" Building, turning towards the Town Green between the "S" Building and the Canal Street Mill, crossing a newly placed pedestrian bridge over the Canal across the railroad tracks to emerge at the new Town Green.



# Main Street's Potential



One of the main concerns about Main Street is the perception that it is not a safe place to walk.

Poor lighting, crumbling sidewalks and empty storefronts all contribute to that feeling.

Also contributing is the lack of interest on the mill side of the street. Heavy vegetation and fencing create a strong sense of separation from the mill buildings and conceal some of the natural features on that side of the street.

While the connections diagram showed how to provide greater access to Main Street, Main Street itself needs to be brought up to a better level.



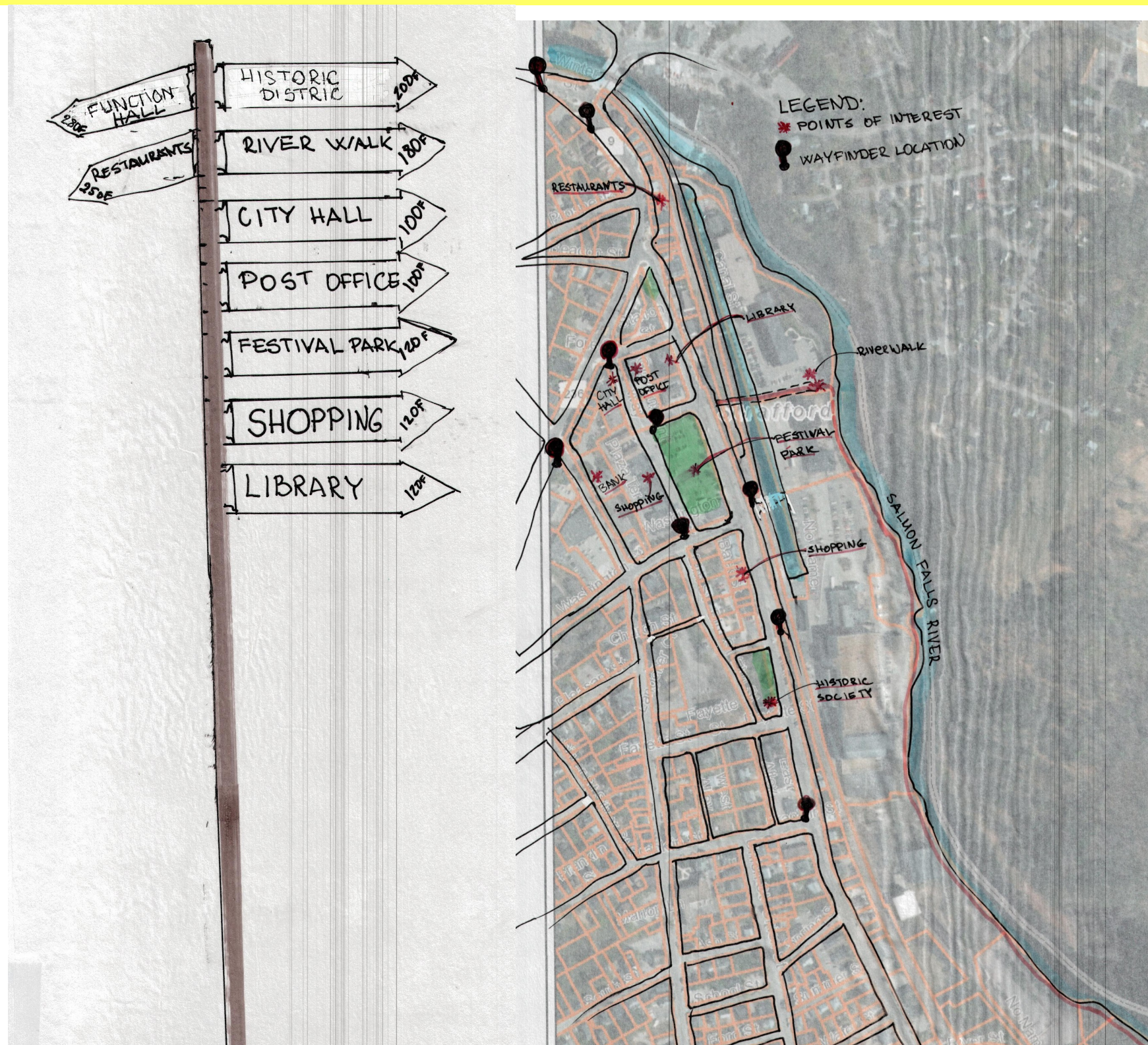
By enhancing visibility from Main Street, improving lighting, along the street and providing lighting along the pedestrian pathways, Main Street will be seen less as something to avoid and more as a place to go to, walk on to get to other parts of town, etc.

Leveraging this connection will open a new door for residents of Canal Place, who are presently less connected to downtown that to their apartments.

We understand that Somersworth is moving ahead with a complete streets program along Main Street, which bodes very well for the future.



# Wayfinding



Wayfinding is a critical part of connections.

Currently, the study area feels quite isolated from the rest of town.

In part that is due to traffic patterns, which may not be realistically changed right now; but also because it is hard to know what there is in town because of a lack of signage.

A strong graphic presence will go a long way to address this issue and open the eyes of both visitors and residents to what is available only a few blocks away.



# Concluding Thoughts

In many ways, Somersworth is at a crossroads—somewhere between its Proud Past and its Bright Future. What we saw of the community through the eyes and hearts of its governmental and business leaders and its citizens; there is a lot to be hopeful about.

A new Town Green, Solid Connections and most importantly, committed citizens will come together to make Somersworth a unique Place—fun for visitors and residents and a great place to call home.

Thank you for letting Plan NH be part of your community!



## **A note about RESOURCES and FUNDING:**

Funding sources change yearly. We recommend the City stay in contact with your Regional Planning Commission, the NH Division of Historic Resources and NH Preservation Alliance to stay current about potential resources for your projects.

