

VI

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN & POLICY FRAMEWORK



Introduction

The Franklin Boulevard Corridor has a storied past, and has been the historical backbone of the City of Gastonia for both commerce and industry. Current conditions along the corridor do not reflect the significance and importance of this roadway, however, forming instead a collage of vacant and underutilized parcels mixed with a series of auto-oriented uses. This Corridor Master Plan illustrates those conditions, and shows what can be done to bring back vitality, activity, and value to this key section of the City. There is need, and there is possibility.

The key issue now is, how to achieve that vision? What steps need to be taken to take the corridor from here to there? How best to honor the street? Achieving the vision that is outlined in this Corridor Master Plan will require ongoing attention, advocacy, and new tools; but the ideas need to be implemented.

The approach to implementation of this Corridor Master Plan needs to be **multi-pronged**. Action is needed on a number of fronts simultaneously to implement these ideas. Attention is needed by the city and other governmental bodies, and also by private property owners. Partnerships will be important. The approaches to implementation can be categorized as follows, and discussed below:

Encourage Private Investment

Private investment in Franklin Boulevard Corridor properties needs to be sparked. Through civic appeals, construction of public improvements (as described below), and an array of regulatory incentives (as described below), private property owners need to be encouraged to invest in the Franklin Boulevard Corridor in ways that are consistent with the principles and guidelines identified in this plan. The City can articulate, through design guidelines and/or policy statements, the actions that it wishes private property owners to consider. Mixed-use development proposals should be encouraged throughout the corridor.

Direct Public Investment and Operational Changes

The most obvious and direct way to accomplish a physical change within the Franklin Boulevard Corridor is to use public resources to directly fund improvements and take the public actions to transform the character of the corridor. Recommendations for public improvements within public rights-of-way are identified in this Corridor Plan, and are organized below in terms of immediate (1-2 year time frame for implementation), short

term (Phase I: 1-5 year time frame), medium term (Phase II: 5-10 year time frame), and long term (10+ year time frame) possibilities. Suggestions for operational adjustments and staff initiatives are also identified.

Adjust Zoning Regulations

Encouraging private investment is a good idea. Directly funding public improvements is necessary for those large-scale projects that cannot be accomplished otherwise. It is also necessary to adjust the city’s current zoning regulations, to be able to influence the form of new private development and to assure that public improvements that are necessary to serve new development are provided as components of new development or redevelopment projects. Zoning amendments must be made in order to achieve the vision set out in the Corridor Plan. The timing is good right now for attention to zoning amendments. A current, separate initiative is underway (and nearing completion), which will result in a common set of zoning regulations to be used by all local governments in Gaston County, and will also set the stage well for Gastonia to prepare overlay districts to apply to portions of this corridor.

There are three types of zoning adjustments that should be considered: (1) Market-based adjust-

ments to allow activity that meets the objectives of the Corridor Plan; (2) Requirements that prescribe standards and procedures; and (3) Incentives to encourage activity of a type that cannot be required.

(1) Market-based Regulatory Adjustments: To the extent that there are actions currently prohibited that might be taken by private property owners, in response to market conditions, that would promote public objectives for the Franklin Boulevard Corridor, zoning regulations should be adjusted to allow these actions. Examples include adding residential uses as permitted uses in commercial districts, allowing small-scale commercial uses in residential districts, allowing accessory apartments in dwelling units in or close to downtown, and allowing existing downtown uses to expand without triggering additional parking requirements.

(2) Regulatory Requirements: Zoning regulations can also be adjusted in a manner that requires new development (or redevelopment) to meet more rigorous standards, and/or to provide public infrastructure that will be needed as a result of the development. Examples include requirements for off-site improvements and expanded landscaping requirements, or to mitigate traffic impacts through contribution to the development

of the greenway network or operation of a downtown trolley system.

(3) Regulatory Incentives: Zoning regulations can be adjusted in a manner that provides incentives for property owners to take actions that are in the public interest. Incentives could take the form of (1) Less stringent requirements if characteristics of proposed development are consistent with policy objectives; (2) streamlined process if development is proposed that is consistent with policy objectives; (3) Modifications of regulations and requirements if certain findings are met; and/or (4) Public participation in the financing of required infrastructure.

In pursuit of these ideas to amend zoning regulations, the approach could take one of two routes: Amendments to the base zoning districts covering downtown, or creation of one or more new overlay zoning districts.

All of these approaches should be pursued: Encouraging private investment, funding public improvements, making operational changes, and adjusting zoning regulations. Further discussion on each topic follows.

Encouraging Private Investment

The undertaking of this Corridor Plan by itself sends a message to property owners and potential developers along Franklin Boulevard: the City of Gastonia places high value on the character of this corridor, and welcomes partnership in improving the corridor. Property owners are encouraged to bring forward proposals for development and redevelopment within the corridor, with attention to the design ideas included in this Plan. The city will pursue regulatory adjustments (as described below). The city also offers the design ideas in this Plan as guidelines. Developers and property owners are encouraged to invest in properties within the corridor, particularly in the downtown portion and the western portions.

Subsequent to completion of this Corridor Plan, it is recommended that the city undertake preparation of **site-specific Design Guidelines** for use by property owners, developers, and staff in designing and reviewing development proposals within the corridor. Such guidelines would be non-binding; however, they would set forth expectations. To the degree that applicants can embrace the guidelines, review of applications could be expedited. Guidelines will differ in different parts of the corridor, but should generally address use, building orientation, and dimensional characteristics. Following are examples of design guideline principles that illustrate how guidelines might be written:

Uses: Mixed use development, including retail and residential uses, is encouraged throughout the Franklin Boulevard Corridor.

Building Orientation: Unless located on a corner lot, the long axis of new buildings should be consistent in orientation with the majority of other buildings on the same block face. In the case of corner lots, a new building should be compatible in orientation with the majority of other buildings addressed off the same street.

Entrances: For all new buildings, an operable building entrance should face the street. In the case of corner lots, the primary entrance(s) should face the street from which the building is addressed.

Setbacks: Front and side setbacks for new development and redevelopment should be within a fixed percentage (e.g., 25 percent) of the average of the existing setbacks found along the same block face.

Scale: The height of new development should not exceed a fixed percentage (e.g., 125 percent) of the average height of the structures found along the same block face, whichever is greater. Unless designed as a multiple component building, the building footprint area of any single structure should not exceed a fixed percentage (e.g., 150 percent) of the average size of other structures found along the same block face. (However, it may be desirable to allow for increased height

and intensity at critical nodes in the area, particularly downtown, to allow for strategically increased density.)

Location of Off-Street Parking and Loading Areas: Off-street parking and loading areas should not be located between the building and the street it fronts. To the maximum extent practicable, off-street parking and loading areas should be located as far as possible from existing single-family detached residential uses.

Street Trees: New developments should provide street trees in accordance with city standards.

Lighting: The existing street lighting conditions along a block face should be continued for all new development. Existing street lighting conditions should include fixture types, pole types, height, lamp type, wattage, shielding and average spacing on the street.

Ground Floor Uses: All development and redevelopment with street frontage should have ground-level space devoted to retail and commercial uses.

Development of design guidelines addressing these topics, used in combination with requirements that might be included in overlay zoning districts as discussed below, would help assure that new development and redevelopment of properties in the corridor takes place in a manner that advances community objectives.

RECOMMENDED NEAR TERM PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS + COSTS

PROJECT	DESCRIPTION	COST (approximate)	UNIT
Pedestrian-emphasis Intersection Improvements	turn lanes, cross walks, pedestrian refuges, etc.	\$50,000-\$60,000	per intersection
Traffic Signal	four corners	\$20,000	per signal
Median Treatment	locations such as downtown blocks of Franklin Boulevard or Greasy Corner @ Vance St.	\$5,000-\$20,000 (does not include landscaping)	per linear foot
Right Turn Channel	depending on size	\$5,000-\$8,000	per linear foot
Crosswalks	thermoplastic	\$8,000	per treatment

Figure 6.1

Public Investment in Infrastructure

One of the best ways to achieve the desired physical environment for the Franklin Boulevard Corridor, and also to encourage development to occur in desired locations and patterns, is to invest in public infrastructure. Each section of this Corridor Plan contains specific recommendations for improvements. Not all can be pursued at once, and priorities need to be established for consideration as resources allow. Projects are categorized below by level of effort/expenditure required that indicate whether planning, funding, and execution of a project might be accomplished immediately, or within a short, medium, or long term context. Projects are listed below without indication regarding individual project priorities or urgency of need. In addition, general cost estimates are provide in Figure 6.1 for a range of near-term public infrastructure projects.

Immediate (1-2 years):

- Develop Gateway Signage into Downtown from the East (at Broad Street) and from the West (at Trenton Street);
- Partner with the developer of the Firestone Mill property for construction of structured public parking spaces, and
- Work with the developer of the Firestone Mill property to develop an internal street network that has the same block dimensions as the surrounding Mill Village, and to

achieve single family housing along new interior streets of the development.

Short Term (2-5 years):

- Develop pedestrian improvements in the Downtown portion of Franklin Boulevard (crosswalks, planters, sidewalk improvements);
- Widen sidewalks at Franklin / Vance (Greasy Corner);
- Make intersection improvements at Franklin Boulevard and Myrtle School Road;
- Install safety intersection improvements at Oakland, Marietta, South, York, and Chester;
- Make Intersection improvements at New Hope Road, Cox Road, Franklin Commons, and Lineberger Road;
- Establish downtown trolley service;
- Create additional parking along the railroad tracks between Tremont Street and Chester Street;
- Transition all signals downtown that hang from wires to signal arms, and
- Replace light fixtures downtown with historic lighting.

Medium Term (5-10):

- Develop a shared-use trail for bicyclists and pedestrians along the railroad right-of-way

between downtown and Dixie Village from W. Main to the Webb Street School;

- Develop a shared-use trail on the south side of Franklin Boulevard;
- Develop shared-use rail spur from the riparian corridor to the intersection with Franklin Boulevard at the city boundary with Lowell;
- Develop a shared-use trail spur from a trail along the railroad between Milton and Vance Streets across Franklin Boulevard, past the Firestone Mill to connect with the proposed greenway trail running along the stream adjacent to Garrison Boulevard;
- Work and partner with the property owner of the Home Depot site to connect S. Bolding Street and Hartman Street through the Home Depot site;
- Work and partner with property owners to create civic open space within redeveloped commercial properties such as Franklin Commons and the Gaston Mall, and

Long Term (10-20 years):

- Underground utilities along the corridor, which range in cost from \$500,000 to \$3,000,000 per mile, depending upon whether new placement or a retrofit.
- Add new pedestrian-oriented signalization (e.g., pedestrian-activated, countdown displays) at Vance and Franklin Boulevard, to al-

low for greenway crossing;

- Create civic open space along Franklin Boulevard, between Oakland Street and Marietta Street;
- Create civic open space along Franklin Boulevard, between York and Chester Streets;
- Create a park (or designated, maintained open space) south of Franklin Boulevard, across from Franklin Commons, between Franklin Boulevard and wetland areas;
- Develop pedestrian connections from the Gardner Park neighborhood south of Franklin Boulevard, across a new park, to connect into Franklin Commons;
- Create an internal street network north of Franklin Boulevard to connect various parcels and reduce traffic demand at the signalized intersections along Franklin Boulevard;
- Develop a shared-use greenway trail running along riparian corridors, including a branch running north from Franklin Boulevard underneath I-85, providing a connection to undeveloped property on the north side of I-85 between Franklin Commons and Lineberger Road;
- Create a South Street Park, along the railroad track on S. South Street;
- Create a Community Art Center on Franklin Boulevard, between Clay Street and Tremont Street; and

- Establish passenger rail service on the Piedmont and Northern railroad line connecting to Charlotte.

In addition to this list of potential capital projects, there is also a need for consideration of rules and procedures that would help promote downtown activity. Those possible operational procedures include:

- Adjustments in refuse collection schedules to accommodate mixed-use development
- Creating provisions for allowing use of public right-of-way, such as sidewalk dining (but not on Franklin)
- More emphasis on grant writing to secure additional resources. Possibilities can include use of Community Development Block Grant funds, programs administered by the NC Main Street program, more aggressive advocacy of tax credit programs related to historic properties, and funding from the NC Department of Transportation and/or the NC Department of Cultural Resources for specific projects that improve the safety and character of individual development nodes along the corridor.

Working with NC DOT

As a designated reliever route for I-85 and a federal-aid highway, Franklin Boulevard (US 29/NC 74) serves multiple purposes for the local community and regional travel demand. It is the responsibility of the North Carolina Department of Transportation to ensure regional mobility along this corridor. It is also the responsibility of the City of Gastonia to ensure new development and redevelopment preserves the capacity of Franklin Boulevard for its regional purposes.

There are several ways to balance the seemingly competing demands of regional travel and the desired type and amount of redevelopment along the corridor. First of all, this master plan is attempting to guide redevelopment in a manner that reduces the demand for automobile travel and encourages use of non-auto modes by creating more compact, accessible centers that are designed at a pedestrian scale. This kind of development pattern can make transit more viable along the corridor so that headways and the span of service make it an attractive option to the auto.

But Franklin Boulevard is a state road. The City must work with the NCDOT to agree on mobility and livability strategies that serve the multiple needs of this corridor. It is recommended that the City of Gastonia and the MPO approach the state with the master plan and ask what elements the state can support or is willing to investigate further.

For those elements the state is not inclined to support, the City should ask the state for possible alternatives that may be able to achieve similar objectives.

The City and MPO should define the capital projects for which state or federal funding is sought in the Long Range Transportation Plan update and the five-year Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). Locally funded projects should also be identified in these planning and programming documents to convey complementary strategies and a sense of partnership. As opportunities arise, such as a state-funded resurfacing project or signal retiming effort, the City should approach the Department early to assess whether any of the master plan recommendations (or alternatives) can be incorporated into the project. It may be possible for the City to contribute some funding at a lower cost through such a partnership as opposed to a stand-alone treatment.

The future of the Franklin Boulevard Corridor as an effective and livable roadway that supports local and regional needs depends on all stakeholder agencies working together in a spirit of collaboration and compromise. This takes hard work and perseverance, and it should become a routine dialogue between the state and local agencies to achieve the over arching objectives for revitalization of this critical corridor.



An Approach to Capital Projects Implementation

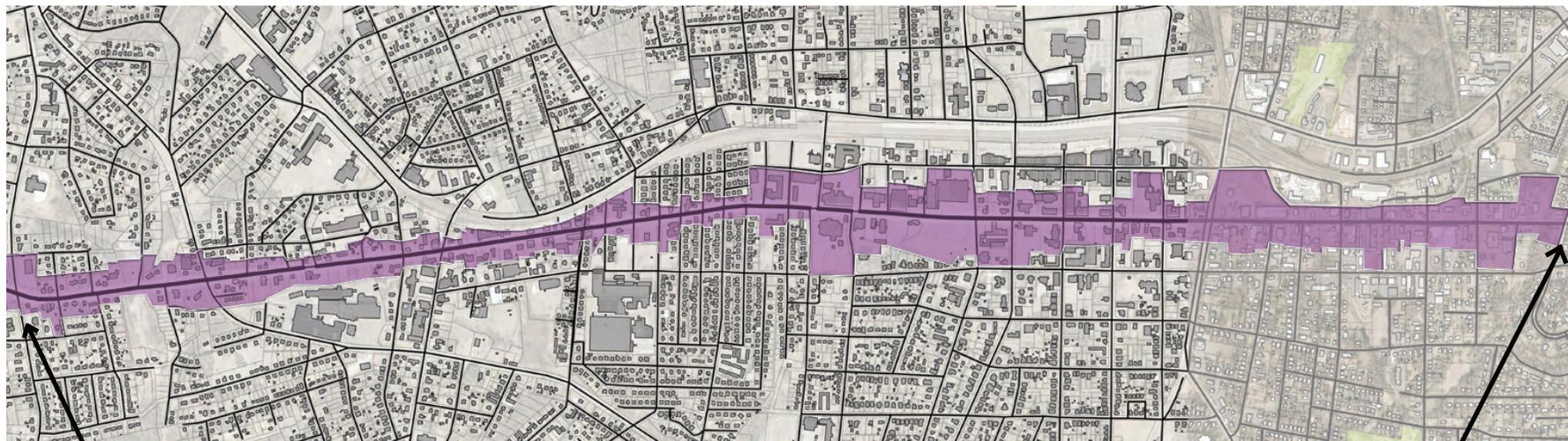
The task of undertaking the various capital projects outlined in this Corridor Plan can be mentally and financially daunting. Transforming an aging commercial corridor like Franklin Boulevard that has experienced nearly 40 years of gradual decline may seem like an overwhelming proposition. For that reason, it is imperative that the redevelopment and revitalization of this corridor occur in piecemeal, incremental fashion. It will take time and money. By focusing on certain nodes or community focal points one at a time, the city and potential partners in other agencies or the private sector can begin to shape a new image for Franklin Boulevard that will guide the corridor and community for the next 40 years.

The Corridor Plan defines specific “pulses” or nodes of development that can serve as gateways, activity centers, and hubs for existing and planned transit services. To ensure that the remake of the Franklin Boulevard corridor is manageable, the City should target its capital improvement program toward addressing the recommendations of one key node at a time. This would have the advantage of demonstrating measurable progress toward the corridor’s transformation in keeping with the master plan vision. In parallel, the City can define the specific overlay district boundaries, criteria and other regulatory strategies for other areas along Franklin Boulevard.

With market forces guiding new development on the eastern segment of the corridor and existing economic and civic destinations driving the revitalization of downtown, public efforts to improve the corridor should begin on the western segment. With relatively little private investment and continuing concerns about crime, blight and urban decline, the western portion of the corridor from Shannon-Bradley Road to Myrtle School Road needs immediate attention. The catalyst for its transformation could be the redevelopment of the Firestone Mill/Loray Village site. The City can therefore capitalize on historic preservation funding assistance, private market interest, proximity to downtown and excellent regional accessibility to use this location as a catalyst for corridor-wide change.

As the City moves into implementation of the capital/public works program for the western node, it should then define the 2nd targeted area of focus, and begin programming capital projects accordingly. The 2nd focal point should be defined based on redevelopment opportunities and/or other public investment opportunities, such as an intermodal transit center or greenway connections.

ZONING OVERLAY DISTRICT (proposed)



MYRTLE SCHOOL ROAD

BELVEDERE AVENUE

Adjust Zoning Regulations

The timing for attention to zoning amendments is good. A current initiative is underway (and nearing completion), which will result in a common set of zoning regulations to be used by all local governments in Gaston County. The Gaston Unified Development Ordinance project began in 2005 to develop a unified ordinance so that land use regulations could be substantially similar across the county. The unified ordinance is being constructed with anticipation of overlay zoning districts that might be developed by municipalities with special standards and procedures to apply to unique areas within a municipality. This sets the stage well for Gastonia to prepare overlay districts to apply to portions of this corridor.

The new draft Unified Development Ordinance currently contains two zoning districts that likely would apply to property within the Franklin Boulevard Corridor:

CBD (Central Business District): Intended to allow for commercial, office, and high-density residential development, and possibly light industrial uses.

UMU (Urban Mixed Use District): Intended to be applied to areas adjacent to central business districts and older mill villages, permitting a variety of commercial, office, and high-density residential uses.

These will be written such that the district provisions can be generally applied by all municipalities within Gaston County. Accordingly, given the general nature of these districts, there is a need for **at least two overlay districts** to apply to areas within the Franklin Boulevard Corridor in Gastonia: one to apply to the core downtown area, and one to apply to the transition areas extending east and west.

Following adoption of this Corridor Plan, work should commence on preparation of these two overlay zoning districts that would apply additional provisions, over and above base zoning requirements. The new overlays should contain customized dimensional standards, calibrated to existing conditions in which the rules would apply, addressing setbacks, height, landscaping and screening, percent of building façade that must be used for windows, requirements that overhead utility lines be relocated underground by developers of property containing or abutting such lines, requirements for public improvements such as bike lanes and sidewalks, and new sign provisions.

Possible provisions that might be included in these overlay zones are:

- Mechanism that triggers the new standards or requirements whenever new development

is proposed

- Mechanism that triggers the new standards or requirements whenever subdivision is proposed (either to create new lots, or to recombine existing lots)
- Requirements that public improvements be completed as conditions of approval
- Adjustments to the list of permitted uses to reflect desired use patterns
- Incentives for mixed use, such as higher allowable intensities and/or reduced parking requirements if residential, office, and retail uses are included in a development proposal.
- Requirements for mixed use, such as requiring that no more than a stated percentage of floor area (e.g., 50%) of a new development in a mixed-use zone can be devoted to one of the following uses: commercial, office, or residential.
- Adjustments to amount of development permitted (raise or lower Floor Area Ratios)
- Adjustments to amount of parking required (eliminate requirements, lower requirements, or offer options, such as shared parking provisions or payments in lieu of providing parking for areas served by transit)
- Placeholder for a future program that would allow the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) into zoning regulations and out of the overlay zone, as appropriate.

A good example of zoning regulations that can be applied to a downtown area to achieve the objectives articulated in this Corridor Plan is attached as an appendix.

Regarding parking requirements, it will be desirable to provide options. The regulations should contain flexibility to allow development and redevelopment to occur without needing to provide all required parking, if circumstances make that difficult. There should be provisions that allow for shared parking (if uses are counter-cyclical in peak demand characteristics), payment-in-lieu of providing parking, or waiver of parking requirements, in part or in whole, if findings can be made that the property owner has put measures in place to allow/encourage non-automobile travel. Particularly as the downtown area promotes greater availability and use of public transportation (i.e., the downtown trolley or longer term commuter-oriented regional solutions), the provision of parking should be considered within the context of a comprehensive mobility and accessibility strategy.

One additional issue that will need particular attention is the subject of nonconforming signs. Current sign regulations in Gastonia are workable and appropriate, and the new Unified Development Ordinance will likely contain additional provisions (such as requiring that all new signs be

ground signs). The problem in this corridor, however, is that there are many existing signs that do not meet current regulations nor would meet new requirements. Signs are critical in establishing the visual character of the area. The old signs create two difficulties: (a) the older, nonconforming signs detract from the visual character of the corridor; and (b) the older, nonconforming signs (many of them large) create a visibility advantage for those owners of the nonconforming signs over the owners of new developments that meet the requirements. This results in a disincentive for old sign property owners to make improvements to that property. Two potential provisions should be considered in the new overlay districts:

- A provision that requires that a nonconforming sign to meet all current requirements if any change is proposed to the sign; and
- A provision that requires a nonconforming sign to come into compliance with current regulations within five years of the date that a property owner is notified of the nonconformity.
- There is a provision in Gastonia's existing zoning that should carry over into the overlay zones, allowing designation of a Historic sign under certain prescribed circumstances, which removes the nonconforming status of the sign.

In order to make the five year amortization provision workable, the city will need to conduct a survey of existing signage to identify nonconforming signs and subsequently notify property owners of that status.

Policy Framework

One of the objectives of the Franklin Boulevard corridor study was to identify a future policy direction for the City of Gastonia to consider in its redevelopment vision for the corridor. The City is in the process of updating its Comprehensive Plan and plans to include a chapter or section that will focus on Franklin Boulevard. Therefore, based on the analysis, public input and feedback from staff, the planning board and the City Council, this section presents policy recommendations for the City's consideration.

CORRIDOR VISION

The vision for the Franklin Boulevard Corridor through Gastonia is to re-create a vibrant series of mixed use centers that define the corridor as a gateway to the community by promoting distinct, multi-modal destinations that provide a sense of character, history and economic opportunity for the next 50 years of Gastonia's evolution. The Franklin Boulevard Corridor will feature highly accessible, attractive and well-connected places that strengthen adjacent neighborhoods while enhancing regional mobility for people and goods.

In support of that vision, the following goals, objectives and policies will guide the corridor's redevelopment and improve personal mobility.

GOAL

Achieve a balance between regional mobility and local multimodal accessibility along Franklin Boulevard.

OBJECTIVE

The City of Gastonia and the Gaston Urban Area MPO shall work with the North Carolina Department of Transportation to develop and implement an access management and inter-parcel connectivity policy for Franklin Boulevard.

POLICIES

Develop methods to improve multimodal connectivity between parcels along Franklin Boulevard, including street connections, cross-access driveways, shared-use paths and sidewalks to help reduce vehicle miles of travel and intersection delays along the Franklin Boulevard corridor.

Work with NCDOT and other appropriate stakeholders to enhance pedestrian safety and accessibility through capital projects, signalization, signage and pavement markings at key intersections where walking and crossing Franklin Boulevard will be encouraged.

Work with the Gaston Urban Area MPO, the

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Area MPO, Charlotte Area Transit System and NCDOT to expand transit service and provide appropriate transit infrastructure at key focal points along Franklin Boulevard.

Work with Gaston County, the MPO and other stakeholders to update the master plan for greenways and pathways, with a focus on connecting parks, civic space and destinations along Franklin Boulevard.

Create a parking master plan to for the downtown and transition areas east and west of the city center to support desired redevelopment and improve multimodal accessibility.

GOAL

Provide incentives and a regulatory framework to guide redevelopment along Franklin Boulevard in a manner that promotes economic growth, enhances the quality of the pedestrian environment and improves the physical appearance of the downtown and its adjacent transition areas.

OBJECTIVE

Establish one or more overlay planning district to guide the desired urban form, scale and character of redevelopment and infill development in the downtown and transition areas, with a funding mechanism to generate revenue for needed capital improvements described in the master plan.

POLICIES

Prepare design standards for specific urban design site plan elements that provide incentives and sufficient flexibility to attract desired future investment and achieve a diversity of land uses.

Develop an ordinance to address nonconforming signage throughout the Franklin Boulevard Corridor.

Conduct a survey of existing signage along the Franklin Boulevard Corridor to identify noncon-

forming signs and subsequently notify property owners of that status and a time period to bring their signs into compliance.

Create incentives for the provision of civic and usable open space with redevelopment along the corridor.

Provide density bonus tied to attainable, live-work housing programs in key development nodes along the Franklin Boulevard Corridor, but particularly within the downtown and transition areas.

Establish an incentive or matching program for undergrounding utilities to reduce visual clutter along the corridor.

Establish a tree planting program to help “green” the Franklin Boulevard corridor.

Funding Strategy

TAX INCREMENT FINANCING

Municipal governments are often limited in their financial capacity to undertake major redevelopment initiatives through their regular sources of revenue. General revenue from property taxes, permit fees, and the like are typically allocated toward a wide range of services and capital projects, all of which compete for scarce resources. Thus, most local governments undertaking significant revitalization efforts turn to grants and creative financing strategies to help leverage private sector investment. Creating public-public and public-private partnerships is typically a necessary step in raising funds for capital projects that can serve as a catalyst for additional investment toward redevelopment. Coming up with a local match for those grants and partnerships is often as big a challenge as reaching consensus on the preferred vision for redevelopment.

One possible mechanism for funding capital improvements along Franklin Boulevard is to establish a type of Community Redevelopment Agency or Urban Progress Zone, which enables a local government to target economic development incentives for a particular area. A common tool of such redevelopment districts is Tax Increment Financing (TIF). To support the recommendations of this master plan, the City of Gastonia should

investigate creating a TIF district for the downtown and transition areas immediately to the east and west. The TIF method would complement the proposed overlay zoning district and related design guidelines by providing a recurring revenue source that developers and property owners can count on as they consider making their own site improvements.

In 2004, North Carolina voters approved an amendment to the state constitution to allow TIF as a funding method for a “Development Financing District.” The new law authorized counties, cities and towns to issue “special development bonds” for public improvements that are needed for redevelopment. This form of financing has been used throughout the United States for many years.

Tax increment financing can be used for a wide variety of public projects, including street improvements, water and sewer utilities, transportation systems, parking facilities, neighborhood revitalization projects, and other public purposes. The only limitation is that the proceeds must be used for projects that enable, facilitate or benefit private development within the special district.

TIF bonds are repaid from the incremental property taxes resulting from the increased value of property within a specially designated development financing district. County residents and businesses that do not reside within the financing district are not taxed to pay debt service on the bonds; those that do reside within the district only pay their normal property taxes.

If property tax receipts from the district increase from a base established at the time the TIF bonds are issued, as a result of either a higher assessed value of property or higher tax rates, the incremental taxes will be used to make payments on the TIF bonds. Residents within a district cannot be targeted for increased taxes simply because TIF bonds are outstanding. Rather, any increase must be on a countywide or citywide basis and achieved through the normal tax assessment process.

If a county, town or city has an area that is blighted or appropriate for rehabilitation or the economic development of the community, it can create a “Development Financing District” encompassing the area. The district can vary in size, and the recommended overlay district presented elsewhere in this master plan would be sufficient. The area within the district cannot exceed five percent of the local government’s geographic area. In addition,

only 20 percent of the private development can be for retail purposes – unless the district encompasses a city’s central business district.

The City must produce a “Development Financing Plan” for the district that addresses the following:

- A description of the boundaries of the district;
- A description of the proposed development within the district, both public and private;
- The costs of the proposed public activities;
- The sources and amounts of funds to pay for the proposed public activities;
- The base valuation of the district;
- The projected incremental valuation of the district;
- The estimated duration of the district;
- A description of how the proposed development of the district, both public and private, will benefit the residents and business owners of the district in terms of jobs, affordable housing, or services;
- A description of the appropriate ameliorative activities that will be undertaken if the proposed projects have a negative impact on district residents, and
- A requirement that the owner of any new manufacturing facility included in the district will meet the minimum wage requirements.

Once the area of the special district is identified and the development plan prepared, the governmental unit must apply to the Local Government Commission (LGC) for approval of the bonds.

NEXT STEPS

This Implementation section suggests the actions that need to be taken in order to begin accomplishing the objectives that are recommended in this Corridor Plan. The next steps needed to achieve the vision articulated in this Corridor Study are:

1. Prepare zoning overlay districts to be ready to apply at the time that Gaston County's new Unified Development Ordinance is in place and ready for the City of Gastonia's consideration.
2. Prepare detailed, site-specific, Design Guidelines and encourage development/redevelopment, identify funding needs/resources for public improvements, and set priorities for public improvements.

Following community acceptance of this Corridor Study, an appropriate next step would be to schedule work sessions with the City Council to identify priorities and give direction to staff.

A final recommendation is that the City Council annually request a report from staff, each year for the next five years, regarding progress on the objectives articulated in this Plan.