TOWN CENTER

Origins of a Crossroads Community

Unlike other New England towns with iconic town centers, Burlington evolved as a dispersed agricultural community along the roads that connected it to surrounding communities. Clusters of homes, shops, and civic uses eventually merged at several crossroads that were part of its 19th century economy. With a scattered population of only about 600 people, according to the 1885 Census, the Town had two small villages. The village at the crossroads of Cambridge, Bedford and Center Street had the Post Office, and has become the Town Center area as it is recognized today.

As the Town grew, it began to assemble the components of a more traditional center. The Town gathered several parcels, removed buildings in the triangle framed by the three intersecting streets, and converted the area into a park. A Town Hall was added on its current site, facing the Common.
The former Simonds farm and its land adjacent to the Town Common was willed to the Town in 1905. The land was converted into the large park, Simonds Park, that begins at the Common and follows the hillside along Cambridge Street as it leads north from the Town Center.

Like so many other parts of Burlington, the conversion of the Town Center to its current form coincided with the suburban expansion era of the 1950s and 1960s. An updated Town Hall was created as part of the municipal campus that included the Library and Fire Station. Other business and residential uses eventually gathered around the Common, serving the growing suburban population.

Meanwhile, down the hill from the Common, retail and commercial development filled the large sites that were carved out of the former agricultural lands. The development pattern was distinctly auto-oriented, catering to the suburban clientele. Most of the stores, shops, restaurants, and consumer services gathered on flat parcels at the bottom of the Cambridge Street hill, about a half mile from the center of the Common. A small industrial and business park filled low land along Terry Avenue, also at the base of the hill.

Cambridge Street descended from the high point of the Common to the commercial clusters. While Simonds Park bordered Cambridge Street to the west, a cluster of retail and commercial uses came to occupy the hillside large parcels to the east.
The Center of Burlington Today

Burlington’s center is composed of geographically separated clusters of uses rather than the type of compact, traditional district that is a feature of other New England communities. There are two major clusters – the civic-oriented area at the top of the hill, and a mixed-use commercial district at the bottom of the hill.

Town Center Areas
THE COMMONS AREA

The Common and the Town’s municipal and civic campus dominate the high ground. The extended campus includes the Town Hall, Town Offices, the Public Library, Fire Station, Police Department, and Town recreation fields. A recent addition to this is the renovated Grand View Farm along the Center Street approach to the Common. The Town acquired this rare, intact 19th century connected farm complex and has converted into a meeting and event venue. The area remains a crossroads within the attractive landscaped park setting, accommodating significant traffic flows through the intersections of Cambridge, Bedford, and Center Streets.

A mixture of commercial uses, multi-family housing and the Post Office occupy sites along the approaches to the Common. Each of these developments has been designed and configured as stand-alone projects, with limited relationship to one another. The resulting development pattern results in limited foot traffic and activity along the street edges. However, there is a network of sidewalks along the main streets that include connecting sidewalks to the new uses that have been added to the Town Center during the last few years.
THE COMMERCIAL CENTER

The largest cluster of locally-serving businesses in town is located along the east side of Cambridge Street between Winn Street and Nelson Road. A traditional “Main Street” shopping district is composed along a pedestrian-oriented street, flanked on both sides by shops and commercial uses along the ground level. The development along Cambridge Street is not traditional, however, with shops, stores, and restaurants in Burlington’s retail and commercial center clustered on one side of the street. Although there are pockets of multi-family and commercial buildings on the western side of the Cambridge Street, this side of the street is bordered by single family neighborhoods. The central segments of Cambridge Street are also much wider than is typical of “Main Street” environments. These segments have been expanded to accommodate traffic that flows through this area, with broad intersections and left-hand turn channels to manage traffic.

The parcels and blocks bordering the east side of Cambridge Street are predominately occupied by convenience retailers, restaurants, and consumer-related services such as banks. Many of the sites have been developed as auto-oriented “strip commercial” developments, with multi-tenant buildings lining shared parking lots. Other sites have been developed as stand-alone retail establishments, each with their own parking areas. Although some sites provide landscaping and sidewalks linked to other parcels, most of the buildings and parking areas are isolated from one another.

The land along Terry Avenue composes a specialized commercial subarea. A variety of light industrial and commercial businesses occupy the area. They have been constructed on parcels that are filled by one story buildings and the parking and loading areas that serve them. Landscaped front yards and a sidewalk along the south side of Terry Avenue contribute to the overall appearance of the area.

CAMBRIDGE STREET AND THE HILL

Cambridge Street connects the commercial center and the Common on the hillside that separates them. Wooded edges of Simonds Park flank the western edge of this Cambridge Street segment. The upper portions of the Park have been graded and terraced to create an array of athletic fields and recreation facilities within an open landscape that extends along Church Lane, Bedford Street and towards the Common. The eastern flank of Cambridge Street is the focus of a significant mixed-use redevelopment. The development master plan includes a more attractive and pedestrian-friendly orientation towards Cambridge Street, with parking confined to a central court.
GEOGRAPHY, IDENTITY, AND SCALE

The center of Burlington is more geographically attenuated and dispersed than traditional town centers. Successful mixed-use town centers offer a compact arrangement of buildings, streets, and places that support convenient pedestrian connections. The land area devoted to a traditional town center is typically contained within an area described by a quarter-mile radius. The average person can reach any destination within such a center in about 10 minutes.

Simple diagrams are useful to convey the planning implications. When drawing a quarter-mile radius around the middle of town centers, like Concord or Lexington, the core of the civic and commercial areas typically fit within this scale and are then bordered by residential neighborhoods. Applying the same scale to Burlington reveals that there are two distinct areas that have the size of traditional, walkable centers – the area around the Common and the commercial center to the north. From one end to the other, these areas span nearly a mile. As a result, the identity of Burlington’s “town center” is somewhat amorphous, because it is too extended and dispersed to provide the type of compact, walkable district associated with conventional planning models.
LAND USE PATTERNS

The land use map for the areas in the center of the town shows the geographic characteristics and themes described in this Plan.

Single family neighborhoods and wetland corridors between them constitute the overall framework and bordering areas of the central districts. The Common, Simonds Park, and the Town Recreation Fields dominate the southern portions of the area. The land near the Common includes a substantial proportion of parcels dedicated to utility, institutional, and recreational uses; much of the land uses within the “commercial” classification are, in fact, municipal offices.

In contrast, the northerly portions of the land use map clearly depict the sale and extent of the commercial areas that flank Cambridge Street. Two enclaves of industrial uses stand out—along Terry and Grant Avenue.
ZONING

Most of the zoning in the central area is General Business (BG), Limited Business (BL), or General Industrial (IG). The Town has established special overlay zoning, however, to strengthen the mixed-use character and bring desirable new development in these areas. There are two different overlay zoning categories – the Central Business District (CBD) and the Civic Center (CC) District. Each category is related to specific geographic areas, which are indicated in the zoning diagram.

Among other purposes, the special Town Center zoning regulations were created to promote increased density where it is appropriate, encouraging infill development and reuse of obsolete properties using “Smart Growth” principles. The review and approval process includes site plan and design review for the projects using this overlay zoning mechanism. The zoning provides a method to transfer development rights under certain circumstances within the Town, particularly where buffers between town center uses and residential neighborhoods might be increased.

The overlay zones broaden the range of uses that can be approved relative to the underlying zoning through special permit processes or as of right. This includes an array of housing and hospitality uses, and nursing homes.
The dimensional standards provide for some increases in achievable densities relative to the underlying zoning, but the increases are relatively modest. The zoning allows maximum building heights ranging from 30 to 40 feet. It limits the maximum proportion of building area to ground area to between 33 1/3 percent to 40 percent. Based on a review of many of the sites and uses within the district, the overlay zoning may be an effective tool to manage the design and mix of uses on projects that replace outmoded buildings and sites. As a practical matter, however, the zoning regulations do not provide adequate incentive for most property owners to replace existing buildings and uses with new development. Most of the existing parcels are effectively “built out” with buildings and associated parking areas, and most have active tenancy and uses.

A Strategy for the Town Center

COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS AND ASPIRATIONS

As part of the planning process, participating community members expressed many aspirations about the town center areas. Many individuals indicated a desire to have additional shops, restaurants, neighborhood services, and cultural and civic destinations along the major streets. Some underscored the benefit of having a broad array of community-serving businesses, including some small, local operations, in contrast to the character and offerings of chain stores. Many also indicated support for various types of housing within, and at the periphery of, the business and civic centers.

In general, community participants stressed the desire to have a livelier area around the Town Common that would attract people. Participants recognized that the central areas lack the desirable design qualities of a walkable district that can be found in other communities.

The planning discussions came to recognize a basic dilemma: it is not at all clear exactly where the “Town Center” is located. The shapes that the central areas have taken do not conform to the simple, central models evidenced in other communities.
CREATING A CLEAR ORGANIZATION AND IDENTITY

This Master Plan recognizes that no path will create a single, unified town center. Burlington, in fact, has the unusual opportunity to have two very different “centers” which are connected, but distinct. Rather than attempt to unify such a large and disparate area, the Town will benefit from a strategy that clearly organizes – but differentiates – the separate areas through Town initiative and leadership.

The organization and identity of these areas should be composed of three parts:

- **The Commons** – This is the precinct of the Commons. It will be marked by its generous public parks and the municipal campus and civic facilities. It will be punctuated by commercial uses and housing that complement the character of this area.

- **The Center** – The Center will be a lively hub of locally oriented stores, services businesses and integral housing in a district that is walkable and a destination in its own right because of the range of activities it supports.

- **The Hill** – Cambridge Street should become an attractive and visually distinctive boulevard with generous landscaping, pedestrian paths, and bicycle routes with openings to the parkland and mixed use along its edges.
THE COMMONS

The Commons can be strengthened as a destination and district through continued enhancements to the Town Common and the civic buildings and places that it flanks. Rather than being a static and passive campus-like setting, the Town’s park and public facilities should incorporate special features that attract and support more activities that draw people to the area. By encouraging mixed-use reinvestment in existing properties around the perimeter of the Common, the district can present an increasingly active and value dimension.

- **The Civic Campus** – The Town should shape its facility planning and improvements in the Commons to continue to expand the range of activities that it supports for its citizens. The Town should continue to add pedestrian paths, lighting, and landscape amenities. Future building improvements should emphasize the design qualities that can be achieved. The Town could invite mixed-uses within its own land and premises, such as space for café or restaurant operations.

- **An Activated Common and Park** – Innovative design and programming can substantially enhance the Common as a destination. For example, looped walking paths are a major attraction if they are visible and well-designed; a new network of looped paths could be created linking the Common and Simonds Park. Innovative landscape improvements and public art programs can become distinctive components and attractions. Programs like the Farmer’s Market, now staged on the Common, could be emphasized and expanded.

- **Strengthened the Edges** – The Town should continue to use zoning and other tools to encourage reinvestment in the private commercial properties near the Commons. Services and shops that serve the community are highly desirable, and the design of sites and buildings should add visual and economic value to the area, as they occur.
THE CENTER

The Center should be incrementally improved through public and private investment. It should have an expanding range of uses within sites that are linked to one another within an environment designed for pedestrians. It must have adequate parking to support all the uses, but should, over time, have fewer uninterrupted asphalt fields of parking. Overall, attractive landscaping should mark the area.

Cambridge Street will remain as an arterial corridor, but will benefit from significant streetscape and landscape enhancements to calm traffic and emphasize pedestrian transitions. The internal street network in the district should become more village-scaled, with excellent streetscaping, lighting, and sidewalks.

- **A community-oriented village of shops, services, businesses, and housing** – The Center should be recognized town-wide as the primary location to find a broad array of convenience goods, groceries, banks, shops, and services oriented towards residents and their daily lives. For those who have an opportunity to live in housing within the Center or nearby, it should be a great place to walk, along streets and sidewalks that are geared to pedestrians.

- **A reshaped Center through incremental reinvestment** – The Center can be gradually reshaped each time there is a new development or alteration of existing buildings. The Town should actively support redevelopment through a clear review process, enhanced design guidelines, and zoning incentives that provide adequate economic benefit to accelerate the conversion of outmoded buildings and sites so that they are more supportive of the village center image that the community seeks.

- **The Terry Avenue area: innovation in uses and placemaking** – Like other communities that are finding new ways to use light industrial areas, Burlington can support innovative mixed-use of this area. The area can become more integrated into the life and economy of the Town Center if it offers opportunities for flexible use that can include retail sales, restaurants, or food service – like the brew pubs and tasting rooms that are proliferating in the region.

- **Streetscape improvements as a priority** – The Town can set the stage for reinvestment with a focused program of circulation and streetscape improvements to significantly enhance the appearance of the public realm in the Center.
THE HILL

The transition area between the Commons and the Center can be improved and attain its own identity as the connecting corridor. It should become a more attractive landscaped link that provides a positive experience for those driving, walking, and biking.

- **Street and streetscape improvements as a priority** – The Town should advance a Complete Streets re-design along Cambridge Street between its intersections with Olympia Way and Winn Street. The connection can be thought of as a boulevard with landscaping, lighting, and design characteristics that frame the roadway and sidewalks. Some widening will be needed to accomplish this multi-modal approach.

- **Modifying the park edges** – The edges of Simonds Park can be modified to provide openings, path connections and landscape features that would be readily visible from the street.

- **Marking transitions** – Streetscape design should help reinforce the transitions to and from the Commons and the Center, reinforcing the identity of each component.

Cambridge Street as it climbs the hill towards the Town Common can become an attractively landscaped “Complete Street” in the character of this illustration, providing for pedestrians and bicyclists as well as automobiles. Removing the overhead wiring will contribute to the quality of this corridor.
Recommendations

TC1. Prepare and implement a comprehensive open space and streetscape plan to articulate and enhance the character of the public realm for three components of the Town’s core: the Commons, the Center, and the Hill.

The Town can strengthen the identity, walkability, and value of its central districts by undertaking a comprehensively-planned and designed program of circulation, streetscape, and open space changes. These should address the existing street system, provide design concepts for enhancing the Town Common and Simonds Park, and set the stage for future changes in the municipal campus and its facilities. Once planned, the improvements can be implemented incrementally.

TC2. Undertake a specialized economic development evaluation of the Center and create incentives to support desirable redevelopment.

The existing development pattern on many of the parcels in the Center is not conducive to the type of walkable, compact, mixed-use district envisioned by the community and sought by current zoning. The Town should undertake a focused economic and development study to better understand the real estate conditions, market trends, and development capacity. With this information, the Town can update its zoning and provide other incentives to attract beneficial private sector redevelopment.

TC3. Create an identity and promotional program for the town center areas in collaboration with area businesses, institutions, and organizations.

The Town should convene the stakeholders and advance a coordinated identity and promotional program for the Commons, the Center, and the Hill. This program should inform the public realm designs and be coordinated with the Town’s initiatives on arts, culture, economic development and the creative economy, open space, and recreation.

TC4. Prepare enhanced design standards and guidelines for the Commons and the Center.

In concert with the economic development studies and identity program, the Town should enhance its existing design guidelines for development to support the private development review and approval process.

TC5. Promote additional uses that will specifically contribute to the vitality of the Commons and the municipal campus.

As the stewards of the Common and the managers of its own municipal campus, the Town should proactively seek and support uses, programs, and activities that will draw more people to the Commons.