

Chapter 4: Commercial Redevelopment Strategy

Commercial Redevelopment History

EMU is located largely on the north side of Cross Street, and small individual businesses are primarily on the south side. Up until the 1970's, the Cross Street commercial district was a thriving business area serving neighborhood residents, EMU students and faculty. A sporting goods store, soda shop, barbers, clothing stores, a bank, restaurants and a record store were active retail businesses. MDOT revised the traffic patterns in the district in the early 1970's, changing two-way traffic on Cross Street and Washtenaw to one-way. On-street parking was removed and loading zones eliminated. Bus stops were moved opposite the shops, and traffic speeds and volumes increased.

Zoning changes encouraged a competitive B2 Community Business District to develop at the north end of campus. Suburban expansion and strip development on Washtenaw west of the campus, along with the closing of old Ypsilanti High School, also contributed to a drop in business activity in the Cross Street Neighborhood. Over a period of years, shop owners relocated elsewhere, leaving the retail district to decline. Additionally, EMU opened several shops in the

McKenny Union to service student and visitor needs no longer met by the district.

Existing Commercial Conditions

Current conditions include vacant and underutilized storefronts interspersed with active shops and restaurants, although the overall activity level is low. A sample of business types includes restaurants, a family-owned drug store, small bookstore, coffee shop, liquor shops and an adult bookstore. A few home conversions to apartments have been recently renovated and are assets to the community. This commercial activity is scattered along Cross Street between Huron and Normal, but principally west of Perrin. The University has an administrative parking lot on the west side of Normal to Summit. EMU offices are in a converted drive-thru bank building at College Place.

EMU and its other partners are concerned with the poor condition of privately owned buildings on Cross Street and the impact the deteriorated area has on the university. EMU has ventured into the neighborhood to acquire derelict or

Commercial Key Findings:

- The existing commercial uses do not address community needs. There is an over-saturation of some commercial uses resulting in a strain for existing small businesses.
- Undesirable commercial uses are concentrated and lure undesirable patrons.
- There is no established merchants association.
- Commercial parking lots are hidden and lack lighting.
- No on-street parking.
- Service/dumpster areas are unattractive.
- Loading and delivery areas are located on Cross Street in the travel lanes.



Above: Looking east along Cross Street from the Water Tower



Above: Commercial Streetscape on Cross between Perrin and Ballard



Above: The rear view of many buildings is that of unkempt dumpsters and poorly organized parking areas

underutilized property. This has initiated a level of speculation that paralyzes private reinvestment. In the past, the city has been concerned about losing tax revenue. The university has been discouraged by the community to take property off the tax rolls. Also, business owners felt that internalizing student services such as fast food restaurants took away investment opportunities from the district.

Commercial parking is a significant problem. Businesses are hindered by the lack of both on-street and off-street parking. Nearby on-street parking along Ballard, College, Normal and Emmet is used primarily by students attending classes, deterring potential customers. A metered municipal lot located on Ballard is under-utilized because it is inconvenient and poorly lit. Off-street private parking behind the existing buildings is disorganized and unattractive. EMU is building a 260 space parking structure at the corner of Perrin and Cross whereby some portion of the deck may be used by the public to handle overflow. Limited time for parking and proper policing may also assist in resolving some issues.



Above: Expansive curb cuts and unscreened dumpsters

Unkempt dumpsters, poor lighting, insufficient and inappropriate signage, sloppy use of materials, poorly maintained back facades, windblown trash and debris and confusing access contribute to perceptions of an unwelcome and unsafe environment.

The lack of district and neighborhood signs is a considerable issue. Huron Street, Cross Street and Washtenaw Avenue are major thoroughfares linking Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor, yet the area lacks a gateway image announcing the Cross Street Neighborhood. Campus entry and directional signs welcoming students and visitors to EMU are not highly visible. The EMU Historic District (National Register, 1984) fronts on Cross Street, however, the designation sign is located at College Place and Forest Avenue. Historically significant buildings such as Pease Auditorium (National Register, 1984), Starkweather Hall (State Register, 1972 and National Register, 1977), Scherzer Hall (State Register, 1978) as well as Welch Hall and McKenny Union all are located on or clearly visible from Cross



Above: Corner of Cross and Perrin: the location of the future parking deck.

Street. This historic character should be emphasized as part of the image of the street.

The overall architectural quality of commercial buildings along Cross Street is not significant. Past façade renovations were not always appropriate or attractive; inexpensive materials were used in making repairs and deferred maintenance contributes to a tired, run-down appearance. It does not appear that any investment has been made in the commercial streetscape in some time. The success of this district in the future is likely to depend on a stronger partnership between the university, city, the Depot Town DDA and the business owners.

Commercial Redevelopment Strategies

Cross Street is transitioning from a linear commercial district to a new student commercial district. Recommendations focus revitalization efforts on a mixed-use residential character for Cross Street, with a relatively small area between



Above: The former Ypsilanti High School is now a successful senior housing development.

Summit and Perrin having a stronger commercial focus. The university can play a significant role by initiating development programs along its frontage. Any new university facilities should have external characteristics embracing the street. When feasible, these new destinations should be located at various points along Cross Street, to promote pedestrian movement and activate the street environment. Part of the problem facing Cross Street is the lack the feeling of “place”. Depot Town has a strong sense of place; merchants there successfully enhance and build their businesses around the theme. Cross Street needs to brand itself by borrowing select elements from Depot Town and the university to capitalize on its distinct urban character and setting. Street image is important, and infrastructure improvements to enhance walking connections to Depot Town are desirable. There are a number of activities happening in the district that can be used to help build momentum for improvements. The old high school has been converted into senior apartments, and new town homes are a feature of the Ypsilanti Fire Museum expansion, while the renovation of Pease



Figure 4: Existing EMU administrative parking lot

Auditorium draws people to the area. EMU is planning a parking expansion program that includes a new 260 space parking deck at Perrin and Cross, a 1031 space surface lot on the north side of campus and a 72 space surface lot. EMU is also assessing its current student union and may expand its facility to the north. People traveling along Cross and Washtenaw do not realize they are passing through a historic district, a neighborhood and a campus. These assets should be enhanced, celebrated and highlighted.

Many cities are reclaiming block frontages of old commercial corridors similar to Cross Street for mixed-use buildings featuring residential town homes and apartment buildings that add new residents, urban mix and twenty-four hour vibrancy. Cross Street has voids where buildings have been removed or are vacant. Infilling with new higher density residential uses should be encouraged.



Figure 5: Commercial/residential mixed use opportunity can occur on the EMU Administrative parking lot if the parking spaces can be relocated to a better location.

Specific sites are targets for redevelopment. A key location for the entire Cross Street Project Area is the point where Cross, Washtenaw and Summit converge. This site could provide immediate impact on the identity of Cross Street and the university by adding a new feature to the district. A new building designed with strong urban form would frame the space created by the water tower. EMU currently uses the site for administrative parking, but it could be used to develop a facility to meet growing demands, possibly a welcome center for new students and guests, if the parking spaces can be relocated to a better location. Other ideas include a mixed-use building similar to one illustrated in Figure 5. Retail tenants would occupy the first floor with storefronts facing Cross Street; multi-level parking is integrated in the building footprint, with apartments or university-related facilities on the floors above. This site offers the best opportunity for initiating the momentum to reinvent Cross Street.



Above: Opportunities exist for rear service areas, shared dumpster locations and consolidated parking.

Commercial Parking Strategy

EMU is making progress on plans for building additional parking decks and construction of a new facility will assist in relieving the parking stress in the area. Short-term actions to improve existing parking lots throughout the entire corridor would include recommendations for screening lots with appropriate landscaping and lighting. Parking lot entrances should be shifted to side streets to eliminate curb cuts on Cross Street, making vehicular and pedestrian traffic safer.

Off-street parking needs to be increased to support the commercial district. Adequate parking is essential to a healthy commercial district. Without parking and access control and management, the potential for commercial business activity along Cross Street, including new infill, is severely compromised. Property acquisition and building demolition will be necessary in the back of commercial frontage to create space for consolidated parking areas. Parking



Above: On-street parking on Perrin between Emmet and Cross

would be developed and maintained with proper landscape treatments, lighting, paving and service areas to be shared by businesses. In communities such as Rochester, Michigan, the Downtown Development Authority has been instrumental in purchasing properties backing onto commercial districts and developing new public parking areas.

An example of how this could happen for Cross Street is illustrated in Figure 6. A metered parking lot of sufficient size to accommodate the capacity of the commercial district is proposed for the area between Normal, Cross, College Place and Emmet. This allows for a more efficient parking layout and amenities like seating, lighting and landscaping. It requires cooperative agreement between the city and property owners.



Figure 6: Consolidated commercial parking and service areas can be located behind commercial development. A drop off is planned for Pease Auditorium.

The corner of Perrin and Cross Street will become an important intersection in the District. By closing College Place between Emmet and Washtenaw, Perrin

becomes a south gateway to the university and the point of reference for visitors traveling west on Cross Street. A drop off roundabout is planned for the front entrance to Pease Auditorium. Patrons would queue for drop off at Pease Auditorium and then circle into the new parking deck to be located at the Business and Finance Building.

Commercial Redevelopment
Policies, Goals and Objectives

The goals and actions for commercial development along Cross Street were developed in conjunction with community stakeholders.

Goal 1:

Improve the physical environment of the Cross Street Frontage.

Short Term Actions:

- Create design and development guidelines, to further define the Cross Street commercial area as a distinct, cohesive entity. The guidelines should encourage quality design principles in both new construction and renovation, addressing building facades, signs, lighting, landscaping and site layout.
- Coordinate with the Depot Town and Downtown DDA's and their efforts to revitalize their districts.
- Develop a program with the EMU College of Business school to develop marketing strategies and long-term business plans for local businesses.
- Consolidate trash receptacles and service areas.
- Design and implement a pedestrian-oriented streetscape plan that outlines enhancements and recommends funding sources /methods.
- Apply for grants for promoting art work related to the community's history and identity and special design elements to emphasize gateways to the neighborhood and important centers and landmarks.

Commercial Policy Statement:
Develop Cross Street as a successful and attractive commercial district that serves the needs of the Cross Street Neighborhood, the EMU campus and adjacent neighborhoods.

- Encourage pedestrian-friendly neighborhood retail to locate at various intersections creating active neighborhood focal points.

Long Term Actions:

- Promote medium and higher density residential uses in mixed-use developments on Cross Street in conjunction with redevelopment projects.
- Consider land assembly strategies to create larger redevelopment opportunities.

Goal 2:

Develop a commercial revitalization economic plan for Cross Street businesses.

Short Term Actions:

- Build a partnership between Cross Street businesses and the businesses located on EMU's campus.
- Develop a marketing and public relations strategy.
- Encourage Cross Street merchants to participate in community events such as the Heritage Festival and the Discover Downtown event.
- Promote the patronage of Cross Street businesses to the surrounding community through such means as:
 - featuring local business advertisements in newsletters;
 - providing links on the community and/or EMU web sites to business web sites; and
 - printing a local business directory as an insert to telephone books and EMU orientation kits.
- Showcase vacant buildings on the DDA website.
- Market Cross Street to retailers/businesses such as neighborhood retail, services, clothing stores and a variety of restaurant types (including outdoor cafes) that generate continuous pedestrian traffic over the course of the day and night.

- Encourage Cross Street businesses to utilize the services and programs provided by the Michigan Small Business Development Center located in Downtown Ypsilanti.
- Encourage Cross Street merchants to participate in the variety of programs, events and activities sponsored by the Depot Town DDA and the local Chamber of Commerce, thus creating a forum for communication and interaction among area businesses.

Long Term Actions:

- Promote commercial infill to maximize the use of existing retail space and to attempt to reduce the number of vacancies.
- Work with realtors and brokers to encourage the types of businesses that would benefit the residents and existing businesses.
- Work with various agencies that are involved with the development, such as:
 - City agencies;
 - Depot Town Downtown Development Authority;
 - Realtors and brokers; and
 - Developers

to promote development that complements the existing businesses, acts as a catalyst for further economic growth and is an identifier for the neighborhood.

