

Bristol, RI

Opportunity at the Waterfront



An Urban Land Institute
Technical Advisory Panel

Report

April 28, 2006

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ATTACHMENTS

Emerging Trends in Real Estate 2005 - ULI/PriceWaterhouseCoopers
Ten Principles for Rebuilding Neighborhood Retail – ULI

OVERVIEW

TAP

As part of ULI's (Urban Land Institute) Outreach committee the TAP or Technical Advisory Panel provides assistance to Towns and non profit organizations who have requested assistance in addressing their land use challenges.

ULI

ULI—the Urban Land Institute is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit research and education organization supported by its members. Founded in 1936, the institute now has more than 22,000 members worldwide representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines, working in private enterprise and public service.

As the preeminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information and experience among local, national and international industry leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places.

The mission of the Urban Land Institute is to provide responsible leadership in the use of land to enhance the total environment.

TAP Process

ULI's Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) for Bristol consists of a diverse group of professionals, representing several disciplines connected with land use. Members are selected on the basis of the specific request for the particular area being assisted.

Members of the Bristol TAP are:

Steven Heikin, Chair	Vice President	ICON architectre, inc.
Evan Mathews, Co-Chair	Director of Planning	Quonset Development Corporation
Geoff Grout	CEO	Quonset Development Corporation
Daniel St. Clair	Senior Vice President	Spaulding & Slye
Don Powers	President	Donald Powers Architects
Nancy Springett	Architect	ICON architecture, inc.
Eric LeClair	Analyst	Spaulding & Slye
Tracy Smith	District Coordinator	ULI Boston
Sara Struever	Developer	Puente Providence
Barry Pahlavi	Financial Advisor	Morgan Stanley
Bill Lawrence	President	CityScope, Inc.
Allen R. Kieslich	President	KDC-Kieslich Development Consultants

The process followed in this TAP by ULI was to review the TAP request and materials submitted initially by the town, with an additional information gathering session between the TAP chairman, co-chair and key town officials. A field review of the key geographic areas was also conducted. Additional TAP members were then added to the group so as to provide a match of ULI members with the Town request.

This information was disseminated to the TAP members in advance of the meeting date for their review. Additional research of demographic and regional retail sales information was collected by TAP members and other ULI members.

The day-long TAP session started with a field visit to the major site under discussion as well as other secondary locations. An information-gathering meeting was held in the Town Hall with presentations by the Bristol Redevelopment Agency, various abutters, town businesspersons, and other interested parties. The TAP team then conducted a closed door session to arrive at a consensus of potential suggestions addressing the future of the town's historic waterfront district. Directly following the Panel's internal working meeting, these findings and suggestions were discussed in an overview at a public presentation and question and answer session at Bristol Town Hall.

As a follow up, this written report will be given to the Bristol Redevelopment Agency, and if desired also presented in a public forum to discuss the details at a future meeting. ULI would also be pleased to provide continued assistance to the town in implementing the various courses of action.*

ULI and the TAP members would like to extend a sincere thanks to the citizens and public officials of Bristol who provided the excellent data, the time at multiple meetings, and coordinated the wonderful experience we had in Bristol. A special thanks goes to Peter Calvet, Chair of the Bristol Redevelopment Agency; Gerry Turbeville, and other staff and local officials for their professional and home town assistance.

Questions presented by Town

The Town of Bristol requested a Technical Assistance Panel to consider the opportunities and recommend strategies for several redevelopment challenges of the Bristol Historic Waterfront Area. Areas of particular concern:

1. What would be a viable and appropriate use for the building currently known as the Belvedere Hotel? What use or mix of uses is appropriate?
2. What is the potential for re-using the vast Robin Rug mill complex? What strategic actions should be considered? What is the appropriate role for the public and private sectors?
3. How can the town maintain the small-town feel and character that residents cherish when faced with increased tourism, growth and interested developers?
4. How can the town address several blighted properties in the historic district, preserving where necessary, and developing them into one overall redevelopment plan?

BRISTOL TAP HISTORY

The Town of Bristol is currently undergoing a legal process to determine a course of action for several blighted properties in the Bristol historic waterfront area. Several of these properties have owners that have been advised that they have several months to come up with a redevelopment plan for the properties, or the town would have the right to step in to seize them by eminent domain. Should this happen, the town is looking for ideas on how to develop the properties into a cohesive plan that would benefit local retailers, residents and employers of the area, while at the same time beautify and preserve the historic character and charm of this sea-side community with its beautiful harbor setting.

ULI TAP FINDINGS

The TAP attempts to address the Town's questions in context within an overall long term plan. These suggestions are specifically tied to the town's unique geographic and land use attributes.

These overall concepts will, if implemented, provide the impetus for:

- Greater connection and activity on Bristol's historic waterfront
- Job retention and sustainable economic growth
- Increased retail and service diversity
- Retention of Bristol's cultural identity
- Re-use of currently blighted buildings
- Additional commercial/retail construction
- Further development and creation of a destination community, tourism, recreation
- A community with a very special sense of place
- A sustainable increased real estate tax base and socio-economic mix to provide for public investment.

Above all, there is a desire for growth, but a resistance to change. These two points are counter-intuitive and harmful to effective and smart growth. Bristol is already a regional center, not becoming one. Change is already happening in Bristol and it is imperative that the town set an identity and clear vision for itself so that the dynamic which has already begun is continued in a way that promotes the town's long-term goals and objectives. The town would much prefer to add to the tax *base*, rather than increase the tax *rate*.

Like many communities, Bristol is concerned that new development would bring additional traffic and require additional parking. However, various studies have concluded that there is a false sense of a parking problem in Bristol. Adequate parking is available, but existing consumers and residents of the area are not amenable to walking any distance and are accustomed to parking within close proximity of their destination.

INITIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

ULI found many elements of the existing Sasaki plan, originally conceived in 1982, still relevant today. The suggestions by ULI utilize the core elements already in this prior plan and build from it. In addition:

Leadership is crucial to success of the overall plan and themes. There are currently several groups in town with similar missions, yet there is a lack of overall leadership in town to forward any of the agendas. Success lies in a town leader or champion, demonstrating consistent effort, aimed at an overall objective, over a long period of time, using multiple projects. This person or organization needs to have the strength and political willpower to succeed. Without this crucial component in place, effective forward movement cannot take place.

Flexibility is key. The overall plan creates a blueprint, and the town must provide flexibility within this framework to reflect a constantly changing economic and social environment. Different projects become more readily financed and feasible within certain economic climates and a plan must be not so tightly wound that it can not adapt to market factors. Opportunities for development must be seized when the timing and financing align.

Don't let the fear of "becoming Newport" hinder development plans. A common theme heard by the TAP panel was the fear that historic Bristol would take a turn toward becoming a tourist mecca – with the ultimate outcome being a "kitsch" and a "t-shirt shop" development. This fear is unfounded and the continuation and validation of this phobia takes away from the real issues of development.

Listen to the current retailers. Retailers in Bristol know their market. In the historic area, these retailers cater to an upscale user-type customer. The market climate has brought the Bristol historic area to this place and it should be embraced, rather than fought. Residents of most of Bristol do not look to the historic district retail for daily necessities, but rather travel to the Route 136 area and “big box” retailers that occupy this strip. The historic downtown has its own distinct clientele and building footprints that make “big box” retail virtually impossible. In reality, the historic district of Bristol is a very small portion (several blocks) of the entire town. It is okay that this small area appeal to a specific type of retailer and resident.

Embrace the waterfront and connect it to the historic district as much as possible. In order to capitalize on the unique natural attributes in Bristol, a physical and cultural link to the waterfront is essential to establish a sense of vibrancy and identity. While the current boardwalk is a good start, it is imperative that the water access be visible from several areas of Hope Street, and that a cohesive plan link buildings and open space to enhance liveliness and activity at the town’s waterfront. The Waterfront needs to be a public place and be seen as a destination for visitors, businesses, and residents.

This strategy could be further enhanced by expanding the marina facilities in the historic downtown area. Marina expansion in the downtown waterfront area could meet the demand for additional marina space, for which there is a long waiting list. This has resulted in a proposal to expand the existing marina in the northern reach of the harbor, which many believe would have adverse environmental consequences.

It is crucial that the waterfront be visible and accessible to all – not simply to those with waterfront real estate. In addition, the town needs to embrace its maritime history and continue to accommodate fishermen, as well as transient boaters. The ULI plan (see graphic) would link the entire waterfront by boardwalk, expand marina space, and enable the general public and visiting boaters access to developed restaurants, retail and recreation.

NEXT STEPS

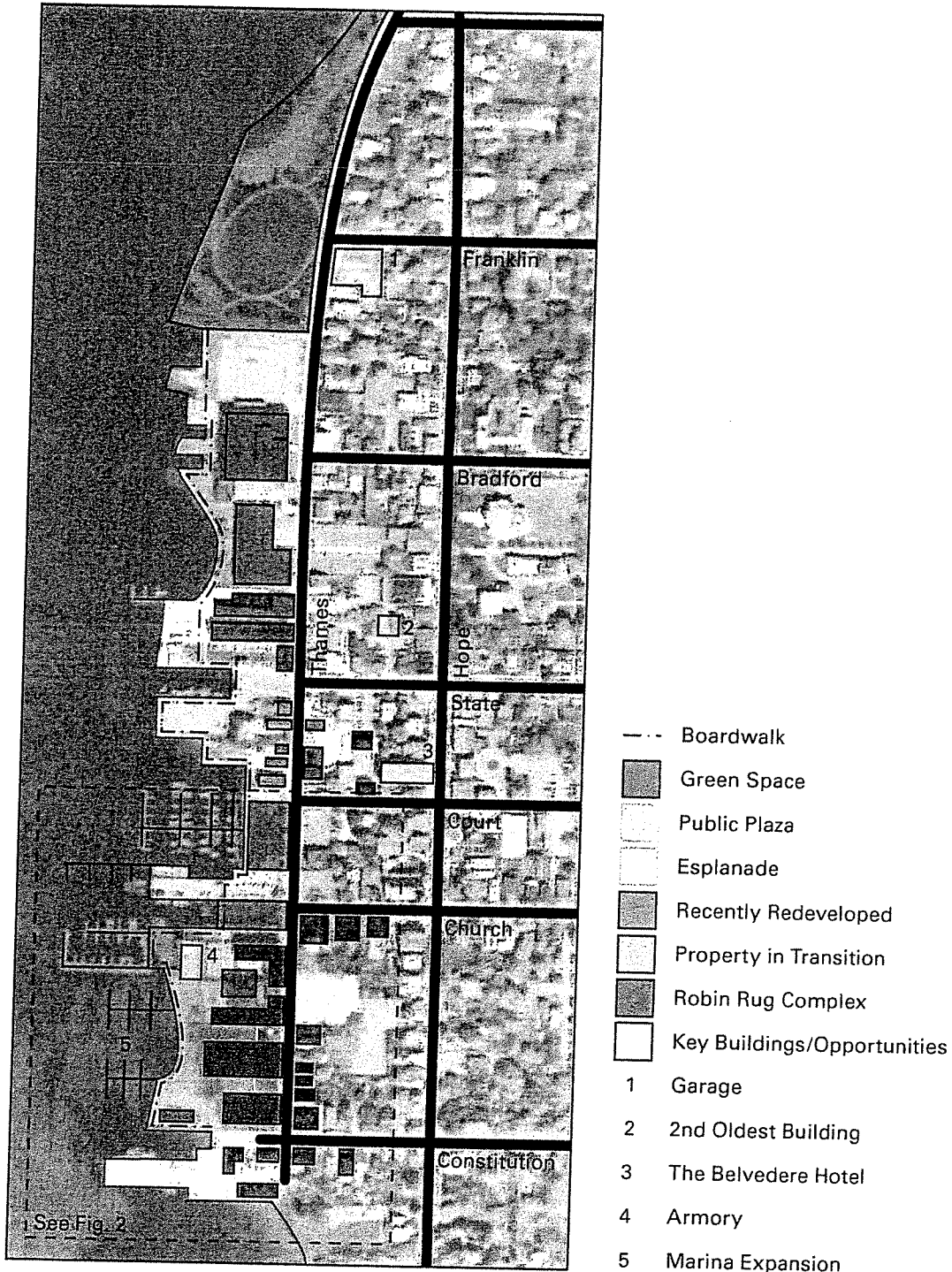
If the Bristol Redevelopment Agency is going to take the next step in this redevelopment process, it is essential that a market study be done to establish development costs and fundamentals for the historic district.

Incentives for developers need to be in place to broaden the interest in smart growth development in Bristol. These incentives could be ways to bridge the gap between what the town would like to see built and what developments are economically attractive and feasible to developers. These incentives could take the form of bond financing; town sponsored planning initiatives, zoning incentives and public/private partnerships.

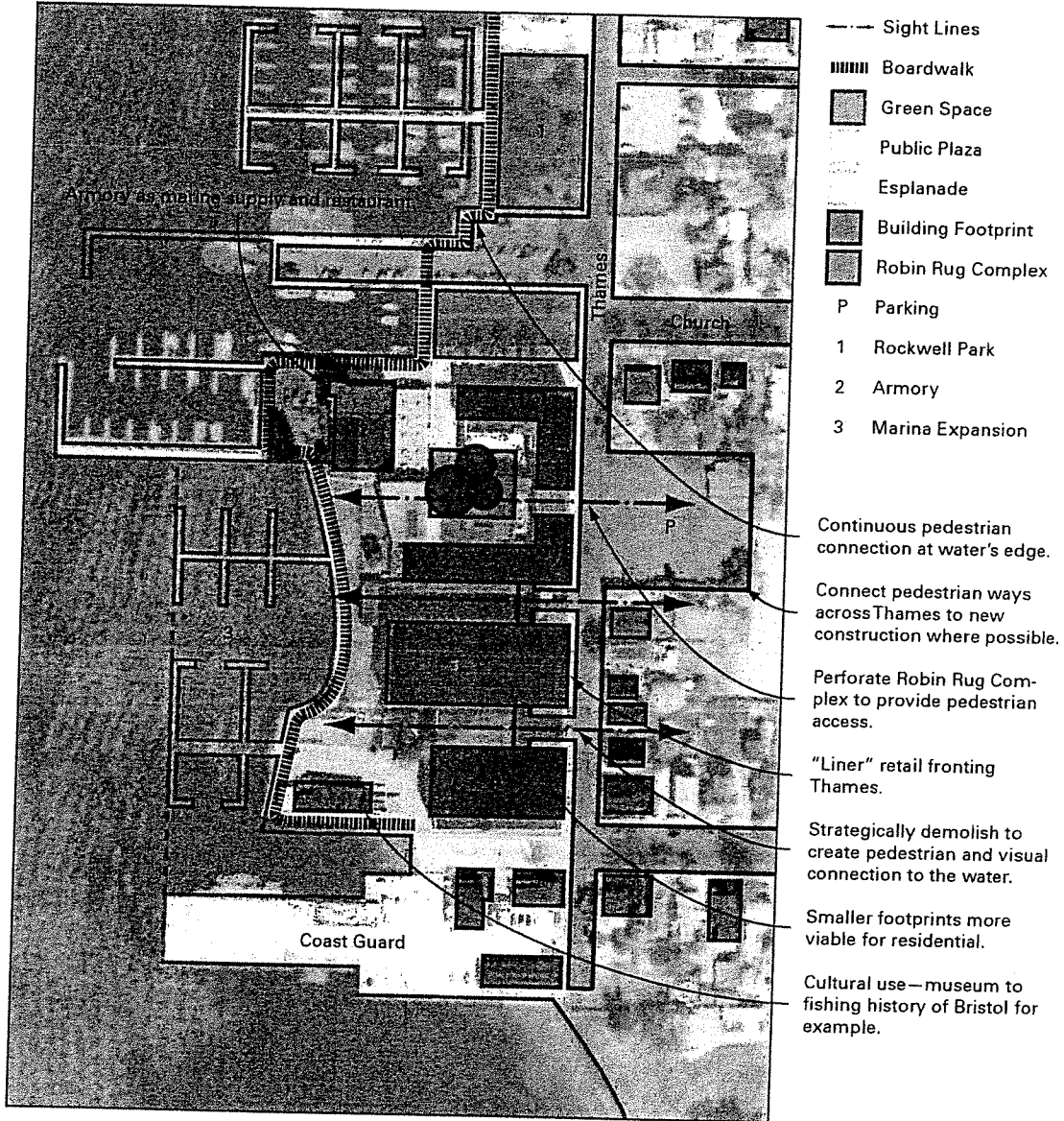
When selecting a development project, it is imperative to select a reputable and reliable developer, rather than solely the project proposed. It is the belief of the panel that developer incentives, combined with a program at the town level assisting developers through the zoning and permit process will not only increase the number of returned proposals, but dramatically improve the quality and feasibility of those projects brought to the forefront.

Further development in Bristol is a perfect opportunity for the town to create a marketing perspective, cultural brand and identity for the town. This is the opportunity for the town to embrace its history, multiple museums, maritime heritage, etc., and to market itself in a way that attracts visitors, business and employment opportunities for its residents.

REDEVELOPMENT DISTRICT



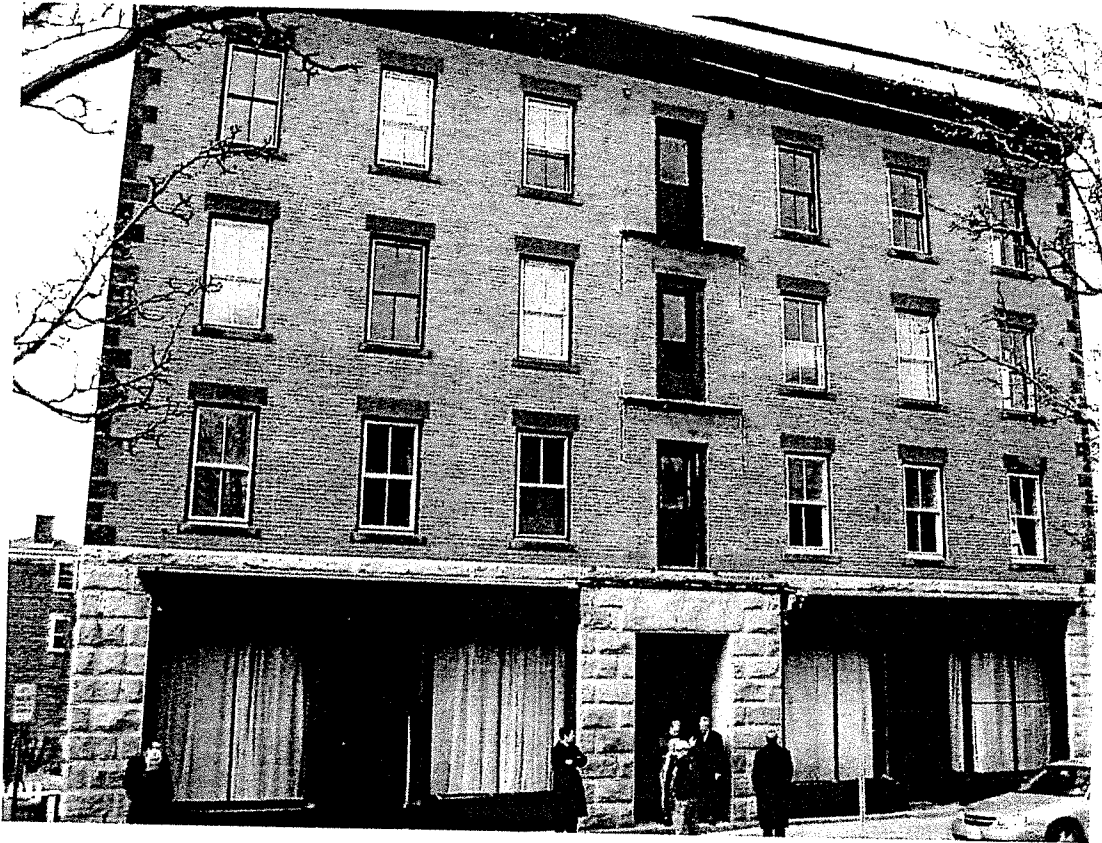
ROBIN RUG COMPLEX



PROPERTY SPECIFICS

The Belvedere Hotel

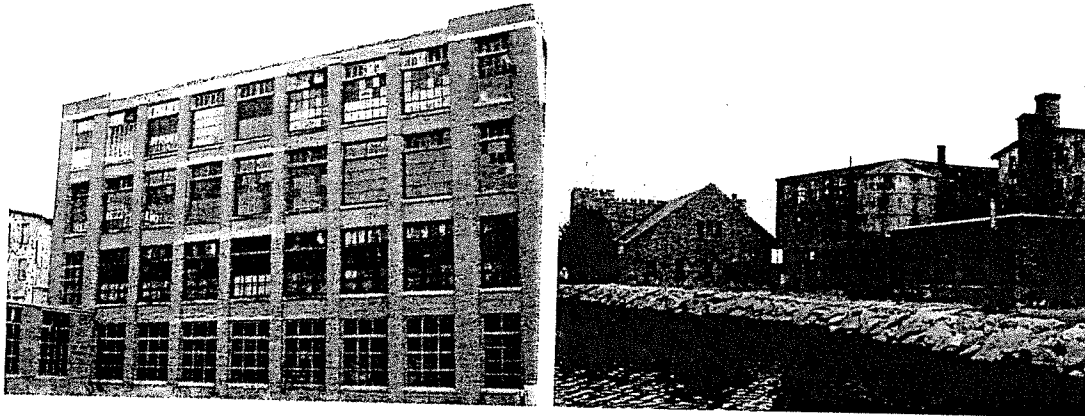
It was concluded that the proposed plan for condominiums, each with an average of 1500 sf, above retail uses on Hope Street (in the existing building, shown above) and fronting Thames Street (new construction) was viable and the best use of the building.



The Robin Rug Building Complex

The existing old Robin Rug Mill complex, with modification, has the potential to become one of the signature portions of a revitalized historic downtown and waterfront renaissance. This 400,000 sf property is currently for sale. As seen in the preceding graphic, selective demolition of portions of the building complex are necessary to increase light, enable a viable floor plate for condominiums, increase pedestrian and vehicular access to and through the site, and create sight lines through the site to the waterfront.

The Armory (seen to the left in the right-hand photo) is another key waterfront property. The historic granite building, which is owned by the State, is currently utilized – in fact, *under*-utilized – as a community center. If a less valuable site for a community center could be found, the Armory's historic character and unique location would be well-suited to a waterfront restaurant and marine chandlery serving an expanded marina and waterfront activity area.



The 'Second Oldest Building in Bristol'

It was the unanimous feeling of the panel that this property, due to its present condition, mid-block location amid the service and parking areas of other existing businesses, has little current value the overall redevelopment of the historic zone and should not be considered for any sort of historic preservation.



'Garage'

It is the belief of the TAP that this garage holds little significance and the site would be better used as parking for local employees during the week, and for visitors in the evenings and on weekends.



BRISTOL RESOURCES

Pedestrian Water Edge Boardwalk

Extending the water experience with a pedestrian boardwalk /walkway along the waterfront, with frequent connections to Thames Street, is essential and presents multiple benefits. Such a walkway provides the opportunity to connect all elements of present and future development around the waterfront while creating a special pedestrian sense of place. Extending the town theme with the use of lighting, railings, signage, construction materials, etc. heightens the experience. It also provides for retail, restaurant, recreational, and environmental interaction along its various sections.

Housing

Bristol's attractive location – roughly half way between Providence and Newport, along with its historical charm and waterfront, make it a good option for baby boomers and seasonal residents looking for waterfront access and recreation without the obligations of owning a single family home. The panel was pleased to see attractive developments already underway on the waterfront, but cautions that additional development would probably require more mixed-use (condo/hotel mix or residential-over-retail) to be considered viable. A mixed-use development focus would also provide a better economic development climate for the historic waterfront district.



Bristol, RI

ULI - BOSTON Technical Advisory Panel Report

A recent annual report done by ULI and PriceWaterhouseCoopers called "Emerging Trends in Real Estate 2005" indicates that Resort/Second Homes for Baby Boomers and Housing for Active Seniors are two major areas for development opportunity (The Best Bets for 2005, p.19).

In reference to this potential it states "At peak earning years with more disposable income, this graying tide focuses on *waterfront condominiums, mountain resort communities and relaxing getaway hideaways to enjoy and use. Best locations include... anywhere just within a two hour drive from a major metropolitan city.*" The report continues on Active Senior Housing: "The oldest boomers are barely 60... *They focus on golf and fishing...*" In the Housing Best Bets section of the report (p.61) it states in reference to baby boomer housing: "The leisure and second home market has legs. *Recreational areas with water views are golden.*" This presents Bristol with a unique opportunity.

Hospitality Housing

Presently, there is one major Inn in town; the Bristol Harbor Inn. In the course of the TAP, the panel listened to different arguments that the hospitality industry in Bristol is so seasonally driven that another Inn or hotel would take away business from the Bristol Harbor Inn, in effect rendering both lodging locations unable to sustain themselves during the quieter fall and winter seasons. At the same time, the panel was informed that Bristol is becoming such a wedding destination during the summer months that the Inn and other wedding destinations have had to turn away weddings simply because there is not enough lodging to house visiting guests.

It was the opinion of the TAP that the town could support additional hotel space, provided that it was partially subsidized with a condominium mix. This type of development is currently fairly common and more readily funded than a condo-only or hotel-only structure. The Robin Rug complex was noted as a potential site for this type of development.

Parking

Concerns with parking were mentioned in the central retail area. The TAP was informed that parking studies have been done that indicate that visitor and commercial parking problems are perceived and not actual. That said, it became clear that parking for employees of local businesses is lacking and that at least one major town employer is considering relocating his business in part to address this issue. It is important that the town address this issue by creative parking solutions, such as stickered parking for area business owners/employees and designated parking lots for the same so as not to discourage retail. In particular, one location, presently occupied by an unused garage (see photo) would be a good location for a shared-use parking lot, serving local employees during the workday and tourists, restaurant-goers and other visitors in the evenings and on weekend.

CONCLUSION

The Bristol TAP was originally conceived as an opportunity for ULI real estate and design professionals to evaluate the town's options regarding the long-awaited redevelopment of the Belvedere Hotel and adjacent properties. However, in preliminary discussions, the TAP panel and town officials recognized that there was a substantially broader agenda and opportunity to consider the Belvedere redevelopment in the context of a more integrated economic development strategy for the larger downtown waterfront and historic district. This larger opportunity became particularly clear when the extensive Robin Rug mill complex, with over 400,000 square feet of space in a number of historic waterfront structures, was put on the market.

The recommendations in this report therefore cover both land-side and water-side uses, ranging from specific recommendations for each of the initial group of key properties to a preliminary redevelopment strategy for the Robin Rug complex, both in the context of expanded pedestrian access to and along the town's beautiful waterfront. On the waterside, a recommendation to expand marina uses in the downtown harbor area – primarily by extending the marina along the Robin Rug property's substantial water frontage – could meet the extensive pent-up demand for both resident and visiting boaters' facilities, and perhaps offer an alternative to the controversial proposal to expand the existing marina at the head of the harbor.

All of these recommendations, the ULI Panel believes, can be implemented with little fear of Bristol losing the historic small town character and charm that the community currently possesses. There is little reason to believe that the scale of development proposed along Bristol's historic waterfront – much of it within existing historic properties and on small infill parcels – would result in Bristol's becoming "another Newport." Many of these recommendations remain consistent with the 1982 "Sasaki plan" for the waterfront, much of which has yet to be realized.

With careful planning and monitoring of future development, including both private sector development and enhancements to the public realm, Bristol can build on the historic charm and walkable pedestrian scale it already possesses, with a mix of development that is financially viable and recognizes the unique locational advantages of the historic downtown waterfront district.