

## CHAPTER 9

# Commercial & Employment Areas

## Introduction

The City's commercial and employment districts are its economic engines. They provide jobs for the citizens, as well as enhance property values and economic activity for the tax base. The City has long been the economic hub for the region, a position it would like to maintain far into the future. Yet the City is quickly running out of undeveloped land for new economic enterprises, and some of its existing commercial areas are experiencing decline. In order to continue to be a leader in the region and the state and to provide the jobs, products, and services needed by its citizens, the City must maintain a vibrant economy.

## Context & Recommendations

The City's commercial districts include retail, personal service, restaurant, lodging, and small office uses. Its employment districts include industrial, research and development, distribution, warehouse, and large office uses. The commercial districts meet the shopping, dining, lodging, and personal service needs of the citizens as well as provide jobs. The employment districts serve primarily to provide jobs. Both types of districts contribute to the tax base. The characteristics and development issues of commercial and employment districts are quite different, so they are discussed separately.

### *Commercial Districts*

The commercial districts of the City comprise about 1,330 acres or 4.2 percent of the City's total land area. The larger commercial districts include the Downtown, The Plaza area, River Ridge Mall, and the Wards Road Area. There are also numerous shopping centers and strip commercial areas that line the City's commercial corridors, including Timberlake Road, Candler's Mountain Road, Fort Avenue, Lakeside Drive, Old Forest Road, and scattered portions of Boonsboro Road, Campbell Avenue, Fifth Street, and Twelfth Street. The Plan Framework Map calls out these commercial areas as either corridor study areas or revitalization areas. The Future Land Use Map classifies them into neighborhood, community, and regional commercial categories, based on the size of their trade areas. The map also shows small office uses (medical, legal, real estate, and insurance offices, for example) that are included in commercial districts.

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While the City offers a significant amount of existing commercial space (3.2 million square feet), some of that space is vacant (approximately 317,000 square feet in March 2001). The Downtown, some of the older retail properties along Fifth Street, Twelfth Street, and Campbell Avenue, as well as portions of older shopping centers, such as The Plaza, suffer from retail vacancies. These vacancies are due to a number of factors, including the growth of suburban populations, and therefore retail demand, at the edges of the City and in surrounding counties, as well as changing tastes in retail. Prior to World War II, most of the City's retail was located in the Downtown and in small neighborhood corner stores. After WWII and with the rise of the automobile as the preferred mode of travel, retail trade expanded outward from the City center, first to shopping centers like The Plaza, then to strip commercial areas and smaller shopping centers along travel corridors. The 1970s saw the rise of the indoor mall, and the 1990s brought "big box" retailers and then in 2001, the "power center" at Wards Crossing. The move of shoppers toward "big box" retail has made some of the smaller shopping centers and the Downtown obsolete for meeting daily shopping needs, thus resulting in vacancies. Retail tastes change, however, and

there is growing evidence around the country of renewed interest in downtowns and the new "town center" retail concept similar to that planned for Wyndhurst.



Target at Ward's Crossing



River Ridge Mall



The Village Courts Shopping Center

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As described in Chapter 3, Planning Context, Lynchburg remains the region's retail hub, offering 93 percent of regional retail space. A market analysis performed in 2001 for this Comprehensive Plan (described in more detail in Chapter 3) indicated that over the next 20 years the region will generate a demand for 600,000 to 700,000 square feet of new retail space. The City should be able to capture a significant portion of this retail space if it can provide at least two major sites accommodating 100,000 to 300,000 square feet each. Possible greenfield sites that have been identified on the Future Land Use Map include the McConville Farm property at the intersection of Old Forest Road and Lakeside Drive and the Cheese Creek Mixed Use Development Area located west of the Expressway and south of Boonsboro Road. The Downtown and the Plaza/Midtown Revitalization area offer opportunities for rehabilitation and redevelopment of existing space to meet this future retail demand.

Lodging facilities also come under the commercial category. They serve the traveling public, as well as clients of local businesses and other visitors. Demand analyses indicate a need for approximately 250 new rooms over the next twenty years. Space for one or more hotels should be provided at locations convenient to major transportation through-routes or to employment districts.

**Issues for the City's commercial districts that need to be addressed include:**

- Appropriate incentives for the private sector to fill vacant retail space and to rehabilitate and reuse obsolete space;
- Maintenance of adequate commercial activity in City's inner circle of neighborhoods to meet daily shopping needs;
- Provision of opportunities for retail and hotel expansion to meet future regional demand;
- Expansion of the City's commercial base while limiting the potential environmental and community impacts of commercial development; and
- Improvement of the design quality of development and redevelopment in commercial districts as recommended in Chapter 6, Design, Character & Quality.

**Employment Districts**

Employment districts offer both industrial and large office space. Land currently devoted to employment uses makes up about 5 percent of the City's land area or 1,590 acres. Large employment areas in the City include the Downtown, First Lynchburg Industrial Park, Graves Mill Business/Technology Area, and Lynchpin Center Business/Technology Area. These areas are shown on the Plan Framework Map. The Future Land Use Map divides employment uses into three categories: the Downtown (traditional mixed use and office core), Employment 1 (large office, research and development, light manufacturing, and "flex" space), and Employment 2 (heavy manufacturing, light manufacturing, research and development, and large office space).

Demand analyses indicate that employment growth in the region will be strong in the next 20 years. The City can expect to capture about 1.5 million square feet

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of industrial uses, about 200,000 square feet of research and development uses, and about 720,000 square feet of office uses during this period. A significant problem for the City is finding sufficient land to accommodate these employment uses. If undeveloped raw land is sought, the industrial and research and development space demand would require about 195 acres. About 35 acres would be needed for the office space. It will be difficult to find sufficient suitable undeveloped land in the City's employment districts due to the physical characteristics of portions of those districts; steep slopes and floodplains are the primary development constraints. Revitalization of existing older developed areas, such as the Downtown, will be needed to accommodate some of the office and technology uses. Redevelopment of some of the City's vacant shopping centers might also hold promise for such uses, freeing up raw land for large manufacturing enterprises.

**Issues for the City's employment districts and uses include:**

- Provision of sufficient undeveloped land for employment uses;
- Appropriate incentives for the private sector to rehabilitate and reuse Downtown space for office and technology uses;
- Consideration of the conversion of some vacant retail space to employment uses;
- Efficient use of land in the City's industrial parks;
- Expanding the City's employment base while limiting potential environmental and community impacts of industrial and office development;
- Industrial Zoning District provisions that are obsolete and do not address current trends in industrial development, as discussed in Chapter 5, Citywide Land Use & Development; and
- Improvement of the design quality of development and redevelopment in employment districts as recommended in Chapter 6, Design, Character & Quality.

It should be noted that the City has recognized that the future expansion of commercial and employment activity will depend to some extent on the revitalization and rehabilitation of the City's older commercial and industrial areas. To this end the City has created Enterprise Zones and Technology Zones that provide tax abatements and other incentives for businesses locating within them. The Downtown Enterprise/Technology Zone includes the City's Central Business District, the Lower Basin, the Fifth Street Corridor, the surrounding neighborhoods, and industrially zoned land between Carroll and Campbell Avenues. Another Enterprise/Technology Zone covers the First Lynchpin Industrial Park, which offers undeveloped land for new business and technology enterprises.



**CentraHealth (left) and GE Financial Assurance (right): Two of Lynchburg's major employers.**

## Goals, Objectives & Strategies

### **Goal 1. Promote the improvement and revitalization of commercial corridors and districts.**

*Note: Objectives addressing commercial area revitalization and corridor improvements and needed changes to the Zoning Ordinance are included in Chapter 5, Citywide Land Use & Development. Objectives addressing site and building design standards are included in Chapter 6, Design, Character and Quality.*

**Objective 1.A. Neighborhood-Oriented Commercial Uses.** Support the revitalization of existing and development of new neighborhood-oriented mixed use districts in locations where such uses will promote neighborhood stabilization and improvement.

- 1) Study the appropriateness of creating a Traditional Neighborhood Commercial Overlay District for application along older mixed use streets in the City where more suburban development standards would not be appropriate and where the City wishes to encourage a mix of residential and small scale commercial development. [Such a zone could be applied along Campbell Avenue, 5th Street and 12th Street, and along portions of Lower Rivermont and Fort Avenue to encourage renovation of existing commercial and residential uses and the development of appropriately scaled, neighborhood uses rather than automobile-oriented commercial uses.]
- 2) Conduct a market study to identify neighborhoods that are underserved by neighborhood-oriented uses such as a community market, branch bank, dry cleaner, and coffee shop.
- 3) Where market support exists, work in collaboration with residents to identify potential locations for neighborhood-oriented uses.
- 4) Identify appropriate conditions for neighborhood-oriented mixed use and commercial uses to ensure compatibility with surroundings.
- 5) Market the City's Downtown Enterprise Zone to encourage appropriate neighborhood retail development.

**Objective 1.B. Large-Scale Retail.** Identify ways to maximize the benefits and minimize the negative impacts of large-scale "big box" commercial development.

- 1) Identify sites appropriate for large-scale, "big box" retail development and prepare design guidelines to ensure safety, accessibility, and compatibility with surrounding uses, while minimizing negative environmental and visual impacts.
- 2) To minimize the negative visual impacts of blank walls, encourage "big box" stores to be wrapped with active retail and services uses.
- 3) Explore strategies to encourage parcel consolidation and discourage "stand alone" stores or isolated stores in areas appropriate for large-scale retail and mixed use development.
- 4) Consider restricting uses that do not promote activity, for example, storage facilities, to areas outside commercial nodes or centers.
- 5) Promote alternatives to "big box" retail, such as pedestrian-oriented, "main street" style "town centers," especially in planned mixed use districts as described in Chapter 5, Citywide Land Use & Development.

**Objective 1.C. Interchange Development.** Ensure that highway-oriented commercial development is accessible, aesthetically pleasing, and has minimal impacts on adjacent commercial and residential areas.

- 1) Promote appropriate locations for highway-oriented commercial development along US routes 460, 29, and 501 as identified on the Future Land Use Map and prepare design standards and guidelines to ensure sensitive design.

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**Objective 1.D. Community-Based Initiatives.** Support community-based efforts to improve conditions in commercial areas.

- 1) Support the creation and strengthening of corridor- or district-based business organizations.
- 2) Explore avenues for the provision of design assistance to businesses for façade improvements, parking lot design and landscaping, improved signage, and access management.
- 3) Encourage coordinated marketing of districts with joint marketing and advertising efforts, special events, promotions, and contests, among others.

**Objective 1.E. Safety and Security.** Expand efforts to coordinate public safety programs with commercial area improvement efforts.

- 1) Require as part of the development review process the consideration of potential effects on emergency response times.
- 2) Encourage commercial area design according to the principles of CPTED, Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, as discussed in Chapter 6, Design, Character & Quality.
- 3) Continue to use the City's community policing program to promote community involvement in keeping neighborhood commercial areas safe.
- 4) Expand support for commercial area neighborhood watch programs.

**Goal 2. Encourage development that maximizes the use of limited land resources, while being sensitive to cultural and natural resources and surrounding land uses.**

**Objective 2.A. Conservation of Development Sites.** Identify undeveloped areas of the City and surrounding counties that would be suitable for large-scale industrial development, and determine when and how to protect these areas from conversion to small-scale uses.

- 1) Review and update the list of uses permitted under the City's zoning ordinance to reflect changes in the type, scale, and use characteristics of emerging industries.
- 2) Explore the feasibility of entering into joint-development agreements with surrounding jurisdictions to develop sites for business and industrial uses.
- 3) Consider increasing minimum lot size standards to encourage parcel consolidation and to discourage the underutilization of sites potentially available for development.
- 4) Create new zoning categories that recognize and accommodate the needs of "clean" industry and high technology enterprises that generate minimal impacts.
- 5) In areas designated for industrial development, limit commercial uses to those providing goods and services to the industries and to their employees.

**Objective 2.B. Redevelopment.** Identify areas of the City with the potential, through redevelopment, to support the expansion of existing and the attraction of new industrial and office development.

- 1) The City's Industrial Development Authority and Redevelopment and Housing Authority should explore the feasibility of converting vacant, multi-story industrial/commercial buildings to office or mixed use.
- 2) Identify residential and commercial areas of the City that are in rapid states of decline and consider redevelopment to support business and industrial development, if such redevelopment would be compatible with adjacent areas, environmentally appropriate for business development, and supported by adequate infrastructure.
- 3) Use the Downtown & Riverfront Master Plan 2000 to promote revitalization of the Downtown for office and other uses.

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**Objective 2.C. Reuse of Existing Structures.** Develop and maintain an inventory of vacant commercial and retail structures. Encourage reuse of those structures as a first preference before new construction is considered.

**Objective 2.D. Incentives and Maximization.** Ensure that City policies and regulations encourage the development of appropriate sites for industry and business.

- 1) Identify site and building design code provisions that limit the maximization of development potential on industrial sites and determine if code changes would encourage maximization without having a negative affect on sensitive natural and cultural resources and surrounding land uses.
- 2) To maximize the use of limited land resources, explore the feasibility of reducing required buffer yards between similar uses.

**Objective 2.E. Coordination and Impact Minimization.** Coordinate city planning efforts with economic development initiatives to minimize potential conflicts.

- 1) Address truck traffic, noise, odor, circulation, access, housing market, environmental impacts, and any other impacts.
- 2) Consider developing a resident's guide that outlines the fundamentals of industrial development to be expected in certain areas (e.g., airport noise).

**Objective 2.F. Infill/Maximization.** Determine the potential effectiveness of offering incentives for projects in areas identified as appropriate for infill development or redevelopment.

- 1) Continue to promote the City's Enterprise Zones and develop a campaign to promote the City's new Technology Zones.
- 2) Identify other zones or districts in the City where incentives may be required to promote infill development or redevelopment and explore providing incentives in the form of tax relief, density bonuses, or alternative development standards.



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