

CITY OF UTICA MASTER PLAN  
ADVISORY COMMITTEE

# FINAL REPORT

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**VISION 2016 – 2021: A FIVE YEAR  
RETROSPECTIVE ON THE CURRENT  
MASTER PLAN**

ISSUED TO THE COMMON COUNCIL &  
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

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RESPECTFULLY  
SUBMITTED: JUNE 2016

## CHAIR'S REMARKS

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Much has changed since the original Master Plan for the City of Utica was presented and accepted in 2011. As the political stewards of our planning future, the Common Council appointed our committee through legislation to begin its work in 2014 and we are now concluding our term of service with this final report. As such, it will be our last act as a committee.

I want to thank each and every member of our committee, both past and present, for two and a half years of really excellent work. Your dedication to the task, through some difficult moments, was something I admired and appreciated. We can be proud of this end-product of our effort. The committee members who remained through until this final report include in alphabetical order: Jim Busby, Steve Cox, JK Hage, Robert Heins, Lucretia Hunt, Lynne Mishalanie, Anthony Salerno, and Ron Vincent.

We also wish to note the hard work and insight that original members of the Master Planning Committee clearly demonstrated in the high quality work they performed at the inception of the process to develop the original report. It was inclusive and clearly comprehensive. And we thank various members of the Common Council for their support.

As a model, the committee has sought to have the same effect: we reached out extensively during our term to gather input and ideas from the citizens of this fine city that we were tasked with representing. Our goal was to hover above the politics of economic development and planning issues which naturally arise over time. Rather, we preferred to offer both a retrospective on what has worked or not since the original plan was conceived and our recommendations on how to proceed forward with it for another five years.

We hope in this final report that every reader finds comfort that they were listened to and acknowledged even those with whom we may have disagreed! While we did not agree with every perspective or viewpoint that was provided, we labored with integrity to be representative of them in our final report except where we felt it inappropriate to our scope.

Our intention is to provide narrative – a story if you like – about how our urban future should unfold to embrace the obvious energy and enthusiasm which is now emerging around our community's future. This points to an improving future and we look forward to watching this unfold over time. We hope in some small measure, this report will have the positive impact we all strove to create in tabling it at this important juncture in co-creating that future.

Submitted on behalf of the committee,

*James Norrie*

Dr. James Norrie, Chair

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report builds on the effort and success of the original master plan, circa 2011. With the passage of time, it seemed clear that an effort to update the plan was timely and appropriate. As a result, a citizens' master planning advisory committee was formed and has completed its work now tabled herein.

We applaud the City of Utica for making progress towards its own revitalization and economic development. As a committee we commend the Mayor and Common Council alike for striving to make our community a better place to live. We accept that seizing opportunity is vitally important to our future and we embrace the value of new developments, even where this may challenge us to change our perspective or outlook on our city's past or future.

This report therefore strives to be an authentic and fair record of where progress on the goals of the original master plan were accomplished; but accepting with good reason, where there was not. We restricted this to themes and areas identified and confirmed by citizens in our various consultations, with occasion direct input from committee members with first-hand knowledge of these matters. As a result of this method, we cannot claim this as a summary of all progress made necessarily; but rather that which was visible and either notable or noted by citizens as having occurred. We feel this is an appropriate measure of our collective progress as a community: if the master planning process is to be useful, its impact and results should be visible to all.

However, this report also strikes a deliberate cautionary tone which invites us all to scrutinize our actions in light of the future we wish for ourselves: we see it as vital that we begin as a group to realize we have turned a corner and that coherence in planning as we move forward into the future will have its own positive and just rewards. At the core of our report we therefore make 10 distinct recommendations to ensure we have the planning intention and expertise in place to be more transparent and effective in the future. We also raise the alarm of civic responsibility for rehabilitation of land for its known lead risk before approving developments. We urge the Common Council, on the collective behalf of all citizens, to carefully consider ensuring progress towards more appropriate form-based building codes that respect both existing law and enable contemporary planning practices. And we urge caution to ensure that economic opportunism does not replace long-term vision and aspirations to create a great community in which to live, work and play.

At its conclusion, we urge all concerned citizens of both the City of Utica and its environs to become aware of the process used to generate this report, its conclusions and recommendations, and the position it takes on the increasing importance of planning acumen and coherence in our future. It is our hope that the report will inspire action, engagement and the political will necessary to ensure that the effort put into its creation will be borne out in future impacts on what we choose to do and not to do as a city in transition.

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## OUR PROCESS

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We were created through legislation and began our Service in December, 2014. Our committee was appointed through Common Council with each member at the time permitted to nominate two members to the committee. We then elected within ourselves a Chair and began our work in earnest. As a body with no legislative authority, and no connection to the ongoing planning function of the city, we deliberately have intended to rise above taking any political position on any project under consideration. The enabling legislation defines a very clear and narrow scope.

The starting point was an original appendix in the 2011 Master Plan. This came to be known as “the matrix” and it consisted of a summary reporting of the detailed goals for each original domain of the Master Plan, of which there were five as follows:

Goal 1 – Housing & Neighborhood Development

Goal 2 – Downtown Development

Goal 3 – Parks & Recreation; Arts & Culture; and Historic Preservation

Goal 4 – Business & Technology Development

Goal 5 – Infrastructure & Waterfront Development

Our initial assessment of due process was to agree to form sub-committees to address each of these five goals and to simply “update” them in terms of what has and has not occurred from the original Master Plan’s vision and goals. This was a seemingly easy approach and we felt would soundly inform where the City of Utica stood today in its efforts to conform to the Master Plan.

Unfortunately, the complexity and enormity of the changes which have occurred around us including much unanticipated good news around development (Marcy-Nano; new regional hospital; downtown revitalization; etc.) rendered this an impractical, if not impossible task ultimately. Despite our initial efforts to locate the proper forms from which to draw updates on what had occurred, we could not reconcile this approach to the scope and breadth of changes that have occurred.

On the other hand, we were clear in not wanting to see ourselves as a committee tasked with creating a new Master Plan for that was neither our original charge nor appropriate in terms of cost and time to accomplish. Nor did we wish anyone to see us as having any particular role in endorsing one project or development approach over another one for that authority is vested in the planning function of the city itself under the control of its executive and legislative branches. The result was a quandary of both purpose and process that required a redefinition of our role.

This occurred near the end of our appointed term and, with the concurrence of Common Council, we were extended in both membership and mandate for an additional six months in January, 2016. The result was a clear plan to engage with the community through

a series of “input sessions”, announced and widely promoted, at which the committee sought the direct input of citizens into what they saw as the results of compliance or non-compliance with the original Master Plan. We sought to solicit and record both the positive accomplishments and the negative observations about what had and had not been accomplished to date. We also used these forums, and the presentations and submissions to the committee that accompanied them, to solidify our advice about how to change our conduct as a community going forward to embrace all the positive changes that have occurred, and are in fact as we speak still occurring, but in a way that is respectful and appropriate under the original vision of the 2011 Master Plan.

We believe we have accomplished that task and that this report is indicative of a highly consultative process that was transparent and open. To that end, and in keeping with our committee’s desire to be transparent, we have included in Appendix A of this report a list of the citizens who attended each of our two community input sessions, each held on a Saturday to promote attendance and hosted by Utica College on neutral territory deliberately.

To further promote transparency, we had notes taken by an external recording secretary (Professor Candace Grant who serves with the Chair at Utica College) who we all wish to thank for her tireless hours of service in recording carefully and completely the proceedings of these two sessions. If a reader is interested in the verbatim record of those two sessions, they have been attached in summary form, by both domain and sub-goal, as Appendix B of this report.

The committee encouraged everyone to attend: community members, residents, civic leaders and politicians, business-owners, and others. While attendance was relatively low, the resulting dialogue was rich and very helpful to the committee in issuing its final report. In addition, individual community members attended other forums (neighborhood watch; churches and associations; or had individual contact with interested citizens) in order to solicit informal feedback on the many issues we were examining and considering in the formation of this report.

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## OVER-ARCHING CONCLUSIONS & GLOBAL RECOMMENDATIONS

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There were a number of over-arching themes which emerged during our work as a committee and which seemed representative of the input we received about the current Master Plan. As a result, this initial part of the report departs from our intention of addressing and updating the original intent of the Master Plan to consider how new developments or gaps in process in the original conception of the plan may be addressed to strengthen its responsiveness to our present environment. In so doing, we hope to make the Master Plan more durable and to improve its opportunity to be a living guide to the city's future development efforts rather than an archaic or iconic effort of the past.

In offering these suggestions to both the Common Council and to the Office of the Mayor, we hope they will find useful insight on some immediate actions plans, and next steps that may be undertaken as we march forward towards the city's future. However, we want to stress that ignoring these initial recommendations may imperil the future of economic development and planning in the city because what is clear is that **some elements of the original Master Plan are now outdated.**

In making this clear statement we have two possible outcomes to pursue as a community: either we determine that this renders almost all of the original Master Plan as being outdated in which case we would immediately recommend that the City of Utica contemplate, convene, and revise the original Master Plan as soon as is practically possible. In the alternate, our committee which does not share the view that the entire Master Plan is outdated or invalidated by these changes, offers the compromise solution of how to **update** core assumptions to reflect the present reality in which case we believe the current Master Plan can easily guide us into the future, with minimal cost and effort, for another five years: hence the title of our report as Vision 2016 – 2021.

In either event, we feel it incumbent upon us as a committee to stress that the continuing disregard for the Master Plan as a **guide to future developments** is both obvious and dangerous. Planning mistakes are easy to make and almost impossible to rectify. In all of our work we have detected an underlying frustration that what may seemingly be guiding development currently is opportunity: are we perhaps being more tactical than strategic presently? If so, this eventually risks the integrity of long-term planning outcomes and compliance with an urban vision, the very essence of which a master plan is supposed to both promote and protect against as an outcome.

Being opportunistic and embracing new development opportunities accordingly is an excellent and important instinct that we applaud. But doing so unbridled by any underpinnings of strategy would be rampant disregard for what the Master Plan intended: planned growth around distinct themed districts. Thus an over-arching conclusion of the 10 recommendations which follow is for the City of Utica to update our current thinking not only about the Master Plan itself; but to also consider the opportunity for this same plan to remain a **firm** guide to future developments so as to ensure that the exploitation of opportunity is done in accordance with a long-term strategy that maps to our collective community aspirations accordingly.

**RECOMMENDATION #1: USE DATA-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING AS A PRINCIPLE**

Our observations of the original Master Plan is that it may lack the substantiation through the incorporation of hard data to support its conclusions (inventories of current assets; open parcels for development; transparency of the extent of current public ownership of non-taxable parcels; accurate and up-to-date demographics and so on).

To address this, we urge the planning department at the city be tasked with updating and disclosing reliable data sources on **pre-agreed** set of data indicators that would be kept current and made available to all stakeholders when considering future planning and economic development proposals. Having an agreed-to set of facts at the disposal of the Mayor's Office, Common Council and, obviously publicly to developers and citizens, ensures that future decisions are processed through a lens of data-driven decision-making that is transparent and clear rather than opaque.

We agree as a committee that the process of going through and determining together what data sources are even required to be considered in future planning and economic development decisions has incredible merit for its own sake and would contribute to more comprehensive consideration of data sources that can support high-quality decision-making in the future.

**RECOMMENDATION #2: CONTINUE TO FOCUS ON DOWNTOWN RE-DEVELOPMENT**

Of the myriad of changes that have occurred since the original 2011 Master Plan was written, the transformation of downtown is one of the starkest examples of the original vision having been embraced. What is happening currently in downtown is remarkable including:

- significant re-development (i.e. Bagg's Square, including Rust to Green student initiatives; the Landmarc)
- the relocation of Utica College's Business programs to Clark City Center (Aug, 2016)
- announcements regarding the planned relocation of the hospital to downtown Utica
- almost completed efforts around downtown branding and destination marketing
- planned infrastructure and transportation upgrades (the "busy corner"; county parking; Oriskany Street/Route 5 improvements)

Any one of these developments alone would be sufficiently breath-taking to help downtown begin to achieve its full potential: the combination the committee has concluded ensure a bright and vibrant future for downtown so long as we carefully consider the long-term strategy of both development and re-development, particularly in the historic downtown core. We concur also that such spectacularly audacious projects as the hospital relocation can spark anxiety and if not handled properly can be the subject of much innuendo, miscommunication, and misunderstanding. As a result, we urge the various

constituents more closely involved in these projects to improve communications, civic engagement, and transparency to promote the value of these projects including their conformity to the principles espoused in the existing master plan, sound planning principles, and how they benefit all residents as they progress towards ultimate approval.

Another over-arching and significantly common theme that citizens in our sessions commented on was the importance of promoting and protecting the arts. The original Master Plan located the arts district downtown and the committee recommends continued development of the arts district, as contained in a 2012 enabling ordinance adopted by Common Council permitting the creation of municipal themed districts. We urge Common Council and the Mayor to respect this request and find ways to fund and promote the arts consistently as a way to culturally beautify our city.

It is further clear that we cannot re-create the past and citizens may wish to consider what downtown once was as truly a relic of the past. We cannot recreate what it was because that is no longer sustainable economically. Instead, the question we pose as a committee is what exactly is the future vision for downtown? With so many new, positive developments occurring in so many places potentially connected to downtown revitalization, we need to be mindful to not squander the opportunity to be strategic. When we consider the four primary foci for development downtown (Bagg's Square, the Aud, Harborpoint, and the historic corridor along Genesee Street between the "busy corner" and the Art Gallery) as the primary "place" most of us define as downtown, there is tremendous looming opportunity to link those four important points and to **strategically consider how they intersect and interact**. How are decisions in each area linked to an overall vision and plan rather than being treated as isolated or independent decisions? We worry that recent decisions in some instances might suggest a more tactical, short-term view dominating civic decision-making that will impair the creation of a powerful, coherent long-term vision for downtown if we are not careful.

In our view, common council and the Mayor must ensure that any developments taking place within the boundaries of these important areas – all of which for the committee's purposes we are calling downtown – must take into account the principle of "better together" – that is a strategy of development of the appropriate infrastructure to support residential, commercial, entertainment and other mixed-uses, including transportation and parking infrastructure, that will create a vibrant, connected and pedestrian friendly downtown that we can all be proud of.

### **RECOMMENDATION #3: TRANSPARENTLY MAP THE DISTRICTS AND THEIR VISIONS**

We note that the original Master Plan certainly contained and promoted the concept of neighborhoods and the importance of their unique character and future development. We agree with this concept entirely as a committee.

However, as the process has unfolded, it is not clear to the committee exactly what the boundaries of each of the important target neighborhoods actually are: should we not all be operating on a common understanding of what downtown is for instance? And if we use terms like Bagg's Square or "Sports and Entertainment" districts, where are those and how do they map to each other? Of course, this invokes the question (ripe with politics even in

the posing of it we recognize) of who gets to make these decisions. Given our mandate, this was a tricky question we nonetheless felt it appropriate to weigh in on.

Primarily, the committee recommends that the Common Council define and then defend the geographic boundaries, and the associated planning and development intentions for each neighborhood (i.e. variable and responsive building codes; agreements on density and similar planning guidelines to protect and preserve character; agreements in advance on the look and feel of new developments in historic areas; etc.) that would bring the vision for each geographically-defined neighborhood into full and transparent relief. With this "road map" in place, we would then urge the three principal constituents involved (the Mayor's Office, the Planning Department, and ultimately Common Council) to use these maps proactively to solicit opportunities for developers to ensure the fulfillment of these visions and/or to ensure approval of projects only in keeping with the visions and boundaries of these neighborhoods in future.

We also believe the transparent publication of these, and making sure that we point developers to them as the guidelines for neighborhoods while they are considering development and re-development proposals, would institute a new regiment of compliance with long-term planning strategy and reduce our response to opportunistic proposals that are currently mostly proposed in a vacuum of this very type of defining information about what WILL and WILL NOT be considered appropriate for various neighborhoods in future.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #4: HISTORIC TAX CREDITS/NATIONAL REGISTER DISTRICTS**

Already in process as spearheaded by the city's Scenic and Historic Preservation Commission, the Transportation National Register District is in process with the State Historic Preservation Office for State and National Park Service approval. The next planned phase will be for a National Register District from Bagg's Square up through Oneida Square, and then the expansion of the Brewery District. This is the result of Scenic & Historic inviting the State Historic Office two years ago to study these areas and recommend where the expansion of the National Register Districts could be.

This was accomplished, and is now in process. Why do this? Unlike designations of particular sites as historically important, we focus on this method because an owner or developer of income producing property can obtain a 40% tax credit - 20% IRS and 20% NYS Tax in the development of their projects so long as the individual building itself is designated (not always welcome) OR if the entire district is designated instead. Our advisory committee feels this tactic has been under-utilized and misunderstood and so we wish to highlight the advantages of this strategy very clearly.

When we have all these districts created and registered, we anticipate developers will flock to Downtown and Varick Street to purchase and develop existing buildings via adaptive reuse, etc. This is a clearly stated goal of the city. As a result, there should be far fewer vacant buildings in the commercial district, and we anticipate an even more robust resurgence in our downtown and the Brewery District in West Utica.

## RECOMMENDATION #5: ADOPT UPDATED AND FORM-BASED BUILDING CODES

The committee detects that, potentially, the building codes in the City of Utica need updating in order for the Master Plan's vision to become a reality. For instance, as we contemplate the opportunity for all kinds of new forms of housing apparently in demand from workers in contemporary fields like Nano Science, might we need to consider developing a condominium act that would enable condominium ownership both within commercial and residential buildings? As we consider historic districts, might the requirements for things like set-backs, heights, and architectural compliance with local neighborhoods demand variations on the building code that might not be universally applicable elsewhere in the city? Should we be encouraging re-development of existing residential housing stock by removing strict compliance standards (in select instances) that would not dampen citizen enthusiasm for making improvements?

All of this thinking may be summarized in a single term: form-based codes. Form-based codes use physical form rather than separation of use as the organizing principle with lesser focus on land use and more on adherence to regulations adopted into municipal law. This helps control urban sprawl, over-intensification, or deterioration and other deleterious effects of inappropriate development by forcing compliance with both form and land-use regulations. Many other jurisdictions have established and are enforcing such codes to great effect (Peoria, IL; Berkley, CA; Beaufort, S.C.; Cincinnati, OH; Seaside, FL, etc).

The committee believes the time has come for Common Council to instruct the Planning Department to consider and adopt a more progressive, future-forward, and workable planning code so that the vision contained in the Master Plan can be made into a reality in a more legally stringent way. Otherwise, there is a risk that with each successive municipal administration variations and deviations from the master plan may continue because stricter form-based codes are not in place.

In addition to the first part of recommendation #5, the committee also discovered during the course of its work several existing and still active amendments to codes that it believes are either not being followed or which are seen as inactive. Of course, legally unless these have been repealed or amended, that is not a sustainable position. For instance, among the documents approved by the Common Council is the March 10, 2005 enabling legislation that created the Zoning and Design Standards for the Gateway Historic Canal District, which is in effect for all development in this area. We can find no evidence of consistent references to this legislation today or its consideration in the original master planning process in 2011. This is surprising in many respects.

The very focused area referred to in this legislation from north at the CSX Railroad lines to south at Columbia Street, to east at Genesee Street and west to NYS 8/12 has existing design standards and zoning criteria that as adopted ordinances need to be incorporated into both the current master plan and, of course, into any development plans for this area.

Therefore, our committee **urges** the Common Council to direct the corporation to do a complete historic review of all documents approved as they relate to zoning, planning, and the development of all categories of properties in the city. We recommend this be combined into a single document, with appropriate revision dates and codes as appropriate to link them all, as reference to all concerned stakeholders.

In doing so, we have acknowledged the past and its importance in planning coherence. We also recommend that the City of Utica consider what else needs to be done to enable the city to lay claim to a contemporary, clear, and coherent building code (and associated processes of approvals, deviations, and consistent enforcement) that will bring more citizen confidence in those processes and eliminate political elements in them to the extent that is possible and recommended. Fairness and transparency are best applied in these areas. But to achieve that, we first need to collectively understand what it is that guides us by ensuring our building codes are uniform and up to date.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #6: RE-ESTABLISH A COHERENT STREET GRID IN UTICA**

The committee recognizes in making this particular recommendation that much of the transportation infrastructure is not under its sole control and involves multi-jurisdictional negotiations with both the county and the state, particularly the State Department of Transportation.

That being said, we believe that the Common Council can exhort significant, strongly-felt and deeply embedded, support from the residents of Utica to enable a much more productive approach to the re-design and re-engineering of city streets and the supporting large transportation infrastructure.

Where road re-developments are occurring, particularly as they relate to the arterial, more care needs to be given to both local through-traffic and pedestrian and bike traffic. We should avoid creating dead-ends of unnatural continuations of the original street grid so as to not negatively compromise certain neighborhoods or developments that exist today. Care needs to be given to re-creating appropriate east-west roadways and not just north-south which planning seems to dominate most transportation projects.

The committee also consistently heard that we must address the issue of parking (both on and off-street) at the same time as we consider the expansion of the street grid to accommodate more traffic flow. Particularly downtown may need to envision more creative parking solutions over time if we are to have vehicular traffic and pedestrians co-exist in a way that creates synergies instead of anomalies. We also note that increasingly we need to consider traffic circulation alternatives to Genesee St. in particular as demand for closing it increases to accommodate various events, festivals, displays and similar opportunities which are important to support as they re-energize and re-invigorate downtown by giving it a personality and character of its own.

The committee notes that while the original Master Plan does make extensive reference to various parts of the transportation infrastructure in some of its sub-goals, there does not appear to be an accompanying conclusive Master Plan for roadways and ingress/egress opportunities to accompany the original Master Plan of the neighborhoods. Given what we know happens in this vacuum (i.e. the bridge to North Utica and the mess around Bagg's Square created by it), rather than leaving this question to a project-by-project assessment, a more comprehensive traffic study and plan, properly researched and prepared in advance, that lays out the city's aspirations for the traffic infrastructure required to support neighborhood development would be a political asset when negotiating and dealing with important third parties who have some control over the destiny of these points.

#### RECOMMENDATION #7: PUBLIC ROLL RE-DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

As public and developer enthusiasm for the re-development of downtown in particular blossoms, the committee recommends reducing the current reliance on publicly-funded projects as the pathway to downtown rejuvenation. While not in principle opposed to public developments (such as the hospital), we are mindful that once land is committed to a designated use that involves either a tax-deferral or a complete abatement of taxes, those parcels produce no long-term revenue for the city. While better than the alternative of derelict or abandoned land, the news is not always entirely positive in some regards. This is a catastrophe if taken to an extreme – we could end up with a fully re-developed downtown, with all of its attendant traffic (both pedestrian and vehicular) but no ability to invest in city services to maintain, upgrade, police or support it in future.

As enthusiasm for Utica grows, we hope that so will the political will and enthusiasm to ensure that developments result in long-term growth in tax revenues. We also believe in creating a long-term goal of balancing public and private development: and in making sure that tax incentives for private developers are transparent, clear, and limited in scope and application. Over time, we should move from being in a position of “buying” interest in downtown re-development often including significant tax-incentive; to “securing” interest through more limited engagement in financial support; to only “approving” developments that naturally arise because of viable commercial returns that no longer require direct financial participation by the city. Arriving at this point creates maximum economic value for the city.

We hope that both Common Council and the Mayor’s Office will attend to this recommendation carefully and, as they go forward, ensure that the economic deals we are making are both justified and truly transparent and that, over-time, a trend to reducing the need for these is established.

#### RECOMMENDATION #8: IMPROVE MULTI-JURISDICTIONAL CO-OPERATION

The committee notes that intra-jurisdictional co-operation appears to be improving overall, particularly between the city and the county. We applaud that as a progressive and necessary first step. However, any productive vision for the City of Utica need not rely simply on personal rapport and relationships. Rather, in future, they should rely on shared aspirations and joint commitments and endorsements.

Therefore, we recommend that Common Council address the future of the Master Plan by updating it accordingly, perhaps with our report as a template, and then seeking proper procedural endorsements of those parts of the plan that require joint co-operation or co-ordination by **specifically and clearly requesting of other levels of government** those approvals required to proceed. We urge the citizens of Utica to rise up in support of these requests to the county and state by aligning their political will at all three levels to coincide with the election and/or appointment of individuals who support the future aspirations and visions for the city and who actively demonstrate both an understanding of those aspirations and tangible support of them.

Similarly, consolidation of services and regionalization of governments between towns and even across counties may be necessary as we all move into a more economically

restrained future. We note that surrounding communities (New Hartford, Clinton, etc.) benefit enormously from their proximity to the City of Utica. However, we do not always embrace the idea of shared services or the cumulative impact of service duplication on both individual tax payers and on businesses. Careful thought needs to be given to this topic which the committee acknowledges is politically volatile. So, while not offering an endorsement of any particular solution, we are highlighting the need for politicians in these jurisdictions to begin the tough conversations and delicate political dance necessary to enact positive change in this important strategy over time, calculated as being in all of the region's citizens' best interests.

In the same way as other recommendations we have made, we feel that being a catalyst for these discussions is almost as important as the outcome: perhaps truly creative solutions will emerge to what has formerly been seen by many as intractable problems. We do not see them as intractable at all. We see resistance often rooted in an intense desire to preserve the status-quo at any cost. That will not help any of us – the City of Utica or its surrounding communities and environs – in achieving our full potential and is something the committee urges everyone to carefully reflect on.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #9: BE MORE DEMOGRAPHICALLY AWARE AND ENGAGED**

During its work the committee detected that the original Master Plan seemed to treat the City of Utica as almost a single demographic. However, we have some very unusual trends forming that emerged in our consultations that we wish to highlight for the Common Council:

1. While we certainly do have an aging demographic, we also have an emerging younger demographic that is choosing to remain in our community now and lead the way forward rather than seeking opportunity elsewhere;
2. We see a resurgence (and many examples were both sitting on our committee and attending our community input suggestions) of those who have left and then voluntarily returned to Utica later in their lives, often with an abundance of time, energy and wealth with them;
3. The presence of so many substantial post-secondary institutions within such a close geography means the potential for students to come here for an education but remain for a career so long as economic opportunity is equitably distributed to include them;
4. The immigrant population of the City of Utica is both an advantage and also a responsibility that includes continuing to ensure the integration of those from afar solidly into the community in all forms and to ensure the richness of their experience and past culture are woven into our own.

These important demographic trends, and perhaps others the committee was not exposed to, need to be incorporated into the Master Plan. We are not dealing with a uniform demographic but rather a variable one. If embraced, it can challenge us to a level of diversity and integration of perspectives that can enhance the long-term growth and development of the city. But to achieve this outcome, we need to ensure that just as

we did for meaningful data around development projects above, we incorporate meaningful and reliable data about the city's demographics squarely into the lens of every planning and development opportunity we consider. This ensures that demographic diversity results in positive integration rather than negative confrontations.

We must also point out that considerations for projects should take into account both historic importance and contemporary support. For instance, consider the Utica Zoo – it has a connection to our past and is a dynamic asset for a city of our size. But think of its future too: already this year 10,000 people have visited the Zoo, many from all over the rest of the country and beyond to see the Red Panda. Assets like this may explain not only tourism interests but may be one of the reasons people who were born here but moved away are now returning or in the process of considering moving back to the revitalized Utica.

#### RECOMMENDATION #10: RIGHT-SIZE OUR CITY'S INFRASTRUCTURE

Our final over-arching recommendation is fairly simple, but again is likely to be controversial. For some time we have engaged in the language of recovery: aspiring to undo the creeping plague of slow economic decline and replace it with rejuvenation but with an aspiration that this really means restoration of the past. The danger in this unspoken wish is that we remain rooted in the past, always hoping for a return to what was rather than in looking forward to what can and should be.

We empathize as a committee with the angst and anxiety that real change generates. We have no easy solutions to propose to make anyone feel better on this point except that in any stressful situation, it is having options and alternatives from which to choose that seems to ease this natural reaction. Reading this report as a starting point, then exploring ways to get engaged in influencing our future choices may be a partial antidote to this anxiety.

We note this because as the population has declined with declining economic opportunity, the city's infrastructure has perhaps, at its own peril, remained more or less the same size. That cannot be sustained and its costs are avoidable with good decision-making. We note examples of this in parks, in services, and similar for instance.

To resolve this dilemma, we must come together as a **whole city** and not as a collection of neighborhoods or even directional axis (north, south, east and west Utica). Perhaps instead we must carefully prognosticate together on what the likely size of our city is in the future: population, boundaries and associated matters. How do we then "right-size" the city to accommodate this new size and shape in future for the collective benefit of us all?

Perhaps this also involves annexing some areas while divesting of others. Perhaps we need to adjust our expectations of future land use to accommodate growth occurring not everywhere in the city but only in specific areas. Again, the committee is not adopting a recommendation on any particular conclusion or advocating a point-of-view other than recognizing that Utica should not, slavishly, anticipate a return to its past but rather anticipate with optimism and hope a co-creation of a new future. To do so requires that we re-think what we need to support that.

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## LEAD TESTING & LAND REHABILITATION

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During our work the committee became aware of current efforts of a local Utica College student (Lana Nitti) who has perfected a novel method of easily testing for lead contamination. This research was guided and validated by a number of experts in the field. Her application of this method in various areas of our city has resulted in her becoming an activist around the very real and present dangers of lead levels in soil as a risk particularly to children. As we now know, high lead levels have been directly linked to long-term health risks and learning impairment.

While deeply impressed with this student's enthusiasm for the issue we were dismayed by the apparent lack of uptake and awareness by city leaders on the importance of this issue. Noting what just occurred in Flint, MI as an example of the dangers of lead, it might seem expedient to ignore the long-term and costly problem of rehabilitating land from past uses as we venture into the prospect of a bright, new shiny future. Or to have only a surface and minor economic commitment to an inadequate scope of action to make ourselves feel better in the face of what might seem to some as an insurmountable problem, perhaps rooted in the past.

But that is a mistake we cannot afford to make. Lead is a real problem that poses real current risks to health and welfare. Perhaps as this student's study indicates, within certain districts of Utica, a severely toxic level of lead that is especially dangerous when lead-contaminated land is disturbed, as it is when land is re-developed potentially making the existing problem worse. We worry that this desire to approve new projects may overwhelm what should be our primary concern about the safety, health and security of city residents.

Given that we cannot independently verify her results, we do not venture to make any specific recommendations based on her research. Nonetheless, we urge the Common Council to always insist on the **proper testing, preparation and potential rehabilitation of any lead-contaminated site** prior to approving any development plan no matter how large or small the project in question is. Or who its sponsor or proposer is – including the state. And if the cost of doing so is unbearable, we urge joint political and civic action to create bona fide understanding of and responsibility for this issue at the state level including the real costs of protecting us all from the long-term negative health effects of lead.

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## ADDITIONAL CITIZENS RECOMMENDATIONS ACROSS THE FIVE DOMAINS

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Having used the original matrix as a template for community engagement sessions, the committee did not want to squander the opportunity to add its own list of refined or new goals that would potentially assist the Common Council to update the matrix in a more meaningful way to guide future developments efforts across the city.

These are in addition to the over-arching goals noted above which are manifest to the whole original Master Plan. However, these have been split out into the original five domains and numbered accordingly because they are specific to a particular issue or observation.

We hope this presentation is helpful; we believe no further narrative is required for most of them and so we present them succinctly in bullet-point form deliberately for additional consideration and discussion by the Common Council and the Mayor as appropriate:

### GOAL 1: HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT

1. Increase percentage of owner occupied structures in most neighborhoods
2. Adopt more mixed income housing models
3. Promote more "green building"
4. Increase downtown residents by 10%-20% within 3 years
5. Increase safety by improving mobility along streets and fostering healthy communities
6. Promote more community leadership and empowerment
7. Reduce deteriorated infrastructure and blight
8. Strengthen relationship between school district and city
9. Promote ever-higher levels of public safety to decrease crime rates

### GOAL 2: DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT

1. Safe, comfortable, efficient multi-modal connectivity between areas of downtown
2. Better funding of the Arts creates a more culturally dynamic downtown
3. While downtown is quite safe, it suffers from a perception it is not that requires better marketing and messaging to correct
4. Recognize downtown as a community gathering place; particularly encourage growth in events, festivals, and similar that encourage pedestrian interest and attendance
5. Foster economic vitality through more commercial and private-sector investments
6. Use downtown to foster the pride of Utica residents through the promotion of more residential-only and mixed-use developments that respect the historic downtown

### GOAL 3: PARKS, REC, ARTS AND CULTURE

1. Increase use of parks by improving services, activities, and events in them
2. Use parks to increase economic and health benefits of city living
3. Use Mohawk River and Erie Canal to stimulate economic development

4. Protect historic buildings, monuments, and such
5. Increase awareness of Heritage Tourism and publish the city's current tourism plan
6. Develop identity of Utica as a welcoming place for art and artists.

#### **GOAL 4: BUSINESS AND TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT**

1. Attract new development through multifaceted plan and incentives that rely less on tax abatements and reductions
2. Retention and expansion of local businesses is always easier than attracting new ones – we cannot lose focus on existing local economic development as a priority
3. Create an environment in the city that fosters entrepreneurship and business-ownership (especially small artisan and craft businesses for instance) as alternatives to employment
4. Continue to invest in re-tooling, re-skilling, and educating the local workforce
5. Emphasize quality of life so as to encourage young professionals to relocate.
6. Continue to use Rust-to-Green efforts to redevelop brown field sites including attracting grants to off-set the costs of these projects

#### **GOAL 5: INFRASTRUCTURE AND WATERFRONT DEVELOPMENT**

1. Enhance quality of physical infrastructure through principles of smart development
2. Develop water structure that eliminates waste, conserves water, and preserves capacity for industrial development and ensures sufficient water supply for growth that is affordable for Utica residents
3. Bring all sewage and storm water systems into compliance immediately
4. Create more inviting, creative, and sustainable streetscapes, gateways, and corridor plans in conjunction with the state and county as appropriate
5. Effective transportation system that includes public transit, vehicle, bicycle, and pedestrian traffic of all types

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## NEXT STEPS & CONCLUSION

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The committee believes there was value in its process and its findings. We hope our various constituents will concur. However, this was not a complete over-haul of the 2011 Master Plan but rather an updating of its perspective and an extension of its original good intentions.

With that, we therefore do recommend that a **completely new master planning process** will be appropriate in future and we recommend that be done in time for 2021. That suggests forming that committee and establishing its mandate near the middle to end of 2019 and then providing them with a year or more to complete their work. We make this recommendation to Common Council now so that this comes as no surprise in the future and to ensure funds can be allocated for doing so.

Why this timeframe? We make this recommendation on the assumption that, by then, the value of the Master Plan will have exhausted both its useful life and that more future developments will have occurred that require an updating of our collective thinking on our future as a city. In fact, with what is already known that lies ahead, our city is entering an exciting but change-intense five year period right now.

In the interim, and after concluding its work this time around, the committee did feel that this **Master Plan advisory process** should be repeated again in **two years** with another citizen-led effort under the auspices of Common Council. While some continuity in membership may be appropriate, it is not essential. Rather, to retain the voice of the resident and citizen in the process should be the call to action of this future committee no matter its constitution.

The committee and the citizens it now represents, feel strongly that more transparency, more coherence, and deep expertise regarding contemporary planning and development practices are required for the city of Utica to succeed. While we defer to the Mayor and Common Council on how best to accomplish this from a managerial perspective, we do need to restore citizenry confidence and collaboration in this regard from our external vantage point. We can report from our work citizen concern, even consternation, about present planning methods and their effectiveness in terms of consistently executing on the intentions of the master plan. We similarly caution the Mayor's office on accusations of favoring economic development at any cost, which while unsubstantiated through any investigation by the committee, was a clearly heard perception that the highest political official in the city may wish to be aware of and correct in his actions.

With these final summary thoughts, we want to thank the fine residents of this community for their support and we table our final report, unanimously and without reserve to you for consideration and future action. We are all proud of this city and its ever-brightening future!

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APPENDIX A – INPUT SESSION ATTENDEES

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**Attendees – March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016 Session (facilitated by the committee chair)**

Lucretia Hunt  
Bill True  
Michael Lehman  
Bobby Oliveria  
Brett Truett  
J K Hage III  
Joe Cerim  
Al La Salle  
Lynne Mishalanie  
John Faust  
Ron Vincent  
Jim Buswell  
Bob Heins  
Judith Olney  
Liz Harbilla  
Nikki Sheehan

**Attendees – April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016 Session (facilitated by the committee chair)**

Mark Mojave  
Anna D'Ambrosia  
Mike Lehman  
Patrick Page  
Oliver Rugg  
Bobby Oliveira  
Joseph Cerine  
John Faust  
Brett Truett  
Joseph P Bottini  
Lynne Mishalanie  
John Jaxon  
Regina Bonacci  
Bill True  
Lucretia Hunt  
Ron Vincent  
Jim Buswell  
Frank Montecalvo  
Rainer M. Wehner  
Final Murtagtagh  
Joe Marino

For the good of the record, what follows are the combined general comments of community input session participants on each of the five domains (the “goals”) and then any relevant commentary identified by sub-goal in most places.

To assist in the interpretation of this input, we suggest new readers explore the original matrix on which this feedback was secured so as to contextualize the comments in relationship to the original language contained in the 2011 Master Plan.

### *Goal 1: Housing and Neighborhood Development*

#### Positives

- 1 Roosevelt School – low to moderate housings for purchase by renters in 15-20 years
- 1 Home Owner Program is in place to increase first time home ownership – good interest
- 1 Improvement in unsellable homes going to owner occupied
- 1 Branding by district and neighbourhood such as Bagg’s Square
- 1 Lot of private development between Oneida and Oriskany Blvd
- 3 County got a grant to deal with lead paint
- 3 Form based zoning adopted in 2004 and formally adopted – actually exists.
- 3 Fire department has ROP program, inspects properties – danger of this being reduced and increase in the numbers of fires.
- 4 Ocean Blue downtown is green building
- 5 Whitesboro Street housing – new housing downtown?
- 5 Public property coming back onto the tax roll
- 5 Downtown residents have increased by 10%
- 6 Addendum to the URA specifications so that sidewalks are replaced by developers on a 50/50 match.
- 6 Public safety program education on police and fire safety, heroin epidemic, trends in crime rate is down in some areas.
- 7 Will be a new park in West Utica
- 7 Roundabout at Oneida Square
- 8 Cornhill, Campbell Park – park improvement, community worked hard on this park and it is now non-toxic
- 8 Scare resources are spread over too large an area
- 11 Highest level of Fire and Safety
  - Integration of services such as ambulance as well as fire and safety
  - Consolidation at regional levels – parochial concerns.

- New public safety building on Anthony Garmone (police station) and satellite on James street (not utilized)

### Negatives

- 1 Home Ownership program also need to target city residents, not necessarily first time owners
- 1 Incentive programs – strategy for encouraging spending of their own money rather than the focus on the hand out – are they maintaining it after it is renovated?
- 1 How many pilots and how many tax exemptions should be available? Do we want a pilot to outlast the administration. Giving more away in tax incentives – let’s make sure there is a return on the tax incentives. Include limits on those awarded. Utica is selling property short.
- 1 Low quality of homes, lead paint, people should focus on renovations
- 1 Rehabilitating older homes - after 25 years, should be able to do so without cost
- 3 Code sheets for new immigrants so they know what needs to be done
- 6 Sidewalks and Inner city streets still need repair
- 6 Took away public playground from North Utica. Coordinate public areas by city and not by district.
- 6 Chronic public safety issue – downtown fear of Utica. Facts don’t support the issue. Afraid of panhandlers and mental health issues, prostitution and drugs, stretch from Oneida Square to the Parkway
- 6 Community policing – police feel that they can’t win. Past 10 years, do the best they can and their hands are tied. No body thanks them. Neighborhood watch. Absentee landlords. Deterioration of the areas.
- 7 Community Gardens – difficult when people have their own yards. Perhaps help people with their own yards.

### *Goal 2 Downtown Development*

#### Positives

- 1 Transfer hub for Centro
- 1 Bicycle/pedestrian and walkway is finished with some lights along the path; canal way bicycle ways
- 1 Rust to Green is developing an identity
- 3 Utica College creating seminar space downtown
- 3 Rutgers Park won a grant for planning a music service

- 3 The Downtown hospital for development of the land opposite the Aud
- 5 Developing the brand identify for downtown – Bragg Square
- 5 Farmers market – doing a great job
- 5 Outdoor seating in restaurants
- 5 Outdoor festivals – one world flower festival – easier to close streets off
- 5 Varick Street – closing street and the ease of that happening in other downtown areas
- 6 Art work in the windows; art community interested in space in downtown Utica
- 6 Strong connection between Aud and core
- 7 Celebrate Utica – downtown Bagg Square
- 8 Landmarc building
- 8 Updated Zimmerman folks study – doesn't reflect lofts
- 8 Condos – no downtown ownership residential – absence
- 8 Succinct connectivity plan – physically how to get from Harbourfront to Bagg Square to Genesee Street

### Negatives

- 1 Is the hospital in keeping with the Master Plan. Lack of data available in the decision making process.
- 1 Universal wifi in the center of Utica needed for the economy
- 3 Have an Arts School in downtown Utica – promote that arts district
- 4 Number of empty buildings downtown
- 4 Parking strategy needed for downtown
- 5 Farmers Market – Railway Express Agency Wing – needs renovation
- 5 Outdoor festivals – Lynn – music and Monday nights – Dick Clark, Annette Funicello – bring back to Utica – New Years in August – festival downtown
- 5 Gateway and entrances to Utica aren't welcoming e.g. Genesee Street and the bridge and Oriskany
- 6 Development of the river and connection to the city
- 6 Development needs to be suitable and businesses to be moved need to be moved to a suitable a place
- 6 Continue the canal way bicycle path – wrong side of canal from harbour development
- 6 Perhaps a mini Times Square – center of Utica – give a big city feel
- 6 Need to ensure that we don't sacrifice retail space in the downtown area.
- 7 Hang on to that which is iconic – “authenticity of place” – be mindful of what defines our community

- 7 Activities in downtown - do we want more street vendors downtown as the downtown develops
- 8 Residential and mixed use – asbestos as well as lead need to be considered
- 8 Stricter reviews on what is done to a historic structure
- 8 Laws on the books but not enforced – scenic and historic preservation not being honoured.

### ***Goal 3 – Parks, Rec, Arts and Culture & Historic Preservation***

#### **Positives**

- 2 Hall of Fame – Running Hall of Fame, Cooperstown Baseball;
- 5 Has more connections to American’s History
- 5 Columbia/Lafayette development, historical perspective
- 6 Create artists housing happening
- 6 Created first arts and culture budget in NY State which leads to 1% - \$300,000
- 6 Good Arts Community – Stanley, Munson, venue for music, arts, poetry; expansion of Stanley helped to increase tourism

#### **Negatives**

- 1 Park system is failing. Park Infrastructure is underfunded and stretched thin. Center strip on Parkway looks okay but what about the rest of the City
- 1 Clarify the use of funding mechanisms for parks and encourage residents to fund/support the parks.
- 1 Comprehensive city-wide park Master Plan and inventory.
- 1 Think regionally – maybe some of the Utica Park gems are part of county – county doesn’t have country parks such as the Utica Zoo.
- 1 Make Murname field a masterpiece.
- 3 Partner with others; we don’t do that ourselves e.g. Children’s Museum and Zoo
- 5 State of NY investing in bike path and need to encourage Erie Canal goes through Utica; linkage needs to be developed
- 5 The old canal path and barge canal – what is the vision for those areas – connection to the history. Not identifying that these buildings are part of the historic preservation.
- 5 Need an understanding of our history; beautiful pieces of architecture is still here; connect our historic past with opportunities for the City
- 5 What is the tourism focus in this Master Plan?
- 5 Possibility of opening up the waterfront – developing from the waterfront in as well as the waterfront out

- 5 The Master Plan must be reflected in the by-laws to ensure it has teeth
- 6 Let's see it happening – the % for arts legislation – need the financing – NY City created a 1% budget for their arts and culture

#### ***Goal 4 – Business and Technology Development***

##### **Positives**

- 1 Nano and cyber developing as industry clusters
- 1 Utica College is coming downtown. City is very supportive of the move
- 1 There is lots of downtown development
- 3 Thinkubator in Bagg Square is visible and positive reinforcement
- 5 UC, SUNY Poly and MVCC all have Nano, Nursing, Financial Services courses
- 7 New community outreach position will reach out to the schools
- 8 Rust to green, Bagg Square, Varick Street, Oneida Square
- 8 Brownfield redevelopment is occurring

##### **Negatives**

- 1 Strip Bleecker to La Fayette that should be developed as food services and tourism
- 1 Don't forget the other business areas Oneida Street, South Utica – e.g. Uptown theatre area, East Utica, West Utica
- 2 Verizon has decided not to extend their program
- 3 Create more business sites but Greenman estates (restricted to recreational use by deed) and Murnane Field were not recommended for business sites. Homestead designed system and we need to protect it.
- 6 Rebuild areas within city blocks and focus on all schools not just the Utica public schools such as Arts School
- 6 Wifi across the city (repeat of point above – different emphasis)
- 7 Arts tourism is equally important
- 7 Tourism marketing plan – need more access to information – on site where there are historic sites e.g. General La Fayette
- 8 8.2 Time line for 5 to 10 years is too long, needed now i.e. land use plan for North of the Aud

#### ***Goal 5 – Infrastructure and Waterfront Development***

##### **Positives**

- 1 Oneida Square – worked with city on how to make it effective

- 1 Maximizing reuse of recycled materials? Restore opened on French Road;
- 2 New meters read instantly from their office in case of water breaks.
- 2 Problem with flooding on Utica Parkway. CPW cleaned drains which caused the flooding
- 3 City taking steps on the sewers
- 4 Traffic signals are improving, procurement with National Grid
- 7 National Grid cleaned up the harbor and the land around the harbor.
- 7 Oneida Square annual flower show May 21<sup>st</sup> and Art Show that continues all summer
- 7 Better fundraising this year. Better median and publicity
- 8 Have restored some of the connection to Whitesboro – Cornelia Street and Oriskany Blvd – property sat empty for 15 years and now interest because of this changes. “View sheds”

#### **Negatives**

- 1 Encourage Smart Development
- 1 Dark skies initiatives – light should be focused on areas on 1500 block
- 1 May need to mothball something – can’t maintain all of it
- 1 Need a regional approach to improve planning consistency & coherence.
- 2 Need to update the water supply study of the 1968’s – recommendation is to follow it and not revise it – done when the area was developing and we were concerned that we were going to run out of water. Not the same concern now.
- 2 Place a high value on clean water is an attractive feature, infrastructure should include impact on water.
- 2 Can the city develop the reservoir area for public use – federal government has number of requirements for closed tanks for
- 6 1-5 years – not happening – water flow is across old boundaries.
- 7 Water way development should be considered from the waterway in not just the waterway out
- 8 Restoring the street grid to where it has been – Whitesboro connects West Utica to Downtown. East/West Arterial cut off Oriskany Blvd/Street. Possible to reverse the process.