



## Boosting Downtown



Across the country, people are moving back into downtown areas. A report by the Harvard Business School's Initiative for a Competitive Inner City tracked 100 urban areas and found that the influx of people has boosted these core areas. The study found that median household incomes rose faster than the national average and poverty fell faster as well. These and other statistics illustrate the promise of cities.

This happens in cities with vibrant downtowns. People enjoy being amidst the culture, services and historic architecture of urban places. More and more businesses, especially those in the creative and knowledge industries, move to cities because that is where they can find the workers they need.

Auburn has proven very resilient as it seeks long-term revitalization. At the same time, residents expressed concern at public meetings that the city has a long way to go to realize its potential. One important challenge facing Auburn and its downtown is the regional economy. As a whole, central New York continues to lose population.

Downtown can also be a core of sustainability. Although a city street seems an odd place to protect the environment, it offers many opportunities to reduce stress on a region's eco-system. This is particularly true if it is designed properly and draws people out of their cars.

Over the past few years Auburn has started to see a revitalization brought about by numerous factors including the desire for downtown living. The city's urban core has numerous historic and cultural amenities.



These are the many in challenges identified during the comprehensive planning process including shopping areas not designed for pedestrians, threats to historic character, the lack of market rate units to attract downtown residents and zoning that works against traditional forms. The city, business improvement district and local merchants already strive to overcome some of these hurdles. Still, in a community such as Auburn, which is located in a generally sluggish region of New York, these challenges must be dealt with over the long-term.

The bottom line is that Auburn's downtown needs to become an interesting, safe and easy place to walk around. Downtown success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires that places be pedestrian-oriented. Cars are not going away soon, but in too many places the transit balance has shifted to favor automobiles over walkers. This has proven to be one of the most environmentally and economically unsustainable problems for cities around the nation.

People walking in downtown lends a sense of vibrancy to the urban core and makes it more interesting to other visitors. Auburn has a good start in this direction.



People like to window shop – walking from store to store – as long as the experience is interesting and safe. A fun and engaging place will get people out of their cars. Realizing this, many private developers now build “town center” developments to attract shoppers – trying to recreate what Auburn has already on its Genesee Street.

The statistics show that such a strategy bears economic fruit. In 2005, an International Council of Shopping Centers survey found that customers spent an average of \$57.50 an hour in enclosed shopping malls versus an average of \$84.00 an hour in town center developments.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ed McMahon in a presentation to the New York Planning Federation, October 9, 2006, Saratoga Springs, New York.



In some ways, downtown Auburn could take a lesson from the most successful new retail developments. The strategies outlined in this chapter seek to adopt tactics from other communities and malls that are doing well – and tailor them to the need of Auburn’s downtown.

### Case Study – Building a successful downtown

One of the most successful new downtown developments is in Mashpee, Massachusetts, where developers created a true downtown called Mashpee Commons. “We felt we could have an impact,” says Douglas Storrs, one of the developers, who is trained as an environmental planner. “We had seen what had happened to commercial patterns on Cape Cod and we didn’t want to exacerbate the problems of poor planning in the past.”

Mashpee Commons follows typical downtown designs with sidewalks, comfortable pedestrian envelopes to separate walkers from cars, and engaging facades to generate customer interest. The layout makes it enjoyable to walk amongst the more than 80 shops and restaurants arrayed along a small network of streets. The buildings are all built right up to the sidewalk allowing window shopping and easy walks.

At first, Storrs admits, national chains eyed Mashpee Commons warily. To woo a hesitant The Gap, the developers offered to build out the store and to take a portion of the sales revenue instead of rent. In essence, Storrs explains, it cost The Gap nothing to move in. “In a year, The Gap was doing so well that it was paying the highest rent in Mashpee Commons.” Since then, the clothing store has quadrupled in size to occupy 12,000 square feet on two floors. According to Storrs, the chain’s experience in Mashpee encouraged it to open stores in downtown areas elsewhere. Today, most of the national chain stores are represented at Mashpee Commons.



An important partner in any revitalization efforts in downtown Auburn is the existing business improvement district. The Downtown Auburn Business Improvement District (BID) represents over 200 businesses and property owners





***Goal 1. Enhance downtown as a walkable, vibrant urban place***

**Strategy D1 – Rename the zoning district covering downtown to emphasize its mixed-use nature.**

Traditional zoning, which sought to separate uses, transferred that philosophy to labeling. Districts names (R-1 Residential, C-2 Central Commercial, etc.) followed the uses described for each. Labeling Auburn's downtown as Central Commercial is misleading. It does indeed hold commercial, but it also has a lot of residential as well as other elements of a complex and complete downtown. Auburn's downtown district should have a zoning name that reflects the on-the-ground reality of a mixed-use area. Some options include:

- > Downtown district
- > Urban core district
- > City center district

**Strategy D2 – Enact as enforceable standards the existing downtown design guidelines to shape development.**

In 1996, the Auburn Downtown Partnership (now known as the Downtown Auburn Business Improvement District) drafted "Downtown Design Guidelines" to encourage infill development that complements the city's urban core. The guidelines offer a unifying theme for downtown and identify key buildings elements that should be preserved or enhanced.

The long-term objectives of the guidelines were as follows:

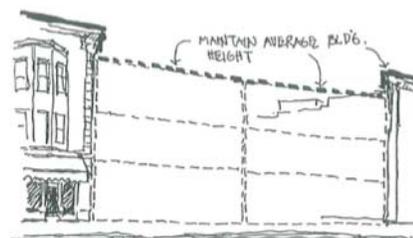
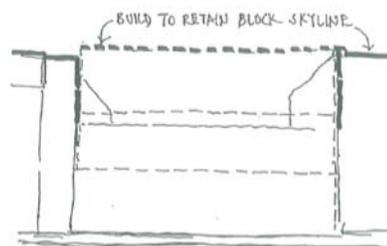
- > Maintain and enhance character of existing historic buildings
- > Support and encourage caring for this "living history of Auburn"
- > Assist new growth and revitalization of the downtown business area

Unfortunately, the guidelines are just guidelines. Building owners and developers must volunteer to institute them in their building. Some will instantly recognize the value of preserving the urban feel of downtown, but others will not. Unfortunately, a few missed opportunities or poorly integrated buildings will severely undercut Auburn's downtown.

As a first step, the guidelines should be adopted into the city's zoning code as a requirement. Eventually, the principles described within the guidelines should be absorbed into form-based code. (See Strategy D3.) However, since the community is familiar with them, they will be easier to adopt in the short-term.



The existing Downtown Design Guidelines for Auburn illustrate redevelopment can preserve the city's urban core. It reviewed building elements including height (illustrated at right), width, setback, massing, roofline, storefront treatment and windows. As a first step towards a form-based code, these design guidelines should be adopted into the existing code as standards that must be followed.



Historic buildings give Auburn a distinctive character – one that is very valuable to people seeking city life. It should be protected and enhanced.

**Strategy D3 – Continue supporting and funding with city, state, federal and private dollars the rehabilitation of historic buildings and buildings that contribute to Auburn’s historic character.**

As in the rest of the city, downtown has many notable historic buildings and other older structures that contribute to Auburn’s character. However, many of these are in varying states of disrepair. In order to attract people to live and work in downtown Auburn, its built environment must be attractive and appealing. Reusing historic buildings not only retains this valuable character, but also serves an environmental purpose: it significantly reduces waste, as well as the production and transport of new construction materials. Unfortunately, in this environment, building owners (including the city) often might not have the financial means to maintain and update older buildings.

The Historic & Cultural Sites Commission and the Downtown BID came together to produce a new brand for Auburn called “Auburn: History’s Hometown.” The brand is a way that local businesses and historical sites can promote themselves by utilizing a common slogan. This repetition of use will build the reputation of Auburn as a city of history – as a cultural destination. Older buildings reinforce downtown’s role in



the city's new theme. The marketing brand was developed independently of this comprehensive plan, yet fits nicely into the plan's vision. The brand is designed<sup>3</sup> to:

- > Attract new residents and draw tourism dollars
- > Shift the percent of Auburn as an outdated and rundown community
- > Create a common vision for the future
- > Provide a consistent representation of the destination
- > Enhances local, regional and national awareness of Auburn

For all of these reasons, Auburn should continue to work with local organizations such as the Business Improvement District to seek and utilize funding from local, regional and federal sources for downtown building rehabilitation. Auburn can encourage building reuse in a number of ways. It can provide incentives (tax benefits, fast track permitting, etc.) to developers who reuse all or large parts of existing buildings. The city can promote and increase participation in its façade improvement program. Funding for such programs can come from sources such as the state's Main Street grant program.

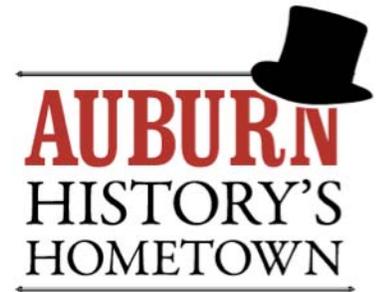
One such source is the New York Main Street grant program, which provides funds from the New York State Housing Trust Fund Corporation (HTFC) to business improvement districts and other not-for-profit organizations that are committed to revitalizing historic downtowns, mixed-use neighborhood commercial districts, and village centers. New rules allow municipalities to apply for the funds and increase the statewide allocation of resources. Auburn has been successful in the past securing money through the BID for a façade improvement program. As these competitive funds are available, the city should continue this effort. (For more information, visit [www.nymainstreet.org](http://www.nymainstreet.org)).

Auburn can also take a more advisory role (or hire historic preservation consultants) to educate building owners of their reuse and preservation options. This could be regarding the physical development issues, or matters regarding the uses of such buildings, such as how to activate the second floors of historic buildings. The reuse of historic buildings is tied in part to Auburn's plan for the downtown area as a cultural center (for example, encouraging live/work spaces for artists), and will be explored further in that chapter.

One place to turn is the Preservation League of New York State. The League developed a program consisting of a workshop and a grant award made available to communities facing the issue of upper floor vacancies. The program brings together experts to help municipal officials and building owners understand building code, design and financial strategies to make it all work.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> These characteristics come from a presentation by Clark CSM, the branding consultant which helped Auburn create the History's Hometown brand.

<sup>4</sup> More information about the Preservation League is available at [www.preservenys.org](http://www.preservenys.org).



In August 2009, the city's Historic and Cultural Sites Commission and the Downtown BID unveiled a new brand and logo to help market the city as a tourism destination. Downtown's historic buildings reinforce that effort.



#### **Strategy D4 – Institute form-based code in the downtown area**

From a land use perspective, the current zoning is one of the largest inhibitors to maintaining the traditional downtown that attracts residents and visitors. Standard zoning through the 20<sup>th</sup> century emphasizes the regulation (and separation) of uses: places where people live must be separate from where they work and where they shop. This is exactly the opposite of a successful downtown. In a vibrant downtown, a mix of uses is required. Residential units provide the customers who can walk to shop, dine and drink in the evenings. During the day office workers circulate around restaurants at lunch and shop before heading (often by foot) home.

While the design guidelines described in Strategy D2 represent a short-term fix, the structure of traditional zoning, including that in Auburn, works against the mixed-use, vibrant vision for downtown. Cities across the nation are instituting more of a *form-based code* for their urban core.

Form-based codes are alternatives to conventional zoning and are adopted into city law as regulations. This alternative approach fosters predictable results in terms of the form of buildings and the creation of a high-quality public realm, for example, sidewalks, streets, and plazas. It is in these public areas that vibrancy is created.

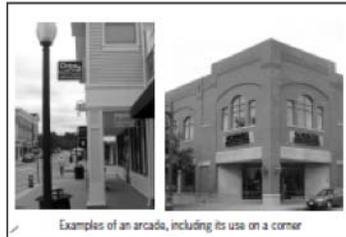
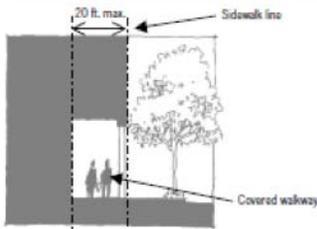
By emphasizing the relationship between building facades and the public spaces around them, form-based codes more easily foster the creation of an urban environment. (Conventional codes focus on the separation and micromanagement of land uses and the micromanagement. The built form is often an afterthought.),

Form-based codes are easier to read and interpret than traditional zoning codes – since they are written in plain English with diagrams and graphics – resulting in a more transparent process for both the public and for developers. Sketches or example site plans and photographs can provide developers, builders, review board members, public officials and the public with a more comprehensive vision for the community's future.

Since form-based codes emphasize what a community wants a place to look like, the result is a higher quality built environment than what is achievable with traditional zoning. Form-based codes rely on context to determine appropriate building scale, material, and overall design, and so such a scheme would be well suited to Auburn's downtown. Since the "form" is built in, form-based codes eliminate the need for separate design guidelines. Auburn's current design guidelines can become integrated right into the code.

### C. Frontages Allowed

#### 1. Arcade

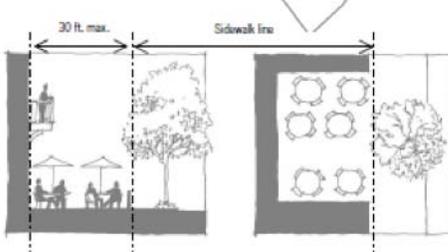


Examples of an arcade, including its use on a corner

##### Arcade Requirements

- Building shall not be setback more than 20 feet from the sidewalk line.
- No elements of the arcade shall cross the sidewalk line.
- Arcade must be defined by a series of evenly spaced columns.
- Arcade may be used for outdoor seating.
- Arcade may be used along a building or at a building's corner.

#### 2. Outdoor Café



Examples of fencing used to define an outdoor café.

##### Outdoor Café Requirements

- Café shall be on the front of the building.
- Building shall not be setback more than 30 feet from the sidewalk line.
- No elements of the café shall cross the sidewalk line.
- Café may be defined by a fence no higher than 36 inches.
- Café may be along a building or at a building's corner.

Numerous cities across the country are turning to form-based codes because they clearly and succinctly illustrate a community's vision. This page, from Troy, New York, uses drawings and examples to describe simply how some retail fronts must interact and shape the public realm.

None of this is to imply that the regulation of uses would end. For example, the first floor of Genesee Street buildings could be reserved for retail – active uses are crucial when trying to foster vibrancy in a downtown. Certain other uses, such as heavy industrial, should be excluded from downtown. However, in allowing retail, for example, we need not define whether the establishment deals in clothing or haircuts or pet grooming. For the downtown, simplifying the zoning code might include, creating a short list of broad uses that would be allowed and another short list of uses excluded.



Downtown Saratoga Springs, New York in the 1970s (top) had started to slide towards suburban style auto-centric development. Residents and business people realized the folly of this trend and required a complete and solid street front for buildings (bottom) that today is a major contributor to the main street's vibrancy. (Top photo by Patricia Croop)



**Strategy D5 – Ensure that pedestrian links within downtown are accessible and well maintained.**

Walking is key to downtown vitality. Therefore, downtown Auburn has to be walkable 12 months of the year if merchants are to survive. Downtown's 'curb appeal' to new businesses and new customers is greatly enhanced if owners can be assured that their workers and customers can reach them in all weather.

The city should develop a detailed comprehensive and enforceable plan, in conjunction with the Business Improvement District and individual building owners, for the quick removal of snow. It is an investment the community must make to support downtown businesses.



After a snow in two cities the differences in pedestrian accessibility become obvious. In Auburn (left), sidewalks have been shoveled, but snow has been mounded up and creates a barrier between cars and shops. In Saratoga Springs, New York, the city scrapes clear all walkable areas to allow people to get out of their vehicles and easily travel by foot through all parts of the downtown.

**Strategy D6 – Visually link the different parts of downtown by continuing streetscape improvements throughout.**

Auburn did an excellent job investing in important streetscape improvements along the Genesee section of downtown. The sidewalk treatments, light poles and various street furniture and amenities unify the area.

Unfortunately, the resources were not available to continue the project over to East Hill or to other areas less identified with downtown such as North Street near the Holiday Inn. Therefore there is currently a disconnect between attractions and services downtown, such as the post office, county building and lodging establishments. For example, from a hotel on North Street or Seminary Avenue, it is nearly impossible to know that a walkable downtown Auburn, with shops and



Along Genessee Street (left) downtown Auburn has a unified look and feel, but the identification is not carried over to other important parts of downtown, such as East Hill or across the arterial (right) to businesses there.





Auburn's zoning code indicates that the city is aware of these issues: for the downtown Central Commercial zoning district, the code states "Any other provisions of this section to the contrary notwithstanding, no off-street parking shall be required for any use, other than residential uses, within the C-2 Central Commercial District."<sup>5</sup>

This is an excellent first step. However, the requirement for parking for residential uses presents limitations for the viability of downtown living. Currently, residential parking requirements include one parking place per single-family detached dwelling unit; two spaces per two-family dwellings; and between one and two spaces for each multi-family dwelling unit. For mixed-use buildings in the C-2 district, the code states, "Mixed-use occupancy residential uses shall only be permitted when parking requirements for all business and residential uses in the building can be met."<sup>6</sup> The city should modify on-site parking requirements in downtown Auburn in order to encourage the reuse of buildings as residences. Some of the potential changes include:

- > Reducing or eliminating the minimum requirement
- > Allowing shared parking with other nearby uses
- > Allow long-term parking for residents, perhaps by permit, in city lots and garages.

**Strategy D9 – Provide a diversity of housing options, particularly condominiums and high-quality rental units, within walking distance of downtown.**

Bringing residents back into downtown requires that have safe and attractive places to live for people of various income levels. In particular, the area needs high-quality, market-rate, owner-occupied units and rental units. Such residential units, which are just starting to be developed in a neighborhood on the outskirts of downtown, would be attractive to the creative class of entrepreneurs and workers important to Auburn's 21<sup>st</sup> century future.

The desire for more diverse types of housing can stem from both financial and behavioral needs. For instance, young singles or couples moving (or returning) to Auburn might not be able to afford a single family home – or they simply might not want that much space or the maintenance associated with it. These young people might want to feel more connected with their peers and want access to friends, jobs, and shops by foot in the downtown area.

On the other end of the spectrum, empty nesters, or those whose children have left the household, might want to downsize their living space for a variety of reasons – not necessarily financial. Perhaps they would like to live in the cultural center of the city, close to the theater and shops. The city should explore ways to enable high-end housing outside of the traditional single-family model. As people age, downtown living tends to keep them more independent as a car is not

---

<sup>5</sup> Auburn Zoning Ordinance, §305-26, (C) (2) "Off-Street Parking and Loading."

<sup>6</sup> Auburn Zoning Ordinance, §305-38 B (6) (b) [1] "Residential Uses in Commercial Districts"



necessary for trips to the store or a restaurant. In particular, a 2006 Housing Market Study indicated that the senior market is growing and provides opportunities for age-restricted rental units.

The city should seek to encourage more types of housing, including apartments, condominiums, and townhouses, in downtown Auburn. Greater density would help create more of a “downtown” feel in these areas, adding potential customers to nearby businesses and restaurants, community gathering places, and an overall sense of place and civic pride, helping to define Auburn’s vibrant cultural and artistic downtown.

### ***Goal 3. Improve the marketing of downtown***

#### **Strategy D10 – Offer a resource, through the BID or the city, to help shop owners succeed.**

Every merchant, especially those urban pioneers starting out in a small storefront, probably does not have all of the skills needed for success. Window displays, store layout and other retail business operations are a science, developed over years, in which new entrepreneurs need mentoring.

This is a lesson that Auburn can take from malls. Successful malls, especially in competitive places, do not leave their merchants to fend for themselves. They are partners in the success. Often they bring in people to help with window display design, store layout, marketing, bookkeeping or other operations.

Some of these services are already provided by the BID – and they should be continued and expanded. The BID should bring in experts and offer workshops on various aspects of the business. Some efforts could be fun, such as hosting a window display contest with consumers casting ballots for the best displays. Other workshops, such as those put on by the Preservation League of New York, help the owners of downtown buildings find ways to economically protect their historic structures.

#### **Strategy D11 – Fill vacant storefronts with art or other signs of life.**

Often, vacant storefronts in a downtown can give the appearance of a toothless smile, with vestiges of businesses long gone, or facades, signs, and interiors in disrepair. The City or BID should explore ways to work with property owners to utilize vacant storefronts creatively—as showcases for local art, marketing for events, and the like. Activating these storefronts would draw attention to the properties themselves, benefiting the landlords as well.

Artistic work need not be static. Pittsfield, Massachusetts, which has had a storefront arts program for several years, experiments with putting musicians in windows at certain times. Philadelphia took this idea a step further, allowing



In Boston, drivers are given instructions for finding and using parking kiosks (left). Numerous and visible signs direct drivers to parking lots in Saratoga Springs, New York and reinforce the city's horse-centric theme (right).

artists to not just display their work in vacant storefronts, but to use the space itself for rehearsal or workspace, signing month-to-month no-rent leases, but paying for utilities.<sup>7</sup> The BID or the city will need to coordinate these activities and help encourage participation.

#### **Strategy D12 – Develop a parking education and signage strategy for downtown**

As walkable as the downtown strives to make itself, many people will still need to drive and then park to take advantage of the urban core. Downtown Auburn currently has places, including the main parking garage, in addition to on-street parking. However, the city lacks adequate signage to alert visitors to the location of this parking.

As part of the overall strategy to market downtown, the city and/or BID should invest in more and better signage outlining the location of various parking lots in the area. This could potentially be incorporated into general visitor-oriented downtown maps available both as brochures and posted as signs. Similarly, parking lots themselves should be clearly delineated with well-designed, easy-to-read signage unique to Auburn. It is not always clear in many urban lots if the parking spaces are truly public, what the costs might be and whether there is a time limit. Also, a number of members of the public have said Auburn's downtown garage, which is an important asset, does not always feel safe. Better lighting, painting and maintenance may help people feel safe in this very convenient parking structure.

<sup>7</sup> "Philadelphia turns over vacant storefronts to artists" *Ashbury Park Press*, March 2, 2009. Last access online on April 29, 2009 at: <http://www.app.com/article/20090302/BUSINESS/90302059/0/UPDATE>



Auburn's Founders Day celebration brought thousands to the city's streets and boosted the city's regional image.  
(Photo: [www.ignite.org](http://www.ignite.org))

### Strategy D13 – Support an aggressive schedule of outdoor festivals

Music festivals, street fairs and other public outdoor events are excellent ways to promote downtown and bring customers there on special occasions. A well-done outdoor event, especially an annual one, can draw people from around the region and regularly expose them to the options found in a rejuvenated downtown.

In many communities, such efforts are met with resistance from some residents or business owners. The complaints center on noise, loss of parking spaces or street closures. However, such fears can be alleviated with careful planning and education.

Communication is crucial in making these events profitable to the broader community. Too often, large numbers of people will come for an outdoor concert or a road race and find stores closed. Other people reported merchants caught off guard – open, but unaware and unprepared for the people and selling out too quickly. Coordination, through the BID, helps eliminate frustrations felt by visitors and business owners. It helps make the visitors to Auburn feel welcome and come back for another event or just to stay, explore and spend their money.

Auburn must support as many festivals as possible in downtown. Indeed they should act as a facilitator to see if festivals can be made bigger or more attractive by adding events such as a road race. The city will have to help alleviate the concerns of such neighbors as well as education everyone that short-term inconveniences can pay off in the long term – and be fun.

### Strategy D14 – Use street banners to tout Auburn

Utilize street banners in central areas of downtown to promote events, such as art fairs or theater events. Banners can function as a "town crier", giving downtown a sense of place and alerting residents and visitors to anything that boosts downtown. Banners can designate districts and link places, such as the disparate parts of Auburn's downtown, together. Another example, museum district banners can help identify the area as important and interesting. Banners can be drawn by school children or professionally done for particular events. Banners could be sponsored by a business or organization, as long as they do not read like an advertisement.



Banners can announce community events (left), mark the boundary of a special place (center) and build community spirit (right). The banner pictured on the right, going up soon in the Village of Victor, was design by school children.



***Goal 4. Develop downtown Auburn as a center for arts and entertainment.***

**Strategy D15 – Market the downtown area as one suitable for arts and trades, as well as a great place to live.**

In many of the comprehensive plan public workshops, residents expressed the desire to market Auburn's downtown as a cultural center, building on its unique concentration of theater, art, innovation and history in order to popularize the city. Already the Musical Theatre Festival has discussed the possibility of a long musical theater season in the various venues throughout the community.

However, building on any arts endeavor requires a unified marketing message for it to blossom – and make sure that any economic gain accrues to other businesses. Potential strategies include:

- > Relate downtown as an arts district to Auburn's "History's Hometown" brand.
- > Create an advertising campaign including posters, signs, email blasts, radio and TV advertisements. Any current advertising about Auburn should be reworked to offer a consistent message.
- > Hold special events to boost downtown as an arts district – store promotions, beautification efforts, sidewalk sales and outdoor arts/cultural events.
- > Focus most outdoor events and festivals in downtown. This serves two purposes. First, it continues to promote the message that downtown Auburn is the center of activity. Also, it keeps such events out of the neighborhoods and lessens conflicts.
- > Hold informational events for the real estate industry – both residential and commercial – to explain the benefits of downtown Auburn.
- > Encourage artists, cultural venues, organizations, etc. to register with the city as "arts anchors," which can become attractions around the city for visitors. They can be given opportunities for special advertising campaigns and able to have promotions to the public.
- > Hold open studio days or arts festivals.



A non-profit arts organization in Somerville, Massachusetts organizes an annual "open studio" event to support arts. The city, a partner in the effort, allows temporary mini-kiosks to be placed around the city with posters, flyers and maps about the event.



### Strategy D16 – Allow and encourage live/work space downtown.

For Auburn to create a true artistic city center, it should consider the lifestyle needs of artists, many of which desire to live where they work. Whether sculptor, jewelry designer, or filmmaker, the work/non-work life of an artist is very fuzzy. Live-work units in downtown put these urban pioneers in proximity to each other and services. The city also benefits by having a built-in core of downtown residents who walk, shop, and eat nearby.

Downtown Auburn largely falls in the Central Commercial zoning district, which permits a variety of commercial uses, including retail, office, and manufacturing in conjunction with retail, such as a bakery or arts and crafts studio. In terms of residential uses, the C-2 Central Commercial district is open to many types of residential dwellings. However, live-work space is not listed as permitted in its downtown district. It should be encouraged and promoted for artists and other appropriate home occupations.



Art springing up in old mill buildings in downtown Lowell, Massachusetts.

(Photo: George Homsy)

#### Case study – Lowell, Massachusetts

Lowell, the fourth largest city in Massachusetts, is home to historic, cultural, and educational institutions. In the 19th century, Lowell was one of the largest industrial communities in America, with a thriving textile industry. The decline of that industry left behind many vacant and underutilized buildings. They are now beginning to be reused for homes, businesses and cultural activity, in part due to the addition of the Artist Overlay District. The new ordinance allows artists to both live and work in the same space, a multiple use not typically allowed. The city implemented this policy to encourage artists to both live and work in the historic downtown.

This policy has been a catalyst for a vibrant, 24-hour downtown life and stimulated new economic opportunities for the district. Between 1998 and 2000, the ordinance was pivotal in the rehabilitation of four distressed properties in the heart of the downtown historic district and National Park. All four were owned by the city through tax foreclosure and were transferred to two private developers who converted them into artists' spaces. Several downtown condominium units, owned by the city through tax foreclosure, were similarly transferred with the stipulation that they be used for artist live/work housing. Further spin-offs of the "Artist Overlay District" policy have included new privately developed art galleries.

*This case study is adapted from work by ArtistLink. Find more information about this and other arts districts go to [www.artistlink.org/?q=spacetoolbox](http://www.artistlink.org/?q=spacetoolbox).*