

What Will It Take?



Early in 2015 the Hartford Preservation Alliance (HPA) and the Hartford Business Improvement District (BID) joined together to address the question posed by a desire to improve the Farmington Avenue corridor between Sigourney and Woodland Streets. What is necessary to bring about a change along the corridor and contribute to community economic development for Asylum Hill? Our determination to gather many collaborators allowed us to seek wide-ranging opinions and to encourage a diverse mix of ideas. With the help of a consultant our collaboration produced "The Farmington Avenue Comprehensive Community Plan", A Framework for Action. Our challenge was to create a vibrant, pedestrian friendly and safe Farmington Avenue corridor between Sigourney and Woodland Streets with a high quality and diverse mix of commercial, cultural and residential offerings. We wished to create a cohesive identity where commercial and residential buildings complement the rich architectural heritage. Along the corridor sit six vacant and abandoned historic properties which, among other sites, posed tremendous opportunity for revitalization.

Perhaps the most singular property is the Comet Diner. Built, or rather delivered, in 1948 the classic stainless steel diner has been a destination and a beacon on Farmington Avenue providing food, drink and hospitality since it opened as the Aetna Diner. Times and urban demographics changed ultimately causing the diner to close its doors ten years ago. The owners have been frustrated with finding a tenant to reuse the property and have determined that the building has no alternative but to be demolished. Without marketing the diner to have an alternative reuse their strategy is to invite big box retail development such as a CVS. In sustainable community's wisdom the destruction of the Comet Diner would drive a spike into any hope for a revitalization of the Farmington Avenue corridor. Replacing an icon with a soulless retail building would contribute to the further decline of one of Hartford's high

profile commercial corridors. For decades the diner has been a destination, even as it sits vacant and abandoned. It remains one of the most identifiable buildings on Farmington Avenue providing an architectural cohesion which can contribute to a broad-based plan for revitalization. To ignore this historic building permanently wastes an opportunity to have it contribute toward the comprehensive community plan to resurrect this major corridor.

Our Comprehensive Community Plan pivots on the preservation and adaptive reuse of the Comet Diner. Since presenting the Plan last September HPA has empowered an ongoing discussion to seek a feasible reuse of the Comet. Much work and research has been accomplished in exploring alternative use concepts for the building. The City of Hartford funded a small grant to explore creating a master plan for the block between Laurel and South Marshall Streets. Of particular excitement is the potential to be found in food; food entrepreneurs, events, access to better food, farmer's markets and best of all employment opportunities for residents. What better reuse than to have the Comet become the focus on an urban effort to feed a community?

Time has become a key element for the preservation of the Comet, a recent application to demolish the Comet is now in play. Within days the Hartford Preservation Alliance worked diligently to alert the public that an application has been filed. It is our firm belief that an alternative reuse development can be feasible. Discussions are underway with development partners; the City is in consultation as well as the Asylum Hill Neighborhood Association (AHNA). Initial support to postpone if not deny a demolition is particularly strong. Our work is to organize a viable, financially feasible project to meet the vision of the Comprehensive Community Plan. However, the Hartford Historic Commission needs to understand that the community, all of Hartford, opposes the demolition of the Comet Diner.

In the words of Floyd Green, Senior Vice President, Aetna: "People need to believe it's a great place...We need a positive campaign. Then perceptions and perspective will change. Begin by taking the randomness out of the neighborhood and then gradually adding resources; whether a bike or walking trail, new vendors or creating the same look and feel... When we do this folks will believe in the potential, have a sense of pride and invest in the area's future."