

Final Report

for

The Arts and Culture Corridor Study

Keene, New Hampshire

Creative Placemaking and Conceptual Design Study

Prepared for:

Monadnock Economic Development Corporation

Prepared by:

Stevens & Associates

95 Main Street, PO Box 1586

Brattleboro, Vermont 05302

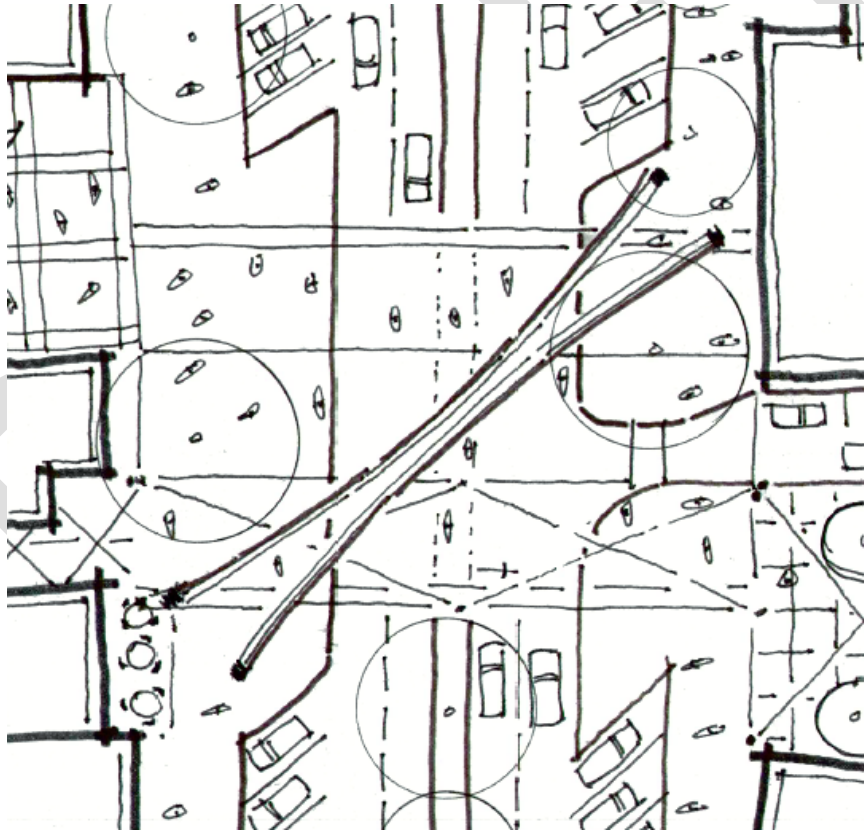
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with

Community Workshop

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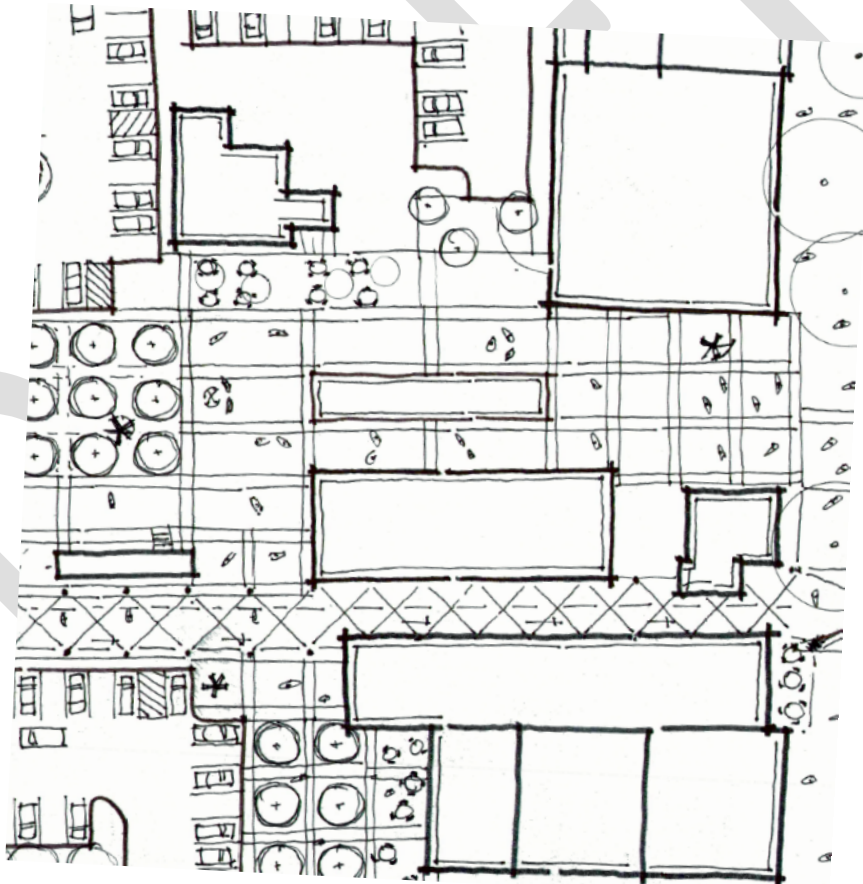
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Section 1. Introduction

The Arts and Culture Corridor is an ambitious and visionary project looking to reinvent a core portion of downtown Keene, NH. This project will further define the City as an active, vibrant place. A place to visit, shop, stroll, eat, meet friends and bring the family. It will promote it as a place of character and culture that will be attractive to those that already live and work in the downtown, as well as others in the city and region, and visitors from the northeast and beyond.

A focus of this reinvention and redevelopment effort is the enhancement and support for the arts and the large arts community in Keene. Currently the city has a strong core of artists, many businesses that have an artistic vibe and sensibility and a number of organizations and institutions that strive to support these. There are also a number of strong cultural institutions and venues in the project area. This project will further reveal the arts and cultural resources of the city and bring their artistic power to bear on the character of the area, while also striving to support the people and institutions in the arts and culture community.



Wall Dogs Mural



Train at the station

The Arts and Culture Corridor also looks to acknowledge and incorporate the railroad heritage of this portion of the city. The project area is made up almost entirely of land that was involved in railroad activity in the past. This includes the confluence of tracks on the western portion of the study area, the train station near Main Street and the railroad lands in the eastern portion of the site.

Project Impact

While the project focuses on supporting arts and the enhancement of cultural institutions in the downtown. The impact of the project will do much to support the residents, business owners and others of Keene and throughout the Monadnock Region. There are a number of key elements of the project that work together to create a new, vibrant corridor and a series of unique destinations. These include:

- Creation of a visually connected, highly walkable corridor extending from the Food Co-op to the east, to School Street to the west.
- A strong pedestrian crossing of Main Street including a design that the marks the area with unique materials, vibrant lighting and a large overhead arch

- A unique plaza space, serving as a hub along Main Street for gathering and socializing and connecting pedestrians from parking areas behind Main Street to the shops, restaurants and activity along Main Street.
- A Welcome Center to provide information for visitors and guidance and support for local residents.
- Train cars that will be used for performance spaces, restaurants or pop-galleries for local artists
- Improved location for the Farmers' Market
- Construction or renovation artist spaces including housing, live / work units, gallery space or other needs
- Construction of a new 15,000 SF pavilion for Keene State College events and other community events
- Renovation of a venue for small performances near the Colonial Theater
- Construction of a new, state-of-the-art skate park to support recreation and an active lifestyle
- Redesign of Gilbo Avenue to enhance the urban feel and to better fit Keene and possibly promote future urban in-fill

Throughout the corridor new elements will be incorporated to display and enhance the feeling of creativity and vibrancy that is important to the people of Keene and central to the Arts and Culture Corridor project. These will include:

- Free standing art installations
- Murals or other wall art
- Interesting, artistic lighting
- Functional elements created by local artist and artisans like benches and light poles

Community will also be encouraged, supported and created through the creation of additional special elements or spaces, including:

- Outdoor gathering spaces
- Small performance venues
- Interesting, interactive water features
- A community playground
- Fire pits and night time attractions

Project Funding and Consultant Team

Monadnock Economic Development Corporation, under the leadership of Jack Dugan, created the initial vision for the Arts and Culture Project and developed funding for this conceptual design effort.

Stevens & Associates led the project design effort along with their partner Community Workshop who focused on the community engagement aspects of the project.

Section 2. Current Site Conditions

The project site is an approximately 11-acre area located in the core of downtown Keene. It is a long corridor stretching from the area of the Monadnock Food Co-op and the Courtyard by Marriot Hotel to the east, crossing Main Street and ending at the School Street to the west. On the east side of Main Street, it is a narrow corridor, which includes the Cheshire Rail Trail and Railroad Square. On the west side of Main Street, the corridor widens to include several City owned parking lots and land owned by Keene State College.

West Side

The western portion of the project is currently comprised primarily of streets, large parking lots and unused open space. This area is still strongly impacted by its railroad history which has left it with a fairly open character, including several large parking areas, giving the area a character that does not fit well with the traditional small city character and urban form of much of Keene. The Cheshire Rail Trail connects through this area running south of Gilbo Avenue. The area of the former train station is the home of the current Transportation Center and of the Corner News.



Western portion of the project area



Gilbo Avenue. Near School Street, Mid block and near Skate Park

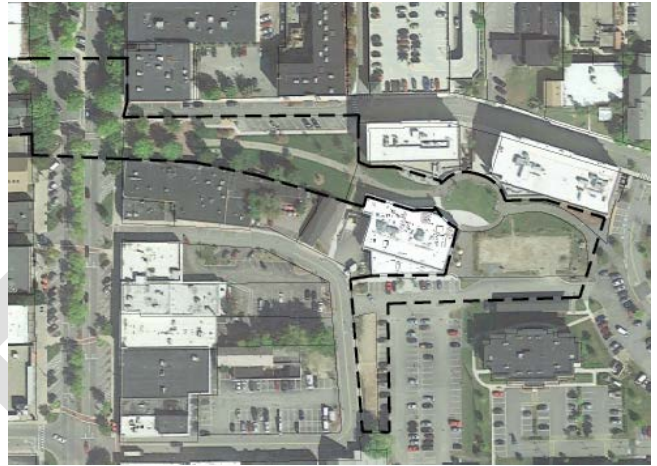


Adjacent parking areas.

East Side

The project site continues to the east including a crossing of Main Street near the intersection of Gilbo Avenue and Main Street. It then includes Railroad Square and continues on towards an oval space that is situated between the Monadnock Food Co-op and the Courtyard Marriot Hotel.

The Railroad Square area is a pleasant plaza space enhanced by the use of brick and granite. Beyond that the primary character of this area is a linear connection between Main Street and the Co-op area. This is reinforced by the Cheshire Rail Trail which runs through this area as a narrow pathway that is used by both pedestrians and bicyclists. The pathway has lawn area on either side, which is visually pleasant but does not activate the space. The oval area is designed as a small performance space with a raised area that can serve as a stage.



Eastern portion of the project area



Images from the east side of the Arts and Culture Corridor

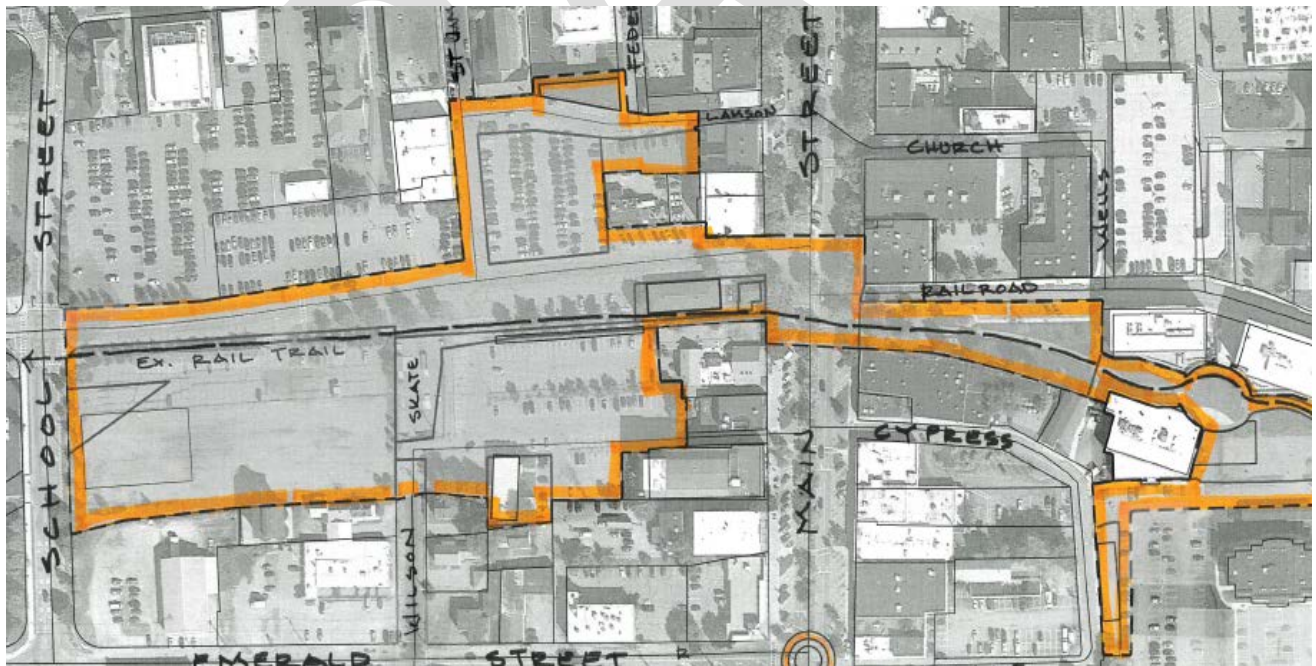
Project Limits

Three very important limitations to the overall project were evident from the start of the project. These included maintaining the existing route of the Cheshire Rail Trail, continued parking in the Keene State College owned lot along Gilbo Avenue and working within areas where MEDC had projects and agreements already in place.

The Cheshire Rail Trail is situated on a right-of-way designated by the federal government. Minor alterations to the right-of-way have proved challenging in the past and would likely do so again. In addition, local bike advocates expressed concerns about the impact of any changes to the bike path route. Some improvements to the bike trail are considered as part of the project but these would not require a change to the existing route or right-of-way.

The KSC owned parcel includes a parking area that National Grange Mutual Insurance has access rights to. Keeping this parking available to NGM must continue into the foreseeable future. Some minor modifications may be acceptable so long as parking remains available.

While many good ideas were raised for properties adjacent to the Arts and Culture Corridor during the project, particularly during public engagement events, only changes that would happen within the project boundaries were included in the overall design.



Project Limits

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Section 3. Community Engagement

Engagement with the general community was a critical part of the planning and design effort. For this project this included a series of events where people could learn more about the project; participate in developing ideas and envision the overall design.

Community engagement is critical to this type of project for many reasons.

- First, it creates a broader awareness of the projects existence. While this might bring out both supporters and naysayers it is appropriate that a project of this magnitude be part of the community conversation.
- Second, it is a vehicle for people to express their hopes and dreams, their concerns and frustrations, and other types of information that can be used to shape a project. While good design professionals can bring a great deal of knowledge and skill to a project it is difficult to have an understanding of a place the way that local community members can.
- Third, community engagement events that include design input can lead directly to new ideas that might impact the final constructed project. Community members with design or drawing skills can sketch ideas. Or ideas might be suggested to a design professional who would then sketch the idea.

Community Workshop led all of the community engagement events with substantial support from Stevens & Associates. Community Workshop has expertise in developing community engagement events and has developed a variety of techniques to help run successful event.

Community Engagement Events

This project included four unique events that helped increase awareness of the project, allow community members to express there thinking about the project and the community and participate in the design process:

- **Community Walkshops** (a workshop while walking) – These events were focused on providing information to abutting property owners, nearby businesses, arts groups, cultural institutions and others groups with an interest in the downtown about the project. To do this, 3 different meetings times were set up on September 18, 2019. Small groups of around 25 people were pre-enrolled to participate in one of these meetings. Each started off with a gathering inside to discuss the overall project and then led to a walking tour. During the walk specific aspects of the project were described and discussed.

During the walkshop there was significant support for the concept of the Arts and Culture Corridor including:

- Adding vibrancy to the downtown.
- Creating a more walkable downtown
- Creating an arts rich area and supporting local artists

Several concerns that were also raised including:

- Limited vehicle access to properties such as Lindy's Diner, The Corner News and 55 Main Street
- Reduced parking near Main Street
- Impacts to the existing Rail Trail

(images)

- **Radically Rural Connect Event** – Radically Rural is an annual two-day summit that brings together people from around the country that are passionate about creating vibrant, robust communities and rural downtowns. On Thursday evening an event was held to promote connection between people and communities. As part of the event, a booth was set up for people to provide input on the Arts and Culture Project. This included people from Keene who had the chance to express some of their hopes for the project as well as those attending from other places who were able to provide ideas that have worked in their communities.

(images)

- **Pop-Up Event** - On Saturday October 19 another significant community engagement effort took place. This was led by Community Workshop and involved a creating a temporary installation in Railroad Square. In this case a number of elements were brought in to help depict how the changes in paving and the addition of elements can enliven a place.

Just as importantly this was an open public event that allowed anyone in the community to learn more about the project and provide feedback. People of all ages and all walks of life were drawn to the event by the displays, music, and excitement. The outstanding weather and the s'mores also helped draw a crowd.

This event also provided a very good opportunity for community members to express their ideas and opinions for the future of the area. Many were very excited about:

- Improving the character of Railroad Square
- Promoting community through play areas,
- Promoting community through share facilities (cook s'mores)
- Programming and events to bring the community together

There were also concerns expressed at the pop-up event. These included:

- Changes happening without public knowledge
- Impacts on the homeless population



Images from the Pop-Event

- **Charrette** – The final public engagement event was a design charrette. This included time for presentation and discussions with community leaders including keypad voting on some important issues. This was followed in the afternoon by a time for discussing the project with others including the general public and putting pen to paper, trying to draw ideas on a plan or as a sketch. The charrette was held on Wednesday, December 4th, 2019.



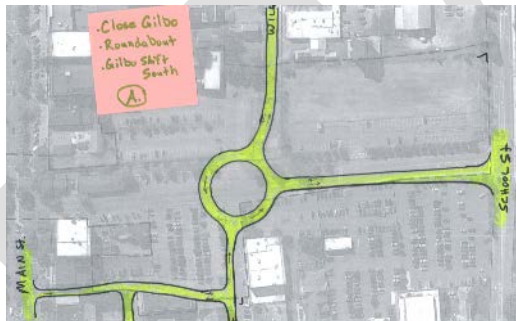
Photo Credit: The Keene Sentinel

Again the overall project received significant support. Early in the charrette groups developed ideas and presented those to the group and keypad voting was used to evaluate the results. Voting showed significant support for:

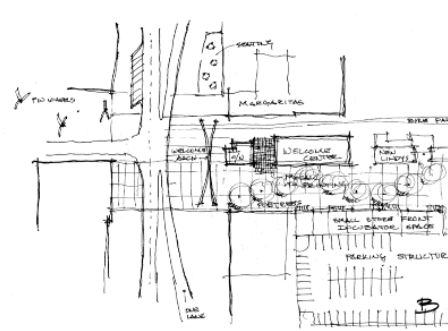
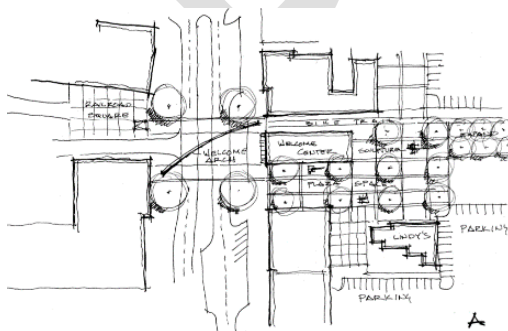
- A Welcome Center near Main Street
- A Transportation Center near the Corridor
- A large arch or similar element at Main Street Crossing
- Closing one block of Gilbo Avenue (Main to St. James)

Also some concerns were expressed. These included:

- Problems with traffic flow if a portion of Gilbo Avenue is closed
- The need to replace / repair utility infrastructure prior to, or as part of this work



Examples of diagrams for traffic flow developed during the charrette



Examples of sketch plans developed during the charrette.

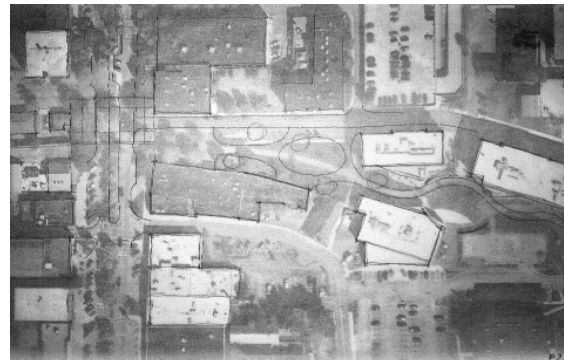
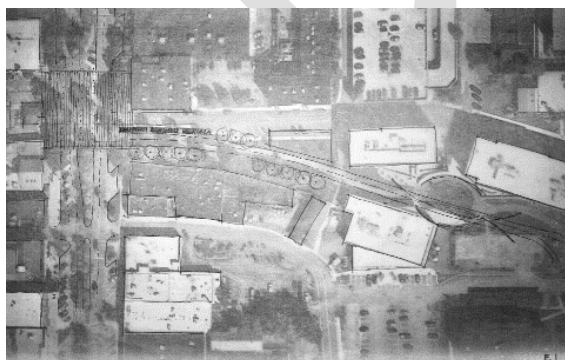
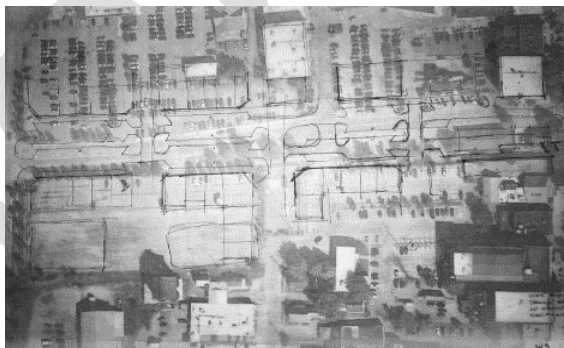
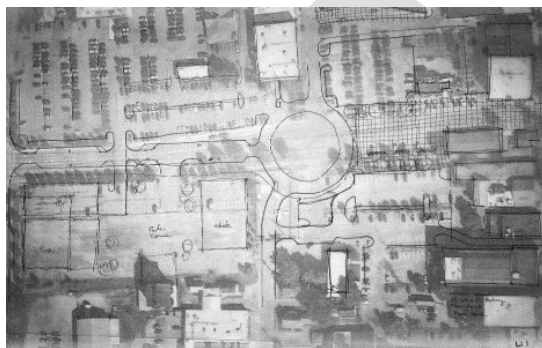
Section 4. Concept Development

Initial ideas for the overall programming and uses of the study area were laid out at the beginning of the study. To better understand these and in order to explore other ideas Stevens & Associates developed a series of quick conceptual design sketches early in the project.

Developing and documenting ideas early in the process has many advantages. First it allowed the project team to begin to consider many (but not all) of the ideas that might come up in the course of the project, both during public engagement events and while furthering the design in-house. By developing and understanding these it was easier to understand input and recognize new or novel ideas that deserved additional thought and consideration.

Second, by sketching out ideas, using reasonable dimensions for each element, the potential of various ideas can start to be understood. Also the possible relationship of elements can be considered. This is particularly important when some of the elements, such as roundabouts, parking structures, pavilions or other uses have substantial dimensional requirements.

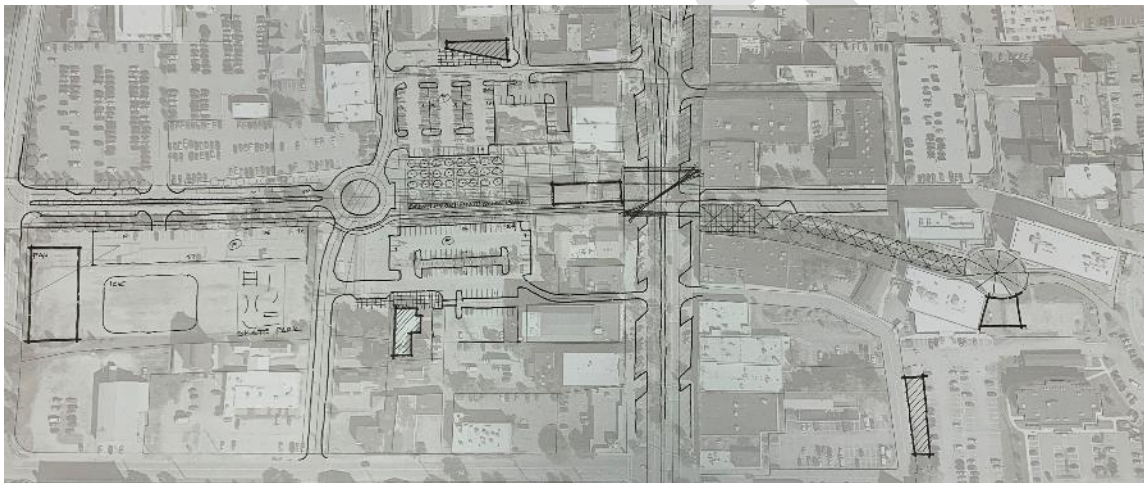
Third, the act of putting pen to paper starts to develop some ideas about the potential form and character of the design. Urban design and site design go beyond the mathematics of space and include ideas of form and character. These ideas are developed over time through a series of iterations of drawing, editing, revising and redrawing.



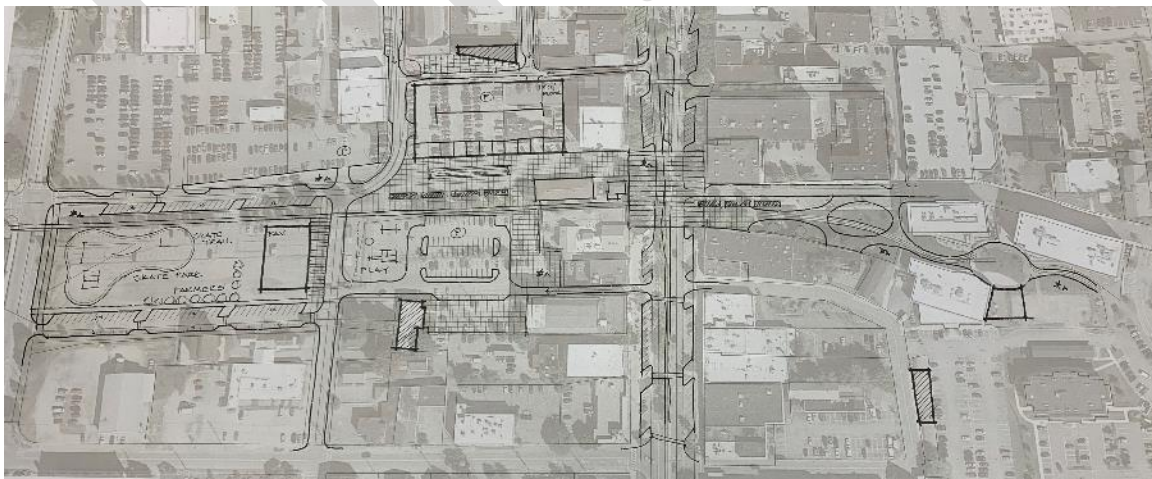
Examples of the first group of design ideas and graphics

The community engagement events previously described took place after developing these initial ideas and provided a good deal of input and ideas. Much of the input supported the conclusions, while some led to new thinking.

All of the design ideas and community input were subsequently considered and two final options were developed for discussion. These options were presented to MEDC and selections were made for preferences for each portion of the study area. For the most part the preferences allowed for ideas that had been connected together in the above design options to remain together, thus allowing ideas and graphics developed for the options to be carried into the final design.



Option A



Option B

Section 5. Preferred Conceptual Design

The preferred design that has been imagined and developed through this process will bring an expanded sense of vibrancy and community to the downtown. The corridor will be a series of gathering spaces, living opportunities for artists, additional art installations, and places to enjoy food, music, and much more in the downtown.

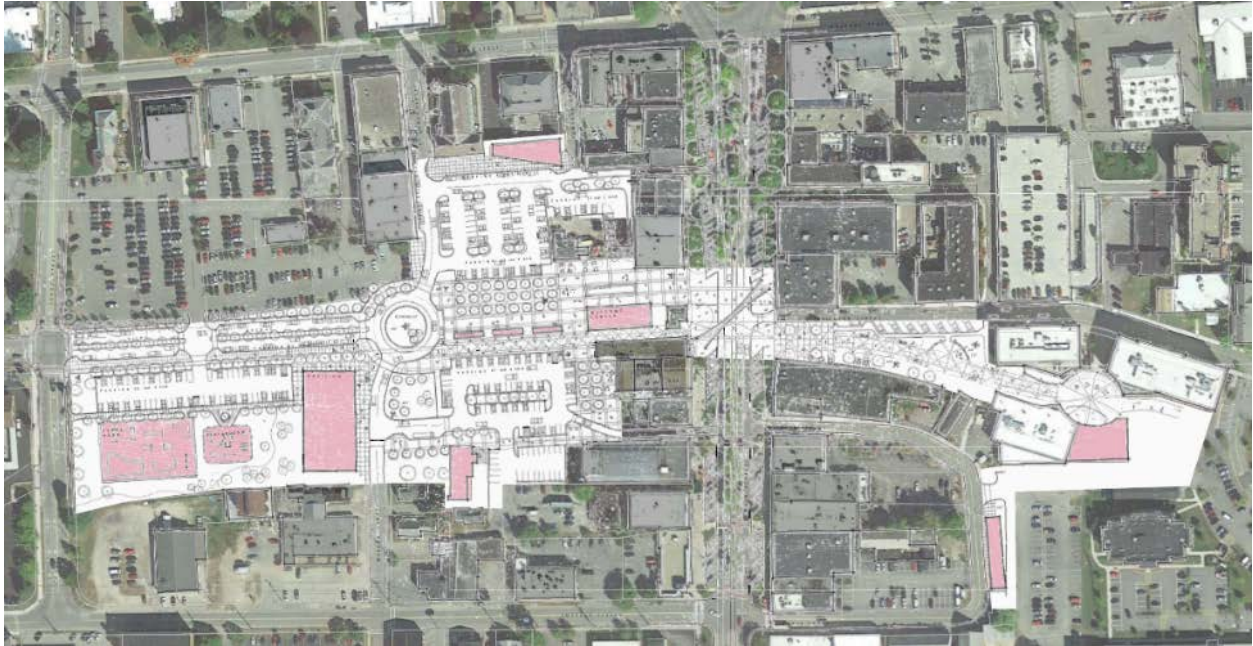


Image of the overall design concept

A core principal of the design is improving the pedestrian experience in and around Main Street. The creation of a large pedestrian plaza just to west of Main Street is the boldest element of this plan and is critical to fully accomplishing this goal. This will become both a new primary destination in the city as well as a pedestrian connector between large parking areas and Main Street. It will create a public space that will be a center for activity, community and the arts and add to the already strong public realm.

Improving pedestrian crossing of Main Street itself is also a critical component. The area between Railroad Square and the newly created pedestrian plaza will become a highly visible wayfinding element and a location that is designed to help pedestrians cross Main Street. This location will be highlighted with a large arch that will be visible from the north and the south along Main Street as well as from the east from the Co-op and the railroad lands and from the west along Gilbo avenue.

Many other elements that are key to the character and culture of the area will be focused on this pedestrian core but extend outwards into the district. These include:

- Lighting – Overhead café lighting will add character and vibrancy to evening life in Keene. These will extend from Wilson Street across Main Street and continue to the area of the Co-op. With modern lighting design these types of lights can be controlled to add all kinds of effects and amounts of light.
- Large art installations – Large art installations will be scattered throughout the project area. These will be commissioned pieces from local or regional artists and will give the sense of “art gallery” to the district / corridor.
- Smaller art installations – These would include sculptural pieces, murals, land art and other art and could be permanent installations, locations for rotating exhibits or even blank canvases where community members could create temporary, ephemeral art.
- Unique furnishings – This includes benches, light poles, and other elements that will populate the corridor. These will be either developed by local artists and craftspeople or selected to add to the creative vibe of the area
- Performance locations – These would be locations designed to act as a small theater with a raised platform or stage area and a place to accommodate seating. Some of these will be quite small

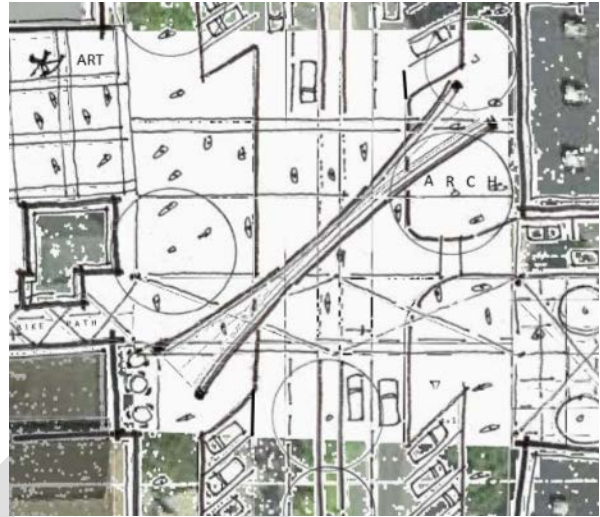
It should be noted that community members expressed strong opinions about the types of materials that should be included in the district. Large timber, iron, brick, granite, and water / ice were all listed as materials that would fit well with the history of Keene and could be used in both traditional ways and with unique applications to develop

Another key to the character of the overall design is inclusion of elements to connect with the railroad heritage of Keene in general and of this area specifically. Much of the project site was formerly inhabited by railroad tracks, the railroad station and the everyday activity of passenger and freight trains. This design includes a series of railcars that would activate and enliven the western portion of pedestrian plaza. These railcars will be transformed into shops, restaurants, pop-up studio spaces or other destinations. This will not only make a direct historic reference to the history of the site but also provide a way to activate this portion of the site in unique way.

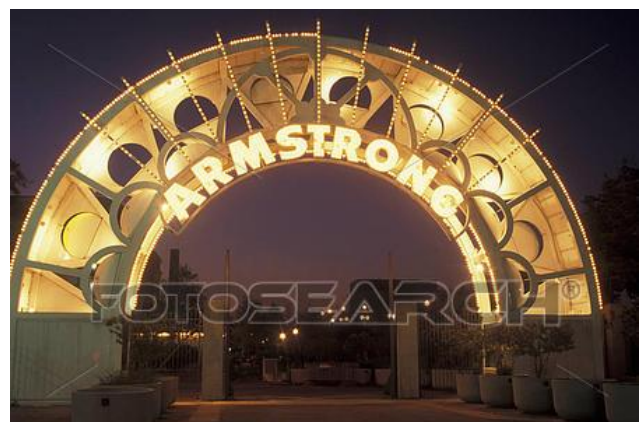


The Crossing

One of the most important areas of the overall project is the crossing of the Arts and Culture Corridor with Main Street. The design envisioned for this area would accomplish two important goals. First and foremost, it will provide a strong east/west pedestrian and bicycle crossing of Main Street. Greatly enhancing safety and promoting a strong east to west connection. This will be accomplished through the use of paving, bollards and other elements that would amplify the pedestrian realm. At the same time the diagonal on-street parking in the area is somewhat reduced and simplified. Allowing drivers to focus their attention on others who are sharing this important crossing point. At night this area will be well lit, primary through overhead café lighting which will add a festive flavor to the area.

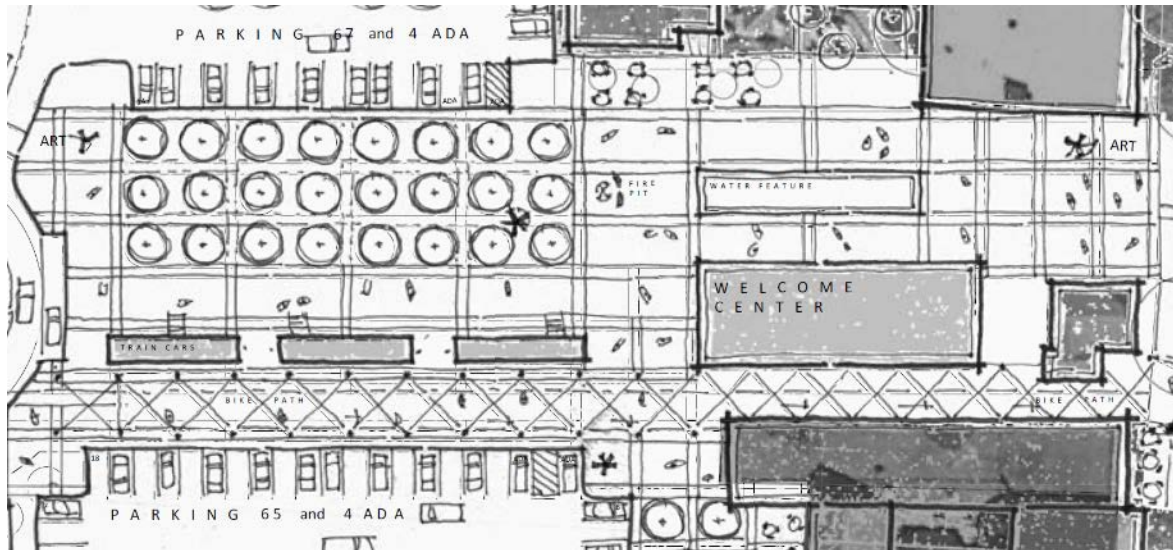


Secondly, because of the prominence of the location and the density of users in the area this is envisioned as becoming “the” place for meeting in downtown Keene. A large arch, or similar landmark, will provide wayfinding for those on Main Street and on the Arts and Culture Corridor. The arch will also provide a fun and unique backdrop for group pictures, selfies, snaps and other social media. The arch will be designed to complement the steeple of the church near Central Square which is an important landmark in Keene. It is envisioned that the new arch would be well below the Steeple when viewed from a distance but then frame the view of it as one gets near to the arch.



Pedestrian Plaza

The large pedestrian plaza just west of Main Street is a bold change to the built environment. This will be a place where people can meet and socialize in a large urban plaza. The plaza will have at least three recognizable portions including: an open plaza near Main Street, an area focused around a large water feature and a large grid (or bosque) of trees with shade and bench seating.



The first open portion will be a perfect place for people to meet. The existing it is depicted as having a large sculpture or similar art piece that complement the adjacent arch. The Corner News will be directly connected to this portion of the plaza, as well as to Main Street.

A new Welcome Center will be an integral part of the central portion of the plaza. Visitors, tourist and locals to get information about the city and upcoming events. This area will also provide an opportunity for outdoor seating near Lindy's Diner as well as access to the rear of 55 Main Street which includes Greenwald Realty and apartments.



A grid of trees, or bosque, is envisioned as a counterpoint to the openness of the first two sections of the plaza. It will have a softer feel and provide substantial shade and benches. This area could be used for the Farmers Market during good weather or for other vending or information booths.

This area will also be the home to several train cars. These will add interest and excitement to the area. These could be permanent uses or places that change occupants on a regular basis and could have a wide range of uses including:

- Restaurant or coffee shop – possibly with some indoor seating or acting like a food truck – taking orders and serving through a window.
- Pop-up Retail – providing a small footprint shop where a local business could try a new idea or artists could have their work for sale
- Artist’s Studio – provide workspace for artist in a public and well-traveled area with large window or doors that could allow passerby’s to see the artist at work
- Performance space – the car could be a small venue with lighting, sound and seating that could also be opened for small outdoor

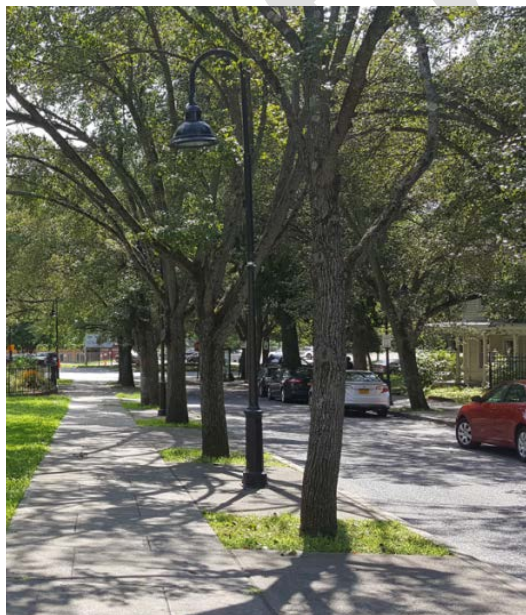
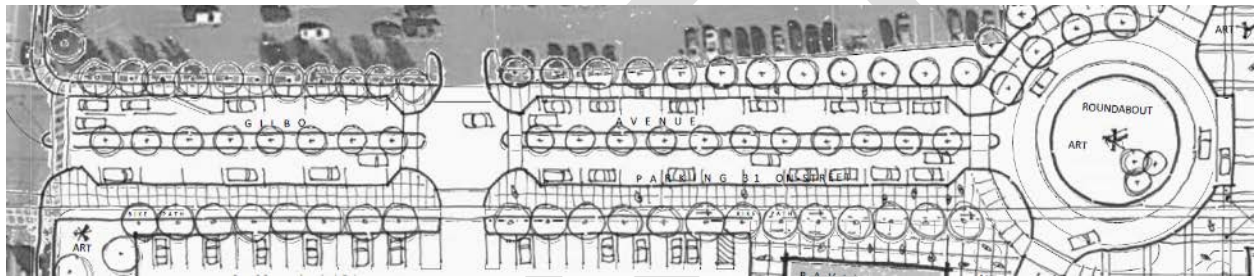
On the south side of the Train Cars, Welcome Center and The Corner News the Cheshire Rail Trail will continue in its current location but will also be improved to aid both bicyclists and pedestrians. The overhead café lighting that crosses Main Street will continue over the Rail Trail throughout this zone. This will provide a fun and vibrant spirit to the area and assist with wayfinding for those trying to connect with the downtown. The lighting will also help with interactions between bicyclist and pedestrians in the area. Pedestrians crossings of the Rail trail will be well designed and well lit.



Gilbo Boulevard

Gilbo Avenue will be completely remade within the project area. At the end near the pedestrian plaza will be a large roundabout connecting Gilbo with both Wilson Street and St. James Street. This will allow access to the City owned parking lots and Arts Plaza. The roundabout is similar in scale and dimension to others in town and will accommodate large trucks and emergency vehicles. Specifically, the dimensions of the roundabout at the intersection of Main Street and Winchester and Marlboro Streets were used to determine the appropriate dimensions.

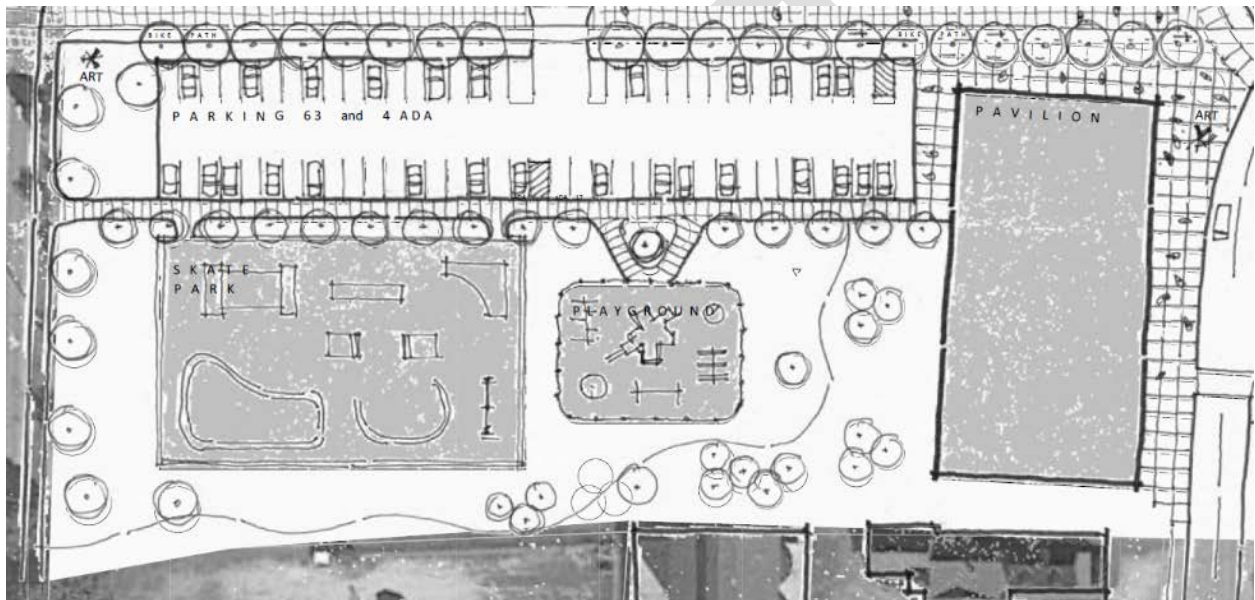
To the west of the Arts Plaza, Gilbo Avenue will be transformed into a boulevard with on-street parking, trees, lighting and benches – creating a comfortable, walkable corridor designed for people. Parking in this area will allow for short term parking with access to new adjacent uses and to Main Street which will be a quick 3 to 4 minute walk for most people.



Community Space

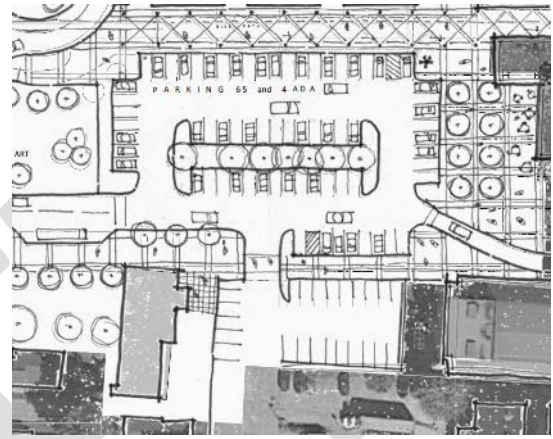
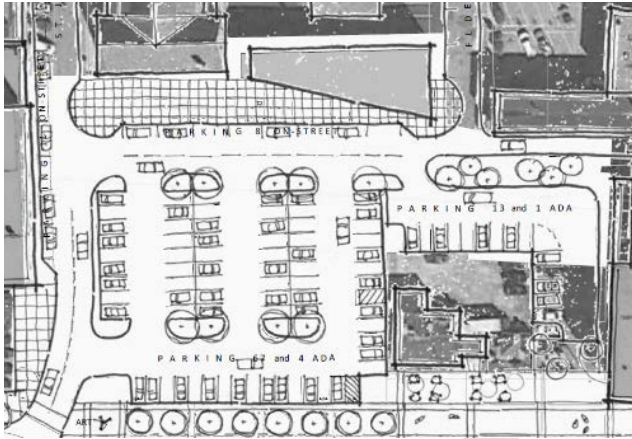
To the south of Gilbo Avenue big changes will be happening to the large, somewhat vacant lot between School Street and Wilson Street. This area will be completely transformed into a vibrant community space that will include a new skate park, a park and playground area and a large pavilion. Fund raising for the skate park is nearly complete and construction of the skate park will likely be one of the first elements of the overall design to be completed.

The Pavilion will be a collaborative effort with Keene State College. It is envisioned as large open floor plan that could house both large events such as concerts or community dances and accommodate smaller events such as yoga classes or community meetings. The pavilion could serve as the winter home for the Farmer's Market.



Parking

To the north and to the south of the plaza area the city-owned parking lots will be slightly reconfigured. This would allow for changes in vehicle access to the lots but more importantly will aid pedestrians to connect directly with the Plaza and to downtown. Pedestrians will be able to quickly park and connect to spaces filled with people, art and events and then make their way to the shopping, restaurants and other events along Main Street.

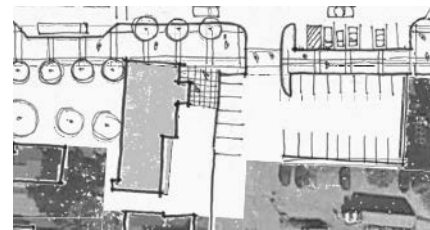


Changes to Buildings

A critical part of the overall thinking and design of the Arts and Culture Corridor is the inclusion of opportunities for reuse of existing buildings. Two examples of this occur in this area. The Jonathan Daniels Building which currently houses the Saint James thrift shop will be renovated to support artist. While a design for the building is not complete it is envisioned that it will include artist housing and possibly artist studios.



Also in this area is the building located at 20 Commercial Street which is currently being designed as a small performance venue related to the Colonial Theater. This new performance space will be connected to Arts Plaza through a series of smaller plaza spaces.



The last element of the overall plan are two buildings in the area of the Food Co-op. The first is an addition to the existing Co-op building which is already under construction.

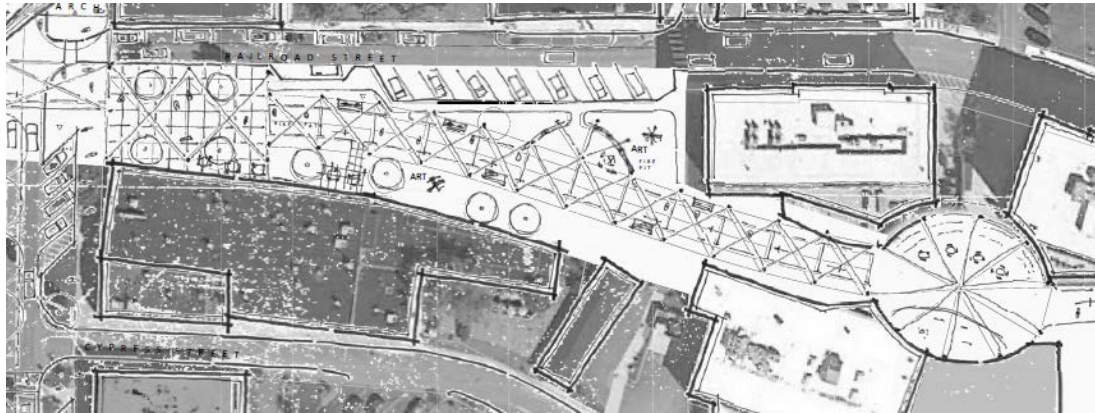
The second is the plan for artist housing and studio or gallery space in a new building along Eagle Court and adjacent to parking for the Food Co-op.



Railroad Square

Changes on the east side of Main Street will also play a critical role in making this area of downtown “the place to be”. This area is much more complete from an urban design point of view but still offers a number of ways that design will energize the area.

Railroad Square is a well-designed place that fits the character of Keene and supports the goals of the Arts and Culture corridor. Extending café lighting to cover this space will provide a festive air to the space at night and will enhance the sense of space and of place during the day. Café tables from the adjacent restaurants would also activate the space.



The primary existing element beyond Railroad Square is the Cheshire Rail Trail. Currently the path is fairly narrow, with both bicyclists and pedestrians sharing the trail. The path would be widened through this zone to better accommodate both. The additional width will allow for easier navigation or pavement markings could be used to help direct traffic. Overhead café lighting will continue through the corridor to help define the space and to improve safety in the evening hours.

Adjacent to the Rail trail corridor outdoor seating could be incorporated. The design depicts benches along the Rail Trail corridor itself as well as somewhat separate areas, such as a small semi-circular area adjacent to the diagonal parking along Railroad Street.



The Oval

The Arts and Culture Corridor ends at the existing oval performance space adjacent to the Monadnock Food Co-op, 51 Railroad Street and the Courtyard by Marriot. This area will be enhanced as an outdoor music venue through the additional lighting, connections for sound equipment and seating. Overhead lighting will add to the character and will clearly announcing that beginning of the Arts and Culture Corridor for those arriving from the east, either via the Cheshire Rail Trail, adjacent housing or nearby parking.



Section 6. Next Steps

Several steps will be needed to move from the initial idea by MEDC of an Arts and Culture Corridor and the subsequent community engagement and conceptual design efforts of this study to move towards a completed project and a new active, vibrant district in downtown Keene.

These next steps include:

- Complete a traffic study to assess the impacts of closing a portion of Gilbo Avenue and other changes to traffic developing new traffic flows in to and out of the areas west of Main Street.
- Work with the City to consider the impact of the project on utilities and other infrastructure, particularly the timing of needed upgrades so that they can be completed prior to or at the same time as surface renovations.
- Work with the City, business owners, local residents and community members to consider the impact of realigning parking including adding on-street parking in the newly developed Gilbo Avenue and reducing parking counts in city owned lots in the area.
- Continue community engagement efforts to keep the public informed and to continue public support for the effort
- Continue to work with community groups involved in specific aspects or elements of the project to further develop support for the project
- Define distinct areas or elements of the overall project and develop additional design, cost and permitting information for each
- Develop construction documentation for each area/element

These steps will lead to a completed Arts and Culture Corridor project that will bring a new sense of vibrancy and activity to both the project area and to many surrounding areas and establishments. Walkability and the overall pedestrian experience will be greatly improved, further defining downtown Keene as a place for both local residents and visitors to come to stroll, shop, eat and recreate.

