

# Memorandum

## City of Lawrence

### Planning and Development Services Department

**To:** David L. Corliss, City Manager

**From:** Planning Staff

**cc:** Diane Stoddard, Assistant City Manager  
Cynthia Wagner, Assistant City Manager

**Date:** November 29, 2012

**Re:** Downtown Redevelopment Issues and Opportunities – analyzing where the height, mass and scale of a particular part of downtown could be changed with new or re-development.

#### **Recommendation**

Review information in this report and refer the matter to the Historic Resources Commission and Planning Commission with specific direction to discuss the information in this report and provide comments/recommendations on the following issues:

1. The level and location of density and height in the Downtown area.
2. With input from the Public Works Department, discuss whether the Downtown Design Guidelines appropriately address the nature of parking (angled and parallel) in the Downtown area and whether intersection improvements, such as traffic circles, would be appropriate to serve the multi-modal demands in the Downtown area.
3. The establishment of policies that address the use of city surface parking lots as development demand increases.

Note: This study and any referral to the HRC and/or the PC is not intended to delay any application in process in the downtown area.

#### **Background**

Staff was directed to complete a downtown survey that evaluates development and redevelopment opportunities primarily along New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Vermont and Rhode Island Streets between 6<sup>th</sup> street and 11<sup>th</sup> street to determine the areas of downtown where the height, mass and scale could be altered from current conditions.

Downtown is recognized as a special place. The physical layout of blocks, streets, and buildings at a pedestrian scale create a rich environment for living, working, and playing. Attributes such as permitted uses, building setback, sidewalk width, design of storefronts, canopies and signs, and building height, mass and scale all contribute to the uniqueness of the downtown area.

The land uses associated with new projects is usually not an issue, as most developments will be mixed use and the permitted uses of the Commercial Downtown (CD) District are not an issue. What is often discussed is the height, mass and scale of a project relative to the character of downtown and its flanking residential neighborhoods. This memo identifies the areas where the height, mass and scale of a particular part of downtown could be changed with new or re-development and also proposes policies to refine the expectations for development in downtown.

The table and map contained in this report reflect 39 parcels identified by staff for new or redevelopment. The parcels represent general development opportunities based on a visual survey by staff and are not being presented as parcels advocated by staff for development or redevelopment. The survey may not represent every development opportunity and it does not take into account owner and/or public input. Public and property owner input is encouraged as the HRC and PC consider this report.

There are approximately 227 parcels in the downtown area studied in this report. Of those parcels, 4 are privately held and vacant and 11 are city-owned and used as surface parking lots. These 15 parcels represent the areas of downtown where the height, mass and scale could be altered from current conditions the greatest extent. The remaining 24 parcels contain some level of height, mass and scale but could redevelop with additional square feet if the owner chose to pursue such.

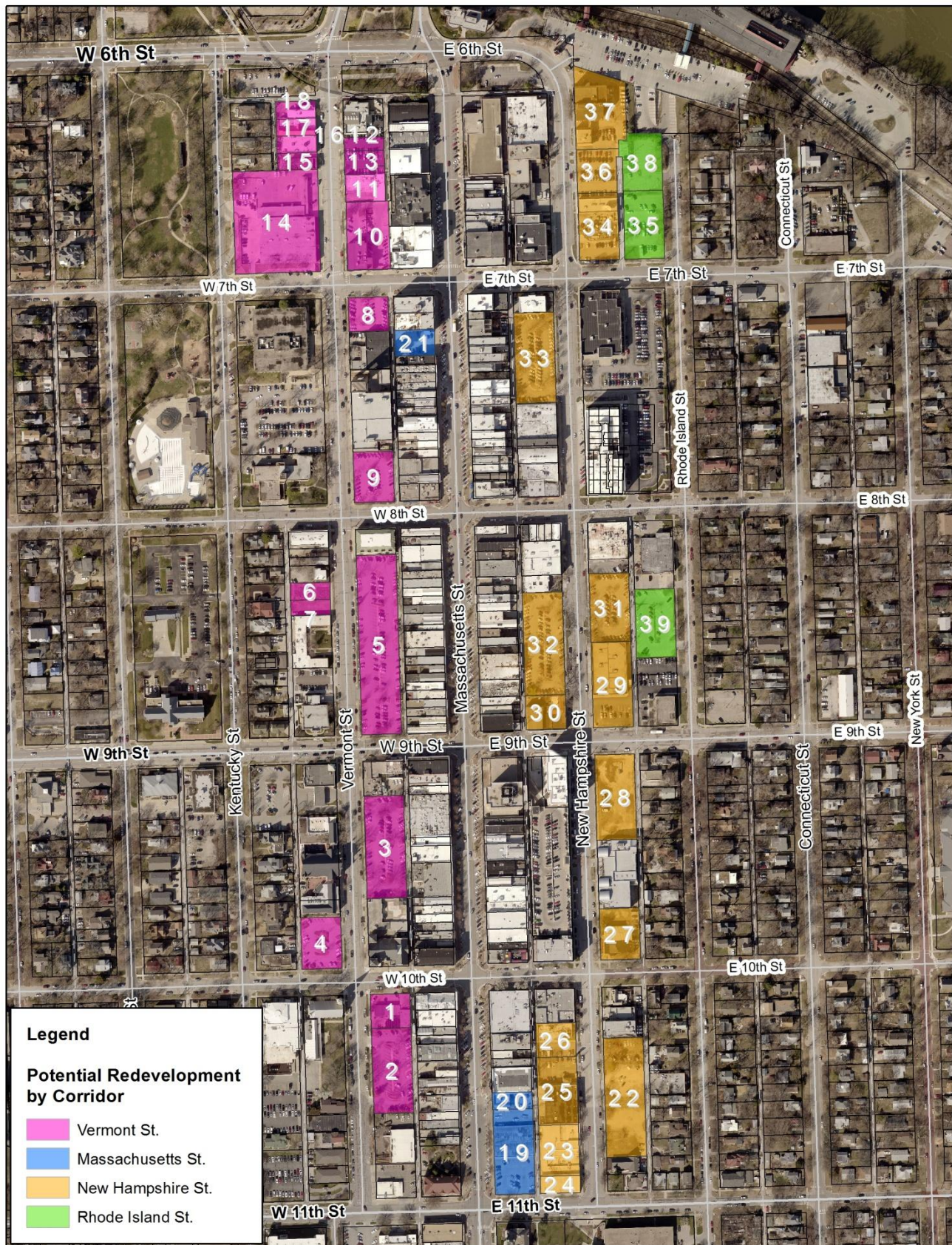
**Parcels Identified for Development Potential**

	<b>Vermont St. Corridor</b>	<b>Massachusetts St. Corridor</b>	<b>New Hampshire St. Corridor</b>	<b>Rhode Island St. Corridor</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Total Square Footage<sup>1</sup></b>
<b>City Parking Lots</b>	6	0	3	2	11	305,463.81
<b>Privately Owned</b>	10	2	11	1	24	432,453.54
<b>Vacant</b>	2	1	1	0	4	60,808.78
<b>Total</b>	18	3	15	3	39	798,726.13

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<sup>1</sup> Square feet does not include rights-of-way







Most of downtown is considered “built-out” in a physical sense, especially Massachusetts Street, and will not likely redevelop in any significant way. However, redevelopment of certain built-out properties is not out of the question and is identified in this memo. For example, there has been periodic discussion of redeveloping the Allen Press property at 11<sup>th</sup> and New Hampshire. This building could be razed and a new building constructed. The proposal would need to take into account the Downtown Design Guidelines, the surrounding fabric of downtown, as well as several historic sites. In any event, though, the character of that area of downtown would surely change and the historic review process and Downtown Design Guidelines exist to ensure that the change to the height, mass and scale is appropriate.

### **Downtown Character**

The downtown area possesses diverse, yet cohesive physical attributes that collectively serve to illuminate periods of the City’s historical development, and that contribute to its overall character. One of the most visible attributes is the remarkably consistent pattern of urban-commercial buildings, wide streets, and alleyways that were constructed over extended periods of time. On block after block we still find dense rows of two and three story, brick or stone buildings with elaborate cornice treatments, upper story offices or residences, and first-floor retail storefronts. Taller, more massive buildings create visual emphasis at select block corners. Alleyways cut between or pass behind buildings, permitting easy pedestrian access and allowing services or deliveries to occur ‘off-stage.’

Lawrence’s downtown is located on a generally level area which slopes gently down to the Kansas River to the north. Diagonal parking is provided along Massachusetts Street, and there are wide concrete sidewalks with curbs, light standards, and stop lights at intersections. The outside edges of the district are defined either by vacant lots and parking lots, most of which were formed by the demolition of historic commercial buildings; non-historic buildings; or historic buildings which have been irreversibly altered. Most of the existing buildings in this district have identical setbacks; i.e., most are constructed to the edge of the property line along the sidewalks.

Downtown is generally built out at a height of 1-3 stories with a few exceptions (US Bank building, AT&T tower, Eldridge Hotel; and more recently Hobbs-Taylor Lofts and 901 New Hampshire). The Downtown Design Guidelines encourage heights for new buildings that are compatible with their surrounding context and directs taller structures to the ends or corner of a block.

### **Discussion**

It is conventional wisdom that increasing the residential density of a downtown maintains its health and vitality. That is true for Lawrence and the code requires a mix of uses so that there is a symbiotic relationship between residents, workers, and shoppers downtown.

One main discussion point is how buildings’ height, mass and scale on Vermont and New Hampshire streets relate to Massachusetts Street on the one hand, and the residential neighborhoods to their other side on the other hand. The Downtown Design Guidelines state the following about the height of Massachusetts Street:

“By historic development, dense rows of two and three story commercial storefront buildings, anchored by larger structures on the block corners, make up the single most identifying characteristic of downtown Lawrence’s primary corridor.”

The Guidelines also state the following about where density, and thus height, should occur in Downtown:

“Densities are expected to be greater along Massachusetts Street and less dense along peripheral streets. Massachusetts Street blocks should be anchored with significant structures at the corners, with an emphasis on retail uses at the street level.”

The Guidelines state the following about the height of new development:

“The height of new buildings and additions shall relate to the prevailing heights of nearby buildings. New construction that greatly varies in height from adjacent buildings shall not be permitted.”

Density is usually implemented through building height and massing. Under the currently adopted guidelines, Massachusetts Street would be taller, overall, than Vermont and New Hampshire Streets; however, as this report reflects, the overwhelming majority of parcels poised for development are on Vermont and New Hampshire Streets. If Downtown’s density is to increase, then it must do so on Vermont and New Hampshire Streets since Massachusetts Street is predominantly built-out at a height of 2-3 stories.

The Downtown Design Guidelines hold Massachusetts Street as the denser street, yet the opportunities to increase density through height exist on Vermont and New Hampshire Streets.

It is important to note that there are 15 properties in all of the downtown area that are either vacant or developed as a city parking lot. Each of these properties will need to be judged in their historic context, as well as pursuant to the Downtown Design Guidelines.

For example, there are only 3 vacant/parking lot properties on the east side of New Hampshire Street that do not have current development approvals and would be considered new development if actually developed. These three locations have vastly different contexts and the public process used to site plan a development proposal would theoretically yield the most appropriate building design for each context.

The approval process typically includes a public meeting at the HRC and site planning, which includes notice to owners within 200’ and to neighborhood organizations registered with the city. The site plan process also includes an appeal process for aggrieved parties to appeal to the City Commission.

A recent request to provide angled parking and a roundabout at 9<sup>th</sup> Street and New Hampshire Street triggered City Commission discussion on the topics. The Downtown Design Guidelines include a standard that requires on-street parking on Massachusetts Street be angled and parking on Vermont and New Hampshire Streets to be parallel. The Guidelines are silent on intersection improvements such as roundabouts. Staff has not completed a comprehensive study as to the appropriateness and impacts of installing more angled parking on New Hampshire and Vermont Streets or whether intersection improvements, such as roundabouts, would serve the needs of all transportation users – vehicles, pedestrians, bicyclists, disabled, etc. If we expect future requests to install angled parking or alternative intersection improvements, then these issues should be studied and the Downtown Design Guidelines revised to implement the new direction.

### **City-owned parking lots**

As noted above, there are 11 city-owned surface parking lots and 4 private vacant lots that have potential to develop. The city-owned parking lots have received some attention recently for their development opportunities. As long as these parcels maintain their function as public parking in some capacity, it is feasible that they may also be built up for a mixed use project. The following policies may be helpful when considering developing any city-owned lot:

1. Any development on a city-owned lot should maintain the same number of, or more, public parking spaces as existing at time of development, as well as accommodate all of the code-identified demand generated by the proposed uses, even though there is no requirement to provide parking in the CD district. This is so parking is not reduced in a relative manner due to the increased demand of any new development.
2. Any city-owned lot should undergo a public process for consideration for development. One process option, for example, would be to issue a Request for Proposals so that all development options are considered as the lot is converted.
3. All development should adhere to the development standards of the Downtown Design Guidelines, any historic review, and any other codes, policies, and processes adopted at the time of development.

### **Downtown Survey of Parcels**

The attached maps and table detail the current use, context, and potential for development or redevelopment for the identified parcels. Development potential has been included on a rated scale: high, medium, or low. The parcels represent general development opportunities based on a visual survey by staff and are not being presented as parcels advocated by staff for development or redevelopment. The survey may not represent every opportunity and it does not take into account owner and/or public input. Public and property owner input is encouraged as the HRC and PC consider this report.

Definitions for these ratings have been provided below to provide understanding of the thought process applied when rating each parcel. Photos have been provided to illustrate the pedestrian-scale view of the parcels. A brief description of each corridor follows the table below.

<b>Rating of Development Potential</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>High</b>	Parcel... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...is/contains a parking lot</li> <li>• ...is/contains a vacant lot</li> <li>• ...is adjacent to a parking lot or vacant lot</li> <li>• ...has been mentioned in previous discussions regarding development and redevelopment opportunities</li> </ul>
<b>Medium</b>	Parcel... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...is adjacent to parcels with high potential and could be included in a larger redevelopment project</li> <li>• ...has underutilized surface parking</li> <li>• ...has varying ratings amongst portions of the building</li> <li>• ...is currently a vacant building</li> <li>• ...is located in an area with larger scale redevelopment opportunities</li> </ul>
<b>Low</b>	Parcel has the potential to expand because of its location and proximity to redeveloping buildings.

### **Vermont Street Corridor**

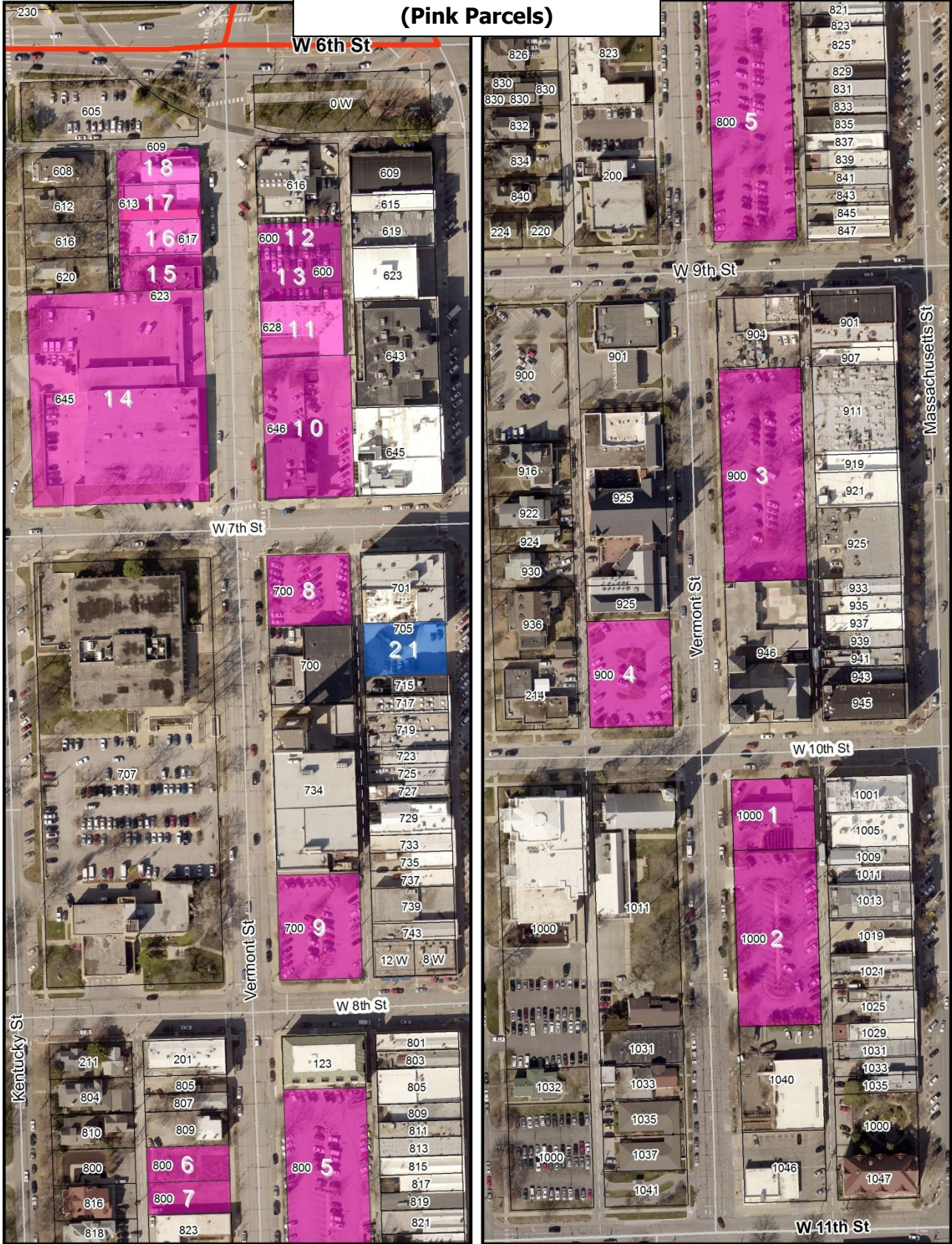
Vermont Street has commercial zoning to its east along the adjacent Massachusetts Street and residential zoning to its west along the adjacent Kentucky Street. There are a variety of civic uses on Vermont Street, including the Lawrence Public Library and US Post Office. With exceptions such as Trinity Episcopal Church, First United Methodist Church and Plymouth Congregational Church that offer architectural height to the streetscape, buildings are 1-2 stories tall.

With 6 city parking lots on Vermont Street in the surveyed area, there is opportunity to enhance the current parcels that function as access to Downtown buildings and events. 11 identified parcels, including 4 city parking lots, are adjacent to an alley that neighbors the buildings on the west side of Massachusetts Street. This alley includes business entrances and pedestrian usage.

The Vermont Street parcels identified are shown in pink on the map on the following page and details are located on the attached table, corresponding with the number on the parcel.



# Vermont Street Corridor (Pink Parcels)



## **Massachusetts Street Corridor**

Massachusetts Street has commercial zoning and a mix of uses to its east and west along the adjacent New Hampshire and Vermont Streets. Three identified parcels are either currently vacant or contain parking lots, yielding minimal opportunities for development or redevelopment.

The Massachusetts Street parcels identified are shown in blue on the map on the following page and details are located on the attached table, corresponding with the number on the parcel.



### Massachusetts Street Corridor (Blue Parcels)



## **New Hampshire Street Corridor**

New Hampshire Street has commercial zoning to its west along the adjacent Massachusetts Street and a mix of commercial and residential zoning to its east along the adjacent Rhode Island Street. With 901 New Hampshire, Hobbs Taylor Lofts and The Lawrence Arts Center, New Hampshire Street contains height that its neighboring streets do not have. There are, however, smaller scaled properties and buildings that are generally 1-3 stories tall.

The former Allen Press building provides opportunity for redevelopment on New Hampshire Street. Of the corridors studied, New Hampshire Street also has the highest volume of vacant parcels that provide opportunity for developing underutilized land.

3 city parking lots provide off-street parking to the downtown area.

The New Hampshire Street parcels identified are shown in orange on the map on the following page and details are located on the attached table, corresponding with the number on the parcel.



# New Hampshire Street Corridor (Orange Parcels)



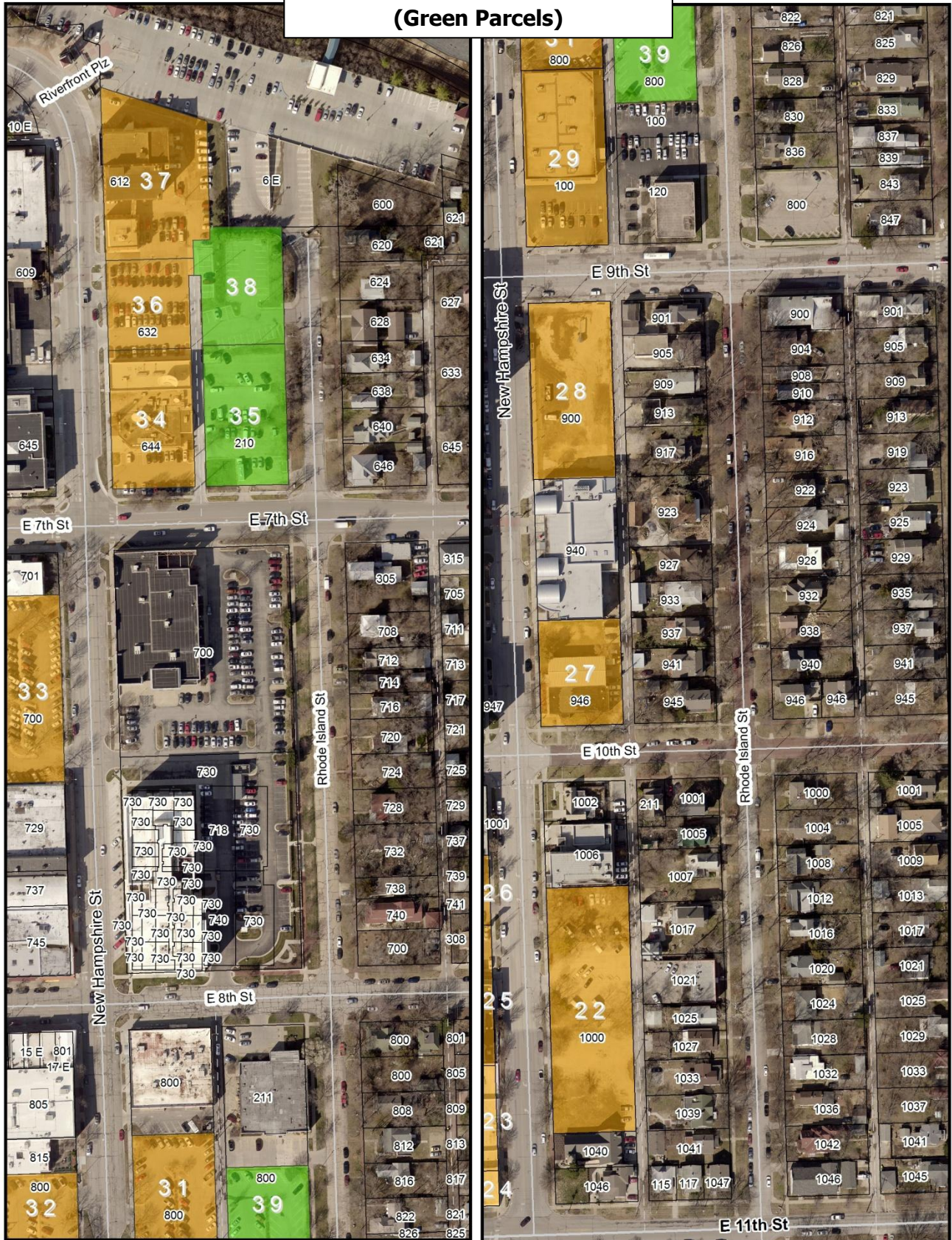
## **Rhode Island Street Corridor**

The Rhode Island Street parcels identified are shown in green on the map on the following page and details are located on the attached table, corresponding with the number on the parcel.

Three parcels are identified between 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Streets. Development of these parcels will need to take into account the residential zoning and uses across Rhode Island Street.



## Rhode Island Street Corridor (Green Parcels)



## **Summary**

The majority of the development or redevelopment opportunities are located along Vermont and New Hampshire Streets. 15 of the 39 parcels identified are existing city owned parking lots or vacant property and will be judged within the context of their surrounding properties and the Downtown Design Guidelines.