EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report presents an updated plan for revitalization of the commercial core in Essex, Maryland. The study also includes retail and non-retail uses in an extended target area adjacent to the CBD. This plan is oriented toward providing a broad, updated strategy that can guide the Essex Development Corporation (EDCO) and Baltimore County in their revitalization program for Essex. In particular, it recommends site- and area-specific public sector projects for consideration for the next phase of the County capital budgeting process, and it identifies other projects for private sector responsibility. These projects would complete the second phase of the commercial revitalization program now underway, and would recommend new uses or improvements for certain key sites to support the updated revitalization strategy. Study objectives are:

- First, to assess current commercial activity in the CBD and in its trading area to determine future market potentials that could support a revitalized CBD;
- Second, to evaluate revitalization activities to date undertaken as Phase I of the Essex Development Corporation (EDCO) revitalization program;
- Third, to update the conceptual framework underlying Phase I activities to reflect current conditions; and
- Fourth, to recommend the strategic next steps to be taken in Phase II to complete the revitalization of the extended Essex core area.

Study Area Description

The Essex business core area for this study is the Central Business District as defined by the 400 and 500 blocks of Eastern Avenue, extending from Mace Avenue and Riverside Avenue on the west to Woodward Avenue on the east, plus selected adjacent properties, which extend south to Maryland Avenue. Also covered in this report is an extended study area consisting of the Eastern Avenue frontages west of Mace and Riverside avenues to the Back River bridge.

Almost without exception, the Essex central business district is an area of small shops, restaurants, professional offices and service establishments, plus several larger government agencies and facilities. Uses in the extended area to the west are more directly oriented to the automobile than is true in the CBD, and include many converted residences. The Essex business district within the study area is entirely zoned business, with commercial overlay districts.

Revitalization Planning History

The early 1980's has seen the execution of a first phase of a concerted program for the commercial revitalization of the Essex CBD. Three plans for the commercial revitalization of the core area were undertaken prior to the execution of the first phase: the Murphy-Williams study (1976), the American City Corporation study (1978), and the Revitalization Plan prepared by Baltimore County staff (1980). Problems identified in the 1976/1978 plans and rated as high priority for improvement included access and parking, and obsolescence in the retail core:

1. Access and Parking:

- high volume of through traffic
- deficiencies in the numbers of parking spaces available
- very poor access to parking from thoroughfares
- poor location of spaces in relation to shops

2. Retailing: Obsolescence

- no clear retail function
- inability to compete with surrounding shopping centers
- large vacancies (64,000 square feet, or 25 percent)
- poor appearance of area
- poor condition of many structures
- lack of large anchors to generate shopper traffic
- lack of shoppers goods and specialty shops
- store units that are too large for modern shops
- lack of concentration of shops in easy walking distance
- absence of high quality businesses; large number of marginal businesses attracted by low rents
- high rate of business failure and turnover
- changing demographic mix: older, moderate income

The 1980 Action Plan

In 1980 Baltimore County staff prepared a Revitalization Plan, including an Action Plan, for Essex that built upon many of the ideas and concepts of the 1976 and 1978 plans. The Action Plan recommended improvements for public and commercial facilities, and private rehabilitation.

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Public Facilities. The basis for the design of the Action Plan is the concept of the Village Green, which was conceived as two (public sector) anchors connected by landscaped streetway (Eastern Avenue). Baltimore County approved a $600,000 bond issue to carry out the first phase elements of the Action Plan, the major components of which are described below.

1. Reconstruction of Eastern Avenue. Improvements to the roadway and beautification of the streetscape between the anchors was seen as essential to creating an inviting environment for upgraded shops, improved traffic flow, and increased access to shopping and parking.

2. Creation of Public Sector Anchors. The two facilities envisioned as the anchors for the Village Center greenway were the Essex Heritage Society museum (the old fire and police station) at 514 Eastern Avenue, and a Government Center one block to the south at Eastern Avenue and Taylor Avenue.

3. Construction of Public Parking Facilities. Creation of additional parking in the CBD was considered crucial. Among the proposals of the Action Plan were the construction of a parking deck at the Government Center, a new lot on the Franklin Warehouse property, and the interconnection of lots to the rear of stores.

Commercial Facilities. Private sector commercial revitalization includes physical improvements and marketing improvements, including tenant mix and business operations and promotion. Projects recommended were:

1. An Extended Commercial Mall for the 400-500 blocks of Eastern Avenue, with renovated shops bolstered by additional pedestrian traffic from the two public sector "anchors." Development would center on the redeveloped major commercial structure at 509 Eastern Avenue, with use of the two-story center portion for a supermarket.

2. Private Office Space and Business Services. The concept of the Action Plan was to focus office development west of the mid-400 block of Eastern Avenue, and on Eastern Avenue east of Margaret Avenue.

3. Entertainment Facilities. Proposed were a Twin Cinema, to be housed in the major commercial structure in the 500 block of Eastern Avenue or other appropriate site, and a complement of Ethnic Restaurants nearby.

Private Rehabilitation. The key to revitalization is to induce private property owners to make improvements to their own properties, such as:

1. Strengthen Residential Uses in the commercial area through the renovation of upper floor apartments.

2. Upgrade Facades along both sides of the 400 and 500 blocks of Eastern Avenue.

3. Create Private Government Support offices through redevelopment of 413-17 and 420 Eastern Avenue.

4. Construct Businesses Services Building to house service establishments not needed in the retail core.

The CBD Today

The Actions Plan's major proposals have been only partially achieved. This is not meant as criticism; the plan was extremely ambitious, but needs a more realistic reorientation today. Project status, and other problems and potentials identified in the CBD, are highlighted below:

- Public Facilities. Both public anchors have been completed. Major changes to the roadway could not be implemented, and landscaping has been more modest than planned. Certain priority areas have not yet received treatment. None of the parking projects has been implemented, although there has been change in policy toward metering, and public use of existing private lots has been negotiated.

- Commercial Facilities. The large retail structure has not been redeveloped, nor have entertainment or ethnic foods complexes been created. Renovation of shops, and particularly of offices and services establishments, is occurring at a modest pace, although not necessarily in accordance with the plan.

- Private Rehabilitation. A considerable amount of facade and other renovation has been accomplished; perhaps two thirds of the structures have been affected. Lack of design controls and incentives has been a problem, and there is still no identifiable retail village image. The business services and government support offices concepts have not been implemented as recommended in the Action Plan.

- A Business Plan for marketing and promoting the CBD has not been developed to date, nor is there a business assistance program to help entrepreneurs improve their merchandising techniques and target their markets. If, in fact, retail is still viable for the CBD, incentives and assistance programs would be in order.

- There is a need for more parking in Essex, but the greatest deficiencies appear to be in parking close to shops, rather than in the overall number of spaces. Visitors to the multi-service government center and the career training center keep the nearby non-metered lots full, preempting spaces for shoppers. Metered Revenue Authority lots at CBD's peripheries are underutilized.

- Building Condition. A survey showed that almost 80 percent of the nearly 350,000 square feet of commercial retail and office space is in good or excellent condition; 14 percent is in fair condition, and only seven percent is rated poor. This is a substantial improvement over condition ratings for previous years and suggests considerable progress in reversing deterioration and in upgrading the area.

Commercial Market Potentials

While there have been substantial improvements to properties in the Essex CBD, there has not been an appreciable improvement in business conditions. In 1988 stores in the CBD sold $14.1 million in goods and services from 147,000 square feet of space, for a very modest $96 per square foot, on average. By comparison, the residents of the Essex trading area spend $426 million for such goods and services annually; Essex's capture of that potential is only 3.0 percent. Some specifics are that:

- While reported retail sales are modest, merchants indicate improvement recently. Data were collected soon after the completion of a major streetscape project; retail sales can be expected to drop off temporarily during and for a period after construction.

- The CBD has been shown to be quite weak in shoppers goods and supermarket retail activity, but to be located centrally in a trading area in which demand for shoppers goods is quite underserved, especially for apparel, furniture, and specialty items. Potential for additional food stores in Essex is much less, due to competition from supermarkets in surrounding centers.

- It is in the area of convenience goods -- notably, restaurants -- and personal services that Essex has had some economic growth. Even so, most local restaurants are mom and pop operations, and the CBD captures only a small proportion of demand in the trading area.

- The predominant personal service in Essex is beauty and barber shops, and there is a limit to the CBD's ability to absorb more of them. The demand analysis has identified a sizable potential for local-serving office-type services: banking and finance, insurance, real estate, medical, legal, and so forth.

Conclusions

It is the conclusion of this report that the retail Village Green concept that has been the basis for past revitalization efforts cannot be achieved and needs to be replaced with a more realistic alternative. Four factors lead to this conclusion:

1. The extensively landscaped village retail center concept is unrealistic and prohibitively expensive. Factors contributing to this conclusion include the inability to obtain State cooperation in limiting traffic volume and in creating landscaped medians and pedestrian crossings; the significant costs associated with the ambitious village center plan; the inability to sufficiently stimulate and provide design control over facade improvements to create a unified image for the CBD.

2. The new Diamond Point Plaza may seriously reduce the potentials for additional anchors in the CBD. The Essex CBD finds itself in the position of being sandwiched between two strip centers, each with supermarket and discount department store anchors -- too close to compete successfully with, yet too far away to benefit from their proximity in attracting shoppers.

3. Public facilities have not been successful as "twin anchors" to stimulate business in the CBD. The restricted hours and modest patronage of the museum are too limited to have much impact. Further, visitors to the government center are there primarily for social services; they tend to be of limited means and do not constitute a stable market for retail in the CBD.

4. An alternative use is planned for the major available retail space in the CBD. The proposed business incubator represents a de facto decision to pursue broad economic development objectives in Essex as well as commercial revitalization. This facility would be linked to the County careers center and would provide important business development assistance opportunities in the community.

Recommendations

A Revised Revitalization Strategy

The revitalization strategy that is proposed here is to build upon the opportunities that will arise due to the incubator without abandoning the goal of retail revitalization. Instead, the revitalization concept would be reoriented to emphasize shops and services that have natural affinity to incubator activities, as well as to improve conditions for retail, services and offices in general. In this strategy, focus would also shift to business development -- which has been neglected in revitalization activity thus far -- to bring it in balance with physical development activity.

The Planned Business Incubator. The incubator would provide physical facilities, and technical and business development assistance, to small start-up firms in the Essex area at below market rates. The County is considering the purchase of the long-vacant A&P store at 501 Eastern Avenue; the incubator would occupy the 21,300 square foot ground level section of the structure, which has upper level retail space fronting on Eastern Avenue. If arrangements to acquire the property at a reasonable cost are not possible, other sites noted in feasibility studies for the facility can be pursued.

The incubator-linked retail revitalization concept would be to create opportunities for incubator tenants to retail their products and to attract other related retail specialties which could benefit from, and lend support to, the activities here and in the CBD. Such activities could include:

1. Food products and preparation, possibly with ethnic orientation. Successful shops of this type exist in Essex. (Appropriate training programs are currently provided at another training center, but not at Essex.)

2. Industrial specialties, including those offered at the occupational training facility in Essex; examples include metalcraft and woodworking, and other industrial arts and crafts (e.g., County demonstration projects, links to historical industries through the museum, commercial graphic arts, fine arts, etc.).

3. A farmers market, with inside vendors or seasonal open-air stalls, should be competitive in Essex despite nearby supermarkets, given its image of low-cost/high-value fresh and specialty foods, and would provide a festive atmosphere sorely lacking in Essex. A study of the Baltimore city markets indicated they involve heavy subsidies which should be avoidable through alternative strategies for space leasing and maintenance.

Other Revitalization Activities. The revised strategy for the Essex CBD essentially abandons the highly landscaped retail village for a broader multi-service concept where it is hoped that a stronger bridge can be established between the commercial sector and public offices and facilities in Essex. The planned incubator is the key link among them. In addition:

- Current physical improvement programs in the CBD should not be slackened but rather intensified to complete improvements begun within the CBD and to expand revitalization activities to include the broader study area. These include streetscape, facades, roadways, parking, design control, signage, etc.

- Business development should join physical improvements as the next initiative for revitalization. Such business development assistance should include the marketing of the CBD and of vacant space in the CBD, technical assistance to businesses, and financial assistance for working capital as well as for improvements to real property.

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Public Sector Responsibilities

As a community development organization, EDCO is the proper body to spearhead these expanded activities for Phase II of the revitalization program for Essex, just as it has led the way in revitalization activities to date. The support and assistance of Baltimore County will be critical, of course, and the County should have responsibility for implementing key revitalization projects in Essex. A summary of roles and responsibilities for EDCO and the County follows below, with a timetable for completion of major physical improvements. A complete site-by-site description is presented in Section IV of the report.

Parking and Traffic. There can be no relief to parking and traffic problems in Essex without the aggressive participation of Baltimore County. The County should not cease to intercede with the State Highway Department concerning traffic flow and control policy for Eastern Avenue. It is recommended that the price of on-street parking meters be increased to $0.20 per hour to discourage meter-feeding. At the same time, the meters should be removed from the Revenue Authority lot at 409 Eastern Avenue to encourage use of this long-term lot by employees. Also recommended are major improvements to alleys to increase access to employee parking behind stores. Finally, the County should consider whether it has a responsibility for providing more parking for the government multi-services center in a way that will lessen the present negative impact on the availability of parking for shoppers.

Business Development. EDCO should take the lead in initiating a business development program for the expanded revitalization area. There should be increased technical and financial assistance from Baltimore County. Activities should include:

1. EDCO activities and roles: advertising and lease-up of vacant space; area promotion and marketing; technical assistance; and involvement of local financial institutions in supporting revitalization projects.

2. Roles and responsibilities for Baltimore County: financial assistance for working capital as well as property improvements; technical assistance; stricter code enforcement.

Key EDC Capital Projects. Design and implementation of physical improvements projects will be primarily the responsibility of Baltimore County through the Economic Development Commission (EDC) with critical input from EDCO and cooperation from property owners. These projects and proposed timing for their implementation are summarized here:

	Recommended Action	Year
1.	Essex Business Incubator: Acquisition and establishment	FY'91
2.	Streetscape: Eastern Avenue from Margaret to Woodward, and on Taylor and Margaret Avenues from Eastern Avenue to Maryland Avenue	
	a. Streetscape design	FY'91
	b. Streetscape construction	FY'92
3.	Essex Village Green Park (523 Eastern)	
	a. Acquisition and design	FY'91
	b. Construction	FY'92
4.	Reconstruction of Alleys in the 400-500 blocks between Eastern Avenue and Dorsey	FY'91-2
5.	Streetscape: 0-300 blocks of Eastern Ave.	
	a. Streetscape design	FY'92
	b. Streetscape construction	FY'93

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