

# TOWN OF GRAY, MAINE

## HANCOCK BLOCK MASTER PLAN

JULY 2013



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## Part 1—Background and Purpose

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Gray Village was the primary focus of commercial activity and community life. The character of the buildings and landscape reflected its social importance until damaged by fire in 1921. Many of the buildings destroyed were located on what is referred to as the Hancock Block or the “Triangle”.

The Village is now an odd mixture of historic buildings and more modern structures and sites that lack visual or functional cohesiveness needed for a vibrant downtown. With the exception of a small public parking lot, all parcels within the block are currently privately owned. Some of these properties feature well-kept buildings, while others have structures that have fallen into disrepair.



**Current mixed-use building restored from the remnants of the original building damaged by the fire.**

The portion of the Village identified for this master planning study was chosen as a step towards fulfilling goals outlined in the Village Master Plan regarding improvement of the Village center’s character, life and economic vibrancy.

### Past Attempts at Revitalization

In recent years, property owners have contacted the town about planning ideas, which included privately-funded, professional conceptual drawings for the project layout. Lack of funding, a soft commercial real estate market and property disputes prevented progress for any of those projects from moving forward. Additionally, an application for CDBG funds was submitted for façade improvements for one of the older buildings as part of a larger project; however, funds were not granted.



**The UCC Church in the early 20th Century**



**The UCC Church today**

## Challenges to Redevelopment

The redevelopment of properties in the “Triangle” is difficult due to the geometry of the parcels and the limited space available. All of the lots are restricted by parking standards and requirements for minimum lot sizes for on-site wastewater disposal.

Several properties are occupied by attractive, well-kept buildings, while others detract from the neighborhood’s character and discourage investment. Successful redevelopment of this block will require property disputes to be resolved, a plan to coordinate shared parking and septic systems, and an ability to draw investment to unkempt properties.

## Planning Study Area

The Hancock Block (the “Triangle”) occupies a strategic location at the busy intersection of Route 115 (Yarmouth Road), Routes 4/100/202 (Main Street), and Brown Street. The Hancock Block is what motorists first see when they exit off the Turnpike to enter the Village.



## Part 2—Engineering Analysis

The engineering assessment completed by the Town’s engineering consultant, Gorrill-Palmer, revealed no infrastructure issues that would significantly restrict redevelopment of the Hancock Block. Wastewater can be treated on-site by means of a septic disposal system due to the capacity of the existing soils. Stormwater can be handled by connecting to the existing infrastructure within the public right-of-ways.

The assessment also examined vehicular, pedestrian and bicycle traffic flows and capacity on the surrounding travelways in terms of access to and from the block. Traffic modeling was conducting based

on MDOT traffic data to determine whether or not Yarmouth Road and/or Brown Street could be converted into a one-way road with the hope of creating on-street parking.

Traffic modeling determined that this concept would not work due to high traffic volumes trying to get to/from Route 26 and Yarmouth Road. The queuing lengths could not maintain the same level of service at the signals. The decreasing levels of service at Main/Yarmouth/Portland/W Gray Roads, from D to F, and at Main/Brown/Shaker Roads, from C to D, would make angled on-street parking concepts for Brown Street not possible.

The community desires to put forward a development option that would result in traffic improvements, but options are limited within the travelways surrounding the block, especially in terms of vehicular traffic. Other than intersection improvements at the corner of Brown Street and Yarmouth Road, traffic improvements for the block ultimately focused on access into, out of and through the site.

Parking capacity was also recognized as a key redevelopment issue. The One Gray Center (or 100 Main Street) building currently has approximately 7,280 square feet of office space. Based on current parking standards in the Gray Site Plan Ordinance for this building alone, parking ratios for various office space range from 4 to 5.5/1000 square feet gross floor area (GFA). For retail/other commercial space the ratio is 4/1000 square feet GFA. Therefore, this building alone requires 30 to 40 parking spaces. Unless this project becomes one large parking lot, the maximum number of spaces that could be created while still accommodating stormwater management, septic and green space is about 50 parking spaces plus or minus 5 spaces. Given that parking maximum, an additional 2700 to 6250 square feet of commercial or office space could be accommodated on the site under current zoning.

The parking demand cannot be met with surface lots on the site for a couple of reasons: 1) the physical dimensions of the block and each interior parcel; and 2) a lack of on-street parking and or alternate parking areas in the village center within walking distance of the block. A parking deficiency on the block is not to be a deterrent to redevelopment; however, it is recommended that parking be addressed in a district-wide manner.

### **Part 3—Architectural Assessment**

Wright-Pierce conducted the architectural site assessment and designed concept redevelopment scenarios. The goal of these scenarios was to make the highest and best use of the Hancock Block given the constraints and opportunities offered by physical site conditions and the existing regulatory framework of the Town.

Factors considered included:

- Opportunities for locating commercial enterprises that will fill community and visitor needs and are conveniently and appropriately located.
- A balance between buildings, pedestrian and vehicular circulation, landscaping and parking.
- Utilizing the architectural character of the downtown as an opportunity to strengthen the retail character of the village center by: building up to the streetline; applying design standards; and utilizing size and characteristic building standards compatible with existing structures.

- Attractive and informative views into and out of the block.
- The character of the downtown streetscape (sidewalks, crosswalks, street furniture, street plantings, lighting).
- Possible new urbanistic, traditional neighborhood development, and smart growth approaches to establishing a walkable downtown environment that is linked to other downtown destinations and attractions.
- Attractive and useable landscaped environment, by creating useable outdoor spaces between buildings, parking lots, development features and streets.
- Parking areas as "green" as possible.
- Traffic flow, including vehicular and pedestrian access to downtown businesses.
- Parking quantity, distribution and quality.
- Mixed use development that includes a housing component.

## Part 4—Landowner Input

Interviews with Town officials and Hancock Block property owners were the first step towards consideration of concept designs. Each property owner was asked a series of questions pertaining to:

- Nature of the Property (History and Current Use)
- Investments in the Property (Past and Recent)
- Goals for Future Development of the Property

### Summary:



#### History and Use

- Family owned – 20 years
- Uses - antiques business, a small eatery and apartment rental space
- A significant amount of restoration has been done to the house and barn including ADA access to buildings

#### Future Goals

- Access to additional parking from nearby parcels
- Small scale retail seems to work, possibly mixed use
- More seating for café/restaurant use

**History and Use**

- Oldest church in Gray
- At current location for over 100 years
- Owns additional properties on Brown Street and Yarmouth Street.
- Rents additional parking on block

**Future Goals**

- Access to additional parking
- Improved pedestrian access

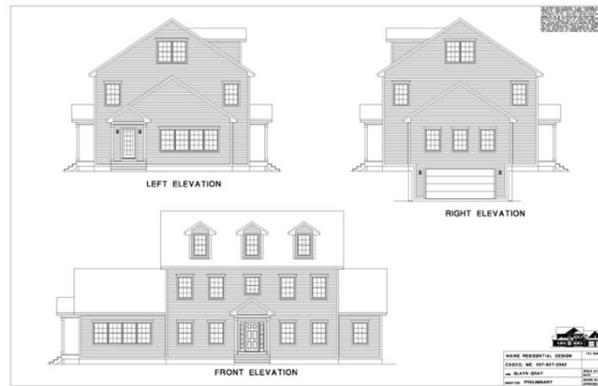


**History and Use**

- Capped foundation
- Unique lot size/shape
- No activity since 2009

**Future Goals**

- Access to parking
- Mixed use building consisting of office space, apartments and/or restaurant



**History and Use**

- Located between Manny Motors and One City Center building
- Free parking (accessibly by Rt. 100 and Yarmouth Rd)
- Underutilized
- Difficult to access coming southbound (i.e. left turn) on Rt. 100

**Future Goals**

- Provide access to much needed parking in the Village
- Increase utilization



Municipal Parking Lot



### **History and Use**

- Previously a gas station
- Offers vehicle repair services
- Underground fuel tanks have been removed
- Highly visible to traffic entering Village from the turnpike

### **Future Goals**

- Improve aesthetics and energy efficiency of building
- Add storage capacity
- Possible second floor addition for office/rental space
- Expand operations (4 bay)
- Additional parking, including overnight if additional floor added



### **History and Use**

- Owner has several properties – a brick, mixed use building; a vacant house; and a partially occupied building with an unpaved parking lot
- Major renovations completed in the brick building
- Installed concrete chamber septic system
- Have conducted various development scenarios for parcels
- Large trucks use their parking lot and walk to McDonalds

### **Future Goals**

- Tear down and redevelop vacant and secondary buildings
- Increase capacity in brick, multi-use building
- Continue to pursue development options which include condominiums and mid-block vehicular access between Brown Street and Yarmouth Road

## Part 5—Redevelopment Concepts

In response to initial meetings with Town officials and property owners, Wright-Pierce developed three potential concept scenarios for the redevelopment of the Hancock Block. Based on these discussions, all three options included retaining the brick mixed-use building, the family-owned multi-story building and the First Congregational Church. Other buildings on the block would be removed. All three scenarios also included sidewalk and streetscape improvements.

### Concept 1 - Maximize Parking

One of the consistent needs of each of the landowners, as well as Town staff, is additional parking. This concept was created with this single need in mind and would include: on-street parking surrounding the block; a significant expansion of the 100 Main Street commercial building (9,000 sq. ft. of new space); a mid-block street across the property; and development of parking lots (90 spaces) on the remainder of the block.



### Concept 2 - Maximize Business Buildout

This concept encourages uses such as hotels, restaurant, and/or mixed use small scale development such as cafes and specialty retail shops. Second and third floors could house office space and/or residential units. This option includes retaining 100 Main Street at its current size and adding three new two-story buildings of different sizes, totaling 33,000 sq. ft., to promote the widest variety of uses. The largest of these buildings would be located at the corner of Main Street and Yarmouth Road to form a meaningful architectural presence at this important entry point and to

complement 100 Main Street and the historic commercial buildings across Main Street. The remainder of the site would be devoted to shared parking. With only 45 spaces, it was assumed that additional public parking would be provided elsewhere in the village.



**Concept 3 – Balance of Parking & Buildout**

This concept attempted to balance parking and additional mixed use needs. Similar to Option 2, this concept includes three new buildings (totaling 22,800 sq. ft.) clustered toward the Main Street/Yarmouth Road intersection; parking (47 spaces) in a smaller number of larger areas, and a welcoming significant public greenspace at the Main Street/Yarmouth Road intersection, framed by appropriately-designed, scaled architecture.

**Part 6—Community Public Workshop**

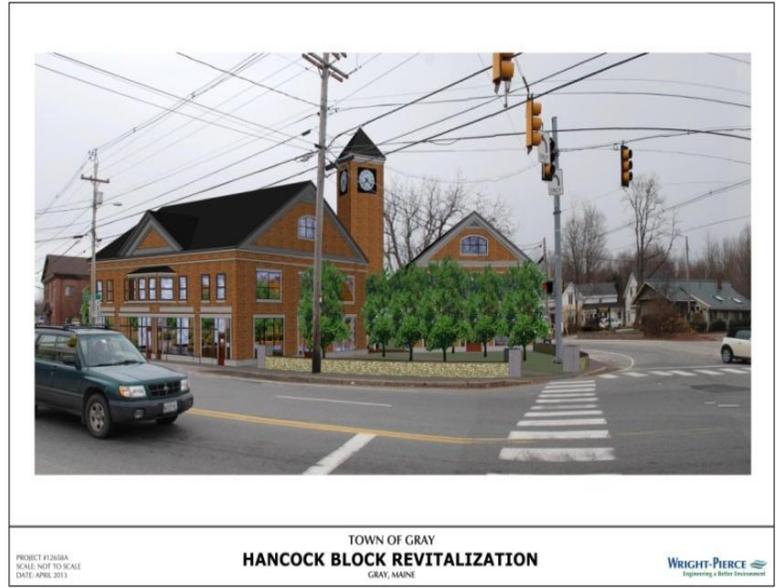
All three options were presented at a public workshop. Two hours of spirited and engaged discussion resulted in Concept 3 being considered by participants who attended (including all of the Hancock Block property owners) to be an appropriate vision for downtown Gray.

These and similar questions were raised at the public workshop:

- What is your vision of downtown Gray?
- How much visitor traffic do you want, and what should visitors see and do when they come to this intersection?
- What uses do you see as possible to offer on this block?
- What uses do you see as critical to include on this block?
- What should the scale of development be for this block?
- What amenities could this block offer to the citizens of Gray? To visitors?
- How should/can this development, the Monument Square development, and other Village planning studies support each other?
- How much of this block should be devoted to parking, as opposed to rentable, useable space and public green space?
- Should traffic flow around this block be changed? Where should parking lot entrances be located?
- Should there be on-street parking as part of the development? Would a cross-over be needed/appropriate?

The preferred concept features two buildings facing the Main Street/Yarmouth Road corner and connected by a covered walkway. A prominent clock tower, with facades to the sidewalk along each street, a landscaped public open space at the corner and a third, smaller building, facing Yarmouth Road are featured.

The general reaction to this scenario was that the building layout was attractive and functional, and provided for a variety of uses that were appropriate and desirable for the Hancock Block location. A mid-block drive offered flexibility for traffic flow and easy access to parking and delivery areas.



In general, the concept was seen as establishing the primacy of the Hancock Block in shaping an appropriate image of downtown Gray. It offers the possibility of attracting needed stores, services, cafes and restaurants, and in-town residences, to the Village center in an amenity-rich and aesthetically pleasing, town-scaled setting.

## Part 7—Recommendations

This draft master plan for the Hancock Block reflects input from engineering and architectural research, staff, and the public participation. The intent of the master plan is to present a coordinated vision for redevelopment of the block that could be done over time to achieve the goals of shared access, increased parking, improved traffic circulation, safe and attractive pedestrian connections, and maximum utilization of buildings and properties.

Three issues to be considered in order to move ahead are: future public and/or private investment; increased pedestrian safety and zoning amendments.

The redevelopment concepts for the study area show that a private developer could maximize building square footage while redeveloping those properties in keeping with both the block master plan and downtown revitalization efforts. While current property owners support these design concepts, funding assistance is necessary and warrants a proposal to pursue a public-private partnership with private owners and developers for revitalization efforts.

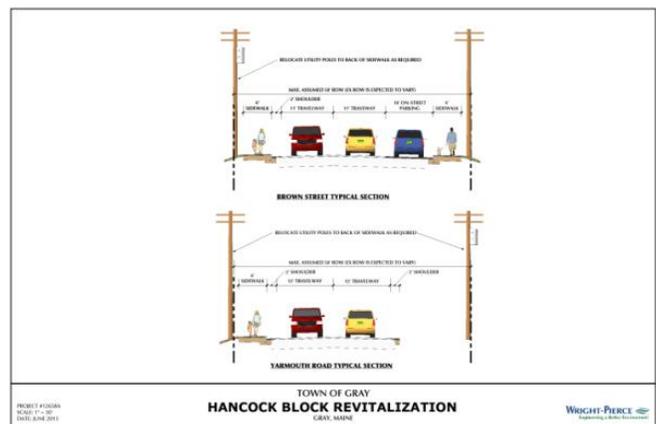
Although development may be market driven, the Town could benefit if economic development tools were provided as an incentive to attract private investment and revitalization, such as applying for Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding and/or application of Tax Increment Financing as has been done on other economic development projects.

Historically, the Town of Gray has shied away from purchasing land. However, the purchase of parcels which currently affect the aesthetic value of the block, and the conversion of those lots into green space, may encourage outside development potential. The community realizes the highly visible location of the Hancock block and supports the need to improve the aesthetics and first impression of visitors and residents entering the Village.

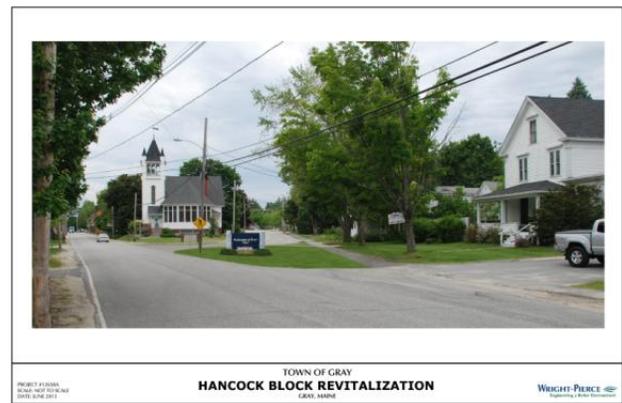
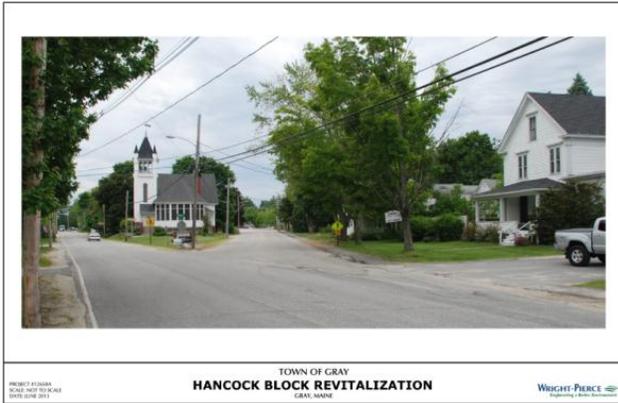
Traffic is/has been a long standing concern for the Village. The increase in traffic and toll booth fees, as well as, access to five State highways and the Maine Turnpike have led to a Village that lacks sufficient safe and accessible access for non-motorized traffic. Traffic concerns will need to be managed on a larger scope than what was identified in the Hancock Block study area.

The Sustain Southern Maine initiative conducted the Gray Village Area Growth Study which ran concurrently with Hancock Block. This study addressed traffic mitigation in other areas of the Village that could provide potential benefit to the Hancock Block. For example: constructing a roundabout on the northern end of the Village on Rt. 100 may be an inhibitor for large tractor truck traveling through the Village. Larger traffic may find it more convenient to stay on the Turnpike instead of enter/exit Gray to avoid tolls in New Gloucester. In addition to reducing the number of larger trailer trucks, other vehicular traffic would be forced to slow down, resulting in increased safety for bike/pedestrian traffic.

This block is strategically located connecting the Gray Public Library and an elderly housing complex to the rest of the Village. Improved sidewalks along Brown Street and Yarmouth Road would encourage pedestrian safety.



A new intersection located where Brown and Hancock Streets intersect would provide a cleaner intersection and a landing area. With this new intersection, traffic coming west on Rt. 115 would need to slow down in order to make a right on Brown Street. (Before: left. After: right)



The Town of Gray has a number of ordinances that would negatively impact the redevelopment of the Hancock Block as proposed in this assessment. There are current ordinance provisions that reflect concepts that could stand in the way of a pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use, traditional neighborhood design (TND) approach to redevelopment of the Hancock Block.

The following are a few comments from Wright Pierce with regard to potential revisions of certain provisions of the Gray Zoning Ordinance that would facilitate the Hancock Block revitalization in accordance with the recommended approach.

- Given the mixture of uses sought by town officials and residents, hotels should be a permitted use in the VCP zone.
- Review the lot dimension, density standards, and parking and loading requirements with regard to realistic requirements for mixed use developments in the downtown core.
- The Good Neighbor Standards for Site Plan Review (402.10.12) are an excellent starting point for promoting high-quality mixed use development in a dense village center, but they should be gone over in detail for their flexibility in terms of current and future trends.
- The Site Design Standards for Site Plan Review (402.10.13) on setbacks and building alignment prohibits "empty corners" - which might eliminate the creation of a high-profile and significant open space at the corner of Yarmouth Road and Main Street.
- The Village Center Design Guidelines do not apply to residential developments or architecture. These guidelines should be revised to include residential developments and architecture that are designed specifically for a core downtown site.

Gray's Village Center is a relatively small, concentrated area. By incorporating the Hancock Block, Monument Square Block, and Sustain Southern Maine planning efforts into an updated Comprehensive Village Master Plan, this synchronized effort will help to avoid unnecessary duplication and/or interference.

The implementation of any piece of the various planning studies will most likely be a catalyst for continued progress toward revitalization efforts throughout the Village.