

Photographs by Thomas McDonald for The New York Times

Wayne D'Amico, a consultant, on the roof of a building in downtown Meriden overlooking an area where a redevelopment project is in the works

## Meriden Takes Another Shot at Revival

By MARK PETERS

**J**OHN CLEMENTS is leery of the planners and the politicians who talk about redevelopment in downtown Meriden. Past efforts have forced his family to move its jewelry store, left customers without parking and caused businesses to shut down.

But even as Mr. Clements bemoaned almost four decades of plans and projects, he agreed that something had to be done to help the city's failing downtown area.

"There definitely is a need; just drive down main street," he said, pointing to the street that runs in front of his store.

This summer, a plan was proposed to end the years of empty storefronts and deserted streets. The idea is winning the support of elected officials and business leaders in this midsize city in the center of the state.

The plan, called the City Center Initiative, would drastically change the shape of downtown, realigning main roads and moving hundreds of residents.

Supporters say that within a decade they expect a vibrant, growing city center to exist, ending a history of redevelopment flops that have left residents cynical about the downtown area's future.

The City Center Initiative, which was released in late July, calls for \$40 million in public spending and \$90 million in private investments to create three retail centers, two office buildings, several restaurants, a multiplex theater, 1,000 new parking spaces and a downtown park.

What is scheduled to be replaced are an outdated federal housing project, a neighboring condominium complex and the Meriden Hub, a near-empty mall that was built as part of a city redevelopment project in the late 1960's.

"It is comprehensively solving an overall problem," said Wayne D'Amico, a consultant for the Meriden Economic Resource Group Inc., which commissioned the plan with other private, nonprofit development groups.

The plan, created by BL Companies in Meriden, relies on the use of public money to solve nagging problems like poor highway access and chronic flooding. The end result is what is being called a one-of-a-kind site in Connecticut: about 40 acres of developable land in an urban center with frontage on Interstate 691.

"I don't know of anything close," said Robert Landino, president of BL Companies, comparing the Meriden initiative with Hartford's redevelopment project. "As an example, Adriaen's Landing is one-third the size."

From this central site, the plan stretches west to what is traditionally known as the center of downtown and east to the neighborhood surrounding city hall. Ideas for the later stages include an art district, a community college campus and a new industrial park.

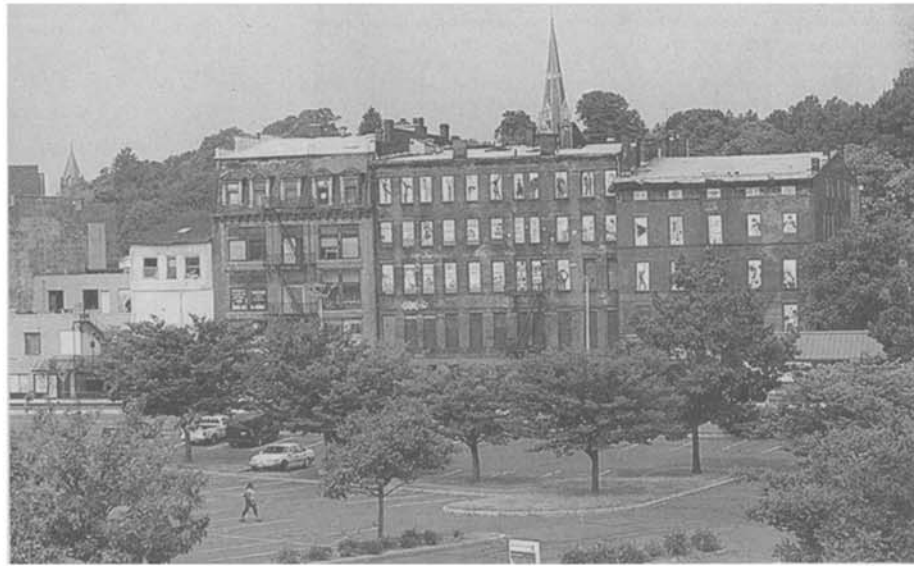
Saulo Sforza can already envision the new buildings and the tree-lined boulevards. Thirty-two years ago his barber shop was the first business to open at the Meriden Hub, which was considered to be a key to downtown redevelopment at the time. Now, Mr. Sforza's is one of only three businesses left in the dilapidated mall.

"I hope they do it," he said over the buzz of electric shears. "I don't know when. It would be good for Meriden."

Although he is optimistic, some of his customers on a recent Saturday were not as excited.

Vincent Cassarino, who grew up a short walk from Mr. Sforza's shop, said he had lived through redevelopment in the late-1960's and a smaller project in the late-1980's and considered them both costly failures.

"Look around," he said. "Most of



Above, one of several blighted buildings in the city's downtown. Left, an area with the Interstate 691 overpass in the background. Below, a mall parking lot that is scheduled to be transformed as part of a long-term plan.



the places are empty."

Like many older residents, Betty Calvi, 74, can remember the bustling downtown of her youth where everyone went on the weekend to shop, eat and be entertained.

Since the plan has been released, its supporters have tried to exorcise the ghosts of past projects, while also trying to convince residents that the long-term plan could return the downtown area to what it was.

"They are looking to the past," said Stephen T. Zerio, the City Council majority leader.

Many residents and even some elected officials, however, cannot forget the \$27 million the city spent to make downtown improvements starting in 1989. The project included a parking garage, a new courthouse and police complex, red brick side-

walks and decorative lighting. It did little to stimulate interest downtown.

Mayor Mark D. Benigni said residents needed to understand that the city's approach has changed. The philosophy before was what is being labeled as a "field of dreams" approach in which the city made millions of dollars in improvements and then waited for businesses to come. This time, however, construction will not begin until there are commitments from retail developers.

"I really want our citizens to be excited, to look at this as an opportunity," Mr. Benigni said.

The idea for a comprehensive redevelopment plan grew out of a series of meetings last year in which business and political leaders realized there were too many competing ideas for downtown.

"Everyone wanted to gentrify or rejuvenate something," Mr. D'Amico said.

The group concluded that the state government and developers would not support a plan if there were no clear goal. The solution was to back one initiative.

Since the plan's release, several business leaders have backed the plan, but the opinions from the City Council have wavered.

Some council members say that residents are opposed to the initiative because they fear the city will raise taxes to pay for it. A vote last month to approve further work of the plan passed by a 10-2 count with one Democrat and one Republican dissenting.

"I am just very leery of the fact that the taxpayers will pick-up a large portion of this project," said Deputy Mayor Walter A. Shamock Jr., a Republican.

Those who are pushing the plan say that the city is more than a year away from starting any construction, and with tough votes on housing and property acquisitions ahead, support will continue to be tested.

"The plan will change tens, if not hundreds, of times before it is finalized," Mr. Zerio said.

The initiative needs state money to move forward. Private groups that have financed it thus far are not prepared to commit further dollars, and there is little political support for the city to spend any money on the initiative at this point.

The state Bond Commission meeting, which is scheduled for Sept. 27, will be a crucial test for the initiative, since the commission will consider allocating \$250,000 for further planning.

During a stop earlier this month, Gov. John G. Rowland, who sets the commission's agenda, promised the city would get the money.

There is also a second plan emerging for downtown. A local developer, Joseph F. Carabetta, is pitching a plan that focuses on building a new high school, a community college, a sports stadium and a park in the same area. The idea is based on his belief retail will not work downtown.

Those who support the City Center Initiative concede there are hundreds of reasons for the plan to fail apart, but they also see no other choice: waiting for change will do nothing to revitalize downtown.