

**Creating a Remarkable Place: Using Transit Oriented Development as a Catalyst to
Restore a Walkable Urban Fabric to One of America's Great Industrial Cities.**

Executive Summary

The City of Pontiac sits at the northern terminus of Woodward Avenue, Michigan's "Main Street, 26 miles north of downtown Detroit. As the home to several key General Motors (GM) manufacturing plants, the City of Pontiac was once well-known as a manufacturing powerhouse. However, between 2005 and 2010, the area lost two GM auto manufacturing facilities and tens of thousands of jobs. The job losses were detrimental to the City and resulted in a \$12 million deficit. The US Census Bureau reports that the population of Pontiac decreased 10% from 2000 to 2010 alone.

Pontiac's historic downtown faced many difficulties during recent decades. The migration of residents to outlying suburbs, the movements of retail outlets to large central malls and commercial strips, changing lifestyle preferences, and demographic shifts have all drawn people and economic activity away from Downtown Pontiac. Urban Renewal planning decisions in the early 1960's perhaps played the most significant role in undermining the downtown. The development of the Wide Track Drive, commonly known as the "Woodward Loop" a wide, high speed roadway surrounding the downtown paired with demolition of numerous buildings turned the formerly vibrant central business district into a desolate, financially deteriorating environment. Additionally, the Clinton River that once flowed through the downtown was buried in the 1960s and paved over to create surface parking lots and the Phoenix Center, a 2,500 space parking garage with an amphitheater on top of the garage.

These factors contributed to very challenging economic conditions that the City is now working hard to overcome. The City was on the brink of bankruptcy and endured five years under the oversight of an Emergency Financial Manager. Local decisions are subject to the review of a state-appointed Transition Advisory Board (TAB). Despite these challenges, Pontiac has experienced over \$300 million in new investment and development since 2011.

The Downtown, however, is still challenged in large part by the legacy of urban renewal. Over the last few years, several studies have been conducted to provide a road map to create a stronger downtown, yet none have been implemented. These studies include:

- Downtown Pontiac Transportation Assessment ("The Loop study")
- Pontiac Moving Forward: An Economic Recovery Strategy
- Daylighting Potential of the Clinton River (Urban Land Institute)
- Bus Rapid transit connecting Detroit to Pontiac
- Woodward Avenue Complete Streets Plan

The absence of a catalyst project – a vision for turning these blueprints into reality – has undermined support for the vision of a healthy, vibrant, walkable downtown. Therefore, Pontiac is applying for the CNU Legacy Project to develop an implantable vision to make a remarkable space that serves as the template for other downtown spaces in Pontiac and other downtowns in Michigan.

Project Area

The southern edge of downtown, from the Phoenix Center south to the Wide Track Drive split, has long been singled out as a multi-modal transit hub and appropriate area for transit oriented development. Furthermore, the Phoenix Center is a huge obstacle to redevelopment in this part of downtown. Physically it is a barrier between the southern tip and the rest of downtown. Culturally, the community is divided over the future of the structure. Resolving this space is essential to realizing a more vibrant and sustainable downtown.

Also in the study area is a large, privately-owned surface parking lot referred to as Lot 9. The Clinton River is buried underneath Lot 9 and the Phoenix Center. While daylighting is neither physically nor financially feasible, there is the opportunity to at least representatively include the river in the redevelopment of this area that will highlight the importance of the natural environment to Pontiac. Finally, the regional SMART Bus system has a large bus stop that serves several lines. The existing stop on Water Street is the downtown's most utilized public space, yet is little more than a bus shelter. Integrating the transit stop into a larger redeveloped district, will make transit a key component of the region's redevelopment. For additional information, please refer to the attached project area map.

Conclusion

The **CNU Legacy Project** is the vehicle to resolve the future of the Phoenix Center and to develop an implementable vision for a transit-oriented development on the south end of downtown. Perhaps more importantly, the Legacy Project will undoubtedly help Pontiac make the case that the south edge of downtown is the best Oakland County location for a regional transit hub, can better utilize the Amtrak station on the west side of Woodward Avenue.

Pontiac is a historic city, with an historic downtown that lacks quality public spaces. Downtown, particularly the southern portion is defined by surface parking lots, a parking deck and undeveloped private land. The SMART Bus stop shelter on Pike Street is what passes as the highest quality public space in that portion of downtown. Pontiac is remarkable in that downtown has managed to seek out a survival despite these challenges. To grow however, Pontiac needs great places!

Development of this part of downtown as a multi-modal transportation hub with associated transit-oriented residential and commercial development will absolutely "move the needle" both local and regional redevelopment. Particularly because this type of development would be the first of its kind in southeast Michigan, it would be a game changer for several reasons:

- It would provide a strong example that transit and access to transit is an economic development catalyst – an idea that is typically rejected in suburban Michigan communities;
- It would serve as an example that economically distressed communities that struggle to attract new development can use transit and multi-modal transportation as a tool to attract residents and investment;
- It could likely be the project that moves MDOT and Oakland County to implement the results of the Pontiac Livability Study which calls for eliminating the "Loop" and making downtown an accessible place.

The City lacks the capacity to undertake the charrette and design process without CNU's help. Furthermore, while the City has the funds for the required match, it cannot financially be responsible for the full cost of this undertaking. More importantly, the experts at CNU will provide a product that will have creditability with the development community and with citizens.

This project requires an independent, outside group of professionals to facilitate a charrette so that the recommendations of the study – especially the recommendations for the Phoenix Center – have broad public support and a will to implement them. We cannot stress enough the division in the community caused by the Phoenix Center – any meaningful study needs to address and resolve that tension with a realistic, yet aspirational plan for the southern portion of downtown.

The region – particularly northern Oakland County – has a deficit of high quality walkable places. Pontiac's historic neighborhoods have a walkable urban fabric that is characteristic of higher density cities. Yet Downtown is cut off from the neighborhoods by Wide Track Drive (also called the Loop) and has no quality public space. Using transit and transit-oriented development to create a remarkable space downtown will absolutely grow the demand for such places across Oakland County.

This project is an opportunity for CNU members and for CNU to showcase skills and to create a remarkable transformation that is illustrative of the quality of the CNU philosophy. Transforming this district, which was all but cut off from Pontiac after the Phoenix Center was completed, would be an accomplishment with national implications.

As discussed in the executive summary, the City of Pontiac does not have the resources to make this project happen. What Pontiac is blessed with are active and engaged property owners, a downtown business association that is committed to finding partners to see this portion of downtown redeveloped in a positive direction, and a champion in Mayor Waterman that will not stop working until this vision is realized.