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## New Directions For Bishops Corner

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A couple of years ago, a teenager of my acquaintance rode his bike over to Bishops Corner in West Hartford to rent a movie and was hit by a car. He wasn't badly injured, thankfully, but it reminded me yet again what a dangerous, outdated, unappealing place this is, especially for anyone not in a car.

Bishops Corner, a four-corner strip plaza at the busy intersection of North Main Street and Albany Avenue, is an anachronism, the real estate equivalent of a car with fins, a jumble of old, nondescript buildings mostly set back from the streets and surrounded by vast swaths of asphalt.

Having seen Blue Back Square to a successful fruition, West Hartford officials would like to do some kind of smart growth enhancement to Bishops Corner. As with many inner suburbs, West Hartford has limited growth opportunities. Its best bet is to get more bang from underused land in neighborhood centers.

Though Bishops Corner is the kind of place planners call "underperforming" — there are some empty stores in the southwest quadrant and a lot of empty pavement — it still has a decent mix of businesses. There are three popular food markets, a terrific bagel store, a party supply store, medical offices, etc.

You wouldn't want to remove this mix; you might want to rearrange and add to it.

In the age of global warming and expensive gas, West Hartford is right to think about a healthier density in its neighborhood centers. The challenges of bringing such changes to Bishops Corner were brought home at a recent presentation by four groups of graduate architecture students from the University of Hartford.

The class was called Sustainable Urbanism, taught by the highly regarded New Haven architect and planner Robert Orr. The hypothetical redesign of Bishops Corner into a New Urbanist mixed-use neighborhood was the class project. The students presented their plans to a group of local planners and officials. The session turned into a colloquium on the aging shopping area.

As was clear from the outset, turning Bishops Corner into an appealing place to live as well as shop and work, as easy to navigate on foot or bike as it is by car, will be no small feat.

The mall is barely connected to its surrounding neighborhood. It's also a hideous pedestrian

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environment, with cars pulling out of parking lots or whizzing by on the streets. People drive from the neighborhood, and from one quadrant to another. Three gas stations dominate the intersection.

The students attacked this problem with new streets that connect the present shopping areas with the surrounding street grid. The addition of streets may give up otherwise developable land, as someone noted, but disperses traffic, improves access and offers more desirable street frontage for development.

There's no reason the main buildings can't be taller. Middletown planner Catherine Johnson pressed the idea of a hierarchy of buildings, moving from two-story row houses leading into the complex to four-story main buildings at the center.

The area ought to have open space. Some students favored parks. There's another option. A few planners around the country are experimenting with urban agriculture. Orr wondered if one or two small farm fields could be reclaimed in the area.

Perhaps the greatest challenge would be managing the traffic on the two busy arterials. "Start with the streets and deal with the cars first," said Hartford planner Toni Gold.

Gold favors narrowing the roads and using on-street parking, but acknowledges this could only be done if the intersection were completely redesigned. She suggested that a modern roundabout would control traffic and help tie the four corners together.

Orr wondered if a roundabout would help the pedestrian environment "because the cars never stop." Gold said it's all in the design; that roundabouts slow traffic and are amenable to effective pedestrian crossings. Johnson and others suggested moving the gas stations up the street. One of the student groups suggested a streetcar loop, connecting to schools and other central points in West Hartford.

Town officials ought to consider some radical changes to this intersection. West Hartford isn't obliged to retain Albany Avenue as a speedway for Farmington Valley commuters. If the cars have to wait a few minutes in return for a decent pedestrian environment (though they may not), that's okay.

I left the session thinking West Hartford ought to do what Orr did: teach residents and property owners something about smart growth and New Urbanism — perhaps in a charrette or design session — and then work with them to develop a plan to sequentially rebuild the whole place. With the economy heading into the tank, it's the perfect time to plan.

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