

# WESTMINSTER CENTER COMMISSION

January 27, 1984

The Honorable City Council and  
Mayor Vincent A. Cianci, Jr.

Dear Mayor Cianci and Members of the City Council:

Pursuant to Resolution 315 (approved April 22, 1983), the Westminster Center Commission has studied whether to open Westminster Center to motor vehicles, the future of Downtown retailing, and the prospects for re-using vacant upper floors of buildings on or near Westminster Center.

This study involved weekly meetings from July to January. The Commission surveyed and interviewed merchants, building owners and brokers, officials from important non-profit institutions, and representatives of public safety departments. Staff of the Department of Planning and Urban Development, under the direction of the Commission, provided technical and administrative assistance.

The result of these extensive deliberations is a goal and strategy statement that represents the consensus position of all Commission members. The Commission has not identified a panacea for Downtown retail expansion and office development. Instead, the Commission has unanimously agreed that the revitalization solutions of the 1950's bear little relevance to Downtown Providence's problems and potentials in the 1980's. In this spirit, the Commission generally urges completion of a new Downtown plan that will incorporate and refine the Commission's more specific recommendations. Only a total plan will efficiently allocate limited resources to meet the City's parking, circulation, economic development, open space, and housing goals in the greater Downtown area. We trust that this Commission's efforts will assist in development of such a plan, while also spurring immediate action to renew the center of Downtown. The Commission further recommends that some representative oversight group pursue and guide the aforementioned immediate actions. If the Mayor and City Council request that the Westminster Center Commission continue to serve for that purpose, the Commission's members will gladly assist in that effort.

Yours truly,

*William M. Kolb*

William Kolb, Chairman

IN CITY COUNCIL

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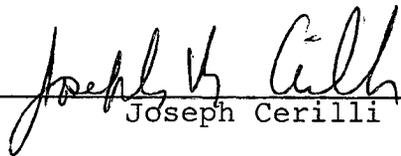
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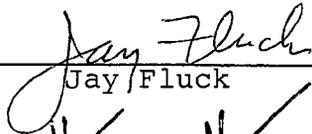
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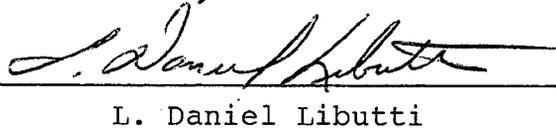
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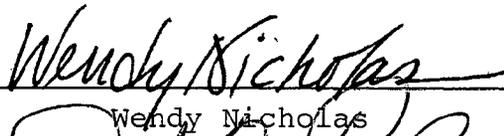
*Richard A. Saltzman*  
Richard Saltzman, Vice Chairman

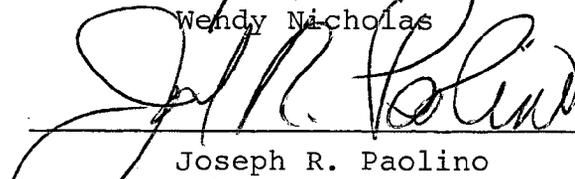
  
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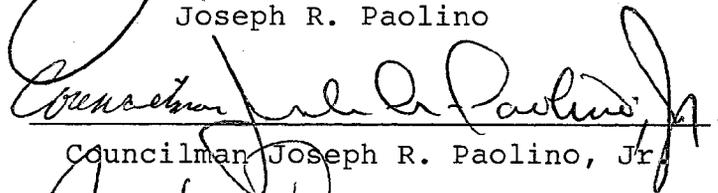
  
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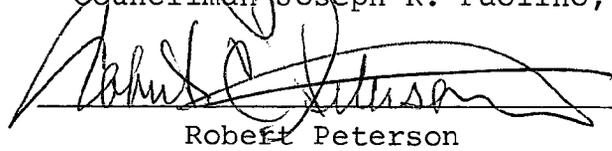
  
Harold Harris

  
L. Daniel Libutti

  
Wendy Nicholas

  
Joseph R. Paolino

  
Councilman Joseph R. Paolino, Jr.

  
Robert Peterson

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DEPT. OF SOCIAL SERVICES  
PROVIDENCE, R.I.

WESTMINSTER CENTER COMMISSION

GOAL AND STRATEGIES SUMMARY

GOAL: To create an environment supportive of business, retail and other, to encourage the private sector to make new investments in Westminster Center\*, to attract new users and uses, and to increase the tax base.

\*Westminster Center is defined as that area bounded by Weybosset, Dorrance, Washington, and Empire Streets including property fronting both sides of these streets.

STRATEGIES SUMMARY:

To achieve the above goal, the Westminster Center Commission recommends the establishment of a new or restructured coordinating entity that shall carry out a comprehensive and coordinated program of physical improvements, investment incentives, and management functions.

Physical Improvements

The Commission does not feel that the existing pedestrian mall has succeeded as a stimulus to retail investment. The mall has not necessarily caused the retail decline, but its original purpose --- to create a shopping environment competitive with suburban shopping centers --- has no relevance to the realities of Downtown retailing today and for the foreseeable future. It does believe that full utilization of upper floors of now vacant buildings on the mall will bring back retailing in ground floor space. In order to effect increased demand for upper floor space in older buildings, access and parking must be improved. Opening Westminster Mall (including Union St.)

to vehicular traffic and provision of additional parking should be a public policy priority in conjunction with the incentives and management improvements outlined below. Opening up the Mall alone will not be decisive in attaining the Commission's goal. Reconstruction must minimize the perception and reality of disruption so that existing retail businesses do not experience diminished sales.

The Commission recommends therefore, the following physical improvements for immediate action and further study, as appropriate:

I. To open temporarily the full length of Westminster Street to vehicular traffic, prior to reconstruction and as soon as possible, to permit development and evaluation of final design to meet two pre-eminent objectives:

1. Provision of direct vehicular access to buildings
2. Preservation of pedestrian traffic in safe and attractive conditions

A thorough study of traffic circulation in Downtown related to a reopened Mall should be undertaken simultaneously, as should investigation of whether reopening the Mall is eligible under the State's Transportation Improvement Program.

II. Opening and widening of streets crossing Westminster St. (Eddy, Union & Mathewson) to achieve maximum curbside parking and access consistent with public safety.

III. The Westminster Center area needs central parking. The Shepard's building site should, therefore, be studied as a possible site for parking and open space.

#### Investment Incentives

The Commission recommends a program of rehabilitation loans and grants targeted to Westminster Center (especially from Community Block Grant Funds) plus Downtown studies that will identify appropriate strategies to encourage investment and growth\*. Outmoded zoning or other regulations that create barriers to desirable investment must be studied and improved.

#### Management

The Commission, based on the experience of other cities studied over the last six months, believes that a centralized management entity concerned with the total maintenance, promotion, and revitalization of the Westminster Center area is critical to the overall program's success. Issues such as security, zoning variances, "one-stop" development permitting, and plan implementation require an advocacy organization for whom Westminster Center is a priority concern.

The Commission recommends that the Mayor and City Council extend its existence to guide implementation of objectives outlined above.

#### \*Further Study

Two independent studies of the Downtown core area will occur in the Spring of 1984. The University of Rhode Island's Graduate School will conduct a Comprehensive Planning Studio with the Providence Foundation as its client. The City's Department of Planning and Urban

Development will provide technical assistance. The Providence Preservation Society will oversee a Harvard Business School course, again principally concerned with the re-use and full occupancy of Westminster Center buildings. These studies should assist full implementation of the Commission's recommendations.

## COMMISSION FINDINGS OF FACT

The facts and conclusions enumerated on the following pages represent a summation of extensive interviews, surveys and other research.

Over the last twenty years, Downtown Providence has experienced a steep and continuous decline in total retail activity. That decline is similar to that in other cities and about average among moderate size northeastern cities. Three corporate bankruptcies involving firms with Downtown Providence department stores are largely responsible for the retail decline (although the Providence stores were profitable to the end). These stores were the anchors of Westminster Mall, and the Mall was designed with the assumption they would continue to prosper. Smaller retailers were dependent on the traffic generated by their advertising and product selection.

Retail trade downtown has gradually adjusted to the disappearance of anchor stores and the emergence of a new primary market -- office employees. The Commission's findings should be viewed in the context of these long term changes in Downtown retailing.

## COMMISSION FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The decline in retail sales which Downtown Providence has experienced is similar to that in other northeastern cities its size.
2. Downtown has, on and around Westminster Mall, some 1.7 million square feet of vacant retail and office space.
3. Retailers surveyed by the Commission are split on whether to reopen the mall to vehicular traffic. Half of the merchants (14 out of 38) on the Mall responded to the survey.
4. Office workers are presently the most important market segment for most CBD retailers. Retail growth that the CBD has experienced in recent years has been closely linked to and located near new office construction.
5. Office workers at Blue Cross surveyed by the Commission favored keeping the mall by more than two to one.
6. Office owners and brokers surveyed by the Commission are split on whether to reopen the mall to vehicular traffic.
7. Public safety officials claim they cannot do more, under existing legislation and constitutional guarantees, than they are presently doing to control "loitering" and "vagrancy". They also state that security on the mall is not more of a problem than on other streets Downtown.
8. Almost all parties interviewed by the Commission have identified low cost or free parking as a public policy priority.
9. Johnson & Wales College because of its location, growth and large staff and student body has and will continue to have important impacts on Downtown retailing and land use.

10. Some 1.7 million square feet of space lies vacant in the retail center. Extensive new construction of Class A space in the Financial District and on Downtown's periphery may significantly affect demand for Class B and C office space.
11. Residential reuse is seen as desirable by many but would involve incentives.
12. Pedestrian malls that are working in other cities feature a strong centralized management, sometimes combined with large numbers of tourists.
13. A retail anchor for Downtown is a top priority among retailers and shoppers surveyed by the Commission.
14. Based on limited surveys conducted by the Department of Planning and Urban Development the numbers of shoppers dropped off in front of stores that face on streets is very small.
15. The results of Pawtucket's reopened mall are inconclusive, but some new investment, on the Arcade model, is occurring.
16. Westminster Center has an exceptional concentration of older (often historic) structures which provide a unique and aesthetically appealing physical character. Pending designation of Downtown as a National Register Historic District will add financial incentives for re-use and restoration.

# CBT RETAIL SALES (1967 Constant Dollars)

