

Design Themes White Paper

April 26, 2004

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work session

In October 2003 the Pleasantville Chamber of Commerce initiated a study program, *Visions for Pleasantville*, with a meeting of community leaders held at the Pleasantville Country Club. Based on the findings of this meeting, three study teams were named to address three improvement goals:

Pleasantville as a Village that Works

Pleasantville as an Arts and Cultural Destination

Pleasantville as a Business Destination

The study team that has addressed the third objective, Pleasantville as a Business Destination, has been a group that has built on the work of the Village's Business Support Council, chaired by Peter Russell. One of the recurrent elements in this and earlier studies to increase the physical and economic attractiveness of Pleasantville has been the need to develop, promote and enforce a coordinated set of Design Themes for our business districts.

In the spring of 2004 the Pleasantville as a Business Destination ("PABD") team chair, Peter Russell, convened an *ad hoc* sub-committee to develop recommendations of just what a "coordinated set of Design Themes" might involve, as seen from the perspective of the sub-committee members. These members were the chairs or the representatives of the several Village approval committees – the Planning Commission, the Zoning Board of Appeals, the Architectural Review Board – and others involved in the appearance of the village – the Beautification Committee, the Business Support Council, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Village Administrator.

The report of this sub-committee is attached and was completed on April 25, 2004. It was agreed that the report, which has been approved by the sub-committee members, be submitted to their full boards and committees for review and endorsement before its presentation to the Village Board of Trustees as an action recommendation. We are not seeking your line-by-line critique, but rather your endorsement of the concept, with the hope that you will agree that this is a reasonable recommendation to the Village for the next steps for the design element of improving Pleasantville as a Business Destination.

Please give your comments to your chairperson.

Peter Q. Eschweiler, Sub-Committee Editor

Design Themes White Paper
Pleasantville as a Business Destination
Visions for Pleasantville

Goal: To create a set of unifying Design Themes for the Business Districts. By Design, we mean the full range of visual signals, terms and techniques through which the physical character of the Village's streetscapes, storefronts, rooflines, sidewalks, streets, greenery, and lighting define and mark our place as a distinctive destination for shopping, dining, doing business, or attending public, arts and cultural events. By Business Districts, we mean to include the Washington Avenue, Manville Road, Wheeler Avenue, Bedford Road, Old Village, and Marble Avenue areas, including any abutting business use areas. By putting forward Themes, we call to mind the diversity of ideas and tastes that can come together in one place, not uniformly but harmoniously, if we pay careful attention to the existing context of this small but vibrant village and creatively enforce current regulations that affect the quality of life in the village and seek excellence in the design of new structures and any improvements to our current business center.

A Starting Point: The notion of taking steps to improve the "look" and attractiveness of the business district in order to reinforce the Village's competitive position as a destination for residents and visitors has emerged from many sources. Village staff and members of official bodies such as architecture review, planning, and zoning board of appeals deal with these issues on a practical basis in handling regular applications and exceptional cases such as the Stop and Shop property. Potential property developers look for guidance on the Village's preferences among alternative activity types. The Beautification Committee has moved ahead with specific projects to increase greenery and flower beds and to add new visual markers such as the clock at Washington Avenue at Manville Road. The Business Support Council has followed up on the recommendations derived from public surveys and those made in business revitalization and economic development studies in 2000 under its predecessor organization, the Business Revitalization Committee and the initial steps taken by that group.

Most recently, The Pleasantville Chamber of Commerce launched "Visions for Pleasantville" last October as a series of discussions and follow-up action by three citizen teams focused on Pleasantville as a village that works, as a cultural and arts destination and as a business destination.

Our "Pleasantville as a Business Destination" team ("PABD") has concentrated on four priorities:

- * Encouraging commercial property owners and local businesses to adhere to current regulations that affect the quality of life of the village, such as clean sidewalks, etc.
- * Promoting the Village business district to shoppers and visitors, and marketing the business area to desired new retail entrants, to our existing business managers and to property owners.
- * Encouraging user-friendly and effective guidelines, handbooks, compliance standards and enforcement for building initiatives.
- * Creating Design Themes that serve to unite the Business District.

This “white paper”, a draft think-piece meant to frame major issues and alternatives, is our effort to give shape to the fourth goal which is key to the realization of all these efforts. These draft Design Themes are the outcome of working sessions begun in February with a sub-committee of the PABD, consisting of participants representing:

- * The Architectural Review Board
- * The Planning Commission
- * The Zoning Board of Appeals
- * The Beautification Committee
- * The Business Support Council
- * The Village Administrator
- * The Pleasantville Chamber of Commerce

We recommend that the following action steps be taken:

- 1- that this “white paper” be shared with professional planners chosen by the Village and known for design expertise to seek their critique, analysis and ideas for actions leading to implementation of a “vision” for the business district that encompasses design themes and programs that stimulate both private and public investment and compliance.
- 2- that steps be taken by the PABD team to draw property owners and business managers into the process of review and discussion once we have the initial response of the design consultants.
- 3- that the Visions for Pleasantville process be used as the channel to bring the Vision and Design Themes discussion to the Village residents.

The outcome is expected to be a statement of a vision for Pleasantville’s business districts that looks a decade ahead, provides a flexible framework within which to anticipate and to prepare for change and articulates a set of Design Themes that encourages a quality of new investment consistent with the vision.

Let’s look at a draft Vision statement- A clear vision of Pleasantville as a Business destination will shape the Design Themes supported by this paper.

Our vision for Pleasantville as a Business Destination reflects our identity and our outlook toward the future.

Our identity is centered in the perception of Pleasantville as a small but diverse village of almost 8,000 and as a community strongly oriented toward youth, young families, its schools, faith commitments, residential character, responsibility toward the elderly, self-governance and volunteerism. This community appears to be supportive of a growing arts and culture presence, historically anchored by the local bookstore, musical groups and school theatre arts and increasingly accelerated by the Burns Film Center and links with Pace University.

Our outlook for the future is certainly affected by the intensification of urbanization in this region and by the competitive environment faced by businesses sensitive to the scale of Pleasantville and its ability to become a destination in its region. Consequently, this vision for the

business district balances our firm desire to preserve and keep lively the small-town character and charm of the Village and our desire for a robust business area.

We seek business districts that complement our residential neighborhoods and schools, that are seen as outstanding in this region as attractive for investors and business operators oriented to full participation in the community, and that draw shoppers who demand quality, diversity and distinctiveness.

Why are Design Themes Needed? Pleasantville will benefit from Design Themes for the business district reflecting a widely shared vision of the Village's future by:

- 1- creating clear design benchmarks for those considering new investment (including the Village itself),
- 2- providing coherent and consistent frameworks, guidelines and standards for Village officials and bodies when reviewing applications for new structures or improvements, and
- 3- impressing visitors and shoppers who gain an immediate sense that they have arrived in a special village deserving of their patronage and time.

How are we doing in line with these measures and are there problems with the "look" of the Village today? Yes. In spite of some outstanding examples of new and renovated business structures and the growing recognition of Pleasantville's advantages, we face significant constraints compared with some of our neighbors in the region, such as Katonah, Bronxville, Ridgefield and Larchmont. Drawbacks include:

- * Gateways -- no clear sense of arrival into the Village, in many cases
- * The Sawmill River Parkway entrances/exits, the walkway fence on the bridge at Pleasantville/Manville, and bordering green areas, are not well maintained
- * Streetscapes -- the presence of overhead power lines, uneven sidewalks, etc.
- * Traffic flow and parking -- fragmented and perceived to be inaccessible for shopping
- * Pedestrian walkways and crossings -- many wide barriers and gaps for pedestrians
- * The state law about vehicles making a right turn on red having to come to a full stop and yielding to pedestrians and other vehicles before proceeding, or yielding to pedestrians within the crosswalks is neither well promoted nor enforced.
- * Directional and other signs are a jumble and are uneven in quality and style
- * There are few landmarks of eye-catching significance to help with orientation
- * Greenery and roadside borders are often minimal in area, are not well-maintained or are in need of replacement; some of these impede the lines of sight between vehicles and pedestrians.
- * There is no sense of Village center
- * Cluttered shop windows and perception of untidiness abound
- * Failure of business owners and landlords to conform to the property maintenance standards of the Village's Commercial Code.
- * There are few major anchor attractions
- * The wide cut of the MetroNorth tracks segments the Village core visually and physically
- * The Master Plan does not address Design Themes, and Village boards often must address design and taste issues on ad hoc basis

Design Themes Reflecting our Vision of Pleasantville as a Business Destination

An Overview- Because the historical design characteristics of the business district are uneven and have been obscured over time by haphazard additions in many cases, and because the Village has had few comprehensive guidelines in the past, we are challenged to imagine Design Themes at this moment with few clear parameters. In considering Design Themes, we are not advocating any kind of mall-like uniformity or standardization. Rather, we seek to highlight characteristics which will be practical and useful to all those making improvements to existing structures or investing in entirely new structures. In the aggregate, we look to bring about street-scapes which are beneficial for shoppers and business alike, where people are encouraged to go from shop to shop, to linger in our village and to return often.

Design Theme Elements to be Defined

- * Colors
- * Open space and greenery
- * Facade materials
- * Awnings
- * Signs
- * Roof, parapet and mansard heights
- * Elevation to the street and openings (window signs)
- * Second floor alternatives
- * Visible back-of-store appearance
- * Lighting
- * Frontage/borders
- * Sidewalk /walkway materials
- * Sidewalk commercial presence standards

Opportunities to use Design Themes for Public Infrastructure and Private Investment

- * To augment pedestrian walkways and crosswalks so as to link parts of the business area and to define the business area visually for both walkers and drivers
- * To reduce roadway widths, where feasible, to recover space for greenery and pedestrian access while smoothing traffic flows, for example in the Old Village and on Manville north of Farrow's Mobil station
- * To create strategically located parking structures consistent with the Design Themes
- * To remove the visual clutter of overhead power lines and out-of-date signs
- * To reorient Memorial Plaza to become the manifestly-clear business center and linking point for the whole central business area
- * To encourage Old Village property owners to cooperate on design initiative using the Tudor elements on many of the structures
- * To encourage property owners at the north end of Marble Avenue to develop an updated retail zone, to reconfigure Marble Avenue street parking and pedestrian walkways and to enforce frontage requirements of auto repair and other businesses on Marble
- * To create pedestrian bumpouts on Washington Avenue at the intersection with Manville Road

- * *To identify new building business potential for key vacant lots on Bedford Road and to combine that with renovation of store fronts south of Memorial Plaza and with additional screening of road frontage of Key Foods and Pleasantville Ford*
- * *To create a visual inventory of the Village business districts and to get professional assistance in identifying historical and innovative design elements for use by those committing to improvements and new structures*
- * *To encourage owners and business managers to use design professionals who will creatively match individual location improvements with their neighboring streetscape*
- * *To encourage joint "street" design cooperation and projects among property owners*
- * *To seek funding sources and to identify incentives to support both design initiatives and physical improvements*
- * *To consider recognition awards for design excellence in the business district*
- * *To develop directional signage to our religious institutions, to be located at or near the entrances to the village.*
- * *To develop directional signage for our government, education and cultural facilities and for merchant businesses on the major business streets*

Taking Initiative to Implement the Vision and the Design Themes

- * *Engage the landlords in order to understand their perspective on incentives and constraints in implementing excellence in design, including those who are non-resident persons*
- * *Prepare an inventory (and keep it up-to-date) of tools available to the Village to encourage and to enforce design excellence.*
- * *Clarify the assessability of improvements, and investigate the exclusion of approved property improvement efforts from any reassessment of the value of the property or tax purposes.*
- * *Investigate the effective use of permits with expiration dates. Enforce code violation notices .*
- * *Survey the best-practices on key design issues as employed by other notable towns, for example, how others have addressed definitions of allowed level of detail on store signs, and develop a catalog of photographs with positive examples available in Pleasantville and other towns*
- * *Select and work with one or two existing businesses to improve and promote their treatment of store fronts, signages, etc, as examples of what can be done and what we wish to achieve.*
- * *Increase the awareness of the property maintenance standards of the Village's Commercial Code, and institute more rigorous enforcement of these requirements.*
- * *Provide no-interest or low-interest loans to property owners for approved property improvements, on a revolving fund basis*