



Oxford Historic Commercial District

A Strategic Plan for Revitalization

Town of Oxford, Maryland
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Oxford, Maryland

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Introduction

Purpose and Focus

The aim of this report is to encourage and help guide coordinated public and private actions and investment in the Oxford historic commercial district and thereby contribute to the Town's economic vitality and historic preservation.

This Strategic Plan's recommendations are mainly focused on the historic commercial district situated along Morris Street roughly between Market and High Streets. The Town Commissioners are in the process of acquiring the Mews building, which will allow the Town to materially shape the future of the commercial district. The decision to pursue acquisition of the Mews and to direct its revitalization is a profoundly smart and entrepreneurial strategy in light of the conditions and factors discussed in this report.

While there are headwinds to business investment in Oxford and longer-term demographic trends that need addressing, there is potential for new and expanded business activity in the commercial district. Indeed opportunities to capture resident and tourist spending are being missed currently.

Revitalizing the commercial district is important because in a small historic town like Oxford, every commercial building vacancy is felt, especially when that vacancy is on the main street. Because the historic commercial district is such an integral part of the whole town, concentrated action to restore and invigorate the district will help make Oxford a better place to live and visit. The bottom line of this report is that economic development in the commercial district can be realized while sustaining Oxford's unique sense of place and historic standing.

Guiding Principles and Central Questions

Oxford dates to the 1660's when a fledgling village was emerging at the peninsula formed by the Tred Avon River and Town Creek. The founding of Oxford, in 1694, signaled its status as an official port of entry into the province of Maryland. The Town's street grid oriented to the main axis, Morris Street, served a bustling pre-Revolutionary War port economy. During its first 100 years Morris Street tied the world to a growing Maryland region and vice versa.

During the mid-19th century, the Town emerged as a center of shipbuilding and oyster and fruit processing spurred on by the development of a railroad line across the Oxford Neck. The Oxford town plan has remained intact through these changes and the commercial district, the subject of this plan, is still situated along Morris Street between Market and High Streets at the town park. This context -- a commercial district along the one street that connects Oxford Landing to the region at large -- has endured for three centuries. In light of this context, this Plan seeks to answer three foundational and interrelated questions:

- How can the Oxford cultural context be safeguarded while bringing about new economic activity? The context or setting for Oxford's rich and long enduring maritime economy is largely unchanged. Morris Street still connects to the landing where the ferry has operated since 1683. The buildings in the commercial district still sit close to the street and are an integral part of the community. Residents and visitors can walk to the commercial district where they find their market, town hall, library, and park.

- How should the fabric of historic Oxford be preserved and restored? "Fabric" refers to the physical elements of a place and their positioning within it. For example, in Oxford, decidedly retail buildings project into the public space. The Mews, for over 100 years, has signaled its significance by standing forward of the established building line on the street with six columns supporting a porch over the sidewalk. Buildings stand one and a half or two stories tall and all feature elements that bring about human scale proportions along the street, such as the porches. Within the district, there are brick sidewalks with a low curb or no curb at all and there is a break in the pattern of street trees and white fences so characteristic of Morris Street. There are no street trees in the district in fact, except at either end. Vehicles park parallel to the street or customers walk as they always have to the shops in the district.



- How can the identity and character of Oxford be sustained and enhanced overtime? Identity and character come about through the interplay of the environment and the culture of a place. Oxford is no longer a seaport or a regional center for ship building and canning, but it does remain a maritime and yachting destination with marinas and yacht serving businesses. Its connections to the water-based economy are enduring and a connection to the water is an integral part of daily life.

Findings

Strengths and Weaknesses

The main study area, described above, lies within the Oxford Historic District, which is on the National Register of Historic Places. It consists of the following buildings along S. Morris Street: the Oxford Market, the “Fowler Building”, Americana Antiques, The Mews, the Oxford Museum, the Oxford Municipal Building, the Mystery Loves Company bookstore, and the former Tred Avon Yacht Sales building. The Library, which lies adjacent to the Town office on Market Street, is also in the district. The main strengths are:

- An authentic historic context and organizing structure with buildings located uniformly on the sidewalk and close to the street.
- The presence of the town park, which offers a high quality community space, with expansive views of the Tred Avon River. The buildings on Morris Street physically frame the park.
- The presence of a bookstore and the museum, municipal offices, and the library. These provide institutional and cultural elements and add continuity and stability to the district. They are destination uses and their presence drives foot and bike traffic.
- The presence of the Oxford Market, which is another destination for residents and people employed in the Town.
- Adequate on street parking along S. Morris Street and a highly accessible location by walking, biking, and driving.
- A multi-faceted market demand: area residents, tourists arriving by boat and car, weekend stays and family gatherings in the second /occasional homes, and a growing population in Easton, eight miles east on the Oxford Road.



There are however, weaknesses that need to be overcome:

- First, the Mews and the Fowler Building are vacant. These vacancies ultimately constrain, if not prevent, the commercial and cultural vitality in the district that is otherwise possible. Also, at present, the building formally housing the Tred Avon Yacht Brokerage is being repurposed and is vacant.

- One part of the Fowler Building, at the intersection of High Street and Morris Street, looks like a residential structure. The residential façade at the street level distracts from the potential commercial vitality of the district.
- The Americana Antiques building is an attractive structure but there is little or no retail “signature” to the building; little about the architecture conveys a business presence, except for the commercial sign.
- There is little apparent coordination or joint marketing among property owners and the business entities within the district.
- There is no central place in the district for residents to gather, for example, to extend the conversation after a town meeting. (There is an element of this at the Oxford Market where residents meet in passing.)
- With the exception of the Oxford Museum, there is little for tourists to do in the commercial district and certainly not enough activity to sustain interest beyond a brief stay, even though the district is one of the most unique and pleasant cultural landscapes in Maryland.

The Town Character

- Oxford is a historic community on the Tred Avon with deep maritime roots in the Chesapeake Bay region and is a tourist destination.
- It has an elegant and authentic charm and a unique sense of place that attracts day-trippers and over night stays by car and sailors by boat. In an increasingly interconnected and fast paced world, Oxford offers a slower pace. The local tourist base includes overnight accommodations, several restaurants, and some retail businesses that address the tourism market, an ice cream shop, a gift shop, and a bookstore.
- Oxford is situated in an affluent economic region with accessibility from and to the Baltimore and Washington areas. It is also on the circuit of regional sailing destinations.
- The Town’s population is composed of many accomplished people who have travelled widely and/or lived abroad and bring vast personal and professional experiences and unique perspectives to their participation in town governance and community planning.
- Oxford has an economic base in the maritime industry with boat yards, full service yacht servicing companies, a maritime surveyor, yacht sales, boat rentals, etc. Nearly 15 businesses are directly tied to the maritime/boating industry and others (including restaurants and accommodations) are indirectly tied to it. It is a port of call for recreational sailors and home to the Tred Avon Yacht Club.

- The Town has a successful community center located at Oxford Road and Second Street. It has high quality parks and recreational amenities; a public beach at The Strand and water based recreational opportunities for residents and visitors alike.

Demographic Findings

- According to the U.S. Census there were 574 housing units in Oxford and 651 residents in 2010¹. The population is considerably smaller than the number of units should indicate, owing to the fact that 31 percent of the housing units in the Town, or 178 units, are “seasonal, recreational or occasional” homes. If these seasonal homes were occupied year round, the Town’s population would approximate 1,000². If Oxford’s overall housing unit vacancy equaled that of Talbot County (17.5 percent in 2010 rather than 41.1 percent) the Town’s population would approximate 1,300³.
- The Town’s population decreased by 30 people between 2010 and 2015 or by 4.6 percent⁴. This decline is a continuation of a trend. Between 2000 and 2015, the population decreased from 771 persons or by 19.4 percent to 621 persons. This contrasts with Talbot County’s population growth of 11 percent during the same 15-year period.
- Over the short-term, Talbot County’s population has trended downward somewhat, by 0.7 percent (between 2010 and 2015). Over the longer term however, between 2000 and 2015, the County added 3,700 residents, growing by 11 percent as mentioned above.
- Oxford is comparatively wealthy. Its 338 households have a median household income of \$88,750 and a median housing value of \$488,700⁵. The poverty rate is among the very lowest in Maryland and educational attainment is near the highest of any Maryland town.

¹ Except where noted, 2010 decennial Census data are used for housing units and households as they provide a more reliable estimate than recent U.S. Census American Community Survey 2000-2014 data, which data at the small geographic level contain very large statistical margins of error. The actual number of housing units in Oxford has not changed materially since 2010 though the use of houses for seasonal and occasional use has increased substantially. By way of illustration, in 2000, 17.8 percent of units were occupied only seasonally or occasionally, compared to 33 percent in 2010. Interviews conducted with local real estate brokers in 2016 indicate that this trend has not reversed.

² This estimate assumes each of the 178 seasonal housing units had an average household size of 1.93 persons per household, which is the average size for the Town in 2010.

³ If only 17.5 percent of the Town housing units were vacant like in Talbot County at large, there would be 100 more occupied housing units in Town (0.175×574 units) and, at the average household size of 1.93, there would be about 194 more Oxford residents.

⁴ The U.S. Census annual population-estimating program provides the following estimates for Oxford following the year 2010 Census: 647 in 2011, 643 in 2012, 635 in 2013, 623 in 2014, and 621 in 2015.

⁵ Source of income and household value estimates: 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, U.S. Census.

- The medium age of Town residents is among the highest of any jurisdiction in Maryland at 61.2 according to the U.S. 2010 Census, which is considerably higher than the 2000 median age of 55.3. The Town is a destination for seniors and those who are in transition from full time career work.

Market Evaluation Findings

- As shown in Table 1, there are 568 households in the local market area, which includes the 338 households (the year round occupied housing units) and the 230 households on the Oxford Neck from the Town limits to Alms House Road⁶. Conservatively, the market area has an aggregate household income of \$50.4 million. If the 178 “seasonal, recreational, or occasional” housing units in Oxford were occupied year-round, an additional \$15.8 million would be available annually to the local income base⁷.

Table 1

Oxford Market Area Summary

Population (of primary market area)		1,150
Households		568
Median Household Income	\$	88,750
Aggregate Income	\$	50,410,000

Source: U.S. Census and Jakubiak & Associates, Inc.

- Within the market area, total estimated annual sales by retail category includes: \$2.77 million for food away from home, \$3.62 million for food at home (groceries), \$0.45 million for alcoholic beverages, and \$0.55 million for entertainment and \$0.25 million for educational services. The resident market alone supports commercial space in these categories totaling 18,400 square feet as shown in Table 2.

⁶ Two hundred thirty housing units on the Oxford Neck between the Oxford municipal limits and Alms House Road were counted using areal photography and for the purpose of this assessment all assumed occupied.

⁷ Assuming these households had the same median household income as that estimated for the whole Town.

Table 2

Estimated Local Market Demand by Retail Category

Expenditure Category	% of Household Expenditures	Total Supportable Sales	Sales Productivity (\$ Sales / sf)	Supportable Space
Food Away From Home	5.5%	\$2,772,550	350	7,922
Alcoholic Beverages	0.9%	\$453,690	350	1,296
Food at Home	7.2%	\$3,629,520	490	7,407
Other Specialty Retail	2.0%	\$1,008,200	500	2,016
Entertainment (fees, admissions)	1.1%	\$554,510	500	1,109
Education	0.5%	\$252,050	350	720

Source of expenditure data is U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Expenditure Survey, June 2015 - April 2016.

- To a large extent existing restaurants in Oxford satisfy the demand for “food away from home” shown in the table above. The food at home and alcoholic beverages categories are only partially addressed by the Oxford Market however, which likely satisfies no more than 20 percent of actual market demand. Local spending on food and beverages occurs mostly in Easton, which is eight miles away; indicating there is a loss of local economic activity.
- The growing Town of Easton is located eight miles east of Oxford. Within a five-mile radius of Easton, there are 22,150 residents, 9,340 households, and 15,240 daytime employees. The annual retail expenditures within this five-mile radius are estimated to be \$33.8 million for entertainment and recreation, \$33.8 million for fashion and clothing, \$10.8 million for furniture and home, and \$32.5 million for food and beverages⁸.
- Visitation in Talbot County totaled 483,400 visitors in 2014 and visitor spending broke down as follows: \$31.5 million on lodging, \$41.9 million on food and beverage sales, \$27.6 million on retail sales, and \$25.2 million on recreation sales. 2014 visitor spending in Talbot County amounted to \$364 per visitor per day as shown in the Table 3 below⁹.

⁸ Source: Mackenzie Commercial Real Estate Services, LLC.

⁹ The Economic Impact of Tourism in Maryland, Tourism Satellite Account, Calendar Year 2014. Dec. 2015, provided by the Talbot County Office of Tourism.

Table 3

Economic Impact of Visitation to Talbot County (2014)

Daytime Visitors	295,400
Overnight Visitors	188,000
Total Visitors	483,400
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Lodging Sales	\$31,500,000
Sales per Overnight Visitor	\$168
Food and Beverage Sales	\$41,900,000
Sales per Visitor	\$87
Retail Sales	\$27,600,000
Sales per Visitor	\$57
Recreation Sales	\$25,200,000
Sales per Visitor	\$52
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Total Visitation Sales (per visitor, per day)	\$363

Source: Economic Impact of Tourism in Maryland, Tourism Satellite Account, Calendar Yr. 2014, Provided by Talbot County Office of Tourism

- Assuming 15 percent of Talbot County visitors are destined for Oxford, visitors create a \$6.2 million in aggregate demand annually for food and beverages or about 18,000 square feet of restaurant space and a demand for non-restaurant retail of \$4.1 million or about 11,800 square feet¹⁰. The supply of restaurants in Oxford is large enough to capture this demand, which is however, largely seasonal. However, other retail spending associated with Oxford's visitors is occurring elsewhere.

¹⁰ In arriving at these ballpark estimates we apply known figures on overnight and daytime visitors, lodging sales, and visitor spending in 2014 for Talbot County (see Table 2 in this report) and assume a 65 percent average room occupancy rate for Talbot County and 54 available rooms in Oxford are occupied with 2.0 persons per rooms, a standard leisure room night stay occupancy (American Hotel & Lodging Association, 2014 Lodging Industry Profile; data compiled by D.K. Shifflet & Associates Ltd.). To capture the effect of daytime visitors we assume they visit Oxford in roughly the same proportion roughly 14+/- percent as overnight hotel visitors, which may be a slight overweighting but given the weekend occupancy in single-family homes and other overnight visits to private residences, the 15% overall estimate overall is reasonable.

Summary and Assessment of Findings

As a small town, a village really, Oxford cannot afford to separate its economic activities from its cultural offerings or its tourist offerings from its local serving businesses. No single market—local or visitor--is large enough by itself to sustain year-round vibrant business activity. The overall market is constrained in part by the large percentage of housing units that are unoccupied year-round, which measurably limits local demand for goods and services, even though there is a pattern of weekend visits to second homes. The retail offerings in the Easton area, even though they are beyond the typical travel distance for basic items like groceries, and the seasonal nature of tourism in Oxford also constrain business activity in Oxford. Vitality of the historic commercial district therefore requires great integration of local and tourism offerings.

The population and median age are factors too. Oxford is not projected to grow and arresting the gradual population decline will be an issue to address over the longer term. The spending patterns of a relatively small population, largely tilted toward older age cohorts, cannot sustain what might be considered a traditional main street commercial area.

However, Oxford does not have a traditional main street. Instead, the Town has a relatively strong tourism base and an economic concentration in the maritime trades; these contribute market support for new and expanded business ventures. And while Easton is a competitive market place for local serving retail, Oxford based businesses could reasonably capture more spending potential from Easton consumers who may seek retail and cultural experiences tied to the historic qualities and unique sense of place in Oxford.

On balance, considering the local resident market, visitor spending, existing commercial offerings, tourism qualities, and the locational advantages of the district, there is support in the market for new and expanded commercial activity as noted below¹¹:

- There is support for “food away from home”, which could be offered in the form of a small café, including the service of coffee, tea, and even beer and wines in the evenings as well as small food items in a casual setting.
- There is support for the specialized retailing of beers and wines and special groceries, including fresh foods, bakery, flowers and other items with higher gross margins.
- There is support for more retailing of gifts driven in part by merchandizing in connection with the Oxford Museum. There is a gift shop on Morris Street four doors west of Tilghman Street but its presence in the 100 block of S. Morris Street would be more positive for the district especially because the owner represents the work of local artists and that would be a welcome addition to the Mews or the buildings near it.

¹¹ The list here was also confirmed in multiple discussions with individual residents attending public workshops and meetings, interviews and discussions with merchants, by input received in workshops organized for businesses, and the comments received by residents at a public meeting at which the draft plan was presented.

- There is support for live and recorded music offerings and cultural events (entertainment) in combination with small food and beverage sales (café) in a central location where residents, tourists, and visitors from outside of Town can all interact together.
- There is likely market support for fee-based classes and seminars, cooking, wine tasting, art, photography, and exercise/physical therapy. To the extent that such programming can be aligned, at least in part, with the merchandizing of retail offerings, they can offer added market support for the retail offerings especially during the “off-season”.
- The commercial district could provide a good location for a bike and kayak rental office and other “visitor-related” services (i.e. a visitor center function).

Goal and Objectives

The goal is to create an Oxford historic commercial district that is a vibrant center of economic and cultural life for the Town and a destination for tourists and visitors. More specifically stated, the following objectives are desired:

- Full and year-round business occupancy of the commercial space on Morris Street.
- Cultural offerings in the district for residents, tourists and visitors alike.
- Increased tourist visitation overall: overnight and day trips to Oxford.
- Extending the Oxford tourism experience into the commercial district in a meaningful way that captures tourist spending.

Issues to Address, Short Term

Over the next five-years the main issues to address are:

- The Mews. The acquisition and revitalization of the Mews building is critically important to secure the vitality of the commercial district.
- Commercial vacancies on S. Morris Street. In addition to repurposing the Mews building, the other vacancies on S. Morris Street need to be addressed. The vacant Fowler Building breaks the continuity between the Mews and the Oxford Market.
- Tourist-supporting venues. The district has the potential to offer an improved venue for tourists. A café with music and arts programming, an arts gallery/studio, the integration of the Oxford Museum into the Mews improvement program, gifts, and specialized food and beverage retailing should be considered at a minimum. Retail spending associated with visitors is being missed and some portion of that will need to be captured in the commercial district.

- The lack of cultural offerings in the district for residents. In any community, economic vitality occurs when cultural and business activities are mixed. They must be in close physical and programmatic proximity. To the extent possible, blending cultural programming with the businesses of the district should be addressed.

Issues to Address, Long Term

Over the next 10 years, the Town will need to address the following:

- Population loss. The loss of population is a headwind for local businesses and is not supportive of the preservation of the historic commercial district. Related to this is year round occupancy and residency of housing. As noted herein, more year round occupancy would increase available income and expenditure potential in the Town and thus measurably lend support to local businesses.
- The Town's larger setting for tourism and sailing and maritime related tourism in particular. If Oxford can be said to have an economic base it is in the maritime industry and a major component of that is tourism driven. Over the next 10 years the Town should work to support and invigorate this industry, which is so central to preserving the Town's historic and cultural context and its waterfront land use and economy. That initiative should by intention result in the presence of local maritime related business activity on S. Morris Street within the commercial district.
- The Town's economic integration with the growing Easton Area. Easton is growing and the prospects for business activity in Oxford should grow with it through the next decade. Customer visitation from Easton should be encouraged over the next decade. The Town can have great appeal to families and others in Talbot County seeking unique experiences for day trips, water related recreation, enjoyable dining experiences, and special experiences tied to the heritage and history of the Town.
- Population Growth. Over the next decade, the vitality of the commercial district will be helped if local population loss is stopped. Growth would be more advisable but the Oxford Comprehensive Plan acknowledges that opportunities for growth are limited by physical attributes and environmental conditions, the lack of buildable land, and annexation policy. The Town might consider other means for supporting growth including promoting apartments above commercial businesses and integrated into commercial development sites throughout the Town.

Plan Recommendations

The recommendations are organized under four headings: General Programming Strategies, Mews-Specific Recommendations, Other Buildings and Uses in the District, and Coordination in the District. It should go without saying that the guiding principles set forth in the introduction to this report are foundational to each and every recommendation contained herein. No recommendation, either in its conception or implementation, should depart from the overarching view that the historic and cultural context of Oxford should be protected, celebrated and advanced. Exhibit 1 locates some of the main ideas on a plan-view illustration.

General Programming Strategies

1. The commercial district should emphasize three things: (1) blending Oxford culture and business together and maximizing their synergies, (2) meeting the demand of three market segments--residents, tourists, and customer-visitors which can be drawn from the Easton area and (3) bringing life to (activating) the street.

Each of the business categories found in this report to have market potential can stand in combination with a cultural programming element, each can serve multiple market segments, and each can be designed to create life and vitality along S. Morris Street. For example, a small café in the Mews can be operated in combination with an art gallery, feature coffee in the morning, live music on summer evenings, outdoor seating year-round, and fee-based cooking classes.

2. The commercial district provides a concentrated venue in a beautiful setting. Architecture that allows the supportable uses to have a spillover effect onto the sidewalk is desirable. Roll up windows and outdoor seating should fit into the building program for the Mews. Well-lit windows and classic merchandizing at the storefront will create a unique shopping experience for the entire district. Each of the buildings in the district should have retail frontages.
3. Programming events throughout the year would add value to the businesses in the district. The Town might want to consider making the park grounds available periodically to outside groups who host “shows” or events.
4. The Town should install or support the installation of a bike rack in the district near the Mews and consider providing multiple bikes for residents and property owners to use for free—i.e. an Oxford Bike Share. Locating the Bike Share near the businesses on Morris Street will increase resident and visitor interaction with the district and send positive signals to tourists and visitors about Oxford’s friendly bike culture. This or similar strategy might also be managed by existing private enterprises in Town.

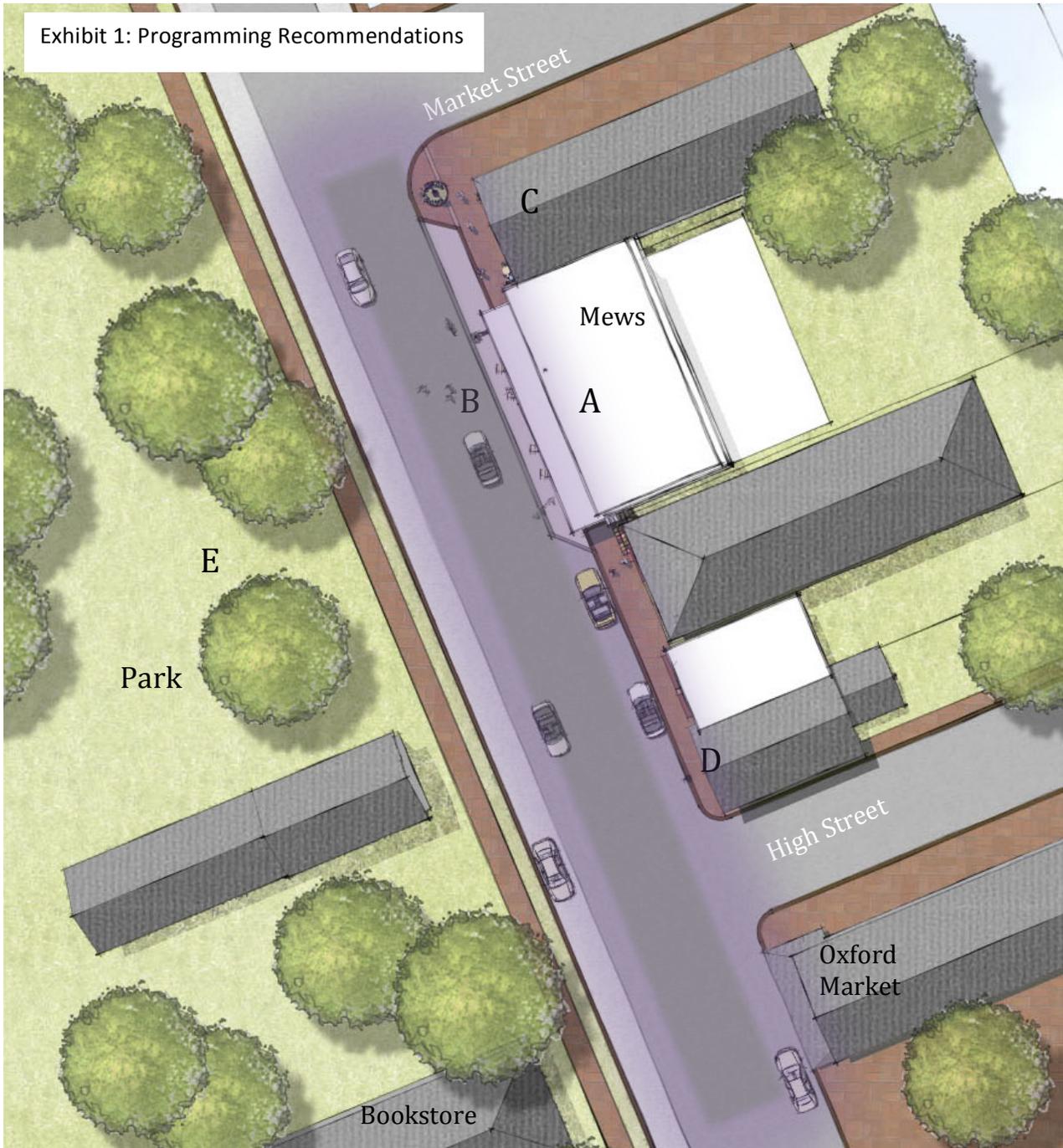
5. The Town should consider making improvements to the park that would add recreational amenities that residents and tourists would both appreciate. Consider for example lawn bowling, croquet, splash fountains for children, and public art. The park, as a public asset, can contribute to the vitality of the business district and to local tourism because of its direct proximity to the businesses on S. Morris Street.

Mews-Specific Recommendations

1. Follow through with the proposed acquisition of the Mews and pursue a path leading to the building's restoration for commercial use in combination with residential apartments. The total leasable floor area at street level would approximate 3,500 square feet, which should readily find market supportable business activity among the retail categories noted in this report.
2. Achieve item 1 above through public/private partnering recognizing that some degree of public subsidy will likely be required to secure the optimal development program and uses for the district¹².
3. For occupancy at the Mews, target a combination of destination and community gathering businesses and locate them at the street level. The Mews was designed to have three bays and this frontage pattern should be retained to the extent possible—that is, there should be three discreet storefronts. The following uses have special potential: a café with outdoor seating on Morris Street, art gallery (in combination with studio space), and the specialized retailing of beer, wines, breads, other specialty food and beverages, flowers, and/or gifts.
4. Consider physically and architecturally connecting the Mews to the Oxford Museum next door in a manner which would allow one or more of the following tourist related uses in the Mews to connect directly to the Museum: café, gift shop, bike/kayak rental, art studio space, and/or visitor center.
5. Apartments and/or office spaces are acceptable uses on the second floor or in the rear (non-street side) of the Mews but should not be located on the street level facing Morris Street.

¹² Subsidy may be required because (1) lease rates in Oxford may not be sufficient to cover debt service and to realize a reasonable private return on equity; (2) the uses for the building that are most desirable from the community's perspective may not be at the top of the list of a private developer; (3) initial municipal ownership and/or leadership may increase the likelihood of grant funding to complete the project; and (4) the building will be an asset and the Town has an interest in securing the public benefits of its investment.

Exhibit 1: Programming Recommendations



- A. Restoration and commercial use of the Mews
- B. Sidewalk café seating at The Mews
- C. Oxford Museum: create close merchandising relationship with the Mews
- D. Fowler Building, complete restoration with retail frontage at street level
- E. Enhancements to the Park, consider a location for bike share / bike rental

6. While maintaining the essential historic integrity of the Mews, bring about innovations in the building that provide for modern merchandizing. Consider for example, installing an overheard roll up door on the center bay of the building so that café activities can enliven and activate the sidewalk with sound and activity. Also consider how to accentuate the front windows and the entrances through the use of high quality lighting, glazing, and signage.
7. Consider converting the parallel parking lane in front of the Mews to a walkway so that outdoor sidewalk café seating can be established under the porch roof where the sidewalk is now. Its conversion will help activate the street and improve the physical and visual connection to the park. It will also increase the seating capacity of the café and attract visitors and tourists without altering the enduring character of the street. Flexibility in this simple design could provide that parking is retained when needed and/or when the outdoor seating is not in effect. See Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2: Introducing Outdoor Café Seating at The Mews



Other Buildings and Uses in the District

- For the existing Oxford Market, the owners may wish to enhance the overall merchandising of food and beverages. However, one-third of the ground floor of the Mews could be built out to accommodate specialized food and beverage retailing as suggested above so some redundancy may occur. The Oxford Market's retail offerings may find a good home in a renovated Mews however and then the existing Market could focus on core deli/lunch offerings, dry groceries, and other "general store" retailing.
- The Mews building offers a preferred location for a café but the other market supported uses listed herein could be considered for the Fowler Building and the former Tred Avon Yacht Sales building.
- The Town should coordinate with the owner of the Fowler Building to assist in overcoming the regulatory (building and fire code) obstacles associated with development of that mixed-use building. The Town should encourage and incentivize the owner to convert the entire façade into a retail frontage. Residential uses should not be located at street level in this location.
- As mentioned previously, the Oxford Museum could be connected to the Mews physically and/or programmatically. For example, the small parking lane in front of the Museum could be converted to sidewalk space and/or outdoor seating allowing the Museum's patrons to capitalize on the café and its offerings. This would also provide a protected and visible place to locate the Museum's street signage.

Coordination in the District

- The owners and business entities, in the commercial district, including the Oxford Museum, should coordinate on an ongoing basis to address the preferred location of the various commercial uses within and among the buildings.
- They should coordinate on joint marketing and participate in planning and executing special events.
- They should work with the Town to organize and coordinate holiday lighting and decorations that are unique to the district and do seasonal decorations as well, such as spring and summer plantings.
- As part of the restoration of the Mews, the Town should consider retaining a consultant on merchandising for input on the design and layout of the retail spaces and to provide consultation services to the end users of the space. Merchandising is about deciding what products to sell, at what price, and in what manner or format to display them within the store. The Town should consider providing that service to others in the commercial district at the same time. By using merchandizing and space planning techniques that have an impact on customers and improve their shopping experiences (as a local resident and as a tourist), businesses in the Oxford commercial district will be more likely to thrive.

Exhibit 3: A Vision for S. Morris Street



Implementation

Among the smaller towns in Maryland, the Town of Oxford has an enviable capacity to manage grants and implement long-term projects owing to its experienced and professional management staff, close working relationship with Maryland's agencies on business and community development, and its municipal budget capabilities. The Town also is home to many residents and homeowners with professional backgrounds and experiences that equip them for innovative thinking about both development and historic preservation. The Town will continue to excel at grant management and the acquisition of State programmatic and technical assistance in securing the best outcome for the Mews and the commercial district generally. Moving forward, the Town should secure a solid public private partnership related to the Mews, the outlines of which will no doubt evolve as the Town considers proposals. The implementation ideas here are provided as guidance.

Priorities for Physical Improvements

- The first priority is to repurpose and revitalize the Mews, modernize its interior, secure business occupancy and maximize residential occupancy on the second floor. The design of a seating area under the front porch of the Mews porch and the front parking lane should be incorporated into the site's improvement. The physical integration of the Oxford Museum into the Mews construction project should be thoughtfully considered and if found feasible should be accomplished concurrently.
- The second priority is to advance the completion of the Fowler Building and its business occupancy. The improvement of this building should include reconstructing the S. Morris Street façade so that it reads entirely as a retail frontage, not as a residential frontage.
- The third priority is to add enhancements to the park that make it a destination for residents, tourists, and customer-visitors from Easton.
- The fourth priority is to create the Oxford Bike Share for town residents located in the commercial district, perhaps at the park's edge opposite the Mews.
- The fifth priority is to secure façade improvements for every commercial building in the district that is not otherwise undergoing improvement through the State façade improvement grant program, which would be administered by the Town. In concert with this, the Town should retain the services an expert in tourism retail merchandizing to secure the public and private investments and to truly invigorate the retail experience in the district for residents and tourists alike.

Performance Indicators

Performance indicators allow progress to be measured toward achieving objectives. The recommended indicators for the commercial district and how they should be measured are listed below.

- Increased assessable tax base within the commercial district. This will be measured every three years by tracking data through the Maryland State Department of Assessments and Taxation.
- Increased visitation to the Town. This will be measured by tracking the number of visitors to the Town Hall, the number of visits to the Town's website, and head counts at community wide events. Visitation should be tracked on an ongoing basis. Lodging occupancies should be tracked.

- Enhanced business vitality in the district. The exact way that this is measured should be up to local business owners since they know best how to track their business performance. It is also important that confidentially be protected. One very effective and recommended measure to use is “sales productively” which is the dollar amount of sales annually per square foot in retail use. Customer visitation is another measure. Irrespective of these more fine-tuned measures, an indicator that the Town can use is simply the total square footage in active retail and service use.

In Considering Proposals for Business Attraction and Retention

In considering and evaluating requests for Town and or State financial and/or technical assistance including tax or other incentives, either sponsored by Oxford or by the State of Maryland for in the district, the Town should weigh the following:

- The degree to which a proposal would be positioned to respond to the demand in the Oxford market and more specifically to each of the following: local residents, tourists, and customer-visitors from Easton area. Proposals that are highly attuned to each of these market segments should be considered favorably.
- The degree to which a proposal either incorporates new cultural offerings or aligns with existing offerings within the commercial district and the Town generally. Proposals that provide for live music or arts programming, that respond to or help develop the local arts scene, or that embrace the heritage of Oxford should be considered favorably. Proposals that ignore the historic context or do not attempt to blend culture and business within the district should not be considered favorably.
- The degree to which a proposal promotes and supports the heritage of Oxford and is tied to its maritime roots. Businesses that can incorporate in an authentic way the history and culture of Oxford in their operations and merchandizing should be encouraged.