

**Walkable Community Workshop  
Mount Vernon, New York  
October 5, 2004**

**Workshop Summary**

On Tuesday morning, October 5<sup>th</sup> nearly 20 people gathered in the conference room at the Westchester County Department of Transportation's office in downtown Mount Vernon to hear Mr. Charles Gandy of Livable Communities Consulting of Austin, Texas present a Walkable Communities Workshop. This workshop was funded through the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council and co-hosted by the City of Mount Vernon and Westchester County Department of Transportation. Mr. Gandy, a recognized leader in bicycle and pedestrian design, has present over 500 workshops nationally.

The workshop began with opening remarks by the Honorable Ernest D. Davis, Mayor of Mount Vernon, who introduced his city. Mount Vernon has a population of approximately 70,000 and occupies approximately 4.2 square miles. It is home to residents from 98 different countries and, according to Mayor Davis, is one of the few truly affordable cities in Westchester County. The city, which is 99 percent built-up, has a broad economic income and desires to make itself more pedestrian friendly.

Mr. Gandy followed Mayor Davis and outlined some of the principles that the workshop would try to follow as the morning progressed. The emphasis was to seek some quick projects that could be completed in 6 months to no more than 2 years. Some of these projects might be as simple as using paint in an imaginative manner or introducing more mixed-use buildings in the downtown area. There are problems with pedestrian crossings in the city and the need to have "public ownership" of some of the open spaces. Pedestrian areas for walking are desirable, as well as the need to make the downtown area a destination zone with both living and leisure spaces. There is also a need to develop the downtown area as a transportation center. The goal should be to lower the average speed of motor traffic in downtown Mount Vernon so that walking in the city ceases to be a "death-defying feat". Style matters in developing these programs. In order for the public to take "public ownership" of a neighborhood, it needs to be attractive and inviting. While "Jersey barriers" and related protective hardware do have a place, they are not attractive and do not encourage residents to develop or make use of a city's assets. When a neighborhood is inviting and people are encouraged to be out on the street, there is a sense of security and the neighborhood is not as threatening to the residents.

After the introduction, Mr. Gandy proceeded to lead the participants on a walking tour of several Mount Vernon neighborhoods. This began with a stop right outside the door of the county owned office building at the corner of East First Street and South First Avenue where there are no pedestrian crossing signals and only one of the four crossings is marked.



Fig. 1 – Corner of East First Street and South First Avenue looking north across the Metro-North Railroad Bridge that connects South First Avenue with Park Avenue.

The group then walked through the residential blocks along Union Avenue to East Third Street. Here a traffic island in East Third Street functioned as both a traffic controlling device and a beautification project. It was presented as an example of what steps can be taken on a limited budget to improve an intersection.



Fig. 2 – Intersection of Union Avenue and East Third Street looking east on East Third Street showing the traffic controlling device and beautification project.

The next stop was near East Third Street and South First Avenue in a section of the city that has been designated as an artist district.



Fig. 3 – The intersection of East Third Street and South First Avenue looking west along East Third Street where the local artists and crafts persons sell their wares each September.

Every September, numerous local artists set up stands at this location and sell their wares. It was suggested that this area be “pulled together” by using a specific motif painted in each pedestrian crosswalk and included on decorative street light banners



Fig. 4 – One of the sets of decorative baskets in the artist district along East Third Street.



Fig. 5 – A view from the corner of South Fourth Avenue looking east down East Third Street. Note the refurbished building to the left of the intersection.



Fig. 6 – A view looking south down South Fourth Street from the intersection of East Third Street. The proposed Hip Hop Cultural Gallery will be located on the left side of the street near the south end of the gray fence shown in the photograph.

At the corner of East Third Street and South Fourth Avenue the group was shown the location of the proposed Hip Hop Cultural Gallery. This is intended to be a principle attraction in the district. In order for the Cultural Gallery to contribute to the revitalization of this part of Mount Vernon it is important that signs be very clear in directing potential visitors to the site by both automobile and public transit. The group then turned north on South Fourth Avenue and walked towards the Metro-North Railroad tracks that effectively divide Mount Vernon into two distinct sections.



Fig. 7 – This is a view looking north on South Fourth.

South Fourth Avenue is the major retail street for the downtown area immediately south of the railroad tracks. It is made up of numerous small to medium size independent retail establishments and enjoys, for the most part, a reasonable building occupancy rate. Here the group also noted a number of buildings that were either recently renovated or in the process of being revitalized.



Fig. 8 – This is a picture of two buildings being renovated on South Fourth Street in the center of the shopping district.



Fig. 9 – Looking north on South Fourth Avenue at the intersection of East Second Street is the green grocer with his display of fresh produce.

Two locations in particular were noted along South Fourth Avenue. The first was in front of a green grocer where the displays of fruits and vegetables flowed out from the store onto the street itself. This resulted in patrons being out on the street while passersby were slowing down to look at the colorful displays, thus creating a sense of neighborhood. The point being made here was that there was life on the street, not just people quickly moving past. The second location was one storefront down from the

green grocer which was a vacant concrete slab of a lot approximately one small retail store footprint in size, with a ten-foot high black iron fence in front. Here people walked quickly past the vacant space and did not slow down. An alternative use for this relatively small space could be a small vest-pocket park with benches, potted plants, a small fountain and community murals on one or both walls. Using the existing iron fence, the park could be secured after dark with security lighting left on.

This could be a temporary use of the property until such time as a new retail facility was located on the site. This strategy for the vacant piece of land would create a point of interest that would encourage more pedestrians to stay in the area and contribute to the vitality of the street.



Fig. 10 – This photograph was taken from the South Fourth Street / Gramatan Avenue bridge looking west at the Metro-North tracks of the New Haven Line. West First Street is on the left while the Fifth Avenue Bridge is directly ahead with the three-story City Hall Parking Garage behind the bridge.

The group proceeded north on South Fourth Avenue to West First Street, which runs parallel to the Metro-North Railroad. South Fourth Avenue continues north across the tracks as Gramatan Avenue. Within the city of Mount Vernon, there are approximately 18 bridges that cross Metro-North Railroad's New Haven line. While standing on the South Fourth Avenue/Gramatan Avenue Bridge, Mr. Gandy related the desirability of bringing various generations of people together in a community. He cited the example of a community where high school students purchased hanging baskets of flowering plants and rented them to local merchants. For approximately \$15.00 a month the student would hang the basket outside the establishment, water and maintain the plants during the season and once a month wash the front windows of the store. This program not only spruced up the retail district but it brought people into the area to shop. Perhaps more

importantly, it brought young people into contact with the older generation of merchants and instilled in the young people a sense of pride in their community.



Fig. 11 – This is one of a number of architecturally interesting buildings in downtown Mount Vernon. The photograph was taken at the corner of Gramatan Avenue looking down West Prospect Avenue.

The group continued up Gramatan Avenue past the street’s shopping area and turned east on East Sidney Avenue, then south on North Third Avenue. This brought the group past one of the city owned parking garages which dot the cityscape.



Fig. 12 – The main entrance to the Third Avenue parking structure as seen from Gramatan Avenue.



Fig. 13 – This is a view of the interior of the Third Street Garage interior looking out toward the Gramatan Avenue entrance.

The next stop was at Petrillo Plaza located between North Third Avenue and Park Avenue parallel to Metro-North's New Haven line. This location is the principle transit hub for the Bee-Line bus routes serving Mount Vernon and, as such, is a very busy pedestrian and vehicular location. The pedestrian crossings at both the west and east ends of Petrillo Plaza received a failing grade for walkability, principally because of poor crosswalk markings but also because of poor design that creates an excessive distance between curb lines for pedestrians. On the west end of the Plaza, the pedestrian crossing is further exacerbated by the pedestrian crossing signals that are non-functioning and the traffic signals that are not visible to the pedestrians once they have stepped off the curb.



Fig. 14 – This is Petrillo Plaza looking east from North Third Avenue toward Park Avenue.



Fig. 15 – A view from the south side of the Plaza looking west back to North Third Avenue.



Fig. 16 – This view from the south side of the Plaza looks east toward Park Avenue.

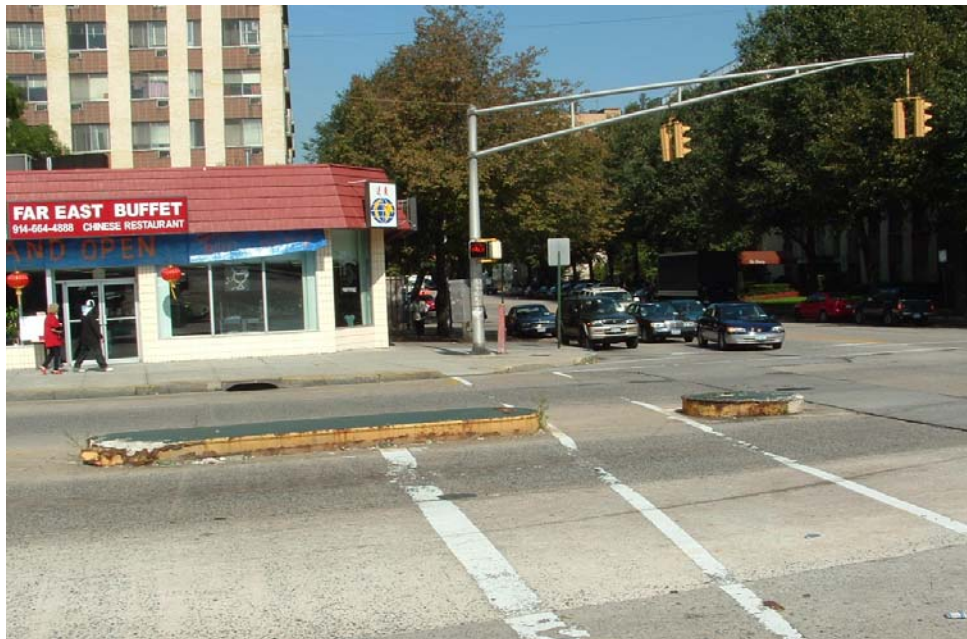


Fig. 17 – This is a view of the east end of Petrillo Plaza from the south side looking north across the Plaza.

The Mount Vernon East train station is located a block away, however, the route between the Bee-Line bus stops and the train station is not marked. One of the group's recommendations was to paint a distinctively colored line designating the route between the bus stops and the train station, and to install signs at appropriate locations.



Fig. 18 – The downtown of Mount Vernon as seen looking west from the Park Avenue Bridge over the Metro-North Railroad

After completing the walkabout, the group returned to the Westchester County DOT offices where the recommendations for the downtown were summarized.

## **Summary of Recommendations**

### Pedestrian Enhancements

- Repaint existing pedestrian crosswalks and, where necessary, add new crosswalks in the downtown area.
- Repair and, if required, install pedestrian crossing signals in the downtown area.
- In the Artist's District, add a specific Artist's District motif to each intersection and to decorative streetlight banners.
- Paint a "trailblazer" line on the pavement between the Metro-North New Haven Line railroad station and the Bee-Line bus stops located along Petrillo Plaza.
- Redesign Petrillo Plaza to improve safety at intersections and make it more pedestrian friendly. Consider traffic calming techniques.

### Other Downtown Improvements

- Continue to develop the Hip Hop Cultural Gallery.
- Continue to renovate and revitalize the various buildings on East Third Street and South Fourth Avenue.
- Encourage the participation of the city's residents, such as youth groups or neighborhood churches in the reclamation of small parks and vacant lots within the downtown area of the city.

Attendees:

Blanche Alter	Mount Vernon Department of Planning
Roberta Apuzzo	Community Services Association
Lawrence Bland	Mount Vernon Police Department
Patricia Chemka	Westchester County Department of Transportation
Ernest Davis	Mayor, City of Mount Vernon
David Drummond	South Mount Vernon (S. O. M. O.)
Ruby Figuerou	South Mount Vernon (S. O. M. O.)
Rodger Griffith	Westchester County Department of Public Works
Lukas Herbert	Westchester County Department of Planning
Naomi Klein	Westchester County Department of Transportation
Robert Miller	South Mount Vernon (S. O. M. O.)
Claudia Mooney	Mount Vernon City Planning
Surya Peterson	Third Street Task Force
Harry Porr	Village of Bronxville
Terri Rouke	Village of Pelham
Lawrence Salley	Westchester County Department of Transportation
Charles Sutter	Westchester County Department of Transportation
Andrew Ziegler	Westchester County Department of Transportation