

Presenting . . .  
**Your Mercer Island  
Citizen-Designed  
Downtown**

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Citizen-Designed  
Downtown**

*Results of the Final CBD Design Workshop  
May 21 & 22, 1993*

*Reported by: Mark L. Hinshaw AIA AICP*

### **B**ackground

Over the past year, Mercer Island citizens have been discussing various options for the future of the downtown area. These discussions have taken the form of numerous meetings in which specific subjects have been addressed and objectives have been established. In addition, a group of people, including residents, planning commissioners, and design commissioners travelled to the Vancouver B.C. metropolitan area to look at different forms of development: community facilities, in-fill housing, mixed use, and low-rise, high-density housing.

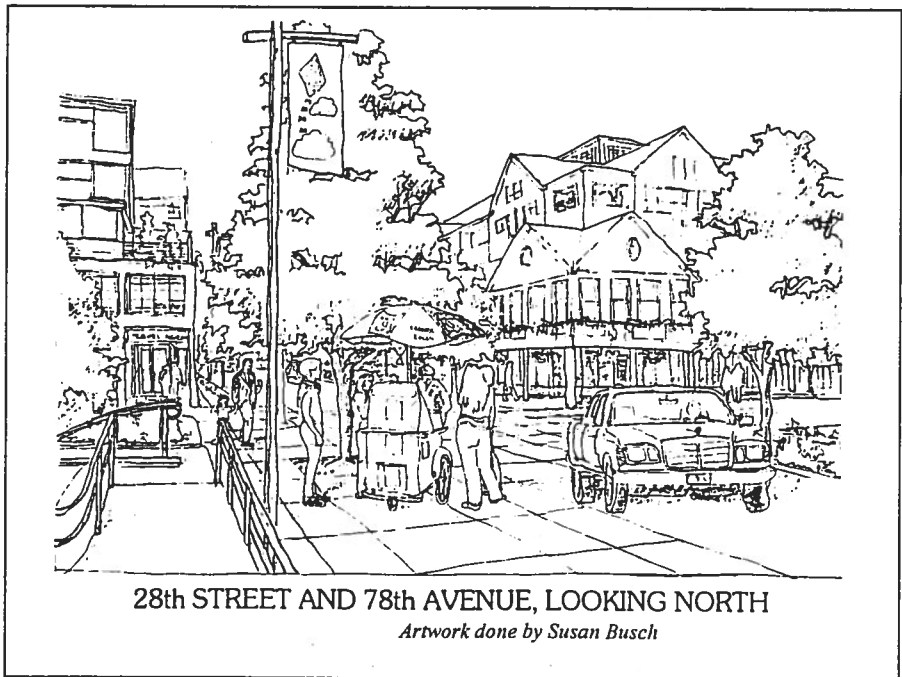
Previously a group of Mercer Island business people, with City support, sponsored a planning effort for downtown called "Project Renaissance." That effort looked at constraints and opportunities for the business area and devised a number of recommendations.

Out of these activities has emerged an interest in seeing the downtown area of Mercer Island evolve into much more of an economic and social focus for the community. The addition of more residents and the aging of current ones, the eventual introduction of some form of high capacity transit, and the completion of I-90 promise to inject new forces on the community in general

and the downtown in particular. This is an excellent opportunity to direct private investment and public improvements in a manner that can better serve the people of Mercer Island.

In order to translate the broad objectives of the current planning effort into more specific concepts, the City held a two-day workshop which looked at possible ideas for downtown. From early in the evening on May 21 to late in the afternoon of May 22, approximately forty citizens were engaged in an intense, concentrated planning process.

Typically, in such a process (sometimes called a "charrette") a group of design professionals is assembled to bring their expertise to bear upon a particular problem or issue. Following their deliberations, a presentation is made to local citizens for comment and questions. In this case, the roles were reversed. The citizens spent the



28th STREET AND 78th AVENUE, LOOKING NORTH

*Artwork done by Susan Busch*

bulk of the time devising and refining proposals, with an eventual agreement on a common set of concepts. While the citizens were engaged in this effort, a group of professional planners and designers observed.

After the citizens were finished, the professionals then commented and made refinements and adjustments to the concepts to reflect realities of building and development. In such a manner, the planning process benefitted from a wide range of opinions and expertise.

This report summarizes, in words and illustrations, the key concepts that were advanced and refined during the workshop. While none of the ideas suggest radical change, they do indicate the need for specific new directions by property owners, merchant, and the City. They are also not self-implementing; a number of actions will need to be initiated to see that these concepts are realized.

While the discussions ranged widely, from broad and sweeping issues such as regional transportation to detailed minutiae such as street names, the recommendations included in this document represent a degree of "informed consent" among the people who participated. There was a genuine willingness to give and take in order that the downtown could become economically stronger and serve residents of the island more effectively.

## The Workshop

Several weeks prior to the workshop, a group of "outside" design professionals was formed. The group included an architect and urban designer, a landscape architect, a transportation planner, an economist/developer, and a graduate architecture student. The group was lead by Mark Hinshaw, architect and urban planner and Pat Serie, public involvement process manager.

On Friday afternoon, the group of professionals was given briefings about the downtown, the citizen participation process, and relevant objectives, policies and regulations. The group toured the downtown area and met with several property owners. All of this information was given to the group to ensure that they had some knowledge of the community and were not coming into it "cold."

Friday evening was devoted to intense work by citizens who attended. The group, numbering approximately 40, was divided into four smaller groups so that sufficient time was available to anyone who wanted to contribute an idea. Each group was given a set of questions to keep in mind so that the discussion would be as productive as possible. By the end of the evening, each group had developed a sketch plan with notes to explain the key points that they wished to make.

On Saturday morning, representatives from each small group presented their proposals to each other. At the end of this step, an effort was made to find as many elements as possible that shared by all of the groups' schemes. A collective representation of these ideas was then presented to the entire group of citizens when it reconvened later that morning. Additional comments were then added to produce a set of recommendations that embraced concepts shared by the greatest number of attendees.

In the afternoon, the citizen's work was then turned over to the professionals. This group critiqued the proposals and embellished a number of the ideas further. In addition, the professionals contributed a number of observations that could make the overall concept stronger or more do-able. At the conclusion, the work of the collective body of people was summarized and an agreement was made to forward the results on to the City Council.

This document explains the complete set of shared recommendations and suggests a number of subsequent steps. In order to make the explanation clear, the recommendations have been arranged into groupings: Land Use, Transportation/Circulation, and Open Space and Community Facilities.

## Land Use Concept

### *1. Create a Focused Commercial Core, Oriented Toward Pedestrians and Containing a Wide Mixture of Uses.*

Currently, the commercial energy of downtown Mercer Island is spread around an area much larger than the market population can support. Therefore, the downtown consists of principally one story strip centers, surrounded by vast parking lots. Land values and zoning constraints do not suggest any degree of intensity. Few uses interact with one another; every building is free-standing and often isolated. There is no real sense of a center in which long-term investments could be made. Consequently, there are few amenities and a very limited range of choices with respect to goods and services. Basically, the downtown acts like a neighborhood shopping area, albeit spread over a land area many times what is necessary for such a purpose.

The downtown would benefit greatly from having a "core" area that is compact and consolidated. Shops, offices, restaurants, services, lodging and public facilities would be located in close proximity to each other; there would be a "critical mass" of activities that would be mutually supportive and reinforcing. This core should not be more than 1000-1200 feet across, so that it can be walkable and served easily by public transportation. This traditional "rule of thumb" suggests that the core should be between 77th and 80th and between I-90 and 29th.

The street level of buildings within the core should contain retail enterprises (not office space, empty lobbies or parking). Above the ground level a wide array of uses should be encouraged. A maximum building height of 60 feet (5 commercial floors) should be allowed, but this could only be achieved as a result of providing substantial public amenities. Underground parking should be strongly encouraged in the core and parking standards

should be revised to allow reductions for the shared use of parking facilities.

### *2. Establish a Mid-Rise Office District*

Over the past decade, several large office buildings began to pop up in different parts of the downtown, giving rise to some amount of concern that downtown would become dominated by numerous, non-descript and overly tall and massive buildings. Rather than reopen this possibility, future demand for office space should be concentrated into one sector of the downtown where this form of building could have the least impact on views and where it would not draw traffic into the city. The triangular area that is situated between 76th and 77th and between 27th and I-90 seems to meet these criteria.

Heights of up to five stories should be possible in this area, but only if substantial public amenities are provided in each project. Ground level retail should be required along 27th and underground parking should be strongly encouraged. Design guidelines should be devised to provide distinctive shape to the mass and roof forms of buildings in this area.

### *3. Concentrate Automobile-Oriented Uses In One Corridor*

Over time, retail and service activities that require drive-up or drive-through transactions should be directed away from the center of the downtown. The sector situated between 80th and Island Crest Way (north of 30th) already has a number of these uses and more could be accommodated. This could continue to be an area with predominantly low-rise buildings.

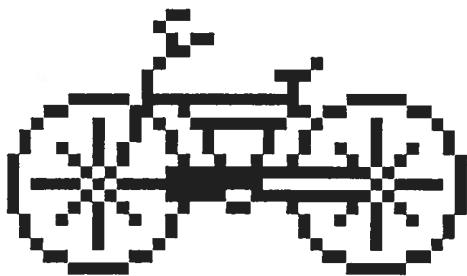
### *4. Encourage Low-Rise, High-Density Housing Around the Core*

The portions of downtown lying to the west of

77th and south of 29th should be redeveloped, over the next twenty years, into "in town" residential use. These areas, approximately 20 acres in total, could accommodate much of the anticipated growth in housing demand on the island, assuming densities in the range of 45-50 dwelling units per acre. They could also provide for forms of housing that seniors would find comfortable and convenient, as the population ages, allowing residents to continue living on Mercer Island even if they sell their homes and without moving into an institutional setting.

Such development would be principally residential, in order to ensure security and quietude for the residents. However, some ground floor, neighborhood-type retail would be encouraged in certain locations, such as around intersections. Underground parking, to the extent that the water table allows it, should also be encouraged.

Heights for the residential areas should not be uniform, but should reflect a stair-stepped arrangement. To the north end, near the mid-rise office district, building heights might be approximately 55-60 feet, while in the area south of the office district and west of the core, building heights might be 45-50 feet. In the area between the core and Mercerdale Park, building heights might be 35-40 feet. Height limits should be defined to encourage rooflines to incorporate sloped forms, rather than flat forms.



## **T**ransportation/Circulation Concept

### *1. Establish Collector/Distributor Streets*

One of the problems of the downtown area is

that much of the traffic to and from the freeway has to use 27th, which penetrates the middle of the district. At times, the congestion makes the environment not conducive to pedestrian movement. Access to and through the downtown would be made more convenient if the frontage road along I-90 were reopened (currently it is cul-de-sac'd at each end). This would allow traffic to avoid 27th. The frontage street would act as a collector and a distributor in much the same way as Island Crest Way passes by the downtown and allows for multiple points of ingress and egress.

### *2. Establish 77th and 80th as Internal Arterial Streets*

Within the downtown, these two streets connect to the freeway and serve most properties. As major arterials, they would flank the core area and offer direct, smooth-flowing access to parking. This does not necessarily mean that they need to be wider or fast moving, indeed they could have wide sidewalks, street trees and other pedestrian amenities. It is possible that these two streets might function as a one-way couplet, but the impacts associated with such a change would need to be thoroughly evaluated.

### *3. Make 78th Pedestrian-Oriented*

Traffic should continue to use this street, but the speed should be lowered through the use of medians and diverters so that pedestrians can feel very comfortable spending time there. Sidewalks should be wide and street trees, special light fixtures, benches, and other pedestrian amenities should be provided. In such a manner, 78th could be a pedestrian "spine" that ties together the core and connects it with regional transit to the north and Mercerdale Park to the south. The street should be lined with storefronts, unique public spaces, art, and sidewalk cafes.

#### *4. Enhance 27th as a Shopping Street*

Because 27th is the only street that crosses the downtown for its entire width and is close to the freeway, it is a prime address for specialty shops. However, except for a short stretch of stores west of 77th, it is now relatively bleak and uninteresting. With some of the through traffic diverted to the frontage road, 27th could be much more pleasant and conducive to shopping and social activities. On-street parking could be provided and sidewalks could be made much more generous and appealing.

#### *5. Provide On-Street Parking on East/West Streets*

In addition to 27th, other east/west streets should contain on-street parking. Some already do; others need to be altered to allow this. At intersections, sidewalks could be widened into "bulbs" that would allow the crosswalks to be short.

#### *6. Create Additional Through-Block Pedestrian Corridors*

The City has gradually gotten several pedestrian pathways to be built that allow people to walk east/west through the large blocks that exist in downtown. This tradition should be continued, but the standards of design should be upgraded to ensure that these are seen by pedestrians as usable, convenient and attractive. Furthermore, some corridors should be constructed in the north/south direction, to allow for multiple choices of movement. Such corridors should have a minimum width of eight feet and they should be paved with unit pavers and contain pedestrian-scaled lighting. They could also connect various public spaces throughout the downtown.

#### *7. Upgrade Proposed Parking Structure*

As a part of the regional transit project, a parking structure is planned for the triangular sector north of 27th, between 77th and 80th. The transit project would build approximately 500 stalls for commuters. In addition, the City should add several hundred stalls to serve the short-term parking needs of the downtown area. This would reduce the amount of peak hour traffic on the internal street network and could allow for reduced parking requirements on individual businesses. The ground level of this building should include retail, services, and some public uses so that it blends with the downtown environment. With a proper design, this structure should be handsome, perhaps even dramatic, as it terminates the north end of the 78th Street axis through downtown.

#### *8. Improve Local Bus Transit*

In addition to the regional transit along I-90, local bus service should be enhanced, with routes passing through and around downtown. Distinctively-designed shelters should be installed at key locations.

### Open Space and Community Facilities Concept

#### *1. Create a Town Center*

Somewhere within the northerly portion of the downtown core, there should be a focal point that residents can readily identify as the "center" of the town. This can include building forms and major streets, but, at a minimum, it should consist of a major public open space. Such a space would provide a venue for important community events and celebrations, as well as summertime concerts. In contrast to a park, this space should be largely hard-surfaced, but should have trees and displays of flowers, as well as, perhaps, a water feature or piece of art.

The center should be south of 27th, between 77th and 80th. It might be located between two parallel streets, or it might "straddle" 78th, with the street passing through it. The center could be created as a result of public action, but it also could be provided as part of a private redevelopment project. The central space should be connected to the rest of the downtown both by sidewalks and through-block pedestrian corridors.

## 2. *Establish an "Activity Center"*

Within the core of downtown, near the center, there should be a public activity center. This would consist of a building that would contain a number of public assembly rooms for meetings, seminars, workshops, social gatherings and other functions. At least one room should be large enough to seat several hundred people for a major event, meeting, or performance. Some rooms should be very multi-purpose, so that many types of activities, including light recreation, can occur. Other rooms might be more finished in appearance and separated from noisy activities so that quiet meetings and small conferences can take place. There appears to be a demand for such spaces by both agencies throughout the region, as well as private companies, and community-oriented programs could benefit from the income that would accrue from rentals. An activity center would not necessarily need to be developed by the City; it could be done via an agreement with a private developer.

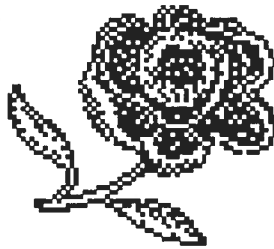
## 3. *Create Pocket Parks*

Throughout the downtown, but particularly in residential areas, there should be a number of relatively small parks. These should have a "garden-like" quality and should be peaceful, attractive enclaves for people who work and

live in the vicinity. Some might be adjacent to intersections, other might be within the interiors of blocks. For the most part, however, such parks need to be in places where they can receive sunlight during the spring and summer months of the year. But they need not be large; a well-thought out landscape design could produce a very special kind of park within a confined area. Some of these could be created as a part of private development.

## 4. *Plant Street Trees and Seasonal Flowers*

One of the things that people who live in the Pacific Northwest thoroughly enjoy is seeing trees and flowers. Most communities have developed a strong tradition of planting street trees and installing beds of flowers at key locations. While Mercer Island is no exception, the downtown area could benefit from a master plan that establishes street tree types and locational specifications and sets forth a schedule for planting seasonal color. This would result in a stronger image for the town that would be perceived both by residents and visitors.



## 5. *Enhance Major Gateways*

Three principal gateways to the downtown have been identified. One is at 77th just south of I-90. Another is at 80th and 27th, just south of I-90. The third is at 78th, next to Mercerdale Park. At present, these major entrance points are not treated in any special way, but the potential exists to do so. This could involve unique plantings, works of art, special lighting, graphics, distinctive buildings, or a combination of these elements.

## 6. *Promote Installation of Public Art*

The City's Arts Commission has promoted

public art in various locations and is currently developing the concept of a collection of art pieces throughout the greenbelt along I-90. To date, this may have been conceived of a display of individual pieces. However, there may be opportunities for more unusual and surprising forms of art that could be integrated with transit, streets and sidewalks. This program could benefit from a coordinated master plan that identifies a multitude of types, locations, and funding sources.

### **The Next Steps...**

This report outlines a number of policy directions, programs and projects that could be undertaken to redirect the growth and development of downtown. Some will take years to be implemented. Others will need to reflect changes in the market. Still others relate to future capital investments, such as regional transit.

However, several efforts could proceed so that key elements begin to be put in place that can stimulate and set the tone for decisions by other parties. These are as follows:

#### *1. Adopt a New Package of Land Use Regulations for Downtown*

A new code would establish different districts, each with its own set of standards for heights, open space, uses, design character, parking, landscaping, etc. An incentive system should offer tangible returns in exchange for the provision of a list of desired public amenities.

#### *2. Develop New Designs for Downtown Streets*

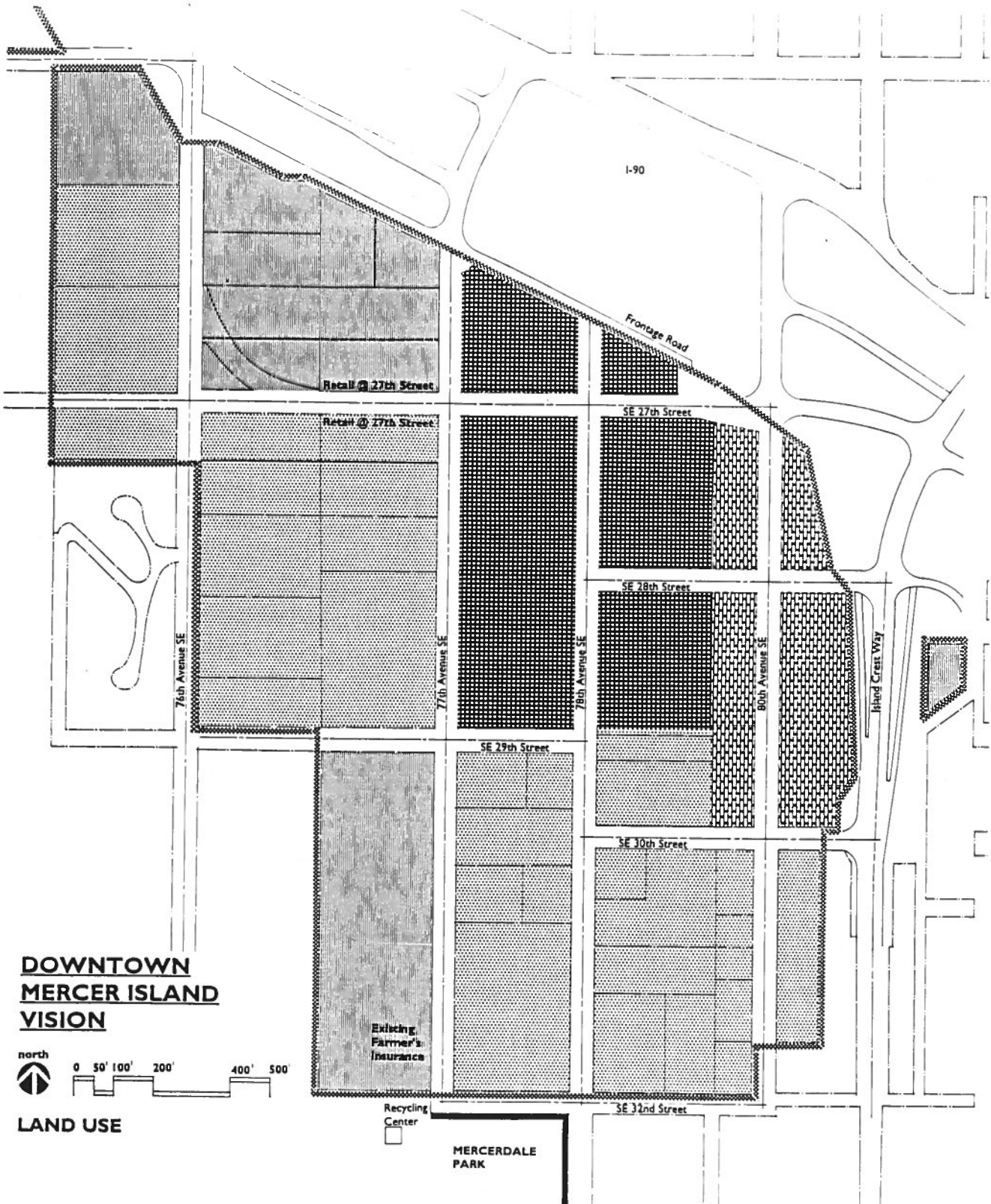
This would involve a redesign of street cross-sections, with details for street trees, sidewalk widths and paving, specialty lighting, medians, intersection "bulbs" and other features to produce a dramatically different appearance.

Some streets, as suggested in the recommendations, should be especially improved with respect to pedestrian circulation.

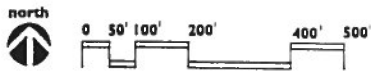
#### *3. Pursue Development of an Activity Center*

This would involve exploring possible locations, identifying users and market demand, developing a program of space allocation, estimating costs, and examining potentials for public/private implementation.





**DOWNTOWN  
MERCER ISLAND  
VISION**



**LAND USE**

**Pedestrian-Oriented,  
Mixed Use Commercial Core**  
Street level, sidewalk-oriented retail uses required.  
Uses above street level: services, office, hotel, housing.  
Five story maximum height, using bonus system.  
Underground parking strongly encouraged.



**Mid-Rise Office District**  
Ground level retail uses encouraged, but not required.  
Five story maximum height, using bonus system.  
Underground parking strongly encouraged.

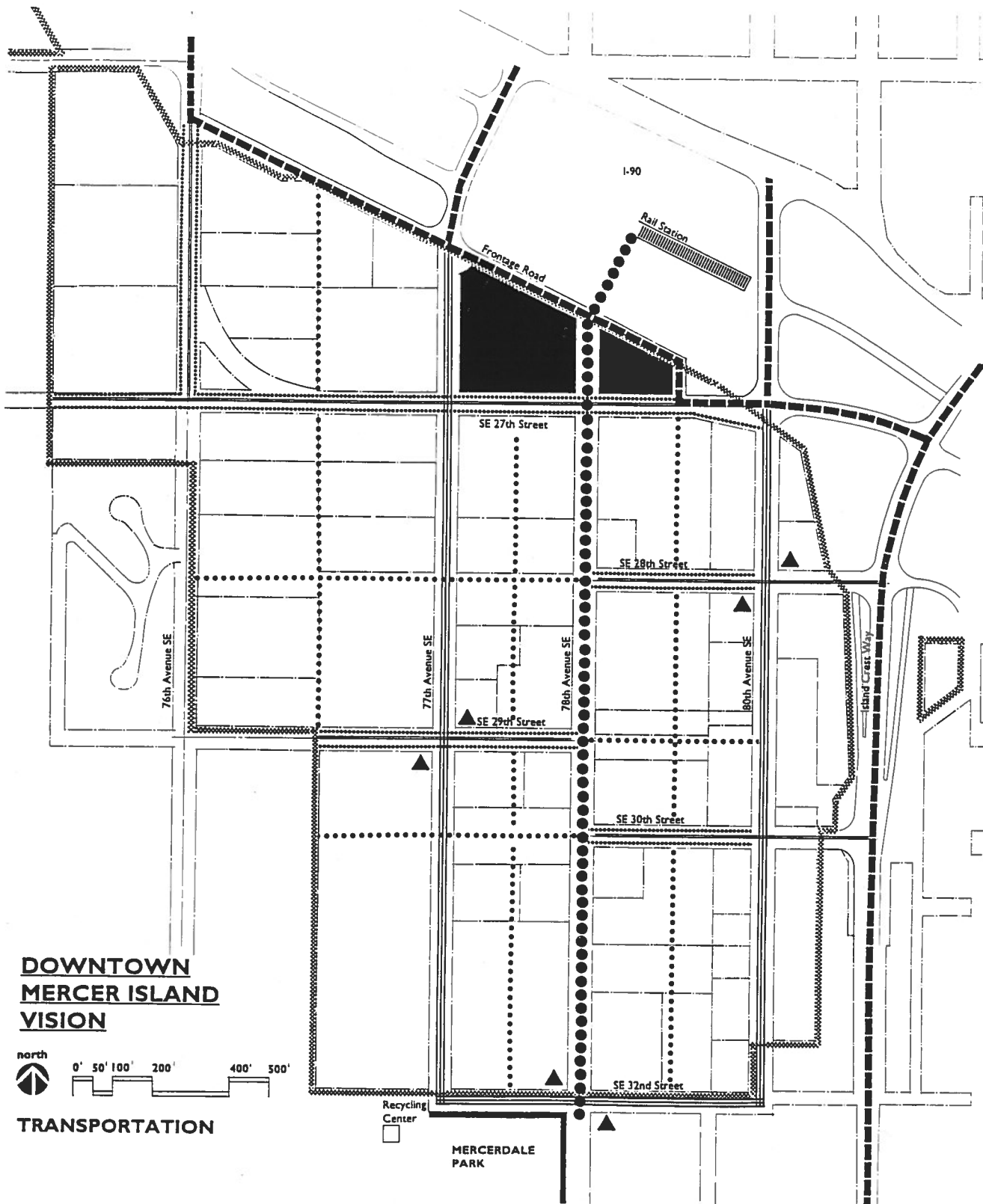


**Automobile-Oriented District**  
Drive-up/drive-through service uses.  
Two-story maximum height.

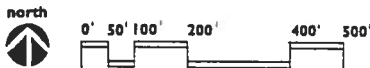


**Downtown Residential Districts**  
Approx. 20 acres: accommodates projected 20 year need.  
Ground level retail uses encouraged in certain locations.  
Tiered heights: 5 stories north end, 4 stories in middle,  
3 stories south end.  
Underground parking strongly encouraged.





## DOWNTOWN MERCER ISLAND VISION



### TRANSPORTATION

#### Collector/Distributor Street

Reopen frontage road south end of I-90.  
Keeps visitor traffic away from core.  
Allows 27th to be more pedestrian-oriented.



#### North/South Internal Arterial Streets

77th and 80th (Island Crest way is distributor).  
One way couplet system to be evaluated.



#### 78th: Pedestrian-Oriented Center Street

Traffic allowed but slow; speed compatible with walking.  
Wider sidewalks, medians, traffic circles at intersections.  
Connects core with Mercerdale Park.



#### 27th: More Pedestrian-Oriented

Wider sidewalks. On-street parking.



#### Other East/West Streets

On-street parking.



#### Through-Block Pedestrian Corridors

Within core, office, and residential districts. East/west and north/south.  
8+ feet wide, with special paving, lighting, furnishings.



#### Parking Structure

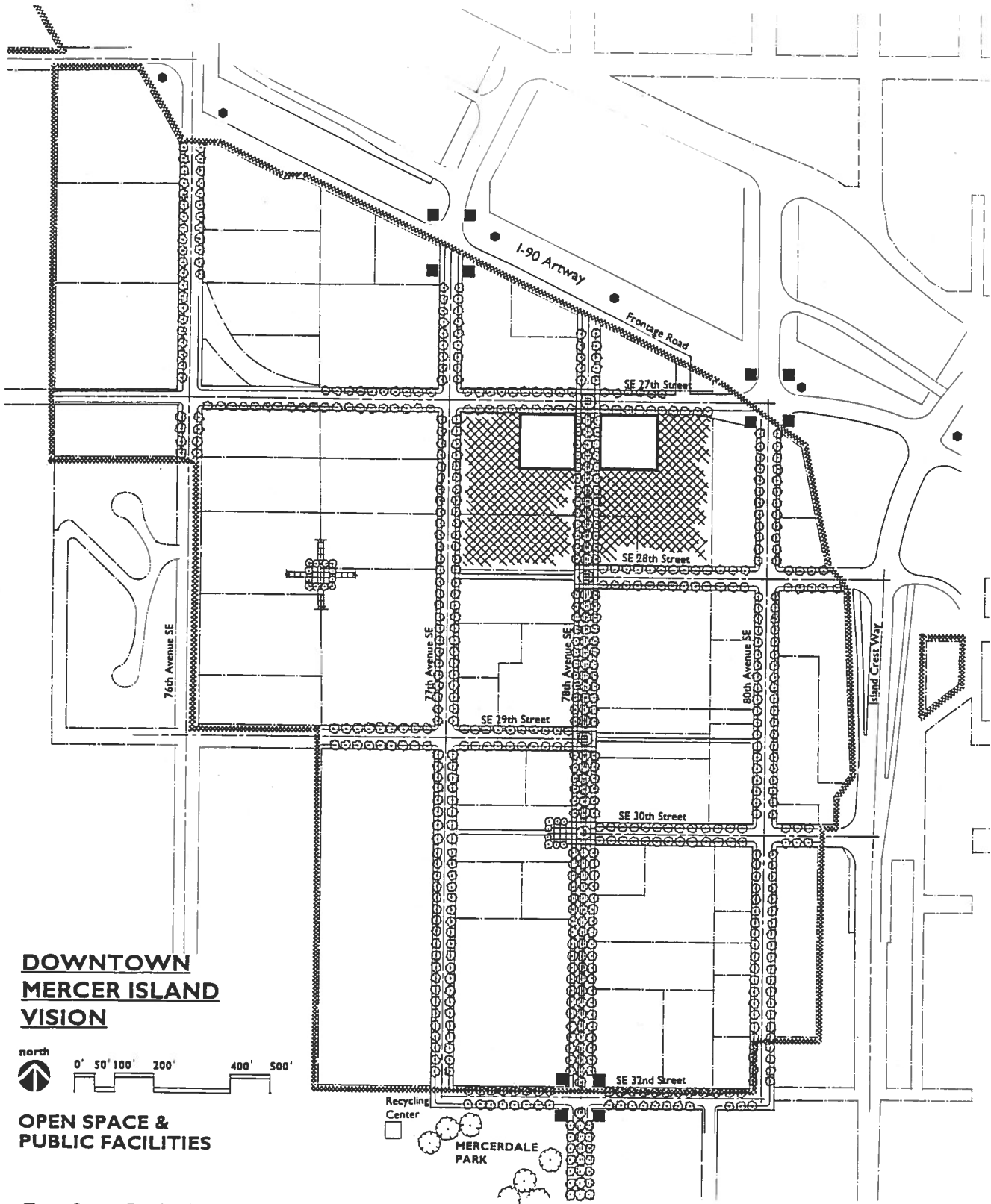
North of 27th, between 77th and 80th. 500-750 stalls, mix of commuter and short-term. Serves regional transit station and core.  
Could allow for reduced parking requirement for businesses.  
Could include retail, services, and public uses.



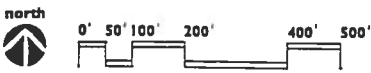
#### Local Bus Transit

Circulator, fixed route, demand-responsive.  
Shelters throughout downtown.





**DOWNTOWN  
MERCER ISLAND  
VISION**



**OPEN SPACE &  
PUBLIC FACILITIES**

- Town Center Focal Point**  
Major indoor and/or outdoor public space.  
In vicinity of 78th and 27th.  
Could be developed by public/private agreement.  
Connected to north/south through block pedestrian corridors.
- Activity Center Area**  
Entertainment, light recreation and cultural events.  
Could include some functions now in community center.  
Additional meeting/conference facilities.  
Large public meeting room.  
Could be developed by public/private agreement.
- Small Pocket Parks**  
Throughout downtown.  
Some adjacent to intersections.  
Some within residential districts.



**Street Trees and Flowers**

All downtown streets.  
Seasonal color scheme.



**Gateways**

Two at north end: 77th and 80th.  
One at south end: 78th.  
Landscaping and/or "objects."



**Public Art**

Along I-90 "art park."  
Throughout downtown.

