

## National Trends and Issues

For the past fifty years, Americans have been moving further and further away from our city centers in search of “The American Dream” - a bigger house with a bigger yard, better schools and more privacy. In place of front porches, houses now have back decks. Retailers and employers have followed consumers to the suburbs, with the help of roads and sewers provided by state and local governments

In pursuit of this dream, we have paved over millions of acres of farmland with highways and parking lots. We no longer know our neighbors, and we are unable to walk to the grocery or to school. Thanks to minimum lot size zoning our communities are once again becoming more segregated based upon income. As William Hudnut, former mayor of Indianapolis and currently a Fellow with the Urban Land Institute said in a recent speech in Columbus, “There is something wrong with a society where a couple have strived for all of their adult lives to achieve a certain level of success and are finally able to buy the home of their dreams, yet neither their children nor their parents, nor the janitor at the school can afford to live in the same community with them.”

Today, civic groups and governmental bodies in Ohio and other states are beginning to question the rationale and the value of the dream we have pursued for so long. They are awakening to the fallacy of providing incentives for sprawl while, at the same time, spending millions of dollars in an effort to revitalize the very city centers that past policies have helped to decimate. They are increasingly recognizing that a metropolitan region’s image, livability and economic health are directly tied to the image and health of its central city and nearby neighborhoods.

In a recent study of sixteen inland, mid-sized metropolitan areas that looked at how downtown population growth and job growth related to area-wide home values, population, job growth, and economic growth, *The Kansas City Star* found:

- Those cities with the fastest rising downtown populations enjoyed, on average, more rapidly rising home values across the entire metropolitan area.
- Those with stronger job growth downtown showed, in most cases, stronger area-wide job and population growth.

- Those with better downtown job growth tended to have better metropolitan economic growth as well.
- Conclusion – A healthier downtown makes for a healthier metropolitan area.

While freedom of choice is a strongly held American value, policies that encourage destructive sprawl are increasingly being replaced with those that create a more level playing field. New and old communities alike are establishing development standards to encourage efficient use of land, strengthen the local economy and assure equal opportunity for all citizens. The following concepts are central to this ‘New Urbanism’:

- Higher density residential development with more open space.
- Grid street networks to dissipate congestion typical in arterial designs.
- Mixed-income/mixed-use developments linked with pedestrian access.

Developers also are beginning to recognize the potential market for people-friendly, pedestrian-oriented urban communities. Many of the fastest rising home values are in older neighborhoods closer to the urban core. Young professionals and aging baby boomers are returning to these neighborhoods in growing numbers as they seek the enhanced convenience, character, diversity and sense of community that is typically present. In Columbus, Ohio for instance, three of the four communities with the fastest rising home values are Grandview Heights, Upper Arlington and Bexley, all areas within five miles of downtown itself. Other Ohio neighborhoods that have experienced recent revitalization include the Short North in Columbus, the Coventry district in Cleveland Heights and Mount Adams in Cincinnati.

# Current Situation

## Stakeholder Views

One-on-one interviews with community and district stakeholders provided critical input to the Highland Square revitalization strategy. Government leaders, business owners, property owners and other district stakeholders were interviewed on a wide variety of topics related to the district and surrounding areas. The following is a brief summary of the results of these interviews.

### **Most Critical Issues Facing the District**

Lack of sufficient, convenient parking was the most frequently mentioned issue, even though most respondents acknowledged that this situation has been alleviated to an extent by the City's addition of angled on-street parking on Market Street between Portage Path and Highland Avenue. A poor safety perception was the second most mentioned issue, with respondents attributing this negative perception to the high number of bars located in the district, activities at some nearby apartment properties and panhandlers. The other issue mentioned frequently was the need for an increase in the number and variety of businesses within the district.

### **Image of Various Aspects of the District**

Community leaders were asked to describe their image of Highland Square in relation to the following:

*Retail* – The retail in the district was described as “small neighborhood retail”, limited mostly to restaurants and bars. Most respondents feel that many more retailers are needed for the district to be successful.

*Office* – Most stakeholders indicate that the district has very little office space, with availability limited to Class B space. They also mentioned that there are not enough parking spaces to support office use.

*Housing* – Housing in the district is described as beautiful and historic. Stakeholders mention that the housing stock is diverse and moderately priced, attracting a varied pool of age groups, professions, and ethnicities.

*Parking* – Stakeholders representing the Highland Square Business District view parking as a critical element in the revitalization process. Many feel that

the district does not have enough parking spaces. Parking behind buildings is considered to be of poor quality.

*Traffic* – Traffic in Highland Square was described as busy, but not enough to disrupt daily car flow.

*Personal Safety* – Due to the presence of panhandlers and people loitering around bars, most stakeholders perceive areas of the district to be unsafe, especially at night.

*Access* – Access to and within the district is described as excellent. Stakeholders say that it is relatively easy to get from one point to the next in the district.

### **District Strengths**

Stakeholders viewed the following as current district strengths:

*Residents* – Highland Square is fortunate to have residents that are concerned about the progress and development in their neighborhood. The growing young professional population has helped the neighborhood gain a reputation for being artistic and intellectual, something that can help the district shape its identity.

*Housing Stock* – Highland Square is fortunate to have a diverse mix of housing styles. This is one of the most important elements distinguishing it from other neighborhoods in the city. This is also one of the reasons why the neighborhood has gained growing interest among young professionals.

*Entertainment* – According to some stakeholders, entertainment represents one of the strongest business niches in the district. Although there is a negative perception attached to some of the bars in the district, they do help generate pedestrian activity.

*Traffic and Accessibility* – Lack of traffic congestion and ease of access are seen as two of the district's best qualities. Many interviewees considered the area to be pedestrian friendly.

**Local Business** – Although Highland Square does not have a diverse mix of businesses, a number of its establishments have been located in the district for several years. Many stakeholders find the small scale and friendly atmosphere of these businesses to be a strength worth building upon.

**Highland Theater** – Because there is no comparable facility in the region, several stakeholders described the Highland Theater as a major plus for the district and the City of Akron. As a result of its moderate seating capacity, the theater is an ideal venue for certain types of local and regional acts, and stakeholders believe it can contribute to an increase in the district's critical mass.

### **District Weaknesses**

Stakeholders viewed the following as Highland Square's current weaknesses:

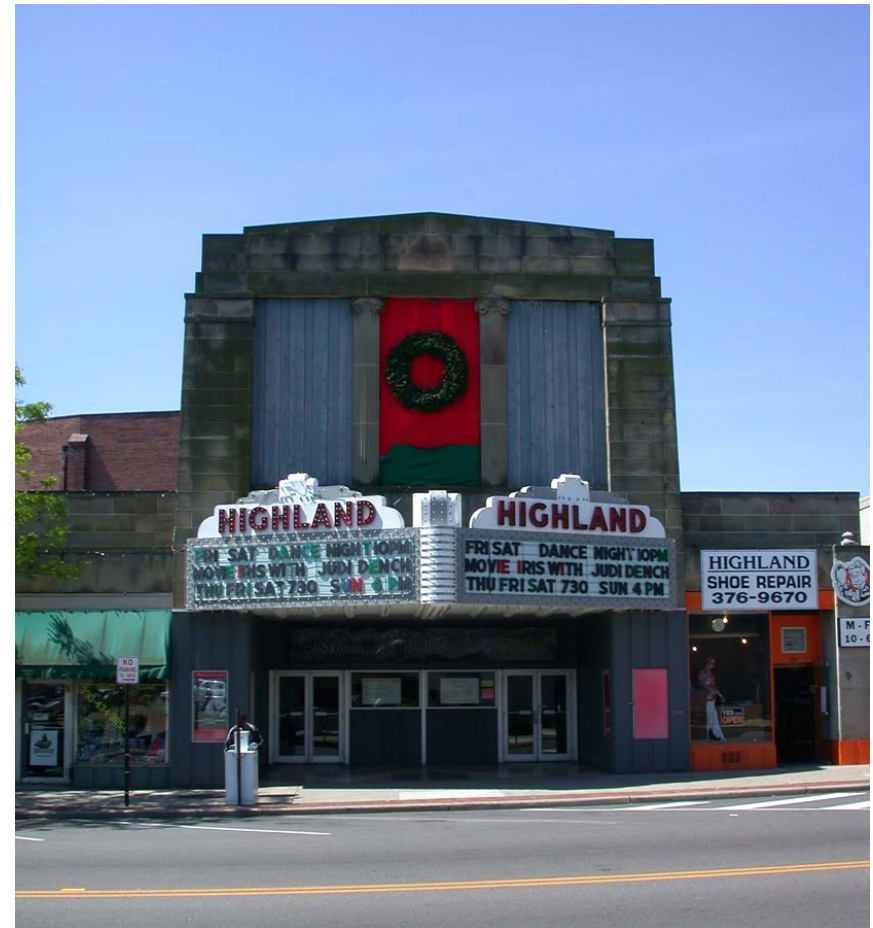
**Critical Mass** – Critical mass can be defined as having a sufficient number of different yet complementary offers/businesses for the district to be viewed as a destination (versus individual destination businesses). Stakeholders considered this to be one of the district's most serious weaknesses. Lack of available space, negative publicity, some weak tenants and crime, have all contributed to the erosion of critical mass in Highland Square. Future plans to improve the district must include promotion of a new image and the recruitment of new retailers, restaurants, entertainment, etc.

**Attitudes** – Panhandlers, loitering, and certain highly publicized crimes in the district have generated negative publicity and have given observers the perception that the district has a high crime rate.

**Tenant Mix** – Although Highland Square has the potential to expand its business mix, it has struggled to keep retailers in the district. Future success will require an organized effort to recruit the most appropriate businesses.

**Parking** – As is often the case in urban business districts and shopping areas, parking is considered inadequate. This is due to improper usage and design, as well as an insufficient number of spaces. Stakeholders also mentioned that many of the parking spaces behind buildings in Highland Square are unsafe because of a lack of maintenance.

**Nightlife** – Significant concerns were expressed about the panhandling, loitering, and negative crowds that often congregate in the vicinity of the district's bars and contribute to a negative safety perception, especially at night. At the same time, this nightlife is generally recognized to be an asset. Stakeholders believe that addressing the safety issues and resulting negative perception can strengthen the image of the district, and contribute to an increase in critical mass.



*Highland Theater*

# Current Situation

## Current and Pending Development Plans

### Library

The Akron-Summit County Public Library plans to replace the current West Hill branch library with a new 12,000 square foot facility in the Highland Square District. In addition, an expansion space of approximately 5,000 square feet is required. The new library will require off-street parking for approximately 36 cars.

The current library occupies a site at the intersection of West Market Street and North Highland Avenue. This site is too small for the proposed new building.

### Portage Path Interpretive Center

The strategic position of the Highland Square district on Portage Path and as part of the CanalWay Ohio Heritage Corridor, makes the celebration of the Ohio and Erie Canal heritage an appropriate component that can add significantly to the special character of the district. The location of a Portage Path Interpretive Center within the District is proposed. Its location should be on or in close proximity to Portage Path. If the new library is located on Portage Path, joint use of the site is possible, although both buildings should be discrete entities.



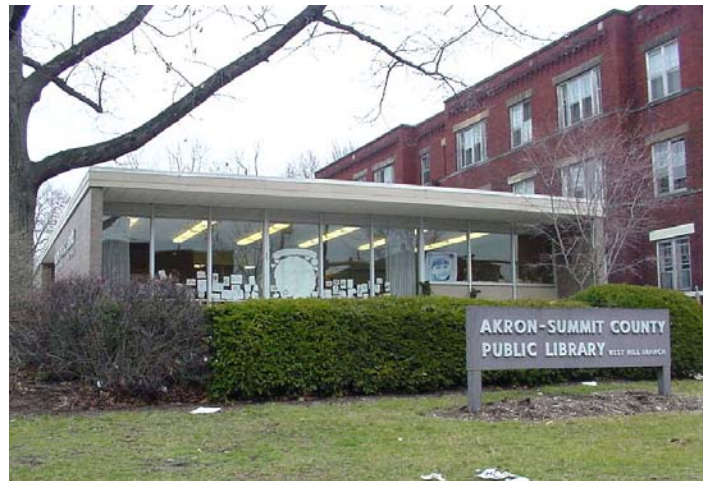
*Star Market Site*

### Star Market Site

Albrecht Inc. is considering redevelopment of the Star Market site under a number of different development scenarios. The redeveloped or new structure and its attendant parking would occupy the site bounded by West Market Street, North Highland Avenue and Conger Road.

### West Market Street

The City of Akron has recently invested considerable resources in the re-surfacing of West Market Street, including upgrades to sidewalks and walls bounding the public right-of-way. These improvements have also included adjustments to the curb line to improve parking patterns, re-stripping the road lanes, and upgrading of street lighting by the installation of pedestrian scale street lights.



*Current Public Library*

**Crime**

Perceptions of crime and its actual incidence are key issues that must be addressed at an early stage of the revitalization process

Prior to the Police Department's recent redistricting, the Highland Square Primary Trade Area (see Market Analysis) was located in portions of three policing districts, numbers 1, 9 and 21 (see map below). While District 9 experienced a significant decline in calls for service between 2000 and 2001, calls in the other two districts increased slightly, and this increase is significant when considered in light of the decline experienced in the Akron area as a whole.

Vandalism, larceny and theft from parked vehicles are the most common reported crimes.

In November of 2002, the Akron Police Department unveiled a new redistricting plan devised to more evenly spread the workload among its officers. As of the beginning of 2003, the number of city police districts was consolidated from 23 to 12. This change is part of a comprehensive update of the department that commenced two years ago with the hiring of an outside consultant to review the department and make recommendations to change how the department operates.

As part of the overhaul, the department instituted zone command, assigning a captain to each of four city sectors versus the previous approach of having captains oversee shifts. The purpose of this change is the reduce the potential for problems that can occur through shift changeovers and permit officers to become more knowledgeable about crime patterns by working in the same area every day. Other changes being instituted include allowing each offer at least an hour of problem-solving time each day, more "park and walks" and increased citizen interaction. All of these measures should benefit Highland Square as officers assigned to its area become more familiar with real and perceived safety issues in the district and interact more closely with district stakeholders.

Type of Call:	Calls	% of Total
DESTRUCTION/DAMAGE/VANDALISM OF PROPERTY	362	19%
ALL OTHER LARCENY	205	11%
THEFT FROM MOTOR VEHICLE	158	8%
SIMPLE ASSAULT	144	7%
BURGLARY/BREAKING & ENTERING	129	7%
MOTOR VEHICLE THEFT	128	7%
SHOPLIFTING	88	5%
THEFT FROM BUILDING	68	3%
DRUG/NARCOTIC VIOLATIONS	62	3%
ALL OTHER OFFENSES	607	31%

*Police Calls in Highland Square Primary Trade Area by Type  
Source: City of Akron Police Department*

DISTRICT	2000	2001	% CHANGE
1	9,725	8,797	-9.54%
2	13,657	14,111	3.32%
3	10,675	10,615	-0.56%
4	3,759	4,029	7.18%
5	18,055	17,930	-0.69%
6	15,294	14,495	-5.22%
7	10,529	10,297	-2.20%
8	10,701	9,584	-10.44%
9	9,486	9,644	1.67%
10	6,648	6,624	-0.36%
11	9,449	9,535	0.91%
12	7,481	7,700	2.93%
13	6,224	6,586	5.82%
14	4,739	5,048	6.52%
15	11,292	11,386	0.83%
16	5,141	5,248	2.08%
17	6,939	6,823	-1.67%
18	10,760	10,597	-1.51%
19	4,046	3,864	-4.50%
20	10,338	10,267	-0.69%
21	18,816	19,328	2.72%
22	10,036	10,070	0.34%
9A	3,207	3,347	4.37%
Unk.	5,346	1,915	-64.18%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>222,343</b>	<b>217,840</b>	<b>-2.03%</b>

*Police Calls by District 2000 and 2001  
Source: City of Akron Police Department*

## Current Situation

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