

Adams urban renewal - II

Mall seen as boost to downtown business

By Robert E. Lamb

(This is the second in a series of five articles about Project Pleasant Park. Adams' proposed second urban renewal project which will be acted upon at a special town meeting Dec. 1.)

IN TERMS of commercial activity Adams cannot hope to compete with larger marketing centers north and south of it, but with newer and more modern facilities the town will be able to increase its community-oriented business by up to 25 per cent.

And, according to a local market analysis by Fred R. O'Donnell Associates, Inc., of Westfield, the second phase of urban renewal will afford some 35,000 square feet of new sales capacity over a projected five-year life span within Project Pleasant Park.

The so-called "market men" also cited statistics showing the growth rate of retail sales in Adams has been significantly behind that of Pittsfield and the county in general.

Those recommendations, the major points in the Land Use & Marketability Study, better known as "LUM study", have been interpreted, by general project planner, John Brown, as follows: "We're orienting it (commercial redevelopment) toward keeping and improving the market that exists now — anything from out of town is really a bonus." He added that Adams is not quite getting its "share of the pie" for what should be local business.

To counteract what appears to be lagging retail business and to take advantage of the market men's advice, the general planner has proposed an innovative and regionally-unique commercial complex — the publicly-sponsored shopping mall.

HAILED AS A DRAMATIC and dynamic step toward bolstering the commercial heartland of town by officials of the Adams Redevelopment Authority and other consultants the

mall concept was ambushed by skepticism from many Park Street merchants and representatives of the Adams Taxpayers Assn. Opponents argue that Adams merchants are unable to afford what they feel will be sharply-increased rents in new quarters.

The general planner noted that the shopping mall envisioned in Project Pleasant Park will be a "new thing" using a provision in the Housing Act of 1969. He said he is unable to describe others because "there haven't been any built, so there's no experience."

In physical terms, the "mall" consists of rehabilitation to the Mausert, Tri-S and Michalenko blocks fronting Park Street, construction of a fourth block between the first two existing ones and construction of the fifth and sixth commercial buildings to the rear of the fourth one and the combined Tri-S and Michalenko blocks, respectively.

A covered arcade connects the buildings and, although urban renewal funds will be provided for initial installation costs of heating and air-conditioning in the mall, Mr. Brown stipulated, it does not necessarily mean the facilities have to be purchased and provided.

STRESSING that the mall "has all the flexibility in the world," he said, "We can even develop the rear buildings first and turn the front into a plaza-like area until it's needed, which would still be more than necessary to make the project worthwhile."

Mr. Brown said he would assume that an association, probably comprised of shop owners, would be formed and that it would develop "under public auspices." Further clarifying the public-private relationship involved, he commented: "The best way to think of it is as a street without vehicles." Maintenance costs (especially without heating or air-conditioning units) would be minimal and, while individual merchants would probably sweep dirt

and pick up litter from in front of their shops, the town itself would still have responsibility.

However, he cited other alternatives such as the town selling the mall in common to shop owners or possibly leasing it to them.

Of principal concern to many townspeople is the question of redevelopment. Mr. Brown reported "plenty of preliminary interest" but added that the "real interest" will come after approval of the project. He further termed recommendations in the "LUM study" as "conservative."

RETURNING to that study, it is found that recommendations are based on studies conducted of economic changes between 1963 and 1967 and which show the local business climate developing primarily unfavorable trends. Some statistics over that time span follow:

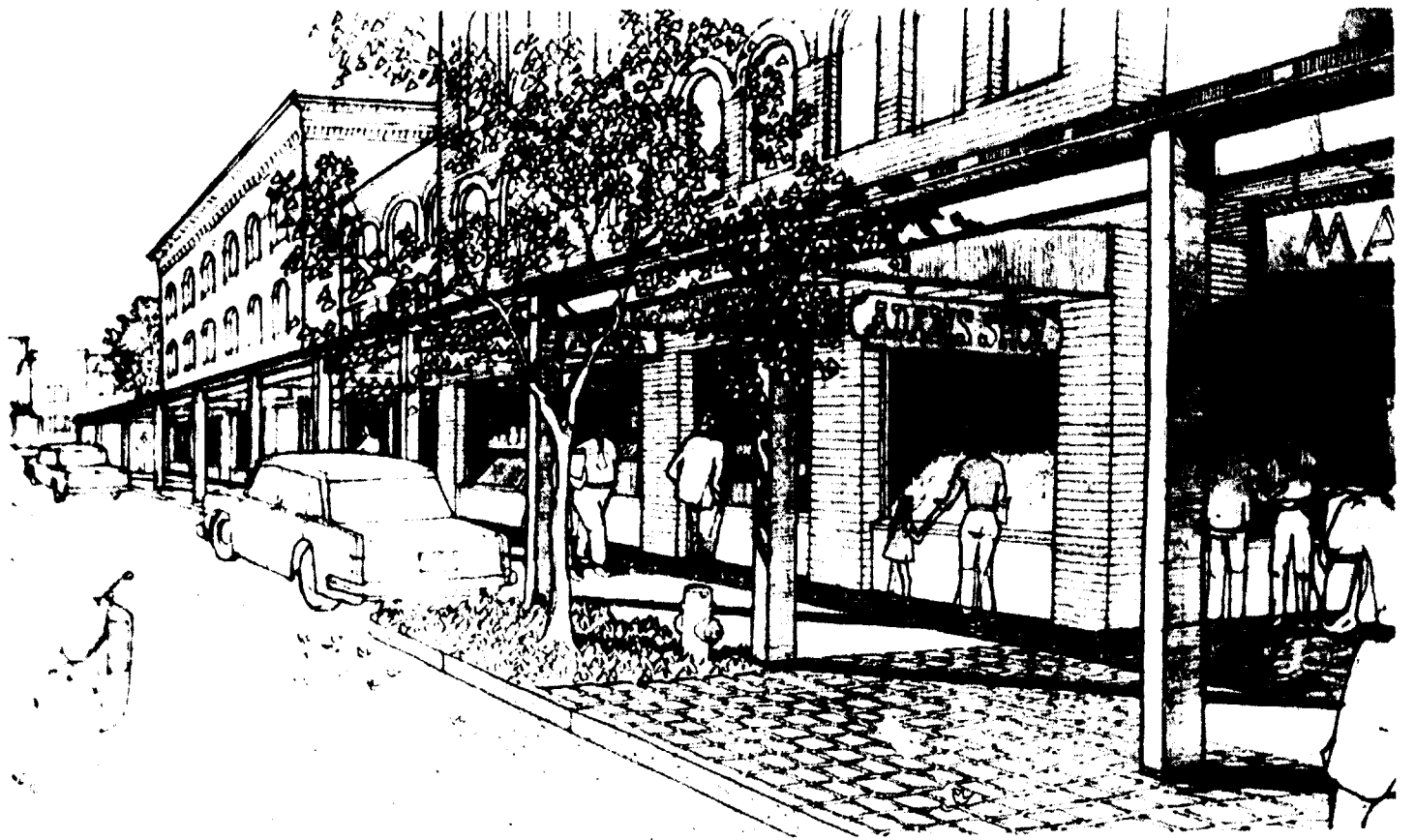
—Retail sales increased in Adams at the rate of 2.6 per cent, in Pittsfield at 5.6 per cent per year and in Berkshire County as a whole at 4.7 per cent.

—In 1967 retail sales per household in Adams was estimated at \$3,471, in North Adams at \$6,157 and in Pittsfield at \$8,720, leading to the conclusion that many Adams residents travel to other communities for retail purchases.

—In total sales, Adams had an increase of \$1,152,000, for a percentage increase of 10.4, far higher than the 5.1 per cent increase for North Adams and a 4.9 decrease for Williamstown. But it was less than half the 22.3 per cent increase for Pittsfield and a little over half the 18.7 per cent increase for Berkshire County.

—Total receipts in selected services, chiefly in the personal services category, increased significantly in Adams, in fact at a rate over three times that of the county in general.

—The ratio of wholesale to retail sales in town decreased by 50.9 per cent from 1958 to 1967, a much larger percentage



ARCADÉ FROM PARK STREET—Closeup view of Park Street shows Town Hall up street on left. Mall extends to rear of buildings where it would be enclosed and possibly both air conditioned and heated.

Adams

than in the county or Pittsfield.

EMPLOYING THESE and many other statistics, the "market men" then began calculating what is projected as additional new commercial floor space which the town may not only be able to absorb but also is recommended to be made available as soon as possible in the project area. "The project must be expedited," the report urges, because commercial development on the outskirts of town "could create further competition for the downtown area, thereby reducing this estimated potential for the project area."

Up-to-date sales figures per square foot for neighborhood downtown-type commercial activities average \$60, according to the report which estimates

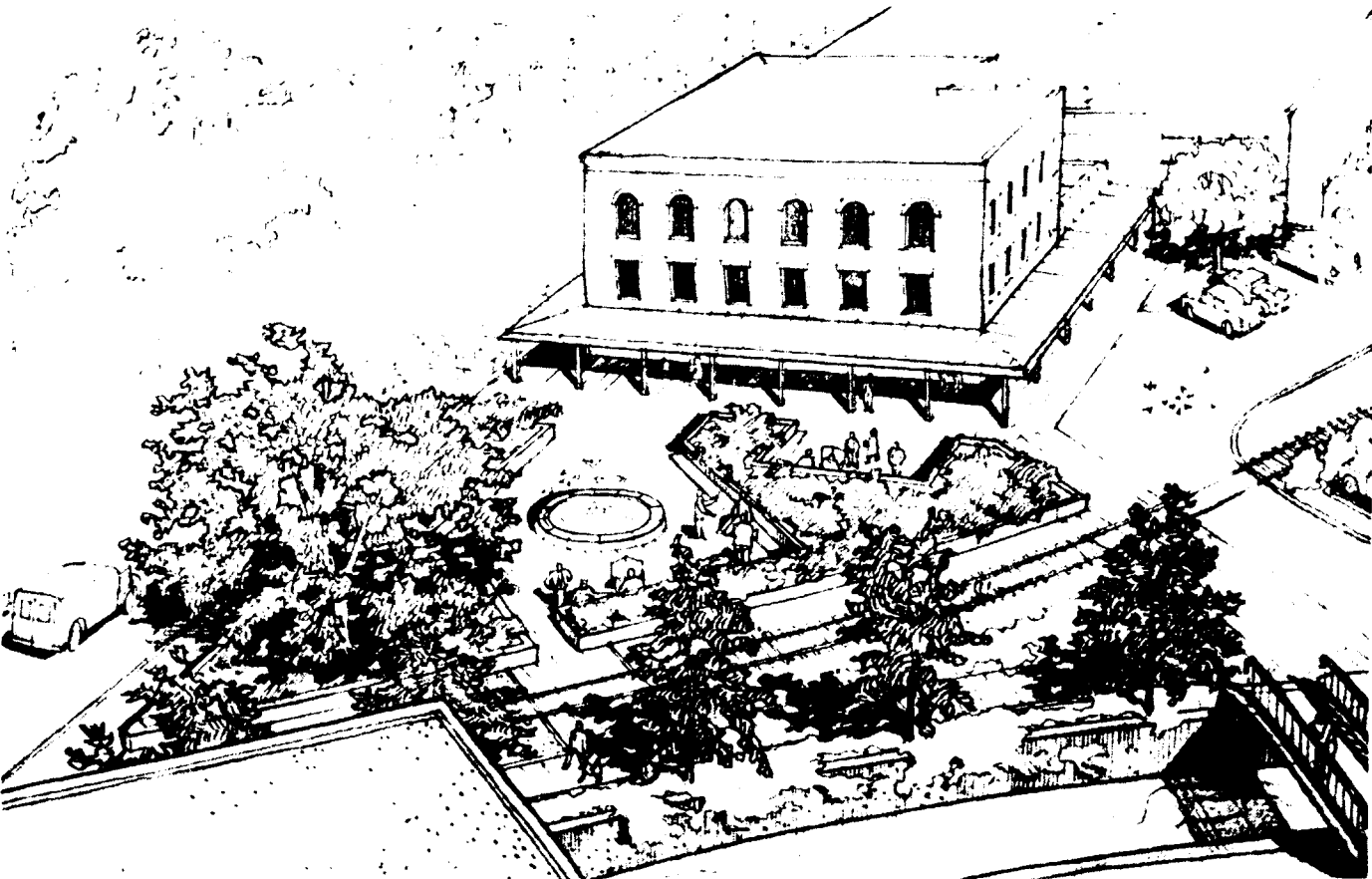
sales volume for "older, more obsolete space" at about 75 per cent of that figure, or \$45 per square foot. "It is this lack of retail sales productivity in the older space that prompts retailers to move out of existing quarters for newer space in which they can afford to pay higher rents because of the extra sales-generating capacity of the new space," the report notes.

Using local records on new commercial construction, normal replacement needs and displacement of existing space and foreseeable future trends in retail sales, the report estimates that the total new floor space to serve the entire town and needed by 1975 amounts to 59,000 square feet. Of that figure, 60 per cent, or 35,000 square feet, is the potential market within the

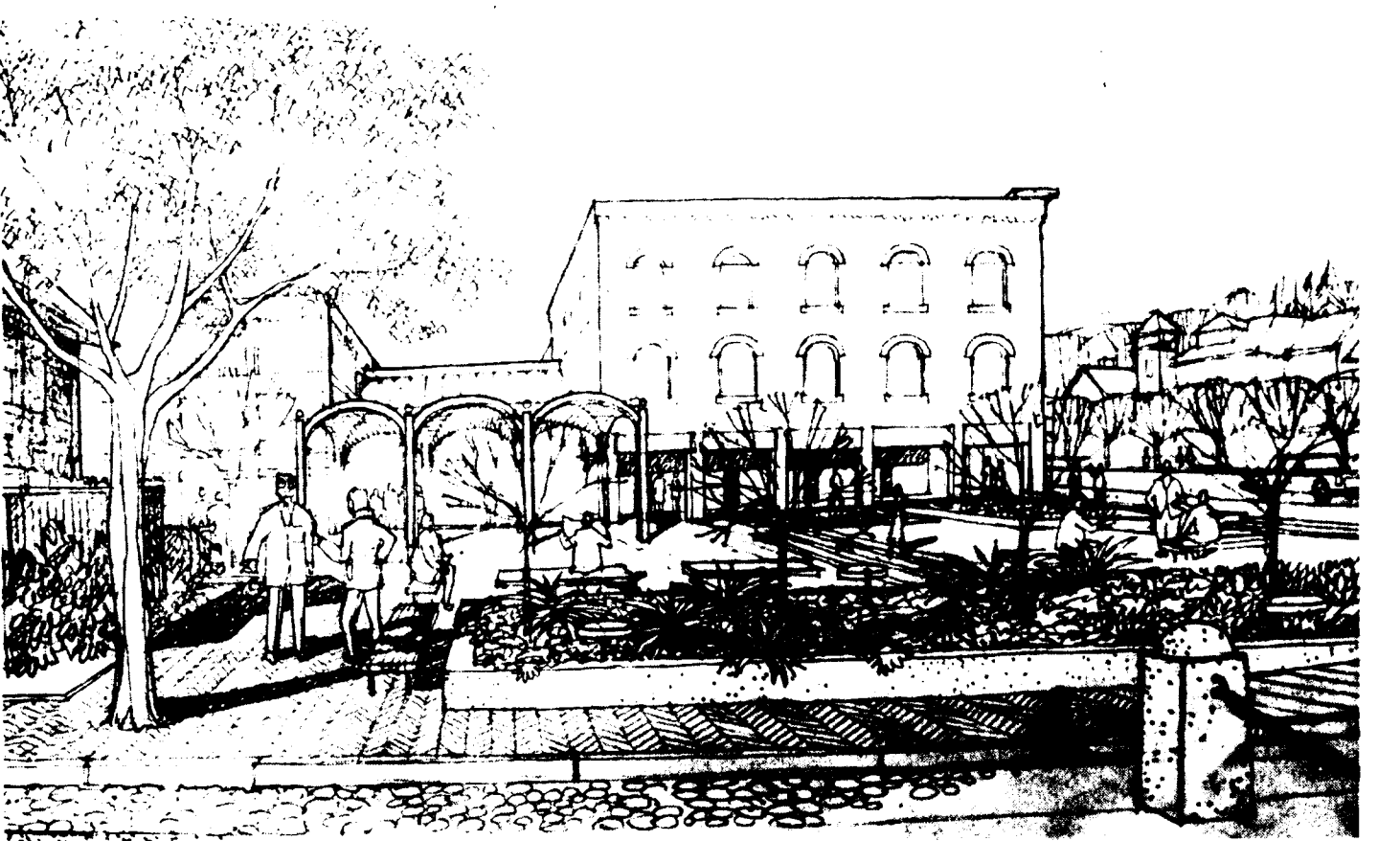
Proposed Project Pleasant Park boundaries.

THE FINAL OBJECTIVE in the LUM study's recommendations is the type of retail space advised. The report states: "In the general merchandise category, sales per household in Adams were only one-seventh of those for the Pittsfield area. Obviously this type of shopping is being done elsewhere, most likely Pittsfield and to a smaller degree in North Adams."

The additional sales potential available to Adams should be retail space "which will serve primarily the needs of the community itself and which are not dependent on generating sales from outside the community for their support," the LUM study concludes.



PARK STREET—Looking towards Town Hall from Park Street across from Post Office, sketch shows rehabilitated Mausert block where mall would start. Small park in foreground would be bounded by Park Street, at left, and Hoosac River flood control chute at bottom of picture.



VIEW FROM TOWN HALL—View down Park Street if person's back was against Town Hall, shows small park in foreground, rehabilitated Michalenko block, and enclosed mall at rear of Park Street buildings.



FROM INSIDE MALL—This is architect's conception of enclosed mall at rear of Park Street buildings. Mall would possibly be air-conditioned and heated.

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