

February 19, 2014

Dear Roundtable Workshop Invitee,

We had a good turnout for the Northfield Roundtable's November 15/16 workshop with Bill Johnson. If you attended, thanks for your input. This workshop focused on the transition area between the commercial downtown and the residential neighborhoods (see adjacent diagram). We are sending this brief summary with three of Bill's drawings. Watch for a posting of the full summary and drawings at www.northfieldroundtable.org.

In his introduction to the subject, Bill noted that planning transition zones is an illusive subject – difficult because transition areas do not have sharp boundaries and planning for these areas therefore demands integrative thinking to bring disparate land uses together. Some of the conflict issues identified by the participants included fast traffic, noise, ill-kept properties, discontinuous walkways, the lack of connectivity due to highway, and other factors that create discordance between residential and commercial. None of the transition areas around the Northfield downtown, however, were perceived by Bill to have serious conflict conditions. As in past workshops, Bill encouraged us to think about multiple little things that could be done that would make a big difference rather than one big fix.



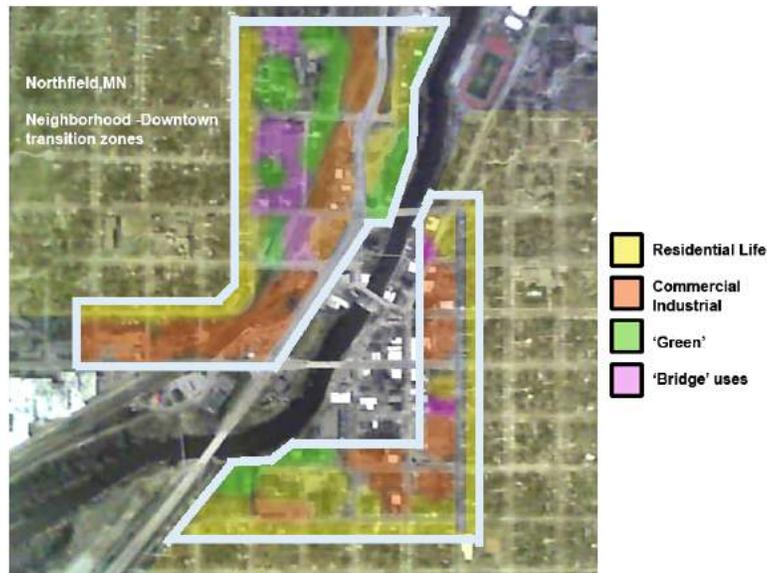
Transition Areas

To negotiate between the two functions of residential and commercial, Bill suggested using two transitioning resources: “green” entities and ‘bridge’ uses (see adjacent diagram). Any “green” entity always needs to have purpose, not just to be green. It can be green, but for a purpose of bringing about a sense of pleasure, comfort, and being at ease. “Bridges” between commercial and residential zones are places where people gather for uses in a friendly, comfortable environment.

Because the west side transition area is sometimes as wide as three blocks, Bill believes there is an opportunity to create smooth transitions in this area. As shown in the adjacent diagram, there are good potential transition functions on the Q-block with intense business near Hwy 3 (orange), a “bridge” in the depot-hub (purple), a parking-park on the west side of the tracks (green), and then the final transition to residential (yellow).

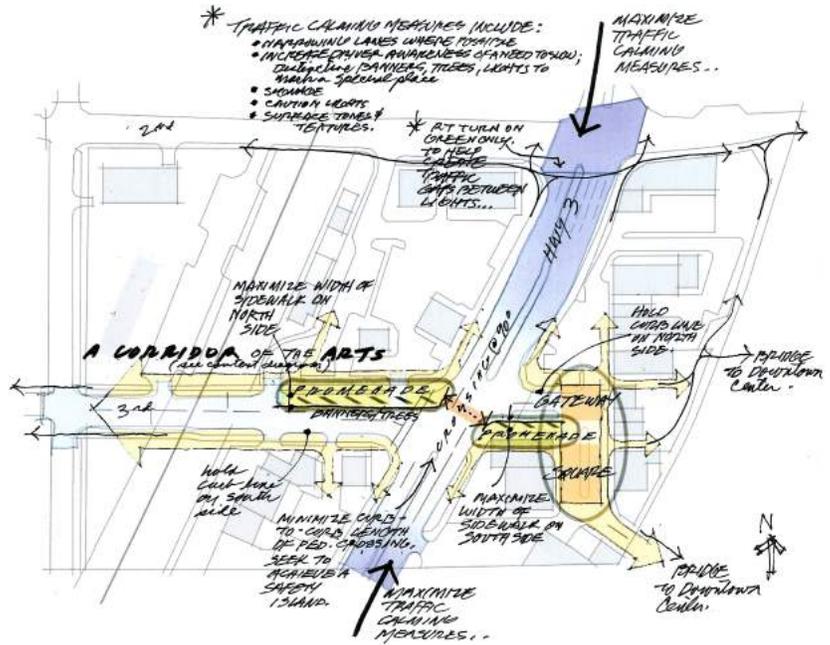
Bill views the east side transition as more difficult; the narrow width of the transition makes it more of a challenge. However, it already contains good “bridges” with a church and the library. In addition, it could be softened by “green” entities such as hedges and native grasses in front of the parking lots.

Bill noted that participants suggested actions that were small, but doable elements that could make a big difference (e.g. completing discontinuous walkways, signage, traffic calming measures, greening, safe crosswalks, creating identity for places and things) and suggested that forming stakeholder coalitions and public/private partnerships would facilitate those efforts.



The Big Idea: A “Corridor of the Arts”

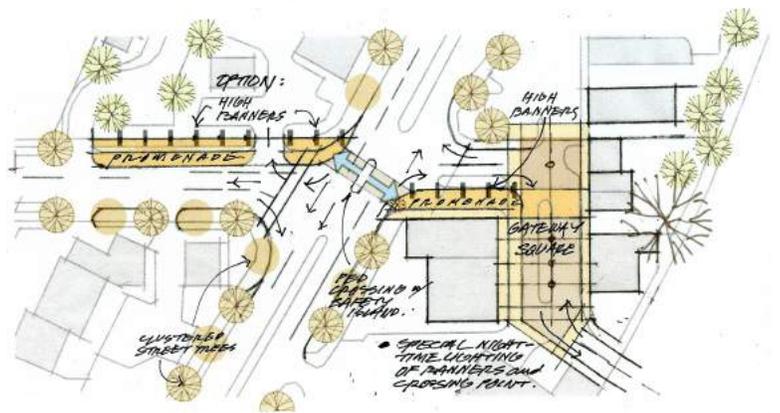
Creating identity, links, and connectivity through the transition areas was a major focus of participant discussion. A “Corridor of the Arts” idea arose in the discussions as a significant component in addressing connectivity between areas that are divided by the highway. Bill identified the Arts Corridor as the heart of the Northfield community that cuts across key areas from east side neighborhood to the west side neighborhood, i.e., from the Library and Weitz Center on the east to the NAG Theater on the west. Pieces of the potential corridor between the NAG Theater and Library currently exist; Bill suggested that we begin by giving the corridor a name – “Corridor of the Arts.” Over time, with the addition of elements such as sculptures and plantings, along with general education/awareness programs, the Corridor of the Arts could become “the walk of the town.”



Bill provided the above sketch as a synthesis of your ideas and comments about the Corridor of the Arts. Again, he encouraged us to think in terms of the area as a big idea made up of a lot of little doable elements.

As identified by Bill and the participants, the one major challenge to creating a Corridor of the Arts is a safe pedestrian crossing at 3rd Street and Hwy 3. Encouraged by a willingness of MnDOT to work with Northfield to address this challenge, Bill believes that a combination of seemingly simple traffic calming measures put together in a creative way could achieve a safe and attractive pedestrian crossing.

As illustrated by Bill’s adjacent drawing, the basic concept for a safe crossing in the Corridor of the Arts is the shortest crosswalk length possible. One idea that arose included a safety island at the halfway point of a diagonal crossing. This drawing shows the reduction in crossing length by narrowing the width of 3rd Street and the lanes of Hwy 3, which would allow a widening of the sidewalk on both sides of 3rd Street. Two diagonally connected “promenades” could create for the driver a sense of entering a special place, augmented by physically passing through a series of tall, colorful banners and/or selected columnar trees. Building on a previous Roundtable theme, this Corridor of the Arts would be a key feature in the “Greening of the Commons.”



Specific elements suggested by participants included trees (Bill suggested 30-40 big, columnar, deciduous trees plus distinctive lighting), greening the corners owned by MnDOT, off-right-of-way planting sites, banner poles in median of Hwy 3, and creative edging along the highway. The accumulation of these and other potential elements, added incrementally, could create a safe Hwy 3 crossing that looks and functions as an east-west promenade, serves as a gateway to the downtown, and links the two commercial and residential areas in a manner that can be safely enjoyed.

Thank you for your interest and ideas. We look forward to continuing this effort with you to plan well for “what could be” in Northfield.

Sincerely,

Northfield Roundtable