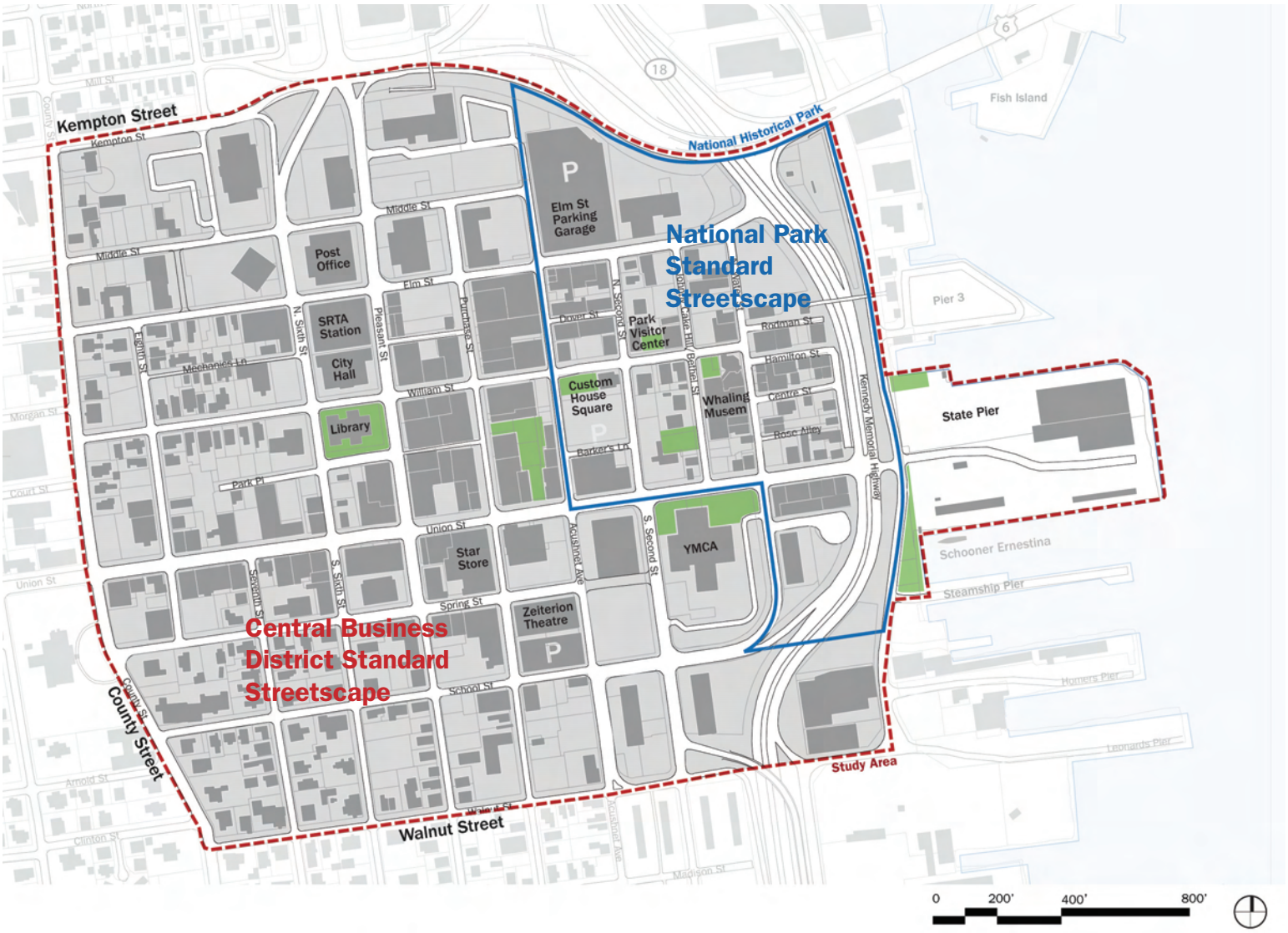
Part II
Public Realm Assessment

II.A Streetscape

Introduction

Any new visitor to New Bedford's downtown core will confirm that the first impression of the City is a positive one. The downtown core has a dense, walkable scale, the 19th century architectural character is consistent, and the typical streets and sidewalks of the core are of a width that creates an urbane pedestrian realm. Approximately a third of the study area of this report is within the boundaries of New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, established by Congress in 1996. Significant capital improvements to the public realm have been undertaken prior to and since the Park's establishment, details of which include cobblestone streetbeds, bluestone/slate sidewalks, lantern-style pedestrian lights and consistent street tree planting.

BELOW: William Street streetscape in New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park.



In terms of streetscape, the study area is thus divided into two distinct characters: Park and Central Business District. The standard streetscape for the Central Business District is more modest than that of the Park; in the best stretches this includes a palette of scored concrete sidewalks, brick continuity strips, acorn pedestrian lights and sparser street trees. The difference between the two zones is immediately noted tactilely (underfoot or underwheel) and visually as the materials, elements, planting, and overall scale change. The following recommendations take this notable streetscape difference as a positive aspect of the downtown character, and suggest that the typical Central Business District streetscape simply become more formalized as the standard design and consistently implemented to extend the vibrancy of the downtown throughout the core streets and into the surrounding neighborhoods.

FACING PAGE: The study area is divided into two primary zones: National Park (outlined in blue to the east), and Central Business District (the balance of the area outlined in dashed red). Materially and in terms of scale, the streetscapes in these two zones differ.

TOP: Typical National Park streetscape, Johnny Cake Hill.

BOTTOM: Typical Central Business District streetscape, corner of Pleasant and William Streets.

Sidewalks

In their current state, the sidewalks in the Central Business District are composed of a mixed collection of materials ranging from all-concrete to all-brick, with many variations between. The middle ground design, as implemented on the sidewalks surrounding the City Hall and the Library, has (moving from the curb inward) a granite curb, a brick continuity strip that becomes the zone reserved for street furniture and street tree grates, and a finely scored concrete walking surface. This design should be the standard sidewalk design for the entire downtown core, to create a consistent and continuous urban realm that signifies "downtown". All street furniture including lights, meters, trash receptacles, bike racks, directional and interpretive signs and newspaper vending boxes should be relegated to the brick continuity strip (and their location enforced), so that the sidewalks themselves remain dimensionally generous and clutter-free. Special attention should be paid to the joint between Park and non-Park sidewalks, the location in which the two systems collide. A standard and simple detail should be developed that creates a neat intersection between the two material palettes and which is used everywhere the two sidewalk types interact.

Short Term Recommendations

- Formalize a standard design for Central Business District sidewalks: brick continuity strip + scored concrete
- Design a "joint" detail between Park and Central Business District sidewalks

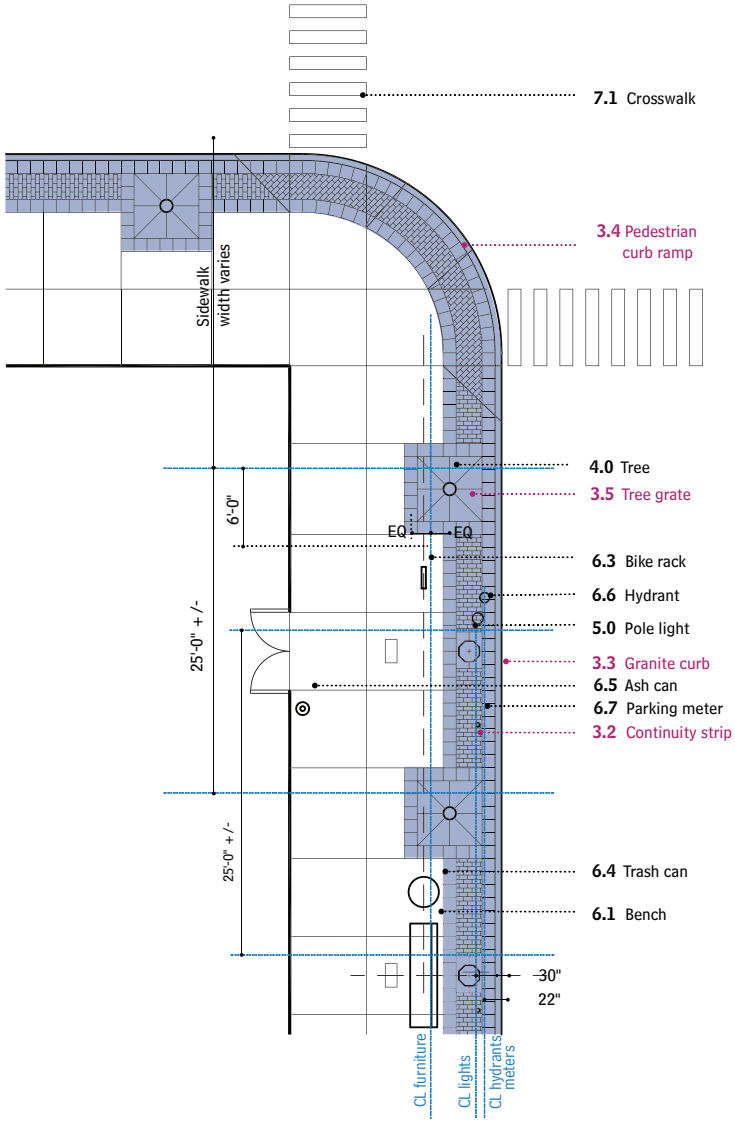
Medium Term Recommendations

- First phase expansion of New Bedford standard design: Union St, Pleasant St, Purchase St

Long Term Recommendation

- Second phase expansion of New Bedford standard design: throughout downtown

BELOW: A current joint between the National Park streetscape and the Central Business District standard streetscape at the corner of Johnny Cake Hill and Union Street. A standard design should be developed that allows for a neater, resolved transition between the two systems.



ABOVE: The corner of Purchase and School Streets, in which the north/south sidewalk is built with the City's standard brick continuity strip design, and the east/west is not. All streets in the downtown core should consistently use the standard design.

RIGHT: It is recommended that the City formalize the standard continuity strip design with a design that lays out the specific dimensions, materials, and locations for street trees and street furniture. A page from the South Boston Commonwealth Flats Design Guidelines and Standards is one such example. Source: Commonwealth Flats Design Guidelines and Standards for Massachusetts Port Authority, compiled by Utile, Inc.

Street Lights

There are three street light fixture types that are used in the study area, two of which are pedestrian-scaled, the third vehicular-scaled. The standard Park light differs from the standard Central Business District light, as would be expected to differentiate the two zones. The Park light is a pedestrian-scaled modern variation on a gas lantern—called a copperhead—that is distributed in a tight cadence throughout the Park. The Central Business District pedestrian light—"Washington" style—has a black cast-iron base style with a glass acorn-shaped top. The placement of Washington lamps was recently expanded in the downtown with the assistance of a State Public Works Economic Development (PWED) grant. Still, these pedestrian-scale lamps are notably sparse in certain stretches of the study area, especially on Acushnet Avenue and South Second Street south of Union Street, and in the blocks between Spring and School Streets. The current lighting in these areas is provided by the highway-scaled cobrahead light which emits the muddy yellow light typical of sodium vapor bulbs, and whose main purpose it is to light the roadbed, not the sidewalk. In order to extend the downtown's vibrancy and sense of security toward the residential neighborhoods to the south, it is recommended that the Washington style pedestrian light replace the cobra head at least to School Street.

Short Term Recommendation

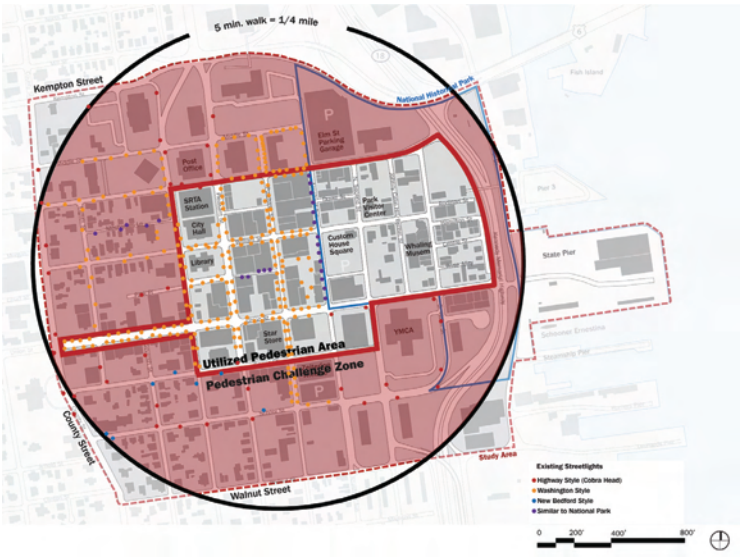
► Install Washington style pedestrian lights on Acushnet Avenue and South Second Street between Union and Spring Streets

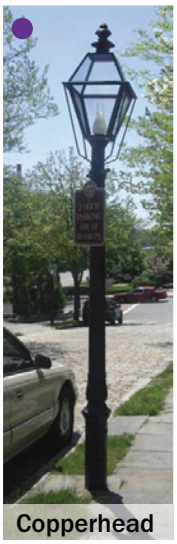
Medium Term Recommendation

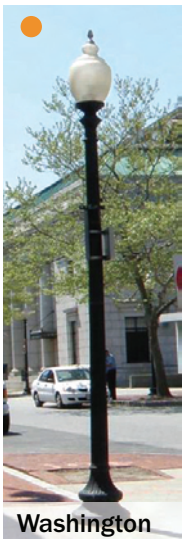
► Install Washington style pedestrian lights on Spring Street between Second and Seventh Streets

Long Term Recommendation

► Install Washington style pedestrian lights in blocks between Spring and School Streets




Copperhead

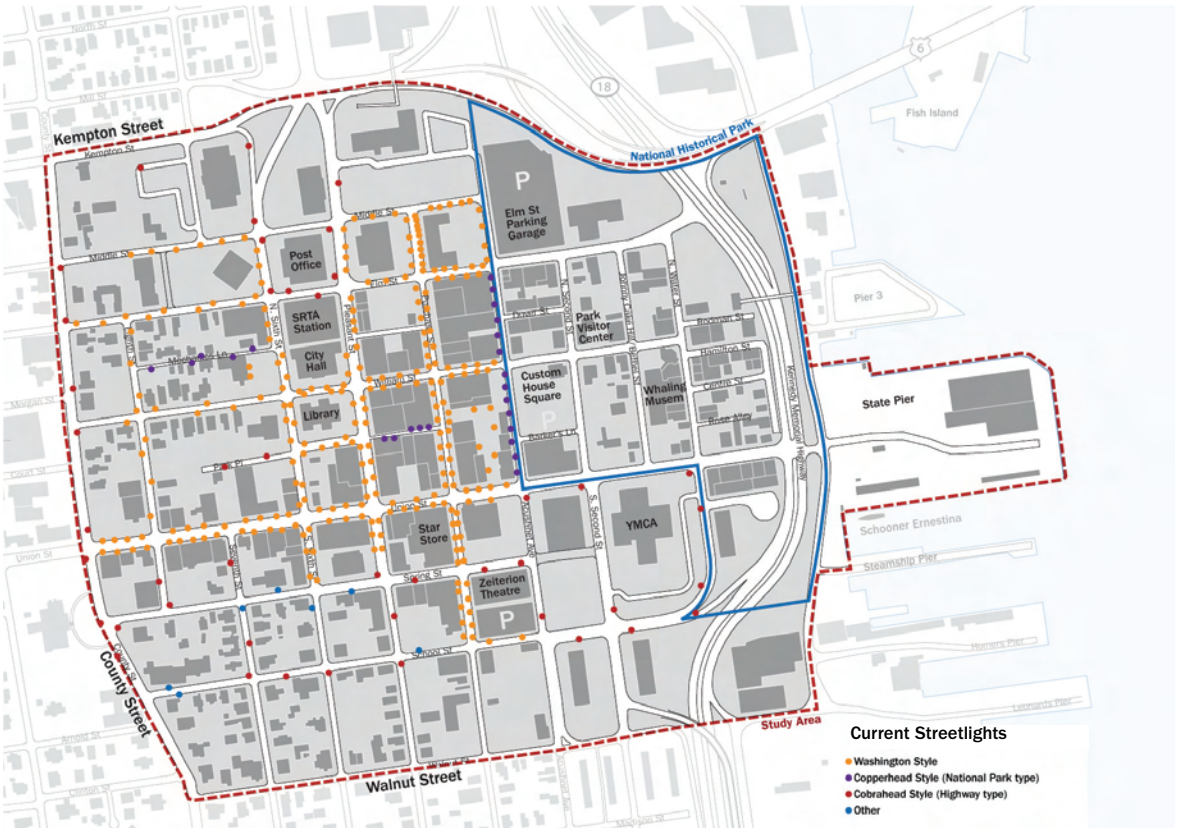

Washington

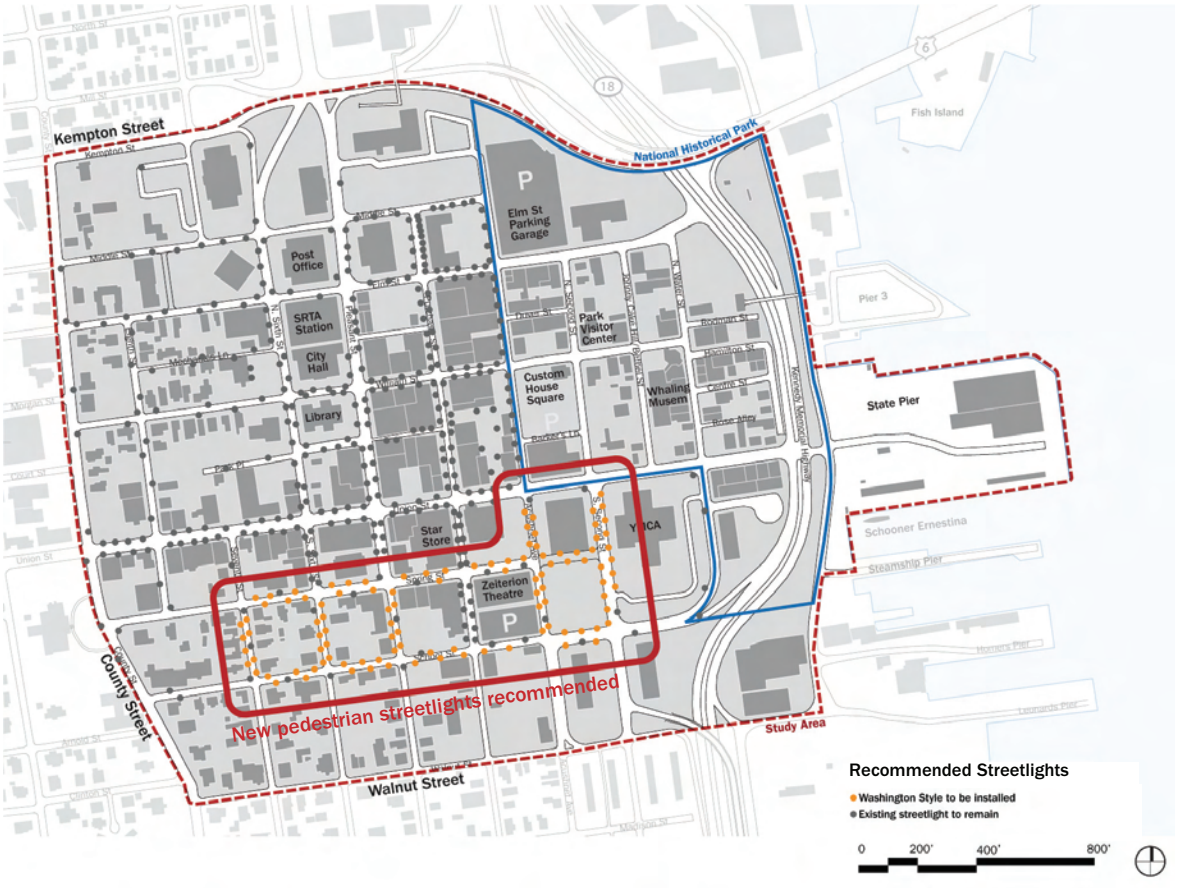

Cobrahead

ABOVE: The standard street lights utilized in the study area include two pedestrian-scale lights—Copperhead on the upper left, Washington style on the upper right—and one highway-scale light, the Cobrahead design shown on the bottom.

LEFT: The red zone was designated the Pedestrian Challenge Area because of the various perceptual barriers that prevent these blocks from feeling like part of the core downtown. Installation of pedestrian lights would help combat this perception.

FACING PAGE: The upper graphic shows current distribution of the three light types in the downtown. The lower graphic suggests streets—particularly to the south of Union Street—on which Cobrahead lights should be replaced with the Washington style pedestrian lights.


Kempton Street
National Historical Park
Elm St Parking Garage
Post Office
SRTA Station
City Hall
Library
Park Visitor Center
Custom House Square
Whaling Musem
State Pier
YMCA
Star Store
Zeiterion Theatre
County Street
Walnut Street
Study Area
Fish Island
Pier 3
Schooner Ernestina
Steamship Pier
Current Streetlights
Washington Style
Copperhead Style (National Park type)
Cobrahead Style (Highway type)
Other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Elm St Parking Garage
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City Hall
Library
Park Visitor Center
Custom House Square
Whaling Musem
State Pier
YMCA
Star Store
Zeiterion Theatre
County Street
Walnut Street
Study Area
New pedestrian streetlights recommended
Fish Island
Pier 3
Schooner Ernestina
Steamship Pier
Recommended Streetlights
Washington Style to be installed
Existing streetlight to remain
0
200'
400'
800'

Street Trees

In the public meetings that were conducted as part of this study, a common public request was for "more green". Upon further probing, it became clear that "green" constituted two different requests: more dedicated open space (covered in the following section), and more street trees. In 2008, the City undertook a Downtown Action Plan, which identified and tackled achievable goals in the public realm—among them being a street tree survey and maintenance plan. The survey revealed that downtown has a fair number of street trees (286 total, according to the 2008 plan), but that their distribution is extremely uneven. In order to create a feeling of green canopy, trees need to be regularly spaced and consistently present on all main and feeder streets into the downtown core. Street trees are notably missing—or very sparse—on some of the most important civic streets such as Union and Pleasant, leading to a perception of these streets as gritty and bare. Secondary streets such as North Sixth, Acushnet Avenue and North Second also suffer from an inconsistent or non-existent tree canopy. This study therefore recommends a first-phase installation of regularly spaced street trees on Union and Pleasant Streets, and a second-phase installation on North Sixth and North Second Streets and Acushnet Avenue. In all cases, the new trees should be spaced to fit regularly between the Washington style pedestrian lights, set within a pit and protected by a standard tree grate (to be chosen by the City's Planning Department). This future New Bedford standard tree grate should be dimensioned to fit neatly from edge-to-edge of the standard brick continuity strip. Careful attention should be paid to tree species selection to insure that critical view corridors (such as the Union Street view toward the waterfront) is enhanced, and not obscured by, the green canopy.

Short Term Recommendations

- Select (or design) standard Downtown New Bedford tree grate to fit neatly from edge-to-edge of the standard brick continuity strip
- Target Union and Pleasant Streets for first-phase street tree plantings

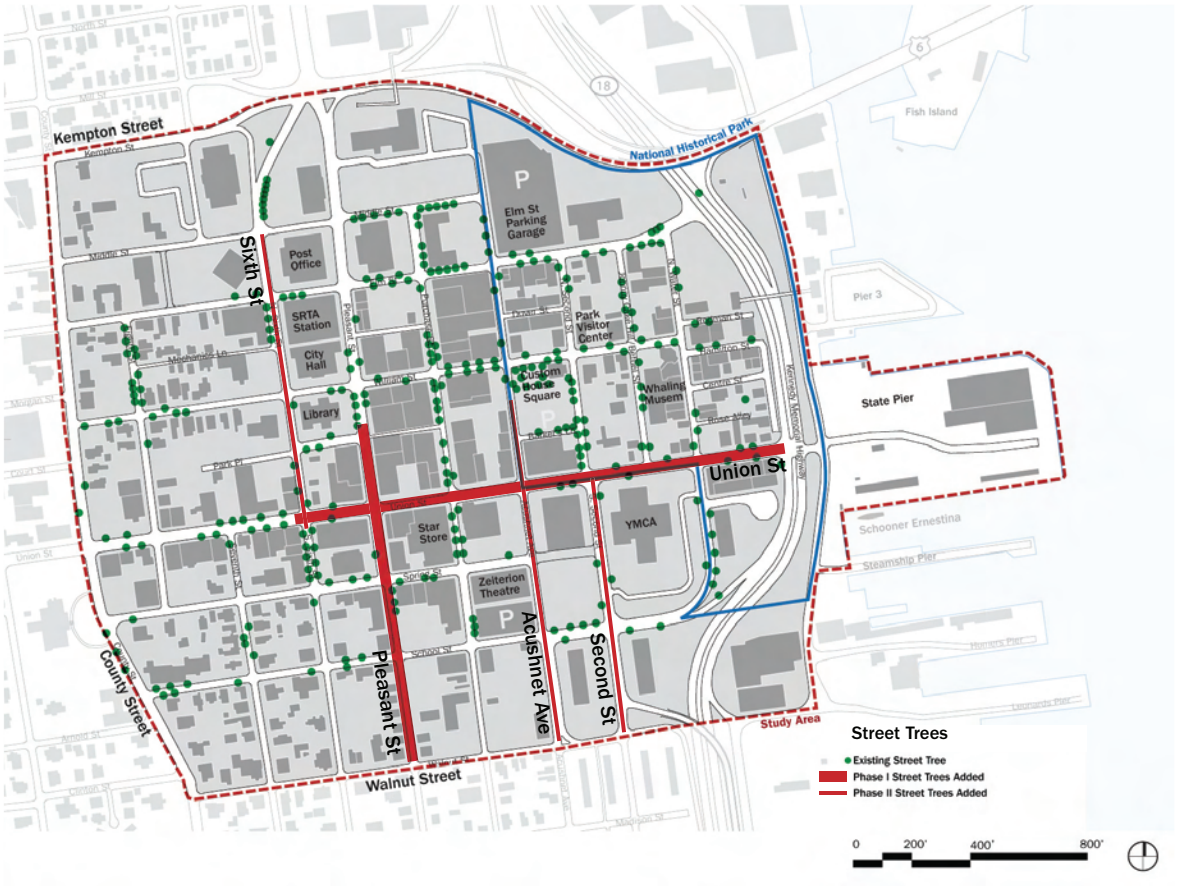
Medium Term Recommendations

- Install new standard tree grate around existing street trees
- Target North Sixth and North Second Streets and Acushnet Avenue for second-phase street tree plantings

FACING PAGE TOP: Two major intersections in the downtown that differ greatly in their "green" quotient. At Union and Pleasant Streets (left), no street trees are visible. In contrast, the corner of William and Sixth Streets has a consistent cadence of trees that create a green canopy.

FACING PAGE BOTTOM: Current street tree distribution in the downtown overlaid with a recommendation to plant new consistently-spaced street trees in two phases, focusing on the main streets of Union and Pleasant first. Source: 2008 Downtown Action Plan, City of New Bedford.


222 Union St.
Webster Bank


Kempton Street
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Sixth St
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State Pier
Union St
YMCA
Star Store
Zeiterion Theatre
Schooner Ernestina
Steamship Pier
Acushnet Ave
Second St
Pleasant St
County Street
Walnut Street
Study Area
Street Trees
Existing Street Tree
Phase I Street Trees Added
Phase II Street Trees Added
0
200'
400'
800'

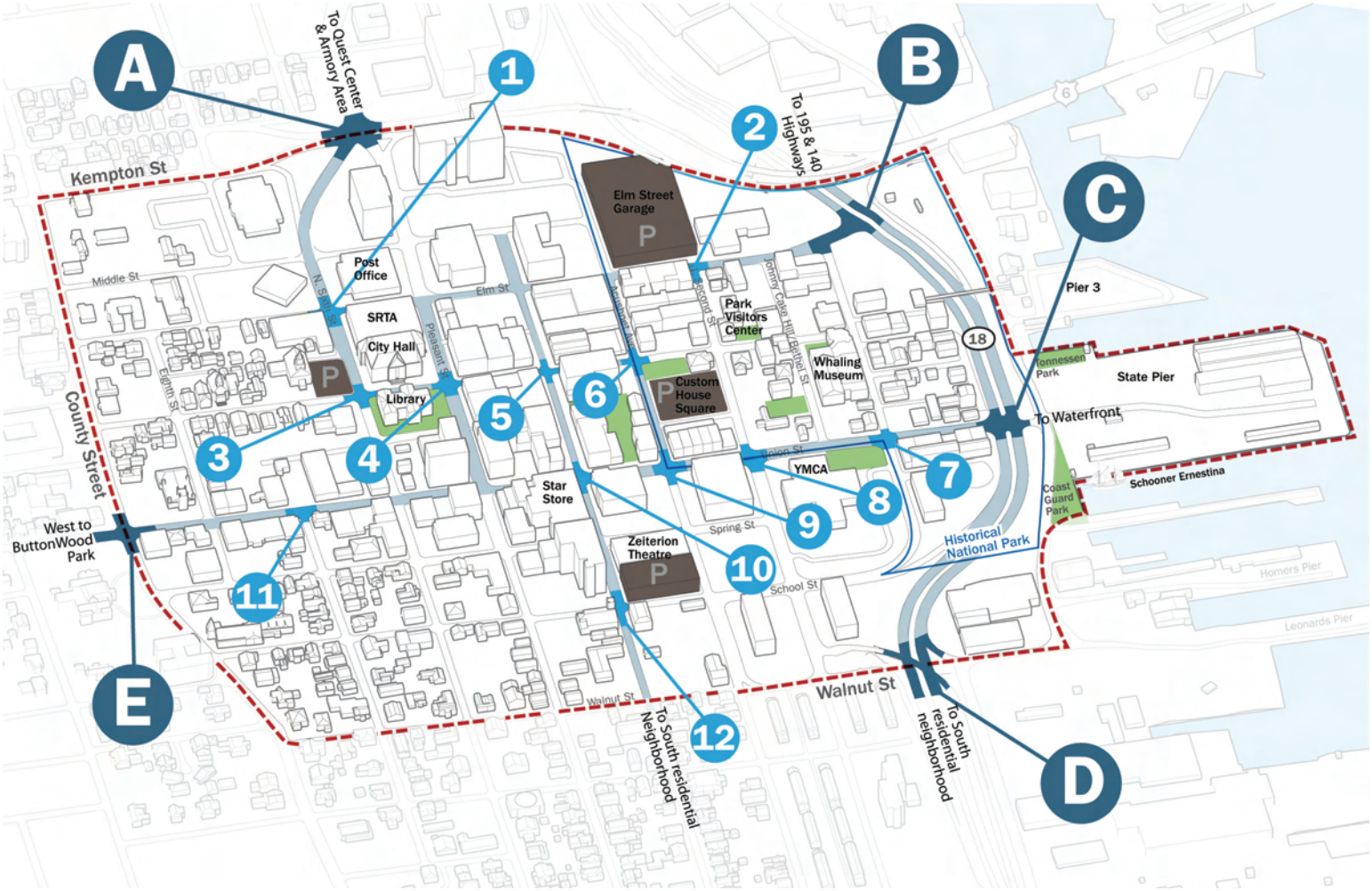
Key Intersections (Gateways + Neckdowns)

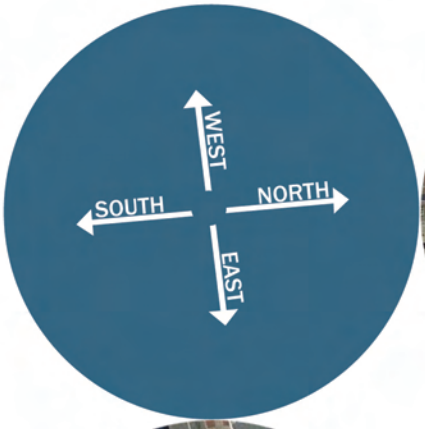
The edges of the study area are peppered with some of the most challenging vehicular and pedestrian intersections in the entire City of New Bedford. Route 6 to the north and Route 18 to the east are multi-lane highways that effectively prohibit easy access to the neighborhoods and waterfront immediately adjacent. Nonetheless, all four edges of the study area should be considered important gateways, and constitute opportunities to welcome visitors to the downtown. The key downtown gateway opportunities are the five-point intersection at Kempton / Pleasant Streets and the Route 18 / Elm Street intersection from the north; County and Union Street intersection from the west; Walnut Street and Route 18 from the south; and Route 18 / Union Street from the East. These locations are therefore the optimal locations for "welcome" signage that indicates passage into the downtown core, provides key directional objectives and highlights visitor amenities. To this end, the National Park Service (NPS) has completed planning for a robust trailblazer signage system in and around downtown which will help create the "gateway" effect as visitors enter the area; fabrication and installation of these signs is expected in early 2010. The NPS program assumes the existing traffic design as a precondition to the installation and location of the signs, however. The City could take the opportunity to commission a separate traffic study that focused upon these five complex intersections so that the optimal location for welcome signage is precisely calibrated. These gateway locations are all prime locations for other streetscape improvements including integrated pedestrian crossings with neckdowns for safety, and more significant and maintained plantings (see following pages for examples).

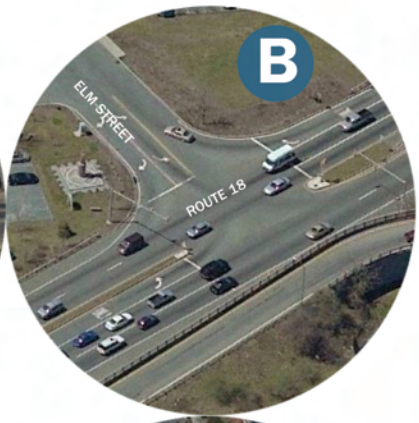
FACING PAGE TOP: Primary Gateways into the downtown that should be considered for further study are indicated by the dark blue, lettered dots. Secondary intersections recommended for neckdown treatment are indicated by the light blue, numbered dots.

FACING PAGE BOTTOM: Primary Gateways shown in aerial perspective. Source: Bing maps.

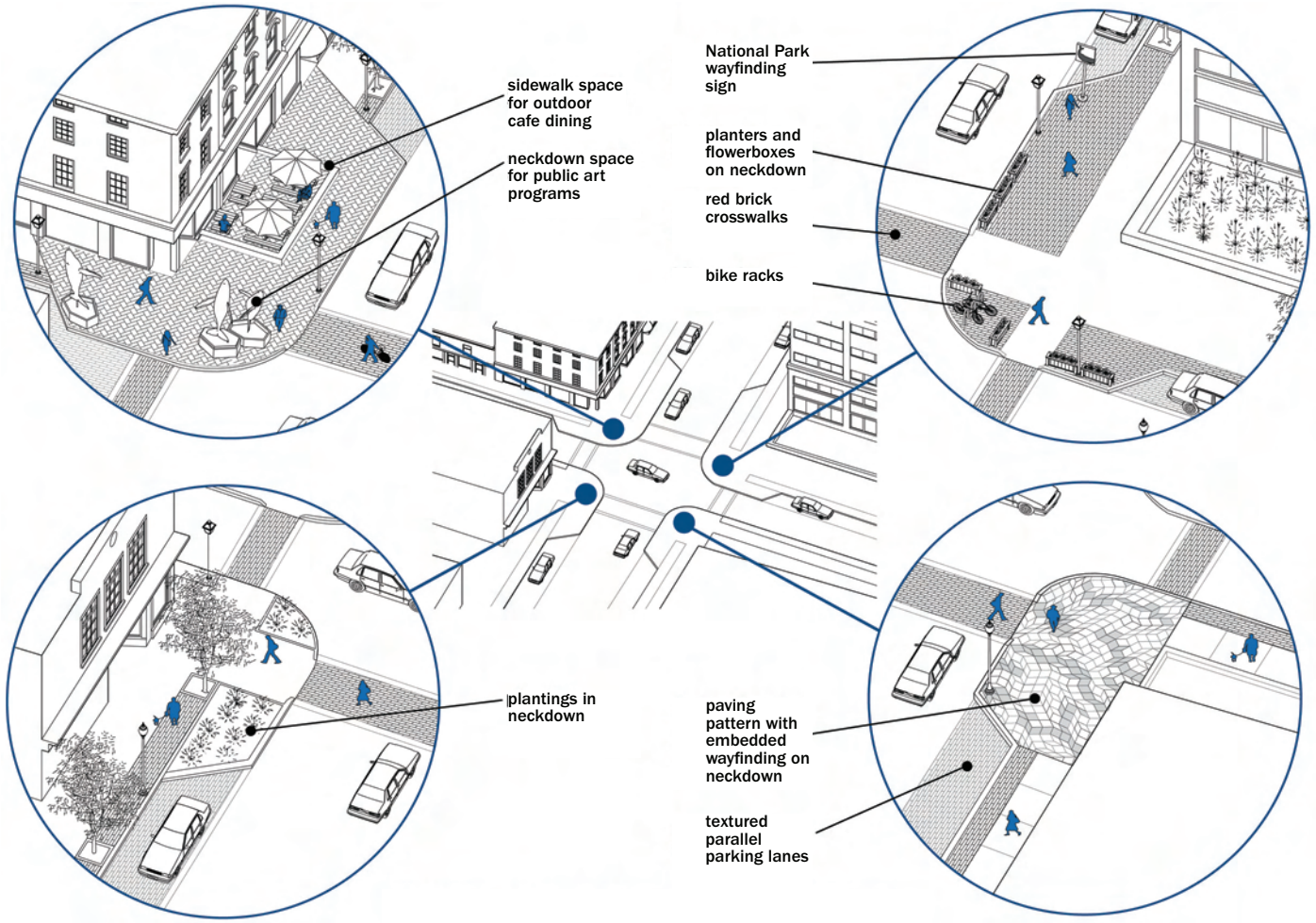
While the typical streets and sidewalks within the downtown core are dimensionally appropriate for a healthy pedestrian environment, there are key intersections that would be improved if necked-down. A neckdown is an extended curb at an intersection that narrows the width of roadway and is intended to slow traffic. The benefits of neckdowns are numerous: they promote horizontal speed control, create better visibility at the intersection, reduce the length of crosswalks, and finally produce extra sidewalk width to hold plantings, street furniture, public art or café seating. These benefits can be achieved without reducing on-street parking and level-of-service at intersections. The page to the right indicates recommended locations for neckdowns in the downtown, and the diagrams on the following page suggest the types of programs and elements that could occupy this new sidewalk zone to activate the public realm. Crosswalks throughout the downtown should be treated with more care, including special paving at the core intersections noted, and crosswalks with painted interiors at the non-core intersections.







1	Elm St & Sixth St
2	Elm St & Second St
3	William St & Sixth St
4	William St & Pleasant St
5	William St & Purchase St
6	William St & Acushnet Ave
7	Union St & Water St
8	Union St & Second St
9	Union St & Acushnet Ave
10	Union St & Purchase St
11	Union St & Seventh St
12	Purchase St & School St



▲ Potential Treatments for Key Intersections

ABOVE: Neckdown concepts for gateway intersections: advantages and programmatic options.

Short Term Recommendation

- Commission traffic study of five primary gateway intersections into the City for gateway signage and pedestrian crossings

Medium Term Recommendations

- Work with NPS to relocate (if necessary) newest trailblazer signs to optimal location at each gateway intersection
- Begin neckdown implementation at most critical core intersections (keyed to map): Pleasant/William (4); Purchase/William (5); Union/Acushnet (7); Union/Purchase (8)

Long Term Recommendations

- Implement better pedestrian crossings at gateway intersections (as indicated in traffic study)
- Complete neckdown implementation (keyed to map): Seventh/Elm (1); Second/Elm (2); Second/William (3); Acushnet/William (6); Purchase/School (9)

South Central Neighborhood Connectivity + Targeted Recommendations for Future Work

Within the study area, the most complex transitional sub-area is the southeastern quadrant where the downtown core abuts the South Central neighborhood. This is a section of the city in which empty swaths of land have been insufficiently infilled since the wholesale clearance of the urban renewal period. Block-sized surface parking lots behind the Sovereign Bank Building and the YMCA create a significant gap in the urban fabric on the northern side of School Street, a circumstance which negatively affects the vibrancy of the blocks immediately to the south.

This is also a section of the City that will be changing dramatically with the redesign and "boulevardization" of Route 18 in the coming months. In the proposed Route 18 redesign, Walnut Street will become a major vehicular entry point to the downtown from the south, and more importantly, will finally connect the neighborhood to the waterfront with a significant pedestrian crossing. With the removal of the highway ramps (that currently prohibit pedestrian connectivity), new and/or expanded parcels will be freed up to support future development. All of these issues suggest that this area be the focus of its own planning effort which could be designated the Downtown / South Central Edge Study. Such a study would look specifically at the key underutilized parcels (the three major surface lots lining School Street) along with the new parcels released by the Route 18 configuration to suggest a mini master plan that balances density with appropriate step-down massing and open space in the transition from the commercial downtown to the residential neighborhood. The parking currently handled on the surface lots will have to be reallocated and the traffic implications of the Walnut Street exit of Route 18 carefully considered in any new scheme.

BELOW: View from the roof of the Zeiterion garage looking east across the Sovereign Bank and YMCA surface parking lots. These empty lots create a rift in the urban fabric and create a perceptual barrier between the core downtown and the residential neighborhood to the south (on the right of the photo).

While the complexity of the issues in play precluded this study taking the area on with the precision required, a few primary observations and recommendations are worth putting forth. As was recommended in the street light and street tree sections above, this residential neighborhood should be connected more explicitly to the downtown core through the expansion of key streetscape elements. The walkable, pedestrian-friendly scale implied by such streetscape elements will be supported by future development that mends the urban fabric with medium-rise building massing and active ground-floor uses on the current surface parking lots.

Short Term Recommendation

- Commission Downtown / South Central Edge Study to create a mini master plan for this area of the City

Medium Term Recommendations

- Expand streetscape elements (standard sidewalk, street trees, Washington pedestrian lights) to School Street

ABOVE: Two examples of transitional development massing that would be appropriate for the Downtown / South Central Edge area. Tent City, Boston, MA by Goody Clancy Architects (top), and Harvard University Graduate Commons, Cambridge, MA by Elkus Manfredi Architects (bottom).

BELOW: Recommended Downtown / South Central mini master plan study area.