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# **EDITORIAL: Downtown makeover – Worcester's new approach to urban renewal targets 24 properties**

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Hold onto your hats. Worcester is proposing an urban renewal project targeting 24 properties in an effort to revitalize a 118-acre chunk of the city's old urban core. Its reach is nothing less than a transformative makeover that would complement and extend the Union Station and CitySquare projects, the Shrewsbury Street and Canal District revitalizations, and complete the Theater District promise around The Hanover Theatre.

The 20-year, \$100-million plan – an estimate assuming every cost if all 24 properties were taken by eminent domain – would have the Worcester Redevelopment Authority first try to work with owners to have them rehabilitate or redevelop their properties, or encourage them to sell to a developer. If owners balk, the WRA could take the buildings as a last resort through eminent domain once they had a willing developer with a plan for something better.

The buildings are in an area stretching from Mechanics and Pearl streets south to Austin and Myrtle streets, and further out to the east of Southbridge Street along both sides of the Providence & Worcester Railroad tracks. Property owners and businesses were being notified by today whether or not they're among the 24 under-performing, blighted or substandard properties. For the curious, the identity of the 24 parcels should be up on the city's website as early as today.

Given a history in which redevelopment demolished entire blocks and broke-up or cut-off neighborhoods, City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. made a point of calling this home-grown approach a more "mature version" of urban renewal. It's not meant as a repeat of the Worcester Center project more than 40 years ago that saw several downtown blocks demolished in making way for a mall and gigantic parking garage that turned its back to the city's east side, cutting off access specifically to Shrewsbury Street, something now repaired by the ongoing CitySquare project.

It's telling that apart from CitySquare, the targeted buildings include a "U" of blocks nearly encircling City Hall – the very heart of downtown. Main Street's empty storefronts were a significant element in fall's mayoral race. The proposed project, which requires state and local approvals, is meant to create a vibrant downtown in remaking and filling storefronts and populating upper floors.

It's easy to guess that the vacant former Paris Cinema -- a first-run palace, the Capitol Theater, that declined over decades and owners into a porn house -- is on the list. Another long-vacant

adult cinema, formerly the Fine Arts/Olympia Theater on lower Pleasant Street, will likely join. Telegram City Hall Reporter Nick Kotsopoulos, in his Sunday “Politics and the City” column, pointed to likely targets as the Paris and also the Midtown Mall, which bracket the Common, along with vacant areas of the Wyman-Gordon property, mentioned as a possible stadium site if the Pawtucket Red Sox were ever to move to Worcester.

It's imperative that care be taken that homegrown businesses – the downtown cobbler, the dress shop, the tailor and dry cleaner and others adding to the city's human character and commerce - are not squeezed out in favor of only chain stores.

And while the “who” should be known today, the “how” of implementation won't be known for years in an endeavor fraught with potential issues. Keep in mind the hullabaloo over Atlantic City's unsuccessful attempt to take a house through eminent domain for a limousine parking lot for Donald Trump's former casino. No residential units are expected to be part of this effort. But a notorious case like the one in New London, Connecticut was fought all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled 5-4 that a city could use eminent domain to take private property for economic development and turn it over to a private developer. The “hows” and the “whys” will be critical.