French Hill Design Charrette

City of Nashua, New Hampshire

June 24 & 25, 2016

PLAN NH
Visioning *for* Sustainable Communities

vibrant villages
new hampshire

Nashua French Hill Design Charrette Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks go to those individuals who donated their professional and personal time to make this charrette a success.
Also, many thanks to the citizens, businesses and City officials who shared their time, services, thoughts and knowledge with us.

The Plan NH Charrette Team

Charrette Leaders

Gordon Leedy, Planner, Landscape Architect, VHB, Bedford
Christopher Kennedy, UK Architects, Hanover

Charrette Team

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Michelle McDonald, PlanNH, Portsmouth

and
Robin LeBlanc, Executive Director, Plan New Hampshire,
Portsmouth, NH

The Nashua Team

Without the support and participation of all of the following individuals, organizations and businesses this charrette would not have been possible:

Mayor Jim Donchess
Alderman David Schoneman, Ward Three
Sarah Marchant, AICP, Director of Community Development
James Vayo, AICP Downtown Specialist & OED Coordinator

The Dental Connection
Fodee's
The Riverwalk Café
A&P Market

Plan NH is grateful for the special support of these members:

Plan NH Comes to Nashua, NH

June 24 and 25, 2016

Who is Plan NH?

Plan New Hampshire, The Foundation for Shaping the Built Environment (Plan NH), is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization formed in 1989.

Plan NH has a *Vision* of a New Hampshire that is vibrant and healthy for its people, its economies and the environment.

Plan NH's *role, or Mission*, in achieving that Vision is to encourage good planning and design and development because, we believe, that *what* we build, and *where* and *how* we build it has a significant impact on that vibrancy and health.

Plan NH *champions principles and ideas* that balance building projects - and this would include anything built in the public realm, such as buildings, roads, bridges, memorials, public sculpture - with

- The needs of people - where they live, how they get about, what services are necessary, what they value
- maintaining the "sense of place" of our Citys, cities and villages that make them unique –
  including preserving historic assets, open spaces, agriculture and farming
- protecting our air, water, flora and fauna

Among our signature programs is the *design charrette*, an exercise that brings professionals from our membership together with our communities to explore design ideas, usually around a City center or other significant neighborhood. Through recommendations made, Plan NH can demonstrate the role and importance of the principles and ideas noted above in concrete, real examples.

What is a *Design Charrette*?

Simply stated, a Charrette is a brief, yet intense, brainstorming session in which information and many ideas are brought together for the purpose of defining potential planning recommendations and possible design solutions for an identified need. For Plan NH, this is usually related to a City center or other significant neighborhood in a community.

The charrette is typically of a short duration – for Plan NH, 8 hours on a Friday for listening and research and then another 8 hours the next day for brainstorming, crafting recommended solutions, and presenting thoughts to the community.

The Charrette Process:

- Identify the need or opportunity
- Collect information from the community itself to understand more deeply and broadly the situation
- Analyze and evaluate what is seen and heard
- Develop conclusions and recommendation for meeting the need or addressing the challenge

Most importantly, the process engages planning and design professionals (and/or others with related areas of expertise) in direct dialog and conversation with local residents and community representatives to collect information needed in order to develop good and relevant recommendations about how to address a particular challenge. Plan NH sees this part of the process as a period of *discovery*: discovering who the community is, what they value, what they really want, dream and hope for. This community input is essential and critical to the value of the outcomes.

The results of a Plan NH charrette are general and overarching planning and design *recommendations,* rather than specific, "how to" construction directions. Plan NH does not dictate, but suggests. Most often, the outcome of a Plan NH charrette is described as a "vision": an expression of how things *might be*, based on what the team saw and heard and learned through the discovery process.

Summary

Corner of Cross Street & Lock Street

In June 2015, the City of Nashua submitted an application for a Plan NH Community Design Charrette:

"The opportunity for French Hill, specifically the Lock Street area, is for infrastructure improvements that would catalyze other private reinvestment in the neighborhood on a much larger scale. The proximity of high paying jobs, quality schools, spiritual & social institutions, and Downtown's commerce make it an ideal location for community revitalization and for it to have the trademarks of a place that appeals to a large group of young adults. The combination of affordable housing stock and a high degree of walkability make the project area a "complete package" for current and future residents whose interests draw them to an urban, socially connected, downtown environment which is in limited supply in Southern New Hampshire."

The application was accepted by Plan NH, and on June 23 and 24, 2016, volunteers from Plan NH came to Nashua to look at the "target area," listen to residents and City staff, and from what they saw and learned, develop recommendations to achieve the goals the City articulated.

Through listening sessions, the team learned about the City's vision for the neighborhood, with discussions about on-going work in the neighborhood. The PlanNH charrette team identified certain existing

Identified Issues & Concerns

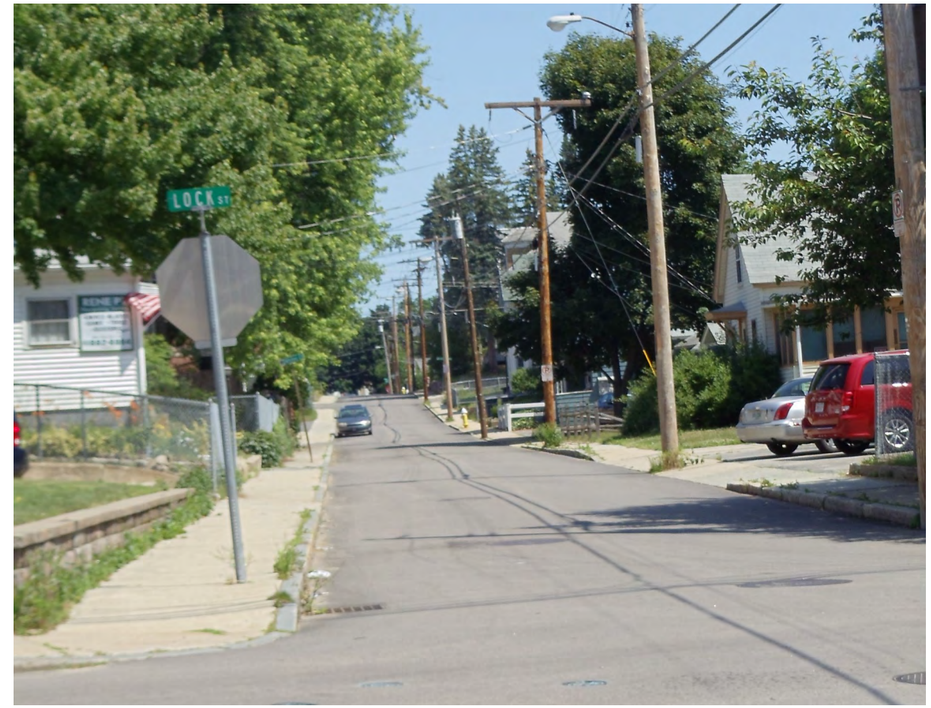
- There are several projects related to Lock Street that are being undertaken by the City:
  - Catchbasin replacement/drainage improvements
  - Repaving
- Absentee landlords are an issue that needs to be addressed.
- Pedestrian safety is an issue that needs to be addressed — the neighborhood is a walk to school neighborhood.
- Accessibility needs improvement.
- The French Hill neighborhood needs improved connectivity to downtown.
- The addition of more public spaces for gathering would be welcome.
- There are opportunities for housing investment to increase the stck of workforce housing in this neighborhood convenient to downtown employment.
- There are many historic resources in the neighborhood worthy of preservation.

Team recommendations:

- Improve sidewalks on Lock Street and the principal connecting streets
- Provide accessible pedestrian accommodation
- Provide bicycle accommodation
- Create a permanent system for on-street parking
- Improve pedestrian crossings and explore the potential for traffic calming to reduce travel speeds
- Improve the Foster Square area to create a gateway to the neighborhood and a gathering space
- Improve the area around the Dental Connection to connect with the playground, and provide an open space spine in the center of the neighborhood

View east to former St. Xavier church from Lock Street

Chris Kennedy & Gordon Leedy of PlanNH



View west down Lock Street

Why did Plan NH come to Nashua?

In June 2015, the City of Nashua submitted an application for a Plan NH Community Design Charrette focused on the French Hill neighborhood. “The opportunity for French Hill, specifically the Lock Street area, is for infrastructure improvements that would catalyze other private reinvestment in the neighborhood on a much larger scale. The proximity of high paying jobs, quality schools, spiritual & social institutions, and Downtown's commerce make it an ideal location for community revitalization and for it to have the trademarks of a place that appeals to a large group of young adults. The combination of affordable housing stock and a high degree of walkablity make the project area a "complete package" for current and future residents whose interests draw them to an urban, socially connected, downtown environment which is in limited supply in Southern New Hampshire.

Upon formal consideration, the application met three essential criteria:

1. The completed application identified a specific area of need and interest within the community, and the community was eager and ready to address the issues.
2. The application’s description of existing conditions in the community demonstrated that there was organized and committed community support already present in Nashua.
3. Nashua has demonstrated that it is a community that takes initiative and was ready and willing to follow through.

Formal approval was confirmed following a meeting between Plan NH representatives and Sarah Marchant and James Vayo of Nashua in early 2016. At that time they chose the June dates for the charrette.

Nashua's Proposal and Challenge to Plan NH

The challenges to Plan NH:

- How can Nashua incentivize and catalyze investment in the French Hill neighborhood, enhancing walkability, pedestrian and vehicular safety, and connectivity to Downtown;

- What type of planning and other pro-active actions might Nashua take with respect to the French Hill neighborhood in order to meet future needs of the community, promote its vitality and vibrancy, preserve its community atmosphere, and its cultural and historic values?

"We can begin by doing things at the local level, like planting community gardens or looking out for our neighbors. That is how change takes place in living systems, not from above but from within, from many local actions occurring simultaneously."

Grace Lee Boggs

Monument to General Foster

View at Cross & lock Street. Accessibility issues force the use of the street for access..

Salem Street Tot Lot

View south on Chandler Street

The Charrette Process & Overview

Nashua City Officials and residents gathered with the **Plan NH** Charrette team on Friday, June 24, 2016 in the meeting room above the Dental Connection to discuss the details of the City's vision with the Plan NH team. Design professionals on the team included three architects, two landscape architects, two engineers, a preservation planner, and a Plan NH staff member The critical piece that the Charrette Team lacked, which only the local residents could provide, was the intimate knowledge of the City and the vision for its future.

Local residents are the experts on the community — what makes sense, what history has brought forth, what will pass at the local board meetings — the design team relies on resident input and knowledge to develop viable suggestions and proposals.

Plan NH had been in Nashua for a charrette in 2003. While many of the recommendations from that event we implemented, a dozen years had passed and the City felt it might be worth another look to expand on the work done previously on the River Walk and the Railroad Square area.

After a walking tour of the study area, an introductory meeting was held with key City staff and neighborhood residents to inform the Plan NH team about the significant issues facing the City in the French Hill neighborhood.

Bob White, PlanNH & Paul Shea, resident

Two public "listening sessions" were held on Friday afternoon and evening.

The purpose of these listening sessions was to describe the challenge that the City had set out for the charrette team and to gather input from the community regarding thoughts and ideas they had about the neighborhood.

Citizens answered questions :

- What are the challenges in the neighborhood?
- What are the neighborhood's assets?
- What needs to be done?

Saturday was "roll up the sleeves day", when the charrette team reconvened, recapped, and prepared recommendations and supporting graphics for presentation to the Community in the afternoon.

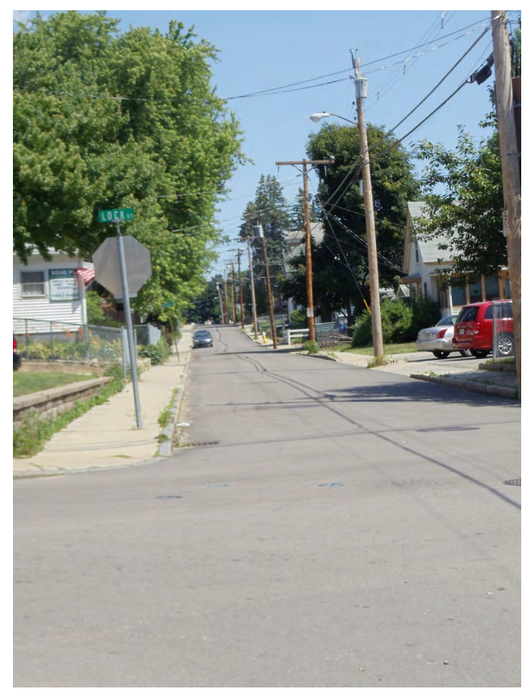
Context

The French Hill Neighborhood, bounded by Canal Street on the South, Main Street on the west, Summer Street on the north and the Nashua River on the east, is one of the oldest neighborhoods in the City. Lock Street gets its name from a barge canal that paralleled the Nashua River to the north of the Mills on Canal Street. The lock system for barge access to the Nashua River was located adjacent to Lock Street. The neighborhood provided convenient housing immediately adjacent to the mills for workers, many of whom were French Canadian immigrants.

Lock Street provides alternative access to Chandler Street from the west and north, and has a relatively high volume of cut through traffic from vehicles going to and from the large parking facilities on Chandler Street and Canal Street that serve employees of BAE Systems. Vehicle speeds are at times excessive, and safe pedestrian accommodation is lacking. Sidewalks are for the most part 4'—5' wide, with utility poles and signage creating impediments to handicap access as well as to winter maintenance.

Zoning for most of the study area is medium density residential, and surviving commercial uses are largely limited to the periphery of the study area adjacent to Canal Street, Railroad Square and Orange Street. There are notable exceptions to this, with several convenience stores serving the neighborhood, and the Dental Connection in it's historic building located at the center of the study are at Lock Street and Cross Street.

French Hill's history as one of the oldest neighborhoods in the City includes iconic buildings such as St. Xavier Church, visible from most of downtown, and in need of structural stabilization and preservation.



What we heard from Nashua

Residents at the afternoon listening session

Here is a summary of the discussions with City staff and residents in the Listening Sessions:

What is the City's Vision?

- ***Safety on the Streets***
  - Make sidewalks safe
  - Achieve Safe Traffic patterns and volumes
  - Complete Streets (more accessible for peds, bikes, etc)
- ***Improved infrastructure (Additional)***
  - Prioritize infrastructure repair needs
  - Better sewer infrastructure
  - Identify metrics for the City to achieve/measure
- ***Create Sense of Community***
  - Make defensible spaces to congregate
  - Find ways to congregate "get to know neighbors"
  - Build Community– Community Projects, Block party, Build comradery
  - Pride

Challenges/community concerns:

- Deficient sidewalks
- Sink holes in Streets
- Lock Street can act as "thru-way"
- 4-way stops needed
- Chandler street volume and flow
- No ADA accessible buildings/sidewalks
- Varied traffic (when police are/aren't around)
- Traffic from BAE
- Street Crossings challenging
- Few businesses & stores so people go elsewhere
- Buildings and yards not maintained
- Lacking signage for parks
- High rental/transient population,
- Drainage & stormwater management

Opportunities

- "Safe Walk to school" Currently underutilized but has potential
- SO MANY WALKERS
- Attention to Lock Street to make improvements (visibility, safety, etc.)
- Pedestrian "walk sign to cross"
- Connectivity to downtown
- Diversity = Potential (income, age and culture)
- Parks: Foster's monument/Playground/near Greely Park & Riverwalk
- Public Art
- NRPC is working on an APP to help people locate parks (could use once developed)

A closer look at access in French Hill

- French Hill is a “Walk to School” neighborhood., as a result, many elementary school children walk to school.
- The Lock Street Corridor is a principal access for employees of BAE Systems.
- Sidewalks lack accommodations for accessibility (curb ramps, grades, clearance).
- Winter maintenance is hampered because of utility pole conflicts and clearance for equipment.
- Pedestrians are forced to use the roadway for access.
- There are not enough adequately marked crosswalks.
- School children waiting for the bus do not have a safe place to wait.

Corner of Tolles & Lock Street

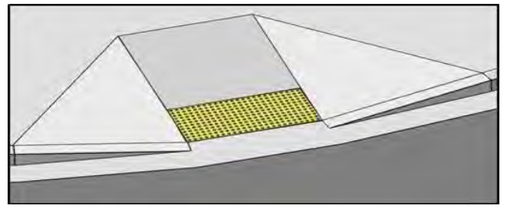
Corner of Orange & Lock Street looking west

Pedestrian considerations

During listening sessions, community members repeatedly identified poor sidewalks as a safety and mobility issue. Rebuilding sidewalks with appropriate widths, ADA accommodation and appropriate design features is a high priority.

According to ADA requirements, a curb ramp is intended to provide an accessible route that people with disabilities can use to transition between a roadway and a curbed sidewalk.

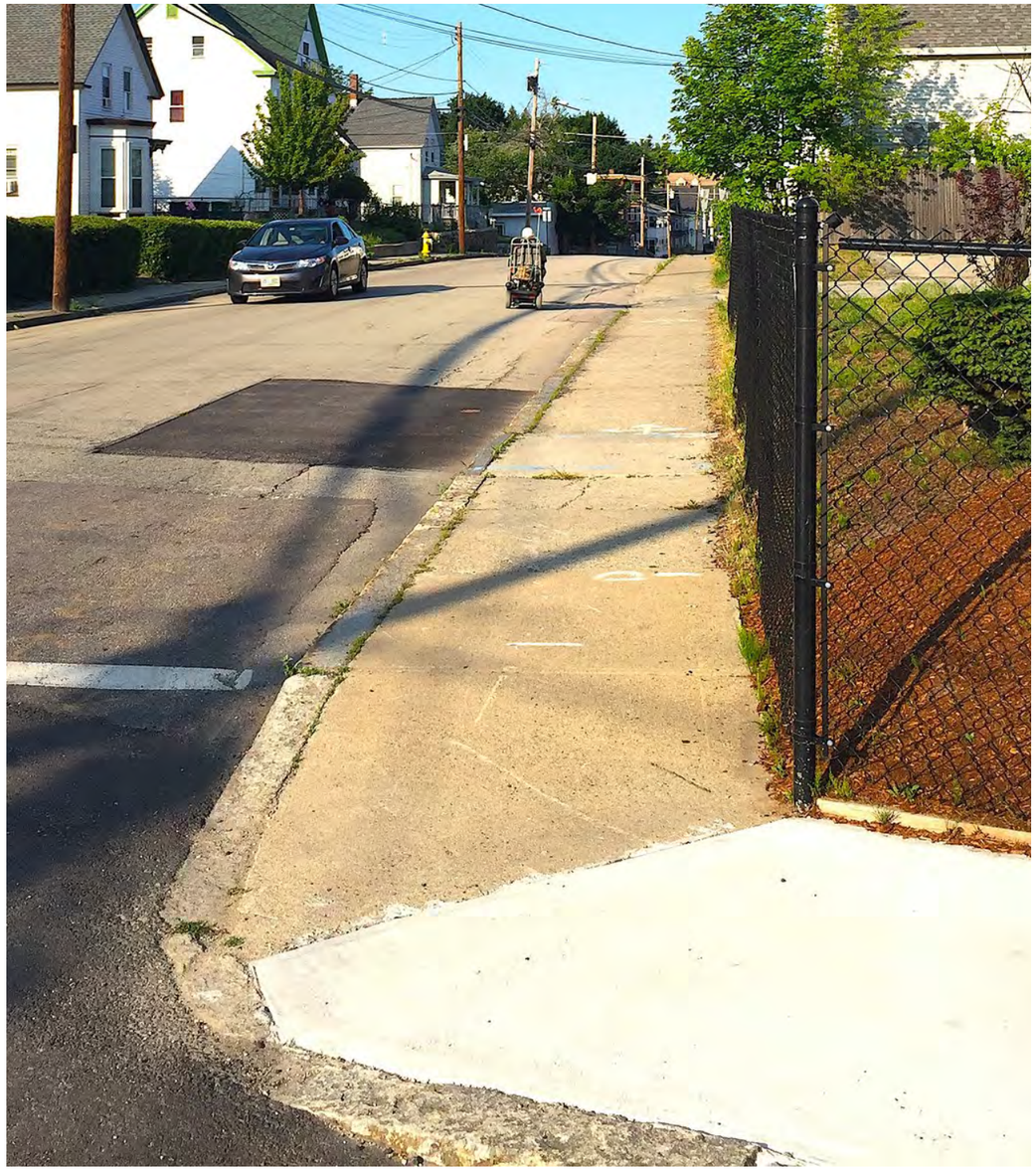
These ramps need to include a detectable warning surface (i.e., distinctive surface pattern of domes that alert people with vision impairments of their approach to street crossings and hazardous drop-offs).



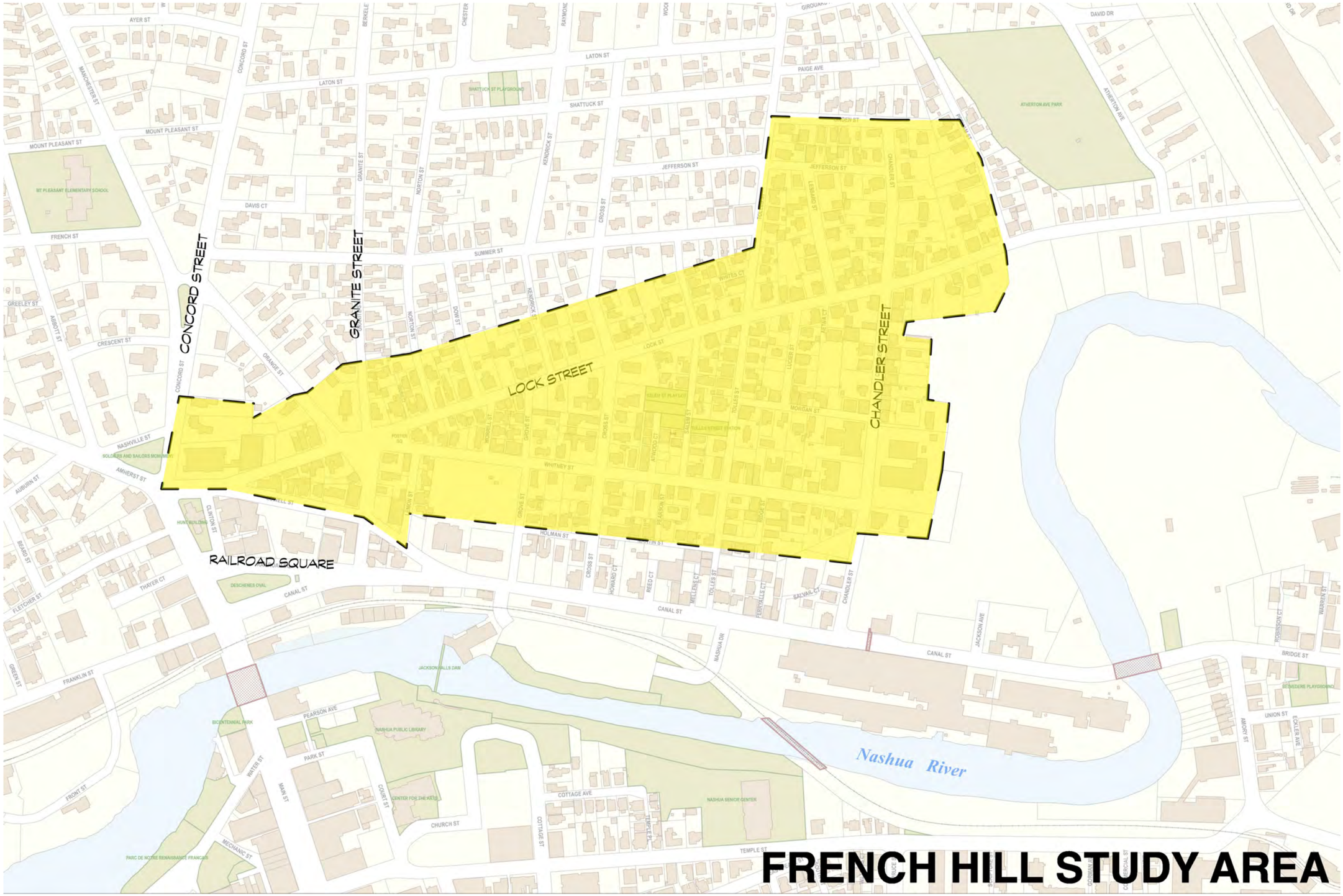
U.S. Access Board: Detectable Warnings on Curb Ramps

Consideration should be given to upgrading the crosswalks and curb ramps to ADA standards.

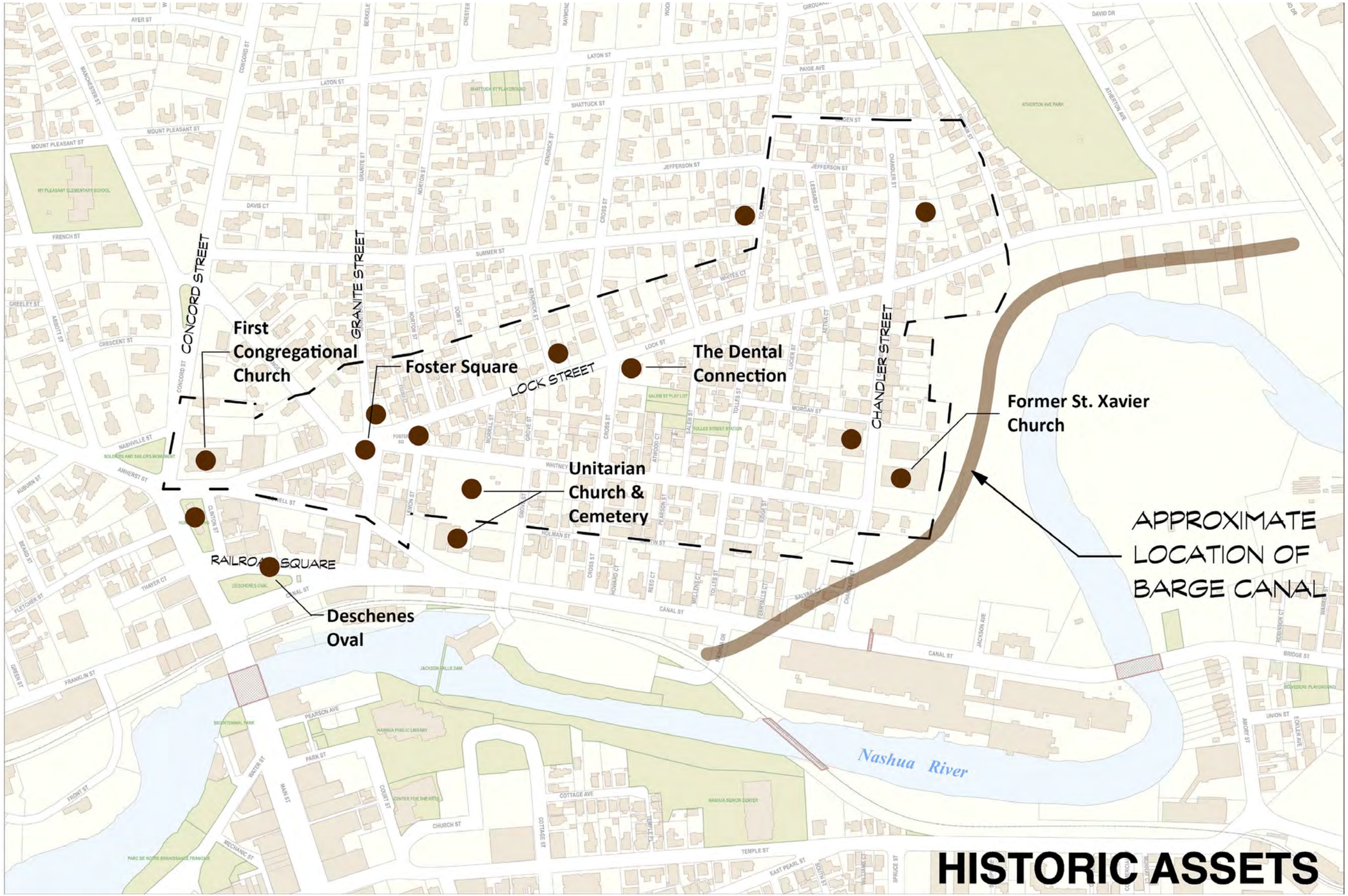
Most intersections in the study area provide inadequate accessibility for people with mobility issues. Safe accessibility for all users to pedestrian facilities that are maintained throughout the year should be a priority in the French Hill neighborhood.

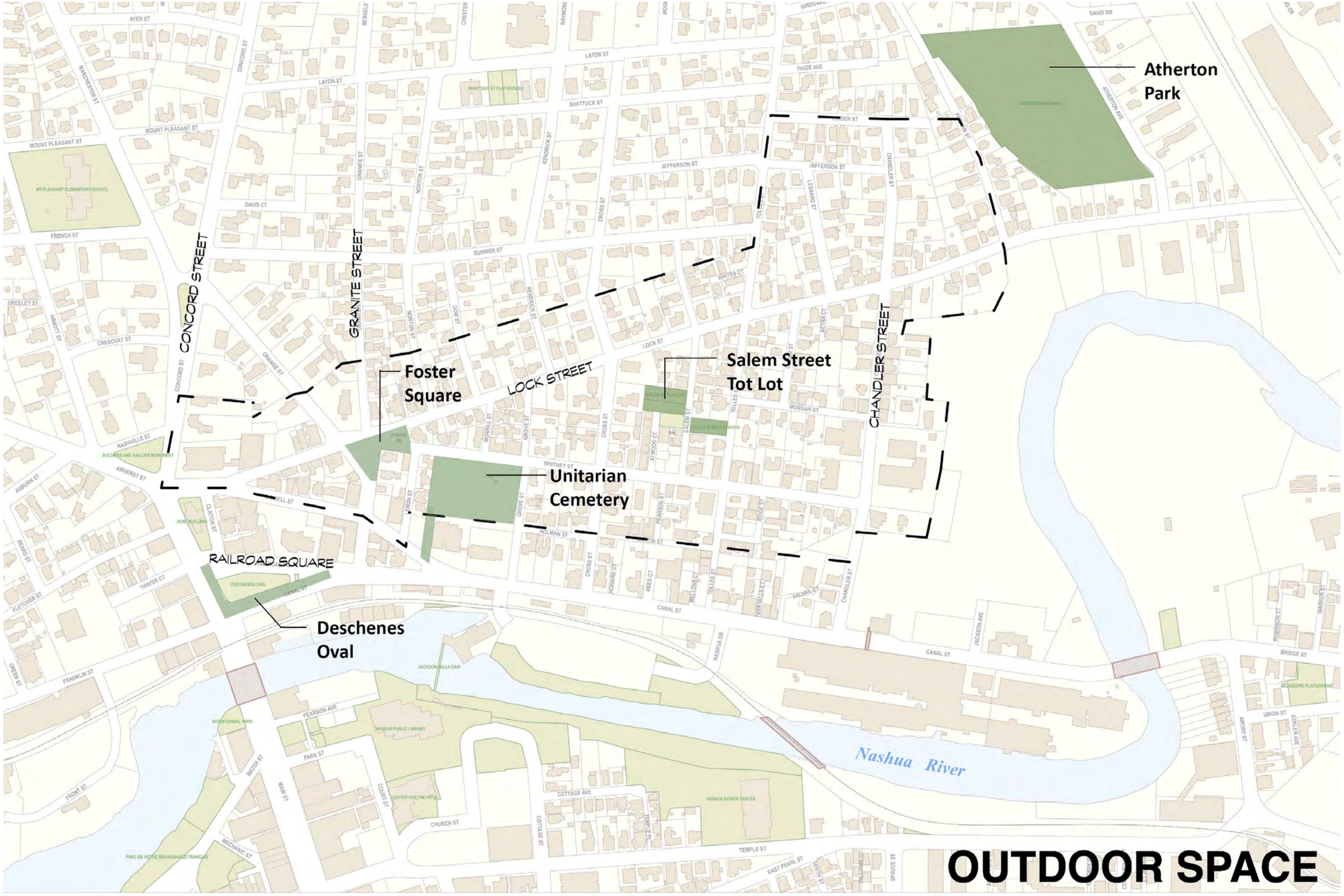


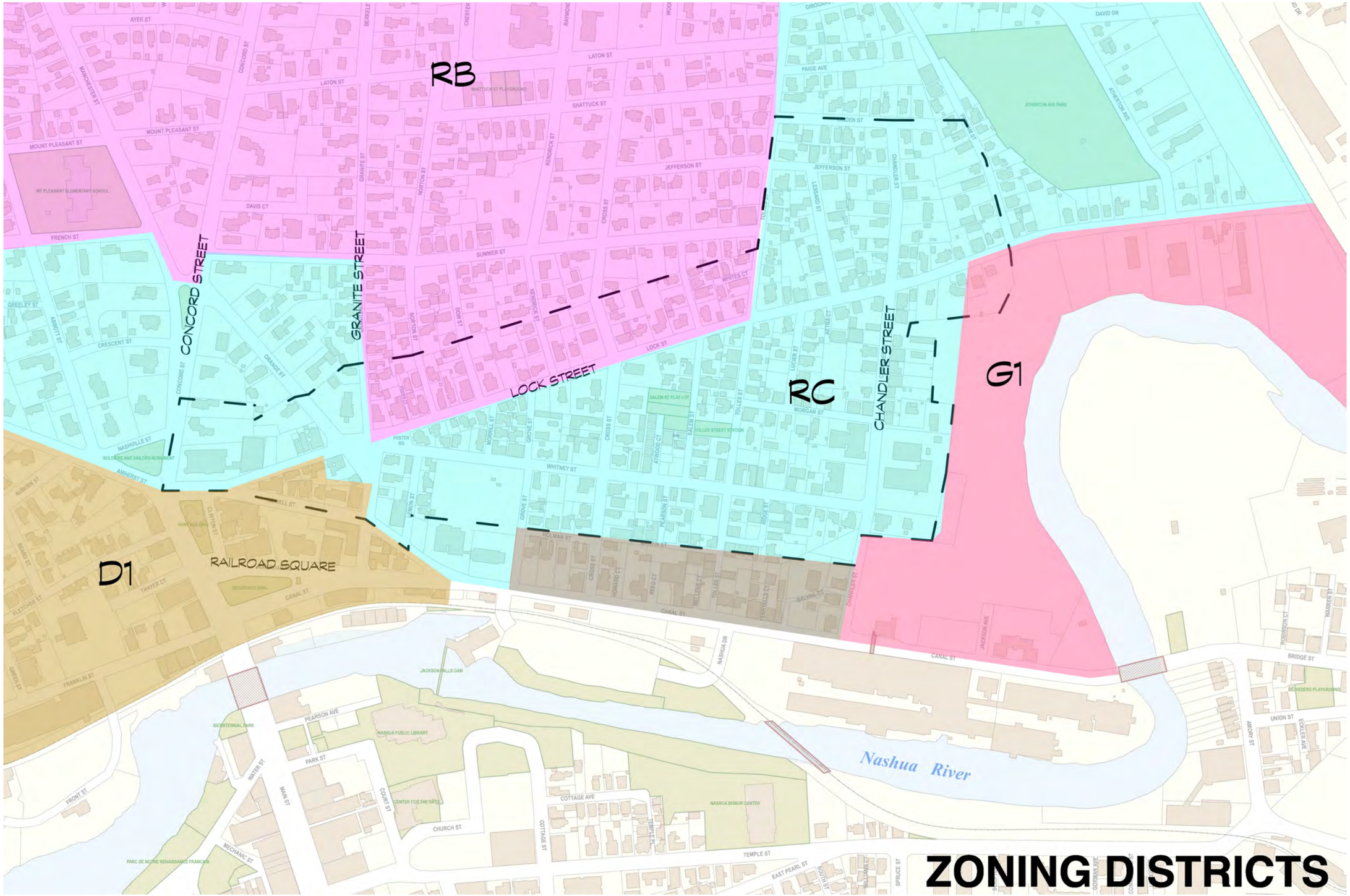
Lock Street looking east from Cross Street

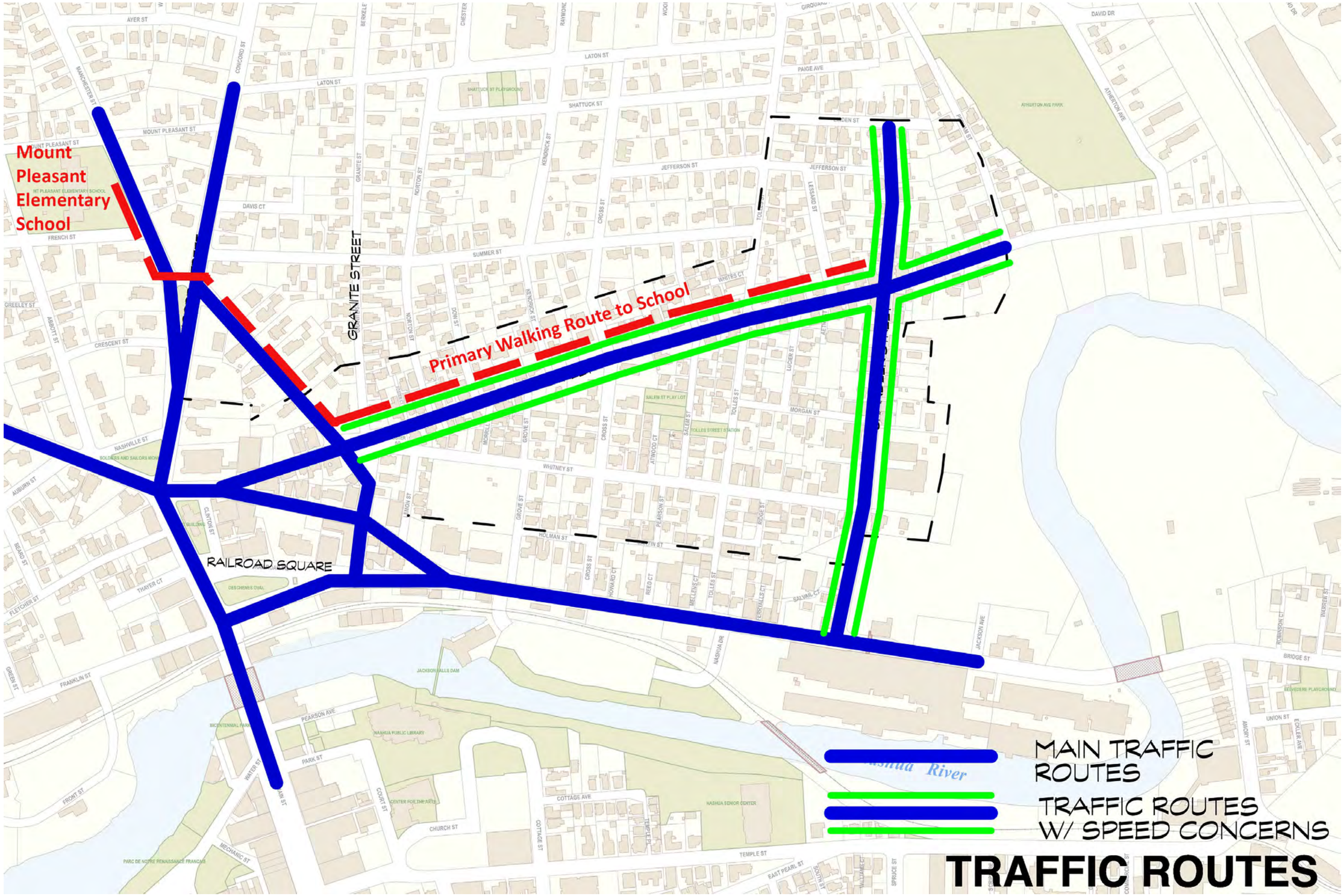


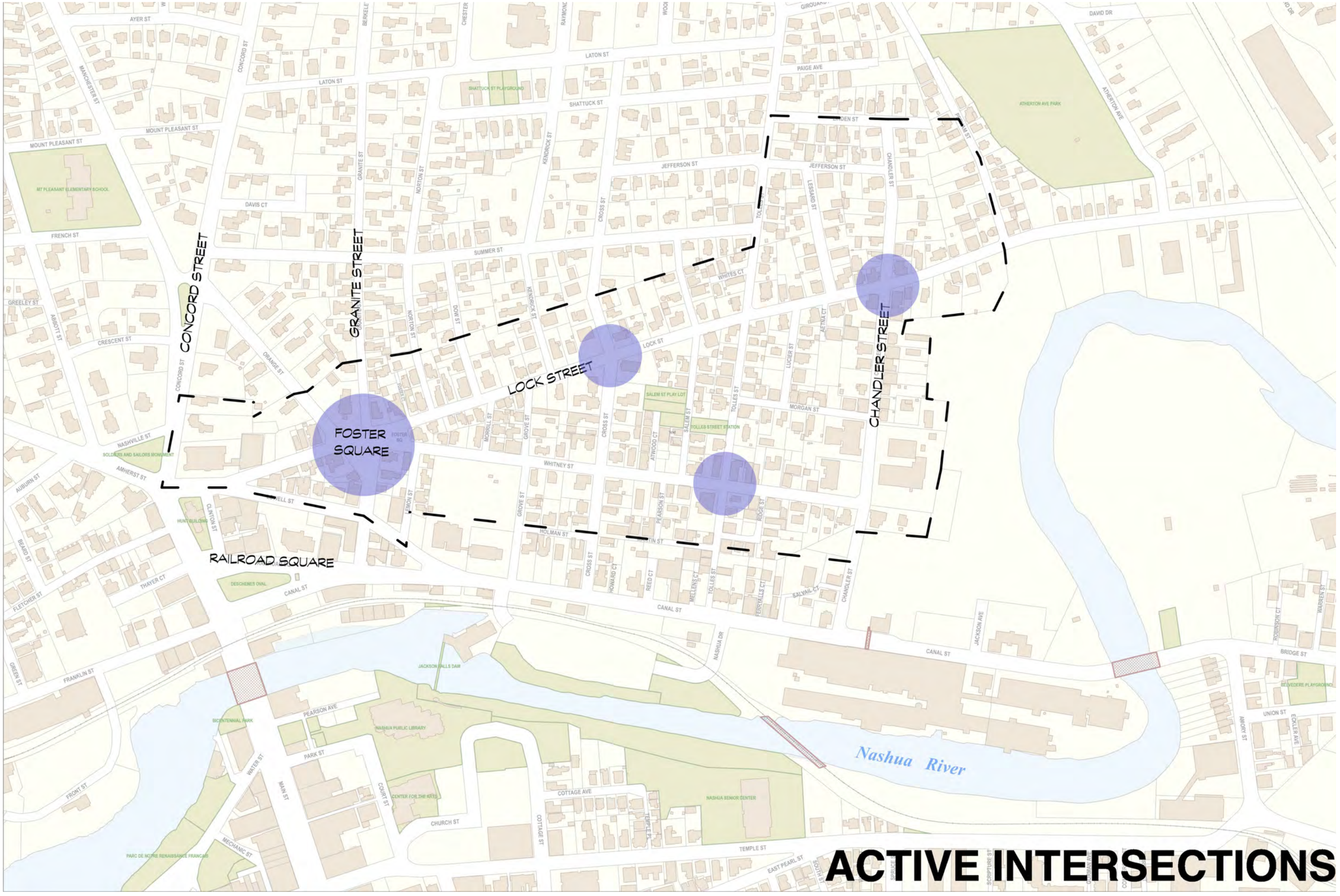
FRENCH HILL STUDY AREA


HISTORIC ASSETS
First Congregational Church
Foster Square
The Dental Connection
Former St. Xavier Church
Unitarian Church & Cemetery
RAILROAD SQUARE
Deschenes Oval
APPROXIMATE LOCATION OF BARGE CANAL
CONCORD STREET
GRANITE STREET
LOCK STREET
CHANDLER STREET
Nashua River


Atherton Park
Salem Street Tot Lot
Foster Square
Unitarian Cemetery
Deschenes Oval
CONCORD STREET
GRANITE STREET
LOCK STREET
CHANDLER STREET
RAILROAD SQUARE
Nashua River
OUTDOOR SPACE

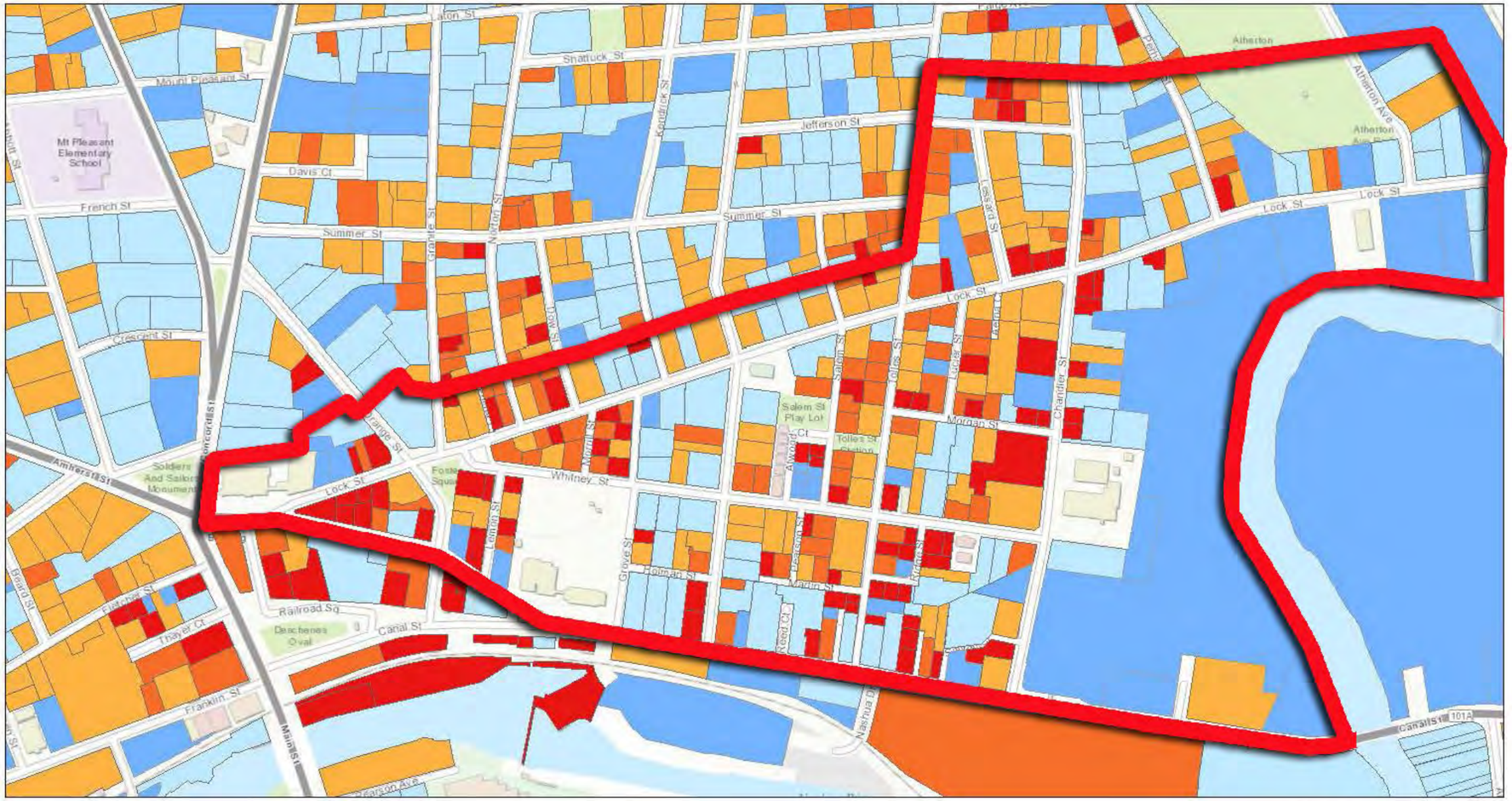

RB
RC
G1
D1
CONCORD STREET
GRANITE STREET
LOCK STREET
CHANDLER STREET
RAILROAD SQUARE
Nashua River
ZONING DISTRICTS


Mount Pleasant Elementary School
Primary Walking Route to School
GRANITE STREET
RAILROAD SQUARE
MAIN TRAFFIC ROUTES
TRAFFIC ROUTES W/ SPEED CONCERNS
TRAFFIC ROUTES



ACTIVE INTERSECTIONS

Value Per Acre Map



October 13, 2016

Value Per Acre

- < -0.50 Std. Dev.
- -0.50 - 0.50 Std. Dev.
- 0.50 - 1.5 Std. Dev.
- 1.5 - 2.5 Std. Dev.
- > 2.5 Std. Dev.

1:4,514

0 0.0425 0.085 0.17 mi

0 0.075 0.15 0.3 km

Sources: Esri, HERE, DeLorme, Intermap, increment P Corp., GEBCO, USGS, FAO, NPS, NRCAN, GeoBase, IGN, Kadaster NL, Ordnance Survey, Esri Japan, METI, Esri China (Hong Kong), swisstopo, MapmyIndia, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS

Interestingly, this graphic illustrates the taxable value per acre of the French Hill neighborhood and surrounding areas . The more blue the color, the lower vthe valeue per acre. The redder or yellower the color, the higher the value. This illustrates that the French Hill neighborhood contributes more to the tax base than ther adjacent areas, and is worthy of investment by the City.

Lock Street ROW Reconstruction Alternative 1

Alternative 1

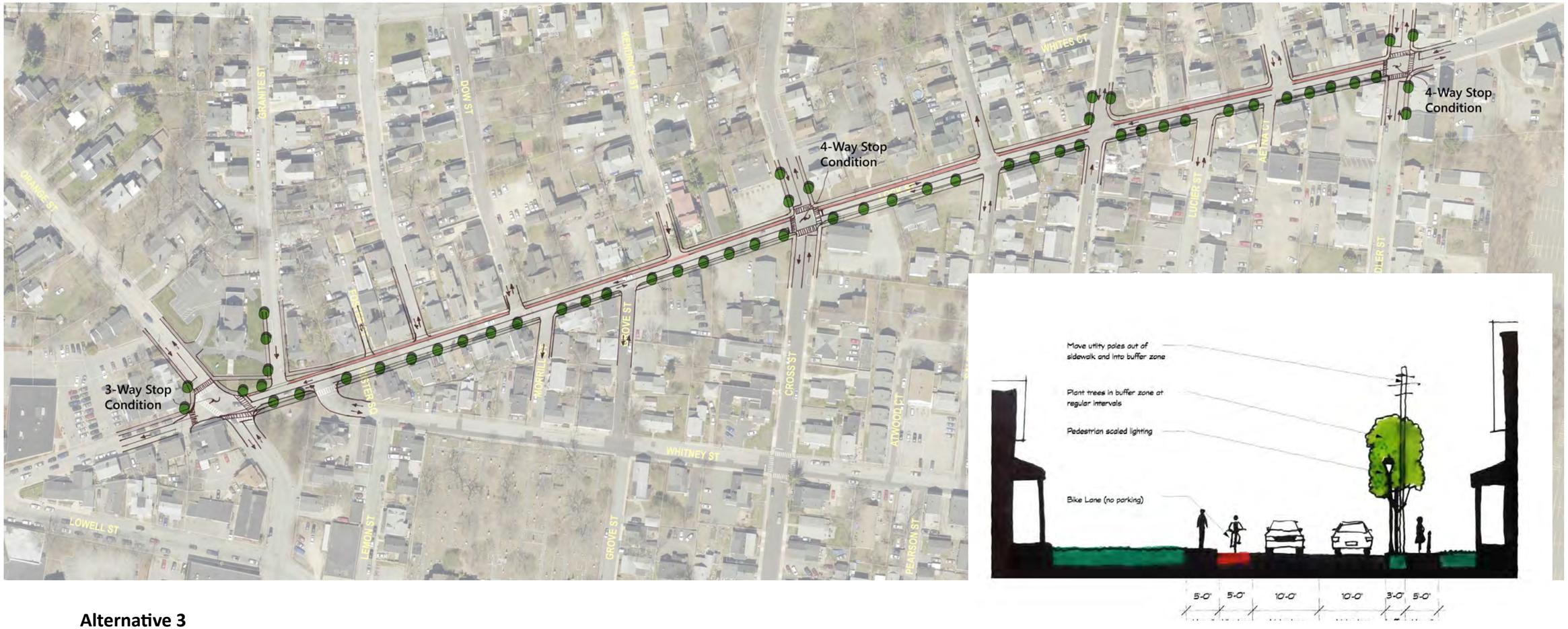
Lock Street could be improved by eliminating on-street parking, and increasing the width of sidewalks to 4' clear. Street trees could be planted along the southerly side of the roadway where there are no overhead utilities. Three and four way stop conditions should be established at Orange Street, Cross Street and Chandler Street. Raised intersections (speed tables) should be considered at these locations.

Lock Street ROW Reconstruction Alternative 2

Alternative 2

Similar to Alternative 1, but preserves some on-street parking on ne side of Lock Street. Sidewalks are improved and the width of sidewalks is increased to 4' clear. Utilities are moved to a landscape buffer, or verge adjacent to the travel lane. Street trees could be planted along the southerly side of the roadway where there are no overhead utilities. Three and four way stop conditions should be established at Orange Street, Cross Street and Chandler Street. Raised intersections (speed tables) should be considered at these locations.

Lock Street ROW Reconstruction Alternative 3



Alternative 3

Eliminates on-street parking and provides a dedicated bicycle lane on one side of the street. Street trees could be planted along the southerly side of the roadway where there are no overhead utilities. Three and four way stop conditions should be established at Orange Street, Cross Street and Chandler Street. Raised intersections (speed tables) should be considered at these locations.

Cross Street/Lock Street Traffic Calming Improvements

Alternative 1

A simple solution to creating a "center" to the neighborhood would be to create a speed table and enhanced intersection at Cross Street and Lock Street.

This improvement, along with sidewalk and streetscape improvements in front of the convenience store could provide a safe place for school children to wait for the bus, provide traffic calming, and would make the Dental Connection building a focal point of the neighborhood.

The Dental Connection building, formerly the first synagogue in Nashua, has a meeting space on the second floor that could serve as a central meeting place.

Building and accessibility improvements through a public private partnership could be considered to make this more of a community asset.

Cross Street/Lock Street Traffic Calming Improvements

Alternative 2

A more aggressive plan for this property provides an explicit connection to the Salem Street Tot Lot and the small park to the southeast. This would create an open space spine through the neighborhood, with important community features accessible from it.

Creating pedestrian connections through the neighborhood will provide additional opportunities for neighborhood interaction, more defensible space and a more coherent sense of community.

Foster Square Traffic Calming & Neighborhood Park Improvements

Alternative 1

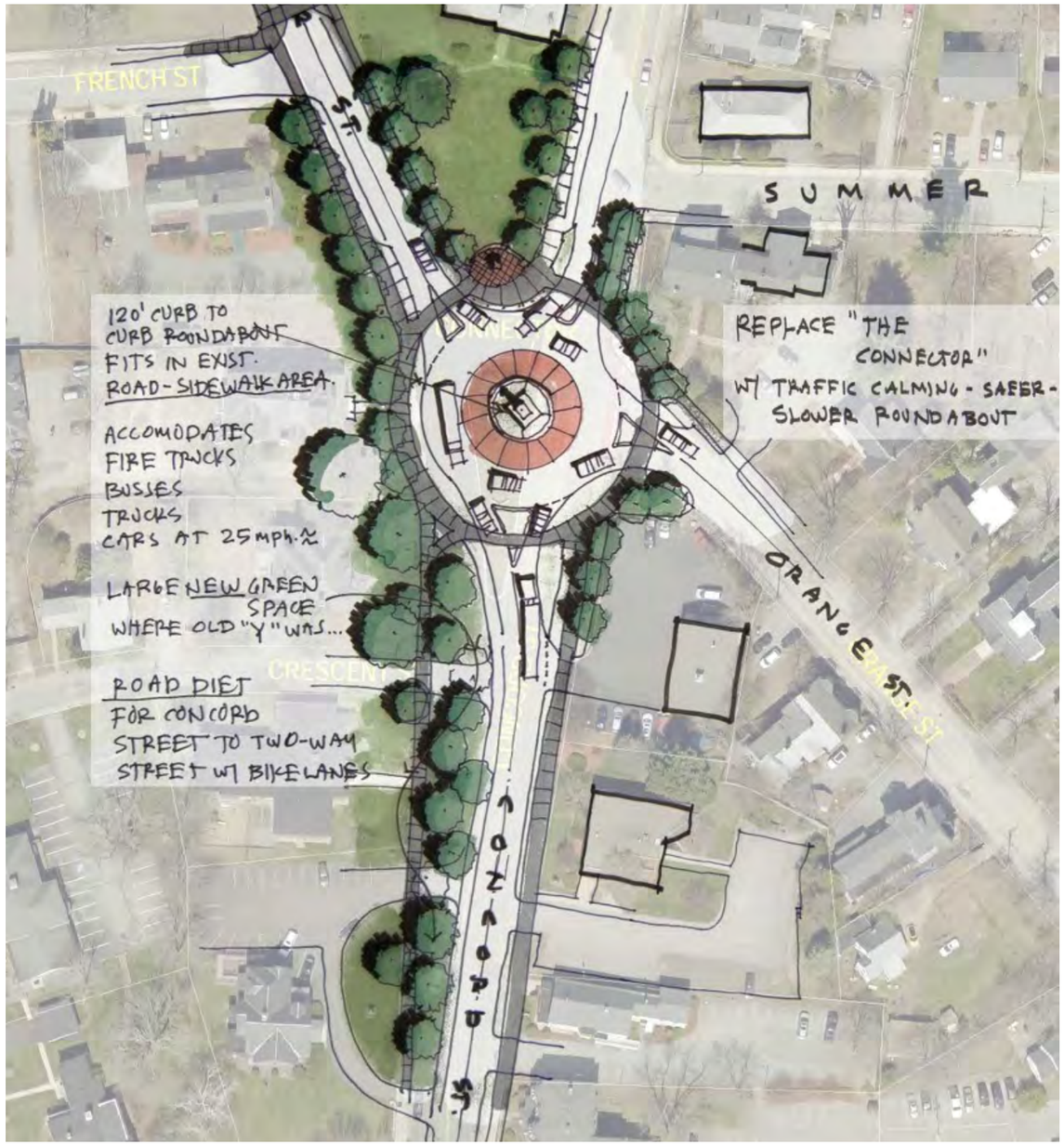
This concept relocates Orange Street to the east, and moves the statue and plaza toward the west. This creates a "chicane" in the street system, discouraging cut-through traffic on Orange Street and calming traffic.

Foster Square Traffic Calming & Neighborhood Park Improvements

Alternative 2

Alternative 2 creates a one-way loop around an enhanced plaza area. The larger consolidated open space in the center of the loop provides anew highly visible location for the Foster statue, as well as space for a small dog park. This alternative would discouraging cut-through traffic on Orange Street and Lock Street, and would create a n attractive gateway to the neighborhood.

Manchester & Concord Streets Traffic Calming & Pedestrian Improvements



While strictly speaking, this intersection is not in the study area, The team observed traffic conflicts and pedestrian safety issues at this intersection. The existing intersection geometry creates uncertainty as to who has the right of way, and pedestrian safety at this important location is compromised. As a walking route for elementary school children, the Team felt it was important to point out the deficiencies in the intersection, and offer one potential solution.

This concept recommends a round about with Concord Street, Manchester Street and Orange Street as the four legs, with improved pedestrian ways through the area.

Conclusions & Recommendations

- Amend the City's ordinances to grant enforcement of building codes and nuisance ordinance to allow sanctions on property owners. This will assist in regulating absentee landlords.
- Reconstruct Lock Street right of way to provide wider sidewalk, compliant with ADA requirements, and appropriate for winter maintenance.
- Provide safe and adequate pedestrian crossings. Consider implementing traffic calming measures.
- Consider implementing a street tree program to "Green" the neighborhood.
- Pursue grant funding to assist the Coptic Church in stabilizing and preserving St. Xavier Church.
- Consider improving the Salem Street Tot Lot to form an open space thread through the neighborhood.
- Consider improvements at Foster Square to reduce cut-through traffic and reduce travel speeds, as well as create a gateway to the neighborhood.
- Consider improvements at Concord Street and Manchester Street to improve traffic and pedestrian safety.