

A New American Dream: *Change Is Not So Bad*



A Safe, Affordable Home:
The Foundation of Opportunity

We are a large group of adults – all in our 20's or 30's, who live in Connecticut or would under different conditions – who want Connecticut to let a New American Dream emerge. Older generations can continue living their American Dream – the homes and communities that previous generations fashioned for themselves still exist. But we need more choices.

For a few decades, homeownership was easier and families used their home to build wealth, people worked decades for the same employer, and there was strong desire to live in suburban car-oriented settings. But the world has changed, and we need communities that help us change with it. Many of us would love to own homes, but we've seen the last few years that homeownership isn't the safe bet it used to be, and tightening credit means many of us can't get a mortgage – affordable rental housing can help us save up for homeownership. In our interconnected and highly-specialized economy, pursuing jobs often demands relocation – affordable rental housing allows us to try out a place before committing to homeownership.

As we start our careers, not earning high salaries, our limited choices in Connecticut (currently) include: expensive homes or apartments we can't afford to buy or rent; neighborhoods with crime and blight that no one should have to experience; living far from our work or social connections; or living with our parents far too long. These choices often lack the sense of community and interesting things to do that other states have.

Whether apartments, condos, or smaller starter homes, many of us like to live in more densely-populated settings where everything we need is nearby, allowing us to drive less and spend more time working or living. And we know that densely populated places offer the customer base for businesses, transit and cultural opportunities we value.

We have lost a higher percentage of our 25-34-year-old population since 1990 than any states but Maine and New Hampshire. As we've deliberated on what would make us and our peers excited to live in Connecticut instead of elsewhere, we realized that what young adults want is compatible with what most people want – a decent place to live that we can afford, aesthetically-pleasing surroundings, interesting things to do and a sense of community. So we're not here to make demands – we're offering ideas and our willingness to help. What we want most is to be actively involved in creating communities we can all be excited about. The work of making Connecticut attractive to young adults isn't just about us, it will also make Connecticut more competitive, attract businesses and jobs, improve the economy, relieve poverty, help the environment and build a sense of pride and community.

We want the American Dream, too – we just see a different one.

These proposals were crafted by _____ adults in their 20s and 30s, convened by the Partnership for Strong Communities, a leader in policy development, advocacy and research in Connecticut that shapes solutions to end homelessness, develop healthy neighborhoods and to create more affordable housing opportunities for workers, young professionals and families.

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Perceptions/Direction

Positive

Connecticut has many strengths, that's why we live here.

- While large enough to contain many opportunities, our cities are not overwhelming.
- Connecticut is small enough for an individual to make a difference, whether civic involvement to improve the community, or breaking into a company or profession.
- Even when living in CT's cities, natural places are still nearby.
- Parks and historic buildings are a big asset.

Negative

But, Connecticut needs a shift in mindset.

- Connecticut has allowed negative thinking to become engrained. People say things can't be done because everyone says things can't be done.
- Connecticut is highly segregated by race and income/wealth. This is a significant economic and ethical problem for the state.
- Creativity seems undervalued in many settings.

For decades Connecticut allowed its cities to decline, so they face significant needs without enough tax base to serve residents, businesses and students effectively. When quality of life factors deteriorate, people and businesses move to other places. Without a strong tax base, remaining city taxpayers shoulder a higher tax burden, causing even more pressure to move to lower-tax towns.

These pressures must be reversed to create the vibrant cities many younger people look for.

State and municipal policies can:

- More clearly focus on sparking market demand through integrated placemaking strategies.
- Actively encourage socioeconomic mixing in our cities.
- More/different state investment in cities to make these goals possible.

Housing

Affordable, decent, convenient, neighborly.

- Most decent housing in Connecticut we can't afford. And we don't get enough value for what we spend on housing.
- Many of the young people that leave Connecticut go to high-rent places like New York and Boston – because if they're going to pay high rent anyway, they may as well get nightlife, culture, shopping, interesting places and better public transit for their money.
- The majority of housing that is lower-priced or in compact settings is in neighborhoods with blight and crime, and lacking access to groceries, transit and activities.
- Rental housing is sometimes stigmatized, but it can offer flexibility to try a new place before buying a home. People won't come to CT and jump into ownership right away.
- Connecticut has great historic architecture, but in many urban neighborhoods it is not well-maintained.
- We often want more connection to the people around us. Community rooms, courtyards, lobbies and other design features can promote interaction between neighbors and foster a sense of community. Co-op housing can lower the rent by having neighbors work together to manage and maintain buildings and grounds – while getting to know each other better.

Neighborhoods

Like most people, we like neighborhoods with cohesion and sense of identity.

- Use signage to label neighborhoods and give them unique character.
- In some neighborhoods, immigrant communities can be highlighted and strengthened to give a unique sense of place.
- In some areas, downtown energy isn't spilling into surrounding neighborhoods. Make walkable connections between them. Invest in these nearby neighborhoods to address crime, poverty and blight – at least past the tipping-point where people with choices will choose to live there.
- "Young professionals" don't only move into cities from elsewhere. Many young people who have grown up in Connecticut's cities – with organization and support – can be a source of vitality and solutions that strengthen our neighborhoods.

Quality of Life

The basics, done well.

- Housing should be mixed with places to get what we need, so a short walk brings us to shopping, entertainment, eating, socializing, work, transit. It's convenient and interesting, and uses less expensive and polluting gasoline.
- In town centers and urban downtowns, make it easy and enjoyable to walk around, with pleasing landscaping and benches; conveniently-placed parking garages that conserve space; consciously-planned and varied retail at ground level; free public restrooms; orderly auto traffic through good signals, signage and crosswalks; attractive pocket parks; and outdoor maps to find one's way around.
- More grocery stores in the cities. Decent, affordable groceries.
- Community gardens, farmers markets and urban farms (even using vacant lots) can improve nutrition, lower food costs, support local farmers and build community.
- Parks, cafes and other places to hang out, read a book, see friends – Including places that are open evenings and weekends.
- A vibrant downtown will have pleasant surprises. Enough going on that when you're there, you don't know what you'll bump into.
- More festivals, parties, performances in public or low-cost venues. There needs to be fun things to do, even if one can't afford an expensive ticket to a show.
- Even when there are cool activities happening, they're not easy to discover. More coordinated marketing, and a well-organized one-stop website to find what's going on, could infuse downtowns with more concert goers, art lovers, sports fans, diners and shoppers.
- Many people our age care deeply about the environment – the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation will be felt in our lifetimes. In our communities we want energy efficiency and renewable energy; recycling bins in public places; composting by restaurants and residents; and thoughtful management of garbage, sewage and other waste. We want a smaller carbon footprint.

Aesthetics

The look and feel of a place makes or breaks it, but is too often forgotten.

CT's cities need to be more interesting.

- Use large and small sculptures, murals and other artistic touches to enliven streetscapes.
- *Sweat The Small Stuff*: signage, streetlamps, bike racks, trash cans, sidewalks, landscaping. Aesthetic mindfulness on these relatively inexpensive items makes places interesting. When these items are thoughtfully-designed and well-maintained, a place appears cared-about, which attracts residents, businesses and investment. Instead of purchasing these items mass-produced, artists could be hired to design them, and volunteers can help make and install them.
- Support and strengthen university/college art programs and art museums, so they can increase their work in neighborhoods and downtowns to boost attractiveness of public spaces.
- Connecticut can attract more artists and support the artists already here: affordable artist housing/studios; tax breaks to start galleries, design firms, video production studios and other art-related businesses.
- Where retail space is vacant, use temporary "pop up" stores or storefront art installations to make the area more attractive to potential residents, businesses and investors. Help and/or pressure retail owners to sell vacant property, rent it at low cost, or lend it for temporary uses to maintain occupancy at all times.

Getting Around

Gas is expensive and ruining the planet. We'd rather not drive everywhere.

- The New Haven-Springfield rail line and Hartford-New Britain Busway are very exciting. Connecticut really needs these, and we need to catch up with other states on this front.
- Local buses can be infrequent, making them hard to use at off-peak times. Bus routes are often organized in a wheel-spoke pattern based on a downtown hub, instead of connecting places directly, requiring time-wasting transfers.
- Streetcars would be helpful and add character.
- Safe bike lanes and ample bicycle racks will help people bike instead of drive.
- Walking can be encouraged with good design and landscaping, and filling in gaps between buildings. One critical measure of vibrancy is how many people we see out walking.

Workplaces

Boring, isolated treadmills – no thanks.

- Employers that locate in cities or town centers will have an easier time recruiting younger workers, who enjoy nearby networking opportunities and things to do after work than are possible in more isolated suburban office parks. With tax incentives or other economic development programs, governments can further encourage employers to locate in denser, mixed-use places.
- Instead of working for an employer, many young people will be self-employed or will start up new businesses. These innovators will benefit from more flexible choices in workspace: incubators (co-working, collaborative workspaces) where entrepreneurs rent work space with office equipment, meeting rooms and support staff included; telecommuting from home or being highly mobile; mixed live/work spaces.
- Enhanced internet access can give a city a competitive edge – including free public wifi throughout a downtown, or advanced high-speed internet to support the cutting edge.

We Want To Be Involved

Governments, companies and civic organizations don't always show young adults the best door to walk through to find a platform for making a difference. We just want to be involved, and help create the great communities we all want.

- During recession when governments are broke, some of the placemaking work we've described can be done by volunteers, who just need permission and a little organizing by municipalities or organizations.
- Local planning and land use is so critical to the health of our communities, but it sometimes makes little sense to the layperson (e.g. younger adults). Some municipalities have held public workshops where planners collaborate with citizens plan future development and land use – more cities, towns and state agencies should adopt this approach in order to harness energy and ideas.
- Governments and organizations can use social media to strengthen communication with constituents.
- Bristol, CT and other smart cities have used online tools and public outreach to "crowdsource" ideas for housing, businesses and public spaces that best meet citizens' needs and wishes. As hundreds or thousands of residents offer and react to proposals, many more creative solutions emerge than would be generated by just a handful of planners and zoning commissioners.
- We can all promote integrated and transparent collaboration between municipal entities, planners, chambers of commerce and businesses, civic organizations, social service agencies, churches and schools. When these entities' work and interactions are organized and well-articulated, people can more easily know where to get their needs met, how to be involved in local decision-making, and where to pitch in to help the community.

We, the undersigned,
all young adults in our 20's and 30's,
agree with the concepts in this document,
and believe Connecticut and its communities would be
well-served by following these recommendations.

Your name here?

We'll list your name, town where you live and your age.

The goal is over 200 signers.

Please add your name, so Connecticut's policymakers,
developers, businesses and the general public understand
the value of addressing your needs and concerns.