



The Research Bureau

Measuring Downtown Worcester's "Curb Appeal:" ComNET Results

Report 08-09

December 12, 2008

BACKGROUND

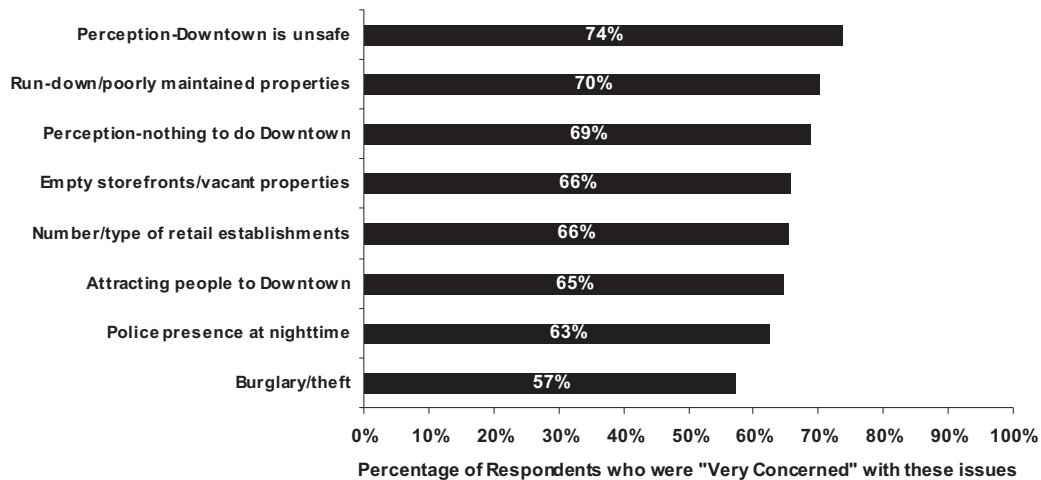
This report complements The Research Bureau's recently-released report (#08-08), "What's Up with Downtown Worcester?: Prospects for Revitalization." In that study, the Bureau focused on the many successfully-completed projects in the past decade that have greatly enhanced downtown. These include Union Station, the Hilton Garden Inn, the Route 146 Connector, the Mass College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, the Hanover Theatre, and Gateway Park. The report also discussed proposed and partially-completed projects including CitySquare, Worcester Common, and Federal Square, and some of the challenges to their completion. One of those challenges is what we have termed downtown Worcester's lack of "curb appeal." This can include poorly-maintained buildings, old signs, broken sidewalks, and litter. The purpose of this report is to document those problems and remedy them to increase the "curb appeal" of Worcester's downtown.

INTRODUCTION

In September 2006, Worcester's City Manager tried to form a downtown neighborhood association. The goal was to provide a forum for all those who live and work downtown to discuss a broad range of issues including public safety, economic development, and the physical condition of downtown, and to formulate strategies – both short term and long term – for addressing problems identified. In conjunction with this effort, the City Manager asked The Research Bureau to conduct an online survey of those who live, work, and own property downtown to solicit their views on the key issues affecting the vitality of downtown Worcester.

The biggest concerns of the 288 survey respondents (70% of whom worked downtown and 22% attended school downtown) were a perceived lack of public safety and the poor condition of downtown properties. **Chart 1** indicates the top 8 issues of concern to the respondents.

Chart 1: Top 8 Issues of Concern About Downtown



The group's discussion of the survey findings did not result in any sustained effort by those who frequent downtown to address these problems. Although the response a couple years ago was disappointing, The Research Bureau decided to document the specific location of problem properties and other physical conditions and determine where responsibility rests for addressing them.

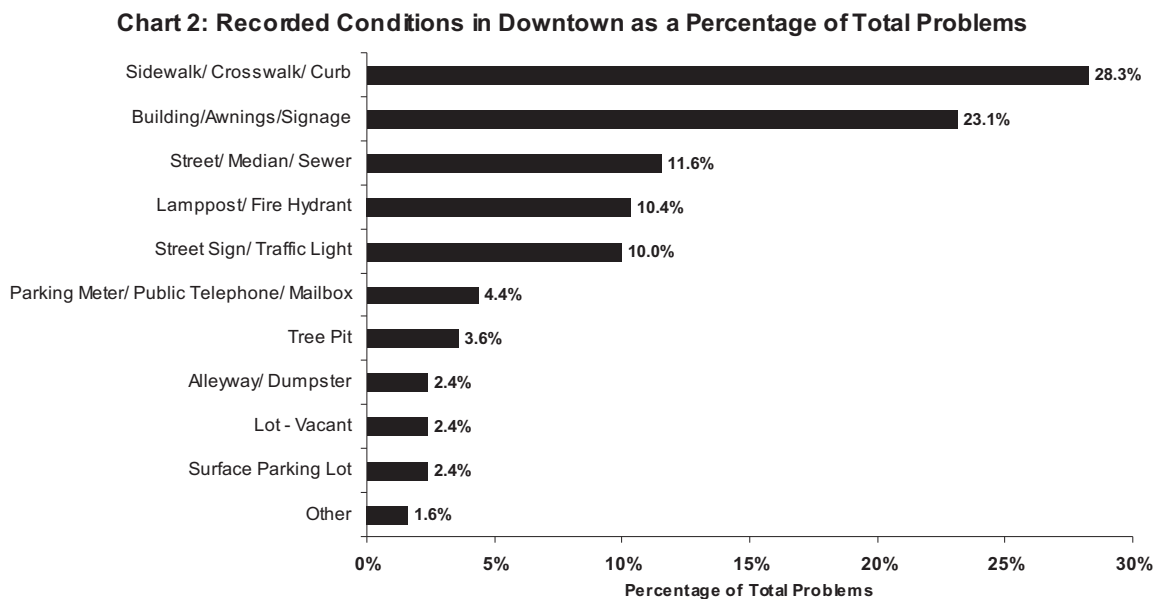
METHOD

In October 2008, The Research Bureau conducted two ComNET (Computerized Neighborhood Environment Tracking) surveys of downtown. This is the tool that the Bureau has used in 13 other neighborhoods since 2001. ComNET is a systematic process that uses handheld computers and digital cameras to record the exact location of physical problems. Since the start of the program, more than 13,000 problems have been identified in these neighborhoods. Once problems are identified, they are referred to the appropriate agency for resolution. During the next neighborhood survey, they are tracked to determine if they still exist. Using this process, we have found that about 70% of previously recorded problems citywide have been resolved.

The Research Bureau adapted the neighborhood ComNET survey to the downtown area. Using very precise and detailed Research Bureau-prepared maps of the area, volunteer teams, consisting of representatives from downtown businesses and students from the College of the Holy Cross and South High Community School, walked prescribed routes and recorded the physical problems they came across, choosing from a drop-down menu of downtown-related physical conditions.

RESULTS

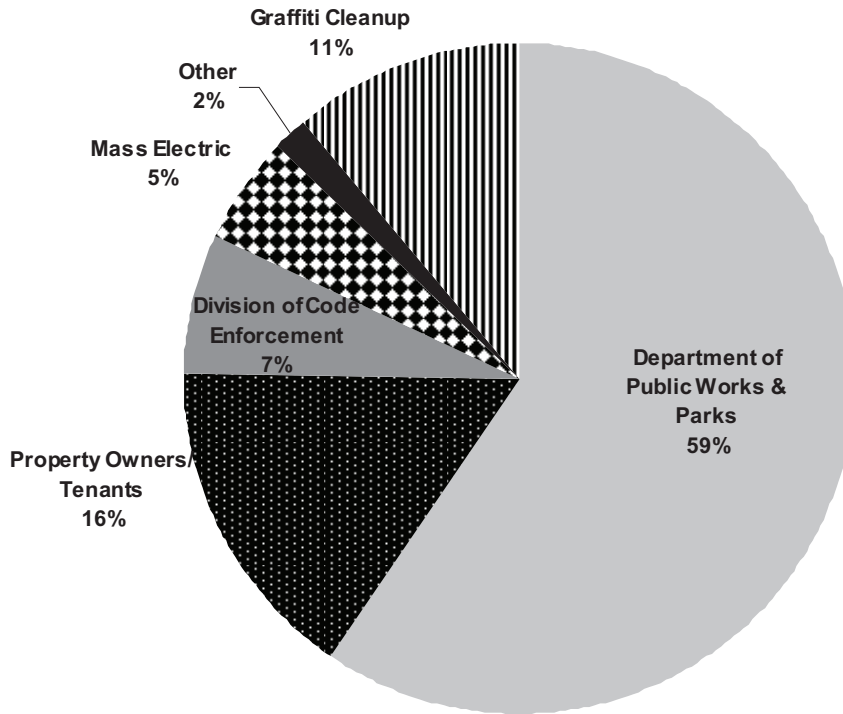
The four volunteer teams recorded a total of 251 conditions downtown, as shown in **Chart 2**.¹ Of the 251 recorded conditions, 26 percent were sidewalk problems, such as trip hazards, missing pieces of sidewalk, and weeds. Almost one in four (23%) problems were building-related, including old or damaged awnings and signage, crumbling facades, and broken windows. Thirty-one conditions (12.4%) related to defaced property, including graffiti and scratchiti. About 10% of problems were street issues, such as potholes or uneven patches of road. Of the 251 recorded conditions, there were 16 (6.4%) instances of litter, trash, and dumping documented. While some of these issues are clearly infrastructure issues such as streets and sidewalks and the responsibility of municipal government to remedy, others, such as rundown buildings with crumbling facades and unattractive or outdated signage, confirm the results of our 2006 survey, and are the responsibility of property owners.



More specifically, over half of the problems (59%) recorded fall under the jurisdiction of the Department of Public Works and Parks, which is responsible for streets and sidewalks, among many other functions (see **Chart 3**). Sixteen percent of problems are the responsibility of downtown property owners and tenants.

¹ To view summary data and a detailed list of all the conditions that were recorded during the recent Downtown ComNET survey, please see our website, www.wrrb.org/ComNet.php.

Chart 3: Incidents by Responsible Agency



NEXT STEPS

Documentation of these physical problems, which includes their specific locations, will be shared with each responsible agency, which will also determine how to address them. Some, such as signage for businesses that no longer exist, can be solved more quickly than others, including major street and sidewalk repair. Since many of the problems identified require the cooperation and active participation of downtown property owners and tenants, the City Manager and the Mayor should appoint a committee representative of downtown interests to set priorities and establish plans of addressing these issues. We hope such a committee will also consider the recommendations in The Research Bureau's recent report on downtown (Report# 08-08, "What's Up with Downtown Worcester?: Prospects for Revitalization" available on our website, www.wrrb.org), and any other matters that would facilitate the revitalization of downtown Worcester.