

## Vibrant Communities Initiative, 2011-2015

### What is the Vibrant Communities Initiative?

VCI grants aim to build community readiness for next steps in a revitalization program. VCI grants provide limited investment (\$50,000 per municipality) to start to unlock time-worn thinking/approaches to historic buildings, like outdated zoning, and to develop a road map to successful economic development based on the reuse of buildings. A VCI grant can change a municipality's attitude about historic preservation. Rather than seeing existing buildings as obstacles to development, a VCI grant process starts with existing resources and assets to inspire towns and cities that they do not have to destroy their streetscapes to enhance their downtowns.

The grants look at the following questions:

- *How can historic preservation be a primary tool for downtown and community revitalization?*
- *How will historic preservation tools foster compact, walkable, distinctive places in our historic city, town and villages? According to a study available from the Project for Lean Urbanism 56% of Millennials and Boomers want this kind of community.*
- *What are the key changes that need to be made at the municipal level to encourage revitalization of communities in order to preserve and protect historic places?*

### Benefits of the Program

- Large scope - Economic revitalization is accomplished at the neighborhood, downtown and district level. **VCI focuses on entire downtowns or areas – its buildings, zoning, building codes, capital funding – that would lead to an economic renaissance.**
- Target underutilized assets –The VCI program focuses on mills, commercial and residential areas that are not productive today and **assembles the real estate strategy to achieve success.**
- Innovative economy and market solutions – The **VCI program links emerging elements of the innovative economy** to real estate strategies, including technology, culture, entrepreneurship. It promotes adaptive reuse of the historic assets by viewing market trends and a review of capital costs.
- Smart growth – VCI is a **smart growth initiative**; it focuses on repositioning previously developed, but now underutilized areas for economic development, using infrastructure and transportation systems already in place, and the redo of substantial buildings and mills to hold new, innovative uses.
- Community stewardship – The VCI process is designed to raise a community-based awareness of opportunities and expand local stewardship of redevelopment by promoting **direct local leadership**. Local municipalities become aware that history is not an obstacle.

### Outcomes from selected projects:

**Ansonia** – The city is using VCI funded consultants to prepare for the rehabilitation of a city owned historic building in the heart of downtown, providing design and code review, capital funding and

operating costs, and evaluating zoning changes to promote the revitalization effort. Ansonia is struggling with its industrial past and in fact has been demolishing a major large industrial complex. The VCI review committee felt strongly that this city needed a boost from the historic preservation community to foster a new understanding that Ansonia's old buildings can have new life. The grant is working on one building at a time, in a challenged downtown area.

*"VCI is helping our City position itself into the future," said Sheila O'Malley, Economic Development Director for the City, "the VCI grant is helping us create a destination and a unique place to live by giving us a plan for a very important building downtown."*

**Clinton** –The VCI consultant team focused on a downtown area that had a number of historic assets, including the Unilever industrial facility. Working with stakeholders and presenting progress at public meetings, the team prepared a Village District Zoning amendment and a National Register District nomination for the area and presented options for adaptive reuse for the now vacant Unilever complex. The owner is now working with the town to implement a development strategy.

*"The VCI program gave us the structure and reason to change the zoning for the area, and, through the National Register process, provided an incentive to the owner to rehab the property with the use of the historic tax credits," said Alan Kravitz, Vice Chair of the town's Planning and Zoning Commission*

**Danbury** – The city of Danbury utilized VCI funding to examine seven options to preserve the former Hearthstone Castle (1899) in Tarrywile Park. Though Hearthstone is a single building, the study involved questions on use of and investment in the very popular downtown park. The city created a stakeholder group that comprised a variety of ethnicities and community leaders and assembled a team of architects, engineers, and historic restoration experts to prepare a study on ways and means of preserving the historic castle which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places but is now in a state of disrepair. The final study included a history of the Castle, its importance to the City and surrounding region, stabilization needs, alternative future uses, and funding considerations for its restoration. As a result of the VCI report, the city came back to the CTHP for a HPTAG planning grant to hire an engineer to produce a structural plan to reinforce the castle's walls as a way to preserve the structure.

*"VCI funding was essential for this study and has paved the way for the City to undertake follow-up efforts to prepare complete engineering and architectural plans to restore and make future use of this historic landmark. We are indebted to the CT Trust for Historic Preservation for their assistance in this effort", said Dennis Elpern, Planning Director, and City of Danbury.*

**Hartford** – Two VCIs awarded to the city of Hartford assisted in providing pre-development funding, structure and neighborhood acceptance to non-profit developers seeking to rehab significant historic former industrial properties, the Capewell Horsenail Factory, and Swift Manufacturing Company. Both developers are finalizing their capital funding strategies.

In both cases, neighborhood buy-in was missing in the projects, which are aimed at bringing vitality to two neighborhoods that have been overlooked by other re-development projects in the city. Capewell had been vacant and deteriorating for years, affecting the whole area around Charter Oak Avenue and Main Street. Swift is in the Northend, near Keeny Park, right inside an intact neighborhood that is poor and underserved by the municipality.

**Lebanon** - Town implemented a Village District Zone, adopting design guidelines and structure, as produced by the team funded from the VCI grant.

**New Britain** – VCI provided the structure for the city to pass the second preservation ordinance in the state, following the Hartford model. The VCI consultant team prepared design guidelines, organizational structure for the new preservation commission, and proposed a new National Register of Historic Places downtown district over which the Preservation Commission will have review. The nomination will be reviewed by the State Review Board, possibly by summer 2015.

**New London** – Working with the city and stakeholders, as well as the community, the VCI consultant team produced architectural drawings, code reviews, capital funding plans and rehab plans, including housing on the upper floors, for three historic buildings on downtown Bank Street. A non-profit developer, utilizing the VCI plans, is currently working with the city and building owners for possible acquisition and redevelopment of the properties.

*"We are grateful for the VCI study grant because without it, we would not be where we are in downtown development and planning," said Harry Smith, Planner in New London.*

**Norwich** - A VCI grant was used by city and Norwich Community Development Corporation (NCDC) to identify key properties in the downtown for rehabilitation. As a result, the NCDC has now stepped up and is acting as developer of the former Reid and Hughes department store, previously a failed development project in the heart of downtown.

**Waterbury** – The city used VCI funds to undertake a capital needs assessment and visioning plan for downtown Green, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is adjacent to the Cass Gilbert designed City Center. The study, which involved numerous very enthusiastic community members, looked at historical and existing conditions of the Green and what funding needs are necessary to implement an action plan to clean up the Green and restore its benches, replant its paths and in general bring it back from a dilapidated state. The final report won an award from Connecticut Chapter of American Planning Association. The city has applied subsequently for VCI grants for similar studies on other city parks.

**Waterford** – The town of Waterford has an indistinct town center and has been challenged by redevelopment plans that do not take into account the historic nature of the area. The VCI report produced Village District Zoning regulations, to ensure appropriate redevelopment, and made design connections between the Jordan Village Historic District and the Town Hall area to create more of a town center. The VCI final report won an award for "Town Vision and Strategic Plan" by the American Planners Association.

**Westport** - City is set to pass a new Village District Zone overlay and a new National Register District in its downtown, as assembled by the VCI grant.

**Wethersfield** – The town used the VCI grant to examine historic resources and planning/preservation issues in Old Wethersfield. Three underutilized buildings were selected for specific study for new uses that included development and operating pro-formas and proposed capital funding. One of the

properties that was for sale at the time of the study, the former Masonic Hall, was sold to an individual who is expected to rehab it. The VCI consultant team and community stakeholders also looked possible expansion of the Comstock Ferre Seed Company buildings which include an old barn that had been threatened with demolition with a previous owner. The new Comstock Ferre owners recently completed Phase 1 of their site improvements with new brick pavers for their parking lot and a series of demonstration garden plots, all as envisioned by the VCI report.