

Bringing Hartford together Revitalization plan includes putting city on 'a road diet'

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Dan Biederman (right) and associate Ted Furst discuss some of the changes that could be made to Travelers Plaza as part of the iQuilt plan to better tie Hartford's cultural amenities together.

Hartford is road-heavy and its public spaces don't invite people to come and enjoy the city.

That's the assessment of urban planners honing the latest effort to revitalize downtown Hartford into a place that will attract new residents and visitors. Foremost in the group is a hot-shot park developer recently brought onto the project.

Dan Biederman, best known for improving the seven-acre space behind New York City's Public Library into Bryant Park, joined Hartford's iQuilt project earlier this year. The project envisions a downtown Hartford that better uses Bushnell Park to attract more people to the city's many cultural destinations.

"The public will not come to public spaces unless there is programming for them," Biederman said.

The three-year-old iQuilt plan is a series of initiatives that seek to tie Hartford's attractions together by increasing the joy of walking in the city.

The proposals, which won't be finalized until December, include exposing a stream that runs under Bushnell Park; narrowing Jewel Street to make the park more inviting; extending the park to Main Street by narrowing or eliminating Gold Street; and tying together the plaza in front of the Travelers Tower on Main Street to better interact with Wadsworth Athenaeum.

“The joy of walking in downtown Hartford is kind of surprising. I think we’ve forgotten how to do it,” said Doug Suisman, a Hartford native who runs the Los Angeles urban design firm in charge of the project.

Biederman’s role in the iQuilt plan is to make people want to come to these public spaces once they are set up.



The plaza in front of Travelers Tower, for example, across Gold Street from the Wadsworth Athenaeum, is one of the few places in the country where a major cultural institution abuts a major corporate headquarters, Biederman said. The plaza should be full of people, but it isn’t.

All the concrete in the plaza makes the area unseasonably hot in the summer and cold in the winter, Biederman said. There’s little for people to do other than sit, and all the seating is on concrete ledges.

Both Travelers Plaza and Wadsworth Athenaeum are surrounded by high walls, which makes visitors to one feel uninvited to the other, Biederman said. Gold Street, which has two lanes of traffic and two lanes of parking, only exacerbates the problem.

“There’s not much to do here,” Biederman said. “This is not the best way for a great cultural institution to interact with a great private entity.”

Biederman envisions a Travelers Plaza with movable chairs, more green space and activities for people such as concessions, chess, ping-pong, and a carousel. One version of the iQuilt plan includes an ice skating rink in the plaza.

Biederman, Suisman and the rest of the iQuilt team said one of the biggest barriers to making Hartford a more walkable city is the large roads. Many of the city’s main roads have four, six or eight lanes — great for rush hour but largely vacant at other times — that segregate areas of the city and deter pedestrians.

“This is an odd cityscape,” Biederman said. “Hartford doesn’t need as many wide streets. There’s much, too much pavement here.”

Key components of the iQuilt plan involve reducing or eliminating roads, making it harder to drive around the city but friendlier to walk. The Bushnell Park proposal calls for the elimination of Pulaski Circle. It would be converted to an intersection with a traffic signal.

The effort mirrors others in the city that would make Hartford more pedestrian friendly, and therefore more inviting to guests and new residents. The Hub of Hartford project seeks to remove the Interstate 84 viaduct in an effort to make the city less divided by the highway.

"For 40 or 50 years, we have made the driver king," Suisman said. "We need to put Hartford on a road diet."

The iQuilt project was borne out of Hartford's cultural institutions, such as the Bushnell Center for Performing Arts. Separate studies in the last decade ranked Hartford as having some of the best cultural amenities in the country, but they are disjointed and don't create a lot of traffic to other amenities in the city.

"The direction we are heading is to look for a partnership for placemaking," said David Panagore, Hartford director of development services, "to make downtown Hartford the region's living room."

One of the iQuilt proposals is to brand the city under its namesake hart, which is another term for a deer. Signs would be put up around the city to better tie everything together.

The initiative includes several Hartwalks around the city. The proposal that includes extending Bushnell Park is for the Greenwalk, a path linking the city's natural amenities from the Connecticut State Capitol to the Connecticut River.

Other Hartwalks could include a Redwalk for specific cultural stops and a Bluewalk for historic stops. Hartwalks can expand into Hartruns, designed paths for joggers; Hartrides for bicycles; and Hartwheels for buses.

Hartford has the groundwork to be a really inviting city, Biederman said, it just needs to take advantage of it. Large parks adjacent to state capitol buildings are few and far between, and Hartford needs to make better use of Bushnell Park.

The iQuilt plan to uncover part of the underground Park River, that runs under the park, could work as long as there are attractions to bring people to the area, Biederman said.

Proposals for a park with a stream include relocating the 97-year-old carousel to the eastern edge of Bushnell Park; installing a permanent rink for skating in the winter and waterplay in the summer; and a public reading room.

"This should be a tremendous asset," Biederman said. "It is worthwhile to spend money here."

The iQuilt project in 2010 received a \$250,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to implement the plan, named one of the five best project proposals from that year. In May, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving gave the project \$400,000 for design and start-up support.

The iQuilt team has not estimated the total cost of the project, as many of the proposals are not finalized.

The key is to implement the proposals in various stages, not try to do everything at once, Suisman said. iQuilt is not a massive project such as the Connecticut Convention Center, but rather about doing small things to tie together what Hartford already has.

"No downtown is built in one project," Suisman said.