Flagstaff, Arizona: The Future
According to Michael Wallis, the self-declared “father” of the Route 66 Renaissance, Flagstaff might be the next, up-and-coming Route 66 city. Much of the built fabric from the 1920s through the 1960s survives, and the town has already developed a strong tourism-oriented economy because of its proximity to Grand Canyon. Of all the Route 66 cities I have studied, Flagstaff draws the most tourists and generates the most income from these visits. According to the City of Flagstaff, 5 million tourists annually come to Flagstaff as the gateway city to Grand Canyon, the Petrified Forest and Painted Desert National Parks, the Navajo and Hopi Native American reservations, the Lowell Observatory, and dozens of other lesser-known national parks and monuments. Altogether, non-city residents, including both tourists and second-home owners, provide around 50% of the town’s sales tax revenue.

The Flagstaffers I spoke to believe that few of these tourists come to Flagstaff to see Route 66, and that those who do come to see the route are often disappointed by the city’s lack of typical Route 66 attractions like neon signage, themed diners, and gift shops. “People come into the train station here and ask, Where’s Route 66? And they’re right here standing on it,” remarks Sharlene Fouser, supervisor of the Flagstaff Visitor’s Center. For tourists, Flagstaff’s famous natural attractions eclipse the cultural attraction of Route 66, despite the city’s recent revitalization of its historic downtown core and the city’s large inventory of historic motels.

Route 66 runs straight through the heart of revitalized downtown Flagstaff, which features late 19th century frontier architecture as well as new additions like structured parking and sidewalk cafes that attract pedestrians and give Flagstaff’s streets a healthy volume of foot traffic, particularly during the summer tourism season. Downtown Flagstaff is what local geographer Thomas Paradis calls a “Tourism Business District”: a small-town main street where tourist-oriented businesses identify themselves with a theme that reflects the town’s history, including its architecture, industry, or natural resources. In an article focusing on the themes adopted by downtown Flagstaff businesses, Paradis found that in 2000, none of downtown’s businesses identified themselves primarily with Route 66. Instead, the most prominent themes were “mountains” and “the environment”, followed closely by “ethnic/cultural.” This may be due, in part, to the fact that Route 66 itself runs along the southern edge of the downtown grid, and that the businesses most associated with Route 66, such as motels and diners, are scattered along the ten miles of the route to the east and west of the Flagstaff metro area. However, it is surprising that a town like Flagstaff with such a prominent tourist economy has not capitalized more on its Route 66 heritage.

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1 Conversation with Flagstaff Planning Department, including Karl Eberhard, Michael Kerski, John Saltonstall, and Kimberly Sharp, Flagstaff City Hall, January 10, 2006.
Route 66 in Arizona – the Statewide Context

Of all the Route 66 states, Arizona boasts the most beautiful natural and built fabric along 66, and it was certainly my favorite part of the corridor when I drove it last summer. The sheer expanse of the desert reminds the traveler of the loneliness and danger associated with early automobile travel, when a drive across the desert was a perilous proposition and travelers could drive for days without seeing any signs of human life. When you do come across a sign of human civilization on Route 66 in Arizona, it is often a civilization with which you may be less familiar – Arizona is where the first known Americans lived, people now called the Pueblo Americans (or Anasazi) and, along with New Mexico, where Route 66 winds through several Native American reservations. Arizona’s Route 66 is not without sentimental, 20th century artifacts as well; the Wigwam Motel in Holbrook and the “Standing on a Corner Park” in Winslow, Arizona, made famous by The Eagles’ song “Take It Easy,” are but two examples.5

The state of Arizona and the Arizona Route 66 Association have worked steadily over the last decade to revitalize the state’s Route 66 corridor, and the results are evident in both the towns and the small businesses that have reclaimed their Route 66 heritage. The public sector has also aided in the state’s Route 66 revitalization through grant programs for transit-related development, historic preservation, and brownfield redevelopment. These partnerships between private citizens and the public sector have facilitated some of Route 66’s most interesting redevelopment projects. For example, in June of 2004, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Arizona Department of Envi-

5 An informal source told me that the words were originally “I’m standing on a corner in Flagstaff, Arizona, and there’s such a fine sight to see/ it’s a girl, my lord, in a flatbed Ford, slowing down to take a look at me”, but that The Eagles changed the town to “Winslow” because it sounded more lyrical.
ronmental Quality (DEQ) instituted a grant program for the cleanup of abandoned underground gas storage tanks along Route 66 in order to encourage redevelopment of historic gas station properties. According to the program’s press release, at least 100 historic gas station properties along Arizona 66 contain leaking underground storage tanks; the cost to repair or replace these tanks is often enough to deter a preservation organization or a developer from rehabilitating or redeveloping the property. The DEQ recognized this obstacle and instituted the program “[to] explore ways to help local communities create more businesses where people can ‘get their kicks’ on Route 66,” according to the program’s press release. In another example, the revamped La Posada hotel, a former Harvey House along the railroad line and Route 66 in Winslow, AZ, was purchased for $11 million by a California architect with partial funding from a Transportation Enhancement Grant from the Arizona Department of Transportation. The rehabilitation of La Posada into a boutique hotel has taken seven years and has been financed in part through Transportation Enhancement Grants and also through Arizona State Parks’ Heritage Fund Grant Awards; the hotel now regularly serves as the state’s most popular site for Route 66-related conferences and events.

In addition to an active public and private sector, Arizona has the country’s oldest Historic Route 66 State Association, founded in 1987, as well as the longest intact piece of original Route 66 paving, 137 miles between Seligman and Kingman. The state is also home to the last Route 66 town in all of America (Williams, in 1984) to be bypassed by an interstate highway. On Route 66’s final day in 1984, roadies, aficionados, and other friends of the Mother Road gathered in Williams to hear Bobby Troup, composer of Route 66’s famous anthem, perform the tune live on a piano rolled out onto the asphalt for the occasion:

If you ever plan to motor west,
Travel my way, take the highway that’s the best,
Get your kicks on Route 66.
It winds from Chicago to L.A.
More than 2,000 miles all the way.
Get your kicks on Route 66.
You go through St. Louie, Joplin, Missouri,
And Oklahoma City looks mighty pretty.
You’ll see Amarillo, Gallup, New Mexico,
Flagstaff, Arizona, don’t forget Winona,
Kingman, Barstow, San Bernardino.
Won’t you get hip to this timely tip,
When you make that California trip?
Get your kicks on Route 66.

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6 January 26, 2006, Arizona DEQ Press Release, “Route 66 project launched to redevelop abandoned gas stations, clean up underground tank sites”.
8 “(Get Your Kicks On) Route 66”, words and Music by Bobby Troup. Troup wrote the song in 1946 while driving Route 66 with is wife, and Nat King Cole’s recording made it famous later that year.
The Local Context – Flagstaff

Despite this active, statewide redevelopment movement, the City of Flagstaff is only just beginning to engage with its portion of Route 66. In 2004, the city’s Convention and Visitor’s Bureau resuscitated its defunct “Route 66 Days” festival, scheduled for the week before the well-established San Bernardino Route 66 Rendezvous in order to attract roadies on their way to California. The festival was first celebrated ten years ago, according to Michael Kerski at Flagstaff City Hall, before it “kind of burned out and turned into a car event.” Then, in 2004, the Flagstaff Downtown Business Alliance revived the event as a celebration of the route itself, rather than the cars and bikes that travel it. In a local newspaper article, the Downtown Business Alliance president Debbie Kaiser argued for the September event as a way not only to extend the summer tourist season, but also to get Flagstaff on the map as a Route 66 town. “The key,” states the article, “will be finding Flagstaff’s particular niche in the Route 66 revival movement.”

The City of Flagstaff Community Development Department has also taken an interest in redeveloping Route 66. The first signs of renewed interest were exhibited in 2002, when the City Council charged the Convention and Visitors’ Bureau with creating a task force to brainstorm and research the future of tourism in Flagstaff. The task force of 50 community leaders decided that Route 66 was one of the town’s dormant assets, and the city created a Route 66 imaging program with a $10,000 startup grant. In early 2005, a planning consultant named Jim Nelson approached the City of Flagstaff and the Route 66 imaging program with a proposal for “creating and implementing an integrated tourism initiative based on Flagstaff’s Route 66 heritage.” Nelson’s high-powered background as director of planning and development for MCA/Universal Development Company and creator of Universal’s CityWalk, a simulated “downtown” entertainment center in Los Angeles, may have alienated him from the major players in the small, civic-minded town of Flagstaff; City Hall failed to renew Nelson’s contract, and only an initial draft of his plan survives. However, even though Nelson’s plan was not embraced by City Hall, it was a starting point that drew attention to the city’s Route 66 assets such as its many intact motels and its stash of preserved neon signs currently languishing in the city’s “sign graveyard.”

More a “pep talk” than a workable plan, the Nelson report uses narrative to describe how the commercial and cultural products of a theoretical “Route 66 Historical District” would appeal to the average tourist: “It isn’t the crowd or the band that you notice the most as you move along – it’s the parade of smells that jump out at you: chili from a booth labeled ‘Hot Rod’s’; grilling hamburgers from ‘Miss Patty’s’…Like trips to fairs and carnivals of the past, you completely become part of the crowd – smiling and swaying to the music.” In its more analytical moments, the report threatens its own credibility with exaggerated estimates of the city’s Route 66-tourism potential; “If dow-

9 Michael Kerski, Flagstaff City Hall interview.
12 Nelson, p 20.
Two images from the Nelson report: above, the Route 66 corridor through the city of Flagstaff, and below, a close-up of Nelson’s proposed “Route 66 Historical District and Promenade”. Source: Nelson Report, courtesy of City of Flagstaff.
town Flagstaff had a Route 66-based visitor destination that could siphon off part of the Canyon’s tourist stream, the potential reward could be an additional 200 to 300 dollars direct spending per capita per day on [sic] tens of thousands of visitors.13 This figure is highly unlikely, given that the average Route 66-oriented motel in Flagstaff charges less than $30/night. “Jim Nelson’s report? We find that…entertaining,” says Redevelopment Manager Kimberly Sharp. “[But] something I liked about the Jim Nelson report,” she adds, “was that in downtown, we’re focusing on truly pedestrian, parking garages, just bringing out people. But Route 66 is more about cars…Route 66 will probably always be vehicle focused. And that part [of the report] I enjoyed, the drive in diners and the drive in theater.”14 This touches on one of many of the complexities of the Route 66 theme – it is unabashedly automobile-oriented, but in a way that explicitly celebrates the cruising and self-expression via automobiles that epitomize mid-20th century American car-culture. This theme is distinguished from both pedestrian-oriented planning and contemporary strip-mall development, because the former eschews the car while the latter addresses it solely as a functional extension of the consumer. As it develops its Route 66 plan, Flagstaff will undoubtedly encounter this paradox and will be forced to invent a new approach to auto-oriented planning – with culture, self-expression, and meaning coexisting with the much-derided yet essential automobile.

Planner John Saltonstall remembers that the City Council’s ambivalence about the Nelson plan focused on its centralized repackaging of Route 66 in Flagstaff; “City Council has sent a variety of mixed messages with the whole Nelson report. They, at that time, said, ‘We don’t want this big thing going on, this celebration of all the neon, a collection of all the experience of Route 66 in one place.’ But now they’re saying they want some of that brought back.”15 The plan emphasized the creation of a “Route 66 Historic District,” in which the city would concentrate its streetscaping and business development efforts within a four-block area to create a themed attraction. The thematic and economic centralization struck the City Council as too “Disneyland,” and the plan was rejected. But, according to the city’s planners, current discussions are revisiting the notion of centralization of cultural resources, albeit with an emphasis on independent businesses and “authenticity,” a term that invariably elicits a wide range images and concepts among the preservationists and aficionados of Route 66. “I think Jim Nelson’s report provides a great place to start,” said Sharp, “but we need to actually talk to the property owners, and I think that the City of Flagstaff might have a different take on authentic preservation versus the theme park.”16

In response to the City Council and the community’s continued demand for some kind of Route 66 planning, the Flagstaff Community Development Department is now working on a plan to create an historic preservation and economic development district around its Route 66 Corridor. The city is using both the Nelson report and a National Park Service motel inventory report as resources in its initial planning stages, and planners have begun meeting with private property owners to get a sense of what policies and incentives the city can implement to engage owners in the preservation process.

However, planners Karl Eberhard and Kimberly Sharp believe that the Route 66 redevelop-

14 Kimberly Sharp, Flagstaff City Hall interview.
15 John Saltonstall, Flagstaff City Hall.
16 Kimberly Sharp, Flagstaff City Hall.
opment process will be long and difficult, since it will require an overhaul of the city’s preservation codes and policies before a district can be put in place.

The draft of the city’s 2006-2010 Consolidated Plan acknowledges both the difficulty and importance of this project, since like many other Route 66 towns, Flagstaff is losing its roadside architecture rapidly – particularly its motels. Flagstaff has only a brief history with the practice of historic preservation; the town did not create a Historic Preservation Commission or a Historic Preservation Ordinance until 1995, when it became a Certified Local Government. And as the city’s Urban Designer, Karl Eberhard, notes, the guidelines for historic preservation were not well thought-out when they were first laid down, which has slowed the creation of any new districts; “The current rules for creating a historic district are chaotic and barbaric and designed to prevent anyone from actually doing anything, but they look good on paper. So we’re basically working… to
revamp the heritage resource protection ordinance. And doing that will hopefully give us the tools to create a Route 66 district easily... Right now, to create the district would probably take just as long as creating a new ordinance.”

Flagstaff also suffers from the social, spatial, and economic challenges that have led to the deterioration of Route 66 businesses in other towns and cities. At present, Route 66 business owners do not have either the inclination or resources to invest in their businesses, since Route 66 tourists have yet to prove themselves a distinct or viable market in Flagstaff. Many of the businesses, particularly motels, have weathered the changes in Route 66’s fortunes by serving the transient, mentally ill, or criminal population. The City of Flagstaff recognizes this issue; “There is a challenge with the existing innkeepers and various business owners who are like, ‘This is what we’ve got, this is what you’re going to get, nothing more’,” says Kimberly Sharp. “So we have to try to work on a collaboration about how it could grow and how it could increase their bottom line.” “There’s a certain education for us that’s involved too,” agrees City of Flagstaff Urban Designer, Karl Eberhard. “The people that own these hotels, these hotels predate the interstate. You’ve seen it – towns like Winslow are wiped out because the interstate came through and everything died. And these hotels and restaurants and gas stations have managed to hang on in spite of the interstate, but it’s been a tough battle for them. They’ve had to adjust their clientele from interstate travelers to hourly rates. And that’s going to take some education to try to get them to market and attract the interstate travelers, or even destination travelers, as opposed to the lowest of the lowest travelers.”

Flagstaff Motels

Business owners are not the only people at whom Flagstaff will have to aim its education and outreach initiatives; visitors and residents both view the decaying motels as the scourge of the city, since they often serve as last-resort housing for the city’s indigent and mentally-ill populations. Ironically, the motels have found a viable market in this population, which has fallen through the cracks in the city’s public service infrastructure. For this population, motels are often an option that is just within their financial reach, as a single-occupancy room in an older Flagstaff motel can cost about $165/week and does not require a large, upfront outlay of cash for security or utility deposits. In addition, unlike in Albuquerque, motel rooms in Flagstaff can be paid for by county housing assistance vouchers. “Living in a motel is not the best option...[but] I’m glad we have them as an interim solution. We certainly appreciate the assistance that they’ve provided us,” said Wenda Meyer, the senior program coordinator for Coconino County Community Services.

For business owners, relying on this market is not without its hazards. Like Albuquerque, Flagstaff has suffered the loss of several historic motels in the last few years, due to the risks associated with this transient clientele. Flagstaff’s Red Rose Motel

17 Karl Eberhard, Flagstaff City Hall.
18 Kimberly Sharp, Flagstaff City Hall.
19 Karl Eberhard, Flagstaff City Hall.
suffered $2000 worth of damages when a homeless client left a dog alone in a motel room for two days. “When you sell a room for $25 a night and you suffer $50 to $75 a night in damages, it’s hard to get ahead,” says Gil Hagmier, a general manager of the Red Rose Inn and the Royal Inn, both located along Flagstaff’s 66 corridor. Add to this the fact that the commercial value of these properties is currently around $30 to $40 per square foot as retail property, and you understand why historic motels are fighting a losing battle, according to Michael Kerski, Director of Community Investments for the City of Flagstaff.

In many cases, property owners can no longer even afford to demolish their own properties due to the expense associated with asbestos testing and removal. In April, 2005, John Connolly, the owner of the 66 restaurant Salsa Brava purchased the Paradise Hotel adjacent to his restaurant for $285,000 and spent an estimated $100,000 on asbestos testing, abatement, and demolition. “We referred to it as ‘The Parasite’…I don’t need this much space for Salsa Brava, but I was seriously sick of looking at that building,” says Connolly. Many motel owners sell to larger developers who demolish and then treat the properties as vacant lots as they wait for land prices to rise. This practice is likely to continue in Flagstaff, since the city and County have natural growth boundaries in the form of National Parks and Native American reservation land. As a result, land in Flagstaff is scarce. At the same time, the town has become a large second-home market for other Arizonians due to its crisp mountain climate and scenic beauty. The growth boundary and robust second home market are at least partially responsible for the town’s increase in housing prices, which jumped 14.4% in 2004, 6 points higher than the increase in the nearby Prescott Valley.

These economic forces only exacerbate the housing shortage for the city’s indigent population. But at least one business owner has responded with a creative solution that maintains the exterior architecture of a historic motel property while providing formalized social services to the motel’s clients. In December of 2005, Lynette and Kent Bybee purchased the Royal Inn, a Route 66 motel, and have begun conversion of the motel into supportive housing. The Bybees intend to equip the lower floor of the motel with handicap-accessible bathrooms and fixtures, and they have partnered with Flagstaff Social Service agencies to help them manage the care and selection of their tenant population. The couple is performing their rehabilitation on a limited budget, and they salvaged many of their new carpeting and fixtures from another, newer motel slated for demolition. “Our goal is to get it to be a safe place to be,” says Lynette, the former owner of a day-care center whose husband ran a successful contracting business before they purchased the Royal Inn. In order to increase the property’s income, the Bybees are working with social service agencies to pair up clients as roommates, which makes the proposition more affordable for both owners and tenants. The endeavor has not been without challenges; the couple evicted 25% of their tenants because of drug and alcohol

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21 Peterson, “Mission of Mercy, a Losing Battle.”
22 Michael Kerski, Flagstaff City Hall.
use in their first month of operation. Notwithstanding these difficulties, this form of adaptive reuse could provide a template for other Route 66 motels in communities that are willing to combine preservation with social services.

**Route 66’s Future in Flagstaff**

Flagstaff benefits from an active and intelligent local government, a supportive state government, and a state-wide network of Route 66 aficionados and private property owners who care deeply about the corridor’s future. Only last year, Sharlene Fouser at the Flagstaff Visitor’s Center succeeded in having Arizona’s Route 66 corridor designated as a National Scenic Byway, joining New Mexico and Illinois, the two other states where Route 66 corridors have also received this designation. Fouser hopes to start an Arizona Route 66 Byways Office in Flagstaff next year with a $25,000 seed grant from the Scenic Byways program, which will coordinate an inter-state effort to have the entire Route designated as an “All-American Road” – the sine qua non of federal historic road designations in the United States. This effort, along with other local initiatives, may position Flagstaff to become “the next big Route 66 city”, as Michael Wallis believes. However, to earn the reputation and tourism of well-regarded Route 66 cities like Albuquerque, Flagstaff will have to address some of its most daunting challenges including the preservation and adaptive reuse of motels, while creating new partnerships among social services, business organizations, private land owners, and city government.

Foremost among Flagstaff’s unexploited resources in Route 66 redevelopment is Northern Arizona University. Sean Evans at the University library has long been a Route 66 aficionado, and he serves as the University’s unofficial representative to the roadie community. Evans directed me to a study performed by NAU students addressing the challenges of motel preservation along the route, and he referred me to several professors who have studied the planning and development of the road in Arizona. He also told me about NAU’s joining with other universities along Route 66 in a new consortium of Route 66-related archives, including photographs, oral histories, and other forms of Route 66 documentation. The planners I spoke with at the City of Flagstaff had not heard of any of these initiatives, nor where they involved in the upcoming planning of “66 Days” by the city’s Visitor’s Bureau. For a town of only 60,000, Flagstaff suffers from a surprising lack of communication among individuals and organizations working on Route 66 redevelopment; to succeed with limited resources, the town should consider establishing a system of communication about Route 66 initiatives, be it a committee, task force, newsletter, or website where advocates can maintain a dialog about planning projects, events, and concerns.

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26 Peterson, “Royal pain gets a makeover”. 

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Flagstaff Conclusions

Of all the cities I visited, the last to engage with Route 66 is Flagstaff, Arizona, and the city has yet to formulate its planning process. If my interviews with Flagstaff City Hall are an accurate indication of the city’s intentions, Flagstaff will rely heavily on planning tools such as historic districts and preservation ordinances in guiding its Route 66 Renaissance. However, the most important thing that Flagstaff can learn from other cities is that grassroots organizations and local Route 66 advocates can be revitalization’s best assets if the city can engage them in the planning process while still supporting their work as independent organizations. It is probable that Flagstaff will not be working with a budget comparable to Tulsa’s; therefore, Flagstaff need not worry about overpowering its volunteers with its large-scale, centralized planning efforts. Instead, Flagstaff is more likely to develop as Albuquerque has, through a series of small-scale efforts by committed groups and individuals. Overall, this is likely to result in a finer-grained redevelopment effort, which will help the city achieve a degree of authenticity and resonance that Tulsa is not likely to have, despite its budget.

The city should also consider forming a motel preservation and affordable housing task force to address these two interwoven issues. If the Bybees can make a success of their historic motel adaptive reuse, then the city should consider creating incentives for other businesses who are interested in providing specialized housing using the existing motel structures. This will become increasingly important to the community’s well-being if Flagstaff’s housing prices continue to rise. As John Saltonstall noted in our interview, Flagstaff may be well on its way to becoming “a little Aspen”; average home valuations there increased 25.8% in the first quarter of 2006, compared to still sizable increases of 11.1% and 10% in 2005 and 2004, respectively.27 More importantly, most of these increases in valuations are occurring in low-to-mid-priced homes, which will increase property taxes for individuals and families that may not be prepared for the additional expense. While the immediate effect of these changes may not be to push more people into affordable housing, the land value for these properties will only increase, as will development pressure.

The city could achieve two positive results if it partnered adaptive reuse of historic motel properties with provision of affordable condos and rental housing. Although the small size and poor condition of many motel units would make this a difficult challenge, individuals have already begun to implement this type of reuse, and the input from the city’s urban designers and planners could only improve this process. However, this success is contingent upon the city’s of Flagstaff intervening on the behalf of its historic motels before they end up demolished and turned into used car lots, like Tulsa’s, or abandoned to vice, like Albuquerque’s.
