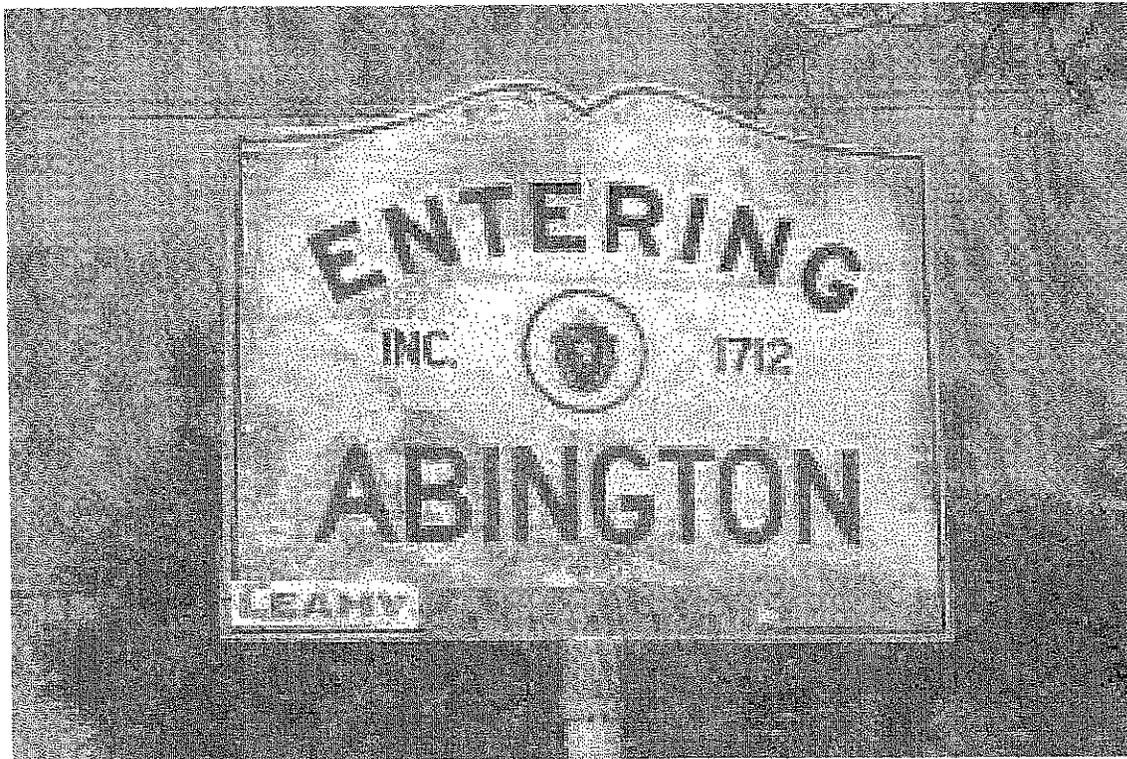


ABINGTON



Introduction and Purpose

The Town of Abington have asked me to provide professional planning assistance to strategize addressing the Board of Selectmen's goal of improving the aesthetics and character of the business, commercial and industrial land in Abington as well as the visual and property value impact on abutting residential neighbors. After an initial consultation, Town Officials again expressed concern over the impacts traffic has had as well as other unsightly features, such as signage; unappealing storefronts and general downtown appeal. Therefore , we have been asked to conduct an on-site, "drive by" assessment of existing conditions within the current business/commercial/industrial zones and abutting neighborhoods; meet with various town officials as necessary, for example members of the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Zoning

Board of Appeals; and review of existing general by-laws, zoning by-laws, and other relevant regulations.

Abington has a long rich history as a suburb of the City of Brockton and as such has experienced an increase in heavy traffic through its two Town centers: North Abington and Abington respectively.

The 2009 Abington Master Plan states “The Town of Abington is well positioned in the eastern Massachusetts and the Greater Boston market area and served by state highway routes 58, 123 and 139. These state routes tie the community to the regional limited access highway network that includes routes 3, 24 and 128. The Town is also served by commuter rail service on the Old Colony Line and is therefore a good location for many commercial and/or industrial businesses that serve the immediate market area or that do not require limited access highway availability”. Unfortunately, this increase in traffic has not been supported by any significant increase in business for the Abington Small businesses. In fact, it has been an on-going concern that the increase of traffic has led to passerby’s traffic not stopping for business and has created congested business districts making it less appealing and increasingly difficult to navigate even for Abington’s own residents.



Town officials have identified this congestion, along with lack of convenient public parking (with adequate signage) as one issue of concern. Officials also believe business appearance; streetscapes and general business advocacy has contributed to the problem, albeit to a lesser degree.



Finally, after meeting with Town administrators; business owners and elected officials it was apparent that the general sense of a “Downtown” or town center and what the identity of Abington is may contribute to some of the issues noted earlier.

Review of Materials

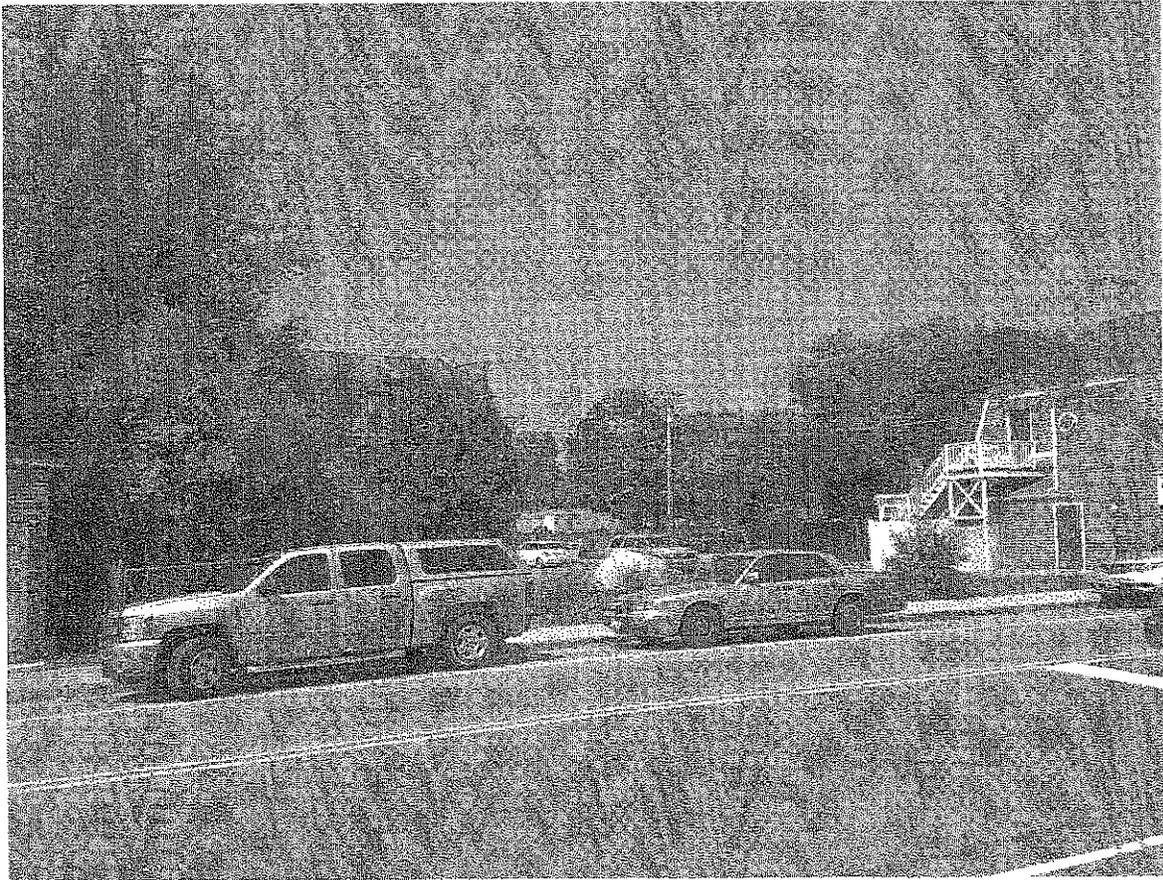
A review the 2009 Abington Master plan; Abington’s Zoning by Laws and various Zoning maps; the 2014 CDBG application and existing program; aerial photos and ownership records, particularly related to North Abington and Abington Centers has been conducted.

2009 Master Plan – The 2009 Master Plans specifically states one of the Towns goals as “to Increase efforts to promote the revitalization of the North Abington and Abington Business

Districts". It goes on to say that "the Abington Planning Board has successfully implemented changes to the Zoning By-law that are designed to enhance the North Abington and Abington Business Districts as viable business centers. This was accomplished by designating these as Central Business District zones that would permit more intense development and support convenience shopping and consumer services in these locations. However, zoning changes alone cannot bring about the revitalization of these established business centers and more must be done to induce businesses to expand in these locations. Tax incentives are certainly one factor that may come into play, but *other features such as creating a more pleasant and attractive environment with pedestrian friendly sidewalks, street trees and street furniture can make the areas more attractive to shoppers and consumers*". It goes on to mention that "The Town should continue to support its town center business owners so they will be able to continue to contribute to being part of a vibrant commercial center". Though rightfully stated, it seems no recent effort has been made to organize a business advocacy group and though some "Street Scape" efforts have been made in North Abington, we find them somewhat lacking in trees, parking and other features and have seen very little in the way of Streetscape improvements in Abington Center.

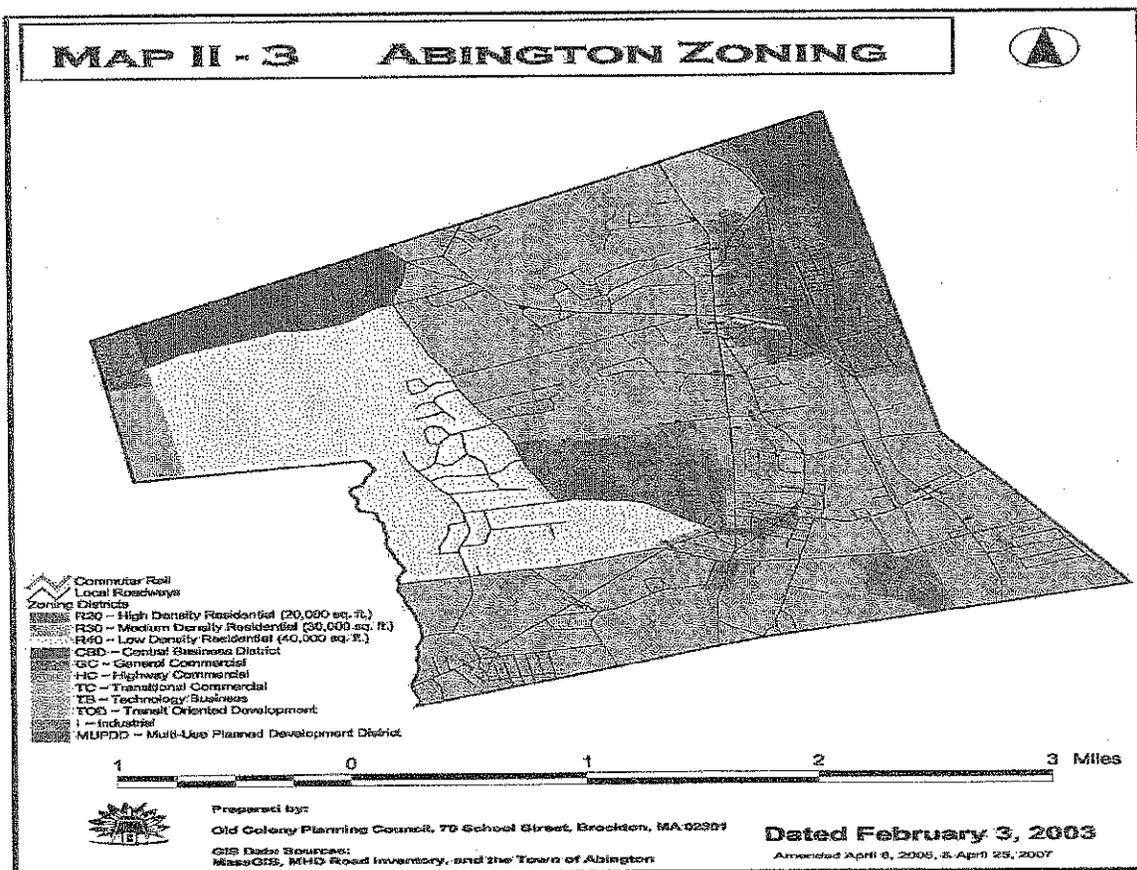


The transportation section reads "To provide for a safe and efficient network of streets and roadways that provides all residents with easy and convenient access to all locations within and outside of the community and to develop and maintain a balanced multi-modal transportation system that assures the efficient and safe movement of people, goods and services". Again though stated we found no objective or goal regarding the prominent issue of "downtown public parking" or attention to the issues of traffic such as traffic diversion, traffic calming or other efforts to address the business owners concerns.



CDBG - Regarding the Community Development Block Program, Abington has a history of providing housing renovations through its CDBG programs and has applied this year with the Town of Whitman for a joint grant to again offer housing renovations, but also to fund the highly successful Whitman food pantry. This joint application, along with the addition of the food Pantry should make for a very competitive application.

Zoning – Both town centers are zoned “Central Business District”, which is very appropriate for Downtown settings, allowing for dense uses, as of right business uses and liberal parking requirements. Signs over four square feet are permitted through the Building department and may not be more than 40 square feet per business; 32 square feet for a free standing sign; and not more than two exterior signs for each store or business. In addition, no sign shall be higher than 25 feet or the height of the associated building whichever is greater. Aesthetics; size and height may be of concern regarding signs.



Observations

After numerous visits and several meetings we have found Abington to be a wonderful place to live and work; with a significant business community; an array of state highways; a commuter rail and a healthy amount of open space. Investments have been made for a relatively new Town Hall and Library and the town has invested in the planning of a new Middle/High School project that is pending with MSBA and scheduled for a ballot question in the fall; improvements to the North Abington business district; a fairly new master plan and a successful history in the highly competitive CDBG program all indicators of a well-run, engaged community.

After meeting with the Town Administration; business owners and Town elected Officials, key issues were identified, but with varied opinions on how to solve them.

These concerns can be summed up as traffic; signage; and parking being of primary concern. It also became apparent that though there is an abundance of traffic in the tow Town Centers, which usually is a welcoming benefit for local businesses. However, in Abington's case, particularly in North Abington local business do not see the usual benefit most communities would realize from such an advantage.

Signage was identifies by Local Officials as being a concern regarding appearance, size and height but local business owners were hesitant to change these requirements especially in light of the lack of business they are currently experiencing and feel any opportunity to attract business should be kept or even enhanced.

Parking loomed large with the local business owners and after several visits to both Town Centers it was obvious there is a lack of convenient, easily identified public parking in both areas.

Lastly, after several visits and discussions in Abington, it became very apparent that there is a lack of identification of whom and what Abington is. Though it has a history in the shoe industry it is now long gone and the Town seems to lack an identity, though surprisingly it does not lack in Town pride or participation. In fact, it was mentioned several times that

“volunteering” is what Abington is known for, which in itself is a very honorable identity to have.

Recommendations

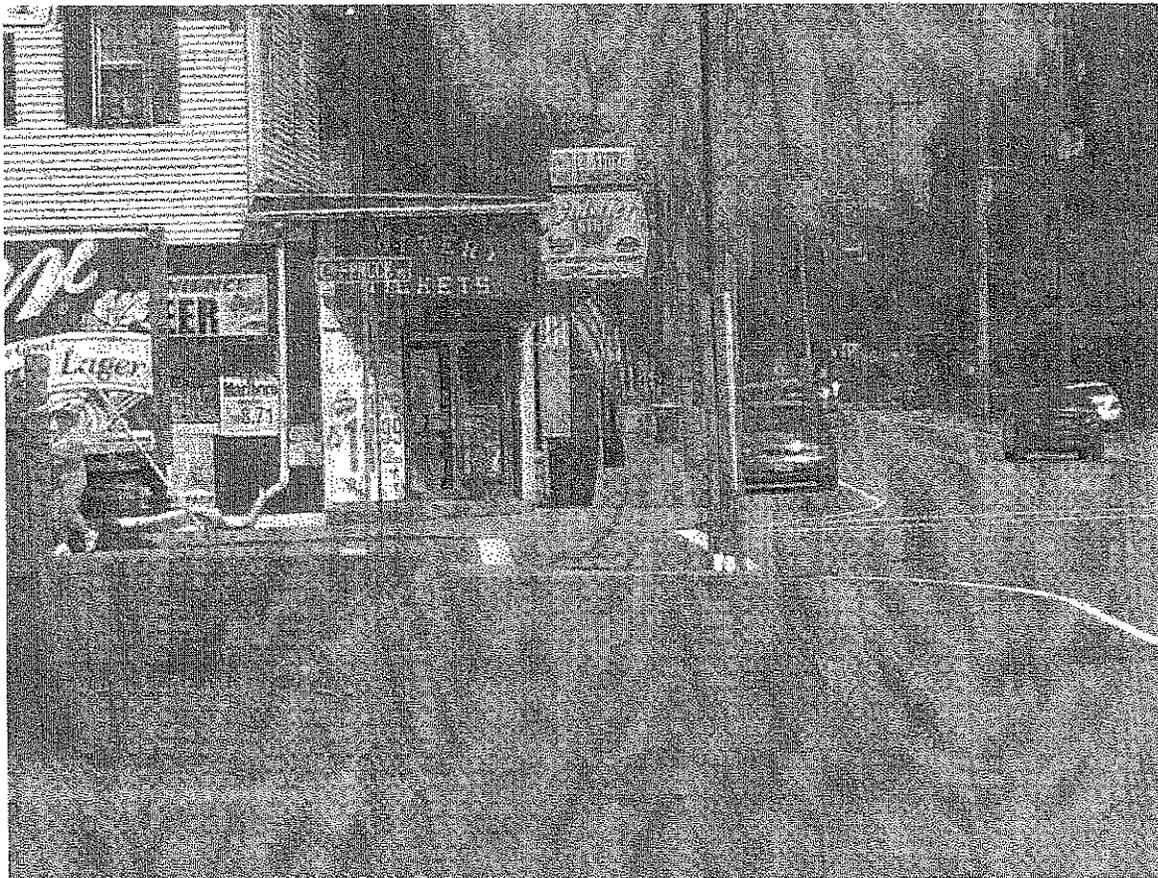
Despite all the wonderful assets Abington has going for it, there are as always room for improvement. Therefore, we offer the following recommendations to be considered:

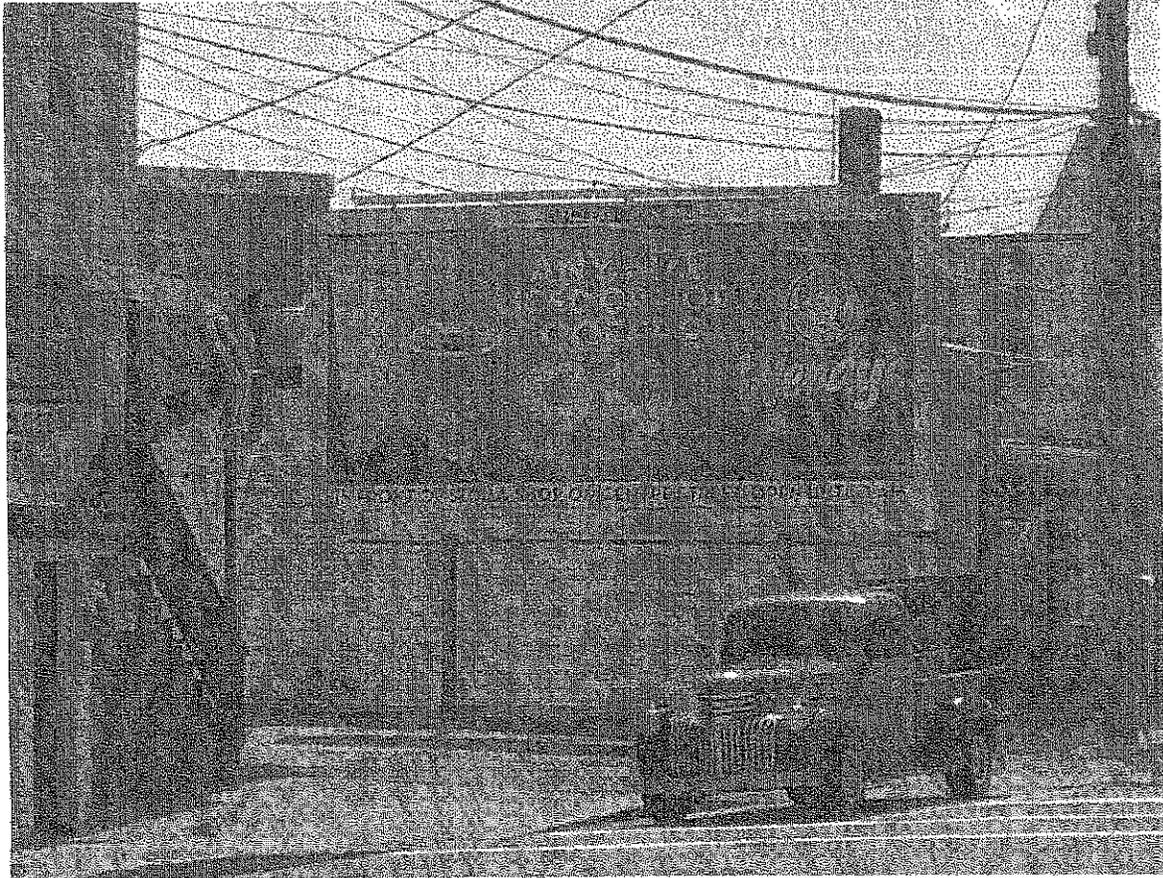
Traffic – There is an obvious need to address the traffic issue within two Business districts. As stated previously traffic is typically welcomed in the business districts, but solutions need to be identified separately for both North Abington and Abington Center on how to tap this resource. It is strongly recommended that the Town ask Old Colony Regional Planning Agency to conduct a downtown traffic analysis for both areas, particularly looking at ways to exploit the high traffic volumes into increase business for the existing local vendors. As we will mention further some techniques to look at are one way reconfigurations; public or shared parking; a wayfinding program; enhanced streetscapes and develop more community or quasi-public attractions in these two areas.

Signs – As planners we have found regulating signs as one of the more controversial issues we routinely face and Abington is no exception. Town officials want a more attractive sign inventory in their Town Centers and; local business want as much attention as they can get toward their businesses. If the Town wishes to move forward it could revise their sign by laws by restricting heights (25 is rather high for a downtown center); limit the square footage (40 square feet is again fairly large sign for a downtown center) and could provide more guidance regarding colors; types of signs and styles. Lastly, Abington could place the sign permitting through the Planning Board or even the Board of Selectman, if they desire even more control and continuity in their signage program.

Storefronts and Signs – It has been cited that there is a desire, especially from town Officials to make both Town Centers more attractive and appealing to the eye and consumer. Some of this can be done through zoning with signs, storefronts offer another challenge. Though some more affluent progressive communities have developed “form design” standards for their

downtowns through zoning, we do not feel such measures are appropriate for Abington at this time. Therefore, we suggest in its next round of CDBG programming the Town request monies to offer a 50% match to any business owner to upgrade either there existing sign and/or storefront. This would be administrated by the Towns CDBG consultant and if implemented would offer architectural standards to the business owner through the grant process. This type of program has been very successful in small cities such as Holyoke and Lowell and could easily be implemented in Abington. In fact, a relationship could be implemented with the local banking community to offer small interest free or low interest loans thought the banks Community Reinvestment Act to participating small businesses to help with their 50% match.





Parking – As in many Town Centers there is never enough parking and very problematic in finding solutions that are not cost prohibitive and meet the goals of the merchants. There seems to be some opportunities in North Abington for more public parking and certainly opportunities for shared downtown parking with the adjacent churches, banks and other businesses to make a significant impact. There also is an immediate need to better identify where public parking is located and in fact, signage to the businesses themselves should be improved in both areas. Therefore, we recommend that again Old Colony Regional Planning Council be asked to conduct a parking analysis of both downtown areas and look at establishing a “wayfinding” signage program in their analysis. Wayfinding can be defined as spatial problem solving. It is knowing where you are in an environment, knowing where your desired location

is, and knowing how to get there from your present location. This study could presumably be included in the traffic Study previously recommended.

Branding – More and more towns are trying to take advantage of every asset they have by developing for lack of a better word a “municipal marketing campaign” and in some cases have gone through the effort of reinventing themselves.

We found that since there seems to be a lack of identity in Abington, the town should conduct a branding exercise to find what identity it wishes to have and then take every effort to reinvent itself.

This can take the shape of signage; logos; advertising; videos; websites; social media etc. All would let the world and consumers know who and what Abington is all about.

Another initiative would be to develop more of a true Town Center where events are always held such as parades; concerts, and other community events. In addition future municipal public buildings should be situated in this center.

Business Roundtable – Thought there have been past efforts within the business community we strongly recommend that the Town administration facilitate monthly Business Roundtables, possible for each Town Center or for the Town as a whole. This would be an opportunity for the Town to have monthly, direct dealings with members of the business community to hear their concerns, help communicate Town proceedings and scheduled improvements and perhaps most importantly provide a forum for business to share their successes; share different business techniques and tell their stories.

It also has been beneficial to bring in resources to these meetings such as small business development; Chamber of Commerce’s; Small Business Loan Center; social media experts and marketing professionals all to help enhance the Town Centers.