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TO: Executive Office of Administration and Finance
Attn: Sean R. Cronin, Sr. Dep. Commissioner of Local Services

FR: Shaun A. Suhoski, Town Manager

RE: Close-out Report: EOAF Economic Development Planning Grant

DT: September 17, 2019



Background

In July 2017 the Executive Office of Administration and Finance (EOAF) awarded \$25,000 to the Town of Athol under Chapter 304 of the Acts of 2008, Section 2C, Item 1100-3001 to facilitate the development of a master plan for the so-called South Athol Road Jobs Corridor. The South Athol Road Jobs Corridor includes an undeveloped, 100-acre town-owned parcel known as the “Bidwell” site and hosts several larger manufacturing employers at its northern reach in downtown Athol.

The original intent was to leverage the EOAF funding and merge the planning effort with a concurrent feasibility study and assessment of a potential future interchange at South Athol Road and state Route 2, the only limited access east-west highway in northern Massachusetts.

Due to timing and substantial delays with the regional planning commission’s efforts to complete the interchange study the Town sought and was approved expansion of the economic development planning scope. To support the expanded planning area, the town of Athol supplemented the grant with a twenty percent local match allowing a total planning budget of \$30,000 for retention of a professional planning consultant as stipulated in the grant agreement.

Project Report

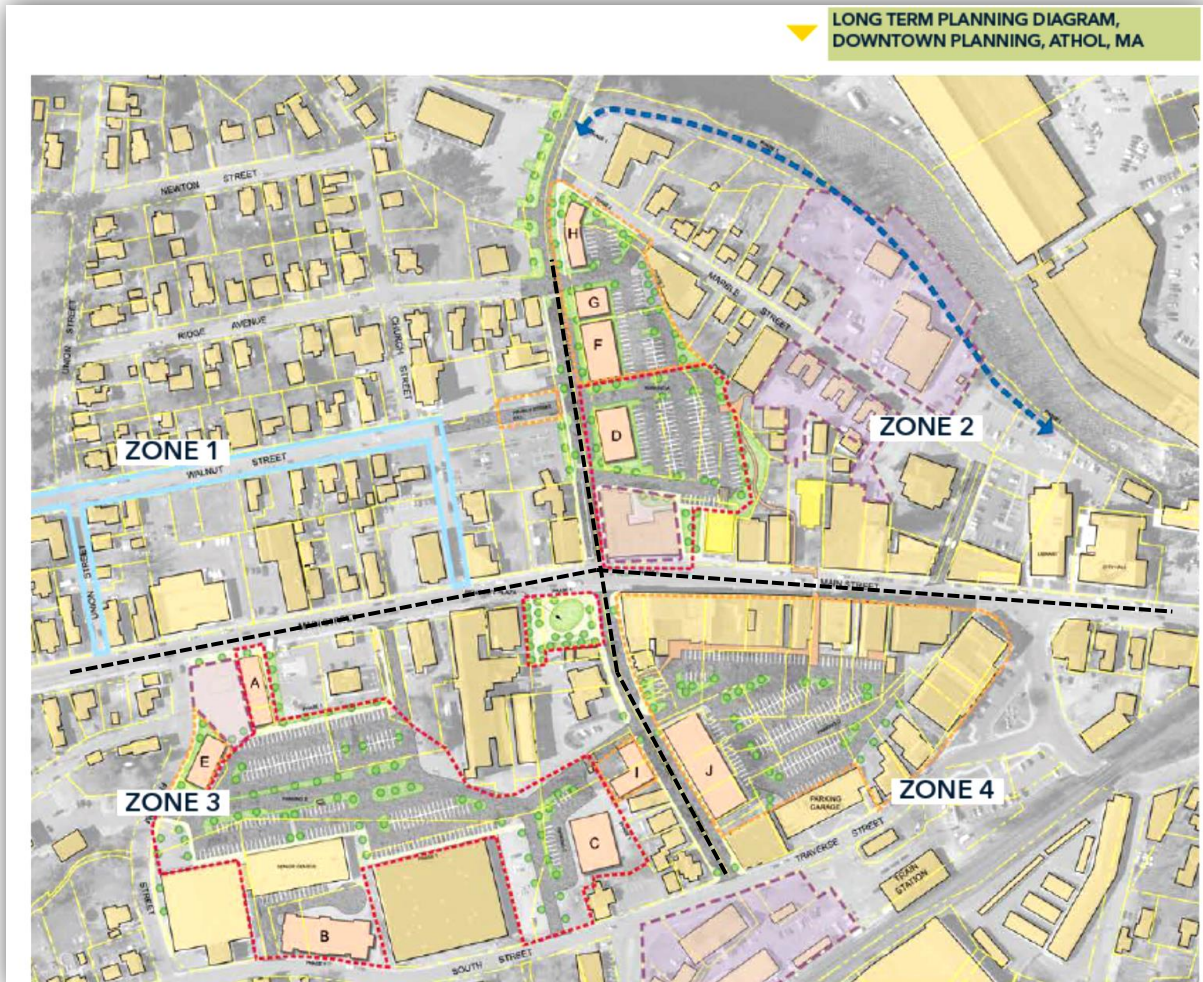
In spring 2018, the Town retained BSC Group (BSC) to undertake a broad set of conceptual planning initiatives to would bring clarity to a number of disparate economic development initiatives by bringing community input and elected policy-maker focus towards the initiative.

BSC assisted the Town with production of various graphics and conducted staff-level focus sessions that included management, planning, police, fire, building, zoning, conservation and other departments. These initial discussions then informed facilitated public outreach and input sessions including staff and BSC.

Due specifically to the lengthy delay in completion of the Route 2 interchange study – inextricably linked to any master planning effort for the South Athol Road Jobs Corridor – as well as the deadline to expend

grant funding, the Town focused its efforts on conceptual planning for the Bidwell site generally and within the downtown district more intensively.

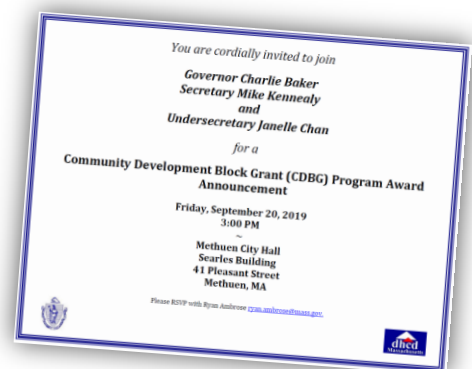
In the end, the EOAF investment coupled with the Town's matching funds, has resulted in clarification of priorities, a high-level introduction of potential uses at the Bidwell Site, community "buy in" towards the downtown action plan, and the leveraging of other resources to further the initial planning effort.



- Source: BSC Group, 2019

For example, the downtown planning enabled the community to envision the district as four distinct quadrants formed at the bi-section of Main Street and Exchange Street; each with its own initiatives either in process or planned as a direct result of the EOAF study:

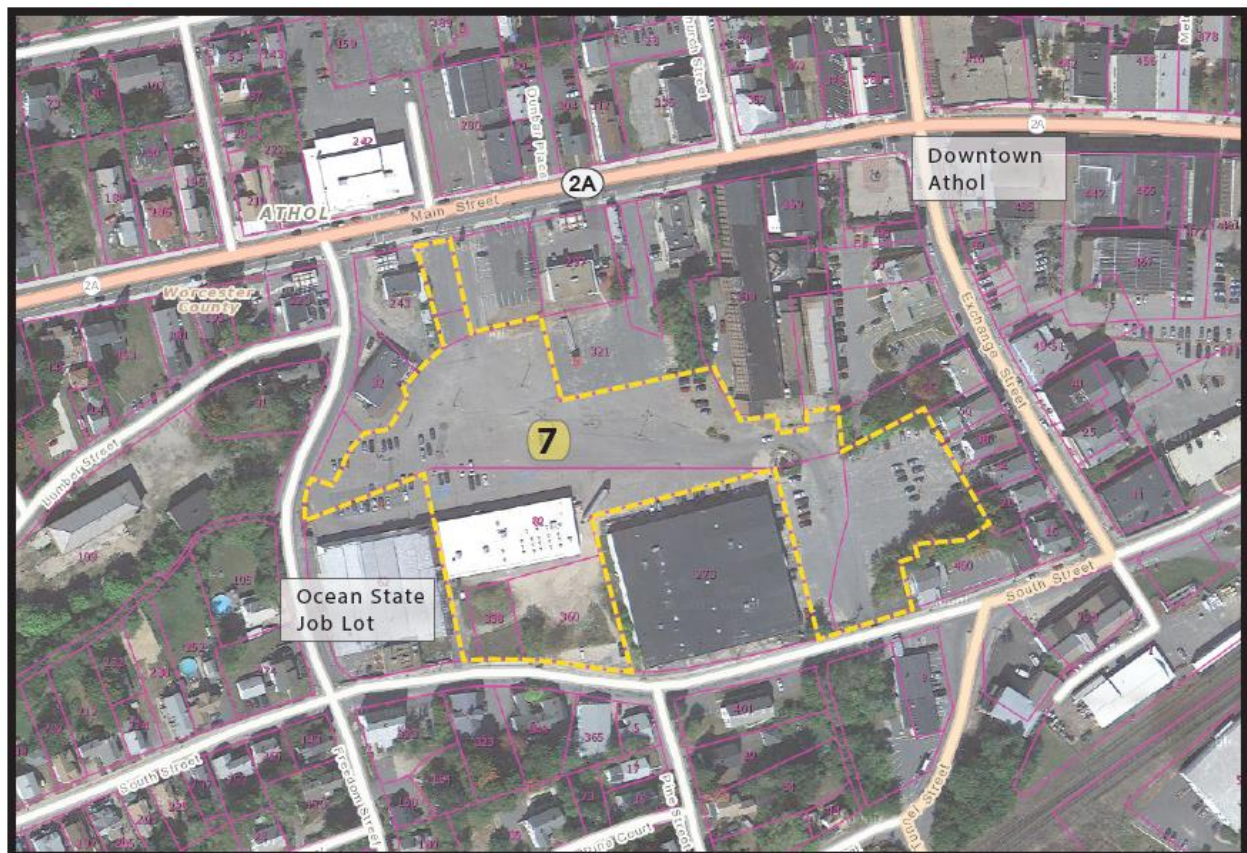
Zone One: Walnut and Church Street neighborhood. This older residential neighborhood is within the downtown target area qualified for Community Development Block Grant assistance under slum and blight designation. The reconstruction of Church Street, and design and engineering of the Walnut Street improvements, is the subject of a \$446,441 award to be announced on September 20.



Zone 2: Bordered by Main, Exchange, Marble and Island streets this area has seen substantial public investment with a \$900,000 CDBG full reconstruction of Marble Street completed in August 2019, and an ongoing \$3 million reconstruction of the Exchange Street Bridge currently at roughly 40 percent completion. The bridge project was funded through a local debt exclusion of \$2.64 million plus an allocation of Ch. 90 funds to meet the low bid.

Future plans here include a vision for a shared and improved parking area to service the existing Pequoig House apartment, a new brewery and tasting room planned for a fall opening on Marble Street, and to spur productive reuse of a vacant bank building and former church.

Zone 3: Primarily composed of the Lord Pond Plaza and its environs this is a commercial plaza located off Main Street, South Street and Freedom Street. The area is a time-worn reflection the strip development of the 1960s and 1970s. The Town owns a substantial portion of the parking field and a commercial building that once housed a supermarket but has since been renovated as the Athol Senior Center and to house the North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce and a Sherwin-Williams paint outlet.



7 Town of Athol property
Map 30 Lot 287 - Includes lots 258, 281, 288, 289, 294 & 454

- Source: Athol Dept. of Planning and Development

The above image is from a planning department slide showing the town-owned area of the plaza. The 2019 downtown planning study by BSC was effective in that it has created a top-level priority to channel traffic and reconfigure the parking field while potentially creating additional buildable lots.

Zone 4: This quadrant is bounded by Main, Exchange, South and Traverse streets. There are three adjoining lots with vacant and underutilized buildings on Exchange Street plus a large public parking area interior to the boundary roads. While there is great promise for future improvement in this zone the key recommendation from the study was to explore the potential for an Urban Renewal Plan. Towards this goal, the Town was awarded a DLTA grant through which the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) has initiated such effort.

Summary

The EOAF investment has already leveraged substantial gains in planning focus for Athol as well as corollary efforts to advance each of the above sectors. A copy of the BSC Group summary is incorporated into this close-out report as Attachment 2.

And, while the downtown planning efforts became a primary emphasis while the feasibility of a new interchange at Route 2 and South Athol Road was being analyzed, the Town was able to begin educating the public about the potential reuse of the Bidwell Site and South Athol Road in general. A copy of the BSC Group planning graphic illustrating a conceptual layout of the Bidwell Site is incorporated herein as Attachment 3.

Moving forward, with the recent completion of the “Route 2 at South Athol Road: Proposed Interchange Study,” the Town is prepared to initiate public education, outreach and discussion concerning future land use and development potential of the South Athol Road Jobs Corridor in general and the Bidwell Site in particular. A copy of the Route 2 interchange study is incorporated herein as Attachment 4.

The Town has utilized the \$25,000 EOAF investment to leverage additional local planning funds, to further economic development planning throughout the greater downtown area and to stimulate completion of an initial study for a future Route 2 interchange which will inform the actual development model for the South Athol Road Jobs Corridor and Bidwell Site.

The Town appreciates the collaborative partnership with the Commonwealth through the Community Compact program and also through the cooperation of all state agencies. If you or your department require anything further please let me know.

Sincerely,



Shaun A. Suhoski, Town Manager

Attached and incorporated by reference:

- Attachment 1: BSC Group – Scope of Work dated March 2018
- Attachment 2: BSC Group – Downtown Plan Summary
- Attachment 3: BSC Group – Bidwell Site Planning Diagram
- Attachment 4: MRPC – Route 2 / So. Athol Road Interchange Study, September 2019