

## **Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Program Action Grant Case Study**

**Municipality:** Athol, Massachusetts

**Project Title:** Greening Lord Pond Plaza, Phase 2

**Award Year (FY):** 2022/23

**Grant Award:** \$ 189,030

**Match:** \$ 78,858

**Match Source:** In-Kind (\$6,408) and Cash Match (\$72,450)

**One or Two Year Project:** Two Year

**Municipal Department Leading Project:** Planning and Development

**Project Website URL:** <https://lordpondplaza.wordpress.com/>

### **Community Overview:**

The Town of Athol is a typical New England historic manufacturing town with a population of 12,000. Athol is in the North Quabbin region of Central Massachusetts, 70 miles west of Boston. Athol's history as a mill town is characterized by its proximity to the Millers River, which meanders through the town in an east to west direction. Factories powered by the Millers River through the mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century established Athol's legacy as "Tool Town" by supporting numerous high-precision tool manufacturers, notably L. S. Starrett Company, which remains the town's largest local employer. Athol is an environmental justice community with socially vulnerable populations, low-income elderly populations, and teens/transition age youth.

### **Project Description and Goals:**

The Greening Lord Pond Plaza project is located at Lord Pond Plaza in downtown Athol. Bounded by Main Street, Exchange Street, South Street, and Freedom Street, the plaza is characterized by a paved parking area that supports a combination of uses including discount retail, restaurants, the North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce, the Athol Senior Center, a manufacturing building, historical mill buildings, and other various business types. Lord Pond Plaza was identified as a key source of climate vulnerability in the community during previous climate resilience planning initiatives in Athol. The goal of the project is to redevelop Lord Pond Plaza in a manner that addresses two key sources of climate exposure: extreme temperatures/urban heat island effect and inland/urban flooding due to extreme precipitation events. The effects of urban heat island effect and inland flooding present significant social, economic, and environmental vulnerability for the Town of Athol.

As described within Athol's climate resilience planning initiatives occurring from 2019-2020, the community identified Lord Pond Plaza as an important community feature that must become climate resilient to support future community prosperity. The use of nature-based solutions/green infrastructure, notably the daylighting of a buried stream channel that flows beneath the plaza, serves as an important mechanism to achieve project goals. Project stakeholders collaborated to identify solutions to enhance the climate resilience of Lord Pond Plaza while simultaneously promoting co-benefits to the community through measures such as public

recreation/gathering space, improving vehicular and pedestrian safety, and supporting existing and future business use. Drawing upon previous climate resilience planning in Athol, a key project feature was to conduct robust community engagement. The public engagement was structured in a way to inform stakeholders, abutters, and the public of the site design concept that will advance to construction in a future project phase. The project team worked with the North Quabbin Community Center (NQCC), the North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce, and the Athol Senior Center to hold a series of events – two public meetings and two meetings with abutters, a site walk, a presentation to the Athol Board of Selectmen, and a presentation at an NQCC forum. Rounding out the public engagement methodology, the project team created a dedicated project website, an ArcGIS Storymap, and rendered graphics of how Lord Pond Plaza would look once the project was built. As a key project partner, the North Quabbin Community Coalition expanded the visibility of this project within the region.

A two-year process, this project was delivered on time and within the approved budget.

### **Results and Deliverables:**

The Greening Lord Pond Plaza project resulted in the development of 100% design documents, construction specifications, and a cost estimate for the Town to proceed to the construction phase once funding is obtained.

Aligned with community goals for social resilience, the Greening Lord Pond Plaza addresses two key sources of climate exposure: extreme temperatures/urban heat island effect and inland flooding due to extreme precipitation events. The project design applies nature-based solutions that will daylight a section of Mill Brook, create wetlands and wildlife habitat, and increase flood storage and stormwater bioswales as part of the overall effort to produce more green space, address heat island effect, and provide passive recreational opportunities. In an urban setting, the work will provide flood attenuation, fish and wetland habitat, and improve stream connectivity. Additional co-benefits include a significant reduction of impervious surface at the plaza, increased tree canopy cover, improved vehicular and pedestrian safety, and additional opportunities for public gathering spaces.

As this is an ecological restoration project, it is estimated that the project will create close to 12,000 square feet of wetlands while daylighting over 500 linear feet of the perennial Mill Brook (currently culverted beneath the plaza). The current stormwater management system within the Project area consists of catch basins. One benefit of the proposed project is the construction of lower impact stormwater management features, which will provide stormwater capture and infiltration while also providing improvement to water quality. Stormwater will also be reduced through the conversion of approximately 53,000 square feet of currently paved surface into vegetated areas, including upwards of 80 new trees. The vegetation plantings will further reduce stormwater runoff quantities through uptake. Finally, areas of pollinator habitat will also be created providing habitat diversity and a source of food for insects and nectar feeding birds.

Project resources and deliverables for the Greening the Lord Pond Plaza Project are provided on the project website: <https://lordpondplaza.wordpress.com/>

### **Lessons Learned:**

There were two lessons learned from this project. First, not all public engagement strategies will be successful. Initially, we tried to incorporate Photovoice into our public engagement process. Photovoice is a participatory photography and digital storytelling platform. Despite providing information on Photovoice and blasting it out to the public, we did not receive any participation and had to switch our approach to alternative methods of public engagement – such as focusing on keeping our project website up to date and creating an ArcGIS Storymap for the project.

However, we were fortunate to have a dedicated, interested group of between twenty and thirty residents who made the effort to attend the public meetings over the course of the two years of the project. In addition, we had interested and engaged abutters who supported the goals of the projects but also understood the need to balance the benefits of a public infrastructure project with their business operations. Ultimately, this led to a better-designed project with realistic parking numbers, better site access and circulation, and increased safety for all plaza users.

Second, understanding the permitting process is critical to a smooth design process. Originally, we were unsure of what federal, state, and local permits might be triggered by the project design and budgeted for them all. Ultimately, we had budgeted for permitting that was not deemed necessary as the design progressed. Fortunately, we were able to work our MVP partners to re-direct this funding to enhance other project tasks.

### **Partners and Other Support:**

The North Quabbin Community Coalition (NQCC) was an important partner on this project. Located in Athol, the NQCC is a non-profit organization with a community-wide alliance committed to improving the quality of life for all those living and working in the North Quabbin region. In addition to drawing upon its vast network within the region to advertise project related events and information, the coalition organized a virtual forum for its partners, primarily public health advocates, to learn more about the Lord Pond Plaza project and ask questions during the design process. In addition, the NQCC incorporated project updates into its member mailings, distributing the project news to a larger contingent than the Town would have been able to reach on its own. The NQCC also advocated for the project and attended public meetings and abutters meetings.

The Town also worked with the Athol Senior Center to ensure that the Senior Center user needs were addressed in the final design and with the North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce, who helped represent the business community during the design process.

**Project Photos:**

- In your electronic submission of this report, please attach (as .jpg or .png) a few high-resolution (at least 300 pixels per inch) representative photos of the project. Photos should not show persons who can be easily identified, and avoid inclusion of any copyrighted, trademarked, or branded logos in the images. MVP may use these images on its website or other promotional purposes, so please also let us know if there is someone who should receive credit for taking the photo.

**The Final 100% Site Plan Concept has been provided as a separate pdf attachment. See pdf file entitled “6113003 - LM-Mcolor -Entrances-Option 1\_Rendered-plan-CD”. That Site Plan Concept is also on the Project website: <https://lordpondplaza.wordpress.com/> and has been uploaded to the EOEEA SharePoint webpage for our Greening Lord Pond Plaza Project.**