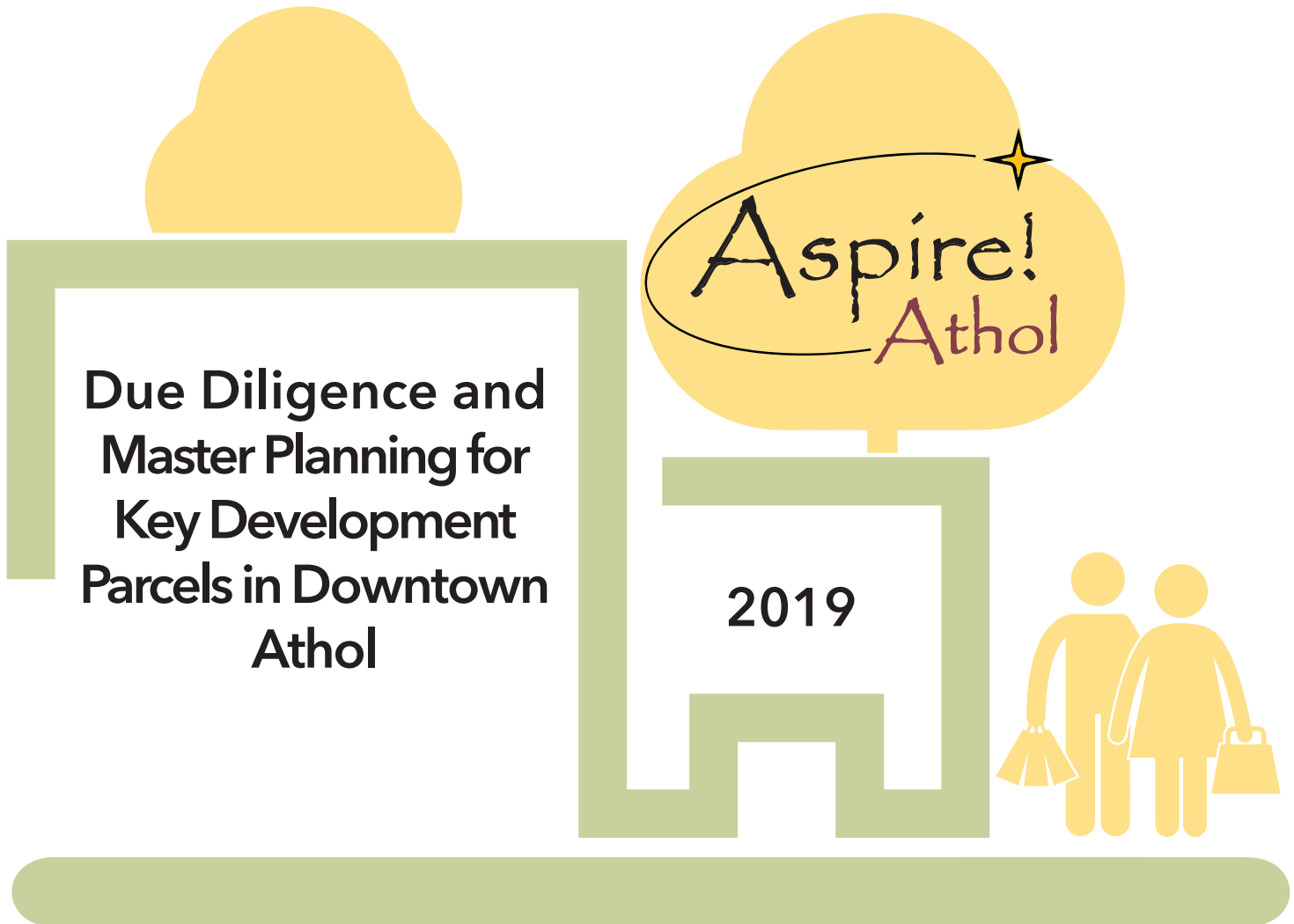


TOWN OF ATHOL, MA



Town of
ATHOL
Massachusetts





Poli, Domenic. "Group Aims to Rejuvenate Shopping Area." Greenfield Recorder. January 22, 2017. <https://www.recorder.com/Athol-committee-aims-to-make-downtown-thrive-7418515>.

T ABLE OF CONTENTS

PROJECT SUMMARY.....	05
EXISTING CONDITIONS....	07
A. OVERVIEW	
B. EXISTING LAND USE	
C. EXISTING ZONING	
CONCEPTUAL PLAN.....	15
PRIORITY ACTIONS.....	17
A. ZONE 1	
B. ZONE 2	
C. ZONE 3	
D. ZONE 4	
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	20
APPENDIX.....	21



"HISTORIC ATHOL." HISTORIC ATHOL. <http://intheclawofthetiger.blogspot.com/p/historic-athol-massachusetts.html>.

P ROJECT SUMMARY



Due Diligence and Master Planning for Key Development Parcels in Downtown Athol

BSC Group, Inc. (BSC) was contracted by the Town of Athol, MA (Town) to provide master planning services for the downtown area. This project was undertaken to support The Town's overall goal to foster and enhance a vibrant, downtown mixed-use district. Elements addressed in the master planning process included land uses, economic opportunities, urban design and public realm improvements.

This work was funded by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development and the Town of Athol

As part of its due diligence, BSC reviewed existing conditions and previous reports. This review included background work previously completed relative to the assessment of existing conditions in the Downtown, including a Downtown Athol Analysis of Economic and Market Conditions, prepared by FinePoint Associates; Technical Assistance Panel Report convened by the Urban Land Institute of Boston; and Downtown Athol: A Revitalization Plan by Millers River Consulting. These studies have provided a foundation to guide redevelopment activities.

In addition, BSC met with town officials to gain a better understanding of downtown development challenges, key properties considered either vacant or underperforming, and proposed public infrastructure investments in the area. BSC then analyzed this data and created a schematic conceptual design plan that incorporated proposed new building footprints on key parcels, traffic and pedestrian circulation and access, infrastructure improvements, parking, and open space.



EXISTING CONDITIONS PLAN,
DOWNTOWN PLANNING, ATHOL, MA



E

XISTING CONDITIONS

OVERVIEW

Downtown Athol

Downtown Athol, particularly along Main Street, has an attractive building stock with a mix of uses. Many of the buildings are of historic and cultural significance, and are named in the Massachusetts Historical Commission database known as the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System (MACRIS). These multi-story buildings provide character, along with density and a sense of place. Sidewalks align both sides of the street. Decorative street lights and street trees add to the walkability of the district.

Main Street is the civic heart of Athol – the Town Hall, the Public Library, the Post Office and the local YMCA are all present along this corridor. Several community institutions including churches and banks are also located in the downtown. Other uses include independently owned retail, restaurants, small businesses, and housing. The Millers River is nearby, providing the potential as an open space and visual asset, such as the current recreational path behind the Town Hall and the Library. However, the river is not easily visible nor accessible in other parts of downtown.

Lord Pond Plaza is a primarily town-owned parcel located just off Main Street. Presently, the Athol Senior Center, North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau and Sherwin-Williams Paint Store are located on the town-parcel. An Ocean State Job Lot is also found in the plaza, on privately-owned land. An abundance of parking exists at the plaza, and the land is generally perceived as underused.

For all its strengths and opportunities, Downtown Athol also has its challenges – commonly cited are lack of greenspace and public gathering space, low restaurant inventory, uncooperative landlords, ADA and accessibility concerns, and high vacancy rates, among others. Few businesses operate past 6 PM, and many businesses maintain inconsistent business hours. Additionally, perception of safety is a concern – particularly after dark from loiterers. On-street parking exists, but is perceived as inadequate.

E XISTING CONDITIONS

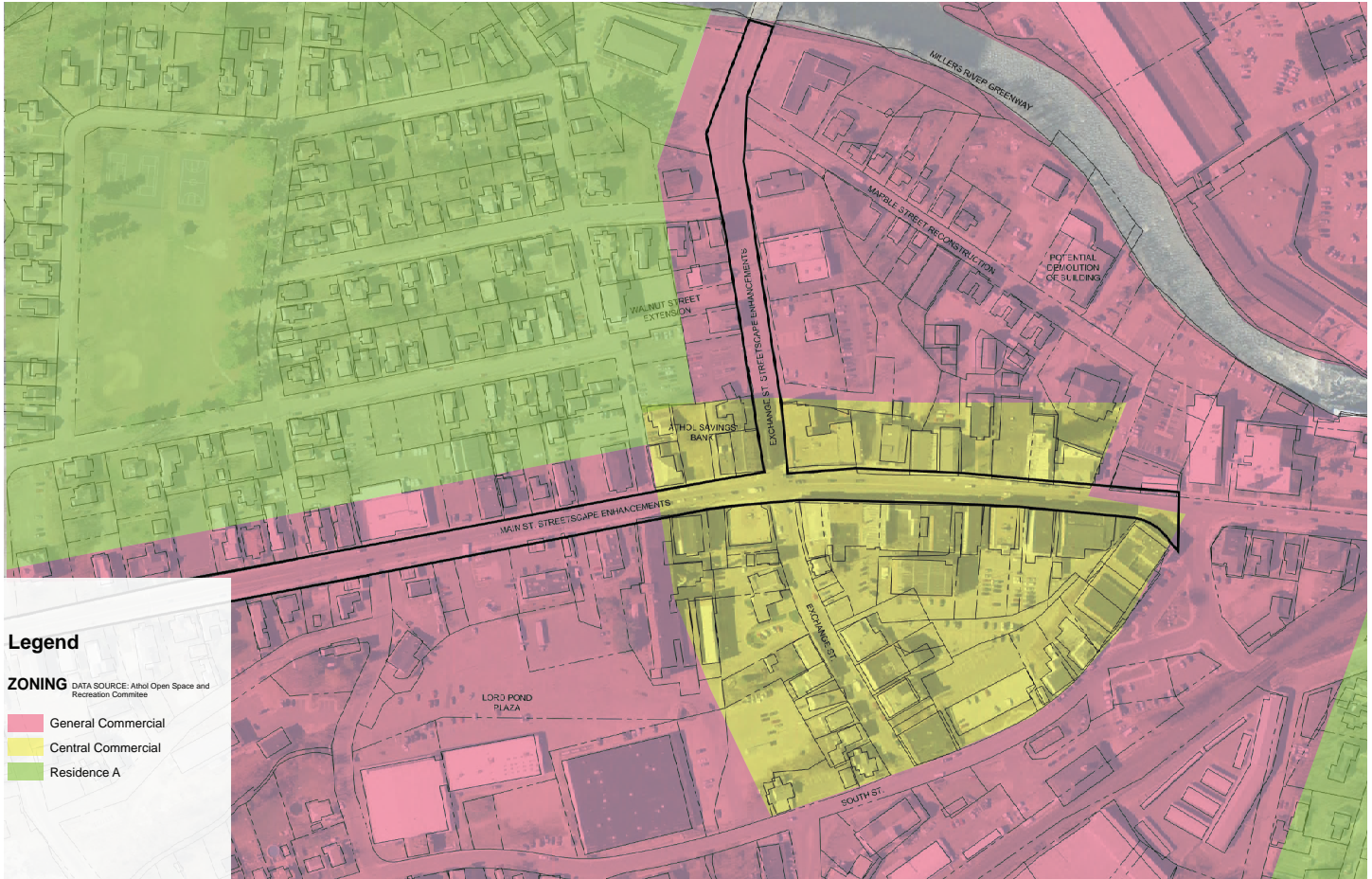
LAND USE



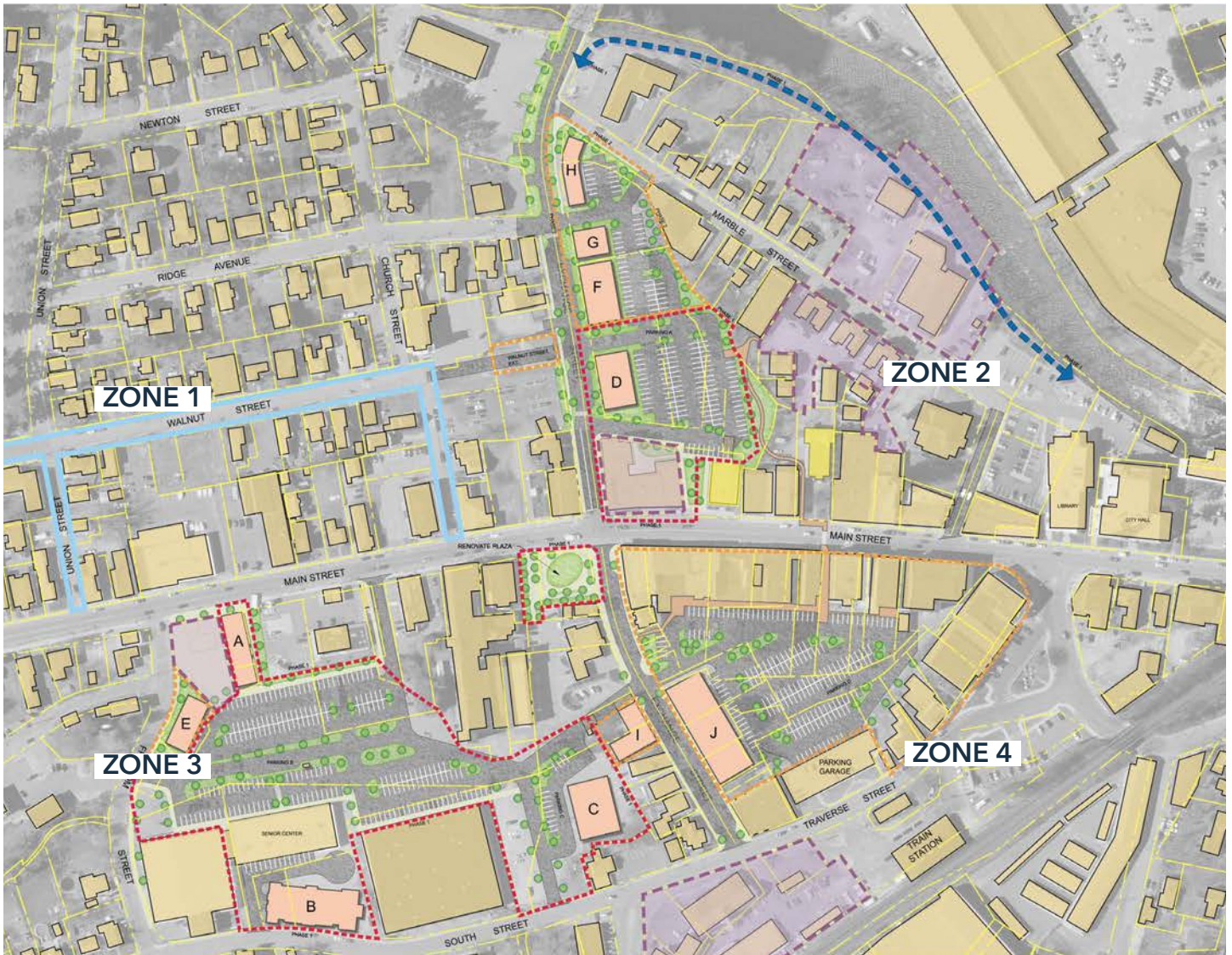
Downtown Athol has historically been a center for commercial and industrial commerce. The river has been an asset for the town's manufacturing base, and many of the buildings located in the downtown date from the industrial era of the early twentieth century. The current land use reflects its history, and is generally consistent with current zoning. Based upon the town's vision to foster an active mixed-use district downtown, ground floor commercial/restaurant/retail is recommended with either upper floor office and/or residential uses.

E XISTING CONDITIONS

ZONING



Three zoning districts are found in the subject area: General Commercial (G), Central Commercial (CA), and Multi-Family Residential (RA) zones. These zoning districts provide for a host of commercial, industrial, institutional, and residential uses. It is recommended that the Town re-consider allowed uses within the General Commercial (G) to avoid a by-right use that may conflict with adjacent uses, or the creation of a use that may not be desirable in the downtown location based upon the Town's vision for mixed-use development (e.g., motor vehicle-related sales/service, industrial storage/contractor's yard etc.)



LEGEND

- PROPOSED BUILDING
- PROPOSED PEDESTRIAN CONNECTION
- PROPOSED TREE
- PROPOSED RIVERWALK
- POTENTIAL PRIVATE REDEVELOPMENT
- VACANT BUILDING
- PHASE 1
- PHASE 2

PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

PHASE 1	
BUILDING A	5,200SF
BUILDING B	11,500SF
BUILDING C	7,700SF
BUILDING D	6,000SF
TOTAL PHASE 1	30,400SF
PHASE 2	
BUILDING E	4,000SF
BUILDING F	6,500SF
BUILDING G	3,000SF
BUILDING H	3,600SF
BUILDING I	4,400SF
BUILDING J	14,000SF
TOTAL PHASE 2	35,500±SF

PROPOSED PARKING

PARKING A	168
PARKING B	222
PARKING C	15
PARKING D	198
TOTAL	603

* AREAS SHOWN ARE FOR GROUND FLOOR ONLY

C ONCEPTUAL PLAN

Overall Plan

BSC completed an analysis that led to the creation of a conceptual plan for improvements to key parcels as well as the public realm within the downtown. The analysis considered potential development opportunities, streetscape improvements, traffic and pedestrian circulation, open space possibilities, and parking. BSC was conservative in its buildout analysis, looking to create a multi-phased, feasible plan for redevelopment.

Overall, BSC proposed two phases of development. The first phase identified the potential construction of 4 buildings (A-D), with building footprints totaling approximately 30,400 square feet. The second phase identified the construction of 6 buildings (E-J), with building footprints totaling approximately 35,500 square feet. It is important to note that BSC solely used ground floor square feet areas in its calculations.

Full buildout will depend on the number of stories built on the recommended building footprint. The focus of new building construction centered around infill development along the Exchange Street corridor as well as within the Lord Pond Plaza area.

Properties identified as potential private redevelopment (purple) and vacant (yellow) are considered transformative parcels. These parcels have the potential to act as a catalyst for follow-on investment, leading to positive change in the downtown.

BSC incorporated reconfigured parking areas in 3 locations near Main Street:

- Lord Pond Plaza (237 spaces)
- Exchange, Marble, and Main (168 spaces)
- Exchange, South, and Main (198 spaces)

The overall parking reconfiguration amounted to a total of 603 surface parking spaces, which nearly doubles the amount of public parking spaces within the downtown.



P RORITY ACTIONS

Priority actions have been broken out by zone quadrants on the concept plan. These actions are related to the public realm; and fall under the town's control. Funding sources, both real and potential are also identified.

ZONE 1

The priority action for this planning quadrant includes infrastructure improvements in the Walnut Street neighborhood. The planned work consists of new water and sewer mains, drainage improvements, sidewalks, curbs, and street pavement.

Within this zone, improvements are planned along Walnut Street, Canal Street (Main to Walnut), Union Street (Main to Walnut) and Church Street. The anticipated funding source is Community Development Block Grant (CDBG).

Short- to mid-term, the Town will have to evaluate the potential reuse of the Fire Department building on Exchange Street versus the demolition and extension of the Walnut Street roadway.

ZONE 2 PRIORITY ACTION PLAN



P RORITY ACTIONS

Priority actions have been broken out by zone quadrants on the concept plan. These actions are related to the public realm; and fall under the town's control. Funding sources, both real and potential are also identified.

ZONE 2

The priority action for this planning quadrant is streetscape improvements to Marble Street. The Town received CDBG funding and committed a match of Chapter 90 local funding to rehabilitate water, sewer, drainage, sidewalks and roadway infrastructure on Marble Street from Island Street to Exchange Street.

In addition, the Town is focused on the consolidation of parking between Main Street, Marble Street, and Exchange Street. To that end, the Town should engage the various property owners to collaborate and create a reconfigured surface parking lot to accommodate more users. BSC also recommends that the Town develop accessible walkways to and from public parking areas to facilitate re-development of the vacant parcels within this block.

Since underused and vacant properties are in this area, an enhanced public realm and additional parking could spur development opportunities. Future actions proposed include streetscape improvements along Exchange Street, including but not limited to, a reduction in the width of vehicle travel lanes, additional on-street parking, crosswalks, wider sidewalks, and street trees; and an extended riverwalk trail running from the parking lot adjacent to the Library to Exchange Street, as a potential open space opportunity in the heart of the downtown.

Portions of this zone fall into the 100-year and 500-year floodplain. The Town has received a Municipal Vulnerability Grant (MVP) to plan for and implement climate change resilience projects through this State program.

Potential State programs and funding opportunities for proposed improvements in this quadrant include but are not limited to Complete Streets, Urban Renewal, CDBG, Massworks, Economic Development Incentive Program (EDIP), Historic Preservation, Placemaking, and Environmental (parks, hazard mitigation, and climate resiliency). In addition, Exchange Street and Main Street are federal-aid eligible roadways



P

PRIORITY ACTIONS

Priority actions have been broken out by zone quadrants on the concept plan. These actions are related to the public realm; and fall under the town's control. Funding sources, both real and potential are also identified.

ZONE 3

The priority action for this planning quadrant is the reconfiguration of the parking and traffic circulation around the Lord Pond Plaza. Safety, access, and through-traffic are present concerns. There are at least 8 access points into and out of the plaza, and some drivers use it as a cut-through to avoid traffic on Main Street. A reconfiguration will restrict and regulate vehicular access, providing mid-block entry/exit from Freedom Street, Main Street, Exchange Street and South Street.

Other planned improvements include walkways and line striping to enhance pedestrian safety and calm traffic. A designated bus stop with a shelter within this lot will provide a safe location for bus riders.

The Town owns a significant portion of this plaza, however, it is important to note that a private parcel will either need to be acquired or the property owner will need to grant an easement or lease for the reconfiguration of the parking spaces to occur as shown in the concept plan.

Currently, Veterans' Park is a hardscape plaza at the corner of Exchange Street and Main Street. The renovation of this park provides an opportunity to incorporate public art and greenspace. Infill development opportunities have been identified on town-owned land in the near-term, with future infill development opportunities in the longer-term.

The Mill Brook flows under the Lord Pond Plaza. As such, the majority of the site is within a 500-year floodplain. This susceptibility should be considered and incorporated into any infrastructure improvements at the site, as well as through the Town's MVP planning efforts.

Potential State programs and funding opportunities for proposed improvements in this quadrant include but are not limited to Complete Streets, Urban Renewal, CDBG, Massworks, Parks/Open Space, Environmental, Placemaking, and Business Incentives. In addition, Exchange Street and Main Street are federal-aid eligible roadways.



P

RRIORITY ACTIONS

Priority actions have been broken out by zone quadrants on the concept plan. These actions are related to the public realm; and fall under the town's control. Funding sources, both real and potential are also identified.

ZONE 4

The priority action plan for this planning quadrant is currently underway. The Town has received a District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA) Planning Grant from the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission to consider an urban renewal approach for the area bounded by Main Street, Exchange Street, and South Street.

Identified improvements include the reconfiguration of the public parking within this area, the demolition of three underused buildings to create a larger development parcel, and enhanced pedestrian connections from the public parking to Main Street and throughout the downtown business corridor.

Potential State programs and funding opportunities for proposed improvements in this quadrant include but are not limited to Complete Streets, Urban Renewal, CDBG, Massworks, Parks/Open Space, and Business Incentives. In addition, Exchange Street and Main Street are federal-aid eligible roadways.

Generally, it is recommended that the Town pursue funding to convert to LED street lights to address the perception that downtown is unsafe.

R ECOMMENDATIONS

BSC recommends the following actions moving forward :

- **Zoning Evaluation** – The Town should complete an evaluation of its zoning ordinance relative to downtown development and allowable uses per the zoning code. Some by-right uses within certain zoning districts may not be considered conducive to promoting a vibrant, mixed-use downtown district. Additionally, many lots are split-zoned lots, which makes permitting more difficult. Parking requirements should be evaluated in downtown zoning districts. The Central Commercial (CA) district is the only zoning district where off-street parking provisions do not apply. In order to maintain the downtown character and sense of place, the Town should evaluate whether adaptive reuse, density bonuses, and/or historic preservation incentives would be beneficial to incorporate into zoning.
- **Additional Funding Sources** – The Town has been able to leverage grant programs in the past relative to downtown development, and should continue to seek creative funding sources and mechanisms to promote its vision. For instance, the Town may choose to leverage revenue from downtown marijuana businesses to assist with downtown improvements.
- **District Improvement Financing (DIF) Program** – The Town should explore the feasibility of implementing a District Improvement Financing (DIF) program to capture funding for public improvements within the downtown. DIF is a locally-enacted tool that enables a municipality to identify and capture incremental tax revenues from new private investment in a specific area and direct these revenues to public improvements and economic development projects.
- **Urban Renewal** – In order to create an incentive to development, the Town should consider the creation of a downtown urban renewal area, through the Commonwealth's Urban Renewal Program. This tool would allow the Town to use eminent domain as a tool to leverage private investment in the area.
- **Decorative Lighting** – The Town should seek to adopt a decorative lighting program. This would not only increase the level of nighttime security and safety, but it could also highlight the architecture and public spaces along the Main Street corridor. Through the use of strategic building uplighting, retail storefront displays, and stringing of white lights within trees and on street lights, the downtown environment would be enhanced without fear of overlighting. The Town could also collaborate with the downtown business community to promote parklet opportunities (temporary use of on-street parking to create a pocket park) in strategic locations, as well as create opportunities for downtown programming, including pop-up shops, vendor fairs, concerts road races, and movie/game nights, among others.



- Placemaking – Aesthetic improvements are recommended along the Main Street and Exchange Street corridors, specifically due to retail presence as well as the capacity for commercial/residential redevelopment. These are primary pedestrian pathways where sidewalk expansion, landscaping, and pedestrian amenities will have the biggest impact on the public realm experience. With small-scale, low-cost ideas, the Town can enhance the public realm. The Town should explore the feasibility of implementing the following measures:

1. Downtown planters for seasonal color
2. Additional landscaping/street trees
3. Business façade/storefront program
4. Streetscape amenities – trash receptacles, benches, etc.
5. Complete Streets recommendations, such as bicycle sharrows or other accommodations
6. Outdoor dining
7. Public art, including murals on buildings, and art between buildings and across streets
8. Downtown banner program
9. Beautification of alleyways/walkways to and from public parking lots



A PPENDIX

- **BSC Meeting with Town Officials –**
July 31, 2018
- **Downtown Planning Forum –**
May 14, 2019



Attendees:

Doug Walsh – Superintendent DPW	Richard Kilhart – Asst. Superintendent DPW
Deb Vondal – Health Agent	David Small – Downtown Vitality Committee/ Planning Board
John Duguay – Fire	Jean Shaughnessy – Historical Commission
Eric Smith – Town Planner	Linda Overing – CDBG Consultant
Shaun Suhoski – Town Manager	Heather Gould – BSC Group

Discussion:

- Short-Term Plan; Interest in Complete Streets (Town has not yet adopted)
 - Town Manager wants to leverage public-private investment; envisions mixed-use downtown district
 - Eric Smith working with Downtown Committee
- Resources:
 - CDBG Target Area Downtown – Marble Street CDBG Grant
 - Water/sewer/drainage upgrades, sidewalks
 - \$25K EOHED Grant, primarily for Bidwell Site
 - MassDevelopment – Site Readiness Program?
 - \$3M for Exchange Street Bridge
- **Focus area: Marble Street, Exchange Street, Main Street and Island Street**
 - What are the key properties?
 - Brewery
 - Batchelder Property near River
 - Extend walkway along River from Library – is this feasible/can it be done?
 - New Fire Station (2 bays – one Fire, one EMS w/sleeping quarters)
 - Athol Daily News/Press properties – ideal spot for new fire station?
 - Annex to Police Department?
 - Within floodplain, has flooded 2x since 2005
 - Old Fire Station Building
 - Demo and extend Walnut Street? Is it historic?
 - Need for more parking downtown (municipal?) off of Metropolitan Court
 - Athol Savings Bank building – Reach out to Bank to determine what it is doing with building and adjacent private parking lots?
 - Unitarian Church – for sale. Can (should) it be demolished to provide for access to parking off of Metropolitan Court?
 - Housing Strategy – How to increase density? Zoning very restrictive for residential downtown
 - Range of housing options
 - Stucco residential buildings on Marble Street – owner tried to sell, getting older, up to code as of moment
 - Market-rate development?
 - Multi-unit buildings to bring folks with disposable income downtown
 - Homelessness a concern
 - Plan for improved streetscape and lighting

- Open Space plan – connecting to Complete Streets Policy?
- Intersection of Exchange/Marble – Opportunity for traffic calming and reducing amount of pavement?
- Parking Management – Peak Demand? Can private parking lots be used by public after hours for off-peak businesses – i.e. brewery?

List of Next Steps:

- Explore Walnut Street/Shore Drive Traffic Circulation
 - Town officials to meet with Athol Savings Bank?
- Zoning Analysis/Review of Downtown zoning
- Parking Area behind ASB off Metropolitan Court – how to improve connectivity?
- Lord Pond Plaza
- *Public engagement - once concepts are on paper?*



To: Shaun Suhoski, Town Manager, Town of Athol, MA
From: Heather Gould, Director of Planning, BSC Group
Re: Downtown Planning Forum – May 14, 2019

Date: May 24, 2019
Proj. No.

Recorded Comments/Notes

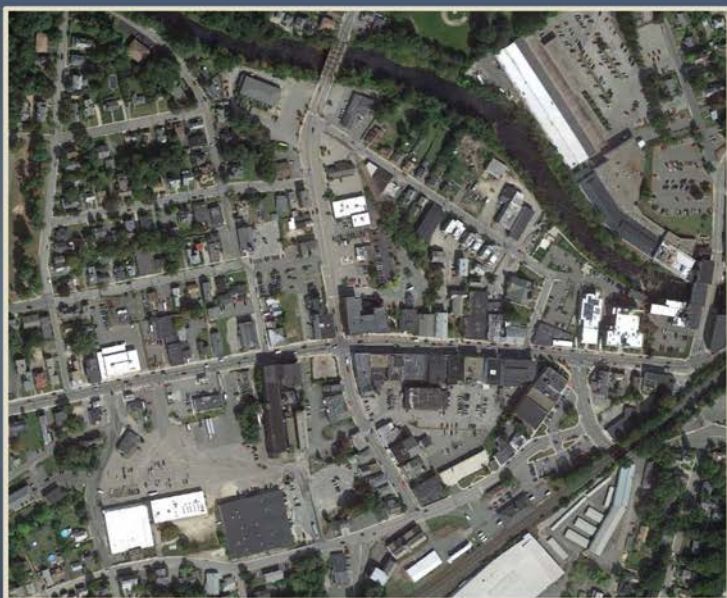
Shaun Suhoski, Town Manager, started the meeting by explaining the project. Heather Gould and Jef Fasser (BSC Group) presented further detail about the planning process and recommendations being presented. A copy of the slides from the presentation are attached to this memorandum.



After the presentation, Mr. Suhoski opened the forum for questions/comments/thoughts from the audience. A bulleted summary of the discussion is as follows:

- The Farmer's Market would benefit by having a downtown public space to operate within. Would like to see a public gathering space downtown as there is presently no downtown common.
- From a tenant in a storefront on Main Street: Very old building stock downtown that lacks accessibility. Q: Are there any incentives available to property owners to enhance their buildings?
 - Eric Smith, Town Planner, mentioned he was looking to implement a local historic district, which would create an avenue for property owners to utilize historic tax credits for renovation.
 - Jef Fasser, BSC Group – One other program he is aware of is another community established a small business loan program through landfill tipping fees – could a similar setup result from the revenue that the Town will bring in from the marijuana companies?
 - North Quabbin Loan Fund
- Would like for Town to create an environment that is conducive to development. For the unrented/vacant storefronts on Main Street near Exchange, would like to see restaurant/retail use.
- Fire Station – Locate a substation downtown? Could there be a broader scope public use building near Exchange and Marble Streets? Preliminary study being looked at presently for a substation, not a HQ.
 - Has there been any thought to accommodating a larger public safety facility in an existing site, like at the location of the Police Station?
- Would like to see Island Street widened.
- Walnut Street is a largely residential street. Concerned about connecting Walnut Street to Exchange Street. Would like to move traffic off Main Street, but also find a way to keep the traffic out of the nearby residential neighborhoods.
- Would like the Town to create good, safe parking so there are front doors and back doors that act as second front doors for additional business support.
 - Eric Smith - Downtown Parking Management Plan – Stantec

- New uses/activities downtown – What would stakeholders like to see?
 - Café, men's clothing store, shoe store, boutiques, specialty retail/restaurant (ex. Hudson – Rail Trail and micro-creamery)
- Inaccessibility is an impediment to any building use on Main Street. Would like to see the Town help building owners address it.
- All for anything that eliminates the carnival coming to the Lord Pond Plaza.
- Parking Lot D – If it is going to be a municipal lot, it should be a municipal lot in ownership, because it is not presently.
- Any thoughts on the casket factory building?
 - Would be a great housing project
 - Right now, it's operational. Talk to building owners to see if they have any plans for it.
- More open space in Downtown Athol would change downtown for the better.
- Marble Street – Residential component but also potential development between Marble Street and River for business/commercial use.
- Is it time for Athol to think about design guidelines?
- How do you attract business downtown? Wherever you go, talk Athol up – be an Athol ambassador!



Town of Athol
Downtown Planning Forum
May 14, 2019



Long Term Planning



Phased Approach

- Streetscape
- Parking
- Open Space (Park/River)
- Development Opportunities



Zone 1










1. CDBG Streetscape
2. Church Street
3. Walnut Street

LEGEND	
	PROPOSED BUILDING
	PROPOSED PEDESTRIAN CONNECTION
	PROPOSED TREE
	PROPOSED RIVERWALK
	POTENTIAL PRIVATE REDEVELOPMENT
	VACANT BUILDING
	FY19 CDBG PROJECT
	PHASE 1
	PHASE 2



Zone 2

1. Parking
2. Riverwalk
3. Development Parcels

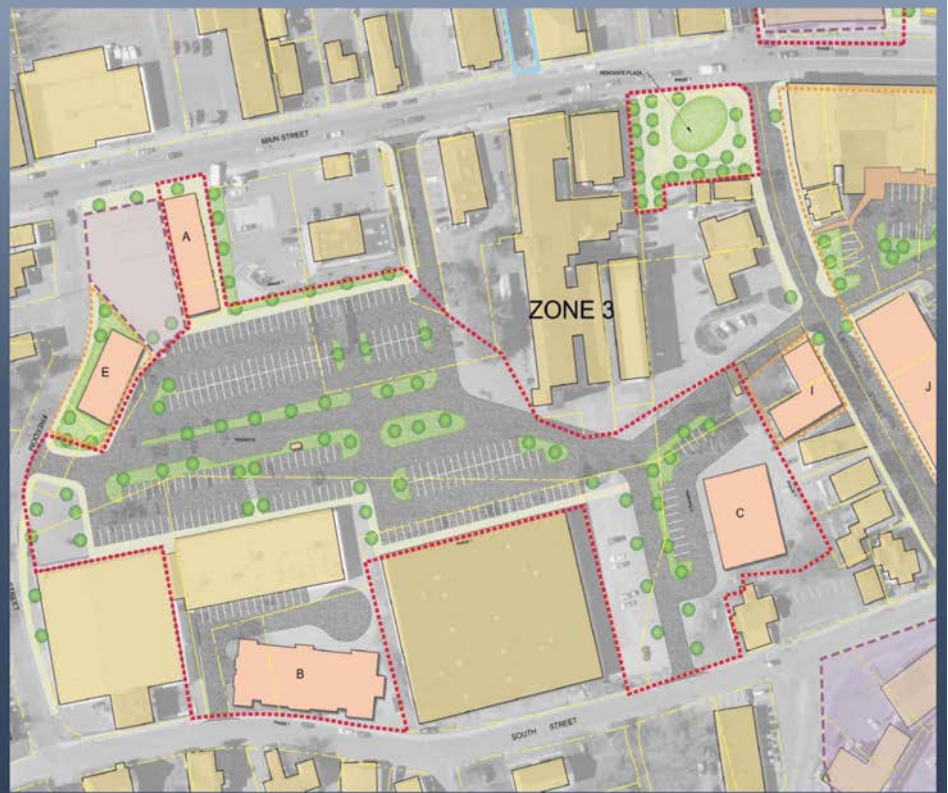
LEGEND	
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	PROPOSED TREE
	PROPOSED RIVERWALK
	POTENTIAL PRIVATE REDEVELOPMENT
	VACANT BUILDING
	FY19 CDBG PROJECT
	PHASE 1
	PHASE 2



Zone 3

1. Parking
2. Veterans' Park
3. Development
Parcels (Phase 1)

LEGEND	
	PROPOSED BUILDING
	PROPOSED PEDESTRIAN CONNECTION
	PROPOSED TREE
	PROPOSED RIVERWALK
	POTENTIAL PRIVATE REDEVELOPMENT
	VACANT BUILDING
	FY19 CDBG PROJECT
	PHASE 1
	PHASE 2



Zone 4

1. Parking
2. Streetscape
3. Development
Parcels (Phase 2)

LEGEND	
	PROPOSED BUILDING
	PROPOSED PEDESTRIAN CONNECTION
	PROPOSED TREE
	PROPOSED RIVERWALK
	POTENTIAL PRIVATE REDEVELOPMENT
	VACANT BUILDING
	FY19 CDBG PROJECT
	PHASE 1
	PHASE 2



Full Buildout

PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

PHASE 1	
BUILDING A	5,200SF
BUILDING B	11,500SF
BUILDING C	7,700SF
BUILDING D	6,000SF
TOTAL PHASE 1	30,400SF

PHASE 2	
BUILDING E	4,000SF
BUILDING F	6,500SF
BUILDING G	3,000SF
BUILDING H	3,600SF
BUILDING I	4,400SF
BUILDING J	14,000SF
TOTAL PHASE 2	35,500±SF

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PROPOSED PARKING

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PARKING B	222
PARKING C	15
PARKING D	198
TOTAL	603



Questions?

