

# ACTON

## COMMUNITY BRANDING & WAYFINDING PROJECT FINAL REPORT 2024

Prepared by Favermann Design

Funded by MA Downtown Initiative Program of:



**Commonwealth of Massachusetts**  
Executive Office of  
Economic Development

## BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

A shared community story is that the first two battles of the American Revolution were fought at the Towns of Concord and Lexington, but the Patriotic men of Acton played a significant role in the fighting. This now suburban small town's history has been strategically intertwined with its growth, neighbors, region, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

The area in and around what is now the Town of Acton is the site of human habitation for at least 7000 years. The various rivers in the area, including the Sudbury, Concord, Assabet, etc., were used by Native Americans as part of their annual migration patterns. Prior to European colonists, the Massachusetts tribe of the Algonquins lived throughout Eastern Massachusetts. The Pawtucket people lived in Acton.



*Acton Town Hall built 1863 in Acton Center*

An epidemic killed almost 90% of the Native Americans in eastern Massachusetts around 1615. It is thought to be viral hepatitis that was introduced by European traders and sailors. A Smallpox epidemic swept through in 1633 and further devastated the region's Native population.

Concord was the first inland settlement of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It encompassed the present-day towns of Acton, Lincoln, and Carlisle as well. Concord farmers used the land which is now Acton as grazing fields for their animals. The first permanent residents of Acton settled in the area in 1639.

During the mid-17th century, colonists began converting Native Americans to Christianity. The converted Indians were settled into towns became known as 'Praying Indian Towns'. One of these towns, Nashobah, straddled the now town line between Acton and Littleton.

Every resident of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was required to attend Sunday Services as well as support through taxation the colony's official religion Congregationalism. With difficult travel along colonial roads, the Sunday attendance became a burden for the residents of what would become Acton. These residents petitioned the Colony's General Court for the right to have their own meeting house and to hire their own minister. With the approval of the General Court, Acton was incorporated as an independent town on July 3, 1735.

Acton has held Annual Town Meetings since 1735. As colonists and Great Britain's relations became more and more strained, in May 1774, the British Parliament passed a law which made it illegal for colonists to hold Town Meetings and to legislate their own affairs. In defiance, the Town of Acton held a series of Town Meetings where they elected a representative to the illegal Provincial Congress and began to raise a local militia. The Town of Acton also sent a list of grievances to King George III on October 3, 1774. The anniversary of this day is celebrated in Acton as Crown Resistance Day.

On April 19, 1775, a company of Minutemen from Acton responded to the call to arms initiated by Paul Revere who rode with other riders, William Dawes and Samuel Prescott. Prescott was the only one of the three who was able reach Acton. The Acton group fought at the North Bridge in Concord. The Acton





*Battle of Concord and Lexington*

Minutemen were led by Captain Isaac Davis. When a company was needed to lead the advance on the bridge which was defended by the British regulars, Captain Davis was heard to reply, "I haven't a man who is afraid to go."

Advancing on the bridge, the men from Acton were in the front lines, since they were the only company completely outfitted with bayonets. In the exchange of musket fire that followed, Captain Isaac Davis and Private James Hayward were killed and Abner Hosmer, also of Acton, was mortally wounded. Thus, Isaac Davis was the first officer to die in the American Revolutionary War.

Each Patriot's Day on the 3rd Monday in April, the Acton Minutemen lead a march from Acton Center to the Old North Bridge in Concord. This route is known as the Isaac Davis Trail.

After the Revolutionary War, the Town of Acton continued to grow in population. By the mid-19th century, Acton was an industrial center for the production of wooden barrels. There were also three grist mills and four sawmills in town. One became the first large-scale manufacturer of woolen cloth in the country. Gun powder mills (1835-1940) were located along the Assabet River, in the southernmost part of Acton. This operation became well known as American Powder Mills, with business offices located in both Boston and Chicago.

The Town of Acton was also instrumental in the development of the modern-day pencil industry. Acton resident Ebenezer Wood automated the pencil-making process at his mill in North Acton. Wood became the first to use a circular saw to speed the cutting and a gluing process that could make 144 pencils at once. His process improvements created pencils in either hexagonal or octagonal shapes. In the latter half of the century, industry continued to grow in Acton with the establishment of a cigar factory and a piano stool factory among others.

In 1843, the Fitchburg Railroad came to Acton serving the mills. South Acton became a busy commerce center with the construction of the Marlborough Branch Railroad that ran from South Acton through Maynard, Stow, and Hudson to reach its terminus at the city of Marlborough. The increased traffic led to further commercial development in the area allowing new stores to be established.



*Memorial Monument to Revolutionary Heroes*



*Memorial Public Library*



*Bruce Freeman Rail Trail*

Eventually, two other railroads bisected Acton-- the Framingham and Lowell and the Nashua, Acton, and Boston Railroads. The Framingham and Lowell was part of the Northern Division of the Old Colony Railroad which eventually became a subsidiary of the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad (later The New Haven Railroad). Today, the Framingham and Lowell right-of-way is known as the extremely popular Bruce Freeman Rail Trail (BFRT).

In 1850, when the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, Acton Town Meeting passed a set of resolutions condemning the Act. The governor of Massachusetts, John C. Andrew, urged all towns to prepare their militia units for the threatening war. Acton followed up on this. On April 12,

1861, the Civil War Began. On April 15, President Lincoln issued a call for 75,000 volunteers. By 7:30 the next morning, Captain Tuttle with his entire command of 52 men reported to Lowell, fully equipped and ready for duty. Company E of Acton of the 6th Massachusetts Militia was the first company of the first regiment of the Union Army to arrive in Washington after the President's call.

Additionally, Acton reservists were among the troops at Fort Sumter when it was fired upon.

After the Civil War, Acton continued to grow and prosper. During that time, the town established its first newspaper The Acton Patriot, many new shops and stores were established, and several elegant Victorian homes were built. In 1890, the Memorial Library in Acton was completed and given to the town by wealthy publisher William A. Wilde as a memorial to the Acton soldiers who fought and died during the Civil War.



*Brookside Shops, East Acton*

During the early years of 20th Century, Acton was primarily an agriculturally based community. The following years saw substantial growth and change in the town. In 1901, a Board of Health was established. In 1912, after prolonged debate, a Water District was established which provided water to the villages. Unlike many other towns, Acton had excellent roads due to a contribution from a former Acton resident Alvin Nothrop. He donated money to the town of Acton to purchase a stone crusher for improving local roads. Because of this contribution, With the advent of the automobile, the railroads serving Acton fell into decline. The Nashua and Acton line was completely abandoned in the mid-1920s while passenger service ceased on the Framingham and Lowell line in the 1930s.

Each village had its own elementary school, but it was not until 1925 that an Acton High School was established. Prior to that Acton students went to Concord for secondary school. Today, the Town of Boxborough and the Town of Acton are in a consolidated school system.



*West Acton*

Acton experienced enormous growth in the last half of the 20th Century largely caused by the growth in industry in suburban areas - facilitated by the construction of Route 128. Acton did not attract a large number of industrial sites itself because of its limited water supply. Instead, Acton became a bedroom community with an increased housing demand due to the Baby Boom and the Cold War. As GI-Bill educated women and men in Boston and its inner suburbs entered the employment sector, they found housing in their hometowns expensive and tight. This led many to look beyond Rt 128





*Variety of Acton Houses*

which was being absorbed into the Interstate system as a portion of Interstate-95. At the same time, the growth of high technology, DoD and information industry contractors resulted in a large increase in college-educated professionals seeking housing within commuting distance. To meet this demand and benefit financially, a lot of Acton's farmland began to be developed into housing developments.

In 1954, the Town established a Planning Board which developed regulations regarding the development of subdivisions. Large bedroom community subdivision followed.

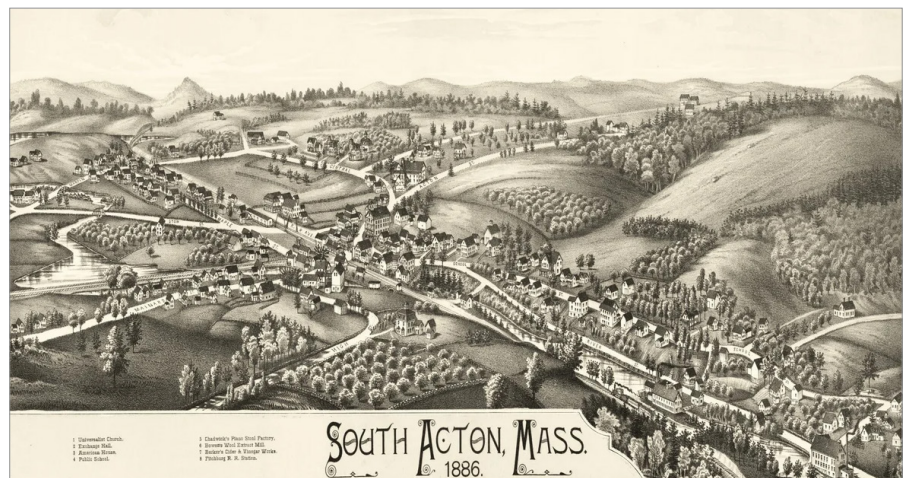
Acton's increasing housing stock and willingness of farmers to sell their land continued to drive growth into the 1970s. Alongside the DoD contract-fueled high technology innovation and development, commercial and non-DoD government contracts spurred a robust civilian high tech and information industry that was expanding in office parks along Rt 128/I 95 in the 1960s through 1980s and then along Interstate 495 in the late 1980s until the present.

Today, the Town of Acton has five villages. They include Acton Center, West Acton, East Acton, North Acton, and South Acton. Each has its own character and personality. Acton Center has been the civic center of the town since after the Revolutionary War. It is primarily a residential area but contains the Town Hall and the Acton Memorial Library as well. West Acton is an important commercial area of town. It consists of several commercial developments centered along Route 111. Initially, it was developed in response to the growth of the Fitchburg Railroad in the mid-19th Century.

South Acton used to be the most industrialized part of town. In the 18th century, this area had many mills and other small industrial developments that used waterpower from Fort Pond Brook. The area includes the Faulkner Homestead, the oldest home still standing in Acton built in 1707. The South Acton MBTA Commuter Station is the only rail station on the Fitchburg line still active in Acton.

East Acton was originally a small commercial area that grew up around the East Acton train station in the 19th century. With the advent of the automobile, and the termination of this branch of the railroad, East Acton is now a largely residential area with an adjacent commercial area that is situated along Route 2A.

North Acton had major growth in the period since 1975–1980. With the growth along the Route 2A/119 corridor, North Acton has developed many commercial complexes and residential condominium properties. North Acton also includes recreational parks and walking trails, and the Village of Nagog Woods, a housing development accessible from Route 2A/119 which is large enough to have its own Zip Code.



*South Acton Map 1886*



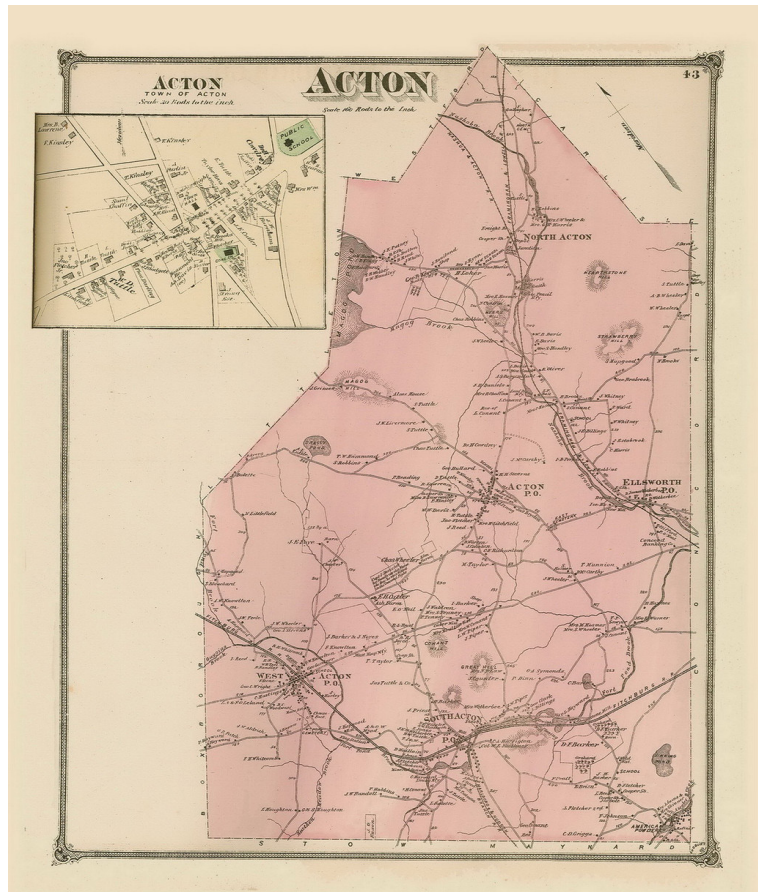


Acton Arboretum

With a population around 25,000 made up of a diverse population, the Town of Acton has an active cultural environment that includes the Acton Arboretum, the Historical Commission, collaborates with Boxborough on a cultural council and is home to the Discovery Museum, a hands-on museum for families that blends science, nature, and play. The business community and the town's Economic Development and Recreation departments also encourage and supplement events, programs, and projects.



With all that as background, the Town of Acton applied for and received a highly competitive grant from the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative (MDI) program for community branding and wayfinding. The MDI is part of the Executive Office of Economic Development (EOED). This project took place over many months. The following explains the approach and results of this study.





## THE PROCESS

The first task was to create a Scope of Services with the Town of Acton. This was completed during the month of December 2023. The Scope of Services to be provided by Consultants Favermann Design for the Town of Acton, MA

### Scope of Service For Community

#### Branding and Wayfinding

##### Actions

Site visit and Analysis of community context including review of existing wayfinding with Planning Division and Economic Development Director.

Three to five Advisory Committee meetings with Town of Acton to discuss context and visual influences as well as individual wayfinding elements and placements.

Design of a brand theme, logo and optional slogan or tagline including color, font, placement, etc. that is cohesive but also calls to each unique commercial centers' offerings, including recreational facilities.

Design and placement of a commercial district focal point in the form of a symbol, sculpture, monument, gateway, or other artwork.

Creation of as many as three (3) brand option designs for application to all wayfinding elements.

Review of 3 branding options and concepts by Advisory Committee.

The focus of the project will be on how to bridge each unique commercial area in the town.

Creation of a "hierarchical family" of individual signs and other components to illustrate design elements.

Refinement of a final logo/logotype and potential optional slogan as a community brand.

Recommendations for placement in Town.

Using town maps, creation of sign element site placement by working with and led by Advisory Committee members.

Development of a final wayfinding sign and element hierarchy to be approved by the Select Board at a public meeting.

Once approved by the Town of Acton Select Board, a full set of specifications will be created for use for pricing and fabrication by appropriate vendors.

QR codes will be developed and integrated into appropriate signs and markers.

The Town completed two area plans that directed the Town to implement wayfinding as a mechanism to encourage economic development throughout Acton. The Local Rapid Recover Program (LRRP) identified this as a top action item for the Great Road Commercial Corridor as well as the Kelley's Corner Improvement Initiative Plan. This also emerged as a priority through the South Acton Vision and Action Planning projects that are actively ongoing.



A Final Report will be submitted to the Department of Housing and Community Development's (DHCD) Massachusetts Downtown Initiative program (MDI). A draft will be reviewed and approved by the Community Development Director before submittal.

There will be monthly Advisory Committee meetings. These will be scheduled every three to four weeks whether in person or virtual by the middle of January 2024. Dates will be developed with the Project Coordinator. The Select Board approval presentation will take place before the end of FY2024.

## Deliverables

### 1. Meetings:

- A. Four (4) Project or Advisory Committee Meetings
- B. A Family of elements mapping session
- C. A public forum and Select Board approval presentation. Note: These can be combined.

### 2. Branding materials, preliminary report and final report

### 3. Brand/logo design in digital format

### 4. Optional tagline or slogan

### 5. A hierarchical family of sign and wayfinding elements

### 6. QR codes will be integrated into signs.

### 7. Social media brand recommendations.

### 8. A map of individual wayfinding element placement at the downtown area and strategically throughout the Town of Acton.

### 9. General cost estimates for wayfinding and sign elements.

### 10. A full set of specifications for vendor cost estimations, fabrication and installation of wayfinding and sign elements.

### 11. Final Report for EOED



*Chinese Garden at the Acton Arboretum*



The second task was for the Acton Town Planning office to organize with the town administrator appointment of an Advisory Committee. Members of the Branding and Wayfinding Committee were the following:

*Acton Branding and Wayfinding Advisory Committee*

**Corey York**, DPW Director

**QinRui Pang**, Town Engineer

**Wanjiku Gachugi**, Director of DEI

**Kaila Sauer**, Senior Planner

**Chief Jim Cogan**, Police Chief

**Julie Peirce**, Former Economic Development Director

**Nora Masler**, Former Town Land Use Planner

**Kristen Guichard**, Town Planner and Chair

The first Advisory Committee meeting, led by consultants Favermann Design, consisted of a comprehensive presentation about what was community branding and how it underscored a sense of place, a community's character, and its essence and unique personality. The second meeting followed a month later was a discussion of several cases studies of similar projects and programs in Massachusetts. Following that meeting, the third meeting was held several weeks later. It was titled and Ideation Exercise. The purpose of this meeting was to crate "word pictures" of what the Town of Acton was, stood for and appeared. This exercise allowed all of the participating. Advisory Committee members to express themselves fully. There were no wrong answers--only better or more nuanced ones.



*Exchange Hall, South Acton, built 1860*



*Natural area in the Fall in Acton*

### How would you describe Grafton using one word?

Engaged	Trails	Agriculture
Pretty	Historic	Conservationist
Green	Villages	Sports
Nature/ natural	Educated	Recreation
Family	Suburban	Motivated
Schools	Emerging	Thoughtful

### How would you describe Grafton using two words?

Kid friendly	Forward thinking	Future oriented
Age friendly	Ensuring suburb	Commercially viable
Rail trails	Open space	Culturally diverse
Town meeting	High school	Religiously diverse
Environmentally focused	Historic preservation	

### How would you describe Grafton with three words or a phrase?

An Evolving Community	Celebrating The Past And Investing In The Future
Looking Back And Moving Forward	Quaint, Community-Focused, Historical
A Community Invested in the Future	Beautiful, Land Conservation-Minded
Preserving the Past and Investing in the Future	Family Community Farms





Acton "Welcome" mural sponsored by the business community

### What color or colors do you associate with Acton?

Blue	White
Yellow	Autumn
Green / Forest Green	

### What symbol or symbols or landmark(s) do you associate with Acton?

Exchange Hall	Memorial Library	Windows with shutters
Town Hall	Boardwalks	Rail Trails
Monument	NARA	Clocktower (on Town Hall)
Isaac Davis Birthplace	Turtless (wood turtles)	
Arboretum	Horses	
Discovery Museum	Meadows	

### Public Art?

Benches	Planting
Changing murals	Bike racks
Gateways	Bollards
Focal point/abstract	

### Future of Acton?

Open space preserved in perpetuity  
Vibrant commercial centers  
Truly inclusive and diverse community  
Resilient and green

### Branded Street Furniture?

Benches - each slightly different in each village  
Art Wings (on existing light poles)

After the Ideation Exercise, Favermann Design took the feedback and started to create concepts to be revised, refined, and approved. Various approaches were taken including painterly, abstract, and highly illustrative. Over the next several weeks, numerous design concepts were shared with the Advisory Committee and town planning office. Optional colors were studied. An interesting suggestion was to create a completely different structural style for the signposts and panels. A series of new designs using the new hardware were developed.

At the same time, the Advisory Committee was discussing taglines or slogans. These came out of the Ideation Exercises as well. The question about the three or more-word description allowed for this piece of the puzzle. Differentiating the five Acton Villages will be done by a bottom sign panel.

Three alternatives were developed for the larger format “gateway” signs—one with cutout letters, another with the outlines of a bridge, and a third with the letters cut out from a solid piece of aluminum. The Town Planner then opened two community-wide surveys to get residents’ feedback.

The surveys’ results:

## Town Wayfinding

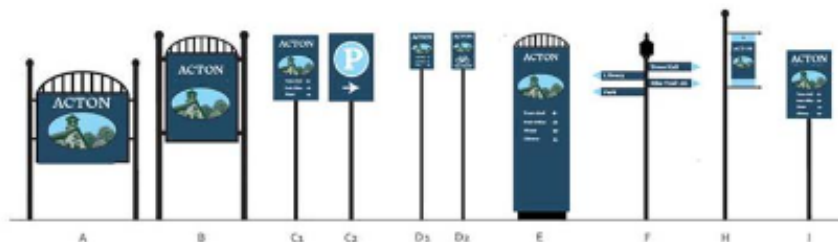
**B I U G X**

The Town of Acton was awarded a grant for design services to create wayfinding signage throughout town. Wayfinding signage guides people to places they seek, but it also brings awareness to places they may have otherwise missed. Below are images of what wayfinding signage looks like.

In this survey we are asking the community two things:

1. Which style you prefer, and
2. Whether you like the idea of the Town including a slogan and if so which one.

Below is an example of the series of wayfinding signs. (The bridge topper is used here as an example) If a slogan is chosen by the community, it would appear under the picture.





Please select the style you like best for the top of the signs.

☐ "ACTON" topper



☐ "Rail Trail Bridge" topper



Please select which slogan option you like best: \*

☐ "Where community thrives"

☐ "Where communities thrive"

☐ "Where trails connect and cultures unite"

☐ "Embracing the past, inspiring the future"

☐ No slogan

100 responses

[Link to Sheets](#)

Accepting responses ☒

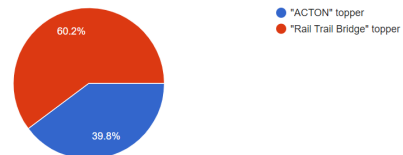
Summary

Question

Individual

Please select the style you like best for the top of the signs.  
98 responses

[Copy chart](#)



Please select which slogan option you like best:  
100 responses

[Copy chart](#)



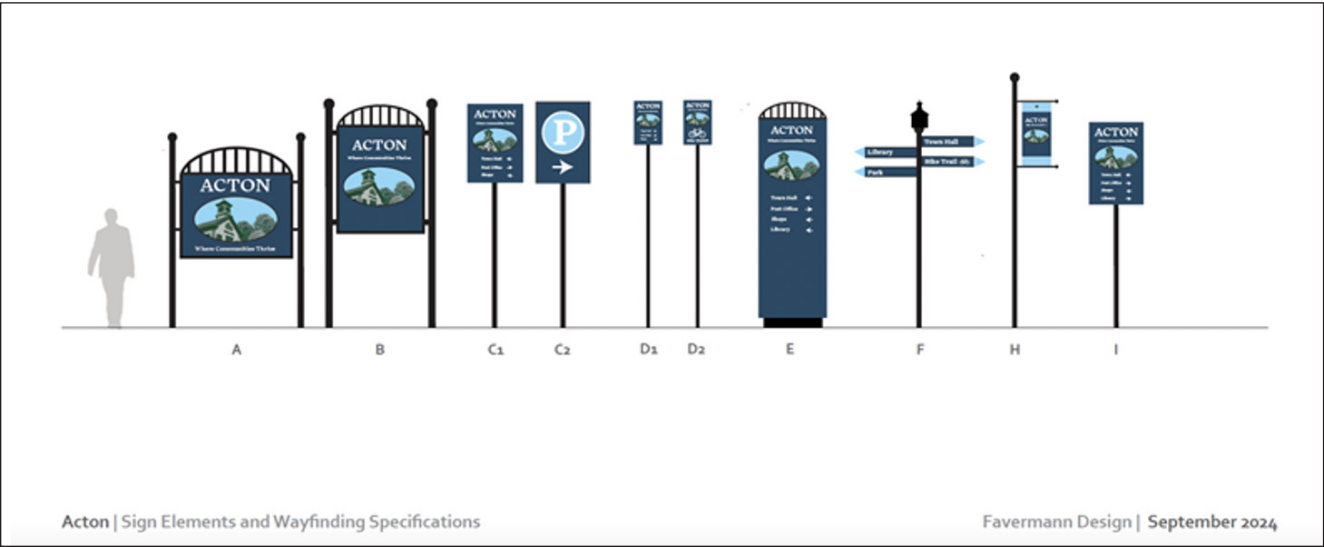
OUTCOME/SUMMARY

The final options were presented to the Acton Select Board. They were pleased to see the amount and quality of the work done. The image of the Town. Hall with the bridge metal topper was selected. After budget analysis, a phased plan for each of the five Acton Villages regarding implementation will be developed in the future.

Various design options:

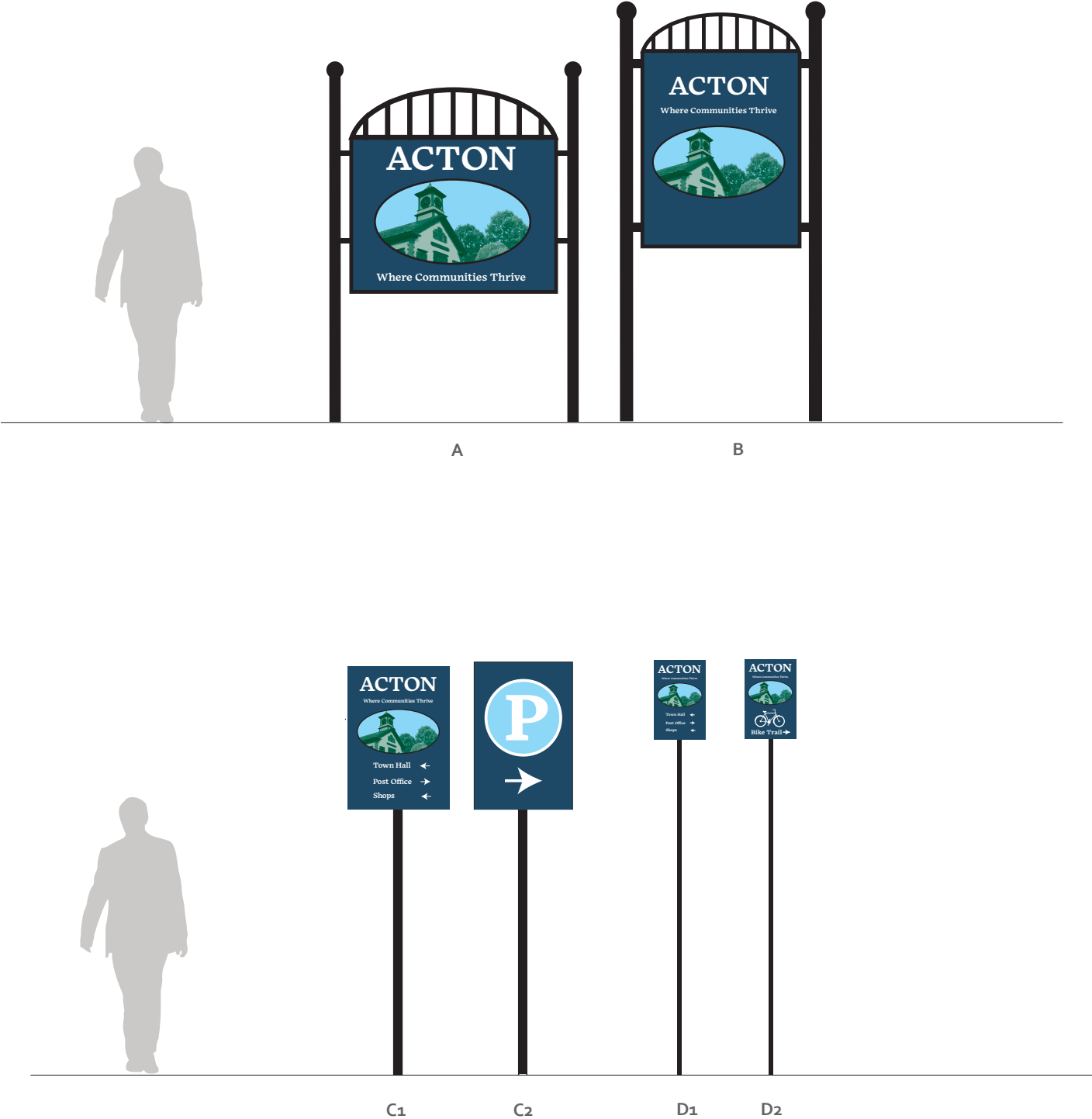


Final Design chosen with Family of Elements:

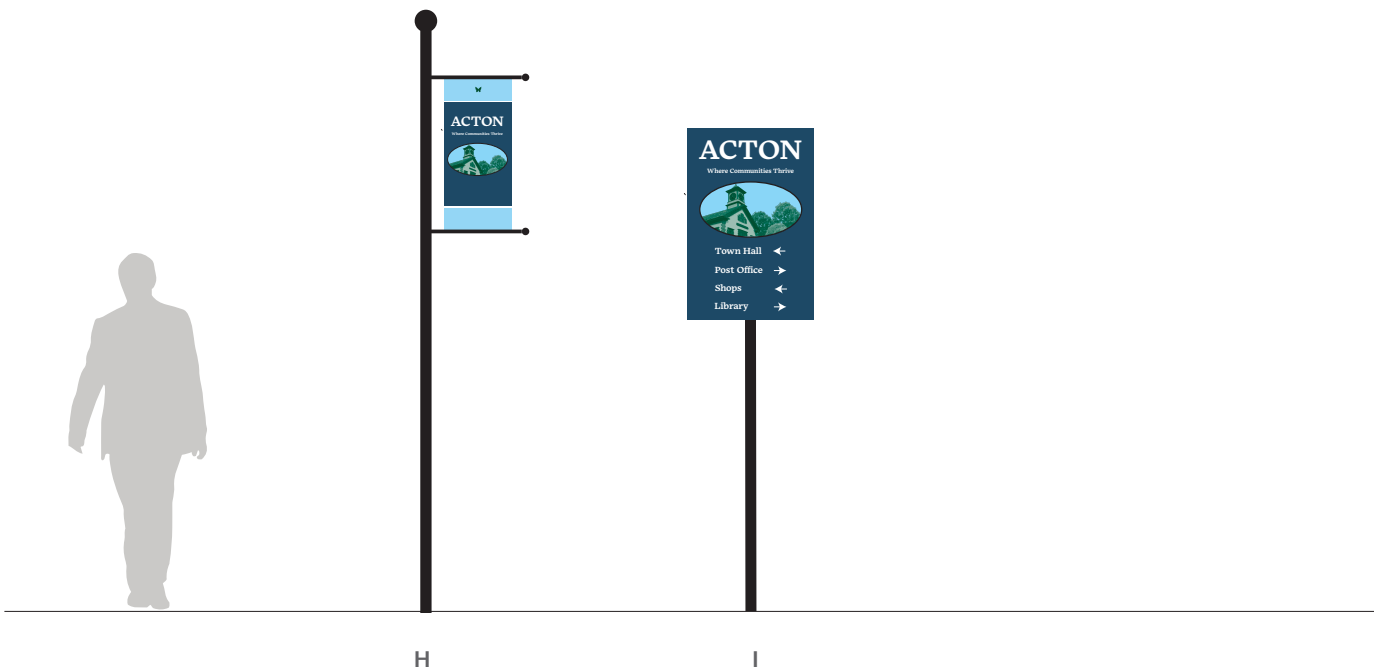
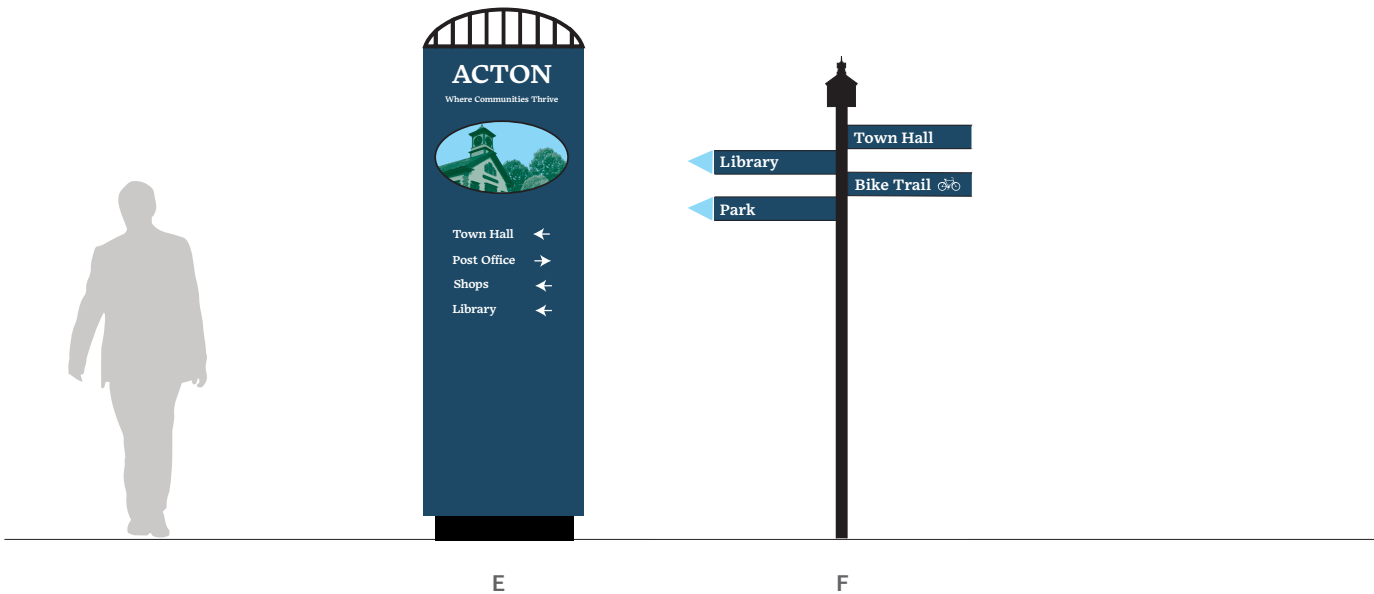




ACTON  
FAMILY OF ELEMENTS



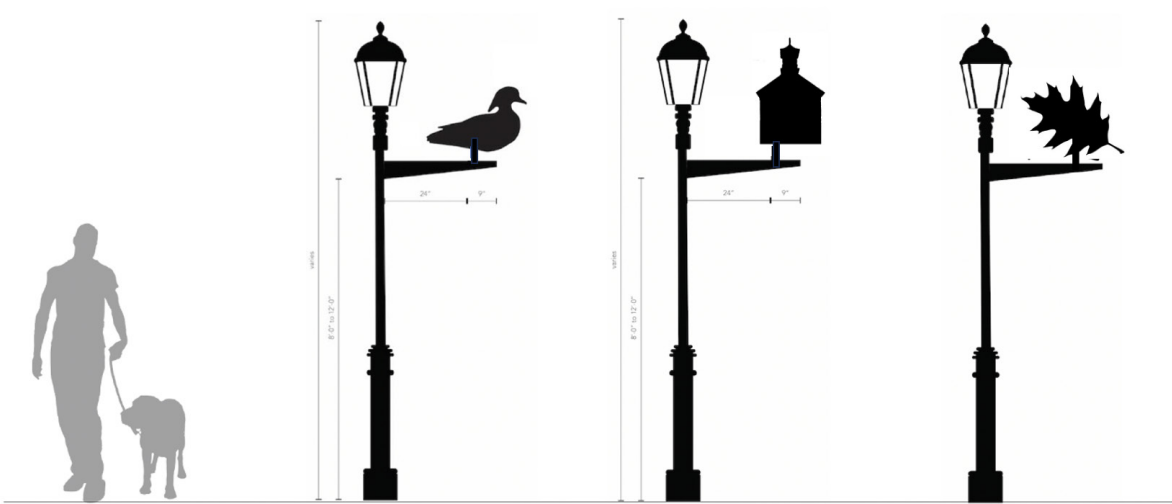
ACTON  
FAMILY OF ELEMENTS





In addition, the consultant recommended that Art Wings, kinetic sculptures attached to light poles be also considered.

Art Wings



Rail Trail signs

