



Rapid Recovery Plan

2021

Northbridge

This plan has been made possible through technical assistance provided by the Baker-Polito Administration's Local Rapid Recovery Planning program.



The Local Rapid Recovery Planning (RRP) program is a key part of the Baker-Polito Administration's Partnerships for Recovery Plan, the strategy established to help communities stabilize and grow the Massachusetts economy as a result of the economic impacts brought on by COVID-19. The plan invests \$774 million in efforts to get people back to work, support small businesses, foster innovation, revitalize downtowns, and keep people in stable housing.

In addition to the planning program, recovery efforts include a Small Business Relief Program administered by the Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation. This program, which concluded in May 2021, provided more than \$687.2 million to over 15,000 businesses across the Commonwealth, with a focus on businesses located in Gateway Cities, among demographic priorities, or operating in sectors most impacted by the pandemic. Cities, towns, and non-profit entities are using Regional Pilot Project Grant Program funding for recovery solutions that seek to activate vacant storefronts, support regional supply chain resiliency, and create small business support networks. To promote recovery in the tourism industry and support the ongoing My Local MA marketing initiative encouraging residents to support their local economies by shopping, dining and staying local, another \$1.6 million in grants were awarded through the new Travel and Tourism Recovery Grant Pilot Program. Through April 2021, MassDOT's Shared Streets and Spaces Grant Program has invested \$26.4 million in municipal Shared Streets projects to support public health, safe mobility, and renewed commerce.

In support of the overall recovery strategy, the Administration made \$9.5 million in awards for 125 communities to create Local Rapid Recovery Plans, through the MA Downtown Initiative Program. These plans address the impacts of COVID-19 on local downtowns and small businesses by partnering with Plan Facilitators and Subject Matter Experts to pursue locally-driven, actionable strategies.

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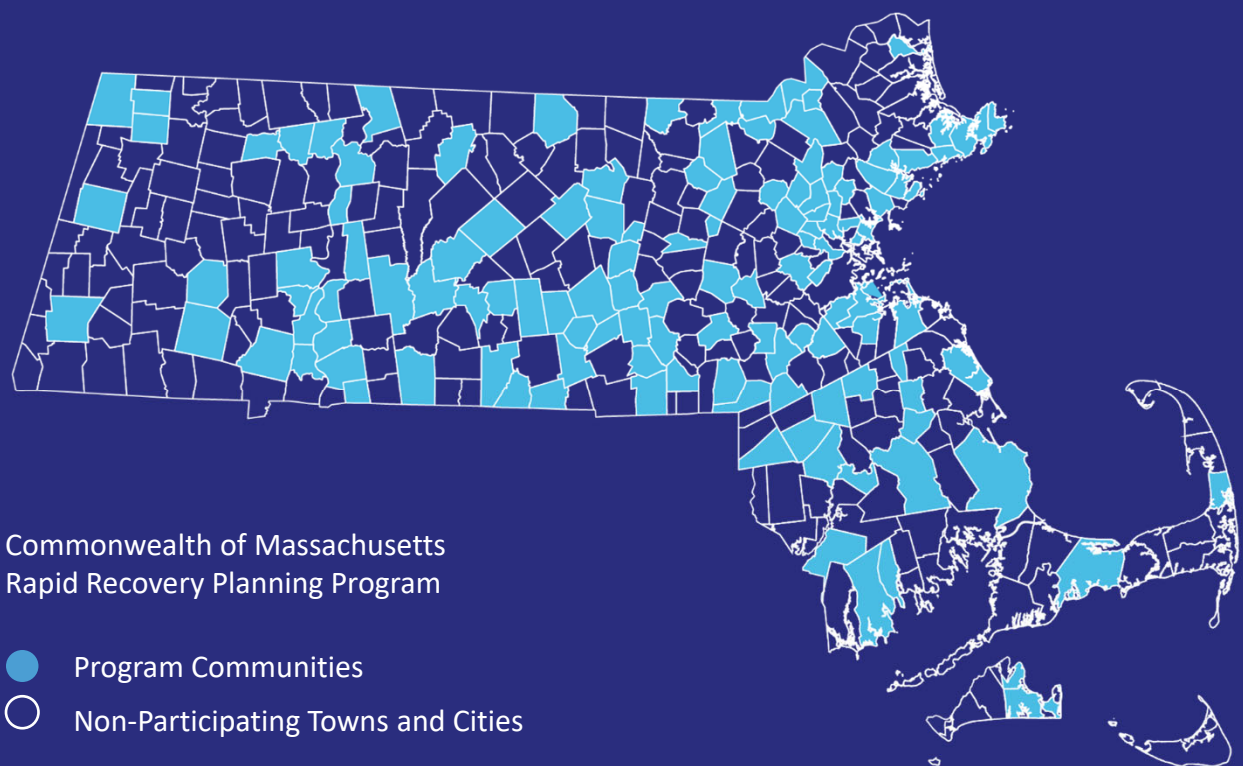
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125 communities participated in the Rapid Recovery Plan Program

52 Small Communities
51 Medium Communities
16 Large Communities
6 Extra Large Communities

Mass Downtown Initiative distributed nearly \$10 million across 125 communities throughout the Commonwealth to assess impacts from COVID-19 and develop actionable, project-based recovery plans tailored to the unique economic challenges in downtowns, town centers, and commercial districts.



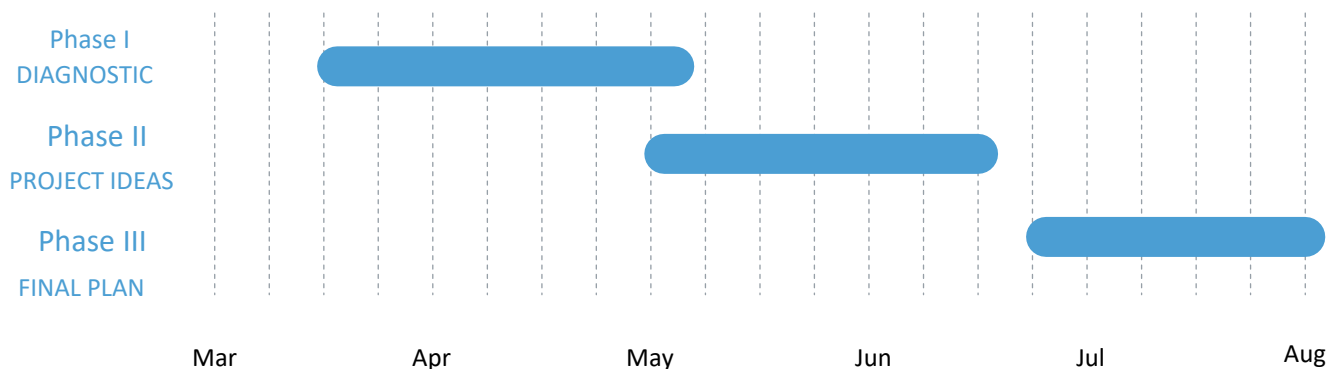
Rapid Recovery Plan (RRP) Program

The Rapid Recovery Plan (RRP) Program is intended to provide every municipality in Massachusetts the opportunity to develop actionable, project-based recovery plans tailored to the unique economic challenges and COVID-19 related impacts to downtowns, town centers, and commercial areas across the commonwealth.

The program provided technical assistance through Plan Facilitators assigned to each community applicant (e.g., city, town, or nonprofit entity) and Subject Matter Experts who supported the development of ideas for project recommendations and shared knowledge through best practice webinars and individual consultations.

Communities and Plan Facilitators were partnered through the program to assess COVID-19 impacts, convene community partners to solicit project ideas and provide feedback, and develop project recommendations. The following plan summarizes key findings from the diagnostic phase of the program and includes a range of priority project recommendations for the community.

Each Rapid Recovery Plan was developed across three phases between February-August 2021. Phase 1 - Diagnostic, Phase 2- Project Recommendations, Phase 3 - Plan.



In Phase 1: Diagnostic, Plan Facilitators utilized the Rapid Recovery Plan Diagnostic Framework that was adapted from the award-winning Commercial DNA approach as published by the Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC) in “Preparing a Commercial District Diagnostic”, and authored by Larisa Ortiz, Managing Director, Streetsense (RRP Program Advisor).

The framework was designed to ensure methodical diagnosis of challenges and opportunities in each community, and to identify strategies and projects that aligned with the interests and priorities of each community. The framework looks at four areas of analysis: Physical Environment, Business Environment, Market Information, and Administrative Capacity - each equipped with guiding questions to direct research conducted by Plan Facilitators.

Rapid Recovery Plan Diagnostic Framework



CUSTOMER
BASE



PHYSICAL
ENVIRONMENT



BUSINESS
ENVIRONMENT



ADMIN
CAPACITY

Who are the customers of businesses in the Study Area?

How conducive is the physical environment to meeting the needs and expectations of both businesses and customers?

What are the impacts of COVID-19 on businesses in the Study Area? How well does the business mix meet the needs of various customer groups?

Who are the key stewards of the Study Area? Are they adequately staffed and resourced to support implementation of projects? Are the regulatory, zoning, and permitting processes an impediment to business activity?

Following the diagnostic in Phase 1, Plan Facilitators, in close coordination with communities, developed and refined a set of recommendations that address priority challenges and opportunities. These project recommendations are organized in clear and concise rubrics created specially for the Rapid Recovery Plan Program. Project recommendations are rooted in a set of essential and comprehensive improvements across six categories: Public Realm, Private Realm, Revenue and Sales, Administrative Capacity, Tenant Mix, Cultural/Arts & Others.



Public Realm



Private Realm



Tenant Mix



Revenue/Sales



Admin Capacity



Cultural/Arts



Other

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

In partnership with the Central Massachusetts Planning Commission (Plan Facilitator) and the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce, Northbridge leadership and stakeholders from the business community analyzed short-, medium-, and long-term pandemic recovery goals; collected standardized data to demonstrate the COVID-19 impacts on downtown commercial activity; and refined project recommendations based on community consensus and expert feedback.

The economic and personal impact of COVID-19 has been deeply felt by communities in Central Massachusetts. In April 2020, the unemployment rate for the region reached 15.4%, up 12.5% from April 2019 (MA Department of Unemployment Assistance, Statewide Report Labor Force and Unemployment Rate, April 2020). Small business revenue has declined over the course of the pandemic when compared to pre-pandemic levels according to more than 50% of Northbridge businesses surveyed. Sectors critical to Northbridge's economy and quality of life have been particularly impacted by COVID-19 from both a revenue and jobs perspective, including the retail sector, accommodation and food services sector, arts and recreation sector, personal care sector, finance/insurance sector, and more.

Amid this crisis, Northbridge residents are engaged in a process of recovery and revitalization. They are wearing masks, washing hands, physically distancing. They are retooling business operations, lending a hand to neighbors, and frequenting local businesses. They are demonstrating courage, compassion, and creativity in the face of crisis.

The Rapid Recovery Plan will not solve all the complex challenges created or made worse by COVID-19 or replace community-led efforts. Instead, the Planning Team (CMRPC, the Town, the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce) has developed a set of recommended strategies, on a short time frame, for supporting economic recovery in Downtown Whitinsville and along Providence Road.

The goal of the Planning Team has been to support and augment community-led efforts, as residents, employers, and public and private sector leaders each have a critical role to play in these complex times. The following principles helped guide Plan project recommendations:

RESOURCE-DRIVEN. The Planning Team focused on strengthening and leveraging local assets, knowledge, capacities, and relationships, rather than focusing on limitations or weaknesses.

RELEVANT. To ensure recommendations were data-driven and locally pertinent, the Planning Team helped promote and distribute the DHCD business impact survey to organizations within the Study Area to gain a better understanding of opportunities and challenges facing local businesses. The survey had 17 responses and results are summarized throughout this plan with full results in Appendix A.

RAPID. The Planning Team concentrated on developing recommendations that can be implemented and acted upon within a short-to-intermediate time frame. Some recommendations call upon action by residents while others call upon action by employers and private and public sector leaders. Potential partners and resources are identified throughout the Plan.

RESILIENT. The Planning Team evaluated project recommendations through a lens of public health, inclusion, and resilience included in the Plan. These considerations provide a basis for nurturing Northbridge's long-term recovery and economic stability.

Executive Summary

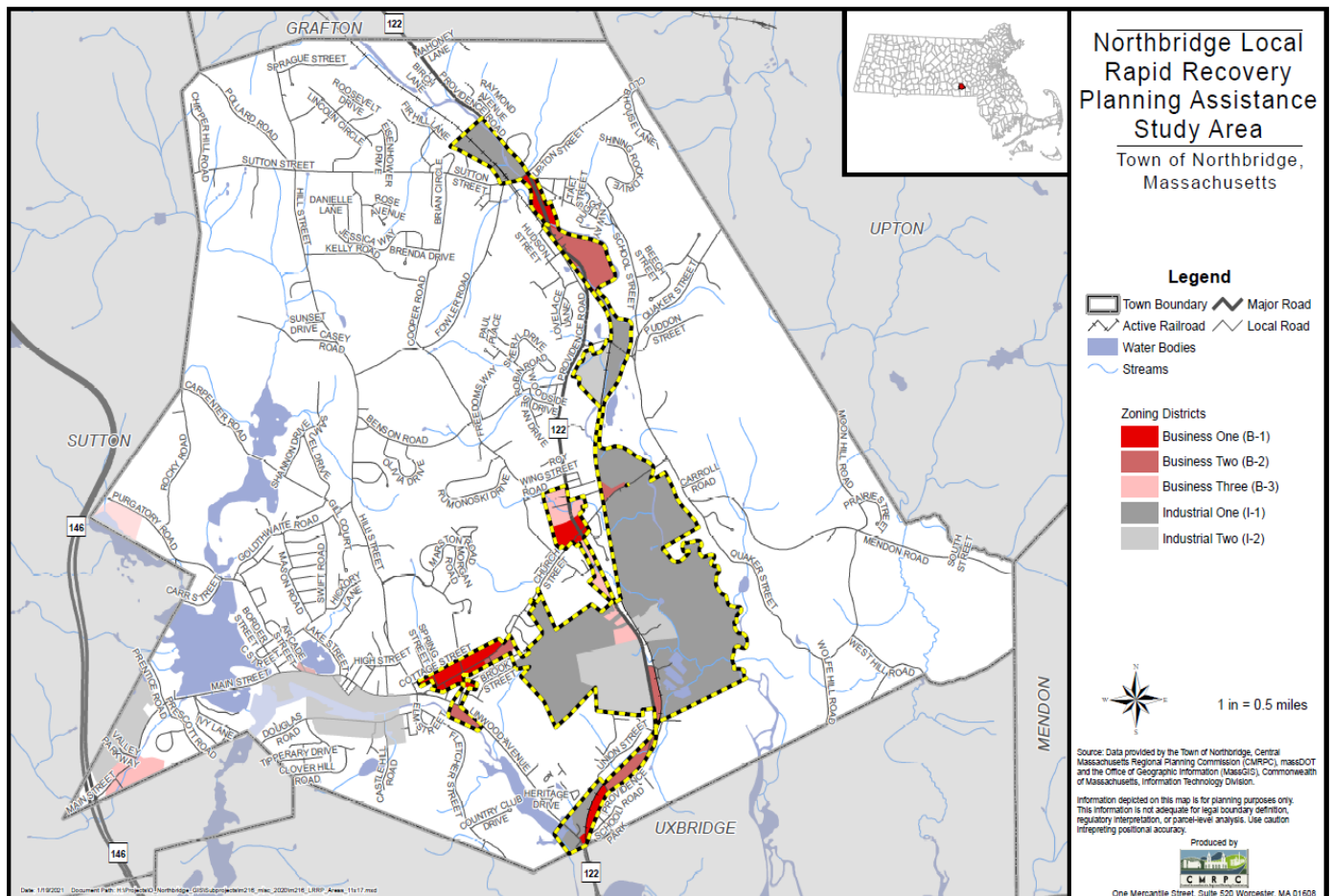
STUDY AREA SELECTION

The Planning Team identified a Study Area that reflects the diverse tenant mix in Town. Business zoning districts dominate village centers throughout Northbridge and are generally clustered around historic mill towns. A secondary concentration of business zones is spread out along the major transit routes, particularly Route 122. As such, the Study Area is comprised of Business- and Industrial-zoned properties in the vicinity of Church Street (Downtown Whitinsville) and Providence Road (State Route 122).

Downtown Whitinsville is named for the Whitin Machine works and serves as the Town's municipal center. While there is limited commercial activity in the village center, this area serves as a gateway to significant commercial activity along Church Street. Over the years Northbridge has moved away from its industrially-driven history, but manufacturing remains an important component of the local economy. The Town is home to a growing service sector, small businesses, auto-oriented development along Route 122, and vibrant cultural and historic assets. The walkable, historic downtown is thriving with a mix of uses and a wide range of businesses – including restaurants, salons, diverse retail offerings, and real estate, legal, and financial service providers.

The Town Common (photo on the following page) serves as an open space anchor for the Downtown and nearby parks, trails, recreation opportunities, natural resources and historic structures can be leveraged to drive traffic to Study Area businesses. The Downtown serves as the civic center of Northbridge with Town Hall and other municipal functions clustered close by.

Church Street is also proximate to or bisected by several major routes that traverse the region (Route 146, Route 122/Providence Road), augmenting the Town's distinction as a destination to people traveling through by car. Plummer's Corner is the commercial center at the intersection of Church Street and Route 122. This area serves as another gateway to both the downtown and the restaurants, auto-oriented development, small businesses and other uses typical of a highway commercial area (big box stores, fast food, etc.) peppered along 122.



Downtown Whitinsville and Providence Road LRRP Study Area



The Town Common serves as one gateway to the Study Area. Photo Source: CMRPC

Executive Summary

DIAGNOSTIC PHASE

Phase I of the RRP process began in March 2021 and focused on diagnosing current conditions in Northbridge. During this phase, CMRPC collected and analyzed information to identify findings and conclusions, and then make recommendations. The diagnostic phase is vital to planning as it is imprudent to make ambitious recommendations without fully examining the current situation. When working to guide recovery in Northbridge, the RRP Planning Team endeavored to start from where Northbridge is now – by conducting an effective discovery to identify current priorities for change by reviewing data from sources such as ESRI Business Analyst, CoStar, the U.S. Census, the local business survey, and site visits.

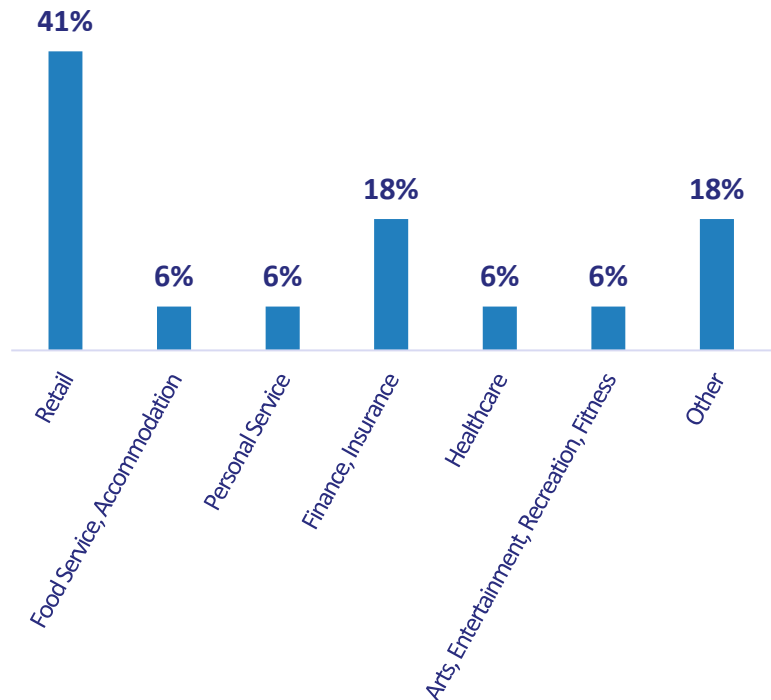
The findings of the Diagnostic Phase are summarized in the appropriate category (Customer Base, Physical Environment, Business Environment, Admin Capacity) in the subsequent “Diagnostic” section of this plan.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Rapid Recovery Program developed a survey to gather input from business owners and managers in the Study Area. The survey featured questions about respondents’ satisfaction with storefront locations, the impacts of COVID-19 on business operations, and their opinion regarding potential strategies to support local businesses and improve the commercial district. The survey was developed and summarized using the internet application SurveyMonkey ©. The availability of the survey and hyperlinks were placed on the Town website and social channels, the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce website and social channels and was sent via email to businesses in the Study Area when email addresses were available. Flyers advertising the survey were also distributed to businesses in the Study Area. The online survey was available in April and May 2021.

Seventeen (17) surveys were received. Participation was achieved across most of the industry sectors found within the Study Area, as shown above at left. All respondents were for-profit organizations.

Half (50%) of the survey respondents were microenterprises (≤ 5 employees) and 94% had fewer than twenty (20) employees.



Survey Respondents’ Business Type.

Six (6) percent reported having 21 to 50 employees. No survey respondents reporting having more than 50 employees.

88% of the responding businesses reported being impacted by COVID. The largest number of respondents indicated that they were affected by reduced operating hours and/or capacity (in fact, at the time of the survey 53% of businesses reported they were still operating at reduced hours/capacity), declines in revenue, and expenses incurred to implement safety measures.

Survey respondents were asked to provide 2020 annual revenue data by indicating the range by which revenue had increased or decreased compared to 2019. 30% of responding businesses generated less revenue in 2020 than they did in 2019. For 30% of respondents, revenue declined by 25% or more.

Respondents also reported less foot traffic in commercial areas, with 60% recording less on-site customers in January and February of 2021 than before COVID, and 36% reporting a reduction in on-site customers of 25% or more.

35% of respondents reported participating in shared marketing or advertising would be the most helpful to their organization followed by assistance setting up an online store or other online selling (29%). Top moderately needed areas of assistance included low-cost financing for purchasing property in the district (24%) – at present only 12% of respondents own their space, low-cost financing for storefront/façade improvements (18%), and creating new services i.e., delivery (18%). Training on the use of Social Media (6%) was least needed.

Executive Summary

More business survey input related to possible strategies is referenced in the “Project Recommendations” section of this plan. Responses related to business satisfaction with the Study Area is interspersed into the subsequent “Diagnostic” Plan Report sections as appropriate.

Full survey results are attached as Appendix A.

The Planning Team held a Community Meeting on June 2, 2021, to present the diagnostic findings, survey results, program goals and objectives, and to discuss potential project recommendations. The Community Meeting was held virtually using the Zoom platform, and the presentation was recorded and distributed to the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce email listserv following the meeting.

Municipal and Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce staff, CMRPC, and two community members participated “live” with many more viewing the recording after June 2nd.

Additionally, CMRPC developed a brief supplemental survey for the purpose of establishing community priorities for recommended projects. The survey asked respondents to indicate whether they were a business owner or manager, employee, or a Northbridge resident / patron of Study Area businesses. Flyers with the survey link and QR code were posted to Town and Chamber social media channels. The hard copy flyers. CMRPC staff also attended the Town’s annual fireworks display on August 14 to encourage attendees to complete the online survey or vote on a poster that included the list of eighteen (18) potential recommended projects with stickers. Planning Team expertise, online survey results, and the sticker votes were combined and used to select the top seven (7) recommended projects featured in this plan.



1. ASSESS IMPACT
2. RECOMMEND PROJECTS
3. CARRY OUT PLAN

**LET YOUR VOICE
BE HEARD**

**JOIN THE WORKSHOP
SHARE YOUR OPINION**

Join us via Zoom on June 2, 2021 04:00 PM
Register in advance for this meeting:
https://us02web.zoom.us/join/tZ0qdeivqz4qE9aDSR_Fj3m3F4Z-Z012sU02
After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the meeting.

dhcd
Massachusetts
CMRPC

Virtual Community Meeting flyer.



**Northbridge
Rapid
Recovery Plan**

Answer this quick survey to let us know which projects would spur economic development in Downtown Whitinsville and along Providence Road (Rt. 122) →

Scan the QR Code with your smartphone, or visit
<https://tinyurl.com/northbridgerp>

CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS
REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION

Supplemental survey flyer. Northbridge business owners, managers, employees, and customers were also able to vote for recommended projects using stickers on posters at community events and placed throughout the Study Area.

PLACEHOLDER FOR DISCUSSION OF BOS / PB MEETING(S)

PREVIOUS PLANNING EFFORTS

The Town has consistently worked to promote and support its business community. Beginning with the 1994 Master Plan, economic development has been a focus of multiple planning and design initiatives (2040 Providence Road Reuse Plan, Economic Development Strategic Plan, Urban Rivers Vision 2, Village of Rockdale -Technical Assistance Panel Report, Northbridge Reconnaissance Report – Massachusetts Heritage Landscape Inventory, zoning updates), infrastructure improvements, and private developments that have contributed to the enhancement of the Town’s character and quality of living. These qualities were bolstered by proactive planning, community engagement and implementation efforts led by Town planning staff.

Further, the Town is committed to streamlining and clarifying permitting requirements and has produced a Best Development Practices Guidebook (2009) and Permitting Guidebook (2012) that make it easier to do business in Town. Despite these achievements, challenges with redevelopment, walkability, and parking limit the potential for economic growth. The Northbridge Rapid Recovery Plan fits into a larger planning effort with the intent to review and assess current progress while supporting ongoing planning efforts by integrating them into a coordinated vision and strategy.

The purpose of the Rapid Recovery Plan is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the Study Area and leverage prospects to enhance economic development and quality of life. The Northbridge RRP also identifies new opportunities for economic growth and community development given post-COVID conditions. **Amid all the tumult in the wake of the pandemic, is an energetic, buoyant community with the potential to be ever more visible as a regional destination in Central Massachusetts.**

The Town's Recovery will play to its strengths

CREATE A STRATEGY FOR THE NORTHBRIDGE EDC

A Strategic Plan will serve as a foundation for the role of the EDC in the Town and provide guidance as to the initiatives under their purview.

DEVELOP A SHARED MARKETING STRATEGY

A branding campaign will create a rejuvenated and cohesive identity throughout Town and among area businesses that will highlight the Town's rich history and assets.

STREETSCAPE & SIDEWALK IMPROVEMENTS

Sidewalk construction and crossing improvements along Route 122 will close the loop between pedestrian-friendly commercial areas like Downtown Whitinsville and the Linwood Mill.

ESTABLISH NEW WALKING TRAILS OR TRAIL MAPS BASED ON CULTURAL ASSET INVENTORIES

A Pedestrian Loop would create connections between public amenities, recreation, businesses, public transportation, and areas of historical or cultural significance. Linking amenities this way will activate public spaces to support recreation and commerce in Downtown Whitinsville.

SUPPORT AND ENHANCE ANNUAL HISTORICAL EVENTS

Cultural events and activities were desired by 41% of Business Survey respondents. The development of a Downtown Whitinsville Walking Loop formally linking existing recreational and cultural resources with commercial offerings on Church Street would be most impactful if connected to the existing annual walking and trolley tours of Whitinsville offered in the spring/summer.

SUPPORT BUSINESSES WITH RAPID WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT AND / OR E-COMMERCE

The service would provide web presence development with a quick turnaround time of 2-4 weeks. Rapid website development could be offered by pre-qualifying a website design and development partner, or potentially by partnering with local students.

IMPROVE WAYFINDING WITHIN THE STUDY AREA

The Study Area lacks a unifying wayfinding and branding identity. Development of such wayfinding and associated annual events related to the district identity would be beneficial to the Study Area and would correspond with shared marketing and other initiatives.

- Enhance the experience visitors to the area with educational components designed to relay the "story" of Northbridge. ★★★★★
- Cultivate opportunities for Business-to-Business support (i.e. B2B town halls or forums). ★★★★★
- Host an annual Wayfinding Competition and/or Historical Scavenger Hunt. ★★★★★
- Develop a Support Plan for Women and Minority Owned Businesses. ★★★★★
- Establish a dedicated marketing fund to support a shared marketing message and materials. ★★★★★
- Create a Parking Benefits District to collect revenue earmarked for Study Area improvements. ★★★★★
- Craft an annual special events calendar that offers a robust schedule to draw people into Northbridge. ★★★★★
- Establish new walking trails & maps based on historic and cultural asset inventories. ★★★★★
- Study Area "Gateway" improvements (the roads leading into a business district) - i.e. decorative trash cans, benches, etc. ★★★★★
- Improve pedestrian infrastructure through art installations and/or Community Paint Days. ★★★★★
- Beautify vacant store fronts; make facades more attractive and market the space. ★★★★★
- Conduct inventories to ensure that historic buildings are saved, decisions about vacant parcels are strategic, etc. along Rt. 122. ★★★★★
- Establish a Northbridge "Town gift card" that can be used at local businesses. ★★★★★
- Develop guidelines to promote business facades and window display standards. ★★★★★
- Create a hotline or navigator program to help businesses find financial opportunities. ★★★★★
- Develop a process to connect local businesses to technical assistance organizations. ★★★★★
- Create an online business directory. ★★★★★
- Extend sidewalk space, crosswalks, bike lanes, and transit opportunities outside of Downtown. ★★★★★

Results of project recommendation prioritization vote following August 14 outreach event at annual Town fireworks.

Diagnostic

Key Findings



There are myriad recreation and tourism opportunities within or proximate to the Study Area.

Northbridge has a rich manufacturing history that has established the Town not only as a regional destination, but with its inclusion in Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park, potentially a national one. The Town landscape is also dotted with natural resources, farms, and recreational opportunities that pull locals and visitors alike toward the historic Downtown. The Town can leverage their striking historic building stock and inclusion in the Blackstone River Valley National Historic Park to attract new visitors and businesses to the Downtown. Area parks and field present an opportunity to draw younger patrons into the nearby Study Area, as well as to capture out-of-Town visitors participating or spectating at youth sports events.



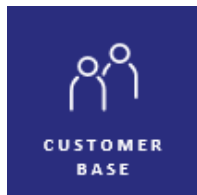
Study Area businesses want to improve streetscapes, customer access, and condition of private buildings, storefronts, and signs.

As part of the Business Survey, respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the various aspects of the Study Area. Respondents to this survey were most satisfied with their proximity to complementary businesses or uses, though during the 2017 Economic Development Strategic Plan process, many residents noted a lack of the kinds of complementary amenities that often characterize tourist destinations such as restaurants, hotels, bed and breakfasts and a visitor center.

The largest number of respondents indicated that “Improvement of Streetscape & Sidewalks” was the most important possible strategy to target related to physical environment, atmosphere and/or access. Respondents were divided on the condition of public spaces, streets, and sidewalks in the Study Area – 53% were either neutral or dissatisfied. Another large percentage (44%) of Survey respondents indicated support for implementing marketing strategies for the Study Area. 41% of respondents said that recruitment programs to attract additional businesses was important or very important.

Approaches that were viewed as less valuable by respondents were changes to zoning or other local regulations, and creation of a district management entity such as a Business Improvement District (only 6% and 18%, respectively, felt that these actions were important or very important).

Key Findings



The Town's customer base is middle-aged and well-educated.

According to Esri data, in 2020 the median age in the Study Area was nearly 43. Like most communities in Central Massachusetts, that number is projected to continue to trend upward in coming years, with expected declines in the under nineteen age cohort, and growth in the 65+ cohort.

An aging population can be an opportunity for economic growth by prompting new business formation and existing business expansion to match the needs and interests of the customer base. Age-related shifts in product and service offerings may diversify the tenant mix in the Study Area. Targeted marketing based on the existing or desired customer base, as well as augmented e-commerce could spur recovery and grow customer bases outside the geographic footprint of Northbridge and surrounding communities.



Northbridge permitting requirements are business-friendly.

Overall, the current version of the Zoning Bylaw is clear, consistent, and well-organized, and 76% of Business Survey respondents said that local regulations do not pose an obstacle to business operation. Of the 24% of businesses that indicated that the regulatory environment poses an obstacle to business operation, 18% said that parking regulations were limiting, and it is recommended that the Town examine parking requirements.

Though not identified in Business Survey responses, in previous planning efforts Northbridge stakeholders have expressed that existing commercial and industrial areas along Route 122 are attractive areas for future opportunity in the Town. However, Industrial I and Industrial II zoning designations in this area prohibit many highly desirable land uses, including more office space, expanded restaurant offerings, bars, and service industries. The Town may evaluate re-zoning to allow more flexibility in by-right usage in those areas to improve market viability.



Public and Private Realm Physical Environment Ratings

During the diagnostic phase of the RRP process, CMRPC collected and analyzed information from numerous data sources, and made several visits to the Study Area to evaluate existing conditions and rank physical environment features. Based on site visit observations, CMRPC planners assigned letter grades from A – FAIL for features of the Study Area physical environment including sidewalks, street trees and benches, lighting, wayfinding and signage, roadbeds and crosswalks, windows, outdoor displays and dining, awnings, and facades.

It is worth noting that overall grades were determined by averaging the rankings recorded at 116 data points throughout the Study Area. As such, there are properties located in Downtown Whitinsville or along Route 122 that would individually be ranked either higher or lower than the average grades memorialized in the table below. The “Grade Description” column in Table 1 describes the specific conditions that resulted in the given ranking.

Study Area physical assets and opportunities are further described in the subsequent RRP section.

Physical Environment Feature	Public Realm Grade	Private Realm Grade	Grade Description
Sidewalks	B	N/A	About 50% of sidewalks in the study area are well-maintained. Sidewalks in Downtown Whitinsville are generally clean in good condition, and wide enough to accommodate the flow of customers, walkers/runners, and in a few cases spillover retail or dining activity. Most of Rt. 122 lacks sidewalks or sidewalks are cracked, uneven, and weed strewn.
Street Trees and Benches	C	N/A	In Downtown Whitinsville, there are street trees and benches, but outside of this small portion of the Study Area, limited availability of street trees and benches creating uncomfortable pedestrian experience.
Lighting	B	C	About 50% of the study area is serviced by street lighting that supports pedestrian visibility and safety. More than 25% of storefronts do not have lighting.
Wayfinding/ Signage	B	B	Wayfinding in the study area is primarily geared towards directing motorists within the Study Area. There is limited signage to identify key assets and destinations to pedestrians. About 50% of storefronts have clear signage that reflect basic business information and can easily be seen from adjacent sidewalks.
Roadbed and Crosswalks	B	N/A	Roads are designed primarily to move motor vehicles across the study area efficiently, with limited crosswalks for pedestrians (most specifically along Route 122).
Windows	N/A	B	About 50% of storefront windows maintain windows with at least 70% transparency.
Outdoor Displays/ Dining	N/A	C	More than 25% of storefronts have spillover merchandise display and outdoor dining that pose challenges to the pedestrian experience.
Awnings	N/A	FAIL	Only a handful of storefronts in the study area are equipped with awnings.
Façades	N/A	B	Although most properties in the study area have clean and well-maintained façades, there are a few properties requiring structural façade improvements.



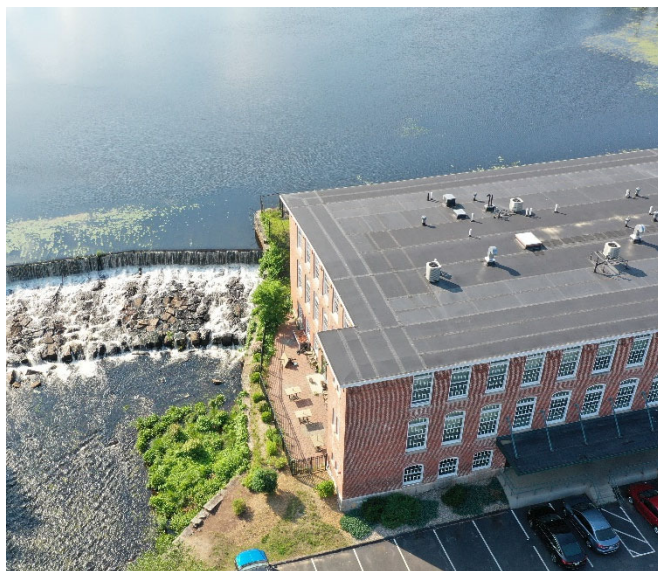
Asset: History

As Northbridge looks move forward post-COVID, they should consider their past one of their greatest assets. The Town's manufacturing heritage dates to the early 18th century, when grist, saw, and iron mills were established in the present-day villages of Whitinsville and Riverdale. The structures that were the backbone of the Whitin manufacturing empire – including the 1826 brick mill, now apartments, and the renovated Whitin Mill, now home to human services agency Alternatives Unlimited Inc. – still stand at the gateway to the Church Street commercial corridor. Historic resources are important to resilient communities, because they are places of memory and stability during a crisis. These structures help to preserve community identity even in the face of change. They are drivers of local economic activity and are critical to a community's ability to bounce back.

Historic downtown Whitinsville has been designated as the Whitinsville Historic District and is on the National Register of Historic Places. Further, the Blackstone River and Canal Heritage State Park includes parts of Northbridge.

The Town of Northbridge is part of the John H. Chaffee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor that extends from Worcester to Providence, RI and remembers New England's industrial heritage. Very recently (July 2021) Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland established the boundaries of the Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park which tells the story of the birth of America's industrialization and its impact on the U.S. The canals that fueled the region's growth led to the development of mills, mill housing, and waves of immigrants across the region. But few communities are as rich in natural resources and ecotourism opportunities as Northbridge. Whitinsville is one of just three (3) town centers highlighted in [National Park Service walking tours of the Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor](#). Whitinsville is also featured in the Blackstone River Valley NPS [Park Passport](#) which provides visitors an opportunity to learn and enjoy recreational opportunities. Each page in the Passport has a space to stamp the date and location of your park visit.

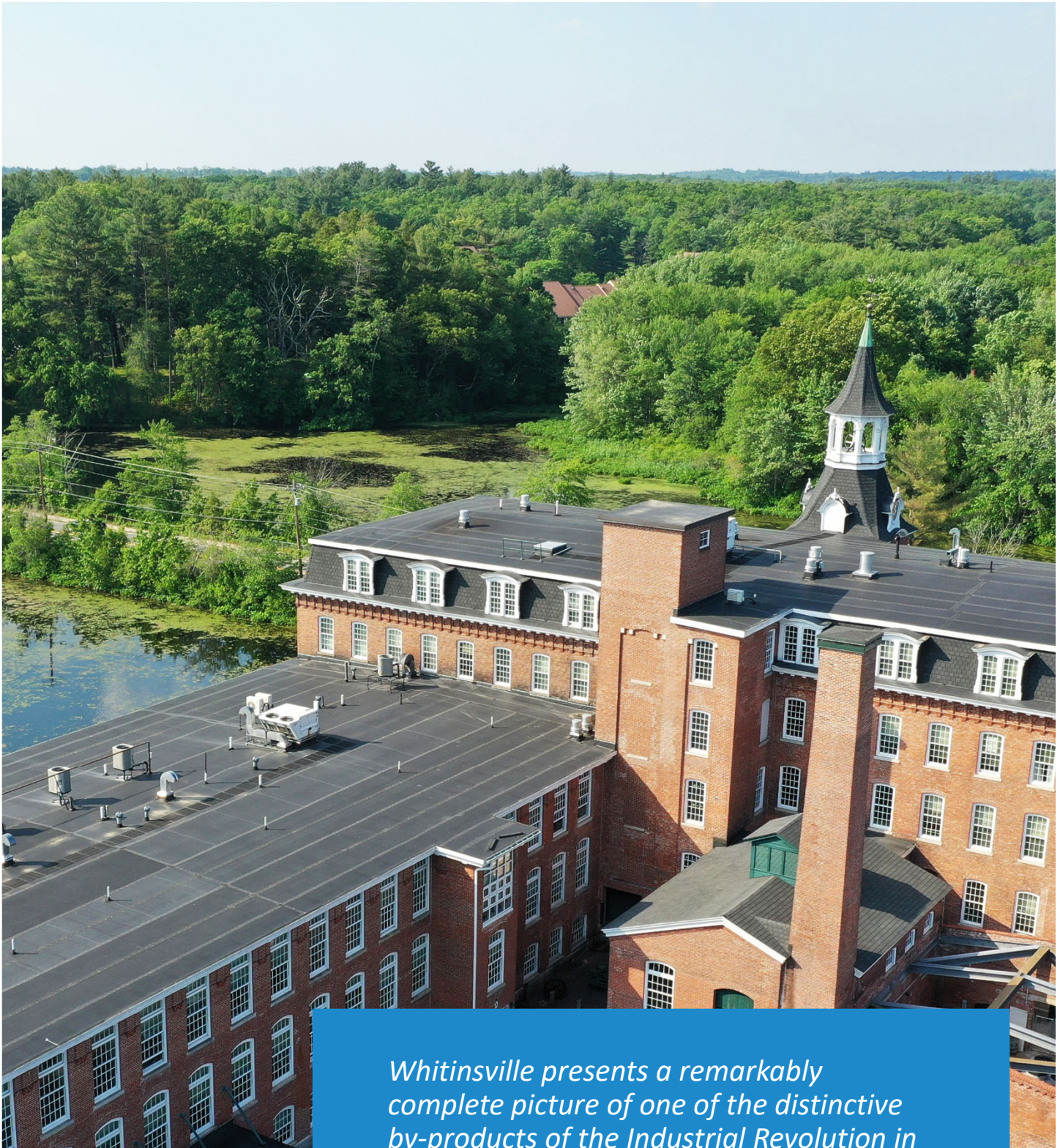
The Town can leverage their striking historic building stock and inclusion in the Blackstone River Valley National Historic Park to attract new visitors and businesses to the Downtown. Please refer to Project Recommendation #5: *Support and Enhance Annual Historical Events* to read more about how Northbridge proposes to take advantage of their unique historical and cultural assets to bolster economic recovery.



The Linwood Mill (circa 1866) is part of the Linwood Historic District. Today, the Mill features mixed-income housing, and a diverse amalgam of commercial tenants including restaurants, breweries, nonprofits, medical professionals, liquor sales, and the Blackstone Valley Education Hub – an advanced manufacturing training center hosted by the chamber, Quinsigamond Community College, Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology and Worcester State University. Photo Source: CMRPC



The picturesque Village Congregational Church (circa 1897) is part of the Whitinsville Historic District. Photo Source: CMRPC



Linwood Mill apartments and commercial space are adjacent to local recreation opportunities including Linwood Pond and the Mumford River Walk. Photo Source: CMRPC.

*Whitinsville presents a remarkably complete picture of one of the distinctive by-products of the Industrial Revolution in New England: **the company town.***

- National Park Service



Asset: Natural Resources



The Mumford Riverwalk runs along Linwood Pond. In the winter, locals ice fish on the pond, and the pair of swans that calls Northbridge home – perhaps the namesake of Linwood Mill tenant Purgatory Beer Co.'s Dirty Swan IPA – can frequently be spotted here. Photo Source: CMRPC (above), T&G Staff/Christine Peterson (right).

The collective experience of the past eighteen months has underscored the importance of the natural world and the value of spending time outside for health and wellness. Fortunately, Northbridge is a veritable smorgasbord of parks, trails, farms, water bodies, and public land.

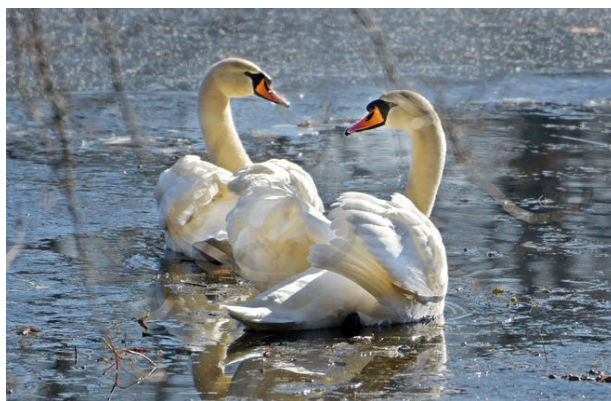
WATER BODIES

The Town boasts several water bodies, including Whitin's Pond, Swans Pond/Burt Pond, Carpenter Reservoir, Linwood Pond, Rice City Pond, and the E. Kent Swift Wildlife Management Area (WMA), which abuts a separate WMA in Uxbridge. Perhaps most notable however, is the driver of America's first cotton spinning mill: the Blackstone River. Today, the Blackstone River Valley is a unique and spectacular National Park – "a living landscape containing thousands of natural and historic treasures" according to the National Park service website.

In 2007, Northbridge residents participated in an UrbanRiver Visions 2 project funded by the MA Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. Through the project, residents defined a vision for the Blackstone riverfront, and identified strategies for activating the riverfront, including better connecting the river to the Rockdale village through a Riverwalk, trails, canoe launches, and/or a waterfront park. Participants in that process indicated that space exists behind many of the waterfront properties to create a trail or other water access point.

PUBLIC LAND

One of the Town's few publicly-owned open spaces, the Elsa Whitin Land Trust consists of 21.5 acres. Approximately



9 acres of the property is cultivated as community gardens. The fields are divided into 3,000-square-foot garden plots, available to Northbridge residents for \$25 per year.

FARMS

Town farm acreage has decreased significantly from its mid-19th century high – most likely related to a shift in farming from mixed agriculture to dairying. Today, Northbridge has few agricultural parcels enduring, but the most prominent remnants shine and draw visitors to Town. Present day farms include Castle Hill Farm, Szerlag's Farm, VandenAkker's Farm, and Foppema's Farm. Foppema's in particular is a local institution. The 75-acre fruit and vegetable farm is family owned and operated and features Northbridge's only farm store – open six days a week June through October.

In 2010, the Town adopted an Agri-Tourism Farm zoning provision that permitted agricultural-based recreation, entertainment and education by-right. The provisions supported expansion of the West End Creamery



Asset: Recreation

(at VandenAkker's Farm), which draws 15,000 visitors annually and features a corn maze, miniature golf, and barnyard jump. Both Foppema's farm store and West End Creamery are regional tourism and recreation draws, and connections between farms and the Study Area should be established or strengthened.

TRAILS

Regionally, Northbridge is a destination for outdoor recreation. The Northbridge Bike Route (from Swans Pond in the western portion of Town to Linwood Pond in the south), Shining Rock Trail (located to the east of Rockdale), and the Rice City Pond trail bring residents and visitors through Town and offer glimpses of the natural beauty on offer. Informal trails used by all-terrain vehicles and off-road bicyclists also exist, but often require crossing private property. Referred to as the Blackstone Trails, these informal trails could connect to the Blackstone River Bikeway and the Grafton & Upton Rail Trail in the Towns of Grafton and Upton. The Blackstone River Bikeway will pass through Northbridge once complete. With over twenty-four miles already constructed (Worcester to Millbury, and next-door neighbor Uxbridge to Blackstone), the vision is for it to extend forty-eight miles from downtown Worcester, MA, to India Point Park in Providence, RI.

PARKS & FIELDS

There are several parks within or adjacent to the Study Area. Plummer's Park is located at the Study Area's edge. Positioned on the Church Street Extension at the

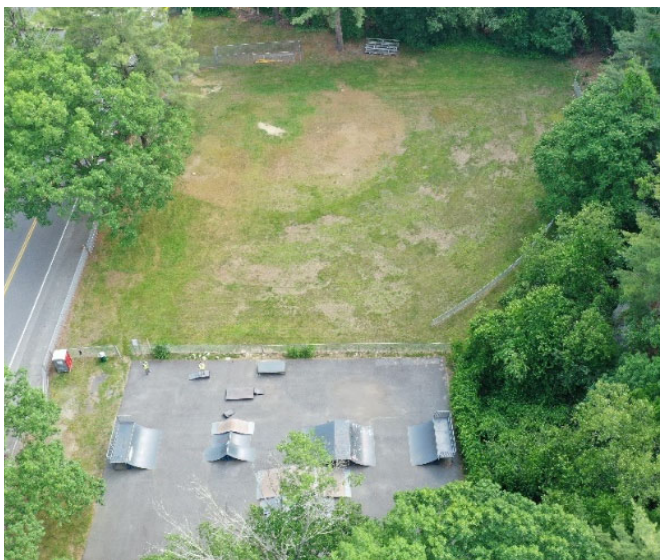
intersection with Providence Road, Plummer's Park features one small baseball field. However, due to a lack of available parking, this field is primarily used for practice. In the early 2000's, a group of local students led the charge to raise the funds and obtain approval for a skate park at this facility.

Linwood Memorial Park is located on Providence Road, directly across from Sundeen Furniture, and features multiple basketball courts and baseball / softball fields. Linwood Memorial Park hosts Northbridge AAA, Minors and Majors teams and has a concession stand and covered dugouts for players. The basketball courts are lit for use after dusk.

Other nearby fields include Lasell Field on Linwood Avenue, just one mile from the Study Area businesses in the Linwood Mill. Lasell is adjacent to Northbridge Middle School and boasts a beautiful turf football/soccer/lacrosse field, separate field hockey field, one softball and one baseball field, and a newly resurfaced running track.

Area parks and field present an opportunity to draw younger patrons into the nearby Study Area, as well as to capture out-of-Town visitors participating or spectating at youth sports events.

Please refer to Project Recommendation #4: *Establish New Walking Trails or Trail Maps Based on Cultural Asset Inventories* to read more about how Northbridge proposes to take advantage of their distinctive natural resources and recreation opportunities to support their business community.



Plummers Park skate park and little league field.



Aerial view of nearby Lasell Field and the privately owned Whitinsville Golf Club from Church Street..



Opportunity: Pedestrians and Bicyclists

While the natural assets of Northbridge certainly wow, the Town could expand the connectivity of parks and open spaces, making them primary, not secondary, to vehicular travel. Coupled with greater investment in public transportation, this would accommodate safer movement for pedestrians and cyclists. Northbridge might even consider implementation of an Open Streets¹ initiative, like what New York City has piloted throughout the pandemic.

CONNECTIVITY

The Town offers many opportunities for outdoor recreation, but connections between open-air destinations are limited. Most connections require driving, with options for cycling and walking limited. This lack of internal connectivity could pose a limitation to the development, use, and promotion of the Town's natural assets. Likewise, some trails within public lands are incomplete or cross through private lands.

PEDESTRIAN-FRIENDLY ENHANCEMENTS

In response to the Business Survey, the largest number of respondents indicated that "Improvement of Streetscape & Sidewalks" was the most important possible strategy to target related to physical environment, atmosphere and/or access. Respondents were divided on the condition of public spaces, streets, and sidewalks in the Study Area – 47% were at least satisfied with the condition of these physical environment features while 53% were either neutral or dissatisfied.

While past streetscape improvements in downtown Whitinsville have improved its pedestrian appeal, the [Town of Northbridge Economic Development Strategic Plan](#) (2017) identified that enhancements at Memorial Square (at the western end of Church Street) would improve the downtown's connectivity to the Town Hall and Whitin Machine Works Shops area. This intersection is one gateway to the Downtown, and despite street medians and a crossing signal Memorial Square is daunting to navigate by foot. Stronger definition of pedestrian pathways at this location presents an opportunity to improve walkability and draw people into the Study Area. The Town could also consider other gateway improvements such as flower boxes to increase the Square's appeal.

Northbridge might also consider pursuing a study for the commercial centers along Route 122 through the

MassDOT Complete Streets Funding Program. Complete Streets provides technical assistance and construction funding to municipalities who have passed a Complete Streets Policy and developed a Prioritization Plan.

Specifically, evaluating Northbridge's village centers and Plummer's Corner was proposed by participants in the 2017 Economic Development Strategic Plan. Increasing walkability and concentrating commercial development at village centers can create a focal point for the neighborhood and limit impact on the flow of commercial traffic along the rest of the corridor.

Northbridge recently (2021) received \$400,000 in Complete Streets funding to provide crosswalk improvements and wayfinding for the Mumford Riverwalk at the intersection of Linwood Avenue and Cross Street, as well as to construct a sidewalk on the southbound side of Linwood Avenue to the Mumford Riverwalk. The project will also reconstruct a section of sidewalk in front of the Northbridge Middle School sports fields and improve the existing crossings on the north side of Linwood Avenue between Middle and High Schools. While these projects are located at the peripheries of the Study Area, this work and future projects aimed at increasing walkability will better connect local businesses on Providence Road and Church Street to other community attractions and amenities.

Please refer to Project Recommendation #3: *Streetscape and Sidewalk Improvements* to read more about how Northbridge proposes improve streetscapes within the Study Area.



Pavement and sidewalk conditions along Providence Road in the vicinity of Pirate's Cove.

1: In NYC, Open Streets turns stretches of roadway into open pedestrian plazas by restricting vehicular traffic, complementing Open Restaurants, which allows restaurants to apply to use the sidewalk or curb lane alongside their businesses for outdoor seating and service (with proper barriers) and/or to extend further into Open Streets.

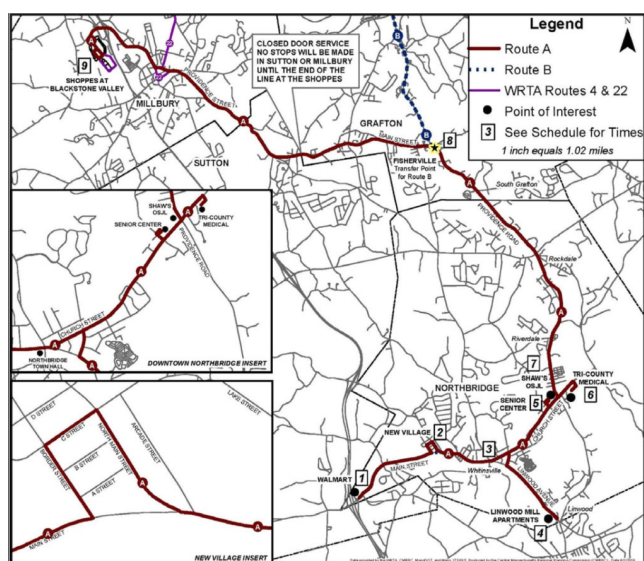
Opportunity: Access

Access for customers and employees seems to be an area where there is room for improvement. 53% of Business Survey respondents were neutral, dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with access. Only 6% were very satisfied. 32% said that changes in public parking availability, management or policies was important or very important.

TRAFFIC

Northbridge is well-connected to major transportation infrastructure, but local roadways present challenges. Route 122 is the Town's primary north/south thoroughfare and Northbridge is proximate to the Massachusetts Turnpike, Interstate 495, and State Routes 146, 140, and 395. Route 146 (the Worcester Providence Turnpike) traverses the Town's southwestern-most corner, connecting to Main Street.

Route 122, Church Street, and portions of Main Street serve upwards of 7,500 vehicles per day, and traffic backs up along these routes during peak hours. During the 2017 Economic Development Strategic Plan process, traffic along Church Street was frequently cited as a constraint to business activity. Church Street represents two (2) of (3) Northbridge auto crash clusters. The most significant of these is at Plummer's Corner (the intersection of Church Street and Providence Road).



WRTA Routes serving the Northbridge Study Area.

2019 traffic counts from MassDOT's Transportation Data Management System indicate that on average 14,986 travel Church Street daily. This figure fell by more than 17% to 12,363 in 2020. Similarly, Providence Road noted an annual average daily trips total of 10,699 in 2019. 2020 average daily trips dipped at a nearly identical rate of Church Street trips, to 8,827.

TRANSIT

Access to the Framingham commuter rail line, with end points in Worcester and Boston, is available in the neighboring Town of Grafton. The Grafton commuter rail stop is approximately 7.5 miles from the northern boundary of Northbridge and 11.5 miles from the Northbridge Town Hall. In addition to this infrastructure, Northbridge also benefits from inter-municipal transit access via the Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA) shuttle bus. Since 2013, two (2) fixed-route lines connect Whitinsville and Rockdale to the Shoppes at Blackstone Valley in Millbury, the MBTA train Station in Grafton, Tufts University, and other sites.

This service connects residents with limited access to vehicles to diverse shopping, employment, and educational opportunities. However, existing routes are limited in terms of how often, how far, and how fast they serve customers. Route A runs five (5) times a day between approximately 9:00 am to 3:30 pm and makes seven (7) stops in Town, including two (New Village/ Coremark, the intersection of Church and Linwood Streets, Shaw's/ Ocean State Job Lot, Linwood Apartments). Route A continues north to Grafton and Millbury's Shoppes at Blackstone Valley. Route B runs approximately twelve (12) times per day from 5:30 am to 2:00 pm making all Northbridge Route A stops except for Tri-County Medical Center. Route B's final stop is the Grafton MBTA commuter rail station. It takes forty (40) minutes to travel from Northbridge Walmart to the train station by bus. Northbridge commuters who arrive at the MBTA station by rail after 6:00 pm are not served by bus connection. The lack of connectivity after 6:00 pm significantly limits commuter rail use by Northbridge residents.

STREET PARKING

On-street parking is available along the Church Street commercial corridor. Approximately 70 formal and free street parking spaces exist between the Whitinsville Savings Bank Building on Linwood Avenue and the

Opportunity: Access

Towne Plaza Shopping Center on Church Street (pictured at right).

During the pandemic, the way that public space is used has changed. Many communities have found that bicycling has increased dramatically. Outdoor dining has provided a lifeline to struggling restaurants and small businesses. If enduring, these activities would displace curbside parking. Further, free parking is depriving the Town of a potential source of revenue. The Town could consider phasing in paid parking on Church Street —perhaps starting with commercial parking and delivery services. It would provide the city with much-needed revenue while giving the city the ability to clear the space it needs to maintain outdoor dining and build out a safe, reliable micromobility transportation network for bicycles and scooters.

“GATEWAY” PARKING

In order to encourage visitors to explore the Downtown Whitinsville Study Area on foot, several paved parking areas at the western edges of Whitinsville may be utilized as “gateway” parking locations. These are lots located at the edges of a district in locations that are close enough to the commercial center to encourage visitors to park and walk, but far enough away that they limit impacts on the main downtown traffic flow. Whitinsville has three (3) surface lots that could be utilized for this purpose: on Main Street (between High Street and Forester) in addition to the lot at the Whitinsville Community Center; and three (3) on Douglas Rd. supporting the Red Brick Mill and performance center.

SHARED PARKING

Where gateway parking is not possible or practical, shared parking opportunities should be explored. By siting shared parking near multiple existing retail sites, those visiting Northbridge can be encouraged to park their cars in a central location and walk the remaining distance to their destination. To avoid potential conflict with private lots in various commercial developments, a shared parking bylaw could alleviate pressure from new development to increase the number of private lots. New site plan reviews can also be used to allow reduction in the number of parking spaces required. The Church Street corridor has several existing lots which could be used to supplement the limited parking options. Plummer’s Corner likewise has an abundance of privately owned parking lots which might benefit from a shared parking bylaw, though in many of those



Towne Plaza Shopping Center is a private lot within the Study Area servicing several restaurants and businesses, as well as the south-central office of the Department of Children and Families.

lots, some walkability improvements would likely need to be made. Formalizing parking regulations in town by strengthening existing language to require shared parking has the potential to improve current parking conditions in Town and to play a role in enhanced economic development in Northbridge. A model shared parking bylaw is included as Appendix F.

OFF-STREET PARKING

Outside of Downtown Whitinsville, other commercial centers rely predominantly on privately held surface lots to support their businesses. This has the effect of fragmenting these centers and limiting their effectiveness as destinations. Town by-laws encourage the addition of rearlot, off-street parking but do not require it. It is suggested that regulations clearly state that locating parking in these areas is to be expected. As they are currently written, general parking and loading requirements demand that parking spaces linked to a particular intended use be located no more than 300 feet from the premises to which they are appurtenant. On-Street Parking: There is some on-street parking which the town has improved with the addition of curb extensions in recent years. However, this is limited to the short commercial stretch of Church St. Other commercial centers tend to rely predominantly on privately held surface lots to support their businesses. This has the effect of fragmenting these centers and limiting their effectiveness as destinations.



LuLu's Jewelry & Gifts: A compelling and well-maintained storefront in Downtown Whitinsville.

Opportunity: Storefronts

Respondents were far less satisfied with private than public realm elements of the Study Area, including the condition of private buildings, facades, storefronts, and signage. 59% were either neutral or dissatisfied with the condition of the private realm, and 41% were satisfied. No respondents were very satisfied or very dissatisfied in this category. Storefront improvements can include installation of awnings, brick pointing, cornices, decorative tile, exterior door improvements, exterior lighting, masonry, exterior painting, signage, windows/glazing, and/or woodwork.

In 2014, Wisconsin Main Street partnered with the University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension on to update a frequently cited study on this topic from 1986. The "[Analysis of Downtown Storefront Improvements: A Selection of Wisconsin Case Studies](#)", provides insights on the value of property improvements from the perspective of the individual property or business owner. The study included 24 interviews with property owners who had recently completed façade improvement projects and were able to provide information on the cost and scope of the enhancements, as well as business operations before, during and after improvements. Properties included a broad cross section of industry types and involved projects in communities of all sizes.

The most compelling study finding was that even a small investment in the exterior of a property has measurable impacts on business sales and the ability of a business to attract new customers. The majority study participants (80%) saw an increase in the number of new customers, with an average growth of 10%. 90% of participants experienced increased overall sales (average increase of 20%).

The UW study offered a glimpse of the individual returns on façade investment and reinforced many theories regarding broader community benefits that can result from individual property improvements. Several participants even identified one or more of these secondary benefits as some of the most rewarding elements of their project. In addition to increased first-time customers and sales, benefits included;

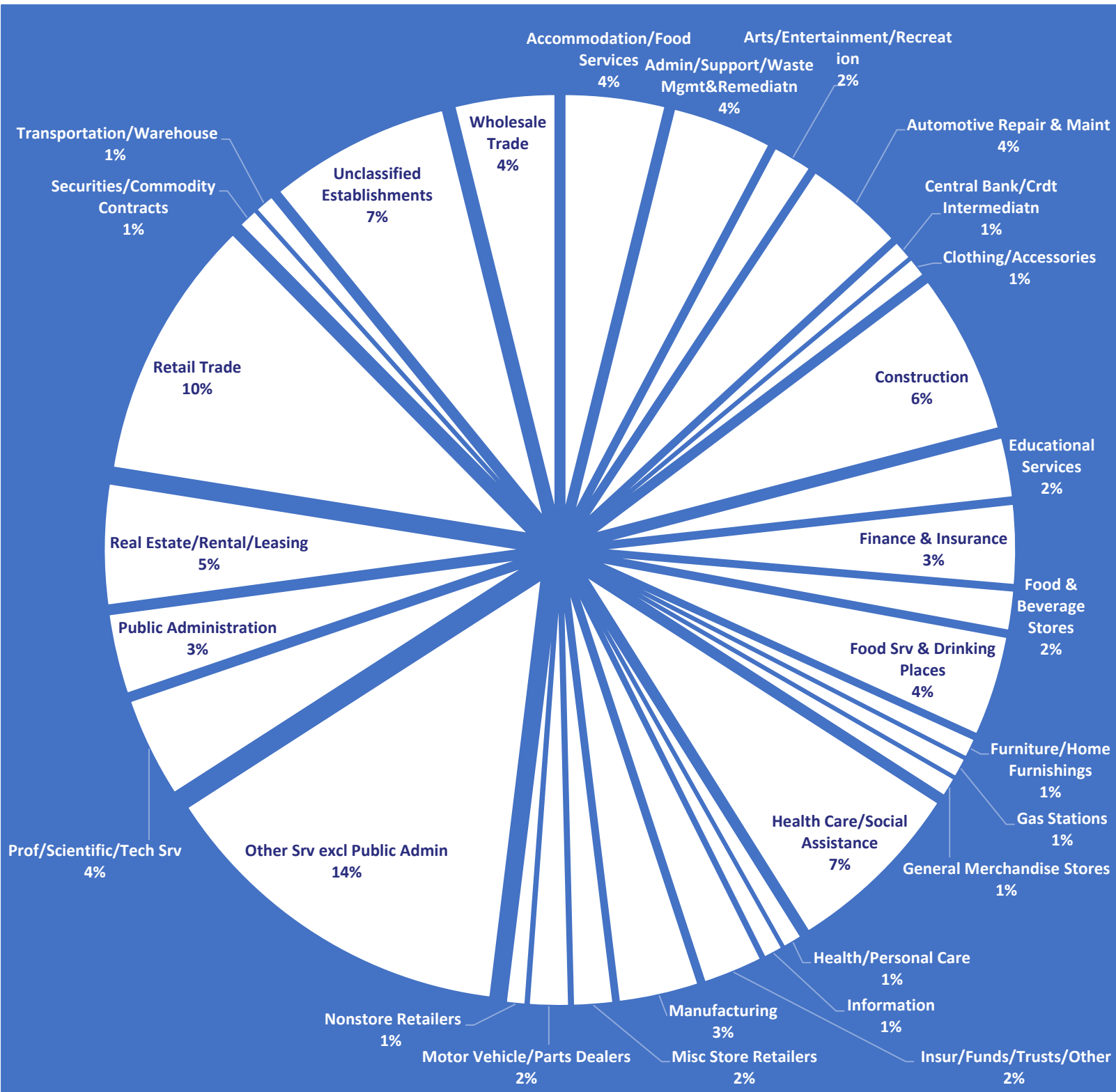
- Increased sales and traffic at adjacent businesses,
- Additional interest in vacant commercial spaces in adjacent buildings,
- Landlords generate increased rental revenues,
- Gains in community pride and civic appreciation among businesses, property owners and customers.

While not an official project recommendation, Northbridge may consider conducting an impartial evaluation of Study Area facades by utilizing the UW-Madison Extension "First Impression" model. [First Impressions](#) pairs two, similar communities in geographically separate areas. Each community sends a team to the other community for a one-day, secret shopper-type evaluation of the other community. The teams then complete a wide-ranging evaluation to develop a comprehensive report describing each team's first impressions. As a result, each community gains insights into its own community through the eyes of an outside visitor and learns how to think about its own downtown through its experience evaluating another community.

The First Impressions evaluation exercise would ideally provide invaluable information to inform development of a Community Placemaking plan to guide future community development.



Study Area Tenant Mix



Mix of business by NAICS category. Source: US Census Bureau



Business needs, customer needs

TENANT MIX

According to 2021 ESRI Business Analyst figures, there are 105 total businesses in the Study Area, comprised of 372,738 square feet of retail space, 593,225 square feet of office space, and 154,496 square feet of manufacturing (CoStar). Average asking rent within the Study Area for ground floor retail space at the time of writing is \$13.14 per square foot, while average asking rent for ground floor office is \$16.11 per square foot. These rates appear to be consistent with other nearby communities (average asking rents for retail and office space in six other Southern Worcester County communities for whom CMRPC served as RRP facilitator were \$14.11 per square foot and \$16.09 per square foot, respectively).

COVID-19 IMPACTS

88% of Business Survey respondents reported COVID impacts. The most significant were reduced operating hours or capacity (71%), decline in revenue (59%), expenses incurred to implement safety measures (47%). 60% of businesses had fewer on-site customers in January and February of 2021 than preceding the pandemic, and at the time of the survey in May 2021, 53% of businesses were still operating at reduced hours. 30% of businesses generated more than 25% less revenue in 2020 than they did in 2019.

BUSINESS INPUT ON ACTIONS TO SPUR RECOVERY

As part of the Business Survey, respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the various aspects of the Study Area.

Respondents were most satisfied with their proximity to complementary businesses or uses (77% indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied, and no respondents were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied). Interestingly, during the 2017 Economic Development Strategic Plan process, many residents noted a lack of the kinds of complementary amenities that often characterize tourist destinations such as restaurants, hotels, bed and breakfasts and a visitor center.

Generally, respondents also seemed happy with safety and comfort of customers and employees, with the majority (53%) indicating that they are satisfied or very satisfied.

Business Survey respondents indicated that recruitment programs to attract additional businesses would be the most beneficial approach to attract new

businesses to the Study Area (41% said that this tactic was important or very important). Approaches that were viewed as less valuable by respondents were changes to zoning or other local regulations, and creation of a district management entity such as a Business Improvement District (only 6% and 18%, respectively, felt that these actions were important or very important).

A large percentage (44%) of Survey respondents indicated support for implementing marketing strategies for the Study Area. Shared marketing and/or a stronger community brand could bolster awareness of Northbridge businesses and help build the customer base. The goals of community branding are to fortify identity and individuality, to visually define community character, and to link collective memory. Good community branding can create a sense of arrival and place.

Northbridge has an economy that is steeped in history and shaped by the presence of major players in the Industrial Revolution. While there are still active manufacturers in Town, that history does not necessarily represent the current economy, or community character. For example, the National Park Service promotes the Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor on its website and in its brochures, characterizing Whitinsville as a “company town” with the tag line, “Making the Machines.” This description is exciting to only a segment of potential visitors and it discounts the architectural beauty and quintessential New England “small-town” atmosphere.

Please refer to Project Recommendation #2: *Develop a Shared Marketing Strategy for Northbridge and Study Area Businesses* to read more about how the Town, the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce, the National Park Service, and local business stakeholders could collaborate to create additional marketing materials that better capture the Town’s diverse charms and commercial offerings.



Asset: Community



Located at a Study Area gateway, the Whitin Community Center could be an invaluable project partner by providing event space or assisting with promotion of economic development initiatives and happenings.

Business Survey respondents were overwhelmingly satisfied with their proximity to complementary uses, and notably – particularly in Downtown Whitinsville – these uses include many community and civic uses in addition to fellow businesses. Collaborations between the business, government, education, religious, and nonprofit sectors can lead to an increase in opportunities and resources. Northbridge has a strong community, and business/community partnerships may be utilized to foster economic recovery and growth in the Study Area.

WHITIN COMMUNITY CENTER

In 1922, the daughters of G.M. Whitin – Treasurer and CEO of the Whitin Machine Works from 1886 to 1920 – funded the construction of a gym and pool for local citizens in memory of their father. At the time, the Center was one of the best facilities in the state and served as a regional training site for elite swimmers, including Alice Bridges of Uxbridge who won a silver medal in the 100-meter backstroke during the 1936 Olympic games.

The Center is located across the street from Town Hall, at the intersection of Main Street and Hill Street and a mere 500-feet from the Town Common that anchors the Downtown Whitinsville Study Area. Northbridge businesses could leverage Center events or camps to draw more customers into shops along Church Street. The Center could also serve as a partner for a number of recommended projects, including Walking Trails or Trail Maps Based on Historical and Cultural Asset Inventories, or an Annual Wayfinding Competition Historical Scavenger Hunt.

BLACKSTONE VALLEY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The Chamber offers classes, seminars, and webinars to help members start, grow, and manage their businesses. They also provide business services, serve as a legislative advocate, host industry roundtables and other events, and provide business counseling. The Chamber already provides invaluable support to members, and is in a unique position to provide immediate, direct input from business to State decision makers.

Additionally, the Chamber could serve as a partner for a number of recommended projects, including Shared Marketing Campaigns, promoting Cultural/Historic Trails and Events, and/or Website Development or E-commerce Support for Local Businesses .



Asset: Community

WHITINSVILLE SOCIAL LIBRARY

In 1913, the Georgian Revival style Whitinsville Social Library was constructed on Church Street through the efforts of Edward and Arthur Fletcher Whitin, who sold it to the Town for \$1.00. The Library is part of the Whitinsville Historic District and included in the National Register of Historic Places. Except for accessibility upgrades, the building is essentially unchanged and still features many original furnishings.

The Library offers varied programs for infants, children, tweens, teens, and adults. In general, libraries have noteworthy reach and trust in their communities, serving as a central, free resource and point of connection while spanning language barriers, economic obstacles, and the digital divide. But libraries need sufficient resources to keep pace with growing needs and to provide a full range of supports and services—whether that’s access to a high-speed Internet connection, digital literacy training, English to Speakers of Other Languages classes, help writing a resume, or connections to other programs provided by government and community partners. The Library could provide an important opportunity to strengthen vital social infrastructure and connect existing or new Library programming the Town’s economic recovery goals.

Specifically, the Library could serve as a partner for a number of recommended projects, including Walking Trails or Trail Maps Based on Historical and Cultural Asset Inventories, an Annual Wayfinding Competition or Historical Scavenger Hunt, and/or Website Development or E-commerce Support for Local Businesses.

SCHOOLS AND YOUTH

Like most communities, Northbridge residents look forward to time honored holiday traditions that make everyone feel warm and festive – and that includes the whimsical painted storefront windows throughout Town. For years, through these dynamic and charming holiday scenes, Northbridge High School (NHS) students have demonstrated how students can help drive business Downtown. The efforts are a fundraiser for the NHS Student Council, with the added benefit of reminding the community to think and shop local. When storefronts are improved, even surrounding businesses may note an increase in sales.

Projects like window painting improve placemaking by reducing vacant storefront space and drawing more



The Whitinsville Social Library – located within the Study Area – could serve as a valuable project partner by helping to distribute trail maps, promote community events, and / or host business support services.

foot traffic into the Study Area. This existing campaign could be expanded and maximized to involve Northbridge youth in economic development by, for example, NHS, the Town and/or the Chamber collaborating to identify local online retailers and vacant storefronts to provide online sellers with temporary, decked-out storefronts.

Further, if the window displays were unveiled in tandem with a Downtown event (i.e., Lights Festival), holiday shopping and well-coordinated local events would unite to bring locals and visitors downtown.

Yet there are still more ways that local schools and youth and the business community can support one another. From the first days of the pandemic, small businesses struggled to access public sector aid programs that were promoted and applied for online, and in response to the Business Survey, 29% of respondents said that assistance setting up an online store or other online selling would be most pertinent to their economic recovery efforts. The Town could recruit tech-savvy local college or high school students to assist small businesses in using technology and accessing recovery funds and other resources, or to apply Instagram and Tik Tok skills to teach small businesses how to use these and other social platforms for advertising and e-commerce.

Please refer to Project Recommendation #6: *Support Businesses with Website Development or E-commerce* to read more about how the Town and/or the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce may consider partnering with local schools and youth to support local business recovery.



Photo by [MART PRODUCTION](#) from Pexels

An Aging Customer Base

DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

Northbridge is currently home to 17,191 people. By 2040, Northbridge's population is expected to grow to nearly 21,800 residents, and the age distribution is expected to skew older. According to Esri data, in 2020 the median age in Town was 40.7 while it was slightly older in the Study Area (42.8).

In 2020, 25% of the Northbridge population was under the age of nineteen, and 18% was 65+. In 2040, the under nineteen age cohort is expected to decrease by more than 3% while the 65+ cohort may increase by more than 8% (*CMRPC population projections based on 2018 Regional Transportation Plan population projections. Age cohort breakdowns based on University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute age cohort percentages*).

Demographic trends indicate that income and level of education are also climbing. From 2010 – 2015, Northbridge median household income increased by approximately 7% to \$72,550 (US Census Bureau, Decennial 2010 Census; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates). The 2020 median household income in the Town and the Study Area were \$78,951 and \$78,588, respectively (per Esri) – an increase of nearly 9% from 2015 figures.

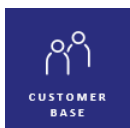
Both in the Town as a whole and the Study Area, more than 40% of the population aged 25+ has a college degree (Esri). Another 48% and 47% (respectively) have a high school diploma or alternative credential.

DEMOGRAPHIC IMPLICATIONS FOR ATTRACTION & RETENTION OF CUSTOMERS

Gender, age, ethnicity, geography and income are all market-segmenting criteria. By having a well-defined set of demographic factors, businesses can identify the best channels to reach their customer base.

Based on the Diagnostic Findings of the RRP process, customers in the Northbridge Study Area are middle-aged, and median age will likely continue to increase in the coming years. The economic implications of an aging population include gaps and shortages in the workforce and loss of experienced workers and business owners to retirement.

Yet an aging population can also be an opportunity for economic growth by prompting new business formation and existing business expansion to match needs and interests. Age-related product preferences run the gamut across many industry sectors from beauty (antiwrinkle creams), to hardware (lighter do-it-yourself household tools), to food (easy to prepare pre-made meals for one or two people).



Potential Marketing and Product Adaptations to Meet Customer Base Needs

Middle-aged and older consumers also require tailored communications. Changes in eyesight call for plainer typefaces, higher-contrast colors, and bigger fonts. Personal contact and the ability to moderate information flow are important to older customers, as are compelling, substantive validations for why a product is better than its competitors.

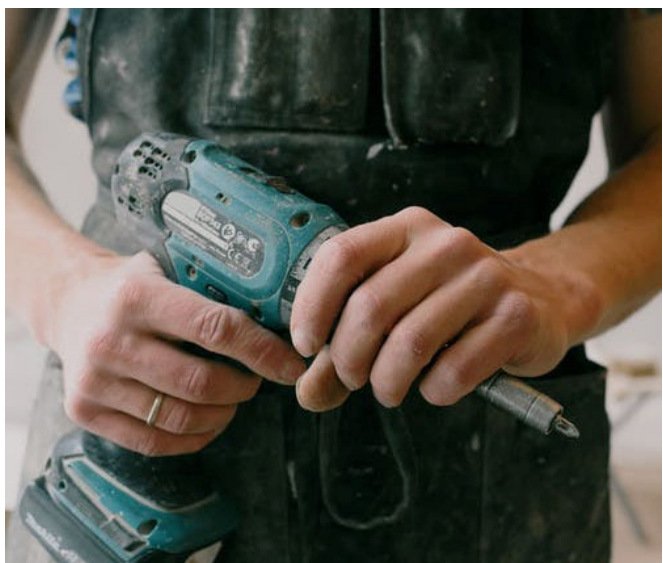
Besides product offerings and marketing however, aging demographics in Northbridge and surrounding communities may create openings for age-specific services.

For example, the aging population may produce a mounting need for senior care workers, creating opportunities for home care and institutional care providers and HR staffing agencies who are able to recruit and retain qualified senior care workers. Major modifications to all types of property are also necessary to accommodate an aging population. As such, licensed contractors who offer renovation services such as installing wheelchair ramps, chair lifts, or elevators, widening doorways, mounting grab bars in bathrooms, or replacing flooring with slip-resistant material may be in higher demand in Town in the coming years.

The existing and projected customer base in Town may have greater impacts on Study Area businesses whose target customer is younger than middle-aged.

Businesses who do not already have an online presence may consider developing a website or social media pages for e-commerce to spur recovery and grow their customer base outside the geographic footprint of Northbridge and surrounding communities. Small business recovery is crucial to job creation and upping online business activities could boost small businesses revenue and help restore the workforce at the same time.

Finally, 41% of Business Survey respondents indicated that more cultural events or activities to bring people into the Study Area was important or very important to attracting or retaining customers. Please refer to Project Recommendation #5: *Support and Enhance Annual Historical Events* to read more about how Northbridge proposes to take advantage of their unique historical and cultural assets to draw new and existing customers into the Study Area.



An aging population may present new opportunities for contractors qualified to install accessibility property modifications.



Northbridge Permitting Requirements Are Business-friendly

The zoning and permitting process at the local level can often be considered a barrier to businesses and new development in a community. Ensuring that the zoning bylaw and permitting process are clear, consistent, predictable, and streamlined is critical to reducing the time and cost of developing and doing in Northbridge.

In the last decade, Northbridge has taken care to implement zoning revisions that would encourage smart growth goals and support existing local businesses. As previously referenced, in 2010, the Town adopted an Agri-Tourism Farm zoning provision that permitted agricultural-based recreation, entertainment and education by-right. The Town has also designated several sites as priority development areas and established a 43D expedited permitting process for six (6) sites on Main Street and Linwood Avenue. Areas designated as 43D sites are provided benefits from the state such as priority consideration for grant funding, online marketing of the site by the state, improved municipal planning and permitting, and collection of special permitting fees from site permit applications. The 43D designation also provides benefits to developers by guaranteeing local permitting decisions will be made in 180 days and provides a single point of contact within the community who is responsible for streamlining the process.

Adopting a Historic Mill Adaptive Reuse Bylaw in 2012 supported adaptive reuse in the Linwood and Whitin Mills. The Linwood Mill complex is now home to affordable senior housing, the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor offices, retail stores, a restaurant, and a brew pub. The Whitin Mill is home to several businesses as well as a successful business incubator.

Further, Northbridge has provided Tax Increment Financing (TIF) agreements for priority properties. Financial incentives like TIF agreements can be an effective way to draw new investment into the community. A TIF is a tax break specifically for job-creating development. The incentive helps mitigate increases in property taxes due to new investment in a development site or improvements to existing buildings. Communities can choose to exempt up to 100 percent of the new tax increment to the benefit of the property owner, and when the agreement expires, that new tax increment will be new revenue for the Town. In 2015, the Town provided Woonsocket Glass Manufacturing with a five-year TIF that enabled the business relocate from Rhode Island to facility in Whitinsville. The agreement funneled \$8.1 million in private investment into Northbridge and created an estimated fifty (50) local jobs.

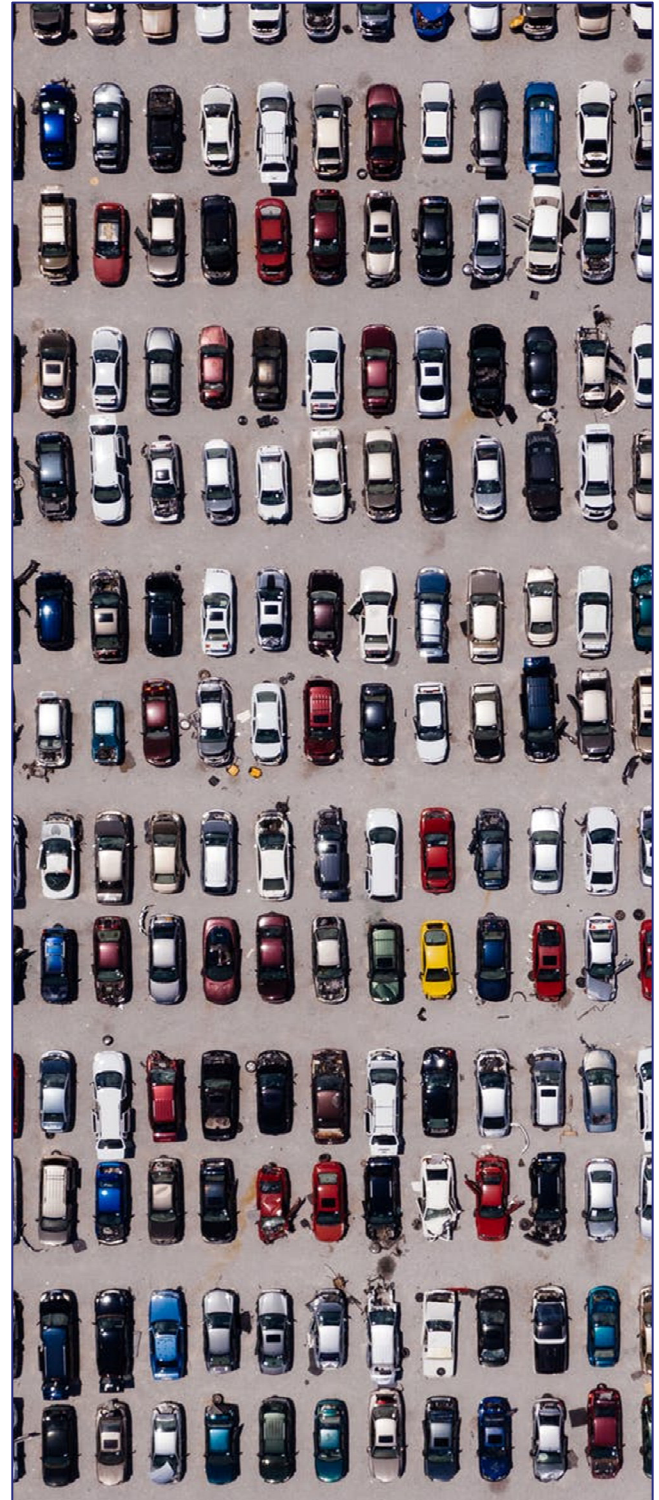
Opportunity: Revise Parking Requirements and Practices

Overall, the current version of the Zoning Bylaw is clear, consistent, and well-organized. **In fact, in response to the Business Survey, 76% of respondents said that local regulations do not pose an obstacle to business operation.**

Of the 24% of businesses that indicated that the regulatory environment poses an obstacle to business operation, 18% said that parking regulations were limiting. The Town currently requires one parking space for every 100 (restaurants) to 275 (theaters) square feet of net floor space for commercial uses regardless of location. Industrial and institutional uses require one parking space for every 250 (medical offices) to 1,000 square feet of net floor space. The Town could consider revising the parking regulations to allow a reduction in the number of commercial parking spaces required when parking near multiple existing retail sites can be shared. By encouraging shared parking, customers and visitors can be encouraged to park their cars in a central location and walk the remaining distance to their destination. A shared parking bylaw could minimize potential conflicts with private commercial lots and alleviate pressure from new development to increase the number of private lots. Reducing commercial parking requirements could help lower overall development costs and increase the financial viability of a new project.

Another parking related opportunity would be for Northbridge to create what is known as a parking benefit district. The Municipal Modernization Act (2016) allows Massachusetts municipalities to establish a parking benefit district – a specified geography in which the parking revenues raised are reinvested back into the district for a wide range of transportation-related improvements. The funds may be used to purchase meters, invest in infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists, or pay for improvements to the public realm, such as street trees, benches, and lighting.

Additionally, though not identified in business survey responses, in previous planning efforts Northbridge stakeholders have expressed that existing commercial and industrial areas along Route 122 are attractive areas for future opportunity in the Town. However, large swaths of land zoned Industrial I and Industrial II in this area prohibit many highly desirable land uses, including more office space, expanded restaurant offerings, bars, and service industries. The sense among business owners who provided this feedback, was that more flexibility in by-right usage in those areas would improve their market viability.



Project Recommendations

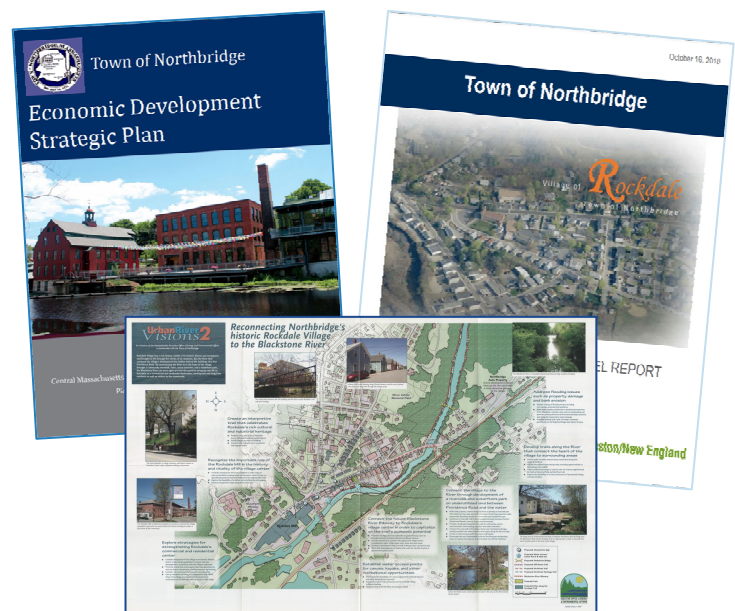
1. Create a Strategy for the Northbridge Economic Development Committee

Category	 Capacity
Location	Northbridge Town Hall
Origin	Economic Development Committee, CMRPC
Budget	 Low Cost (<\$50k)
Timeframe	 Short Term (Less than 1 year)
Risk	 Low Risk
Key Performance Indicators	Goal Setting; Town Collaboration
Partners & Resources	EDC, CMRPC, Town of Northbridge, Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce

Northbridge has all the assets in place to create the vibrant community they desire. With the creation of a Strategic Plan for the Economic Development Committee they can put all the time and energy they have committed over the past several years into action. Working on a strategy can be a short 3-month process with enumerable rewards. Having a strategy in place can also make the committee more appealing for recruiting new members.





A Strategic Plan will serve as a foundation for the role of the EDC in the Town and provide guidance as to the initiatives under their purview. The EDC Strategic Plan should include the following :

- A mission statement;
- Goals;
- Projects the EDC will undertake to meet established goals;
- Demographic data of businesses and customer base;
- Exploration of future market trends;
- Public input;
- EDC roles and responsibilities, including those of the EDC as a whole, EDC members and specific positions, Town staff liaisons, and regional representatives (e.g., CMRPC, BVCOC); and
- EDC operational procedures, including member turnover procedures and guidance for plan maintenance.



The Northbridge EDC Committee is comprised of five members appointed by the Board of Selectmen for terms of three years, one member of the Board of Selectmen, and one member of the Planning Board. Town Planner serves as an ex-officio member. The EDC oversaw development of the Economic Development Strategic Plan (June 2017), Urban Rivers2 (Rockdale), and Village of Rockdale -Technical Assistance Panel Report (January 2019).

2. Develop a Shared Marketing Strategy

Category	 Revenue/Sales
Location	Study Area
Origin	Northbridge Economic Development Committee, local business stakeholders, Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce, CMRPC
Budget	 Low Budget (<\$50k)
Timeframe	 Medium term ongoing project with Short Term initial training and implementation
Risk	 Low Risk, assuming satisfactory organization and implementation. Requires sensitivity to messaging and privacy issues. Stakeholders agree this is needed and a high priority project.
Key Performance Indicators	Message impressions, followers, responses, reach
Partners & Resources	Town administration, Professional marketing agency, business community, traditional media, schools (NPS and area colleges and/or universities)
Diagnostic	<p>Like so many towns, Northbridge has experienced a decrease in visitors, and resulting business revenue, throughout the pandemic. 88% of Business Survey respondents reported COVID impacts including reduced operating hours or capacity (71%) and decline in revenue (59%). 60% of businesses had fewer on-site customers in January and February of 2021 than preceding the pandemic.</p> <p>Business Survey respondents demonstrated a clear desire for developing marketing strategies for the Study Area, as 44% of survey respondents for implementing marketing strategies for the Study Area. Shared marketing and a stronger community brand could bolster awareness of Northbridge businesses and help build the customer base. The goals of community branding are to fortify identity and individuality, to visually define community character, and to link collective memory. Good community branding can create a sense of arrival and place, increase visibility, and act as a catalyst for further economic development.</p> <p>Study Area businesses would benefit from a shared district identity. A shared marketing vision and plan would support coordinated and integrated marketing efforts that encourages shopping with the local retail community – both online and in-store.</p>

Action Items

A branding campaign will create a rejuvenated and cohesive identity throughout Town and among area businesses that will highlight the Town's rich history and assets. This effort will align with ongoing efforts to reestablish emphasis on historical aspects of Downtown Whitinsville. Establishing a shared marketing campaign will help local businesses attract a larger audience and aid in economic recovery. The branding campaign will build off existing strengths and will include the following aspects:

- Social media outreach
- Wayfinding in the district and online
- Target college students and prospective students
- Create a logo and branding strategy that markets the district's local identity
- Highlight the district and Town's economic, cultural, and historical assets
- Enhance gateways to the Downtown Whitinsville
- Integrate uniform signage and wayfinding to clearly convey information to visitors and encourage exploration
- Utilize placemaking to create an inviting, inclusive atmosphere
- Create a facade improvement program with design guidelines to promote high quality design focused on the pedestrian experience
- Tell the story of Northbridge's heritage through placards, tours, living history events, public art, etc.





Process

Launching this project requires an initial planning session in which the groups and their key spokespeople are identified, along with the initial timeline and objectives. Once a committee of Town stakeholders to oversee the development and implementation of each phase of the branding campaign is established, a comprehensive internal assessment of current town branding should be completed to highlight existing strengths, best practices, and growth areas.

Following the audit, the committee should conduct outreach to members of the community to identify what exactly to highlight in the branding campaign. This may include interviews and surveys with business owners, Town staff, and local organizations and round-table meetings with group representatives.

Finally, using information and feedback collected from key stakeholders, develop a vision and theme for the Study Area branding campaign and identify best marketing approaches. Town branding should be aligned with existing and planned wayfinding efforts and other projects as applicable.

3. Streetscape & Sidewalk Improvements

Category	 Public Realm
Location	Study Area along Route 122
Origin	Northbridge completed a Complete Streets Prioritization Plan in 2019 with extensive stakeholder engagement.
Budget	 High Budget (>\$200k)
Timeframe	 Medium Term
Risk	 Low Risk, assuming an effective, community-driven planning process
Key Performance Indicators	Number of sidewalk improvements completed; Longevity of street/sidewalk improvements and tree planting; increased investment in public realm; decreased traffic incidents; improved business traffic, Number of pedestrians and bicyclists using the facilities and reduction of vehicle speeds
Partners & Resources	Town Administration, Business Community, Residents, Planning Board
Diagnostic	<p>Route 122 is a wide two-way arterial street with wide shoulders and no on-street parking which encourages high traffic speeds with no protection for pedestrian and bicyclists. Traffic volumes and speeds are moderate to high along the corridor. Demand for pedestrian and bicycle use along the corridor is moderate to high as it connects with businesses and residential areas.</p> <p>In 2019, Northbridge approved a Complete Streets Prioritization Plan that identified and ranked 43 projects – including seven that specifically involve portions of Route 122. In 2021 Northbridge received \$400,000 in Complete Streets funding to provide crosswalk improvements and wayfinding at the intersection of Linwood Avenue and Cross Street, and to construct a sidewalk on the southbound side of Linwood Avenue to the Mumford Riverwalk. The project will also reconstruct a section of sidewalk in front of the Northbridge Middle School sports fields and improve the existing crossings on the north side of Linwood Avenue between Middle and High Schools.</p> <p>Continuing Complete Streets improvements with sidewalk construction and crossing improvements along Route 122 will in effect close the “loop” between pedestrian-friendly commercial areas like Downtown Whitinsville (Church Street) and Linwood Avenue.</p>

Action Items

New Sidewalk Construction along School Street, between Providence Route (Route 122) and 53 School Street. A new sidewalk on the north side of the road will be constructed between Route 122 and 53 School Street (to be approximately 540 ft in length and 5 feet in width). A new crosswalk with ADA-compliant curb ramps and surfaces will be constructed on Edmond Street.

New Sidewalk Construction along Route 122, from Beaumont Drive to Upton Street. To connect to the existing sidewalk network on Route 122, a new sidewalk will be constructed on the north side of the road, from Beaumont Drive to Upton Street (350 feet in length and 5 feet in width).

New Sidewalk Construction along Church Street, between Highland Street and Route 122. To provide continuity in the Church Street sidewalk network, a new sidewalk will be constructed on the westbound side of Church Street, between 639 Church Street and Route 122 (0.2 miles in length and at least 5 feet in width). The existing sidewalk from Highland Street to 639 Church Street will be replaced so that the sidewalk will consistently be 5 feet and include grade separation. The existing midblock crosswalk will be repainted and include ADA-compliant curb ramps with detectable warning surfaces.





Crossing Improvements on Church Street Extension and Providence Road (Route 122): Crosswalk Replacement and ADA-Compliance. The 4 existing crosswalks will be repainted as high visibility crosswalks and will include ADA-compliant curb ramps with detectable warning surfaces. This intersection is adjacent to many businesses that would attract local residents. MassDOT HSIP Crash Clusters (2013-2015, 2012-2014) are within this project.

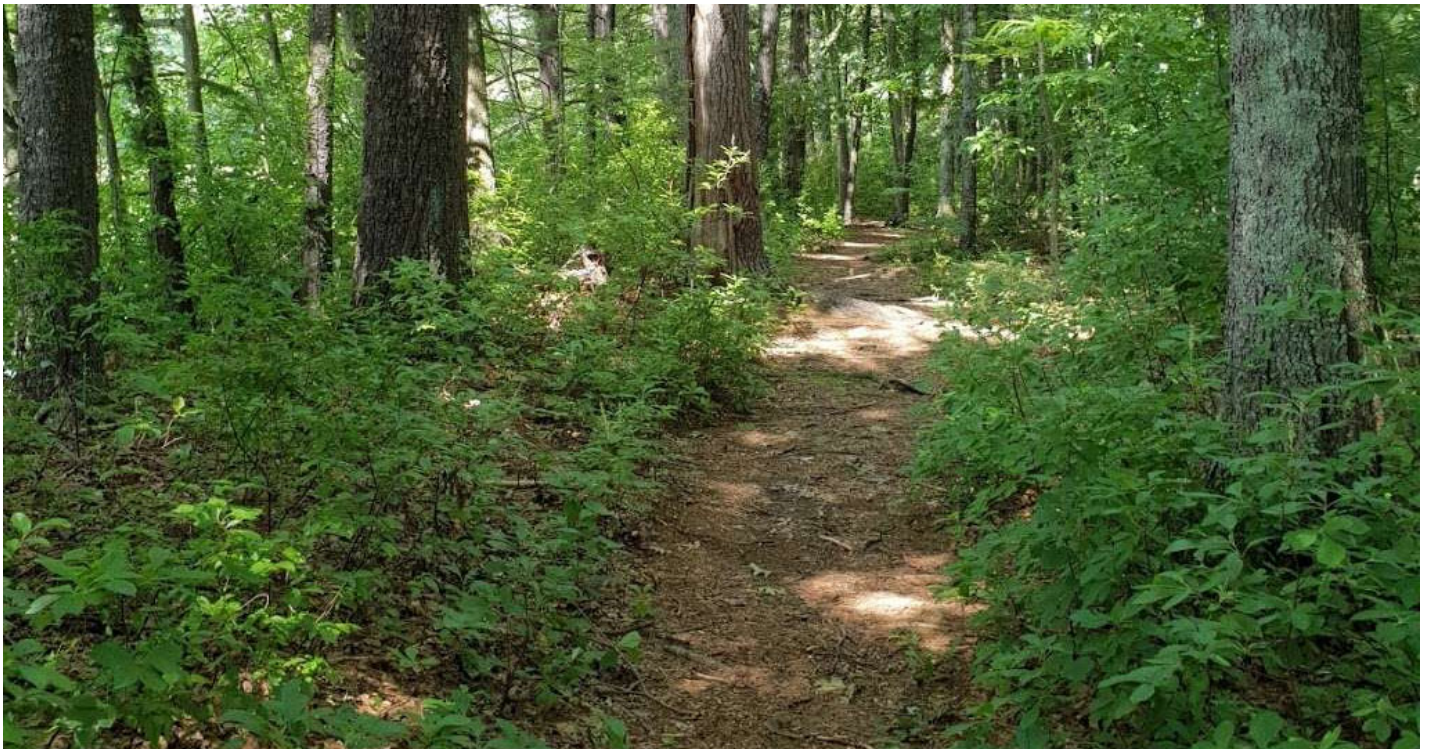
New Sidewalk Construction along Church Street Extension, between Route 122 and Plummer Park. To provide continuity in the Church Street sidewalk network, a new sidewalk will be constructed on the southwestbound side of Church Street, between Route 122 and across the street from the north end of Plummer Park (0.3 miles in length and at least 5 feet in width). The three existing crosswalks across Church Street, between Plummer Park (western end) and Plummer Park (eastern end), will be repainted and include ADA-compliant curb ramps with detectable warning surfaces.

Process

- ✓ Adoption of a Complete Streets Policy.
- ✓ Approval of Complete Streets Prioritization Plan by the Massachusetts Complete Streets Funding Program so that the community is eligible to apply for complete streets implementation funding.
- Completion of a conceptual design process that included broad participation.
- Application to the Massachusetts Complete Streets Funding Program for project implementation funding.
- Approval of implementation funding through the Massachusetts Complete Streets Funding Program for the project.
- Completion of the final design for the project which includes collaboration with businesses and abutters so as to address needs for parking, outdoor dining, and pedestrian facilities.
- Conduct procurement process to hire contractor.
- Contractor completes project construction.

4. Establish New Walking Trails and/or Trail Maps based on Cultural Asset Inventories

Category	 Revenue/Sales, Cultural/Arts
Location	Study Area. Specifically, an opportunity exists to connect the Mumford Riverwalk to Downtown Whitinsville
Origin	LRRP Planning Team
Budget	 Low Budget (<\$50k)
Timeframe	 Short Term
Risk	 Low Risk
Key Performance Indicators	Successful completion of asset inventory, trail users, successful partnerships, good press, increased visitors at historic sites
Partners & Resources	Town administration, business community, planning board, CMRPC, National Park Service, Historical Commission



The Mumford Riverwalk (about seven tenths of a mile one way) is a pathway that ambles between Linwood Avenue and the Mumford River at Linwood Pond. Parking is available about midway along the trail or at the north end opposite Lasell Field.

Diagnostic

During the pandemic, regional tourism increased, especially for outdoor attractions. These assets should be prioritized when thinking in terms of building a destination economy. Historic sites and recreation areas in Northbridge are an underutilized cultural assets. Northbridge is known for its history – a legacy that remains evident in the Town’s historical building stock – and natural and recreation resources appeal to residents and visitors. Yet there are many more “cultural assets” – including businesses, civic uses, art, memorials, and so much more.

In particular, the Mumford Riverwalk is an existing attraction at the southern periphery of the Study Area, which could be connected to Downtown Whitinsville via a new walking loop and more comprehensive trail mapping. This would encourage visitors to the area to spend more time in Northbridge and contribute to a Study Area identity.

A Pedestrian Loop would create connections between public amenities (Town Hall, Town Common, Library), recreation (Mumford Riverwalk), businesses, public transportation, and areas of historical or cultural significance (Brick Mill, Vietnam Veterans Memorial). Linking amenities through a safe and engaging transportation alternative will support environmental, conservation, economic, and public health goals in Northbridge. A new walking Loop would activate public spaces to support recreation and commerce in the community.

Action Item

At the time of writing, the Northbridge Conservation Commission is working with CMRPC to map several local trails within the Shining Rock Conservation Land and the Mumford Riverwalk with MassTrails Grant funding. The trails will be featured in an online interactive trail guide for the region and will also be available on the Town website and in PDF. Due to its proximity to the Study Area, National Park Service Visitors Center, and historic assets such as the Whittin Mill, the Mumford Riverwalk is an ideal leg of a Downtown Whitinsville walking loop that would spotlight community assets.

Cultural asset mapping rests in the belief that there are valuable assets - people, places, associations and organizations - and that recognizing, counting, and tracking those components can help communities plan and implement their vision. Asset mapping identifies a community's strengths and resources through the process of inventorying tangible and intangible cultural assets. Once this is complete, a more extensive map and branding of a walking loop would draw people to the Downtown (Church Street) and Linwood Mill. The Town should also consider branded signage along a walking loop.

A mapped and marked walking loop could more formally incorporate the NPS’ self-guided Blackstone Heritage Corridor walking tour, a 1.25-mile loop including stops at the James Fletcher Homestead, the 1826 Brick Mill, the Granite Cotton Mill, the Whittin Machine Works, Whittin Mansions, and Memorial Square. Connecting the Mumford Riverwalk to this existing loop and directing pedestrians up Cross Street and down Church Street (through the Study Area) would result in an approximately 3.25-mile route. Please see Appendix B for a pamphlet of the existing walking tour.

Development of a cultural asset walking loop to formalize connections between current Town resources would require collaboration and community engagement and would ideally be unveiled at a public event with activities along the trail. Please see Recommendation #5 (*Support and Enhance Annual Historic Events*) to learn more about how Northbridge could tie this potential project to existing historic/cultural events, and better support those events.

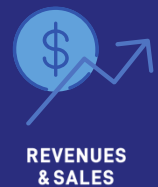
Process

- Complete asset mapping to identify additional “destinations” to feature on a Downtown Whitinsville “loop”.
- Identify the easiest physical route from the Mumford Riverwalk to Whitinsville commercial corridor.
- Approach partners from the business community and civic organizations to conduct an event promoting the trail.
- Develop promotional material in coordination with the shared marketing plan. Allow for several months of planning and collaboration to appropriately publicize the “kick-off” event.



Best Practice

Create a walking loop to attract customers and test ideas for long-term implementation



REVENUES
& SALES

Location

Manchester, NH

Diagnostic

“The Loop” – a walking tour of Manchester– hosted its kick-off event in 2017. Residents were invited to meet at City Hall for a map and some instructions, then follow the path from Elm Street, down to Commercial Street, and back. The Loop is a marked pathway that highlights the physical link to get from one destination to another, and includes way-finding to help navigate sites, history, and stories along the way. The pathway features 17 stops throughout – each significant in Manchester’s culture and history. Stops include the Mill Museum, City Hall and the Gaslight District.

The Loop was conceptualized, in part, to connect the thousands of high-tech workers and university students in the Amoskeag Millyard to the downtown. The Millyard is separated from Downtown Manchester by wide streets, a rail line, topography changes that necessitate stairs at some points, and an underutilized Merrimack River. The Amoskeag Millyard is lacking amenities such as restaurants and cafes, places to sit outdoors, and welcoming public spaces. Because it is isolated from the downtown, businesses have trouble attracting the Millyard market and a sense of vitality is missing from the entire area.

The Loop project focused on analyzing the best route and providing technical assistance and graphics help to get the pilot up and running. The Loop demonstrated the benefit of public art and programmed spaces and the impact these improvements make on the perception of space and distance between the Millyard and riverfront and the downtown.

Action Item

The resulting project was called “The Loop” and was the name of the designated route as well as the event that tested the conceptual idea of creating a focused path between the Millyard and downtown.

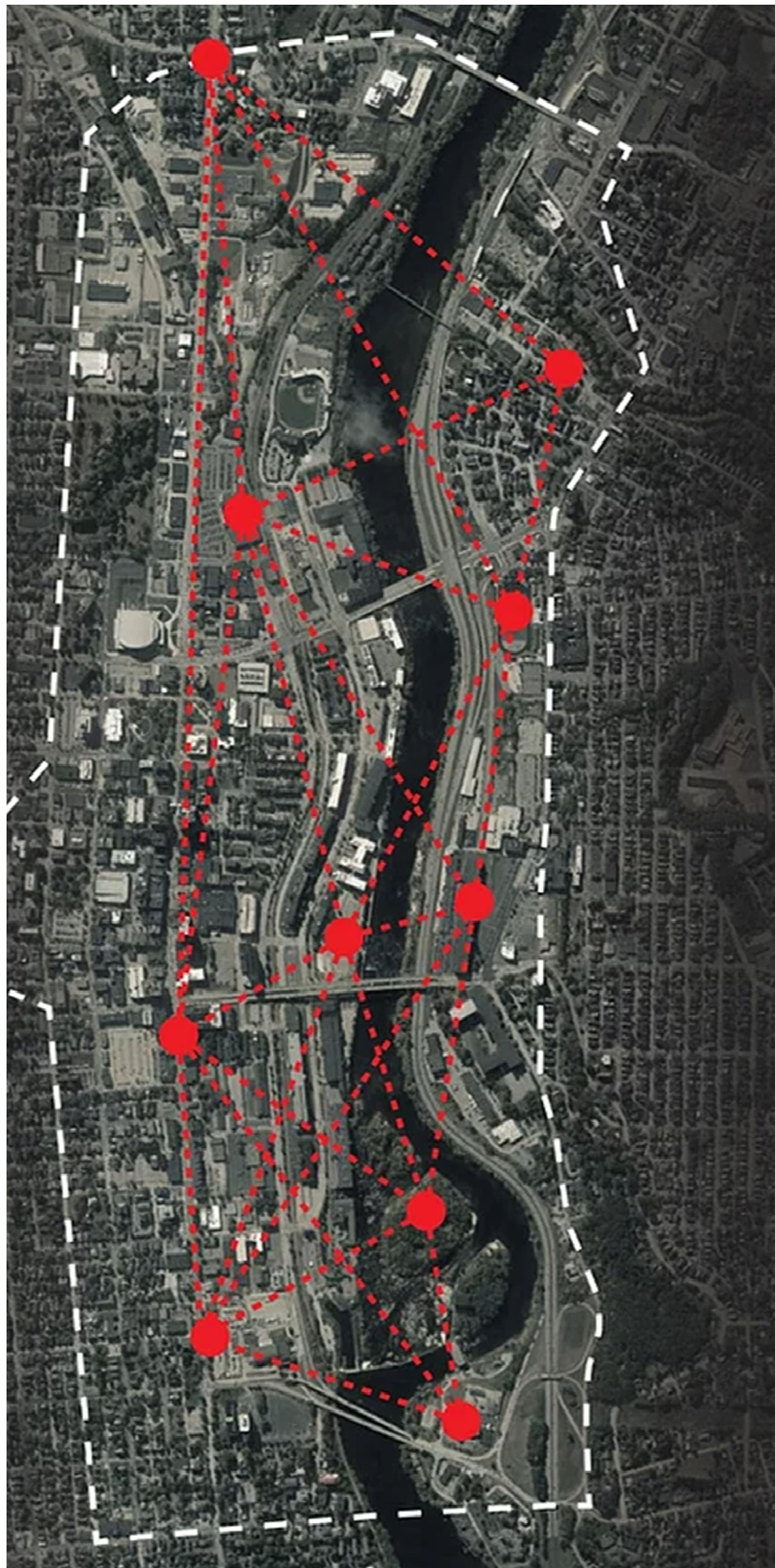
Using a map created by the consultant, the steering committee programmed a series of events, coordinated public art projects, and created seating and public space areas (all temporary) along a loop that connected downtown to the riverfront and Millyard. Businesses were involved in promotions and the Public Art Commission of the City collaborated with organizers to highlight new artists works. The downtown BID and City were also involved in helping plan and provide permitting for the event.

Process

The Loop event was a pilot project that grew from recommendations in the Manchester Connects plan for the Millyard and downtown. Seen as a way to demonstrate that Manchester Connects was about action, Loop Event Planning began with conceptual brainstorming with the entire project steering committee on multiple ways the committee could achieve the goal of better connectivity between downtown and the Millyard.


The steps to plan and execute this type of event include:

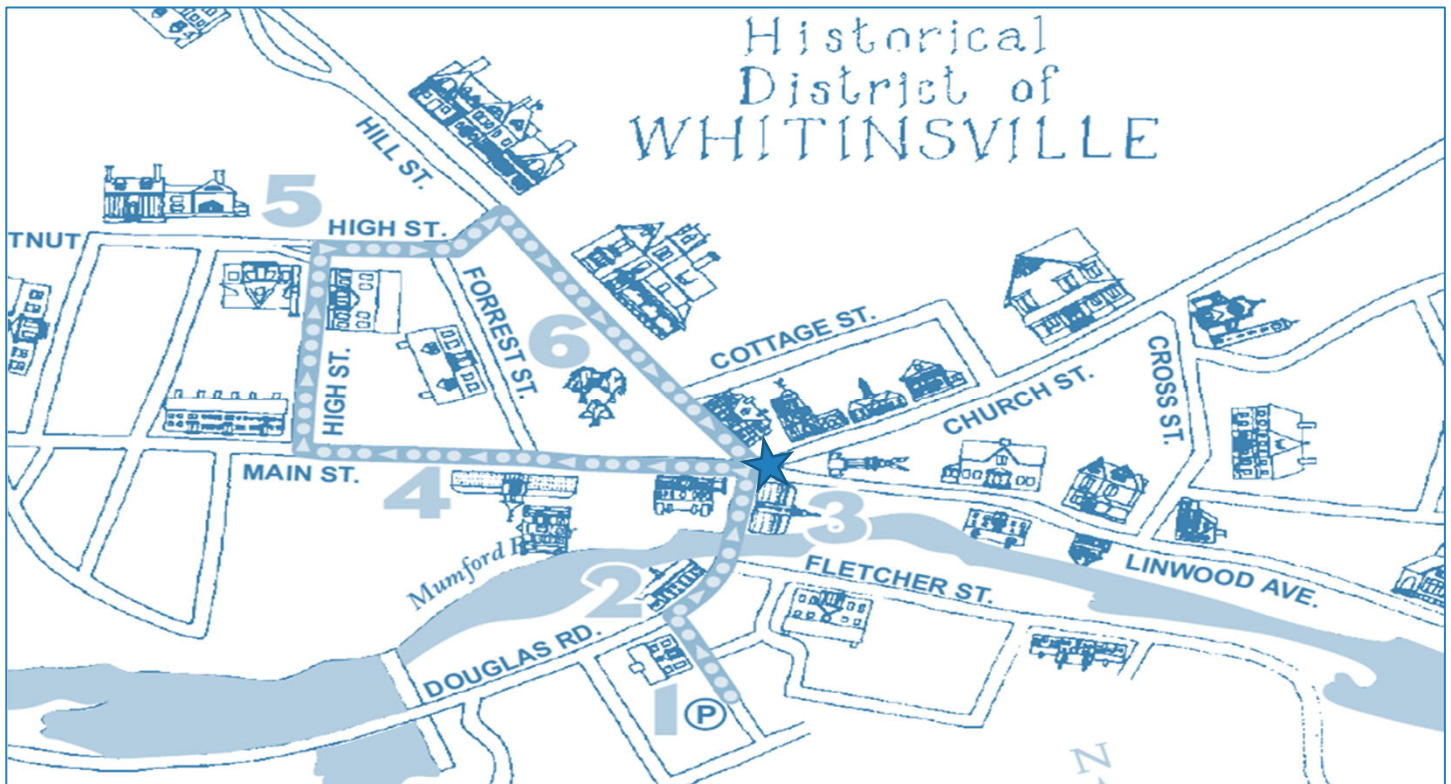
- The consultant team identified the challenge of physical connectivity and created a suggested map of the easiest route to and from the two disconnected areas.
- A few members of the steering committee volunteered to lead the effort and began planning.
- Partners were approached, including the City of Manchester, the Public Art Commission, some local retailers, the Millyard Museum, and others.
- Local graphic designers offered their services to design promotional literature and a major social media campaign was launched, building on the thousands of followers on the Manchester Connects Facebook page.
- Collaborators planned for approximately three months, garnering good press and many attendees the day of the event.



*Establishing connections on both sides of the Merrimack River was a priority for project partners.
Source: CivicMoxie*

5. Support and Enhance Annual Historical Events





Category	 Cultural/Arts
Location	Study Area
Origin	LRRP Planning Team
Budget	 Medium Budget (\$50k - \$200k)
Timeframe	 Medium Term
Risk	 Low Risk - If any portion of event is held on privately-owned property, private owners may be concerned about liability and the Town should consider if it can provide a blanket liability protection for these situations or indemnification agreement.
Key Performance Indicators	Event attendance and participation of local business community, space programming
Partners & Resources	Town administration, NPS, Historical Commission, residents, students, business community, Chamber of Commerce



Existing tour route in Downtown Whitinsville. Please see Appendix B for a full pamphlet describing the walking tour.

Diagnostic	<p>In the Business Survey, cultural events and activities were desired by 41% of respondents. In that same survey 60% of businesses reported a drop in on-site customers compared to pre-COVID conditions. One way to encourage greater foot traffic is through community and/or cultural events. Development of a cohesive Study Area identity and associated annual events would be beneficial to the district and would correspond with shared marketing and other initiatives.</p> <p>The development of a Downtown Whitinsville Walking Loop formally linking existing recreational and cultural resources with commercial offerings on Church Street (as endorsed in the previous Project Recommendation) would be most impactful if connected to existing events.</p> <p>The Town/NPS already annually offer walking and trolley tours of Whitinsville in the spring and/or summer. Local history expert Ken Warchol, has led multiple walking and trolley tours over the decades of the National Register Whitinsville Historic District including the transportation cog of the district, Memorial Square. This event could be more effectively marketed, and funding for trolley rentals would help keep costs down. There may also be opportunities to better incorporate Downtown Whitinsville commercial opportunities into the day's festivities.</p>
Process	<p>Identify town staff who will be responsible for overseeing the process of developing and publicizing the annual event. The planning committee should align on event goals, roles and responsibilities of each member, the implementation process, and event details (e.g., frequency, location, timing).</p> <p>Identify key community stakeholders (Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce, Scouts groups, Historical Society, etc.) who could provide different perspectives on how community (and particularly business) involvement in the annual event can be amplified. Based on stakeholder feedback, identify new potential tour stops or tie-ins and additional space programming (e.g., Concert on the Commons, Farmers Market, Small Business Showcases).</p> <p>Review current town regulations on street and sidewalk closures, food distribution permits, capacity and safety constraints, and any other requirements associated with establishing an outdoor event in a public space. If necessary, discuss an expedited and singular permitting process for recurring town events.</p> <p>Conduct outreach to the identified businesses, locations and organizations to garner participation in the identified recurring town events and/or request donations or development of an event day special.</p> <p>Create a survey to invite local businesses or attractions to sign-up for the event and detail their requirements and services/products offered. The survey should translate into a database to support scheduling, marketing and promotions, and ensuring even access to the events. For example, local businesses along the route could indicate whether they would be willing to provide restroom use, and/or offer an event day special (e.g. a Whitin mocha latte, 10% off any textile goods as a nod to Whitinsville's role in the Industrial Revolution). Create a resources database to identify implementation resource needs (e.g., additional material needs for town events include signage, safety) and who is providing each item.</p> <p>Develop a marketing strategy to attract vendors/participants and promote the event (e.g. flyers, storefront posters, local news and coverage).</p> <p>Create and distribute surveys that target both vendors and community members to understand the strengths of the program and any areas for improvement.</p> <p>The planning committee should also work to identify event sponsors or other funding sources to advertise and execute the event. MassDevelopment may be a good funding source. MassDevelopment recently offered a Resurgent Places initiative to help community partners prepare public spaces and commercial districts to best serve their population during COVID-19 social distancing and the phased reopening of the economy. Implementation grants of up to \$50,000 for the implementation of locally led placemaking projects. Up to \$10,000 per project may be awarded as an unmatched grant. Any amount of grant funding over and above that \$10,000 (not to exceed \$50,000) must be matched on a 1:1 basis with crowdfunding.</p> <p>Align the annual event with <i>Project 2: Develop a Shared Marketing Strategy</i> and <i>Project 7: Improve Wayfinding within the Study Area</i>, and use updated downtown branding to promote the event!</p>

6. Rapid Website and eCommerce Development

Category	 Revenue and Sales
Location	Online, involving Study Area businesses
Origin	Study area businesses
Budget	 Low budget (TBD.. Likely \$1k - \$2k per project)
Timeframe	 Short term per project
Risk	 Low Risk
Key Performance Indicators	Development time, ecommerce capabilities, website traffic
Partners & Resources	Business community, website design and development partner

Northbridge businesses are interested in website and e-commerce assistance. This could be accomplished by identifying a web design and development partner, or by partnering with local organizations and schools to support businesses and workforce development.

Diagnostic

Websites and related social media pages are a vital tool for businesses in the 21st century - many consumers rely on search engines for their decisions and having a presence is critical. Providing web development services for local businesses could be key to helping them go to the next level.

Action Item

The service would provide web presence development with a quick turnaround time of 2-4 weeks. These platforms could serve for ecommerce or simply creating a digital identity to bring in-person customers to the store.

Rapid website development could be offered by pre-qualifying a website design and development partner, or, potentially by partnering with local students.

For example, the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle partners with the Seattle Office of Economic Development (OED) on a Youth Web Design pilot program. The initiative provides an opportunity for Black youth to learn website design — at no cost — by connecting with local minority-owned businesses to establish and/or improve web presence.

ULMS recruited 16 Black-youth and designed a 6-week curriculum that included web design training, Wix skill certification, consulting with Black small businesses owners, and a stipend for their work. OED identified 16 Black-owned small businesses that were interested in website support and matched them with the youth web designers. In addition, OED funded the program through their Youth Workforce Development and Key Industries investments.

Process

Process for business owners:

- Overview of service and benefits
- Purchase of domain name
- Goal setting and timelines
- Gather content for website and determine aesthetic
- Develop/link social media
- Develop/link ecommerce platforms
- Review site with business owner prior to publication
- Assist business with incorporating site into business plan
- Handoff website and encourage/facilitate frequent edits and updates

7. Improve Wayfinding within the Study Area

Category	 Public Realm
Location	Study Area
Origin	Town, CMRPC
Budget	 Medium Budget (\$50K - \$200K)
Timeframe	 Medium Term
Risk	 Low Risk
Key Performance Indicators	Installation and use of signage / Study Area gateway definition, functionality of signage, participation in events
Partners & Resources	Town administration, business community, planning board



North Chelmsford Wayfinding family of elements. Source: Favermann Design.

Diagnostic

There is no unifying wayfinding and branding for the Study Area commercial district. Development of such wayfinding and associated annual events related to the district identity would be beneficial to the Study Area and would correspond with shared marketing and other initiatives.

Action Item

Develop a wayfinding system through community input and host related events to promote the system and build district identity. Adoption and distribution of attractive, branded signage would help further define the target area.

Defining the gateways of the target area by hanging banners, baskets, or string lights, self-watering planters, painted road art, picnic tables and benches, and other low-cost aesthetic improvements will make the area more inviting to visitors. High visibility areas such as the Town Common and Plummers Corner are high priorities. Longer-term, potential improvements could include the installation of brick paver stones instead of painted or concrete sidewalks, decorative trash receptacles, benches, additional pedestrian information/location signs, decorative street and traffic signs, uniform property information and address signs, lighting.

Rt. 122 lacks curbing or other features defining egress and ingress paths. For safety and better definition of space, the Town could work with property owners to create a plan for access management. Paint and DIY self-watering planters can be used to create a barrier that defines spaces and act as removable curbing. Establishment of visual barriers and landscaping will improve the aesthetics of parking lots, many of which require maintenance.

Process

Identify a design consultant and secure funding. [The Massachusetts Downtown Initiative annually funds Wayfinding initiatives \(project limit \\$25,000\)](#). All communities are eligible to apply. Some of the funding for this program is reserved for non-entitlement Community Development Block Grant communities. MDI staff will assign a consultant to assist the community with the technical services, which could include creating the program, developing the design guidelines, and providing conceptual designs for improvements, depending on complexity.

Develop wayfinding and branding through a series of group meetings involving Town committees and public input through meetings and a resident survey. The Project Committee and design consultant will collaborate to design and analyze a brand theme, logo, and slogan or tagline, including color, font, placement, and other elements.

To help launch and promote the wayfinding, hold an annual Town event (such as a revitalized an expanded Whitinsville Walking Tour).

Appendix

Appendix A

Business Survey Report

This report provides the results of a business survey conducted during March and April of 2021. The survey is part of a program launched by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development to help communities develop Rapid Recovery Plans for downtowns and commercial districts. The survey was directed to owners or other appropriate representatives of business establishments located in the targeted commercial areas. (For Data Tables, see page 9.)

Northbridge

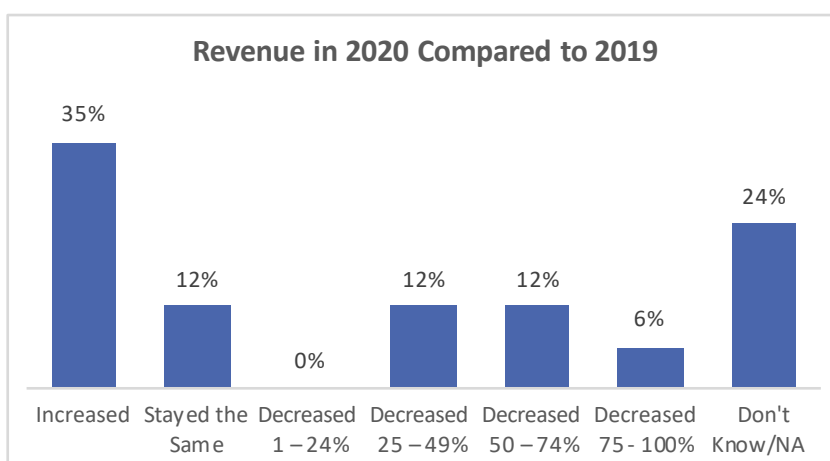
Downtown Whitinsville & Providence Road

Responses: 17

Impacts of COVID-19**Decline in Business Revenue**

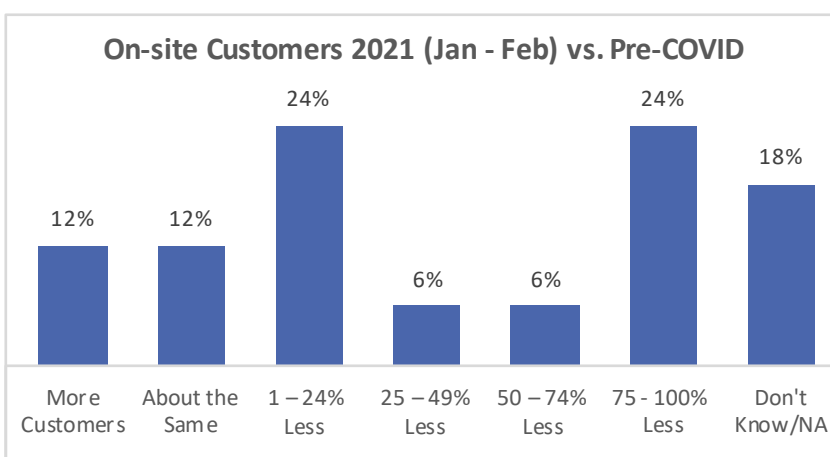
30% of businesses generated less revenue in 2020 than they did in 2019.

For 30% of businesses, revenue declined by 25% or more.

**Less Foot Traffic in Commercial Area**

60% of businesses had less on-site customers in January and February of 2021 than before COVID.

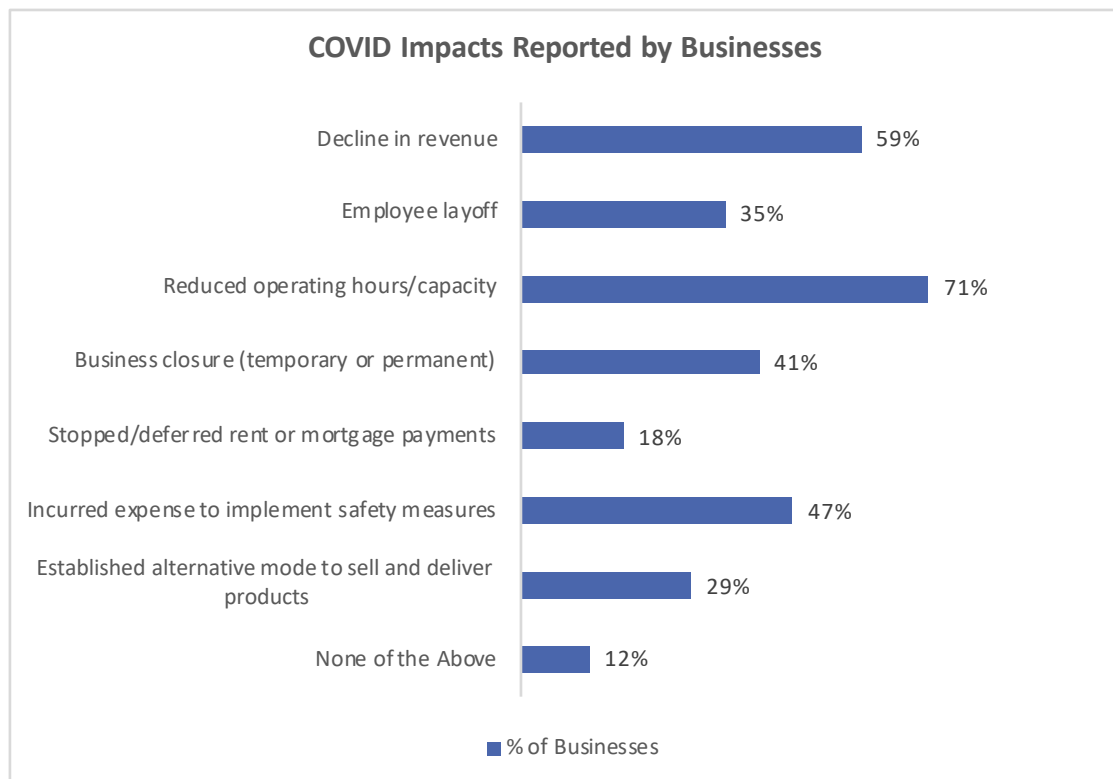
36% of businesses reported a reduction in on-site customers of 25% or more.



Impacts of COVID-19 (cont'd)

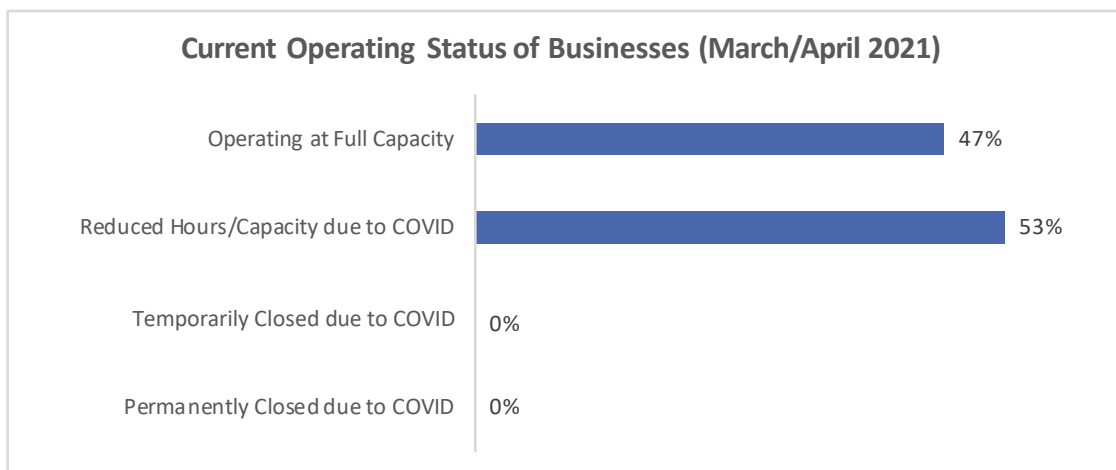
Reported Impacts

88% of businesses reported being impacted by COVID.



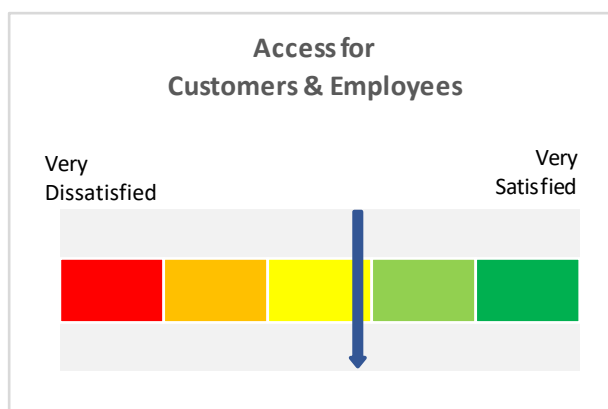
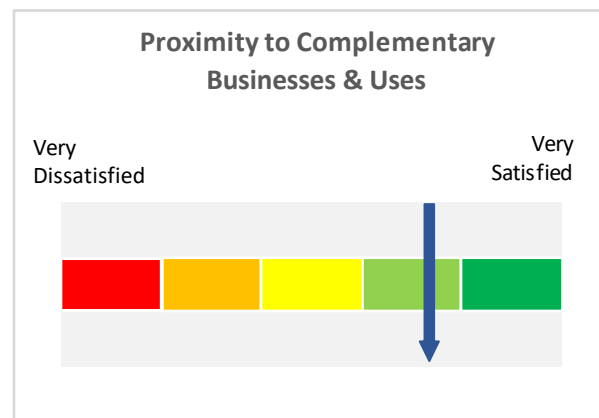
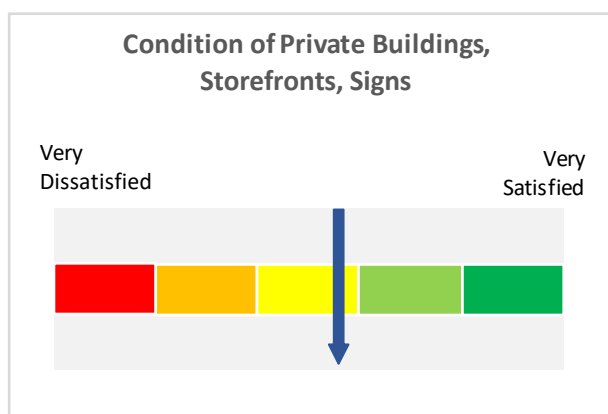
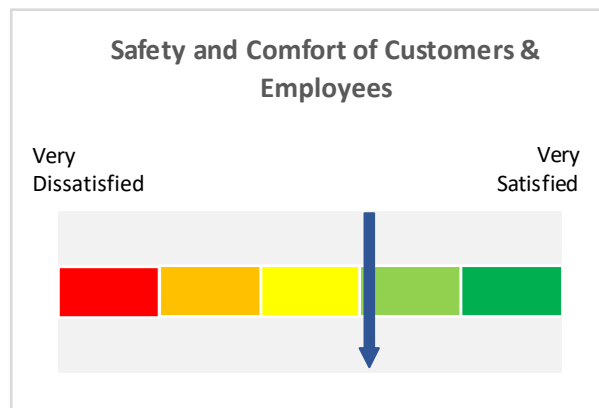
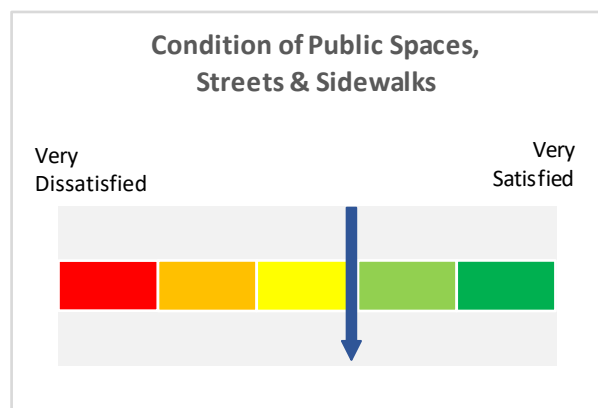
Operating Status

At the time of the survey, 53% of businesses reported they were operating at reduced hours/capacity or closed



Business Satisfaction with Commercial District

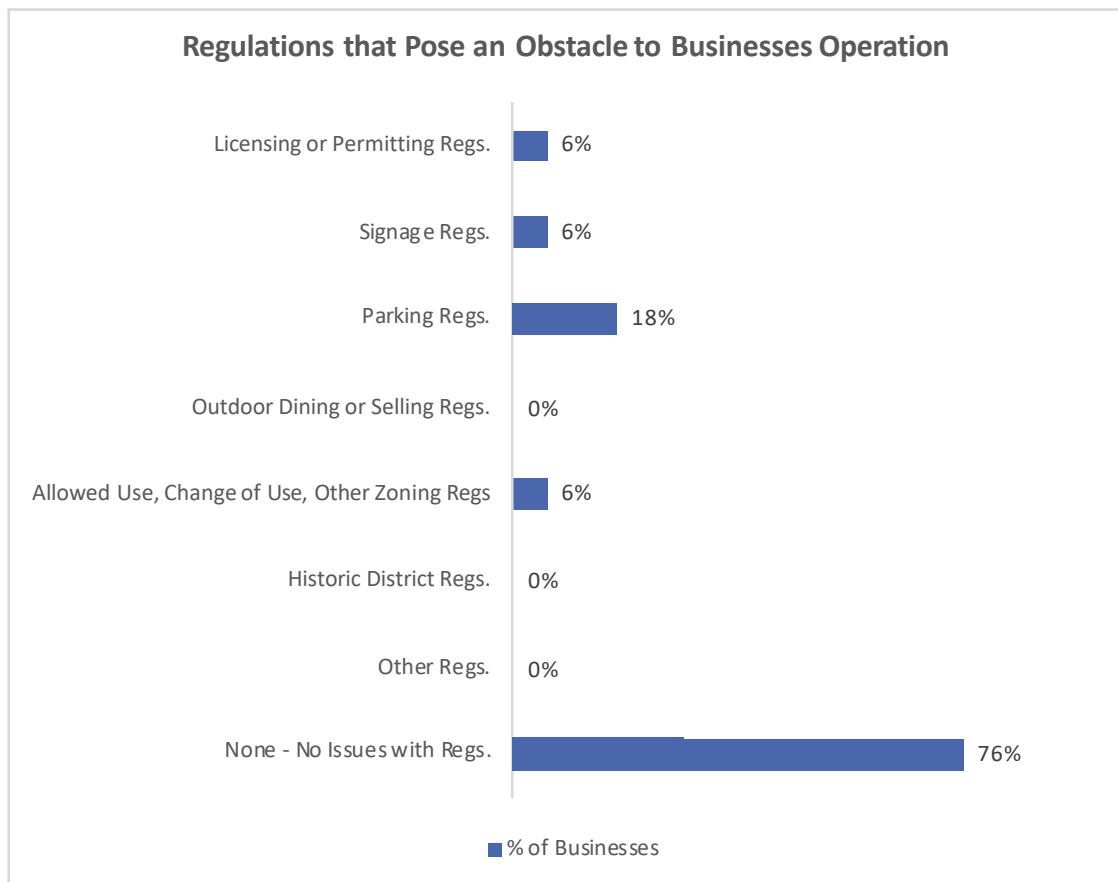
The charts below illustrate the average satisfaction rating among respondents regarding various elements.



Business Satisfaction with Commercial District (cont'd)

Regulatory Environment

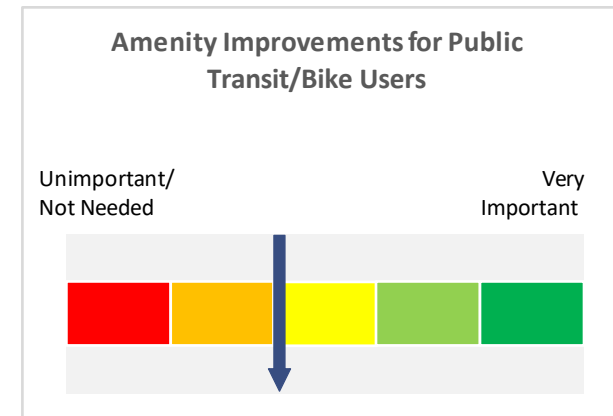
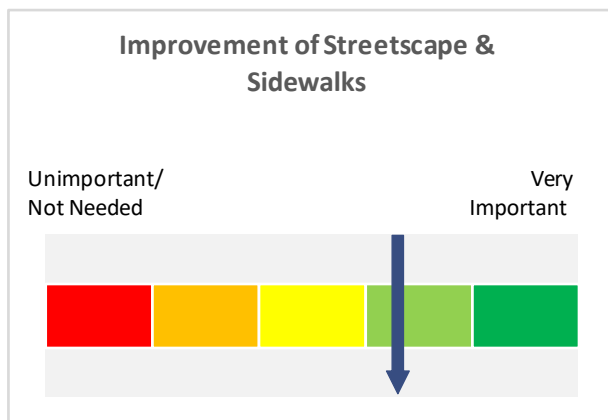
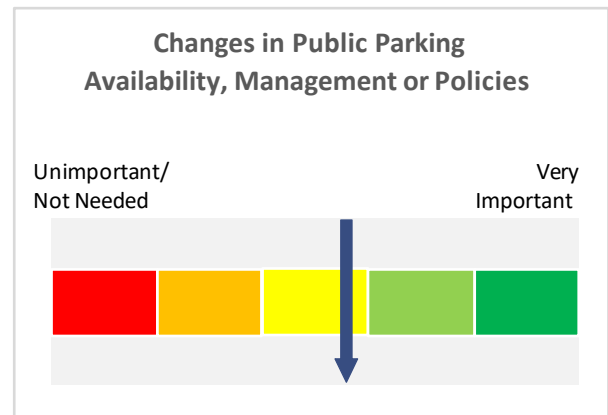
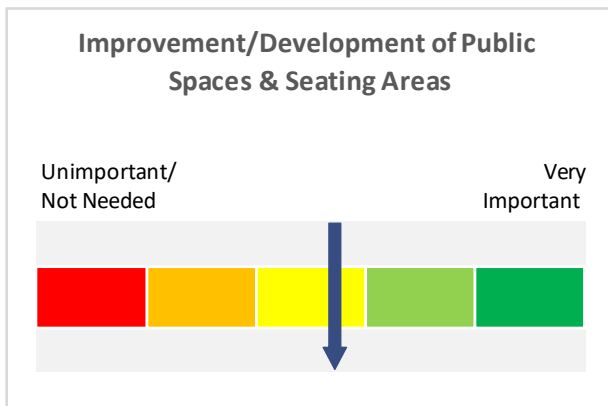
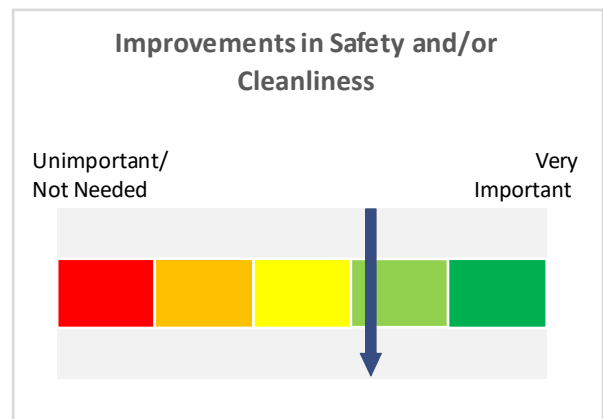
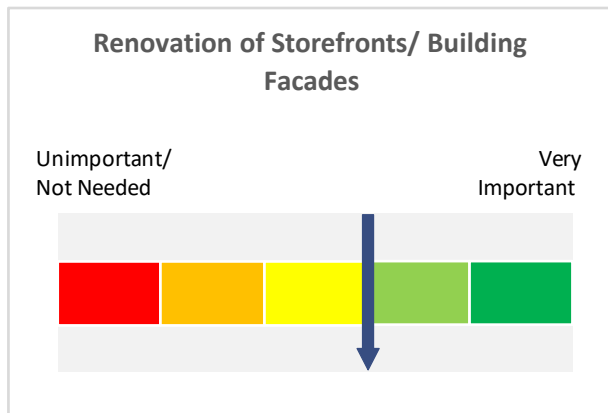
24% of businesses indicated that the regulatory environment poses an obstacle to business operation.



Business Input Related to Possible Strategies

Physical Environment, Atmosphere and Access

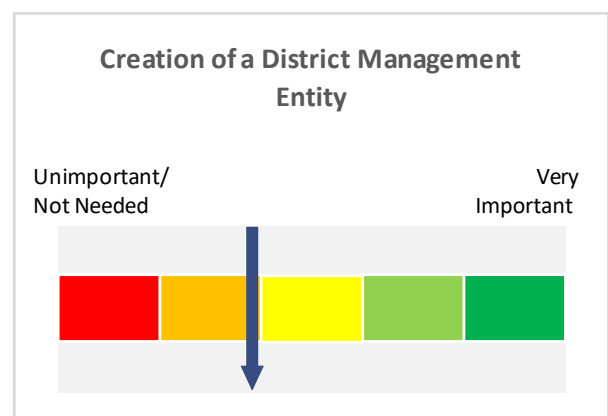
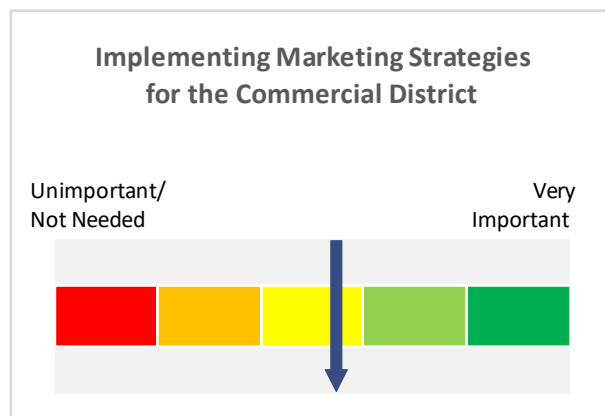
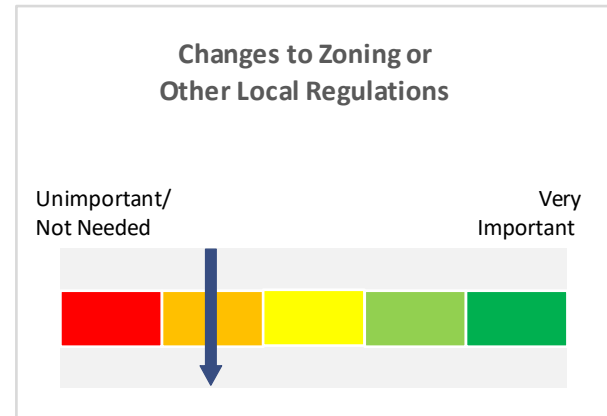
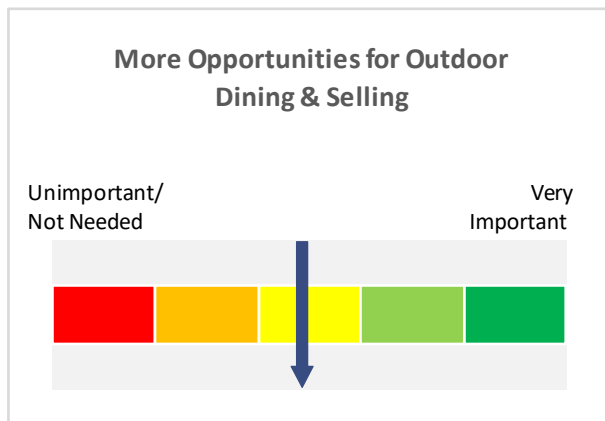
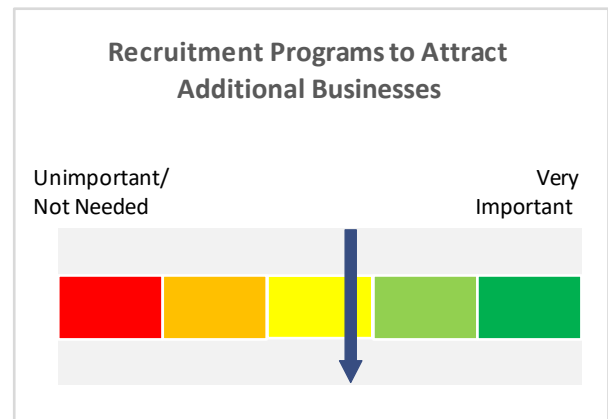
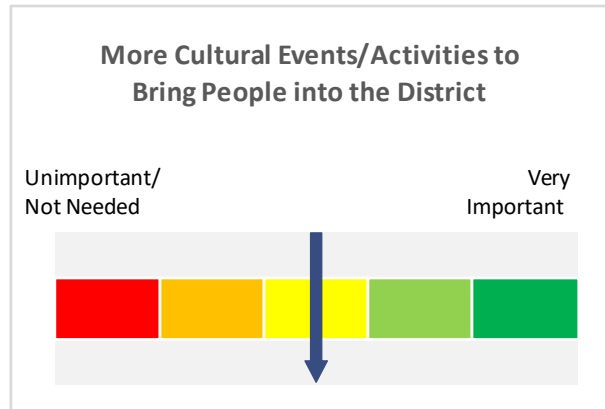
The charts below illustrate the average rating among respondents regarding importance of various strategies.



Business Input Related to Possible Strategies (cont'd)

Attraction/Retention of Customers and Businesses

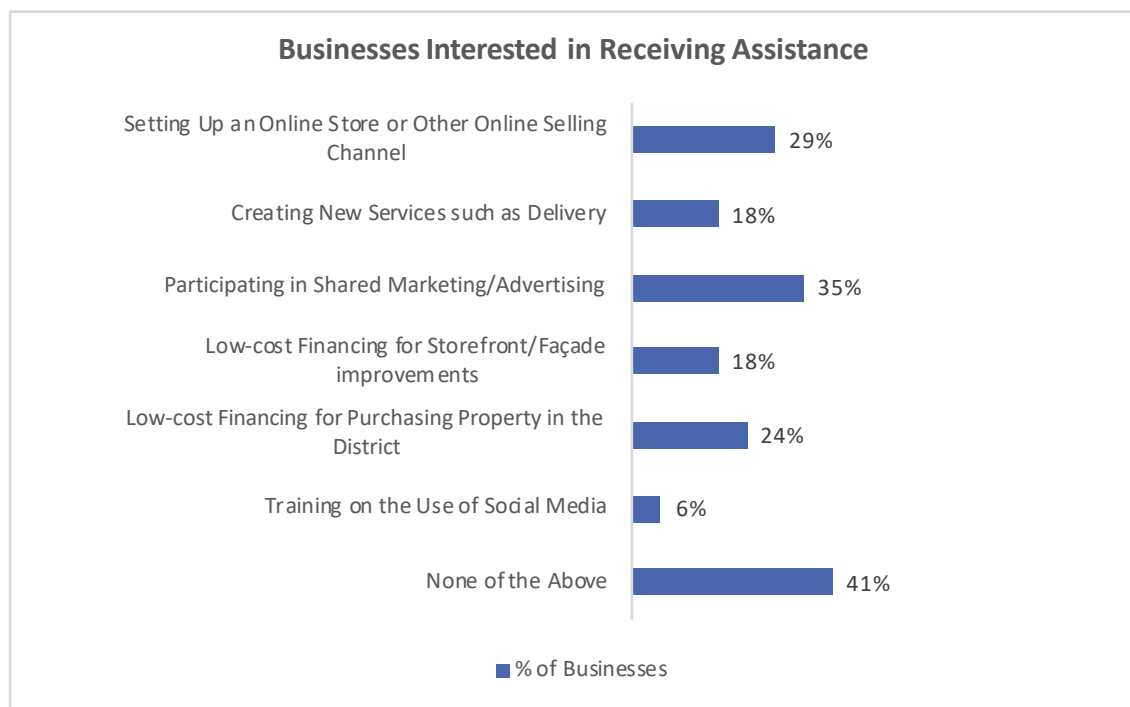
The charts below illustrate the average rating among respondents regarding importance of various strategies.



Business Input Related to Possible Strategies (cont'd)

Businesses Support

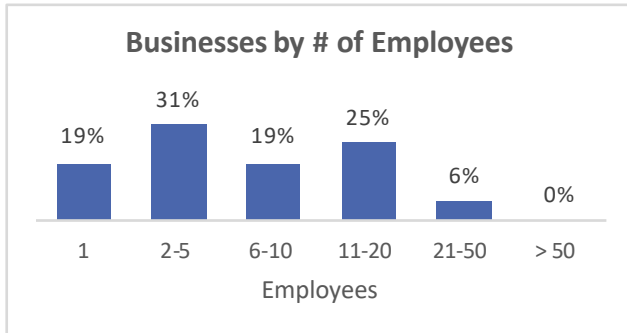
59% of businesses expressed interest in receiving some kind of assistance.



Business Characteristics

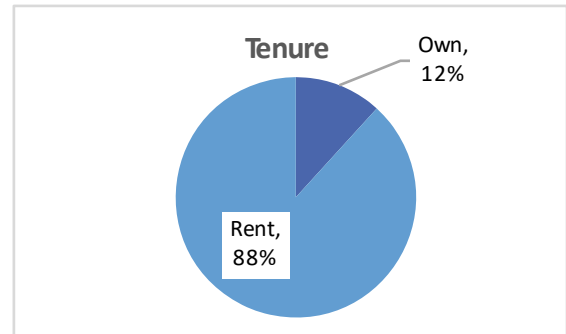
Business Size

50% of businesses are microenterprises (≤ 5 employees).



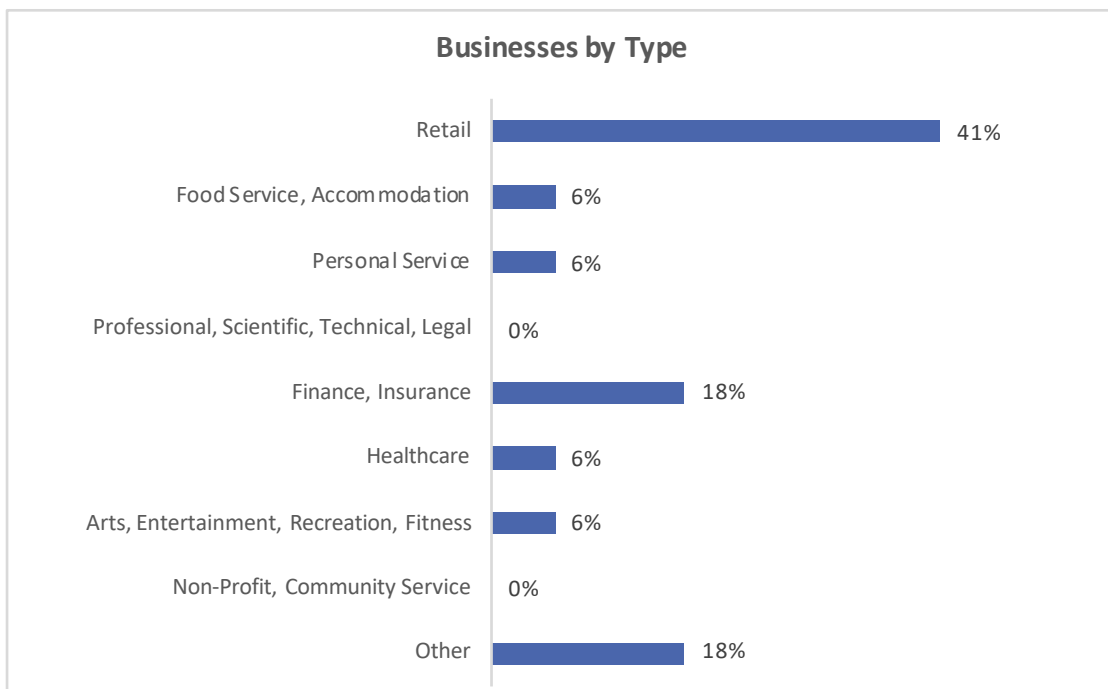
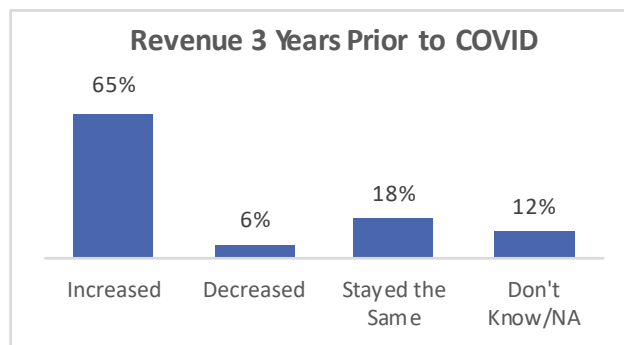
Business Tenure

88% of businesses rent their space.



Revenue Trend Prior to COVID

65% of businesses reported increase in revenue during the 3 years prior to COVID.



Business Survey Results - Data Tables

Community Where Targeted Downtown or Commercial District is Located

1. Please select the community where your business is located.

Northbridge	17
-------------	----

Business Characteristics & Satisfaction with Commercial Area

2. Including yourself, how many people did your business employ prior to COVID (February 2020), including both full-time and part-time?

1	3	19%
2 to 5	5	31%
6 to 10	3	19%
11 to 20	4	25%
21 to 50	1	6%
More than 50	0	0%
Total	16	100%

3. Does your business own or rent the space where it operates?

Own	2	12%
Rent	15	88%
Total	17	100%

4. During the 3 years prior to COVID, had your business revenue . . .?

Increased	11	65%
Decreased	1	6%
Stayed about the Same	3	18%
Don't Know/Not Applicable	2	12%
Total	17	100%

5. Please select the category that best fits your business.

Retail (NAICS 44-45)	7	41%
Food Service (restaurants, bars), Accommodation (NAICS 72)	1	6%
Personal Service (hair, skin, nails, dry cleaning) (NAICS 81)	1	6%
Professional Scientific, Technical, Legal (NAICS 54)	0	0%
Finance, Insurance (NAICS 52)	3	18%
Healthcare (medical, dental, other health practitioners) (NAICS 62)	1	6%
Arts, Entertainment, Recreation, Fitness (NAICS 71)	1	6%
Non-Profit, Community Services	0	0%
Other	3	18%
Total	17	100%

6. Please rate your satisfaction with the following aspects of the Downtown or Commercial District where your business is located.

Condition of public spaces, streets, sidewalks

Very Dissatisfied	0	0%
Dissatisfied	3	18%
Neutral	6	35%
Satisfied	7	41%
Very Satisfied	1	6%
Total	17	100%

Condition of Private Buildings, Facades, Storefronts, Signage

Very Dissatisfied	0	0%
Dissatisfied	3	18%
Neutral	7	41%
Satisfied	7	41%
Very Satisfied	0	0%
Total	17	100%

Access for Customers & Employees

Very Dissatisfied	1	6%
Dissatisfied	2	12%
Neutral	6	35%
Satisfied	7	41%
Very Satisfied	1	6%
Total	17	100%

Safety and Comfort of Customers & Employees

Very Dissatisfied	1	6%
Dissatisfied	0	0%
Neutral	7	41%
Satisfied	8	47%
Very Satisfied	1	6%
Total	17	100%

Proximity to Complementary Businesses or Uses

Very Dissatisfied	0	0%
Dissatisfied	0	0%
Neutral	4	24%
Satisfied	10	59%
Very Satisfied	3	18%
Total	17	100%

7. Do any local regulations (not related to COVID) pose an obstacle to your business operation?

Licensing or permitting regulations	1	6%
Signage regulations	1	6%
Parking regulations	3	18%
Outdoor dining or selling regulations	0	0%
Allowed uses, change of use or other zoning regulations	1	6%
Historic District regulations	0	0%
Other regulations (not related to COVID)	0	0%
None - No Issues with regulations	13	76%

Impacts of COVID

8. Did your business experience any of the following due to COVID? Select All that apply.

Decline in revenue	10	59%
Employee layoff	6	35%
Reduced operating hours/capacity	12	71%
Business closure (temporary or permanent)	7	41%
Stopped/deferred rent or mortgage payments	3	18%
Incurred expense to implement safety measures	8	47%
Established alternative mode to sell and deliver products (on-line platforms, delivery, etc.)	5	29%
None of the Above	2	12%

9. How did your 2020 business revenue compare to your 2019 revenue?

Increased compared to 2019	6	35%
Stayed about the same as 2019	2	12%
Decreased 1 – 24% compared to 2019	0	0%
Decreased 25 – 49% compared to 2019	2	12%
Decreased 75 - 100% compared to 2019	2	12%
Decreased 50 – 74% compared to 2019	1	6%
Don't Know/Not Applicable	4	24%
Total	17	100%

10. Please estimate how the number of customers that physically came to your business in January and February 2021 compares to before COVID.

More customers than before COVID	2	12%
About the same number as before COVID	2	12%
1 – 24% less customers than before COVID	4	24%
25 – 49% less customers than before COVID	1	6%
50 – 74% less customers than before COVID	1	6%
75 – 100% less customers than before COVID	4	24%
Don't Know/Not Applicable	3	18%
Total	17	100%

11. At the current time, what is the status of your business operation?

Operating at full capacity	8	47%
Operating at reduced hours/capacity due to COVID	9	53%
Temporarily closed due to COVID	0	0%
Permanently closed due to COVID	0	0%
Total	17	100%

Strategies for Supporting Businesses and Improving the Commercial District

12. A few approaches to address Physical Environment, Atmosphere and Access in commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important are each of the following strategies?

Renovation of Storefronts/Building Facades

Unimportant/Not Needed	0	0%
Of Little Importance or Need	4	24%
Moderately Important	5	29%
Important	5	29%
Very Important	3	18%
Total	17	100%

Improvement/Development of Public Spaces & Seating Areas

Unimportant/Not Needed	1	6%
Of Little Importance or Need	3	18%
Moderately Important	8	47%
Important	2	12%
Very Important	3	18%
Total	17	100%

Improvement of Streetscape & Sidewalks

Unimportant/Not Needed	0	0%
Of Little Importance or Need	3	18%
Moderately Important	3	18%
Important	8	47%
Very Important	3	18%
Total	17	100%

Improvements in Safety and/or Cleanliness

Unimportant/Not Needed	1	6%
Of Little Importance or Need	2	13%
Moderately Important	3	19%
Important	7	44%
Very Important	3	19%
Total	16	100%

Changes in Public Parking Availability, Management or Policies

Unimportant/Not Needed	3	18%
Of Little Importance or Need	1	6%
Moderately Important	6	35%
Important	3	18%
Very Important	4	24%
Total	17	100%

Amenity Improvements for Public Transit Users and/or Bike Riders

Unimportant/Not Needed	2	12%
Of Little Importance or Need	6	35%
Moderately Important	6	35%
Important	2	12%
Very Important	1	6%
Total	17	100%

13. A few approaches to address Attraction and Retention of Customers and Businesses in commercial districts are listed below. Considering the conditions in your commercial area, in your opinion, how important are each of the following strategies?

More Cultural Events/Activities to Bring People into the District

Unimportant/Not Needed	3	18%
Of Little Importance or Need	3	18%
Moderately Important	4	24%
Important	5	29%
Very Important	2	12%
Total	17	100%

More Opportunities for Outdoor Dining and Selling

Unimportant/Not Needed	2	12%
Of Little Importance or Need	5	29%
Moderately Important	4	24%
Important	4	24%
Very Important	2	12%
Total	17	100%

Implementing Marketing Strategies for the Commercial District

Unimportant/Not Needed	1	6%
Of Little Importance or Need	6	38%
Moderately Important	2	13%
Important	3	19%
Very Important	4	25%
Total	16	100%

Recruitment Programs to Attract Additional Businesses

Unimportant/Not Needed	1	6%
Of Little Importance or Need	3	18%
Moderately Important	6	35%
Important	5	29%
Very Important	2	12%
Total	17	100%

Changes to Zoning or Other Local Regulations (not related to COVID)

Unimportant/Not Needed	2	13%
Of Little Importance or Need	10	63%
Moderately Important	3	19%
Important	1	6%
Very Important	0	0%
Total	16	100%

Creation of a District Management Entity (Business Improvement District or other organization)

Unimportant/Not Needed	3	18%
Of Little Importance or Need	6	35%
Moderately Important	5	29%
Important	2	12%
Very Important	1	6%
Total	17	100%

14. Are you interested in receiving assistance for your business in any of the following areas? Select All that Apply.

Setting up an online store or other online selling channel	5	29%
Creating new services such as delivery	3	18%
Participating in shared marketing/advertising	6	35%
Low-cost financing for storefront/façade improvements	3	18%
Low-cost financing for purchasing property in the commercial district	4	24%
Training on the use of social media	1	6%
None of the above	7	41%

15. Please list any specific suggestions or ideas for possible projects, programs or actions that could help support businesses and improve the commercial district. (Optional)

Comments

EA Custom Millwork
—
—
—
—
BUMA FUNERAL HOMES
Program to subsidize some of the other businesses "storefronts" and to attract viable businesses
—
—
—
Foxy Travel, inc dba FTI Coach
msm management/Sparetime
Attract more dining options - add more parking
Brochures to include local businesses for tourism, downtown events both shopping + food, +art inspired
I'd love to see more events to draw people to Church Street - concerts on the common maybe? Signs to indicate parking is available behind our businesses would be fantastic!
—
—

Appendix B

DIRECTIONS

Whitinsville is located in Northbridge. Take Rt. 146 to Lackey Dam Road, Whitinsville Exit. Follow signs to Whitinsville for about 2.5 miles. Turn right onto Elm Place. Parking at James Fletcher Homestead.

BLACKSTONE RIVER VALLEY
NATIONAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR



WHITINSVILLE, NORTHBRIDGE, MA

Walking Tour

ALONG THE WAY

- ☒ Parking is available at the Northbridge Historical Society, at One Elm Place.
- ☒ Refreshments are available across from the Historical Society, at "The Barn"—formerly Whitin Stables—and along Main Street.
- ☒ If time (and energy) permit, take a short stroll or drive up Douglas Road past Whitin Avenue to Castle Hill Road. You will see a spectacular view of Whitin Machine Works along the Mumford River. Turn up Castle Hill Road. About 3/10 of a mile brings you to the remains of Castle Hill Farm. John C. Whitin established this beautiful farm during the depression of the 1870s in order to provide employment to his workers. Workers cleared the land and built the magnificent stone wall that surrounds the property. The farm supplied dairy products and produce, which were sold to workers at the company store. The homes on Castle Hill housed the farm employees. The homes and farm are all privately owned.
- ☒ For information about events, restaurants, and lodging in the Valley, call the Blackstone River Valley Visitors Bureau, 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. 800-841-0919 or 508-234-9090.
- ☒ Be sure to visit the Blackstone River & Canal Heritage State Park and River Bend Farm Visitor Center at 287 Oak Street. Features include canal tow path walk, canoe launch sites, hiking trails, free maps, brochures, interpretive tours, and exhibits with videos, and more. Free parking, free admission. Open seven days. 508-278-7604.
- ☒ Visit a historic working mill museum, just 22 miles south of Uxbridge at Exit 27 on Interstate Route 95—Slater Mill Historic Site, Pawtucket, RI. Free parking. Restrooms. Admission charged. Open June 1-Labor Day, Tuesday-Saturday 10 a.m.-5 p.m. 401-725-8638.
- ☒ To take a riverboat excursion—spring, summer, or fall—call for the schedule for The Explorer, Blackstone Valley Tourism Council. 401-724-2200 or 800-454-2882.
- ☒ For further information about Whitinsville, visit the town library and the Whitinsville Historical Society.

Congress established the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission in 1986, recognizing the national significance of the region between Providence, RI and Worcester, MA—the Birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution. The John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor is an affiliated area of the National Park Service.



This brochure was developed under the direction of The Rhode Island Historical Society in partnership with the Heritage Corridor Commission.



Follow the path to riches in a company town.



W H I T I N S V I L L E

The historic district of Whitinsville in the Town of Northbridge presents a remarkably complete picture of one of the distinctive by-products of the Industrial Revolution in New England: the company town.

Maintained and controlled by the W hitin family for over 100 years, Whitinsville today reveals its evolution from agrarian settlement to industrial giant, and offers a fascinating glimpse of the powerful family behind it all.

Following the Revolutionary War, Colonel Paul W hitin came from Dedham, Mass., to serve as an apprentice in an iron forge in the budding community then known as South N orthbridge. James Fletcher owned the forge, along with most of the land that now comprises W hitinsville.

Eventually, Paul W hitin married Fletcher's daughter, Betsy, with whom he had five sons and a daughter. The W hitin-Fletcher alliance was further solidified in 1815 with the establishment of the W hitin and Fletchers Cotton Mill.

In 1826, W hitin bought out the Fletchers and went into partnership with his sons Paul, Jr., and John C., under the firm name of Paul W hitin and Sons.

Both sons were astute businessmen, but it was John's inventiveness and marketing acumen that led to the

development of W hitin Machine Works, which would overshadow the family cotton mills and become the world's largest textile machine shop.

Explosive industrial growth throughout the Blackstone Valley during the 1800s resulted in ongoing labor shortages in this region. To staff their burgeoning enterprises, the Whitins brought in workers—Irish immigrants beginning in 1847, followed by French Canadians, D utch, and Armenians. And to house their employees, the W hitins built nearly 1,000 worker dwellings between the mid-1820s and mid-1920s.

In addition to housing, the Whitins built or subsidized the town's schools, churches, town hall, library, and recreational facilities. Like lords of the manor, the Whitins erected grand homes from which they dictated many aspects of the town's political and social life. They perpetuated a system of benevolent paternalism, providing job security and an orderly environment in exchange for worker loyalty.

By the late 1940s, worker loyalty was tempered by a tide of labor unrest. When employees voted to unionize, company president E. Kent Swift—the last of six generations of W hitins to run the company—resigned. The Whitins sold their interests in Whitin Machine Works along with their town properties.

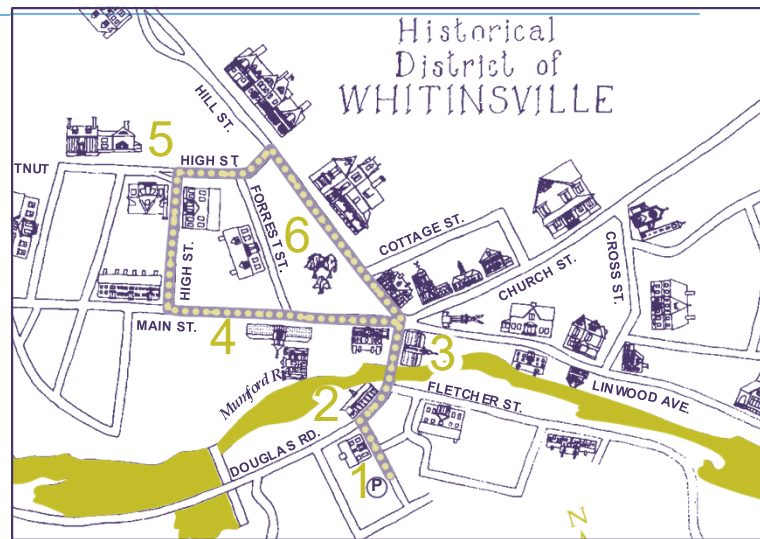
With the end of the W hitin era, a new chapter in the town's history began—a chapter that is still unfolding today. 🌟



John C. Whitin, the inventor and organizational genius who founded the Whitin Machine Works.



Whitin Machine Works, as it looked in 1879. At its peak in 1948, the complex employed over 5,600 men and women.



WHITINSVILLE

1

JAMES FLETCHER HOMESTEAD

Your tour begins at the James Fletcher Homestead, now the Northbridge Historical Society. One of only two remaining 18th-century structures in Whitinsville's National Register District, this house was built in 1770 by Colonel James Fletcher. Fletcher set up the first iron forge in the community, and later established a cotton mill. He served in the Revolutionary War and held many town offices.

Note the close proximity to the Brick Mill across the street, where Fletcher built his iron forge in 1772. It was then customary for a proprietor to live near his place of business.

The Whitinsville Brass Band was one of many recreational organizations open to residents.



2

OLD BRICK MILL

Across the street, along the Mumford River, stands the Old Brick Mill. This mill marked the beginning of large-scale industry in Whitinsville. Paul Whitin and Sons built the mill as a cotton and textile machine shop in 1826, on the site of a much smaller cotton mill owned by James Fletcher. The Brick Mill originally employed 40 workers, most of whom were from the village. It was expanded in 1830 and employed 146 workers at the height of its operation in the early 1840s.

By 1845, Whitin cotton manufacturing had outgrown this mill. The company constructed a much larger mill, and John C. Whitin began using the Brick Mill exclusively for machine production and repair. This was the beginning of the Whitin Machine Works, which would come to dominate the town.

Before heading down towards Main Street, take a short side-trip up Fletcher Street to your right. Here you will see

three Federal-style workers' houses, numbers 18-20, 26-28, and 36-38, constructed in 1826 in conjunction with the Brick Mill. These houses represent the beginning of the extensive company housing system that the Whitins developed over the years.

The remainder of the workers' houses on Fletcher Street were built in the 1840s, in conjunction with the granite Cotton Mill.



These houses for Whitin employees were built in 1889. Workers with higher status in the mill enjoyed larger, more attractive living quarters than those with lower rank. Eventually, the town contained more than a dozen clearly differentiated levels of housing.

3

GRANITE COTTON MILL

Retracing your steps, turn right towards Main Street. Across the Mumford River on your right stands the massive cotton mill built by the Whitins in 1845. Built of local granite, this mill increased the company's production four times over what had been possible in the Brick Mill. In front of the building stood the Dudley Company store, where residents could purchase basic foodstuffs and dry goods.

The textile industry in the North suffered economic depression following WWI, and cotton manufacturing came to an end in Whitinsville in 1923. The granite mill became part of Whitin Machine Works, used as the company's research branch. The mill was converted to apartments in 1976.

Directly across the street is the Northbridge Town Hall. Built in 1876 by John C. and Charles P. Whitin and

donated to the town of Northbridge in honor of their parents, the building was erected on the site of the original Paul Whitin homestead. Whitinsville then became Northbridge's political center.

Turn left onto Main Street and you will immediately come to the imposing Whitin Machine Works.

Loom fixers at work. Rent for Whitin company houses in the 1860s ranged from \$3 a month for an unskilled worker's multi-family house to \$12 a month for a single family upper-level manager's house. The average weekly pay was around \$6.60 for a 60-hour week.



4

WHITIN MACHINE WORKS

What would become the largest textile machine manufactory in the world began with the building of Whitin Machine Works along the Mumford River in 1847. The original two-story mill, with its octagonal corner towers and crenelated battlements, accommodated 200 workers and was devoted exclusively to the production of textile machinery.

The mill was expanded decade by decade as the company came to dominate the manufacture of machinery for picking, carding, and spinning cotton and wool. Additions to the plant included machine shops, foundries, and specialized structures that ultimately

gave it a floor space of 1 3/4 million feet. The 1923 addition facing Main Street features a ceremonial balcony and large clock face.

As you continue along North Main Street, you will pass the Whitin Community Center,

which was built by the Whitins in 1922, and remains the social and recreational hub of the town. Further along you will see a series of row houses on your right. Built in 1864, these dwellings were so unpopular with employees that the Whitins did not build row houses again until the early 1900s.

Turn right up High Street, where you will pass a number of duplexes built for Whitin employees between 1847 and 1864.

Betsy Whitin, matriarch, business partner, and civic leader.



5

WHITIN MANSIONS

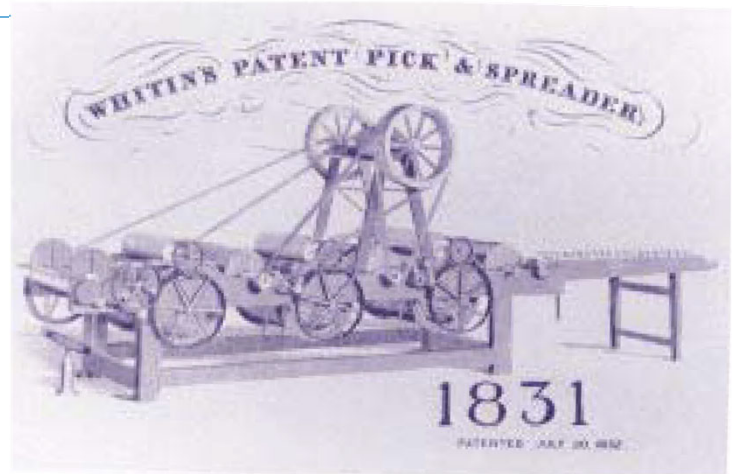
The Whitin mansions reflect the mill owners' rise to power and the social stratification that came to characterize Whitinsville. At the top of High Street, turn left onto Chestnut Street. Immediately on your right is the first mansion built by John C. Whitin, a Greek Revival structure erected in 1840. It originally stood across from the Whitin Machine Works and was moved in 1870 to make room for Whitin's second, and grander, mansion.



The Whitins brought in Dutch immigrants to tend to the herds of Holstein cattle on Castle Hill Farm, the company-owned farm that supplied food to employees and their families.

Turn back to where Chestnut Street merges with High Street and continue northeast to Hill Street. Across the street to your left stands Oakhurst, built in 1890 by Chester Lasell, son of Josiah Lasell and Jane Whitin, daughter of John C. Whitin. Chester Lasell succeeded his father as president of Whitin Machine Works. He bred some of the finest race horses in the country and entertained guests, including President Taft and Booker T. Washington, on a grand scale.

Turning right on Hill Street towards the town center, you will pass Whitin Park



John Whitin excelled at making machinery to improve the production of cotton. This picker, which removed dirt and seeds from raw cotton, was his first product and the foundation of the family's subsequent dominance in the textile machinery field.

on your right. This was the site of John C. Whitin's second mansion, a 32-room Victorian structure that stood at the top of this landscaped estate. Built in 1875, the estate boasted three greenhouses, several swan ponds, and trees imported from all over the world. The house was torn down in 1943, but much of the foundation remains.

Across the street, at 46 Hill Street, is the Victorian home built in 1875 by Gustavus Taft, John C. Whitin's Superintendent of Works.



These bicyclists may have belonged to the Whitinsville Bicycle Club, which sponsored an annual race for many years.

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MEMORIAL SQUARE

At the intersection of Hill Street and Main Street is the heart of Whitinsville—Memorial Square. The Whitin family transformed an existing pasture into the village common in 1890 and in 1905 added the Civil War Memorial. Across from the Square

stand the imposing Congregational Church and Whitinsville Social Library—both given to the town by the Whitins. The white mansion beside the Library is the Congregational Parsonage, donated to the Congregational Society by the Whitins in 1864.

Cross through Memorial Square to the central intersection, and a short walk up Douglas Road brings you back to the Historical Society.



The Ancient Order of Hibernians in their Irish Jaunting Car. Irish immigrants first came to Whitinsville in the 1840s. By 1863, they made up nearly one quarter of Whitinsville's population.