
AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT VISION AND ACTION PLAN

FOR THE

TOWN OF ASHLAND



November 1, 2010

PREPARED BY
LARRY KOFF & ASSOCIATES
BLUESTONE PLANNING GROUP

CONTENTS

I. Executive Summary	1
II. Introduction	4
Background	4
Goals	4
Methodology	5
III. Ashland’s Economic Base and Regional Context	7
Location	7
Economic Development Subareas.....	7
Ashland’s Economic Base	8
IV. Issues & Opportunities for Economic Development	10
Introduction: Myths and Realities	10
Results of Interviews and Surveys	12
Issues Identified.....	12
Opportunities Identified.....	14
V. Economic Development Scenarios	16
Background	16
Buildout Analysis.....	19
Fiscal Impact Analysis.....	19
Comparative Evaluation Criteria	19
VI. Recommended Vision and Action Plan	21
Introduction	21
Business Retention and Attraction Program Action Plan	21

Supplemental Documents:

Economic Development Vision and Design Principles

Appendix Materials

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Goals of Economic Development Vision and Action Plan

- Enhance Ashland’s visual quality in order to attract higher quality residential and commercial development.
- Identify strategies to facilitate commercial expansion and attraction.

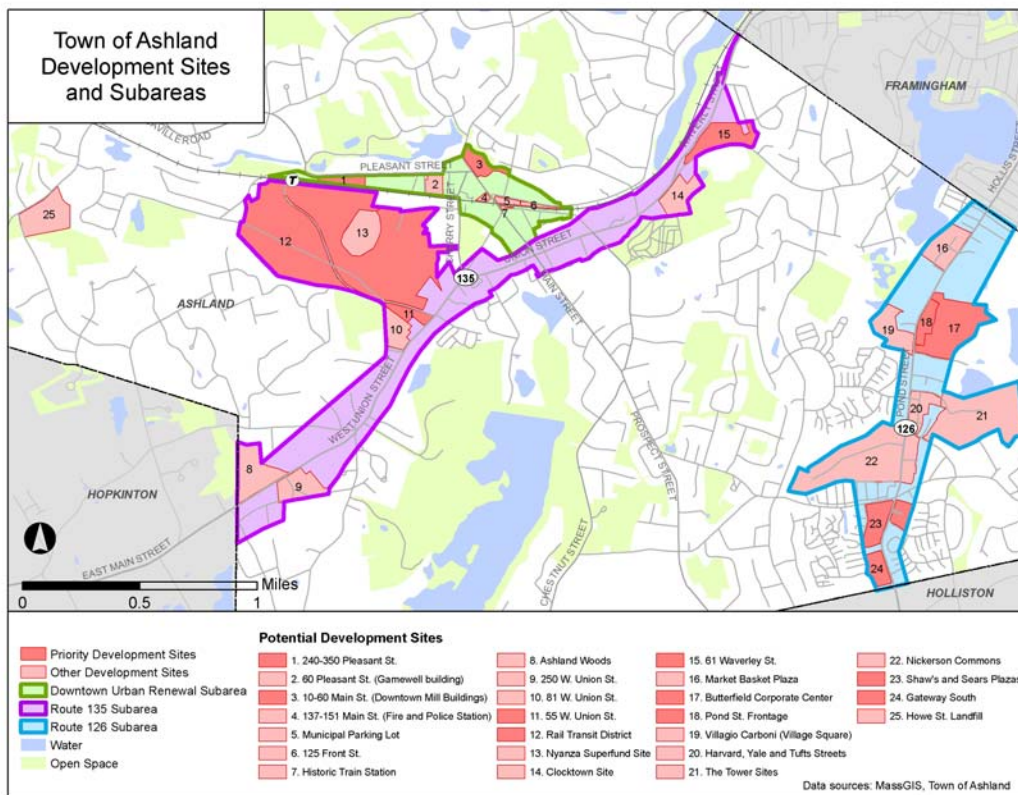
Issues and Opportunities

- Coordinated support of business retention and attraction
- Visibility and image of Ashland’s commercial areas
- Planning, financing, and implementation of roadway, streetscape, and public realm improvements
- Need for Zoning reform

Analysis of Development Opportunities

Buildout analysis of eight key development sites demonstrated a range of suitable, fiscally sustainable land use alternatives.

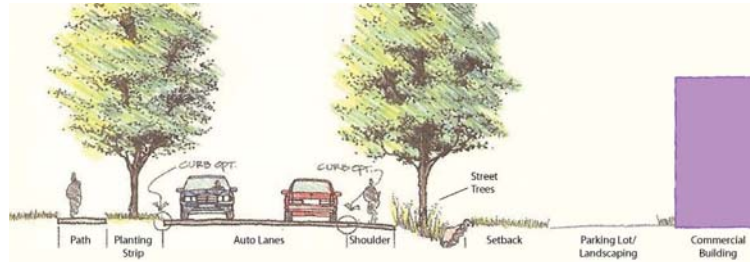
- Encouraging *higher quality* development, whether commercial or residential, to enhance fiscal benefits.
- Market reality, community character, and supporting infrastructure should inform land use choices.



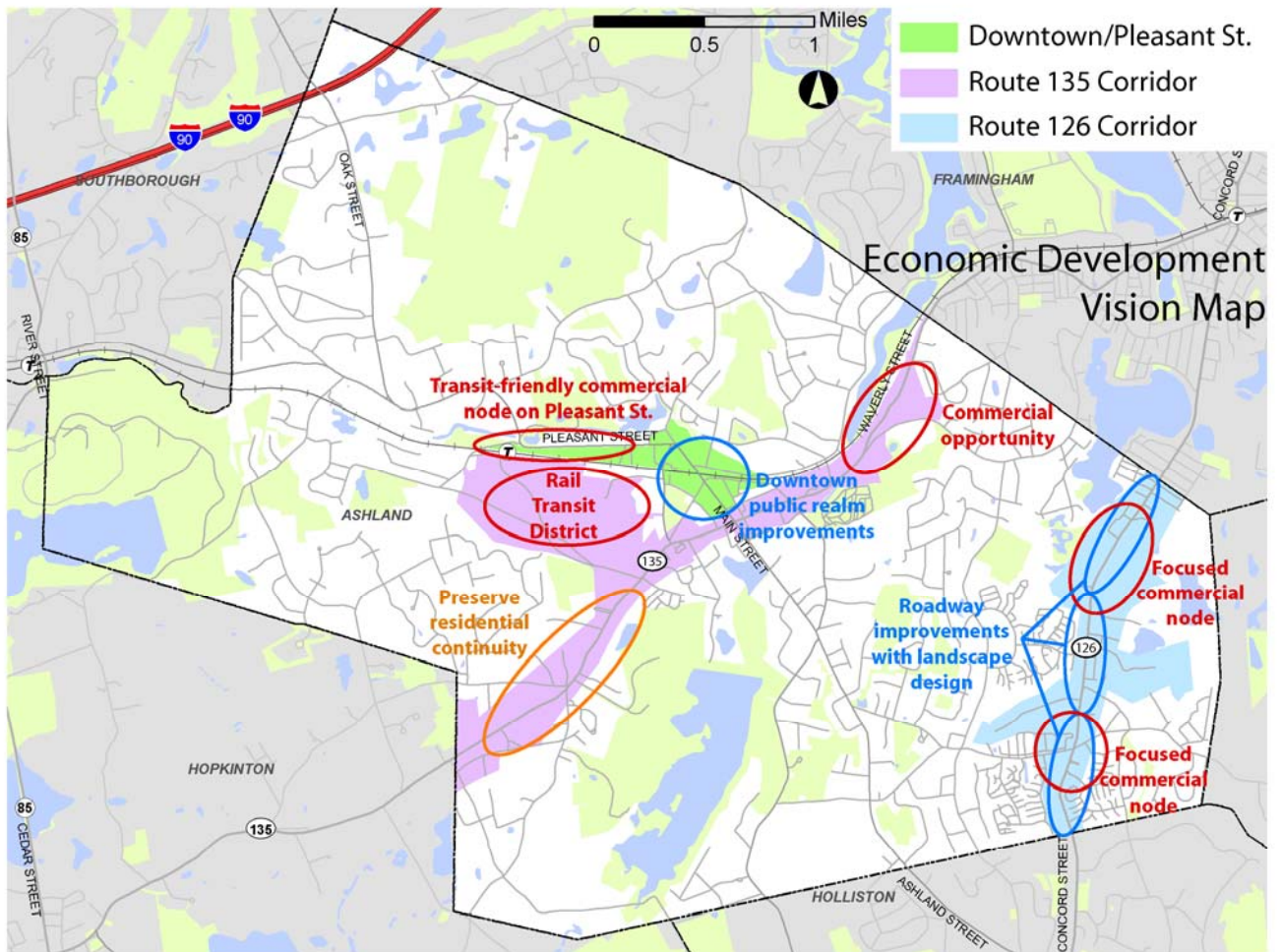
Economic Development Vision

A Vision to enhance Ashland’s commercial character provides overall principles that should guide zoning reform, adoption of a design review process, planning for public improvements, and public/private coordination toward economic development goals:

- Concentrate large scale commercial development in defined nodes.
- Encourage continuity of land uses and visual character along corridors to create a sense of place compatible with corridor and neighborhood context.
- Regulate “form”, i.e., site design, landscaping, and building features.
- Within nodes, allow flexibility in zoning for a range of suitable uses at marketable densities.
- Protect historic assets and views.
- Enhance roadways with streetscape features such as shade trees and planting strips.
- Seek opportunities to increase pedestrian connections between residential and commercial areas.



Vision recommendations for specific commercial areas are summarized on the following map:



Action Plan

Business retention and attraction

A comprehensive program of business retention and expansion will mutually reinforce local employment, business development and an enhanced tax base; as well as improve the visual quality in the downtown and along the major corridors, relieve traffic congestion, and enhance the quality of life for residents. Guided by the Vision, the following five strategies comprise a “Blueprint” for Economic Development Action.

ORGANIZATION / SERVICE DELIVERY	Coordination between various municipal staff and volunteers, with the assistance of an Economic Advisory Committee of business leaders, can ensure effective services in response to local business needs.
PLANNING	The ARA, Planning Board, and others need to develop consensus and undertake planning for public and private improvements at key commercial sites.
ZONING REFORM	The current bylaw needs to be clarified, as discussed in the Community Opportunities Group report. Zoning should be flexible to allow a range of suitable uses and marketable densities, while more focus is needed on the visual quality of development.
INCENTIVES	The town needs to identify which of the various applicable incentive programs might leverage the greatest return for economic development and formulate an approach that can best facilitate public/private partnership.
PUBLIC FACILITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE	Investments in roadway, sidewalk and streetscape improvements, and other capital improvements can facilitate economic growth.

ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES	POTENTIAL PLANNING PRIORITIES	INCENTIVE PROGRAMS	PUBLIC FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Director of Community Development - Planner - ARA - Planning Board - Comprehensive Plan Review Committee - Economic Advisory Committee (recommended) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Six Downtown Urban Renewal sites, public realm improvements - Rail Transit District - Villagio Carboni (Village Square) - Solar field 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 43D Priority Development Sites - Urban Renewal - Disposition of Town-owned sites - PWED Application - Business Improvement District - Tax increment financing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fire and Police stations - Route 126 roadway improvements - Streetscape - Wayfinding - Gateway signage - Water and sewer - Communications infrastructure

I. INTRODUCTION

Background

Concerns about the vitality of Ashland's commercial areas combined with opportunities for funding to support economic development spurred the Town of Ashland to retain Larry Koff & Associates (LKA) to draft an Economic Development Plan outlining needs, opportunities, a vision, and next steps for the Town.

As a rural/suburban town, Ashland has significant development opportunities that could accommodate a range of land use alternatives. The Town of Ashland has absorbed an enormous amount of condominium development in the past decade and has reached the saturation point for senior housing. Single family residences, it has been assumed, cost the Town more than the tax revenue they generate. The Town would like to attract high quality development that would provide employment opportunities, fiscal and economic benefits, and improve the attractiveness of the community. Opportunities for commercial and, in some cases, residential and "green energy" development need to be identified as part of an overall economic development planning initiative. At the same time, it is vital that the Town retain and support businesses that currently contribute to Ashland's economic base.

Goals

This report is intended to provide an understanding of the Town's economic base and to prepare an action plan for town-wide economic development. While initially focused on the town's commercial areas and types of businesses, it has become apparent during the course of our study that this topic also needed to include a land use and fiscal impact analysis of residential development in the commercial corridors as well as factors which contribute to enhancing the town's character. Following are the goals that have been identified for this study:

- Describe the characteristics of the Town's industrial areas and businesses
- Identify the key issues, opportunities, and barriers to economic development
- Identify opportunities for "green economy" uses
- Identify commercial development opportunities, and evaluate the fiscal and other impacts of various land use choices in Ashland's commercial areas
- Identify strategies which will enhance Ashland's visual quality as a tool to attract higher quality residential and commercial development
- Identify current barriers to business, industrial and commercial expansion and attraction; discuss the policies needed to overcome the barriers; and assess their potential costs and benefits.
- Prepare a "Blueprint for economic development" – in other words, an action plan highlighting key opportunities for business retention and development.

Methodology

For purposes of this study, the Town's commercial areas are divided into three core study areas: Downtown/Pleasant St. (the historic village and transit village subareas), Route 135, and Route 126 (Pond Street). In order to develop an understanding of the characteristics, issues and opportunities in these areas, the following five tasks have been undertaken.

- 1) Review of previous studies
- 2) Survey of key businesses
- 3) Public meetings
- 4) Assessment of market conditions
- 5) Buildout and fiscal impact analysis

1. Review of Previous Studies

Prior studies – in particular, the 2004 EO418 Community Development Plan, the 2006 Pond Street Study, the Von Grossman & Company's 2006 Downtown Vision, and concurrent 2010 analyses of the downtown and the railroad crossing impacts by VHB¹ and Community Opportunities Group (COG)² – have provided a context for understanding the downtown and Pond Street, as well as market information on the region.

A review of these reports indicates a difference in understanding of Ashland's growth potential. The prior reports provided a regional context for understanding Ashland's economic base which did not sufficiently capture the town's opportunities in manufacturing, service and home based businesses. Furthermore, too much emphasis was placed on the potential for mixed use in the downtown and along the corridors. The importance of the current businesses and their needs and the limited market potential was not sufficiently addressed.

By contrast, the COG study highlighted the potential impacts of the various options for the at-grade rail crossing on the economy of downtown Ashland and identified some strategies such as zoning and improvements to the public realm that are needed to improve the town's economic base and public safety. Drawing on the results of the VHB report investigating the Town's options concerning the downtown at-grade rail crossings, solutions to public safety concerns will require the relocation of the police and fire station to a more accessible location outside the downtown. Furthermore, it was pointed out in great detail that the town will need to focus its revitalization efforts on fundamental strategies such as a reform of the zoning bylaw in order to remove barriers to economic development, both within and outside of the downtown area.

Another important report is the 2008 *Proposed Improvements to Pond Street*, prepared by the ARA, which outlined roadway concept plan improvements intended to increase the economic potential of this corridor through roadway and streetscape treatments.

2. Surveys & Interviews

In order to understand the types of businesses located in Ashland, LKA, with the input of the town, created a business survey. This survey was distributed to selected businesses in the key categories of manufacturing, computer services, contractors, grocery, office and business services,

¹ Vanasse Hangen Brustlin (VHB), *Ashland Grade Crossing Study*, April 2010

² Community Opportunities Group (COG), *Economic Policy Plan*, August 2010 (Draft)

auto services, transportation, finance, and medical offices in June and July of 2010 (see Section IV of the Appendix). Representatives of a number of Ashland businesses—many of whom returned completed surveys—agreed to more in-depth conversations regarding the topics highlighted in the survey. The combination of surveys and interviews helped LKA identify current market strengths and potential business expansion barriers and opportunities, as well as ways in which the Town might better support and cultivate its economic base.

3. Public Meetings

Along with COG, LKA participated in a June 9, 2010 public meeting at the Ashland Community Center. The purpose of this meeting was to gather resident input concerning the strength and weaknesses of the local economic base and to learn the community's visions for particular sites and subareas around town. Information obtained at this meeting has been incorporated into LKA's final recommendations. LKA staff also assisted with a previous public meeting conducted by COG assessing the Town's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats regarding future economic development.

4. Qualitative Market Assessment

Market data has been cited in numerous prior studies, providing a basis to characterize economic activity and conditions in Ashland, and to compare Ashland with neighboring towns and the region. LKA supplemented relevant market analysis through windshield surveys and conversations with local real estate professionals. These findings help to identify the Town's economic strengths, as well as the types of businesses and market sectors which might be most attracted to locate in Ashland.

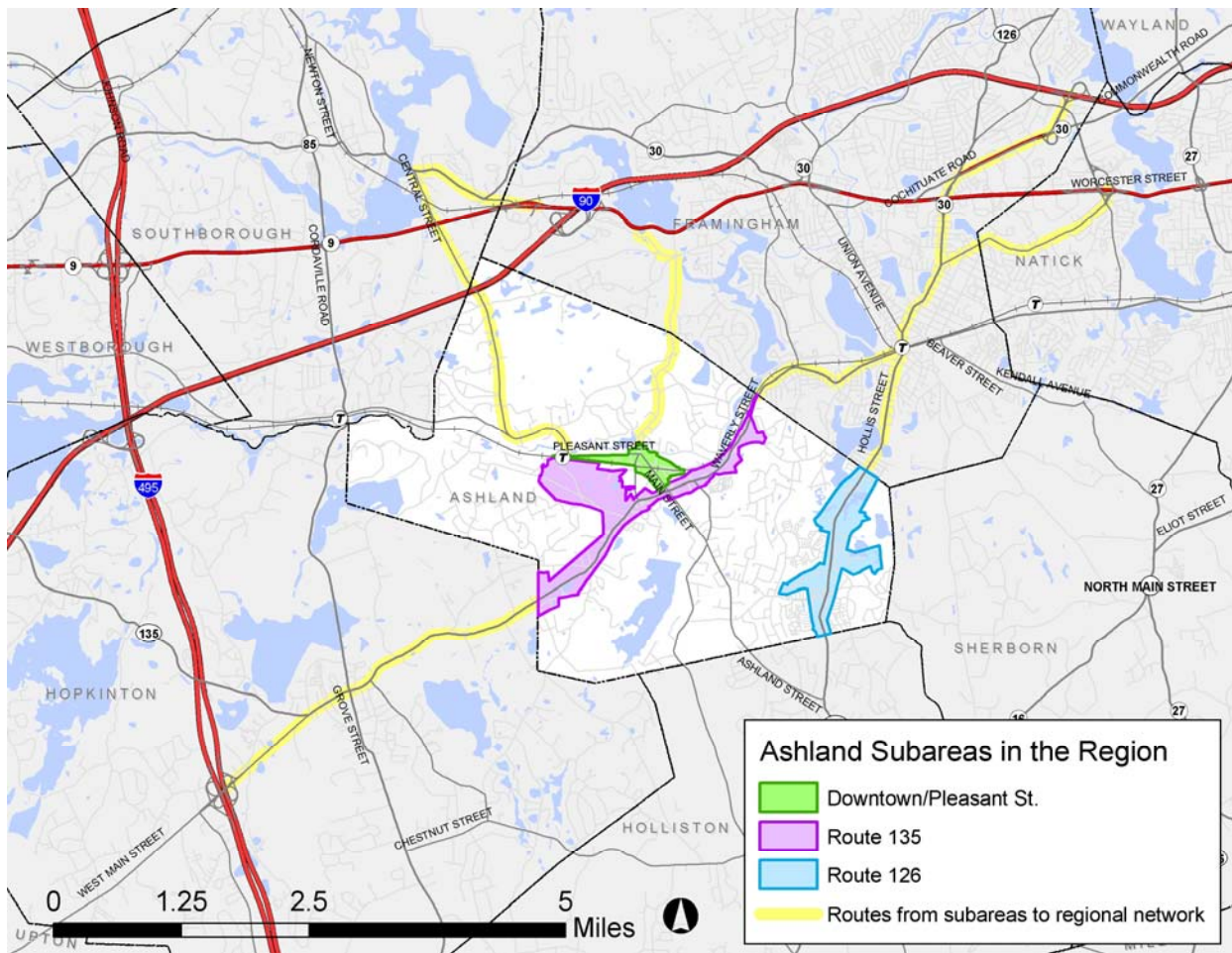
5. Buildout Scenarios

Potential realistic development scenarios were envisioned for a representative sample of sites throughout the Town in order to test the impacts of various land use choices and evaluate barriers and opportunities presented by alternative development strategies. Out of a larger set of sites initially considered, a buildout analysis was prepared showing two scenarios for each of eight locations in town that could accommodate new development or redevelopment. A fiscal impact analysis was prepared using Town budget and anecdotal data collected from comparable development throughout the region by LKA in order to assess whether specific land use choices would be fiscally sustainable. Finally, a broader set of evaluation criteria are presented to indicate marketability, potential infrastructure needs, zoning barriers, and other concerns that might be considered regarding the development or redevelopment of these, or other commercial parcels.

II. ASHLAND'S ECONOMIC BASE AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

Location

The Town of Ashland is located adjacent to Route 9 and Interstate 495 and in the center of the MetroWest region, which also includes Framingham, Holliston, Hopkinton, Natick, Sherborn, Southborough, Sudbury, and Wayland. While lacking frontage on these major roadways, the downtown and Route 135 are easily accessible via secondary roads to the adjacent residential communities such as Hopkinton, Holliston, and Natick, which have employment opportunities for engineers, as well as unskilled and semi-skilled labor force living in Framingham and the surrounding towns.



Economic Development Subareas

Ashland can be divided into three economic development zones: Downtown/Pleasant St., Route 135, and Route 126. Although certain dynamics of the Downtown/Pleasant St. and Route 135 subareas may be closely interrelated, the Route 126 subarea stands apart. These subarea delineations are consistent with the business districts identified in COG's *Economic Policy Plan*.

Downtown/Pleasant St. Subarea

Ashland's historic commercial center, this subarea is the only part of the Town with notable existing mixed use buildings. Home to the town's rail station, this subarea is significantly impacted by a commuter and freight train crossing. Pleasant Street, which extends to the new commuter rail station, is lined by light industrial uses on one side and residential homes on the other, suggesting a confused vision for its future. An Urban Renewal Plan is being established for the Downtown which includes the adjacent Megunko Road industrial area (see map page 25).



Route 135 Subarea

Adjacent to the Downtown/Pleasant St. subarea, this subarea connects the town borders with Framingham (to the northeast) and Hopkinton (to the southwest). The Route 135 corridor contains a successful commercial node at the intersection with Summer Street, and one of the town's most successful office/R&D complexes, Ashland Technology Center, at the intersection with Homer Street. The Route 135 subarea also includes the 200 acre former Nyanza site, which is currently entirely undeveloped but has recently been the subject of multiple proposed development schemes.



Route 126 Subarea

The subarea flanking Route 126 (known locally as Pond Street) extends north/south from Framingham to Holliston. Route 126 is marked by commercial and light industrial uses of varying quality, intermittent wetlands, and entrances into adjacent residential subdivisions. Although it accommodates significant through-traffic, the combination of its environmental constraints and historical lack of cohesion present significant economic development challenges throughout the Route 126 subarea.



Ashland's Economic Base

Businesses in Ashland contribute 9% of the Town's tax base. Many of Ashland's largest employers are goods producers such as Kidde-Fenwal, Terumo Cardiovascular Systems, and MatTek. These businesses tend to be located along Route 135 and in the Downtown. The Ashland Technology



Center building at 200 Homer Street, for example, contains some 337,000 square feet of space and is occupied by a number of larger start-up firms. By far, the highest number of Ashland businesses and largest number of employees are in the office & business services and contractors & construction sectors. These businesses are located in the Downtown as well as along the Route 135 and 126 corridors, and they are

predominantly small businesses. This sector accounts for almost 18% of the total jobs followed closely by manufacturing and retail trade as noted in the Appendix.

Collectively, the MetroWest cities and towns have a higher percentage of manufacturing jobs than the Commonwealth average, and these are disproportionately located in Ashland, particularly in manufacturing and construction. Within the service-producing domain, Ashland provides over 17% of the region's jobs in transportation and warehousing – more than three times the Town's proportional contribution to region's job base – although like the region generally, the single largest job sector in Ashland is professional and business services. Conversely, the information and financial sectors have less significant presence.



Proximity of employment opportunities attracting a skilled and semi-skilled labor force contributes to the town's quality of life. Many businesses locate in town because the owners choose to live in Ashland or a nearby community. Ashland has experienced substantial net job growth over the past decade. Ashland's unemployment rate is slightly below that of the MetroWest region, and far below Massachusetts in general. While jobs on average tend to pay less than those both in the region and statewide, this is due in large part to the high proportion of service and retail jobs in town.

It is no surprise, given the town's location and rural character, that Ashland has relatively few jobs compared to its labor force (nearly two residents in the labor force for every one Ashland job). Nevertheless, this perception should not distract from the importance of commercial activity to the sustainability of the town.

III. ISSUES & OPPORTUNITIES FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Introduction: Myths and Realities

Discussions with local real estate professionals, civic leaders, and municipal staff, a review of existing reports, field surveys and meetings with local businesses have enabled the consultant team to identify a series of issues and opportunities.

A starting point for this discussion is what we have come to understand as four myths and realities which impact the town's economic growth. Public education and discussion is needed to correct these misunderstandings so that corrective strategies can be adopted to foster appropriate economic growth.

Myth #1: Zoning promoting the “vertical integration” of mixed uses, i.e., ground floor retail with housing above, is needed to uplift the image of Ashland’s commercial corridors, restoring a sense of place and enhancing its small town village atmosphere.

Reality: While an attractive development model, the housing and retail market has not adopted this concept in Ashland or other adjacent towns. Moreover, site constraints and existing land use patterns limit the potential for developing walkable mixed use village centers, particularly along Route 126.



Strategies: The Town can enhance its suburban land use pattern by pursuing roadway and streetscape improvements to upgrade the character of the commercial corridors, limiting additional curbcuts, and increasing pedestrian and/or vehicular connections to residential neighborhoods wherever possible. Additionally zoning can help to reinforce a sense of place by establishing uniform standards for building, site, signage, and landscaping design.

Myth #2: Maximizing commercial development wherever possible ensures fiscal sustainability, while allowing residential development will place demands on Town services that exceed the revenues it generates.

Reality: Residential development contributes sufficient municipal revenue to more than offset costs associated with new school children and residents. All of the residential and commercial development alternatives evaluated (see Appendix) were found to generate net revenue surpluses, which vary depending upon the density and quality of the development.



Strategies: The Town should consider how land uses in specific locations meet the Town's overall vision for economic development and community character. Flexibility is a key element in zoning, allowing developers to respond to the market. Focusing attractive

high quality, dense development in the optimal locations will help to ensure fiscal sustainability as well as economic vitality.

Myth #3: Ashland’s historic significance as an incubator for high tech industry, recognized in its nickname as “Clocktown”, has long declined.

Reality: Despite its “hidden” location and suburban residential image, Ashland has a substantial ongoing presence of light manufacturing, R&D, and high tech businesses in the downtown and along Route 135, primarily in the older mill buildings and Megunko Road. One business owner commented that as a place to do business, Ashland is the “best kept secret” with its affordable rents and relatively convenient access to I-90. Nevertheless, the lack of building upgrades and public infrastructure investment in some of the more visible commercial areas contributes to the perception that Ashland is in decline.



Strategies: Improve roadway connections to I-90, signage and way-finding, and enlist the support of the private sector in providing business retention and expansion services. Utilize tools such as zoning reform, Priority Development, and incentives to attract new investment and enhance the visible image of commercial development in Ashland.

Myth #4: Businesses in Ashland will take care of themselves; they operate independently of Town support or services.

Reality: Ashland is in danger of losing some of its largest businesses and discouraging the attraction of new businesses due to a variety of factors that the Town can address. A number of successful businesses are outgrowing available building space or site area for expansion, downtown parking is limited, the zoning bylaws are confusing, roadway conditions are deficient, there is inadequate broadband internet service and insufficient staff support to the business community.



Strategies: The organization and staffing of a business retention and development program in partnership with the private sector, zoning reform, and funding for roadway and parking improvements.

Results of Interviews and Surveys

In order to develop a more in depth understanding of the issues and opportunities concerning the composition and success of the local business community, Larry Koff & Associates conducted extensive interviews with Ashland's most prominent employers and distributed a number of surveys to selected Ashland businesses. Cumulatively providing roughly 1,100 full-time and 400 part-time jobs in Ashland, these 19 employers represent a range of business sectors including manufacturing, computer services, grocery stores, office and business services, auto services, landscaping, and communications. See Section IV of the Appendix for more details.

A major finding of the report was that a significant number of businesses are located in Ashland because the current or previous owner lives in or near the Town. In addition, a quality regional labor force of engineers, semi and unskilled workers, and the prevalence of inexpensive mill and flex space have allowed a number of small businesses to grow, particularly in the light manufacturing and R&D sectors.

Two surprising findings of the survey were the positive response business owners felt concerning the Town's public safety and inspectional services, as well as the lack of complaints about the Town's tax rates, which compare favorably to regional and state averages (see Section II of the Appendix).

The following is a synopsis of the prominent current issues and potential opportunities identified through these surveys as well as discussions with residents, civic leaders and municipal staff.

Issues Identified

- *Current market conditions* – Ashland is considered a secondary market area in contrast to locations in Framingham, Natick and the boroughs which have more direct access to the major regional highways. As a secondary market area, businesses will generally be attracted to the primary locations and then back-fill the less desirable locations. In contrast to this assumption, windshield surveys of the local business areas indicated substantially lower vacancy rates for commercial uses in Ashland compared to the reported vacancy rates in the region—particularly Westborough, Southborough and Marlborough, where 20%- 25% of the office space and 16-18% of the industrial space lie vacant. As noted in the appendix, regional vacancy rates have existed at this level since 2003.
- *Environmental contamination* – Because of contamination released by the former Nyanza chemical company into nearby soils and waterways, areas near the current Nyanza Superfund site are saddled with various limitations on economic development. Some of these limitations, such as restrictions on building into the ground in certain locations, are imposed by state or federal environmental protection agencies. Quality economic development in these areas is further complicated by the stigma of past pollution, which may itself discourage potential projects.
- *Zoning constraints* –A major barrier to investment is the current zoning bylaw, the sign bylaw and the lack of a professional design review process.

- As discussed in the 2010 Community Opportunities Group study, the commercial zoning is in need of reform due to its incoherent layers of regulations which in some cases have conflicting objectives, and/or are too narrowly tailored to encourage specific hoped-for developments. Too much emphasis has been given to the concept of mixed use overlay districts. The zoning districts need to be consolidated into some general categories which reflect a coherent vision such as has been recommended in the Community Opportunities Group study. The districts need to permit a reasonable mix of quality uses that reflect existing market conditions. Specific auto-oriented land uses such as storage/warehousing, automotive, and drive-through services should be limited or prohibited in places where they would be unsuitable.
- More focus needs to be placed on the design review process rather than on specific types of uses and densities. Landscaping, site planning, signage, and design features should reflect the desired character of Ashland's downtown and commercial corridors.
- *Limited space for expanding businesses* – Some businesses are outgrowing their current locations and, if they cannot expand in their current locations, they are exploring the possibility of moving. In fact, while most survey respondents indicated they may or likely will expand in the next five years, an equal number indicated they may or likely will relocate in that time. The driving factor in this potential exodus of successful Ashland businesses is the lack of sufficiently large, low cost space in town.
- *Limited transportation access and visibility* – Ashland lacks “gateway” entrances into town and is often perceived to be difficult to access via nearby thoroughfares (I-90 and I-495). Improving wayfinding from regional highways and enhancing the entrances to the town's commercial areas would lend Ashland a greater sense of place and stature within the region. Moreover, there is poor traffic circulation within Ashland, particularly between the Rte. 135 and Rte. 126 corridors, discouraging travel across the Town.
- *Substandard infrastructure* – Existing and new development is severely constrained by the capacity and cost of the current wastewater system. In order for the Town to double its wastewater capacity to two million gallons per day, as described in the Town's Comprehensive Wastewater Management Plan, improvements are needed at the Chestnut Street pumping station and the outflow pipes which extend through Framingham to the MWRA treatment plant.
- *Lack of strong public and private organizational support for business development* – Several business representatives informed LKA that this was the first time they had ever been approached by the Town regarding business improvement and retention strategies. In the private sector, the Ashland Business Association appears to be limited in its membership and not serving the needs of potential new members.
- *Lack of coherent vision for sub-areas and corridors* – The pattern of land uses lacks consistency or correlation. The Route 126 corridor, in particular, is an incoherent mix of retail, residential and industrial land uses strung along a two-mile corridor joining Framingham and Holliston. There are no clear nodes of economic activity with the exception of the area surrounding the intersection with Eliot Street. The Downtown and Route 135 areas have a similar mix of residential, office, retail, and industrial businesses. Again, there is no clear

pattern of building setbacks, signage, landscaping, and curb cuts. Many of the buildings are of poor construction or lack maintenance. The public infrastructure of sidewalks and street trees, likewise, is lacking.

- *Low market profile* – While the town has many notable retail and industrial businesses such as John Stone’s, Kidde-Fenwal, and Market Basket, the visibility of these companies is often lost because of a number of factors. The Town of Ashland’s commercial areas are often perceived to be some distance from the major regional road network. Other limitations include the substantial site contamination near the downtown area, the presence of the rail lines through the downtown, a limited number of large sites served by infrastructure, the prevalence of wetlands along the corridors, and a confusing pattern of zoning and decisions by various Boards, which have allowed secondary service, retail, and industrial uses to locate in Town, often in the wrong places.
- *Signage* – A number of industrial parks lack signage at their entry points, such as Megunko Road, Nickerson Road, and Butterfield Drive. The current bylaw limits gateway signage. In addition, business signage along the gateways lacks any visual coherence.

Opportunities Identified

- *Location* – A number of interviewees commented that the Town enjoys easy access to I-90 and Logan Airport. This is contrary to common perception that Ashland is a poorly located business environment. A way-finding program could help to overcome this perception.
- *Key clusters* – Compared to the region, Ashland has a disproportionate number of businesses in the areas of high tech, light manufacturing and R&D. Furthermore, as noted in the COG report, Ashland has a large proportion of home-based businesses.
- *Potential development sites* – As identified in the following section, there are a large number of potential development and redevelopment sites. Some of these will require new zoning to attract desired redevelopment. The Planning Board and the ARA need to establish some prioritization of these sites so as to focus limited staff and volunteer board resources on the most viable opportunities.
- *Interested business owners* – Our surveys and discussions with local businesses and property owners has identified considerable support and interest in the Town by the business community. The Town needs to consider forming a group of local business leaders to advise the Town on appropriate business incentives and economic strategies.
- *Broadband cable* – A high-speed cable line between Worcester and Boston which runs beneath Route 135 could possibly be utilized by local businesses.
- *Potential municipal support* – Besides a Town Manager, Ashland also has a Planning Board, the ARA, and a Director of Community Development, and a full-time Planner. This collection of Town personnel should be sufficient, if properly coordinated with Board members who are fully engaged in their roles, to implement substantial and necessary economic development initiatives.
- *Commuter rail station* – The commuter rail station is primarily used by Ashland commuters traveling toward Boston, and at present has virtually no relationship with nearby properties

which include a church, light industrial businesses, and single family residences. However, future development in this area could make greater use of the station's proximity, for example high density residences and limited convenience retail.

- *Current planning initiatives* – The ARA is undertaking several planning initiatives, including identifying a boundary and revitalization/redevelopment plan for key parcels and sub areas within a purposed Urban Renewal Area, exploring possibilities for moving the present police and fire stations, and proposing a Business Improvement District (BID) for Route 126.
- *Economic Development vision* – A vision concept for locating economic development activity as well as draft design guidelines have been illustrated at the end of this report. It is hoped that this framework, with local review, can be edited into a framework that is accepted by the key boards concerned with development.

IV. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS

Background

Ashland has a substantial amount of land zoned for commercial use, as well as properties that would be suitable for redevelopment. In many cases, it is not clear what type of use would be most appropriate or beneficial. The Zoning bylaw does not provide a coherent or realistic vision of future development in Ashland's commercial areas. In order to establish a land use/economic development vision, a broad range of factors should be taken into account, including fiscal sustainability, market potential, infrastructure requirements, and the limitations of current zoning. Additionally, how well a development option embodies smart growth or enhances community character, i.e., how it "fits" with adjacent land uses, and the potential to enhance existing or emerging nodes of commercial activity, should be taken into account.

The intent of the analysis which follows is to provide a guide for evaluating potential development at key locations. It is hoped that this methodology and process can be considered by the Town as it manages land use changes in an effort to promote economic development and improved community character.

We have selected eight representative development sites for an illustrative buildout analysis in order to test out possible development scenarios and the potential of various sites to reinforce a land use vision along the Route 135 and Route 126 corridors and downtown. Two alternative development themes to consider for each site were identified: Alternative A, Varied Uses, or Alternative B, Commercial Emphasis. While the themes informed the development of scenarios, recommendations for each site are considered independently, based on evaluation criteria.

Objective Alternative A (Varied Uses): Encourage high quality development at key nodes by limiting new commercial expansion in outlying areas. In particular, major retail uses are concentrated in downtown and the northern end of Route 126. Convenience-oriented village-scale development at principle nodes could include a mix of residential and commercial uses in some cases. Beyond these sites, encourage residential or light industrial/office uses, consistent with the surrounding context. Also increase connectivity between existing/new residential areas, commercial corridors, and transportation routes.

Objective Alternative B (Commercial Emphasis): Maximize commercial development opportunities (retail, office or industrial) throughout the town. Allow a flexible range of development quality, uses, and design to promote absorption of commercial space. Maintain separation of residential development from commercial corridors, and encourage expansion of commercial uses along corridors.

Table 1, Evaluation Sites

Site	Alternative A: Varied Uses	Alternative B: Commercial Emphasis	Recommendations
Rail Transit District (zones A and E)	Multifamily residential development similar to JPI proposal	Light industrial / R&D / flex space. Assume FAR approximately 0.25	Consider zoning change to allow a range of uses, including light industrial / R&D / flex space in addition to multifamily. Provide access via High St or Cordaville Rd. Apply site design and landscaping criteria to ensure compatible character of development.
55 W. Union St.	Multistory professional office building	Single story convenience retail building	Encourage attractive, quality development through site plan and design guidelines, while allowing market to determine best use.
61 Waverley St.	Townhouse residential development, which would require removing 43D status	Single story retail building, as permitted under 43D	Promote as optimal site along Route 135 corridor for supermarket or other large retail; reform parking requirements and zoning to facilitate feasible, quality development.
Downtown Mill Buildings	Renovate older mill structures to have upper floor residences and ground floor commercial use; replace newer building with attractive multistory office and retail.	Renovate all of the mill buildings and continue to occupy them with office / R&D / flex space uses.	While “vertically integrated” mixed use fits the downtown context, it is unlikely to be marketable in the short term. Renovated structures could continue to provide office/flex space until such time as there is a stronger market for downtown mixed use.
240-350 Pleasant St. (current MetroWest Workshop Center properties)	Mixed use development with ground floor retail, upper floor professional office space and some residential condos, creating a small TOD village near the train station.	Reuse or redevelop existing buildings and build additional space for light industrial / flex space uses	In terms of smart growth context, this location might be equally suitable for transit oriented mixed use, or more intensive light industrial/flex space. Zoning should allow flexible uses, but ensure site and building design criteria compatible with its prominent gateway location and residential abutters.
Butterfield Corporate Center	Create a retail node on Route 126 with low impact single family residential development in the rear of this site.	Create a high quality office / R&D development on this site with frontage on Route 126.	Adding Pond Street frontage to the Butterfield parcel could increase its feasibility for quality commercial development, depending on configuration of wetlands. Otherwise, LID residential development could be more compatible with the severe wetland constraints.
Gateway	Integrate single family residential subdivision into existing Meeting-house Path neighborhood, with additional access road and an undeveloped buffer along Route 126.	Construct a light industrial / flex space building, as allowed under current zoning.	Expansion of retail, already in excess at the southern end of Route 126, would be less preferable than either flex space or continuation of the adjacent neighborhood.
Sears/Shaw's Plazas	Encourage reuse/redevelopment of buildings at this location to favor light industrial / flex space, with a modest amount of convenience retail.	Encourage renovation and re-tenanting of existing retail space.	While retail is currently overbuilt along Route 126, Ashland lacks accessible retail serving the central and western portions of town. Encouraging a shift away from large-scale retail at this location could enhance the potential for retail in the Downtown and Route 135 Corridors.

Table 2, Site Evaluation Criteria

Alternative	Rail Transit District		55 W. Union St.		61 Waverley St.		Mill Buildings		240-350 Pleasant St.		Butterfield Corp. Ctr.		Gateway		Sears/ Shaw's	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Land Use																
Commercial area (1,000 s.f.)		407	113	85		74	22	147	36	45	32	228		63	126	126
Residential units	565				36		69		10		31		58			
Jobs Created		407	376	170		147	44	147	105	45	63	228		63	146	252
New Residents	943				92		118		22		90		167			
New School Children	80				18		11		3		25		46			
Net Revenues (\$1,000)	417	362	199	116	42	100	44	131	83	40	61	203	37	56	121	172
Cost/Revenue Ratio ³	0.64	0.09	0.14	0.11	0.77	0.11	0.70	0.09	0.29	0.09	0.76	0.09	0.90	0.09	0.09	0.11

Current Site Condition

Undeveloped	
Existing Development	

Future Land Use Option

Multifamily Residential		Industrial/Flex	
Townhouse Residential		Professional Office	
Single Family Residential		Retail	

Table 3, Comparative Site Evaluation Criteria

Alternatives	Rail Transit District		55 W. Union St.		61 Waverley St.		Mill Buildings		240-350 Pleasant St.		Butterfield Corp. Ctr.		Gateway		Sears/Shaw's	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Rate of Market Absorption																
Traffic Impacts																
Water Impacts																
Wastewater Impacts																
Current Zoning		Use			Use	SP	Density		Density		SP	SP	Density	SP	SP	
Smart Growth / Character																

Advantageous/Opportunity		Moderate Barrier/Disadvantage	
Neutral		Significant Barrier/Disadvantage	

³ The cost/revenue ratio indicates how robust the fiscal impact expectations are; a ratio between 0.95-1.05 can be considered to break even, while smaller numbers indicate a stronger positive impact.

Buildout Analysis

Eight sites were selected for the Buildout Analysis out of a larger list of potential commercial development sites, shown in Section V of the Appendix. The intent in selecting these sites was to evaluate realistic alternatives for current major development opportunities, as well as to test a range of long-term strategies for some key sites that are currently occupied with commercial uses.

While the uses that are shown for each alternative follow the themes outlined above, the amount of developable space and number of residential units was based on a combination of current zoning, recent development proposals, and in some cases the residential density that would be required under 40R (the Massachusetts Smart Growth Zoning and Housing Production incentive program).

Fiscal Impact Analysis

The fiscal impact analysis utilizes a “marginal cost” approach, which compares the additional demand for municipal services to the revenues generated by property taxes for a “snapshot” year after buildout is completed. Only annual operating costs and ongoing revenues are included in this analysis – not one time revenues or costs associated with permitting, capital facilities, or infrastructure development.

An analysis of the Town’s budget is used to identify the portion of costs in each which are impacted by growth (as opposed to fixed costs, which remain the same). Population, school children, and employment projections are based on observations of similar development in Ashland and comparable towns in the suburban eastern Massachusetts region. Projection of assessed valuation is likewise based upon observations of comparable development in Ashland and other rural/suburban towns in the region.

Each of the development scenarios considered results in net revenue surplus to the Town. The cost/revenue ratio indicates how robust the fiscal impact expectations are; a ratio between 0.95-1.05 can be considered to break even, while smaller numbers indicate a stronger positive impact. While commercial development consistently generates more favorable cost/revenue ratios than residential development, the magnitude of surplus can, in some cases, be greater for residential development because of higher value of development.

Comparative Evaluation Criteria

While fiscal sustainability is an important concern, additional criteria should be taken into consideration when comparing possible land use alternatives. These might include such concerns as impacts on public infrastructure needed to support development, feasibility of zoning changes that would be required, and land use context.

Infrastructure

Different land uses generate varying urgency for roadway improvements that include visual enhancements, as well as accommodating pedestrian and vehicle demand. Residential development generates the least additional traffic, while retail draws the greatest amount of traffic.

The Town should also consider the existing and potential water and sewer capacity, whether upgrades will be needed to serve priority development sites, and how these might be funded. Residential development generates the highest demand for water, but lowest impact on wastewater. Industrial development, on the other hand, demands less water and generates more wastewater.

Current Zoning

The Rail Transit District is the most restrictive in terms of prohibiting potentially suitable uses. Special permits required in some zoning districts can create a disincentive for development that is not warranted by site conditions. Furthermore, parking regulations are a significant limiting factor in determining the potential buildout on some commercial sites. Where residential development is allowed under current zoning, a change to allow higher density could provide an incentive for higher quality development that fits a “village” context.

Smart Growth/Character

The final evaluation criteria depicted on Table 3 indicates how well each alternative enhances community character and contributes to a vision of “smart growth”. This ranking takes into consideration neighboring land uses, correlation with public transit and/or major roads, potential to reinforce a commercial node, and compatibility with natural resources on or surrounding the site. Given that any of the land use choices evaluated were found to be fiscally sustainable, priority should be given to encouraging development which enhances community character and a sense of place, rather than simply generating revenue.

V. RECOMMENDED VISION AND ACTION PLAN

Introduction

The Economic Development Vision and Design Principles, which follows the Action Plan, identifies guiding principles and a recommended vision for the town's commercial areas. The Action Plan, itself, provides five strategies to be considered in pursuit of a business retention and development program. Adoption of a consensus vision should be the starting point in implementing an economic development strategy, as it provides a context for considering zoning reform and targeted public investment and incentives.

Input from the buildout analysis has contributed to identifying the visions concerning the pattern of land uses and visual quality that is appropriate for Ashland's commercial areas. It takes into account market and fiscal impacts, as well as qualitative factors that contribute to smart growth and community character.

Business Retention and Attraction Program Action Plan

Five key strategies for a Business Retention and Attraction Program have been identified below: Staffing and Organization; Planning of Key Sites, Zoning Reform; Incentive Programs; and Public Facility and Infrastructure Improvements. Within each lead strategy are identified a number of initiatives to be considered. The strategies and initiatives should be reviewed by the key decision makers in town. They can then identify and delegate a manageable list of appropriate tasks. Priority of implementing strategies may follow availability of funding, opportunities for coordination with private investment, and the readiness of staff and boards to undertake specific initiatives.

1. Coordinate organizational structure to provide Business Assistance services

- 1.1 Identify most effective roles, clarify objectives, and formalize coordination among staff, volunteer boards, and private sector:

Director of Community Development: This position should take the lead role in economic development efforts as outlined in this Action Plan below. This task requires coordinating the activities of Town staff and Boards, as well as assisting in setting priorities and following through with business retention efforts. He or she should also act as the staff assistant to ARA and the key contact with the proposed Economic Advisory Committee of local business leaders.

Planner: The newly-installed Planner should coordinate the roles of both the Planning Board and the Comprehensive Plan Review Committee. In addition, this position should provide technical support to the Planning Board as it prepares design guidelines and conducts area and site planning assignments.

Ashland Redevelopment Authority (ARA): An Urban Renewal Plan which largely mirrors the boundary of the Downtown/Pleasant St. subarea is presently being prepared by the consulting firm VHB for adoption by the ARA and the Town. The mandate of the ARA will be to stimulate economic development activity and enhance business in the downtown

district by pursuing various job creation, site remediation, infrastructure, housing and related revitalization improvements.

One of the starting points for finalizing the Urban Renewal Plan and a subsequent work program would be to review the recommendations of this report and integrate some of the findings into the Urban Renewal Plan. Two tasks, in particular, should receive priority consideration: (1) the formation of an Economic Advisory Committee, and (2) identifying options to provide additional parking to service local businesses in the Mill building (10-20 Main Street) and Ashland Technology Center at 200 Homer Street.

Planning Board: The Planning Board needs to consider appropriate zoning changes, developing and adopting a new sign bylaw, and creating a design review process. The Planning Board should work jointly with the Board of Selectmen to appoint the Comprehensive Plan Review Committee.

Comprehensive Plan Review Committee: Review and update the 2003 Comprehensive Plan. Review recommendations of this and other reports (particularly the 2010 COG report) with respect to land use and zoning and make those recommendations to the Planning Board. Assist the Planning Board on the items described above.

Economic Advisory Committee: An organization of business leaders should be established to work with the town on identifying priorities and carrying out a business retention and development program.

- 1.2 Develop consensus around Vision and Action Plan: Town staff, Planning Board, and ARA should review and revise Vision and Action Plan to be adopted by Selectmen.
- 1.3 Focus on Service Delivery: The organizational resources listed above should coordinate to provide services that will support business retention and attraction. For example the Economic Advisory Committee can work together with the appropriate staff and boards to address expansion concerns of local firms including Terumo, MatTek, StepDirect, Kidde-Fenwal Inc, and Nyacol.

2. Develop Planning for Key Sites

(Planning Board, ARA, and Comprehensive Plan Review Committee)

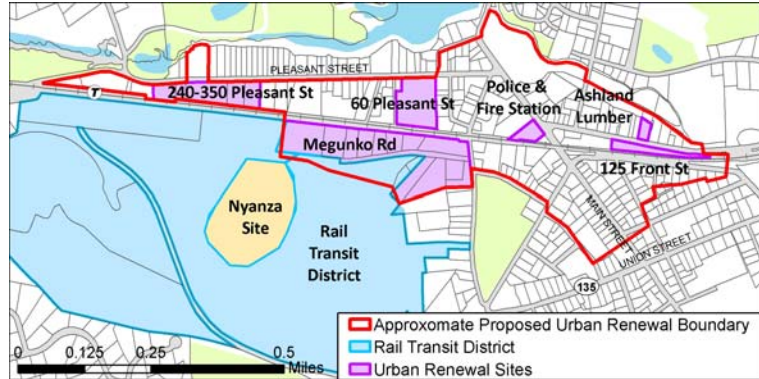
2.1 Downtown Urban Renewal District:

Follow recommendations of COG analysis in Downtown.

Establish a vision for redevelopment of underutilized sites that is suitable for the Pleasant Street gateway location, adjacent to train station, residential neighborhood, and pond as well as other downtown parcels noted below:

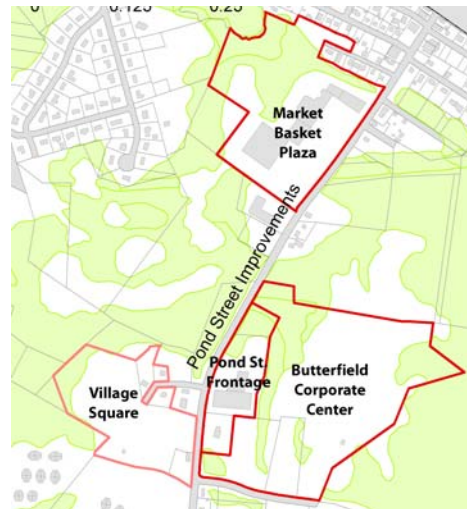
Meguko Road: This is the locus of a number of auto repair and landscaping companies. Due to prior industrial soil contamination by Nyanza and uncertainty about the status of DEP and EPA regulations for site reuse, no investment is being made to upgrade the infrastructure-roads, water and sewer or the buildings.

61 Pleasant St. (Gamewell Building)
 Relocation of Police and Fire Station
 125 Front St. redevelopment
 Lumber Yard expansion



- 2.2 **Rail Transit District:** The zoning for this area will need to be redrafted as the narrow uses defined in the current zoning are not reflective of current market conditions and preclude other potentially beneficial, marketable uses.
- 2.3 **Nyanza Superfund site:** This site would be an appropriate location for a solar farm. The logical purchaser of power would be the town. While the current municipal electricity contract extends out some four years, it should be possible to begin planning now for future opportunities.

- 2.4 **Villagio Carboni (also known as Village Square):** This 70,000 square foot development proposal is currently stalled in the permitting process and, given the current economic climate, should be considered as a 43D Priority Development Site. Potential opportunity to coordinate with roadway improvements and revitalization of surrounding commercial properties including Market Basket, Tri-Valley Tennis Club, and Butterfield Drive.



3. Undertake Zoning Reform

- 3.1 **Zoning bylaw reform:** The COG report details a number of ways in which zoning bylaws are confusing and unclear. In some cases, details such as dimensional regulations even contradict the stated intent of the zones themselves. These issues are significant and should be addressed.
- 3.2 **Design guidelines:** A bylaw establishing a Design Review Committee should be drafted and adopted by Town Meeting. Utilizing the proposed vision statements previously discussed, the Committee should then with some technical support, draft relevant guidelines to be utilized in the site plan review process.
- 3.3 **Sign bylaw reform:** The current sign bylaw does not provide sufficient guidance to ensure some uniformity in size, location and design. Furthermore, certain types of gateway and

directory signage may not be allowed. A coherent pattern of signage is important in improving the visual quality of commercial areas.

4. Promote Incentive Programs

- 4.1 **43D Site Designations:** This designation can reassure a developer that a proposed real estate investment will be supported by an expedited permitting process. A number of additional sites considered for redevelopment might be possible candidates.
- 4.2 **Urban Renewal Boundary designation:** In the past when State funding was available, this designation would bring resources for land acquisition, removal of blighting conditions, and infrastructure. It would appear that the Megunko Road area might be the most suitable location for this designation assuming there was a clear plan for the district's improvement supported by property owners and the State. As the adoption and implementation of an Urban Renewal Plan is a time consuming effort, it is suggested that the ARA and town staff consider the range of activities recommended in this Action Plan and determine the best use of their efforts and limited resources.
- 4.3 **Disposition of Town-owned sites:** Should the Main Street Police and Fire buildings be relocated, there could be an opportunity for adaptive reuse of the historic downtown buildings. Also there is potential to utilize the Town-owned land on Front Street either to create additional downtown parking supply or an infill development site.
- 4.4 **PWED application:** Designate key nodes on Route 126 to be identified as initial targets of PWED investments. Coordinate with proposed private investments at the Market Basket site, Villagio Carboni (also known as Village Square), and at the intersection with Eliot Street.
- 4.5 **Business Improvement Districts (BIDs):** Consider BID where appropriate for smaller target areas (nodes) along route 126.

5. Public Facility and Infrastructure Improvements

- 5.1 **Fire and police stations:** Complete negotiations to move the police and fire station to a combined newly constructed public safety facility. For reasons of Public safety as identified in the COG report, it is of the highest priority that this project move forward.
- 5.2 **Route 126 road improvements:** Carry out a 10% Design of Route 126 improvements consistent with vision concept as presented in this report. Focus the plan on the two key nodes identified in this report.
- 5.3 **Streetscape improvements:** Incorporate streetscape features into design of roadway and public realm improvements in the Downtown and Route 126.
- 5.4 **Wayfinding:** The Town should petition for clearer signage highlighting the points of entry to Ashland from the Mass Pike and Route 495. In addition, better signage is needed showing how to navigate within Ashland, particularly between Routes 126 and 135.
- 5.5 **Gateway signage:** A gateway signage program should be initiated by one or more civic organizations such as the Ashland Business Association or the Ashland Lions. Town entrances from the major roadways need to be identified with clear signage. Furthermore, business

directory signage is needed for Nickerson Road and Megunko Road.

5.6 **Water and septic issues:** should be addressed as part of a review of the key business retention and development sites.

5.7 Approach major service providers to seek expansion of **broadband service**.