

# Lower Village Revitalization Subcommittee Final Report

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## Introduction

This report was developed by the Lower Village Revitalization Committee, on behalf of the Stow Planning Board. In 2018, the Planning Board created the Lower Village Revitalization Committee (LVRC) for the purpose of providing the Planning Board with recommendations for updating Lower Village Business District zoning in the summer of 2019. A secondary task included guiding development of the recently completed *Business District Assessment and Market Analysis* grant from the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative.

## Charge of the Lower Village Subcommittee

The Lower Village Business District, inclusive of business and personal residences along Route 117 between White Pond Road and Bradley Lane, has been a hub of Stow activity for hundreds of years. For nearly a generation, the Town of Stow has discussed, planned for and debated how to evolve the business district into a functional, vibrant gateway to a Town that has so much to offer. Stow's Lower Village is continuously affected by trends in the local and regional economy, the housing market, and the larger transportation network. The trends in resurgence of New England villages and downtowns, together with data gathered from Stow residents over the years, reveals a noticeable disparity between what Lower Village could be and what it is today.

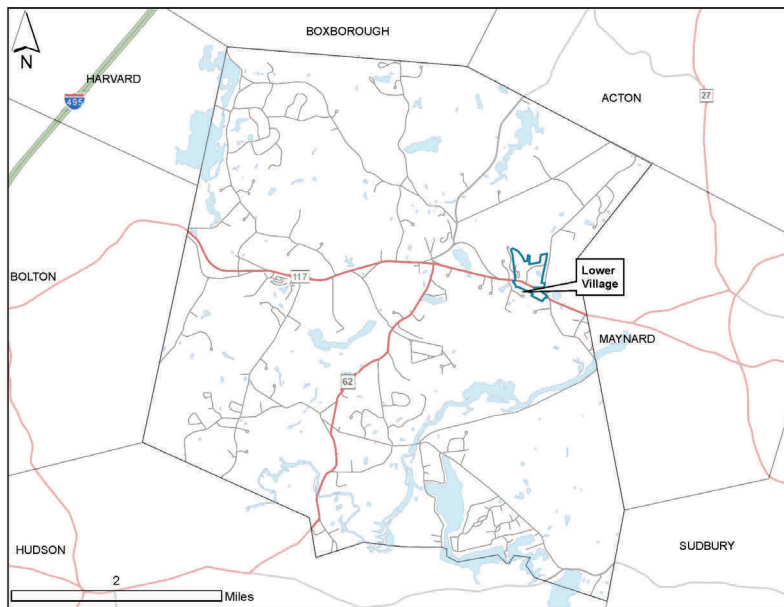


Fig. 1—Proximity of Lower Village to Abutting Towns

## Defining a Vision

Through analysis of current conditions and previous planning initiatives, the Lower Village Revitalization Committee offers the Planning Board an updated Vision for the District that balances community desires with the principles of traditional New England Village design. The resulting Vision is current but not new. The LVRC believes it has been in development over the past decade, articulated bit by bit, plan by plan, containing the feedback of many residents, spanning various topics of interest. This Vision has helped the LVRC center a strategy for improvement in the Lower Village Business District and offers the Planning Board realistic recommendations to advance planning efforts in line with community goals.

### Vision Statement

*Lower Village will be an attractive gateway to Stow, developed in the tradition of a New England village, where residents and visitors can safely and conveniently live, work, shop, dine and recreate. As the primary gateway into town, Lower Village will project the history and character of Stow through the architectural compatibility of its buildings and streetscape, providing residents and visitors with a defined sense of place. Lower Village will be a place to meet and connect, with civic spaces for gathering, and wayfinding to attractions, including farms, orchards, conservation areas and the Assabet River Rail Trail. Businesses will thrive in Stow's revitalized hub, attracting people of all ages to services, shopping and entertainment opportunities accessible by all modes of transportation.*

# What is Traditional New England Village Design?

Traditional village centers across New England share common designs that shape the popular image of how a Town Center should look and feel. Historically, the design of such village centers are exemplified in five (5) distinct ways:

- **Walkability**—The village district is compact and easy to access on foot. It provides for social and community activities. The Lower Village Common historically functioned as a public space available to all.
- **Provides a strong mix of different uses**—People live, shop, dine and run errands. The mix of uses provides vitality and activity. It is a place to pick up groceries, have lunch and go to the post office.
- **Includes a diversity of housing opportunities**—Homes of different types and sizes fit with the look and feel of the district. They are integrated into the village rather than distinctly separate.
- **Accessible by various modes of transportation and ability levels<sup>5</sup>**—The village center is accessible to everyone, regardless of ability.
- **Conveys a distinct sense of place**—The village is the center of business and many aspects of community life. It is a social place to meet friends and neighbors, shaped by history, the values of its residents, and the surrounding environment.



Much of the information residents have provided over the years, including feedback from the Visual Preference Survey and streetscape design comments, align with the concepts described above. The LVRC uses the idea of a traditional New England village as a concept to guide development of a Lower Village Vision, to review the zoning bylaw, and to understand how the comments from residents over the years can translate to quality of life improvements in the Village.

# Lower Village Study Area

The Lower Village Business District is a historic gateway district situated along Route 117, which serves as an arterial route for regional traffic to and from interstates 495 and 95. Lower Village is the only village along Route 117 between the two interstates, and is noted as a "Priority Development Area" in the 495 Compact, a regional economic development plan developed by the 495 Partnership. In 2014, upwards of 16,000 vehicles per day traveled through the district.<sup>1</sup>

As Stow's largest business district, Lower Village is relatively compact, spanning the north and south sides of Route 117 (Great Road) for approximately 1/3 mile, from Bradley Lane, east to White Pond Road. The district is anchored on the north side by the Stow Shopping Center, with a major grocer, gym and several retail/service/food establishments. The south side is made up of three smaller plazas, a used car dealership, as well as a vacant gas station and restaurant structure.

Fig. 3—Composition of Uses in Lower Village Business District (Source: Lower Village Business District Assessment and Market Analysis, Fine Point Associates, Inc.)

Figure 7-a. Composition of Uses (# of establishments)

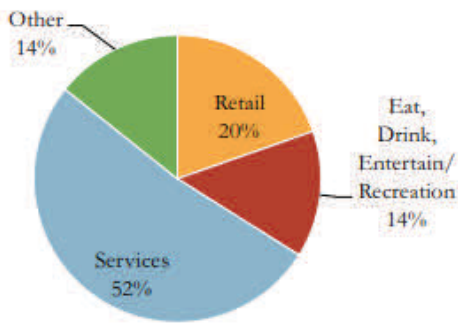


Figure 7-b. Composition of Uses (Occupied Square Feet)

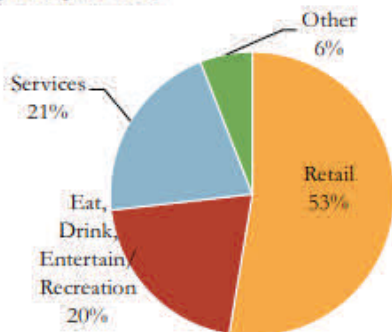


Fig. 2—Lower Village Statistics

Lower Village Business District by the Numbers	
194,000	Square footage of commercial space spread across 80 units
20,323	Square footage of vacant commercial space across 24 units (11% vacancy rate)
>16,000	Number of vehicles passing through Lower Village each day (2014 HSH Technical Memo)
67	Percentage of Independently owned, single location businesses (Out of 56 total establishments)
61.5	Total acreage of Lower Village Business District
11	# of retail establishments
5	# of restaurants
1	# of restaurants serving alcohol

Housing is confined to units within three parcels at the east and west edges of the district, as well as in the Faxon Farm and Meeting House *Independent Living Residences*, with 66 units of age restricted housing located within the district.

Data collected as part of the *Lower Village Business District Assessment and Market Analysis*, by Fine Point Associates, describes the village as primarily a neighborhood retail and service district, with office space limited to a few properties with second floor lease opportunities. The lean toward neighborhood oriented services is partially evidenced by the fact that of the 56 total establishments, 67% are independently owned. Additionally, a small cluster of healthcare and personal service establishments account for nearly 60% of the total services offered.

<sup>1</sup> Howard Stein Hudson *Technical Memorandum*, dated August 8, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Fine Point Associates, *Lower Village Business District and Market Analysis*, Table 2, p.20. 2018.

# Issues / Opportunities Analysis

Several planning initiatives and studies were reviewed to inform the LVRC’s analysis of existing conditions in Lower Village. Among the varying plans, surveys and forums, patterns and themes emerged. The LVRC used this data to

Fig. 4—Relevant Studies & Initiatives | 2011– 2018

2011	<b>Lower Village Committee Final Report</b>	Focused on pedestrian and traffic safety, village center zoning, and pursuing water infrastructure. Streetscape standards and permanent traffic islands are proposed to improve identity of the District and reduce traffic incidents.
2012	<b>Lower Village Planning Public Forum</b>	Residents attend kickoff planning event to provide feedback on desired uses and priority improvements
2013 - 2018	<b>Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats (S.T.O.W.) analysis</b>	A parcel by parcel assessment of Lower Village, detailing issues and opportunities at individual sites
2014	<b>Lower Village Traffic Improvement Planning</b>	Forums to gain feedback on traffic improvements and pedestrian improvements;
2015	<b>Lower Village Visual Preference Survey</b>	Survey of Stow residents regarding architectural preferences
2017	<b>Complete Streets Prioritization Planning</b>	Town wide pedestrian and bike planning effort garners many comments on Lower Village improvement actions
2018	<b>Business District Assessment and Market Analysis</b>	Report provides in depth analysis of existing real estate profile, business conditions, and resident and business owner survey

## Primary Issues

### 1. Predominately Automobile Oriented Village

Every study and planning effort since 2011 identifies the detrimental effects of an auto dependent environment on plans to create a more village centered development strategy. Auto dependency is linked to pedestrian safety concerns, the lack of bicycle infrastructure, as well as development patterns that do not reflect the community character of Stow.

Many of the detailed concerns around pedestrian safety and traffic congestion are incorporated in the final design for the Lower Village Improvements currently under construction. Large curb openings, incomplete sidewalks, deteriorating pavement and traffic congestion are addressed through targeted Complete Streets improvements aimed at separating pedestrians and bikes from traffic, slowing vehicles at the gateways and creating opportunities for breaks in traffic.

The S.T.O.W analysis and Business District Analysis of 2018 identifies existing site configurations as a symptom and a cause of the auto orientation of the District. The majority of parking is located in front of buildings, with few pedestrian connections to storefronts. Inter-lot connections for vehicles or pedestrians are largely non-existent, leading to further vehicle use despite the relatively compact village. The lack of shared parking agreements, mixing of uses and flexible design standards continue to incentivize strip style development that is oriented primarily toward automobiles.



## 2. Outdated / Inadequate Water Infrastructure

Since the early 2000s the Town has continuously worked to improve opportunities for business expansion and redevelopment due to the lack of public water supply availability in the Business District. For instance, the Town worked with state legislators to pass legislation allowing public water exploration on the open space associated with Heritage Lane, though it is not known whether that parcel could provide sufficient water for multiple properties in the Lower Village Business District. Utilizing Town land was seen as a potential solution to the large acreage requirements for wellhead protection areas of privately operated public water supplies, which has made compliance with current Department of Environmental Protection regulations difficult for the owners of relatively compact business lots in Lower Village.

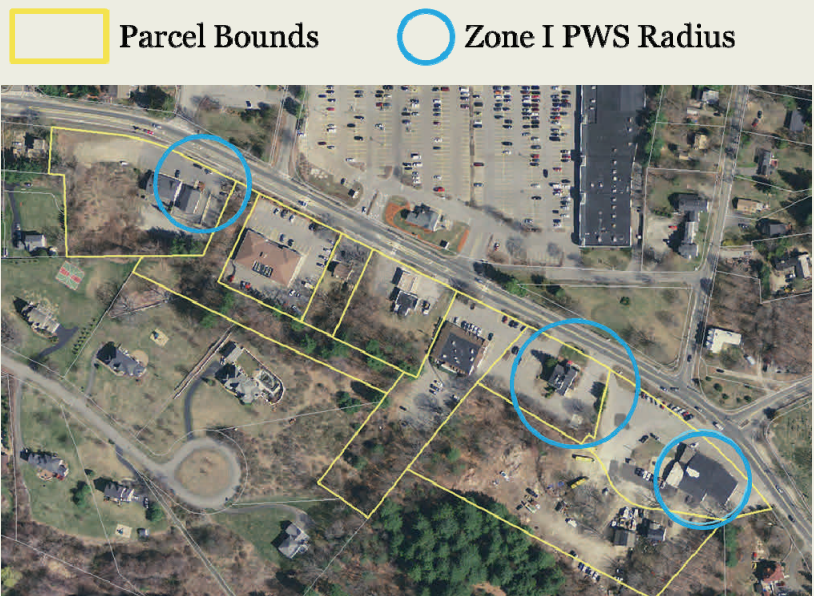
The combination of existing lot configurations, inflexible zoning, and state regulations has led to an appearance of disinvestment or stagnation in the Lower Village Business District. Many of the property owners on the south side of Route 117 have spent nearly two decades choosing between a limited selection of tenants that utilize relatively low amounts of water. The result has led to an artificial ceiling on development, revealed through vacant and outdated buildings, expired permits for expansion, and a mix of commercial/industrial uses not typical for a retail and service business center. The recent Business District Assessment and Market Analysis shows access to a public water supply to be the top disadvantage among property owners for doing business in Stow.

### Nowhere to Grow

DEP Public Drinking Water standards have evolved over the years, requiring a greater area of land to be set aside as wellhead protection areas.

Given the relatively small lots in Lower Village, there is not enough space to fit a wellhead protection area and still leave developable land for buildings, parking and wastewater treatment.

*Fig. 5—Public Water Supply Regulations in Context*



## 3. Prolonged Vacancies

Long lasting vacancies can damage the appeal and draw of a business district. The 2018 Business District Assessment and Market Analysis indicates the lack of water infrastructure can lead to vacancies and underdeveloped parcels that would otherwise have increased opportunity for redevelopment. The figure below shows that business and property owners in the Lower Village Business District feel aesthetics and physical appearance are among the top locational disadvantages.

## 4. Limited Connections to Town Resources and Amenities

The 2010 Master Plan declares that “conservation lands, farms, orchards, and golf courses are the resources of Stow that provide and preserve [Stow’s] rural character.” However, there are no visual cues directing visitors to the resources that draw people to Stow. The Business District contains no directional signage, or unifying wayfinding elements that use the Town’s rural resources to its locational advantage. The Assabet River Rail Trail, terminating at the end of White Pond Road, is the newest resource in proximity to Lower Village. Additional opportunities for recreation located within proximity of the district include the Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge, Stow Town Forest, Red Acre Woodlands, and Crow Island Air Park. There are currently limited connections drawing users to and from the Business District.



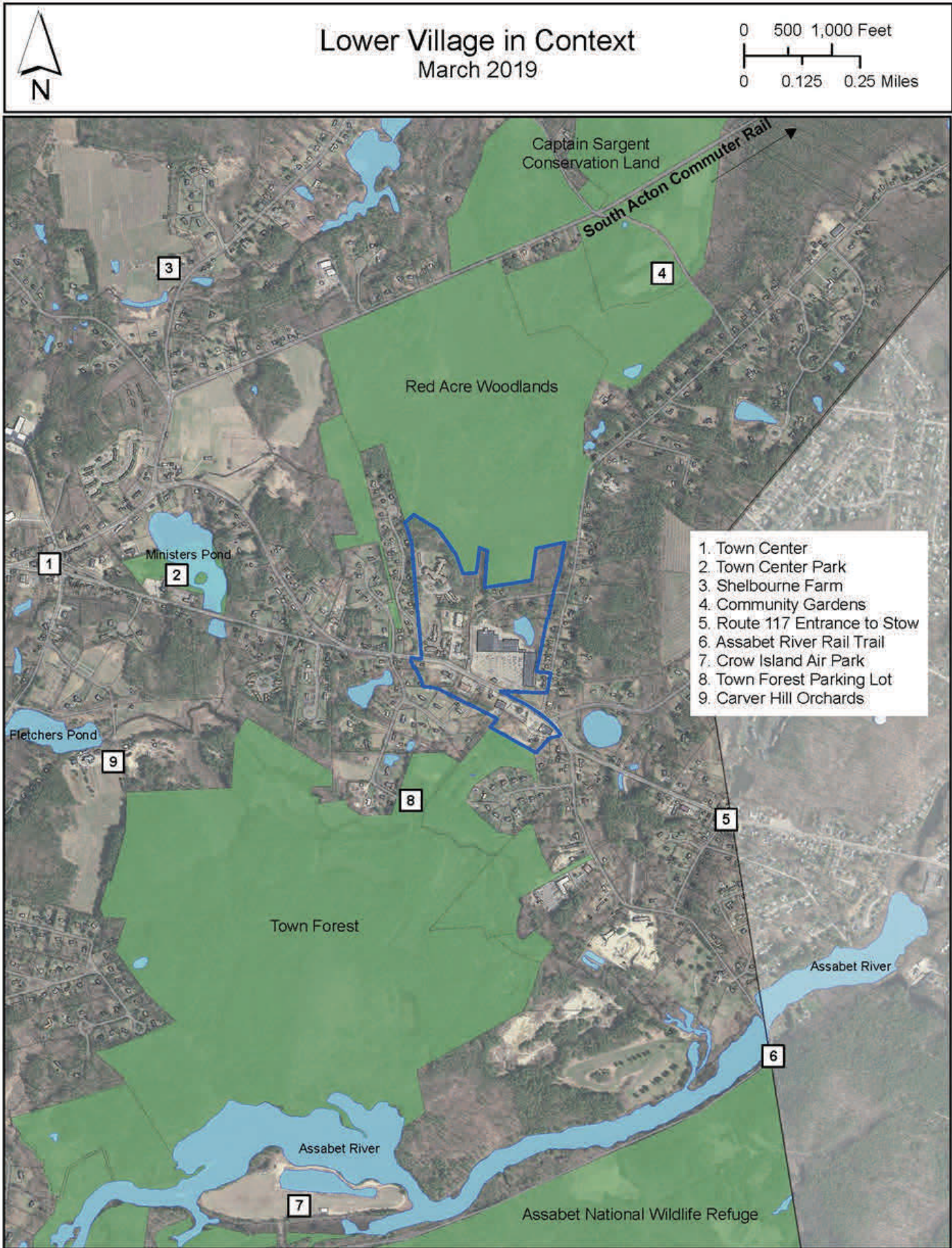


Fig. 6—Lower Village in Context



## 5. Architecture and Design Incompatible with Village Center District

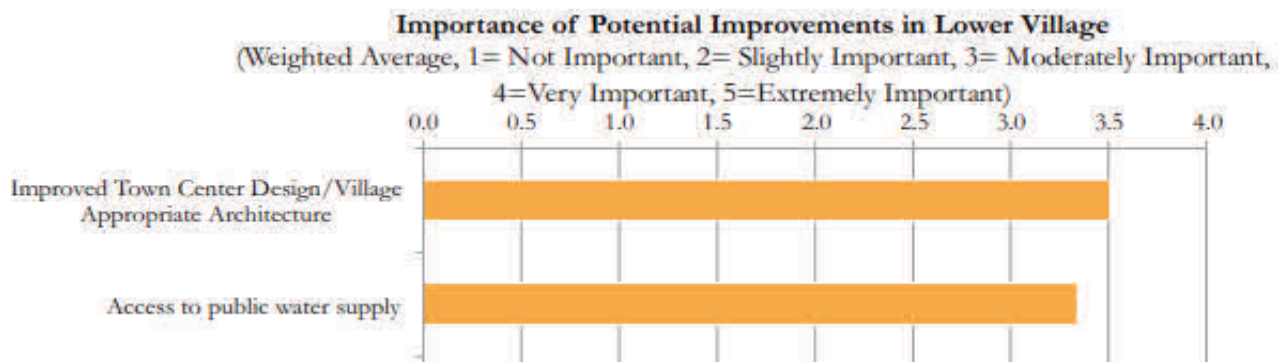
Stow’s 2010 Master Plan recommends the promotion of village style development, as well as the enhancement of the Lower Village Business District’s unique identity. Despite these goals, the 2018 Business District Assessment and Market Analysis describes the Business District as vehicle oriented, lacking unifying elements as a village, and consisting of architecture that is simple and utilitarian. Data from the S.T.O.W. Analysis finds a village dominated by large expanses of paved parking, which separates buildings from the streetscape, as well as vehicle scaled architectural and site design concepts that are disincentives to pedestrian use.

In 2014, the Planning Department developed a *Visual Preference Survey* to gauge the community’s feelings around preferred types of architecture and site design. The survey’s 123 respondents revealed a strong inclination to architecture and site design that is walkable, inviting and developed in the common New England vernacular style; including gabled roofs, ample windows and variations in design elements that more closely resembles Stow’s rural residential character. Of the 303 respondents that participated in the 2018 Business District Assessment survey, “Improved Town Center Design/Village Architecture” ranked the highest among potential improvements in the Business District.

Fig. 7—High Scoring Images from Stow Visual Preference Survey



Fig. 8—2018 Resident Survey Responses Regarding Potential Improvements in Lower Village | Source: Lower Village Business District Assessment and Market Analysis



## Primary Opportunities

The Town's body of public input and research suggests that the Lower Village Business District benefits from built-in locational advantages, and together with targeted regulatory reforms and investments, it can be positioned for future growth opportunities. Lower Village is the only village district along Route 117 between I-95 and I-495, serving as a gateway to Stow for visitors and residents alike. Over 16,000 vehicles per day travel through the village, commuting to work, running errands, or on their way to Stow's seasonal attractions.

### 1. Lower Village Business District is a Gateway to Stow

Lower Village's prominent location along Route 117 provides opportunity to strengthen ties to Stow's recreational resources. Whether it is the increasing recreational cycling, proximity to the Assabet River Rail Trail via White Pond Road, hiking opportunities on conservation land or visits to Stow's golf courses and farms, the Lower Village Business District is well situated to capture the value of Stow's visitors. Similar to many communities in Massachusetts, the Business District can use bike friendly infrastructure as an economic development tool. Wayfinding, creative signage programs, kiosks and the activation of the district's public spaces can help position the Lower Village Business District as a jumping off point or stopover to other destinations in Stow and build off the focus on recreation and cycling that is taking place in the region.

### 2. Proximity to Residential Units

The Lower Village Business District contains several residential properties that will require careful attention in any redevelopment scenarios. Historic homes on the east and west end of the corridor are in close proximity to sites with redevelopment potential, and it will be important for any development to be scaled appropriately given this context. Given that Lower Village is currently not an integrated mixed use district, the contrast between businesses and residences is stark. Plans for future growth will need to balance concerns and learn from successful mixed use site plans, such as the Faxon Farm development, which utilized commercial and residential development in a cohesive site plan.

### 3. Lower Village's Central Location Provides Opportunity for Redevelopment

Over the past ten years, residents have repeatedly indicated their preference for a safe, attractive and walkable business district; one that contains food and entertainment options, as well as neighborhood retail and service establishments. The trade area delineated in the Business District Assessment and Market Analysis points to the scarcity of options residents are looking for, with most retail and service hubs existing in a five mile ring around Lower Village, from West Concord, to downtown Hudson, Maynard, and "The Point" development in Littleton. Within Lower Village's primary trade area, there is approximately \$50 million dollars of unmet demand for full service restaurants annually.<sup>3</sup>

The focus on restaurant and entertainment options provides Stow an opportunity to not only capture value, but provide a catalyst for place-making in Lower Village. The Business District and Market Analysis finds that "food is the new anchor" and that "restaurants can help to reinforce the identity of a commercial center."<sup>4</sup> The trade area for Lower Village, combined with resident sentiment and preferences, suggests a strong opportunity for redevelopment that can catalyze a more vibrant business district.

### 4. Underdeveloped Parcels Offer Redevelopment Opportunities

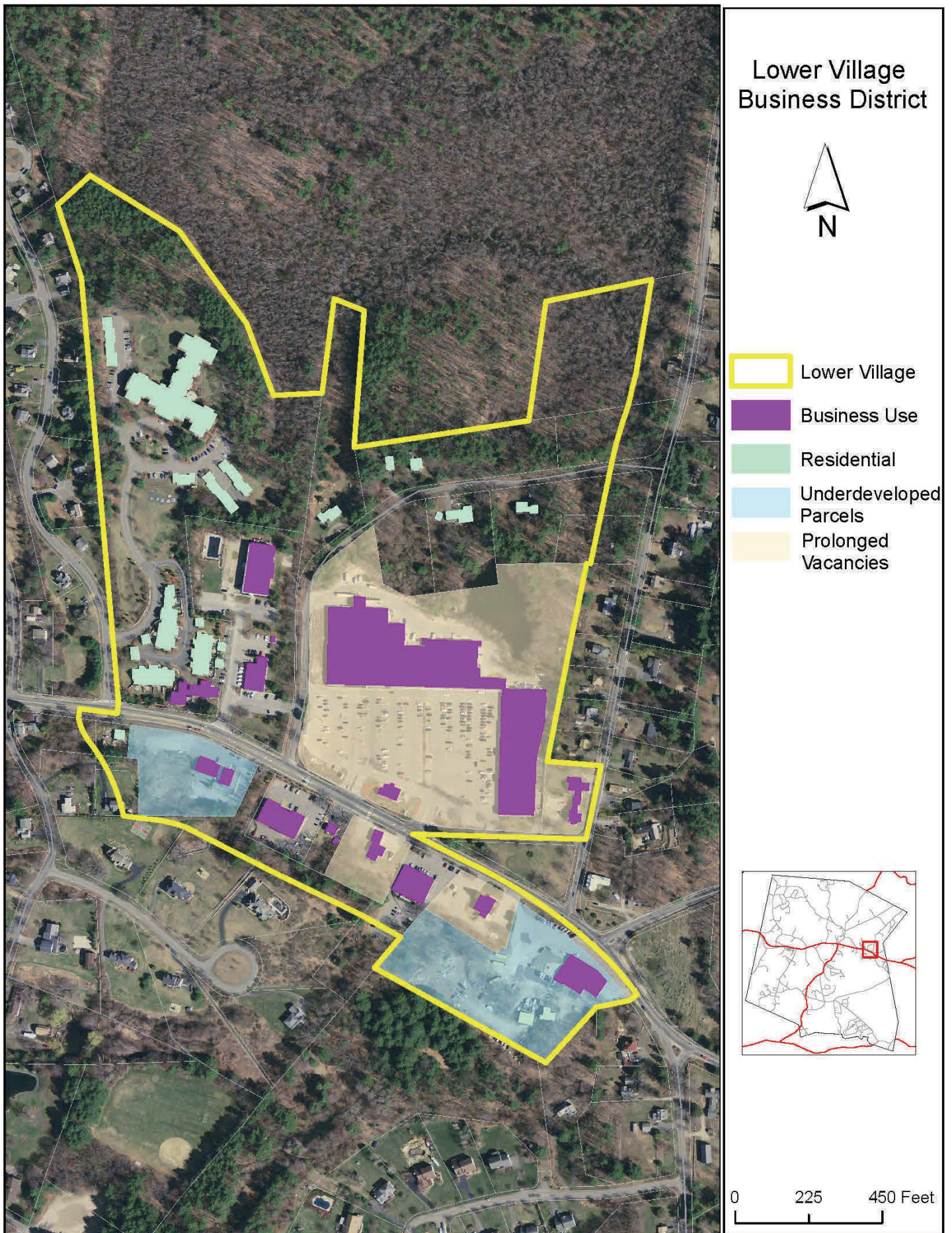
Several parcels in the Lower Village Business District containing vacancies and uses not typical of a business district have the opportunity to be redeveloped into creative site plans, provided zoning updates are adopted. Key locations, including 92 Great Road, the current location of Infinite Auto, and 108 Great Road, the former location of the Beef N' Ale restaurant, are central to Lower Village and contiguous to one another. Together the two properties offer nearly five (5) acres of land in a relatively compact district. The former Mobil station located at 171 Great Road, another long term vacancy, has been undergoing a long term environmental cleanup with encouraging progress. Targeted zoning reforms and infrastructure investments could unlock the potential of underdeveloped properties in Lower Village.

<sup>3</sup> Fine Point Associates, *Lower Village Business District and Market Analysis*, Table 6, p.43. 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Fine Point Associates, *Lower Village Business District and Market Analysis*, p.6. 2018.



Fig. 9—Development Status of Lower Village Properties





## Analysis of Current Zoning Regulations

The primary charge of the Lower Village Revitalization Subcommittee is to provide recommendations for improving the Town’s Zoning Bylaw to enable preferred development types to take shape. Additionally, the Subcommittee has surveyed the Town’s policies regarding regulatory tools for redevelopment. Some key questions to be posed include:

- *Are regulations in place that can address identified challenges and take advantage of the key opportunities in the Lower Village Business District?*
- *How can the vision of a traditional New England village be demonstrated in the Lower Village Business District?*

### Zoning Bylaw Structure

The Stow Zoning Bylaw is structured in such a way that standards and regulations that often effect one another are found scattered in various parts of the document. For many projects, the structure does not present a problem. However, with regard to Business District, it means there is no specific section that can define how the district is expected to look and function. There is no guiding purpose or vision that communicates the Town’s desires and expectations to the applicant. The below table illustrates the separation of relevant standards for the Business District:

Fig. 10—Zoning Bylaw Standards by Section

Bylaw Section	Topic of Regulation
Section 3.3	Business District Uses
Section 3.8	General Use Regulations Pertaining to All Districts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Includes Lighting</li> </ul>
Sections 4.1- 4.5	Dimensional Requirements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Includes standards for height, area, setbacks from the road, etc.</li> </ul>
Section 6.3	Signs
Section 7	Parking
Section 9	Special Permits and Site Plan Approval Standards

<sup>5</sup>Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, *Smart Growth/Smart Energy Toolkit*, <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/smart-growth-smart-energy-toolkit-modules-traditional-neighborhood-development-tnd>.



## Allowed Uses

Allowed uses are a regular feature of nearly every Zoning Bylaw. Recently, zoning codes have trended toward a form based approach, in which the dimensions and architectural components of the built environment take on more importance than the specific uses allowed. This is particularly relevant in Stow, where public input has placed a strong emphasis on design and architecture.

Stow's business district allows a variety of typical business district uses, but fails to address how those different uses can coexist within a traditional village styled neighborhood. For instance:

- Outdoor dining is prohibited;
- Restaurants serving food in disposable containers are prohibited (likely intended to limit fast food restaurants but could unintentionally prohibit uses that could otherwise enliven the district);
- There are no standards for mixed-use establishments and no ability to add a housing component;
- Modern uses, which merge entertainment, manufacturing, light industry and retail, such as bike share facilities, breweries, artisan shops, etc., are not allowed in the bylaw and have no specific performance standards.

## General Use Requirements (Lighting and Erosion Control)

Stow's general use requirements are meant to establish Town-wide standards. While this has largely worked as an approach to dealing with universal issues, such as lighting, noise, odors and erosion control, the Zoning Bylaw does not address these topics within the specific context of Lower Village.

### *Lighting*

The Business District and Market Analysis regards public lighting as a way to provide unifying elements to a business district and activate nightlife. The Zoning Bylaw does not reference applicable or acceptable design options in relation to potential lighting in Lower Village. The bylaw does not offer exceptions or special standards for security lighting, or other types of fixtures that may be necessary for some allowed uses.

### *Erosion Control / Drainage*

Managing onsite stormwater is a critical function for a town that relies on private well water and aquifer recharge. However, the Zoning Bylaw does not integrate green infrastructure or stormwater management practices into the requirements of open space, parking or site planning, potentially missing creative options for infrastructure. For instance, there are no standards or incentives to utilizing rain gardens, dispersed recharge areas or other stormwater management best practices that can have the dual effect of managing stormwater and creating attractive public spaces.

## Parking Regulations

Stow's Parking Regulations in Section 7 of the Zoning Bylaw offers key guidance, including dimensions for typical parking spaces and standards for off-street loading areas and access drives. When considering a district that represents a more traditional village setting, formulaic requirements without the ability for discretion by the Special Permit Granting Authority can create inflexible requirements that provide a more uniform outcome. For instance:

- Shared parking agreements are referenced in Section 7.3.2 – Mixed Use Facilities, but lack the detail and legal framework to provide an effective long-term arrangement;
- The Shopping Center parking space requirements have provided for an overabundance of parking in the Stow Shopping Center as the bylaw lists minimums rather than parking maximums;
- 30 ft. setback requirements for parking areas may be warranted in some instances, however, there is no provision for altering the requirement, where a creative design can provide further public benefit;
- Perimeter landscaping requirements are meant to soften the view of parking areas, but can also create islands of parking that limit site planning options.
- Interior landscaping requirements are well intentioned, but fall short of incentivizing useable open space or the creation of civic areas for people to gather;
- Stow's bylaw does not include design recommendations for utilizing interior open space for decentralized stormwater management, a key component of development in Stow.

## Signs

Similar to other bylaw sections on Parking and Dimensional Regulations, the Business District's sign regulations do not focus on the design of signage, or provide incentives to utilize textures or arrangements to invite further interest. In the absence of design guidance the bylaw requires signage to fit into predetermined size limitations.

The sign sizing limitations, while attempting to limit large signs out of scale with a village character, provide for little flexibility. Where multiple businesses share the same building, the square footage limitations may not allow for adequate visibility of businesses within certain developments. In the event multiple buildings were part of a more creative site plan, limitations on the number of signs as well as their relation to Great Road could complicate efforts.

The Zoning Bylaw does attempt to limit the impact of vehicle oriented signage. Prohibitions include signs that are flashy, internally lit, or moving and/or oscillating. These types of signs are generally meant to gain the driver's attention and can often be seen on commercial strips dominated by automobiles.

Fig. 11—High scoring images of signs from Visual Preference Survey

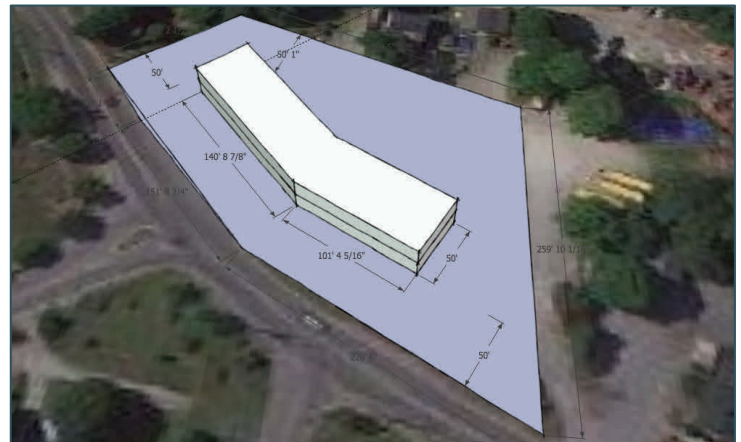


## Dimensional Regulations

Standards of dimensional requirements in Stow’s Zoning Bylaw provide little direction for creative and flexible site planning in the Lower Village Business District. Generally, the standards are formulaic - providing specific setbacks, frontage requirements, and floor-area-ratios that direct the placement and size of buildings on a specific lot, but offer few opportunities for conveying preference for designs that make a business district attractive, interesting and inviting. This mismatch becomes even more apparent when combining the requirements in the Dimensional Regulations of Section 4 with the Parking Regulations in Section 7.

Utilizing road setbacks, street frontage requirements, minimum lot sizes and floor area ratios can create an invisible box in which a building can be constructed, limiting the placement and design of parking and loading areas. This type of bylaw standard limits the potential for development to adhere to a more cohesive site plan, where elements are able to better relate to one another. Buildings on lots are essentially incentivized to be islands, often isolated on development “pads.” This type of development pattern is geared toward the automobile, and reduces the ability to create interesting, and inviting pedestrian environments.

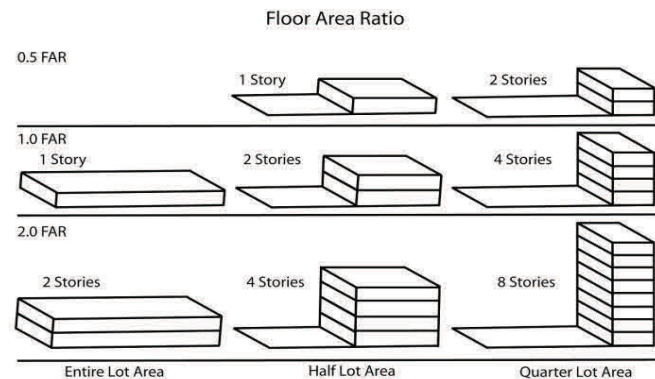
*Fig. 12—Rendering of Floor Area Ratio (FAR) Requirements in Lower Village. When FAR requirements are mixed with setback requirements, there can be less opportunity for creative site plans.*



Stow’s Business District includes a maximum Floor Area Ratio of **0.3** (i.e. A one story building footprint may occupy nearly 1/3 of the lot area). This concept limits overall density, but provides little guidance on preferred design principles when not used in conjunction with more specific design standards.

### What is Floor Area Ratio?

Floor Area Ratio (FAR) is the ratio between the size of a building and the lot on which it is built. Zoning Bylaws often use such ratios to govern the intensity of use on a site. Where a structure contains more than one floor, it’s footprint on the lot is reduced to keep the maximum allowed FAR consistent. The diagram in fig. XX illustrates the concept.



## Recommendations

Based upon the review of the Zoning Bylaw, research into past planning efforts and the guiding concepts of traditional New England Village design, the Lower Village Revitalization Committee has identified four (4) core goals that guide recommendations for Lower Village Improvements.

1. **Advance the Public Planning Process**
2. **Identify Approaches for Public Water Infrastructure in the Lower Village Business District**
3. **Position Lower Village as a Gateway to Stow’s Community Assets**
4. **Update Zoning to Align with Community Vision**

During the planning process, the LVRC recognized that the absence of a public water supply in the Business District affects all aspects of planning for the district. Therefore, the LVRC has provided recommendations that assume public water supply infrastructure will be available at some point in the future. After reviewing resident input provided over a series of years, the LVRC found that the overwhelming majority of resident comments regard future development scenarios that would be only be possible through the availability of a public water supply.

### Goal #1 – Continue to Advance the Public Planning Process

Many years of planning in Lower Village underscores the importance of sustaining planning momentum. For the purpose of creating a focused, yet evolving planning process, the LVRC provides the below considerations and recommendations for the Planning Board.

Goal #1	Continue to Advance the Public Planning Process		
<b>Continue to provide opportunities for further input and research into Lower Village planning matters in line with the 2010 Master Plan Goals.</b>	<b>Action Steps</b>	<b>Update Charge of the Lower Village Revitalization Subcommittee</b> The LVRC has the ability to complement the Planning Board’s work-plan by collaborating with Planning staff on implementation of several identified efforts that go beyond zoning. Research and planning regarding public water supply partnerships in Lower Village and development of a wayfinding and signage plan are two examples of priority projects that the LVRC could provide a lead role in advancing.	<b>ST</b>
		<b>Present Report Findings for Public Input</b> This report combines several years of public comment and feedback on a variety of issues regarding Lower Village. While the Planning Board is developing a scope of work for updating zoning in the District, a forum should be considered to discuss the findings of this report with Stow residents and make any necessary updates.	<b>ST</b>
		<b>Incorporate Sustainability Goals from the Master Plan</b> The Planning Board should consider balancing the sustainability goals of the 2010 Master Plan Update into all Lower Village planning efforts. The goals seek to advance several social, economic and environmental goals that the proposed vision for Lower Village encompasses.	<b>LT</b>



## Goal #2 – Identify Approaches for Public Water Infrastructure in Lower Village

The Lower Village Revitalization Subcommittee believes there are a variety of economic development issues outlined in this report that can unlock potential for the District that zoning amendments cannot achieve on their own. Chief among these efforts is a mechanism for providing public water to Lower Village businesses. Making public water available to Lower Village businesses does not necessarily mean the Town must become a water operator. Indeed, before any such solution is discussed, the Town must fully explore, with the Lower Village business owners, a fully private or public-private hybrid solution. This is a core finding of the LVRC, and one that guides the group’s infrastructure recommendations. The Subcommittee recognizes the variety of arrangements the Town could pursue in making public water available for businesses in Lower Village. Committee members also recognize that the first step in resolving the issue is for the Town, together with actively involved business owners, to fill in the knowledge gaps regarding the physical availability of water and the various costs associated with accessing it.

Goal #2		Identify Approaches for Public Water Infrastructure in the Lower Village Business District	
<b>Research Public Water Supply initiatives and identify tools to determine water supply feasibility in Stow</b>	<b>Action Steps</b>	<b>Create case Studies of Water Infrastructure Efforts in Communities Without Public Water Supplies</b> The LVRC has identified a number of communities in Massachusetts that do not have access to public water supplies for their commercial and business districts. Researching the various approaches these communities have taken can provide insight into what initiatives are the most relevant for Stow.	<b>ST</b>
		<b>Reinvigorate Engagement of Business and Property Owners</b> Previous efforts that led to the potential for using Town owned land for a privately operated public water supply in Lower Village were predicated on the existence of a public/private partnership. The Planning Board should reinvigorate the partnership with private property owners in the Business District by connecting the private sector with state and federal opportunities for financing and redevelopment, ensuring that property owners are actively involved with Town efforts.	<b>ST</b>
		<b>Conduct a Water System Feasibility Analysis</b> Develop a scope of work for a water system feasibility analysis. The feasibility analysis should include but not be limited to identification of potential water supply parcels; detailed cost analyses for permitting, constructing, and transporting water; long term maintenance costs; as well as options for managing wastewater onsite or through a limited sewer district.	<b>MT</b>
		<b>Identify Regulatory Tools for Further Study</b> A variety of funding mechanisms and partnership models exist for providing public water supply infrastructure. A survey of different regulatory and non-regulatory tools should be conducted to determine the best fit for Stow.	<b>MT</b>

### Goal #3 – Position Lower Village as a Gateway to Stow’s Community Assets

Lower Village’s location at the eastern gateway to Stow provides an opportunity to create linkages and connections to various recreational and natural resource assets that define Stow. This opportunity is in line with Stow’s various planning documents, which include the repeated theme of balancing community growth with the Town’s historic and rural character.

Goal #3		Position Lower Village as a Gateway to Stow’s Community Assets	
Connect Lower Village to nearby recreational and natural resource assets	Action Steps	<p><b>Improve Pedestrian and Bike Infrastructure on White Pond Road<sup>6</sup></b>                      White Pond Road provides direct access to the current terminus of the Assabet River Rail Trail, Track Road, and recreational opportunities in the Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge. Complete Streets improvements on White Pond Road can link pedestrians and cyclists to the newly constructed sidewalks and bike lanes in Lower Village, linking visitors to recreational opportunities and drawing additional activity to Lower Village.</p>	MT- LT
		<p><b>Develop a Wayfinding and Signage Plan to Strengthen Lower Village as a Gateway<sup>7</sup></b>                      Consider development of a plan that unifies the elements of landscaping, full cutoff lighting and directional signage to lessen Lower Village’s image as a pass through district and strengthen Stow’s image as a recreational destination. Wayfinding signage or kiosks installed in Lower Village and at the Assabet River Rail Trail link can help identify businesses in Lower Village and direct visitors to and from the Business District and other Town destinations.</p>	LT
		<p><b>Incentivize the Creation of Public Spaces and Gathering Spots<sup>8</sup></b>                      Activate Lower Village by incentivizing the use of Lower Common as a public gathering space. Require redevelopment plans that include the creation of civic spaces and useable open space, including bike racks, benches and design treatments that strengthen the relationship between Lower Village and Stow residents, and incentivize visitors to patronize local businesses.</p>	MT-LT
		<p><b>Build On Recent Streetscape Upgrades to Improve Landscaping and Aesthetics</b>                      Continue to work with abutting property owners on integrating streetscape elements from the Lower Village Committee with a cohesive plan for landscaping in the village. Determine whether planters could be maintained on the refuge islands .</p>	ST

<sup>6</sup> Recommendation is referenced in the Lower Village Business District Assessment and Market Analysis by Fine Point Associates, Inc.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

## Goal #4 – Update Zoning to Align with Community Vision

At the center of the LVRC’s zoning recommendations is the reconfiguring of Stow’s Zoning Bylaw to be design forward. This approach would emphasize inclusion of detailed design guidelines that would be incorporated into development approvals to ensure that the Town is developing a district fit for the vision of the future.

Goal #4 Objective A	Focus on Design		
Develop a permitting process that incentivizes creative site planning within defined standards	Action Steps	<p><b>Pursue Creation of Design Guidelines in Conjunction with Zoning to Ensure Flexibility and Smart Village Design</b>                      Compliance with Design Guidelines based upon feedback from the Visual Preference Survey and traditional New England Village design concepts can be linked to Special Permit approval for all new development in the Lower Village Business District. Adherence to design guidelines can communicate the core design principles to developers while still providing flexibility for achieving the guideline goals.</p>	<b>ST</b>
		<p><b>Consider Utilizing Planned Unit Development/Master Plan Zoning Approach in Conjunction with Design Guidelines</b>                      Reducing the formulaic zoning approach of the current bylaw can allow for flexible site designs that can better achieve the components of the Lower Village vision. The Planning Board should consider allowing a Lower Village Master Plan Special Permit or Planned Unit Development Special Permit to require conformance to design standards.</p>	<b>ST</b>
		<p><b>Create a Design Review Committee to Administer Guidelines</b>                      A Design Review Committee appointed by the Planning Board can review project applications for compliance with the design guidelines and provide the Planning Board with recommendations on Special Permit approval. Members with experience in construction, architecture, engineering and landscape design could provide valuable insight. Proposed regulations could consider the use of a peer review consulting architect or landscape designer to provide the Board with advice on design guideline compliance and technical analysis of larger or more complex projects.</p>	<b>ST</b>

The core charge of the Lower Village Revitalization Subcommittee is to provide the Planning Board with recommendations for updating zoning in Lower Village to reflect current planning goals. The Lower Village vision provided by the LVRC at the beginning of this report is a guiding set of principles by which the Committee assessed the existing bylaw and developed the following recommendations. These zoning recommendations are specifically tailored to guide the 2019 update of the bylaw by a consultant funded through the Massachusetts Community Compact Program award in 2018.

<b>Goal #4 Objective B</b>		<b>Direct Zoning Updates that are Reflective of Stow’s Rural Character</b>	
<b>Create a process for Zoning Bylaw review that is reflective of past efforts, current issues and future scenarios.</b>	<b>Action Steps</b>	<b>Focus Zoning Updates on the Lower Village Core</b> Past efforts to expand the Lower Village Business District as a mixed use district to parcels on Red Acre Road, east along Great Road and south to White Pond, were unpopular among Stow residents. Consider focusing zoning efforts on the core of Lower Village business opportunities, recognizing that many of the properties at the periphery comprise open space or are residential and often contain historic values that could be lost in commercial applications.	<b>ST</b>
		<b>Alter Underlying Zoning of Business District</b> An overlay district should be avoided to preclude the possibility that an applicant chooses to develop in accordance with a bylaw that will not provide for a traditional New England village feel. Changing the underlying zoning will allow the Planning Board to have the most certainty in an outcome aligned with resident preferences.	<b>ST</b>
		<b>Consider a Separate Effort to Rezone White Pond Road</b> White Pond Road’s Commercial District is not the focus of this report, but its proximity to the Business District and location as a link to major recreational assets suggests that future review of allowed uses could unlock further economic potential if and when Assabet River Rail Trail usage increases. Updates could include accessory retail uses.	<b>LT</b>
		<b>Explore Zoning Updates Under a No-Public-Water Scenario</b> The vision put forward by the LVRC is predicated on the availability of future public water supplies. However, the Planning Board should consider exploring how zoning could be updated if public water systems are not available. An exploration of expanding allowed uses will be particularly important as some uses will not be viable without certain infrastructure improvements.	<b>MT</b>



Goal #4 Objective C	Direct Zoning Consultant to Include Core Design Principles of Traditional New England Villages in Design Guidelines and/or Zoning Updates		
Create zoning regulations that allow for flexibility in site planning, while adhering to core design principles of Traditional New England Villages	Action Steps	<p><b>Include Mixed Use Provisions to Allow for Housing Component</b>            Limited housing development in Lower Village can further activate the district and provide for needed housing diversity. Housing should be focused on second floor spaces or integrated into a site plan to complement business uses. The Zoning Bylaw should incentivize a ratio of housing and business use that fits with the goals expressed in this plan. Specific zoning provisions can include limits on dwellings per acre and/or bedroom limits to guide implementation.</p>	ST
		<p><b>Develop Language for Shared Parking Agreements</b>            The Zoning Bylaw should be updated to allow shared parking agreements where applicable, including reductions in overall parking minimums. Standards should be included to require that such agreements are codified in a legal document.</p>	ST
		<p><b>Consider Parking Maximums</b>            The Planning Board should ask a future zoning consultant to explore parking maximums to ensure that parking is not overprovided. A review of parking limits and space counts at similar villages may be helpful. As an alternative, the Zoning Bylaw should provide for a waiver to parking requirements in the event certain criteria can be met.</p>	ST
		<p><b>Incentivize Inter-lot Connections</b>            Design Guidelines should include examples of inter-lot connections and allow for creative approaches to accessing multiple parcels or developments within the Business District.</p>	ST
		<p><b>Focus on Requiring Useable Open Space</b>            The requirements for open space in a development should be updated to guide applicants toward creating outdoor spaces that achieve low impact development techniques and/or provide for functional civic spaces. Benches, plazas, bike racks, patios and seating areas can activate spaces and create space for public interaction. This should be incentivized over creating landscaped spaces around parking areas for the goal of meeting a required minimum.</p>	ST
		<p><b>Require Integration of Low Impact Development Techniques</b>            On-site recharge of stormwater is a critical component of development in Stow. Consider guidelines that incentivize rain gardens, landscaped swales and native vegetation to reduce water demands and recharge stormwater in an attractive way that complements that overall aesthetic appeal of the development.</p>	ST
		<p><b>Integrate Signage into Design Guidelines and Zoning Bylaw Updates</b>            The Stow Visual Preference Survey provided insight into preferable sign design in Stow. Design Guidelines should provide examples of sign designs and materials. The Zoning Bylaw should consider allowing flexibility in the size and/or number of signs where preferred design and placement can be achieved. Conformance to recent Supreme Court guidance should be considered in any sign bylaw updates.</p>	ST
		<p><b>Consider Guidelines for Street lighting</b>            The Business District Assessment and Market Analysis indicates that lighting can help activate a district after dark and alert drivers they are entering a village district. Although the Zoning Bylaw contains standards for Public Streetlights, it is likely that future lighting will be a mix of public and private. Creating a complementing mix of lighting that follows specific design parameters can achieve a more cohesive environment in Lower Village while maintaining “dark sky” compliance.</p>	ST
		<p><b>Landscaping and Streetscape Standards</b>            The Planning Board should consider updating the original Lower Village Streetscape standards for inclusion in future design guidelines. Additional guidance on landscaping can help create a uniform appeal along the Route 117 corridor.</p>	ST

## Appendix 1: Planning Timeline

- 1996 Master Plan Completed**  
Master Plan first recommends mixed residential uses and encouragement of village scale business development.
- 2002 Lower Village Committee Formed**  
Charged with spearheading efforts to improve the safety and appearance of Lower Village
- 2004 Town is Awarded Grant to Identify Issues and Opportunities in Lower Village**  
The Cecil Group works with the Lower Village Committee to identify a number of streetscape, site planning and safety upgrades that can reduce traffic congestion and build identity for Lower Village.
- 2005 - 2009 Town Works with Design Consultants to Improve Traffic Safety**  
First modern traffic study is completed proposing solutions including round-a-bouts, which were later deemed infeasible by subsequent designers;
- 2005 Mixed Use Overlay District Drafted**  
Draft is not submitted to Town Meeting, largely due to expansion of the Lower Village district boundaries.
- 2006 Working Group Assesses Land for Potential Public Water Supply**
- 2010 Master Plan Update Published**  
Goals for Lower Village are updated to reflect safety improvement recommendations and village style zoning recommendations from previous studies and efforts.
- 2011 Lower Village Committee Final Report Published**  
Report recommends improvements in pedestrian and traffic safety, village center zoning efforts, and pursuing water infrastructure. Streetscape standards and permanent traffic islands are proposed to improve identity of the District and reduce traffic incidents.
- 2013 Planning Board Completes Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats Analysis**  
Study updates the documented existing conditions for incorporation into updated traffic concepts.
- 2014 MA Legislature Approves Bill to Allow Exploration of Public Water Supply at Heritage Lane Open Space Parcel in Lower Village**  
**Planning Board Hires Consultant to Modernize Traffic Concepts and Provide Plans for Construction**
- 2015 Planning Board Completes Visual Preference Survey**  
Visual Preference Survey comments identify resident preference for architecture in Lower Village, providing data for use in development of design guidelines.
- 2016 Planning Board Receives \$1,000,000 MassWorks Grant**  
Grant funds used to create drainage and Complete Streets upgrades to Lower Village
- 2017 Planning Board Secures Community Compact Funding for Rezoning Effort**  
\$10,000 is awarded to the Planning Board to hire a consultant to assist in providing updates to zoning in Lower Village.
- 2018 Planning Board Receives Grant for Business District Assessment and Market Analysis**  
Massachusetts Downtown Initiative awards \$15,000 grant for the completions of a Market Analysis to identify opportunities for growth and provide recommendations for action.
- Construction on the Lower Village Traffic Improvements Begins**  
**Planning Board Forms Lower Village Revitalization Subcommittee**  
Subcommittee charged with providing recommendations on upcoming re-zoning and planning efforts.

## Appendix 2: Conservation Commission Letter on Lower Village Water



### Town of Stow Conservation Commission

380 Great Road  
Stow, Massachusetts 01775  
(978) 897-8615  
FAX (978) 897-4534  
conservation@stow-ma.gov

TO: Jesse Steadman, Town Planner  
FROM: Kathy Sferra, Conservation Coordinator  
RE: Lower Village Water/Heritage Lane Site  
DATE: May 28, 2019

Your office asked that I summarize the history and next steps with regard to the use of a parcel of conservation land off Heritage Lane for water supply for Lower Village.

#### Background

The Conservation Commission voted to start the process of using a portion of the Heritage Lane Open Space parcel (acquired by the Commission in May 2008) in February of 2013. This process is known as the Article 97 Disposition process (Article 97 is a provision of the Mass Constitution) and it governs the use of municipal conservation land for other purposes. As part of its decision, the Commission found that the Town had engaged in an exhaustive search for other sources of water and come up empty-handed. Maps demonstrated that it was possible to locate a limited yield water supply on the parcel to serve a few of the businesses on the south side of Great Road, and fit the Zone 1 within the property boundaries. Town Meeting voted in May of 2013 to file a Home Rule petition with the Legislature to move this idea forward. As a follow up, in October 2013, Town Meeting voted to transfer a 0.74 acre parcel of town-owned land adjacent to the Police Station on Route 117, which includes a portion of Ministers Pond, to the Conservation Commission as compensatory land for the land that will be lost to conservation (technically) if the well is developed. The Home Rule bill was enacted by the Legislature in May of 2014 and is contingent on the provision of the compensatory land.

#### Next Steps with Conservation Commission

1. Back in 2013, when things appeared to be moving forward, the Commission voted to allow short-term exploration of the feasibility of water supply on the parcel. Given the amount of time that has passed, I would expect to bring this matter back to them for a confirmatory vote. We will need to review a plan for the test wells, including location of the wells, proposed access and site restoration. Some of the Commission members have changed in the intervening years, so they need to be brought up to date on this and may have additional thoughts on requirements. It may be that a wetlands permit would be needed, depending on the exact location.

2. Assuming that preliminary exploration determines that the parcel appears viable for water, the Commission will need to enter into a long-term agreement for the use of the parcel for water supply with the future waters supplier. It would be the Commission's goal to convey the smallest interest in the land that is permissible, and so (for example) a license or lease agreement is the preferred method of giving the water supplier site control. As part of the process of developing the agreement for site control, the Commission would expect to see more detail on the actual proposal -- location of the wells, access road, any fencing, etc. There is a trail near the well site and we will want to ensure that it is not obstructed, or if so that it can be satisfactorily relocated. We would also want to ensure that any access point is sufficiently gated so as to deter dumping or inappropriate use.

3. The Commission will need to review the pump test/safe yield information to ensure that there will be no adverse impacts on wetlands and the wells of the adjacent property owners (mostly on Heritage Lane). DEP will be looking at this issue as well.
4. The vote transferring the compensatory parcel of land adjacent to the police station needs to be recorded prior to the signing of a site control agreement (license or lease).
5. Finally, if any of the work will be within 100' of wetlands on the property (there are some), the Conservation Commission would need to issue a permit for this work under the Wetlands Protection Act and Town of Stow Wetlands Protection Bylaw. That would require the filing of a permit application and public hearing prior to issuance of a permit.