



Islington Center



Historic Colburn School on High St.

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TOWN CENTERS

BACKGROUND

The existing village centers on High Street and Washington Street are critical elements in the Town's small commercial areas' appearance, and overall planning approach. The centers are vitally important in conveying the image of the community. The Town has limited means for guiding the character and development of private property but is supporting the revitalization of the Town centers through investments in public facilities and infrastructure, adoption of innovative regulatory tools, and outreach for economic development.

Both corridors along Routes 109 and 1A have numerous, dispersed, and mostly small-scale commercial development and municipal facilities, with properties between and behind them containing almost entirely single-family homes. These roads are commuter routes, with significant traffic congestion everyday interfering with vehicle, bicycle, and pedestrian movement along and across these corridors. Also, the distance between the corridors, the Town's limited east-west road connections between them, and the lack of a sidewalk along the primary one, Gay Street, combine to create a distinct separation between these areas, with a similar separation from the Route 1 and University Station commercial areas.

Over the last decade small and specialty retailers and other local businesses have been greatly affected by a significant increase in online shopping and related trends. Thus, a shift towards entertainment and social gathering spaces such as food establishments and similar destinations is both desired by residents and needed to maintain the vitality of local commercial centers. Niche retailing, specialty stores, coffee shops, gathering spaces, restaurants and other destinations that provide opportunities to interact with fellow residents was emphasized in the survey and visioning session. Almost half (47%) of the survey respondents reported that Westwood's small-town character is among their favorite things about living in Westwood. The survey, visioning session, and open houses received strong support for additional dining options, and more variety of businesses, and improvements to the aesthetics in these local business villages.

At the visioning session the Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee asked residents to identify their favorite places, which included many areas in the Town centers such as the School Street Playground, Libraries, the Council on Aging, and tree-lined High Street. The centers contain a majority of Town facilities including the Town Hall, police station, two fire stations, two Town libraries,

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the Deerfield School, recreation areas such as Morrison Park, the multipurpose fields and track at the nearby high school, and the Town cemetery (see the Community Facilities and Services Element for a discussion of the challenges they present).

Zoning is the primary tool for shaping development. To encourage revitalization of the two Town centers, the Planning Board initiated several changes be made to the Zoning Bylaw over the last decade. Most significant was the Flexible Multiple Use Overlay District zoning covering the commercial properties of the two centers and primarily aimed at providing incentives for redevelopment. The overlays promote a mix of uses and establish dimensional controls to ensure cohesive and compact development at an appropriate "village center" scale.

The revised provisions reduce the minimum front yard setback to encourage buildings to be closer to the street and push parking to the back or sides of buildings. They also limit retail sales and service uses to be no larger than 10,000 sq. ft. (except grocery stores) to encourage the desired small-scale retail and exclude incompatible large-scale business uses.

In 2011, the Upper Story Residential Overlay District (USROD) zoning was adopted over a few parcels on High Street which lead to the redevelopment and restoration of the historic Colburn School with a first floor retail bank use and six residences on the second and third floors. The USROD is an overlay district over largely Town owned properties and initiated a collaborative process between the Town and private entities for the relocation and redevelopment of the historic building along with the construction of the new library in 2012.

This zoning has successfully attracted two developments in Islington Center by redeveloping previously underutilized business and institutional properties to attract new commercial space. The projects contain thirty new residences, providing the desired mix of housing options and consumers to support the local business establishments.

As Westwood and other communities have also done successfully, the Town uses a planning approach that employs site design to connect Westwood by establishing pedestrian oriented villages, fostering social gathering spaces, and guiding construction that reflects a small-town village atmosphere. This encourages independent businesses and centers that respect the surrounding established suburban character (see "Land Use Element"). The results of the survey show that residents desire village centers that serve as primary gathering spaces for people to mingle at community, civic, shopping, social, and sporting events, whether occurring at Morrison Park in Islington, or at independent businesses such as cafes, restaurants, or niche retail, all within a walkable pedestrian centered environment.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The following objectives guide the actions needed to realize the type and quality of the Town Centers that residents desire:

Objective 1: Continue to balance the needs of residents and businesses while creating more vibrant and active Town centers with a diverse range of offerings.

Objective 2: Create an improved image for Westwood through its Town centers.

Objective 3: Enhance the small-town community character with attractive buildings, streetscapes, greenery, and amenities conducive to multigenerational gatherings.

Objective 4: Continue to prioritize the pedestrian experience by fostering walkable and intimate village centers to serve all residents and visitors.

Objective 5: Encourage additional activities at University Station to simulate and function as an additional village center.

STRATEGIC APPROACH

The strategic Town Centers approach of this Plan is to carefully design actions in line with the stated desires of the community and its priority concerns as expressed by residents in the survey results and the visioning session. These actions and improvements will advance and enhance the high quality of the Town centers in their economic and fiscal vitality, community character, community cohesion, and appealing physical character. They will enable the centers to each continue to serve as a welcoming community destination for residents of all ages, and to flourish into the future.

IMPLEMENTING ACTIONS

The following actions are not formerly prioritized but are organized under topic categories related to the above overarching goals and objectives, followed by an informal priority order.

- TC1. Consider expanding the FMUOD or USROD on High Street to the existing local business properties currently in the LBA Local Business District but not included in the overlay districts, in order to provide options for upper-story housing and flexible reuse.
- TC2. Collaborate with the School Department and School Committee if school property becomes available at the Deerfield School. In addition to protect redevelopment benefiting the community, the newly available open space could serve as a town green and community gathering place.
- TC3. Encourage property and business owners to make storefront and sign enhancements, façade restorations, attractive window treatments and storefront displays, projecting signs, and other enhancements geared towards pedestrians and attracting customers. Seek funding opportunities to support these upgrades.
- TC4. Promote community cohesion by encouraging public, cultural, and civic events and activities in the Town Centers. Work with the Neponset River Regional Chamber to promote local businesses, advocate for business needs, and organize merchants and activities.
- TC5. Encourage outdoor seating and street features such as benches; trash/recycling receptacles, bike racks, artwork, drinking water fountains, shade features, decorative lighting, and small gathering spaces wherever possible to allow for casual gatherings. Review zoning and licensing procedures to ensure opportunities for sidewalk cafes.
- TC6. Increase pedestrian accessibility and safety by applying universal design standards for all sidewalks, walkways, and crossings, and by maintaining a minimum six-foot clear passage for all pedestrian access.
- TC7. Establish a street tree replacement program and tree fund for the care of street trees, and a recommended tree list of species best suited in village centers.

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- TC8. Consider supplementing the existing Council on Aging bus with other ride-share and shuttle programs to bring people to the Town centers.
- TC9. Optimize zoning in Town centers to support community desires for first floor active uses (coffee shops, cafes, sit-down restaurants, and entertainment) and to steer less active uses to upper stories or less visible locations.
- TC10. Consider a process for the annual review of infrastructure, street furniture, and amenities in each of the Town centers.
- TC11. Improve pedestrian and biking connections to and through the Town centers with enhanced sidewalks, crosswalks, and lighting to provide safe access from surrounding neighborhoods and other business districts. Create an accessible and safe walking path or sidewalk on Gay Street to connect the two Town centers.
- TC12. Formalize and strengthen the Planning Board’s design review process by promoting desirable design traits for architecture, building orientation, materials and site design to achieve attractive and compatible commercial buildings to enhance the desired pedestrian village experience.
- TC13. Encourage adjacent property owner collaboration to create more efficient site redevelopment, consistent with the neighborhood, by combining underutilized properties for redevelopment and shared parking.
- TC14. Encourage public art in business districts and Town gateway signage, partner with local artists, and include public art and public amenity requirements in Town center project reviews.
- TC15. Incorporate public gathering areas, pocket parks, and seasonal outdoor amenities.
- TC16. Incorporate greenery such as trees, landscape islands, window boxes, raised planters, and green walls into public ways and commercial properties.
- TC17. Partner with University Station to create public activities and events in that area.
- TC18. Revise zoning to promote curb cut consolidation, improve vehicular traffic flow, and encourage shared parking, charging stations, and solar panels over parking spaces.
- TC19. Enhance the Town’s public-private partnership with property owners and tenants in the Town centers. Create an up to date contact list and meet with them to learn about their challenges and together identify opportunities for improvements.
- TC20. Improve regulations and local permitting to streamline the review and licensing process for desired businesses.