



Emerging Vision and Goals for Acton's Future

March 2009

Today. Tomorrow. Together.

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Thanks to all the local businesses

that supported meetings by providing fun and sustenance to the visioning process through their donations of food and door prizes at the Town-wide Visioning workshops:

AAA Southern New England
Acton Bowladrome & Arcade
The Acton Jazz Café
Bagels Plus
Café Ziba
The Discovery Museums
Dunkin' Donuts
Ichabod's Café
Idylwilde Farms
Kitchen Outfitters
League of Women Voters
Little Market
Midas Auto Service Experts
Moonlightdjs.com
Powers Gallery
Roche Bros.
Savoury Lane
Starbucks Coffee Company
Sweet Bites Bakery and Café
Trader Joe's
Willow Books & Café

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In early 2008, nearly two thousand Acton residents participated in a six-month long process to develop a Vision and Goals for the Town's future. Residents provided their input through surveys, Visioning workshops, outreach meetings, and comment boards. Their voices inform the Vision, core values, and goals presented here. This Vision will help frame subsequent discussions regarding the Town's priorities and how resources should be allocated. A series of action steps will also be developed, recommending ways of achieving the Vision.

The Purpose and Process

The purpose of this document is to summarize the input of those residents and businesses of Acton who participated in a six-month conversation regarding the future of the Town: what they wished to preserve, what they wished to change, what they are concerned about, and what they hope to improve. The "Emerging Vision Statement" and "Core Values" which follow (page 4) are a summary of what participants cared about most and is the first phase of a Comprehensive Community Plan. The next phase will include an inventory of the Town's resources followed by an implementation plan comprised of steps

to reach the Vision. Many of the issues presented here will need to be verified, clarified and probed further in subsequent phases of the planning process. This document is presented as a starting point.

The Town of Acton hired the consulting firm of Planners Collaborative, Inc. and appointed a twenty-one (21) member Outreach Steering Committee to conduct an intensive and broad outreach program. The outreach consisted of providing multiple opportunities for residents and businesses to participate in contributing their thoughts and ideas regarding a desired future for Acton.

Why Vision?

Visioning is an opportunity for Town government to check in with its citizenry and ask, "What do Actonians have in common, even if they may differ on the solutions, what do they hold dear, care most about, wish to preserve for future generations, and wish to change or improve for tomorrow?" It affirms Acton's commitment to a set of core values to be used as a lens through which to view information and make future decisions. Having a vision will help

to frame subsequent discussions regarding how to achieve a shared desired future; it will help keep these discussions focused.

Participation venues included:

- 12 Outreach Committee meetings
- 7 Targeted outreach meetings
- 5 Presentations to varied organizations (ranging from the Chamber of Commerce to school teachers)
- 3 Town-wide Visioning sessions
- 3 Focus groups with Town boards, committees and commissions
- 2 Locations with a Comment Board (for public comment)
- 1 Focus group with Town Department Heads
- 1 Town-wide mail + web survey to all Acton residents (15.6% response rate)
- 1 Town-wide mail + web survey to all Acton businesses (5.3% response rate)
- 1 Phone survey of a random sample of 366 Acton residents
- 1 Meeting with the Student Council at the High School

These voices are documented in notes provided in Volume II of this report. This degree of public outreach and participation is unprecedented in Acton.



Citizen Feedback

Residents, business owners, and town staff were asked what they most appreciated about Acton and to identify the most important future challenges. Over 2,000 people responded in surveys, visioning workshops, outreach meetings and comment boards. The following is a summary of the main themes that emerged in the conversation with the community. These form the basis of the vision for the future.

What did we learn? Actonians expressed a sense of urgency about protecting what they felt was special and unique about the Town as well as about addressing its challenges. Some participants went so far as to say that Acton is at “a tipping point” and worry that it is overextended, the Town’s future threatened. Many called for more deliberate control of growth and development and for sustainable planning in the future. Interestingly, while many comments had to do with somewhat immediate and personal inter-

est (schools, concerns over high taxes, appreciation for open space), there was an undercurrent of civic responsibility, expressed in a concern for others (e.g. seniors, newcomers, health issues, sustainability for future generations).

There was consensus around the need to protect the town’s most important assets. These include the schools, open space, historic buildings/landscapes and ‘town character’. Further elaboration of how to do this and what, for example, ‘town character’ might mean in the twenty-first century will happen in Phase II of the master plan. Phase II will include an action plan that takes into account fiscal realities and looks at different options and ways to get there.

Participant Priorities

Actonians were asked in a variety of forums what they most appreciated about their town and to identify the most important future challenges. Participant priorities were:

Most important assets

- Schools
- Open Space, conservation land, natural features
- Historic Buildings / Landscapes
- Town Character (including rural and historic characteristics)

Also: sense of community, easy access/location, commuter rail, small town feel

Priority challenges

- Need to Control Growth & Development
- Need to Plan for Sustainability
- High Cost of Living (including taxes)
- Lack of Transportation Options (including walking/ biking)
- Traffic

Also: lack of adequate opportunities for casual social interaction, town government issues, erosion of town character

- 1 See Planning Process Section (Page 44) and/ or Volume II for more complete documentation of survey results and other outreach efforts.
- 2 Open-ended Questions (number indicates frequency of mentions and has relative value which pertains to each question individually.)

Written Survey

Acton's three most important assets	Percent of Respondents
Schools	75.0% (1114/1479)
Diversity of activities, including open & wooded land, homes & businesses	31.7% (469/1479)
Conservation land	28.9% (414/1479)
Acton's three most important challenges	Percent of Respondents
High cost of living	57.7% (854/1479)
Traffic	46.4% (686/1479)
Lack of continuous pedestrian/bike paths	44% (650/1479)
Which would you like to see more of in Acton?	Percent of Respondents
Open space	82.7% (1101/1479)
Historic homes protected & preserved	74% (1025/1479)
Affordable housing ³	40.8% (554/1479)
Sustainability	Percent of Respondents
Should Acton actively reduce greenhouse gases?	74.4% yes (1035/1479)
Are you willing to support taking action as long as it doesn't cost too much?	79.4% yes (1106/1479)

What makes Acton unique? ¹	What would you like to see less of in Acton? ²
Schools (201) Small Town (50) Rural (43) Location (35) Population (34) Access (33) History (33)	Development (172)* Traffic (154) Taxes (122)
	* also includes mentions of building & construction

A survey was mailed to all Acton residents and was available on the web. The response rate was 15.6%. When compared to the Town's census, the demographics of those who responded were fairly representative.

Stay involved.
Look for the invitation to participate in the next phase.



³ While Massachusetts has a statutory definition of affordable housing, respondents may have defined this term in different ways.

Emerging Vision Statement⁴

Imagine an Acton that has retained its uniqueness by **preserving its rural and historic characteristics** – with ample open fields and meadows, tree-lined roads with meandering sidewalks, ponds, farms, wooded areas, stone walls, and beautiful renovated historic buildings. Imagine an Acton where growth is managed and developed in keeping with the Town’s character.

Imagine an Acton that proactively strives for a **sustainable future**. Imagine an Acton where new residents continue to be attracted to: the **excellent schools**; as well as to a variety of **recreational opportunities**; welcoming, safe and **lively neighborhoods**; and **attractive, safe, and walkable shopping areas**. In addition to **sidewalks and bike paths**, a **Town shuttle** connects people and places, providing alternatives to automobile travel. Residents are also connected by way of **open communication and accessible information**, and there are numerous **opportunities for the community to gather**.

Imagine an Acton with several **vibrant village centers** – each distinct in its character; and walkable to enjoyable and unique window shopping with locally-owned shops; stores to run to for daily errands and a variety of places to eat; and where you can run into people you know. Envision our ethnic communities enlivening our villages with cultural celebrations, music and food from their countries of origin. The villages are “quaint, but not cute;” they are authentically Acton.

Imagine that **Kelley’s Corner has become a walkable town center**. It is vibrant with a wide range of shops and restaurants. Parking, sidewalks, benches, street lighting and signage are all oriented to the pedestrian. Redevelopment is guided by design guidelines and review so that all buildings are lovely and in keeping with Acton’s character.

Imagine an Acton that **welcomes all its residents** – of all ages, socio-economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds – by providing a variety of housing choices and support services, communicating in multiple languages, and inviting all to contribute to Acton’s civic and social life by creating opportunities for intergenerational experiences and cultural celebrations to be shared and enjoyed by all.

Core Values - Guiding Principles⁴

Town Character. We feel strongly about preserving and enhancing what makes Acton special and unique, including its rural and historic characteristics and its village centers.

Sustainability. We value taking responsibility for our actions and planning for the future. We are mindful of our actions today because we are considerate of future generations living tomorrow.

Connections. We recognize that a community that is connected is safer, stronger and provides more opportunity for meaningful interaction. We envision supporting these connections through physical means including sidewalks, bike paths, trails and public transportation to connect people and places, and to support independent and safe travel for all. We also envision open communication as a means to further connect residents (e.g., through the web, cable TV, community bulletin boards, etc.).

Community Gathering. We value the small town feeling and appreciate the sense of community that results from frequent opportunities for interaction. We support providing places for casual social interaction and facilities for organized events which bring members of the community together. We believe in offering opportunities for intergenerational experiences, and for sharing of inter-cultural celebration (e.g., community/ senior center, park, farmer’s market, cultural venues, community garden).

Inclusion and Diversity. We value a diverse population and wish to foster respect, promote interaction and actively support a wide variety of individuals to live, work and play in our community. This includes a range of ages, and socio-economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Town Assets. We value our Town assets and wish to preserve and enhance them. These include our open spaces, schools, historic sites, municipal properties, commercial areas, recreational areas, and our neighborhoods.

⁴ Vision and guiding principles are based on input gathered from residents through surveys and meetings. Notes from all outreach forums are available in Volume II: Acton Voices posted on the web at www.ActonOureach.com.

How to Read this Report

In the interest of readability as well as sustainability, the report is divided into two documents: this report (**Volume I**), the *Vision and Goals for Acton's Future*, developed as a result of listening to the concerns and desires of Acton's Townspeople; and (**Volume II**), the *Appendices: Acton Voices*, an archive of the results of the surveys and notes from discussions with the people and groups that participated. Volumes I and II are available on the website, www.ActonOutreach.com, as well as at Town Hall and the Memorial Library. Excerpts from *Acton Voices* are also located throughout the first volume.

Volume I is Organized as Follows:

Introduction - includes a discussion of purpose, methodology, Vision Statement, Core Values and a brief description of Acton's Character.

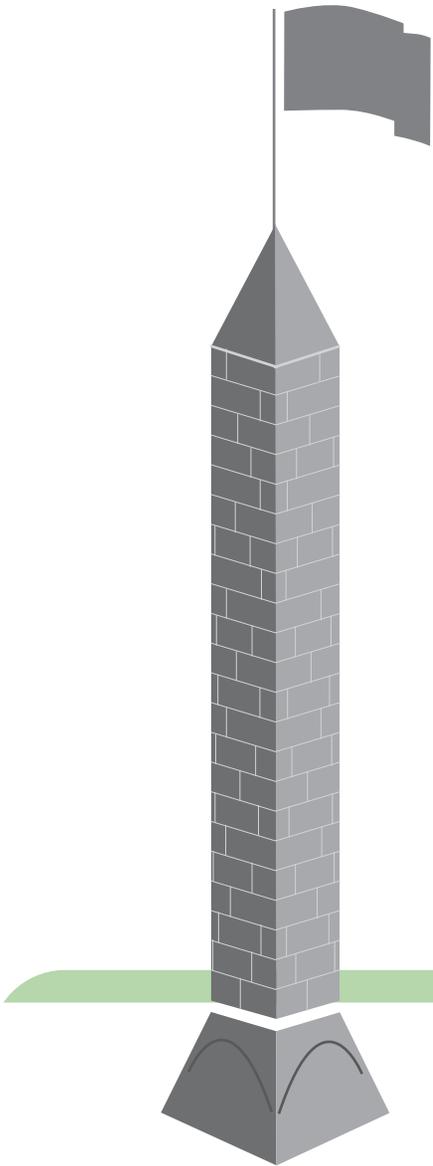
Core Values, Goals and Objectives - includes a goal statement, objectives and quotes from Acton residents for each Core Value.

The Planning Process - includes a brief overview of the process, a list of venues of participation, a description of who participated ("Who

We Heard From") and representative samples of participant input, including key survey results ("Highlights of What We Heard").

Next Steps - includes a brief overview of Phase II of the process, a partial List of Concepts to include in Phase II, the Preliminary Identification of Key Priorities for Acton, and the start of a list of Community Challenges for Phase II and Beyond.





INTRODUCTION

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Purpose

A community develops a Comprehensive Community Plan for a variety of reasons. First and foremost it is the obligation of a responsible government to periodically check in with its citizenry and ask what it is that concerns its residents. It is also a way to ensure that what is unique about a place is identified, preserved and celebrated, and that those issues that concern residents most are addressed. It is a way to determine what a community's priorities are so that resources – time, money and attention – are allocated in such a way that are aligned with the core values of its townspeople.

The purpose of this phase of the Comprehensive Community Plan was to invite Acton residents and businesses to participate in a community conversation regarding the Town's future. In order to accomplish this, an Outreach Steering Committee was formed whose role was to provide multiple opportunities in a variety of ways for Actonians to provide their input into defining the kind of future they wanted for their Town. This input was used to develop a Vision and to identify a set of core values which take into account the issues people feel are key. The

input was also used to shape goals and objectives. These in turn will form the foundation of a Comprehensive Community Plan that can be used to outline the steps to achieve this desired future.

Acton residents were asked questions such as:

- What do you like most about Acton and hope to preserve?
- What do you like least and would like to change?
- What do you feel is missing from our Town?
- How could Acton be made an even better place to live?

As a result of asking such questions, we have been able to gain a broader and deeper understanding of what is commonly believed, desired and valued by the Town's residents.

Residents were asked follow-up questions about specific issues as well as questions attempting to identify resident priorities during a second round of questions, in large Town-wide Visioning sessions, in smaller meetings, and in a phone survey.

We are trying to define **what makes Acton special**, how to preserve its uniqueness as well as



Developing a Comprehensive Community Plan is like choosing which road to take into the future.

During the process many people contributed interesting and important ideas. They are not all captured here, as this report represents a broad brush direction for the Town to take. The varied and creative thoughts offered by residents in numerous forums will be revisited during the subsequent phases of developing and implementing the Comprehensive Community Plan.



determine what it needs to make it an even better place to live, work and play.

We reached out to Acton's residents to ask them in a **variety of forums** what they would like their community to give them, and what would make them give their community more.

We have identified where there is relative **consensus**, and we attempt to describe this desired future; one which preserves what Acton's residents cherish and identifies what they feel are unmet needs.

This report represents the main product of this phase of the planning process: a Vision statement and a preliminary set of goal and objectives which embody the community's core values. An archive of the survey results and a collection of notes from the participants' discussions is available in Volume II *Appendices: Acton's Voices*, to be found on the web at www.ActonOutreach.com and at Town Hall and the Memorial Library.

Process

Articulating a shared vision is the first step in developing a Comprehensive Community Plan. The Vision describes the kind that community participants would like to strive towards. An inventory of existing resources will be conducted in the next phase of the planning process. This will be followed by a continuation of the community conversation regarding how to achieve the Vision by identifying the ways to preserve, protect, maintain, utilize and/or enhance these resources. First, the Town will invite residents to provide their input into deciding what the Town's priorities should be. This input will then inform the recommendations of the plan. These recommendations will include a number of action steps, such as regulatory changes, administrative changes or other ways of supporting and implementing the Vision. Many of these recommendations will require additional discussions with the community, including those requiring passage at Town Meeting (for example, any recommended changes in zoning would have to pass Town Meeting by a two-thirds majority). Therefore, there will be many opportunities to check back in with Acton residents. There needs to be a continuous conversation which will

update and refine this Vision and related core values, and the actions associated with implementing them. In summary, expressing a shared vision is the very first step in the planning process. It will continue to be refined by ongoing conversation with the community.

While this report is the final product of this phase of the planning process, it is in effect an interim report. It is a working document intended to provide guidance for the next phase. The Vision and the related goals will require verification. Additional goals will be formulated around Comprehensive Community Plan elements⁵ and refined as a result of further research, analysis and additional community conversations.

5 Comprehensive Community Plan elements include housing, economic development, open space and recreation, natural and historic resources, public facilities and services, transportation and circulation, land use, etc.

Previous Comprehensive Community Plan & Update

Acton's Comprehensive Community Plan was prepared in 1991 ("Town of Acton Master Plan") and completely updated in 1998. The 1998 Acton Master Plan Update ("1998 Plan") is a valuable resource that is still relevant to the issues Acton faces today. Other resources include the 2002 Open Space and Recreation Plan, currently being updated; the 2004 "To Live in Acton" affordable housing and economic development report; and the 2006 Heritage Landscape Inventory. The "big picture" themes of the 1998 Plan were to control residential growth, preserve Town character, encourage appropriate economic development to build the tax base, protect the environment and cultural resources, calm traffic and provide pedestrian and bicycle connections.

The 1998 Plan contained 12 goals, 65 objectives that articulated these goals more specifically, 126 strategies to achieve the objectives, and 145

actions. Seventy percent of the actions have been addressed in some manner: fully implemented, partially implemented, or acted upon but not implemented after further consideration by Town staff, Town boards/commissions, or Town Meeting. In several cases, implementation is ongoing (See table with details in Volume II: Appendices.). This record of accomplishment is a good one for a Comprehensive Community Plan and it should be viewed as very positive, particularly given the large number of recommended actions.

The main lessons that can be applied to the new Comprehensive Community Plan are that the big picture can sometimes be obscured by too many recommendations. Priorities that emerge from community outreach should guide the new plan to a manageable list of the most important actions for the Town to take. Rather than a "wish list," the new plan should identify the resources (both staff and monetary) needed to implement these high priority actions.

Why a New Comprehensive Community Plan Now?

Acton updated its comprehensive community plan in 1998. Why are we going through this process again? The answer is that times change, and plans need to be renewed from time to time if they are to be useful tools to guide and spur action. In 1998, we were in a housing boom. Gasoline cost less than \$1.50 a gallon. Climate change was a controversy, not a reality to many people.

The 1998 plan still has value to offer (as does the Open Space and Recreation Plan and the "To Live in Acton" Report). But demographic changes, new residents, changes in technology, and climate change are a few reasons that the Selectmen and Planning Board decided that a new Vision is needed. The Town is now nearing the conclusion of one of the most extensive efforts undertaken by any Town to reach out to both residents and businesses to hear what they have to say. The Vision reflects the input of public workshops, meetings, and surveys.



Contents of a Comprehensive Community Plan

According to Massachusetts General Law (MGL) Chapter 41 Section 81D, a community must include the following “elements” in its comprehensive community plan:

- Vision and Goals
- Land Use
- Housing
- Economic Development
- Natural, Cultural and Historic Resources
- Open Space and Recreation
- Public Facilities and Services
- Transportation and Circulation
- Implementation

Acton has decided to add Governance and Sustainability to this list.

For each category, the plan must include a goal, an inventory, policies, and proposed actions.

This document represents the first of these: the Vision and related Goals that have been developed as a response to this Vision.

What is a Comprehensive Community Plan?

A Comprehensive Community Plan is a document that defines a Vision for a desired future, documents a community’s resources, anticipates future trends, and identifies ways to improve the community by defining the direction and steps to take towards the desired future as articulated in the Vision. The Comprehensive Community Plan is a process for developing and achieving a community’s goals and objectives, a process of community building and a guide for decision making and managing growth.

Two of the most direct ways the Town can affect its physical development is through regulation (e.g., zoning) and the investment of public money (e.g., the appropriation of funds to improve a facility such as Town Hall or the construction of sidewalks). The Town can also influence its physical and social “being” by constructing policies which direct staff, developers, businesses and residents towards a shared Vision. The Town can do many things to “develop” a downtown or a “sense of place” that may or may not include building additional infrastructure. The Comprehensive Community Plan will assist in providing a rational strategy for the Town to achieve the Vision and goals and objectives set forth in this report.

What would Acton look like if every house and business allowed to be constructed under existing zoning and other existing regulations were built? A comprehensive plan will

guide that growth and development in the locations that the Town would like to see such development as well as deciding intentionally what kind of development, at which locations, and with what look (i.e., what is in keeping with the character of Acton). It is also an opportunity to identify priority sites to preserve as non-developable land.

What is missing from Acton currently? This is an opportunity to decide what kind of community the Town wants to be (e.g., in terms of the services it provides to the population, what it would like to support, and to protect against inappropriate development, degradation of the natural environment, fragmentation of neighborhoods, traffic congestion, and overburdened municipal infrastructure.) It is an opportunity for the community to articulate its priorities and then proactively move forward to achieve them.

To be effective, Town government must have an understanding of what its residents are concerned about and are willing to support (in terms of changes in policy, regulation, and/or appropriation of funds). Visioning helps a community define goals for protecting its character and planning helps to anticipate and prioritize needs and to describe the means and mechanisms for achieving the community’s goals. An implementation strategy is most effective when the community understands it, has contributed to developing it, and is willing to support it through the implementation stage.

Methodology

To develop a common Vision and identify core values that are shared by a majority of the community, we made a concerted effort to involve as many residents as possible, soliciting their input in a variety of ways and on several occasions. We provided multiple opportunities for residents to contribute their ideas including a mail survey that was sent to every Acton household, a phone survey that was conducted of a random sample of Acton households, and several meetings held throughout the six-month process. The purpose of these forums was to gather resident concerns and desires. Events, as well as the process itself, were widely publicized. Nearly two thousand Acton residents participated; they represented a wide range of demographics and a variety of points of view.

A survey, separate from that distributed to residents, was mailed to all businesses in Acton and resulted in a 5.3% return rate. The Outreach Committee also contacted Acton's business community by meeting with the Chamber of Commerce, conducting a mini Visioning session with members of the Rotary Club, and inviting businesses to participate in Town-wide Visioning workshops.

Acton Comprehensive Community Plan



* Public Input: meetings, surveys, opportunity to comment, etc.

How did we determine the community's core values? Participants were asked directly to identify what they most appreciate about Acton and what they would like to improve. They were also asked about core values indirectly, for example during facilitated group discussions designed to elicit what people care about. The Vision and list of core values are based on an analysis and interpretation of these responses and reflect areas where there was relative consensus.

Of all the forums we provided, the **mail survey** engaged the largest number of participants. Generally speaking, resident respondents were fairly representative of the Town's population when compared to U.S. Census demographics. Mail survey responses were compiled and common themes were extracted, and further discussion was focused on these. Follow-up questions were developed and asked of residents in a phone survey, as well as in a Town-wide Visioning session. These responses were also compiled and interpreted.

Residents selected to be surveyed on the telephone were a random sample, almost one-third

(29.3%) of whom had not heard about the Visioning process and approximately two-thirds (64.2%) of whom had not yet participated in the process. While a larger number of people participated in the mail survey, those who participated in the **phone survey** were the only true random sample of the population,⁶ therefore, they are the best representation of the range of viewpoints in the town.

Responses to the **business survey** were compiled and interpreted. They were also compared to resident responses in order to identify areas of agreement and divergence (See section entitled "What We Heard" on page 53).

Responses to the open-ended questions in both the mail and the phone surveys were analyzed to determine the number of mentions there were per theme (e.g., to the "What Makes Acton Unique?" question, there were 201 mentions of "schools," 50 mentions of "small town," 43 mentions of "rural," etc.). Also, the entire responses to these questions were read in order to obtain a deeper understanding of what people thought and felt (e.g., one particular entry was categorized as "sidewalks", but it actually reads:

"sidewalks in residential neighborhoods, walkable neighborhoods (retail), diverse restaurants, ...) so this adds more texture to the entry "sidewalks."

In addition to the surveys, three Town-wide **Visioning sessions**, seven targeted **outreach meetings**, and a number of **focus groups** were held. Input gathered at meetings has additional value. Often a participant benefits from discussion with others present at the meeting which can result in a more thoughtful response than that of someone answering a survey alone at their desk. Also, meetings provide an opportunity to listen more carefully to nuance, to follow up with additional clarification questions, and to hear the emphasis with which people present their thoughts. For example, while meeting notes may summarize a discussion in a few words, participants may have expressed one particular thought with more emphasis than another. Therefore, when attempting to infer what people care about, both the amount of emphasis and the frequency of response are considered.

⁶ It is often the case that a certain self-selection occurs when responding to a mail survey and that those who respond are more likely to be interested and involved in the town and its governance.

Determining consensus is both a science and an art. Deriving a Vision statement from a community conversation is an effort to “take the temperature” of a community. It is based on immersion in the community discussion as well as on data analysis. By definition, the process is both quantitative and qualitative in nature.⁷ All of the above input⁸ was consolidated, carefully reviewed for common themes, and interpreted for the purpose of extracting core values. The core values in turn helped to form the Emerging Vision Statement and to identify goals.

For each **core value** identified, a guiding principle was developed. For example, for the core value of “community gathering,” the principle of providing facilities and events which bring members of the community together is expressed. Additionally, for each of the values, a set of goals and objectives were also developed to begin the search for the directions in which the Town would like to go to support these core values. For example, for the core value of “sustainability,” the following goal was developed: “Increase awareness regarding the need to plan for sustainability.” Two objectives address this

goal: “Define and discuss sustainability” and “Develop a sustainability plan.”

The **goals and objectives** incorporate more detailed ideas expressed by residents and business owners. While in most cases the goals reflect what a large number of people have expressed, in some cases the goals encompass thoughts that were explicitly stated only by a few participants, but seem consistent with other, more widely discussed objectives. For example, many residents expressed support for the core value of “inclusion and diversity.” Most cited the Town’s socio-economic and cultural diversity as an asset, a feature of the Town they would like to support, and stated their desire that the Town continue to be welcoming and supportive to all. They also talked of a desire to be supportive to a range of ages (citing seniors as those being most in need of support). Very few people (in fact only three) mentioned the objective of being inclusive and supportive of the disability community. However, given the expressed goal of wanting to be a Town welcoming to all, it would seem consistent to extend the goal to include providing access to persons of all ability levels.

Additionally, the Town is responsible for meeting codes and regulations (e.g., Americans with Disabilities Act) and the Vision and goals need to be responsive to these. Providing physical access to all is listed as an objective, but it was not specifically named by the majority of participants. Listing it is based on interpreting and extending the core value of “inclusion and diversity.” Residents will have an opportunity to respond to the Vision and goals and objectives at subsequent phases of the planning process and thus to add or adjust to these interpretations.

As a way of capturing what participants said, **representative quotes** are listed in each section. These are entitled “Acton Voices,” and are taken from the mail survey, phone survey, business survey, visioning workshops, outreach meetings and/or other parts of the community

7 See “What We Heard: Highlights” (page 53) for more detail regarding responses located in the Planning Process section of this report.

8 Notes from all the forums are available in Volume II: *Appendices, Actons Voices*. See www.ActonOutreach.com or a copy at Town Hall.

conversation. When the responses listed are from a particular forum (e.g., the business survey), this is noted. In most cases, quotes have been compiled from a variety of forums and, therefore, a specific source is not given.

In some instances, one or more participants offered very specific suggestions; these are captured in “**idea boxes**” where relevant.

This is the beginning of the Comprehensive Community Plan process and, therefore, this report should be seen as a working document. The Town will conduct additional outreach to verify that the residents of Acton feel that the Vision and core values express their views and are indeed commonly shared.

Next Steps

During Phase II of the Comprehensive Community Plan, we will conduct an inventory of the Town’s existing resources and develop an implementation plan comprised of recommended actions to take towards achieving the desired future as articulated by the vision. The first step will be to verify the vision and guiding principles as summarized here.

Vision Statement

Crafting a Vision statement is a way of understanding and describing the desired future as envisioned by a group of people. This Vision is a result of the input of those who participated in a six-month long community conversation. It represents a summary of the input of residents gathered in meetings and solicited through other means, including a Town-wide survey. The following represent the key values to include in the Vision statement as identified by the participants. An action plan will be developed at a later part in the process; it will be based on this Vision. The plan will outline steps necessary to reach the shared Vision.

Why Vision?

Visioning is a way of seeking consensus on a broad-brush descriptive image of what a community values and how it sees its future. Visioning also provides an opportunity to:

- Explore “best practice” concepts and policies
- Consider making new choices, validate and confirm existing choices
- Consider the consequence of various choices
- Articulate a common Vision and consider a different way of being
- Define priorities
- Use imagination to come up with new solutions
- Communicate with citizenry regarding their concerns and desires

A Vision statement should inspire and challenge its citizenry and leadership to reach toward common aspirations. It is intended to provide direction, motivation, and momentum towards these aspirations. Elements of the Vision are both tangible and intangible in nature. They focus on the

big picture and long-term goals, even if the path to get there may still be uncertain. The Vision should capture the attention, imagination, and commitment of the community so that all can turn to the next challenge, that of determining how to reach the future described by the Vision.

A Vision statement responds to questions such as:

- “What do we wish could happen?”
- “What are our aspirations?”
- “What is our ideal future?”
- “What do we value about our community?”

Emerging Vision Statement⁹

Think About Acton Today...

Imagine Acton Tomorrow...

The following represents a compilation of ideas suggested by those residents who participated in a six-month long community conversation. The ideas included represent those around which relative consensus was reached and / or seemed consistent with other thoughts expressed by the participants. "We" refers to the people of Acton who participated in the process. There will be additional opportunities to provide input to the Vision and core values in subsequent phases of the planning process.

Imagine an Acton that has retained its uniqueness by **preserving its rural and historic characteristics** – with ample open fields and meadows, tree-lined roads with meandering sidewalks, ponds, farms, wooded areas, stone walls, and beautiful renovated historic buildings. Imagine an Acton where growth is managed and developed in keeping with the Town's character.

Imagine an Acton that proactively strives for a **sustainable future**. Imagine an Acton where new residents continue to be attracted to: the **excellent schools**; as well as to a variety of **recreational opportunities**; welcoming, safe and **lively neighborhoods**; and **attractive, safe, and walkable shopping areas**. In addition to **sidewalks and bike paths**, a **Town shuttle** connects people and places, providing alternatives to automobile travel. Residents are also connected by way of **open communication and accessible information**, and there are numerous **opportunities for the community to gather**.

Imagine an Acton with several **vibrant village centers** – each distinct in its character; and walkable to enjoyable and unique window shopping with locally-owned shops; stores to run to for daily errands and a variety of places to eat; and where you can run into people you know. Envision our ethnic communities enlivening our villages with cultural celebrations, music and food from their countries of origin. The villages are "quaint, but not cute;" they are authentically Acton.

Imagine that **Kelley's Corner has become a walkable town center**. It is vibrant with a wide range of shops and restaurants. Parking, sidewalks, benches, street lighting and signage are all oriented to the pedestrian. Redevelopment is guided by design guidelines and review so that all buildings are lovely and in keeping with Acton's character.

Imagine an Acton that **welcomes all its residents** – of all ages, socio-economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds – by providing a variety of housing choices and support services, communicating in multiple languages, and inviting all to contribute to Acton's civic and social life by creating opportunities for intergenerational experiences and cultural celebrations to be shared and enjoyed by all.

⁹ Vision and guiding principles are based on input gathered from residents through surveys and meetings. Notes from all outreach forums are available in Volume II: Acton Voices posted on the web at www.ActonOureach.com.

Acton: This Town is Your Town

The following are the lyrics from a song developed from a teacher-led brainstorm with the 6th grade students and written by the Music Department.¹⁰



Two of the youngest participants waiting their turn to present their input regarding what they would like to include in the Vision of Acton's future.

This Town is Your Town Melody: "This Land is Your Land"

Chorus/Refrain:

*This Town is your Town; this Town is my Town,
From the edge of Boxborough to the Concord border.
From the pine tree forests to the Nagog waters,
This Town will change with you and me.*

Install some streetlights and maybe sidewalks.
I've walked past litter and don't enjoy it.
Add many trashcans to make it cleaner,
Then Acton will be a better place.

Chorus/Refrain

As I was walking around Acton,
I saw we needed bike paths and park space,
A community center, more ethnic restaurants.
This Town should change; don't you agree?

Chorus/Refrain

Stop building condos and houses, too.
Let's make it greener for me and you.
Use solar panels and biofuel.
If we unite, it will come true.

Chorus/Refrain

Stop driving SUVs.
Help plant some more trees.
Recycle paper, glass, plastic, too.
Acton's the place for you and me!

Chorus/Refrain

Get rid of Styrofoam as our lunch trays.
Compost the food scraps, don't fill the landfills!
Stop chopping down trees upon the highways.
This Town should preserve the greenery!

Chorus/Refrain

I like my school, and the Memorial Library.
From Dunkin' Donuts to Starbucks Coffee,
From Hybid Farm to Friendly's Ice Cream,
Acton's the place for you and me!

Chorus/Refrain

¹⁰ All schools participated. The teachers worked with the grade 6 students from each school and then formulated the lyrics, combining ideas from all of the schools. It was reportedly a true team effort.

Teachers/Schools:
Judy Melillo - Conant/Gates
Kim Ward - Gates/Merriam
Chris Porth - Merriam/McCarthy Towne
Peter Broggi - Douglas/ McCarthy Towne

Core Values - Guiding Principles

The following represent the core values as expressed by Acton residents and defined by their input provided through surveys and meetings. The goals associated with these will be considered the set of “Guiding Principles,” that will help shape decisions regarding the future.

- **Town Character**
- **Sustainability**
- **Connections**
- **Community Gathering**
- **Inclusion and Diversity**
- **Town Assets**

Town Character. We feel strongly about preserving and enhancing what makes Acton special and unique, including its rural and historic characteristics and its village centers.

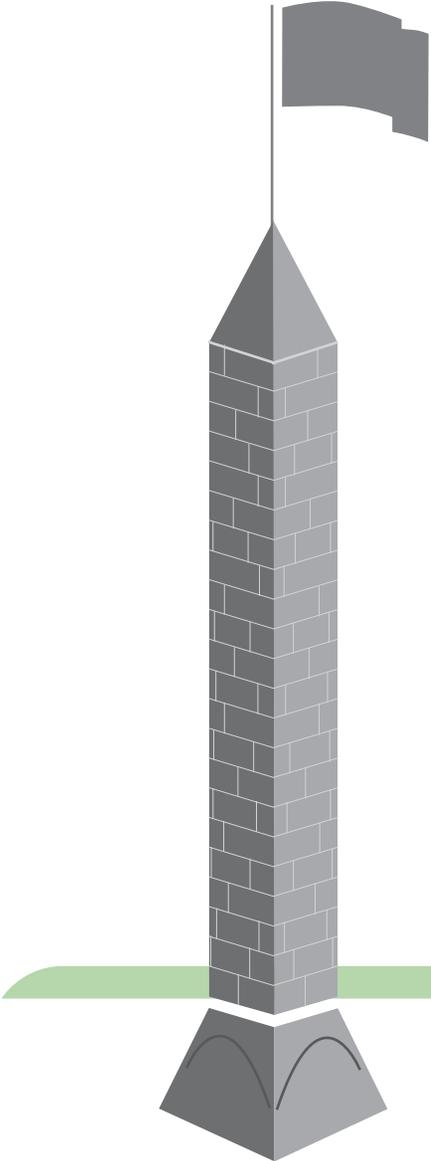
Sustainability. We value taking responsibility for our actions and planning for the future. We are mindful of our actions today because we are considerate of future generations living tomorrow.

Connections. We recognize that a community that is connected is safer, stronger and provides more opportunity for meaningful interaction. We envision supporting these connections through physical means including sidewalks, bike paths, trails and public transportation to connect people and places, and to support independent and safe travel for all. We also envision open communication as a means to further connect residents (e.g., through the web, cable TV, community bulletin boards, etc.).

Community Gathering. We value the small town feeling and appreciate the sense of community that results from frequent opportunities for interaction. We support providing places for casual social interaction and facilities for organized events which bring members of the community together. We believe in offering opportunities for intergenerational experiences, and for sharing of inter-cultural celebration (e.g., community/senior center, park, farmer’s market, cultural venues, community garden).

Inclusion and Diversity. We value a diverse population and wish to foster respect, promote interaction and actively support a wide variety of individuals to live, work and play in our community. This includes a range of ages, and socio-economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Town Assets. We value our Town assets and wish to preserve and enhance them. These include our open spaces, schools, historic sites, municipal properties, commercial areas, recreational areas, and our neighborhoods.

A tall, narrow stone tower with a flag on top, standing on a green base. The tower is constructed from grey stone blocks and has a pointed top. A dark grey flag is flying from a pole at the very top. The tower sits on a dark grey, trapezoidal base. A thick, light green horizontal bar is positioned behind the tower's base and extends across the width of the page.

CORE VALUES, GOALS, AND OBJECTIVES

CORE VALUES, GOALS, AND OBJECTIVES

The following chapter summarises the core values, goals & objectives that relate to and support Acton's Emerging Vision.

Preserve Town Character



Preserve Rural and Historic Characteristics

Preserve and Enhance Village Centers

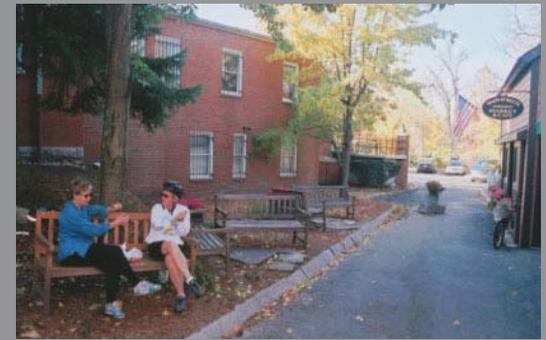
Increase Awareness Regarding the Need to Plan for Sustainability



Define and Discuss Sustainability

Develop a Sustainability Plan

Improve Connections



Improve Walking and Biking Experiences

Improve Circulation in and Around Town

Improve Communication

Provide More Opportunities for Community Gathering



Expand Senior/Community Center

Increase Amount and Variety of Restaurants

Support Additional Cultural Activities

Support Inclusion and Diversity



Support All Ages

Support Socio-economic Diversity

Embrace Cultural Diversity

Support the Disability Community

Preserve and Enhance Town Assets



Protect Existing and Acquire Additional Open Space

Support Excellent Schools

Improve Commercial Areas and Promote Economic Development

Maintain and Increase Recreational Opportunities

Support and Strengthen Neighborhoods

Preserve Historic Buildings and Landscapes

Maintain Municipal Properties

Core Value: Town Character

Participants in the mail survey and other venues cited the town’s character as one of Acton’s top assets and the need to control growth and development as one of the most important challenges

Goal: Preserve Town Character

We feel strongly about preserving and enhancing what makes Acton special and unique, including its rural and historic characteristics and its village centers.

A common concern of Acton residents is that growth is eroding the Town’s character. It is important for us to define what the Town’s character is, to identify the elements that make Acton Acton, in order to recommend how to preserve this character. While the sense of a place can be very intangible, there seem to be a number of common themes.

Objective: Preserve Rural and Historic Characteristics

The key ways in which we Actonians feel the Town’s character can be preserved:

- Preservation and acquisition of open space
- Preservation of historic features
- Growth management
- Site and design review

The preservation of open space seemed to be the way most people feel the rural characteristics of the town can be best maintained. “Open space” is how the majority (82.7%) of written survey respondents answered the question “What would you like to see more of in Acton?”. Along with historic features, open space is considered to be a very important asset. Existing green spaces contribute to the Town’s uniqueness, and in many cases are listed among the top reasons that people move to Acton. Both open space and historic sites are discussed more fully under “Town Assets” (page 36).

Definition of “Rural Character”

There were many discussions regarding the definition of “rural character.” Residents seem to agree that what was mostly meant by this is a “rural feel,” or a “rural aesthetic,” and that it is more accurately expressed by the term “rural characteristics.” These were listed as including:

- Tree-lined roads
- Open space
- Trails, ponds, natural habitat, meadows, and woods
- Stone walls
- Farmland



Acton Voices: What Defines Acton’s Character?¹¹

- Trees and open land
- Excellent schools, community commitment to education
- Sense of community, small town feeling, run into people you know
- “Seasonal changes, stone walls, foliage, picturesque, old barns”
- Historic, New England architecture
- “Not Your Average Wonderbread Town”
- “Semi-rural/Town and country, suburb”
- Villages provide focal points
- No Town center
- “Peaceful, quiet, family-oriented, friendly, safe, socially aware, livable”
- Good balance between nature and development
- “Its bucolic beginnings”
- “The presence of the past”
- “Wonderful woodland trails”
- Neighborhoods
- Running into people you know

11 See “What We Heard: Highlights” (page 53) for a more detailed list of resident responses.

Ways to Preserve Rural and Historic Characteristics

- **Protect existing and acquire additional open space**
 The number one way in which Acton residents felt that the town’s rural “feel” should be protected is through the acquisition and creation of open space. This is discussed further under “Town Assets” (page 36).
- **Protect and enhance sense of history**
 An awareness of, and pride in, the history of Acton and the remnants that symbolize the Town’s past was a dominant theme in all discussions. We found this to be true of old-timers, newcomers, senior citizens, residents coming from other countries, as well as school children. This is discussed further under “Town Assets” (page 36).
- **Growth management and site and design review**
 We care about how our community grows and realize that we cannot stop all development, but we can guide where buildings are built and how they look. We strongly support developing and applying design guidelines to ensure that new and renovated buildings are in keeping with our town character.



Acton Voices: What are some ways in which the Town’s rural characteristics can be preserved?

- Acquisition of open space
- Judicious use of Zoning
- Active support of agriculture (e.g., right-to-farm by-law)
- Meandering sidewalks
- Promoting natural environments
- Preserving and promoting green space along roads and in front of buildings
- Protecting and promoting community gardens, stone walls, trees, country fairs and farmer’s markets



Acton Voices: Other characteristics which people felt contributed to the Town’s character included:

- Socio-economically and culturally diverse, accepting, welcoming
- High degree of civic involvement
- Convenience of having a variety of shops and other activities located nearby
- Rural meets suburban conflicts
- Small town close to Boston – good mix
- Good value – schools and town economically efficient
- High-achieving, driven, ambitious

■ Objective: Preserve and Enhance Village Centers

In Acton, we do not have one town center, but we have several. Acton’s residents value this feature of the Town, recognize it as an organizing concept and appreciate the opportunities that town centers afford for social interaction and running errands. While some Actonians do lament the fact that there is a lack of one central town center, most of us do not want to tamper with Acton’s civic center (Town Hall, the Memorial Library, etc.). Instead, we would like to enhance the existing villages and perhaps create more.

We like that we have a variety of areas, each with distinct character, some vestiges of the past, and a mix of vibrant uses. We would like there to be more vitality, more places to go/things to do and more walkability. West Acton and West Concord are good models.

“Let’s turn Kelley’s Corner into our Town center,” several people said.



IDEA BOX

Ideas for Kelley’s Corner:

- Encourage wide range of shops and restaurants.
- Redevelop area with pedestrian orientation (including sidewalks, benches, signage, etc.).
- Develop design guidelines to control “look and character.”

Acton Voices: What is an ideal village center and how can we enhance ours?

- Activities including parks, outdoor areas to congregate, grocery store. Family restaurant, benches, variety of businesses, parking in back of buildings, places to go at night, pleasant lighting
- Walkability
- Events
- Unique and fun window shopping
- Locally-owned shops; develop “buy local” campaign
- Need anchor with pulling power
- Character – “quaint, but not cute,” each village with its own distinct character
- Strategies – slow traffic, plant flowers and trees, use zoning, move towards mixed use
- Invite ethnic community to contribute vitality through celebration, food, etc.
- Develop a non-profit semi-government organization to revitalize village centers
- West Concord is a good model

Core Value: Sustainability

Goal: To Increase Awareness Regarding the Need to Plan for Sustainability

We value taking responsibility for our actions and planning for the future. We are mindful of our actions today because we are considerate of future generations living tomorrow.

Objective: Define and Discuss Sustainability

Global warming presents enormous challenges on a global scale as well as on a local one. The challenge is determining what Acton can do on its own or in conjunction with surrounding municipalities to contribute to a global solution. Sustainability is a very broad topic that includes a wide range of possible responses. We need to define what we mean by sustainability. Green building? Alternative energy sources? Social Equity? Equitable distribution of resources? Fiscal responsibility? All of the above?

72% of the phone survey respondents agreed that the lack of a plan for sustainable development is a major concern and 78% agreed that the Town should take actions to reduce greenhouse gases.

Sustainable development is defined most generally as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs in harmony with the needs of the planet.” Related more to town planning it is defined as, “Planning new development such that it encourages the use of public transport, discourages the use of the private car, and minimizes the impact on air quality and the local environment.”

Green building is the practice of increasing the efficiency with which buildings use resources - energy, water and materials - while reducing building impacts on human health and the environment, through better siting, design, construction, operation, and maintenance.

Greenhouse gases are gases that increase the temperature of the earth's surface. They include water vapor, tropospheric ozone, chlorofluorocarbons, carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, methane and nitrous oxide. They stem from burning fossil fuels and other mostly man made emissions.

These definitions are modified from definitions provided on www.wikipedia.org.

Acton Voices: Do you think Acton should actively reduce greenhouse gases?

- “Yes, if it doesn’t cost too much” — said 79% of the mail survey respondents.
- Further discussion at Visioning workshops and in phone surveys revealed that many Actonians are willing to pay higher taxes for measures to reduce greenhouse gases.
- Teens in town demonstrated their concern by conducting their own survey on sustainability.
- Slightly over half (55%) of the business owners responding to the mail survey also viewed sustainability favorably. They responded that they would use “green construction techniques.”



Swap center at a Town dump in Amherst, New Hampshire.

■ Objective: Develop a Sustainability Plan

In order to plan for a sustainable future, we need to educate our citizenry on the choices and the consequences associated with these choices. There are many “sustainability measures” that we can adopt. We need to make informed choices as individuals and as a community. What are we willing to do? What are we willing to pay for? We need to have an informed conversation. This will involve a public education campaign that should include the schools.

IDEA BOX

Ideas on ways Acton can reduce greenhouse gases:

- Increase recycling
- Adopt a proclamation supporting greenhouse gas reduction
- Publicize the issue to promote greater public awareness of the problem and potential solutions
- Explore use of renewable energy sources
- Provide incentives to home-owners & businesses to build green & save energy
- Retrofit public buildings to be energy efficient
- Provide public transportation/walking/biking facilities
- Eliminate idling vehicle
- Organize web based car pooling
- Start a “Transitional Town Project” toward self sufficiency and energy autonomy.
- Turn the transfer station into a renewable energy power plant (also use yard waste)
- Use the transfer station as a model for sustainable development, including exhibiting trash as art
- Involve the ethnic communities; many come from cultures that have a history of sustainability
- Re-think how Town staff works and commutes

Core Value: Connections

Goal: To Improve Connections within Town

We recognize that a community that is connected is safer, stronger and provides more opportunities for meaningful interaction. We envision supporting these connections through physical means including sidewalks, bike paths, trails and public transportation to connect people and places, and to support independent and safe travel for all. We also envision open communication as a means to further connect residents (e.g., through the web, cable TV, community bulletin boards, etc.).

Objective: Improve Walking and Biking Experience

We want to be able to walk and bike in a safe and pleasant way. We recognize that this is good for us as individuals as well as for Acton as a community in a number of ways.

Acton businesses agree that improving walking and biking connections would help make commercial areas more vital.

Almost 50% of the written survey respondents stated that they considered a lack of continuous pedestrian/bike paths to be one of Acton's three most important challenges.



Acton Voices: In what ways are biking and walking important for Acton?

- Good exercise
- Good for the environment
- Supports the independence of youth and seniors
- Increases the opportunity for casual interaction
- An important way to connect our open spaces, recreational resources, village centers, schools, historic sites, and other destinations.

Acton Voices: What should Acton do to improve the walking/biking experience?

- Increase safety
- Create connections, system of sidewalks, trails, bike paths, bike racks
- Explore North American and European models and incorporate relevant elements and become a model for a walkable and bikeable community

Traffic and other related issues (e.g., lack of commuter rail parking, congestion & safety) was cited as one of Acton’s most important challenges in surveys as well as at many of the meetings.

■ Objective: Explore Ways to Improve Circulation in and Around Town

We would like to make improving walkability and bike access a priority. We recognize that driving in motor vehicles will continue to be a primary mode of transportation. We would like to make improvements to vehicular travel as well as to provide alternatives to the automobile. Improvements should include reducing congestion, making intersections safe, improving parking and traffic calming.

We also think that the Town should develop a Comprehensive Transportation Plan for motor vehicles, bikes, pedestrians (sidewalk planning and implementation), commuters (including train schedules and parking at the train station), and potential shuttle service.

Acton businesses¹² cited traffic as Acton’s number one challenge. They also most frequently mentioned making improvements to traffic as an important way to improve business conditions in Acton. Some cited the need for traffic signs, reduction of congestion, and additional parking, as suggested solutions.



IDEA BOX

Idea for a Town-wide Shuttle:

The idea of a town-wide shuttle was brought up in several meetings as worth exploring. Participants saw it as a possible way to provide alternative transportation: a means for teens and seniors to travel, a way to reduce traffic congestion and benefit the environment. Additionally, when asked, almost one-third of respondents to the phone survey said that they or a member of their household would use a Town shuttle at least once a week. This alternative should be explored further¹³ and considered for possible inclusion into the Town’s Vision.

¹² Acton businesses that responded to the business survey.

¹³ The Transportation Advisory Committee is in the process of conducting a survey and subsequent study of a Town-wide shuttle for Acton.

Acton Voices: How can the train station be improved?

- Provide more parking
- Town shuttle to and from parking
- Train station building
- More overhang on canopy for weather protection
- Safe bike lane to station
- Train station as mixed use center with shops, etc.

Acton Voices: What would improve getting around Town the most?

- A shuttle would be useful for my elderly mother
- A shuttle would be great so I don’t have to chauffeur my teens around everywhere.
- A shuttle would be great because I don’t have a U.S. driver’s license
- A shuttle would be great because my family only has one car
- Given the high cost of gas, a shuttle is looking real good!
- A shuttle might help bring more people to our shops on Great Road

■ **Objective: Improve Communication**

Good communication is very important for staying connected. As technology changes, we need to stay abreast of new opportunities and continue to improve how we provide information and encourage input into town affairs and civic participation. Town Department Heads also feel the need to improve communication with residents so that there is a better understanding of Town operations and resources.



● **Increase Volunteerism**

Acton has a well-developed culture of volunteerism. It is what makes our Town work; it is one of the ways that keeps our Town connected. There is always a need for more and new volunteers. Residents were asked for their ideas regarding how the Town could attract more volunteers.



Acton Voices: What would make your business feel more a part of Acton?¹⁴

- Provide information for business owners
- A more friendly approach from Town Hall
- We spend a lot of time and money giving, it would be nice if someone noticed!

Acton Voices: How can the Town improve communication with its residents?

- The Town web site should be kept more up-to-date
- We need a community bulletin board
- We need to use multiple languages reflecting our population (both staff and written materials)
- There is a need for a centralized reference guide of existing Town resources
- We need more communication regarding Town services and the impact on our Town.
- There is a need for improved communication between the schools and the Town

Acton Voices: How can the Town attract more volunteers?

- Publicize more
- Use website
- Information/communication
- Promote
- Outreach, recruit
- Provide incentives
- Scheduling/timing
- Provide and advertise opportunities for one time volunteering (trial)

14 From the Business Survey.

Core Value: Community Gathering and Connections

Goal: To Provide More Opportunities for Community Gathering

We value the small town feeling and appreciate the sense of community that results from frequent opportunities for interaction. We support providing places for casual social interaction and organized events which bring members of the community together. We believe in offering opportunities for intergenerational experiences, and for sharing of inter-cultural celebration (e.g., community/senior center, park, farmer's market, cultural venues, community garden).

A desire for more opportunities for community gathering was an important theme in discussions at the visioning sessions and other outreach activities.



Objective: Expand Senior/Community Center

Acton residents agree that we should examine the need for an expanded or new senior center. People agree that any new space should be made available for other community needs and not dedicated solely to use by the elderly (over half (54.6%) of phone survey respondents support shared use by the community). This could be accomplished in a number of ways, including through after hour usage or by dedicating some space for community use. Additionally, when asked if they were willing to pay more taxes for this, many agreed they were.

Acton Voices: If we expand the senior center, should it accommodate community use?

- Avoids waste of underutilized space
- Provides opportunities for intergenerational exchanges
- Use school building model – utilized by different groups after hours

■ **Objective: Increase Amount and Variety of Restaurants**

Many residents cited the need for more restaurants (this included teenagers). When questioned further, as evidenced in the “Acton Voices” box, Acton palates vary in their taste.

■ **Objective: Support Additional Cultural Activities**

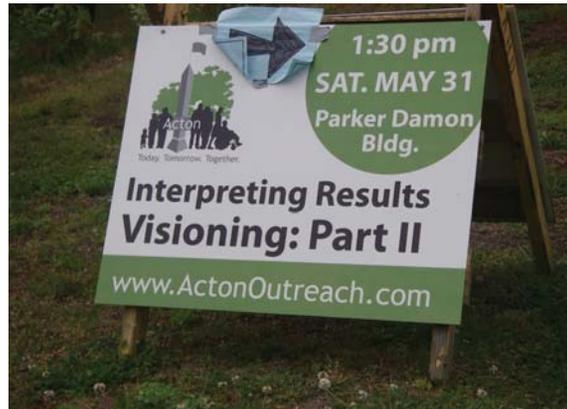
Actonians would like more places to go, to meet, to be entertained and to experience cultural activities. (Over half (53%) of phone survey respondents would like to see more.)

A **movie theater** was by far the number one venue asked for by all age groups (68% of phone survey respondents.)

Also, creating a more walkable/bikeable community increases opportunities for casual spontaneous social interaction.

Acton Voices: What kind of cultural activities would you like in Acton?

- Festivals
- Music
- Theater (drama, concerts, dance)
- More classical music opportunities
- Only if self-funded



Acton Voices: What kind of restaurants does Acton need?

- Indoor/outdoor
- Homemade food
- Café, soup/salad
- A gathering place
- Ethnic: Vietnamese
- Mid-level: Like Not Your Average Joe's
- Mid-low level: Like Panera Bread
- Fine dining, sit down
- Casual, but not pizza
- Pub-like, wine bar, neighborhood-based
- Chinese, Middle Eastern, Brazilian
- Outdoor seating; Porches
- Small bistro type, ethnic foods
- More atmosphere

Acton Voices: What kind of movie theater would you like in Acton?

- Independent art films
- Walk to outdoor café and nighttime gathering places
- Community theater with film capability
- One with armchairs and tables for food (teens)
- Create a tax break to encourage it
- Like West Newton theater (see left)



Core Value: Inclusion and Diversity

Goal: To foster respect, promote interaction and actively support inclusion and diversity in Acton's population.

We value a diverse population and wish to foster respect, promote interaction and actively support a wide variety of individuals to live, work and play in our community. This includes a range of ages and socio-economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Objective: Support All Ages

We feel that we need to do more to meet the needs of our teens and seniors.

Seniors

Our over 65 years of age population is rapidly increasing as our baby-boomers age. We believe strongly in providing support to our elders so that they may "age in place." They should be able to continue living in Acton if they so choose, near their friends and family, and near the landscapes and places of which they have grown fond.

The value of inclusion and diversity was particularly emphasized in discussions at the visioning sessions and outreach meetings.



Acton Voices: How can senior citizens be supported?

- Provide services
- Provide housing affordable to those on a fixed income
- Provide transportation
- Improve/expand senior center
- Health, fitness/wellness (classes, sidewalks, promoting walking)
- Inclusion, not separate from community
- Provide services, including housing, health care, etc.
- Provide inter-generational opportunities interaction, opportunities for learning
- Include all seniors in outreach (e.g., new immigrant groups).

"Great place to bring up your children; it is too bad a lot of people have to leave because of high taxes. Older citizens can bring a great deal to a community."

"It has been a wonderful place to raise our children. We have many close friends and continue to enjoy a close community."

• Teens

We want our teens to feel supported, to have wholesome activities to choose from in their free time and to be able to travel throughout Town independently and safely. We would like to listen more to our youngsters in order to better identify and meet their needs.

We, as adults, feel that there isn't enough for teens to do, but teens themselves spoke up in a school-wide survey they developed (with our input) and administered to their peers. They agree that they would like more to do and alternative ways of getting to activities.

■ **Objective: Support Socio-economic Diversity**

We want to be a community where people of various income levels can live. We would also like it if our grown children and our seniors could afford to live here. Many of our municipal staff, including our school teachers and policemen, cannot afford to live in Town.

Acton Voices: If you could do one thing to make Acton a better place for teens, what would it be?¹⁵

Ways teens felt life could be better in Acton included:

- Number 1 – movie theater
- Number 2 – sidewalks

Other ways teens felt life could be better in Acton included:

- A club (like Danny's Place) for older kids
- Another park
- Plan for sustainability
- Need for public transportation
- More restaurants
- Swimming pool
- Amusement park



Teens gathering in Lexington Center

Acton Voices: How can Acton support socio-economic diversity?

- Provide housing affordable to empty nesters
- Our Town staff cannot afford to live here
- There are fewer and fewer houses affordable to young families
- Ensure that affordable housing be kept to an aesthetic standard that is in keeping with Town character
- Provide needed support services
- Coordinate with school system to identify those in need and match them with volunteers and agencies willing and able to help them

**“I think there should be less expensive houses so people can afford them. The amount of money can still be in the thousands, but not so expensive.”
(Acton first grader)**

¹⁵ From High School Survey.

■ Objective: Embrace Cultural Diversity

The growing cultural and ethnic diversity of our population provides new challenges and opportunities for Acton to weave diversity into a unified social and civic fabric. We take on this challenge and welcome the opportunity to create a richer and more stimulating social environment. We are committed to achieving inter-cultural understanding and support our residents from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. We wish to incorporate diverse cultures as part of the experience of living in Acton. Our Town Department Heads are currently thinking of ways in which Town services may be improved to better serve these newcomers.

In discussions with members of the various ethnic groups in Acton (e.g., Chinese, Indian, Latino, and Brazilian) there was consensus that they feel very welcome in Acton (especially relative to other communities in which they have lived) and that they value the very same aspects of the town value by longer-term residents (e.g., schools, open space, history, village centers). Finally, they also highly valued the diversity of the Town.



Acton Voices: Why did you move here?

- The schools
- Because there were other people like us here (good for the children to feel comfortable)
- The warmth and welcome of Actonians
- Housing affordability – more house for your money compared to surrounding towns
- The location and accessibility to jobs (highways, train)
- Beautiful landscape – trees, open fields, woods, historic buildings
- Peace and quiet (not like the city)

Acton Voices: How can Acton better meet your needs?

- Need space for celebration, cultural activities and parties
- More gathering and promenade (walking) space(s) to run into people
- Support and encouragement to participate in town government such as recent policy that any Acton resident can participate on Town board or committee (regardless of whether or not they are a U.S. citizen).
- More English as a Second Language classes
- Need for affordable housing
- Need for organized welcome (contact people, welcome committee, reference guide to existing resources)
- Need for public transportation (often multiple generations in a household, have only one car, and/or do not have driver's license).
- Provide contact information for various ethnic and cultural communities, including who to contact in the Brazilian, Chinese, Latino, Russian and Indian communities.
- Recognition of holidays in the schools (and maybe allowance for time off)
- Hire multi-lingual staff at Town Hall
- Need for multi-lingual staff and materials at the Memorial Library
- Include Chinese languages and Portuguese as foreign language options in schools

■ **Objective: Support the Disability Community**

We wish to be a Town that is comfortable for and inclusive of all its citizens. We would like our shops, public spaces, and municipal buildings to meet the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines¹⁶ and thus be accessible to persons of all ability levels. We recognize that ease of physical access benefits everyone. First, it increases the participation of individuals with disabilities. Second, universal design also supports the independence of children, people with strollers, individuals with a temporary inju-



16 Required by law



Universal Design is a relatively new paradigm that emerged from “*barrier-free*” or “*accessible design*” and “*assistive technology*.” Barrier-free Design and Assistive Technology provide a level of accessibility for people with disabilities but they also often result in separate and stigmatizing solutions, e.g., a ramp that leads to a different entry to a building than a main stairway.

Universal design, on the other hand, strives to be a broad-spectrum solution that helps everyone, not just people with disabilities. Moreover, it recognizes the importance of how things look. For example, while built up handles are a way to make utensils more usable for people with gripping limitations, larger, easy to grip and attractive handles appeal to a wide range of consumers, not only those with gripping limitations.

Source: This definition is from www.wikipedia.org.

Acton Voices: How can Acton be more supportive of people with disabilities?

- Need for more transportation options
- Need for job opportunities and job training
- Need for accessible public spaces



Core Value: Town Assets

Goal: To Preserve and Enhance Town Assets

We value our Town assets and wish to preserve and enhance them. These include our open spaces, schools, historic sites, municipal properties, commercial areas, recreational areas, and our neighborhoods.

Objective: Protect Existing and Acquire Additional Open Space

We Actonians treasure the open space that makes up a significant part of our landscape and our “sense of place,” our sense of Acton. We love our Town’s meadows, agricultural fields, forests, trails and conservation lands. We feel that the open space contributes a great deal to the Town’s uniqueness and character. Respondents to the mail and phone surveys as well as participants in Visioning workshops and other meetings agree that Acton’s open space is one of the Town’s most important assets and that more should be acquired and protected. When asked what they want more of, a majority of residents (82.7% of mail survey respondents) said: “open

space, conservation lands and other natural features were identified as being among the town’s top three assets in all forums. When asked what they want more of, 80% of mail survey respondents said “open space”.



space.” When asked in a variety of forums if they would like the Town to acquire additional open space, a majority responded with a resounding “yes!”

The number one way in which we Actonians feel that the Town’s rural “feel” should be protected is through the acquisition and creation of open space (60% of phone survey respondents.) Some of us are willing to pay more taxes in order for the Town to purchase additional unbuilt land (37.7% of phone survey respondents). The majority of those participating in the planning process prefer that open space be preserved and acquired in other ways.

Acton Voices: What ways should Acton try to preserve open space?

- Purchase open space (use Community Preservation Act funds)
- Zoning
- Perpetual conservation easements
- Require playgrounds for kids in developments as part of approval process
- Convert open municipal property to conservation status
- Promote National Wildlife programs
- Bio-diversity education
- Encourage cluster development
- Limit development
- Prevent clear cutting, preserve wooded areas
- Public education
- Provide tax incentives

75% of mail survey respondents selected schools as one of the town's top three assets.

■ **Objective: Support Excellent Schools**

We love our schools. We enthusiastically volunteer to help out in the classroom and consider the schools to be a center for community gathering. We in Acton use our schools fully. They are vibrant places all day, every day, including after hours and on weekends. The facilities enjoy a high level of community use.

“Good schools” is one of the top reasons we move to Acton. Schools are considered by many residents to be a key asset; many cited the schools as one of the main reasons they moved to Acton. When residents were asked in the phone survey “Why do schools deserve top asset ranking?”, the three top responses were: teachers, college preparation and choice. On the other hand, there was also discussion regarding the need to balance the needs of the schools with those of the community at large.

There was a recognition that the schools play an important role in providing a focus and gathering place for the Town. At the same time, there is a sense that the school funding structure places an unfair burden on the Town and makes the task of meeting other needs difficult. In discussions with seniors and with Town Depart-



ment Heads, the need to address the divisiveness that this causes was emphasized.

IDEA BOX

Idea for student community service:

The idea of having students provide community services to the Town was mentioned for consideration/exploration (e.g., years ago Acton teens helped conduct the Town census).



Acton Voices: What do you consider to be Acton's top assets?

- The schools, definitely the schools
- Commitment to education
- Community education, opportunities for life long learning
- Appreciation of value of education
- The schools are very educational (8th grader)

■ Objective: Improve Commercial Areas and Promote Economic Development

Many of us enjoy shopping in Acton.

Approximately one third (30%) of Acton residents responding to the mail survey reported doing about half of their shopping in Acton.

Some residents expressed a desire for additional stores both in order to have more choices as well as for the purpose of expanding the tax base. Many expressed a concern for pedestrian and vehicular safety and a desire for improved aesthetics, especially along Great Road.

Many of the Acton business owners who participated reported being satisfied with their current location; they also said that they feel a part of the Town. Several cited ways of improving conditions for doing business in Acton, through better permitting and improved communication, among other factors. Improvements to traffic and transportation were also frequently cited as ways of making it easier to do business in Acton.



IDEA BOX

Idea for shopping district:

Several participants called for aesthetic and functional improvements to the parking areas in the strip mall, especially along Great Road. The strip mall development (pictured above) in Rhode Island was redone with parking broken up with landscaping and more space dedicated to the pedestrian. Safe entries and aesthetically pleasing buildings also characterize the redevelopment.

Acton Voices: How can shopping in Acton be improved?

- Improve aesthetics
- Provide more parking
- Increase safety, especially at entries
- Connect strip malls especially along Great Road
- It would be nice to have more places to shop and to eat to choose from
- Promote economic development to enhance commercial tax base so we can pay for needed services

Acton Voices: What can the Town do to improve business conditions?¹⁷

- Include businesses in events and notices. Acton Day ... could be so much more
- Easier permit process
- Be more business friendly
- Make it easier to open a business in town
- Reduce traffic congestion
- Make improvements to transportation – walking, shuttle, interconnect paths
- Increase flexibility on sign allowances

17 From the Business Survey.

■ **Objective: Maintain and Increase Recreational Opportunities**

Actonians enjoy playing in town and appreciate the existing recreational opportunities. We would like more opportunities to recreate and want better maintenance of the existing venues.



Acton Voices: How can recreation be improved in Acton?

- Provide more opportunities indoor and outdoor
- Provide opportunities for all ages
- Provide small parks in neighborhoods
- I love NARA Park – it is one of my favorite features of living in Acton
- The tennis courts need repair
- There is too much focus on school sports
- Some of the recreational facilities need bathrooms, parking and better maintenance, including lighting



Acton Voices: What other activities should the Town support or develop for teens and seniors?

- Swimming pool
- Sports
- Teen center
- Recreational activities
- Outdoor activities
- Bike trails
- Walkable villages

■ Objective: Support and Strengthen Neighborhoods

We Actonians value our sense of community and our tight-knit neighborhoods. We like the small town feeling, the helpfulness and friendliness of our neighborhoods. We like the feeling of safety (adults and children of all ages brought up safety as an important aspect of the town). Our sense of community is part of our Town's character and fosters connections and community gatherings.

“Running into people you know on the street” is something we value, and many of us report experiencing in our neighborhoods. Almost 60% of the Acton residents responding to the mail survey report knowing at least three of their neighbors “well” or “very well.” This question was asked of the 8th graders, many of whom reported that they knew their neighbors well. “I know my neighbors well enough to be their friends (8th grader).” This level of familiarity is unusually high and is indicative of a healthy community, one that is connected, one that derives strength from connections.



Acton Voices: What are the characteristics of an ideal neighborhood?

- It is walkable, with sidewalks
- It provides activities, such as playground, neighborhood swimming pool, coffee shop, library, places to walk to
- It is safe (traffic safety)
- It is aesthetically pleasing: public art, open space, parking behind stores, architecture in keeping with character, meandering sidewalks
- There are benches and opportunities for outdoor eating

IDEA BOX

With the goal of supporting and strengthening neighborhoods, participants identified many ways of communicating and interacting among neighbors both casually and formally:

- Block parties
- Neighborhood newsletter
- Neighborhood e-mail lists
- Neighborhood book groups
- Organize competitions between neighborhoods
- Walking groups
- Establish community projects
- Have places to walk to
- Database of residents by neighborhood

A majority (74% of mail survey respondents) said they would like to see more historic homes protected and preserved. Additionally, almost one-fifth (19.8%) of the mail survey respondents cited history and historic architecture as being among the Town's three top assets.

■ **Objective: Preserve Historic Buildings and Landscapes**

We treasure our historic sites and consider them major unique features of our Town. We appreciate our three historic districts as well as individual historic sites located throughout Town.

Some residents pointed to the recently completed Heritage Landscapes Inventory as a resource of sites and landscapes valued by residents.

Of significant note is the fact that many of Acton's students participated in the Visioning, and that youth of all ages listed historic buildings and the sense of history as an important and special feature of the Town that they wish to preserve. For example, in the 8th grade survey "the history" was cited among the Town's three most important assets. They also often answered "Its history" to the question "What makes Acton unique?".



Acton Voices: What are some ways in which the presence of the Town's history can be enhanced so that it continues to contribute to Acton's Town character?

- Preserve historic buildings and landscapes (see Heritage Landscape Inventory)
- Support historic celebrations
- Increase awareness of historic past



Acton Voices: What is unique about Acton?

- The presence of the past
- Crown Resistance Day
- Exchange Hall
- Our beautiful historic town buildings and monument
- Our history
- Isaac Davis
- Beautiful old stone walls and farm structures

■ Objective: Maintain Town Properties

We appreciate our town properties and feel that they are an important part of our community in a number of ways. Town properties provide places for community gathering, for the provision of important services, and several of our municipal properties contribute to the historic character of our town.

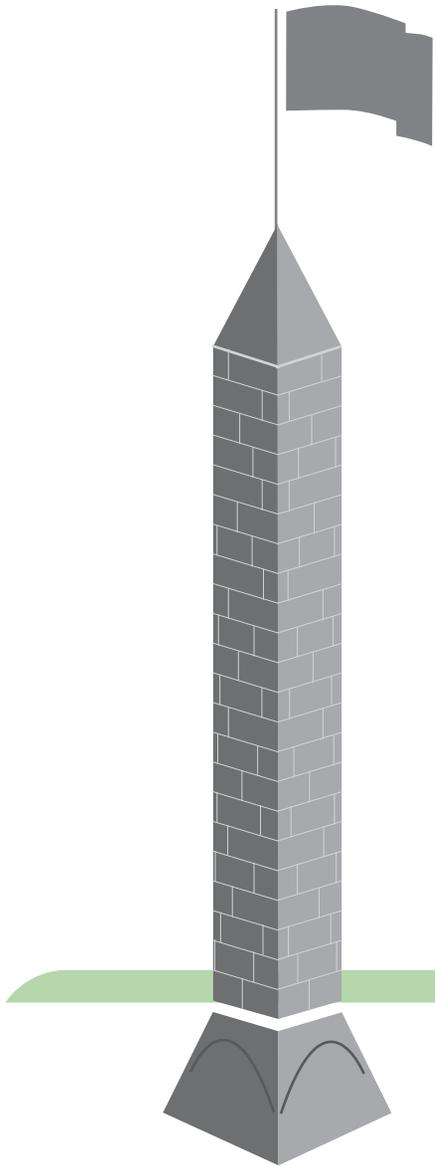
We feel it is very important to maintain these properties, to update them, and to begin exploring ways to make them more energy efficient. We should investigate using state-of-the-art technology for communication, data collection and archiving of records.



IDEA BOX

Ideas about public buildings:

- We should conduct an energy audit of our public buildings to see what we can do to be more energy efficient
- Use the transfer station as a model for sustainable development
- Our schools are our biggest assets, we need to keep the facilities well maintained and updated
- Memorial Library is a very important gathering place.
- Town Hall needs to look at ways to provide services using more recent technology.



THE PLANNING PROCESS

THE PLANNING PROCESS

Brief Overview

The Planning Process began with the formation of an Outreach Steering Committee (Committee). The Committee was comprised of 21 Acton residents volunteers and staffed by the Acton Planning Department. The Town hired the firm, Planners Collaborative of Boston, MA, to assist the Town and Committee with reaching out to the citizens to provide input into defining the Town's future. The first step involved developing a logo and tag line that would help to brand the planning process and to distinguish it from others. It was used in all communication and for publicizing events.

Starting in February 2008, the Committee developed an outreach plan with the goal of representing many different points of view and reaching every Acton household. The goal of the Outreach Campaign was to reach all residents including those who had not previously participated in civic affairs, and to talk with them in their gathering places. The outreach process was designed to alert citizens about the process and inviting them to participate in several ways, including attending meetings, filling out a survey, etc.

The target audience for the outreach process included organizations, agencies, establishments, community leaders, other individuals, and ways of reaching them through newsletters, representatives, e-mail lists, and other outreach methods. The process succeeded in reaching audiences holding a wide variety of view points about how they see Acton now and how they would like it to be in the future.

The result of the "Community Conversation" is a Vision and a set of Goals to be further reviewed by the community, and to eventually be used as a foundation for an implementation plan outlining the steps to achieve the Vision. This report summarizes the results of the Community Outreach campaign. It represents the very first step in developing a Comprehensive Community Plan (see Acton Comprehensive Community Plan Process Diagram on the next page).



Venues of Participation

Significant thought and effort were expended in order to reach the widest possible distribution of viewpoints. A variety of opportunities for participation were provided and these were advertised widely through numerous articles in *The Beacon* and announcements in *The Boston Globe*, cable TV, distribution of flyers, posters in public places, banners hung across the street and on light poles, etc. See Volume II: *Appendices: Acton Voices* for a complete list of publicity.

In addition, the Committee created a website as one way to make the planning process as accessible, transparent and inclusive as possible. It was designed to, among other things, help the citizens of Acton understand what a comprehensive plan is, why it is important for Acton to have one and how a plan is developed. We also branded the process with the words “Today. Tomorrow. Together”

Town-wide Visioning Workshops

Three town-wide Visioning sessions were held. The purpose of the Town-wide Visioning workshops was two-fold: both to explain the planning process to participants as well as to invite the

Acton Comprehensive Community Plan



Acton community to come together and generate ideas in small group discussions to help create a shared Vision for Acton's future. There were 175 participants at the first Visioning meeting, and 80 at the second meeting. The third session was held to provide an additional opportunity for those who were unable to attend the second one (only a small number attended).

- Visioning I: Saturday, March 29, 2008
- Visioning II: Saturday, May 31, 2008
- Visioning II: Monday, June 16, 2008

Targeted Community Outreach Meetings

Another way input was solicited was through community outreach meetings, targeted to reach particular communities. The purpose of the targeted community outreach meetings was two-fold: both to explain the planning process to participants and to provide an opportunity for those who identify themselves as belonging to a demographic group with particular interests (e.g., ethnicity, business, age-group). The following targeted community outreach meetings were held.

- Chinese Language School
- Indian Community

- Latin Family Network
- Rotary Club
- United Way
- Senior Center
- Chamber of Commerce
- Brazilian Community

Town Government Focus Groups

- Town Department Heads
- Town Boards, Committees and Commissions (3 separate meetings)

Comment Boards

Large poster boards were placed in "high traffic areas" in the main lobby of Town Hall and the Memorial Library. These were for people to write their answers to the question: "What Makes Acton Unique?"



Scenes from the Town-wide Visioning Workshops.

Who We Heard From

The outreach campaign provided multiple opportunities for residents and business-owners in Acton to provide input to the visioning process. The following explains the data-gathering process and describes those who participated.

Surveys

The following three surveys were developed, administered, and analyzed as part of the Visioning for the Comprehensive Community Plan (see Acton Outreach Surveys table at right). Detailed documentation of these is available in Volume II of this report.

- Town-wide Mail Survey to Residents (mail and web)
- Town-wide Mail Survey to Businesses (mail and web)
- Phone Survey to Random Residences

Acton Outreach Survey	Residents (Mailed to all addresses in Acton)	Businesses (Mailed to all businesses in Acton)	Phone Survey of Residents (Random Sample)
Web Returns	335	11	N/A
Mail Returns	1,141	75	N/A
Total Returns Received	1,476	86	N/A
Total Sent Out	9,438	1,622	Approximately 1,400 calls were made
Response Rate ¹⁹ (% Responded)	15.6%	5.3%	366 successfully completed
Error Rate ²⁰	+/- 2.6%	+/- 11.4%	+/- 5.1%

19 Industry guide – 10 - 20% expected / considered good.

20 Error rates at the 95% confidence limit (which means that 95% of the cases/observations are estimated to fall under the normal bell shaped curve). The smaller the error rate the better. Therefore, the mail and phone survey to residents rates are very satisfactory, while the business survey rate is less so. However, the Business Survey rate is still within an acceptable reliability regarding accuracy of responses.

Mail Survey

How representative of Acton’s population are those who responded to the mail survey?

The demographics of respondents reflect U.S census data and are thus considered to be fairly representative of the town’s population. Three of the questions were socio-economic status items that allowed comparison with U.S. Census data to check the relative “representativeness” (compared to the Town as a whole) of the survey returns. These three items were age, annual income and ethnicity.

It is important to point out that the mail survey results do not meet the test of randomness, when seeking to create mathematically defensible survey conclusions. The reason for this is the a non-random survey creates a self-selection process that results in some bias in the conclusions which tend toward the responses of those who are most interested in Acton and its government.

Respondents:

Who answered the mail survey questions?

The following tables show how the age, income and ethnicity characteristics of Residential Mail-Out Survey respondents match those characteristics of the entire population of Acton (as measured in the 2000 U.S. Census which is now eight years old).

In some cases, the survey percentages within the data groups agreed well with Town percentages. In other cases, there are fairly large differences, such as the over-representation of high income respondents and the under-representation of respondents of European ethnic heritage. Some of these differences can be attributed to the different time periods of the data. The survey was taken in 2008 and the Town data is from the 2000 U.S. Census. Since 2000, Acton Town officials have noticed that more people from South and East Asia have moved into Town. Also, income has increased since 2000. Overall, the survey seems to represent the population of Acton fairly well.

The survey questions and detailed analysis of the responses are contained in Volume II: *Appendices: Acton Voices*.

Survey % Distribution by Age Groups Compared with the Town as a Whole

Age Group	18-30	31-45			81+	Total
Survey %	2.5	31.8	48.7	13.8	3.2	100.0
Town %	12.4	38.5	37.1	9.1	2.9	100.0

Survey % Distribution of Annual Household Income Compared with the Town as a Whole

Income Group	\$10-40K	\$41-70K		\$101-131K	\$131K+	Total
Survey %	6.7	12.1	16.1	21.5	43.6	100.0
Town %	15.5	23.7	14.4	21.7	24.7	100.0

Survey % Distribution of Ethnic Heritage Compared with the Town as a Whole

Ethnic Heritage Group	Survey %	Town %
African	0.2%	0.7%
East Asian	7.4%	6.4%
European	62.9%	84.9%
Latino	0.9%	2.7%
Middle Eastern	1.0%	0.8%
Native American	1.8%	0.3%
South Asian	4.5%	2.2%
Mixed Heritage	2.7%	1.5%
Other Heritage	10.5%	0.6%
Preferred not to Answer	8.1%	--
TOTAL	100.0%	100.1%

Source for Town Data: 2000 U.S. Census of Population



Mail Survey Methodology: As part of the Acton Comprehensive Community Plan outreach efforts, a survey of attitudes, values, and opinions about the future of Acton, was conducted in March-May, 2008. All Town residents were sent a mail-out/mail-back postage-paid survey form in April. In March, the same survey form was posted on the Town website, encouraging Acton residents to fill it out electronically. Three hundred thirty five returns were obtained electronically. Of the 9,438 survey forms mailed out 1,141 were returned. The combined total of 1,476 returns (website and mail-back) represents a 15.6% return rate. Publicity was done via newspapers, notices and meeting announcements to help increase the return rate. The original deadline for mailing back returns was extended from April 11th into May to encourage more returns.

The survey was developed through a process of determining topics for questions from public and committee meetings, then preparing a draft for review by a subcommittee of the project Outreach Steering Committee. Eight re-drafts of the survey were prepared through this committee review, resulting in a final two-page survey form. This form was printed on two sides of a large sheet of heavy paper that could be folded, taped shut, and mailed out, and then mailed back with postage paid in both directions. The survey was addressed to Resident, Acton, MA 01720

(and 01718 for Nagog Woods) and sorted by 21 mail routes for delivery at a bulk-rate by the U.S. Postal Service. It was an anonymous survey with no way to identify who sent back returns.

The survey was comprised of seven multi-part questions, which contained a mixture of multiple-choice responses and open-ended comment type responses. Sixty-four separate items of information were asked for in the survey.

How accurate is the survey? Any survey provides a snapshot of public opinion at the time people responded. There are two sources of error in a survey: how close the people who responded were to a truly random sample of all Acton residents, and whether the sample was large enough to minimize statistical sampling error.

- The 15.6% return rate is large enough that the statistical error rate is +/- 2.6% at a 95% confidence level. (based on standard mathematical assumptions for a random sample of this type, there is a 95% probability that the result reported for each item is within +/- 2.6% of the actual views of the Acton population; for example, if the survey found that 70% of those who responded said X, then the odds are 95% that the actual opinion is between 72.6% and 67.4%.) Just

as in a pre-election survey, if the answers to a particular question are far apart (for example 70% said X and 30% said Y), we can be pretty confident that there is significantly more support for X. But if 52.6% said X and 47.4% said Y, the error rate could mean that the actual split is 50-50.

- Large differences in opinion are more meaningful than smaller differences.
- Randomness cannot be guaranteed in a mail-back survey; for example, people who were motivated to respond to the survey may have different attitudes from the people who did not respond.
- The results are not significantly limited by the sample size, but there may be reasons why the attitudes of some people who participate in town government might differ from those who responded to the survey, particularly as time passes and more specific issues arise.

The bottom line is that the survey gives useful information, but continued effort is needed to hear from Acton residents as more specific proposals are developed for consideration in later phases of the Comprehensive Community Plan.

Phone Survey

A phone survey was conducted of a random sample of Acton residents with questions that were derived from themes that emerged from the mail back survey and first Town-wide Visioning session. Randomness is defined as each member of a group being surveyed (residents of the Town of Acton) having an equal chance to be selected to provide a return. This test was met in the Phone Survey described in a separate report that can be found in Volume II: Appendices. The quality of randomness allows us to draw conclusions from the results of the survey that are highly representative of the entire population of the town. In this survey, some of the same topics as those in the Resident Mail-Out Survey were covered, giving a chance to better determine public opinion. Additionally, many of the questions asked in the phone survey were also asked of residents who participated in the second Town-wide Visioning session.

The table (at right) shows how the age categories reported in the Phone Survey match those reported by the U.S. Census Bureau in the 2000

Census of Population and those reported in the earlier mail-back resident survey.

The 18 to 30 age group is under-represented in both surveys. Perhaps this is because some people in this age group have not yet formed their own households and do not have listings in the land line residential phone book. There was no attempt to contact people by cell phone in the phone survey. The 31 to 45 age group is quite under-represented in the phone survey and somewhat under-represented in the mail-out survey. Perhaps this is because this is the age group that was too busy or not yet vested enough in Acton to answer the survey. The 46 to 65 and 66 to 80 age groups are over-represented in both the phone and mail-out surveys. This may reflect the fact that these people have probably lived longer in Acton and are more interested in its civic affairs. They also are less likely to have had younger children at home which allowed them more time to answer the survey. The fact that the Town of Acton age group data are eight years old is another possible explanation for differences in the relative proportions between age groups in the Town, and those reported in the two surveys.

Phone Survey Methodology: About 1,400 phone calls were made by three callers located in the Acton Town Hall.

- The 1,400 calls were made between the hours of 4:00pm and 8:00pm on weekdays over a four week period from May 27th to June 20th.
- From the 1,400 calls 366 were successfully completed. (This represents a 5% return from the 7,500 phone numbers listed for all Acton residents.)
- Publicity for the phone survey was done via newspapers, notices and meeting announcements to help increase the return rate.

Phone Survey % Distribution of Age Groups Compared with Mail-Out Survey and the Town as a Whole

Age Group	18-30	31-45	46-65	66-80	81+	Total
Phone-Survey %	2.2	22.4	52.5	20.1	2.8	100.0
Mail-Out-Survey %	2.5	31.8	48.7	13.8	3.2	100.0
Town %	12.4	38.5	37.1	9.1	2.9	100.0

Source for Town Data: 2000 U.S. Census of Population

Business Survey

All town businesses were sent a mail-out/mail-back postage-paid survey form in April. The survey returns reasonably represented the existing business mix in Acton. The Outreach Committee also reached out to Acton's business community by meeting with the Chamber of Commerce, conducting a mini Visioning session with members of the Rotary Club and inviting businesses to participate in Town-wide Visioning workshops. These face-to-face sessions provided additional information to add to the survey results.

Profile of Business Survey Respondents

Thirty percent of the businesses survey respondents reported they had been in business in Acton between one and five years. Twenty-two percent reported they had been in business six to ten years. Eighteen percent said they had been in Acton between 11 and 20 years, and 30% said they had been in Acton for 21 years or more. Forty-two percent of businesses responding said they felt "very much" a part of Acton, while 31% said they felt "somewhat" a part of Acton. Fifteen percent said they felt "very little" a part

Business Survey Methodology:

In March 2008, the survey form was posted on a website, encouraging Acton business people to fill it out electronically. The survey was developed through a process of determining topics for questioning from public and committee meetings.

- The total of 86 returns (website and mail-back) represents a 5.3% return rate. Eighty-six returns are associated with an error rate of +/- 11.4%.
- Some of the same questions included in the parallel Resident Survey (done as part of this outreach effort for community comprehensive planning) were asked to determine if there were differences in attitudes between the business community and Town residents.

of Acton, while 13% said they felt "not at all" a part of Acton.

Youth Participation

Students in each of the public schools in Acton were invited to participate in the Visioning process. This gave students exposure to the planning process. It allowed students to express their opinions and have their voices heard and respected. It also gave adults an opportunity to hear directly from youth their Vision of the future.

Students and teachers prepared a large number of varied modes expressing their concerns and desires for the future. Each school submitted

their input (a partial list of which is to the right) which was presented at the Town-wide Visioning workshop on May 31, 2008. The input included a significant number of surveys at every grade level, drawings, movies, a song, posters, a mural, etc. It was also on display at the Memorial Library for a couple of months during the summer. The following is a partial list of some of the activities undertaken by the students and their teachers as part of the Visioning process:

Elementary Schools

- The Kids Committee (Parker Damon Building) held a mini-Visioning session
- Douglas 5th graders: made a movie of students in various parts of Acton discussing what they like/dislike
- Grades 1 & 2: Drawing Visions of the future
- McCarthy Towne & Merriam: mini-Visioning session
- Music Department: music video, lyrics of ideas: 6th graders sing song (lyrics are included on page 17)

Junior High Schools

- prepared a powerpoint of their plans for participation
- 8th grade survey
- Art Department: responses to Acton in terms of visual appeal

High School

- Survey
- Survey regarding sustainability
- Video interviews

Extended Day

- Poster with their ideas

Additional samples of the above are included in Volume II: *Appendices, Acton Voices*.



Written Survey²¹

Acton's three most important assets	Percent of Respondents
Schools	75.0% (1114/1479)
Diversity of activities, including open & wooded land, homes & businesses	31.7% (469/1479)
Conservation land	28.9% (414/1479)
Acton's three most important challenges	Percent of Respondents
High cost of living	57.7% (854/1479)
Traffic	46.4% (686/1479)
Lack of continuous pedestrian/bike paths	44% (650/1479)
Which would you like to see more of in Acton?	Percent of Respondents
Open space	82.7% (1101/1479)
Historic homes protected & preserved	74% (1025/1479)
Affordable housing ²²	40.8% (554/1479)
Sustainability	Percent of Respondents
Should Acton actively reduce greenhouse gases?	74.4% yes (1035/1479)
Are you willing to support taking action as long as it doesn't cost too much?	79.4% yes (1106/1479)

A survey was mailed to all Acton residents and was available on the web. The response rate was 15.6 %.

What We Heard: Highlights

The outreach process included a variety of forums with the goal of providing multiple opportunities for people to participate in contributing their ideas to the Vision for Acton's future (see page 43, "Planning Process," for a complete list of outreach activities). The following are highlights from the forums where the most people participated, that is, the mail survey to residents and businesses, the phone survey and the first two Town-wide Visioning sessions. A brief description of the methodology used in conducting the surveys is provided in the previous section (beginning on page 50), entitled "Who We Heard From" (page 48). For a more complete report on the surveys and the Visioning workshops, see Volume II: *Appendix, Acton Voices*.

- 21 See Planning Process Section (Page 43) and/or Volume II for more complete documentation of survey results and other outreach efforts.
- 22 While Massachusetts has a statutory definition of affordable housing, respondents may have defined this term in different ways.
- 23 Open-ended Questions (number indicates frequency of mentions and has relative value which pertains to each question individually.)

Participant Priorities

Actonians were asked in a variety of forums what they most appreciated about their town and to identify the most important future challenges. Participant priorities were:

Most important assets

- Schools
- Open Space, conservation land, natural features
- Historic Buildings / Landscapes
- Town Character (including rural and historic characteristics)

Also: sense of community, easy access/location, commuter rail, small town feel

Priority challenges

- Need to Control Growth & Development
- Need to Plan for Sustainability
- High Cost of Living (including taxes)
- Lack of Transportation Options (including walking/ biking)
- Traffic

Also: lack of adequate opportunities for casual social interaction, town government issues, erosion of town character

What makes Acton unique?²³

- Schools (201)
- Small Town (50)
- Rural (43)
- Location (35)
- Population (34)
- Access (33)
- History (33)

What would you like to see less of in Acton?²³

- Development (172)*
- Traffic (154)
- Taxes (122)

* also includes mentions of building & construction

What additionally would you like to see more of in Acton?

Cultural activities (community theater, art, concerts, etc.)

42.8% a little more variety

17.3% a lot more variety

60.1% a little more to a lot more variety

Restaurants (fast food, ethnic, family, etc.)

37.7% a little more variety

26.5% a lot more variety

64.2% a little more to a lot more variety

Shops and services (food stores, doctors, apparel, hardware, etc.)

55.5% Stay the same

What makes Acton unique? (number of mentions/percent of respondents)

Good schools (373/604; 62%)

Commute-related (distance from Boston/Worcester/easy access highways/commuter rail) (110/18%)

Conservation land/rural/open space (103/17%)

Community involvement/volunteerism (66/11%)

History/historic architecture (63/10%)

24 Responses represent a random sample of 366 residents called to complete the phone survey.

25 Open-ended questions

Cultural/ethnic diversity (62/10%)

Nothing- the town is overdeveloped/has lost its uniqueness (48)

Good services/amenities- well-maintained roads, etc. (40)

High Taxes (26)

Phone Survey²⁴

Questions were developed for a phone survey as follow up to the questions asked in the mail survey. These were intended to verify mail survey results as well as to be more specific about some of the issues that emerged as key in the mail survey. A random sample of residents were called. Approximately two-thirds (64.2%) of those called had not previously participated in the outreach process.

Do you agree that Acton’s top three assets are schools, diversity of activities and conservation land?

Yes 79.8%

No 20.2%

Do you agree that the three most important challenges facing Acton are the high cost of living, lack of walking facilities, and traffic?

Yes 57.4%

No 38.8%

What are Acton’s other top challenges? (number of mentions)²⁵

Taxes (23)

Funding schools (15)

Public transportation (9)

Do you think that there are enough social services available in Acton?

Yes 53.6%

No 15.0%

What social services are lacking? (number of mentions)²⁵

Social Worker (14)

Senior services (7)

Do you think the Senior Center should be expanded?

Yes 24.9%

No 7.1%

No Opinion 67.5%

If the Town builds a larger Senior Center should portions be available for other community needs?

Community-wide needs 54.6%

Reserved for seniors only 33.3%

Are you satisfied with the level of cultural activities in Acton?

Yes 76.3%



No 14.4%
 No Opinion 9.3%

What kinds of activities would you be interested in the Town developing and/or supporting?

Cultural activities 29.3%
 Community center, restaurants 25.8%
 Movie theater 10.3%

What other activities should the Town support or develop for teens and adults?

(number of mentions)²⁵

Swimming pool (10)
 Sports (9)
 Retail shops (6)
 Teen center (4)

Do you agree that a plan for sustainable development is a major concern?

Yes 72.4%
 No 12.0%
 No Opinion 15.6%

Do you agree that the Town should take actions to reduce greenhouse gases?

Yes 78.7%
 No 13.1%
 No Opinion 7.9%

How often would people in your household use a Town-wide shuttle connecting various high traffic areas ?

(only most frequent responses listed below)

At least once a day 10.3%
 At least once a week 28.7%
 Infrequently 24.4%
 Never 27.3%

What would be the most important improvement to make to the train station?

More parking 60.9%
 Shuttle to and from the station 21.9%

Do you think the Town should acquire or by other means preserve more open space?

Yes 60.8%
 No 23.2%
 No Opinion 16.0%

Business Survey

A separate survey was distributed to all Acton businesses. The survey indicated an overall satisfaction with business conditions in Acton, with a few areas identified for improvement. Traffic, signage and taxes led the list of conditions that respondents felt needed improvement for better business conditions. These were followed by improvements needed in permitting, zoning,

provision of more sidewalks, trash disposal and sewers.

Businesses surveyed were satisfied with police, fire and traffic control services. The highest level of dissatisfaction was with sign control, value received for taxes, the permitting process and town health and zoning controls. An overwhelming proportion of business respondents were satisfied with their location, building and premises. A majority were satisfied with their parking situations. Almost 75% of the businesses surveyed felt they reached adequate markets for their sales, and almost 60% felt they could find the type of employees they needed. About 20% of the business respondents were planning business expansions and 60% said they were interested in using “green” building practices and materials. Over 60% of the businesses said they were definitely or possibly interested in more connections between local businesses. Almost 30% of the businesses said they participated in local business associations.

Comparison of Business Survey with Residential Survey Responses

The following tables indicate the divergences between responses to similar questions in the business and residential surveys. Not surprisingly, the main difference is that the business community favors more growth in general, while the residents favor selective limited growth and improvements for existing development (such as sidewalks). As mentioned, sidewalks are also important to the business community.

Visioning Workshop I

A Town-wide Visioning session was held at the Parker Damon Building on Saturday, March 29, 2008 from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. Approximately one-hundred and seventy-five (175) residents participated. The following are some highlights from discussions held at the workshop.

BUSINESS SURVEY		RESIDENT SURVEY	
How should Acton evolve in the future?	Mentions	What would you like to see more of in Acton?	Mentions
1. Development	6	1. Sidewalks	131
2. Business	5	2. Restaurants	68
3. Walking Facilities	3	3. Open Space	43
3. Community Activities	3	4. Parking	39
3. Residences	3	5. Bike Paths	33
		6. Public Transportation	32
		7. Trails	29
		8. Shopping Opportunities	23
		9. Preservation	21
		10. Conservation Land	21
		11. Populations/ People	18
		12. Fiscal Restraint	16

BUSINESS SURVEY		RESIDENT SURVEY	
What makes Acton Unique?	Mentions	What makes Acton Unique?	Mentions
1. History	8	1. Schools	201
2. Diversity	7	2. Small Towns	50
3. Location	6	3. Rural	43
3. Schools	6	4. Location	35
4. Conservation/ Open Space	5	5. Population	34
5. Neighborhoods	4	6. Access	33
6. Country	3	6. History	33
6. Rural	3	8. Taxes	23
7. Suburban	2	9. Quality	22
7. Taxes	2	10. Services	20
		11. People	17
		12. Diverse	15
		13. Safe	12
		14. NARA	12
		15. Proximity	9
		16. Sports	6
		17. Police/Fire	5
		17. Charm	5
		17. Atmosphere	5

BUSINESS SURVEY		RESIDENT SURVEY	
What are Acton's assets?	Mentions	What are Acton's assets?	Mentions
1. Schools	18	1. Schools	1,005
2. Town Character	10	2. Diversity of activities	467
3. Open Character	9	3. Conservation land	408
4. Location/Access	6	4. Easy access to highways	391
5. Community	4	5. Commuter rail transportation	390
6. Rail	3	6. Small town appeal with large town features	336
6. Police	3	7. Sense of community	300
7. Fire	2	8. History	293
7. Restaurants	2	9. Rural character, agricultural land	218
7. Diversity	2	10. Economic and ethnic diversity	206
		11. Friendly, welcoming small town feel	193

BUSINESS SURVEY		RESIDENT SURVEY	
What are Acton's challenges?	Mentions	What are Acton's challenges?	Mentions
1. Traffic	19	1. High cost of living	854
2. Taxes	8	2. Traffic	684
3. Parking	4	3. Lack of continuous pedestrian/bike paths	642
3. Growth	4	4. Lack of range of restaurants	377
3. Development	4	5. Erosion of town character	371
3. Housing	4	6. Lack of walkable shopping districts	362
4. Condos	2	7. Lack of opportunities for casual social interactions	176
4. Transportation	2	8. Lack of range of retail shopping opportunities	163

What are your favorite things about Acton that you would want to ensure be preserved in the future?

(listed in order of priority as expressed by participants)

- Rural character, natural features, conservation lands
- Schools
- Village centers
- Sense of community
- People, diversity
- Variety & convenience of retail and services
- Train
- Culture of volunteerism
- Recreation
- Location
- Arts and culture
- Neighborhoods

What are your least favorite things about Acton that you feel are important to change in the future?

(listed in order of priority as expressed by participants)

- Traffic
- Lack of walkability
- No real town center
- Affordability (including housing)
- Lack of adequate site review, subdivision design and design review

- Kelley's Corner
- Biking and walking not safe
- Lack of growth management
- Poorly designed commercial areas
- Improvements needed at train station
- Divisions between competing interests
- Taxes are too high
- School issues (e.g., overcrowding, lack of full-day Kindergarten)
- Lack of variety in activities/places to go

What do you see as challenges and/or potential obstacles to positive change facing Acton now or in the future?

(listed in order of the number of groups who mentioned this as an issue)

- Limited ability to control growth and development
- Money/budget
- Achieving consensus is difficult
- Taxes
- Approach of town government
- Volunteerism
- Lack of walkability in many parts of town
- Limited public transportation
- Aversion to bringing new businesses into town

If you could do one thing to improve Acton, what would it be?

(listed in order of priority as expressed by participants)

- Make pedestrian and bike-friendly environment
- Develop a sustainability plan
- Expand the commercial tax base
- Make traffic improvements
- Control development
- Protect and acquire open space
- Provide public transportation

Visioning Workshop II

A Town-wide Visioning session was held at the Parker Damon Building on Saturday, May 31, 2008 from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. Approximately eighty (80) residents participated. The following are some highlights from discussions held at the workshop.

Open Space

A large majority of participants were in favor of the town acquiring more open space.

Other means of preserving open space were also supported including:

- Zoning
- Deed restrictions
- Public education
- Use of Community Preservation Act funding
- Limiting development
- Providing tax incentives

Rural Character

Participants suggested ways of preserving rural character including through:

- Zoning
- Active support of agriculture
- Encouraging development of meandering sidewalks
- Promoting natural environments

- Preserving and promoting green space along roads and in front of buildings
- Protecting and promoting community gardens, stone walls, trees and country fairs

Neighborhoods

Participants defined a good neighborhood as including the following characteristics:

- Sidewalks
- Many ways of communicating and interacting among neighbors both casually and formally
- Addressing traffic issues
- Providing more activities such as playground, neighborhood swimming pool, coffee shop, library, places to walk to

Village Centers

Participants defined the characteristics of an ideal village center:

- Activities including parks, outdoor areas to congregate, grocery store. Family restaurant, benches, variety of businesses, parking in back of buildings, places to go at night
- Walkability
- Events
- Character – “quaint, but not cute,” each village with its own distinct character
- Strategies – ease traffic by planting flowers and trees, use zoning, move towards mixed use

Addressing Acton’s Challenges

Participants emphasized the need to address the following challenges identified in the previous Visioning session and the Town-wide survey:

- High cost of living
- Lack of walkable facilities
- Traffic
- Need for growth management and site and design control

Participants also added the following challenges:

- Maintain Acton’s culture
- Biking
- Address climate change
- Recruit more volunteers
- Attract more businesses to town
- Increase school involvement

Planning for Sustainability

The majority of participants agreed that planning for sustainability is an important concern for the Town’s future. A large majority of participants also agreed that the Town should take actions to reduce greenhouse gases. Participants prioritized the kinds of actions they felt the Town should take. The top priority actions were:

- More walking/biking facilities
- Provide incentives for homes and businesses to become more energy efficient
- Provide public transportation

- Increase recycling
- Building and retrofitting public buildings to be energy efficient

Senior Center/Community Center

A large majority of the workshop’s participants felt the senior center should be expanded and a significant majority felt that the larger center should have a portion dedicated to use by the community at large.

Prioritizing Use of Resources

Participants identified the following priority goals:

- Planning for sustainability
- Addressing the lack of walking/biking facilities
- Enhancing village centers
- Preserving rural character
- Addressing traffic issues
- Addressing growth management and site and design review issues

26 Surveys were developed by students and teachers, in some cases with input from Consultants and Outreach Committee, in other cases they were developed independently.

Representative Youth Quotes

The following are some sample quotes from surveys²⁶ of Acton students in different grades:

“If I elected myself mayor of Acton I will make Acton a better place by stop littering in rivers because animals can get hurt or die. I would also like more people to recycle because trees get cut down and animals sometimes lose their homes. I would like to try to put most of the polar bears in captivity because in the artic the temperature is rising and polar bears need a cold habitat. What about cleaning. If you clean you have fun and people don’t bother. Also listen to your parents and teachers. Thank you.”

Extended Day, Grades 1 and 2

“I want more animals and wildlife”

Gates Elementary School , Cindy Hollis Class, Grade 1

“I would like Acton to have more parks. One reason why is because families can bond. Also kids need exercise like doing sports at the parks. It’s so fun for everybody. Kids are all over Acton. What if all of them wanted to go to a park and there’s only one - they can’t all fit!”

Gates Elementary School , Cindy Hollis Class, Grade 1

Student Survey - Stratified Random Sample

7 Green, RJ Grey Jr. High School (5/27/08)

The seventh graders expressed an interest in surveying as their way of participating in the visioning process and together with some of their teachers developed, administered and analyzed the results. Some examples are provided below:

Are you interested in making Acton a more environmentally conscious town?

49% – Yes

41% – Maybe

(it depends on the changes being made)

8% – No

When you stay after school for extra help or an activity, how do you get home?

Walk – 19.6%

Bike – 6.1%

Carpool with a friend – 16.7%

I get picked up in the family car – 60.8%

Other (roller blades, scooter) – 2%

If Acton had a clean, modern movie theater with affordable prices, how often would you go?

One or more times per week – 34%

About one time per month – 51%

About one or two times in six months – 11%

About one time per year – 3%

Never – 3%

R.J. Grey Junior High School, Grade 7

“ I enjoy all of the parks and playgrounds around town; it makes it look friendly and inviting. ”

“ A nice new mall, a movie theater with a lot of colors, and restaurants... ”

Pretty stuff:

- Town center monument
- Arboretum
- NARA Park
- Amanda
- Clouds
- Gardens
- Duck Pond
- Nature
- Great Road stuff

Not Pretty Stuff:

- KMart
- Condos
- Litter
- Libby’s fence

Want:

Mall (girls say and guys agree)

“I don’t enjoy how many houses there are in Acton that ruin the scenery.”

“Plant more trees.”

“What I enjoy most visually in Acton is its nice rural area look.” - Christian

“We could make malls, better-bigger brand stores to make visually exciting.”

“Not cut down trees and stuff, not build ugly houses, conserve the environment.”

“The thing that is least appealing is the old automobile shop on the corner near the bowling alley.”

“I don’t like downtown West Acton. The stores look very ... almost run down - as well as the house next to the Fire Department...”

“I love the parks - NARA Park and the design of the neighborhoods and houses.”

“Acton needs flashing neon signs along the border saying: Welcome to Acton.”

“I like the old colonial look.”

R.J. Grey Junior High School, Grade 8

The eighth graders developed their own survey and based it on the survey mailed to Acton residents as part of the outreach process. Sample responses are provided below:

What are THREE most important assets you feel Acton has (qualities you like)?

- “It is a tight community that is very loving. The people in Acton are very nice and are loving to their neighbors. Also is has almost no pollution.”
- School is very educational
- Great sports program
- Good schools
- Low crime rate
- Good neighborhoods
- Nice people
- Small town
- Caring community
- The history
- Fun things to do/activities
- “Riding horses”
- “Danny’s Place”

What are the THREE most important challenges you feel face Acton

(qualities you do not like)?

- Way too competitive
- Get up too early to go to school
- Not enough sidewalks
- Houses are expensive
- Amount of litter
- Drugs, smoking and bullying at school
- Loss of small town feel
- “Really bad school lunches.”
- “Taxes are too high”

What makes Acton unique?

- “It is a tight community that is depending on each other that builds a great community.”
- “Acton is very woody and does not look like your average town.”
- “Friendly people”
- “Has lots of different activities”
- “It’s history”
- Close to cities but rural
- Close to the Cape
- “The people who live in it”

How well do you know at least three of your neighbors?

- “My friend Phoebe lives next door. I sit with her on the bus. Rachel is in 8th grade and I talk with her at the bus stop. Carol is someone my mom uses in case of emergency.”
- “I know my neighbors well enough to be their friends.”

- “very well”
- “I see and play with them everyday.”
- “Very well, we talk a lot, we’re relatives”
- “not very well”

What would you like to see more of in Acton?

- “More green and open spaces because I really like nature, forests and large open fields that are left untouched by humans because you don’t see those types of things often anymore.”
- Activities for teens
- More eco-friendly opportunities
- Restaurants and clothing stores
- Sidewalks
- Less big companies, more local ones
- Grass
- “Programs to know more others less fortunate/elderly”
- “A downtown area”
- “I would like to see more parks and places to play for young children, because I, as a young child, loved to play around outside, and I don’t want Acton to turn into a city with only houses and buildings.”
- “More activities other than sports and school.”

What would you like to see less of in Acton?

- Less sports competition on Sundays

- Development/loss of open space
- Litter
- People going to fast food places like McDonald’s and Dunkin’ Donuts
- Pollution
- Drugs and smoking kids
- “I hate all the trees being cut down and having more and more townhouses/condos”
- roads
- “Less frivolous spending by town committees (stained glass window in high school instead of fixing mold in Douglas)”
- “Bad substitute teachers.”



Defining Acton's Character

The preservation of Town character is an important priority expressed in the Comprehensive Community Plan process. It is a very widely held concern and desire of Acton's residents. The importance of Town character to participants was evidenced by the frequency with which Acton's character was mentioned and the emphasis with which it was discussed in all forums.

One of the objectives of a Comprehensive Community Plan is to identify those features that make a "place" special and are treasured by its residents; and to protect the particular "sense of place" that makes a community unique and distinct from other communities. It is part of the role of a Comprehensive Community Plan to define these themes and identify measures and means by which to preserve and enhance them. It is these that are incorporated into the Vision statement and that need to be taken into account when determining how to manage growth and mitigate related impacts.

Residents were asked, in Visioning sessions and on comment boards located in the Memorial Library and at Town Hall, what they felt makes Acton unique and defines its character.

What Makes Acton Unique?²⁷

Qualities of Place

- Trees and open land
 - Great open spaces
 - Arboretum
 - Conservation land
 - Environmental awareness
- Good schools
 - Open enrollment – each has its own personality
- Seasonal changes, stone walls, foliage, scenery, "Steepled" churches, postcard picture, old barns, Picturesque
- Lots of big houses
- Historic, Classic New England
 - Exchange Hall, Town Hall
- Visually attractive, e.g., Arboretum
- It's next to Concord
- Disjointed, no town center
- Not overly commercial
- Traffic congestion
- Mix of housing & green space

Sense of Place

- Beautiful
- Neighborliness, friendly
- Semi-rural/town and country
- Bedroom community, commuter Town
- "Not your average Wonderbread Town"
- Suburb of Boston and Cambridge
- Spread out
- Villages
- Quiet, peaceful, sleepy
- Family-oriented, family-friendly, kid-friendly
- liveable, enjoyable
- Convenient
- Socially aware
- Safe community
- Nourishing and supportive community
- The presence of the past
- Rural meets suburban conflicts

Efficient Town government

- More proactive than other Towns
- Volunteer-oriented
- Solid corps of volunteers; limited participation of others; "Shrinking population" for volunteering; community participation/activism
- Good value – schools and Town economically efficient

People

- Lack of diversity culturally and economically and racially
- Upwardly mobile, middle-class
- Culturally diverse
- Middle upper class
- Sense of community, supportive people
- Outreach, i.e., libraries deliver books if needed
- Competitive in everything: education, sports, leisure
- Driven, ambitious
 - High achieving
 - Academic and athletic competitiveness
 - Girls soccer champs
- Educated
- Self-aware
- Stress
- Education as a shared value

At a tipping point - development

- On the edge of being a disaster
- Congested
- Overextended
- Financially unplanned – taxes not prudently allocated
- Sustainability in question if current growth rate leads to 35,000 with current services & infrastructure –
- Threatened
- Ad hoc planning and development
- Infrastructure doesn't support connectivity
- Strip mall

27 Source: From comment board located in Town Hall where residents were invited to write answers to the question, "What Makes Acton Unique?" combined with responses to the same question posed at the first Town-wide Visioning session held in March 2008.

Acton's Culture

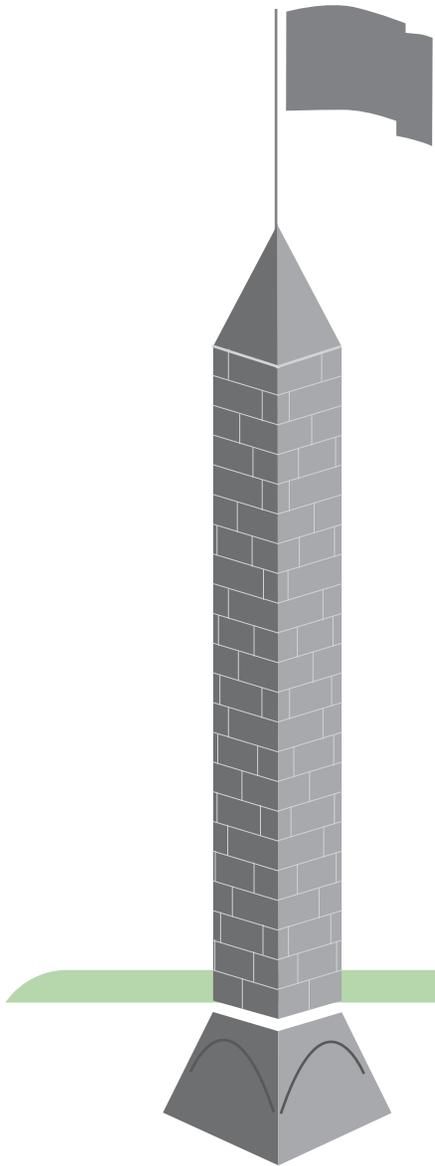
In addition to discussions regarding Acton's Town character, several residents made reference to Acton's culture and the importance of recognizing and appreciating it. Residents referred to a "strength of character" and a strong tradition of volunteerism as being important elements of the Town's culture.



Strength of Character:

"It's the Isaac Davis thing. He was the first to get killed at the Old North Bridge. I think the Acton thing started before him though - we have something called Crown Resistance Day which celebrates Acton's having public meetings in defiance of a decree by the King of England."

"I think it's the 'I haven't a man who is afraid to go' thing. We are a Town with a history of being out there first - not waiting for others to talk about things, but to lead the action."



NEXT STEPS

NEXT STEPS

Next Phase of the Planning Process: Phase II

We would like to end Phase I of the planning process by thanking all those who participated.

The next phase will begin with a verification and refining of the Vision and core values. This will be followed by an inventory of the Town's existing resources and the development of an implementation plan. The implementation plan will be comprised of recommended actions to take towards achieving the desired future as articulated by the Vision.

Goals will be developed around each Comprehensive Community Plan "element." These will include the following (as mandated by Commonwealth of Massachusetts Law).²⁸

State-Mandated Comprehensive Community Plan Elements

1. **Goals and policies** statement which identifies the goals and policies of the municipality for its future growth and development.

Each community shall conduct an interactive public process, to determine community values, goals and to identify patterns of development that will be consistent with these goals.

2. **Land use plan** element which identifies present land use and designates the proposed distribution, location and inter-relationship of public and private land uses. This element shall relate the proposed standards of population density and building intensity to the capacity of land available or planned facilities and services. A land use plan map illustrating the land use policies of the municipality shall be included.
3. **Housing** element which identifies and analyzes existing and forecasted housing needs and objectives including programs for the preservation, improvement and development of housing. This element shall identify policies and strategies to provide a balance of local housing opportunities for all citizens.
4. **Economic development** element which identifies policies and strategies for the expansion or stabilization of the local economic base and the promotion of employment opportunities.
5. **Natural and cultural resources** element which provides an inventory of the significant natural, cultural and historic resource areas of the municipality, and policies and strategies for the protection and management of such areas.
6. **Open space and recreation** element which provides an inventory of recreational resources and open space areas of the municipality, and policies and strategies for the management and protection of such resources and areas.
7. **Services and facilities** element which identifies and analyzes existing and forecasted needs for facilities and services used by the public.
8. **Circulation** element which provides an inventory of existing and proposed circulation and transportation systems.
9. **Implementation** program element which defines and schedules the specific municipal actions necessary to achieve the objectives of each element of the master or study plan. Scheduled expansion or replacement of public facilities or circulation system components and the anticipated costs and revenues

²⁸ From The General Laws of Massachusetts, Chapter 41: Section 81D. Master plan



associated with accomplishment of such activities shall be detailed in this element. This element shall specify the process by which the municipality's regulatory structures shall be amended so as to be consistent with the master plan.

Acton has added two additional elements:

10. Sustainability

11. Governance

Continue Community Conversation

Phase II will be focused on more specific issues, priorities and recommendations. It is critical that the community conversation continue and that the Town continue to conduct outreach to obtain thoughts and reactions to the plan as it is being developed. The recent dramatic downturn in the national and international economic outlooks (beginning in September 2008) with the resulting uncertainties and vulnerabilities of municipal finances may force a slower Phase II process than anticipated during the active Outreach Campaign held in the Spring of 2008.

Additionally... the second phase of the planning process should meet the following challenges:

- Target outreach to those segments of the population that were underrepresented in the first phase.
- Continue efforts to involve youth
- Conduct public education and continue to engage residents
- Continue to keep the business community informed about the master planning process and continue to reach out to them for their reactions to more specific recommendations developed in later phases of the plan.

Key Concepts to Include in Phase II

The following is a partial outline of elements to include in the development of final goals and objectives for the Comprehensive Community Plan as it moves forward to its second phase and closer to identifying ways to achieve the Vision. The outline is based on the Visioning process.

Natural Resources

Preserve and protect rural characteristics

- Natural features, open lands, ponds, natural habitat
- Conservation lands
- Tree-lined roads
- Farms

Traffic and Circulation

Improve the experience for walkers and bikers

- Safe, pleasant
- Connections, system of sidewalk, paths, trails
- Provide alternative mode of transport

Train

- Some improvements, especially to parking
- Consider commuter rail shuttle

Traffic and Circulation

- Reduce congestion, increase safety at intersections, traffic calming
- Provide alternative modes of transportation
- Improve parking

Public Facilities and Services

Continue to provide excellent education

- Support community commitment to education and related facilities
- Community education and use of schools after hours
- Relationship to local businesses and Town

Maintain quality municipal properties including the public safety building, Memorial Memorial Library, Town Hall, etc.

Importance of community gathering

- Libraries
- Senior Center
- Community center
- Teen center
- Movie theater and family restaurants

Sustainability

Plan and educate for Sustainable Future

- Renewable energy sources in public buildings
- Recycling
- Explore variety of ways
- Develop public education campaign
- Ensure fiscal sustainability and tax affordability for the middle class
- Create inviting environments for young adults so that they stay local
- Develop more attractive businesses that pay good wages so residents can work locally

Land Use

Protect and enhance distinct village centers

- Make more walkable
- Provide more activities
- Improve Kelley's Corner
- Review zoning so that it supports desired degree and type of development

Manage and control development

- Enforce existing zoning and step up design review
- More proactive planning of development
- Protect open spaces

Neighborhoods

- Walkable to services
- Safe
- Moderate density; green space

Preserve sense of community

- Small town feel, family-friendly
- Casual social interaction, run into people you know on the street
- Friendly, helpful, welcoming, Town spirit

Economic Development

Improve functioning and aesthetics of commercial areas

- Great Road – safety, visual appeal, pedestrian experience

Protect and enhance retail mix

- Support local businesses
- Attract more family restaurants
- Enjoy lack of malls and big box
- Increase commercial tax base

Historic and Cultural Resources

Protect and enhance historic buildings/sense of history

- Historic preservation of buildings (e.g., Exchange Hall)
- Historic celebrations, (e.g., Crown Resistance Day, Patriots Day) – “presence of the past”

Arts and culture

- Community Theater
- Create more opportunities

Housing

People, Diversity

- Support variety in population – age, economic, ethnic, religious
- Support tolerance

Provide a range in housing types

- Affordable to empty nesters, workforce and young families
- Need for accessible units
- Ensure that design is compatible with community character

Open Space and Recreation

Recreational opportunities for youth and adults

- Outdoor and indoor (e.g., x-country skiing, NARA Park, tennis courts, ice skating)

Town Governance

Review government organization and structure

Evaluate government functions

- Improve communication
- Creative solutions
- Culture of volunteerism (build on, attract more)
- Strike balance between affordable taxes & provision of Town services



Preliminary Identification of Key Priorities for Acton

Today. Tomorrow. Together.

Based on an initial interpretation of resident and business interests expressed through the Comprehensive Community Planning process, we believe the following key priorities need to be attended to first and foremost (although not necessarily in the order listed). These priorities will be verified and further refined throughout the rest of the Comprehensive Community Plan process:

- Preserve open space through a variety of measures including acquisition, zoning, conservation easements, etc.
- Preserve and enhance historic buildings and landscapes, including those located in the historic districts, but also historic sites and landscapes located throughout the Town.
- Plan for sustainability.

- Provide needed infrastructure to improve walking and biking experience.
- Enhance and improve existing village centers and shopping areas, especially Kelley's Corner.
- Improve traffic (e.g., provide a Town-wide shuttle, make improvements to train station, facilitate walking and biking).
- To better manage growth, use site and design review to be more intentional about ensuring that new development is consistent with Town character.
- Provide more opportunities for community gathering, possibly including a new community/senior center.



Priorities will continue to be discussed and refined with residents and town officials as the planning process continues. Therefore, priorities may change as a result of additional analysis and/or as a response to community input. Also, more specific action items will be identified and recommended.

Community Challenges for Phase II and Beyond

Areas needing more conversation

There are still a number of questions remaining to be further explored in Phase II of the Comprehensive Community Plan process. In some instances there is no clear consensus regarding a particular issue while others need additional discussion because of actual disagreements. Additionally, while the Emerging Vision, core values, and goals and objectives encapsulate what most people agree are issues important to Acton's future, circumstances change, new people join the conversation and other factors can cause things to change. This list should be considered as a starting point for further refining of the Community's Vision for the future.

This list of community challenges will be continually added to and responses to these questions will be sought as the planning process moves forward.

Sustainability

- What can we do to reduce greenhouse gases, what are we willing to do
- What are we willing to pay for?

Walking/Biking

- Should sidewalks, walking trails or bike paths have priority in terms of timing?
- Where should sidewalks be clustered first?
- Are there some areas where putting in sidewalks goes against the rural character?

Diversity

- How will we best meet the challenge of creating a unified social and civic fabric from an increasingly diverse population?
- How will we balance the needs of a growing aging population and the need to continue to support school facilities and the curriculum?

High Cost of Living

- How will we address the high cost of living especially in view of the value of supporting socio-economic diversity?

Traffic

- How will we address traffic issues when they tend to be regional in nature?

Housing

- How can we reconcile the inherent conflict between the desire to provide affordable housing and that of preserving open space?
- How and where will our more affordable housing be located?
- How can we preserve the existing mix of housing, both historic and non-historic, in the face of tear downs to build very large new houses? Is this in keeping with Acton's character?

Village Centers

- How can we balance strengthening our village centers and creating more vitality there and in Kelley's Corner with absorbing the impacts of increased activity and development (e.g., traffic, more school children, change in character, etc.)

Open Space

- How do we fund the purchase of open space once the Community Preservation Act (CPA) set aside funding has been depleted?
- How do we define the term "open space" as a community and use it in a way that best communicates what we mean and what we value?

What are Acton's challenges for the future?

Resident mail survey respondents identified the following:

- High cost of living
- Traffic
- Lack of continuous pedestrian/bike paths
- Lack of range of restaurants
- Erosion of Town character
- Lack of walkable shopping districts
- Lack of opportunities for social interactions
- Lack of range of retail shopping opportunities

Phone survey respondents agreed in part with mail survey respondents and added:

- Taxes
- Funding schools
- Public transportation

Business owners responded with:

- Traffic
- Taxes
- Parking
- Growth and Development
- Housing and Condos
- Transportation

Visioning workshop participants felt that these were the top challenges:

- Limited ability to control growth and development
- Money/budget
- Achieving consensus
- Taxes
- Approach of government
- Lack of walkability in many parts of town
- Traffic and limited public transportation
- Planning for sustainability
- Recruiting more volunteers
- Attracting more businesses
- Maintaining Acton's culture