

# Acton 2020

## GETTING AROUND ACTON: PUBLIC WORKSHOP

### BURNING ISSUES: Committee Role-Playing



## How can we love cars and hate traffic?:

### Getting around Acton

Wednesday, March 9, 2011

7:00 p.m.

Acton Town Hall

**PURPOSE:** *To hold a public workshop with the purpose of gaining a better understanding of transportation and circulation by inviting “experts” and the public to discuss some of the key issues important to Acton’s future. Also to further understand the variety of viewpoints and people’s concerns regarding this issue.*

“I got stuck in traffic.” We all hear it, perhaps with increasing frequency. Acton has several key traffic pinch points that cause frustration for all. What can the town do to help alleviate car congestion? And what about those who are unable to drive? Are Actonians willing to use more public transportation if it were offered? Are there enough people clustered in the right places to make a public transportation system viable? Will investment in bike paths and sidewalks help alleviate traffic? Or are the costs of such undertakings really worth the benefit? Come help us evaluate how we can get around town better.

7:00 – 7:30 Welcome and Introduction (including powerpoint presentation)

7:30 – 8:30 Role-play including discussion

8:30 – 9:15 Small Group Discussions including mapping and prioritization exercises

9:15 – 9:30 Reconvene as Large Group  
Next Steps

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**Purple** = committee decision

**yellow** = consultant work to be done

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## 1. QUESTION FOR THE LARGE GROUP:

Traffic. What is it that really rankles people about the life of cars in Acton, and can we do anything about it? Are traffic issues more about safety and predictability about getting things done and less about the speed of getting from one place to another?

Get some sense as to majority opinion in the room

## 2. Move on to ROLE PLAY

**Purpose of Role-play:** To articulate concerns surrounding economic development and to have Acton “win” the role-play (as opposed to one particular point of view winning) by coming up with a list of concerns to address and some mitigating measures

The following is a hypothetical scenario that has been imagined to be somewhat extreme in order to best dramatize trade offs and positions. The role-play will consist of Committee members representing the 5 most relevant goals to the topic. Role-play guides are provided.

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## HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO

Let us suppose the following (this is not a real scenario and some of the facts have been stretched in order to dramatize issues):

While Acton has recently implemented public transportation services, invested in sidewalks, and promoted two rail trail conversion projects, these programs and projects will not substantially alter travel behavior without a substantially greater investment. With limited available federal and state funds, the Town is proposing an increase in local property taxes to pay for investments in transportation facilities and services in the form of an override.

Funds would be used to complete the Town's sidewalk plan, implement an on-road bicycle route network, expand the MinuteVan service to cover all of the Town's villages, and identify traffic calming projects throughout the Town. In addition, funds would be used to repair, reconstruct, and maintain Town-owned roadway, sidewalk, and trail infrastructure. Some of the Town's dirt trails would be paved in order to make them more accessible to disabled people, older people, and individuals with strollers. In order to complete the sidewalk network the Town will have to obtain easements and right-of-way from residents whose property the sidewalks will be constructed on. Some residents are likely to deny requests for construction easements and the Town may need to explore eminent domain as an alternative strategy. In addition, the Town may consider implementing some restrictions on the use of cars in the village centers and increasing parking fees to discourage driving.

## VITAL STATISTICS:

## PROJECTED HYPOTHETICAL IMPACTS

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## ROLE-PLAYING PERSPECTIVES

**Instructions:** *Read through the blurb describing the hypothetical scenario and issue and then think about how you might respond to this if you were to represent your assigned goal. In other words think about what your position would be if you only had this goal in mind when making decisions regarding economic development in Acton. It's OK to make extreme arguments in order to exaggerate your points. The purpose here is to illustrate the diversity in points of view and the potential trade offs of decisions in order to get the discussion off to a "burning" start!*

*1. Playing your role, comment on what pleases you and what concerns you about this proposal? Can you think of ways to mitigate some of your concerns?*

*2. Use the questions as a guide to ask questions of the experts and of the public.*

**Goal viewpoints** for the role-playing will be:

Town Character (con)

Sustainability (pro)

Connections (pro)

Inclusion/Diversity (pro)

Financial (con)

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**ROLE:** Preserve Town Character

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

Objective 1: Preserve rural characteristics and open space

Objective 2: Preserve historic buildings and landscapes

Objective 3: Foster an understanding and appreciation for what makes Acton unique, including its history.

Objective 4: Preserve and enhance village centers

## **SCRIPT GUIDE:**

Walking and bicycling are certainly compatible with Acton's character, but an ambitious plan to double the extent of sidewalks raises many issues of how compatible this sidewalk system would be with the rural character of many of the Town's roads. The same goes for widening roads to accommodate bicycles.

**POSITION:** Con

“While I do not want sidewalks everywhere because that goes against my sense of what rural character means, I am interested in reducing traffic congestion because it will help to enhance Acton's character”

## ***Additional Concerns:***

- What have other communities done to calm traffic? What about to reduce traffic congestion?
- What kinds of changes can we expect to realistically make on 2A given that it is a state road? What about Rt. 27?

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## ROLE: Ensure Environmental Sustainability

**As Acton residents, we recognize that our health and well-being depend on protecting the web of life of which we are a part. Therefore, it is vital that we live and work here in a manner that supports that web and the well-being of people everywhere, including future Acton citizens.**

Objective 1: To protect the quality and quantity of the water that cycles through our ground water, surface water, drinking water, waste water, and storm water systems.

Objective 2: To reduce waste and the accumulation of toxins in our environment.

Objective 3: To reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from residential, commercial, industrial, and municipal uses.

Objective 4: To move toward patterns of land use and land protection that support broad biodiversity, soil preservation, and healthy local agriculture.

### SCRIPT GUIDE:

This is where the rubber meets the road from the sustainability viewpoint. Transportation accounts for a large share of our energy use, and we cannot solve our transportation problems by accommodating more automobiles as the Town grows. Instead, we need a new paradigm that allows people to drive if they wish but also provides alternatives that make walking, biking, and public transportation real options for our citizens.

### POSITION: Pro

“Providing alternative methods of getting around town (other than the car) will reduce toxins in the environment”

### *Additional Concerns:*

- What can be done to encourage more biking, besides actually creating the bike paths?
- What have other communities done to accomplish this (e.g. public outreach campaigns, bike parking stations)?

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ROLE: Maintain and Improve Financial Well-being of the Town

**GOAL: We believe it is critical for us to sustain and strengthen our town's financial well-being. This includes commercial and economic development that reflects the long-term goals of both businesses and residents of the community.**

Objective 1: Improve existing commercial areas

Objective 2: Promote economic development that supports our other goals

Objective 3: Achieve a balance of services and taxes

Objective 4: Support the ability of all residents to stay in Acton for a lifetime

## SCRIPT GUIDE:

The transportation system requires considerable ongoing public investment; deferred maintenance of transportation resources can lead to considerable financial strain when costlier replacement projects are eventually needed. Sustainable transportation is all to the good, but we can't afford major investments at this time, and an override is a non-starter.

POSITION: Con

"How much is all this going to cost and is it worth it?"

### *Additional Concerns:*

- How much do sidewalks cost?
- How much do bike paths cost?
- How much room is needed to put in sidewalks and/or bike paths? How much room do Acton streets have?

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## ROLE: Improve Connections

**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 1: Improve walking and biking experience

Objective 2: Improve circulation around town

Objective 3: Promote communication amongst town government, citizens, schools, and the business community.

Objective 4: Support and strengthen neighborhoods

### SCRIPT GUIDE:

Whenever transportation is discussed in Acton, the conversation always seems to focus on better conditions for biking and walking. These modes, as well as a public transportation system that is convenient to use, are the ways we can really make a positive impact on providing connections. Furthermore, when people can bike and walk more places in safety, it will strengthen our neighborhoods and business districts.

### POSITION: Pro

"Providing better physical connections (e.g. sidewalks, bike paths) may contribute to strengthening the social ties in our neighborhoods."

"Having people walk, bike and taking the town shuttle may create more a sense of community as there are more opportunities for casual encounters.

### *Additional Concerns:*

- What other low- to medium-density towns have made a transition away from more and more cars? How did they do that?
- Are there any studies that show what suburban people mean when they say there is "too much traffic?" What makes it "too much" and what can municipalities do to relieve the stress?

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## • ROLE: Support Inclusion and Diversity

**We value our diversity in all its forms, reflecting a range of ages and socio-economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. We wish to foster respect, promote interaction and actively encourage a wide variety of individuals to live, work, and play in our community.**

Objective 5.1: Support all ages

Objective 5.2: Support households of all income levels

Objective 5.3: Embrace cultural diversity

Objective 5.4: Support citizens with disabilities in participating fully in the life of the community

### SCRIPT GUIDE:

Seniors and children, as well as many people with disabilities cannot travel independently if the only option is to drive or be driven around Town. As the population of Acton ages, this will become even more of an issue. Good sidewalks enable young people, seniors, and people with disabilities to move around safely, and teenagers and younger adults can take advantage of opportunities to bicycle more safely. Expanding the existing demand-responsive shuttles will bridge the gap for longer trips within town.

### POSITION: Pro

“Providing public transportation options supports teens and seniors to get around as well as individuals who do not own cars (or who cannot afford to own more than one)

### *Additional Concerns:*

What is needed to support other modes of public transportation (e.g. shuttle, buses)? What can we do to increase ridership potential?

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## DISCUSSION with Experts & Public

BRIEF SUMMARY OF INPUT AND DISCUSSION UNTIL THIS POINT

ENDING QUESTION (no longer in role-play)

What are some obstacles to the use of alternative modes of transportation?

Walk

Bicycle

Shuttle

Train

Other?

What can we do to encourage the use of alternative modes of transportation?

Walk

Bicycle

Shuttle

Train

Other?

### ***Brief Discussion***

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## SMALL GROUP EXERCISE

(45 minutes)

Brief Introduction and description of small group exercises (10 minutes)

*You will be asked a couple of questions, next you will be invited to participate in a mapping exercise and finally you will be asked to prioritize action steps.*

### 1. A. How often to you walk or bike around Town? Show of hands

<i>What?</i>	<i>Where?</i>	<i>Why? (exercise, to get to a specific destination, good for the environment)</i>
Walk		
Bike		
Other		

*B. What are reasons that you choose not to? (Do you feel safe? Is it pleasant, is there enough to look at, to do along the way?)*

2. *Where would you like to be able to go walking/by bike/ or by public transportation (what kinds of goods and services would you like to access in this way)?*

*If there was an opportunity to cluster businesses and other activities in one location so that you could park once and then walk so that it was safe and pleasant, would you like this? (and if yes, what kinds of activities would you like clustered?)*

3. *How often to you car pool? (estimate times per week)*

### 4. Mapping (15 minutes)

USE MAP --- what are the main locations and/or routes that should be priority for sidewalk/bike improvements and/or public transportation (USE COLOR CODED **PIPE CLEANERS** TO INDICATE MODE NEEDED)

*Sidewalks*

*Bikepaths (also indicate locations where bike racks are needed)*

*Dirt paths/trails*

*Shuttle*

*Other?*

### 5. Prioritizing (5 minutes)

*If you could do one thing to address traffic and circulation issues in Acton, what would it be?* PRIORITIZE WITH DOTS: After all participants have added their thoughts to the list, give each participant 5 dots. They may not use more than 3 on any one item.

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## RELEVANT REFERENCES

### Maps

Commercial and Industrial Areas in Acton (Figure 2.7 in Inventory)  
Housing Opportunities Identified in the 2006 Community Development Plan (Figure 1.6)  
Acton Open Space (Figure 5.1)  
Existing Zoning (Figure 8.2)  
Acton Sidewalk Locations (Figure 6.2)  
Acton Multimodal Transportation Network (Figure 6.1)  
Acton Recreational Resources (Figure 5.2)  
Historic Resources (Figure 4.6)

Copy of inventory

### Other Relevant Reports?

Town shuttle schedule  
Map of paths/trails?  
Information update on Bruce Freeman rail/trail?

### PROPS

Use **legos or colored stickers** to indicate desired locations + type / kind of economic development

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**ROLE PLAY QUESTIONS.** Begin with “staged debate” in order to highlight variety of points of views and potential tradeoffs . Answer the following questions “in character” (think about what representing your goal in its extreme would mean).

### Testing the Value of Density as a planning tool

a) A lot of recent literature about suburban planning seems to be about the ecological and other negative consequences of sprawl (low density housing chewing up open space), and the value of density (concentrations of people and activity approaching urban levels allows for more human interaction, and less use of energy and land and cars). What can we do to change the economic incentives and regulatory requirements so that developers are motivated to do in-fill development and not sprawl development in Acton?

#### a. Density vs Sprawl in primarily residential areas

One zoning tool Acton has used to encourage preservation of open space while still creating residential developments is cluster zoning (single family homes) and Planned Conservation Residential Communities (PCRC, which allows up to four dwelling units/building). Has that been successful? [from von Hoffman, Wrestling with Growth in Acton, Massachusetts (Jan 2010), “ many opponents of growth in Acton dislike the law because they feel that it increases the number of allowable dwellings by allowing developers to count wetlands, on which wetland restricts prohibit development, in calculating their land-to-housing unit rations.” p. 20-21]

How safe is it to walk or bike in Acton?

Do we have the density to make shuttles/buses work?

What kinds of things can we do to reduce traffic congestion?

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## RELEVANT REFERENCES

**PROPS:** Maps with color –coded pipe cleaners

Do we have info such as:

Areas of most congestion?

Location of existing sidewalks /bike paths?

Shuttle route?