

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 Discussion of Hypothetical Scenario

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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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 transportation 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 necessarily a real scenario and some of the facts have been stretched in order to dramatize issues):

To go beyond recent initiatives in sidewalks, rail trails, and bus shuttles, the Town is proposing an increase in local property taxes-- \$250 on average for every Acton household -- to pay for investments in transportation facilities and services in the form of a special override.

Funds would be used to:

- double the extent of current sidewalks
- implement an on-road bicycle route network
- substantially expand the MinuteVan service
- implement traffic calming projects throughout the Town
- repair, reconstruct, and maintain Town-owned roads, sidewalks, trail infrastructure, and associated stormwater drainage.

Some of the Town's paths would be upgraded in order to make them more accessible to persons with disabilities and others who could then use them. In order to complete the sidewalk network the Town will have to obtain temporary and permanent easements from property owners who abut the sidewalks. Some residents are likely to deny requests for construction easements and the Town may need to explore eminent domain as an alternative strategy.

VITAL STATISTICS:		
Special Override of \$1.84 million per year for 10 years	Increase in average residential property tax bill of \$250 per year (for 10 years)	\$1.54 million for capital and \$0.3 million for operations
Public Transportation: Town-wide shuttle service centered on Kelly's Corner with two loop routes Covering West Acton, South Acton, Town Hall area, and Great Road	Funding would cover purchase of vehicles, operating expenses, signs, shelters, and also incorporate dial-a-ride and paratransit services	\$350,000 per year
Sidewalk Projects:	Approximately 4 miles per year	\$800,000 per year
On-road bicycle improvements:	Up to 8 miles per year plus intersection modifications	\$150,000 per year
Traffic calming projects:	As determined in project planning and design process	\$150,000 per year
Road maintenance and repair:	As needed	\$390,000 per year
Total		\$1,840,000 per year

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PROJECTED HYPOTHETICAL IMPACTS

Fiscal impact

\$250 per year for average homeowner based on a tax rate impact is approximately \$0.52 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation.

Environmental impact

Improvements to public transportation, walking, and bicycling facilities can lower automobile use and therefore reduce carbon and other emissions. Some increase in stormwater runoff, offset by new drainage improvements. (For example, unmitigated increased runoff could affect some habitats such as that of the blue salamander.)

Traffic impact

Increased walking, bicycling, and use of public transportation will lower vehicle use. Traffic calming and on-road bike lanes may lower vehicle speeds.

Impact on town character

There will be some change in appearance of streets and rural roads; Sidewalk Design Guidelines and input from Sidewalk Committee would limit these impacts. The design must be sensitive to important features such as mature street trees and historic stone walls.

Property impacts

Some easements will need to be acquired from property owners; eminent domain may be necessary in some instances.

Impact on sense community

Providing more facilities for walking/ biking and public transportation may result in increasing opportunities for spontaneous encounters thereby strengthening social connections and the overall sense of community in neighborhoods and in the Town overall.

Impact on health of residents

Providing alternatives to car travel may also result in making Actonians more fit as they will have additional opportunities to make exercise a part of their everyday life (if they choose to utilize these facilities). Physical activity has also been shown to be beneficial to mental health. Additionally, improvements to the road network including traffic calming measures will increase the safety of Acton's residents.

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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

"I do not want sidewalks everywhere because that goes against my sense of what rural character means." Additionally, I don't think that paving dirt trails is in keeping with our rural character"

"Sidewalk design can help to make these more compatible with our character."

"I am interested in reducing traffic congestion because it will help to enhance Acton's character"

"However, I can see how if more people are out of their cars it will add to the small town feeling that we value here in Acton."

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)?
- What if the Town were to implement some restrictions on the use of cars in selected locations plus increase parking fees to discourage driving? What other means/measures can we think of (examples from other places) to help encourage people to change their behavior/reduce their addiction to their cars?

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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? While I'm all for such facilities, I'm not sure that this should be our top funding priority. Also, I am really opposed to the taking of private property for any reason."

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

“Improving conditions for walking and biking will most certainly improve circulation around town. This proposal will provide more options, increase traffic calming, repair roads, and increase town shuttle access. This will most certainly reduce traffic congestion.”

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

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)

“Having people walk, bike and taking the town shuttle may create more a sense of community as there are more opportunities for casual encounters and may therefore support more interaction among different groups of people “.

“Providing safe options for walking and biking also helps to support the health of residents of all ages by providing opportunities for them to keep physically fit.”

Additional Concerns:

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

Is simply providing sidewalks and bike paths enough to encourage their use (examples from elsewhere)?

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DISCUSSION with Resource People & 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.

Questions

1. A. *How often to you walk, bike, or car pool around Town?*

Show of hands

<i>What?</i>	<i>How often</i> Every day Every week Every month Never	<i>Where?</i>	<i>Why?</i> (exercise, to get to a specific destination, good for the environment, other)
Walk			
Bike			
Car Pool			

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

Mapping (30 minutes)

Think about what activities/locations you would like to be better connected. Use a color-coded piece of yarn to show these connections (e.g. bike, walk)

Sidewalks

Bike lanes

Bike paths

Unpaved paths/trails

Other?

Additionally, use color-coded sticky dots to indicate the following:

<i>Critical missing bus stops for an expanded town shuttle</i>	<i>Yellow</i>
<i>Locations where it currently feels unpleasant/unsafe to walk/bike</i>	<i>Red</i>
<i>Locations where you think it would be good to have a "walking/pedestrian oasis"¹</i>	<i>Green</i>

Prioritizing Action Steps (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.

¹ A rest area with street furnishings such as bike racks, benches, trash/recycling bins, drinking fountain, etc.

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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?
Other?

PROPS

Use colored yarn and sticky dots to indicate desired locations