

Acton 2020



PUBLIC WORKSHOP ON HOUSING

Purpose: To hold a public workshop with the purpose of better understanding housing in Acton by inviting “resource people” to contribute their experience and expertise to help the Acton 2020 Committee gain perspective and deeper understanding of the issues and ways of addressing them. The public was also invited to contribute to the discussion. The workshop was held on Saturday, March 12, 2011 at 2:00 p.m. at Acton’s Town Hall.

Process: In order to be more interesting and engaging, a hypothetical scenario was developed and purposely exaggerated, in order to better illuminate the issues and tradeoffs. Acton 2020 Committee members performed a role-play of the different points of view (derived from master planning goals) to help to dramatize these tradeoffs as well as think through mitigating factors. The attendees (comprised both of the general public and resource people) participated by asking and/or answering questions. The role-play resulted in a list of pros and cons as well as mitigating measures agreeable to most. This then led to a more general discussion of the issues.

Prior to the discussion, the Consultants presented a PowerPoint slide show summarizing some of the main findings of their research regarding existing conditions and future trends in Acton. A Highlights Handout was distributed in order to provide participants with relevant facts and figures to help inform the discussion.

The discussion was followed by smaller break out groups, where among other things, attendees were invited to participate in a mapping exercise to begin to try to locate desirable types of activities and facilities. They were then asked to suggest action items and to prioritize these.

Following the small group discussions the group reconvened to share priorities and to outline next steps. The forum was well attended and was characterized by a high energy level and productive dialogue. Approximately forty (40) people were in attendance.



Key Themes:

The following are some key themes that emerged from the discussion with the “large group” of participants as well as in the small group discussions (See appendices for detailed notes).

UNDERLYING THEME: There seemed to be general consensus regarding a desire to focus on meeting Acton’s specific housing needs rather than 40B requirements (especially not in one large development) and that small, scattered and integrated sites of “affordable” housing is more in keeping with the town’s character and attitudes. Many thought that infill in and around village centers was a desirable and appropriate location for smaller, more affordable housing units.

- ❖ **Important to differentiate between meeting Acton’s needs and meeting 40B requirements.**
 - Even if met 40B would not meet all of the town’s housing needs
 - Even if build one large development will not solve the “problem” as additional growth will continue regardless
 - If can demonstrate commitment to a housing production plan of 35 units per year, get two years of 40B relief – this is preferable to focusing on the 40B 10% threshold and allows the Town to focus on its own housing needs
- ❖ **Small, scattered sites integrated** into the surrounding neighborhoods for smaller, “affordable” housing units is preferable and more in keeping with Acton’s physical and social fabric.
 - Concentrating people of any kind in one place is isolating and stigmatizing
 - Integration of low- and moderate-income families in many Acton neighborhoods is good for everyone
 - Locate where can walk to school, to shops, to public transport
 - Infill in West and South Acton and Kelley’s Corner
- ❖ **Focus on meeting Acton’s housing needs.** Acton’s housing needs include:
 - Low income rental
 - Moderate income ownership
 - Rental for elderly (below market)
 - Below market home ownership
 - Housing for people with disabilities
 - Emergency housing (for those with sudden unemployment, divorce)
- ❖ **Consider using existing housing stock for providing “affordable” units.**
 - Convert to two-family homes
 - Explore ways of making existing housing affordable by deed restriction
 - Condo buy down program began in 2007; eligible buyers prefer townhouses or single family homes, but these are too expensive for buy down program
 - Condo units in complexes with lots of rentals not eligible for mortgages, therefore opportunities for funding units that qualify is small
- ❖ Currently affordable housing issue is being addressed by **an all-volunteer effort.**
- ❖ **Key concerns regarding additional housing development** include impact on school enrollments (and related impact to quality of education and facility needs), loss of open space, impact on water supply, wastewater, and town character.
 - 37% of Acton households have school-aged children, this has been steady and town falls just under state average for per pupil cost
 - Outdoor water usage
 - LEED doesn’t give much weight to treating waste
 - Design reviews need to be mandatory

Priority Action Steps

If you could do one thing to address housing issues in Acton what would it be?

Action	Comments	# of groups¹	# of dots²
<i>Mixed use pedestrian village</i>	<i>Cluster housing & commercial activity in W. Acton, S. Acton & Kelley's Corner</i>	3	27
<i>Sewers to villages</i>		1	9
<i>Increase density</i>		1	9
<i>Lower property tax</i>		2	9
<i>Mandatory design review</i>	<i>For housing</i>	1	8
<i>Connect housing to transportation</i>	<i>Improve infrastructure</i>	1	6
<i>Housing moratorium</i>		1	6
<i>Reuse already built space</i>	<i>Identify green space for protection and protect it</i>	1	6
<i>More houses at average price</i>		2	5
<i>Get rid of 40B</i>		1	5
<i>Cap the population</i>		1	4
<i>Program to fund energy efficiency in older houses</i>		1	2
<i>55+ housing (ownership)</i>		1	2
<i>Allow 2nd detached unit on a lot</i>	<i>Allow houses to be subdivided</i>	1	2
<i>Limit housing size</i>		1	2
<i>Emergency housing</i>	<i>For use for less than 1 year e.g. for recent divorcees</i>	1	

Main Ideas regarding implementation:

- **CREATE MIXED USE PEDESTRIAN VILLAGES (36)** includes:
 - Cluster housing and commercial activities (27)
 - Increase density (9)
- **INVEST IN INFRASTRUCTURE (15)** includes:
 - Sewers to villages (9)
 - Connect housing to transportation (6)
- **CONTROL HOUSING DEVELOPMENT (15)** includes:
 - Get rid of 40B (5)
 - Cap the population (4)
 - Housing moratorium (6)

¹ Out of a total of three (3)

² After all participants added their thoughts to a list, each was given five (5) dots with which to prioritize. They were instructed to use all five (5), but no more than three (3) on any one item.

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- **PROVIDE VARIETY OF HOUSING TYPES (11)** includes:
 - More houses at average price (5)
 - 55+ housing (2)
 - Allow subdivision of existing housing (2)
 - Provide emergency housing
 - Limit housing size (2)
- **GUIDE DEVELOPMENT (10)** includes:
 - Mandatory design review (8)
 - Program to fund energy efficiency in older homes (2)
- **USE EXISTING HOUSING STOCK (8)** includes:
 - Allow subdivision of existing housing (2)
 - Reuse already built space (6)



When the small children present at the workshop were asked what kind of housing Acton needs one of them drew this picture and said "old houses with trees".

Small Group Exercise: Summary

In addition to the action steps that participants were asked to suggest and prioritize (summarized on the previous page), participants were asked a couple of questions and invited to participate in a mapping exercise.

Questions

1. Who do you think would like to live in Acton/stay in Acton but have a hard time doing so?

- People who cannot drive
- Retirees and elderly on a fixed income
- Town employees
- Crowded Nest Syndrome (elderly parents or in-laws moving in with their adult children) and Boomerang Generation (young adults moving back in with parents)
- Housing for seniors: should be low maintenance and near village services (e.g. condo with a small yard)
- Low-to moderate-income families
- Teachers: give them a tax break to encourage them to live in Acton
- Adult children who grew up in Acton

2. What would you say are the characteristics of the kind of housing that these people would like/meet their needs?

- Need housing options with lower property taxes. Rising property taxes makes living in Acton unaffordable for many low wage town workers and low or fixed-income individuals and families.
- Need smaller apartments to accommodate family members moving back to town in times of financial or physical need in order to be closer to their Acton relatives.
- Need better infrastructure support throughout the community. E.g. better maintenance of roads, especially re-stripping center line and travel lane edge markings for better visibility by elderly residents who drive. And better connectivity between residences and commercial establishments for those who don't drive.
- Development for persons over 55 years of age with all amenities (e.g. theater, gym, etc.)

3. Does this kind of housing exist in Acton? If yes, is there enough of it? Is it located well?

- Permit single family housing to be modified to include in-law apartments on the premises. This could alleviate the crowded nest and boomerang needs described above, and hopefully add to the value of the property.
- Redo outdated housing stock to produce more modern developments, specifically ones that appeal to young adults. Young adults are not drawn to the town now because Acton lacks the social environment to support them. I.e. there is nowhere to go and nothing to do in town to socially connect with

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- other young adults.
- Route 2A area is overdeveloped.

Mapping Participants were asked: **“Where do you think the different kinds of housing types would best be located?”** They were instructed to use color-coded legos with which to indicate locations on the map. Post-it notes were available for making comments on the map.

(Types of housing available on the key were: Single-family attached, single-family detached (e.g. townhouses), multi-family complex (e.g. multiple buildings), apartment building (e.g. garden apartments), mixed use (e.g. housing over retail), Other __).

- All three groups focused housing around West and South Acton villages and Kelley’s Corner. In all of these cases apartments and mixed use (retail with housing above) were the most popular type of housing used, with some townhouse options as well.
- Single-family homes were included only by one group – in East Acton and west of West Acton.
- Only one group put any multi-family complexes on the map (in this case, two in North Acton Village and one at Kelley’s Corner).
- Senior housing was designated by two groups – townhouses on Main Street between Acton Center and Great Road, and apartments in West Acton Village.





APPENDICES



APPENDIX A: NOTES FROM LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

- Worry about loss of open space
- Increased need (including emergency need) among current town residents
- Concern increases when a new house/ development is next to one's own house
- Impact on water supply and demand

Hypothetical Scenario:

- Make them luxury condos ←→ lower income, less environmental impact
- Can protect other areas of town from future 40Bs
- Avalon location appropriate, satisfied customers – this type of housing is good for divorcees; well-managed
- Design and visual impact can be considered
- Criterion: doesn't need to hide it, because of the good design; screen parking, make it pedestrian oriented
- Can 40B be limited to certain areas of town? State suggests that town designate appropriate area for this housing type and density
- Examples of well-sited and –designed housing?
- Need minimum number to support rental housing
- But, one 40B doesn't solve all the town's housing issues – Need more affordable units as total housing stock increases
- Avalon has been a good neighbor, (commenter via email) – police reports concentrated in apartments
- Concentrating people (of any kind) in one place is ludicrous – scattered smaller development is preferable for town character as well as social character
- Use of rental to take advantage of 40B loophole is not good for the overall housing needs
- Integration of low and moderate income families in many Acton neighborhoods has been good for everyone
- Agree with idea of integration and mainstreaming rather than concentrating affordable housing in a lump
- Should be in walkable locations, permit walking to schools
- More recent residents may see the town differently than long time residents
- Both lost and gain with growth

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- 37% of households with school children has been steady and Acton is just under state average for per pupil cost
- On 2A Springhill 12 unit building closed after fire
- 42% of households have school age children
- Agree with scattered sites for affordable housing
- Should get creative design for housing – paths, playground, fitness training – open to whole community
- Would oppose this project – haven't addressed need, but market rentals not really needed – only 60 affordable units in Avalon
- Don't use trickery to achieve 10% goal
- If committed to a housing production plan of 35 units per year, get 2 years of 40B relief
- Putting people in concentrated development at the corner of town is a failed strategy
- Need: low income rental, moderate income ownership, rental for elderly below market, below market ownership (between market and moderate income), housing for people with disabilities
- To address all 40B in one place doesn't get the human dimension – integration of tolerant people together. Her street has both owners and renters and she likes that
- Should ask people what they want
- Town could be proactive, not reactive – *improve* town character through new development, e.g. Kelley's Corner; also infill in West and South Acton would be positive
- LEED at lower levels (e.g. silver) “sort of a joke”
- Site is on brownfield not Greenfield
- Walk to school, close to community routes
- How does housing development affect real estate values?
- What ways are there to make existing housing stock affordable by deed restriction?
- Housing for older people – such as one's parents or grand parents – shouldn't be isolated and auto-dependent
- Actual projects have needed better design reviews – mandatory – and need follow-up to verify accountability through lifetime of project
- Even with one large development the other growth will happen anyway

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- Need to connect water resource and waste disposal issues – large projects can create unsustainable demand for water
- If reach 10%, doesn't mean diversity and affordable housing needs remain
- What's the break even point on local impacts? Brian Barber – probably around 2 BR
- Springhill Commons had wastewater problem
- LEED doesn't give much weight to waste
- Gal/capita/day is 30 gal higher than many projects – 2500 gal/day review threshold – easier for friendly 40B
- Believe that the perception of the supply problem is greater than the reality
- Have seen water use level out despite growth, outdoor use is a major concern
- Is this a 20th century housing development or a 21st century development? Housing growth in Acton took place when house prices were steadily rising.
- NE had biggest housing bubble of US, so it's a unique situation as prices drop
- Concord population stabilized, Acton's went up even after price drops
- Cheap oil is over – last master plan at stable \$20/gallon of crude oil, peak oil reached in 2000-2010 decade, now price going up
- 83% of tax dollars go to schools
- 2006 \$50 project to expand ABRSD High School – now on starvation diet Acton ranked 26th in Boston magazine
- Condo buy down program – began in 2007 – 1000 units worth \$175k or less (mostly \$150k to \$200k apartments); ACHC identified unit, makes offer contingent on funding base; DHCD approval. 1st was \$157k need to be \$100k plus condo fee; ACHC bought down to \$100k for qualified buyer → CPA funds – enough for 2 units per year
- Townhouse or single family home preferable but more expensive 00> \$250k for 2 bedroom – need to sell for \$150k
- Very hard to get a mortgage for a condo building
- Suburbs going bankrupt on a steady diet of single family homes
- Mortgage deduction gives the wrong incentive
- Plan must deal with survival of existing housing stock in Acton, e.g. convert to two family house

APPENDIX B: NOTES FROM SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Group 1 (Kathy Bagdonas):

QUESTIONS

1. Based on those you know, who do you think would like to live in Acton/stay in Acton but have a hard time doing so? (E.g. seniors, low and moderate income, town staff, teachers, fire fighters, adult children who grew up in Acton)

Group Responses:

- *People who cannot drive*
- *Retirees and elderly on fixed incomes*
- *Town workers*
- *Crowded Nest Syndrome (elderly parents or in-laws moving in with their adult children) & Boomerang generation (young adults moving back in with parents)*

2. What would you say are the characteristics of the kind of housing these people would like/meet their needs?

Physical form (*small, single family, apartment*)

Location (*access to public transportation, access to personal services, walk to shops, recreation, socializing*)

Price point (*"affordable", market*)

Other _____

Group Responses:

- *Need housing options with lower property taxes. Rising property taxes makes living in Acton unaffordable for many low wage town workers and low or fixed-income individuals and families.*
- *Need smaller apartments to accommodate family members moving back to town in times of financial or physical need in order to be closer to their Acton relatives.*
- *Need better infrastructure support throughout the community. E.g. better maintenance of roads, especially re-striping center line and travel lane edge markings for better visibility by elderly residents who drive. And better connectivity between residences and commercial establishments for those who don't drive.*

3. Does this kind of housing exist in Acton? If yes, is there enough of it? Is it located well?

Group Responses:

- *Permit single family housing to be modified to include in-law apartments on the premises. This could alleviate the crowded nest and boomerang needs described above, and hopefully add to the value of the property.*
- *Redo outdated housing stock to produce more modern developments, specifically ones that appeal to young adults. Young adults are not drawn to the town now because Acton lacks the social environment to support them. I.e. there is nowhere to go and nothing to do in town to socially connect with other young adults.*
- *Route 2A area is overdeveloped.*

PRIORITIZING ACTION STEPS

Group Responses (in descending order by number of votes received):

- *Mandatory design review for housing (8 votes)*
- *Improve infrastructure to connect housing to transportation (6 votes)*
- *Cluster housing and commercial activity in village centers, especially West Acton, South Acton, and Kelly's Corner (6 votes)*
- *Lower property taxes (6 votes)*
- *Housing moratorium (6 votes)*
- *Limit housing size (2 votes)*
- *More affordable housing (1 vote)*

Notes from Maps:

Location: Maynard border, near Assabet river trail

Note: in-law apartment access or b (?)

Location: Concord border, near Lawsbrook Rd

Note: A big commercial site: other business park or shopping center, down in the WR Grace site to offset taxes!

Location: north of Post Office Sq

Note: Senior housing

Location: Acton Center

Note: Acton Center is effectively built out and a historic district. New attached town houses are neither possible nor desirable. Ron R.

Group 2 (Jim Purdy & Celia Kent):

There were four people in the group who had spent from 6 months to 38 years in Acton. The group felt that all the categories of people mentioned in the first question (seniors, low and moderate income, town staff, teachers, fire fighters, adult children who grew up in Acton) as well as young families and divorced people have a hard time finding appropriate housing in Acton. The group felt that housing for seniors should be low maintenance and near village services, such as a condo with a small yard. Apparently there are 548 affordable units, only 148 of which are owner-occupied. For low- to moderate-income families, small single-family homes seemed appropriate, but there are none available. Some felt that adult children of Acton families could live in small condos or with parents. However, others in the group did not think that adult children would have much reason to want to stay in Acton. The group felt that some town staff would not want to live in Acton, while others, like teachers, should be given a break (tax break?) to encourage them to live in Acton.

The group identified three main priorities for Acton housing. The first priority is a sewer system for the villages. The second is mixed use pedestrian villages. And the third priority is a combination of repurposing existing built spaces and identifying and protecting existing open spaces. Other ideas included, having more houses of “average” price, allowing houses to be subdivided or allowing a second detached unit on a lot, a program to fund energy efficiency in older houses, 55+ housing (owner), and emergency housing (~ 1 year of occupancy, e.g., for recent divorcees).

Votes:

Sewers to villages = 9

Mixed use pedestrian village = 8

Identify green space for protections/ Reuse already built space; leave open space = 6

More houses at average price = 4

Program to fund energy efficiency in older houses = 2

55+ housing (owner) = 2

allow 2nd detached unit on a lot/ allow houses to be subdivided = 2

emergency housing (<1 year) = 0

Notes from Maps:

Location: below Mass Ave near Brucewood Rd

Note: add public transport

Location: South Acton

Note: not in historic district, already enough

Location: Kelley’s Corner

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Note: create a “center” around Kelley’s corner

Location: Mass Ave near Macpherson Field

Note: sustainable village – 2 & Piper – create a village – food, restaurant, doctor’s office, etc; cluster housing/ mixed use

Location: Acton-Boxborough Junior High

Note: West Acton village where there is shopping, restaurants and walkability and access to van to get to train – build to fit into character

Location: Acton Center

Note: No new housing in Acton Center

Location: Acton Center

Note: Don’t categorically exclude new housing proposals in Town Center. Could be site suitable, fit in, etc.

Location: 2A near Henley Rd

Note: No more cluster housing along 2A

Location: Intersection of 2A and Littleton border

Note: small cluster housing can go so many places if we add transportation

Group 3 (Kids)

Group 4–(Jim Snyder-Grant & Sahana Purohit):

1a) Town Employees

b) Seniors

c) Adult children who grew up in Acton.

2. Over 55 development with all amenities

theater, gym, etc.

3 a) Mixed use - Kelly's corner (13 dots)

b) Cap the population (4 dots)

c) more dense (9 dots)

d) get rid of 40B (5 dots)

e) lower taxes (3 dots)

Notes from Maps:

Location: Powdermill Rd

Note: good, need stormwater management

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Location: South Acton

Note: neighborhood input on design (Lauren)

Location: South Acton

Note: concern about breaky (?) pattern of ½ acre lot in South Acton (John)

Location: Prescott Rd

Note: for Elders

Location: West Acton

Note: small scale apartments ... fit in

Location: Concord

Note: redevelop brownfields not new stuff

Location: Great Road near border with Concord

Note: not convinced Acton needs more low income rentals (Matt)

Location: Davis Rd

Note: too much traffic already (Sahana), redevelop rather than develop

Location: near Whittier Forest and Nagog Hill

Note: proactive plan for undeveloped or unprotected lots

Location: Littleton

Note: good to isolate rental houses se (?) in 40B (like proposal) (John)

Location: Nagog Park, near Littleton border

Note: more shops, especially retail near Avalon