



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Acton 2020 Comprehensive Community Plan

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Acton
2020



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Today. Tomorrow. Together.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Actonians treasure their town. They also worry about it. They feel strongly about preserving its character that they see as including Acton’s rural and historic characteristics, its small town feeling, the support of excellence in education. Acton residents sense that things have been changing both positively as well as in ways that are of concern to some.

Actonians are concerned about preserving the physical characteristics of their town which define it, but also would very much like to have more opportunities to connect with one another, to gather, and to run into one another spontaneously and casually. They would like the physical



infrastructure for connections to be improved, including ways of getting around without driving as well as improvements to virtual connections such as better use of the internet for connecting the community. Town residents are also very aware of and concerned about the future of the town in terms of the sustainability of the physical environment, the town’s ability to support social and economic diversity (primarily due to rising cost of living) as well as the financial viability of town government.

This document represents the significant effort of the Acton 2020 Committee working closely with the Consultant Team of the Collaborative and Community Circle to develop a plan that addresses these desires and concerns by proposing a set of strategies in an implementation plan that:

- supports the vision and goals that Actonians have articulated
- helps allocate and prioritize resources (time, money, attention)
- identifies lead responsibility and phasing of action steps

Underlying Themes:

Desire for and increased ‘Sense of Community’

- **Community gathering:** desire for indoor and outdoor places and events to meet and interact casually, spontaneously as well as in a planned, more formal fashion
- **Town character:** desire to preserve and enhance features --physical and other -- including a commitment to excellence in education, rural and historic characteristics, and small town feeling, which make Acton unique and contribute to its sense of community
- **Connectivity:** desire for walking, biking, public transportation; traffic calming and improvements; increased opportunities for social networks and connections.

Concern Regarding the ‘Future Resilience’ of the Town

- **Environmental sustainability:** concern regarding the survivability of the environment due to overuse, abuse and neglect.
- **Social and economic diversity:** concern regarding ability to accommodate a range of socio-economic levels as well as the ability to age in place.
- **Financial viability:** concern regarding the ability of the Town to protect its assets and maintain a viable balance between taxes and services provided.

Purpose

The purpose of the Plan is to guide the future growth and development of Acton. It is a roadmap, a decision-making tool, to be used by town officials and citizens alike to understand and express a desired future and the steps that lead there. It is intended to help poise Acton, to put the Town in a position to take advantage of opportunities as they arise and to have a strong sense of direction when moving forward on initiatives.

Process

The plan was developed in two phases. The first, Phase I, comprised extensive and intensive outreach to the Acton community through a variety of means including town-wide visioning sessions, focus groups with town boards and committees and other specific stakeholder groups, town-wide mail and telephone survey of all households and businesses and multiple opportunities and input for and from the town's youth. This extensive public input resulted in an "Emerging Vision Statement" and a set of Goals and Objectives that encapsulated what residents and business owners envisioned for the town's future.

Phase II involved the following major activities:

- Developing an inventory of existing conditions of the town's resources (including housing, transportation, public services and facilities, open space and recreation, cultural and natural resources, economic development, and land use.)
- Identifying Key Issues, Opportunities, and Challenges and developing a preliminary list of ways to address them.
- Developing a comprehensive Implementation Plan that provides a prioritized and phased proposal for moving forward to fulfill the vision and goals.
- Using the internet both to disseminate information regarding the process and the content of the plan as well as to provide an additional opportunity for people to interact with the content of the plan (blog, Facebook, and interactive posting of the entire Implementation Plan).

"What Makes Acton Unique?"

- *"excellent schools, community commitment to education"*
- *"small town, close to Boston"*
- *"Not Your Average Wonderbread Town"*
- *"semi-rural/town and country suburb"*
- *"peaceful, quiet, family-oriented, friendly, safe, socially aware, livable"*
- *"location, access"*
- *"seasonal changes, stone walls, foliage, picturesque, old barns"*
- *"good value"*
- *"sense of community, small town feeling, run into people you know"*
- *"history and historic New England architecture"*
- *"train"*
- *"degree of volunteerism"*
- *"village centers"*
- *"open space and recreation"*
- *"culturally diverse, accepting, welcoming"*
- *"good balance between nature and development"*
- *"high achieving, driven, ambitious"*
- *"community events"*
- *"charm, atmosphere"*
- *"highest taxes in the state"*
- *"a great safe place to raise a family"*
- *"wonderful woodland trails"*
- *"Discovery Museum"*

Vision

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 **side-**



walks 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 for 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.

A Vision for Acton

- *Preserving the rural and historic characteristics*
- *A sustainable future*
- *Excellent schools*
- *Recreational opportunities*
- *Lively, safe neighborhoods*
- *Attractive, safe, and walkable shopping areas*
- *Sidewalks and bike paths*
- *A town shuttle*
- *Open communication and accessible information*
- *Opportunities for the community to gather*
- *Vibrant village centers*
- *Kelley’s Corner as walkable town center*
- *Welcomes all its residents*

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.

Key Opportunities and Challenges

Phase 2 of the Plan began with extensive research on all aspects of the Town, from natural resources to services and facilities; the full inventory report is in Volume II. From this research several key opportunities and challenges stand out.

External Forces pose the **challenges** of a **slow economy, rising gas prices, and climate change**, so it will take longer to realize desired commercial development, and the Plan should aim at enabling less driving and reducing Acton’s carbon footprint. At the same time, there are **opportunities** in changing public attitudes about the need for **sustainability** and the desire for **alternatives to driving**. And the **residential markets are shifting** to demand for smaller units in walkable neighborhoods that are fiscally beneficial.

Internally, the population will include **more seniors**, and **school enrollments will gradually decline**, improving fiscal capacity. Protecting **natural resources, especially water**, will require **continued vigilance**. **Town facilities** are in **good shape** and, except for the **Senior**

Center, adequate for the future. Despite the desire for alternative transportation, **Acton is still highly auto-dependent**. And **slower growth gives the Town an opportunity to prepare for it now**.



Goals and Objectives

GOAL 1: Preserve and Enhance Town Character

- Objective 1.1: Strengthen tools to manage growth pro-actively.
- Objective 1.2: Preserve and enhance village centers.
- Objective 1.3: Preserve rural characteristics and open space.
- Objective 1.4: Preserve historic buildings and landscapes.
- Objective 1.5: Foster an understanding and appreciation for what makes Acton unique, including its history.

GOAL 2: Ensure Environmental Sustainability

- Objective 2.1: Protect the quality and quantity of Acton's water.
- Objective 2.2: Reduce waste and the accumulation of toxins.
- Objective 2.3: Reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.
- Objective 2.4: Move toward patterns of land use and land protection that support broad biodiversity, soil preservation, and healthy local agriculture.

GOAL 3: Improve Connections

- Objective 3.1: Make walking and biking easier and safer.
- Objective 3.2: Improve transportation around town.
- Objective 3.3: Promote communication among town government, citizens, schools, and the business community.
- Objective 3.4: Support and strengthen neighborhoods.

GOAL 4: Provide More Opportunities for Community Gathering and Recreation

- Objective 4.1: Provide a community facility large enough to accommodate a variety of uses and a wide range of programming.
- Objective 4.2: Provide more playgrounds, fields for team sports, parks, and conservation lands.
- Objective 4.3: Create new gathering spaces and better use existing ones.
- Objective 4.4: Support additional cultural activities.



GOAL 5: **Support Inclusion and Diversity**

- Objective 5.1: Support residents of 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.

GOAL 6: **Preserve and Enhance Town-Owned Assets & Services**

- Objective 6.1: Protect Town-owned open space.
- Objective 6.2: Support excellence in schools.
- Objective 6.3: Manage the Town’s facilities efficiently.
- Objective 6.4: Continue to provide high quality services that are responsive to Town needs.
- Objective 6.5: Provide excellent public health and safety services.

GOAL 7: **Maintain and Improve the Financial Well-Being of the Town**

- Objective 7.1: Promote fiscal responsibility.
- Objective 7.2: Promote economic development that supports other goals.
- Objective 7.3: Improve existing commercial areas.
- Objective 7.4: Support the ability of all residents to stay in Acton for a lifetime.



Key Recommendations

The Goals and Objectives will be implemented through a number of strategies that involve one or more action step. Fifteen key recommendations stand out as highest priority among the more than 200 proposed action steps; the full Implementation Plan is in the body of the report and online at <http://implementation.acton2020.info/>. Several of the 15 recommendations combine action steps that go together and may serve more than one goal.

- Preserve and enhance village centers and Kelley's Corner (Prepare a focused Village Centers Plan and area-specific design studies to set priorities for new and redevelopment in the centers).
- Develop Kelley's Corner into a mixed use town center and transportation hub.
- Actively promote employment-oriented economic development (e.g., R&D, high tech, office) to expand the tax base.
- Review and revise Town zoning to align with Acton 2020 Plan objectives (while considering ways to strengthen the design review process)
- Protect, acquire, and improve open space for conservation, farming, and recreation, using a combination of acquisition and zoning, including Transfer of Development Rights to centers.
- Manage wastewater (e.g., consider a West Acton sewer extension and/or advanced package wastewater treatment with groundwater recharge for other development concentrations).
- Improve the transfer station to increase recycling and reuse.
- Reduce energy use in Town buildings and promote townwide energy conservation with the help of a ½-time Sustainability Coordinator. Evaluate a Transition Initiative for a greener Acton.
- Construct more sidewalks and facilities for safe bicycling, in centers and townwide.
- Continue to fund, and later expand/improve the MinuteVan shuttle to build ridership (with more frequent service between village centers, Kelley's Corner, and rail station).
- Plan, site, and construct a new building to accommodate the Senior Center and larger community, when finances permit.
- Prepare a proactive plan to address housing needs and free the Town from 40B development, with housing in small, scattered sites near walkable service and business destinations, especially village centers. (Consider possible Town financial participation in desired housing developments).
- Develop policies and strategies to keep seniors in Acton (e.g., Senior Center, provision of appropriate housing, etc.)
- Integrate teens in the community; involve them in planning to provide more activities teens can reach without a car.
- Continue to support and achieve high standards of excellence in Acton's schools.

Plan Concept

The 2020 Plan embodies a central concept that is built on the Goals and Objectives and the input of Acton citizens. It has four key aspects that provide a framework for the Plan.

Guide future growth to key town centers (such as Kelley’s Corner, South Acton and West Acton) by providing zoning incentives and improvements (e.g., sidewalks, landscaping), and applying transfer of development rights. Provide a variety of housing types including smaller units for empty nesters, young families, seniors, etc., located in the centers with shops and services within walking distance. This type of growth is more sustainable, tends to place less burden on the schools, and can be fiscally positive.

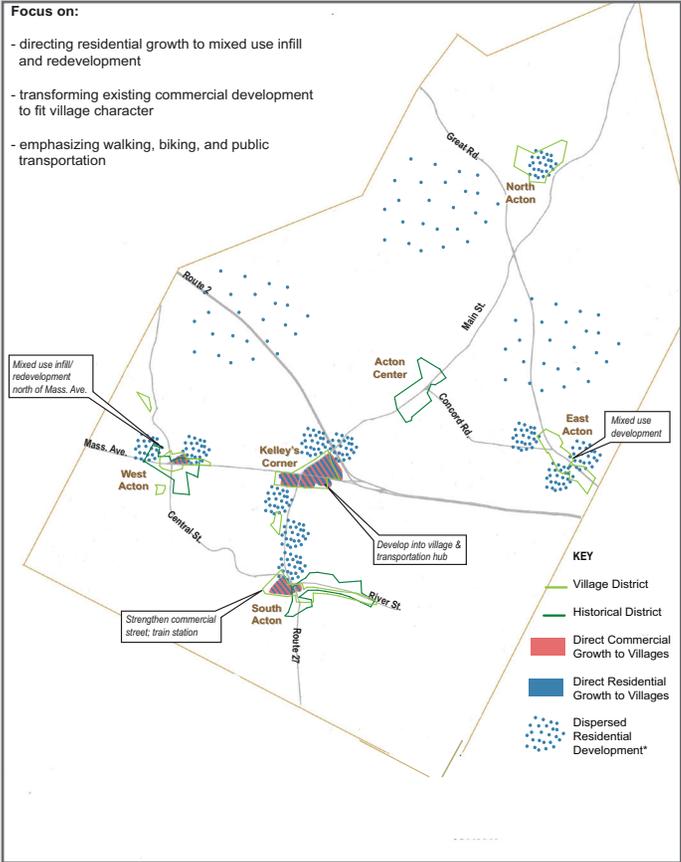
Protect and acquire open space especially in areas outside the centers using both acquisition and zoning, and consequently reduce residential development of large open parcels.

Actively promote employment-oriented development in order to increase the tax base and the market for other goods and services provided locally, and to reduce commuting.

Invest in sidewalks, bicycle facilities, and public transportation to connect the centers.

How is this concept different from the village focus of the 1991 and 1998 Plans?

- There is now increased awareness of sustainability and wellness and expressed desire of residents for compact mixed use centers.
- Both demographics and the housing market now favor this type of setting.
- As defined, the 2020 Plan has much stronger incentives to make it happen.



Cost and Financing

Town finances are being squeezed between the desire for services (excellent schools and other Town priorities) and a limited tax base and reduced state aid. Many of the Plan’s top recommendations can begin to be implemented with existing Town staff and relatively small additional expenditures (e.g., small-scale studies to prepare for appropriate growth in the centers). Other priorities like a new building to serve seniors and the larger community, or an expanded shuttle system, are more expensive.

The solution to this challenge is to phase the major actions as finances permit. This can include some open space acquisition and investment in pedestrian and bicycle facilities each year as can be afforded, continuing to fund the MinuteVan at current levels until expansion becomes possible, phasing improvements to support desired redevelopment in Kelley’s Corner as the market revives, and planning for a new senior/community center but putting off design and construction.

In the mean time, Town fiscal capacity can be improved by promoting economic development,

seeking special purpose state funding and grants, and continuing to explore public-private partnerships for specific projects and cooperation with surrounding towns to provide services efficiently. The recommendation to reduce energy use in Town buildings and promote townwide energy conservation with the help of a ½-time Sustainability Coordinator will pay for itself and also help to save money for residents and businesses. More detail on costs is presented in the body of the report.

Major Expenditure	Average Annual Tax Burden (For the Typical Single Family Home)
Kelley’s Corner Improvements	\$22
Open Space Purchase/Improvement	\$17
Sidewalks and Bike Improvements	\$14
New Senior/Community Center	\$173
Expanded Shuttle System	\$48
Total Annual Cost: \$1.3 million	\$174