

**EXISTING
CONDITION** **8** Land Use
and Zoning

Land Use and Zoning

Land use and zoning are critical elements of the Comprehensive Plan. Land use planning defines the location of uses within the community. Where people live, work, shop, play, and educate is reflected in the land uses. Existing land use reflects past decisions about the locations of these activities and is the basis for future decisions. Zoning and subdivision regulations are among the Town’s legal tools for enforcing where and in some ways how these activities are located and built.

Summary of Key Points

Land Use

Major Land Use Categories, 2008	
Residential	26.7%
Commercial/Industrial	5.1%
Open Land*	63.7%
Water & Wetland	4.8%
	100%

* Includes agricultural, recreation, forest, forested wetlands, open wetlands, cemetery, and other relatively undeveloped land.

- Key Centers are Kelley’s Corner and the five villages: Acton Center, West Acton, South Acton, and, less well defined, East Acton, and North Acton.

- The dominant residential type is a single-family home on a variety of different sized lots.
- Multi-family homes are principally concentrated along Great Road and also at Kelley’s Corner, and in parts of South Acton. A multi-family assisted living community is also located in North Acton. Other multi-family homes are dispersed throughout other parts of Town.
- Since the late 1980s most subdivisions of more than five lots have been cluster subdivisions (either Planned Conservation Residential Communities or Open Space Developments).
- Commercial uses are concentrated along Great Road, Massachusetts Avenue (around Kelley’s Corner), and along Powder Mill Road (Rte. 2) in Acton’s southeast corner along the Assabet River, with smaller commercial areas in West Acton, South Acton, and a few other sections of Town.
- Industrial uses are concentrated in North Acton, along Massachusetts Avenue east of Kelley’s Corner (mixed with commercial/office uses), and in Acton’s southeast corner, with a few smaller industrial areas located in other parts of Town.

Acton Voices*

“What we are really missing is a Town center. It would be so great to turn Kelley’s Corner into such a place.”

“There needs to be more thoughtful planning of development and commercial zoning limits.”

“Focus on: open space, Town center, designated walkable shopping areas.”

“I would like to see more strict zoning.”

“I would like to see less growth in Town and in the schools, Acton feels like Framingham did 20 years ago and look at it now.”

“Need to attract more business (light industrial or office), perhaps on Route 2 corridor to help offset the heavy taxes homeowners pay; a senior center more centrally located.”

“I would like to see less new housing and retail development overtaking historical and environmental necessities.”

“I would like to see more restaurants, retail shops, small stores, not big box stores (Walmart), florists.”

“Less inappropriately developed land and less traffic.”

“I want more [swimming] pools and wish there were more places to buy Pokemon cards.” (1st grader)

“No more “40B” condo/apartment/truck housing.”

In a mail survey one third (31.7%) of Acton’s residents felt that the diversity of activities, including open and wooded land areas, homes and businesses was among Acton’s three most important assets.

* public input from Phase I of the planning process

Zoning

- The Town has nine residential districts, five village districts, two office districts, three business districts, five industrial districts, two special zoning districts, and four overlay districts.
- More than 60% of the Town is zoned for residential uses: 58.1% for single-family homes, and 1.7% for multi-family homes.
- A Village Residential District (VR, 0.5% of the Town's area) allows mixed residential and commercial uses.
- Two provisions of the zoning ordinance allow Open Space Development (OSD) and Planned Conservation Residential Community (PCRC), to encourage the preservation of open space, thus facilitating the preservation of significant land, water, historic, archeological, and natural resources. They are special permit options for residential development in all the single-family residential districts (R-2, R-4, R-8, R-8/4, R-10, R-10/8).
- Multi-family dwelling units are allowed under the provisions of the Residence A district (5 units/acre) and Residence AA district (15 units/acre).
- The five village districts comprise 1.2% of the Town's total area. They allow a mixture of business and residential uses and have a number of provisions to encourage compact development including transfer of development rights from the Great Road corridor to the North Acton and East Acton Village Districts (NAV and EAV), and within these village districts.
- Office and business zones comprise 6.9% of the land in Acton and are located along some of the key transportation corridors in the Town, including Routes 2A (Great Road) and 111 (Massachusetts Avenue).
- There are three office parks, one located in the northwest corner of town and two along Massachusetts Avenue (Route 2 and 111).
- The main business zones are located along Great Road, at Kelley's Corner (KC), and the Powder Mill district (PM), with other business located in West Acton and the other villages.
- Industrial districts comprise 6% of the town's area and are located in North Acton, along Post Office Square and Hayward Road near Acton Center, the southern end of Main Street, and in the Powder Mill area in the southeast corner of Acton.
- The Technology District (TD) is located in the southeast corner of Town off Independence Road and Knox Trail.
- The Agriculture-Recreation-Conservation District (ARC) (14.1% of the town's total area) applies exclusively to land owned by the State, the Town, and the Acton Water District. It excludes all residential, office, commercial, and industrial uses. Agriculture, conservation, recreation, municipal, educational and religious uses are allowed by right.
- There are four overlay districts:
 - Affordable Housing – encourages the development of affordable housing in new development.
 - Flood Plain – regulates development in flood-prone areas.
 - Groundwater protection – regulates the development in the Town's water supply protection areas.
 - Open Space Development – encourages the preservation of common land; significant natural, historical and archeological resources; scenic vistas; rural character; village clusters; water supply resources; and better overall all site planning.



- PCRC is the preferred method of land development and may be applied to any of the single-family districts in Acton.
- Full buildout of all developable land would result in an increase from Acton’s current 8,350 housing units to an order-of-magnitude total of 10,300 units, depending on the assumptions used in the analysis. A key point is that residential buildout is unlikely to be reached in the next 30 years.

Opportunities and Challenges Posed by Existing Land Use and Zoning

- Agriculture and some other relatively undeveloped land is challenged by continuing development.
- The use of Open Space Development and Planned Conservation Residential Community provisions in the last 20 years has provided a considerable amount of common land that is an opportunity for maintaining much of the Town’s character.
- Concentrations of automobile-oriented businesses, especially along Great Road, result in congestion.
- The mixture of residences, businesses and industries provides some residents with an opportunity to live and work in the same community.
- Several relatively innovative zoning provisions encourage open space and a mixture of uses in some areas of Town.
- There is very little space in several districts available for new development.

- Pressure for redevelopment will increase as areas for new development are filled.
- Kelley’s Corner and some of the villages, especially West, South, and East Acton are opportunities to concentrate future development and leave more land open at the periphery of Town.

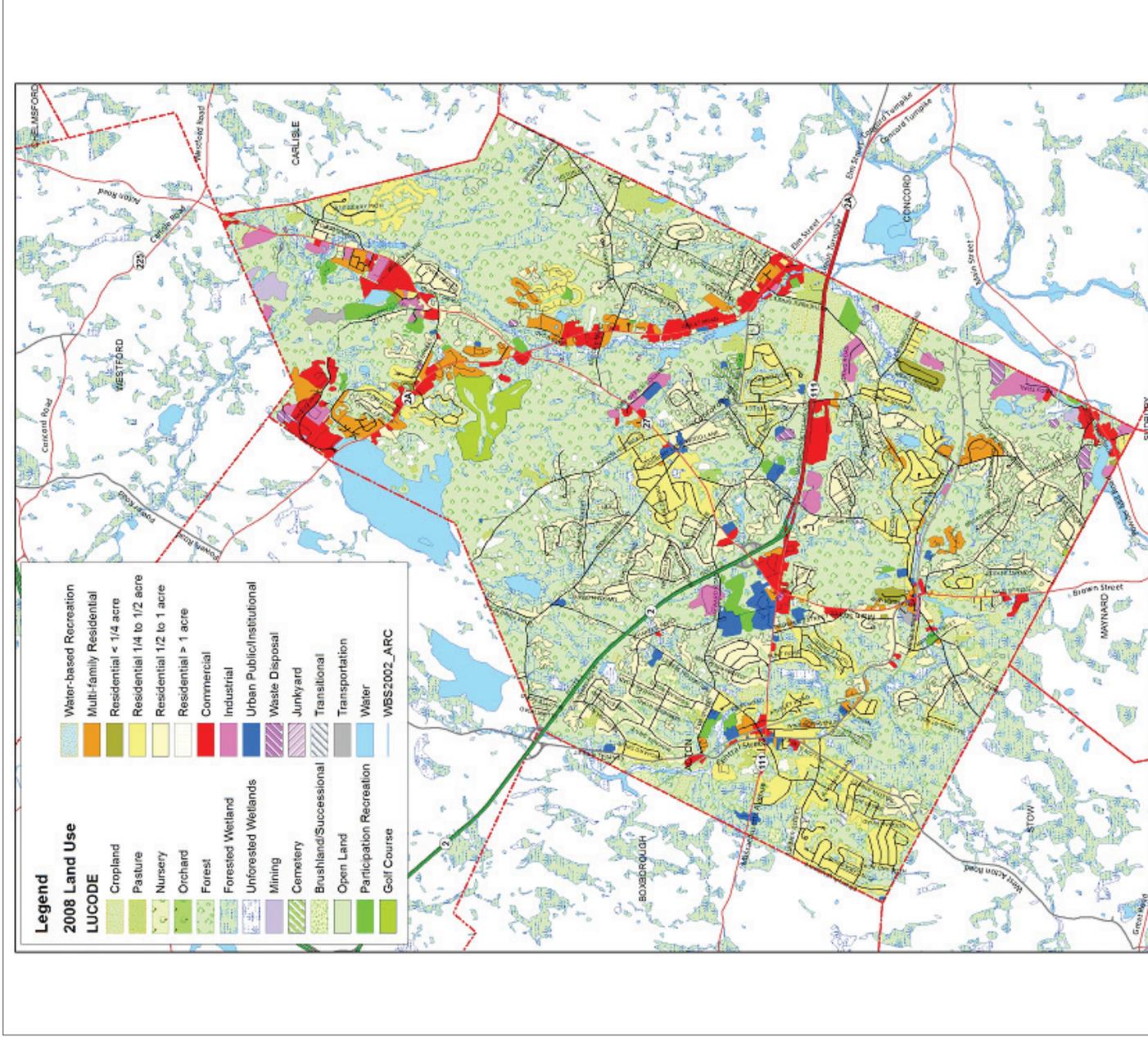
In conclusion, zoning and future changes in zoning, along with the provision of services, can guide future land use. What future land use will be depends on the desires of Acton’s residents and their determination to make and implement choices about the Town’s future.

Table 8.1: Major Land Use Categories, 1971 to 1999

	1971		1999	
	Acres	Percent	Acres	Percent
Agriculture	830.3	6.4	582.3	4.5
Undeveloped	7,724.4	59.6	6,329.7	48.8
Developed	4,411.5	34.0	6,054.2	46.7
Total	12,990	100	12,990	100

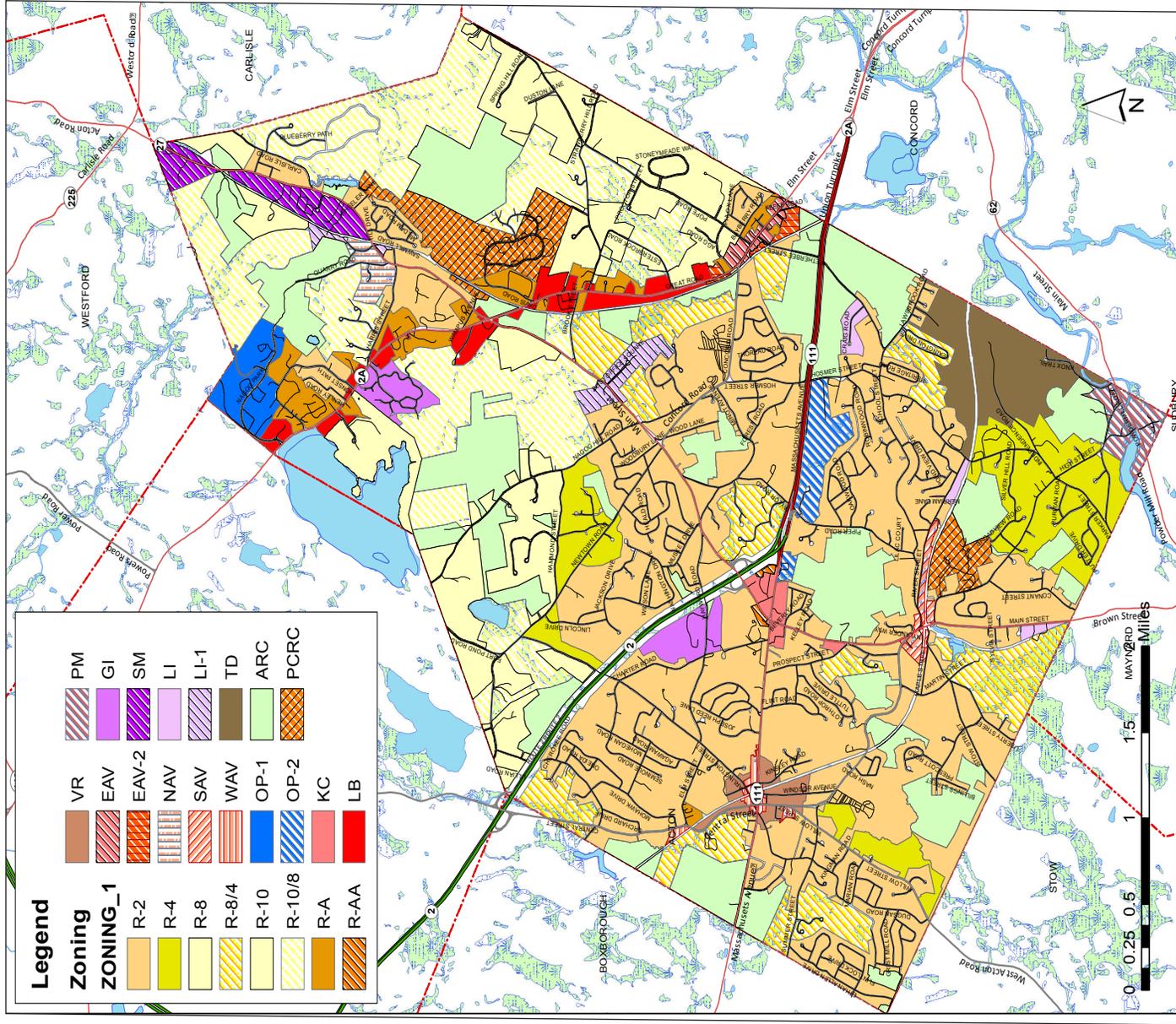
Land Use & Zoning

Figure 8.1 Acton Existing Land Use



Zoning

Figure 8.1 Acton Existing Land Use



**EXISTING
CONDITION**

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Sustainability

Sustainability

Traditional comprehensive community plans are comprehensive in the sense that they address all important aspects of a town, from housing and economic development to transportation and public facilities. But it has become clear that the world is rapidly changing and that climate, energy and resource use are interrelated topics that have enormous implications for our children and grandchildren but have not traditionally been part of a comprehensive community plan. As discussed below, water quality is addressed in traditional plans, but because it has characteristics similar to climate and energy, it is also a subject of this element.

Acton has made a serious commitment to sustainability in its membership in ICLEI and its certification under the Massachusetts Green Communities Act. The Town has completed a benchmark survey of its energy use in schools and other public buildings and is working to improve the energy efficiency of these buildings and to encourage behavior that reduces energy use.

Summary of Key Points

Water Quality and Quantity

- Preserving water quality and quantity includes measures to ensure that well-fields are protected from development that would lead to contamination or depletion; ensuring that on-site wastewater disposal (which is used by approximately 90 percent of properties in Acton) is properly managed and regulated; and managing storm water to maintain the quality supply of both surface water and groundwater. All of these functions are being performed by the Town and the Acton Water District. More than 2,000 acres are considered permanently protected (Conservation Commission – 1,642 acres, Water District – 395 acres).

Agricultural Land

- Farmland, which was once the predominant land use in Acton (including most areas that are now forested), has become scarce with the replacement of farms with houses and business areas.
- Local agriculture has importance to human ecology as well as serving as habitat. Active farms illustrate our connection to the land and recall Acton’s history as a farming community.

Acton Voices*

“Publicize sustainability issues to promote greater public awareness of the problem and potential solutions.”

“Eliminate idling vehicles.”

“Turn the transfer station into a renewable energy power plant (also use yard waste).”

“Re-think how Town staff works and commutes.”

“Involve the ethnic communities; many come from cultures that have a history of sustainability.”

“Use the transfer station as a model for sustainable development, including exhibiting trash as art.”

“Organize web based car pooling.”

“Explore the use of renewable energy sources.”

“Look to other countries for models.”

“If there were more options for public transportation and easier and safer biking and walking, that would help a lot.”

Almost two-thirds (74.4%) of respondents to a mail survey replied: “Yes” to the question: “Should Acton actively reduce greenhouse gases?”

Over two-thirds (79.4%) of respondents to a mail survey replied: “Yes” when asked: “Are you willing to support taking action as long as it doesn’t cost too much?”

Slightly over half (55%) of the business owners responding to the mail survey responded favorably to the idea of using “green construction techniques.”

** public input from Phase I of the planning process*

- Local farming also serves the sustainability goal by connecting us to the source of our food, which in modern American society has become a matter of long-distance transport.
- Many communities have encouraged local farming through community-supported agriculture (CSA).
- Community gardens are another way of connecting people to the land, furnishing fresh produce to families, providing a healthy and creative use of leisure time that can involve people of all ages, and educating children regarding where our food comes from. Acton has community gardens in North Acton and at Morrison Farm.



Biodiversity

- Acton contains major wildlife resources including five “hotspots” for biodiversity identified in the state’s BioMap 2 Project.
- Protection of biodiversity within Acton is primarily a matter of protecting land from development and ensuring that land which is developed is developed in ways that preserve natural habitat.

Reducing Waste and the Accumulation of Toxins in our Environment

- The number of households using the Transfer Station is approximately 4,000, (roughly half of all households). The other half of Acton’s households are served by private solid waste disposal firms. In calendar year 2008, Acton reported a recycling rate of 22 percent of its solid waste. This is similar to Littleton but substantially less than the other adjoining towns, five of which exceed 40 percent.

Conserving Energy and Reducing Carbon Emissions

- Acton’s contribution of carbon dioxide from energy use is clearly a small part of the world-wide problem of global warming and climate



change. However, mitigating the problem by reducing carbon emissions requires that all energy users be part of the solution. Acton is already engaged. The Town has taken the step of becoming a member of ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability. In addition, Acton has been awarded Green Community status under the Massachusetts Green Communities Act. These sustainability commitments are the foundation of an ongoing program to carry out the Green Community commitments and the ICLEI milestones.

- As a result of its Green Community status, Acton was able to receive a \$150,000 grant for capital improvements and education programs to reduce municipal building energy use.

- Electricity use per square foot varies widely among Acton’s public buildings.
- Acton’s public buildings also vary considerably in natural gas use per square foot.
- Acton recently converted all of its street lights to energy conserving metal halide luminaires.
- Since 2006 residential electric use has declined by 10.6 percent, which may reflect consumer awareness of the need to conserve and particularly the replacement of incandescent lighting with compact fluorescent lamps.
- However, even with the recent reduction, households in Acton had an average electricity use of approximately 8300 kWh. According to NStar, the average residential customer uses 6,000 kWh per year, indicating that Acton



households use substantially more than the average, possibly owing in part to the 10-11% of households that use electricity for home heating.

- Non-residential use of natural gas for heating (which includes public buildings as well as private business and industry) is of roughly the same magnitude as for all residential customers.
- Although the sources of data differ, the estimated average Acton household uses approximately 830 to 894 therms of natural gas each year. NStar’s average residential gas heating customer uses 850 therms per year.
- Approximately 27 to 29 percent of Acton households use oil heat.
- The largest use of energy by residents of Acton is for transportation, accounting for an estimated 43 percent of the Town’s carbon footprint and 59 percent of the residential portion of the carbon footprint. 80.8 percent of Acton residents commuted to work in 2000 by driving alone; another 7.4 percent used car pools, and 4.5 percent used public transportation; the remaining 7.7 percent walked, biked, or worked at home.
- Electricity and home heating fuel each account

for approximately 20 percent of the residential portion of the carbon footprint. Acton households had the third lowest vehicle miles traveled among the nine adjoining towns, averaging 76.0 miles per day for all trip purposes. Nonetheless, driving is the single largest component of Acton’s total carbon footprint.

- Trips for shopping, entertainment, socializing, medical appointments, and other purposes outweigh commuting trips by more than four to one. This is significant because even those residents who use modes other than driving alone to commute are likely to drive to most other destinations. Energy saving modes such as public transportation and shuttle bus, walking, and bicycling are highly dependent on favorable land use patterns that provide enough density to make public transportation feasible and destinations close enough together to make walking and bicycling reasonable alternatives.

Opportunities and Challenges Posed by Existing Conditions

- Preserving water quality involves the opportunities and challenges described in Volume II, Facilities and Services, including measures to implement the Comprehensive Water Resources management Plan.
- Acton’s public open space including conservation land and Morrison Farm provide opportunities to preserve biodiversity and to promote local agriculture.
- There may be opportunities to provide pick-up points for Community Supported Agriculture in locations like the farmer’s market in West Acton village.
- Water supply for irrigation may be a challenge in expanding community gardening.
- Since farmland is generally well-drained and easily developable, development pressure on private agricultural land is a challenge to sustaining its use. Community Supported Agriculture is a potential opportunity for promoting local agriculture.
- The fact that Acton does not have public curbside trash pickup is a challenge to

- increasing the rate of recycling of solid waste; however, there is an opportunity to facilitate recycling at the TCRP by exploring single stream recycling, and some aspects of keeping material goods out of the waste stream can be served at the Transfer Station and Recycling Center (TSRC), for example setting up swaps of usable goods from one household to another.
- Providing financial incentives such as free disposal of recyclables while charging on a per-bag basis for non-recyclables would be an opportunity to improve the recycling rate.
- Acton’s baseline/benchmark data can be the basis of ongoing efforts to encourage progress in saving energy, both in public buildings and in Acton’s households and businesses.
- Acton households’ use of substantially more electricity than average NStar customers will be a challenge to reducing energy use.
- Energy prices worldwide are expected to trend upward over the next decade. This is an opportunity to encourage energy conservation by households and businesses. Currently low interest rates increase this opportunity by shortening the payback period on investments

- such as household energy improvements. This is therefore an opportune time for Town programs to encourage home and business energy improvements.
- Acton’s low density land use pattern makes encouraging less driving a challenge; however, there are opportunities to strengthen (and emulate) existing villages which are more amenable to reducing vehicle miles traveled.

In conclusion, Acton is on the path to environmental sustainability, but continued effort is needed to reach the goal. In the area of reducing energy use (and therefore carbon emissions) there is much more to do, but the Town has made a strong start with its Green Community Status and commitment to the ICLEI milestones.



