

KELLEY'S CORNER



SPECIFIC AREA PLAN

Prepared by

Kelley's Corner Planning Committee • Acton Planning Department

Consulting Assistance Provided by

The Land Use Collaborative

In Association With

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document presents a plan for the long-term development of Kelley's Corner and the surrounding areas. The plan focuses on land use and regulatory changes that are designed to promote appropriate economic growth in Kelley's Corner and in several nearby locations along Route 2. It also addresses strategies for managing the impacts of development, including traffic and pedestrian circulation and wastewater generation; evaluates alternative mechanisms and strategies for promoting economic development; and outlines the issues that will need to be taken into account if the Town wishes to adopt an impact fee system to finance infrastructure.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Through the public participation process and its own discussions, the Kelley's Corner Planning Committee drafted a set of goals and objectives to guide the preparation of the Specific Area Plan. These goals and objectives represent a balancing of the Planning Committee's economic development mission with town and neighborhood concerns regarding aesthetics and traffic. Goals and objectives were identified in five areas:

- **Economic Development Goal:**
Accommodate and encourage commercial and industrial development that serves the needs of the Town of Acton and its residents.
- **Aesthetics and Town Character Goal:**
Ensure that new development and redevelopment reflects and reinforces the character of Acton.
- **Circulation and Traffic Goal:**
Provide for safe and efficient circulation throughout the Kelley's Corner Planning Area.
- **Wastewater Management Goal:**
Provide adequate wastewater treatment capacity for existing and planned development.
- **Environmental Protection Goal:**
Protect the area's natural resources.

LAND USE PLAN

The Kelley's Corner planning process resulted in the following land use strategies for the Planning Area:

- **In Kelley's Corner proper—that is, the existing retail area surrounding the intersection of Main Street and Massachusetts Avenue—the plan recommends that permitted land use**

intensities be increased as an incentive to upgrading and infill, and as a way to leverage private funds for infrastructure improvements.

- New development or redevelopment that takes advantage of the increased development potential should be designed to enhance the visual appearance of the shopping district, and should be oriented to improve pedestrian circulation and access.
- The isolated single-family residential district on Main Street between Hosmer House and the Redstone condominium development is designated for multifamily development. This will relieve any pressure for converting these properties to commercial use and, by adding residents close to the business district, will also support the objective of creating a walkable shopping area.
- No land use changes are proposed for the residentially zoned areas south of the business district (Prospect Street, Main Street and several neighborhood streets), or for the Acton Shopping Center area (Donelan's, etc.).
- An increase in permitted development intensity is recommended for the Office Park district along the south side of Route 2 between Piper Road and Hosmer Street. This area contains the Concord Auto Auction site, the Concordian Motel, and two light industrial parcels (Modular and Data Instruments). As in the retail center, it is hoped that this change will encourage additional development that can support the costs of needed public infrastructure, such as roadway improvements and community wastewater treatment.
- A large residentially zoned parcel on the westerly side of Piper Road is proposed for rezoning to Office Park use, consistent with the Modular and Data Instruments sites on the opposite side of the street. The purposes of this proposed rezoning are to minimize land use and traffic conflicts by achieving compatible uses on both sides of Piper Road, to reduce the residential build-out in this area, and to expand the commercial/industrial tax base.
- The Plan recommends accommodating a proposed 90,000 square foot expansion of the Haartz Auto Fabrics facility by rezoning a portion of the Haartz site that is currently zoned for residences. This will reduce the potential residential build-out in this area.

REGULATORY RECOMMENDATIONS

The regulatory recommendations of the Specific Area Plan flow directly from the strategies presented in the previous section.

- The maximum permissible floor area ratio (FAR) in the Kelley's Corner retail center (i.e., the area currently within the Kelley's Corner zoning district) should be increased from the current level of 0.20 to a new level of 0.40, subject to site and design review (through a special permit process) in order to ensure consistency with municipal goals and objectives.

- Clear design standards should be established for the Kelley's Corner district, to encourage a higher quality of design and the evolution of an environment that is better oriented to pedestrian circulation. The principles embodied in these standards should include the promotion of shared parking facilities, the establishment and expansion of walkways and bikeways to connect activity areas within the Planning Area, the use of appropriate building materials, the siting of buildings close to the street, and the use of landscaping to screen commercial parking areas from the street and from nearby residential areas.
- The existing multifamily residential district on the northwest side of Main Street should be extended to include the adjacent single-family residences, and the permissible residential density should be increased from 5 dwelling units per acre to 15 dwelling units per acre (which is the current density of the Redstone condominiums).
- The existing Office Park 2 (OP2) district located between Hosmer Street and Piper Road (comprising the Concord Auto Auction, the Concordian Motel, and the Data Instruments and Modular facilities on Discovery Way) should be rezoned to a new Office Park 3 district, within which the maximum FAR could be increased from 0.20 to 0.30 through a special permit process.
- The residentially-zoned portion of the Haartz Auto Fabrics property should be rezoned to the General Industrial district, consistent with the rest of the site, provided that an adequate buffer is maintained between the uses on the site and the nearby residences on Charter Road.

CIRCULATION

Without an extensive study of traffic in the Kelley's Corner area it is not possible to determine how much of the existing traffic is locally-generated, and how much is through traffic using Routes 27 and 111 for longer journeys. Therefore, no direct projection can be made of the increases in volume resulting from additional development in the Planning Area. However, the increased level of overall development envisioned in this Plan will inevitably result in some level of increased traffic, and the Circulation component presents strategies for addressing both existing traffic conditions and future traffic growth:

- *Regional access* is currently provided by connections to Route 2 from Main Street and Massachusetts Avenue, with more local connections at Taylor/Piper Road and Hosmer Street. There does not appear to be a need for an additional interchange as far as Kelley's Corner is concerned, but any significant change in access connections could impact through traffic in Kelley's Corner.
- With respect to *local access*, the Plan recommends consideration of a frontage road system along Route 2 with a connecting overpass to provide adequate access to existing and new development between Piper Road and Hosmer Street and to the transfer station. A more

modest local access recommendation is to formalize the "cut-through" between Main Street and Massachusetts Avenue next to the Acton Plaza shopping center.

- A number of *roadway capacity and safety* improvements are recommended. These are divided into three groups: development management policies (including zoning); safety and operational improvements at several intersections (Route 2 at Taylor Road/Piper Road; the intersection of Hayward Road and Main Street; and the Main Street/Prospect Street intersection), and capacity improvements at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street, and at the Route 2 ramps on Main Street.
- The Plan also recommends a comprehensive set of *pedestrian and bicycle enhancements*, including improvement of existing sidewalks and crosswalks, and creation of new walkway and bicycle connections within and between development parcels and to key open space areas in and adjacent to the Planning Area.

WASTEWATER IMPACTS

Like traffic and circulation, wastewater management will be an issue in the Kelley's Corner Planning Area regardless of how much growth occurs.

- Until recently, the total costs of relying on individual septic systems for wastewater disposal have been hidden. However, this is being changed by the State's new Title 5 regulations for inspection and repair of septic systems, which have already had an impact in Acton and across Massachusetts. It is quite possible that the cost of constructing and managing community wastewater treatment systems will begin to compare favorably with the cumulative costs—in terms of maintenance and repair, depressed real estate markets, and environmental protection—of hundreds of individual systems.
- Homes and businesses in the Kelley's Corner area have a septic system failure rate that is higher than average for Acton. Hence, the impacts of the new Title 5 regulations—and the potential benefits of moving to community wastewater treatment—are likely to be greater here than in other areas of the Town.
- Under existing zoning, the volume of wastewater that could be produced in the Planning Area at build-out is estimated to be about 40% greater than at present. This volume would be increased by an additional 50% if the recommended land use strategy is adopted and full build-out occurs.
- Moving toward community wastewater treatment systems does not necessarily mean constructing large-scale facilities to serve the entire town. In the case of the Kelley's Corner area, needed capacity might be provided by using several smaller facilities to serve groups of users. For example, the school campus may be best served by a small on-site system, rather than by being linked to a larger system for the retail and office centers.

- Potential locations for wastewater treatment facilities have been identified at the Concord Auto Auction site and on the Piper Road site that is proposed for rezoning from residential to Office Park.
- The report contains preliminary estimates of the costs of treatment facilities, and suggestions for financing these costs through a combination of general obligation bonds (paid for by all Acton taxpayers) and assessments to individual users of the facilities.

ECONOMIC BASE ANALYSIS AND MARKET STUDIES

The findings and conclusions of our economic base analysis and real estate market studies are the following:

- Economically, Acton is in very good shape. The town has emerged from the last recession with over 500 more jobs and nearly 150 more firms than it had a decade ago. By 2000, employment in the town is projected to increase by 1,800 at which time it should total around 11,300. Over half of the job gains are expected to be in office-based and R&D-intensive activities.
- Acton has a very high proportion of jobs in larger manufacturing establishments and a low proportion of jobs in smaller personal, business, and financial services firms. Although this makes the town vulnerable to potential further job losses in manufacturing, it also indicates good growth prospects for services.
- The commercial real estate market reflects the town's general economic upturn. Class A office, R&D, and industrial space, which faced vacancy rates of around 40% in 1990 is now 97% occupied. This provides a sharp contrast with the 495 North Market area, where commercial vacancy rates are pushing 30%.
- Due to the high level of commercial vacancy in the wider market area, speculative commercial construction has come to a standstill since 1988. However, the owner-built market in Acton has been lively, averaging an annual absorption of 13 acres a year. This rate of absorption is expected to remain steady throughout the remainder of the decade.
- From the standpoint of market feasibility, the following uses offer the best near-term prospects for reuse of large, key sites in Kelley's Corner:
 - large, "box" retailing uses
 - owner-built office and R&D flex space
 - a Continuing Care retirement center

In addition, investment in incremental improvements and piecemeal redevelopment of existing retail properties is expected to continue throughout the decade.

- Other uses offer longer term prospects for the district. By 2000, excess space in the market area is expected to be absorbed creating a demand for additional:
 - village retailing (e.g., small retail and service units)
 - speculative office park construction
 - an upscale hotel/conference center with community access to recreational facilities on a membership basis.

- Acton does not need to undertake a large-scale economic development effort. Rather, administratively simple and cost-effective measures, such as density bonuses and short-term tax abatements, should be offered as incentives for incremental upgrading in Kelley's Corner. A part-time staff member should be assigned to coordinate the process.

FISCAL IMPACTS

The recommended land use plan will have two types of fiscal impacts to the Town: increased revenues from property taxes, and increased costs for providing municipal services and facilities.

- The long-term fiscal benefits of encouraging commercial and industrial development are not clear. Although the correlation between tax rates and land use patterns is weak, it appears that Massachusetts communities with higher proportions of nonresidential development may also have higher residential tax rates. This may be attributable to higher infrastructure needs in more urbanized communities.

- In the short term, however, an expansion of the nonresidential tax base has clear fiscal benefits. Given Acton's current distribution of land uses and its property tax structure, it is estimated that residential parcels generate about \$1.40 in municipal service costs for every dollar of tax revenue that they produce, whereas the cost of providing services to commercial and industrial parcels is less than 20 cents for every dollar of tax revenue generated. These and similar estimates present a strong case for expanding the commercial and industrial tax base to help fund needed municipal services while minimizing the tax burden on Acton homeowners.

- Based on an estimated floor area increase of about 337,000 square feet over a ten-year period, the total nonresidential tax base in the Planning Area could increase by about \$14.2 million and annual property tax revenues by about \$291,000. After accounting for municipal service costs attributable to this new development, the estimated net fiscal benefit to the Town would be \$232,800 per year at the end of the ten-year development period.

IMPACT FEES

The final section of the report presents an outline of an impact fee system that might be implemented to help fund infrastructure improvements in the planning area or in other areas of the Town. This outline includes a review of the legal authority for Towns to adopt impact fee measures; a review of the key court decisions, both in Massachusetts and elsewhere, relating to such fees; and an overview of how impact fees are being used in communities across the country. Specific attention is paid to the use of impact fees to fund roads and sewers, as these are the major capital improvement needs that are anticipated for the Kelley's Corner Planning Area. Key points from this outline include the following:

- An impact fee is a fee charged to a developer to pay for capital improvements that are required by the development. It cannot be used to pay for the portion of capital improvement costs attributable to pre-existing demand, nor is it used to help fund ongoing operating costs.
- An impact fee by-law or ordinance must be supported by a capital facilities plan, including cost estimates and an inventory of deficiencies in existing capital facilities.
- The impact fee system must include a formula or methodology to determine the proportion of the capital facility need caused by the new development, and this methodology must yield a fee that is "roughly proportional" to the demand created by the development.
- Funds received from impact fees should be earmarked to a zone or district to ensure that the paying development benefits from their expenditure, and they must be spent for earmarked purposes within a reasonable period of time or be returned to the payer.

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