A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

Kelley's Corner

Can It Become a Walkable Town Center?

Acton, Massachusetts

February 10, 2014

Urban Land Institute
Boston
Serving the Six New England States

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Executive Summary

Under the direction of the Urban Land Institute's Boston District Council, the Kelley's Corner Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) convened in Acton, Massachusetts in February 2014, bringing together stakeholders, community leaders, and a panel of planning, design, engineering, and development professionals for a day-long session focused on identifying the issues, constraints, and opportunities presented by the desire to transform the Kelley's Corner district into a walkable town center. The report that follows, which summarizes the TAP recommendations, is comprised of five chapters:

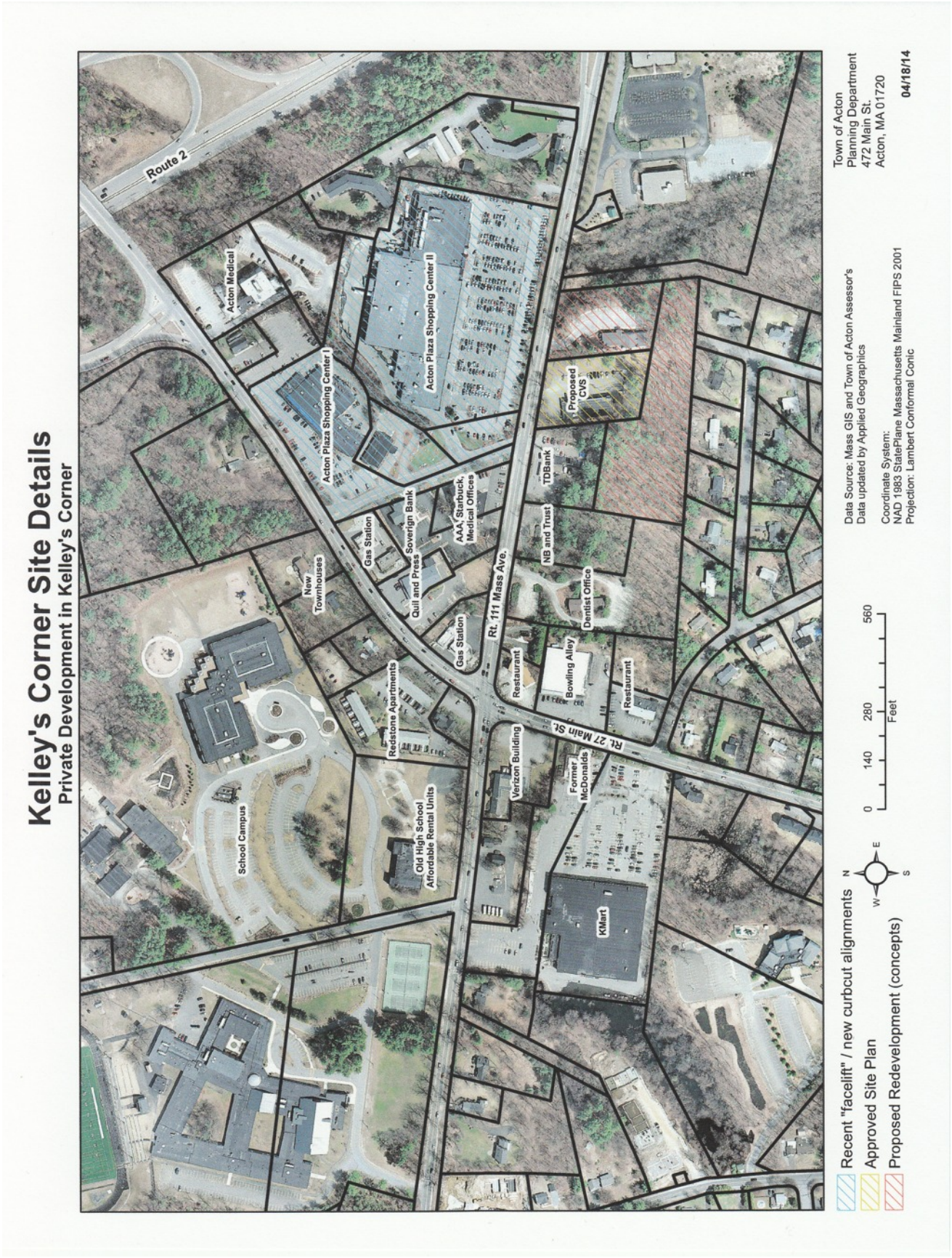
Chapter 1: ULI and the TAP Process gives an overview of the Urban Land Institute's Boston District Council and its Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs), and provides a detailed list of participants in the Kelley's Corner TAP including town officials, stakeholders, and the panel of land-use professionals.

Chapter 2: Background and Assignment gives background information about Kelley's Corner, and provides an overview of recent activity in the area, including the "Revisioning Kelley's Corner" study conducted with Tufts University and the Acton 2020 Master Plan. This chapter also reviews the Town of Acton's objectives for the TAP, as stated in its initial application, which were: to identify impediments to Kelley's Corner's transformation into a town center; to offer suggestions for overcoming those impediments; and to recommend tools and initiatives that Acton can pursue to further its goals for the district.

Chapter 3: Observations and Findings presents an overview of existing assets; a summary of the critical elements that are missing, including "imageable" space, cohesive identity, programming, pedestrian opportunities, civic amenities, upscale dining, and public parking; and a discussion of the technical, political, and physical challenges that must be addressed in order to move the redevelopment of Kelley's Corner forward.

Chapter 4: Recommendations proposes a number of ways that the citizens of Acton can reframe their mindset about the Kelley's Corner district by defining an achievable vision focused on elements within the town's control that can be accomplished within the 2020 timeframe.

Finally, **Chapter 5: Next Steps** summarizes the panel's key recommendations, including engaging the regional school district as stakeholders, maximizing the potential of the Kmart site, adjusting the scope of the upcoming planning study, focusing on near-term improvements, and resisting the temptation to completely revision the Kelley's Corner area.


Kelley's Corner Site Details
Private Development in Kelley's Corner
Route 2
Acton Medical
Acton Plaza Shopping Center I
Acton Plaza Shopping Center II
Proposed CVS
TDBank
NB and Trust
Dentist Office
Restaurant
Bowling Alley
Restaurant
Rt. 111 Mass Ave.
Rt. 27 Main St.
Gas Station
Sovereign Bank
Quil and Press
AAA, Starbuck, Medical Offices
Gas Station
New Townhouses
Redstone Apartments
Verizon Building
Former McDonalds
KMart
School Campus
Old High School
Affordable Rental Units
Recent "facelift" / new curbcut alignments
Approved Site Plan
Proposed Redevelopment (concepts)
N
W
E
S
0
140
280
560
Feet
Data Source: Mass GIS and Town of Acton Assessor's Data updated by Applied Geographics
Coordinate System:
NAD 1983 StatePlane Massachusetts Mainland FIPS 2001
Projection: Lambert Conformal Conic
Town of Acton
Planning Department
472 Main St.
Acton, MA 01720
04/18/14

1. ULI and the TAP Process

a. Urban Land Institute (ULI)

The Urban Land Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit research and education organization supported by its members. Founded in 1936, the Institute now has nearly 30,000 members worldwide representing the entire spectrum of land-use and real estate development disciplines, working in private enterprise and public service, including developers, architects, planners, lawyers, bankers, and economic development professionals, among others.

As the pre-eminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information, and experience among local, national, and international industry leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places. The mission of the Urban Land Institute is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and to help sustain and create thriving communities. The Boston District Council serves the six New England states and has over 1,000 members.

b. Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)

The ULI Boston Real Estate Advisory Committee convenes Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) at the request of public officials and local stakeholders of communities and nonprofit organizations facing complex land-use challenges who benefit from planning and development professionals providing pro bono recommendations. At the TAP, a group of diverse professionals specially assembled with expertise in the issues posed typically spends one to two days visiting and analyzing existing conditions, identifying specific planning and development issues, and formulating realistic and actionable recommendations to move initiatives forward in a way consistent with the applicant's goals and objectives.

c. Panel Members

ULI Boston convened a panel of volunteers whose members represent a range of the disciplines associated with the planning and development challenges presented by Kelley's Corner.

Disciplines represented include architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning and design, development, civil engineering, and real estate law. Members were selected with the intent of convening a robust array of professional expertise relevant to the Town of Acton's objectives for this TAP. The panelists were:

- Richard Lampman, Barr & Barr (TAP Co-Chair)
- Edward O'Rourke, GEI Consultants (TAP Co-Chair)
- Sarah Barnat, ULI Boston
- Frederick Kramer, ADD Inc
- Ruth Loetterle, Carol R. Johnson Associates
- Sandi Silk, Jefferson Apartment Group
- Andrew Sutton, Riemer & Braunstein

Roland Bartl, planning director for the Town of Acton, and Kristen Guichard, assistant town planner, served as the primary contacts for ULI Boston for the town.

Virginia Quinn served as the consulting technical writer, while Michelle Landers of ULI Boston provided organizational and technical support in preparation for and during the TAP event.

d. Stakeholders

The TAP benefited from the participation of a diverse group of stakeholders — policy makers, town staff, business owners, and property owners — who met with the panel and shared information, ideas, and opinions on a range of issues affecting Kelley's Corner. Stakeholders at the session included:

- Janet Adachi, Chair, Board of Selectmen
- Steven Ledoux, Town Manager
- Roland Bartl, Planning Director
- Andrew Brockway, Chair, Acton 2020
- Kat Hudson, Vice-Chair, Acton 2020
- Margaret Wolley Busse, Finance Committee and former Acton 2020
- Lauren Morton, former Planning Board and Board of Selectmen
- Steven Cecil, The Cecil Group
- Sammie Basil, Owner, Sorrento's Pizza
- Louis Levine, attorney and property owner
- Marvin Gould, property owner
- Eric Solomon, Kelley's Corner neighbor

e. TAP Process

The Kelley's Corner TAP was held on February 10, 2014 at Acton Town Hall. In the morning, Roland Bartl, planning director for the Town of Acton, welcomed the panelists, then led a bus tour of Kelley's Corner and the surrounding area.

The tour began at Town Hall, proceeded southwest on Main Street through the historic district, crossed over Route 2, then past the Hosmer House to the upper Acton Plaza retail area. The tour continued onto "No-Name Street" (proposed for renaming to "Community Way"), then proceeded west on Massachusetts Avenue through the intersection of Routes 111 and 27 to the former high school and the current school campus. After driving through the Prospect Street neighborhood and past the Acton Shopping Center, the tour proceeded north onto Main Street, then east into the Kelley/Beverly Road residential neighborhood. The tour then returned to Main Street past the Kmart, McDonald's, and Verizon properties, turned east onto Massachusetts Avenue and into the recent TD Bank development, across Route 111 into the lower Acton Plaza retail area, then returned to Town Hall.

After the tour, the ULI panel interviewed a diverse series of stakeholders to gain a better understanding of the relevant issues, dynamics, and opportunities surrounding Kelley's Corner. The panelists then engaged in an intensive charrette to develop recommendations addressing some of the critical issues associated with transforming the area into a walkable town center. The TAP concluded with a presentation to the Board of Selectmen and members of the community at a public meeting that evening at Town Hall.

The presentation is available electronically at the ULI Boston website *http://boston.uli.org*.

2. Background and Assignment

a. Kelley's Corner

Kelley's Corner is Acton's main commercial center, located at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue (Route 111) and Main Street (Route 27). Over the past 17+ years, Acton residents have highlighted the problems and unrealized potential in Kelley's Corner. Last year, the town adopted the Acton 2020 Master Plan, once again identifying the need to improve Kelley's Corner. Residents stated they felt the town has no defined town center and expressed a strong desire to establish Kelley's Corner as a walkable "downtown." More recently, at the April 2013 Annual Town Meeting, the town approved funding for the Kelley's Corner Improvement Initiative, to lay the groundwork for transforming Kelley's Corner into a mixed-use town center. Three main tools are specified as deliverables for this project: zoning amendments, design guidelines, and public infrastructure improvement plans.

b. History

There have been numerous efforts over the past 17+ years to improve Kelley's Corner. In 1995, the "Kelley's Corner Specific Area Plan" was created, followed by the 1997 "Kelley's Corner Circulation Plan." Both had recommendations for zoning bylaw amendments. Some of the recommended zoning changes passed and some failed at various Town Meetings. Opposition came largely from residential abutters. After 2001, the matter was deferred indefinitely.

In 2010, the town teamed up with Tufts University to conduct a study entitled, "Revisioning Kelley's Corner: An Experiment in Public Participation." This study focused on empowering residents through public participation using visualization tools to share their ideas for a revitalized Kelley's Corner. At the same time, the Acton 2020 Comprehensive Community Plan Outreach Phase I commenced, followed by Phase II, creation of the Acton 2020 Comprehensive Community Plan. The 2012 Annual Town Meeting adopted its goals and objectives, and shortly thereafter the Planning Board adopted the Acton 2020 Comprehensive Community Plan as Acton's new master plan.

One of the town's overarching themes of the Acton 2020 Master Plan is to direct future growth to existing centers that have capacity for infill and denser development while preserving open spaces in the more outlying areas. Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) was identified as the primary implementation tool. Kelley's Corner will be the first center studied within the parameters of this model. An important aspect of this project will be to incorporate new development in a shape and form that is acceptable to the community – especially residential abutters – with digital visualization tools expected to play a large role in this process.

c. Current Status/Recent Activity

Kelley's Corner is a mixed-use area at the intersection of Route 27/Main Street and Route 111/Massachusetts Avenue (the latter a state-controlled road, including the intersection) near the geographic center of Acton. The Kelley's Corner zoning district is made up of approximately 47 acres of land. This area is dominated by commercial uses, with some multi-family residences scattered along the perimeter. Design and layout largely stems from the 1960s and early 1970s, with singular orientation toward accommodating the automobile as the only form of transportation. The businesses consist primarily of retail and restaurant uses, extending east from this intersection toward Route 2. The Charter Road school campus to the west and residential, mostly single-family home, neighborhoods to the south abut the Kelley's Corner district. Strip mall shopping developments with a significant amount of paved parking in front house several businesses. Major tenants are Roche Brothers, T.J. Maxx, and CVS. Kmart shares a large parcel on Main Street with a vacant McDonald's building just south of the principal intersection. Several smaller buildings on separate parcels contain professional and medical offices, banks, and restaurants. A Sunoco filling station occupies a prominent corner in the intersection. A former muffler shop is now converted to a restaurant, and a bowling alley located on the south side of Route 111/Massachusetts Avenue has received a modest facelift.

Recent redevelopments for TD Bank and Sovereign Bank (now Santander Bank) forecast a more walkable town center: the bank buildings are at the street and parking/ drive-ups are to the side and rear. A new CVS store has been recently proposed to replace the Goodyear tire store on a site directly across from Acton Plaza, and the town is encouraging site and building design features that will contribute to the more pedestrian-friendly environment envisioned for Kelley's Corner. Three parcels on the west side of Route 27/Main Street contain three different multi-family housing developments; two are recent redevelopments from small single-family homes. Kelley's Corner has been served by sewer since 2002 and has capacity for additional development if higher density zoning were allowed.

d. Town of Acton's Objectives for the TAP

The Technical Assistance Panel was asked to provide a review of the Kelley's Corner study area, with the goals of:

- Identifying overarching impediments that, to the extent that they exist, in addition to unsuitable zoning standards, inhibit or impair Kelley's Corner's transformation into a vibrant, walkable, mixed-use center;
- Offering suggestions for overcoming those impediments and moving forward; and
- Within a holistic, problem-solving approach, focusing on the projected market conditions, trends, and challenges for commercial and residential real estate that may conflict with Acton's town center redevelopment goals, and recommending tools and initiatives that Acton can pursue to further its goals.

Some landlords in Kelley's Corner have recently invested in improvements to their properties.

3. Observations and Findings

a. Overview of Existing Assets

Acton is fortunate to have, in Kelley's Corner, assets that many suburban towns covet. The area already has in place a flourishing mix of high-quality uses, either directly within the Corner or in close proximity. Additionally, the area has a solid infrastructure foundation, with the beginnings of a sidewalk system and street edges which can someday be made continuous, as well as sewer with the capacity to take on additional development.

Acton is also fortunate to have a highly engaged, proactive Acton 2020 Implementation Committee that has generated enough political momentum with town voters to support the funding of a more detailed planning evaluation by the Cecil Group, commencing in the spring of 2014. Many towns struggle mightily, and not always successfully, to garner support for such ambitious efforts.

Upon examination by the panel, a number of the fundamental elements of a successful town center were found to already exist in Kelley's Corner:

- Balanced mix of high-quality uses/tenants: office, medical, educational, retail, restaurants.
- Desirable demographics of the surrounding population.
- Vibrant retail mix of national chains and popular local stores and restaurants, with few vacancies.
- Exceptional vehicular access: with its location at the crossroads of two major roads, the retail locations benefit from high traffic count and ease of vehicular access.

The nearby school campus contributes significant traffic.

- Appropriate parking ratios: parking availability is for the most part adequate, with occasional overflow in Acton Plaza.
- High visibility: stores and restaurants are easily seen and accessed by the large numbers of vehicles passing through on Routes 27 and 111.
- Employment center: there is a plentiful mix of all types of jobs in the business, medical, education, and retail sectors.
- Housing mix: ample housing in a range of price points and residential types: single-family, multi-family, condominiums, and rental apartments.
- Food and entertainment: attractive mix of national and regional chains and local establishments.

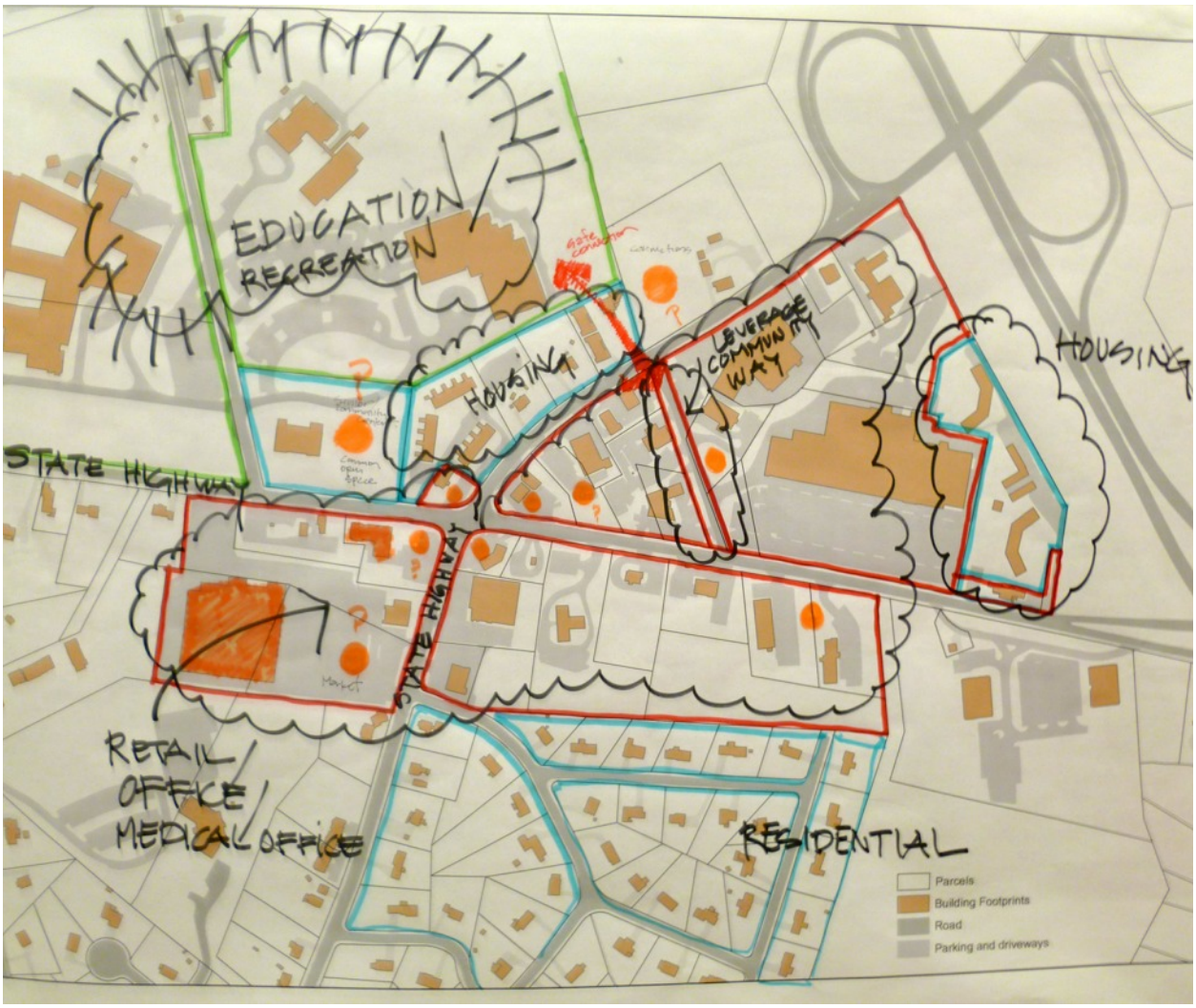


Diagram showing zones of existing uses in Kelley's Corner and the surrounding area.

- Proximity of the school campus, which contributes a critical mass of vehicular and pedestrian traffic.

b. What's Missing?

Although Kelley's Corner has myriad but sometimes under-appreciated assets, it is apparent that several critical elements are lacking:

"Imageable" gathering space: Kelley's Corner reflects the period (1970s) when the Town of Acton saw enormous growth as a desirable suburban location. The area's lack of distinguishing design features, typical of suburban development of that period, does not resonate with town residents today. Unlike New England downtowns anchored by a traditional green, there is "no there there" – it is not a memorable place to shop in, walk around, or drive through.

District identity: Kelley's Corner lacks a cohesive identity, due in large part to the disparate land ownership and the prevailing development aesthetic of the 1970s. An intensive branding effort, making effective use of signage, landscape improvements, and thoughtful siting of new buildings, could help create a distinctive identity.

Programming: People come to Kelley's Corner for a specific purpose, then leave; there is no reason to linger. Other suburbs have successfully used regularly scheduled activities like farmers' markets, food trucks, and art/craft fairs to populate and enliven public spaces.

Pedestrian experience: Although some sidewalks have recently been added along Community Way, there are not a lot of walkable opportunities around Kelley's Corner: neither reasons to walk, nor continuous sidewalks to walk upon. The area would benefit from a safer and more connective pedestrian experience.

Civic amenities: Although it is geographically the center of Acton, there are no public buildings such as a town hall, library, community center, or post office to act as a magnet to attract and keep people here.

Upscale dining: Residents and visitors alike would welcome one or more destination "white tablecloth" restaurants added to the existing mix of more casual family-style dining establishments.

Public parking: Each business or group of businesses has its own site-specific dedicated parking, but there is no centralized shared public parking. Having a town-owned lot would add more pedestrians to the sidewalks and more human-scale activity to the streets.

c. Challenges

The panel noted a number of challenges that must be addressed in order to move the redevelopment of Kelley's Corner forward:

Technical/Political Challenges

- It is difficult to define an achievable vision in an area where control of property is spread widely among various private owners, with little town-owned land.

- An earlier effort in 2001 to get Town Meeting support for changes to Kelley's Corner lost by a small margin (15 votes shy of the needed 2/3 majority). It will be important to distinguish the current plan from the previous effort in order to move it successfully through the political process. Although housing considerations are not directly a part of the Kelley's Corner initiative, residential abutters are important stakeholders; their opinions must be taken into consideration if the project is to succeed.

- Mashpee Commons and Linden Square in Wellesley have been offered as examples of desirable suburban projects with some similar attributes to Kelley's Corner; but those projects were realizable because they were developed all at once on large parcels of land owned by a single entity. In Kelley's Corner, ownership is spread among many different

Unlike Kelley's Corner, Mashpee Commons and Linden Square were developed on large parcels of land owned by a single entity.

entities, making it difficult to achieve a cohesive design vision. Additionally, these projects are insulated from most of the through traffic in the area, with access points into the retail zone off the major street, as opposed to a retail core similar to that found in Concord Center.

- Acton's zoning regulations adequately establish and control land use consistent with the town's vision of Kelley's Corner; however, the highly detailed and infrastructure-intensive nature of the zoning may act as a disincentive to some landowners. Additionally, Acton's zoning regulations seem to lack incentives for landowners which could help to offset the additional cost of compliance with the design demands of the neighborhood zoning.

- Because Kelley's Corner is in no way a "blighted" area, given its high-value land uses, it will be hard to convince owners to undertake major change and significant investment in their properties when they are satisfied with the way things are already working. The prevailing attitude may be, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Physical Challenges

- Linkages throughout Kelley's Corner are fragmented; sidewalks are not continuous across parcels or across major streets.

- Linkages from the school campus to Kelley's Corner need improvement. The informal path that has been created over the years from the schools through the Historical Society's Hosmer House property to Main Street would benefit from being formalized and made safer.

- Routes 27 and 111 are both major thoroughfares. Route 111 is state controlled, making any modifications more complicated, and limiting some of what can be accomplished. 80% of traffic passes *through* the Kelley's Corner area, making it a great location for retailers, but a challenging hurdle to be overcome in achieving walkability within a busy transportation nexus.

- There is limited bicycle access, with roads not wide enough to accommodate bicycle traffic.

Route 111 is state controlled, making any modifications more complicated.

4. Recommendations

Given the many positive attributes already in evidence at Kelley's Corner, the panel recommends that the citizens of Acton reframe their mindset: take a step back and reconsider fine-tuning the district's existing strengths rather than thinking about entirely revisioning the area.

- Define an achievable vision. 2020 is only six years away – what can be achieved in that short timeframe, given the current land ownership structure that exists?

- Focus on the elements that Acton as a town has within its control to fix, such as branding.

- Identify town resources rather than depend on private funding for streetscape improvements that emphasize health, safety, and sustainability, including uniform/consistent pavement width, materials, and curbing; consistent street lighting at a pedestrian scale; signage marking entry to the district or at lamp poles; trees and plantings that repeat throughout the district. Because the existing owners/tenants are already satisfied with the Kelley's Corner environment, they have little incentive for common infrastructure investments that provide no measurable return to them.

- Leverage the fact that existing tenants are thriving, to attract new businesses to the area.

- Activate under-utilized spaces with innovative programming that helps to create the feeling of a town center. Revisit the parcels that are already under town control (lot next to former high school, path through Historical Society property) with an eye toward establishing linkages.

- Make an all-out effort to get the owner of the Kmart site to cooperate with the town to repurpose as much of it as possible so that it becomes an asset rather than a wasted opportunity.

- Optimize the retail, dining, and entertainment mix for the district. One remarkable attribute of the area is that it provides the sizeable adolescent population with attractive food and entertainment options within easy walking distance of the school campus.

- Identify an economic development strategy to formally engage landowners and business owners (Verizon, Stop & Shop, Kmart, EDENS, various banks) and encourage their collaboration in pursuit of desired goals. For example, the Kmart site could be used for a farmers' market, food trucks, or other programming that would help bring the neighborhood together. The town must initiate direct conversations articulating their vision for the area

and inviting the active participation of these owners in the outcome.

- Evaluate opportunities to use town-owned properties for civic uses. For example, given the increase in Acton's older population, the parcel next to the former high school might be activated as a senior/community center.

- Recognize that the educational campus is the largest single abutter to Kelley's Corner and, as the prime source of retail users, integral to the vibrancy of the area. Make sure the streetscape improvements integrate students into the mix, making it safe for them to walk around and to cross streets. Formalize and make safe the woodland path from the school campus to Main Street.

- Explore the possibility of mid-block pedestrian crossings on Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street as a way to increase safety and walkability. Although Route 111 is a state-owned roadway, there are precedents for signalized crossings on state roads that have heavy pedestrian traffic.

- Leverage the infrastructure work that has already been done on Community Way to pave the way for future opportunities there. For example, the small unused parcel on Community Way next to Acton Plaza could be transformed into an actively used open space of some sort.

Explore the possibility of mid-block pedestrian crossings on Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street.

5. Next Steps

Engage the regional Acton-Boxborough school district as stakeholders in the planning process. An important part of the process going forward involves being mindful of the integration of the K-6 elementary school into the Acton-Boxborough regional school district, effective July 1, 2014. Portions of the very large area that had been directly under the Town of Acton's control will now fall under a regional authority, making them a much larger stakeholder in Kelley's Corner than previously. Achieving linkages between the campus and Kelley's Corner, and creating streetscape, circulation, pathway, safety, and landscape improvements, will require a different process than in the past. Figure out ways to get the school district to participate in the branding efforts.

Maximize the retail potential of Kmart/Stop & Shop site. As was discussed earlier, Kelley's Corner is different from the areas like Mashpee Commons or Linden Square where the developer was able to work with a large parcel and stamp a cohesive downtown feel on it. The greatest potential for achieving a comparable type of development in Kelley's Corner is at the Kmart/Stop & Shop site, but that redevelopment should take care to make sure it engages with the rest of Kelley's Corner and doesn't turn inward. Maximizing the retail potential of that site as it relates to the rest of the area would be crucial to advancing the desired vision for Kelley's Corner. Communicating with the property owners should be a key priority.

Adjust the scope of the upcoming comprehensive planning study. Many of the stakeholders who have been contemplating a significant redevelopment of this area for a long time may be surprised or even a little indignant that the panelists, looking at Kelley's Corner from an outside perspective for a single day, have concluded that the district is not really all that broken. The Cecil Group, on the other hand, has been engaged for a more thorough analysis oriented toward possible futures for Kelley's Corner.

The Panel recommends that the Town of Acton reconsider the scope for the planning study set forth in the Request for Proposals. As the scope currently stands, it includes significant background research and data collection, much of

Maximizing the potential of the Kmart site is crucial to advancing the desired vision for Kelley's Corner.

which the panel believes may not contribute significantly to accomplishing some meaningful improvements within a relatively short six-year (2020) timeframe. The panel thinks the Cecil Group's considerable expertise would be put to better use by focusing more on developing a design vision that leverages existing assets, to dig deeper into existing conditions on the site and figure out how to maximize achievable infrastructure improvements, to provide for meaningful near-term improvements.

Focus on near-term improvements. Although the year 2020 sounds like the distant future, it is in fact only six years away, a relatively short timeframe for accomplishing major goals. The panel recommends focusing on near-term improvements. If this approach resonates with the town, energies could be focused on how to move the public process forward to fund infrastructure investments to bring the site up to the desired level by, for example, taking the lead on sidewalk improvements, rather than waiting for landowners to do it.

Resist the temptation to completely revision the area. Many of the Kelley's Corner landlords have recently invested in improvements to their properties. They have strong, stable tenants. There is not enough reason to motivate already-satisfied landlords to change their properties substantially. Focusing instead on smaller goals that could realistically be achieved by the town within a six-year timeframe – infrastructure-related investment, minor zoning tweaks such as expedited permitting and overlay zoning, along with more consistent enforcement of the well-thought-out design guidelines that dictate a clear vision for the site and are already in place – has a good chance of succeeding in laying the groundwork for transforming Kelley's Corner into the longed-for walkable town center for Acton.

Figure out how to maximize achievable infrastructure improvements within the relatively short 2020 timeframe.