

Acton 2020

BURNING ISSUES: Highlight Sheets

HOUSING HIGHLIGHTS

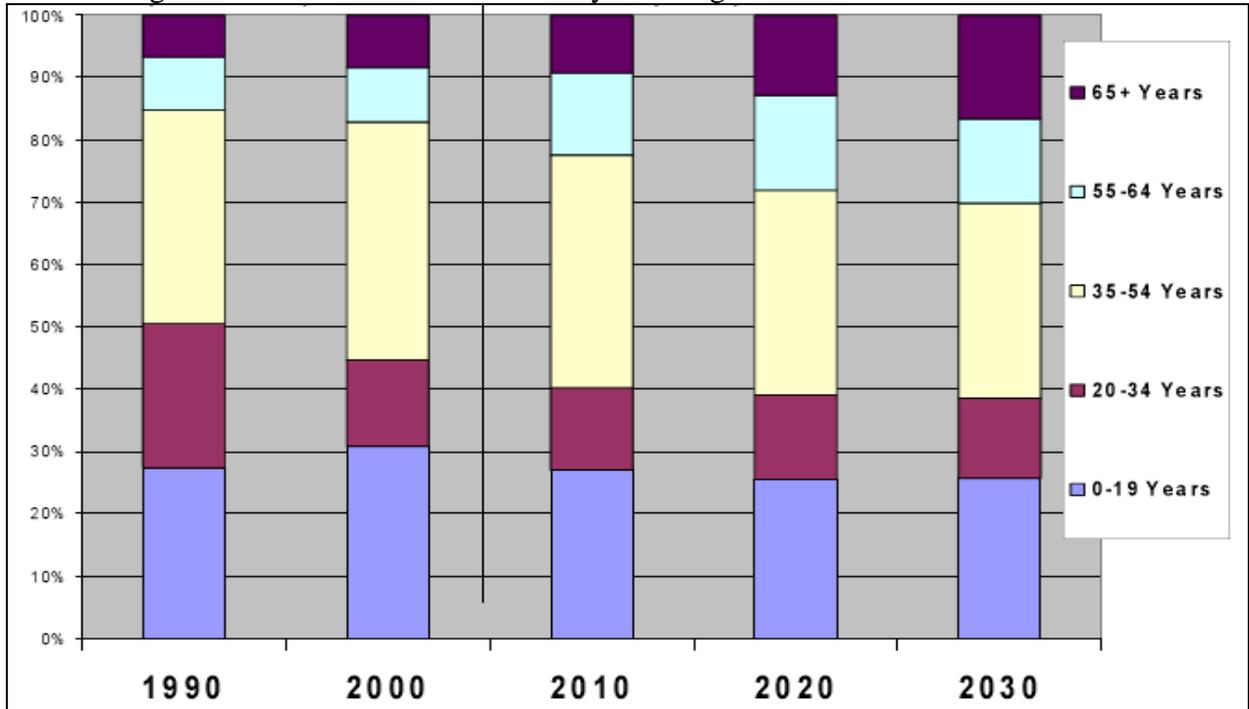
Key Points to Consider

- Population growth has slowed in recent years.
- There have been and will continue to be significant shifts in the age and ethnic structures of Acton.
- Acton's population is highly educated.
- There is likely to be a demand for about 500 new housing units by 2020 and an additional 400 units by 2030.
- There has been a shift in housing construction from 4 and 5 bedroom units to 2 to 3 bedroom units. This is likely to continue.
- The fastest growing category of households are those headed by females with children under age 18.
- Seventy-six percent of Acton's housing stock has been built in the last 50 years.
- About 3% of Acton's housing units are vacant.
- Acton's housing stock is predominately single-family detached units.
- Seventy-five percent of Acton's housing is owner-occupied.
- The average length of stay for a household in owner-occupied units is 17 years.
- The average length of stay for a household in renter-occupied units is 7 years.
- Since 2000 773 residential building permits have been issued.
- Acton has a moderate overall housing density of about 0.4 acre per housing unit.
- At current and projected rates of residential growth Acton will come close to, but not exceed its buildout capacity, based on existing zoning.
- In 2010 the average selling price of a single-family home was \$498,750. The average selling price of a condominium unit was \$280,000.
- About 5% of Acton's housing stock is sold each year. This has averaged about 400 sales per year, but has fallen in recent years owing to the economic downturn.
- Forty-seven percent of Acton's households could not afford to buy an average priced house in town.
- Seven and two-tenths percent (7.2%) of Acton's housing stock is classified as affordable.
- Between 1998 and 2010, 375 units of affordable housing have been created, a rate of 31 per year.
- Residential uses pay 87% of all property taxes in Acton.

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Figure 1.3: Relative Shifts in Life Cycle Categories from 1990 to 2030



Sources: U.S. Census of Population, Acton Town Census for 2010 and MAPC for future years.

Demographic shifts in age categories will be significant for town services and facilities and housing. Elderly population is expected to grow substantially, while school age children will decline slightly in numbers.

Table 1.8: Number of Housing Units, by Size in 2010

Type (Size) of Structure	Units in Structure	% of Housing Stock
One Unit – Detached	5,433	61
One Unit – Attached	782	9
Two Units	196	2
Three or Four Units	266	3
Five to Nineteen Units	1,168	13
Twenty to Forty-Nine Units	708	8
Fifty or More Units	410	5

Source: Claritas Estimates adjusted by Planners Collaborative based on the U. S. Census of Housing.

Acton is predominately a single-family detached housing unit town. Sixty-three percent (61%) of Acton’s housing stock is estimated to be in single-family detached units in 2010. There is no predominant other type of housing.

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Opportunities and Challenges posed by Existing Conditions

Acton is a very desirable place to live because of its accessible location, reputable schools and other municipal services, and the high quality of its housing stock. Acton is however an expensive place to live, requiring relatively high household incomes to maintain the quality of the existing housing stock, and pay the property taxes needed to support good quality town facilities and services.

- Creating affordable housing¹ is a challenge and an opportunity to retain residents
- It is a challenge to get renters to stay longer than 7 years on average (in Acton?)
- Building up residential densities in and around village centers is a challenge
- Assuring that new housing created best matches likely demographic changes will be challenging
- Matching residential growth to town infrastructure and services capacities is a challenge
- Creating moderately priced market-rate housing and holding down municipal expenses to maintain or lower property tax rates will be challenging

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¹ Insert comment on different definitions.....

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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT HIGHLIGHTS

Key Points to Consider

- In 2010, on average, 11,248 people were employed in Acton. (Jobs in Acton held by Acton residents and residents of other cities and towns.)
- There were 784 establishments in Acton in 2009 (2010 data is not yet available.)
- Acton is an important employment center in its nine town sub-region. Concord and Westford are the other important employment centers.
- Acton is expected to remain an important sub-regional employment center.
- Major categories of employment in Acton are retail trade, public administration including public schools, health care and social assistance, computer systems design and related services, education services (not including public schools), and eating and drinking establishments.
- Health care and social assistance and computer systems design and related services are the fastest growing categories of employment (147% and 112% respectively, between 2001 and 2009).
- The average weekly wage in Acton establishments was \$938 in 2009.
- Average weekly wages ranged from \$226 (used merchandise stores) to \$2,346 (scientific research and development services).
- The average number of employees per establishment in 2009 was 12.
- There are about 500 home based businesses in Acton.
- In September, 2010 Acton had a labor force of 11,757 (Acton residents who hold jobs anywhere.)
- In September, 2010 5.6% of Acton's labor force was unemployed (compared to a statewide figure of 8.0%)
- Most of Acton's commercial development is located along its numbered highways (Routes 2, 2A and 27) and in village centers.
- The value of retail sales in 2007 in Acton was \$644,864,000.
- Motor vehicle and parts dealers and food and beverage stores accounted for 58% of all retail sales in 2002 and 64% in 2007.

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- Acton collects 12.9% of its property taxes from commercial and industrial property.
- Acton is a town of small businesses, measured by employees per business
- The largest number of Acton residents are in the high wage/high education categories of management, computer/mathematical, educational/training/library, sales related and office/administrative support
- In a survey² conducted in 2008, more than half (57%) of Acton residents reported doing more than half of their shopping outside of Acton
- For the last eight years, Acton has had the highest residential tax rate of all towns around it, except for Stow which had a higher rate from 2003 to 2005.

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² Phase I – explain....>>>>

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Table 2.9: Amount and Percentages of Property Tax Revenues Raised from Commercial, Industrial and Personal Property in Acton and Surrounding Towns in 2010

Town	Commercial	%	Industrial	%	Personal Property	%
Acton	5,497,569	8.6	1,675,574	2.6	1,110,816	1.7
Boxborough	1,341,843	8.4	2,286,998	14.4	326,253	2.1
Carlisle	144,139	0.7	19,309	0.1	193,075	1
Concord	5,100,090	7.8	406,458	0.6	669,985	1
Littleton	1,796,882	7.6	4,259,388	17.9	750,419	3.2
Maynard	1,780,763	7.9	2,158,385	9.6	751,915	3.4
Stow	919,565	4.7	417,504	2.2	364,708	1.9
Sudbury	3,158,019	4.8	1,294,359	2	1,264,922	1.9
Westford	3,297,328	5.9	3,618,276	6.5	1,072,015	1.9

Opportunities and Challenges posed by Existing Conditions

Acton has a strong and diverse economic mix of activities that provides a base for further growth. While further strengthening its role as a sub-regional employment center, Acton can improve its visual character by better design in new and redeveloped commercial and industrial properties.

- Floor-area ratios in industrial areas and the villages can be increased to obtain greater density and better utilization of the land.
- It is possible to seek home rule authority to establish a differential property tax policy in order to encourage and retain start-up ventures, micro-business incubators and micro-business cooperatives in Acton.
- A graduated commercial property tax increase, starting from a lower base, would make Acton desirable for start-up companies and entrepreneurs by reducing their operating costs for three to five years.
- Economic development and housing affordability are mutually dependent public policy issues.
- Commercial development can be focused on creating more local opportunities to shop for goods and obtain services, and publicizing the shopping opportunities that already exist.
- Existing strip commercial development is unsightly but presents opportunities to redesign and redevelop it.

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CONNECTIONS HIGHLIGHTS

Key Points to Consider

Ann Sussman's numbers of cars / people – Brian reviewing definitions

- The Town of Acton is accessible by highway as well as by commuter rail between Fitchburg and Boston.
- For the last eight years, Acton has had the highest residential tax rate of all towns around it; however, the tax bill, which is the tax rate times the assessed value, is more significant than the tax rate itself.

Overview

- As the cost of transportation continues to increase (both driving and using public transportation), the cost of commuting will likely be an important factor in residential and employment decision making.
- As with its neighboring communities, the 2000 Census showed that nearly 90 percent of Acton residents drove or road in a car to work and 4.5 percent used public transportation.
- While car travel and to a lesser extent regional commuter transit will continue to predominate in the Town, participants in the planning process have expressed a desire for other viable alternatives.

Roadways

- Acton's principal roadways were never designed to carry high traffic volumes. Also, because of their historical importance, maintaining their visual character is an important element of the Acton 2020 Plan.
- Many of the intersections along these corridors are uncontrolled, which means that left-turning traffic creates backups; left-turns entering from side streets can also be difficult. This is particularly challenging along Great Road (Route 119) where multiple driveways permit entries and exits that can result in conflicts and potentially in crashes.
- Speeding is a problem on many of the Town's roadways, particularly on road segments between congestion hot spots.

Public Transportation

- The MBTA recently began improvements to the Fitchburg Line, which include extending double tracking from Boston to Ayer to increase train speeds and on-time performance. The project also includes renovating SATS.
- In March 2010, the MBTA adopted the design alternative

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proposed by Acton residents. The Acton Historic District Commission has begun reviewing the latest 60 percent design plans.

- The MBTA is working on improvements to the Littleton/495 commuter rail station. When construction is completed, express service currently available at SATS will be extended to the new station, thereby relieving some parking congestion at SATS.
- While the LRTA does not provide fixed-route bus service in Acton, it provides paratransit service to Acton's senior and disabled communities.
- In 2009, Acton received \$95,188 in federal funding to initiate the MinuteVan shuttle service between the station and a 22-space satellite parking lot behind the West Acton Fire Station
- The MinuteVan shuttle also offers dial-a-ride service outside of the commuter service hours to any destination in Acton and to five locations in adjacent towns.
- Acton Council on Aging also provides shuttle service for Acton residents 60 years old and older and for disabled residents as space allows.
- Yankee Line, Inc. provides weekday morning and evening charter-bus trips between East Acton, Concord Center, and Copley Square in Boston.

Pedestrian Facilities

- With the notable exception of recent sidewalk projects, most of Acton's sidewalks are narrow and often exist on only one side of the street. Often, for reasons that include avoiding historic stone walls, large street trees, or property takings, sidewalks sometimes shift from one side of the street to the other.
- Acton Subdivision Rules and Regulations require developers to provide pedestrian improvements as deemed necessary by the Planning Board. They also require local streets to have a sidewalk on at least one side, while collector and arterial streets must have sidewalks on both sides.
- The town's Sidewalk Committee helps set priorities for pedestrian improvements, and Acton has recently completed construction of many sidewalks.
- Since one of the challenges to providing pedestrian facilities is the perception of many residents that they are inconsistent with the town's rural character, it is noteworthy that the Sidewalk Committee has published design guidelines for sidewalks that address this concern.

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Bicycle Facilities

- Acton has many two-lane roads that are ideal for recreational cycling during off-peak times. However, these same roads are less than optimal for cycling when vehicular traffic volumes are higher and there are no marked bicycle lanes in the Town.
- At present, there is no bicycle committee or TAC subcommittee on bicycling.
- Acton is directly involved in two major rail trail projects. Assabet River Rail Trail (ARRT) Phase 2, which would provide an important commuter link to

SATS, and the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail (BFRT), for which the Town has selected a design firm for final design.

- The Acton Subdivision Rules and Regulations also addresses bike paths as deemed necessary by the Planning Board.

Table 6.2: Commuting Modes in Acton and Surrounding Towns³

Town	Drive Alone	Car Pool	Public Transit	Walk	Work at Home	Other
Acton	80.8	7.4	4.5	1.2	5.6	0.4
Boxborough	84.6	5.9	2.4	1.1	5.9	0.0
Carlisle	77.1	4.3	2.8	1.7	13.9	0.2
Concord	76.8	5.2	5.2	2.8	9.1	0.9
West Concord CDP	84.3	3.4	5.7	1.2	4.7	0.6
Littleton	85.5	4.5	3.0	1.1	5.2	0.7
Littleton Common CDP	86.2	3.9	2.9	1.1	6.0	0.0
Maynard	82.6	8.6	2.6	2.3	3.3	0.6
Stow	84.2	4.6	3.5	1.2	5.8	0.7
Sudbury	84.8	3.8	3.1	1.7	5.9	0.7
Westford	88.0	5.3	1.2	0.6	4.8	0.1

³ Source - ????

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Opportunities and Challenges posed by Existing Conditions

Some improvements in conditions on Acton's roadway network are possible, but the areas in which the Acton 2020 plan can improve transportation most appear to be in public transportation, walking, and bicycling

- Although controlling traffic speeds, particularly in residential areas, and managing traffic entering principal roads are both challenges, these initiatives may be worthwhile in terms of improvements in safety and livability.
- Sidewalk maintenance, particularly in winter months, is an ongoing challenge, owing to its cost.
- Pathway linkages can be explored, particularly where connections can be made between adjacent parcels and from residential areas to commercial areas.
- The market for the MinuteVan service exists, but the current pricing structure for parking and using the shuttle should be evaluated; requiring an annual commitment at the start of the program may be a substantial disincentive to trying the service.
- The addition of the MinuteVan Dial-a-Ride (DAR) service has shown that a more locally tailored service is popular. Discussions with adjacent towns and Montachusett Area Transit Authority (MART) could produce a better local service than the current DAR through LRTA.
- With two shared use paths in development and bicycle parking program expansion, there is an opportunity for the Town to form a bicycle committee, either independently or as part of the TAC.
- The limited resources available for transportation planning may limit progress in addressing the desires of those who have participated in the planning process. With so much interest in alternatives to driving, improving connections will likely require more staff resources than are currently available.