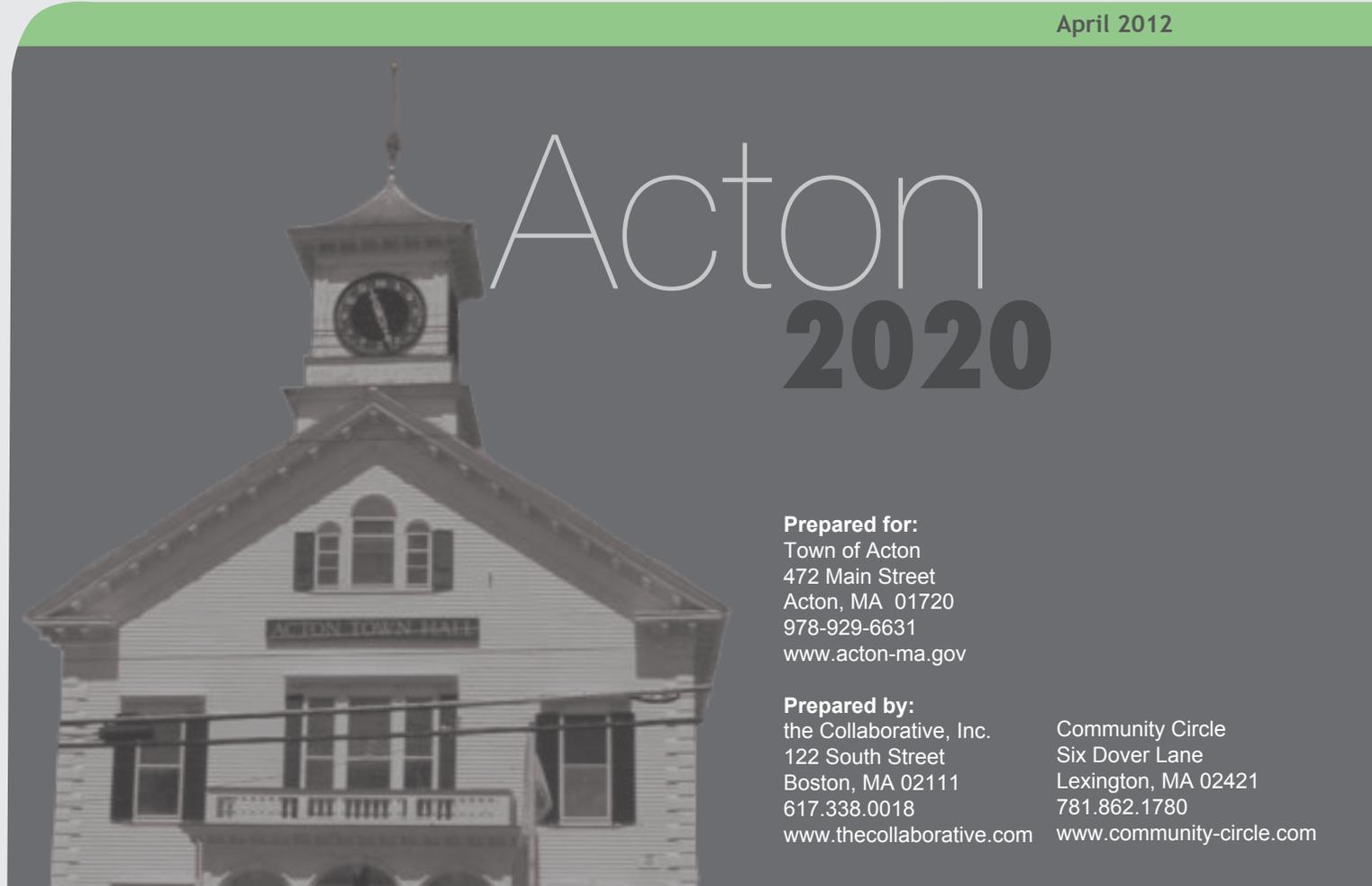




Acton 2020 Comprehensive Community Plan

April 2012



Acton 2020

Prepared for:
Town of Acton
472 Main Street
Acton, MA 01720
978-929-6631
www.acton-ma.gov

Prepared by:
the Collaborative, Inc.
122 South Street
Boston, MA 02111
617.338.0018
www.thecollaborative.com

Community Circle
Six Dover Lane
Lexington, MA 02421
781.862.1780
www.community-circle.com

Today. Tomorrow. Together.

Acknowledgements

Acton 2020 Committee

Margaret Woolley Busse, Chair
Jim Snyder-Grant, Vice Chair
Celia Kent
Paulina Knibbe
Charles Mercier
Sahana Purohit

Clint Seward (Finance Committee liaison)
John Sonner (Board of Selectmen liaison)

Former Acton 2020 Committee Members

Sue Benson
Dean Cavaretta
Bill Marathias
Sandeep Verma

The Acton 2020 Committee extends its thanks to:

Acton's Boards, Commissions, and Committees, whose members provided invaluable information and input; and to the **Phase I Outreach Committee** for their hard work in establishing the groundwork for the planning process.

The Acton Planning Department

who worked tirelessly to provide information, support and institutional memory to the process.

Roland Bartl, Acton Planning Director
Kristin Alexander, Acton Assistant Planner
Kim Gorman, Planning Department Secretary
Scott Mutch, Assistant Planner and Zoning Enforcement Officer

The Town Manager and Town department heads and staff who participated and assisted in the development of the Plan.

Other Organizations who participated

Acton-Boxborough Regional School District
Acton Chinese Language School
Acton Community Access Television
Acton Water District

And special thanks to the over 2,500 Acton residents and business owners that participated in the planning process.

Consultant Team

Jim Purdy Co-Project Manager, The Collaborative
Daphne Politis Co-Project Manager, Community Circle

The Collaborative staff:

Joe Brevard, Principal

Susanna Anthony Report Designers
Nicole Buxton

Kathy Bagdonas
Brian Barber
Bill Giezentanner
John Hersey
Elizabeth Resor
Lauren Schunk
Bill Schwartz

Photo Credits

Daphne Politis
Jim Purdy
Acton Historical Society



Table of Contents

ii	Foreword	115	Description of Existing Conditions
ES-3	Executive Summary		Population and Housing
1	Introduction		Economic Development
	History & Background		Natural Resources
11	Roadmap for Guiding Growth		Historic and Cultural Resources
	Background		Open Space and Recreation
	Planning for a Resilient Acton		Transportation and Circulation
	Implementation of the Roadmap		Facilities and Services
	Analysis of the Roadmap		Land Use and Zoning
25	Plan Foundations	173	Process
	Guiding Principles		Definition of Phases I and II
	Goals and Objectives		Acton Voices - Phase I
	Outreach - Acton Voices Phase I		Acton Voices - Phase II
	Outreach - Acton Voices Phase II		Public Workshops
	Key Opportunities and Challenges	183	Afterword
	Did You Know?		
39	Implementation Plan	187	Appendices
	Key Implementation Strategies		Appendix 1: Affordable Housing
	Cost and Phasing		Appendix 2: Transfer of Development Rights
	Detailed Implementation Plan Tables		Appendix 3: Youth Art Contest Winners
		Vol II	Appendix 4: List of Action Steps Sorted by Plan Element
			Appendix 5: Inventory of Existing Conditions
			Appendix 6: Reference Material
		Vol III	Appendix 7: Summary of Public Input
			Appendix 8: Selected Press Coverage

FOREWORD



Today. Tomorrow. Together.

Foreword

In the course of working together as residents on the Acton 2020 committee, we've read a number of other comprehensive community plans. Many of these plans seem to start with a simple extrapolation of past trends put forth for the future, but looking back and then forward at the edge of our 20-year planning scope, we don't think this is the right approach for Acton. Instead, we are proposing something bolder, something that responds to the changes happening all around us.

Over the last sixty years, Acton has been defined by its rapid growth from a rural community to a bedroom suburb.¹ Growth was driven by the post-war boom in suburbia, the broad availability of state and federal support to build infrastructure, the availability of relatively cheap land in Acton, and cheap energy everywhere. But now, land has become more scarce and fuel more expensive. Demographics and sensibilities are changing too - as the population gradually shifts towards more seniors and fewer children and awareness and concern increase for environmental sustainability. From a fiscal standpoint, we also know that we can't rely on an ever increasing population to pay for ever more services. And we are more aware that most new residen-

tial development now comes at an increasing cost:² more traffic, more risk to water supplies, more infrastructure to pay for and maintain, and more costs for services.

Actonians are pragmatic and smart. We see changes are coming and we want to find a positive future. What we on the committee have learned during this planning process is that there is an emerging sense among residents of what sorts of shifts will be needed to navigate the coming changes in order to foster a resilient and vibrant community. Indeed, the feedback we've received from residents strongly reflects both a desire for an increased "sense of community" and concern regarding the "future resilience" of the Town. These two themes really frame the Comprehensive Community Plan.

As you read through this document, please keep in mind that the elements of the plan we have laid out do not comprise a simple wishlist that residents expect the Town can achieve by waving a magic wand. The Plan presents a vision of how to support each other by creating a different sort of Town prosperity driven by the richness of social connection, a deep appreciation for the historic and natural realms in which

we are embedded in Acton, and a commitment to a good shared future. And it will take broad and deep resident participation to move in this direction; the Town government itself can only do so much.

By communicating with many residents, boards, and committees through numerous meetings and a number of public workshops,³ a Roadmap for Guiding Growth has emerged that we feel strongly can create Town prosperity. We invite you to join with Town officials, volunteers, and residents to make this vision a reality.

- The Acton 2020 Committee

Margaret Woolley Busse

Margaret Woolley Busse, Chair

Jim Snyder-Grant

Jim Snyder-Grant, Vice-Chair

Celia Kent

Celia Kent

Paulina Knibbe

Paulina Knibbe

Charles Mercier

Charles Mercier

Sahana S Purohit

Sahana Purohit

**The Committee extends its thanks
to everyone who participated in the planning process.**

- The Planning Department staff put the plan at the top of their very full work priorities. Kristin Alexander, Roland Bartl, and Kim Gorman contributed countless hours to attending meetings, document production and review, and, over and over, educating the rest of us by answering our questions about how the Town works.
- The rest of the Town’s staff have decades of experience in Acton and helped us improve the plan each time they engaged with our process.
- Our consultants at the Collaborative and Community Circle worked tirelessly on building the plan and on nurturing the community-wide conversation that formed the basis of the plan.
- The volunteers of every Town board and committee spent some time on parts of the plan, improving it with their deep knowledge of particular areas, out of their commitment to Acton.
- And most importantly, there was an unprecedented engagement by the citizens of Acton at each stage of the planning process. Your commitment and involvement in the future of this Town is the key ingredient that gives us hope for Acton’s future.

“Thank you!”

1. Rapid growth (p.ii): See growth chart, page 21. Acton’s population has grown at a rate of over 3,000 persons per decade since 1950.
2. Increasing cost of new residential development (p.ii): See Fiscal impact research in Appendix 6, Volume III, Harrison and French, Introduction to Fiscal Impact Analysis, UNH; and Kotval and Mullin, Fiscal Impact Analysis.
3. Number of public forums (p.ii): See Process section, page 177.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Today. Tomorrow. Together.

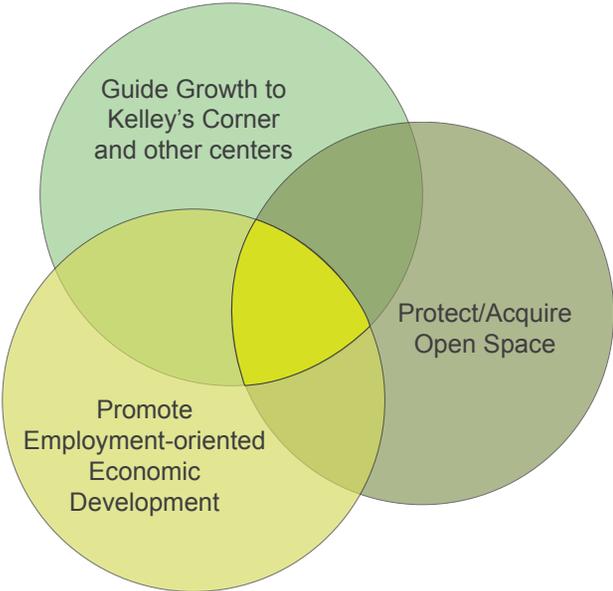
Introduction

The purpose of the Acton 2020 Plan is ultimately about how to create a better community and covers a whole range of different elements, including land use, recreation, transportation, and housing, to name a few; these are reflected in the Plan’s seven goals and corresponding objectives. The Plan is a decision-making tool to be used by Town officials and citizens to express a desired future and the steps that lead there. It is intended to help guide the future growth and development of Acton and to give the Town a strong sense of direction, positioning Acton well so as to take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

The Plan is based on **Underlying Themes** (see sidebar) that were expressed by Actonians. These themes connect residents’ desires and concerns with the Plan’s Goals and Objectives that as mentioned above comprise the entire breadth of the Plan and refer to a range of concepts such as Town character, the environment, and Town facilities.

Many of the themes have to do with growth and its consequences. With the recognition that growth can be guided, but not fully avoided, the main thrust of the Plan describes the **Roadmap**

for addressing our Town’s future growth. The **Roadmap**, while only a sub-set of the overall plan, represents its core and has three main parts. As shown below, these overlap to create a sweet spot that combines both environmental and fiscal sustainability. How those parts work together is explained on the following pages and in the diagram on page ES-4.



The three parts of the **Roadmap** intersect to provide more environmental and fiscal sustainability.

Underlying Themes

An increased ‘sense of community’
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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, including the preservation of open space, 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, and increased opportunities for social networks and connections.
The ‘future resilience’ of the Town
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental Sustainability: concern regarding our ability to ensure the future health and well-being of our environment. • Social and Economic Diversity: concern regarding the 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.

Roadmap for Guiding Growth

Acton can't avoid all future growth, but it can guide the expected growth in a way that better fits with the Town's goals. The three major parts to this approach, and how they relate, are described and illustrated below:

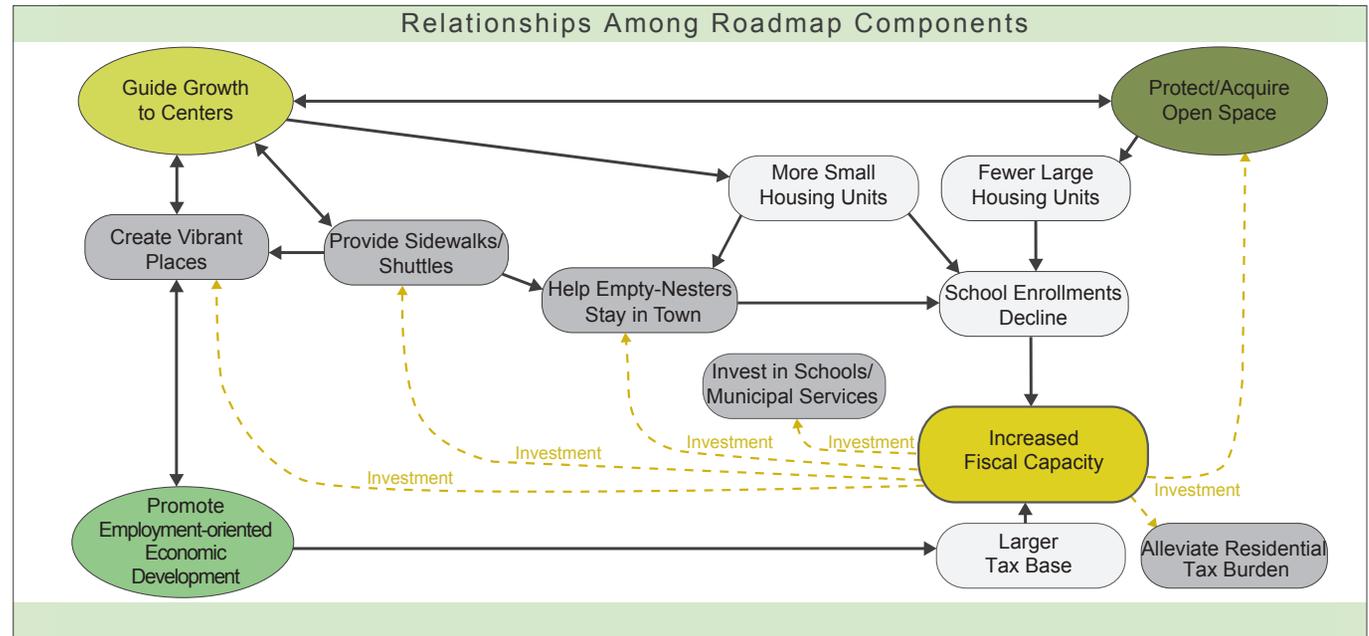
Guide growth to Kelley's Corner and Key Village Centers (such as West and South Acton) where smaller residential units will fit the growing market and provide more options for seniors and young people. This type of development strives to be both fiscally and environmentally sustainable.⁴ Place-specific guidelines and design review will ensure that new development helps create successful places.⁵

Guiding the majority of growth to village centers in smaller units helps to reduce future school enrollments,⁶ provides more affordable housing for empty-nesters who want to continue to live in Acton,⁷ and makes it feasible to create livelier walkable places for the whole community to gather.⁸

Preserve Additional Open Space by providing incentives to property owners in outlying areas to leave their land undeveloped and instead encouraging them to participate in development in the centers. This will result in preserving the rural characteristics so appreciated by Acton residents. The tool recommended to accomplish this is called Transfer of Development Rights (TDR - see explanation in endnote 9)⁹; it is used to guide growth away from the subdivision of large tracts of land and to the centers without having

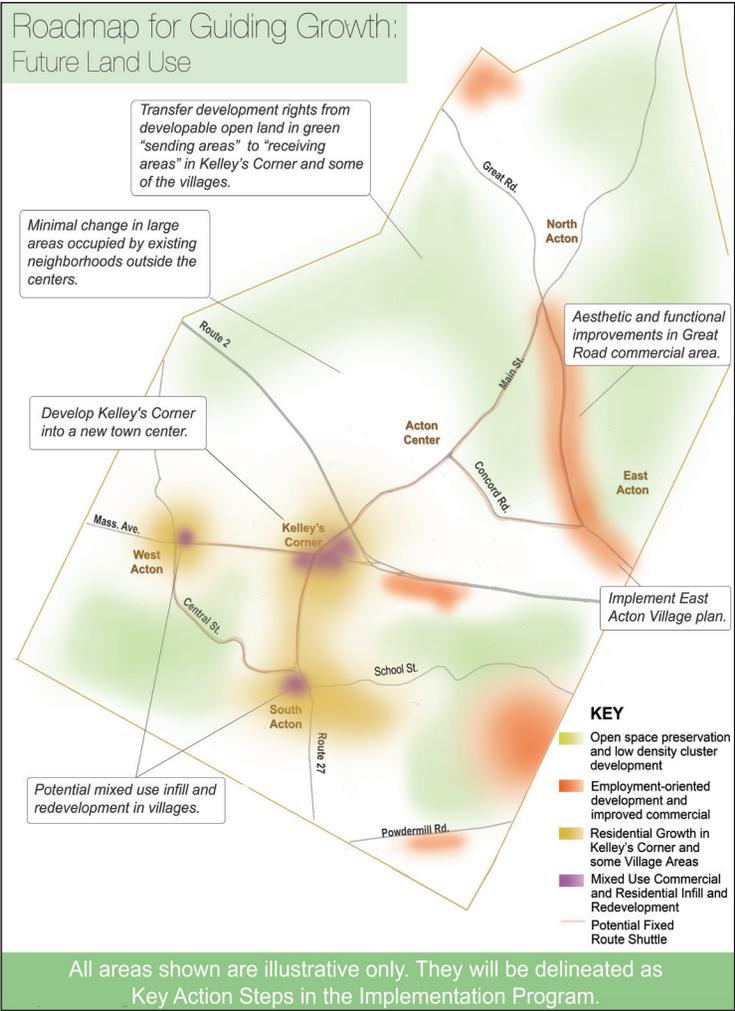
to pay for open space acquisition. It is also recommended that priority parcels be acquired by the Town when possible.

Actively Promote Employment-Oriented Economic Development, which will increase the tax base and, along with the mixed-use development in the centers, will produce more tax revenue than the cost of services for the new development¹⁰ and also create local jobs and reduce commuting for more residents.



Relationships among **Roadmap** components (colored ovals), other strategies (darker gray bubbles), and fiscal capacity (gold bubble). This diagram is explained on page 15 of the full report.

The following concept map illustrates the Roadmap for Guiding Growth and identifies some key features:



This map is explained on page 15 of the full report.

How the Roadmap Addresses Key Concerns

Financial Resilience. Acton is currently financially sound with a top bond rating and funds in reserve, but the Town budget is under pressure and costs are expected to rise as healthcare costs and other post-employment benefits increase.¹¹ In order to address this, some combination of higher taxes, reduced costs or services, and a bigger property tax base will be needed.¹²

The **Roadmap promotes economic development in appropriate locations**, and encourages **fiscally beneficial residential development** by shifting from large lot subdivisions, which increase school enrollments and costs, to compact development with smaller units that have been shown to have fewer school-age children and therefore generate more tax revenue than costs.¹³

Environmental Resilience.¹⁴ Acton is committed to reducing its carbon footprint and protecting its water resources. These efforts have some costs, but the investments will be repaid in lower energy costs and avoiding the need to later remediate impacts to the Town's drinking water.¹⁵

The Roadmap and More

- The Plan is comprehensive and contains much more than the Roadmap for Guiding Growth; it contains strategies to implement the complete set of Goals and Objectives (page ES-7).
- The Key Implementation Strategies (pages ES-8 & ES-9) are a summary of the highest priorities of a much more extensive list of strategies and action steps recommended to achieve the goals and objectives, and are listed in the full report and at <http://implementation.acton2020.info/>.
- This document also includes some interesting facts about Acton on the page entitled "Did You Know?" (page ES-13). Finally, while this summary contains a page of Notes and References keyed to the text that provides some basic explanations and support for the report's statements, it is the full Acton 2020 plan that provides a thorough explanation and examination of each of the plan's components.

Where the Roadmap Takes Us

- Kelley’s Corner becomes a busy, walkable Town center.
- Villages become denser with redevelopment of non-residential parcels; stronger design review preserves and enhances existing character.
- School enrollments decline gradually; school costs rise more slowly as the population ages and the housing mix in the new development provides smaller units for seniors and others.¹⁶
- The tax base is expanded by economic development.
- Home values (adjusted for inflation) outside the centers will be maintained and those in the villages may increase.¹⁷
- Many large parcels of open land will be protected through acquisition and transfer of development rights to the centers; on those that do develop, part of the parcel can be protected through cluster zoning.¹⁸

By concentrating growth, it becomes feasible to serve more of Acton’s population by public transportation, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, saving money for residents, and providing access for Actonians who can’t drive or don’t wish to be automobile-dependent. It also gives residents the opportunity for walking, which

benefits fitness goals and increases sense of connection to others.

Future Contingencies

A Comprehensive Plan should be resilient – it should continue to be a guide even if the unpredictable happens. The “**wild cards**” that Acton might have to face include:

- Prolonged economic downturn combined with escalating healthcare and pension costs.
- Energy costs rise even more sharply than in recent years.
- Weather events, such as more frequent and more violent storms and significant climate changes.
- School enrollments that don’t decline as expected.
- Revival of the housing market leading to a major residential subdivision proposed for a large tract of land.

There is also the risk that things don’t turn out as anticipated, e.g., more or less development pressure, tighter budgets, or unforeseen infrastructure needs.

By guiding growth to the centers and protecting open space through transfer of development rights, the development of a large tract of land

with consequent increases in school and other costs, can potentially be channeled into compact mixed-use development with smaller units that generate less school cost and pay more taxes than their cost to service.

By emphasizing employment-oriented economic development, the most promising source of added tax revenue, Acton can do better than similar towns that don’t invest in attracting commercial growth, even in a prolonged downturn.

By moving to more sustainable land use patterns, alternatives to the automobile become more feasible, reinforcing these patterns and enabling people to reduce their energy costs.

By calling for appropriate guidelines and more rigorous review of development in the centers, particularly Kelley’s Corner where sewers are already in place, the Town’s water supply can be better protected from wastewater impacts, largely funded by new development. A key recommendation is a study of each center to assess capacity and potential impacts.

And if Town finances constrain desired improvements, the phasing of major investments can be adjusted to correspond to available resources (see page ES-10).

Goals and Objectives

GOAL 1:	Preserve and Enhance Town Character	Objective 4.2:	Provide more playgrounds, fields for team sports, parks, and conservation lands.
Objective 1.1:	Strengthen planning tools to manage growth pro-actively.	Objective 4.3:	Support additional cultural activities.
Objective 1.2:	Preserve and enhance key centers.	GOAL 5:	Support Inclusion and Diversity
Objective 1.3:	Preserve rural characteristics and open space.	Objective 5.1:	Support residents of all ages.
Objective 1.4:	Preserve historic buildings and landscapes.	Objective 5.2:	Support households of all income levels.
Objective 1.5:	Foster an understanding and appreciation for what makes Acton unique, including its history.	Objective 5.3:	Embrace cultural diversity.
GOAL 2:	Ensure Environmental Sustainability	Objective 5.4:	Support citizens with disabilities in participating fully in the life of the community.
Objective 2.1:	Protect the quality and quantity of Acton’s water.	GOAL 6:	Preserve and Enhance Town-Owned Assets and Services
Objective 2.2:	Reduce waste and the accumulation of toxins.	Objective 6.1:	Protect Town-owned open space.
Objective 2.3:	Reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.	Objective 6.2:	Support excellence in schools.
Objective 2.4:	Move toward patterns of land use and land protection that support broad biodiversity, soil preservation, and healthy local agriculture.	Objective 6.3:	Manage the Town’s facilities efficiently.
GOAL 3:	Improve Connections	Objective 6.4:	Provide high quality services that are responsive to community needs.
Objective 3.1:	Make walking and biking easier and safer.	Objective 6.5:	Provide excellent public health and safety services.
Objective 3.2:	Improve transportation around Town.	GOAL 7:	Maintain and Improve the Financial Well-Being of the Town
Objective 3.3:	Promote communication among Town government, citizens, schools, and the business community.	Objective 7.1:	Promote fiscal responsibility.
Objective 3.4:	Support and strengthen neighborhoods.	Objective 7.2:	Promote economic development that supports other Acton 2020 planning goals.
GOAL 4:	Provide More Opportunities for Community Gathering and Recreation	Objective 7.3:	Improve existing commercial areas.
Objective 4.1:	Create new gathering spaces and make better use of existing ones.	Objective 7.4:	Support the financial ability of all residents to stay in Acton for a lifetime.

Key Implementation Strategies

The Goals and Objectives and Roadmap for Guiding Growth will be implemented through a number of strategies that involve one or more action steps. The full Implementation Plan is in the body of the report and online at <http://implementation.acton2020.info/>. Fifteen key recommendations stand out as highest priority among the more than 200 proposed action steps and are listed below, not in priority order.

Roadmap Strategies for Guided Growth

► Guide Growth to Kelley’s Corner and Villages

- **Develop Kelley’s Corner into a mixed-use Town center and transportation hub** in conformance with a specific plan for the area. Encourage mixed use with people living in smaller housing units near vibrant shops and restaurants with opportunities for socializing, running errands, dining, and community gathering. Creating more activities and a safe and pleasant pedestrian environment will also attract teens from the nearby school complex; they should be involved in the planning for the area.
- Prepare a plan to improve Kelley’s Corner and to **preserve and enhance village centers**. The **Key Centers Plan** will set priorities for new development and redevelopment in centers. The plan should consider Kelley’s Corner and the villages as a system, build on existing strengths in each, identify necessary aesthetic and functional improvements, assess capacity for density incentives, and prioritize and sequence which areas to work on first. This plan would include a quantitative analysis of a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) system, to verify which incentives are most likely to create the desired changes.

The **Kelley’s Corner Development Plan** will be part of the Key Centers Plan; it will provide the basis to proceed with zoning changes and infrastructure investments needed to begin the improvements at Kelley’s Corner and promote development and redevelopment of key parcels as soon as practicable.

- **Actively promote employment-oriented economic development** (e.g., Research and Development, high tech, office) to expand the tax base. This may also reduce commute time for some residents.
- **Protect, acquire, and improve open space** for conservation, farming, and recreation, using a combination of acquisition and zoning, including Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) to move development away from open land and to the key centers. This will help protect Town character and the environment, as well as provide additional opportunities for recreation.

Other Strategies

- **Consider a sewer extension and/or advanced package wastewater treatment** with groundwater recharge in order to support an increase in



small-scale commercial development and better manage wastewater in West Acton.

- ▶ **Improve the transfer station to increase recycling and reuse.**
- ▶ **Construct more sidewalks and facilities for safe bicycling, in centers and Town-wide.** This will help connect people and places and provide opportunities for fitness while also being beneficial for the environment (by reducing car fumes).
- ▶ **Reduce energy use in Town buildings and promote Town-wide energy conservation.** Support joint community/Town efforts to reduce reliance on fossil-fuel energy sources and to explore shifting to renewable sources.
- ▶ **Develop policies and strategies to keep empty-nesters in Acton.** As the senior population continues to grow, they will need a number of facilities and services that meet their special needs.
- ▶ **Continue to fund, and later expand, MinuteVan** to build ridership with more frequent service between village centers, Kelley’s Corner, and the rail station. This will connect various places in Town and also provide a service to those who cannot drive as well as to those wishing to use public transportation.
- ▶ **Construct a new building to accommodate the Senior Center and larger community,** when finances permit. This will serve to provide space for expanded programming for an increasing senior population as

well as a meeting and gathering place for the community at large.

- ▶ Prepare a proactive plan that encourages the **provision of a wide range of housing types** to meet the needs of empty nesters, Town employees, young couples, and those of moderate income, by locating housing **in small, scattered sites near walkable service and business destinations**, especially village centers. Consider possible Town participation in desired housing developments. The plan should address the Town’s relationship to the state’s affordable housing law (Chapter 40B), but its purpose is to address Acton’s local and regional housing needs.
- ▶ Create a new **committee composed of liaisons from the various ethnic and language groups in Town** to provide **information to newcomers and assist with organizing multi-cultural activities.** This will help build bridges, knitting the community closer together, and it will provide guidance to those unfamiliar with the Town and its resources.
- ▶ **Continue to support and achieve high standards of excellence in Acton’s schools.** A majority of residents when asked “Why did you move to Acton?” responded: “because of the schools.” The schools and school-related activities are a major community focus contributing to the culture of Acton.
- ▶ **Continue to work to control cost,** planning for future financial responsibilities like pension liabilities and finding new ways to reduce current costs, such as regionalization and cooperation with other towns.



Cost and Phasing of Major Actions

Town finances are being squeezed between the desire for services (excellent schools and other Town priorities) and a limited tax base, reduced state aid, and unfunded liabilities. Fortunately 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).¹⁹ Other priorities like a new building to serve seniors and the larger community, or an expanded shuttle system, are more expensive.

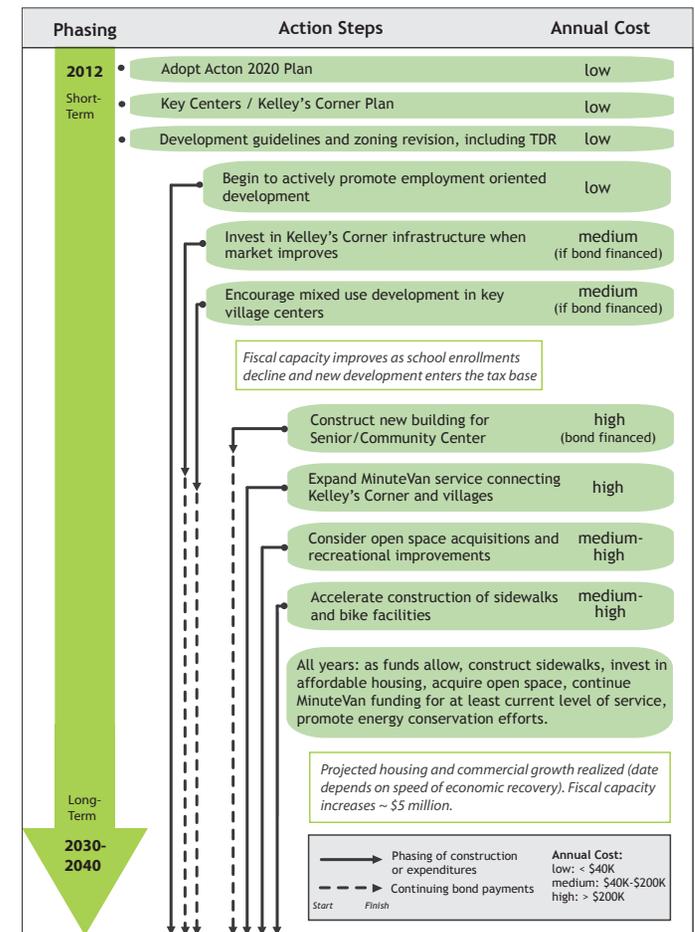
The solution to this challenge is to **phase the major actions as finances permit**. This can include some open space acquisition²⁰ and investment in pedestrian and bicycle facilities each year as can be afforded, continuing to fund the MinuteVan at current levels²¹ until expansion becomes feasible, phasing improvements to support desired redevelopment in Kelley’s Corner as the market revives, and planning for a new senior/community center,²² but putting off construction until it can be afforded.

In the meantime, Town fiscal capacity can be improved by promoting economic development, seeking special purpose state funding and grants,

continuing to explore public-private partnerships for specific projects, and cooperating with surrounding towns to provide services more efficiently. Also, the current economic slowdown is an opportunity to complete the initial planning steps so that the Town is poised for action when opportunities arise and/or the economic climate changes. The recommendation to reduce energy use in Town buildings and promote townwide energy conservation will pay for itself and also help to save money for residents and businesses.

It is significant that a fiscal analysis of the **Roadmap** concluded that by the time 1,200 new housing units and 1.5 million square feet of commercial space have been built (longer than 20 years because of the current economic downturn), Acton’s fiscal capacity will be increased by nearly 5 million dollars per year compared to a business-as-usual scenario where no roadmap for growth is implemented.²³ More detail on costs is presented in the body of the report.²⁴ In addition to the major investments, the Plan also identifies actions

Phasing Key Investments:



that don’t cost much to implement but have significant benefits; these “ripe apples” are identified throughout the Implementation Plan (see Full Plan Report).²⁵

Process

The Plan was developed in two phases.²⁶ 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 surveys covering 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:

- Development of 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.)
- Refinement of the Goals and Objectives.
- Identification of Key Issues, Opportunities, and Challenges and development of a preliminary list of ways to address them.
- Development of a comprehensive Implementation Plan that provides a prioritized and phased proposal for moving forward to fulfill the vision and goals.
- Facilitation of an extensive level of public involvement, including:
 - Use of 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).
 - Six major public forums and more than 10 public meetings with special outreach to specific town boards and committees.

Components of the “Emerging Vision” (from Phase I)

- *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*
 - *Welcoming residents*
- Production of a movie “It's a Wonderful Acton” to raise awareness and increase turnout to a key forum.
 - Involvement of youth through art contest.

Notes and References

The notes below provide sources and explanations for the statements in the report that are flagged with the corresponding numbers.

1. Rapid growth (p.ii): See growth chart in full report, page 21. Acton's population has grown at a rate of over 3,000 persons per decade since 1950.
2. Increasing cost of new residential development (p.ii): See Fiscal impact research in Appendix 6, Volume III, Harrison and French, Introduction to Fiscal Impact Analysis, UNH; and Kotval and Mullin, Fiscal Impact Analysis.
3. Number of public forums (p.ii): See Process section in full report, p.164.
4. Fiscally and environmentally sustainable (p.ES-3): fiscally sustainable because of smaller units and more compact development making it easier to serve town streets and infrastructure. Residential development can be fiscally positive (p.ES-4): the main reason residential development in the past has cost more than the taxes it generates is the added burden to the schools, which comprise over 2/3 of Acton's budget. Even though there are individual instances of many children in a small housing unit, on average, the number of school children is strongly correlated with the number of bedrooms in the new housing. This has been substantiated in the number of new school enrollments generated by the Avalon Acton housing development. Smaller units have fewer school children and generate more taxes than costs to the town.
5. Place-specific guidelines (p.ES-4): a key strategy is to do design studies for Kelley's Corner and village centers to set priorities and determine what kind of development is compatible, then make these guidelines part of the zoning review process.
6. Smaller units reduce school enrollments (p.ES-4): see note 4.
7. More affordable housing for empty-nesters (p.ES-4): in the sense that smaller units that empty-nesters may desire will cost less than single family homes; "affordable" does not necessarily refer to state housing definitions and goals, but could include some of this type of units.
8. Livelier walkable places (p.ES-4): compact mixed-use development with pedestrian amenities has been shown to create lively places where people want to be.
9. Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) (p.ES-4): TDR is a zoning mechanism that has been used across the United States; a property owner in a designated "sending area" can work with an owner in a "receiving area", e.g. Kelley's Corner, to sell the rights to development of the sender's property to the owner in a receiving area; there is no cost to the town except development review, and the sending property is protected from any future development.
10. Economic development produces more taxes than costs (p.ES-4): This is mostly due to the fact that commercial development does not add to school costs. (See references cited in note 2).
11. Healthcare and pension expenses increase (p.ES-5): Acton, like most Massachusetts towns, needs to prepare to pay for obligations to teachers and employees who will retire over the next 20 years.
12. Bigger property tax base needed (p.ES-5): it is preferable to raise property tax revenues to pay for increasing costs from new development of the type that is fiscally positive, instead of higher taxes on existing residential and commercial property; see notes 4 and 10.
13. Fiscally beneficial residential development (p.ES-5): development with smaller units that consequently generate fewer school enrollments overall; see note 4.
14. Environmental resilience (p.ES-5): Shifting residential growth from large lot subdivisions to compact development in the centers saves energy by reducing auto dependency, and it enables wastewater to be handled better via sewers or advanced package treatment plants, while leaving more open space undeveloped. Dealing with existing and anticipated stormwater issues in the centers can be planned for now, instead of waiting for worsening conditions.
15. Town's drinking water (p.ES-5): Acton's public water supply comes from groundwater wells; therefore it is essential to protect the groundwater from sanitary wastewater and other contaminants and to recharge stormwater to the ground.
16. Smaller units for seniors and others (p.ES-6): the compact development that would be encouraged for Kelley's Corner and, potentially, other village centers, would be mixed-use with apartments and condo units in low-rise buildings, suitable for seniors, empty nesters, and small families.
17. Home values (p.ES-6): Acton homes would keep their value as the town's character and excellent schools are preserved; village-specific plans and development guidelines would make them desirable places and potentially increase the value of existing homes.
18. Cluster zoning (p.ES-6): in areas away from villages, Acton's current zoning permits new housing units to be concentrated on approximately half of a residential parcel, leaving the other half in deeded open space.
19. Small-scale studies (p.ES-10): These relatively inexpensive studies (less than \$40,000) are the key to determining development priorities and developing guidelines to create successful places, preserve existing character, and minimize impacts.
20. Open space acquisition (p.ES-10): the town would continue to use Community Preservation Act funds to acquire open space when it becomes available; when finances permit, additional land acquisition can protect more open land and pre-empt large-lot subdivision that is likely to increase school costs more than it contributes in property taxes; see note 4.
21. MinuteVan (p.ES-10): continuing this service is important to moving toward a more sustainable transportation system that provides an alternative to car travel and serves the town's key centers.
22. Senior center (p.ES-10): the current center is not large enough to fully serve today's seniors; as the population ages, a larger center will be even more needed. The limited hours scheduled for use by seniors would permit the larger community to be served by the same facility.
23. These cost scenarios were developed to help make informed planning choices, but more detailed analysis of individual costs will be needed in the Implementation Phase.
24. Fiscal analysis of Roadmap for Guiding Growth (p.ES-10): see page 20 of the full report.
25. "Ripe apples" (p.ES-10): also called "low hanging fruit," i.e., relatively low cost for the benefits provided.
26. Two phases of the 2020 Plan (p.ES-11): see "Process" section of full report, beginning Page 175. Both phases involved extensive outreach.

Did You Know?

Extensive research was done by the consultant team, the 2020 Committee, and additional information was contributed by some members of the public.

The “snapshot” on this page is largely drawn from the Inventory Report, which is summarized in the next-to-last section of this volume and presented in full in Volume II.

Housing and Population

- Acton’s 2010 U.S. Census population was 21,924, up 8% since 2000.
- The percent of residents 65 and older is expected to nearly double over the next 20 years from less than 10% to over 18%.
- Over the same period the number of school-age children is expected to decline slightly, even while the total population increases.
- Acton had 8,530 housing units in 2010, up 11% from 2,000. 63% are single family houses.
- Projections by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council suggested that, based on current policies, population will increase by 10% by 2030 and housing units will increase by 1,000 units or 12%.

Schools and School Enrollments

- In 2010 there were 218 students (K-12) per 1,000 population, the third highest of the towns Acton touches.¹
- Acton Public Schools spent \$11,246 per pupil in 2009-2010, the second lowest of the towns it touches.
- Acton-Boxborough Regional High School was named a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education in 2009.

Land Use

- Acton’s land area is approximately 13,000 acres (20 square miles).
- 29% of Acton’s land area is open space (lower than five of the towns it touches). Roughly 1/3 of this open space is not protected from development.
- There are about 2,200 acres of developable land (vacant and not wetland).
- Based on 2008 land use data, approximately 1,800 additional housing units could be built on land now zoned residential, bringing the total at build-out² to 10,300, or 22% more than today. This would take more than 30 years at the projected growth rates.

¹ These are Boxborough, Carlisle, Concord, Littleton, Maynard, Stow, Sudbury, and Westford.

² “Build-out” occurs when all developable land has been fully developed.

Water and Wastewater

- All of Acton’s public water supply comes from groundwater wells.
- Water demand has been relatively constant over the past six years, approximately 600 million gallons per year (MGY), reflecting water conservation efforts. Acton’s state permit allows up to 708.1 MGY.
- Residential water demand is estimated by Acton Water District to be roughly 55 gallons per bedroom per day, substantially lower than the norm of 70.
- 80% of Acton’s homes have on-site septic systems, a high ratio for a town of Acton’s population. The other 20 percent use sewers or package treatment to dispose of wastewater.

And...

- The average household in Acton drives 76 miles per day, the lowest of the adjacent towns except Concord.
- 87.5% of town revenues come from residential property, in the middle of the group of towns it touches.
- Acton was named the 16th Best Place To Live among small towns in the country by Money Magazine in 2009 and in 2011.



INTRODUCTION

- History & Background

Today. Tomorrow. Together.

Introduction

The purpose of the Acton 2020 Plan is to guide the future growth and development of Acton. It is an opportunity to document those aspects of the Town which Acton residents care about and to develop the means to protect and enhance what’s valued. It is also an opportunity to document residents’ concerns and recommend changes that will improve the experience of living in Acton.

The Acton 2020 Plan is 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 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.

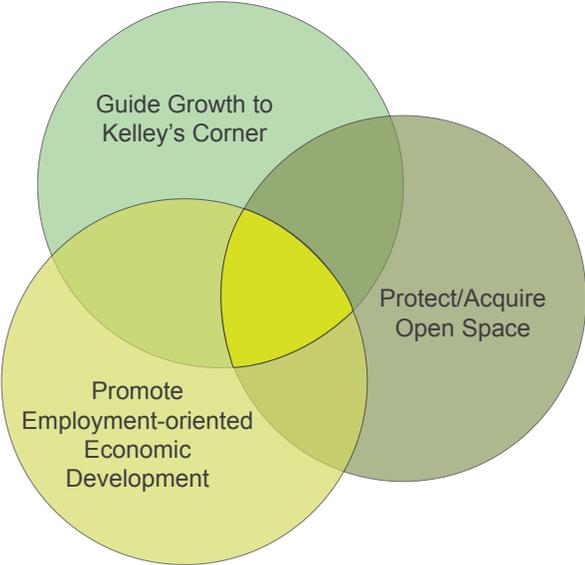
The Plan is based on **Underlying Themes**,¹ a distillation of the desire for an increased sense of community that was expressed by many Actonians and their concern for the Town’s future resilience. Many of these themes are about growth and its consequences. With the recognition that growth can be guided, but not fully avoided, the main thrust of the Plan describes the **Roadmap** for addressing our Town’s future growth. The **Roadmap**, while only a sub-set of the overall

¹ See page 30.

plan, represents its core and has three main parts. As shown below, these overlap to create a sweet spot that combines both environmental and fiscal sustainability. How those parts work together is explained in the section that starts on page 13.

How to Use this Report

The report begins with the background and history of planning in Acton.



The three parts of the **Roadmap** intersect to provide more environmental and fiscal sustainability.

The section on the Roadmap for Guiding Growth describes its main components and how they are interrelated, how it would affect future land use, and its effects on housing, open space, developable land, and the Town’s fiscal capacity.

The Foundations section describes the Plan’s Vision, the Goals and Objectives, Opportunities and Challenges, and how the Plan deals will Future Contingencies. A section called “Did You Know?” lists important facts and figures.

The Implementation Plan section includes Key Implementation Strategies, which are a summary of the highest priorities, followed by a much more extensive list of strategies and action steps that are listed in detail beginning on page 51. The full Implementation Plan is a database located at <http://implementation.acton2020.info/>.

The section also discusses costs and phasing of major investments.

The Process section documents the extraordinary level of public participation that went into the Plan.

A final section summarizes the research and data that was collected on existing conditions; full inventory reports are included in Volume II.

History & Background

Brief History of Acton

Acton is an upper middle class suburban town in Middlesex County, Massachusetts (U.S.), located about 21 miles west-northwest of Boston along Route 2, west of Concord and about ten miles southwest of Lowell. The Town's population is 21,924 (2010 Census).

Prior to its settlement by farmers from Concord, the area that became present-day Acton was frequented by Nipmuck-related Native Americans who may have practiced some limited agriculture, hunting, fishing and gathering. Many areas of Acton were good campsites, especially areas along Nashoba and Fort Pond Brooks as well as Nagog Pond. Artifacts from early hunting and fishing villages have been found in Acton, in the Pinehawk site in the south of Acton and in the area of Nagog Pond.

What is A Comprehensive Community Plan?

- a basis for decision making regarding the long-term physical development of the municipality (MGL Ch 41 Sec 81D)
- a process that leads to a plan for action that is based on the Town's values and goals
- a set of priorities for addressing the full range of issues facing the Town

Nearly all of present day Acton's 12,990 acres is comprised of portions of four early land grants. The two largest were: Major Simon Willard's Grant (which became Iron Work Farm), and the New Grant or Concord Village. Next to these grants was the Praying Indian Township of Nashoba Plantation, which lay entirely outside present-day Acton.

The early colonial landscape included large areas of meadows. These prime grazing lands were the reason Concord sought to annex these additional lands in 1655. The earliest European settler was John Law, Concord's shepherd, who built his home in 1656 on School Street near Lawsbrook Road.

By 1730 there were at least two-dozen settlers scattered across the Town. In 1735 Acton was incorporated as a town with the same Open Town Meeting and Board of Selectmen that are still here today. A meetinghouse was built in the center of Town with roads coming from the outlying farms. Although Acton was primarily an agricultural community in its early days, residents were involved in a range of other economic activities, including sawmills, gristmills, the manufacture of barrels to store and ship



Town Center 1890

foodstuffs, a pencil factory, and even a woolen industry centered on the Faulkner Mills in South Acton; one of the first large-scale manufacturers of woolen cloth in this country. Remnants of that original mill still exist.

Only with the arrival of the railroad did the villages really begin to grow, especially West Acton Village. It wasn't until after the Civil War that the railroad finally went through East and North Acton. The rail beds remain today and are locations for the proposed Assabet River Rail Trail and Bruce Freeman Rail Trail.

The 1890s brought a shift in population towards South and West Acton, which caused the precincts and school districts to be realigned. The North and East District Schools were combined

into the Center District. Although the districts were officially changed the residents still thought of the villages as East and North Acton. At the turn of the century Acton was still an agricultural community, with five villages and a population of 2,120. Apples were Acton’s main agricultural export being shipped not only to Boston but to Europe. Before modern refrigeration, space in the cellar of the Town Hall was auctioned off for storage. Apples were stored in the center of West Acton into the 1950s. Improvements were coming however; a water district was formed in 1912 for West and South Acton; the Center was added later. A Town fire department, starting in 1915 with West Acton, replaced the independent fire companies.

1950 marks the shift from apples to houses, with most of that development in the southern half of the Town. There were 3,500 people in Acton in 1950; by 1974 there would be 17,000. The orchards and open fields turned into subdivisions; although Acton still kept its agricultural ties, with apples being a major crop into the 1960s. The Town was then three villages; Acton Center, West Acton and South Acton.



South Acton Train Station



Horse and Buggy



Acton Center School



North Acton School



West Acton Center



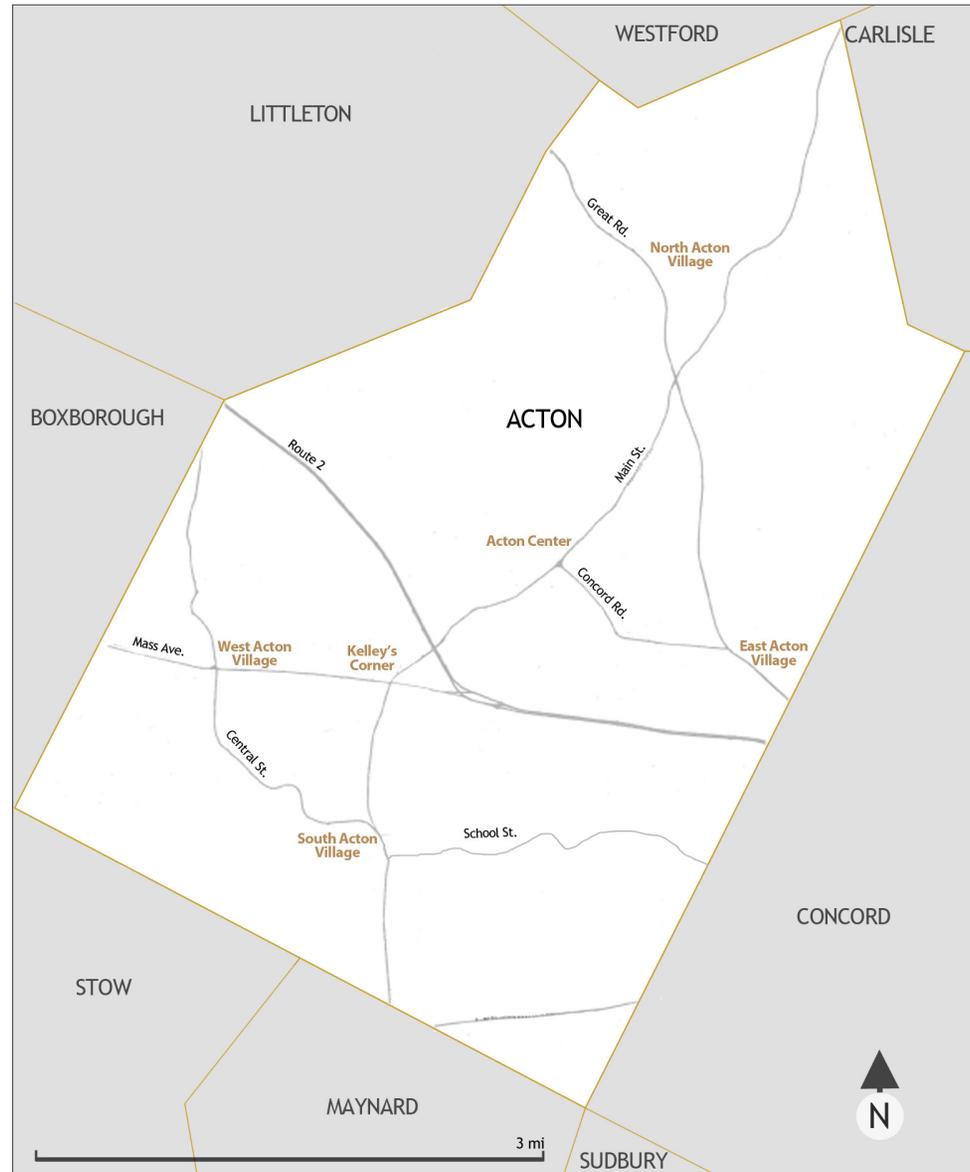
Acton Library

The Five Village Centers¹ and Kelley's Corner

While Acton Center has been the civic center of the Town since the revolution, the four other village centers earned their nomenclature from the names of their corresponding railroad station.

- **Acton Center** is the civic center of the Town and is the site of the Town Hall, the main public library, a children's playground, an obelisk monument commemorating Acton's role in "the Concord Fight" of the Revolutionary War, a fire station, a Congregational church, a 64-acre arboretum and conservation area, and a former post office. The modern post office and the police station are each located about one-half mile away in opposite directions along Main Street. Otherwise, Acton Center is generally a residential area.
- **West Acton** is an important commercial area of town, with shops and businesses centered along Route 111. It developed in response to the opportunities created by the Fitchburg Railroad in the 1840s. West Acton also has a fire station, a playground, a small public library, and two nearby elementary schools, and it is surrounded by extensive neighborhoods.

¹ Based on info from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acton_Massachusetts



- **South Acton**, also on the Fitchburg Railroad, used to be the most industrialized area of the Town of Acton. Already in the 18th century, this area held many mills and other small industrial workshops that used water power generated by Fort Pond Brook. Today South Acton has a few small businesses and shops and includes the Jones Faulkner Homestead (‘Faulkner House’), the oldest home still standing in Acton, Jones Tavern, Exchange Hall, a fire station, two playgrounds and ball fields, nearby conservation land, and many surrounding neighborhoods. The South Acton MBTA station is the only rail station on the Fitchburg line still active in Acton.
- **East Acton** was the site of several small 18th Century mills and an early iron forge located along Nashoba Brook. A small commercial area that grew up around the East Acton train station in the 19th century, also called Ellsworth. With the advent of the automobile, and the demise of this branch of the railroad, East Acton became a largely residential area with a sizeable commercial base that is dispersed along the Route 2A corridor.
- **North Acton** is the village located where Main Street (Rt. 27), Harris Street, and Quarry Road come together. Historically, the vil-

lage was associated with quarrying activity in the late 1800s, utilizing the rail line which ran along Rt. 27. Several historic homes are located along Main Street. There is a mixture of commercial and light industrial uses along with single family homes. The North Acton Recreation Area (NARA Park) is located nearby.

- **Kelley’s Corner** is the commercial area at the intersection of Main Street (Rt.27) and Massachusetts Avenue (Rt. 111). Commercial development, primarily retail and restaurant, extends east from this intersection to Rt.2 and along Main Street from Rt. 2 to Prospect Street. Development, which began in the 1950s, took advantage of the roadway access, central location in Acton, and drive-by traffic. The Charter Road school campus and a residential neighborhood are adjacent to the commercially zoned land. The area is characterized by several strip mall-type shopping developments with a significant amount of paved area dedicated to parking. A K-Mart store occupies a large parcel on Main Street south of the principal intersection. Several smaller buildings on separate parcels contain professional and bank offices and restaurant uses. A Sunoco filling station occupies a prominent corner of the intersection, a former muffler shop, now

converted to a restaurant, is on the opposite corner, and Acton Bowl-a-Drome is located to the south. Multifamily housing is also located on three parcels. The area has been served by sewers since 2002.

Infrastructure

Public infrastructure grew to accommodate the increasing population. A Water District was established in 1912 and a Town-wide Fire Department was established in 1913. In 2005 a new Public Safety Building was built that expanded space for the Police Department and provided for a Joint Dispatch area with the Fire Department. The Acton Water District is a community public water supply that delivers drinking water to the majority (about 90 percent) of the residents of the Town of Acton. Most homes and businesses in Acton (approximately 80%) use private on-site sewage systems (i.e. septic tanks). Higher density developments, such as condominiums and apartment buildings (approximately 10% of the Town) use private sewers that go to small-scale private treatment plants. In 2001, Acton completed its first public sewer system, which serves approximately 10% of the Town, primarily in South Acton. Approximately 45% of Acton households are served with natural gas.

Schools

“Schools” is among the top responses to the question: “Why did you move to Acton?” and is a critical component of the experience of living in Acton and of building a community. At the beginning of the century, each village in Acton had its own grade school, but until 1925, when the Towne School was built, Acton students were sent to Concord’s high school. In 1953, new schools were constructed to accommodate the growth in the student population. In 1954, Acton and Boxborough created a regional school district for grades 7-12, replacing the Towne School. The Merriam School was constructed in 1958. Other schools quickly followed.² In 1967 a building was constructed for the junior high. In 1973 a large addition was added to this building and it became the high school; the junior high moved to the 1954 high school building. Both the junior high and high school were enlarged and renovated in 2000-2005.

Residents tend to place a high value on education and are very proud that the high school, Acton-Boxborough Regional High School, was named a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education in 2009.

² Douglas (1966), Gates (1968), and Conant (1971)

Acton has a unique method of assigning students to elementary schools, called “Open Enrollment.” In contrast to surrounding communities which assign elementary schools by neighborhood district, first-time incoming kindergarten parents in Acton participate in a lottery-based selection process where the parents choose the school by listing their preferences in ranked order.

This method of school choice has a significant impact on the nature of the community. Acton is less oriented around neighborhoods than towns that have neighborhood-based schools. While neighborhood ties are reportedly strong and depending on the neighborhood people identify strongly with geography, school choice also results in providing students and their families with opportunities for additional social connections that are independent of their neighborhood.

Previous Planning Efforts

The Town’s previous master plan was completed in 1991 and updated in 1998. The 1991 Master Plan addressed those issues that most concerned Acton’s residents at the time, mainly traffic, commercial growth management, environmental protection, and affordable housing. The Master Plan proposed strategies for managing com-

mercial development and guiding it into existing village centers and Kelley’s Corner, and for preserving open space by employing the strategy of cluster development.

The 1998 Update was based on the 1991 Master Plan; it did not find that the community values, goals and/or development trends and issues had changed significantly. Instead the 1998 Update refined the main ideas in the 1991 Master Plan. The 1998 Update identifies two underlying and complementary objectives, that of promoting and enhancing village centers as growth areas, and that of preserving open space. The main themes of the Update were as follows:

- Control residential growth
- Preserve Town character, particularly by strengthening the villages for both residential and business uses
- Encourage appropriate economic development to build the tax base and provide a greater variety of goods, services, and employment opportunities in Acton
- Protect the environment and cultural resources
- Calm traffic and encourage non-automobile transportation
- Provide pedestrian and bicycle connections



The recession and subsequent recovery in the early 90s undercut many of the assumptions made in the 1991 Plan. As a result growth assumptions had to be adjusted accordingly in the 1998 Update. The general direction was not altered, just the pace.

While overall, the 1998 Update was ambitious – it contained 12 goals, 65 objectives that articulated these goals more specifically, 126 strate-



gies to achieve the objectives, and 143 actions – an impressive number of these (approximately 70%)³ have been implemented. In several cases, implementation is ongoing.

Changes since the 1998 Update

In some ways this Acton 2020 Plan has a similar relationship to the Master Plan 1998 Update that the 1998 Update had to the 1991 Master Plan in that there have not been any significant changes in the Town’s core values.

Residents are still concerned with preserving open space and are very interested in enhancing the village centers. They may, however, be more concerned with environmental sustainability and the economy than they were in 1998. As a result, many of the 1998 Update recommendations are reiterated and refined in the 2020 Plan. The Plan also identifies and supports on-going efforts to continue to implement the previous plan’s goals and objectives.

³ Through discussion with the Planning Director and follow-up with the Natural Resources and Conservation Department, it was determined that 102 of the actions (70%) were addressed in some manner: 61 actions (42%) were fully implemented, 31 actions (21%) were partially implemented, and 7 actions (5%) were acted upon but not implemented by Town staff, Town boards/commissions, or Town Meeting.

What has changed since the 1998 Plan

- **Demographics, primarily in the form of:**
 - an increase in the elderly population.
 - an increase in the Asian population.
 - changes in the projected school enrollments which, in contrast to the period between 1991 and 1998 when they grew faster than forecasted growth (resulting in the need for a school expansion program), are instead expected to decline resulting in increased fiscal capacity.
- **Awareness with regard to planning issues, including environmental sustainability, relationship between planning and health and wellness, and smart growth principles.**
- **Market trends such as growing demand for smaller housing units in walkable neighborhoods.**
- **The public outreach conducted for the 2020 Plan was much more extensive so that it can be said that the 2020 Plan perhaps has broader understanding, support, and political will to implement the recommendations.**



ROADMAP FOR GUIDING GROWTH

- Background
- Planning for a Resilient Acton
- Implementation of the Roadmap
- Analysis of the Roadmap

Today. Tomorrow. Together.

Roadmap for Guiding Growth

The 2020 Plan embodies a central concept or **Roadmap**, which was built on the foundation of the Goals and Objectives; these in turn were developed with the significant input of Acton citizens.

The **Roadmap** responds to people’s widely expressed desires and concerns over the past four years. Chief among these are:

- Protecting Acton’s character and preserving open space.
- Creating vibrant walkable centers where people can live, shop, eat, and gather together.
- Planning for a resilient and financially viable town.
- Creating a plan that is responsive to environmental concerns.

The **Roadmap** addresses the crucial issue of future development, which can be guided but not avoided. The main focus is to maximize open space and minimize developed land, not to limit population.

Main Components

The Roadmap has three main components:

- ▶ **Guide Growth to Kelley’s Corner and Key Village Centers** (such as West and South Acton), where smaller units will fit the growing



market for empty-nesters and provide more options for young people. This type of development strives to be both fiscally and environmentally sustainable as described below. Place-specific development guidelines and improved design review will help preserve village character and ensure that new development meets Town needs and helps create successful places.

Guiding growth to village centers in smaller units helps to reinforce the trend in a reduction in future school enrollments, provides more housing options for empty-nesters who want to continue to live in Acton, and makes it feasible to create livelier walkable places for the whole community to gather.

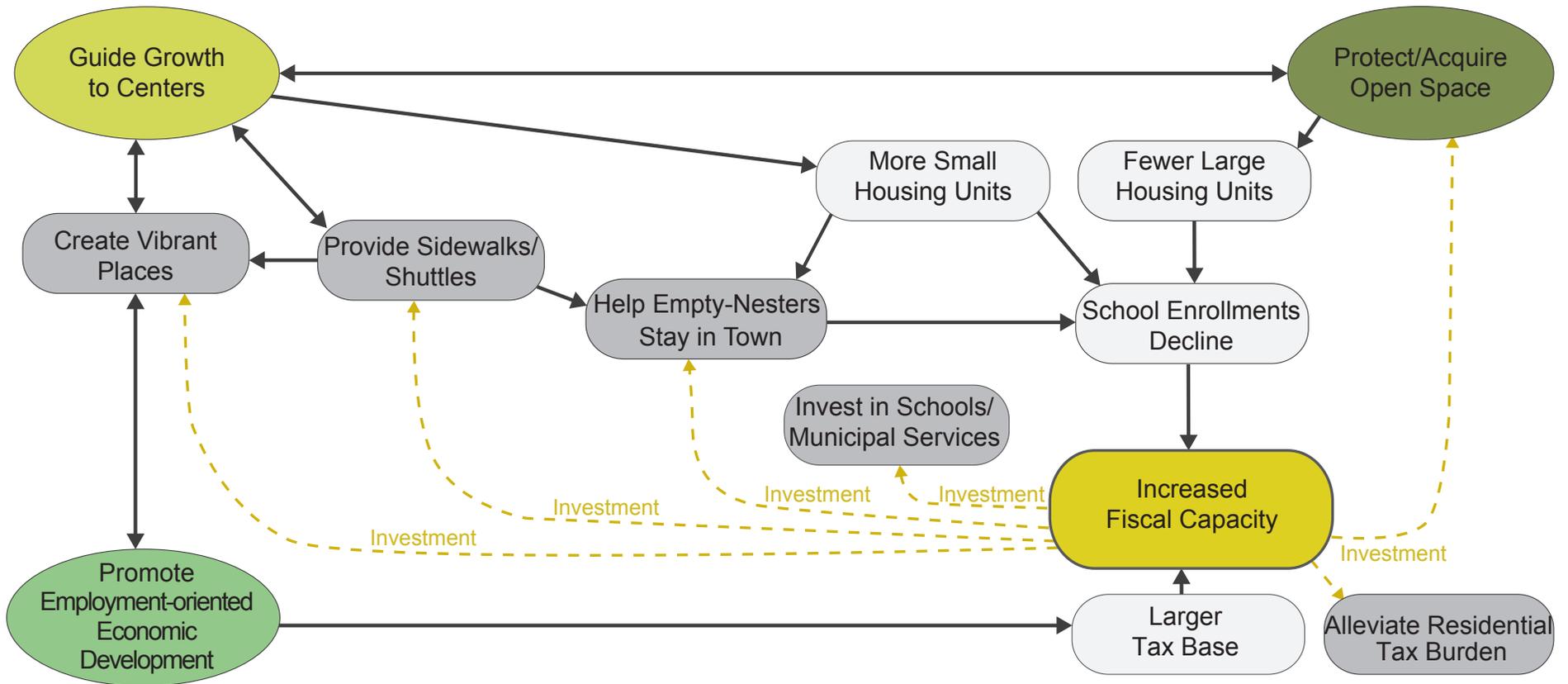
- ▶ **Protect, Acquire, and Improve Open Space** for conservation, farming, and recreation, us-

ing a combination of acquisition and zoning, including Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) to guide development away from open land and to the key centers. This will help protect Town character and the environment, as well as provide additional opportunities for recreation. These efforts will be supplemented by continuing to purchase open space with CPA funds.

- ▶ **Actively Promote Employment-Oriented Economic Development**, which will increase the tax base and, along with the mixed use development in the centers, will produce more tax revenue than the cost of services for the new development. Additionally, there will be local employment opportunities and reduced long distance commuting for some residents.



Relationships among Roadmap Components (colored ovals), Other Strategies (darker gray bubbles), and Fiscal Capacity (gold bubble)



Relationship of Plan Components

The diagram on the preceding page shows how these three key components of the Roadmap interact to further the Plan’s goals and improve fiscal capacity.

- Guiding Growth to Centers and protecting Open Space are linked by the TDR mechanism.
- Guiding growth to Kelley’s Corner and other centers results in development of more small housing units, and the protection of large developable parcels reduces the number of new large housing units.
- Together with more sidewalks and public transportation, Guiding Growth results in vibrant places where people want to live, shop, and gather; this helps keep empty-nesters in town and provides more opportunities for all residents to shop, dine, and socialize.
- Demographic trends predict lower school enrollments, and shifting the new housing to smaller units will strengthen this trend.
- Reduced school enrollments will provide more fiscal capacity, which can be used for improving the schools, investing in improvements

throughout Acton that further the Roadmap strategies, and/or reducing the tax burden on residential property.

- Promoting Employment-Oriented Economic Development will increase the tax base, further increase fiscal capacity, and provide some residents with the opportunity of reduced commuting time.

Future Land Use under the Roadmap

The map on the next page illustrates the idea of guiding growth.

- Areas of developable open land (green) tend to be situated outside the already developed neighborhoods.
- Some future development would be guided away from the green areas to Kelley’s Corner and some villages (gold); Transfer of Development Rights would provide incentives for property owners to participate.
- The centers would include potential mixed-use development (purple) as appropriate, with strict design review based on detailed studies of their capabilities to support these uses.
- Economic development would be targeted to

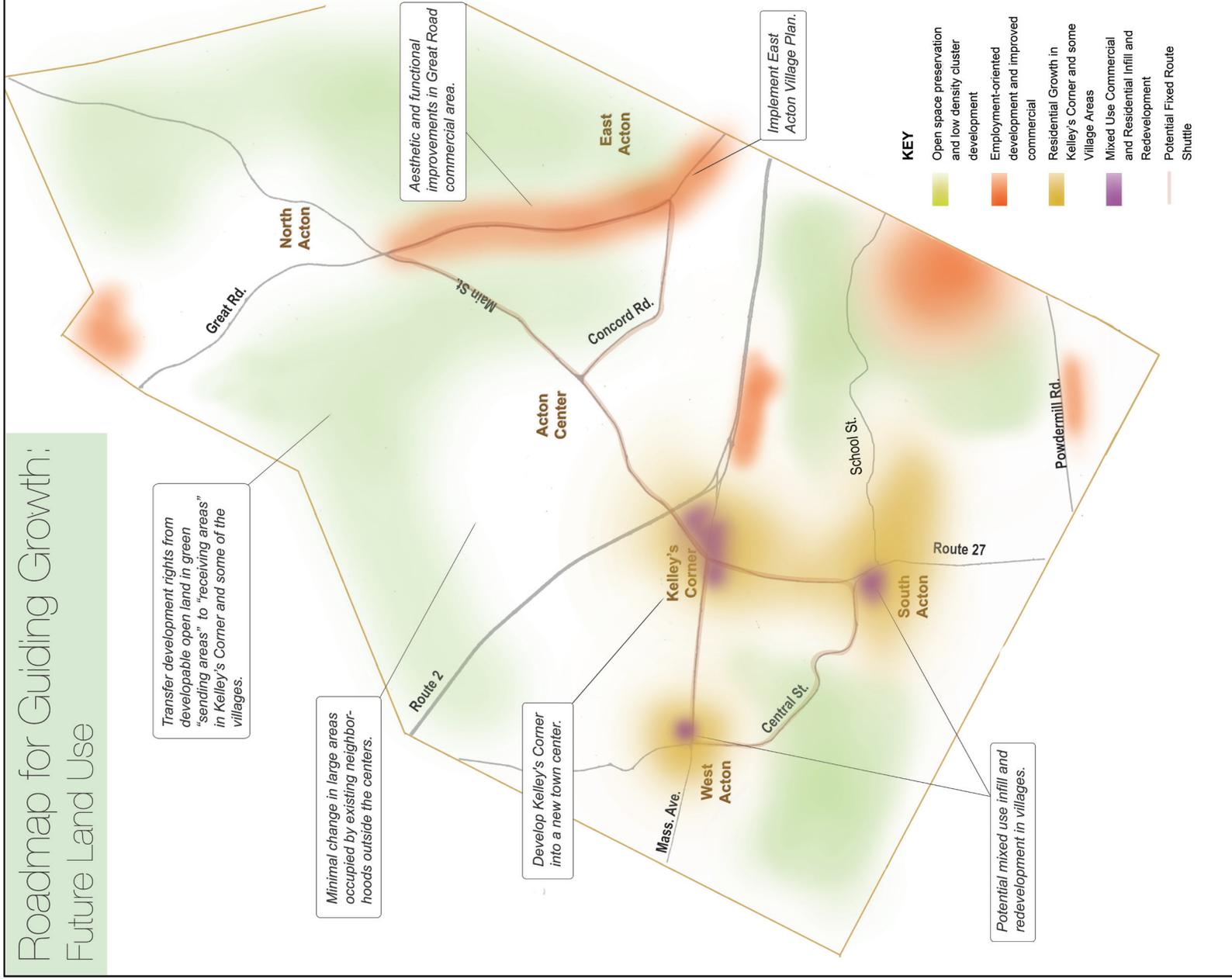
appropriate areas (red). These will be primarily small shops and restaurants.

The map is illustrative only! Actual areas will be delineated after detailed study in the implementation phase.

Does the Roadmap promote growth?

- Growth is the result of the residential and commercial market and property owners’ plans. The Acton 2020 Plan cannot prevent growth but it can guide it.
- Growth can be measured many ways: amount and type of land developed, number of square feet constructed, pressure on the schools, traffic, etc. Most of these have more impact on Acton’s character and quality of life than the Town’s population.
- The Roadmap uses zoning incentives to make TDR effective and the desired type of new development to happen in the desired places. It uses development controls tailored to each location to minimize visual impacts, manage traffic, and create vibrant places where people want to be, for example turning Kelley’s Corner into a new Town Center.
- The result will not be less growth but rather more open space, opportunities for empty nesters to stay in town, and more harmonious and vibrant walkable centers that are more environmentally sustainable than the growth that would occur without the Roadmap.
- The Roadmap also seeks to promote more economic development in appropriate locations.

Roadmap for Guiding Growth: Future Land Use



All areas shown are illustrative only and will be delineated as Action Steps in the Implementation Program.

Background

In June 2011 a public workshop considered three alternatives for managing growth. One, Disperse Growth, was a continuation of current practices. A second, Limit Growth, emphasized aggressive acquisition of open space to reduce residential development and proactively encouraging employment-oriented economic development in limited commercial areas. The third, Concentrate Growth, emphasized directing growth to key centers such as Kelley's Corner and some of the villages. The outcome of the workshop was a strong majority in favor of concentrating growth in mixed use centers but also stepping up the acquisition of open space and the promotion of economic development. These aspects form the **Roadmap for Guiding Growth**.

The **Roadmap** uses zoning incentives to attract growth to the centers, particularly Transfer of Development Rights, a technique that has been successfully used nationwide that allows a developer (or the Town) to acquire rights from owners of property that should remain open and using those rights in a targeted center, with an incentive in the form of additional development units or density.



Mixed use village center (Lexington)



Village Green (South Hadley aerial photograph)



Village Green buildings located at the street edge and parking behind. Its site design includes public places for informal gathering. (South Hadley)

Where the Roadmap Leads

- Kelley's Corner becomes a busy, walkable Town center.
- Villages become denser with redevelopment of non-residential parcels; stronger design review preserves and enhances existing character.
- School enrollments decline gradually, and school costs rise more slowly as the population ages and the housing mix in the new development provides smaller units for empty-nesters and others.
- The tax base is expanded by economic development.
- Home values (adjusted for inflation) outside the centers will be maintained; and those in the villages may increase.
- Many large parcels of open land will be protected through acquisition and transfer of development rights to the centers; on those that do develop, part of the parcel can be protected through cluster zoning.
- By concentrating growth, it becomes feasible to serve more of Acton's population by public transportation, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, saving money for residents, and providing access for Actonians who can't drive or don't wish to be automobile-dependent. It also gives residents the opportunity for walking, which benefits fitness goals and increases sense of connection to others.

Planning for a Resilient Acton

While financial and environmental conditions can't be predicted with certainty, it is prudent to act now to prepare for the Town's future. The Acton 2020 Plan is an opportunity to do this.

Financial Resilience

Acton is currently financially sound with a top bond rating and funds in reserve, but the Town budget is under pressure and costs are expected to rise even if the level of services remains constant, as healthcare costs and other post-employment benefits increase. In order to address this, some combination of higher taxes, reduced costs or services, and a larger property tax base will be needed.

Increasing the property tax base will require growth, but people are concerned that too much development will negatively affect the Town's character as well as put undue pressure on existing services.

One answer is to **promote economic development in appropriate locations, and to encourage fiscally beneficial residential development.**

This can be done by shifting from large lot subdivisions that increase school enrollments and costs, to compact development with smaller units that have been shown to have fewer school age children and therefore generate more tax revenue than costs.

At the household level, rising energy costs strain family budgets, and the cost of living overall sometimes makes it hard for some seniors to remain in Town. Smaller housing units in compact walkable centers cost less to buy or rent and save on both transportation and heating costs.

Additionally, the Plan encourages the exploration of alternative and creative ways of funding capital and operating costs that invite private sector participation.

Environmental Resilience

Acton is committed to reducing its carbon footprint and protecting its water resources. These efforts have some costs, but the investments will be repaid in lower energy costs and avoiding the need to later remedy impacts to the Town's drinking water.

Shifting residential growth from large lot subdivisions to compact development in the centers saves energy owing to reduced auto dependency, and it enables wastewater to be handled better via sewers or advanced package treatment plants, while leaving more open space undeveloped. Dealing with existing and anticipated stormwater issues in the centers can be planned for now, instead of waiting for worsening conditions.

Future Contingencies:

A comprehensive plan should be resilient – it should continue to be a guide even if the unpredictable happens. The “wild cards” that Acton might have to face include:

- Prolonged economic downturn combined with escalating healthcare costs and other post-employment benefits.
- Weather events, such as more frequent storms and significant climate change.
- School enrollments that don't decline as expected.
- Revival of the housing market leading to a major residential subdivision proposed for a large tract of land.

The 2020 Plan has resilience in the face of such unexpected trends and events as well as the possibility of more or less development than anticipated, tighter budgets, or unforeseen infrastructure needs.

By guiding growth to the centers and protecting open space through transfer of development rights, the development of a large tract of land with consequent increases in school and other costs, can potentially be channeled into compact mixed use development with smaller units that generate less school cost and pay more taxes than their cost to service.

By emphasizing economic development, the most promising source of added tax revenue, Acton can do better than similar towns that don't invest in attracting commercial growth, even in a prolonged downturn.

By calling for appropriate guidelines and more rigorous review of development in the centers, particularly Kelley's Corner where sewers are already in place, the Town's water supply can be better protected from wastewater impacts, with improvements largely funded by new development. A key recommendation is a study of each center to develop place-specific design guidelines and evaluate potential impacts due to traffic and wastewater disposal.

Implementing the Roadmap

Residential

- Limit and guide growth geographically through infill and redevelopment in and around existing centers (West Acton, South Acton and Kelley's Corner).
- Utilize cluster zoning for most residential development outside the centers.

Commercial

- Redevelop Kelley's Corner (KC) and village commercial areas into mixed use centers that improve KC and respect the existing village character.
- Promote employment-oriented development in areas that don't directly impact neighborhoods: Great Road, Nagog Park, Powdermill Road, W.R Grace property, and large commercial parcels on Rt. 2.
- Improve existing commercial areas with retail and restaurants.

Protection of Village Character and Historic Resources

- Prepare strong design guidelines for Kelley's Corner and villages to which growth is guided, with incentives dependent on preserving character and compatibility with historic resources.



- Use strong design review to protect historic character and natural resources.

Open Space Preservation

- Provide incentives for transfer of development away from open land to desired growth centers (thus preserving the entire open parcel) and cluster zoning for the development that does occur outside the centers (thus preserving at least half of the parcel).
- Use tax income generated from economic development to accelerate purchases of open space.
- Develop opportunities for recreation near village centers and small vest pocket parks and tot lots in villages.

Transportation

- Concentrate transportation investments such as sidewalks and traffic calming in and around Kelley's Corner and the villages.
- Provide bicycle accommodation through both off-road paths and on-road improvements (e.g., bike lanes and wider shared lanes).
- Build MinuteVan shuttle into a more comprehensive system providing access between villages, Kelley's Corner, commercial areas, and the MBTA commuter rail.

Water Resources Management and Protection

- Prioritize Kelley's Corner development, which has sewer service.
- Consider extension of sewer and/or advanced package wastewater treatment in West Acton Village to serve redevelopment of the commercial area on the north side of Massachusetts Avenue and in other commercial areas.
- Actively manage stormwater in new development.

Fiscal Viability

- Continue to find ways to control costs, including regional options and cooperation with other towns.

Analysis of the Roadmap

Projections

- Analysis of the **Roadmap** rests on some assumptions about how much growth will occur over the next 20 years. Based on projections by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, this was expected to total approximately 1,000 additional housing units. The **Roadmap** includes the use of incentives to induce property owners to use the proposed Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) option and developers to meet stringent guidelines; these incentives would raise the total to approximately 1200 units, increasing Acton's total housing stock about 15 percent to 9,387 units in 2030. Population would increase approximately 14 percent to 25,000 people. (See charts on page 21.)
- The current economic downturn will delay the start of new development, but this simply pushes back the date when the projected totals will be reached. (In any case, growth would continue beyond the horizon of the Plan.)
- Commercial development is more difficult to project; projections are based on the assumptions that the real estate markets will revive, and that Acton will actively work to attract up to 1.5 million square feet of development.

Fiscal Impacts

- Implementing the **Roadmap** would result in 260 fewer school children than at present. This is the result of demographic shifts Town-wide and the lower school enrollments that result from smaller housing units, encouraged by the Plan, compared with large single family homes. The relationship between number of bedrooms and the number of school children is based on national trends and has been confirmed locally, including the enrollments generated by the Acton Avalon development.*
- The result is that total revenues from all residential property in Acton will exceed total costs (including schools) by \$5.6 million. If the target for commercial development is reached, this would increase net revenues by another \$1.5 million. The net benefit in the last year of the projections would thus be \$7.1 million, minus infrastructure cost.
- The investment needed to fully implement the Plan would depend on whether wastewater treatment costs are borne by the Town or by developers. Some additional staff would also be needed. Assuming \$1.3 million in annual infrastructure cost, plus a wastewater contingency of \$1 million in annual bond costs, the Plan with all components (see page 22) would be fiscally positive.

Open Space

- The amount of land left for development at the end of the projection period depends on how much open space is protected. The Roadmap is estimated to protect 880 acres through TDR, cluster zoning, and some purchase. This would increase Acton's protected open space from 1,837 acres to 2,717 acres (see chart on p. 22.)

Water

- The Acton Water District currently supplies approximately 600 million gallons per year (MGY). The Roadmap for Guiding Growth would raise this amount to 684 MGY, which is less than the state permitted withdrawal limit of 708.1 MGY.

Schools

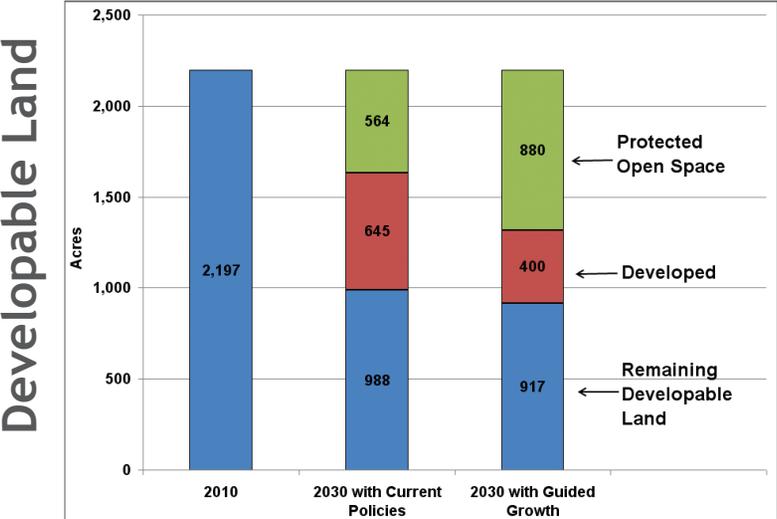
- Enrollments are expected to decline due to a projected average decrease in family size. The Plan reinforces this trend by encouraging the development of smaller housing units (see chart on page 22). This will result in a reduction in class size which has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on education, especially in the younger grades.

* The assumptions about declining school enrollments are based on demographic trends and are more conservative than the School Department's enrollment projections (which extend only to 2023).

Land Use and Buildout

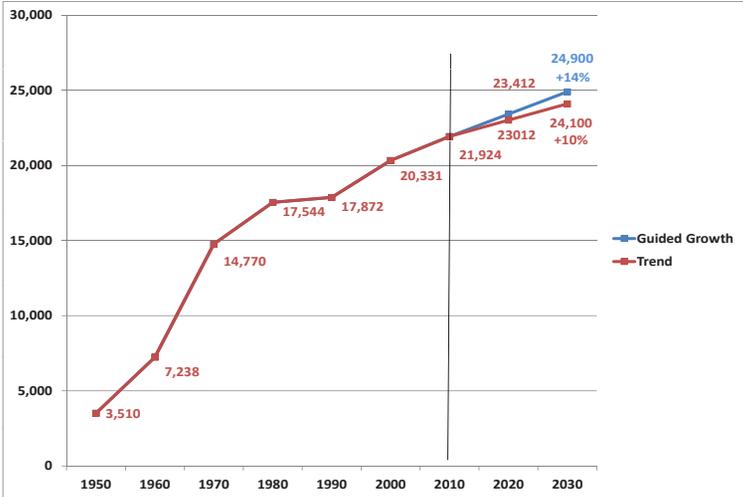
- By concentrating residential growth in the centers, the total land consumed for all types of development would total 400 acres. Developable land would be further reduced by 880 acres of open space. Subtracting the 1,280 acres from the roughly 2,200 acres of developable land that remained in 2010, would leave approximately 900 acres of developable land in 2030. Therefore, build out would occur well beyond 2030.
- The following charts illustrate the different impact of the Roadmap as compared to continuing with current policies as measured by a variety of growth factors (e.g. land developed, population, housing, school children, and open space).

If current policies are continued, more than half of the Town’s current developable land would be developed or added to the amount of protected open space; implementing the **Roadmap** would result in a higher percentage of developable land set aside as open space than under current policies.



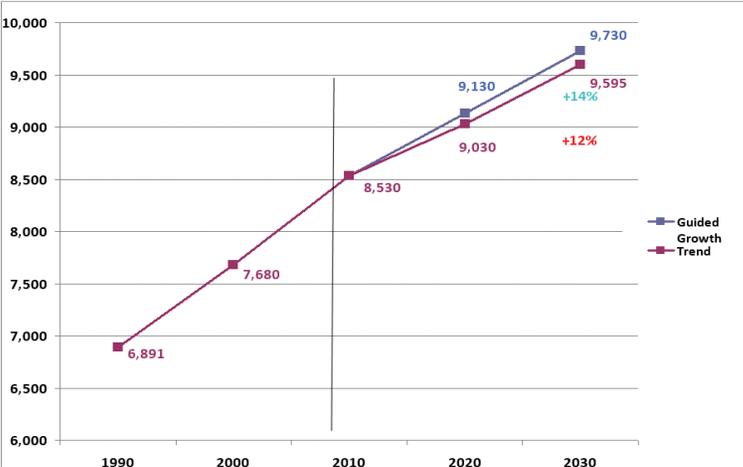
Acton grew rapidly in nearly every decade since 1950, but the rate of growth is projected to decrease, even after the current economic downturn ends. Implementing the **Roadmap** would result in slightly higher growth to provide an incentive to use TDR.

Population



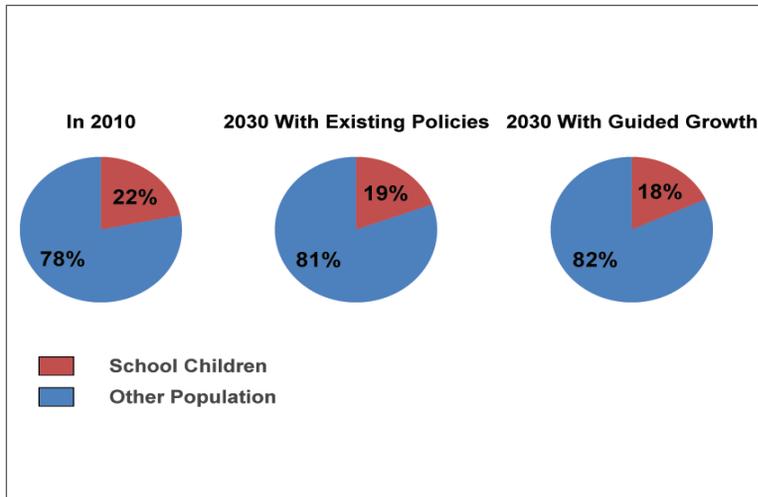
The growth of housing parallels population growth, except that demographic changes will result in fewer persons per household, and therefore more housing units in relation to the population.

Housing Growth



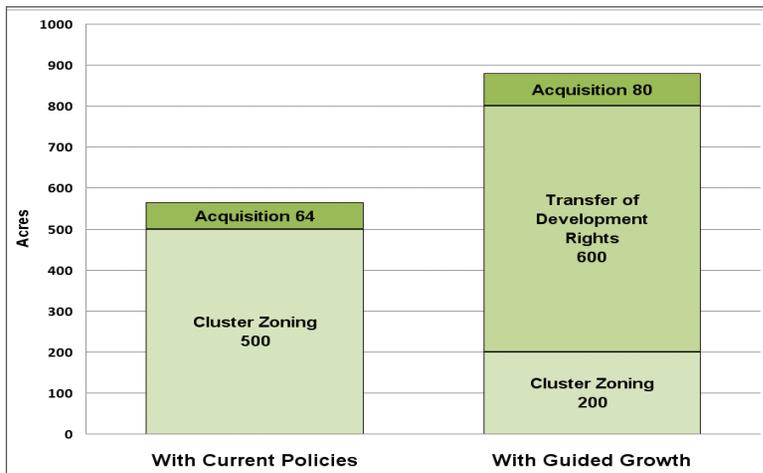
School-age Children

The number of bedrooms in the smaller housing units expected to result from implementing the **Roadmap** will result in a smaller ratio of school children to total population.



In addition to future open space purchase and open space set aside in cluster subdivisions, the use of Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) is expected to result in protecting substantially more open space.

Open Space



Summary of Roadmap Analysis

	2030 with Current Policies	2030 with Guided Growth
Housing Units Added and Percent Increase from 2010	1,000 (10%)	1,200 (12%)
In Centers	Few	800
In Outlying Areas	Nearly 1,000	400
Average number of bedrooms in new housing	3.04	2.55
Change in Population and Percent Increase from 2010	Approx. 2,200 (10%)	Approx 3,000 (14%)
Change in Number of School Age Children	Decrease of 112	Decrease of 260
Acres of Residential Land Developed	645	400
Acres of Developable Land Remaining and Percent of Currently Developable	988 (45%)	917 (42%)
Added Acres of Protected Open Space and Percent of Currently Protected	564 (31%)	880 (48%)
Added Acres of Commercial Development	85	135
Water Demand in million gallons per year (MGY) and Relationship to Current Permitted Withdrawal of 708.1 MGY	675 MGY (33 under)	684 MGY (24 under)
Increase in Fiscal Capacity by 2030*		
From Reduced School Enrollments	\$4.5 M	\$5.6 M
From Added Commercial Development	\$1.0 M	\$1.5 M
Subtotal	\$5.5 M	\$7.1 M
Major expenditures in 2030	(\$0.5 M)	(\$1.3 - \$2.3 M)
Net Increase in Fiscal Capacity	\$5.0 M	\$4.8 - \$5.8 M

* Potential annual costs may include \$1 million for bond payments for sewer or wastewater treatment infrastructure, which are uncertain and may be off-budget. See page 48 for list of Acton 2020 major expenditures. These are estimates that illustrate the relative costs and changes in fiscal capacity of current policies when compared to the **Roadmap**.



Important Points about the Roadmap

- School enrollments are expected to decline simply because of demographic trends. This can be an opportunity to make Acton’s schools even better than they are now by reducing class sizes.
- Reducing the ratio of school children to overall population will not be drastic, but the effect at the margin will be to increase fiscal capacity.
- The analysis of fiscal capacity is conservative, assuming less reduction in school enrollments than the School Department projections indicate. The improvement in fiscal capacity is due to a number of factors, particularly shifting future residential development to a small size on average, so that the school costs associated with the new housing is, on average, less than it will pay in property taxes. Added to this is the property taxes paid by new economic development, which costs less to service than it pays.
- Providing incentives to develop smaller housing units in key centers will result in a wider range of housing choices. Turnover in the larger homes and some additional building of such homes means that there will always be an ample supply of 3-4 bedroom single family homes. The Roadmap will result in the addition of small units for empty-nesters, town staff, and young adults who want to live in walkable neighborhoods.
- The Plan’s major investments – in transportation, infrastructure to support mixed use development in the centers, community facilities, open space purchase, etc. – are paid for out of increased fiscal capacity as it develops over the next 20 years.
- These investments are phased (see page 46) so that major expenditures occur only as fiscal capacity increases. If this occurs more slowly than projected (or in the worst case not at all), the Town will not need to spend beyond its means.
- Much of the growth in the centers will be infill and redevelopment of non-residential property. The amount and location will be determined by detailed study of each center, including how the new development will look, how it will be served by parking and utilities, and how traffic will be managed. Strong development review will protect existing character of the centers and adjacent neighborhoods.
- Zoning changes to implement the Roadmap (including Transfer of Development Rights) will be determined based on a Key Centers Plan and place-specific studies.
- The “village focus” of the 1991 Master Plan and 1998 Update did not succeed in changing development patterns, although the previous plan for Kelley’s Corner came very close to the necessary 2/3 vote of Town Meeting. Now, the Roadmap’s proposed TDR mechanism has stronger incentives for property owners to use it, demographic trends are being reflected in a residential market for quality smaller housing units in vibrant walkable centers, and people’s understanding of the benefits of this kind of development (for the environment, personal health, and quality of life) has created the political will to make it happen.
- The Roadmap uses Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) to protect open space and help create vibrant centers. This technique has been used successfully across the United States in communities both smaller and larger than Acton. It has a number of features that can be designed to fit Acton’s specific needs. This will be done in the implementation phase.

