

**EXISTING
CONDITION**

5

Open Space
and Recreation

Open Space and Recreation

Acton was settled by European colonists in the 1600s because it had many open meadows for grazing. To this day Acton’s open spaces and natural resources provide the Town’s rural characteristics of protected natural areas with trails, tree-lined roads, stonewalls, ponds, meadows, wetlands, forests, wildlife habitats, and farmland. These characteristics and areas for recreation, help define its sense of place and contribute greatly to the quality of life of its residents.

One of the primary ways to help preserve the Town’s character that was identified in developing a vision for Acton’s future was the preservation, protection, and additional acquisition of open space.

Potential conflicts may exist between identified goals related to open space and natural resource protection and other components of the Plan, such as traffic and economic development.

Summary of Key Points

Open Space Resources

- Approximately 29% of Acton’s 13,000 acres of land (3,717 acres) is in some form of public open space or recreation use. This is a higher percentage than Chelmsford, Westford, Box-

borough, and Littleton, but less than Concord, Carlisle, Maynard, and Stow.

- More than 2,000 acres are considered permanently protected (Conservation Commission – 1,642 acres, Water District – 395 acres).
- There are over 6 miles of paved paths and 15 miles of trails in Acton including a portion of the Bay Circuit Trail – a 200 mile greenway corridor between Rt. 495 & Rt. 95.
- Some of the major open spaces include: Acton Arboretum, Great Hill, Camp Acton, Spring Hill, Grassy Pond, Wills Hole, NARA Park, and Nagog Hill – All have trail systems and maps available on-line (see <http://www.acton-trails.org>).
- Many of the Town’s open spaces protect important natural resources, as well as historic and geological features.
- Many privately owned open spaces (common land, back land, etc.) contribute to the Town’s sense of nature, and some create important corridors. Open space in cluster developments is protected by Special Permit Conditions.

Acton Voices*

“Farms, conservation lands, NARA Park, Arboretum, and the commitment to preserving open space” were cited as responses to the question: “What Makes Acton Unique?”

“I would like a big Town pool that only Acton people and their guests can go to.”

“Recreational facilities are poorly maintained and there is a need for more bathrooms and parking.”

“I want more activities other than sports and school.”

“NARA Park should be free for all residents.”

“One of my favorite things about Acton are the recreational resources such as the tennis courts.”

“I would like to see more parks and places to play for young children...”

“I would like more open space (including trails, meadows, woods and recreational areas.” (according to 82.7% of respondents)

“The rural character, NARA Park, conservation land & the Arboretum are among my favorite things about Acton.”

“Soccer at school and at Teamworks on the Great Road are one of the things we most like about Acton.”

“There is an increasing demand on existing recreational facilities, including athletic fields, and more demand for local recreation.”

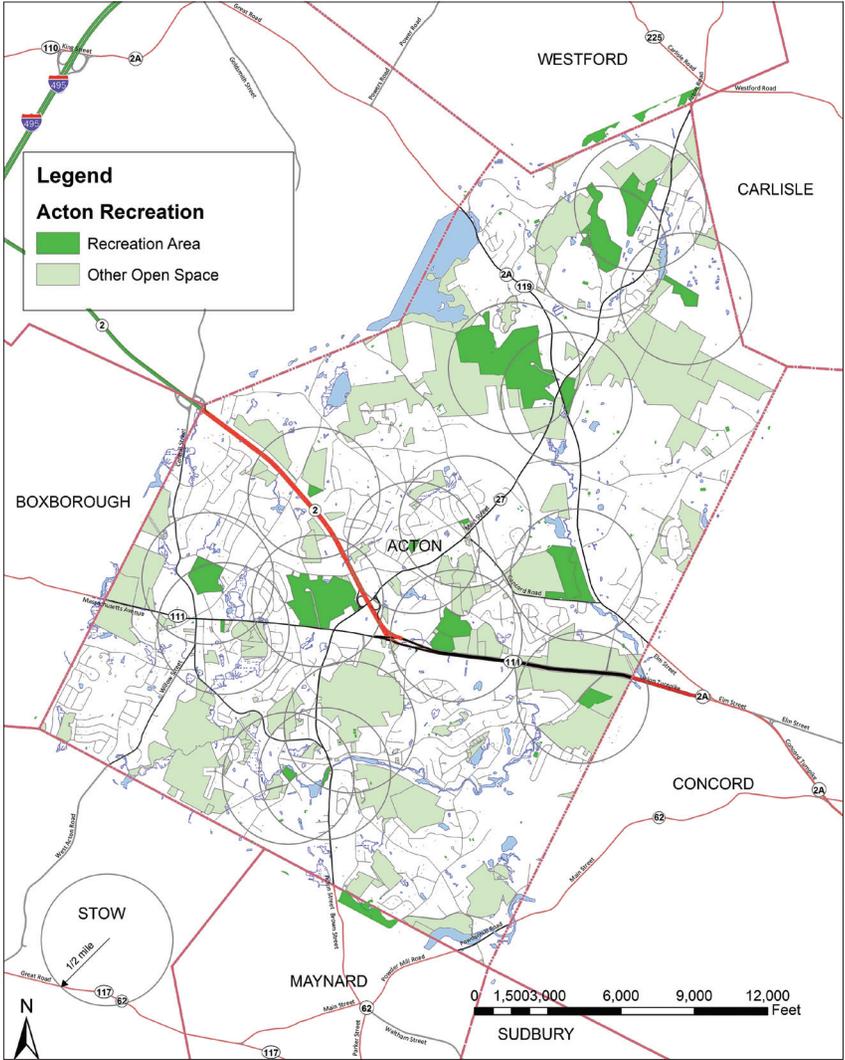
Almost three-fourths of Acton residents (74.4.%) said they would like to see more open space preserved in Acton.

* public input from Phase I of the planning process

Recreation Resources

- Recreation Department has an active and varied program of activities and events.
- Recreation Department manages activities at:
 - 7 baseball/softball fields
 - 9 soccer fields
 - 1 outdoor basketball court
 - 7 playgrounds
 - 2 practice fields
 - 2 fishing areas
 - 1 swimming beach
 - 1 amphitheater
 - 1 skate park
 - 3 picnic areas
- Schools have fields and indoor recreation facilities.
- There are two Community Garden sites – North Acton Community Gardens and Morrison Farm Community Gardens.
- Major recreation sites include NARA Park, School Street Field, Veteran’s Field, Elm Street Fields, Great Hill, Jones Field, and Gardener Field.
- There is one golf course in Town and several in adjacent towns.

Figure 5.2 Acton Recreational Resources



Opportunities and Challenges Posed by Existing Open Space and Recreation Conditions

- Acton still has some small privately owned and operated farms producing produce sold in local markets. These agricultural areas are highlighted in the Open Space and Recreation Plan as important assets deserving of protection. They also help provide some diversity of habitat. These scattered agricultural areas have value for wildlife and help provide some of the distinctive character of the Town. They also have a greater value as sustainable, local sources of food.
- Much of the Town’s wildlife diversity is a



result of its variety of habitat types. The challenge of maintaining that diversity will require protection of both small and large areas like those identified in the Priority Habitats and BioMap Core Areas and areas of different habitats; non-forested wetlands, forested uplands, open/vacant areas, grasslands, and open space corridors that make connections between areas.

- Protection of Priority Habitats and BioMap Core Areas is an important conservation priority for the region as well as the Town. These areas include several already protected areas. There is an opportunity to expand protection of these important resource areas.
- Part of the Town’s scenic quality is due to the visual impact of broad vistas and more intimate views. Retaining that quality will be an on-going challenge and opportunity.
- The 2011 Acton Open Space and Recreation Plan is being developed by the Open Space Committee. It contains a priority list of open space parcels for acquisition or protection.

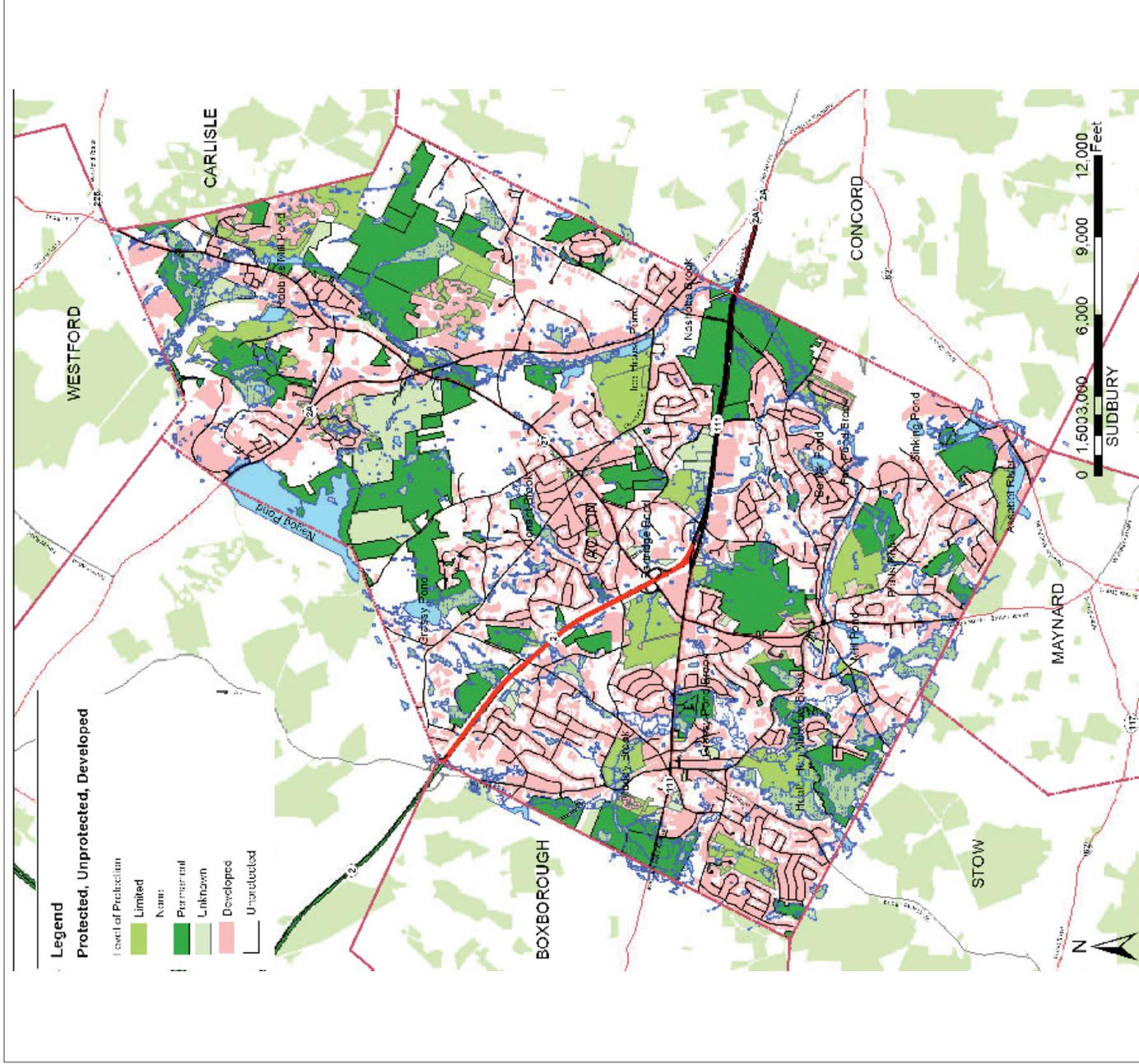
Table 5.1: Open Space Acreage

Owner	Total Acres
Town of Acton (includes School Dept. & other)	773
Town of Acton Conservation Commission	1,642
Town of Acton Water Department	395
Commonwealth of Massachusetts (includes Department Of Corrections)	192
Non-profit Land	78
Private Land (includes golf course, common land & other)	6659
Other Town (Maynard, Concord) Land	71
Total	3,810

In conclusion, Acton has done an admirable job of preserving and managing open space and recreation resources, but continuing investment and effort to manage these resources will pay dividends in the Town’s quality of life, help to preserve its character, and advance the goal of ensuring environmental sustainability.

Open Space and Recreation

Figure 5.1: Acton Open Space



**EXISTING
CONDITION**

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Transportation
and Circulation

Transportation and Circulation

Almost everyone needs access to transportation resources on a daily basis. Because those who cannot get around easily are often disconnected from the rest of the community, transportation access and circulation becomes an essential component of community comprehensive planning.

Acton’s transportation system is primarily a network of roadways, most of which were not designed for today’s traffic volumes. At the same time, many Acton residents are interested in better public transportation, pedestrian, and bicycle facilities. Efforts by Acton’s TAC and its Sidewalk Committee, and interested citizens have resulted in a new shuttle service to the South Acton Train Station, a better station design, and new, well-designed sidewalks and sidewalk design guidelines. Two major shared use paths, the Assabet River Rail Trail, and Bruce Freeman Rail Trail are moving closer to construction. However, Acton does not have a bicycle committee, and in general, the Town lacks staff dedicated to encouraging public transportation use and bicycle improvements other than the rail trails.

Summary of Key Points

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 neighboring communities, the 2000 Census showed that nearly 90 percent of workers living in Acton 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 the historical importance of some roads, maintaining their visual character is an important element in how the community views and considers roadway improvements.
- Many of the intersections along these corridors

Acton Voices*

“Acton should provide more safe bicycle and walking trails/lanes and sidewalks.”

“You can’t turn left in most places in Town due to traffic congestion.”

“There is a lack of public transportation and too much dependence on cars.”

“Easy access to highways and commuter rail are important assets to the Town.”

“Expand parking at South Acton Train Station.”

“I don’t like that there isn’t a traffic light near my house at the intersection. If there were, then driving would go a lot more smoothly.”

“Build the sidewalk ALL along Main St., one end of Town to the other.”

“We need public transportation for those who cannot drive.”

“One of my favorite things about Acton is the commuter rail (especially the “super express” from Acton to Porter Square).”

“The senior van is limited in terms of when and where it goes; we need more public transportation.”

“Traffic safety is a serious obstacle to attracting customers.”

Almost 1/2 (46.4%) of respondents cited traffic as one of Acton’s three most important challenges.

* public input from Phase I of the planning process

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 the South



Acton Train Station (SATS). In March 2010, the MBTA adopted the design alternative proposed by Acton residents. The Acton Historic District Commission has approved the latest design proposal from the MBTA (details here).

- 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 moved to the new station, thereby relieving some parking congestion at SATS.
- Although the MBTA provides commuter rail service to Acton, the Town is also part of the Lowell Regional Transit Authority (LRTA) service area for paratransit service to Acton’s senior and disabled communities. LRTA does not provide fixed route bus service in Acton.
- In 2009, Acton received \$95,188 in federal funding to initiate the MinuteVan shuttle service between the SATS 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 seven locations in adjacent towns.



- The Acton Council on Aging also provides shuttle service for Acton residents 60 years old and older and for residents with disabilities 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

- Acton’s sidewalks often exist on only one side of the street. With the notable exception of recent sidewalk projects, most of Acton’s sidewalks are narrow. 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.

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 (Transportation Advisory Committee) subcommittee on bicycling.
- Acton is directly involved in two major rail trail projects: The Assabet River Rail Trail (ARRT) Phase 2 is under design, 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 address bike paths as deemed necessary by the Planning Board.



The Bruce Freeman Trail will be extended through Acton.



Opportunities and Challenges Posed by Existing Transportation Conditions

- Some improvements in conditions on Acton’s roadway network are possible, but the areas in which Acton can improve transportation most appear to be in public transportation, walking, and bicycling. These improvements would ultimately help to reduce traffic (as would housing and economic development choices that would reduce commuting and would make walking, biking, and use of public transportation more feasible for many people by reducing the distance one needs to travel to shopping, work, and other destinations).
- As the cost of transportation continues to increase because of the increasing fuel prices and public transportation fares, the expense of commuting will likely be an increasingly important factor in residential and employment decision making.
- Federal and state funding for the MinuteVan is expected to decline in future years, and Acton will need to decide how and whether

to continue funding these services.

- 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) are underway regarding MART provided contracted transportation services, which could be more locally tailored than the service currently provided by LRTA.
- The market for the MinuteVan service exists, but to maximize use, the current pricing options for parking and using the shuttle should be evaluated (annual subscription, ten-ride passes, and pay-by-the-day hangtags), and options such as schedule improvements and route extensions should be explored.
- Although controlling traffic speeds, particularly in residential areas through design (“traffic calming”) and enforcement, 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.

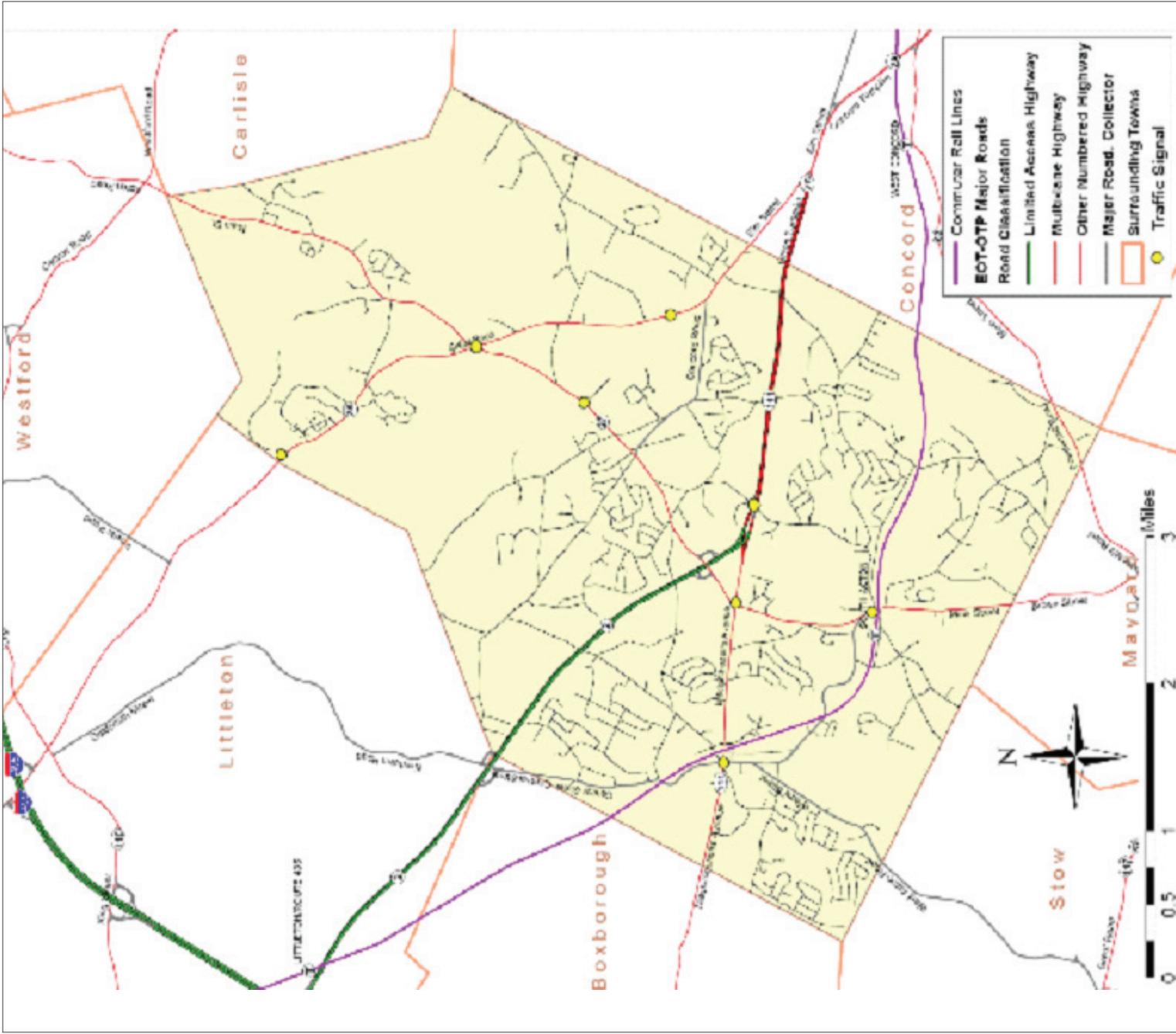
- Pathway linkages can be explored, particularly where connections can be made between adjacent parcels and from residential areas to commercial areas.
- With two shared use paths in development and bicycle parking program expansion, there is an opportunity for the Town to form a bicycle committee, either independently or as part of the TAC.

In conclusion, 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.



Transportation and Circulation

Figure 6.1: Acton's Multimodal Transportation Network



**EXISTING
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7

Facilities
and Services

Facilities and Services

Facilities and services are the core functions of Town government. The way they are provided determines what residents and businesses get from the Town and, conversely, what taxpayers must pay to provide those services and facilities. Particularly for capital facilities such as schools and other Town buildings, the level of investment today affects Acton’s ability to provide the services Actonians desire, and today’s investments have implications for future budgets.

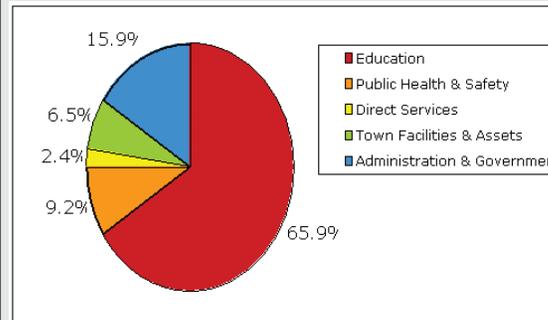
Acton provides a high quality set of services and facilities in return for the taxes paid by property owners. The Town’s facilities are generally in very good condition and are for the most part adequate in size to serve the needs foreseen over the 20-year horizon of this comprehensive plan; the possible exceptions are the proposals to build a larger Senior Center and a new fire station. While not perfect, the Town’s water supply meets enforceable standards and is adequate in capacity to serve all but summer outdoor watering needs. Stormwater is well-managed in accordance with federal and state regulations. The Comprehensive Water Resources Management Plan identified 15 Areas of Need, 14 of which need appropriate action to manage wastewater in

a manner that preserves the quality the ground-water that supplies most of the Town’s drinking water.

Summary of Key Points

- Acton provides excellent services to its residents and businesses, of which education and public health and safety are major parts with substantial costs.

Figure 7.1: FY 2009 Expenditures by Purpose



Source: Massachusetts Department of Revenue

- Since FY 2004, Acton has had the highest residential tax rate of all towns around it (except Stow in FY2004 and FY2005). However, the tax bill, which is the tax rate times the assessed value, is more significant than the tax rate itself; on this basis Acton is in the middle of this group of towns.

Acton Voices*

“Schools” were cited as among the top three “favorite things” about Acton.

“We need to improve the senior center, provide more activities, better transportation, and opportunities for intergenerational interaction.”

The needs of “teens” and “active seniors” are the most unmet.

“It would make people who speak languages other than English at home, feel more comfortable and welcome if materials related to Town services were translated.”

“We need full day Kindergarten for everyone, the lack of neighborhood schools, and some overcrowded classrooms are my concerns.”

“We need a place to hold cultural celebrations.”

“The Town website should be kept up to date and we need a community bulletin board.”

“Allow all tax payers (including non-citizens) to vote on Town issues.”

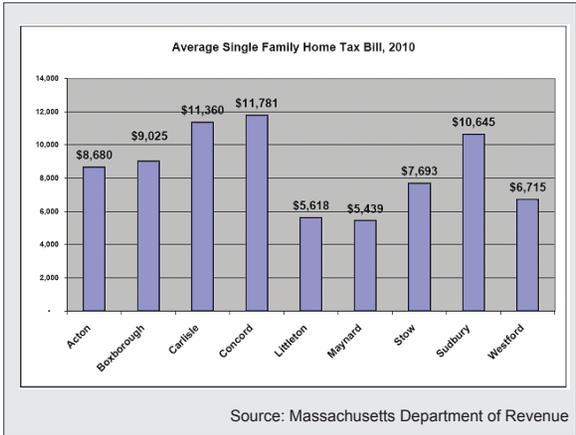
“There is an increasing demand for ‘virtual’ Town services.”

“The Library, an important gathering space for the community, is facing a number of challenges including changes in technology and diversity of languages.”

“Transportation” (31.5%), “trash” (18%), senior” services (14.5%), “sidewalks” (6.4%), “parking” (5.8%) or “sewer” (5.8%) were services most frequently mentioned as unmet.

Schools were cited by 3/4 (75%) of respondents of a mail survey as being among Acton’s three most important assets.

* public input from Phase I of the planning process



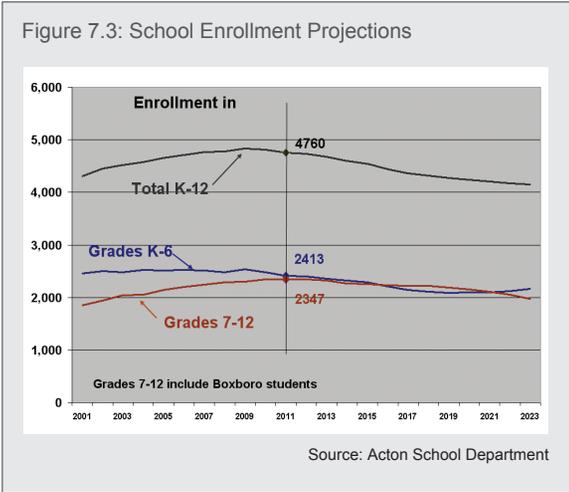
- Acton does not use a separate tax rate for commercial and industrial property.

Schools

- Acton’s schools provide high quality education at a lower cost per pupil than most school systems of comparable quality.
- The portion of the municipal budget that goes to education is large in Acton, as is the case in most communities.
- Acton has made substantial investments in two elementary schools, and the ABRSD junior high school and high school; three elementary schools were built in 1965 and 1970. Although ongoing improvements are needed, particularly in the three older schools, the School

Department has regularly maintained and improved the school buildings.

- Based on detailed enrollment projections, Acton’s schools are currently at peak student population and enrollments are expected to gradually decline, making expanded school facilities unnecessary.
- Many families undoubtedly move to Acton because of its good schools, and while some of them leave the Town when their children have graduated, many others plan to stay; this is not unusual for a town with relatively affordable housing and topnotch schools.



Municipal Buildings

- Along with the school projects described above, several other major facility needs identified in 1991 have been fulfilled.
- The Town buildings are generally in good condition. The Municipal Properties Department, which maintains these buildings, has made a series of improvements to make them more energy efficient.
- The primary municipal facilities issues and constraints are the amount of Town Hall office space for Town departments, insufficient public meeting space, the amount of space in the Senior Center, and the Fire Department’s proposal to build a new facility in North Acton to improve response times.

Water Supply

- Water supply and wastewater management are both partly dependent on Acton’s soils, subsurface geology, aquifers and groundwater. These natural resources are as much a part of these systems as the public and private infrastructure that supplies water and treats wastewater.
- The Acton Water District has supplied approximately 600 million gallons per year (MGY), which is equivalent to 1.64 million gallons per day (MGD) over the past six years; the trend is essentially flat because conservation and use of private wells offset increases in demand due to growth.
- Water demand varies seasonally because of outdoor water use in the summer.
- Maximum daily demand is often greater than 2.0 MGD and in the summer months reaches 2.6 MGD, the District’s self-imposed limit. As a result, summer watering bans have been instituted.
- The water supply system is composed of groundwater wells, water treatment facilities, storage and pumping facilities, and water mains.

- The water being supplied meets the primary standards promulgated by the U.S. EPA, as the law requires. Secondary standards are currently not required to be met, but should these become enforceable, additional treatment facilities may be needed.
- The wells are surrounded by protection zones. Land uses in the protection zones around the wells are limited through Acton’s zoning bylaw to protect the quality and quantity of the groundwater resource.
- The capacity of the water system is limited by the capacity of the individual wells and well-fields, but more importantly, by state regulation. The current withdrawals are well within the permitted amount.
- The Water District has identified the replacement of aging water mains as a priority and has been doing so on an ongoing basis.

Wastewater Management

- Wastewater management involves a combination of private on-site disposal systems as well as the public “centralized” Middle Fort Pond Brook wastewater treatment plant on Adams Street in South Acton.

- There is additional capacity available at the Middle Fort Pond Brook Plant of approximately 50 percent of that which is currently used.
- An additional 10 percent of properties are estimated by the Health Department to be served by clustered on-site septic systems or package treatment plants.
- The remaining 80 percent of properties have on-site systems.
- The majority of these on-site systems are believed to function well. Nonetheless, the proportion of systems that require variances is an indication of the limitations of many Acton’s soils for wastewater disposal.
- The Town’s water supply and its wastewater treatment and disposal exist within a compli-



Middle Fort Pond Brook Wastewater Treatment Plant

cated system that has multiple interactions between stormwater, surface water bodies (ponds and brooks), and groundwater both within and outside Acton’s borders.

- Innovative/Alternative (I/A) systems are now allowed for replacement of conventional systems (sometimes for new construction), which assists in finding solutions for difficult lots.
- The Comprehensive Water Resources Management Plan (CWRMP) concluded that over 90% of the existing on-site wastewater systems can remain as on-site systems for the planning period (which extends to 2024), with approximately 3.5% of these requiring I/A technology.
- In summary, on-site treatment is viable for most, but not all, residential lots in Acton; meeting on-site treatment standards on some lots may involve additional cost, compared to lots that have soils that are considered “good” for on-site disposal.
- The great majority of on-site wastewater systems identified for replacement has been through the mandatory inspection requirement when a house is sold.
- The Phase II CWRMP completed in 2006

identified 15 wastewater planning “Areas of Need” and categorized five of those as high priority needs areas.

- The initial implementation of the CWRMP has focused on evaluating which Areas of Need could feasibly be served by the existing wastewater treatment plant and identified priority areas for sewer extensions. There is additional capacity available at the Middle Fort Pond Brook Plant of approximately 50 percent of that which is currently used.
- The CWRMP identified Wastewater Management Districts (WMD) as the primary or secondary solution to be considered for most of the 15 Needs Areas.

Stormwater Management

- Management of stormwater includes both measures to reduce the rate of flow and to improve quality through settling or other means. Together these measures are known as Best Management Practices (BMPs). The 2003 Acton Stormwater Management Plan (SWMP) contains recommendations for managing stormwater to reduce quality impacts and comply with federal regulations.
- Acton has had bylaws and regulations since



the late 1980s that embodied what are now called BMPs, and these regulations have been modified as necessary to comply with Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection MADEP standards under the permit.

- The Town has implemented all of the measures identified in the SWMP, including outreach, public education, and regular maintenance and cleaning of stormwater structures such as catch basins.

Services for Seniors

- The number of Acton residents 65 years or older is expected to increase over the next two decades. The Acton Council on Aging believes that a larger senior center is needed to serve current and future needs and provide a fuller range of programs.

Libraries

- Demand for Acton’s libraries is steadily increasing and meeting it requires more resources; however, the library buildings are generally adequate for the future.

Public Safety

- The recently constructed Public Safety Building is adequate for the future needs of the Police Department.
- Acton’s Fire Department has three fire stations built 40 or more years ago. With the steady growth of the northern part of the Town, there is a case to be made for a new fire station in North Acton replacing one of the existing stations, but there are other means of improving response time, such as cooperation with other towns.

Opportunities and Challenges Posed by Existing Facilities and Services Conditions

- As in all towns concerned with high quality schools and other public services, there is an on-going tradeoff between what the Town provides and the cost to taxpayers.
- Acton has a generally very good inventory of schools and other Town buildings that are adequate in capacity for future needs, but on-going improvements are needed, particularly in the older buildings.
- The water supply system is expected to be adequate in quantity for future needs, but on-going improvements in the distribution system are needed, and ongoing efforts are needed to preserve quality.
- Water quality is an issue both in terms of land uses in the areas surrounding the groundwater wells and protection of the larger groundwater aquifer that supplies them but receives 90 percent of the Town’s sanitary wastewater.
- Because of the limitation of much of Acton’s soils, better management of on-site wastewater

disposal and/or some extension of the Fort Pond Brook wastewater treatment plant may be needed in identified Areas of Need.

- Acton’s growing population of seniors would be better served by a new senior center large enough to accommodate seniors and the larger community.
- Ways of improving Fire Department response times in North Acton should be studied.
- Acton’s libraries are key resources for cultural information and as public gathering places; while adequate in size, they will continue to need more resources to serve demand.

In conclusion, Acton is fortunate to have excellent schools, very good facilities, and high quality services. Prudent budgeting to resolve competing priorities and maintain financial well-being is a continuous process that is well served by Town Government but requires the ongoing effort of officials and citizens. Continuing effort is needed to manage risk to the Town’s water supply and surface water quality.

Facilities & Services

