



# Athol TAP

October 10, 2017



**Urban Land  
Institute**

Boston/New England

# About ULI – the Urban Land Institute

## Mission

To provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide.

ULI is a research and education institution with nearly 40,000 members worldwide representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines, working in private enterprise and public service.

## ULI at the local level

### ULI Boston/ New England

Boston/New England District Council covers nearly all of New England with over 1,300 Members—developers, architects, planners, public officials, financiers, students, etc.



## Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)

ULI Boston/New England is committed to supporting communities in making sound land use decisions and creating thriving places.

The TAP program brings together ULI members with a range of professional expertise to provide focused, collaborative consultation to a local government or qualifying non-profit organization.



### **Athol TAP: Sponsored by the Town of Athol and MassDevelopment**

- This panel looked at the full range of options from an unbiased perspective.
- Panelists include private and public sector experts in the fields of commercial real estate analysis, architecture, planning, and design.

### **Panelists have donated their time**

- Final Deliverable – Written report (8 weeks) will be available at <http://boston.uli.org>



## The Panel

### Co-Chairs

Ed O'Rourke, Commodore Builders  
Emily Innes, Harriman

### Panelists

John Martin, Elkus Manfredi  
Drew Kane, Utile  
Bob Maloney, AW Perry  
Matt Mvra, Bohler Engineering  
Bridget Kelly, Nickerson PR  
Amanda Maher, MassDevelopment

### ULI Staff

Sara Marsh

### TAP Writer

Michael Hoban



## Panel Sponsors



MASSDEVELOPMENT



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## Panel Assignment – Address These Questions

### 1. Zoning and Parking Issues

- a) Should the Town rezone the entire "Downtown" defined area, in particular the business/commercial area to Central Commercial?
- b) How can Athol address parking management under zoning?
- c) Can ULI provide recommendations on how best to manage our Downtown parking meter pricing?

### 2. Building reuse/feasibility

- a) What can the Town do to help fill the vacant storefronts and buildings?
- b) Can ULI recommend to the Town what best practices should be taken to develop and implement a redevelopment plan?
- c) Should the Town even be a shopping center landlord or would it be best to have a private-sector developer take over this initiative?

### 3. Pedestrian Connections

- a) How can we address the challenges (physical and fiscal) to implement the Millers River Greenway in the Downtown?
- b) Is a physical connection from the Downtown to the proposed mixed-use development at the UTD mill recommended and feasible?

# The Process

## Briefing

- Panelists met with sponsor and received briefing materials

## Site Visit:

- Panelists visited key locations throughout Athol, focusing on the Downtown area and Main St.

## Panel interviewed stakeholders today including:

- Athol Business Owners
- Public Officials
- Residents
- Property Owners



# What did we hear?



## Assets and Opportunities: Athol

- **Downtown / Main Street**
  - Attractive building stock
  - Low commercial rents
  - Low cost of housing
  - Walkable
  - Access riverfront and neighborhoods
  - Ample parking
  - Civic/social assets
  - Town's ownership of Shopping Center
  - Significant Main Street traffic (26k/day)
  - Access to water supply
  - Rail line infrastructure
  - Access to regional transit system
  - Fiber optic cable



## Assets and Opportunities: Athol

- **Town**
  - Strong social media reach
  - Influx of home investment
  - Sense of community
  - Strong, new, municipal leadership
  - Green Community
  - Largest business district in area
  - In-migration of young families
  - Millers River
  - Recreational Activities
  - New elementary school
  - North Quabbin Commons



## Challenges: Athol

- **Downtown/Main St**
  - Low restaurant inventory
  - Lack of gathering spaces
  - Non-participatory landlords
  - High rates of vacancy
  - Lack of neighborhood retail/services
  - Poor signage
  - Perceptions of safety issues
  - Inconsistent lighting
  - Inconsistent business hours of operation
  - Challenge of upper story redevelopment for ADA
  - Diversity of housing (low income vs. market)





## Challenges: Athol

- **Town**
  - Lack of staff
  - “Disengagement” in civic leadership
  - Business owners not taking advantage of tools and resources
  - Diversity of jobs

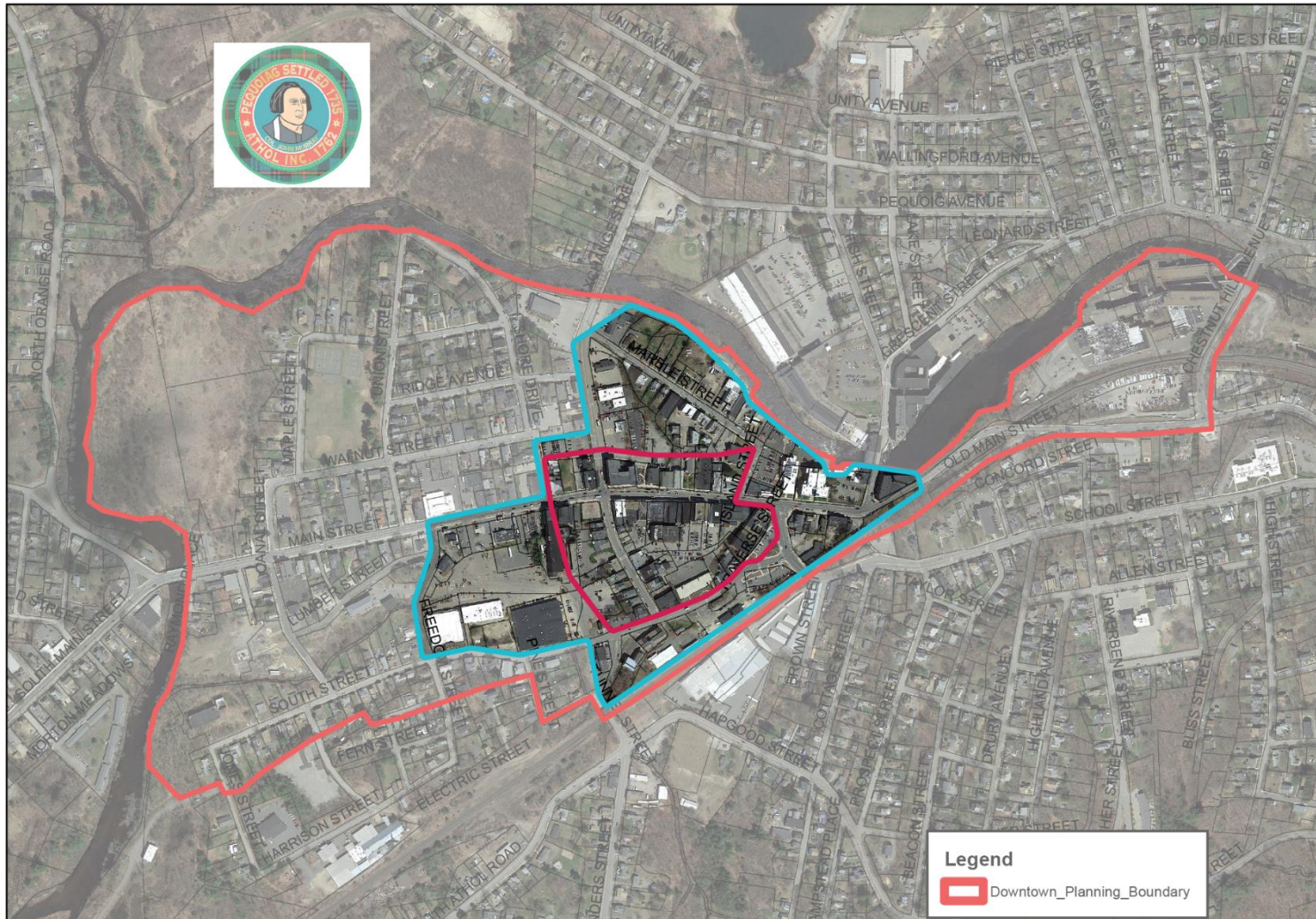




## Recommendations: Zoning

- Rezone all split lots to appropriate zoning districts
- Expand boundaries of Central Commercial (CA) district
- Change allowable uses in CA
  - Remove golf course as an allowable use
  - Add multifamily over four units (but not on Main Street)
  - Consider on-site parking requirements for single businesses above 5,000 sf

## Recommendations: Zoning



## Recommendations: Parking

- **Short-term**
  - Enforce parking meters on an irregular basis
  - Install signage to direct people to municipal lots
  - Address deterioration of municipal lots
- **Mid-term**
  - Create a parking management plan
- **Long-term**
  - Raise parking fees; dedicate funding to downtown improvements

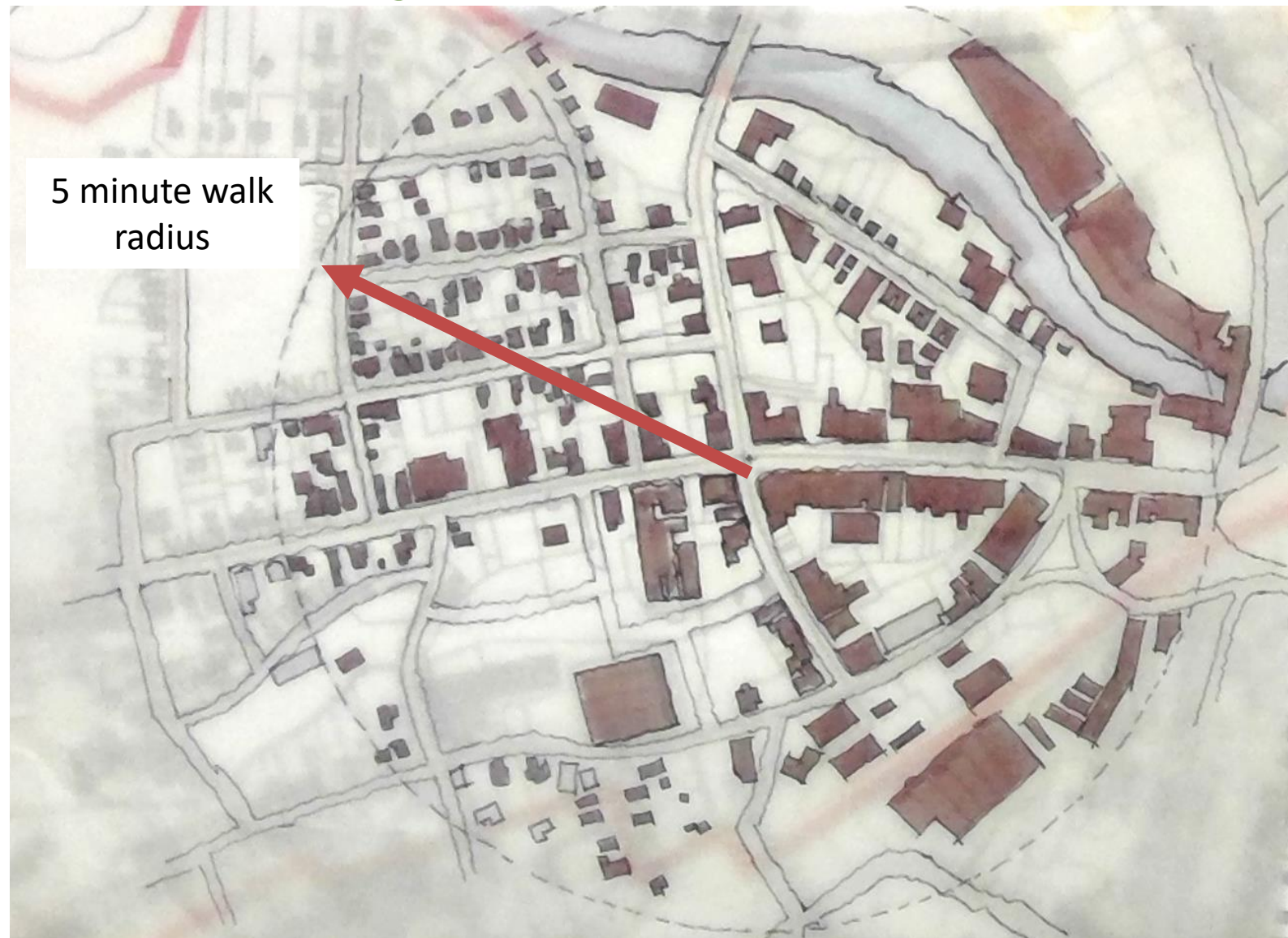


## Plaza Case Study





## Base Map – Existing Condition



## Recommendations: Parking Consolidation

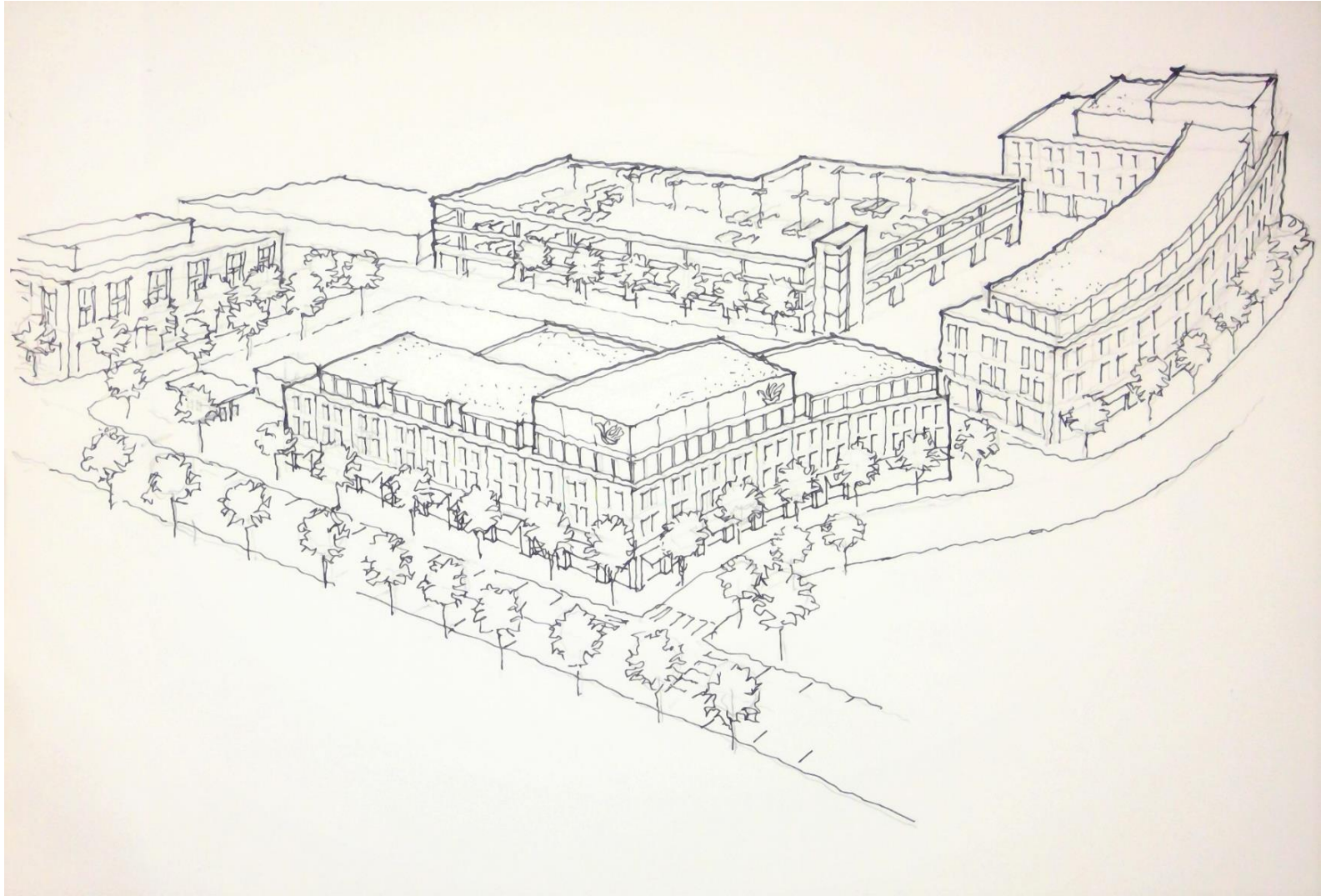


## Recommendations: Lord Pond/ Municipal Lot Redevelopment





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## Recommendations: Positioning the Town for Economic Growth

### Short Term

- Refine messaging and create collateral/marketing piece for Athol with a focus on generating jobs and driving new businesses to Athol
- Review social media presence and create a social media plan for Athol, highlighting its advantages to tourists
- Review and revitalize collateral for Athol's Parks and Greenway Network
- Meet with Orange leadership to discuss cross-promotion and joint marketing of Athol and Orange, including events creation

## Recommendations: Positioning the Town for Economic Growth

### Mid and Long Term

- Revitalize and redesign the Town of Athol Branding
- Design and develop wayfinding signage for the Town of Athol, Downtown and Athol Parks & Greenway Network
- Create event activations on town owned sites
- Engage the community online and in person
- Create a Merchant's Association to support downtown marketing initiatives
- Clean up the exterior of Alan E. Rich Environmental Park (including new signage) and make a pillar of Athol's recreational marketing campaign

## Recommendations: Downtown Strategies

- Create activity
  - District management approach
    - Diversify downtown business committee
    - Downtown fundraising campaign
    - “Main Streets” or “Local First” Programs
  - Programing
    - Vacant storefront pop-ups
    - Monthly movie night
    - Joint Athol/Orange events
    - Public art activations



## Recommendations: Municipal Actions

- **Short-Term**
  - Focus on jobs
  - Parking lot rejuvenation
  - Pursue creation of Redevelopment Authority
    - Create redevelopment plan under MGL Chapter 121B
  - Review streetscape strategy
  - RFI for Lord Plaza
  - Build capacity



# Funding

## MassHousing

- **Workforce Housing Initiative**
  - MassHousing \$100 million Workforce Housing fund supports the creation of rental housing that is affordable for working families whose incomes are too high for subsidized housing but are priced out of market rents.

## Mass Development

- **Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Fund**
  - MassDevelopment supports the arts with capital grants for the acquisition, design, renovation, and construction of cultural facilities. They also offer grants for development studies. Both MassDevelopment and the Massachusetts Cultural Council administer this fund.
- **Predevelopment Loans**
  - MassDevelopment provides low interest rate loans up to \$100,000 with deferred repayment terms to finance predevelopment real estate projects.

## Funding

- **Commonwealth Places**
  - Commonwealth Places provides a creative funding mechanism to advance community placemaking projects throughout Massachusetts. The statewide program will help fund place-based, community-driven projects – art installations, parks, bike trails, markets, and more – that revitalize downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts.
- **Public Infrastructure Financing**
  - Tax-Exempt Bonds for Public Infrastructure
  - MassWorks Grant
  - MassDevelopment issues tax-exempt bonds for improvements to roadways, sidewalks, parks, parking garages, bridges, tunnels, wharves, and a range of public facilities. Infrastructure programs that use this tax-exempt financing includes
    - Infrastructure Investment Incentive Act (I-Cubed or I3)
    - District Improvement Financing (DIF)
    - Special assessments

# Questions?