

DEVENS



A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT



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Executive Summary

The Devens TAP convened on June 22, 2017, at MassDevelopment's Devens office, under the direction of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England Chapter Young Leaders Group. Over the course of the day, the TAP, consisting of 10 real estate and marketing professionals, met with local business owners, representatives from some of Devens' largest tenants, company employees and HR managers, property owners, residents of Devens, and other key stakeholders. The purpose of the TAP was to devise a strategy that would help companies to attract and retain employees by transforming Devens into a more vibrant, 18-hour environment where people could congregate, share ideas and spend time beyond their typical workday.

Chapter 1: ULI and the TAP Process

Offers an overview of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council and its Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs), while also providing a list of the panel members and stakeholders who took part. The chapter also outlines the study area for the TAP, and describes the process undertaken by the panelists and stakeholders to arrive at the recommendations presented at day's end during a public presentation.

Chapter 2: Background and History

Looks at Devens as it is today – a vibrant economic center for the region that is home to more than 100 companies and 5,000 employees, located within a park that offers a plethora of recreational activities. The chapter also provides a brief overview of the military history of Devens; its unique and complex system of governance; the business-friendly environment (including expedited permitting powers) that has allowed the park to become a national model for military base reuse; and its constrained housing stock.

Chapter 3: Assets and Opportunities

Examines how Devens is uniquely positioned to potentially become not only the economic center of the region, but a true recreational destination for surrounding communities and beyond. Devens has a multitude of recreational activities, which include facilities for golf, softball, lacrosse, hiking, swimming, fishing, and boating. These facilities, however, remain undiscovered by the employees of Devens companies and underused by the general public outside of Devens and the organized sporting communities.

The spiking populations on weekdays (5,000 employees) and weekends (thousands attend sports tournaments) provide a base that could potentially support experiential retail and restaurants. Devens is also home to Vicksburg Square, the stately former headquarters for the Army, which has fallen into disrepair but could be redeveloped as a mixed-use housing/retail development if the political will exists.

Chapter 4: Challenges

There are a number of issues that MassDevelopment will need to address in order to fulfill its goals of creating a seven-day, 18-hour destination, beginning with the unique and complex structure of governance. Devens is an enterprise zone that straddles three towns – Ayer, Harvard, and Shirley – changes in zoning require approval by all three towns at a Super Town Meeting, making redevelopment efforts extraordinarily difficult at times.

Vicksburg Square, which could serve as the centerpiece of any redevelopment efforts in Devens, has seen development proposals voted down by the Super Town Meeting process.

Devens also suffers from a surprising lack of awareness on the part of the companies of the recreational opportunities that exist within the park. Some of this is due to a lack of signage, as well as the absence of a concentrated marketing effort to make firms – as well as the outside world – aware of all that Devens has to offer.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

The clear short-term recommendation for Devens was to designate a point person or ambassador to coordinate efforts between the companies, surrounding towns, and residents to develop programming that would build the foundation for the 18-hour environment. Other easily achievable recommendations included conducting a signage audit to improve wayfinding and to promote the park's recreational assets; forming partnerships with young professional associations, business groups, sports leagues, and arts councils to stimulate

engagement; a consolidation of Devens' multiple websites as well as a more focused approach to the use of social media; and the development of innovative programming to engage residents and the surrounding towns.

One long-term recommendation that would require approval from the surrounding towns was the redevelopment of Vicksburg Square into a mixed-use residential/retail destination. The development of support facilities for recreational attractions such as Mirror Lake, an underused swimming, fishing, and boating attraction located in the heart of Devens, is also a longer-term recommendation.

Chapter 6: Community Feedback

While surrounding community feedback was limited, there was a strong sentiment that zoning changes through the Super Town Meeting, once thought to be unachievable, could be realized if Devens were to create a strong sense of regionalism.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

Devens needs to hire a full-time point person or “ambassador” to coordinate efforts between the companies, surrounding towns, and residents to develop programming that would build the foundation for the 18-hour environment. There are some relatively simple solutions to improve awareness and engagement with the community's many assets, such as improving signage for promotion and wayfinding, and developing consistent messaging. There are also more difficult challenges that will require cooperation with the surrounding towns as well, such as the redevelopment of Vicksburg Square.

ULI & the TAP Process

Urban Land Institute (ULI)

The Urban Land Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit research and education organization supported by its members. The mission of ULI is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities. Founded in 1936, the institute now has worldwide over 40,000 members worldwide representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines, working in private enterprise and public service, including developers, architects, planners, lawyers, bankers, and economic development professionals, among others.

The Boston/New England District Council of ULI serves the six New England states and has over 1,100 members. As a preeminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI Boston/ New England facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information, and experience among local, and regional leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places.

MassDevelopment

MassDevelopment, which manages Devens, is Massachusetts' economic development and finance authority. The authority works closely with state, local and federal officials to boost housing and create jobs. With the power to act as both a lender and developer, MassDevelopment also works to fill in gaps in infrastructure, transportation, energy and other areas that may be holding back economic growth. MassDevelopment has worked with ULI since 2011 to help sponsor and support the TAP process in cities and towns across the Commonwealth.

Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)

The ULI Boston/New England Real Estate Advisory Committee convenes Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) at the request of the public sector and local stakeholders of communities and nonprofit organizations facing complex land use challenges that benefit from planning and development professionals providing pro bono recommendations.

At the TAP, a group of diverse professionals specially assembled with expertise in the issues posed spends one to two days visiting and analyzing existing conditions, identifying specific planning and development issues, and formulating realistic and actionable recommendations to move initiatives forward in a way consistent with the applicant's goals and objectives.



ULI TAP panelists at work

The Panel

ULI Boston/New England convened a volunteer panel of experts whose members represent the range of disciplines necessary to analyze the challenges and opportunities facing Devens in their efforts to make the community a more vibrant place to work and play. Disciplines represented included architects, designers, planners, project managers, and marketing professionals. The following is a list of panelists:

Co-Chairs

Ryan Leeming, Senior Designer, New England Development

Jamie Simchik, Principal Planner, Fort Hill Places, Fort Hill Companies

Panel

Heath Cody, Architect, SGA

Dan Drazen, Project Manager, Trinity Financial

Aaron Jodka, Director of Research, Colliers International

Christine Lewis, Account Director, InkHouse Public Relations

Matt McCarty, Architect, Stantec

Gloria Liu, Student, UNC Chapel Hill

Harron Ellenson, President, Harron & Associates

Katie Hawkes, Manager of Event Operations for The Lawn On D at Massachusetts Convention Center Authority

Panelists have donated their time.

ULI Staff

Manikka Bowman, Director, Policy & Outreach

TAP Writer

Mike Hoban, Principal, Hoban Communications



Touring Devens



Participants meet at the Natural Café & Market

Stakeholders

The TAP benefited from the participation of the diverse group of stakeholders – local business owners, representatives from some of Devens’ largest firms, company employees and HR managers, property owners and residents of Devens, as well as the executive director of the Nashoba Valley Chamber of Commerce – who met with the panel and shared information, ideas, and opinions on how to help Devens become a vibrant 18-hour live, work and play environment.

The following is a list of stakeholders:

Vera Tyagi, HR Business Partner, Bristol-Myers Squibb

Steven Goodman, Founding Partner, GFI Partners (owner of Quiet Logistics facility)

Melissa Fetterhoff, President/CEO, Nashoba Valley Chamber of Commerce

Owen Richardson, Vice President of Sales & Marketing, Laddawn, Inc.

Anne Ferguson, Owner, Dragonfly Wellness

Laura Hume, Manager, True North Hotel Group

Robert Walker, Developer, RAVentures

Chris Kasheta, General Manager, Red Tail Golf Club

Cyndi Raabe, Manager of Human Resources, Quiet Logistics

Dan Gainsboro, **Developer**, Emerson Green

Tom Kinch, Chair, Devens Advisory Committee

Employees from Quiet Logistics, Laddawn, Inc., Bristol-Myers Squibb, NYPRO, and a representative from Fort Devens also participated in a panel discussion.

The TAP Process

The Devens TAP was held on June 22, 2017. Panelists from ULI Boston/New England were greeted at the Natural Café & Market by Thatcher Kezer, MassDevelopment’s senior vice president for Devens; Mika Brewer, MassDevelopment senior vice president of real estate; and Ed Starzec, MassDevelopment director of land entitlements and master planning; who led the ULI panel on a 90-minute walking and bus tour of Devens. Kimberly Walsh, MassDevelopment recreation program manager, also joined the contingent.

The tour began with the group walking to the former Devens parade grounds, now known as Rogers Field, a 44-acre open space that hosts sporting events such as lacrosse and soccer tournaments on weekends throughout the year. The group next walked to the headquarters of Laddawn, a manufacturer of plastic and film for packaging applications. The firm had recently expanded its original facility, an adaptive re-use of the former Devens Davis Library, by tripling its space into a state-of-the-art tech corporate headquarters complete with standing desks, treadmill and balance ball workstation areas, a café-style gathering space, lounge areas, and a rock-climbing wall in the lobby.

The group then boarded a bus and drove by the facilities of Quiet Logistics and Bristol-Myers Squibb (which added to its extensive Devens campus holdings with a 200,000-square-foot biologics facility in 2016), as well as Mount Wachusett Community College, the TaraVista Behavioral Health Center, residences (including Emerson Green, a new 124-unit development) and a wide range of tech companies, nonprofits and support businesses. The tour included a drive around Vicksburg Square, a large cluster of boarded-up buildings in the center of the campus that once housed Army personnel but have fallen into disrepair.

The trip also gave panelists a feeling for the natural beauty of Devens and showcased the array of recreational options, including a stop at Mirror Lake, where visitors are welcome to swim, picnic, boat, canoe, or fish.

Following the tour, the ULI panel interviewed stakeholders, listed in the previous sub-section, in two sets of separate, simultaneous interview sessions. The panelists then engaged in an intensive “closed door” charrette to develop recommendations based on the information provided in their research prior to the meetings and the input from the stakeholders. Next step recommendations were then shared with MassDevelopment, the Devens Enterprise Commission, the community’s regulatory and permitting authority; business owners; and the general public at an open presentation that evening.

Background and History

Devens is a 4,400-acre mixed-use community located in north central Massachusetts that is home to a thriving base of high technology, manufacturing and related companies, with nearly 2,100 acres of open space and recreational grounds. Devens is currently home to about 140 mixed-income households (400+ people) with another 160 households (500+ people) slated to come on line in the next three or four years.

History of Devens

Camp Devens was created by incorporating intersecting segments of the towns of Ayer, Harvard and Shirley in 1917 to provide a military training facility during World War I, and was the U.S. Army's New England headquarters for 79 years. Later renamed Fort Devens, the facility closed in 1996, significantly impacting the economic well-being of the towns as 7,000 civilian jobs were eliminated and local businesses lost their customer base. The property was conveyed to MassDevelopment in 1998. With the blessing of the three towns and financial support from the Commonwealth, MassDevelopment began to redevelop the base into a business community. Boasting approximately 100 companies employing over 5,000 employees, Devens is now recognized as a national model for military base reuse. The former Army base also continues to serve as a training ground for the National Guard, U.S. Army Reserve, Massachusetts State Police, and regional law enforcement agencies.



Devens Fire Station

Governance and Municipal Services

Devens is a self-contained, non-incorporated regional enterprise zone that was created in 1993 by the Massachusetts Legislature. The enterprise zone is operated under the blueprint of the Devens Reuse Plan and Zoning Bylaw that serves as a guide for future development. Any changes to the Reuse Plan requires a majority vote of all three Towns at separate but simultaneous open town meetings known as a Super Town Meeting, making zoning changes very difficult to secure. The plan remains in effect until 2033, when the host towns and MassDevelopment will have to decide on a recommendation for a permanent government structure for the ongoing operation and administration of Devens.

The Devens Enterprise Commission acts as the regulatory and permitting authority for the Devens Regional Enterprise Zone, and administers and enforces the reuse plan, by-laws, regulations and sustainability vision within the Devens Regional Enterprise Zone. It functions as a board of health, conservation commission, zoning board of appeals, historic district commission and planning board.

Devens residents pay their property and excise taxes to MassDevelopment, not the underlying town, but vote in their underlying communities. K-12 Devens students attend school in the Town of Harvard under a competitively bid contract, where MassDevelopment reimburses Harvard full cost for each student and any special needs costs.

MassDevelopment contracts with the State Police to provide local police services in Devens, while MassDevelopment hires firefighters to staff



Laddawn's corporate headquarters

the Devens Fire Department. These firefighters are considered MassDevelopment employees. Additional municipal services in Devens (DPW, recreation, bookkeeping, etc.) are provided by MassDevelopment employees.

Economic Development

Devens is home to approximately 100 businesses employing over 5,000 workers, with a concentration of high technology, advanced manufacturing, scientific and technical firms. One of the principal benefits Devens businesses cite to locating in the community is the expedited 75-day permitting process. Devens' largest employers are pharmaceutical company Bristol-Myers Squibb and Quiet Logistics, a third-party fulfillment provider for e-commerce retailers. Total employment in Devens rose from 3,208 in 2012 to 4,977 at the close of 2016, an increase of 55 percent over four years. According to a report by the UMass Donahue Institute, total estimated wages paid by Devens employers totaled \$415.8 million, with an average salary of \$83,545, well above the Commonwealth's average of \$64,094.

Recreation and Open Space

Devens has nearly 2,100 acres of open space and recreational land, including 1,700 acres of protected land that supports a wildlife habitat, and numerous rare plant species, nine miles of nature trails and 1,500 acres of forest. Active recreation facilities include Rogers Field, a 44-acre site used for sporting events and camp programs from April 1 through November 1 and enough room to offer 13 tournament fields at a time; two disc golf courses; the award-winning Red Tail Golf Club; Mirror Lake, which allows visitors to swim, picnic, boat, canoe or fish; the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge, and a number of additional athletic fields, including three softball fields.



Emerson Green neighborhood

Housing

The Devens Reuse Plan limits additional residential growth in Devens to 282 households, and also requires that approximately 25 percent of the 282 units of housing must be set aside for low income, moderate income, or special needs populations. The caps were established as a way for the towns of Ayer, Lancaster, Harvard and Shirley to protect the values of local homes at a time when Army personnel were relocating and there was an abundance of available homes on the market. The local housing market has substantially recovered since that time.

Devens is currently home to about 140 mixed-income households with another 160 households slated to come on line in the next three or four years. There are 124 units currently under development at the Emerson Green project. Another 120 units of low-income, senior housing has also been proposed and the project is currently in the process of seeking low-income housing tax credits. Vicksburg Square, a cluster of buildings that once housed military personnel, has fallen into disrepair and become a blight on the community. The Super Town Meeting has voted down multiple redevelopment proposals for the structures, but MassDevelopment remains hopeful that Vicksburg Square will someday be developed for residential apartments or condominiums.

Assets and Opportunities

With a strong commercial/industrial base, acres of underutilized recreational facilities, and an emerging local business community, Devens appears to be ripe for positioning as a model of the suburban live, work, play environment. In addition to emphasizing the wealth of recreational opportunities to attract and retain both employees and companies, the park could become a regional centerpiece for recreation on a much broader scale for the surrounding communities.

Vicksburg Square

Vicksburg Square has become a blight on the otherwise pristine campus. And although it would require zoning changes through the Super Town Meeting process to move forward, the buildings could be developed as a mixed-use retail/residential destination that would provide a “Town Square” environment that could serve as the focal point of any larger strategy for Devens. MassDevelopment officials are hopeful that support can be gained with surrounding towns to allow for housing-centered redevelopment.

Mirror Lake

Mirror Lake has the potential to become a bonafide attraction for employees and visitors from around the region. This “hidden gem” is located adjacent to the acclaimed Red Tail Golf Club, and abounds with possibilities for increased use, but remains largely unknown by the Devens employment base and the outside world. Visitors are welcome to swim, picnic, boat, canoe, or fish during the lake’s regular season, and a boat ramp is located at the end of Mirror Lake Road. There is also a playground area for children to enjoy activities that the beach has to offer. With some infrastructure development, this could become a more utilized asset.

Red Tail Golf Club

Red Tail was ranked one of the “Top 50 Public Golf Courses in America” in 2009 by Golf World Magazine. While the golf business is booming, there is room for growth with the facility’s food and beverage business, the Red Tail Tavern. Traditional advertising avenues have yielded sparse results, but the venue could benefit from a larger Devens promotional push.

History - Fort Devens Museum/Cemetery

Devens remains a popular destination for veterans who served there and their families, and is also home to a museum and the Fort Devens Cemetery. The museum has acquired a collection in excess of 3,000 artifacts, photographs and documents related to the land, buildings, soldiers and families that were once part of New England’s largest military base. The museum currently operates in leased space, and would be a natural fit for any redevelopment of Vicksburg Square.

Regionalism Beginning to be Realized

The strained relations between Devens and the towns of Shirley, Harvard and Ayer appear to be easing, as evidenced by the approval of the rezoning of 32.7 acres of residential land in Devens at the October 2016 Super Town Meeting. There is a spirit of optimism expressed by MassDevelopment officials that relations between the towns and Devens are improving with the appointment of former Amesbury mayor Thatcher Kezer as lead staff person in Devens.

Local Businesses

In recent years, local businesses such as Anytime Fitness, Dragonfly Wellness Center, Natural Café & Market and Devens Grill have been established in Devens, providing much needed services to form the basis of an 18-hour live, work and play environment.

A Spiking Daytime/Weekend Population

Devens has approximately 400 civilian residents, but during weekdays, the population balloons to well over 5,000 with employees of the various Devens firms. On weekends, softball, soccer and lacrosse tournaments, as well as hiking, fishing and boating activities, draw thousands to the recreational areas.

Community Events

Community activities that were once directed towards residents should be offered to the firms on campus, such as the monthly outdoor yoga event introduced this spring. Devens also has a long history of holding regional events such as the Fourth of July celebration, which could be resumed to include surrounding towns to promote regionalism.



Vicksburg Square

Challenges

In order to achieve the goal of transforming Devens into a vibrant and active place that encourages employees to spend time beyond their typical workday, and for surrounding towns to make greater use of the community's underused recreational facilities, there are a number of issues that need to be resolved. Some are simple, others more complex.

A) Disconnect Between Devens and Neighboring Communities

Since the closing of the base and the acquisition of Devens by MassDevelopment in 1996, the relationship between Devens and the surrounding towns of Shirley, Ayer and Harvard has been somewhat contentious. Although MassDevelopment officials have expressed optimism that the relationship is improving to the degree that Devens has come to be seen as a source of economic development for the region, it is an evolving relationship.

B) Dearth of Local Lunchtime Options

Other than the Devens Grill, Great American Grill (inside the Hilton Garden Inn), Red Tail Tavern, the Natural Café & Market, Dunkin' Donuts and Pizza Bella Devens, there are currently very few lunchtime options to serve the 5,000 on-campus employees.

C) Lack of Awareness of Devens Recreational Features and Amenities

Representatives from the firms occupying Devens, as well as panelists who live in surrounding towns, indicated that they had no knowledge of many of Devens' features. Mirror Lake, as well as other recreational facilities such as hiking trails and boating facilities, were mostly unknown to panelists.

D) Abandoned Vicksburg Square Buildings

Although it has been determined that the highest and best use for the Vicksburg Square buildings would be housing, unanimous approval at a Super Town Meeting is necessary to proceed with any development involving residential use. However, the deteriorating Vicksburg Square buildings are what the public sees and leave a negative lasting impression. The buildings are also deteriorating at a rate that may soon make them unsuitable for re-use.

E) Lack of Signage/Wayfinding/Visitor Center

There is a profound lack of signage either directing or making visitors and employees aware of recreational facilities, dining options, etc.

F) Governmental Structure May Change in 2033

There is uncertainty about the future of Devens. MassDevelopment will likely run Devens until at least 2033, at which time the agency and the three Towns will make a recommendation to the Massachusetts Legislature about a permanent government structure for Devens. Some of the options that have been discussed are leaving the current government structure in place, dividing up Devens along the original town lines of Ayer, Shirley, and Harvard, or allowing Devens to become its own town.

G) Devens Identity/Multiple Constituencies

Devens is still recognized by many as the U.S. Army Reserve military installation “Fort Devens.” Outside of the immediate region, Devens is often identified as an industrial park. Devens also has four distinct constituencies that it is trying to serve, the companies and their employees, support businesses for those companies, residents, and the surrounding towns.

H) Housing Cap

Currently, there is a housing cap (as per the Reuse Plan) that limits the number of housing units in Devens to 282. In order to build a center that would activate the 18-hour live, work and play environment, panelists agree that more residents in the town are critical to creating a consumer base and a real community.

Recommendations

AWARENESS

In order for Devens to fully serve all of its target audiences – residents, businesses/employees, users of recreational facilities and the greater region, there needs to be consistent messaging through centralized communications.

A) Establish A Point Person

A full time, dedicated “ambassador” position should be created. This ambassador will be focused on making the businesses and the broader region more aware of the multitude of assets that Devens has to offer. The ambassador will engage the employers and employees in a meaningful way to create programming that the businesses actually want. The position will be responsible for keeping all of the social media channels updated and relevant. The ambassador’s responsibilities will also extend to marketing Devens’ programming to the surrounding towns and region.

B) Website Consolidation

Devens currently has multiple websites (Devens Community, Devens Enterprise Commission, Devens Business, and a Devens Recreation Facebook page). There needs to be a single website where all of the target constituencies can go to find out about all that Devens has to offer – from recreational facilities, to resident and community services, to development information. The website should be user-friendly, robust, highly visual (emphasizing the many recreational activities) and optimized.

C) Signage/Wayfinding Audit

The signage in Devens is inadequate, both from an informational and wayfinding standpoint. Many of the community’s features are not to be found on signage, and it can be difficult to navigate the area. An audit of the current signage is in order, and signs promoting the many recreational features of Devens are recommended.

D) Improve Social Media

Although Devens Recreation has a Facebook page, it could be better used as a way to drive awareness. Content could be uploaded on a more consistent basis through the use of a dedicated content calendar. A campaign to increase ‘likes’ for the page (currently somewhat low at 442), could be achieved organically through the use of the Devens newsletter, and engaging Devens employers to promote the page to educate employees about the wide range of activities. It was also suggested that paid Facebook “geo targeting” would be a low-cost way to promote the recreational aspects of Devens throughout the region.

E) Enhance Newsletter

While the weekly newsletter does a very good job of keeping subscribers up-to-date on activities and events in Devens (and provides links with additional information), it could be optimized to become a tool to create a greater sense of community.



Panelists indicate opportunities for placemaking

Visuals are important, and photos from the previous week's events and activities could be posted to generate excitement for ongoing activities. It was also suggested that the business community could be incorporated into the newsletter, including CEO and employee profiles, so businesses can learn about each other and potentially foster social and business collaboration.

ENGAGEMENT

Programming

A) Mirror Lake

Mirror Lake is a unique asset that other communities generally don't have. Unfortunately, many companies, employees, visitors and people in the region are not aware that it exists. In addition to promoting its existence, improvements can be made to maximize its potential: bathhouse facilities for showering and changing could be constructed; and the entrance to the beach area could be made more appealing; lighting could be added to extend the hours and create an outdoor gathering place for employees, residents and people throughout the region; and activities such as horseshoes and cornhole could be added to increase the appeal for millennials, who are often looking for post-work activities with co-workers.

B) Optimizing Fields/Open Space

1. Bring back the Devens tradition of hosting a Fourth of July celebration that includes parades, fireworks, family activities, etc. Use the event as a regional connecting opportunity with the neighboring towns of Ayer, Harvard and Shirley by pooling resources while showcasing Devens' recreational facilities.

2. Reinstate Devens or Armed Forces Day. Tie in the Fort Devens Museum and showcase military vehicle equipment to encourage those who were stationed at Devens and their families to return.

3. Construct more playgrounds and outdoor seating. There is just one playground available for children who may be there while families are involved in the weekend sports tournaments. There is also very limited seating and few picnic tables for events or for employees to sit and eat lunch.

4. Add a snack bar and more dining options. There is no place to get food or beverages near the sports fields (with the exception of unregulated vendors) at events on weekends. Installing a facility, possibly one with a connection to one of the local restaurants, could serve as an amenity and provide cross-promotion for businesses.

C) Maximize Use of Commons

The Devens Commons Center includes a 14,000-square-foot facility that hosts weddings, conferences and social events, but its potential could be more fully realized.

1. Utilize the Commons for a variety of purposes such as farmer's markets, conferences and movie nights.

2. Food Trucks. Bring in food trucks during the week to provide food options for both residents and employees.

3. Create events, such as an "innovation mixer" that will bring in employees and foster collaboration between the various companies.

D) Forming Partnerships

The companies interviewed during the charrettes seemed amenable to helping to finance any initiatives that would enhance the employee work/life experience. With the help of an ambassador, committees enlisting employees from companies could be formed to create programming that would be of interest to the millennial workforce (softball leagues, cornhole tournaments, canoe and kayak outings, etc.)

Partnerships with young professional associations, business groups, sporting clubs and arts councils could also be initiated with the help of the ambassador and HR departments.

DASH 2033 - THE FUTURE OF DEVENS

With the uncertainty about the future of Devens' structure of governance looming in 2033, a concerted effort should be made to create a sense of Devens as a shared place by the surrounding communities, rather than a separate entity and a competitor for tax dollars.

A) Town Square/Placemaking in Vicksburg Square

One of the key elements to fulfilling the vision of regionality for the Devens, Ayer, Shirley, and Harvard area (DASH), would be to make Vicksburg Square the focal point of any long term planning efforts at Devens:

1. Relocation of Museum

The Fort Devens Museum serves as the custodian of Devens' unique historical record, with a collection of over 3,000 artifacts, photographs and documents related to the land, buildings, soldiers and families that were once part of New England's largest military base. It provides educational programming for area schools, historical societies and senior centers.

The museum, currently located in a low visibility, leased, third-floor space on Jackson Road, would be a natural attraction for the region as well as personnel who served at Fort Devens and their families, and a welcome addition to the placemaking efforts for Vicksburg Square.

2. Housing

Although more ambitious housing plans have been proposed involving thousands of units, a more modest proposal (of possibly 750) could create a local consumer base to anchor the retail uses that would enable the businesses to become a regional destination.

3. Retail/Food

The nature of retail is changing and is moving away from the big box or grocery anchors and towards creating an experience and sense of place. By creating this with shops and restaurants in Vicksburg Square, it may be possible to tap into the employee base, the broader region, and the thousands of visitors that come to Devens for sporting events on weekends.

4. Brewery/Distillery as Destination

A true “destination” experience that could anchor Vicksburg Square might be a craft beer microbrewery or a distillery, which are gaining in popularity and rivaling shopping as a retail experience. The addition of a brewery or distillery would serve the dual purpose of creating an 18-hour post-work environment while also creating a regional attraction. Devens has already had talks with prospective microbreweries and is open to the idea.

B) Changes to Re-Use Plan

The business retail services district is currently the smallest portion of Devens. In order to connect the various recreational and business nodes, Devens should be re-zoned in order for more retail development to be located in a way that encourages greater movement throughout Devens.

C) Lift/Alter Housing Cap

The current housing cap is 282 units, and more households need to be built in order to create a true community. The housing would serve as a draw for potential employees relocating to Devens. Also, in addition to the Vicksburg site, Devens might support more residential pockets. Two parcels near the golf course zoned for tech uses might be candidates to be re-zoned for residential.

D) Regionality

Planners need to answer the question, “What is it that Devens can uniquely provide that the surrounding communities want or need?” By identifying those assets and aligning what Devens can provide to meet those needs, the conversation about adding housing, businesses and retail become exponentially easier when dealing with those other entities. By doing so, the door could be opened to change the hearts, minds and votes of the other municipalities. While some of the panel’s recommendations were outside of the scope of the TAP (such as pooling municipal resources for police, fire and public works), they bear documenting. The towns have non-recreational issues that could be addressed with the help of Devens, particularly educational (short-term) and transportation improvements to better serve the entire region. Coupled with the increased awareness and engagement of the recreational amenities, a greater sense of regional community with the neighboring towns could be fostered.

Community Feedback

Feedback from the community was limited but positive following the presentation, with a pair of key points that corroborated the conclusions of the TAP panelists.

Solving the Political Issues

One audience member suggested that in order to change the outcome of the Super Town Meeting in terms of zoning changes to Devens, political will needs to change. He agreed that could be accomplished by lessening the “somewhat adversarial” relationship that has existed in the past by fostering a team approach between Devens and the surrounding communities. Without such a change, he anticipates that there would be “significant roadblocks” to accomplishing the panel’s recommendations.

Putting the Cart Before the Horse?

A member of the Devens Enterprise Commission acknowledged the difficulties of getting zoning changes through the Super Town Meeting process, despite the October 2016 vote that rezoned a 32.7-acre lot to locate an innovation and technology business. But he suggested that in the past, Devens has taken the approach of trying to get zoning changes through before initiating improvements that would not require approval. He agreed that the panel’s recommendation of creating regional awareness of Devens’ many amenities and engaging the communities in cooperative activities before requesting zoning changes could encourage the surrounding towns to make the zoning changes for larger improvements.

Conclusions

MassDevelopment has done an extraordinary job of attracting and retaining businesses during the 20-year redevelopment of Devens, and can further enhance the appeal of the community by creating an 18-hour live, work, and play environment that could help businesses better attract and retain their employees. In order to do so, Devens needs to increase awareness of its multitude of assets for its 5,000 employees, as well as the surrounding communities and the broader region.

The single most important element to meeting this goal would be to hire a dedicated ambassador whose sole function is to market the natural resources and local businesses located in Devens. The position would involve engaging the firms in a meaningful way to develop programming that incorporates Devens underutilized recreational assets and local businesses. Working in conjunction with employee groups and outside associations, the ambassador could coordinate various after-work sporting leagues and social functions, and promote activities at local restaurants and hotel conference centers.

One of the simpler solutions to increasing awareness of Devens' assets is to simply improve the signage, for both wayfinding and promotional purposes, and to add a visitor's center. Another is to consolidate the multiple websites and social media channels to deliver a consistent message and to create a one-stop shopping channel for businesses, visitors and residents.

The second wave to establishing Devens as an 18-hour destination is more complex, and involves infrastructure improvements such as snack bars, picnic tables, and playground areas for the weekend outdoor tournaments, as well as investing in Mirror Lake by adding a bathhouse and a recreation area to the existing boat dock and swimming area.

Although the primary purpose of this TAP was to recommend ways to create the 18-hour environment without suggesting programming that would require changes to the Devens Reuse Plan, it is difficult to envision Devens fulfilling its potential as a destination without addressing the issue of Vicksburg Square. These structures, located in the heart of Devens and in close proximity to the heavily utilized Rogers Field, is an eyesore that detracts from the natural beauty of this magnificent community.

But Vicksburg Square also has the potential to become the crown jewel of Devens, a one-of-a-kind community that combines hiking, boating, swimming and sports leagues, with a destination such as a microbrewery.

During the charrettes, it became clear that there is a growing sense of optimism among stakeholders that the surrounding towns may be more amenable to allowing zoning changes to improve the quality of life for the region. If Devens is able to create a stronger sense of regionalism through the creation of programming that benefits all of the surrounding towns and the Devens companies, it could become a one-of-a-kind attraction.