

# Town of Ashland



## A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

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# Executive Summary

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The Ashland TAP convened on December 12th at the Town Hall, under the direction of the Boston/New England District Council of the Urban Land Institute. Over the course of the day, the TAP, consisting of 10 land use and real estate development professionals, met with local business owners, representatives from the Town of Ashland and other key stakeholders. The purpose of the TAP was to provide guidance to the Town of Ashland in their efforts to redevelop its Downtown into a walkable Live/Work/Play destination.

## Chapter 1: ULI and the TAP Process

Presents 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 the public presentation at the Town Hall.

## Chapter 2: Background and History

Gives a thumbnail sketch of the Town of Ashland, its origin and history as a farming and manufacturing community; key population and demographic information that provides insight into the changing nature of the town; and an overview of the study area, including its historic buildings and town-owned parcels being considered for redevelopment. The chapter also includes the series of questions that the town posed to the panel regarding redevelopment.

## Chapter 3: Assets and Opportunities

Identifies the existing assets and strengths of Ashland in relation to its redevelopment potential. Strengths include an impressive inventory of structurally sound historic buildings; committed town leadership and an engaged community; a number of public infrastructure and private projects already underway; and abundant natural resources in close proximity to the downtown.

## Chapter 4: Challenges

Examines the obstacles Ashland faces in its efforts to transform the downtown. These include: the perception of the town as a "bedroom community"; the somewhat scattered nature of the downtown's retail businesses; the bisecting of Main Street by an active rail line; a lack of an effective parking strategy; and a number of permitting and environmental issues.

## Chapter 5: Recommendations

Proposes a number of actions that the Town of Ashland can implement to achieve its goals. Key recommendations include creating a master plan for the downtown that reflects the vision for the redevelopment; conducting feasibility studies to discover the best and highest uses for the town-owned parcels; implementing changes to the zoning that will allow for mixed-use and greater residential density; and developing an integrated process involving the local, state, and federal agencies to give developers a better understanding of how to navigate environmental challenges.

## Chapter 6: Funding Sources

Provides a list of potential funding sources through federal and state agencies, as well as an appendix of articles and papers that could be used for modeling some of the recommended actions.

## Chapter 7: Conclusions

Offers a final assessment of the redevelopment possibilities for the revitalization of downtown Ashland, reiterating the challenges and new strategies for moving forward.

# 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 to help sustain and create thriving communities. Founded in 1936, the institute now has nearly 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 1,200 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.

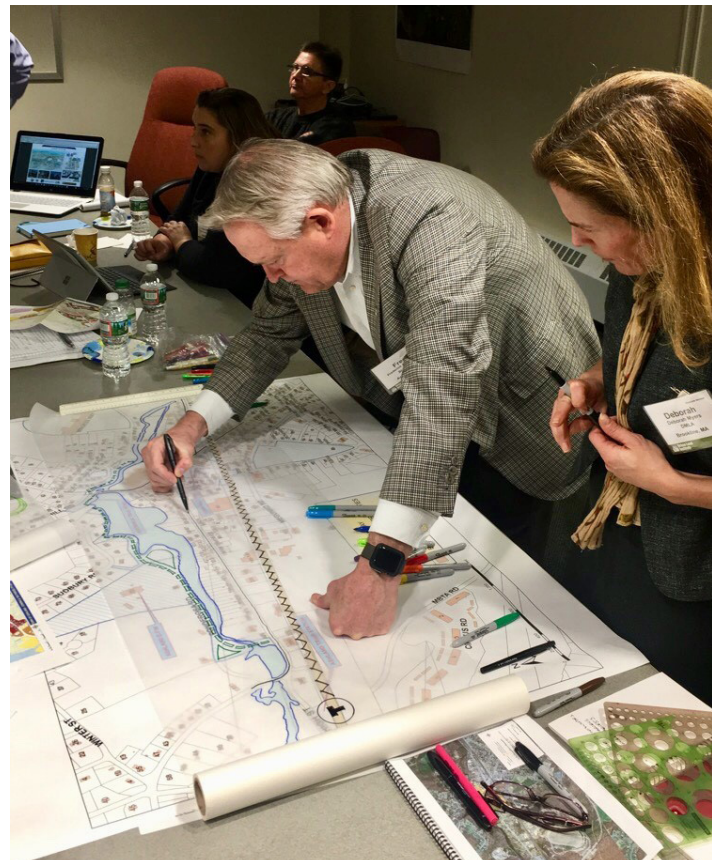
## Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)

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

TAPs are a specially assembled group of diverse professionals with expertise in the issues posed by the specific project. Each TAP spends one to two days visiting study sites, 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.

## MassDevelopment

MassDevelopment is the state's economic development and finance authority. The quasi-public agency 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.



ULI TAP panelists at work



## The Panel

ULI Boston/New England convened a volunteer panel of 10 experts whose members represent the range of disciplines necessary to analyze the challenges and opportunities facing Ashland in their efforts to make the community a more vibrant place to live, work and play. Disciplines represented included architects, designers, planners, project managers, market analysts, environmental consultants, and attorneys. The following is a list of panelists:

## Co-Chairs

Jamie Simchik, Principal, Simchik Planning & Development

Michael A. Wang, AIA, LEED AP BD+C, Principal, Form + Place

## Panel

Patrick Campbell, Principal, Commonwealth Development

Rob Caridad, The Chiofaro Company

Fred Kramer, VP, Northeast Regional Business Leader, Stantec

Ryan Hoffman, P.G., LSP, Senior Project Manager, GEI Consultants

Deborah Myers, Principal, DMLA

Claire O'Neill, VP of Planning & Development, MassDevelopment

Craig R. Seymour, Managing Principal, RKG Associates, Inc.

## ULI Staff

Sara Marsh, Manager, Boston/New England District Council

## TAP Writer

Mike Hoban, Principal, Hoban Communications

**Panelists have donated their time.**

All images used in this report were taken by the panelists.



Panelists on walking tour and brainstorming during charette

## Stakeholders

The TAP benefited from the participation of the diverse group of stakeholders – the following is a list of stakeholders:

Peter Barbieri, Development Attorney, Fletcher Tilton, PC  
Denise Conti, Branch Manager, Needham Bank  
John Dudley, Owner, MetroWest Design Center, 60 Pleasant St; (Former Planning Board Chair)  
Rich Gordon, Owner of 10-50 Main Street  
Steven Greenberg, Realtor, Oak Realty, Tenant at 21 Main Street  
Julie Gross, Owner, Julie's Z Breads, Tenant of 50 Main Street  
Philip C. Jack, Development Attorney, Partner, Wise & Jack LLC  
Peter Lentros, Owner, Lentros Engineering, Owner of 280 Eliot Street  
Garrett Quinn, Commercial Real Estate Broker, Parsons Commercial Real Estate  
Ben Stevens, Developer, 21 Main Street, Trask Development  
Jim Ward, Manager, Stone's Public House



Needham Bank, included in the walking tour of the study area.

## The TAP Process

The Ashland TAP was held on December 12th, 2017. Panelists from ULI Boston/New England were greeted at the Ashland Town Hall by Town Manager Michael Herbert and Assistant Town Manager Jennifer Ball, as well as Town Planner Sheila Page and Economic Development Director Beth Reynolds. Herbert kicked off the day with an overview of what the Town is hoping to accomplish with the downtown revitalization to the ULI panelists, as well as members of the Ashland Business Association, the Design Review Board, the Economic Development Advisory Group, the Planning Board, and the Board of Selectmen.

Following the presentation, Herbert, Ball, Page and Reynolds conducted a guided walking tour of the study area along Main and Front Streets, including multiple sites that may be redeveloped as Ashland re-imagines their downtown. What the panel observed along the route were properties with an eclectic mix of uses, including retail and service businesses, public buildings, some residential properties and local restaurants. Many of the buildings are in need of varying levels of investment (or redevelopment).

The tour began with the group observing some of the historic structures, including 98-100 Main Street, a historic colonial two family, and the Federated Church at 118 Main Street; Ashland House, built in 1855 and now used for senior housing; 128 Main Street, a 2.5-story building that is slated for mixed-use redevelopment; and 137-151 Main Street, the current site of the Police and Fire Departments, also being considered for redevelopment.

The tour proceeded down Front Street, where there are a number of businesses, including two banks and a lumber yard, as well as the Masonic Lodge (an iconic brick building which includes two first-floor businesses), the Town Library and a thriving restaurant, Erica's. The historic Ashland Station (now Charles River Medical Associates) on Homer Street is nearby, as is another popular restaurant, Stone's Public House at 179 Main Street. The tour then retraced its steps past the Town Hall to view the large former mill complex at 10-50 Main Street (which consists of a variety of building types and tenants), and the newly constructed mixed-use project at 21 Main Street, which features nine apartments and 2,700 SF of retail space.

Upon returning to Town Hall, the ULI panel interviewed stakeholders (listed in the previous sub-section) in two separate panel discussions. 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 as well as the input from the stakeholders. "Next step" recommendations were then shared in an open public forum in the Selectmen's Meeting Room at Town Hall that evening.



Panelists at Town Hall presenting their recommendations



# Background and History

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The Town of Ashland sought the help of the ULI TAP to devise a strategy to transform its underutilized downtown into a higher density, walkable Live/Work/Play destination through the judicious use of town-owned parcels and private investment. The town is also seeking guidance on how to address potential environmental permitting challenges associated with underground contamination from a nearby industrial parcel. The TAP was specifically asked to address the following questions:

## A) Questions for the ULI Panel

The panelists were asked to address the following questions:

### **Understanding Market Forces**

Understanding the community's vision for a vibrant live-work-play destination in downtown, and comparing that vision with market influences, what are the mix of uses that present the greatest potential for downtown redevelopment, and what strategies should the town use to attract that right mix of uses in the right places? Are there any market challenges for downtown redevelopment? What is a realistic absorption rate of new retail/commercial/residential uses?

### **Understanding Environmental Permitting**

Do any state and federal environmental permitting challenges exist for future downtown development, as relates to an historic nearby industrial contamination? If yes, what can the town do to mitigate those challenges? Is there anything that the town can do to preempt future permitting challenges that may disincentivize private investment in downtown?

### **How to Stimulate Investment.**

What can the town do to stimulate private investment in downtown? Would local investments in town-owned properties or infrastructure help to stimulate private activity? What other strategies can the panel recommend to support transformative redevelopment on key parcels and throughout downtown?

## B) Ashland Today

The Town of Ashland is a largely residential suburb located 20 miles east of Worcester and 22 miles west of Boston. This bedroom community was once home to a large manufacturing base but now serves largely as a pass-through to routes I-90 and I-495 for neighboring towns via routes 135 and 126, which traverse the town. Ashland is bordered by Sherborn on the east, Framingham on the north, Southborough on the west and northwest, and Hopkinton and Holliston on the south. The town also has its own stop on the MBTA's Framingham/Worcester Commuter Rail Line, located approximately three-quarters of a mile from the Downtown. There is very little business activity after 6PM in the downtown, with the exception of a pair of popular restaurants.

## C) History

Originally inhabited by the Megunko Indians, the area formerly known as "Unionville" was created by taking near-equal parts from the towns of Hopkinton, Holliston, and Framingham (all of which were established in the early 1700s), and was incorporated as Ashland in 1846. At that time, the Town was home to paper, cotton, shoe, grist and saw mills along the Sudbury River, and was also a farming community.

The construction of the Boston & Worcester Railroad in the 1830s contributed to the early development of the town, but mill activity declined soon after the damming of the Sudbury River in 1875. Manufacturing in the town ramped up again in the early 1900's, led by the Warren Clock Company (later Telechron). The firm employed thousands during its boom years between 1925 and 1955, and was so intertwined with the town's identity that the high school adopted the name "Clockers" for its sports teams. Telechron ceased operations in Ashland by 1979, but the town had already begun its transformation from rural mill town to bedroom community by the 1960's, as farmland and open space were converted into single family housing.

#### D) Population/Demographics

Ashland has seen a steady rise in population during the 21st century, from 14,674 in 2000 to 16,593 in 2010 to 17,420 in December of 2017, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The estimated median household income has also risen dramatically – from \$68,392 in 2000 to \$107,106 in 2016, a significantly higher figure than the median household income of Massachusetts (\$75,297). The median home value in Ashland is \$389,200.

#### E) The Study Area

Downtown Ashland is comprised of what was described as a "mish-mash" of commercial, retail and public buildings – many of them historic – interspersed with scattered green space and a large municipal parking lot. The panel identified three areas as having the most promise for redevelopment in the downtown. The first is anchored by the large former mill complex at 10-50 Main Street, the northern "gateway" to Main Street from I-90. The complex is comprised of a mix of building types that are nearly fully occupied by a variety of tenants, including a CrossFit facility, a discount mattress retailer, churches, a wholesale/retail bakery (Julie's Z Breads), and a variety of office users.

Across the street from the stone office buildings of the mill complex is a newly constructed mixed-use project at 21 Main Street, which features nine apartments and 2,700 SF of retail space. The two-bedroom apartments (priced \$1,875 to \$2,095) leased almost immediately, while the commercial space lay vacant for a year before 1,500 SF was leased to the Bagel Table. At the corner of Pleasant and Main Streets is The Corner Spot, a site that had been designated for affordable housing, but has instead been transformed into a community gathering place that offers pop-up retail storefronts to entrepreneurs in warm weather months.

The second redevelopment area is 125 Front Street, which currently serves as the seasonal location for Ashland's popular Farmer's Market, which typically draws 1,500 visitors on Saturdays from June through October. This long, narrow site, which was acquired by the Town of Ashland from the now-defunct Ashland Redevelopment Authority, is located adjacent to the municipal parking lot (218 spaces) and the commuter rail corridor.

The third area extends from the Town Hall (101 Main Street) to the Police and Fire Department complex where there are number of properties that are being considered for redevelopment. These include 98-100 Main Street, a historic colonial two family (built in 1800) that is being planned for mixed-use redevelopment (4-9 Condominiums, commercial space); the Federated Church at 118 Main Street, another historic structure that currently houses a preschool, thrift shop, a social services organization and a food service vendor, that could be considered for re-purposing; 128 Main Street, a 2.5-story mixed-use building that is currently in the permitting process for conversion into 15 residential units and 2,000 SF of commercial space; and the current site of the Police and Fire Departments, which will be relocated to a joint public safety complex outside of downtown within the next three years. The police station is expected to be razed, while the fire station (built in 1927 and structurally sound) is expected to be re-purposed, possibly as a restaurant.

# Assets and Opportunities

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Although Ashland is viewed primarily as a bedroom community, the downtown area has a number of strengths that could be parlayed into a lively live/work/play destination that retains its character as a quintessential New England Village center.

## A) Historic Structures

Ashland has a deep inventory of architecturally distinct, structurally sound historic buildings that could serve as cornerstones for the creation of a destination New England town center. Beginning with the Town Hall (listed on the National Register of Historic Places), the Downtown is also home to Stone's Public House (the former Railroad House-Ashland Hotel, built in 1834) at 179 Main Street.; the Fire House (1927); the Masonic Lodge; and a myriad of other structures, some of which are being considered for redevelopment along Main Street.

## B) Ashland MBTA Commuter Rail Station

The presence of Ashland station on the Framingham/Worcester Commuter Rail line is highly attractive in the current commercial and residential real estate market, which prizes transit-oriented development. The station would be a major draw for apartment/condo residents seeking to live in the suburbs while working in Boston or Worcester.

## C) Low Vacancy

The downtown vacancy rate for retail, commercial and residential properties is very low. The demand for residential appears to be the strongest of the property use types (as evidenced by the quick lease-up of the apartments of 21 Main Street and the low inventory of apartments, according to local realtors), with the access to the commuter rail to Boston and Worcester as the primary driver. Demand for office space is limited, but there is virtually no inventory available. Main Street retail businesses have struggled in recent years, but unlike most suburban towns seeking to revitalize, there are few empty storefronts.

## D) Robust Community Involvement

As evidenced by the popularity of the farmer's market (1,500 visitors on a typical Saturday) and The Corner Spot (the newly created retail pop-up venue and gathering space that attracts hundreds of visitors on some days), there is a real enthusiasm for creative public programming in Ashland. There is also an engaged business advocacy organization, the Ashland Business Association, which promotes local businesses and the arts.



Federated Church of Ashland located on Main Street

### E) Pro Development Attitude

Stakeholders expressed confidence in the ability of the new Town leadership, many of whom assumed their positions since January of 2016, to spearhead redevelopment efforts. The Town has begun improvements to the infrastructure, including these recent programs:

**Streetscape Improvements** - As part of the Downtown Planning Initiative, Ashland is working with the BSC Group on design alternatives that would include refinements to vehicular circulation patterns, the undergrounding of utilities, placemaking opportunities, a widening of the sidewalks, and the addition of bike lanes to the Downtown. It is also worth noting that a September planning meeting on this topic drew over 100 townspeople.

**The Riverwalk** – Design work is underway for the Riverwalk, a .8-mile trail along the Sudbury River that will stretch from downtown Ashland to the nearby MBTA commuter rail station. The project is anticipated to be completed by the summer of 2018.

**The Ashland Upper Charles Trail (AUCT)** – The town recently completed a feasibility study for Ashland's 8.7 mile portion of the 30-mile, five-community Upper Charles Trail that will include a Downtown Loop for trail users to conveniently access businesses in downtown Ashland, Town Hall and the public library, as well as the MBTA Commuter Rail Station and the Ashland and Hopkinton State Parks.

### F) Strong Daily Traffic Count

According to a recent study by the MassDOT, the daily traffic count is 19,000 on Main Street, and 16,000 on Pleasant Street.

### G) Town-Owned Parcels

The Town owns a number of key parcels being considered for redevelopment (including the Fire/Police Station complex and 125 Front Street), which should allow them to be more proactive in shaping a vision for the downtown and facilitating partnerships with private investors.

### H) Natural Resources

Although lacking a town common, one of Ashland's greatest assets is its collection of parks and green spaces, including the Ashland and Hopkinton State Parks. The Mill Pond Park recreation and conservation area, the soon-to-be completed Riverwalk and a number of scattered parcels in the downtown are integral components of the public realm that could be key ingredients to activating the downtown.



Public space known as the Corner Spot.



# Challenges

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Despite its many positive attributes, Ashland has some obstacles to overcome if the vision of a vibrant Downtown is to become a reality.

## A) Perception Issues

There are a number of perceptions held by townspeople and outsiders that could be potential impediments to redevelopment efforts. Some are fact-based, others may be misperceptions, but as one panelist noted, perceptions are often reality when it comes to the decision-making process.

**The Rail Station** - There are two primary concerns with the rail line running through downtown. One is a perceived issue of safety; the other involves the psychological barrier that exists within the Town, as the north and south sides of the line are seen as two distinct neighborhoods rather than as a unified Downtown.

In terms of safety, there have been a number of pedestrian deaths recorded on the Framingham/Worcester Commuter Rail line in recent years (including several in Ashland), but according to recent published reports, many of the fatalities were ruled suicides. It should also be noted that earlier this year the town approved a project to design and construct roadway and pedestrian improvements as supplemental safety measures by implementing a Railroad Quiet Zone in Downtown Ashland. The measure will virtually eliminate the need for the forty daily train whistles and will improve the quality of life for current and future downtown Ashland residents and businesses.

Another downside of the rail station is that while it is clearly an asset, it is located approximately .75 miles from the downtown, which strains the concept of “walkability”.

## Impact of Increased Residential Uses on School System-

There is a perception in many Greater Boston communities that adding residential units leads to an overburdening of public school systems. A recent report by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) found no correlation between growth in the number of housing units and growth in the number of students in public and charter schools. (*MAPC report on the effect of multifamily on school systems* <https://www.mapc.org/enrollment/>).

**Ashland as “Bedroom Community”** – The image of Ashland as a residential-only community, where the population does not engage in local activities, will need to be overcome as efforts to re-invent the Downtown as a live/work/play destination move forward.

## B) Configuration of Downtown

As currently configured, there are a number of structural obstacles to creating a vibrant, walkable downtown that will be attractive to current and future residents.

**Greenspace** – While there are appealing greenspaces scattered throughout downtown, there is no centrally located greenspace that could be used to host outdoor events, such as a town common. While a traditional common is not a necessity, the current locations, sizes and shapes of public open spaces do not currently afford the type of focal point for gathering that will help stimulate pedestrian activity for businesses.

**Lack of a Retail Corridor** – The Downtown was described as “a mish-mash” of commercial, retail and public buildings by stakeholders, and lacks a contiguous retail concentration as found in more vibrant suburban downtowns. In addition to a lack of continuity, many storefronts are also set back from the street edge, which is inconsistent with the preferred design approach for a walkable downtown. There is also a lack of “practical” retail (such as general merchandise stores and pharmacies) as well as outdoor retail or dining options in the downtown.

**Shortage of Year-Round Gathering Spaces** – As evidenced by the successes of the Corner Spot and the farmer’s market, there is a desire on the part of the townspeople to commune together, but there are few year-round gathering spaces. There is a lack of interior space, such as a coffee shop or a community center, as well as exterior space that can accommodate year-round programming (ice skating, etc.) all of which could serve as a consistent draw to the Downtown.

**On-Street / Municipal Parking** – Despite a sufficient number of public parking spaces (according to a parking utilization review), many of the business owners felt there was a lack of parking convenient to the storefronts and restaurants.

### C) Embracing New Demographics

In order to create a thriving downtown, there needs to be a willingness to embrace a new demographic, including a millennial population that is moving to the suburbs but are still looking for an engaging lifestyle. This presents a major opportunity to increase residential density in suburban downtowns, particularly those fortunate enough to have existing, convenient MBTA commuter rail access and the corresponding access to major job centers and cultural offerings.

The supporting experiential retail such as brew pubs, health and fitness facilities (yoga, massage and meditation studios, as well as traditional gyms), additional restaurants and cinema/theater/music venues that will follow can be transformative for a Downtown. The over-55 “empty-nester” group should be another target demographic, as they are often looking for options to downsize yet remain connected to the community that they have lived in for years. Resistance to development – more specifically, adding residential density – is a common challenge for suburban communities.

### D) Underutilization of Existing Parcels

Prominent street corners that could be home to “landmark” buildings or restaurants are either vacant or have buildings that are set too far back to create a consistent streetscape (as was the case with The Corner Spot prior to its re-purposing). The parcels at 10-50 Main Street to the north and the collection of parcels between Stone Park and the railroad tracks to the south could potentially serve as ‘Gateways to the Downtown’, but may not presently be serving their highest and best purpose. While the Town of Ashland can choose how to redevelop the Fire and Police Station sites, the 10-50 Main Street mill buildings and the parcels south of the railroad tracks are privately owned, and their owners must be actively engaged in helping to define the vision for the downtown. The TAP was unable to engage the owner of the 10-50 Main Street mill buildings in discussions.

### E) Wayfinding

While there is unified signage for public buildings, there is a lack of consistent signage to alert the high volume of traffic on the main thoroughfares (Main and Pleasant Streets) to the local businesses. Signage informing the public of the available municipal parking is inadequate as well.

#### F) Public Parking

In terms of sheer numbers, Ashland has adequate public parking, according to recently concluded parking studies.. However, there needs to be a re-organization of the parking and improved wayfinding to better serve the businesses downtown.

#### G) Permitting Uncertainties

Stakeholders indicated that the permitting process and the zoning bylaws can be confusing. Stakeholders also stated that there is a disconnect between zoning bylaws and the Design Review Board process.

There also appears to be uncertainty regarding environmental regulations and requirements for development in Ashland, given the presence of contaminated groundwater north and east of the Nyanza Superfund site located just outside of the downtown.

In an environment where many potential developers are likely to be smaller-scale, without the financial wherewithal, experience or in-house expertise to navigate regulatory hurdles, this is a significant disincentive to achieving meaningful change in Ashland.



Commuter Rail Train crossing Main Street.

# Recommendations

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Utilizing background information provided by the TAP sponsor, discussions with stakeholders, and an intensive five-hour charrette, the panelists came up with a number of recommendations that directly address the questions outlined in the TAP request. The findings were presented at the Selectmen's Meeting Room at Town Hall and additional recommendations were added following discussion with the TAP chairs.

## A) Redevelopment of the Downtown

- Rezone all split lots to appropriate zoning districts
- Expand the Central Commercial district (refer to zoning map below, dark red indicates the downtown planning boundary)
- Change the following allowable uses in CA as recommended below:
  - Remove golf course as an allowable use
  - Expand Multifamily Zoning to include projects totaling over four units (but not on Main Street)
  - Consider onsite parking requirements for single businesses above 5,000 SF (or another figure deemed appropriate by the Town), but allow on-street parking for smaller businesses

**[1] Create A 'There' There.** Currently Ashland is viewed as a bedroom community by the thousands of motorists who pass through each day. The town needs to create a sense of place and an identity that will encourage people to stop and spend time in the Downtown. Regional market conditions suggest that the time is right for downtowns like Ashland to attract more investment and new residents, if the underlying economic and political environment is "right".

The thoughtful articulation of the built environment can be an important part of this effort, and the Town should therefore consider mechanisms that incentivize storefront and signage improvements, such as a Façade Improvement Grant program, as part of an overall branding campaign (See appendix).

**[2] Create a Walkable Downtown.** Establishing identifiable "gateways" to Downtown from the North and the South, and connecting key parcels with open spaces, is vital to creating a walkable Downtown. The trail networks that engage the river are also an asset and could be a significant component of the redevelopment plan if effectively connected to the Main Street corridor. In addition, Front Street presents a marvelous opportunity to create a double-loaded pedestrian shopping environment. Redevelopment of the south side of Front Street could result in a completed streetscape that would provide a visual and auditory buffer from the adjacent railroad tracks. The Town should continue to invest in streetscapes and the public realm, including devising a comprehensive parking plan that integrates signage for municipal parking and to help promote downtown businesses. (Refer to map on page 17).



**[3] Invest in a Holistic Master-plan Vision for the Downtown.** While there are numerous ongoing development initiatives along the Main Street corridor, the single most important action that the town could undertake to attract a diverse mix of uses is to collaboratively generate a master-plan vision. This document/plan should articulate goals, not only for the type of redevelopment that would be most beneficial in the downtown, but for the revitalization of the public realm. Perhaps as important, however, is that this master plan is informed by market-based economic input, so that the end-product is not only aspirational, but also achievable. It has been the experience of the TAP panelists that having a well-developed plan that reflects that vision before implementing zoning changes produces far better results.



An illustration created by the panel to highlighting key town owned parcels in study area

**[4] Implement Changes to Zoning.** Developers reported that the form-based code, which in theory should provide more clarity and certainty, appears at times to be in conflict with the process of utilizing a Design Review Board, whose recommendations are often more subjective in nature. Zoning and permitting need to be less discretionary, as a more predictable approvals process will encourage private developers to invest in Ashland. Zoning should also be more closely aligned with the realities of the market and the town's overall objectives, which means allowing more density and having flexibility regarding the number of parking spaces required for downtown residential projects.

Zoning changes which encourage streetscape activation such as sidewalk dining and outdoor retail should also be implemented. And while retail on the ground floor is a welcome part of any mixed-use development strategy used to create an active streetscape, it is imperative that there also be flexibility in height restrictions. This will facilitate architectural interest and accommodate the real challenges associated with delivering new development that is economically viable, while also providing desirable community and neighborhood amenities. In some cases, that would mean allowing as many as five stories in strategic locations. The careful integration of design guidelines can ensure the appropriate level of architectural detail.

**[5] Parcel Assembly by Town.** While there are some encouraging signs of well-conceived development, including 21 Main Street and 128 Main Street (now in the permitting process), those projects are not understood in the context of a comprehensive plan or a holistic vision for the town.

Getting the public and private owners of parcels to act together in a way that is cohesive in a market and financial sense can be challenging. Working to assemble developable parcels (town-owned and private parcels, as well as open space) is often an important step in the re-imagining of a downtown. Encouraging the participation of private land owners and helping them understand the potential benefits of a cohesive redevelopment plan is strongly encouraged. Offering density bonuses to developers when a project provides other public benefits (such as cultural or civic facilities, or perhaps even certain types of retail) or fulfills a need for a specific type of housing (e.g., affordable or elderly) should be strongly considered.

**[6] Leverage Town-Owned Properties to Attract Private Investment.** The Fire/Police complex and the Front Street parcels owned by the town, combined with the public realm investments that have been made in its streetscapes and the Riverwalk, should allow the town to catalyze redevelopment and work towards forming effective public-private partnerships. Feasibility studies should first be conducted to discover the best and highest uses of those properties that could fully unlock the development potential of downtown, which would then have a ripple effect on the surrounding parcels.

**[7] Increase Downtown Density.** Residential development brings foot traffic, “eyes on the street,” and activation, as well as focused spending power to support commercial growth. At present, there is limited economic viability without residential development. In general, absent a significant forward commitment by a large user with particularly strong credit, neither the demand nor the market rents would appear to support new stand-alone commercial development at this time and in this market. Attracting new commercial uses – particularly larger scale uses – means adding that residential component, which is the only use where the market will clearly support the revenues to make a project viable. Typically, including residential uses with commercial in a mixed-use project increases the degree of certainty for investors, while the retail makes the development more attractive to residents.

New residential development should be aimed at a younger “entering-the-household” market and older “empty nesters,” and include apartments and condominiums. These target demographic groups are also seeking to live in an environment where they can have direct access to experiential retail, restaurants and services and convenient access via the commuter rail to Boston, Worcester and other job centers and cultural opportunities.

**[8] Increase Affordable Housing.** As of September 2017, Ashland has reached 6.2% affordable housing units on the Department of Housing & Community Development's Chapter 40B Subsidized Housing Inventory. The town needs approximately 250 more affordable units to reach the state 40B mandate of 10%. Therefore, any new housing should include, where economically feasible, provisions for the inclusions of affordable and workforce housing. Such development allows the town to work closely with smaller scale developers to achieve this aim. Strong consideration should also be given to adding in-fill accessory dwelling units in single family neighborhoods in close proximity to Downtown.

**[9] Add More Retail to Curtail Spending Leakage.** One of the biggest challenges for Ashland will be to recapture the "spending leakage" caused by the lack of a true retail center within the Town. The residents are currently spending a majority of their disposable income elsewhere. This can be addressed by devising a comprehensive, yet realistic, retail strategy in a masterplan that focuses on experiential offerings and homegrown, primarily small, local businesses.

## B) Environmental Planning

**[1] Develop Clear Guidelines.** Although environmental permitting challenges exist for future downtown development, the technological and cost challenges are less daunting than commonly perceived. The issue is more of a permitting and regulatory framework challenge. In short, there is a real need for a "road map" to assist in navigating a complicated, multi-jurisdictional process. Documentation that provides a clearer understanding of the environmental requirements and approvals that will be needed by developers from agencies should be developed.

**[2] Streamline Approval Processes.** Recognizing that the relatively small-scale opportunities currently available in downtown Ashland are not necessarily going to attract development firms with prior experience in dealing with environmental issues, the town must make it easier for motivated, entrepreneurial developers to thrive. The town can mitigate many of the challenges by developing an integrated process involving the local, state (MassDEP), and federal agencies (EPA) to help developers better understand what those requirements are, and to find ways to streamline the approval processes.

It is also suggested that the town work with these agencies to develop a site-specific guidance (co-published by EPA, MassDEP, and Ashland) that will explain what developers need to know before they begin the development process near a superfund site. Such items would include establishing clarity on items such as liability relief, a developer's duty to mitigate vapors, and what the obligation is for mitigating potential exposures. Also, it is important to alert developers that while the downtown area is not within the source area of groundwater (superfund) site, the plume does extend into the downtown area, so there are potential issues with vapors volatilizing from the groundwater and getting into the indoor air of developments. The technical fix is relatively simple, but one that needs to be conveyed to developers so that they can incorporate preventative measures.

# Funding Sources

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## MassHousing

**Housing Choice Initiative** – Municipalities apply for Housing Choice designation to qualify for grant money to support housing production. <https://www.mass.gov/housing-choice-initiative>

**Housing Toolbox for Massachusetts Communities** - This toolbox was developed by Citizens' Housing and Planning Association and the Massachusetts Housing Partnership as part of a statewide initiative to support local officials and volunteers in their efforts to provide more affordable housing opportunities in their communities. <https://www.housingtoolbox.org>

**Planning for Housing Production Program** will provide \$2 million in grants of consultant services, across multiple years, to municipalities that are actively planning to increase their supply of affordable housing. [https://www.masshousing.com/portal/server.pt/community/planning\\_programs/207/planning\\_for\\_housing\\_production](https://www.masshousing.com/portal/server.pt/community/planning_programs/207/planning_for_housing_production)

## MassDevelopment

**Real Estate Services** - The Town may be eligible for Real Estate Planning & Development Services from MassDevelopment to help reposition town-owned parcels for economic development purposes. <https://www.massdevelopment.com/what-we-offer/real-estate-services/technical-assistance/>

**Finance Programs** - Developers may be eligible for various types of financing from MassDevelopment, subject to acceptable underwriting and required approvals. Capabilities are described at <https://www.massdevelopment.com/what-we-offer/financing/>

- Loans for environmental site assessment and remediation
- Predevelopment financing
- Loans and loan guarantees for building acquisition and renovation
- Low-interest rate tax-exempt bond financing for qualifying projects by manufacturers or rental housing developers

## TOD Resources

**CEDAC (Community Economic Development Assistance Corporation) Supporting Equitable Transit-Oriented Development**

- Provides financial and technical assistance to several eTOD projects along the Fairmount commuter line. <https://cedac.org/blog/supporting-equitable-transit-oriented-development/>

**LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation)** - The Equitable Transit-Oriented Development Accelerator Fund (ETODAF) was created by LISC Boston, The Boston Foundation, and the Hyams Foundation to provide developers with streamlined access to acquisition and predevelopment capital that can be used to acquire and advance strategic properties along transit corridors.

<http://www.lisc.org/boston/our-work/affordable-housing/transit-oriented-development/>

**MassDOT MBTA land tracker** – Resource for TOD parcels when available, and users need to be approved/registered before getting access. This has been part of the state's efforts to increase TOD development. <https://www.mbtarealty.com/landtracker/>



# Conclusions

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The Town of Ashland has made great strides in laying the groundwork to transform its downtown into a walkable live/work/play destination, as evidenced by the streetscape redesign and Riverwalk projects now underway. However, if Ashland hopes to achieve its ultimate goal of a vibrant core, a number of issues must be resolved in order for the plan to succeed.

The cornerstone of the type of revitalization the town is seeking is residential development. Adding households that will provide 18-hour activation, with incomes capable of supporting the type of experiential retail that will drive the redevelopment, is crucial, and that means increasing residential density. It has been the experience of panelists that increasing density in the suburbs of Greater Boston has typically been a challenge, due in part to the resistance of residents. The fears that usually accompany discussions of increased density – increased traffic and burden on the school system - were evident during both the stakeholder meetings and the community feedback portion of the presentation at the Town Hall. With well-defined development parameters, these concerns can be mitigated. Downtown Ashland does not require, nor do we recommend, high density of the type found in urban centers, only higher density than that which exists today.

A second issue is the lack of a clear vision for what the downtown hopes to become, and the absence of a corresponding masterplan. A collaborative master-planning process that includes substantial community input, and is informed by considerations of economic viability, is critical to developing a collective vision. The success of the farmer's market and the Corner Spot are clear indicators that Ashland has a strong sense of shared community. Active participation in developing the end vision will help build consensus.

Third, the ability of the town to help assemble multiple parcels – including public, private, and open space – necessary to create transformative developable sites will be essential to creating a truly walkable downtown. While Ashland has already begun the transformation through infrastructure improvements, it is essential for redevelopment efforts to have the cooperation of private land owners. Whether this is accomplished through tax incentives, expedited permitting or other means, it is vitally important. It is difficult to imagine any real transformation of the Downtown taking place without the cooperation and shared insights of private land owners. Despite numerous obstacles, Ashland has a real opportunity to transform itself from a bedroom community into a true live/work/play destination. A vibrant downtown, intertwined with the abundant natural resources Ashland has to offer, would be a boon to the community and the region at large.